

SWING RIDE

by Constanze Neumann

Sample Translation by Imogen Taylor

Later

‘Life goes on,’ my grandfather said, rubbing his hands. He was proud of his hands—the long, slender fingers, the elegantly rounded nails. All the men in his family had hands like that.

I was twelve. He was sitting in his armchair, looking out of the window. ‘I was always good at maths,’ he said. ‘Numbers are important. On 26 March 1943, they came for my father, your great-grandfather. And thirty years later, almost to the day, you were born. Life goes on.’

He was far away in his thoughts and I couldn’t follow him—couldn’t ask him what those numbers hid. It was pure chance that he got onto the subject. He had picked up the book I was reading—*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* by Judith Kerr. It was the story of the little girl that Kerr had once been, and how she had fled the Nazis with her family, first to Switzerland, then to France, and finally to England.

‘Judith,’ he said, out of the blue, turning the pages of the book. ‘My cousin Julia’s daughter.’ I looked at him in astonishment. My grandfather had no brothers or sisters, no aunts or uncles, no cousins of any kind. All those slender-fingered men in his family were the stuff of legend; I had never set eyes on them.

Then he got up and left the room, unsteady on his feet as always, shuffling in that strange way that was so familiar to me. ‘He lost his sense of balance,’ my mother and grandmother would sometimes say, ‘when they beat him up on his way home from the camp.’

The words never varied and I couldn't remember a time when they didn't exist. Like my grandfather's numbers, they were a part of my world.

Later, at university, I came across the writings of Alfred Kerr, Judith's father, and thought of that day when my grandfather had first mentioned his cousin, Julia Weismann, Alfred Kerr's second wife. By then I knew that my grandfather came from a big family and that all his uncles and aunts and cousins had left Germany, never to return, and made lives for themselves elsewhere. All that remained were a few graves in German cemeteries and some documents that I tracked down on the internet: birth certificates, marriage certificates, passenger lists of ships to Britain, the United States, Brazil, India, Africa. All other traces of them were lost; I knew very little about them.

I didn't know much about Heinrich Reichenheim either—my great-grandfather who had remained in Germany.

Then my grandfather began to tell me about his childhood and family: fragments from the past, memories of the happy years growing up in Dresden, before the shadows fell. He told me about his mother who was never accepted by his father's family because she didn't fit into their world. About his only visit to his snobbish paternal grandmother. About a cousin who had emigrated to Brazil and tried to persuade him to join her there after the war.

When my grandfather died, these memories were supplemented by a small collection of objects: a silver coffee spoon engraved with his initials; a photograph of an 1881 oil painting of a young woman in a white ball dress—the grandmother who hadn't wanted to see him; another photo, of his father with his adored dachshund, taken at a time when he was no longer allowed out on the street with the dog; and a photocopy of a family chronicle from 1936, written in the face of looming extermination.

I stared at these things, trying to make sense of them, but they didn't tell me the story I was looking for. I pored over the family chronicle, reading about factories in Silesia and England, textile firms in Leipzig and Berlin; about bankers, politicians and art collectors. What fates did these facts conceal?

They were numbers and dates such as my grandfather had clung to all his life.

But I had inherited neither his elegant hands nor his gift for maths. The numbers meant nothing to me. I needed stories—even if they no longer existed.

Part I

ANNA

1864–1905

1

‘Once upon a time, there was a poor little orphan girl who lived at the edge of a big forest with a charcoal burner and his wife. These people were hard-hearted to her and made her work from morning till night. One day, the charcoal burner’s wife found a spider’s web in the kitchen. She scolded the girl and went to kill the spider with her shoe, but the girl was quicker and carried the spider out to safety.

Another day, a jug slipped out of the girl’s hands and broke, and the charcoal burner’s wife chased her out of the house. The girl ran into the forest crying. She ran and she ran, through bracken and brambles, and soon she was in the deepest, darkest part of the forest.

In the evening, the girl came to a small mossy clearing and dropped to the ground in exhaustion. Dusk was falling and the moss was so dark and soft that the girl fell asleep at once. When she awoke, the moon was shining into the clearing. She saw a silver thread and at the end of the thread she saw a spider.

‘Hold on tight and climb up to Heaven, little girl,’ said the spider.

And the little orphan girl took hold of the thread. It was soft and strong as the finest yarn and she climbed up quickly until she came to the meadows of Heaven. When she looked about her, she saw the spider, and the spider said to her, ‘As you helped me, so I will help you. You have a kind heart and you shall choose a husband for yourself. But choose wisely. Here are two brothers, the Sun Prince and the Moon Prince. One of them shall be yours.’

At that, two young men appeared before the girl. The Sun Prince was so dazzling that she had to turn her eyes away from his face. But the Moon Prince was pale and gentle, and the girl could look into his kind face without fear.

The girl said to the spider, 'I cannot take the Sun Prince; there is such a terrible blaze in his eyes. I will take the Moon Prince.'

Hardly had the words left her mouth than the Moon Prince came to her and carried her up to Heaven. And to this day the little orphan girl wanders the heavens with her husband the Moon.'

'What happened to the Sun Prince, Father?'

'Wasn't he all bright and shiny? Wasn't he terribly handsome?'

'Are the stars the little orphan girl's children?'

'Have you seen her, Father? Have you?'

Anna snuggled close to her father and gazed up into his face, while her two little sisters Margarethe and Marie plied him with questions.

Anna wouldn't have chosen either of the brothers, neither the Moon Prince nor the Sun Prince; she was going to marry Father. She had turned eight in January and was quite certain that there was no handsomer or cleverer man in the world.

'Not so loud, please, Isidor. Nanny's put Henriette to bed and she needs quiet. And don't put nonsense into the little ones' heads—that silly story about spiders and suns and moons. Marriages are made by God, not silver spiders. That's how it was with us and it's what the rabbi teaches.'

Mother always got upset when Father told the fairy tale that Anna and her sisters loved so much. She seldom argued with Father, but whenever he told the story about the spider,

her face and neck came out in red blotches, and the children knew she was angry. She kept her eyes lowered and her voice calm, but she invariably came up with a pretext for putting an end to the storytelling. And Father didn't protest, although he disliked being told what to do and was usually quick to lose his temper. He only smiled and got a faraway look in his eyes. Was he dreaming of all the places he had been to? Berlin, London, Bradford—the names sounded strange and wonderful to Anna. He had even been to Paris.

He never told them who had told *him* the fairy tale. Could he have heard it in Paris or London—maybe from a sailor who had travelled the world and heard the story in some far-flung harbour, on an island full of exotic flowers and trees? No, the forest was the forest of Father's native Silesia; he sometimes elaborated on the story, telling the children of firs and oaks, of ferns and mushrooms and berries. While Mother yearned for what Father called the 'village', he spoke only with disdain of narrow alleyways, bad smells, nosy neighbours and the dirty classroom where he had been to school as a little boy.

But he spoke with intense longing of the forest, the rolling hills of his childhood, the pale green of spring. He talked about them with Grandfather when he visited from Silesia.

'If you want to get to the office today, you'll have to hurry. It's almost Shabbat.'

There it was—the pretext. Anna looked up at her father, who pressed her close to him, his arm around her shoulder.

'Very well, I'll be going. The carriage is waiting. And you, Anna, are coming with me.'

Anna saw Mother stifle the impulse to object. She had already cut short the storytelling; she could hardly put a stop to the outing too—not without incurring the wrath of both father and daughter. *The office is no place for a girl* were words that she often muttered under her breath, but seldom dared say out loud. Anna loved going to the office. She loved the warehouse with its rolls of cloth of all different colours and textures. She loved the big

ledgers where the office boys entered the incoming and outgoing goods. She knew where the cloth came from and where it was going and could recite the names of the cities and countries in her head. Father explained everything to her patiently and was pleased when she knew which cloth was being sold where. Her big brothers, Hugo and Georg, had to study the accounts with Father, and they groaned a great deal—especially Georg. They weren't interested in the cloth or the big ledgers with their columns of numbers, but Father took them along to the office all the same. He had wanted to send Hugo to Berlin, to the firm where he himself had learnt the business, but Mother had persuaded him to wait a while. This had been no easy task and Father had been furious.

'What's the matter with these sons of mine! Why do I go to all this trouble? Your husband will have to run the business, Anna; you're the only one who understands me.'

After this argument, Mother and Father stopped speaking to each other, and Father stopped coming home in the evening. Anna heard one of the servants whisper something about the Italian Cellar and saw Mother box the girl's ears. Respectable men didn't set foot in the Italian Cellar; it was not done even to mention the place.

Sara, the old cook, who had come with Mother from Gleiwitz, comforted her in the kitchen. She was Mother's confidante. Mother called her Chanele when Father wasn't listening and they spoke Yiddish together, which Anna barely understood and Father disapproved of.

'We are not that kind,' he shouted on one occasion when Mother timidly objected that it was the language of her home country.

'Forget about Glewitz, forget about Silesia! That's not what I fought for, it's not what I travel all over Europe for. I didn't go to the trouble of setting up a business here in Leipzig so

that you could harp on Glewitz. We can achieve anything if we move with the times. But that Oriental language isn't going to help us.'

There was a hint of disdain in his voice and Anna could tell that Mother was offended.

'*Gadles ligt oifn mist,*' Mother said. She spoke so softly that Father couldn't hear, but Anna heard, and that night, when she was sitting on Henriette's bed to read to her, she asked what it meant.

Her sister's dark eyes flashed in her pale, haggard face and she laughed.

'*Gadles* means pride. Pride is on the dung heap.' She giggled. 'Where did you pick that up, Annie?'

'I don't know. In the kitchen.' She turned back to the novel and, slowly and distractedly, she began to read.

Anna quickly fetched her cape and put on her new boots of smooth soft leather, before Mother changed her mind and told her she couldn't go.

But all she said was, 'Don't be too late.' A few moments later they were sitting in the carriage, jolting over the cobbles.

'And the thread, Father, that the girl climbs up to get to Heaven?'

'Finest worsted,' Father said, deep in thought. 'We must see if the delivery has arrived from England. Next week's the fair. Everyone wants blended wool Jacquard in red, blue and yellow, Anna, and the best weaving mills are in Bradford.'

He drummed his fingers nervously on the bench and Anna followed his gaze out of the window. The carriage was crossing the Brühl; she saw the furriers' shops, the bustle of the street. Goods were delivered and unloaded daily now; the first merchants had draped their furs over the windowsills as a sign that the trade fair would soon begin. Anna loved the fair.

She loved the comings and goings in Father's office, the strangers, the guests who stayed in their house—close associates of Father, who brought them presents and told them stories. She also loved the travelling performers and the funfairs and the Grossbosesch Gardens outside Grimma Gate that were opened every year for the duration of the fair. She thought of the doughnuts that were sold at the booths, of the fire eaters and sword swallows.

When they stopped outside the office, Father flung open the door and got out. He lifted Anna down from the carriage, taking care not to soil his polished shoes.

Callmann & Eisner English Manufactured Goods, read the brass sign on the building in Katharinenstrasse and, as always, Father's gaze rested on it for a moment.

The office was full of hustle and bustle. The sales clerks and office boys were getting under each other's feet and the buzz of voices was so loud that an office boy standing at a counter writing called out for quiet because he couldn't concentrate.

'No deliveries today.' Anna followed Father into the warehouse where the long rolls of cloth were stored—all different kinds, in every hue and shade: heavy fabric and light fabric, panama, alpaca, Orleans. Father stopped to finger a grey woollen stuff with a fine pale stripe.

'Cotton warp, woollen weft... The weft is English worsted from Yorkshire, mohair... Good and strong, with a nice sheen to it; you can use it for anything: pinafores, linings, gabardines, sack coats... Come here, Anna. Just feel this. You won't find such robust blended wool cloth anywhere else in town. Woven in England—they weave finer, sturdier fabric there than in Silesia. This cloth doesn't rip or wear and it lasts a lifetime.'

Anna gingerly ran her fingers over it.

'Mohair, crossbred, cheviot,' she murmured. How beautiful the words were. She saw her father smile because she had remembered the names. Anna tried to increase her

knowledge at every opportunity, and on good days, her father was quite forthcoming. If only he weren't always being interrupted by people who thought he was wasting his time with her.

'Tell me about Bradford, Father,' she begged him.

'Not now, Anna, I'm too busy. But the day after tomorrow the Reichenheims will be here. The privy councillor has telegraphed; he's bringing Julius and Adolph. Adolph's his youngest—not much older than you. And Julius is just back from Bradford and will be able to tell you far more than I.'

Anna was pleased about the guests, but a little afraid of the austere Louis Reichenheim. Her father still addressed him as 'Mr Councillor Reichenheim', although he'd learnt the trade from him as a young man in Berlin and had known him and his brothers for years.

Father looked up to the Reichenheims as examples and spoke of their business in glowing terms. 'Big mills in Bradford and Silesia,' he said, 'very modern, best quality cloth.' He was proud that they stayed with their former office boy when they came to Leipzig for the fair.

Sometimes the privy councillor visited with his brothers, sometimes without them, but for as long as Anna could remember, he had always been accompanied by his son Julius. Mr Julius was a thin, young man—'weakly', she had heard Father say to Mother. He suffered from a chest complaint and was constantly in and out of sanatoria, so that although he was almost thirty, marriage seemed unlikely.

'Are you coming, Anna?' Father called, and as she ran her fingers over the rolls of cloth, lost in thought, she saw Julius standing on board a ship to England, the dark gabardine that he had worn on his last visit to Leipzig flapping in the wind. He held himself straight and stared out to sea with his pale blue eyes, an earnest look on his face.

2

The last week before the fair passed in a flash. Anna had no time to accompany Father to the office again; she had to help Mother put the house in order and get everything ready for the visitors.

Seven-year-old Margarethe never went to the office; she preferred to play with little Marie. Henriette had to spend so much time resting that, although already thirteen, she was hardly a rival to her sister. But when Father took the boys into work with him, Anna felt a stab of envy. She would far rather have gone along to Katharinenstrasse and helped with the preparations for the fair than stayed at home and set the house to rights.

When the first traders arrived, Father went to Sanders' Inn with Georg and Hugo to meet two cloth merchants. The three of them came home in a very good mood that night; even Georg was cheerful. He told Anna and Margarethe that a merchant from Galicia had shown him a prayer shawl unlike anything he had ever seen—lavishly embroidered in brilliant colours. Anna felt left out. Disappointed, she cast aside the needlework that usually gave her such pleasure. But then Father came over to her. He took up the needlework frame and praised the flowers she had embroidered.

'Will you embroider me a spider next to that flower there?' he whispered in her ear, and her gloomy thoughts were blown away.

The last days went even faster and no sooner was everything ready than the guests arrived: Louis Reichenheim and his sons Julius and Adolph. Julius, a taciturn young man, kept an eye on the younger boy, a boisterous thirteen-year-old who looked nothing like his austere father. He had unruly dark-brown curls, dark eyes beneath straight dark eyebrows, and a narrow face with a sprinkling of freckles on his nose.

Through the open door of the spare room, Anna watched Julius unpack the heavy trunk and hang his and Adolph's things in the wardrobe. Adolph, meanwhile, stood at the window shooting little stones onto the street with a catapult until Julius told him to stop.

Then Julius took a big doll from the bottom of the trunk. Later that evening, when they were all having dinner together, he presented the doll to Anna, Margarethe and Marie.

'She's from France,' he said and explained that she was mechanical and could walk and talk. Father wound her up carefully and she sang a song, fluttered her blue eyes and walked a few steps in a circle. Anna wanted to hold her and stroke her silky blond hair, but Mother took her away. 'You must be careful,' she said. 'The mechanics are delicate.' And she shut the doll away in a cupboard.

Then dinner was served. Louis Reichenheim told Adolph not to bolt his food. When Adolph held his knife in his fist like a sword, he took it away from him and laid it on the table. 'That's enough now,' he said, getting up. 'We've had plenty to eat. Come, there's a lot to discuss.'

Adolph was about to protest, but Julius took him by the hand and led him off to the kitchen.

'Mr Julius knows better than his father that thirteen-year-old boys are always hungry,' Mother said later that evening.

'But Hugo and Georg don't bolt their food like that,' Anna objected. Her brothers had looked on wide-eyed at the spectacle offered by Adolph at the dinner table.

'No. I make sure they behave themselves,' Mother said. 'Mr Reichenheim and his wife are of an age to be grandparents. Mr Julius would be better advised to marry than to play nursemaid to his brother.'

The days of the fair were filled with excitement, even for Anna and her sisters who had to stay at home, waiting for the men to come back and tell them all about it—or at least drop snippets of information about the progress of their deals and the latest curiosities and sensations. For there was more to the fair than business; the traders and merchants who came to Leipzig brought news from all four corners of the world. Time flew and Anna eagerly looked forward to the last day and the outing to the Grossbosesch Gardens.

At the same time, she was afraid that Henriette would be unwell that day and that Mother would ask her to stay in and sit with her. She was ashamed of herself for feeling this way, but remained apprehensive about having to sacrifice her afternoon out.

In the event, though, Mother asked the maid to sit with Henriette, and soon Anna was in the carriage with Margarethe and Marie, dressed in her best pale-green taffeta dress with a lace collar, her dark hair tied with pale green ribbons. Father sat in another carriage with the Reichenheim boys. The privy councillor stayed behind because he had business to attend to.

It was a glorious September day; the air was clear and warm and filled with the rich, aromatic smell of autumn leaves and mushrooms. The sky was a deep blue and the trees had already turned yellow and red.

The nearer they came to the gardens, the slower their progress. The roads were filled with crowds of pedestrians and a never-ending stream of carriages and ‘white elephants’—the white covered wagons that were used to transport exhibition goods. The throng grew denser by the moment; the buzz of voices grew louder and louder. Anna heard foreign languages, shouting and laughter, and she craned her neck longingly towards the gardens. The carriages stopped at the wrought iron railings and she leapt out, followed by her sisters.

‘Stay here,’ Mother called and they waited obediently at the open gate for Father and the Reichenheim boys.

‘Where are the doughnuts?’ Adolph was impatient, his eyes sparkling. ‘I’ve heard they’re much better here than in Berlin.’

Anna felt sorry for Adolph for having to live in a city with inferior doughnuts; maybe, she thought, as he greedily licked jam off his fingers, they could send him some now and then. Only Father didn’t eat any.

‘He’s afraid of getting sugar on his coat,’ Georg said with a laugh, and from the way Father smiled, Anna knew that he was right, but that Father would rather not be teased about it. There was nothing Father hated more than stained clothes or dirty shoes. Everything had to be neat and immaculate and at the height of fashion. He wouldn’t tolerate poor-quality cheap fabric that became scratchy or lost its shape.

They marvelled at a sword swallower and a rubber-limbed lady contortionist whose arms and legs were wound about her as if she didn’t have a bone in her body. Anna stopped and stared at the woman, open-mouthed, and when she woke from her trance the others had disappeared into the throng. She thought she recognised her father’s hat, and ran after it, but the crowd had a life of its own and pushed and jostled her until she lost sight of the hat.

The crush seemed to get denser and denser. Then Anna saw the smoke. The smell of roasted chestnuts and almonds that had hung over the gardens was suddenly pungent and acrid, making her cough. These billowing clouds weren’t coming from the chestnut sellers’ braziers; they were thicker and darker. The first yells rang out. *Fire, fire!*

All at once the smoke was everywhere and Anna couldn’t see more than a few yards ahead. Where was the entrance—was it behind or in front of her? There was only one gate in the high railings that surrounded the gardens. While Anna was trying to get her bearings, she was swept away by the crowd. Everyone was pushing and shoving; women were screaming, dogs barking, and far away Anna could hear the whinny of horses. Panic broke out. The smoke

stung Anna's throat. Beside her she saw the woman with rubber limbs, screaming and pushing like everyone else. Then, very close by, flames blazed up. One of the wooden booths must have caught fire from a spark from a chestnut seller's brazier.

Anna was barely getting anywhere. She coughed and choked, her eyes watering; she felt dizzy. Then suddenly she felt a hand grab hold of her.

Her father pushed people aside, wrapped his arms around her and steered her through the crowd. By now the heat was unbearable and the smoke so thick that Anna couldn't see her hand in front of her face. Her father shouted something; she couldn't hear what, but they were making progress and eventually reached the gate. Anna's head was spinning and when at last they were outside and could stop to get their breath, she fainted.

When she came to, she was lying in the carriage and Mother was dabbing at her forehead with a damp handkerchief.

'Ajele poppejele,' she sang softly and the old song comforted Anna. Greedily she sucked in the fresh air.

'You did give me a fright,' Mother said. 'Wherever were you?'

Father planted a kiss on her forehead. His coat was dusty and torn at the hem and his face was smeared with soot.

Julius and Adolph didn't look much better. The sleeve of Adolph's jacket was ripped and Julius's collar had come adrift. Still dazed, Anna clutched her head. Julius climbed into the carriage and came over to her. It was a moment before she recognised what was in his hand.

'Your bows, Miss Anna,' he said. His face looked like a black mask; only his eyes were bright.

She wondered how he had found them in the crush.

'Thank you,' she said shyly, reaching out her hand for the grimy green ribbons.

The outing put an abrupt end to the euphoria of the fair. When they returned home, the privy councillor stared in astonishment at their soot-smearred faces and Adolph's torn jacket.

Anna could tell that her father was particularly annoyed by the ripped hem of his elegant coat, but he was also displeased that his careful plans had been destroyed. They had to change their clothes and wash the soot from their hands and faces; the maid ran endlessly back and forth with basins and jugs of water. When Anna took off her dress, she saw that even her underclothes were stained brown, and the acrid smell of smoke seemed to have penetrated not only her clothes, but her hair and skin. She scrubbed until her hands were sore, but she still didn't feel clean.

The big dinner that evening had to begin much later than planned, which made Father nervous. Anna and Mother weren't present, but Anna lingered by the dining-room door and saw the privy councillor and his sons sitting solemn-faced at the lavishly laid table. Chanele and Mother kept calling her back to the kitchen, but she stayed at her post by the door, trying to piece together the snatches of conversation. Reichenheim spoke of the mill at Wüstegiersdorf and the laziness of the workers in Bradford; of a big deal with a merchant from Odessa he had never heard of; and of the price of cotton which was gradually falling again after the years of crisis in America. Anna craned forward so as to miss as little as possible.

She saw Adolph looking bored. He was staring out of the window, spinning a little silver spoon between his fingers. The grown-ups took no notice of him; they were deep in conversation, talking loudly. Then Adolph looked up and his eyes fell on the crack of the door. Anna took a step back, but he had already seen her; the spoon slipped from his hand and fell to the floor with a clatter.

3

The fairs set the rhythm of their lives, dividing each year into three. They were more important than birthdays or holidays.

And at each fair, three times a year, came the Reichenheims, sometimes five or six of them. Julius was always one of the party and increasingly Adolph, too.

Both sons were, as Father said, 'ailing'; there was talk of visits to sanatoria and spas. But they always seemed healthy enough when they came to Leipzig; they were certainly a good deal less pale than Henriette and, unlike her, they didn't have to rest in the afternoon.

Anna lived for the fairs. Father took her to the office less and less these days; instead she had to sit at Henriette's bedside, help Mother in the house, or play the piano and do needlework like Margarethe. The visitors from Berlin broke the monotony of everyday life, livening up the dinner table with their talk of trade and business.

Father engaged a new governess from Paris, who was allowed to speak only French with Anna and her sisters. He forbade Chanele, the old cook, from talking Yiddish, and swore he'd send her straight back to Glewitz if he caught her speaking it again.

Yiddish was permitted only when Grandfather came to visit from Glewitz.

'*As men hot chassene mitn schwer, schloft man mit dem ber,*' Anna heard Chanele say one day in the kitchen. Afterwards, she tried to repeat the words to Henriette, but they eluded her.

'*Chassene mitn schwer,*' she said, 'I can't remember the rest.'

'Marry your father-in-law. Hmm...'
Henriette frowned, her pale, high forehead furrowed with thought.

'That would be if Father married Grandfather,' she said.

'But he hasn't.' Anna was outraged. She was nine and knew now that she couldn't marry Father, because he was married to Mother. She would marry another man, chosen by her parents just as Grandfather had chosen Father for Mother.

'Who's marrying her father-in-law?'

Anna and Henriette hadn't noticed Mother coming into the room.

'*As men hot chassene mitn schwer...* Is that what she said? That Chanele, she just can't help herself, can she?'

Mother was furious and Anna noticed that she didn't talk to Chanele for two days.

A few days later, Henriette told Anna the rest of the saying: '*As men hot chassene mitn schwer, schloft man mit dem ber.*' Chanele often sat with Henriette in the evenings, talking to her in that strange, comforting language—dark, soft sounds in which you could curl up and hide. Henriette had no trouble coaxing the words from her.

'If you marry your father-in-law, you sleep with a bear,' Henriette translated for Anna. Then she sat up in bed and explained that it was what people said when you loved your grandfather as much as they loved theirs. And that it wasn't a nasty bear, but a nice one, like in *Snow White and Rose Red*.

'Then why was Mother so cross?'

That Henriette couldn't say. She changed the subject and told Anna one of the fairy tales she had heard from the servants, *The Water Nix* or *Spindle Holda* or *Captive Mohra*, tales of witches and wizards who helped people or frightened them, cast spells on them or carried them off to other worlds.

Grandfather was short with a round belly. He liked eating and drinking and spent a lot of time with Anna and her sisters. He brought them presents too, especially Henriette: necklaces and bracelets, a needlepoint cushion and coloured silks. In the afternoon he drove

to the office with Father and the boys, and Anna bit her tongue and settled herself on the sofa with her needlework. Her mind wasn't in it; she kept pricking herself and the petals came out crooked.

Grandfather stayed for two weeks. 'Home again,' he said, when it was time for him to return to Glewitz, and for two days Mother's eyes were red from crying. Father was angry; the vein in his neck swelled—a sure sign that he was better avoided. Sometimes he got up without warning, took his hat and coat, and stormed out of the house. The servants watched him go, wide-eyed as always. Once Anna heard one of them sigh and say, 'What a handsome man.'

A few days later, Grandfather's departure was forgotten. Mother busied herself in the house; Father left on one of his trips; the doctor came to see Henriette, and Anna and Margarethe quarrelled over trifles.

Meanwhile, Anna waited for the next fair.

In 1866, the year she turned ten, the Autumn Fair was called off. There was an outbreak of cholera in the city; people kept to their houses, and the city was covered by a heavy blanket of fear and sickness and death. It was a glorious day in August with blue skies and balmy summer air when news of the first cases swept through the streets like wildfire.

Mother forbade Anna and her sisters from leaving the house. Father asked the piano teacher to stay away. And when Anna was caught trying to slip out of the house, Mother was cross.

So why didn't Father stay at home?

'How can I?' he yelled angrily. 'I have to keep an eye on them all.' And when Mother burst into tears and begged him to close the business, at least for a few days, he got up from table and went out, slamming the door behind him.

Anna and Margarethe took advantage of the disturbance to creep out of the house unnoticed. It was too dull being shut up at home all day. Anna imagined Cholera as an old witchlike woman who came knocking at people's doors, bringing the fever that everyone was so afraid of. She half expected to come across her on the street. The usually busy thoroughfare with its printworks and bookshops was empty. Only a few people were out, hurrying past with bowed heads. The sisters took a few nervous steps. Margarethe's hand was clammy—or was it Anna's? They exchanged uneasy glances.

'Perhaps we should go back before Mother notices we're gone,' Margarethe said softly. Anna wanted to tease her for being so cowardly, but thought better of it. The silent ghostly street was making her, too, feel jumpy; it stood in eerie contrast to the sunshine and birdsong. They almost ran home and, before creeping back into the house, they looked about them like startled animals.

The next day, first Hugo and then Henriette fell sick. Anna heard her brother groaning and calling for Mother in the early hours of the morning. Later she saw Mother taking him tea and compresses. The doctor came, the room was darkened, the linen changed. Everyone went about on tiptoe, talking in whispers. That evening, Anna saw sweat on Henriette's forehead. She looked even paler than usual, even more haggard. Dark rings had formed beneath her eyes.

'Wouldn't you like to get up tomorrow?' Anna suggested. 'Just for an hour—I'll help you.'

'I'd like to very much,' Henriette whispered with a sad, twisted smile. 'But I'm not feeling so well today; it's so hot, don't you think? I am sick to my stomach and finding it hard to breathe. Would you open the window?'

She tried to sit up, but almost immediately pressed her hand to her mouth and doubled over. When she began to vomit, Mother appeared at her bedside and pulled Anna away.

'Out!' she cried, so firmly that there was no arguing with her. Anna got up and Mother pushed her out of the room. Before the door closed, Anna saw Henriette cough and another surge of liquid leave her mouth.

After that, the house seemed to grow quieter still. Even Chanele stopped making her usual clatter in the kitchen; silently she carried trays of broth or camomile tea to the sickrooms and helped the servants boil the sheets.

During this time, Anna saw neither Henriette nor Hugo and very little of her mother, who spent mealtimes with the patients.

Father was taciturn. He joined them at table only briefly, disappearing without a word after swallowing two or three mouthfuls.

Anna and Margarethe tried to pass the time with their dolls, but they almost always ended up squabbling. In the past, Mother had settled things between them or the maid had intervened, and sometimes a tired look from Henriette had quietened them.

Now, a trifle was enough to set them quarrelling endlessly. This made Marie cry; she hated it when her older sisters fought, but as the three of them were generally on their own in the nursery, they paid no attention to her. As if in a trance, they tugged at each other's toys and sometimes hair, until one of them got hurt and started to cry. Then one of the servants would poke her head round the door and call out, 'Stop that!' or, 'Shame on you!'

Soon they had to keep to their room even at mealtimes. Chanele brought bread and plates of broth or meat to the nursery.

'When can we see Henny again?' Anna asked one evening. It was a cool September day; the first leaves had fallen, and when she had opened the window that afternoon, the air

had been chill and smoky. The streets were still deserted; the cholera drove people to stay at home. Almost every day the doctor's carriage stopped outside their house; Anna had seen it that morning.

Chanele, who had brought them dumplings and gravy for the third day in a row, answered Anna's question evasively.

'Not now, she must get better first.' And she hurried out of the nursery. Disgruntled Anna began to eat the lukewarm dumplings.

That night she couldn't sleep. She listened to Margarethe breathing steadily beside her and Marie breathing a little more shallowly in the next bed. Silvery moonlight fell into the room. It was cold and Anna shuddered. She thought of the kind face of the Moon Prince in the fairy tale, but the moon's face didn't look kind to her; there was something nightmarish about it and she wished for a dark place where she could hide away. Then suddenly she heard noise and voices and a crash, as if a chair had fallen to the floor. She got out of bed and gingerly opened the door. Her father's voice mingled with that of the doctor; he cried, 'Quick, quick,' and then words that she didn't understand, in the language he disapproved of. Slowly she made her way downstairs; her feet seemed to stick to the floorboards and she was trembling with cold. Henriette's door was open; Mother and Father and the doctor were standing at her bedside.

Anna's gaze fell on the gaunt face; it had never looked so pale and Henriette's eyes frightened her; they were neither open nor closed, making her look devious, almost evil, nothing like her usual gentle self. Anna screamed. Her parents wheeled round.

'What are you doing there? Go back to bed at once!'

Mother took Anna by the arm and pulled her up the stairs. 'Back to bed. You've no business being up and about.'

She pushed her into the nursery. As she did so, she tripped over a shoe that hadn't been tidied away, but she seemed to care nothing for the noise or the fact that Margarethe was now awake too. Pushing Anna onto her bed, she hissed at her to stay there and sleep, then she left the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

Anna sat on the edge of the bed in stunned shock. She sobbed and trembled, unable to answer her sister's questions, and when Margarethe touched her shoulder, she tore herself free and crawled into bed with Marie who had slept on through all the noise. Snuggling up to the skinny, little-girl's body, she drank in the scent of her soft hair until the trembling subsided and she fell asleep.

The next morning a leaden silence hung over the house. The sky was blue again, but the autumn sun gave no warmth. When Anna woke, Marie and Margarethe were still asleep, but something told her that the sun was already high in the sky. The maid hadn't brought the hot water.

Cautiously she opened the door a crack. She didn't dare step out into the passage. The silence was almost unbearable; it was like being alone in a haunted house. Anna didn't know what to do. She went back to bed and shut her eyes. Why had Henriette looked so strange?

She must have fallen asleep again, because she jumped when she saw the governess standing next to the bed.

'Get dressed, quick, your father wants to speak to you,' she said, pulling clothes out of the wardrobe and helping Marie to dress herself. 'He's waiting for you in the drawing room.'

'Your sister died in the night,' Father said curtly, when they were standing before him in the large room. He gripped the table for support. His shirt was as white as ever, but his hair was tousled.

Anna stared in disbelief.

'She looked at me last night,' she said. 'She gave me a funny look, her eyes were open, I saw her.' But even as she spoke, she began to doubt that she had left the nursery that night.

'She is dead,' Father repeated, 'and now go back to the nursery and stay there. We will have to bury your sister.' He glanced out of the window and Anna had the feeling he was talking not to them, but to himself. 'We will have to bury her, she is dead...' He turned round so abruptly that she jumped.

'Anna, you are the eldest now. You are responsible for your little sisters. And you must help your mother; no more childishness. You are old enough.'

Without warning he slammed his fist down on the table. He looked furious, but Anna didn't understand why. Tears pricked her eyes as he left the room. Later, from the window, she saw the doctor's carriage and then another carriage with a coffin. Marie stood next to her at the window.

'Has the Water Nix come for Henny? She always told us about her and now she's come to get her, hasn't she?'

'There's no Water Nix, Marie, and no Mohra, and no little orphan girl who marries the Moon Prince,' Anna said firmly. She didn't know what made her so certain. Henny, her sister, who had told her so many stories and whom she had read aloud to ever since she could spell out her first words—Henny wasn't with the Water Nix in her kingdom at the bottom of the sea, and neither Spindle Holda nor Mohra had come to fetch her. She was dead. Dead and gone like all the other people who had been carried away in wooden boxes. The certainty took root inside her and began to spread, and she reached for Marie's hand and held it tightly in hers.