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***Unwanted Daughters***

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Chapter 1

The Cabinet

My great-grandmother Margarethe commissioned a Dresden carpenter to make her a cabinet in 1912. The cabinetmaker was a paternal older man who asked precisely what she wanted and then surprised her with a drawing based on her wishes, which she liked even better than what she'd envisaged. It was made of cherrywood, oiled to a dark shade and topped by a narrow chapter with slightly rounded corners. The upper section had two glass doors each divided into eighteen small windows, behind which Goethe and Schiller could take pride of place. This display cabinet part was slightly shallower like on a bureau, while the cupboard below had greater depth, its doors made of wood, a place for unsightly things like her documents. On either end, attached only by small supports, were two simple open bookshelves, the same height as the cabinet without its chapter. When the carpenter and his assistant delivered it, Margarethe couldn't stop stroking the wood and admiring the shiny brass locks and handles; she had to write a letter to her best friend before she began to arrange her books on it with much thought, placing the great writers not alphabetically, but according to their importance. You're always complaining about things being vain, her husband said when he came home. But this is your form of vanity.

Margarethe's cabinet has often moved house. Within Dresden itself, then southwest to Meiningen, and in the end in East Westphalia it was the only piece of furniture that always found a new place against various living-room walls. That was where I first consciously noticed it, at the age of four, on the Christmas day when my grandmother Marianne presented me with a doll's house she'd made herself, in her attic flat. In my memory, the doll's house had three floors, but there might only have been two; it was inhabited by dolls a tiny bit too large for the rooms and the furniture and it had electric light, a little switch on one side that turned miniature lightbulbs on or off in every room.

The doll's house was set up in the corner beneath the sloping roof, where only I could stand upright. Beside it was a small chest of drawers, then came the door with its large yellow fluted-glass window, and on the other side of the door stood the book cabinet with its open shelves on either side. It's a bookcase cabinet, my mother said at least, accusatory, for my grandmother used only the shelves for books; behind the glazed doors with their two sets of eighteen little windows, she had placed a large pink seashell and Fipps the monkey, who clashed two cymbals together when you wound him up, and two small billy goats. One was black like my father, one white like my mother; they were magnetic and they butted heads if you placed them in the right direction, repelling one another the other way around. For the sake of these treasures, my grandmother had exiled Goethe and Schiller to the side wings. With them were works by Rabindranath Tagore, among others, which my great-grandmother had also taken along every time she moved house, something that astonished me

when I was a little older, aware of her aversion to everything non-European; I had understood that deeply and devastatingly, though I don't remember anyone ever telling me about it. Why, then, was an Indian whose name sounded like a magic spell worthy of sharing a shelf with Goethe and Schiller and Lessing?

On my grandmother's death, her brother's daughters-in-law came to see if there was anything they might find useful, mainly interested in what remained of the Meissen porcelain, but my mother, who had used a big round Persil tub as a bedside table for years and was usually a stranger to the material world, wanted to keep the porcelain. She was outright angry when one of her cousins' wives said she'd like to take the cabinet. It turned out that my mother viewed this cabinet with its now tarnished brass locks as her natural legacy and had considered it to be in the wrong hands even with her dead mother Marianne. She took it home to her own flat in Frankfurt, threw away Fipps the monkey and the magnetic goats and filled it up again with the old classic editions, and on the side shelves she placed the works of Turkish writers, which she read in the original.

When my mother died, I was afraid of the cabinet and didn't want it. Nor did I know where to put it in our small terraced house. I was glad when my lover offered to look after it for me. He kept it in his bedroom, my mother's Thomas Mann and Joseph Roth collections now behind the glass windows, the dark red collected works of Freud I'd always wanted to read on the right-hand shelves. The cabinet was right there when he spoke to his previous girlfriend on the phone in my absence and talked about how he intended to leave me. Two days after he called me from a psychosomatic clinic where he was spending a few weeks for depression and told me I was demanding too much commitment of him, I rented a van and went to collect the cabinet. A friend of my daughter's came with me to help. The glass section comes off, so he and I could carry it easily.

I put the two side units in storage in the basement of an office building. The young man and I lugged the rest of the cabinet up to my attic study. I'd always thought the cabinet was very big, too large for the small room, but that wasn't true; it fitted perfectly, and it made the space into a proper room that I enjoyed entering. I was finally grown up enough to possess the cabinet that had previously belonged to my great-grandmother, then my grandmother and most recently my mother. My great-grandmother had dedicated the cabinet to her sacred poets, my grandmother to the trinkets that made her happy, and my mother had returned it to its original purpose, albeit with small variations. And me? I used it for what they wrote about their lives. The many diaries they left behind are now behind the two sets of eighteen windows.

## Chapter 2

### Villa Parsifal

In a corner at the back of the garden, in the spot where nothing grew in the shadow of the big cherry tree and the earth was hard as rock, the children had built a little staircase with four steps. It was mainly her two little sisters who built it, out of material Margarethe had found in the cellar, bricks, wood, a broken drawer. They had piled it all up, and Margarethe had shown them how to make the staircase as stable as possible.

She hadn't known how to do it, of course, she had never built a staircase either, but she had always seen right away what fitted and what didn't, and the girls had carried out her orders in rapt devotion, as they always did. Once they were finished they had all fetched their mother, who was resting on the sofa in the salon, her belly slightly rounded with the baby on its way. Their mother got up to view the construction. When she looked into her younger daughters' faces, she couldn't help but tell them how lovely their staircase was. But as the little ones ran back and forth between their mother and sister, interrupting each other and explaining every construction step, Margarethe already knew she mustn't show any sign of satisfaction, let alone pride. Later, after dinner when the maid had put her sisters to bed, her mother told Grethe she was a wild minx who did nothing but nonsense with them. What did they need a staircase for, her father asked Margarethe. And even that question angered her mother, who accused him of always encouraging Grethe. The very tone in which he commented on her nonsense was inappropriate.

They needed the staircase to climb over the wall and play in the huge plot of land next door. From the wall, they could jump down or clamber onto one of the little trees on the other side. There was nothing built there yet but plans had been drawn up; there were to be villas here too, their parents often talked about it. They had done everything right with Villa Parsifal, one of the first villas on this road in the south of Dresden, not far from the station. More and more was being built there now, and their property value was rising. Their father had done everything right, anyway. After initially failing to keep his bicycle factory up to the technical standards of the more proficient competition, he had fallen back on his strengths, made the best of the flourishing economy, developed an instinct for popular taste as a sheet-music salesman and purchased the rights to successful pieces and songs. Their father was a success because he could talk to anyone, musicians, music-lovers, concert organisers, rich society ladies; he was so charming with the ladies that their mother, whenever she had witnessed such conversations, would maintain an icy silence all through dinner. On other days, though, she praised their father's business acumen, and his success had taken physical form in Villa Parsifal. The window mosaic in the conservatory, blue, green and milky-shimmering white, depicted the swan from Lohengrin. Thou shalt never ask me, their father quoted Wagner.

He quoted a wealth of sources in his full voice, he knew everything, and what he said echoed in Margarethe's mind. *Per aspera ad astra*, through suffering to the stars. What does the proud oak care if a boar scratches itself on its bark. I would be, grant me this request, the third in your band. Their mother only ever quoted Goethe, claiming all else paled beside his genius; just as one needed nothing in music but Mozart, so literature had reached its apex in Goethe. Before him the rise, after

him the fall. And at the same time, Goethe was balm for the soul. Unlike the avaricious churchmen with their drivel about the kingdom of heaven, he had seen straight into people's hearts: And, if man is silenced in his pain, There would be a god to tell me what I suffer. Their mother's birthday was the 28th of August, the same day as Goethe's. And their father was born in 1849, a hundred years after Goethe.

It was on a summer's day shortly after the staircase was built when their mother said the photographer was coming later and told them to put on their Sunday dresses and come down to the salon at eleven on the dot. Margarethe asked whether, instead of her pale-blue Sunday dress, she couldn't put on her red one, it was less elegant but the colour was better, and her mother looked at her and said, she did know the pictures would be black and white? They were not to play their usual wild games, they were to please read or play with their dolls, and Margarethe was responsible for her sisters. At first, Margarethe sat on the little sofa and read ballads. As long as she was reading Goethe, she was doing nothing wrong in her mother's eyes, and it was at least better than playing with dolls. Her sisters dressed the dolls in their nightshirts and put them to bed, and by the time the dolls had woken up for the fifth time and had to be put back to bed, it was eleven at last, and they ran in their Sunday shoes to the salon. But the photographer was not yet there. He was obviously running late, they were told, and they were to be patient; he would soon arrive, no doubt.

They went back to the nursery, and Margarethe told her sisters the natives in the South Seas believed a photo captured the souls of those it depicted. That's why they were afraid anyone who possessed their photo could rule over their souls or their lives. If someone screwed up the photo, they would die. But that was nonsense, the girls exclaimed. Yes, but they believe it, and then they really do fall down dead. Even if they're not there when the photo is screwed up – they feel it, and their hearts stop beating, Margarethe claimed. And when her sisters' eyes widened in fear, she reassured them and said, yes, that was the power of superstition in the South Seas, but no one in a civilised country like Germany believed that, and therefore it couldn't happen there. Otherwise, powerful people like the King of Saxony or the Emperor wouldn't let anyone take their photo.

The sun beamed pillars of dancing dust motes into the room. Margarethe had once told her sisters they were the souls of the unredeemed heathens not allowed into heaven, not being christened, who must now forever float in mid-air. She herself had later asked her mother whether the dust in the sun weren't a sign that Sanne wasn't cleaning properly, but then too, her mother had looked at her with her usual slight amazement over stupid questions and told her there was always dust in the air. But why? Because that's how it is. Margarethe said nothing more to that, but it seemed to her a strange flaw in God's creation; why this dust everywhere, which constantly needed wiping away?

After her sisters had been astounded long enough by the South Sea natives and fallen into fits of giggles in relief that nobody in Germany fell down dead through a photo, all three of them noticed they were bored. They decided to ask their mother whether they couldn't play in the garden a little after all, just on the swing; if they swung very carefully and wiped the swing down properly beforehand it wouldn't be bad for their Sunday dresses, since they had often played on the swing after church.

But her bedroom door was closed, and the cook told them to leave their mother to rest. Their father had not gone to the shop today because the photographer was supposed to come; he was up in his top-floor study with the big window from which you could see all the way to the station. But they didn't dare to knock on his door. There had only once been a situation in which it had seemed justified to disturb their father at work. The cook and the maid had both been off, and their mother had suffered a fainting fit while trying to teach the little ones a simple lied on the grand piano and had collapsed onto the floor next to the huge instrument.

The three of them sat on the little sofa, the dolls asleep, the jigsaws so familiar they did themselves, the picture books' stories told so often that the little ones, who couldn't yet read, could turn the pages and recite the words. All around them stretched an endless desert of time, a standstill that swallowed everything up and turned the flounced pale-blue curtains into shrouds for all eternity.

The ceiling bore down upon them, the walls held them captive. And then they decided to go into the garden; it couldn't be all that bad.

The moment they passed through the wooden door with its two little windows to the outside world, the nursery's slow viscosity abandoned them.

Margarethe pushed her little sisters off on the swing, giving them each turns. Their Sunday dresses billowed in mid-air as they swung themselves so high with their feet that they almost thought they could jump all the way to the roses, though they knew that was too far and they would only land on the patch of lawn in front of them, yet again.

They knew they were not to jump in their best dresses, but that was such a shame. Then Margarethe sat down on the swing with one or other of her sisters on her lap, alternating between little Hanny, while Tutty stood jealously in the triangle of the wooden frame and counted to twenty on her fingers for want of a clock, and Tutty again. When it was Tutty's turn, Margarethe made the swing circle, not just back and forth but left and right as well, meaning Hanny had to leap aside as they almost banged into the supports. Margarethe and Tutty laughed, the swing trembled in its moorings, and the warm air stroked their faces, the wind's fierce bride – Margarethe's father recited in her head, it spurred us on like the wind's fierce bride and plunged us deep in murd'rous tide and in the spears' black night. Tutty didn't want to stop, but then Hanny almost burst out crying, so Margarethe put down Tutty despite her protests and took Hanny onto her lap. Tutty wandered off, picking daisies for a chain, and Margarethe circled the swing again with all the wildness of the wind's fierce bride, harder and harder, higher and higher.

I want to get off, cried Hanny.

Don't be scared, it's fun, come on, cried Margarethe, and she swung even higher and held tight to Hanny, who called once again that she wanted to get off. They circled and swung, the roses rotating ahead of them, and when Margarethe tipped her head back the villa swayed behind them like a drunken ship, and the blue sky was also part of the spinning top in which they turned and turned and turned, and Margarethe laughed again. She held tight to little Hanny as a squirrel darted along a branch, up and down and round and round. It spurred us on like the wind's fierce bride. But right in

the moment when they were high above, their backs to the earth and to finitude, Hanny belched out a squall of vomit, onto her dress and onto Margarethe.

Hanny was very pale and silent; Tutty dropped her daisies on the grass and came running back to the swing. And cried: What will Mother say?!

Margarethe stood there for an instant, at a loss; there was almost more vomit on her dress than on Hanny's.

Their mother never beat them, and nor did their father; they agreed that such a thing was primitive, a disciplinary method for undisciplined people. To punish them, their mother maintained silence, previously only for a few hours, usually, until Margarethe began to cry, but more recently, since Margarethe tended to withdraw from this silence, the punishment could go on for days. Margarethe flicked a few clumps of vomit onto the grass. Then she dragged her little sister to the water barrel beside the shed and began to wash them both. But she had hardly begun before the back door opened and their mother came out, and her call that the photographer had arrived died on her lips when she saw her daughters in their ruined dresses.

In the photo, taken shortly later in the garden rather than the salon, to make the most of the good weather and the villa in the background, you can see her silence: their mother, Anna Maria Augusta Weber, née Richter. She looks older than her 32 years in her dark maternity dress, though her protruding belly is hidden by Hanny, the dainty blonde daughter perched on her lap and smiling in a slightly too tight dress, picked out as a replacement. Beside her stands her husband, Carl Hermann Weber, moustachioed, his slightly too long hair revealing his love of music and admiration of Wagner, yet nothing about his dignified gaze betrays the passion that had led, nine years previously, to Margarethe being born only three months after her parents' wedding, a healthy, almost eight-pound baby. To his right stands Tutty, staring with concern at the camera as if afraid the South Sea natives might be right to fear the power of photography. Margarethe is standing to her mother's left, in the too short dress that had still just about fitted. She looks cheerful with her rounded face, emphasised by a middle parting. Her light brown hair is pulled back into a full, soft wave.

After the photographer released them, she fled the silence into the garden, this time without her sisters, who returned to their dolls, still frightened. She crossed the lawn to the small staircase they had built and climbed down a small walnut tree on the other side of the wall. It was the summer holidays, and the other neighbourhood children would come later to play cops and robbers or hide and seek or Who's Afraid of the Big Black Man. Margarethe would set the tone, usually winning. It was such a bore to be always a little bit cleverer and quicker, but the others expected it of her, and she couldn't help it.

Now, though, she was alone, no one was there. She took off her shoes, which pinched and were not to get dirty, and stuffed her stockings inside them. And she played with her toes in the cool grass. Hail, great victoress, overcomer of difficulties. The queen of the roses. Triumph to thee! Margarethe was the Amazonian queen Penthesilea. Amazonian, her father had said about her. Most people saw her as a nine-year-old girl, a trifling child. But just because she was small and looked like

a child, that didn't mean she was one; she carried all the dramas, sagas and ballads inside her and now stepped with the dignity of a victorious princess across the unmown grass of the as yet unbuilt plot. It felt unexpectedly good to walk across the grass barefoot, the bushes all around that made wonderful hiding places, and further back the stream they had recently dammed with sticks and branches. Margarethe began to run through the garden, the Amazon queen galloping on her horse, and Margarethe's feet galloped across the soft grass, the sky was blue with two large friendly clouds and the soft grass stroked her legs, and then she flew, the wind's fierce bride, on the summer breeze, into a feeling of happiness she had never known before.

A few months later, little Siegfried was born. The sisters were led by their mother to the carved cherrywood cradle and then stood around their little brother, who didn't look at them with his red face but twisted restlessly in his mother's swaddling beneath the pale blue flower-embroidered canopy. He loved all three of them very much already, their mother claimed, taking Hanny and Tutty by the hand. Now they had a son and heir who would continue the Weber line, for the girls were bound to marry one day and take other names entirely.