

BURDEN

by Anna Neata

Sample Translation by Imogen Taylor

SOLAR ECLIPSE 1999

It's the day of the solar eclipse and on the housing estate to the south of Salzburg there's a sense of doom in the air, a fear of going blind—and no one (including Eva, lying on the grass under the brambles, hefting a heavy camera into the air) knows how the computers are going to make that leap from 1999 to 2000 without exploding.

Eva, where are you? The voice fills the garden and Eva lets it drift over her like the clouds in the sky. A few days before, just like every day in the summer holidays, Grandma had shared her newspaper with Eva, and Eva, as always, had turned to the last page to read the brief reports gathered under the rubric 'Curiosities from around the World'. She'd been gripped by a tiny report about a man from Idaho who kept a record in a notebook of the names of every person he met, and as Grandma sat beside her, stirring her coffee and cutting out the death notices as if it were a job that had to be done, Eva had decided that from now on she was going to take a photo of everyone she met. As luck would have it, today was the day of the solar eclipse and the whole family was meeting up to stare at the sky together. Eva had told her parents of her plan and both of them, quite independently of one another, had said it was just like her, except that Milan had smiled when he said it, and her mother had frowned slightly.

She looks through the viewfinder at the fine, thorny branches of the brambles, rolls onto her side, lowers the camera for a moment, shakes out her arm and looks at the boy lying beside her. His arms and legs have grown so long they seem to have taken on lives of their own—as if his foot no longer had anything to do with his head; as if his fingers no longer belonged to his hand. The only part of him Eva is certain about are his eyes, which are still blue, but they are closed. His lips are purple from blackberries and there is a scar on his cheek that Eva strokes in her mind.

Button, turn your head, I want to take a photo.

The boy mumbles something and shows no sign of doing as she's asked.

Come on, Konrad, says Eva, using his proper name as she always does when she's serious—and as always when she's serious, he does as she asks. It makes no difference that he's sixteen and she's still only thirteen, or that he, unlike Eva, has a mobile he can't take his eyes off. It makes no difference that his breath smells of smoke these days (so that Eva lies awake at night worrying, praying please don't let him smoke a bad cigarette, a cancer cigarette).

Silly, that's not how it works with cancer, Button mumbles, turning his face to her. It's not like playing the lottery. He pulls a blade of grass from the earth and sticks it between his teeth.

We can ask your dad, Eva says. He's a doctor, he must know. And she zooms in with the heavy lens to between his eyes.

Button tells her that doctors are the worst of all, then mumbles something about Hannes knowing that he smokes, what could he do to stop him, and anyway, it's the summer holidays and you don't ask questions in the summer holidays, you don't do anything, and Eva says, well that's not hard in a place like Salzburg where there's never anything to do, and Button says, rubbish, we'll go out later, you'll see, and he looks up at her obliquely, the way he sometimes does, and in that precise moment Eva presses the shutter button. What time are you going to leave, Eva asks, and Button says not before eight, knowing full well when Eva has to be back. But when she's out with Button, her parents can't complain, although Milan did praise the house's natural alarm system yesterday, his eyes laughing at Eva—the old wooden stairs that give away every secret step, make every broken curfew audible. He couldn't know that Eva and Button had spent long, solitary evenings experimenting with those stairs, placing their feet in every possible position until they could make their way up without a sound, even with their eyes closed.

Eva, someone calls again, a man's voice this time.

Coming, Eva calls back, and she rolls onto her side and jumps to her feet.

Button, too, peels himself slowly off the grass. Then he stands there, hitching up his baggy trousers, unbuckling his belt, doing it up again. Together they head towards the old house with its thick covering of creeper, and Eva recalls a time when they always ran everywhere, their faces flushed, because they were children and did everything more quickly—and yet at the same time everything had gone more slowly, and every summer had felt like an eternity.

How's the camera? Milan, Eva's dad, is standing on the patio, smiling at her, his hands deep in his pockets. Eva smiles back. Much better than the Polaroid. Not that she's thinking of getting rid of it, but every film costs about twenty marks. Milan nods. He's still nodding when Mum comes out of the patio door and hands a pile of napkins to Auntie Ursel who's sitting bolt upright at the table. Thank you, Alexandra, Ursel says, taking the napkins and putting them round, informing Button as she does so that his trousers are far too big for him. You can tell a pair of trousers is too big for you, she says, when the seat's almost at your ankles. Button quickly sits down on a green garden chair and Eva giggles. Happy, Mum asks, and Eva nods. I'm going to take photos of you all, she announces. Sounds like a threat, says Alexandra, disappearing into the house again, and Auntie Ursel says oh Lord, and holds a hand up to her face.

You're first, Eva says, dropping onto the chair beside her.

Gently she pushes Ursel's hand down; it feels like old paper. Just one photo, Auntie, she says, and Ursel throws her a doubtful glance. She always looks at Eva like that. She's strict, stricter than Grandma; in fact, the two of them are so different in every way that Eva sometimes can't believe they're sisters. Ursel can be cold and aloof, but she loves with a fierce, hot love; she's the one who shakes her head at Eva, but she's there for her when Eva needs her; she holds her hand, like now, her cold, dry fingers tapping impatiently.

It won't take long, okay, Eva says, letting go of her hand and zooming out of the picture as Ursel mumbles sullenly to herself. *Okay, okay.* The word's not part of her vocabulary. Eva zooms out a little further until the pink oleander frames Ursel's head, her brown hair freshly dyed and blow-dried by the hairdresser—but just as Ursel's face softens a little and she's about to press the shutter button, Ursel turns her head away in disgust. You smoke too, don't you, she says to Button, jerking her chin up as if to see him better, and although Button is

quite a bit taller than her, even sitting down, he pulls in his head like a tortoise. Leave the boy, Alexandra says, appearing on the patio again, this time with cake forks and a big knife. We're none of us good role models, she says, pushing the ashtray closer to Button.

Speak for yourselves. Grandma comes bounding onto the patio, her hands full of plates. Eh, Button? she says, and goes back in, only to re-emerge a moment later with an enormous Linz tart on a big silver tray, currant jam oozing out at the sides and leaving red stains on the white paper doily. Button smiles furtively at Eva with the cigarette in his mouth. We never smoked, did we, Ursel, Grandma says in her relentless singsong; she utters even the cruellest truths in such a way that you can't be cross with her. Alexandra rolls her eyes and no one thinks to look pleadingly at Ursel, who goes almost unnoticed as she draws breath to speak. Auntie Ursel has always been a great one for the truth—and if it gives her the chance to contradict her sister, so much the better. Eva knows. She once listened to the two of them argue for hours about whether their favourite TV programme started at 8.15 p.m. on a Saturday or 9.50 p.m. on a Friday—they didn't stop even when Eva consulted the TV guide and discovered they were both wrong—or both right, depending how you looked at it—because although the show started at 8.15 p.m., it was on a Friday. Nonsense, Elli, Ursel says now in a very calm voice, dabbing her sweaty temples with her napkin. You must have smoked. Elli freezes midway through cutting the tart. I never smoked. Never. I ought to know, don't you think. Ursel is about to object, but can't compete with Elli who punishes her by giving her the largest slice of tart. Hilarious, the desperation on Ursel's face as she contemplates the huge slice on her plate. I ask you, she mutters under her breath, Linz tart in this heat. Grandma doesn't hear, swells in outrage like bread dough, and it's a good thing that Milan is there, peace-loving Milan, who announces in a loud voice that Eva wants to take photos of everyone today, have they heard.

Five pairs of eyes turn to Eva who nods and holds up her camera as if in proof, and suddenly everyone is keen to pose for her. Eva's camera is a valve that sucks in the air between them on this warm day and spits it out again.

Please. But before she can finish speaking, there's a ring at the door. I'll go, says Grandma and gets up, ignoring Ursel who's trying to make the peace now, singing the praises of the Linz tart—although as soon as Grandma's vanished into the house, she bends her head to Alexandra and adds, really very good, but Linz tart in summer, I ask you, it's ridiculous.

Hello, son. Hannes stands in the door. He nods at Button, and a woman with the same nose as Button leans over and kisses him on the cheek. Let's not smoke too much, eh Konrad, Liane says and shows Alexandra how big a slice of tart she'd like. Just a sliver, please. Hello, Eva, says Hannes and sticks out his tongue when she points the camera at him. Opinions are divided on Hannes. Eva likes everything about him that reminds her of Button; she likes his warm, loud voice and his playful manner, and she likes the way her mother is transformed in his presence. And why do you think that is, Button had once asked sharply, but Eva didn't know. Hannes and her mother have known each other almost all their lives. As a father, Hannes is different. He expects Button to finish school, has talked him out of a carpentry apprenticeship and makes fun of his pensive nature—the boy's always frowning, he doesn't get that from me. Eva's dreaminess, on the other hand, he sees as a sign of creativity. Unlike Button, though, Eva is always being told to look after herself. No one says why. She nods like a good girl but doesn't act like one, buying herself alcohol in the form of liqueur chocolates and hitchhiking home from town in the evening, even if it's only just gone ten and the buses are still running.

Eva, would you make room for Liane, please. Alexandra interrupts her thoughts and Eva gets up. Sure, she mumbles, hello, Liane. Hi there, Liane says, but coldly, turning to Eva for a photo with that look on her face; she always looks at Eva like that these days, her head tossed back so that Eva, zooming in close, can see her nostrils. Liane has never forgiven Eva the scar that runs across Button's face. Button, on the other hand, has told her he's forever in her debt; the girls think it's sweet or manly or something, and he said that if he ever got the chance to repay her, he would. But not like with like, Eva had whispered, and Button had taken her in his arms the way he used to, when they still lived in Grandma's house and were here all year round, not just in the summer, with Button the other side of the garden fence where he still lives and sometimes waits for her.

Considering what a short distance you had to come, it's taken you a bloody long time, Milan says, and now sparkling wine is being poured. Button gets a glass, he's old enough, and Eva's allowed too. Girl looks peaky, it won't do her any harm. Good for the old circulation.

True, Grandma was always pale like that, Alexandra says, and Eva giggles because Grandma's sitting there olive-skinned next to Alexandra, heaping whipped cream onto her plate as if she had nothing better to do. Alexandra raises her eyebrows. *My Grandma*, she explains to Eva, pressing her hand to her chest. You think so? Ursel looks at Eva, and then at the space next to Eva, as if expecting an imaginary great-grandmother to appear for purposes of comparison. Yes, maybe you're right. Eva, too, begins to conjure pictures in her head, but Grandma says no, Mummy wasn't as pale as that. Yes, because she worked outside all day, Ursel says, and Alexandra starts telling them about Great-grandmother, Margaretha. Always that melancholy look about her, always that sadness—today you'd call it depression and go running to a shrink, but in those days it was just the burden you had to bear. It was the same with Paul, Great-grandfather Paul, only that he put his grief for the fallen Habsburgs into

building a house—the house they’re sitting outside now, built with stones from the river, while Margaretha gave birth to Ursel in the building shell. The house that wraps its walls around them like the creaking arms of a tree, the house in which two people had died and one had tried to end his life. The place was stuffed full of stories; you just had to look for them, listen for them.

It’s quiet for a moment and a warm breeze laps at Eva’s bare calves. We have enough glasses at any rate, Hannes says, breaking the silence, and he opens his doctor’s bag and pulls out a bag of tinted plastic glasses. How lucky that you got enough, Elli says, excited. Hannes hands them round and Milan asks earnestly for Hannes’s expert opinion—is it really as bad for your eyes as everyone says, or is it actually, as Alexandra suspects, nothing but mass hysteria. Meanwhile, Ursel is flexing the glasses suspiciously in her hands. Very cheap plastic, she says. Nice to be back for the summer, Liana asks, and Eva doesn’t know if the question is aimed at her or at Alexandra, so she just nods. Eva, who gets on all right in Wiesbaden, but still doesn’t have any real friends except Button, has heard so much in the last weeks about the house in Salzburg—that they’re going to do building work on it, that they’re going to move back for good; she’s been waiting and waiting for someone to talk to her about it properly, but neither Mum nor Milan has come to her yet and now Liane’s sitting in front of her, all knowing and smiling, as if she were doing it on purpose.

I have to go. Eva shoves the last piece of tart into her mouth, picks up her camera and pushes aside the curtain at the patio door. Be quick, Milan calls out. We’re going up on the balcony in a second. Yes, Eva says, and hears Ursel’s voice behind her. Can you credit it, the girl’s taking her camera to the lavatory.

But Eva isn't going to the lavatory. She hurries along the passage and slips unnoticed behind the majestic cast-iron hat stand that occupies the corner between the front door and the stairs; she sits down with her back to the wall, and her gaze drifts slowly upwards, as if she were seeing everything for the first time. The coat hooks stick up like the points of a crown; they are laden with colourful anoraks, light spring jackets and thick, musty-smelling fur coats, and beneath the coats, umbrellas hang by their handles, their spikes stopping just short of the floor above a little cast-iron trough where the rainwater gathers when they're wet, but which now contains nothing but a few dead flies. Eva rests her toes against the edge. Here it is. Her favourite place in the house. Her hidey hole.

Alexandra had made more than one attempt to persuade her mother to put the coats away in suit bags for the summer, but Elli had only shaken her head. Gosh, you're stubborn, Alexandra had said, but Elli was doing Eva a favour. When she'd caught Eva cowering behind the hat stand a few years back, she hadn't asked for reasons. Your favourite place, is it, she'd said, repeating Eva's words, and that had been enough for her. Eva had been spared having to explain, spared having to tell Elli of the moments she had spent there—sometimes it seemed to her that it was only when she was hiding behind the hat stand, opposite the mirror, that she understood who her family really was. Eva's earliest childhood memory was of the old cracked mirror with the foxed glass; it was hard to find a spot that gave you a clear reflection.

She is pointing her camera up at the mirror when she hears chairs being pushed back on the patio and footsteps approaching, getting louder. She sits and waits, not daring to breathe. Button appears first, striding ahead, his new Nokia 32/10 in his hands, his thumbs playing

Snake. Hannes isn't far behind, his arm through Liane's. Once Eva saw Hannes and her mum standing back-to-back in front of the mirror, comparing their heights as if they were children. Next is Milan. Eva's fingers are poised tensely on the shutter button; she needs another photo, just one more, and she'd like to take it right here, right now. But Milan is followed by Elli, her arms swinging in time with her legs, something Eva has often observed in old people. Before Elli discovered Eva, she would often walk past the mirror like that, sometimes stopping in front of it and running her hand over its frame, as if it were an old photo, as if it had magic properties that had only to be unleashed. Maybe she thinks Eva's already upstairs waiting for them; at any rate, she doesn't throw a knowing glance into the corner. Behind her comes Ursel, treading softly, white bandages on her brown legs from her last fall. How often Eva has seen her standing alone at the mirror, sometimes whispering a word that Eva thinks is a name; it sounds like Peter. There are names in this house that are never spoken out loud. Peter is one, Alexander another. Alexander was Eva's grandfather's name, but she can barely remember him; even that summer four years ago no one spoke his name, the summer when Grandfather died and Button got his scar—and how the two events are linked is a secret known only to Eva and Button.

Now Eva hears firm, purposeful steps. Alexandra is walking barefoot towards the old wooden stairs. For a moment it looks as if she will walk right past Eva. The camera is heavy in Eva's hand. Then Alexandra seems to think better of it and veers off to the left to peer at her blurred reflection, her lovely straight nose, high cheekbones, dark eyes, black hair tumbling onto her shoulders. A few weeks ago in May, Eva had given her a book for her birthday, *You Are Not Like Other Mothers*. She had found it in the little second-hand bookshop in the centre of Wiesbaden, and Alexandra had seemed genuinely pleased. She had read the blurb and asked

Eva where she had heard about the book, how she knew that she was a fan of the author and that it was an era that particularly interested her. Eva hadn't dared tell her she had bought the book only for its title and because of the cover—a beautiful woman with black hair and a straight nose, crossed legs and a knowing, greedy look in her eyes that seemed to challenge everything. Never before had Eva felt so close to Alexandra. If only she could have captured that moment. Her hands are trembling, her palms damp with sweat. She looks up from the lens at her mother's reflection. She wants to—has to—see the whole of her face; not a millimetre must be covered. Carefully she pushes aside the sleeve of a coat and there it is: Alexandra's face, staring ahead, lost in thought. With the fox fur in her right hand and the camera in her left, Eva presses the shutter button, once, twice, three times. If she could only capture it. This moment. She has to. *The camera. No, please, not the camera.* Her fingers like a shoal of fish. *No. Heavens.* She's screaming. Who's screaming? Slowly, as if in slow motion, Eva sees the camera slip from her hand, sees her mother's incredulous face hanging over her. Heavens, Eva, what are you doing there? Even worse than the sound of the camera hitting the floor is the loss of her secret hiding place. Typical, Eva thinks. The only day in eighty-two years when there's a brief moment of darkness in broad daylight, and she's gone and got herself discovered.

SPRING 1942

The mirror reaches to her waist. Elli can see her knee socks, her tanned knees and the heavy pleated fabric of her blue-black skirt. She crouches down with a sigh and runs a finger through the film of grime on the distorting glass that shows neither the red of her cheeks nor the white teeth that everyone envies her.

Someone ought to hang it back up, Elli says into the mirror, and then she sees a figure reflected in it—a person curled up motionless on a patch of green upholstery to her left, or perhaps only a smear on the mirror.

Filthy, too. Elli runs her tongue over her lips. I do believe this mirror is the only thing in the house that Mummy doesn't polish with her rags.

Then get the rags and do it yourself, says a muffled voice behind her.

Now just you listen. Elli turns and stares at what a moment before was only a smear on the glass—Ursel reading a book in the green velvet armchair. I can't clean in my uniform, or do you want me to get all dirty. If I look a mess, I can forget about going.

You're right there. Ursel turns the page, unmoved.

Don't you want to come with me. Elli tightens the knot of her neckerchief. You can go as you are.

Ursel shakes her head.

Have you better things to do.

Elli has to take care not to get impatient. She can't imagine that anyone in Salzburg could have better things to do than attend her League of German Girls meeting. But for days, something in this house has been different—maybe Ursel's face, which has never looked so pale; she's withdrawn too, even more so than usual. Their parents have been behaving strangely too. Mother's been quick-tempered all week, flaring up at the tiniest thing. All Elli did was stand for a little too long in front of the mirror. Straightening your plaits, pinching your cheeks to make them shine like apples, biting your lips for a richer red—all that takes time, and Elli would never have dreamt that Mother would lift the mirror from the wall—that's enough of that; it'll have to go—and bang it down on the floor of the barn in such rage that the glass cracked right the way across.

Father, as so often, had said nothing. He'd just stood there, shaking his head. Come to think of it, he'd been shaking his head an awful lot lately—and once or twice Elli had seen him take Ursel's hand and squeeze it.

None of these things had been made much of; it would have seemed odd to mention them. Elli had tried, but Mother had waved her aside—don't be silly, what are you talking about—and Father had smiled and shaken his head. Look, Elli, he had said, but he'd got no further and Elli hadn't a clue what he wanted her to look at. As for Ursel, the only time she opened her mouth was at dinnertime, when she dug in like nobody's business.

I can't do it. Elli contemplates the loose strands of hair sticking out of her plait.

Come here. Ursel puts her book down on her lap and beckons to her sister. Sit there.

Elli is glad that Ursel's taken charge of her pigtails. Ursel's good at anything that requires precision. She's good at embroidery, good at sewing—not like Elli who can't even thread a needle.

Ow!

Don't make such a fuss, Ursel hisses. You always want to be the prettiest, but you won't do anything for it. She tugs the wide-tooth comb so hard through Elli's curls that Elli has the impression her scalp is on fire. She sees hair flying through the air and feels Ursel's fingers pound her forehead so ferociously that she wonders if this is really about her plaits and not, perhaps, about the comment she made earlier—if Ursel senses that she senses that something's going on. She'd better grit her teeth and stop moaning, though, or Ursel will tell her to do her own pigtails. Maybe if she asks nicely, Ursel will pin her plaits into a crown around her head, and maybe she'll find some violets on the way—no, violets wouldn't be such a good idea, but she might find a daisy or two for her hair. See what Hanni says.

Will you make me a crown, please. Elli moves a little closer to the armchair.

If you keep still, Ursel says.

Elli keeps still; she even stops cracking her fingers when Ursel drops her plaits for a moment to warn her. On Ursel's instructions, she takes hairpins from her shirt pocket and hands them to her. When they were little, Elli had worn her hair loose, and people had stopped on the street to admire her and stroke her curls. Their old neighbour Mrs Thaler had even given her a sweet once—because you look like an angel—but Mrs Thaler wasn't around any more—disappeared three years ago—and at the last German Girls meeting Hanni had explained that it would be better if Elli wore her hair in plaits, so she didn't look so wild and exotic. Nice and blond, at least, she had said, smiling at Elli.

Noises drift into the barn, wood banging on metal. Mother will be in the kitchen, Elli thinks, and feels Ursel's hands arranging the second plait on her head. Give me another kirby grip. A soft sizzling sound comes in through the open doors; Elli thinks she can smell frying onions. She breathes in deep, sniffing the air. Mummy's making fried potatoes, she says. With bacon.

Don't be stupid. Ursel takes the kirby grip from her. Where would Mummy have got bacon from?

Today's a special day. Elli twists her head round. So's tomorrow. Why shouldn't there be bacon?

Some things were hard to come by, but everything was still available. Elli didn't know any more than Ursel where Mother had found the bacon, but she knew *why*. Because it's my Pledge of Allegiance today, she told herself. And because it's my birthday tomorrow. Ursel's fingers on her head are still for a moment and Elli hears a soft sniffing sound behind her.

Potato cakes if we're lucky, Ursel says, a few seconds later. Potato cakes and apple sauce. You wait and see.

Elli hopes she's not right. All they ever talk about these days is saving, *disciplined saving*. Elli can't feel grateful for the potatoes in their garden, or for the news that the potato supply in Salzburg is guaranteed (though residents are requested to use their own supplies first). How she'd love a piece of bacon, preferably all to herself. It's true, of course, that plenty of people are worse off—we're the lucky ones, Elli, we want for nothing, Father keeps telling her. You've never gone hungry to bed, have you. And Hanni says she'd happily live off potatoes, or even potato skins, just as long as the Führer was there to look after them. Elli wishes she were like Hanni, but secretly she knows she isn't. You don't say these things out loud, but she has no desire to fight for a world without bacon or chocolate.

Elli! Mother is standing in the door in her blue apron. That's three times I've called you. Come in the kitchen, please, I need someone to help me grate the spuds for potato cakes.

Quickly Elli gets to her feet and smooths her skirt. I have to leave in a minute, Mummy. She looks at Ursel who, for the first time in ages, has a big grin on her face.

But you need to eat. When will you be back?

Mummy. Elli rolls her eyes. I don't know. First there's the meeting and then we're all going into town. Are you sure you won't come?

Mother stares at her, as if she doesn't know what to say.

You know we've got to get ready for your birthday. You'd better eat something now, then you can take your time later. Can you go to Hanni's afterwards?

A surprise for me? Elli immediately forgets that her parents won't be there today; they'd talked it over several times and no matter how much Elli had begged and raged, the answer had always been no. A surprise for me, Elli says again. She turns to Ursel, smiling all over her face, but Ursel has resumed her usual expression, eyes fixed on the ground, lips a thin pencil line. I'm sure Hanni will have me afterwards.

Mother nods. Good, and now come and help in the kitchen.

Is it a skirt, Mummy? Elli kneads her fingers in excitement. There are so many rumours. She's heard there are extra clothes coupons for all the young people of Salzburg.

Ursel, you too. Ursel heaves herself to her feet and puts her book down on the little table.

A blue silk skirt?

Give over, Elli.

Where would Mummy get silk, silly, Ursel whispers, rolling up the sleeves of her blouse; then Elli moves on to the next question.

Have you had any news of Peter?

The meadow is reflected in Elli's eyes in many shades of green. It's good to be away from home at last, away from Ursel who didn't say a word all through lunch, away from Mother's demands—please take care; please ask Hanni's mother if you can stay till evening. Away, too, from all thoughts of Peter, who since his visit four months ago has written only one letter, which Ursel, instead of putting it under her pillow as she usually does, has placed in a casket. Away with such thoughts. All around her everything is in bloom; the snow can cling to the Untersberg as stubbornly as it likes—down here, it's spring. The sun casts warm, dappled shadows on Elli's skin; only her feet are cold. She's taken off her knee socks because it's spring, her birthday tomorrow—and again she's reminded of Peter who once explained to her that you shouldn't go barefoot until April, because the warmth of the sun is deceitful and the spring snow on the mountains particularly insidious.

There aren't many people out. Everyone will be in town, Elli thinks, for an event like this—then upbraids herself in her best Ursel-style. Silly. Not everyone's interested in your Pledge of Allegiance. Some people think they're a cut above the rest—just because the Führer's often within spitting distance of Salzburg, they say, doesn't mean I have to go flinging my arm in the air every time—but still, Elli's sure that most people she knows will be there this afternoon: her teacher, Mr Halmisch from the clothes shop. Mr Machmer from the café.

True, her parents won't be there. Elli wishes she could tell herself that Father has to work, but she knows he could have taken the afternoon off if he'd wanted, and Mother could

surely have managed too, even with Elli's birthday to prepare for. They were acting so strangely, so unlike everyone else—but Elli had taught herself not to ask questions. Who cares, she thought. Even Hanni hadn't asked any awkward questions, and her family was quite different. Hanni's mother had been reluctant to raise her arm at first, but now she attended every event going, despite being a staunch Catholic. The portrait of the Führer now had pride of place next to the big wooden cross in their sitting room, and Hanni had explained to Elli how well they went together.

Scanning the ground with her eyes, Elli spots a violet and then a crocus, but decides not to pick them. She sniffs the earth between her fingers; it feels pleasantly cold to the touch. At first she treads gingerly, taking care not to get dirty, but soon her toes are digging deep into the grass, tearing up tuft after tuft. And why not—she can always wash in the Salzach afterwards. It isn't deep at the moment; they haven't had rain for a long time and the melted snow hasn't swollen the rivers yet. She's all alone on the little path and the buzzing, whirring world around her is making her exhilarated.

She feels the way she felt last summer when she cycled to the river with Ursel and Peter. Ursel had gone on ahead on Father's old bicycle; Elli had brought up the rear, and Peter had gone in the middle, sometimes shouting to Ursel with a laugh, things that Elli couldn't hear, and sometimes turning back to make sure Elli was all right.

You still there?

The river had been so cold that Elli had squealed just dipping her toes in. Ursel had only shaken her head and walked into the water like a queen.

It's deeper ahead, Peter had called out, when Ursel had complained that the water was too shallow; they'd have done better to go to a lake. Lake Irr, Lake Matt, Lake Fuschl—anywhere would have been better than this puddle here. Warmer, too. We can go to a lake tomorrow, Peter had replied, and Elli had nodded and bitten into one of the chive sandwiches Mother had packed for them, happy as the thickly spread butter melted between her teeth. She had watched Ursel in awe as she waded majestically through the water, threw herself in and disappeared around the next bend in the shore.

You're eating already? Peter had sat down beside her, laughing, his brown shoulder touching hers, his nose all wrinkled. Elli had never known anyone laugh so much.

You bet, Elli had replied with her mouth full, and a piece of crust had stuck in her throat so that Peter had to thump her on the back. What was strange, though, was that he had left his hand between her shoulder blades even after she'd stopped coughing. Did he help Ursel like that, too, Elli had wondered. Did he leave his hand resting on *her* back. But Ursel never choked on her food and spluttered out crusts of bread; she chewed every mouthful carefully, no matter how hungry she was. Peter's hand had slid very gently down Elli's back; she had felt it on her spine and her belly, her neck, her thigh, her navel, between her legs—but Peter didn't have that many hands.

Aren't you coming in the water?

Elli had opened her eyes. What came first? Ursel's voice? Or the naked feeling on her skin where Peter's hand has been—as if everything inside her was calling out to him to do it again,

not to stop; as if the hum and buzz of a spring meadow was something you felt not around you but inside you.

You bet. Peter had shot up and pulled off his trousers, leaving them in a heap on the shingle. He had run into the water, shouting glorious, glorious, so loud that it roared in Elli's ears.

Ursel had picked up Peter's trouser and shaken out the little stones that had caught in the waistband and pockets. The stones had fallen on Elli's head; Ursel had shaken the trousers fiercely, making the cloth whistle around Elli's ears. Stop it. Elli grabbed hold of a trouser leg.

Let go, Ursel had screamed. Let go at once.

Then stop it, Elli had screamed back, clinging to the trouser hem.

They were quieter on the way home. Ursel had cycled at the front again, faster than before, and Peter had cycled next to her, talking to her quietly, cajolingly, no longer turning round to Elli. The wind had kept catching in the tear in his trouser leg and Elli just had to keep on cycling, telling herself there was another Peter who wasn't as kind or handsome or wonderful.

If you walk in the places that don't get any light—because the sun, no matter how much it twists and turns, never reaches the shady patches behind the yew bushes, behind the ashes whose trunks are so broad that you can't wrap your arms round them even if there are three of you—if you walk in those shady places, you can feel the last weeks' rain underfoot, rain that's no longer visible in the calm and steadily flowing Salzach. Elli curls her toes under, sending earth into the air and watching it fall back down. She tries to identify the birds by the noises they make, chirping and twittering in her ears.

Elli, what are you doing?

It's Hanni.

You've got something there too. Hanni points a finger at Elli's left ankle. Elli walks a little way into the water, pushes the instep of her right foot against her ankle and rubs it back and forth, scraping off a little leaf with her toe, wiping off the brown of the earth.

Let's go! Hanni looks on with a frown as Elli slips her wet, but thankfully clean, feet into her knee socks and polished shoes. Hurry up.

Together they clamber back up the little slope; Hanni holds out a hand to pull Elli onto the path, and looks at her with wide eyes.

What were you doing there?

Just walking.

Down there? You know we're not allowed now that the camp's there.

I was nowhere near Maxglan, Elli says, trying to shake the thought of the dirty-faced children in the camp. And anyway, I was only looking for flowers. Elli bows her head so that Hanni can get a better look at her hair. What, barefoot, Hanni asks, still teasing, but then she sees Elli's crown of plaits and has to marvel and ask how she did it, and Elli has to stop her from running her hands through her hair and mussing it all up. Since being made group leader, Hanni sometimes gets a bit above herself. Group leader at the tender age of fourteen—she's forever reminding Elli of that. She seems to have forgotten that they all clubbed together to pay for her uniform, without which she'd be nothing. She wouldn't have been able to take part in any of the sporting events, and never could she have climbed so high so fast. But Elli keeps her thoughts to herself. Hanni's her best friend. Hanni has to fight twice as hard as the

other girls whose fathers are doctors. Hanni is the exception from the rule; you never know with Hanni.

Can you do that on my hair?

Yes, of course.

Can you do it now?

We're already late.

Please, we can stop off at mine, it's on the way. Hanni clasps her hands like a beggarwoman. Or did Ursel do it for you?

Rubbish, says Elli, as they turn off into the lane leading to Hanni's house. But I can't promise I can do it as well on other people.

Of course, Hanni says, slipping her arm through Elli's. Maybe Mummy will let us pick some flowers in the garden, she cries. Imagine how lovely we'll look.

Elli imagines. She skips along next to Hanni; she can't help herself. I'll manage somehow, she thinks.

For goodness' sake, it doesn't look anything like yours. Hanni turns this way and that in front of the little bathroom mirror. You wasted all that time just for this?

You look lovely.

It's all loose, Hanni wails, tugging the kirby grips out of her hair. And my scalp's so sore.

I told you I wasn't sure I could do it as well on other people.

You never did those plaits yourself, Hanni hisses.

You always want to be the prettiest, but you won't do anything for it.

At least help me undo this mess.

Can you ask your mother if we can have some flowers.

I'm not asking anything. Can you help me, please.

Hanni's scalp is red and her plaits are all higgledy-piggledy on her head. Elli tugs the kirby grips out, sometimes gently, sometimes quite roughly, depending how loudly Hanni is moaning and cursing.

Ow.

Girls! What's going on in here?

Mrs Hinterbauer appears in the door, still in her nurse's uniform. Hello, Elli, how are you?

Hanni immediately stops moaning. Mummy, she says, why are you back so early.

What do you mean, *early*, it's nearly four, Mrs Hinterbauer says, setting her bag down on the narrow wooden bench.

Nearly *four!* Elli stops tugging at Hanni's hair, and Hanni drops her handful of kirby grips on the floor. We should have been in town ages ago.

Big day today, eh, Mrs Hinterbauer says.

Will you come with us, Hanni asks, squinting up at her mother and chewing her lip, as Mrs Hinterbauer pulls off her shoes with a sigh and tells them what a hard day she's had.

I think on a day like today I will, she says at length, and Hanni gives her a hug. What about your mother and father, she asks Elli, over Hanni's head.

They have things to get ready for tomorrow, Elli says quickly.

Your birthday?

Yes, Elli says. My fourteenth, luckily.

It really is lucky. Last year, just before Elli turned thirteen, she hadn't been allowed to join the other girls and Hitler Youth boys in the festival hall. She'd been too young to be

accepted as a fully-fledged member of the German Girls League by Oberstammführer List (who was said to be a very dashing fellow). Elli feels a surge of happiness and gets that warm feeling inside that you get when you're first aware of yourself as an individual—and at the same time know that you are, at last, about to become part of a larger movement.

That *is* lucky, Mrs Hinterbauer says.

Mrs Hinterbauer! There's a knock at the front door and a thin little voice says hello, hello, Mrs Hinterbauer.

Coming, Hanni's mother calls. There's a scuttling on the stairs and little Friedrich from Elli's street appears, red and breathless, his little legs trembling in a pair of greasy Lederhosen that are far too big for him.

Yes, Friedrich? What is it?

Please, mum—Friedrich gasps for breath—you're to come to the Kirschhofers', Mr Kirschhofer sent me, something's happened.

Is it Mummy? Elli's face is white as chalk and her head is suddenly full of images. She sees Mother falling off the ladder as she prunes the apple tree, her head almost exploding with pain, Ursel holding her legs in the air, so that the blood can flow back to Mother's heart.

Please, miss, I don't know. Little Friedrich shakes his head. All he knows is that they should come as fast as they can. Mrs Hinterbauer nods and grabs Elli's hand.

Here, Elli, take my bag and make sure nothing falls out. Hanni, there's potato stew on the stove, you can heat it up for your supper. She speaks sternly.

But we have to leave, Hanni protests.

That's enough Hannelore. Elli has never heard her speak so loudly and Hanni nods in silence, but glares at Elli, as if it were all her fault. And you, Friedrich, Mrs Hinterbauer says,

more gently, wait here till you've got your breath back, then you go home too, do you hear?

Friedrich nods solemnly. I have to be back for tea anyway.

If you walk from Hanni's to Elli's like a grown-up, without stopping to pick flowers for your hair or look for coloured stones by the wayside, it takes eight minutes at most. Never, though, has Elli run home as fast as she is running now, behind Mrs Hinterbauer, not even on the day when she heard about the Anschluss on the radio at Hanni's. How marvellous it was when the radio announcer said *the Führer is here*, and the crowd cheered in waves, like a roaring sea. Hanni had almost cried—it was, she had explained to Elli, like feeling a sudden yearning for a home she hadn't realised existed—and they had sat hand in hand in front of the radio until Mrs Hinterbauer told Elli to run along home; she was sure her parents would want her with them just now.

The lanes are empty and the windows of the houses dark; only in Elli's house a dim light comes from the kitchen window—she sees it from a long way off. They must be in the kitchen.

Thank God you're here. Father is standing in the door, his face pale. He looks up and down the lane. Come in, please.

What's the matter with Mummy? Elli hears her voice slide away from her.

Go upstairs, please, Elli.

What's the matter with Mummy? Tell me, please.

Nothing's the matter with Mummy. Now go upstairs, this instant.

Never has Father shouted at her like that before. Never has she seen anyone whose face was twisted like that—not with anger but with fear.

The higher Elli climbs, the louder the whispering seems to get. At the top of the stairs she sits down in the corner and draws her legs up to her body.

...what's happened...

...she told us too late...

...how long have you known...

...can you help her...

...so much blood...

...my wife...

...you know what it means to me...

...was it deliberate...

...I can't tell you...

...I ought really to report it...

...please, you know us...

...do you have any idea of the position you're putting me in...

...please...

...if anyone finds out...

...for old times' sake...

...please...

...oh, come on...

Elli feels sick to her stomach. I have to know what's happened to Mummy. Ursel, she thinks. Ursel will tell her. But where is she? Elli runs into the nursery, but Ursel isn't on her bed and Elli can't find her in the bathroom either, or in the attic. She can't be downstairs, can she? Or

can she? Father won't have shouted at her, of course. Ursel, the older, more sensible sister. Ursel, who can do everything, who has Peter, who's always allowed to be present at everything, who isn't left in the dark with her thoughts whirling round and round her head.

The whispering in the hall has stopped, but there are still noises coming from the kitchen. Elli hears a shriek that goes through her like an icy wind and sticks in her stomach. I have to know. She creeps down the stairs, jumping over the last two steps that always creak and give her away; she only just manages to grab the banister rail in time and stop herself from falling.

The kitchen door is ajar; she pushes it open with the tips of her fingers.

Her mother's face is as white as the lime-washed walls. Tears are running down her face and her lips are strangely twisted; they whisper something that Elli can't make out. Her fingers are tightly clasped around Ursel's wrist, and Ursel is lying on the kitchen table on a big piece of cloth. The cloth is dark with blood that is running out from between her legs; a dark pool is forming under the table. There is blood on Mrs Hinterbauer's nurse's uniform. Elli even thinks she sees blood on Father's trousers; he is lifting a saucepan full of hot water from the stove and drops it when he sees Elli.

The hot water makes the blood paler, thinner. Elli watches it spread on the beige linoleum, like rivulets or pathways on a map leading no one knows where.

SUMMER 1945

The stairs creak under Elli's feet. Ursel is always one step ahead. She's still the lighter of the two sisters; the last months haven't yet begun to eat away at Elli's reserves—people on the estate are already starting to whisper behind their backs. What do Mr and Mrs Kirschhofer feed their daughters, they ask, that one of them looks like a stick, as if she's been fighting at the front, while the other is the picture of good health, though there's a war being lost. It doesn't seem right, they whisper. Is it even allowed.

In fact, it had been Elli with her rosy, heart-shaped face, who had been all doom and gloom, unable to accept what was happening around them. Ursel had taken things with more serenity. Who cared whether they won or lost—just as long as it came to an end. Such talk had made Mother and Father shudder. Ursel, you mustn't say things like that outside the house. But they needn't have worried; Ursel was a realist. Don't be ridiculous, do you really think I'm that daft? Since the incident in the kitchen and Peter's failure to return from the front, Ursel had been a changed person. No, not changed; it was more that she'd gone back to being the person she'd been before—stern, aloof, prim. It was as if Peter had briefly lit up another aspect of her, just to show what might have been possible. Now Ursel had been assigned the part of war widow; people on the street threw her knowing glances—one of us...poor Ursel Kirschhofer, what suffering—and Elli was left on her own, gloomy thoughts concealed behind that rosy, heart-shaped face which, not so long ago, had earned her sweets and kind words from strangers.

Can't you keep up? But then Ursel stumbles and glances back and before she knows it, Elli has grabbed her knees—a little tug and Ursel's feet are slipping over the edge of the stair. Are you mad?

Elli pushes past her. In a sense, she thinks, people aren't wrong to think the way they do. Her worries aren't the same as the worries their neighbours discuss over their garden fences. Of course, like them, she'd been afraid of the Russians, afraid of rape; for a time, they'd all started up in the middle of the night, plagued by thoughts of doom, but that had passed, talk had turned to other things, life had gone on. Now Elli's concerns are of a different nature. She is seventeen and beautiful—but when did she last see a man in town who wasn't ancient or wounded or a little boy. She's young and doesn't know what the future will bring, now that everything she had clung to has vanished—Hitler, the ideas he stood for, that warm sense of being part of a 'we'. It has cost Elli a lot of strength to accept that the dream is over and real life has yet to begin.

With Ursel close on her heels she runs up the last steps to the attic. Dreaming is frowned on these days—but today is different. A few minutes ago they heard on the radio that the Americans are coming; a rearguard contingent is on its way to Salzburg. Now dreaming has taken over from reason again. As Mother had pointed out, their chances of actually seeing something from the little window in the attic are practically non-existent—what are you expecting, do you think the Americans are going to come down our lane—but Elli and Ursel were not to be deterred. Their mouths still full of breakfast, they had looked at each other and immediately had the same idea. There was a race to be first, of course, first to get to the attic and look out of the window, and neither cared if the other fell and bloodied her knees; neither had a thought for Mother who could have done with some help in the garden and was left grumbling about the giddiness of modern girls.

On the last step it's Elli who stumbles, catching her slipper on the overhang of the stair tread—but she falls well and breaks the fall with her hands. All that gymnastics has paid off; not everything these last years was bad. She hears Ursel call out to her. Who do you think you are. She hears her leaping up the creaking stairs like a mountain goat, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, but she pushes herself up from the floor without turning round—and feels something in her palm, a piercing pain; Elli yells when she sees the enormous splinter that has driven itself into the heel of her hand.

What's the matter with you now, she hears Ursel say. What is it. Elli holds up her hand to the light and tries gingerly to pull out the splinter. It's huge, but she can't find the end. She pulls the skin tight, then puckers it up; she feels Ursel push her from behind. Get out of the way, Elli—but Elli's not going anywhere until she's got the splinter out. She turns her hand to catch the sun from the skylight and pushes as hard as she can against Ursel who is trying to squeeze past her through the narrow door.

I've almost got it, just wait.

She pulls off the torn skin next to the splinter, dead white skin sticking up from her hand like tousled old hair; she bites her lips to concentrate better, but something distracts her. Not Ursel behind her, clamouring and shaking her—no, it's something else. Something up here is strange, something is wrong. She drops her hand and takes a step forward; her gaze travels along the flue in the middle of the room. Ursel seizes her chance and dashes past Elli into the attic. Something in this room is wrong. Something is hanging in the air. Literally hanging. Next to the window, by the old workbench, over the wooden floorboards. Shoes dangle in the air. Father looks as if he's flying.

They both scream at the same time. They scream and they scream, moving towards one another, almost as if the screaming were an inner motor propelling them forwards, making it possible for them to place one foot in front of the other. They scream, their heads in their hands, their arms making triangles in front of their bodies. They scream, moving towards one another. They scream, pushing the fallen chair back underneath him, but his feet, he really is flying, he twitches, his feet push away from the chair, again and again. They scream and in the midst of their screams something resembling a clear thought takes shape. You hold his feet, I'll climb up to him—and Elli climbs onto the chair, while Ursel holds him steady, holds his twitching feet, and up on the chair Elli puts her arms round Father, her hands on his belly, lifting him up. It looks as if she were drowning and he, Father, were saving her.

The house speaks. In every joist and every beam. It speaks whenever anything happens, and today is no exception. The floorboards squeak beneath the metal feet of the chair on which Elli is standing. Elli's arms are wet with Father's saliva. It sprays down on her like foam, and she doesn't know if he's really talking or if it's just wishful thinking.

Now the beam above her head is saying something, groaning under Father's weight, as if it, too, were being choked by the old, cut-up sheet around Father's neck.

And the stairs, the last in the alliance, do what they do best—creak beneath the feet that are pounding up to the attic.

Great God in heaven, what *are* you doing? Mother stands at the top of the stairs, shouting into their screams, shouting accusingly, as if it were a conspiracy, a plot hatched by Elli and Ursel, as if they were dancing a strange dance they'd been rehearsing together, rather than trying to stop Father from dying.

Hold him further down, Elli, round his waist. Don't cut off his airway. Ursel, where's the other chair?

Ursel only stares at her uncomprehendingly, his feet on her shoulder, stares at Mother as if a chair were the last thing they needed.

Yes, she says. But Elli's standing on it.

I asked where the other chair is, for heaven's sake. What's the matter with the pair of you, have you gone mad. Mother's movements are jittery, but there is no fear in her voice, only anger. Elli's afraid that Father might slip down, that she might lose her grip on his leather belt. She's surprised he's still wearing it. She once heard that you're better off using your belt if you want to be sure. What a good thing Father didn't know.

Mother with her heavy white body has found the little stool that Father sits on to do his woodwork. Surely she won't—the stool's not much bigger than a small plate; it will never hold her. But there's no stopping her; quickly, nimbly, she climbs onto the little piece of wood, as if she's never done anything all her life but cut her husband down from a beam. Undeterred by the wobbly legs, she stands next to Elli. Paul, she says imploringly, Paul, you're not to die on me, do you hear. I won't have it. Woe betide ye if you go and die on me—and from her apron pocket she takes the heavy garden shears. Lord knows how they fit in there, but thank goodness they do, and she begins to saw away at the sheet until the cloth starts to fray. When I tell you to, Elli, she says, breathlessly, and Elli sees beads of sweat gathering in the furrows on her brow. When I tell you to, I want you to go down to your sister and catch him, do you hear, and listen to me, Paul, you're not to die on me. I'll come to your grave and murder you if you die on me, she adds, and Elli hears her father give a kind of snort.

He comes down into their arms, more rotten apple than fallen angel. He jolts against them on the floor, and they against him; they all have bruises. Mother kneels down next to them and lifts his head onto her lap. Paul, Paul, you're not going to leave me, are you, you won't leave me yet. She whispers the words again and again, and now, as well as *hearing* the words coming from his mouth, Elli can see them too. He's still alive, he really is; he snorts out a *Margaretha* that sounds like a *Maia*; he squeezes out a hoarse *I want*; there isn't a trace of relief on his face. When Mother's tirade of blandishments and curses gives way to a quick prayer of thanks, a shaft of light falls through the window onto Father's face, and Elli sees disappointment in his eyes.

We ought to fetch the doctor. Would you go, Ursel?

I'm all right, Margaretha, Father says, struggling to get the words out.

What have you been and done? Ursel, go quickly and fetch the doctor.

Why did you do it, why did you do it, Mother repeats, and Ursel tiptoes down the stairs, though she's no more idea than Elli where she's supposed to find a doctor. Mrs Hinterbauer hasn't been around for weeks either—not since it became clear that the dream of a thousand-year Reich maybe shouldn't have been taken quite so literally.

What have you been and done. Mother's voice sounds harsher now, sharper, and the more Father shifts his limbs, the stronger his hoarse voice becomes. But it was all a farce; she knew what he'd done and why he'd done it. They all did. Evening after evening, Elli and Ursel had sat on the stairs outside the kitchen, eavesdropping. Soon Father wouldn't be able to work, because he was a former member of the Nazi Party—oh, come on, Paul, officially you were, but the whole estate knew how you stood—but Paul had said that wasn't what counted, and Elli had said to Ursel, Father of all people, it was ridiculous, but Ursel said, no, it wasn't

ridiculous, because there it was, black on white, and they'd already been told they'd all lose their jobs, especially ordinary men like Father—they had it in for ordinary people; it was always the same. Nonsense, Elli had thought. How often these last years had she wished for a little more passion from Father—even half as much as he was being accused of now. That would have been something. No, Ursel had said, shaking her head, that would have been nothing, because then Father would really be in for it; this way, at least, there was hope for him. And speaking of such things, Ursel had said, Elli ought to think about burning her League of German Girls uniform. There had been an incredible number of garden bonfires lately, and maybe the odd apple had been roasted in the flames, but plenty else had been burnt too—anything that might put its owner in an awkward position. But Elli couldn't bring herself to burn her uniform. If she didn't have a right to the future she'd been promised, surely she had a right to her memories of the past. She'd hidden the uniform secretly one night in the wooden chest in the attic, and was amused to find that Ursula's signed copy of *Mein Kampf* was already in there, right at the bottom, under Father's toolbox.

What's the matter? What's the matter? Mother's voice is suddenly very close to her ear.

You look like death warmed up. It's strange; the voice echoes in Elli's head, but it takes her a moment to realise that Mother's talking to her, not to Father. It must be true. She strokes Father's stubbly face and it's like one fish touching another. She strokes his blue-veined legs. Come on Elli, for heaven's sake, get up, take him. She tucks her arm around his and slowly gets to her feet.

His body is very cold, but hers is like ice.