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The Reason We Remain
A novel

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Reading Sample

I lie in bed and wait. I'm still here. Still living. Although death is lying on me like a blanket. I can't die, mustn't die. Not yet, at least. Not yet, not too. I just feel so dead. If you carry an empty bag, it's light. But my emptiness is heavy beyond measure. And it's impossible to imagine moving this heavy, empty body out of bed.

The tears have dried on the windowpane, but they've left behind visible traces. Now, in the light of day, they look like flattened, dried-up worms. Someone ought to wipe them off.

I lie there and ring Grandmother. Unfortunately, she doesn't understand what I'm doing on the other end of the phone. She keeps asking which button she needs to press to make the downstairs door open.

Maybe it was a mistake to let her smoke that cigarette.

Grandmother, I'm *at home*!

Oh, she says. And when are you coming upstairs?

I have to go *to work* first, you know?

Oh yes, she says. You do that, then, child. See you!

And she hangs up. That nasty beep in my ear.

I haven't told Grandmother I'm working less at the moment. I haven't told her anything about the current situation. What would be the point. She has enough worries; she doesn't need any more.

I'll head out and get a coffee to drink on the way. Somewhere on Skalitzer Straße or further into the neighbourhood, one of those little barista places. I'll get a caramel-flavoured coffee for Heide. She said she needs sugar.

It's strange how she manages to smile when she sees me. She smiles and puts her arms around my shoulders, my neck. Only very briefly, and then she turns away.

Come in, she says, and only then do I really notice that I'm already at her flat. I can't remember cleaning my teeth. I look down at myself to see whether I'm dressed. The last thing I remember is my dirty windowpane. Looking at it from my bed, where I was lying just now.

Heide looks as though she's spent the night standing behind the door, waiting for me to bring her this coffee. I see how her thoughts crumble and slide a long way down. They land in her heart, an enormous mass of crumbs. She takes one sip, then her shoulders sag downwards. She looks at the grain of the table and squashes an imaginary insect on it.

How are you? I ask.

Heide nods absently and looks me in the eyes, just as absently.

I've no idea what I have to do now, she says.

You don't have to do anything, I say.

That would be nice, she answers.

She picks up a couple of sheets of paper and waves them around.

I have to deal with all this.

Oh no, I say, all this ridiculous bureaucracy again. Can't I take care of it?

I'm afraid you'll understand it all even less than I do.

Did you sleep last night? I ask.

Oh, says Heide, I don't know.

Do you want to lie down for a bit?

I don't know where.

I take her by the hand and lead her to the sofa. She lays her head in my lap. I pull the blanket up over her slender body and rest a hand on her shoulder.

When did Sophie leave? I ask.

Ten minutes ago.

Heide can be alone for ten minutes, then. Ten minutes without jumping out of the window, without reaching for a razorblade or the hairdryer.

She's beyond tired. She probably fell asleep even as she was answering me just then. Now she's breathing deeply and evenly in my lap.

There's a photo album on the table. I pull it towards me and open it.

Etty as a baby, facing the camera. Etty as a baby, facing away from the camera. Etty at one year old, with one little tooth. Etty at two, with her pull-along duck. Etty at three, with a paper hat on her head and chocolate around her mouth. Etty at four, in the swimming pool. Etty on Heide's lap, cutting out biscuits. Etty at five, on my lap. Etty at six, on a trip to the zoo, standing brave and proud in front of the tiger enclosure. Etty at seven, blowing out candles on a birthday cake. Etty at eight, at a dance lesson. Etty at nine, on a horse. Etty at ten, in her bedroom. Etty at eleven, playing mini-golf. Etty at twelve, brushing her teeth. Etty at thirteen, in the foulest of moods. Etty at fourteen, at some buffet or another. Etty at fourteen, diving into the lake. Etty at fourteen, emerging from the lake. Etty at fourteen, eating cake. Etty at fourteen, on the beach in Fuerteventura. Etty at fourteen, by the front door. Etty at fourteen, shortly before her death.

If I don't shake while I'm crying, Heide will stay asleep. There are no photos of Etty asleep. I look into her beautiful eyes. They're green – yes, green, like everything I have.

It's difficult not to shake. I find myself thinking of Grandmother, of the expression on her face. I feel myself become as ugly as her, my lips stretching taut and the pain crawling up into my head. Everything tenses. I'm made of some kind of metal. But my elbow can still be bent and my hand can still be moved, all the way up to my face, which I wipe with my sleeve. Breathe evenly! And then the feeling as the metal melts.

Heide's windows are extremely clean. The rest of the flat, not so much. In no way does the apartment look as though Etty no longer exists. She's everywhere. There must be at least a hundred of her hairs still in here. The only question is: for how much longer?

When the doorbell rings, we both jump, Heide and I. Before the identification, we'd still have hoped it might be Etty standing on the other side of the door. That it wasn't her but another girl who'd been murdered. But although we didn't recognise her as she lay there, stiff and motionless on that metal table, it's been different since then. The image of her scratched body is imprinted behind our eyes. If we move them the wrong way or accidentally blink, it flashes up without warning.

Now, we know that she's dead. We remind ourselves of the welts around her neck. We know it isn't anyone's job to tidy up a body before its next-of-kin come to identify it.

We know that Etty is with the pathologist and can't possibly be standing on the doorstep now.

Will you get it? asks Heide. She lifts her head so I can stand up.

Now I notice that my trousers are wet. Heide's tears flow without pause, no matter whether she's awake or asleep.

The detective inspector is on the doorstep.

I've brought Etty's things, she says, and the results of the phone analysis.

Heide sits up. She still looks as though she's spent the whole night standing by the door. Her eyes peer out from dark caverns.

I take the bag from the detective. ETTY was so desperate to have it. Gold, with a secret pocket for goodness-knows-what. If only she could have got into it herself.

We didn't find any leads, no communication with a stranger.

Heide nods in the direction of the floor. It would have been shocking if ETTY had been chatting with her murderer. But no one can say for definite which pieces of information are good and which are better right now. Thus far, the only thing that's certain is that the last contact ETTY had was with Heide. Unfortunately, the detective can't say anything else at this point. The CCTV footage from the nearby U-Bahn stations is still being evaluated. She'll need to keep hold of the phone for now. She'll be in touch.

She doesn't want to take a seat, nor does she want any coffee. That was all she had to say. I walk her out, ETTY's golden bag still in my hand. I start to give it to her by way of farewell, but then I remember there's no longer anything left to find in it.

Heide and I repeat what the detective said, so we don't forget it. But in the end we wind up at ETTY's final exchange of messages again. It exists in mirror image on Heide's phone, and every day she reads something different into the words. Sometimes she thinks she was too nice, that she should have insisted ETTY came home at ten. Other times, she thinks she was too brusque, because she let her know she didn't like it when the plan changed.

When I read ETTY's words, I hear them in her voice. The gentle rasp of it, especially when she laughed. Whenever she told a joke, I always knew when the punchline was coming; that rasping gave it away.

I hear ETTY and I see her, too. I don't know how I'm supposed to grieve her when I can sense her so clearly. I've sat in this very chair with her feet in my lap. Don't tickle, just rub them, she said.

She sat in this very chair and tried her first sip of coffee. Bleugh, that's disgusting! And you drink this voluntarily? she said.

She sat in this very chair and just wouldn't stop growing. She was nearly as tall as Sophie and desperate to overtake her. Think about that very carefully, Sophie said, you'll be constantly making yourself smaller, because you'll want to fit in with all the others.

But I won't want to fit in, ETTY answered. If I fit in, I'll never be famous!

She stood in this very room and demonstrated her new dance moves for us. In this very room, bent over a bowl, she nursed a bad cold. There was a pan of chicken soup on the stove and when ETTY ate it she made sure to tell us that she would go back to being vegan again just as soon as she was well.

Sophie arrives later than planned. She says: Your mother sends her love; she'll give you another ring tomorrow.

Sophie looks like a big version of Etty. I wonder whether similarity of appearance can arise from social contact. It's out of the question that Sophie is Etty's real mother. I was present for the birth. And Sophie wasn't pregnant at the time. Sophie doesn't have any children. And yet: she has the same hair as Etty, similar facial expressions, the same way of walking. It's also out of the question that Sophie is really Etty. It feels like constantly waking up, reminding myself that no one is Etty, that no one can be Etty.

I think about *Ghost*, that daft film with Whoopi Goldberg and Patrick Swayze. How many people must have tried to make contact with the dead after watching that film?

I'm just about to ask what we'd like to eat, probably for the tenth time today, when Sophie says that the people from RTL are hanging around outside again.

Outside the door to the flat or the building? I ask.

The flat, says Sophie. Probably best you stay here tonight.

I had actually been planning to go for a walk – get some fresh air, move a little bit. But I have no desire to be asked stupid questions by RTL, perhaps even on camera: What do I know? Nothing is what I know.

How is the mother? Where was she at the time of the murder? Why was a fourteen-year-old girl out by herself so late at night?

I'd much rather ask that crappy channel some questions of my own:

Do you have a child yourself? One that's hit puberty? One that's hit puberty and lives in Berlin? If so, do you really find it so hard to understand why a fourteen-year-old kid would have been on her way home at ten thirty at night? Especially seeing as it was a Saturday, after a party at a friend's place.

I'd like to ask:

Do you think it would be better to lock a fourteen-year-old up at home on the grounds that you don't care whether all her friends are allowed to meet up and have fun? Do you think that kid would understand? How do you imagine the atmosphere at home would be, if your child wanted to go out with her friends at the weekend but you gave her the option of playing Scrabble or watching TV with you instead?

I'd like to ask if it isn't about time we started wondering how we can make the world safer, instead of meekly submitting to the dangers it holds.

Above all, I'd like to ask:

How do you know the mother's name and address? Did you bribe a police officer to bring you here?

Oh, fuck off! I'll just stay here, then.

So, what do we want to eat?

We eat pasta with tomato sauce. Pasta is always comforting somehow, and also Etty's favourite. We eat without tasting it. No one says it's good. And it isn't. Pasta with tomato sauce without Etty tastes awful.

Sophie talks about her day at work. Somewhat carefully at first, because she doesn't know whether we'll be interested. But it's a welcome distraction. Ten minutes later, she's in full flow, all het up about one of her colleagues. She gets herself into a lather talking about how unfair and shitty this woman is. They'll talk about this and that, and then she just doesn't stick to her word. Now something in me shifts, too. I look over at Heide, but she's behind a veil. I can never tell if this is too much for her or if she finds it just as silly as I do. I remember Heide once telling me about a similar situation. It was back when Sophie was still working behind the bar at Morena. Heide said that Sophie had got louder and louder as she talked; not even when one of the customers asked her to turn up the music did she stop getting so worked up about her boss.

Maybe it's a good thing that Sophie isn't behind the bar any more, that she works these days at a tax consultancy firm. But the way it looks, she has terrible colleagues wherever she works. And who else can she tell if not us. I just wonder why she's doing it now. Here and now.

On the other hand, perhaps she shouldn't stop. It's so pleasantly everyday, so boring, so inconsequential. It pushes the thoughts of ETTY aside. The thoughts and the questions. How should we have talked to ETTY? Differently? More? Why wasn't Heide standing by the window that night? Why didn't Heide insist she came home in a taxi? The questions always elicit the same feeling: guilt, bearing down on us like a slab of concrete. Guilt has many colours. Sometimes it's blood red, sometimes black, sometimes grey. The only colour it never is is pink.

Sophie pours us all wine. Wine in place of sedatives.

We talk about Morena, the bar. No idea how we lighted on that. Fortunately, Sophie doesn't remember her former colleagues. She says she loved that job. Especially when ETTY came by after school. The hot chocolate she used to make for her always had extra cocoa powder in it.

Have I already told you how many days of so-called compassionate leave you get if a close relative dies? asks Heide.

Oh, is there such a thing? replies Sophie.

Yes. Paid, even.

That sounds almost utopian.

So, what do you think? How many days am I allowed to . . . wait a moment . . . what did they call it again? She flips through the papers on the table.

How many days am I allowed to be *temporarily indisposed* in this kind of situation?

Oh God, that sounds very German, says Sophie. No idea, but if they've worded it like that, I'd guess two weeks.

I've never heard of compassionate leave, I say, but then, I've never been on the payroll anywhere either. So . . . if we were in Norway, I'd guess six months. But here . . . I don't know. A month, maybe?

Heide nods thoughtfully. She puts the piece of paper back on the pile, smacks the palm of her hand down on top.

Two days, she says then.

What? cries Sophie. You're kidding!

No, says Heide. The day of the death and the day of the funeral, *to support me through this difficult time*, end quote.

Wow, I say. I'd feel so ashamed if I had to send a letter like that.

But you're still allowed sick leave? asks Sophie.

Yes, says Heide. My sick notes say I'm suffering from an acute stress reaction. My doctor says she can't put down anything about bereavement.

So bereavement isn't a valid reason for being temporarily indisposed?

Exactly, says Heide.

There are still a few bottles of wine in the rack. We drink two and a half and the evening goes fuzzy and at some point it turns into night. Sophie gets into bed with Heide. I take the sofa, which is still damp from Heide's tears.

The flashes come when I close my eyes. The things I've seen blur into the ones I've imagined. Etty's murderer is wearing a green baseball cap and jeans that are too big. I hear Etty scream; I see her struggle.

Why couldn't she make it those last couple of metres to the front door? Did no one hear her screaming? Did she even scream at all?

I lie on the wet sofa, my head throbbing, and wonder how sleep is ever going to come.

In actual fact, as you lie there, you're standing next to the bed as well. You look at yourself from a distance, try to massage your head from the inside out. You turn the images back and forth continually, like massive boulders, never coming to rest. But then, at some point, when the room grows light again, you still rub your eyes and come back to reality from some other plane. You're awake and, on the one hand, happy to have escaped that state. On the other hand, you find yourself asking what, if anything, has changed.

Time no longer has any meaning. It could be Wednesday, but it could also be Sunday. It could be morning, or it could be night. Sometimes it's dark in the daytime; sometimes I lie awake; sometimes I close my eyes. This thing called time ticks past us. We're no longer taken into account. The minutes mesh indiscriminately with one another, no rhyme or reason. Appropriately, 'Every Day Is A Small Century' plays on repeat in my head. When I open my eyes, everything in my field of vision is blurry. I can't see or feel anything, but actually the opposite is true. It's just that my gaze is directed inwards. I'm full of Etty, full of grasping the fact that she isn't just away but is never coming back. Full of the knowledge that the monster who took her life is somewhere out there still. Full of the questions that Heide asks, to which I have no answers. Why did someone murder my Etty? Who does that? Who rapes a child? Who kills a child? How can you grasp a thing like that, let alone understand it? Why have they still not found him? Why didn't I hear her? How did I not see anything out of the window? And how did no one else? How is something like that even possible, in the middle of Berlin? What's supposed to happen now? The song in my head gets stuck on a single line: *Time is just a rubber band, stretched between two people's hands.*

We skip breakfast. Sophie goes to work and we borrow Micki's dog. Micki lives downstairs from Heide and occasionally comes to the door if he hasn't heard any noises through the ceiling. He has to go to work as well, and we're in need of fresh air. RTL is no longer hanging around outside the flat. I ask Micki to check whether the coast is clear outside the building, too. Thirty seconds later, he shouts through the intercom: You're good!

I link my arm through Heide's and try to remember the dog's name. It doesn't really matter because he's always on the lead, but somehow it's nicer if you can be in conversation. Something beginning with B, I think, but it wasn't Blackie. Bodo? Bobby?

Heide, what's the dog called again?

Heide looks at the dog and then at me. I'm startled by the expression of grief on her face today. It seems to be spreading beneath her skin. Her swollen eyes are sunk in shadowy holes that go down who-knows-how-far. She answers me almost as though she's sleepwalking:

Skipper – that's his name.

Something beginning with B, then, I think.

As soon as the front door opens, Heide jerks her head away from the crime scene, away from the bush that seemed so harmless until a few days ago. I check quickly that no one's lurking there, camera in their hand or pencil behind their ear.

I bet no one who lives on this street could say what kind of bush that is. No one has ever paid much attention to it. It doesn't take up much space. A bush like this is actually quite rare here, in Berlin. It doesn't seem to belong anywhere. It just grows quietly away in its corner. There's no fence and no facade behind it, no one to say: That belongs to me and my property! No one

trims it. It's grown so high it's taller than me. Most likely the bush planted itself and now it bears responsibility for everything that happens in it. It's still contained within the barrier tape emblazoned with the word *Police*. I hope that when they come to collect the tape, the bush collapses or they take it away as well. It mustn't be allowed to stay there. The light needs to get in! Someone needs to be able to see from far away, from the side and from above, that it's empty there behind the bush. No other creature should be given a chance to use this bush to commit a crime. Instead of a bush, there should be a streetlight.

We walk in the direction of the canal. Skipper pulls hard on the lead. He's taking us for a walk, not the other way around. After a few metres he squats in the middle of the pavement and leaves a steaming pile.

Next to us, a door opens. A man bellows out: Gonna clear that up, aren'tcha?

I pull a plastic bag out of the roll clipped to the lead and pick up the mess. When I straighten up, I see that the man is still there.

Not in my bin, all righ'?

I sense Heide freeze, her arm growing ever more solid. She can't bear someone speaking to us. Especially not in that tone. I have to stop myself from throwing the poo bag at his feet.

Somehow, we hesitate too long. He raises an eyebrow and asks: What, you not right in the head or summin? Not understandin' me, are ya? Don't chuck that shit away in front of my gaff, s'all I'm askin'.

There's so much on the tip of my tongue, so much I'd like to say to this arsehole. But he might have a knife in that bag where he's been keeping his hand this whole time.

I pull Heide away, but the dog doesn't want to come. He snuffles excessively along the wall of the building. Suddenly, I've forgotten his name again. Something beginning with B, I think.

Come on, I say, and drag the poor thing far too roughly behind me.

This neighbourhood isn't what it used to be; hasn't been that way for years. Everyone is sitting together but neatly separated. The homeless from the teens, the teens from the old stoners. It's not even necessary, this, seeing as they're all swilling the same shitty schnapps anyway. They could just as well sit together on the *same* bench and drink out of the *same* bottle. That would be less hypocritical.

The dog has stopped pulling. Now he's done his business, he trots obediently to heel.

We walk along the river, which also used to be much nicer, back when there weren't any fish with their heads stuck in condoms floating along beside the yoghurt pots and Coke cans in the water.

The paths are full of families. They go out for their walks wearing gleaming bike helmets and lick away at salty pistachio ice creams. They move with that swaying gait common to all parents. Even I had it when ETTY was little, every time I picked her up. You automatically turn into a kind of machine as soon as you go near a baby. No sooner does the baby press the button than the adult starts swaying, like a jukebox full of waltz numbers.

I don't know if I'll ever eat pistachio ice cream again. So many things belong to ETTY. She was always so thrilled about it; it was as though pistachio ice cream had been invented just for her. Fortunately, the breed of people changes with the bend in the river and I'm able to forget about pistachio ice cream. Now it's men on bikes coming towards us. They're dressed in suits, trouser legs clipped back with clothes pegs to stop them getting tangled in the oily chain. These men are wearing bike helmets, too. Everyone's wearing a helmet! Absurd, really, how many people safeguard their lives with a bike helmet. Everyone here seems to be worried about the possibility of an accident. But not murder.

We get to Görlitzer Park and Heide wants to go home. I suggest throwing a few sticks for the dog so he can run around a bit.

Everywhere stinks of shit. Thousands of black poo bags spill out of overflowing rubbish bins. It's hot. If the sun keeps shining like this, the bags will melt and all the shit will run out on to the grass, which isn't actually grass any more. We walk across the dried-up earth and I pick up a stick, which makes the dog start barking. If he were mine, I'd have trained him out of that. There's nothing more annoying than a dog that can't wait. I throw the stick a couple of metres ahead of us. The dog does run after it, but as soon as he gets to where it fell, he starts digging a hole. Skipper. I've remembered his name again. Everything is sliding around inside my head. Neither Heide nor I have the faintest clue about dogs. Do we wait until he comes back of his own accord, or are we supposed to go over there now? Shouldn't he have brought the stick back? Have we lost any kind of authority over him for the way home? Are we meant to fill in the hole again when he's finished? It wouldn't do for someone to twist their ankle in the dark. I realise that Heide isn't standing beside me any more. I walk over and sit down next to her on the bench. A fug of weed wafts over to us.

Heide breathes in deeply.

That smells so good, she says.

I dig around in my coat pocket to locate my wallet and nod at the pair sitting on the bench beside ours.

Can I buy some off you?

We got it from that dude over there, says one of them, indicating a man who has just started running. He's being followed by several others, probably ten of them in total, all shouting *Fuck* and *Police* and *Run, run run!* as they go.

I turn back to our neighbours on the bench.

Just a little twist, I say.

The girl plucks off a small amount and hands it to me.

Forget the cash, she says, it's OK.

I thank her and set off in pursuit of Heide, who seems to have found the whole exchange embarrassing somehow. She's now standing right in front of Skipper, watching him dig his hole. I wonder when we should smoke the joint. Not here, at any rate.

Skipper is not to be deterred. The dogs that pass us sniff at him. But he doesn't turn around. He looks like a construction worker who needs to get a job finished. He's soon standing in a proper trench, all four paws one level below us. I find myself thinking about ETTY's funeral, and on the edge of my vision I catch Heide wiping tears from her eyes. I link my arm through hers again and put the weed in my coat pocket.

Skipper doesn't want to leave yet. He clamps his jaws around roots and pulls them out, making ferocious noises as he does so. I bend down towards him and clip the carabiner to his collar. We don't want to stand here watching you exploring the ground any more, I say. He looks up at me and licks his muzzle excitedly. There's soil stuck to his teeth, his tongue. He's bound to be thirsty now.

We take him back to Heide's flat with us. I put down a baking dish filled with water, and he drinks half of it in one go.

I just don't know what they're thinking, says Heide. It's going to drive me totally mad soon. I also think she'll have gone mad soon. Every day her searching expression looks a little more desperate.

The answer machine isn't flashing, so, as usual, she checks whether the phone is sitting properly on its base. Every ten minutes she gets her mobile out of her pocket and checks whether it's charged and the volume is turned up.

You know, I say, we should start having a think about how it's all going to work, when the time comes. You're going to have to deal with it at some point, so why not now?

You mean the funeral? she asks.

Yes, I say.

She's definitely not going in a coffin, says Heide. I don't want anyone coming anywhere near my child's body ever again, even if it is just grubby worms.

I open my laptop and show her two funeral homes I've found online. One of them is a bit hip. It offers interment in an organic urn. The other is more of a classic establishment, but with younger staff who all look somehow nice.

How am I supposed to be picturing this organic urn? asks Heide.

I scroll quickly past words like *coffin* and *funeral rule*. But there aren't any pictures of urns on the website. I google *organic urns* instead. They're made of sand, salt, cork or bamboo.

ETTY wouldn't like those, says Heide. I can only agree. They look dreadful. But the more I scroll, the more I have to ask whether there are any kinds of urns that ETTY would like at all.

The funeral home must have nicer-looking urns, I say and confess to Heide that I've already made a couple of calls and she has an appointment next week. Sophie's going with her.

Heide can't keep up. Too much information at once. We could get one of those dreary-looking urns and paint it – what do you think? she asks.

Yeah, we could do that, I say. I'm sure that must be possible.

Heide asks what time it is.

Half two. Why, have you got plans?

She shakes her head. I just wanted to know if it's acceptable to open a bottle of wine yet, she says.

Even if I am generally of the opinion that you should do or not do whatever you want, whenever you want, I'm worried about what will happen if Heide starts drinking during the day and it becomes a habit. On the other hand, alcohol is a sedative and might not get her addicted as quickly as those awful pills she's been prescribed.

I remember the weed in my coat pocket.

I'll roll us a joint, if you like.

Fine, she says, it's better than nothing.

I open the window and light the joint. I've only put in a bit of tobacco, so it's going to be a fierce one. Heide rests her head on the arm of the sofa and blows smoke towards the ceiling. I follow its progress and, as it dissipates over our heads, I see something stuck up there. It looks like a spider. When I look closer, though, I see it's a crack. I point a finger at it. Heide nods and says: That was ETTY. She was so desperate to open the prosecco on New Year's Eve.

The joint seems to be having an effect already. We even laugh a bit. Somehow, ETTY is in the room with us, opening the bottle of prosecco again. I can see her quite clearly. She's standing there, clasping the bottle, fumbling around the cork. Finally, it comes loose and shoots off into the air. And yet, I can't hear it. It just doesn't go *bang*.

We're properly stoned when Heide's phone rings. Oh shit, she says, it's my mother.

Shall I answer? I ask. But what difference would that make.

Hello, Mama, she says.

I stand up and wander over to the fridge. I've got a craving for chocolate blancmange.

No, no, you're not interrupting, all good, says Heide in the background.

There's milk in the fridge. Now I just need to find the blancmange mix. I open the cupboards and get out a glass. I never usually drink tap water – it tastes horrible in Berlin – but now I need to quench my thirst quickly; my tongue is all stuck to the roof of my mouth.

No, I'm not ill, says Heide, I've got a sweet stuck to the roof of my mouth.

I fill a second glass and take it to her. Heide drinks it down in one go.

OK, that's better now, she says, nodding at me.

What did I want again? I can't remember, so I close the cupboard doors and sit down at the kitchen table.

It's OK today, says Heide.

There's a big to-do going on in the tree outside. Loads of birds fetching and carrying things. I watch them for a little while.

But we haven't got that far yet, Mama, says Heide. And anyway, Etty wouldn't like that. I bring her another glass of water. I can hear her tongue getting sticky again.

Of course! That's precisely my point. It's not my funeral, unfortunately; it's Etty's, Heide says angrily.

She picks up the glass of water and drinks it again in one. At precisely that moment, the door opens and Sophie comes in. She looks exhausted. When she realises it's Heide's mother on the phone, she looks questioningly at me. But I've got no idea how long the conversation has been going on for. Sophie has some kind of connection to Heide's mother. *My second daughter*, she often called her. That's why Sophie is allowed to say things Heide isn't. Sophie waits another minute, then takes the phone from Heide's hand.

Brigitte, let's talk later on, OK? Heide needs to rest now; it's been a long enough day as it is.

Even if this is more of a reference to her own day than anything else – because our day, well, what have we really done with it? – it's good that she says it, because it makes Heide's mother shut up. She ends the call and I'm finally able to ask where Heide keeps the blancmange mix.

We eat it warm. But it doesn't taste good. It's Sophie's fault. She looks accusingly at me. Her eyes have gone very narrow. She looks from me to Heide and back again, and when her gaze comes to rest on me, she shakes her head. Even if I'm still grinning and in another world, I can see it. I can see her anger. Anger at how Heide and I have got stoned. I'm sure her face is going to appear in my dreams.

Heide says her mother wants to order one of those boring old funeral wreaths, the kind with a horrible bow.

She means well, though, I say, but Heide says that every time they talk she has to explain to her mother exactly who it is that's died. Her granddaughter is who this is about, not some OAP who had white lilies down as state-approved mourning flowers.

The dog whimpers under the table and nudges against my leg. I'd totally forgotten about him. I look over at the baking dish. Not a drop of water left. I go down to see Micki, who's actually at home, and tell him Skipper needs to pee. Now it's Micki's turn to look accusingly at me. He must have been hoping we'd look after his dog for him all week.

I hold Heide tight, imagine being able to staple her to me, but I haven't got further than the stairwell before I realise I've lost her, that I'm going downstairs without her. By the time I get to the street, I'm empty again. And alone.

I walk in the direction of my new TV. When I moved into the flat, I also got my very first television. Today is going to be its first outing. I don't want to do anything apart from eat blancmange and watch TV.

I buy blancmange and two big bags of crisps. That should do it. I will *not* dream of Sophie's accusing face. I'm going to watch TV all night and eat and hope that she isn't too fierce with Heide.

All because of *one* little joint! Some people just have nothing good to say about drugs, no matter the situation. Now I can feel the anger rising through me. Couldn't Sophie aim her outrage somewhere else? At criminals, at politicians, at the police force that's incapable of finding out who killed Etty?

He might be walking down the street ahead of me. He might be sitting in that car driving past right now, thinking about putting his foot on the accelerator at the next red light.

How many murderers are there in Berlin? At this very moment, as I'm passing the entrance to Falckensteinstraße 13, is the next woman being murdered inside Falckensteinstraße 13?

I don't turn around. I go home to my TV.

The flat looks as it always does. Boxes everywhere.

I dump everything on the coffee table and fetch a spoon and a plate. They only had the kind of blancmange with cream on top, worse luck. I've never liked the taste. I spoon the cream off on to the plate until it looks like the Alps, and press the power button on the remote.

On the first channel, someone is being stabbed. On the second, the music suggests that things are about to get gory. On the third, a child is screaming for its mother. On the fourth, they're looking for a body. On the fifth channel: war. On the sixth, two people sobbing in each other's arms. On the seventh channel, a woman is being raped. On the eighth, something is being cooked.

My pulse is racing. I take a few deep breaths and see Etty in my mind's eye, trying to escape from her killer. I see her running and running. And I see the killer, the way he grabs her by the feet, drags her towards him. I see the flash of a knife. But then I remember that he didn't stab her at all; he strangled her. I put the blancmange back on the table. No more.

Then you need to give the mixture a good beating with the whisk – like this, see, says the man at the mixing bowl. The woman standing beside him has an egg in her hand.

I won't touch the remote again. It can stay right where it is, until I'm eighty years old.

*Sample from The Reason We Remain by Marlen Pelny (Haymon Verlag, September 2023),
translated by Eleanor Updegraff*