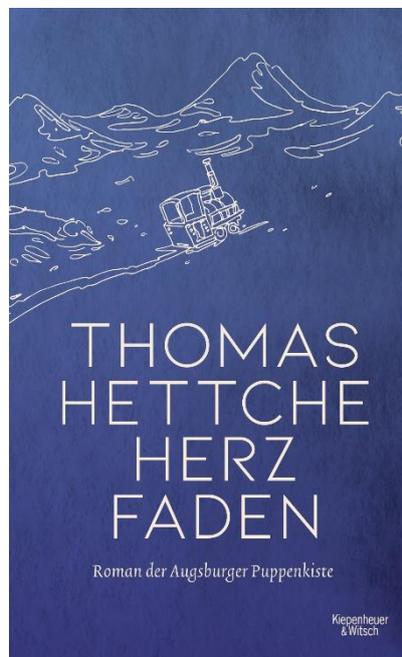


Heartstring

by **Thomas Hettche**

Sample translation by Ruth Martin

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Iris Brandt (ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de)

Lara Mertens (lmertens@kiwi-verlag.de)

The girl wrenched herself away from her father’s hand and ran off. She couldn’t let him see her crying – though she herself didn’t understand why she suddenly felt so terribly sad that tears were welling up in her eyes. Frantically, she pushed through the hordes of smaller children who were rampaging around the theatre’s foyer after the performance, and finally crouched down in the furthest corner of the large room, where her father couldn’t see her. She pulled her iPhone out of the pocket of her hoodie and sent all her friends crying emojis. And at the same time, she wiped the real tears from her face with the flat of her hand until they stopped coming.

When she could see clearly again, she noticed a small wooden door beside her, whitewashed the same colour as the wall, and without any lock or handle. Curious, the girl pushed her fingers into the narrow gap between wood and stone. The door moved, but so stiffly that it felt like no one had opened it for a long, long time. The girl stood up, pulled at the door with all her might, and soon a waft of cold, musty air hit her face. The bare stone floor that led into the yawning darkness was coated in a thick layer of dust, and in the light

from the foyer, the girl could see the bottom step of a spiral staircase. Above it, another step faded into the darkness. When she heard her father calling her, she slipped through the door and pulled it closed behind her.

At once, everything around her turned jet black. The girl could feel her heartbeat in her throat. She switched on the torch on her phone and put one foot on the first step of the staircase, then the next, and the next, up and up. In the weak LED light, she held tightly to the stone pillar around which the narrow spiral staircase coiled upwards. Suddenly, the light went out. The girl stopped, trembling. She knew the battery had been on seventy-five percent just a minute ago.

She felt her way upwards, slowly and tentatively, one step at a time. Sensed it getting colder and colder. Clung to the stone pillar and pulled her hood up with the other hand. Was reminded of how insistent she had been that morning about wearing her new white hoodie, and doing the quite complicated plaits that her friend had shown her, although her mother kept nagging her that she was going to miss the train. When she remembered that, she almost started crying again. What was her father *thinking*, she thought angrily: puppet theatre was kids' stuff. But as she carried on up the seemingly never-ending staircase, she had the sense that with every step she took she was getting smaller, and would soon vanish altogether in the darkness, would no longer exist – and she was almost glad of it. Then her foot struck something hard.

The girl held her breath. Was it another door? And yes: when she put out her hand, she could feel wood, and when she threw her whole weight against it, this door opened, too. Glad to escape the darkness, she slipped through, at the same moment realising that the darkness had not abated. It was true that she could no longer sense the confines of the spiral staircase around her, but now she had the feeling that the room she was standing in must be enormous. The sound of her breathing was swallowed up by the vast space. Her eyes scanned the blackness anxiously, in search of something to cling on to.

After a while, she started to make out shadows, then a thin light that seemed to be seeping in from above. Slowly and imperceptibly, a room emerged from its cocoon of darkness, an immensely large room. High above her head, the girl could make out the exposed beams of a roof, and then between the beams an attic window through which moonlight was falling, and in the middle of this huge attic at whose edge she was standing, a spot on which the moonlight was shining down, as if someone had laid out a round, white rug.

And then the girl discovered something else: the walls of the huge room were lined with racks, tall wooden racks on which something was hanging. Curious, she ventured over to find out what it was, and in the dim light she could make out feet and arms, dangling limbs, brightly coloured clothes. They were marionettes, row upon row of them one above another, countless marionettes, hanging so lightly from their thin strings that, as the girl walked by, they began to clack together. The noise was so unearthly that it frightened her and she stopped where she was.

And as the clacking gradually subsided, the girl heard another sound. Footsteps approaching through the darkness. Her heart began to beat wildly as she listened, unable to move. And then a figure appeared out of the darkness; she could barely make it out at first as it slowly approached the carpet of light in the middle of the attic. The first thing she saw was a yellow dress, then two black plaits, and finally the figure stopped in the patch of moonlight and began to sing.

“Oh how lovely, oh how grand
To walk alone along the strand!
I am the princess called Li Si
And when I hide, they never see me.”

“Li Si?”

A great weight fell from the girl’s shoulders. She ran over to the princess, whom she had not thought about for years, though she had so loved her as a child.

“Good day, my girl,” said the marionette, nodding her wooden head. “Do not be afraid. I am the princess called Li Si, and when I hide, they never see me. Hum diddle-dum drum.”

“Me neither!”

The girl couldn’t help but laugh, and she felt her fear dissolving. She wanted at once to tell the princess, whose puppet eyes were giving her a kindly look, about running away from her father and the strange way in which she had got here, but then there was a sudden, loud patter of feet. She peered into the darkness.

“Do not be afraid, my girl,” said Princess Li Si.

Just then a stork appeared from out of the dark, as if emerging from under a blanket. It was an old and very battered marionette, and it set its long legs down carefully and swung its head inquisitively from left to right and from right to left.

For a moment, the girl watched the old stork, spellbound, and then the clacking and rattling in the dark grew louder and louder, until a whole tin-can army appeared, followed by three little devils, a skeleton, the Moomin family – the girl didn’t know where to look next. Parrots and nightingales and owls and seagulls flapped above her head; donkeys and horses and a little roebuck came bounding out of the darkness; there were white, woolly sheep; snakes of varying lengths and colours slithered towards her; cats swished their tails excitedly through the air; a dachshund trotted up, barking.

The girl could see more and more of the marionettes that had been hanging on the tall racks at the sides of the room breaking free of their strings and climbing down onto the floor, and among all the animals that began to mill around her, she spotted Mrs Wutz and Ping the Penguin. There was Schusch, the monitor lizard with his red newsboy cap, and there were the elephant seal, the lion and Mikesch the tomcat – and it wasn’t just animals:

she could also see Professor Habakuk Tibatong and Aladdin, Nose the dwarf, Mrs Holle and Hotzenplotz the bandit, the Little Witch and Zoppo Trump, the Little Prince with the fox, Seppl and the grandmother, the policeman Alois Dimpfelmoser, Jim Button, Mrs Waas, the false giant Tur Tur, who got smaller and smaller the closer he came, and Lukas, with Emma the locomotive, who chugged over slowly and carefully, edging her way through the crowd.

They all thronged towards the bright circle of light where the girl and Princess Li Si were standing. There was a lot of pushing and shoving, a pony tripped over a dwarf on the slippery floor, and the girl was much too confused by all the goings-on around her to notice that all the marionettes were as tall as she was, and moving entirely without their strings, as if they were really alive, and talking and whinnying and bleating as they went. And there was someone else whom the girl didn't notice emerging from the darkness. It was only when the figure was standing right in front of her that she looked up at it in surprise.

It was a beautiful woman, standing as tall as a giant and wearing an old-fashioned ladies' suit made of shining, creamy white silk that looked just like the moonlight. She had one arm propped on the other, a narrow, silver watch strap around her wrist. She was smoking the cigarette that was held between her fingers. Her red nail polish and lipstick were exactly the same shade as her high-heeled shoes.

“Smoking is bad for you,” the girl said.

The woman smiled and nodded, and sat down on the floor with a sigh, all the marionettes gladly making space for her. Her legs and feet in their high heels lay side by side, like those of a deer. And she was already holding a silver ashtray in which to stub out her cigarette.

“You're right, smoking is bad for you. But in my time, it was just what people did.”

“In your time? What do you mean?”

“Come now, dear heart, what do you think I mean? I died a long time ago!”

The girl shuddered, but what could she do?

“Do not be afraid, my girl,” Princess Li Si said again. She was now kneeling beside the woman on the floor, just as Chinese princesses do.

“Who are you?” the girl asked in a soft voice.

“I’m Hatü.”

“Hatü?”

“It sounds funny, doesn’t it?” The woman smiled at the girl. “My sister came up with it. My real name is Hannelore, but she couldn’t say that when she was little.”

“Hatü,” the girl repeated. “I think that’s a lovely name.”

“Hatü,” comes a whisper in her ear. “Are you asleep?”

Hatü tries hard not to laugh. She is lying on her back; a cloud drifts across the sun and throws a shadow onto her closed eyelids. Then the heat starts to burn her skin again. The grass tickles her bare arms, and her bare feet, too. She smells the scent of the warm meadow, above which not a breath of wind stirs. All she can hear is the loud chirping of the crickets. Sometimes they stop, as if they are holding their breath, and for a long moment it is deathly silent. She imagines the Lord God looking down on them both in the long grass, lying there in their matching dirndls with red aprons, which their mother made them specially for the holidays. From up there, she imagines, they are two puppets in a meadow. She turned eight in March, and her sister is nine already. And she feels something so strongly that it rises hot from her belly: how much she loves Ulla.

“I want to tell you a secret,” Hatü whispers.

“What kind of a secret?” her sister whispers back, her lips right by Hatü’s ear. She can feel the hot gust of her breath.

Hatü turns her head to Ulla and opens her eyes. The sisters aren’t twins, but they are very alike, and when she looks at Ulla, Hatü always feels as though she is looking in a mirror.

“I like Papa better than anything in the world.”

“More than me?”

Hatü nods. She is so happy to have said it, and she knows her sister isn't cross with her. And in fact, Ulla puts her arms around her. She can't say how long they lie like that in the grass; the world seems to stand still.

“Hatü?” Ulla whispers eventually. “Look over there.” She points towards the mountains.

Hatü turns around and squints across the valley.

“Just now, the sun was exactly above that peak there. That one's called Elfer, because it was just eleven o'clock. And now the sun is going over to the Zwölferkopf. When it's above that, it'll be midday.”

Hatü contemplates the farmhouses in the valley, sees the cows – little dots in the pasture – and is just able to make out the thin, cold glitter of the Breitach river, which flows through everything. And at that moment, she also spots her mother. She is walking quickly up the grassy slope, waving at them, and Hatü can already hear her calling.

The sisters bound down the meadow towards her and throw themselves into her arms. Mama is in such a rush to get them back to the farmhouse that they don't dare ask what's going on. Papa has already got the blue DKW out of the barn and is busy strapping the suitcases to the luggage rack on its roof. Mama sends the children off to the lavatory one more time, one of them waiting outside the door for the other. Hatü senses that something bad has happened, and tries helplessly to commit to memory the holiday apartment where they have been escaping the city heat for the past two weeks: the dining table with the oil lamp on it, the two bunk beds, the red and blue curtains, the black wooden balcony with the roof hanging low over it. When the sisters come clattering back down the wooden stairs, Papa is already sitting behind the steering wheel and Mama is waiting by the wide-open passenger door to bundle them into the back seat. There is no sign of their hosts, the old farmer and his wife, from whom the girls have fetched the milk every morning in a dented metal pitcher.

Their father turns the car around in the farmyard and pulls out onto the dirt track that leads to the road. The sisters kneel on the back seat, saying

nothing, watching sadly through the oval rear window as the farmhouse with its huge old chestnut trees gets smaller and smaller in the dust that the car throws up, as if it is trying to make their whole holiday vanish behind a veil.

“Strange that you found me,” Hatü said, pensively. “It’s a very old building, full of secret doors and staircases, built in the Middle Ages with thick walls and passageways that once served some purpose, though no one now remembers what. No one has ever come up here to me before. But then, coming up here does mean you have to shrink.”

“What do you mean, shrink?”

“Sweetheart! Do you think I’m a giant?”

Hatü already had another cigarette in her hand. She lit it with a silver lighter that she then put down beside the silver ashtray. The smoke rose through the moonlight, and the girl watched it rise, a soft, grey wisp vanishing into the immensely high, night-black roof. She nodded, fearfully.

Hatü smiled and shook her head, as if at a toddler who doesn’t understand something quite simple. “The marionettes are not as tall as you are, sweetheart. *You* are now as small as *them*. And I made them all!”

With the burning cigarette, Hatü gestured proudly at the figures that surrounded them.

The girl had quite forgotten the countless marionettes, who were looking at the pair of them, quiet as mice.

“You made them?”

Hatü nodded.

“My Papa gave me a DVD of Jim Button once.”

“And did you like it?”

“Yeah, it was good. But I’m not a little child any more. I’m twelve.”

Hatü shook her head with a smile. “Of course you’re a child. And you’re very little now, as well. Did you watch Jim Button together then, you and your Papa?”

“Papa hasn’t lived with us for a long time.”

Hatü smoked in silence, looking at the sad girl sitting in front of her on the carpet of moonlight. When she had stubbed out the cigarette in the small silver ashtray, she said: “Like all children, I too had a father. And I was much younger than you when he went away, and I didn’t know if I’d ever see him again.”

The girl looked inquisitively up at the woman. “Why did he leave?”
“He had to go to war.”

“Thank God! The telegram arrived!”

August Kratzert is waiting for them in the courtyard at Donauwörther Straße. The bald-headed master wainwright lives in their building. He, his wife Uschi and their little boy Theo have an apartment on the ground floor, and the workshop and the large hall where he builds omnibuses are right behind the apartment block. The girls’ father exchanges no more than a few words of greeting with August; he starts unstrapping the suitcases at once and lifting them down from the luggage rack.

The apartment’s dark rooms are filled with the heat of a summer fortnight. Mama throws open shutters and windows and busies herself in the kitchen, cooking something for lunch, their father disappears into the bathroom, and Hatü goes from room to room, marvelling at how unfamiliar everything seems. The embroidered white cloth on the round table in the dining room, the sofa and piano beside the dark bookcase in the living room, her parent’s bedroom, where the shutters are still closed and the meagre light is picked up by the green and gold counterpane and the mirror of the elegant dressing table. Even the girls’ own room appears transformed. Ulla is lying on her bed, reading. Hatü sits down on the floor and gets out her dolls, which she hasn’t seen for two weeks.

But she can’t stop thinking about the journey. The way the needle of the DKW’s speedometer shuddered. Landsberg am Lech flew past, Igling, Kaufering, Hurlach. At the Lechfeld airbase, a large military plane roared off over their heads. Their mother asked if it was likely to be going to Poland,

but their father didn't reply. The sisters watched the plane go, with its glass nose and twin propellers, the red swastika resplendent on its rudder. Watched it circling upwards into the still-cloudless sky. They saw a second plane, and a third, and then they all disappeared from view. A little later, the Siebentisch woods appeared on their right-hand side, where they sometimes went for walks on a Sunday, and then the Red Gate. And although Hatü had been feeling sad about leaving the meadow at the forest's edge, she was now looking forward to seeing everything again. There seemed to be even more swastika flags than usual hanging on the Perlach Tower and city hall, and the lengths of red fabric, packed close together, billowed sluggishly in the heat. The Augustus fountain lay deserted, and there wasn't a soul to be seen outside the shops on Hohe Weg, hardly any cars on the road.

Over lunch, their parents barely speak a word, and the sisters still don't dare to ask what's going on. They have fried potatoes with bacon, and the only sound is the clink of cutlery. It is only later, when their parents call them into the hallway, that they understand what has happened. The tension of the whole day is released and Hatü starts to cry; she sobs, her arms limp at her sides, the whole of her little body heaving and the tears falling on the dirndl's red apron, and through the tears she looks at her father, who is now standing before her in uniform, an unfamiliar figure in the grey jacket with the grey metal buttons and the silver eagle with the swastika on his chest, and as she weeps she stares at the grey trousers and the black boots, which she has never seen on him before, the steel helmet on his head, and she knows this is war. They are at war now. Papa crouches down and takes Hatü in his arms. It's a long time before she can stop crying, and he holds her tight until she does. Wipes the tears from her face with his pocket handkerchief, before he leaves.

It is really just a large wooden board that her father has used to block up the doorway between the dining room and the living room, but he has painted it lovingly, with pillars and twining flowers, a nymph on a rearing horse, and when the closed shutters in the board swing open to either side like double doors, the sisters and their mother are suddenly sitting in an auditorium, not a living room, and their eyes fall on a tiny stage that looks just like one in a real theatre. The surprise their father has been planning is a fabulous success! They clap delightedly. They can already hear the clack of footsteps, and then Hansel appears. He comes slowly out from the wings, takes a few steps, looks around as if everything were still strange to him. And finally, he walks down onto the forestage and beckons to them.

“If I might be permitted to invite you to visit!”

The girls leap up at once and run into the dining room. They stand in the doorway, astonished to see what their father has spent every spare minute working on down in the workshop for the last few weeks: the whole room is taken up with a wooden rack that reaches almost to the ceiling, with marionettes hanging from it, and tiny spotlights, and their father is now busy taking more marionettes out of a chest. Hansel is already there, and now Gretel comes to join him. She has blonde plaits made of wool. Their father has given the hunchbacked, big-nosed witch a broom to hold. There is a deer as well, a tiny butterfly, and the little woodland bird that pecks up the breadcrumbs in the fairy tale. And finally, the beautiful fairy Zimberimbimba, balancing on her shiny ball.

Their father takes off his shoes and climbs onto the dining table, which he has pulled up to the back of the stage.

“This is our puppeteers’ platform, where we stand to work the puppets,” he says, looking down at his daughters.

Ulla shakes her head sceptically, but Hatü has already climbed up.

“We take hold of the marionettes like this,” Papa says, demonstrating for her, “and when we’ve finished with them, we hang them up again, like so.”

He explains the stage trolley, where the various backdrops will later stand. At present there is one with a forest painted on it, and the witch’s cottage.

“Crawl under the table for me, Ulla. There’s a plywood box under there with three switches on it. They’re labelled *Lamp 1*, *Lamp 2* and *Lamp 3*. That’s the light-board. Flick the first switch, will you?”

Ulla crawls under the table and does as her father says. The stage is now bathed in a warm evening glow. Mama applauds from the living room. Papa takes Gretel from her hook, flies her over the backdrop and puts the cross-shaped controller into Hatü’s hands. Now Ulla climbs onto the table as well. Papa gives Hansel to her.

“And now, let’s rehearse!”

To begin with, the sisters have a hard job making sure that their marionettes’ feet are touching the stage, as if they were really standing on it, but they are helped by their experience with Kaspar and Balthasar. While they are still practising, their father takes the witch down from her hook and she floats down onto the stage between Hansel and Gretel.

Mama, watching from the living room, clears her throat and says in a very creepy voice: “Nibble, nibble, little mouse, who is nibbling at my house?”

The sisters make Hansel and Gretel scurry towards one another in fright, because the marionettes are just as afraid as they are themselves. They whisper: “The wind, the wind, the child of the sky.”

Then the witch crooks her forefinger and lures Hansel towards her, a gesture that looks quite uncanny. Hatü has been begging her father to make a marionette that can move a finger, just like in the book *Pole Poppenspüler*, and now it delights her as much as it gives her the creeps. Hansel walks slowly over to the wicked witch, his wooden feet clacking across the stage; in a moment, she will trap him in a cage. It’s as though the marionettes are alive, and it doesn’t matter that the girls are holding them by their strings, so engrossed are they in the fairy tale. Then their father suddenly jerks the

controller up and the witch flies out of the scene. The sisters turn to him with a look of surprise.

“This is the heartstring,” he says, drawing an invisible line in the air from poor Hansel to the girls.

“The heartstring?” Hatü asks.

“A marionette’s most important string. We don’t use it to move the puppets; they use it to move us. A marionette’s heartstring makes us believe it’s alive, because it’s fastened to the heart of the person watching.”

“You made that up, Papa!” Ulla cries.

Her father laughs. He has lit himself a Juno and the ashtray is perched on the corner of the stage. He draws the smoke deep into his lungs and blows it out, before making that invisible line in the air again with the glowing tip of his cigarette.

“What, can’t you see it?”

The sisters hear applause coming from the living room, and as if wanting to leave the strange word behind them, they rush over to their mother.

“How did we do?” Ulla asks.

“Wonderfully!”

Mama embraces them both. But there is still something missing, she says, and disappears for a moment into the bedroom, returning with a dress made of light blue silk.

“That’s your Luise costume!” Papa exclaims.

“Yes, that’s my Luise costume. But I don’t need it any more: I’m not an actress now, I’m a costumier. For our very own theatre!”

The girls cry out in horror as their mother tears up the dress.

“Oh, stuff and nonsense!” she says. “Ulla, come and help me.”

The sewing machine starts to rattle away in the kitchen, and Hatü and her father stand before the empty stage.

“Do you know why I am so very fond of marionettes?” he asks.

Hatü gives him a quizzical look.

“The strings they hang from are fixed right at their centre, which makes you think there is something like a soul behind their movements. But

their limbs are just following the law of gravity. A law they don't know. As little as they know vanity. All people are vain. And all people need a floor to stand on. But marionettes use the floor like fairies do, they merely brush across it. That's what gives them their grace. Do you see?"

"Grace?"

"Yes, grace."

Before Hatü can ask her father more about this word she doesn't know, her mother comes back from the kitchen and fixes a length of blue silk to the painted stage front with a few pins.

"There: our puppet cabinet," Mama says with satisfaction.

The Puppet Cabinet. Hatü likes the name; it sounds sumptuous. She looks happily at the tiny stage.

"But shouldn't a stage curtain be red?" Ulla asks.

Papa shakes his head.

"In human theatres, yes: red is the colour of our blood. But marionettes have no blood. Their theatre is the colour of the sky."

Hatü was lying on the floor, not speaking, her hand over her closed eyes and her suit gleaming in the moonlight. The girl was still sitting in front of her. She looked at Hatü as if she might still find in her the child that this woman had once been. Eventually, Hatü opened her eyes and lit another cigarette. And began to sing, as the smoke streamed out of her mouth:

"Hansel and Gretel got lost in the woods.

It was so dark, and so very cold.

They came to a house made of gingerbread.

Whose house could this be? little Hansel said."

"Was your father a Nazi?"

The singing halted abruptly. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, because he didn't have to fight in the war any more. And because he could work on the theatre again. Didn't all the people who were against the Nazis run away?"

Hatü shook her head, a serious expression on her face. “No, it wasn’t like that. But honestly, my sister and I didn’t give it any real thought, either. Not before the end of the war.”

“Your father smoked, too.”

“That’s true,” said Hatü. She pointed upwards with the hand that held the cigarette. “Look how the smoke floats through the air. Just as weightless as the marionettes.”

The girl saw Princess Li Si following the smoke with her eyes as it rose from the burning tip. The old stork looked up, too, before laying his tired beak back down on the floor beside his long, folded legs. Next to him on the edge of the moonlight carpet sat the Little Prince with his golden hair, and he too was looking longingly after the smoke, as it curled and rose and vanished into the darkness among the rafters.

“I don’t understand the part about grace,” the girl said, thoughtfully.

“Do you do ballet?”

The girl nodded.

“And can you do the splits?”

The girl nodded again. She leapt up to stand in the centre of the moonlight carpet and sank into box splits. Slowly, she leaned forward until her chest was flat on the floor.

“Bravo! And what else can you do?”

She got up again and demonstrated the ballet positions with *port de bras*, turned a precise pirouette and then took a few short, fast steps ending in an arabesque, her arms elegantly outstretched.

“Bravo again! But marionettes are different. Shall I show you?”

The girl couldn’t imagine what Hatü meant. But she nodded all the same.

“Sure? And you’re not frightened?”

Of course she was frightened, but she was curious, too. She pressed her lips firmly together and shook her head.

Hatü stubbed out the cigarette in the silver ashtray and stood up. Immensely tall, she held out her arms above the girl, palms downwards, and

the girl felt herself beginning to grow lighter. As if the weight were dripping off her like water. At first it was her arms that felt lighter, then her legs, then her head, and then the girl felt as if she wasn't standing on the floor at all any more, but hovering and just pretending to stand, and it was a wonderful feeling. As if by magic, she suddenly rose onto the tips of her toes, like a real ballerina. She looked happily up at Hatü, who smiled at her and then jerked one hand sharply upwards.

The girl flew up into the air, as if there were strings attached to her head, to her thighs, to her hands, to her shoulders, pulling her upwards. But unlike the trampoline in the garden or the time she had been on a plane with her parents, going on holiday, and it had hit an air pocket, it didn't feel like all her limbs were moving independently, but as if her body was dancing in the air. A dance she had always dreamed of. She was performing all these pirouettes, *sautés*, *ballottées* and *grand jetés* for the first time, and managing them with unreal ease. She flitted across the moonlight carpet as if it were a stage.

After a while, Hatü spread her fingers and the girl's arms stretched out wide; she pulled the other hand up and the girl found herself horizontal in the air, like a bird. This was no longer a dance: she was flying! Hatü moved a forefinger and the girl's head looked around. She peered down at the marionettes, who were crowding around the edge of the moonlight carpet in rows that stretched all the way back into the darkness, and saw that all eyes were following her flight, all the puppet heads with their carved eyeballs, on which the shining upholstery nails glowed like pupils.

It was lovely to fly like this! But also slightly eerie: it felt as though every part of her body wanted something, but it wasn't her own mind doing the wanting. Hatü raised both hands, and the girl was suddenly floating very close to her face. Small as a hummingbird before a flower, she hovered for a long moment in Hatü's smile. Then Hatü carefully lowered the girl again. She felt her feet gliding across the floor without touching it, still quite weightless and moving in just the same way she had always imagined fairies did.

Finally, Hatü lowered both arms and at that moment, the girl regained her weight and she felt for the first time what it is to be human, when every part of you wants to sink down and you have to struggle incessantly against the pull of the earth. She stood there, a little shaky and astonished, looking at Hatü in disbelief.

The guests are spread around the entrance hall as if they're waiting in the foyer of a theatre for the bell to ring and summon them in. Papa is pouring sparkling wine. The Krohers and their two boys have just arrived. Vroni is there, too, her eyes shining as she whispers into Hatü's ear how excited she is. Carola Wagner, as beautiful as ever in a dress with a plunging neckline, has brought along a young debutante from the Stadttheater, who shows her large, white teeth when she laughs. Moritz Hauschild, one of her father's former assistant directors, seems embarrassed by the laughter. He has just returned from the front and is the only one in uniform. Hatü spots the Iron Cross between the tabs on his collar. The left arm of his uniform jacket, neatly ironed flat and fastened with a safety pin, is empty. Erna Kroher holds out her glass towards Papa. Hatü watches him refill it and then go to the door to welcome that evening's guest of honour, whose coat and hat Mama is just taking at the coat stand.

Erich Pabst was the artistic director in Osnabrück when her parents first met there. He then convinced them to come to Augsburg with him. Since he left the city again in 1936, they have seen each other only rarely. He is all dressed up in white tie and tails. And a monocle like his great idol Fritz Lang, in whose silent film *Destiny* he had a small role as a young actor. Hatü's father beckons his daughters over and they both shake hands politely with the famous director.

“It's my eldest's birthday today.”

“And how old are you?” Pabst smiles at Ulla.

“Thirteen,” she says, shyly. It is 15th November, 1942. She is glad when Pabst takes no further notice of her.

“You know, *Destiny* was really a Grimm fairy tale, too,” says Pabst.

“*Godfather Death*,” her father nods.

“Yes, of course. Lang always used to say that you learn most about the things that trouble our minds from fairy tales. They are the manual from which we learn to read our own emotions as children. And so we never cease to be captivated by them.”

Hatü is much too excited to listen. Her eyes dart about. The Kratzerts are here now, too; Papa invited them because the chassis-builder has given him the use of his workshop over the last few months. August Kratzert is sweating in the suit he is unused to wearing, and Theo seems uncomfortable in his Hitler Youth uniform as well. The memory of him badgering her in the courtyard catches Hatü unawares again, and she quickly looks away.

“Do you remember when we managed to get Strauss over here?” Pabst slaps her father on the shoulder with a laugh. “That *Elektra* at the open-air theatre was a triumph!”

“Yes,” her father nods. “But I sweated blood for it!”

“You were young. And now look at you! Head of the Reich Theatre Association for the whole of Bavaria.”

Her father shakes his head morosely.

“They say,” Carola Wagner puts in as she comes to join the men’s conversation, “that on the same day Fritz Lang was offered the directorship of the state film studio, he left everything behind and took the night train to Paris.”

She pauses and gives Pabst a questioning look. “And then went straight to America.”

Before Pabst can say anything, the doorbell rings again and everyone turns to see Hatü’s mother greet the newly-arrived guest. It’s an old man who clearly finds walking difficult. His suit, with a gold watch chain strung across the waistcoat, has seen better days. Vroni suddenly appears beside Hatü and slips her hand into hers. *Half-Jew*, she whispers, startling Hatü, as her mother leads the guest in very slowly. Pabst looks surprised; he tries to make a joke, but no one laughs.

“Arthur! Great to see you’re still with us!”

Arthur Piechler clearly feels uncomfortable with all these people eyeing him up. A flickering, apologetic smile flits across his face. But he can’t help the fact that everyone is unsettled by his presence: they don’t know what threat the composer – who is famed throughout the city – might be facing. And they are also unsettled because they know full well that what threatens him is no threat to them at all. It is as though he were already gone. They look at him as if he is a ghost, and the leaden silence that settles over the assembled guests is one that Erich Pabst in particular finds unbearable. The composer is an unwelcome reminder of his own guilt. As director of the theatre, he dismissed the Jewish bandleader. There were reasons, there were considerations, but it wasn’t strictly necessary. He feels he cannot bear this silence a minute longer, and through the monocle, his gaze falls on a plump boy in a Hitler Youth uniform.

“So then, squirt!” he calls over to him. “How’s the final victory looking?”

Theo’s face turns beetroot red.

“Oh, leave the boy alone, Pabst.”

Arthur Piechler lays a gentle hand on Theo’s shoulder. The two men look at one another. Then Rose Oehmichen bangs the gong three times.

There is a general sigh of relief, and everyone streams into the living room and distributes themselves across the armchairs and dining chairs that are laid out in a semi-circle around the proscenium arch of the Puppet Cabinet. Last to take their seats, with a touch of the diva about them, are Carol Wagner and the debutante. Their little theatre has an audience of fifteen, at least, Hatü thinks proudly.

She has made a sign that says *Stage Door*, and stuck it to the door of the dining room, which she now closes behind her. Excitedly, she takes Gretel’s controller down from the hook and calls to mind one final time what the past weeks of rehearsal have imprinted on her flesh and blood. This is the main bar, and its two strings control the marionette’s whole attitude. Gretel shakes her head. This is the foot bar, to which the strings for the legs are

attached. Gretel takes a few steps. This is the shoulder bar, attached to the cross only loosely; it carries the marionette’s whole weight and ensures that its head can move freely. And finally the hand bar. Gretel waves up at her. Then there is the string attached to the marionette’s posterior, which allows it to take a bow.

The heartstring doesn’t exist. And yet there it is, in the uncanny transformation that Hatü experiences every time a single movement of her raised hands appears to turn the clacking contraption of wood and screws and strings into a living thing with desires and intentions. But now is not the time for such thoughts; Hatü can hear her father in the next room, telling everyone he hopes they enjoy the show. She listens to the rustling and the scrape of chairs, the coughing and whispering which, as in a real theatre, gradually dies away.

Ulla and her parents come in. Everyone knows what they have to do. The two girls and their father climb quietly onto the puppeteers’ platform. *Break a leg!* he whispers, winding up a little music box. As the melody begins, he turns the small wheel and the shutters slowly open. It seems to Hatü that the silence in the next room grows a little more silent still, and she imagines the curtain now shimmering pale blue in the half-light. Her father looks down and nods to her mother, who draws the curtain back as the last enchanting notes ring out, and switches on the stage lights. The parlour in the house where the woodcutter and his family live appears, dimly lit. Ulla is holding the controllers for Hansel and Gretel, who are lying in their little beds, not moving.

“Whatever shall become of us?” Papa says. His marionette hangs its head. “How can we feed our poor children when we have nothing for ourselves?”

From the side of the stage, their mother says: “I tell you what, Husband: tomorrow morning, we will take the children out into the forest, where the trees are thickest. We’ll make a fire for them and give them one last piece of bread before we go to work. They won’t find their way home, and then we will be rid of them.”

“No, Wife,” Papa says. His marionette shakes its head grimly. “That I will not do! How could I bring myself to leave my children alone in the forest? Wild beasts would soon come and tear them to pieces.”

“Oh, you fool!” Mama says, “All four of us will starve to death, and all you can do is plane the wood for the coffins.”

“But I feel so sorry for the poor children.” Papa’s voice now sounds desperately sad. His marionette crumples at the table.

The girls’ mother switches the footlight off, and now the parlour is lit only by the moon, a disc of parchment in the window on the backdrop, behind which their father has clipped a little lamp. Hatü quickly passes him the mother marionette and takes Gretel from Ulla, who is waiting to hand her over.

“Now we are done for,” she says, making Gretel shake her head dully in her bed. She focuses on Ulla.

“Quiet, Gretel,” Ulla’s Hansel replies. “Do not fret, I will save us.”

The curtain swishes closed, the light blue silk swinging back and forth for a moment. Now everything happens so quickly that Hatü has no time to think about her performance. Her mother is already wheeling over the next stage trolley, changing the lighting, and the curtain opens again. It is daytime, and the mother says: “Now lie down by the fire and rest, children, and we will go into the forest and chop wood. When we have finished, we will come back and fetch you.”

But the parents don’t come back. Ulla says: “We’ll find our own way.”

But they don’t find their way. They walk all night, and another whole day from morning to evening, without getting out of the forest, and with nothing to eat but the berries they pick along the way. Now it is the third morning, and if help doesn’t come soon, they will surely perish. Then Papa picks up the beautiful snow-white bird and makes it flap across the stage, singing as it goes. It flies ahead of Hansel and Gretel, and they follow it until they reach a little house, where the bird perches on the roof. It is made entirely of bread and roofed with cake, and the windows are made of clear sugar.

Ulla glances at Hatü and smiles. In her rich Hansel voice, she says: “Let’s help ourselves to a good meal. I shall have a piece of the roof, and Gretel, you eat the window, it will be sweet.”

She makes Hansel stretch his arms up high, which means that she herself has to stand on tiptoe and hold the controller above her head. And Hatü makes Gretel trot over to the window, moving the puppet’s head as if she is licking a lollipop. The marionettes don’t want to stop, and the sisters understand them only too well. No matter what efforts their mother goes to, there are still days when they get up from the table hungry. The very thought of gingerbread, honey cake, spiced biscuits! It reminds Hatü of the Christmas market, which was even darker and sadder this year than last.

“Nibble, nibble, little mouse, who is nibbling at my house?” Mama finally cries.

Ulla and Hatü, bending over the stage with the controllers in their hands, answer with one voice: “The wind, the wind, the child of the sky!”

Since a marionette’s strings will not allow it to pass through a doorway, the witch comes out from behind the façade of the cottage. “Ah, you dear children, who brought you here? Now come in and stay with me, no harm will come to you.”

She crooks the finger of her right hand, something Papa has spent a long time practising: it requires its own string, which has to be fastened to the marionette in an unusual way. The way the old woman beckons the children looks unearthly. And so the play moves slowly towards its conclusion. Hatü performs as the good fairy Zimberimbimba, who stands on a shining ball and is her father’s own invention. And the cage comes onto the stage.

“Hansel, stick out your finger so I can feel how fat you’ve grown,” the girls’ mother cries out in her most dreadful witch voice. At a moment when Hansel’s hand is hidden from view, Hatü quickly fixes the little bone into it, and he holds it out to the witch.

And then Gretel is standing in front of the oven, which Papa welded together from sheet iron in the workshop. It glows inside, and real smoke is rising from it. “But I don’t know how. How do I get in?”

“You silly goose,” says the witch. “The door is big enough, look, I could get in myself.”

She totters over and sticks her head into the oven. Hatü’s father is standing beside her, their arms touching as they work the controllers. They don’t take their eyes off what is happening on the stage for a second. A trick is needed to make it look to the audience as if the witch is really disappearing into the oven, and they both have to concentrate hard to make it work. Even so, Hatü thinks of the factory, the heat and the molten steel. How terrible it must be to burn up in an oven! And she can’t help thinking of old Mrs Friedmann and the empty sleeve of poor Moritz Hauschild’s uniform jacket. And then she realises that her father is looking at her, wondering why she is hesitating. Gretel gives the witch a shove, closes the iron door and slides the bolt across. Whew! *Then she starts up a terrible howling, but Gretel runs away, and the godless witch burns wretchedly to death.*

The marionettes silently made way, and Hansel and Gretel stepped forward, Gretel with her checked dress and thick woollen pigtails standing beside the dishevelled Hansel. Their bare wooden feet clacked across the floor. At once, Hansel began to lay white pebbles down across the moonlight carpet, and the pebbles gleamed in the light like silver sixpences. The girl watched as he slowly placed one after another on the floor, and her heart grew heavy. When Hansel had run out of pebbles, he sat down with Gretel in the centre of the patch of light.

“I’d like to go home now,” the girl said.

Hatü, who had been watching the marionettes without speaking, looked over at the girl. “And do you know where that is?”

The girl thought of her mother and her bedroom, her friends and her school, and then she thought again of her father, who must surely be looking for her.

“No,” she said, sadly.

“Then I suppose you will have to stay with us.” Hatü began to sing softly again: “Hansel and Gretel were lost in the woods. It was so dark, and so bitterly cold.”

The song made the girl feel even sadder. But then Princess Li Si knelt down, just as Chinese princesses do, beside Hatü on the floor. “Don’t be afraid, my dear,” she whispered to the girl. “Now that you can fly, you are one of us.”

The girl studied the marionettes that surrounded her uncertainly, imagining what it would be like if the princess was right and she could be one of them. A dancer, maybe, like the one from the fairy tale about the steadfast tin soldier. Weightless and light forever, her body not caring what she thought or wanted.

[END OF SAMPLE]