Irmgard Bauer, born 1956 in Munich, studied educational science for the teaching profession. She never practises this profession, because she has four children early and shortly after each other. In addition to bringing up the children, she helps her husband to build up a delicatessen business with wine wholesale.

In later years she earns her living as a freelance advertising copywriter and works in the communications department of several companies and as an editor for employee magazines. Since 2008 she has been carrying out teambuilding measures for companies and is a university lecturer for team competence. She lives in Munich with her second husband, who is a Montessori teacher.

Irmgard Rosina Bauer

Life could be so hard

Thirteen and a half

mostly true stories

Sophie alias Susanne alias S. is trapped in her principles: A macho man can be a macho man, and a marriage must be maintained at all costs. Especially since Sophie and her husband have four children and divorces "back then" were not as common as they are today.

The different roles of women in the stories of a single woman let you look deep into her heart over decades. Their common goal is to be able to say, "I love my life."

On her way there, Sophie alias Susanne alias S. gains new freedoms and yet falls back again and again. She seeks recognition and suffers a burnout as a result. She wants to get out of her victim role, but the way to do so is long ...

"Life could be so hard is a gripping life story in thirteen and a half mostly true stories.

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For my children and stepchildren,

for my children-in-law,

for their mothers

(Bettina, Carola, Helga, Renate, Ursel)

and for Constanze

At the source

Lifestream, flow!

Walk along the banks of a large river and see a group of rowers rippling the water with their rhythmic beat: Who can go on without admiring them for the ease with which they use the river to move forward?

But such a large river is not immediately a river, but is created from a tiny source and only grows through its tributaries and tributaries.

Just like a river, the present book also consists of such tributaries - their water keeps on flowing, does not care about obstacles, it sometimes falls downhill, it always finds its way. The river receives clean tributaries (lovely) and mud (amazing), sometimes it is fed by pure, clear, fresh springs (happy), sometimes it flows through muddy areas (embarrassing), sometimes through wooded dark floodplains (sad), sometimes through a wide stone landscape on which the mists still rest when the sun rises (melancholic). Sometimes the river pushes its way underground through caves (frightening) or through a lake in which it has been dammed by human hands (fateful encounters).

With the familiar image of tributaries I use independent stories that have happened in one way or another in my life and in their juxtaposition create a flow of life. Just as the tributaries have already covered their own distance, the characters in the stories have their own lives in their respective stages of life - and their own names, just as tributaries bring their own names with them.

In the end, a big river flows into a big sea. But its water evaporates again in the sun and forms clouds. The wind drives them on, they get caught in high mountains and rain down again - to feed a spring again.

Although the river of life flows through the present time, it is also a small part of eternity. Therefore: Flow, my river!

Irmgard Rosina Bauer

First inflow

"Sophie" and "Gunnar"

Many roads lead through Rome

Sophie was twenty then. It was April and freezing cold and at night it rained terribly on her tent.

But the days...

She sees herself with Wolfgang in her hand on the Via Sacra, jumping over two cobblestones at a time. Whoever didn't hit the third one had to kiss - they rarely hit the third one. She sees how Wolfgang, the archaeology student, built an air temple for her with the holy ruins on the Forum Romanum, including a portico, inner courtyard and sanctuary; how he hurled flaming declarations of love down to her before the imaginary Roman people from the place where the Rostra must have stood, the large speaker's platform consisting of the beaks of captured enemy ships. Where already Cato and Cicero and Pliny and all the important Romans from the Latin lessons held their speeches.

Sophie sees how she and Wolfgang laughingly bow to the she-wolf with her twins in the Capitol Museum; "seven five three", they said as if from one mouth. She sees him playing wild animal for her in the Colosseum and how she always judged his performances with a cheerful "thumbs up" and she sees how he carried her triumphantly through the Arch of Constantine.

"You know I want to go to the food fair in Rome this weekend," her husband Gunnar says to her now, twelve years later, "I've taken a closer look at the programme in the meantime. I'm satisfied with just one day at the fair, Saturday. But if I'm already going, you could actually go!"

Sophie gets a fright.

"Today is Monday. If we start tomorrow at noon in Munich, we'll be there in the evening," he continues. "Then we would have three days together in the city. Then on Saturday we'll go to the fair, and on Sunday we'll go back again."

Secretly, Sophie was afraid of this question. The beautiful memories she had of Rome were tied to a different life than the one she was leading now.

Many excuses come to her mind: Her four small children need her after all, and friendly families are certainly not so spontaneously prepared to take her in for the time being. That again takes a lot of persuasion! And where does a trained helper for the common gourmet trion come from so quickly, for almost a whole week, from one day to the next; plus the long car journey.

"That would be so much effort", she tries to fend off his proposal.

"You always rave about Rome," he interrupts her excuses. "This would be the opportunity to show me!"

She looks doubtfully at Gunnar. She can handle the fact that he's spontaneous. They're both spontaneous. Quick to make decisions, quick to change. The people around her are used to it. That's not what worries her. Rather this: Gunnar is different from Wolfgang. So far, Gunnar has rather dismissed her enthusiasm for antiquity with "old stuff". Do you think she'd be able to make the bow in Rome? Her enthusiasm at the time was based on the circumstances of the time. Well, her relationship with Wolfgang had already come to an end during her studies. But Sophie still glowed for the "old stuff". No, the thing with Gunnar together, that couldn't go well. On the other hand: Rome! Your Rome! How beautiful it was! How she loved Rome! Shouldn't she just grab it on this occasion? After all, she didn't come there every day.

Sophie knows she has to decide quickly. Images overflow her: The Castel Sant'Angelo up there, the Pantheon, the Forum Romanum, the proud obelisks, the basilicas, triumphal arches, the many, many cats at the Cestius pyramid and the old woman who called and fed them all by name, Giovanni - Alessandro - Francesca; the beautiful old cemetery behind the pyramid - yes! Sophie senses enthusiasm coming up inside her.

Yes, she would throw all doubts overboard and seize this opportunity. Taking Gunnar with her into the great past. Try it with him again. If only the suggestion came from him! She would show him everything!

Two children can go to grandma, she will take them to kindergarten. Sophie can clarify that after a long phone call. And the two older ones can stay with friends who will send them with their own children to the nearby primary school. So now quickly hire a temp for the next few days. Urgent packing of suitcases; leave three more important instructions in the shop.

On Tuesday at half past two they can finally start.

Gunnar boards over the motorway.

Around midnight they already drive "Al lungo del Tevere".

"Al lungo del Tevere", you say? Is that a river?"

Sophie laughs politely. He must be joking.

But he really knows nothing about Rome, she realizes, but has complete faith in her.

While driving, she has quickly thought up a big program for Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. "Just do it," he had said. "I don't know anything about it anyway."

A great deal of anticipation pervades her. She'll show him everything.

First thing in the morning, St. Peter's, he would be immediately impressed. In addition, the view from the high terrace would give him an idea of the city. Yes, she liked that!

The next morning, however, his eagerness to see the city is too little for her: the alarm clock rings, but he doesn't get up.

"After all, I'm on holiday!"

"Yes, but we wanted to see the city."

"It's not going anywhere!"

He fell asleep again.

Sophie is disappointed.

But if she would wake him up and push him, she knows she would have to put up with his bad mood for the rest of the day.

At noon he is finished with breakfast, at two they finally get back into the car to drive to the Centro. At last! Sophie is happy. The sun is shining clearly.

"It's still summer here," he enthuses. "And the two of us in Rome, on October 1st, at 26 degrees. Munich can't keep up with that."

Yes.

Roma Aeterna.

She'll show him everything.

He can't find her a parking space fast enough. And now go!

Hand in hand they approach each other along Via della Reconciliazione - "Ah, I know that from TV!" - the cathedral.

She didn't remember St. Peter's Square being this big! She's moving Gunnar on.

But as they stand at the main portal, she suddenly hesitates, she shudders. How vividly the memory of the "Pietà" seizes power from her! Yes, that's it, she should be over there.

Why was Sophie so feverish before they reached the Pietà? When she saw it for the first time, she and Wolfgang had been infatuated. For a long time they had both stood in front of it and were absorbed in its contemplation, had let the Blessed Mother and her Son work on them. Such a touching thing! Sophie now wants to explain to Gunnar what is happening in her. That she is excited before meeting this statue again. Wasn't that ridiculous! She fears his reaction.

"What you have... She's not that great! Surely there are more interesting things to see here," he could say.

She knew that as a businessman he often thought very differently from her. He often quarrelled with her because she, Sophie, was only half as much a businesswoman as he had imagined.

So here she stood. Hiding her emotion from Gunnar in front of a white marble statue?

"Come on, let's go inside. Why are you stopping?" He looks at her impatiently.

She can't explain her confused feelings so easily. A moment ago she was urging him to hurry, and now nothing has happened!

How graceful Mary still sits there in her tenderness, delicacy, inner harmony. This gentleness, the expression of tender sorrow and love on this figure of stone! As if it were sitting and living there, the white block of marble! The Jesus in her arms, he's probably just sleeping. He must feel very comfortable under the gaze from this perfect face: beautiful, kind, motherly ¬¬- and passionate at the same time.

"Yes, it's already great!", the contemplation of the Pietà also elicits Gunnar. Sophie breathes deeply and relieved.

Gunnar finds the dimensions of St. Peter's "frightening".

"It's much too massive for me! It's too big for me!"

Again and again Gunnar shakes his head while walking, not finding the connection to his purpose.

Sophie cannot explain and show him enough, because barriers are being erected in the cathedral, they are being pushed out, "una messa del Papa", of all times. The timing of her visit is inconvenient.

"Then let's hurry to the Sistine Chapel, the frescoes there are also by Michelangelo, like the Pietà. He was a very versatile artist. He could simply do everything, sculpt, paint, design, build - ingenious! My city guide says that the chapel has been restored in the meantime. At my first visit everything was still quite faded. I'm curious if the frescoes really look purple and candy-colored now."

Full of anticipation, Sophie grabs Gunnar's hand and pulls him along.

But when they get there, it's already after 4 pm, they won't let anyone in.

"Too bad!"

"Never mind," he says, "I wouldn't have been so interested anyway. Just show me something else."

Sophie thinks for a moment and decides to take the Spanish Steps, which are not too far away. Here, they don't have to worry about admission times. And she knows that he will like that. Looking at all those people. Strolling in Via Condotti from one luxury fashion store to the next, licking an ice cream in between.

And he is indeed fascinated by the fashion masters.

"So much aesthetics," he says.

Then they have seen enough, he thinks.

To his horror, he can't get an Orvieto to drink in a small street café: "Where else, if not in the growing area?" So he obediently drinks Frascati with her at a white tin table in the middle of the pedestrian zone, a paradise for moped riders of all classes, the Bella Signora in a tight skirt with a rider's slit and a waving shoulder bag, over the Papagalli from Trastevere, the well-dressed businessman in dark grey, who flashes past them on his Vespa with a new type of giant telephone on his ear, to the aged Roman with a cigar in the corner of his mouth, "Il Giorno" under his arm, all of them: rattling, smelly.

How she enjoys it, her Rome, the amazement, this living Rome, far away from home, from all cultivated domesticity with its animal seriousness. What a wonderful flair of the unconcerned, "dolce far niente"; what does the world cost?

Two adolescents on fast mopeds skilfully drive past their little white metal table. Gunnar shakes his head in horror. "And they call this a pedestrian zone in Rome? I find it really ugly here. Tomorrow we'll go to the beach and soak up the sun. Winter in Munich will come soon enough."

Well, that's not on Sophie's program. "But what do I want to put Roman culture on him if he's interested in Roman sunshine," she regrets. And under no circumstances would she take the risk of putting him in a bad mood. So she complies with his wish to go to the beach of Ostia on her second day. The fact that he gets up late again in the morning does not bother her this time.

Many people in Ostia are busy hosing down the deckchairs of the summer, and there is a sense of optimism for autumn in the air. The black-grey sand on the beach, fine and dry, is laid clean in waves by the cleaning machines. The sun is only nostalgia, cool its light remains on the sea, it can no longer lighten the dull colour of the sand.

"Let's go back to the city", Gunnar soon suggests.

"Yes, I'd love to!"

At last we're back in Rome, to her thousands of memories of thousands of years of glory.

Gunnar has found a central parking lot.

Sophie is happy. With him on her hand she can still see a lot. Maybe she can dive into the Forum Romanum, the Colosseum, the Capitol Hill ...

"Oh, no," he says, "not that much old stuff."

All right, then maybe Trevi Fountain or the Pantheon?

Sophie enjoys walking over the pretty old bridges, letting her gaze wander over the richly decorated buildings they stroll past. I wonder what the people who have walked here over the centuries have said, thought, how they have lived their lives? So many different religions, philosophies and rulers had determined the cityscape here! And now they were both here, she and Gunnar.

But then he ripped them out of their dreams.

"And this is Rome?" he asks her the second night. Piazza Venezia, Via del Corso, echoing street noise. This street of shops between rows of townhouses is almost unlit, but he shakes his head violently at the many scraps of paper at the side of the road, the torn tickets, cigarette butts, crumpled empty bags-

"Where is Rome? Where are the people? Are the Romans asleep? In which cafés are they, in which restaurants, where is their Place du Tertre or their Schwabing? Sachsenhausen, you remember, it was always beautiful there. That old stuff everywhere. You've been here before. Show me Rome! In your clever guide, is there nothing clever in it?"

Sophie feels how a boulder, hard, stony, heavy, angular, first threatens to get stuck in her throat and then, slowly crumbling, spreads like semolina over her limbs, right down to her fingertips. Up there, where she suspects her head to be, she thinks - no, she doesn't think - but she thinks - oh, leave the old stuff alone, she thinks - Wolfgang, she thinks, in Saudi Arabia, she thinks - but she wanted to - what is an archaeology degree if it's not finished because you got pregnant - that's the way it was, that's the way he is, she thinks -

Her legs carry her beside him, she follows him through the narrow streets, the crowds of people lead him, ha, he says, finally a place where something is going on!

Piazza Navona. Unimpressed, he hurries past Bernini's Four Rivers Fountain, determinedly he dives into the crowd of people gathering around the artists in the square, they draw attention to themselves with kerosene lamps. "We could have a portrait painted of you," he says, "but tormented as you look - what's wrong with you? Let's go out for dinner. I saw some nice restaurants on the way."

"What would you like?", he then asks her in the fine ristorante with the entertainment display in the window full of lobsters, bream, mussels, antipasti, fruits, a large bouquet of long-stemmed gladiolas, in the ristorante with the white-laid tables.

Sophie has no appetite. She listlessly orders some kind of pasta variation, while Gunnar deals extensively with starter, main dish and dessert on the menu. He appreciatively lets his gaze wander over the restaurant's interior.

"Everything very nobly furnished," he says, "look at the beautiful modern counter. Beautiful here!"

Sophie looks apathetically at him.

"What do you want," he asks as he looks at the colour of the aperitivo in the glass, sinks his nose into the glass, pushes the sample sip back and forth in his mouth while checking it, and then nods contentedly to the waiter, who is now pouring the glasses.

Sophie is still thinking. How could she best explain to him that what she found so fascinating about Rome was its history? With a shovel in her hand and digging in the old earth under floodlights, that's what she would want! Finding little old ruins and putting them together to make big old ruins. That this meant more pleasure for her than a visit to a noble restaurant.

Finally she breathes in, wants to start formulating

At that moment the waiter serves Sophie's "Pasta Fantastica" and Gunnar's "Spaghetti Pomodore".

"The kitchen can't go wrong," he explains his choice. "You can't eat these modern pasta variations that they serve all over the place."

Sophie smiles politely.

He tries the first fork. When he tastes it, he opens his mouth again and again. He had explained to her once that this would stimulate the sense of taste even more. He wraps more forks with red spaghetti. His expression shows great appreciation.

"They can cook, the Romans, I'll give them that."

Full of enthusiasm, he almost emptied his plate, while Sophie slowly stuck the fork into her dish.

"Well, eating isn't the only thing, is it?" she says.

He waves to the waiter and discusses with him the choice of white wine for the fish course.

Soon his St. Peter's fish is brought on an elegant silver platter.

"Beautiful," he raves. It is grilled as desired and served with giblets.

"Dewy fresh!"

Gunnar starts eating immediately.

"How do you know so much about this Rome?" he then asks between two bites of his rump steak, which has actually been roasted in English, which delights him greatly.

"Try the wine. Light in the front, but a fantastic finish!"

"This is culture here!" He waves the red wine in the elegant goblet.

"Interesting wine!"

With relish he licks the meat juice from his lips before wiping them off with a napkin and placing it on the plate free of residue.

"Would you like some dessert as well? You've hardly eaten a thing."

Sophie still has no appetite. Finally, they serve the caffè. Shaking her head, Gunnar looks at her.

"So what do you want to do tomorrow?"

Sophie takes a deep breath. She counts them down without a sound:

"The Caracalla Spa, I thought, and I'd like to go to the Roman Forum".

"Well, if you insist, tomorrow we'll go to the Baths, what are they called again?" He waves to the waiter and has the difference between three ripe marc brandies on the drinks menu explained in bumpy German.

"What kind of people are they who pay this horrendous entrance fee for something like that," he asks the next noon, shaking his head at the entrance to the Caracalla Spa.

"That's just a heap of rubble. No wonder nothing is happening here."

Two students are measuring the height of the cisterns, the former water basins and remaining parts of broken statues.

Sophie asks herself, "Are they studying archaeology?

With interested facial expressions and gestures, they chat, pointing from round arches to columns to remnants of walls on the ground and write notes of the explanations on small boards in a notebook.

Otherwise Gunnar and Sophie are alone in this wide place.

Behind a big gate she sees the big Mercedes that was so important to Gunnar. She sees in her mind's eye the Gourmetrion, the delicatessen where she always worked, it was so practically close to the children's home. She sees the big house in front of her, the big house where they live with their children.

Wild grass has overgrown many beautiful mosaic fragments of this once magnificent thermal bath.

"What is it? Why do you look so absent-minded?" he asks.

"It's late," she says.

Second inflow

"I" (Mrs Steinmann) and "my husband"

Enchanter

Everyday business life, a bitter one actually, because my saleswoman Edith is on holiday, I have to do her work as well as mine, but still: this February sun! Not only do I seem to be happy for my customers, but I am really happy. Mrs. Stötzel, my morning worker, is still here at last!

Deliveries of cheese, boxes of fresh produce everywhere, everything should already be in the cold store, telephone, and even these customers! Then finishing the ordered gift basket for a fiftieth, a cheese dairy representative is standing in the corner waiting for his weekly order.

Telephone again!

"Yes, Mrs. Steinmann is here, one moment please."

They simply can't do it! Pretending that I'm not here! Of course it's more comfortable for you, if I scold my employees silently. Mrs. Stötzel hands me the receiver.

"The gentleman who just picked up the gift box of wine."

I am startled. Herr Dahlmaier? Was anything wrong? Did I forget something? Did I make a mistake? Did the box fall apart? He's a very nice and friendly customer - did I upset him with something?

"Hello, Steinmann here", I answer, with question mark in my voice.

"Mrs. Steinmann, I just wanted to hear you again. You have had such a wonderful charisma for me, I have to tell you now. Do you have some time now?"

His voice sounds very friendly, almost tender, wooing. I feel hot. What's the matter? How can I put this? I'm swamped. It's a bright working day, Edith on holiday, me from all the work on high tension. The door to our tiny office, which also houses the sink, cannot be closed because, as always, dirty dishes are on the floor between the door and the sink, above which the wall telephone hangs. The ordered radio telephone is still not installed.

Mrs. Stötzel is standing only two meters away from me. Nice, such a call, but also very private. I block:

"Yes, I always have a lot of work", I say in the friendliest, most open and at the same time most restrained voice I can put in. I float. If only Frau Stötzel would finally leave from there!

"You seem so balanced, so natural, so creative, I admire you. I admire you.

There will be a pause. My brain is empty. A single crackle.

"I would take you away from that spot," he continues, laughing slightly, as if he had made a joke, the truth of which must be veiled.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

Without waiting for an answer, he asks:

"But you're probably married?"

I want to melt away, savour the situation, enjoy it again, yay - I am a woman! That feels so good.

Are you married?

Yeah, I'm married to this place.

Mrs. Stötzel is cutting onions, two meters away from me, what excuse should I use to send her away?

I would like a lovely voice now.

"Yes, very much", I then say as neutrally as possible, Mrs Stötzel is none of her business, yet I try to put a light smile in my voice. I am not thinking of my husband now, or yes, I am, and the children, omnipresent, although I would have loved to flirt again.

"Yes, right." His voice has become joyless, careful. His enthusiasm is at zero. It's over. Now he probably won't ask, "How much?

He'll ask, "Do you have children?"

"Yes, many," I try to avoid.

"How many?"

But this man wants to know everything very badly.

"Four."

Pause. Break. The pause does not end.

I imagine this is going to be embarrassing for him.

"Then, despite having four children, you've kept up a good appearance. Congratulations!"

Congratulations. He sounds so cold.

"You see, all this stress just gets to me," I try to turn it around slowly. The man put me in euphoria, enchanted me, I am actually grateful to him, I don't want to let him down now.

"But even a woman with four children is happy about such recognition. You can never hear enough compliments, I think."

"Yes, you're right."

He seems relieved.

"I was really happy to get your call.

"All right, well, he says.

"So I'll see you around the next gift box or something,"

"Yeah, right." He's laughing again. "Goodbye, Mrs. Steinmann!"

"Goodbye, Mr Dahlmaier."

With a big smiley face, I go back to the shop. A few minutes later the cheese dairy salesman can leave the shop with a big order, also with a smiley face.

Third inflow

"Susanne" and "Gernhardt"

Blue Hawaii

Susanne checked the departure time again on the tickets from Munich-Riem: 16 January 1990, 9:50 am.

Yes, everything was now properly prepared for her flight.

Gernhardt had already been in San Francisco for eight days. He had booked Susanne's flight so that she could visit him there now.

"Meanwhile, I went through the most important Californian winemakers in Napa Valley and ordered the wines," he explained to her.

Two years ago he had set up a wine import wholesale business in Ismaning, a suburb of Munich, where they lived with their children. In order to be able to manage the wine wholesale business, he unceremoniously handed over his Gourmetrion, a small specialty shop, to Susanne for a tour, at least for the organizational part. This shop formed the financial basis for her young family and for the hoped-for future success.

"You have enough experience with the goods and the little staff by now," he had dispelled her concerns at the time. "I will continue to take care of the commercial side of things. You're not very good at it."

Susanne smiled at this sentence, it did not upset her. She knew this phrase very well from her mother, so there must be something to it.

On the one hand, Susanne felt overwhelmed with the management of the shop, because for the last twelve years she had only stepped in "for a moment", next to the children, when a saleswoman was absent. She also didn't like working in the shop very much. She just wanted to show solidarity with her support. She had also always helped in her parents' shop. Because only together we were strong!

On the other hand, she was proud of this new challenge, because she knew about the recognition that would be given to her. Often enough, she had been able to bask in the admiration Gernhardt received from customers, suppliers, friends and relatives as his wife.

"After my visits to winegrowers in California, we are both going on a 14-day vacation in Hawaii," he told her in early January. "The travel agencies in the USA offer cheap domestic flights, I saw during my visit last year. I can book that from the USA."

Susanne knew such spontaneous decisions only too well. It had been like this in her childhood home. There was only "fast" or "too slow". She was used to having no time for back and forth. It was just being determined. One had to get involved in ideas quickly and without weighing up too much - if one thought too long, very often a chance was irretrievably lost, she had learned, and then there was trouble.

\* \* \*

Susanne didn't want to tell Gernhardt that she wasn't looking forward to the vacation. He couldn't have understood, she thought. When he had prepared everything for her!

But she felt like a traitor when she again asked friendly families with children of the same age whether they would take their children. "Yes, of course Dominik and Markus can stay with us again, they will go to school with our two boys. But during your last trip your two have suffered quite a lot, was my impression," Karin said to her. In similar words friend Monika, who took Lisa to her home. Susanne's mother liked to take little Raphael, but she too: "You often accused me of not being there for you. We couldn't help it, after the war we had to rebuild our lives. But you are not doing any better than I did then! You're away so often!"

Susanne agreed with them all. It hurt her to leave her children behind, but there was Gernhardt too:

"You're always holding me back," he said when she made her wishes.

"I need you much more often," she often heard him, and:

"You should support me." "We have to make a living. Even you. You can't just walk away!"

\* \* \*

Now the flight was weighing on them. She was 34 years old at that time and until then she had always gone on holiday or to business appointments by car. She had just flown from Munich to Hamburg, from Munich to Düsseldorf, and even to Paris. Nothing more.

What if for some reason Gernhardt didn't come to the airport to pick her up? What if there was a change in the flight plan? How could they communicate? After all, she had to change planes twice, in Amsterdam and in London, so there could be delays! They had no means of communication. Mobile phones, emails and the Internet were far from being common.

When he left a week ago, he couldn't even give her the address where he was staying. He wanted to arrange all this "from over there".

On the day of her departure the phone rang at six o'clock, she could talk to him again, at least hear him. Despite the bad connection, his voice had a calming effect on her, she finally felt a feeling of security. The taxi also arrived punctually at six o'clock. Gernhardt had put two hundred marks in her cash box for it and for the most basic expenses on the journey.

\* \* \*

The buns in the plane were hard like concrete. With salami and cheese. Real butter, after all. She thought of the hands that had prepared all this in the very early morning. In fact, she too had recently applied for a job as an airline caterer, but the competition was fierce - and for little money she didn't want to get even more manual work than she already had in her shop.

Unlike her, Gernhardt had fulfilled a life's wish with the Gourmetrion. Eating and drinking, that was life, fun and profession for him. With great passion, he put a lot of effort into getting and preparing high-quality food from good suppliers, sniffing out everything edible with his own highly developed sense of smell, tasting every wine very consciously with his nose and palate. He never ate or drank anything without a searching expression on his face, with which he analysed ingredients and flavours, and then used practised words to describe the finest nuances in composition, aroma or degree of maturity.

The stewardess served the coffee in a Styrofoam cup. It reminded Susanne of her time at university. Every time she took a sip, she imagined she had to bite into the cup, and the mere thought of it made her teeth whistling.

Susanne admired the diligent politeness of the stewardesses. At the same time she scanned their faces for impurities. Why did the dermatologist call Susanne's pimple on her face stewardess disease? What psychological stress did she, Susanne, have in common with stewardesses?

\* \* \*

America. She felt no anticipation, not even excitement. She just wanted to get off that endless flight. Unforeseen stop in New York, mammoth airport, check-out, check-in. Onward flight cancelled, three hours unplanned stop. Another six hours flight.

What if for some reason Gernhardt wasn't aware of the changes? What was she doing alone in San Francisco if Gernhardt wasn't standing there waiting for her? Where would she go? Where would she live? That's what scared her so much. The whole trip was nothing to her but an errand that simply had to be done. She would have much rather spent the time with her children, who had been left behind during the stressful Christmas season. But instead she had to go so far away! She did not feel like adventure. She knew nothing of the city, knew no one there. Susanne had no idea what she would do if they were not there. Only fear she felt, like when she was a child, when she hadn't found her parents on the street right away.

But it would all go well, wouldn't it? Gernhardt wanted to take care of everything concerning the trip, so that she could organize everything at home and in the Gourmetrion in her hurry. Only now did she realize that with the few marks in her wallet she couldn't even have taken a hotel.

Dealing with money was annoying to her.

"You must manage your money better," her mother always used to say. For her and her commercial thinking it was easy. Gernhardt put it in a similar vein. "All you have to do is analyze the bank statements and you'll know what to do." Maybe she should have developed her own way of handling money? She would have done it long ago if it was easy for her. She had enough on her mind already. She just couldn't cope with everything.

It was enough for Gernhardt to take care of the money. When she looked after the children, took them to school, to kindergarten, and then went to this shop, provided lunch for them at noon and dinner for them in the evening, checked the homework of the three older ones, put the children to bed with songs, bedtime stories and a lot of patience - only to fall asleep in front of the TV.

"How boring you are!" he would say to her when he wanted to watch the late film on TV with her.

\* \* \*

San Francisco. Through the glass partition she saw him standing. She could have jumped for relief! There he was.

But when he noticed her, he threw his arms up and fervently clapped his hands together in front of his face. "There you are at last," he said to her. He shook his head violently. "I've been waiting here for ages!" he called and rolled his eyes.

"A connecting flight has been cancelled, haven't you been told?" she pushed out and threw herself at his chest.

"There was nothing I could do but wait here for hours! As if I had nothing better to do!" He trembled with irritation. Then he gave her a kiss. "As if we had infinite time! I've really worked hard to get it all done!"

She looked at him uncertainly, wanted to say something, but he took her suitcase and hurried out of the airport building.

\* \* \*

His wine business was finished. Everything had gone to his satisfaction, he said. He had negotiated good conditions, as the dollar exchange rate was very favourable. They could hope for a good course of business, because with Californian wines he could also approach larger food chains or department stores and organize the deliveries of significant quantities. He proudly told her that he had ordered a whole shipping container to Rotterdam. Among others, he had ordered a whole ship container to Rotterdam from a renowned winemaker involved in the Intercontinental Hotel in San Francisco. Two free overnight stays for the end of their journey, he said! Five-star luxury in gold, marble and solid wood awaits her there! A nice transition between Hawaii and Munich, he said. Susanne was happy for him because he was so proud of his successes. But secretly she already calculated the nine hour time difference and the time when she could reach her children on the phone, at Karin's, at Monika's, at Grandma's.

\* \* \*

Maui. Susanne was wide awake since six o'clock, although she was so tired from the long journey! But she didn't think about it any further, that's the way it was. After all, life was no walk in the park.

Hundreds of kolea birds in the lush banyan trees screamed their good morning greetings to each other. Several gardeners must have been busy downstairs watering the grounds to make this paradise even more paradisiacal.

She heard the waves beating. Slowly it became light. It was warm. From her bed she could see the ocean through palm trees. Wild and furious the waves clapped against the beach, although it was called the Pacific Ocean!

Gernhardt lay uncovered between her and the window. She let her eyes wander over his blond hair and his long broad back. The belly, the professional belly, as he called it, which had grown even bigger through the last business lunches, lay on the window side. She slipped over onto his bed, hooked herself in, enjoying the pleasant feeling of feeling him.

She would now be very keen to go for a run on the beach! With him! If only he would come with her! How nice that would be! Jogging along the beach as a couple. Yes, now, at seven in the morning! But she didn't need to ask him that. He would only shake his head uncomprehendingly and uncouraged.

Whoosh, the spray hit high. The famous Ka'anapali Beach outside her window! She was curious after all! At eight o'clock finally she went down alone. House high waves chased each other tirelessly. Hawaii.

Both of them. Just the two of you. Finally, she began to enjoy herself. No important errands to be completed right now, no social obligations. He and she, as a couple, in their love nest Hawaii, far from anything that had to work.

She was completely with herself as she walked barefoot past elegantly dressed people, through the spacious hotel complex with all its bars and dining areas, where one could order a cocktail in the morning and where Polynesian cuisine was served at noon and in the evening.

Yes, this cuisine delighted them both. The vegetables fried crisply, almost raw, enriched with tofu and only seasoned with a little soy sauce; chicken, duck and rabbit legs juicy grilled, sweet & sour brushed over; luau pork; dishes from nearby Japan: sushi and sashimi with rice; poi, the Tama bark porridge, no, but it didn't have to be, they both hated it.

After two days:

Did they go on a whale-watching trip or a snorkeling excursion? Helicopter-sightseeing? Or nothing at all? Lying on the beach, in the warm wind, swimming occasionally, out into the open, warm sea? Who pushed her? Why argue? Each time they quickly found a common decision. What was at stake? Did they take a Banana Daiquiri or another Blue Hawaii in passing by the bar?

There was no timetable in place for when anything had to be done. No friends to prove themselves to, no children who wouldn't stop until their special wishes were fulfilled.

After four days:

a trip on a small plane to Waikiki Beach. Royal Pineapple Drink at the outdoor bar of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. Mighty gladiolus bouquets in mighty vases. Pina Colada. Honolulu. Blue Hawaiian. Mai Tai. Chi Chi. Hotels. Skyscrapers. Diamond Head. Hofbräu. Hofbräu!

Finally, beer for Gernhardt. The wheat beer tastes like home, he said. A brown-skinned Hawaiian girl, the waitress, sat down on Gernhardt's lap and wrapped his neck around it for the exotic photo he wanted to show to his friends at home. "Hofbräu Waikiki" was written on her dirndl.

Banana plantations. The wild sea. Surfers at its line of refraction.

For two weeks they played the carefree Hawaiian game.

Every day at eight o'clock in the morning, she called the children one after the other at their host families. It was seven o'clock in the evening in Ismaning and everyone was within reach. Susanne's regret at not being with them pulled her down again and again. But the children sounded cheerful. And the beguiling surroundings that surrounded them immediately captivated their senses again.

\* \* \*

Back at the airport, Susanne probably did react a second after him, she wondered. Hands thrown to the sky, gasping for air, he seemed to wrestle with her, this incomprehensibility of person. How could she stand in line at baggage claim "2" (two people) when there was only one person standing in line at baggage claim "1" on the left! How could she!

He shook his head violently and rolled his eyes up as if to underline his disapproval. He threw his hands up again when she came back to him, startled.

"I did not see Left!" she said apologetically. "I just went to an open counter and I would have waited my turn."

"You're never in a hurry!" he snarled at her. "I always have to take care of everything!"

She felt herself jerk, as she so often does. She pulled her head back in again, her back rounded.

She had not seen the left switch. She had been very calm. She didn't feel the need to hurry. You still had time, didn't you? she thought and found this confirmed on her wristwatch.

Why did she always do everything wrong in his eyes?

She was depressed and angry with herself at the same time. It could only have been a game! Not for a moment could she have seriously believed that his patience was now finally bounced for life. His touching concern for her well-being, which was so good for her, which she longed for, for which she was finally with him, for whom she worked so much. That's why she had married him after all! The well-being that only he could give her! If he, if he only took the time to walk beside her. Instead, he just kept dragging her along behind him. He had to go fast, fast. But she said nothing. She did not want any discord, she did not want to explain herself, he would not understand it anyway, she thought. And I'm sure he was right. Maybe she was too slow.

In the evening, she wrote in her diary, anxious:

"I can't fight back. A ghostly hand holds me down. I swim, with great effort, against everything that drives me so hard. I don't want to let myself drift - no - I certainly have my ideas - yes - only he would not understand them - no - I want to make it clear to him - yes. And then I talk, I explain, show him. Then I get a bit further - but then I wash, his whirlpool grabs me again, throws me back. It's his words, it's his attitude, when he stands there like that, waving his hands, a spirit, just like mother did when I was a child, just like that. There's nothing I can do about it.

\* \* \*

Now they had two days left in San Francisco. Susanne tried to understand Gernhardt's experiences.

"You must see the Golden Gate," he said. But Susanne could not share his enthusiasm. Often she had already seen a picture. The only thing that was new to her was that the Golden Gate was orange, ugly orange, she thought, like red lead, which was used to paint iron. No, actually she didn't like the bridge. But she did not want to contradict Gernhardt. Not that he got angry again!

She followed him and his friends, whom he had met on his wine shopping tour, in the next two days with very little words. Friendly, polite, always smiling. And so that was Fisherman's Warf. Nice, nice. She had enthusiastically read in her travel guide on the flight here that you absolutely have to eat crabs on Sourdough Bread here. She would have liked to try that now. But the others wanted to visit a real restaurant later.

In a fine restaurant in Chinatown (which Susanne didn't find as cramped as they all said, because it was rather cramped at home with the big family and in her small cramped shop, but she kept that to herself) they ate Chinese duck. Afterwards the friends scolded the animal "jumping duck", because they all had a "jumping stomach" after the meal and they felt sick until the evening. Susanne had painted four good Chinese restaurants in her book on the plane. But she had not said anything. She'd rather be quiet. Not that she said anything wrong and embarrassed Gernhardt. Anyway, she couldn't remember everything the others already knew, she hardly understood her Californian slang.

\* \* \*

In an unobserved moment she was dreaming:

I'm sitting at a table, somewhere in the middle of the city, talking to my neighbours, I ask them something, they ask me something, I test my knowledge from nine years of English lessons, I don't get along so badly, I think about whether perfect or imperfect, I mean, to make the right decision, use the infinitive after "ask" and "want", then simple ing-form, after "succeed" connect the sound correctly with "in" ...

"Come on Charlie, let's go", she heard.

She would have loved to stay in the small Chinese grocery to absorb the exotic scent mixture of sandalwood and myrrh and a thousand and one nights, in order to grasp the many strange things. She was so slow, she wanted to spend a lot of time here and be amazed, she was lost in looking, could not grasp the countless beautiful little things at once, wanted to buy one or the other as a souvenir. "Come on, Lady, we're going on!" She broke free from her absorption, secretly paid for a few flower chains at the cash register and scurried after the others again.

The frowned upon tourist shops fascinated her. They had so many ideas to sell themselves, funny signs, appealing displays, oh, what you could learn here, how many ideas for your own shop you could see here! "You can find that everywhere", the others said and pulled them away.

But Susanne was no longer with them in her thoughts. Depressed, she was submerged in desperate self-reproach. I cannot get involved! I am too boring for them! They have fun together, just look at them! Except me. What am I doing wrong?

Am I doomed to wander the world alone to be happy? Just because I can't make my wishes clear to others? Will I only signal suffering to this world in ten years with the frozen smile of the Mona Lisa?

Sunken, she trotted along behind the others.

But to be rebellious would also mean putting my marriage at risk, she thought. Then I would have to argue with Gernhardt day and night. like my parents still do. I hate it! No, I don't want you to hate it. I want a good marriage. I'll shut up!

\* \* \*

Even in the following months, long since back home, Susanne kept her mouth shut. She only tried to assert herself when her collar burst, her hat string tore, when only the icing on the cake was missing, when ...

Then the people around her wondered about her, the silence, the calm, always level-headed. And Gernhardt was able to silence her again with a few strong expressions, against which she knew no arguments.

"You're getting away from me," he said when Susanne tried to express her thoughts to him. "You leave me alone with my worries!" and "You're not on my side!" But she neither wanted to break away nor leave him alone nor turn against him. She just couldn't make him understand that she didn't want to be just his appendage.

\* \* \*

The noisy icing on the cake situations increased more and more, Susanne's well-being decreased more and more. The four children, the gourmet trion and his wine wholesaler demanded all their strength. There were fewer and fewer opportunities for the quiet, thoughtful conversations with Gernhardt, which she so much wanted, which she felt were so necessary, and moreover, she understood Gernhardt. In his limited free time, he wanted to invite friends and have parties, not just talk. And also take a vacation, but with funny friends!

The Hawaii stay had also ended with a fun party with many friends and many cocktails. Again Susanne had brought in fun and power, nimbly and quickly she had taken care of the organisation, tidied up her house, supported Gernhardt's cooking skills in the kitchen, set the table with the plate series nicely and provided the right glasses for his wine selection, which he had brought in a sturdy case because the shipping containers needed several weeks for delivery: the elegant narrow stem glasses for the white wines, opulent swivel chalices for the reds. Several of them for each person, so that the new wine varieties could be compared with each other.

Funny decorations had occurred to Susanne, as a bar for the many cocktails planned, she set up the long surfboard from the garage in the living room, with good humour she welcomed her friends at the door and hung a flower chain from the Chinese grocery around the neck of each of them. Yes, the two of them were a well-rehearsed team in front of the guests.

\* \* \*

From August onwards, purchases had to be made for the Christmas business in order to take full advantage of the strongest sales period of the year. From the end of September, special deliveries arrived daily, which had to be accommodated in the small shop with the small cellar. In order to be able to handle the many expected additional orders for gift baskets, wine gift boxes and heaped party service orders for Christmas company parties. December would once again be a horror month for Susanne. The children would be running alongside her again. She would not be able to go to the St. Martin's, Advent, St. Nicholas, Christmas parties in kindergarten and schools this year either. While Gernhardt would be happy about the good sales and the next Hawaii trip, which they would be able to afford again.

\* \* \*

The intervals at which Susanne sought rest became shorter and shorter. More and more often she made mistakes in planning in the shop. She forgot appointments for which cold buffets were ordered - how embarrassing! How annoying for the customers. Or she didn't plan enough staff so that there was a lot of stress in the shop. She made the wrong decisions when ordering goods, so that many articles went out too early or were spoiled due to excess quantities. At the checkout, she often found herself giving change back the wrong way - even worse, customers usually discovered it before she noticed. She could hardly read her own handwriting anymore, she wrote her notes so spidery, jumpy, and unclean. "Mama, what did I say? You didn't listen again!", the children rebuked.

She was tired. Always tired. Not just physically. She couldn't pull herself together anymore.

The many invitations, which were the elixir of life for Gernhardt, became annoying for her, although she had always liked to have guests. No rest, no arrangements! Everyone decided only for himself! Always chasing after deadlines, trying to make it all work! The children mutinied when it came to completing the tasks in the house, they no longer did their homework carefully, the teachers called Susanne, not Gernhardt. She had felt for a long time: Her children also needed more attention, each one of them, silence, talking, playing, also sometimes with them, the parents, not always just sending them away to friends.

Should this continue for the next twenty or thirty years? Was there nothing more beautiful? Was that life? Such questions came up in her several times. She would have liked to deal with them more, but who could she have talked to? Everything was just pressing, always fast, no time to wish, just do his work, that's all!

When she finally asked Gernhardt about it, his answer was: "Of course I love my children. But they are growing up and then they don't need us anymore. But I need you. We both have to take care of our own progress, because then we will only have each other.

\* \* \*

On 11 November the big St. Martin's Goose dinner was scheduled in the house. Parents, siblings and their families would come to visit, as they do every year.

Susanne was terrified. She saw a mountain of work ahead of her, and she was so exhausted. So infinitely tired she was! She wanted to cancel.

"You can't do this to me," Gernhardt reacted to her wish. "Such a nice tradition it is. It's always been such a wonderful party!"

"Come help me in the kitchen," cried Gernhardt then on St. Martin's Day up to the bedroom where Susanne had lain down, feeling more burnt out than ever before.

There she lay. Wanted to get up.

Sure I'll help. They'll all be here soon. I have to help.

I wanted to get up. What the hell happened?

She was just lying there, stuck to the floor.

"I can't," she whispered.

"Come on down, I need you!"

"I can't." With all her strength she tried to answer louder, once more, so that he could hear her.

"I can't! I can't."

"You can't. Am I supposed to do everything alone, or what? Because you want to save yourself like an old granny?"

"I can't!"

Susanne just lay there. She wanted to get up. She wanted to give him a hand, like always. She wanted to-

She could not move. She was on her bed. Ordered herself to get up. But her legs did not lift. Not an inch. As if pulled down onto the mattress by a powerful magnet. Her arms - nothing. Nothing could move them. Not even her fingers still moved. She wished she could get up. Of course she wanted to get up and help. But she could only breathe:

"I can't."

Gernhardt had come up and was standing by her bed.

"You don't want to!" he yelled at her angrily, threw his arms up, rolled his eyes. In short movements he shook his head impatiently. "You can't just lie there!" In his eyes stood indignant horror. The guests were about to arrive. In the kitchen, the table was not yet set, the cloakroom in the entrance area still overflowing with children's jackets and many shoes, nobody could get through.

Yeah, she knew that. Susanne had always tidied the house. That's what Gernhardt wanted, when guests were announced.

"You can't receive guests like this, the way things are here!" he yelled at her. "And you lie in bed and want to play madam!"

Susanne lay there, not moving.

"Now pull yourself together and get up!"

"I can't move."

Wringing his hands, shaking his head violently and shouting loudly, Gernhardt went into the children's rooms. He stopped the children to help with the cleaning and the decorating. They obeyed his sharp tone of voice immediately. Susanne heard the dishes clattering, the glasses on the table clanging, the rustling of bags in which shoes were stuffed to make them disappear into the basement with all the toys lying around. The scents of goose and duck from the kitchen rolled up to her. Yes, she wanted to help, she didn't want to leave him alone with all this, she wanted to do her part, as always, she couldn't leave him alone now-

A wild mess in her head. But her body lay there motionless. She strained all her imagination and thought desperately about how she could dress more inconveniently and faster than planned, whether she really needed to fix her hair-

Again she tried to loosen her legs from the mattress and lift them out of the bed.

When a heavy crying attacked her. She cried, cried, cried, sobbed loudly, louder and louder, now she started to cry as well, she heard Gernhardt moaning from below, and then the doorbell rang.

She sobbed loudly. The children came in to her in turn, Lisa, Raffael, Dominik, Markus, they asked, distraught, what was the matter with Mama, but she couldn't come up with anything but a faint, "I can't get up.

Even when her younger sister came to her bed, she couldn't say more than that.

"Don't be such a baby!" she too pushed out and stamped her foot before leaving the bedroom.

"She's not well," she heard Gernhardt explain to the family, "leave her alone today. She can't come down."

As a matter of fact, she was left alone at last. Her tension alternated with powerless breathlessness, renewed sobbing and inner emptiness. When nobody came into her bedroom for a long time, she finally felt a deep calm. She felt her limbs sink even harder into the bed. Then she could finally fall asleep; she slept and slept. The others just let her sleep until the next afternoon.

The following days and weeks in the pre-Christmas season Susanne could only work at half strength. She did her duty as well as she could, but there was no momentum, which customers and friends and Gernhardt appreciated so much about her, the athletic speed, the quick decisions, the cheerful laughter, the "rousing joie de vivre", which they had often attested to her.

Gernhardt, who had to take over many of Susanne's activities, became increasingly aggressive. He simply couldn't manage everything, and his wife held herself back in her commitment, he accused her loudly.

"That you let me down like this! In the Christmas season! Where we generate almost half of our annual turnover! You never think about how we should live on, do you?" he reacted angrily. "But money isn't that important to you," he mocked. Susanne was very depressed by her weakness. She had always been the power woman! Some customers referred to her as an overtype. She wanted her energy back. Run, run, power, yes, she wanted to work.

Not a chance. Susanne remained weak.

Several weeks. Into January.

Gernhardt remained reproachful.

"You are withdrawing from our joint responsibility!"

"You leave me alone with the store, when I also have the wholesale wine business!"

"You know very well that I can't do it alone!", and:

"In January, when I wanted to go back to Hawaii with you!"

Susanne was startled because she couldn't take it anymore. The diagnosis "depression" - she'd heard it before - wouldn't have brought her any relief. It was an ostracized condition that people only talked about behind closed doors and at gunpoint.

What she wanted most of all was to lie down and die. Then she wouldn't have to worry about anything anymore, wouldn't have to justify herself to anyone. Just lie down.

The children, only the children, not Gernhardt, went through her mind. No, she couldn't leave them like that. She really wanted to be there for them more. Dying, no, she would not help them with that, on the contrary, she would leave them alone again. But where to start, how to start to change something - and what at all? How did she ever get out of this life? Gernhardt, the livelihood, the business, the wine wholesale, the house, the mutual friends. It was all intertwined, her ways were intertwined, like a hard, hard Gordian knot.

But how to unravel it? With what sword, at what point?

Maybe she was indeed lining herself up. Others were also miserable. Karin, for example, had shocked her with the news that she had breast cancer and needed surgery. On the contrary, Susanne, she was fine, wasn't she?

"Mum, do you need to be repaired too?", little Raphael asked her one evening as she tucked him in.

She looked at him in bewilderment, then broke out in a relieved laugh.

She took her little son in her arms and pressed him tenderly against her.

"No, Mama does not need an operation," she said with a smile.

The little darling knew exactly what to do. Of course! Yes, she had to go for repairs. She had to admit it to herself. She was sick. Not really, but really - she was sick. She had to go there, to the psychiatric clinic. On Münchner Strasse, she had seen the sign. What else were they for? Yes, they were for her too. And for Raphael. They'd fix his mom there. And for Lisa and Dominik and Markus, she would take the step.

Yes, she'd make an appointment. Yes, she wanted to live her life again, in strength, with power, she wanted to become a super type again for her children.

Gernhardt? He wouldn't be able to help her. No, he couldn't. Not for him. For herself, she would need all her strength now.

A few days ago, she had a customer in the store who literally said, "I love my life. What had to happen that she, Susanne, could say such a sentence? I love my life.

Her little Raphael had taught her the answer. She had to be repaired! Her wheelwork was slowed down by too much friction. Maybe just a little oil was missing?

The very next day she had an appointment with her contact.

"The first thing we'll do is apply for a course of treatment, preferably a maternity cure."

"A cure?"

Susanne was startled. Going away somewhere again! "Where?"

"Where would you like to go?"

Susanne looked uncertainly at the friendly face behind her desk. Was she really allowed to make requests here?

The woman looked at her expectantly.

Was that possible? A single rattling sound in Susanne's head. Again she looked at the woman.

Susanne wanted so much to go to the North Sea. It must be incredibly beautiful there. But Gernhardt had only ever wanted to go to the south, Italy, southern France, where he could taste and buy his wines for his business. Or to Hawaii...

Then Susanne's expression revived. In a firm voice, she said:

"To the North Sea. I want to go to the North Sea."

The lady nodded.

"With Raphael, my youngest."

Again, the lady nodded. Was it really that simple?

Susanne leaned back in her chair.

"Yes, to the North Sea."

"...for repairs," she added with a smile.

Fourth tributary

"Mrs. Fall" and "her husband"

Ms Fall and her Mr Psychologist

Suppose you are a woman and thirty-eight and still in a good mood and in the middle of a midlife crisis and you feel constantly watched, as if you were suffering from persecution mania. Then people say there's something you can do about it: You should see a psychologist.

There's nothing wrong with that.

And only because psychologists are often accommodated on the fourth floor of a restored old building behind a large creaking entrance door behind small old elevator doors behind piercing glances of the receptionist, a feeling comes up that you know from the old days in the waiting room of the dentist, when the painful injections were not so common. And you remember in the waiting room everything you have read about the unconscious and about drives and about depth psychology and dreams and repression and childhood coping and para and psi and how far it can still be to the dear God.

And then the door opens for Frau Fall, thirty-eight and still in a good mood and in the middle of her midlife crisis. And he has no white coat and no thick glasses and no penetrating look. He greets her politely like a schoolboy and he doesn't help her take off her coat, and while she is hanging her coat over the hanger she feels observed again and she imagines she has to hurry so that it doesn't look as if she is provoking his help.

And there is no couch there at all, but she is relegated to an armchair by the friendly big boy at the front.

And while he cautiously asks her tale of woe, she doesn't know where to look, and she feels like she's in a glass cupboard, in which she can't hide anything without it being shaken from the front, from behind, from the side, from everywhere, not the two-kilo belly of the last sluggish days, not that she spent the night at a friend's last night because her husband didn't want her, not when she got up this morning, not how many such boyish looking cuddly young men she has seduced, and she fears the Mene mene tekel u-parsin: Counted, weighed, and divided, she does not want to be divided here!

And then she remembers the last motor show, the car with the shiny, shiny, trimmed front, and how she wanted to experience the interior: How much power the engine had and how fast it went from zero to a hundred, and whether it was also protected by an airbag and what disadvantages it had compared to ...

For there he sits, the psychologist, with big, participating amber eyes that won't let go of her, with a finely curved mouth with definitely soft lips that, seen from her right, can wince to a mischievous grin as soon as she really says the honest thing, and with dimples when he smiles, and the fine hands that make his words forcefully clear, and with ideal man-size, at least one eighty, and her answers come faltering, and in between she notices that "horny" and "crass" fall into the vocabulary of her adolescent children.

And so there he sits opposite her, legs crossed over in crisp jeans, his head, about thirty-five years old, with the straight boy's haircut, resting on the psychologist's hand, on his sporty arm, on the back of his armchair, while he looks at her sympathetically, and that's how cuddly he looks, cuddly boyish in his Norwegian sweater with the slightly opened zipper and the loose white shirt collar underneath, and anyway, he could at least wear a tie here!

So if the psychologist can sit there and young God is allowed to play, and if she has to play glass car and she feels naked, and if he could think how much power she has, how fast she undresses, if she protects herself, how she performs compared to ... but then as a woman at thirty-eight and still in a good mood and in midlife crisis, before you are counted, weighed and found to be too heavy in the tough inhibited flow of speech, then you can rip the coat off the hanger and put it on quickly, so that the saint does not need to help you, and then you can rush off, past the receptionist with the gloating look, down in the small old elevator over four floors, out of the big creaking exit door of the beautifully restored old building.

Fifth inflow

"Siglinde" and "Gerold"

Ghosts

Siglinde held the bundle of paper in her hands, lost in thought. It was one of her first documents written on a PC, still from the time when she had experienced so much sorrow. How proud she had been when she had stood up to Gerold and took a computer course. With the new word program she could now easily eradicate typos. The loud clattering with which the files were stored on the disk at that time was now back in her ears.

Several generations of PCs had passed since then, floppy disks were long gone, and many files had been lost due to PC changes or memory errors or even viruses. At least this version was still available here, printed on punched paper by a dot matrix printer of that time. Up to now, she had not been able to bring herself to throw the sheets away.

However, the writing was sometimes very faded, after so many years of pushing back and forth from one stack of paper to the next, from one move to another.

The date was still easy to read, and she calculated: she had been 39 at the time, her husband Gerold was 41. What a difficult time! She had put thirty pages on paper for her psychologist, dealt with her childhood in detail, and followed the "Instructions for a report for your psychotherapist" like a questionnaire.

"Are you going to see the psychohexer again?", Gerold had said when she had dragged herself from one psychologist to the next, unsuccessfully and desperately. She could have well needed support, because inside she was in chaos - and fear. She would have to give herself up with her soul. A psychologist would use tools that she could not simply touch. He would use them to poke around in her underworld and mess up her life. Even though it was already out of whack. The health insurance company paid for several such trial lessons. Until she had decided for Mr Wieland. He had seemed most trustworthy in his way of asking and responding to her.

But basically it had not been a decision of her own. Actually she had simply run out of strength. She had been constantly tormented by a violent inner restlessness which ransacked her mind, body and soul, which cost her an infinite amount of energy, so that in the end her exhaustion was the deciding factor: "I'll take him, he must help me now, immediately! I can't go on!

Gerold seemed not to be able to understand her state of exhaustion.

"You're a case for the madhouse," he commented on Sig Linde's efforts to improve her condition.

It was only years later, when she had gained a little more distance from herself and him, that she began to suspect that such statements, which hurt her so much, were the result of his own despair. He was afraid in this new and confusing situation for him that his wife would change course - without him. He probably simply did not know how to deal with it differently, she explained his ugly words.

She ran her finger over the perforated edge of the perforated paper as if she could use it to trace the past time.

"I remember the family atmosphere in my parents' house as rather threatening and disharmonious," she read then.

Yes, that's how it was. In fact, it had taken her a very long time to finally achieve the now friendly relationship she cultivated with her parents. Yes, she had done a good job in the past decades.

"I know my mother as a resolute power woman," she continued to read, "who, with a lot of intuition as well as her temperament and energy, upsets and m itreii es all the peace in her surroundings. I often recognize this quality in myself as well. I also have boundless energy - when I know where to go.

But since my birth, which she almost didn't survive, Mama's health had deteriorated. She often introduced stories about her multifaceted diseases with a meaningful look at me: 'Since you... - I have an open leg'.

It sounds mean, but from my point of view she took advantage of her sickness: By lying weak and sick on the couch in our kitchen-living room, Mama forced the attention and consideration of the whole family. She often sent me to do things that were not for her support, but that were simply annoying to her. To contradict her, however, would have meant ignoring her sickness and not taking it quite so seriously. To this day I have not been able to resist her suffering gaze. After all, I was to blame for her condition.

Siglinde remembered that the psychologist had urged her in emphatic words to express her thoughts relentlessly and not to shy away from blaming her. "Only when an accusation is named, Mr Wieland explained to her, you can take it up and clarify the situation.

The text continued:

"My father is a rather thoughtful man, struggling with fate, quiet, reserved, visionary. And then, when he is tired of everything, he is suddenly explosive, hot-tempered, quick-tempered, irritable, rebellious, uncontrolled, uncontrollable and therefore unpredictable, aggressive, choleric, but also doggedly ambitious. He retired at the age of 58, after three years of being unable to work due to depression and having spent time in health clinics. He is 71 today," read Siglinde.

"Father and mother, I feel, are united in me in equal parts. The tension that the two of them presented to me from the outside all my life, I experience in my inner life, and I do not succeed in defusing it.

My parents argued a lot and still argue a lot today. I found and still find it unbearable when they humiliate each other before then slamming the doors without agreement. Unfortunately, my husband and I also fight a lot."

Again and again Siglinde could no longer read several passages or even pages from the bundle of papers because they were too faded.

Then she had answered questions about her siblings in a few lines:

"My mother loved my brother Jürgen very much (or did she treat him preferentially because he was often treated contemptuously by our father and was also severely beaten and she did nothing about it and now had a bad conscience?) Jürgen is six years older than me.

I see myself as a superficially dear, well-behaved, orderly, obedient girl, with whom one did not need to deal with. I understood early on that contradiction brought me disadvantages and secretly carried out many things that my parents had forbidden me.

My sister Nicole, seven years younger than me, is described by my father as a bundle of joy. She is blonde and blue-eyed, so for my father, the patriot, an ideal of beauty. She was also 'strong'. "She was born into a quiet, prosperous time. She was very lively, gave a lot of pleasure and got everything she wanted.' This is how my father speaks of her today."

Siglinde kept yawning at a piece of gray paper emptiness. A little further on, she could decipher again:

"My relationship with my parents is still very much childish, they are still very actively involved in my life. Often I go to them, but more like a defiant child.

(…)

For my father, I was always the weak child. A healthy child had to be chubby for him. Then it was a 'strong' child. There was nothing 'about me', he often said. In the same context he called me his 'Kritzimari'. I have never heard this word from anyone else, I don't know where he got it from. But his scornful expression on his face (even today I still go into retreat when I imagine him) showed me its meaning: 'You pathetic, miserable thing! He didn't like my freckles either. 'They are ugly, you inherited them from me', he often said.

(…)

As soon as a situation became slightly dramatic, tears came to my eyes. I cried a lot. My father would say to me, "Stop it already! He sat down in a threatening posture and ordered me to stop sobbing. But this made me cry even more, I could not stop on command. After that there was usually a strong slap in the face, 'so that you know why you are crying'.

My father grew up in the country, there was no squeamishness.

(…)

My mother also beat me often: with the rod, which, as she said, cried out for 'meat' every time she clicked. "Do you hear it?" she asked me in her rage, "Do you hear it? "And again!

Or with the leather strap that was always waiting on the towel rack in the kitchen and had no other use there; or with the nylon shopping net, whose many knots were particularly painful."

Siglinde put the document on the table. It shook her. What a charge she had made! How evil it sounded in her ears today.

But she remembered her third grade at elementary school. Like teacher Schikowsky not only the boys, but also an eight-year-old classmate - hadn't she been called Waltraud? -, beat her with a stick until she bled. And not just once. Because more than once she hadn't done her homework. The girl lived in a very poor neighbourhood. Her father was known to every child in town because he staggered through the streets, drunk and staggering even during the day. Was family circumstances in the sixties taken into account? Until 1973, Siglinde had read, corporal punishment was allowed in schools. Until 1980 corporal punishment was a parental right. So Siglinde's parents were no exception.

She bent over the pages again and continued to read.

"The last time my father slapped me - on my mother's orders - was when I was fifteen and I didn't want to combine a certain sweater with a certain skirt. For her, clothes had to be "as long as they're neat". Fashion was something reprehensible. But when it came to clothes, I always had an advocate in my big brother. We both wanted to fit in with other people rather than our parents, to at least get recognition from others.

(…)

My father kept rabbits in the stable in our garden. When I was about two years old, I dreamed of an oversized rabbit. I was very scared and suffered a heart attack in my cot. My mother noticed this in time and reanimated me, she says, by grabbing my little body by the legs and shaking it vigorously, head down, until I could breathe again.

Here Siglinde paused. Thoughtfully, she looked out the window.

How good that she was alive. That her mother had had such a good reaction.

"Thank you, mom, for letting me live," she said to herself. And the other thing - you just didn't know any better. You passed on your own upbringing. There are so many things I didn't do right with my children either. The spirits of the past have such great power over us!

"Often I had bad dreams and fear in my crib, then I cried and wanted to go to bed with my parents. Once my father came to my bed and screamed at me loudly about it. The following morning I had a high fever. I did not try to get into my parents' bed after that.

(…)

Our lives were very purposeful. You had your duty to do. I first heard the term "handicrafts" from neighborhood children when I was eight years old. For us, handicrafts were something pointless and useless.

(…)

My mother sent me back to the corner shop to complain every time I brought home a broken egg in the thick, brown paper bag - whether Aunt Berta had been careless, or I had been, or whether 'Aunt Berta' had smuggled it in, I couldn't tell at the age of six or seven (egg boxes were not yet common). I always found exchanging them very humiliating, especially when Mum sent me outside opening hours and I had to knock on the back door. I can well remember that it was impossible for me to say my name to Aunt Berta when she asked who was there at the still closed door. I could always answer only with 'I', even to her repeated educational questions: 'What is your name? I never said my name, only 'I'.

(…)

I had to help my father slaughter the rabbits. He pressed the hind legs of the wriggling animal into my hands. He killed the animal with a well-aimed blow to the back of its head with the axe. In the meantime I have read that this way the rabbits get the least amount of attention. But for me it is a terrible memory how they stopped twitching in my hand. After all, our rabbits were my friends, whom I stroked, played with and gave names to!

(…)

On my first day of school, my mother had a neighbor girl's mother accompany me. Mama went to work. I was the only child who appeared without her mama. As an adult I still resented her for not going with me and once again she preferred her work to mine.

(…)

I wondered, perhaps twelve years old, about a couple who were friends with my parents: The husband, Uncle Hans, was admiring his wife's nylon stockings and beautiful legs. And he also praised the stocking seams on the back leg! We didn't talk about 'something like that'. My mother usually wore thick woollen stockings, long skirts and woollen panties up to her knees, mostly also in summer, because of her illnesses.

(…)

I remember my youth between about twelve and nineteen years with pleasure. I had good friends and found many excuses not to be at home in the afternoon. Together with my classmates I got involved in many trends of the time. My grammar school in Schwabing was a bus hour away and I could not be controlled from home. I rolled up my long skirt, which my mother had ordered, into a short miniskirt and after the street corner I cut my ponytail into long flowing hair, as the girls wore it at the end of the 60s in their new openness. At noon I returned home after the street corner as the good daughter.

(…)

When I was 19, I met my husband, and he was attracted to my cool, dismissive manner, which was only an act. On the contrary, I was very soft and vulnerable inside. Our two-year friendship before marriage was marked by my reticence, my frequently changing yes and no, a back and forth and my fear of giving in to feelings that, if I did not reciprocate, could hurt me. So I preferred to offend him with an unclear attitude, sometimes with sympathetic politeness, sometimes with desire and then again with harsh rejection, from the outset with fear in my neck: "It is impossible that he loves you.

(…)

I was inoculated by my parents with the motto "Boys are bad and hurt girls“.

For me, this motto was confirmed by the behaviour of my older brother towards girls. He lived with our parents until he was 22. Jürgen changed his girlfriends very often and often had love affairs running parallel. Unwillingly, he instructed me to deny him on the family phone, which was common at that time, when his long-time main friend Renate called and he had another girl with him in his room. I was not strong enough to resist my big brother, but I could not take his girls as easily as Jürgen wanted me to. Finally I liked Renate very much, she was always very nice to me. My brother is now forty-five and unmarried and still undecided. His behavior is, I suppose, partly responsible for my certainty that I am powerless against men.

This was reflected in my relationship with my husband as gratitude that he 'took me'. From my perspective today, this led to a submissiveness, bondage and dependence in our marriage that I only recognized late. From which I now want to actively and violently escape.

(…)

I know I am not behind my previous life, it was more the life of my husband that I led.

(…)

Now I start a psychotherapy because I have lost my power in the fight for love.

What do I ultimately want to achieve through therapy?, the instructions ask. It is very difficult for me to formulate this. "Exorcising your own will" was one of the educational goals of my parents. Now how am I supposed to know what I want?

I try to:

I want to be able to want what I want.

Siglinde held the leaves against the window. She lit them up with the bright desk lamp. She leaned over it even closer. That's all there was to get out of it. At most she could only make out single, incoherent words that made no sense.

For a while she looked at the grayish yellow papers in her hand. She turned them and turned them over. and placed them on the table. Pushed them away and back again. ...looking thoughtfully at the old printing of the characters. Turned the pages forward again, then back again. She raised her eyes to the window. Long she looked up at the clouds in the sky. Suddenly great peace returned to her. She bent under the table. And handed the old, pale spirits over to the shredder that stood down there.

Sixth inflow

"me" and "Guenter"

The lot of mothers-in-law

Everything seems very clear in my snail shell. Here in my Cévennes, the wild French Cévennes. So jagged and spacious and varied they are, as made for me.

I have converted my van into a mini camper and everything I need is always with me. Tailgate open, pot out, water bottle here, gas cooker on, boils. Here on the dry ground by the roadside. I can make myself a coffee in no time, a powdered soup, whatever. I had got up and left my sleeping place immediately, still unwashed. It's so easy, it's so wonderful not to be civilized. Nothing else I need. And from the sun there are blissful free rays as a bonus. I can't believe I haven't done this before.

In the course of the leisure that comes with my feeling of freedom, memories keep creeping in.

This time of an event that should influence my life more than I could have guessed at that time.

It has been more than thirty years ago ... two weeks before our wedding. Günter, who had been transferred by his company to Düsseldorf for a year, visited me in Munich at least every fortnight. Only twice I had visited his parents in their smart house in Nuremberg.

I had never been with Günter in Düsseldorf. He had only considered his apartment as a temporary home and had furnished only the most necessary things. During the day he worked long hours, on weekends he usually went to Munich directly after work.

Now Günter's parents, who owned a drugstore in Nuremberg and were looking for the latest trends at the trade fair in Düsseldorf, wanted to visit him - and he wanted me to be there, he wished. I was quite excited when I arrived at Günter's house, only three hours before them from Munich. In a few days I would become his wife and her daughter-in-law.

Günter's furniture was makeshift, the kitchen only minimally equipped and the cleanliness, well, did not meet the standards of a good German housewife. In other words, the apartment was a mess when I arrived.

The curtains, which he had received from his mother, were still over an armchair. A tablecloth on the table was teeming with stains. Somewhere on the PVC floor, quite accidentally and uselessly, lay a stained carpet.

Used dishes had - after all - been rinsed and put into the basin, other dishes were still unpacked in cartons. And on the skirting boards all around had accumulated swathes of dust. My dilemma was great. I saw the dirt and the mess, and it bothered me. Could I look away? Was it my responsibility now and in the future to make his apartment presentable to him, to bring it up to the clean standard of his parents' house?

No, I was not, I decided. But I noticed that he would have liked to present a tidy apartment to his parents: "You can eat off the floor at my mother's house," he said, looking at me helplessly. I felt sorry for him - and I decided to help him. So we divided the time by two, indulged our need for tenderness in the first half, and then quickly looked for some dishes from the box for an evening with the parents that would be as comfortable as possible, tracked down bedding and set up sleeping places for them, tidied up as best we could. The time was over quickly.

Of course, our reception table was not set as one would learn it in a hotel management school: We offered different wine glasses, the dishes arranged in the order of the finding boxes, salt and pepper from the package, and as we hadn't found any cutlery in the box in the hurry, we presented disposable cutlery that I had quickly bought downstairs at the kiosk.

"Just like camping!", I said in a good mood and proud to have brought these solutions to the table for my parents-in-law.

But no, that would have been too easy!

My future mother-in-law had a different opinion. Outraged and with a pointed undertone, she took a piqued look at her untidy son and the untidy daughter-in-law.

And then came her sentence, which was to leave a lasting impression on me: "But I'm better equipped for camping!

Apparently I was the only one who heard that sentence. Because the tone of her exclamation got deep into my conscience. I have no idea what else was said that night. Just that she offered me the "You can call me Martha".

"I'll be better equipped for camping!" With that sentence, I realised that evening that my creative approach to housekeeping would be a touchstone for me.

In fact, I soon had the opportunity to be a guest in her own well-kept caravan on a well-kept campsite with other well-kept caravans. I was served with pretty, modern tableware, the colour of which was exactly repeated in the striped pattern of the tablecloth. The dinner sausage was taken out of the large, clean, white refrigerator and the bread was freshly baked in a flashing oven of the latest design. The gentlemen of the family received round mushroom tulips for the right flower on the pilsner, water was served in water glasses and the Trollinger we drank from shining wine glasses. Everyone present had a comfortable seat at the table with tastefully matching cushions, and I didn't dare to get up in between, at least for a moment to get out of the confinement. Until around midnight the family ran out of things to talk about and Günter and I drove home.

It's strange. My future mother-in-law embodied a lifestyle from which I was far removed, and yet, for all my incomprehension, I admired her. Why? Because I felt Günter admired her. "You can eat off the floor at my mother's." Not demanding, not reproachful. But I could tell by his tone how much he loved it. How tastefully he dressed, how beautiful he found her. How splendid, unique, unsurpassed. How brilliant she was. I wanted to be just like his mother.

But none of this had entered my consciousness at the time. So in future, without realizing it, I followed my mother-in-law on the path of cleanliness and what she called good taste.

Over the years I took off my funny, colourful clothes and learned what it meant to be a lady. My shoes now matched my leather belt and for the first time in my life I bought a lipstick that matched the colour of my clothes. Without realizing it, I copied her efficiency, so praised by Günter, in Günter's later delicatessen, where I - of course! - brought in.

There I converted my sporting needs into functional, functional movements that serve our daily business. For example, dragging heavy wine cartons and quickly fetching goods tripptrapp tripptrapp from the cellar. I wore a hat at social events. Even when we had several children, my own needs remained secondary - and instead of a practical family carriage, we drove the latest Mercedes, which was highly regarded by Günter's mother. In the trunk of the Mercedes, which was situated high up, I could only lift the prams with great difficulty.

For almost twenty years I practised becoming a damsel - and scolded myself when my wild side broke through and I didn't behave like his mother. When on a family outing I walked barefoot across the meadow and did not use the path in the hiking boots of the hip brand. When I did not only want to admire the beautiful mountain lake, but went swimming in it. And I didn't care if I could blow-dry the soaking wet hair to a proper hairstyle afterwards.

But I didn't notice all that then. I adapted, wanted recognition, got it, and still was unhappy. I got credit for the wrong things! And Günter did not get from me what he might have loved me for: this my wild side. That might have brought him emancipation from his roots.

But now, another ten years later, here I am. In my wild Cévennes. I'm already a mother-in-law myself, uff, how much responsibility this role could carry without me noticing it!

Today I take the liberty of stopping at this bend in the road, where there is a particularly romantic view of the rugged mountains. Allow me to open the tailgate at the side of the road, over a mini gas stove that finds its best place on the ground, heat water and drink my instant coffee in complete freedom.

Perhaps Martha would have enjoyed this simplicity too?

Of course I would have made a cup of coffee for her too!

Seventh tributary

"Sabine" and "Gerhard". "Arnold"

What lasts a long time

Dear Vroni,

Here I am again. With the promised continuation from my last letter. I had already told you a lot about how I felt after my divorce from Gerhard. She was no honey lick. And neither was the time after that. There were a few failed attempts at "New Man". It's been almost 15 years now. How do you feel, dear Vroni, now? After your divorce, do you still live in such seclusion?

I chose the path of psychoanalysis for myself. It wasn't an easy decision for me. In fact it wasn't me who made it, but my poor mental health: I had become completely powerless, had no prospect of improvement in my life, had no goal in sight, I just couldn't go on, I was burnt out. Without my children - I am afraid I would have given myself up.

And without therapy, I would have remained in the timid position of "Better a known misfortune than an unknown happiness." Only through many conversations and by trying out new behaviors could hardened structures that hurt me come loose.

Very often, however, I had to tell myself another proverb: "Better an end with horror than a horror without end". But often this hurt me, and I was very surprised how I missed the old normality with all its routine. Like Moses and the Israelites, I longed to return to the meat pots of Egypt, do you remember this picture from religious education? Twenty years of established habits, you know ... I had no structure at all in my new life. It was almost unbearable.

The development went like this:

After Arnold and I had contacted each other via a singles site on the Internet, he turned out to be the ideal "pen pal" for me. How wonderfully noncommittal we could openly address each other by email, which moved us! Thinking about our life. Very personal. So I was even able to reflect on my understanding of marriage with someone in detail. He had the same questions as I did and was also looking for the answers.

But when our openness came too close to me, I was glad to have written to a man whose zip code started with 2. Far, far away from me with the 8, just not near... The only time you had to make a phone call was if you wanted to find out what was meant in the mail.

Apparently Arnold was the same way. He acted exactly as I imagined him to act. He never pushed me. He didn't insist on getting to know me, on more e-mails, on more phone calls, on nothing. It went on like that for half a year.

He could wait until I extended an invitation: "Come and visit me, I'm having a casual garden party for friends and their friends on July 12th."

I wrote this knowing full well that Oldenburg was too far to take the distance for a weekend garden party. But I thought that this party would be a good opportunity to have a look at each other in a relaxed atmosphere and to continue to email from there on, just like before. Yes, you've got the right combination: "Wash my fur, but don't get me wet!"

In my email I had of course not formulated these thoughts. And Arnold didn't even jump on my camouflage "loose garden party", but only heard "invitation". Called me. Since he had an important job to finish, he couldn't come on July 12th. But he could come the following weekend.

Now I became hot! How did I get out of this scam! His suggestion did not correspond at all to what I had intended. No, I didn't want it to be difficult. Such a personal meeting, for a whole weekend, without the protection of the other guests! Besides, if he came, from so far away, if that wasn't another obligation - phew, be polite, offer food, take care of him, the guest is king and all that.

Before I could finish thinking, he went on:

Whether he could bring his three daughters with him, they would only have to spend the night somewhere, all four of them, because the way home was so far away. He asked this in such a helpless tone of voice that I broke out in equally helpless laughter. Yes, he had been planning a visit to his parents in Mannheim that weekend for a long time and had taken time off until Tuesday, he defended himself. He said that Lower Saxony was already on holiday. And Mannheim is already halfway south of me.

No, no, it screamed inside of me, I wanted to be relaxed, garden party, yes, but not.

Horror, panic!

But he sounded so nice.

Could I really cancel? It was against our family tradition. We had an open house.

If I accepted, how much responsibility did I take on? Was it just a "non-committal visit", where I could have said: ", I can't stand it for a whole weekend with you", or did I have to hold out because of the children, who you don't want to offend? Was that not too much for me? Yes, it was too much for me!

In order to sort all the possible answers in my head, I would have had to endure at least a ten-second pause in my thoughts-

but already I heard myself say: Yes, of course you can come.

Dear Vroni, you don't know this beautiful old magic house where I lived with my children in Strasslach in the meantime, you had moved away from Ismaning shortly before me.

We didn't have much room for visitors in the house, but it was surrounded by a wonderful big wild garden with tall apple, pear and plum trees, two cute sheds, an old tool shed, with hidden corners and nooks and crannies, my children and I loved it more than anything else - so I invited Arnold to bring a tent and pitch it in our garden. All of her other utensils would then be accommodated.

"You can have our big family tent as well, then you'll have more space", I suggested to him. Again my calculation: If he is terrible, at least I don't have him in the house.

But I didn't feel like setting it up and preparing for it. To make this clear, I said:

"You just build it yourself."

That's what I'd learned by now: Don't take on tasks you don't like just because it might and might not be expected. And again I received confirmation for my new line: I would have tormented myself while setting up the tent, sacrificed - he, on the other hand, said quite simply:

"I'm having so much fun!"

Fantastic summer weather supported us and made our meeting quite easy. This was also helped by the fact that his three teenage girls in their age groups each found an approximate equivalent in the age of my kids. And Dominik, my big boy, had already accepted a place at university in Würzburg and was not there. Our offspring quickly moved into their rooms together so that Arnold and I could have a good time alone and watch each other.

Oh, dear Vroni, haven't we all become overcautious after so much disappointment? We are careful, oh yes. So is he.

"From our big summer party last week there are still plenty of grilled sausages left," I said. My tone was apologetic.

Why, actually? Gerhard, you know him, the great gourmet, felt sausages to be something low, you were not allowed to offer something like that to a guest! He always had steaks, real meat. Twenty years with a partner, that does something to us, that educates us, you know that! I still apologized on Gerard's behalf.

But Arnold couldn't have known that. He was happy.

"I love sausages. You have a grill over there. Can I turn it on?"

Oh, I was happy to let him do that.

But I had a few moments of peace and quiet to watch him do it. How calmly and thoughtfully and with a quiet joy he chose the wood from the shed, chopped it with the axe on the old log, how he later added the larger pieces of wood on the grill. Always with a relaxed satisfaction on his face. That was what I liked about him. He seemed to rest in himself, not needing my care and attention. This was new to me about the man, it did me good, I felt relieved of my claim to have to give attention and recognition - come hell or high water, I always had to be there for the man.

Only this much about Arnold's appearance: He seemed likeable to me. The size, yes, and the figure, that fit. I didn't notice any other details. Especially since it was almost evening and dark in the garden. So he got his guitar out of the car and played Bridge Over Troubled Water.

"That was my favourite record," I was glad to hear it, "its green cover is all worn out!"

Then he played "Puff, the Magic Dragon" by Peter, Paul & Mary.

"What, you know her too?"

"Do you still have that record with the red cover?"

"Yes, I do!"

I sang his songs out loud, he sang the upper voice, I sang the lower voice, it was harmonious, and he played very well.

Our children, almost all of them teenagers, got along well. You only saw them at mealtimes.

The initial tension had given way to a pleasant looseness. Soon the days were over.

Arnold visited me again during the autumn holidays.

"My daughters would like to be with your children again."

Sure, smile.

I was happy.

Also, when we next met, I made sure I did what I wanted - and made no compromises. I was very brave and tried out many new behaviours with him that were important to me. And lo and behold, nothing bad happened. He could accept everything I wanted. And he remained calm, didn't get upset at all, he seemed satisfied when he asked my wishes and could respond to them. It was a really new experience for me.

When he had left again, I desperately called my friend Susanne:

"Hey, I met this really nice guy."

"Yeah, good for you. Why is that so difficult?"

"I'm so happy to be away from Gerhard, with all that alcohol. Look at him, he's really into it! I almost am too, you know..."

"Yes, my Peter went to see him recently. Gerhard keeps on barking. He takes a break, but then he starts drinking again. We're very worried about him."

"And now Arnold, that's his name. Arnold drinks no alcohol, not a drop!"

"Just be happy!"

"No, he can't have any!"

"Why not, is he sick?"

"You could call him that. He used to be an alcoholic. He's in rehab.

Susanne laughed on the other end of the line.

"Well, everything's okay then. At least he's done that!"

"I'm scared," I said. "In our house, there are bottles everywhere, the children are already having a pre-glazed, as they say, drinking parties, you know this strange trend. Plus, my kids are so used to Gerhard, there's no holding back!"

"Then this Arnold is a huge opportunity for you! Your kids will see you can do it without alcohol.

"Do you really think we can do that? I'm so scared.

"Well, you're not married to him yet! You could try it out, see how he handles it. Then I had to make the gravy for him without red wine.

Dear Vroni, do you remember Susanne? She always hits the nail on the head, and I appreciate her for that.

Arnold invited me to spend a week with him on the North Sea. The North Sea! He opened doors for me. When I was a kid, I liked to read books that played on the North Sea. But Gerhard was never drawn to the harsh North Sea climate, always only to the South.

Arnold wanted to stick to my guidelines when choosing the holiday flat: Separate living quarters, please. Separate rooms anyway! And he actually found one. In Ostfriesland, in Bensersiel.

Again he succeeded in fulfilling my wishes completely. The apartment consisted of three well-separated parts. The middle part consisted of kitchen and living room, from there it went left into my wing, right into his.

It was easy to reach an agreement with Arnold. About the choice of food, who cooked what and when, about when we went for a walk on the North Sea, when we signed up for a guided walk on the mudflats, or when I wanted to go jogging, and spontaneously did so barefoot - while he transported my sneakers along the beach.

Even when he was very surprised about my "rubber boot behaviour", as he winkingly called it the next day, he let me do it: I wanted to be sure I could leave at any minute, any time. No, I didn't even want to leave my rubber boots in his car overnight. Nothing. Mine! Yours! It had become so important to me! And he could accept it, although he was very surprised about it, as he told me later. For me it was another confirmation: Yes, I can be free with him, and he doesn't laugh at me with my need for independence, however exaggerated it may seem to him.

In the evening, when he picked up his guitar and sang romantic songs to me, I began to dream - bad people don't have songs. I found confidence in the male species again - and let him touch me tenderly. How good his calm caressing hand did me!

"You don't have to say anything, Daddy, I know what's going on", his big daughter Frauke welcomed us when we stopped together at his apartment in Oldenburg and she saw his shining eyes.

Yes, we had ventured out onto the ice and fallen in love.

And now?

Him in Lower Saxony at the top, me in Bavaria at the bottom. Eight hundred kilometers!

Longing! Like in teenage days of first love. I want to you! When can you come? Can I come to you? Five more days! Ninety-six hours. That was Arnold. He's always thinking clearly.

Every two weeks he came to Munich, or I drove to him. Bought me a suitcase just for the long train journeys.

Half a year after our North Sea time, Arnold looked for work in Munich - and found a job, although he was already 54.

"And you're not moving so far away from your family just because of me? I couldn't bear that responsibility!".

I was very afraid.

But he said:

"No, I will never hold that against you, no matter what happens to us."

Dear Vroni, how would you have felt? Would you have believed it, honestly? I was worried I could be blackmailed with his moving act That he might demand compliance. If I take the blame for this, then you must...

Would you have thought the same as me? Or would you have taken his coming here as a matter of course? Or as an honor for him? There are so many different ways of seeing the world.

It was a very important question for me.

I would never have moved away from my children, although they were already so grown up and although they could have stayed with Gerhard. No, we, my children and I, had only just become accustomed to each other and had found and enjoyed new freedom in our magical home.

Very well, I believed him.

"My daughters have only lived with me on weekends. They can still stay with Ingeborg, she and her boyfriend Björn have enough space. They live in a big house in the countryside in Hannover, they love that. There they can attend school as before. Anyway, Frauke will graduate soon."

"Won't you miss them?"

"Of course I'll miss them! I will go up once a month and visit them at Ingeborg, I can sleep at their house, if you don't mind?"

How would you have handled it, Vroni?

I for one was not entirely free of jealousy. But my pragmatic side was that anything goes. Accept the challenge of having faith.

Long speech short gulp:

He took a flat in Munich. I continued to live with my children in Straßlach.

There was no way I could let him stay with me. We only knew each other a little!

After all, we had spent several decades working in very different systems, not just regionally. We developed different attitudes to many things, very different habits and ways of thinking.

Serious, for example: He had always been an employee, but I had been self-employed all my life. What that alone does to us, over the years!

Perhaps you have already looked curiously into the mail attachment and seen the photo. Yes, we dared! Are we not beautiful?

The young man behind us, who shows "rabbit ears" above my head with his finger, is Raffael, my youngest, who was - you remember! - who was in kindergarten with your Timmy.

On the other photo you can see all four of my children performing a play at our wedding. The word "children" is not so appropriate anymore, is it?

On the left, the one with the beard, is Markus, the second born, and the long-haired young man without beard is Dominik, my oldest. Then you see my daughter Lisa, who went to riding lessons with your Melinda. Next to her, Raphael again.

Arnold's daughters performed some shanty songs together, just like they had done in their Nordic family. Accompanied by daddy's voice and guitar. The girls have such beautiful, confident soprano voices!

Yes, that's how it was.

Am I happy now?

What a big word. How can anyone be happy for more than a moment! I would rather say: Yes, I am very happy, I am very well. Life is good. I love my life.

I am me.

Yes, I love my life!

And I notice over the ten years that Arnold and I are together, how my pink ones mix with Arnold's light blue thought particles and his "light blue ones" mix with my "pink ones. How our common intersection is constantly growing. And the best part is: I can let this happen. Him anyway. He doesn't need to be as isolated as I desperately need him to be.

At some point, the two thought circles with the pink and light blue peculiarities will probably overlap in such a way that there will only be one circle with the same number of pink and blue particles floating around. This picture creates calm in me. Striving for good understanding means for me: finally not so many hurtful quarrels anymore.

My dear Vroni, I hope that I can encourage you with my story. What lasts long will finally be good. Life will not remain as ugly as it is with you right now. I recently read a graffito: "He who is at the end, can at least start over"

I hug you and I'm happy to read about you again. And give Melinda and Timmy my love if you ever see them again.

Sabine

PS:

An example of the above-mentioned thought circles:

In road traffic.

How many parking tickets have I already got and had to pay, because I like to drive fast, always faster than allowed. It is incredibly difficult for me to keep to the speed limit.

Arnold, on the other hand, always, really always, kept exactly to it. In built-up areas: exactly fifty. On highway construction sites: exactly sixty. Abroad, exactly one hundred and twenty.

Of course, I never really thought my higher speed was wrong, and sometimes I smiled at his accuracy in dealing with guidelines and rules. But it did something to me. After all, I enjoy his reliably clean thinking. And I find myself driving (almost) as the round sign with the red frame wants me to do.

Arnold, on the other hand, has already received two parking tickets and is very proud of them.

Eighth inflow

"Silvy" and "Armin"

Armin and the yoghurt

Armin was 53 years old and visiting his girlfriend Silvy in Munich, with whom he still had a weekend relationship at the time. A large part of his life had already been lived, many ways of behaviour and thinking had become a natural habit.

He was born as the son of an engineer, who worked as a civil servant for the railways at a time when they were still a state-owned company. In Armin's parental home in Heilbronn, much value was placed on regulated procedures and order. The father arrived punctually at twelve o'clock from his railway office to the railwayman's apartment, which was within walking distance, where the mother had already put lunch on the table for twelve o'clock sharp. The rations on the plates were scarcely but fairly divided among the family with the three boys. And it was also a matter of course that the father always received a little bit more of the meat. The proverbial Swabian thriftiness set the tone in the family.

The learned qualities were supported by Armin's choice of profession: As a teacher, it was part of his daily routine to set rules, to supervise their observance and to stick to them himself. As a result of his childhood experiences, he had experienced the allocation of rations as a natural and incontrovertible law and had practiced this with his then wife and three daughters. For example, a pack of six fruit dwarfs was divided up among the children in such a way that two of the small crumpled cups were determined for each one per day while they were shopping.

Silvy, however, probably attracted Armin precisely because of her otherness. She liked to resist fixed structures, set up no rules or her own, for him often illogical rules, and still seemed to be able to survive. How was that possible? She worked freelance and irregularly and spent money abundantly when she had it. When she had little, she spent little. She lived with her four children in an unorthodox, winding witch's cottage. The three sons and the daughter, between fourteen and twenty-one, consumed vast amounts of food during this physical development phase. An always well-filled refrigerator, from which everyone in the family helped themselves when they wanted, was the most natural thing in the world for them. And rationing was a foreign word in their grandparents' war stories.

The new couple had become aware of certain contrasts in their way of life. Therefore, the two decided to keep the habits and customs they had lived in their families for the time being. So, during Armin's first weekend visit to Silvy and her children, shopping in the supermarket was initially strictly separated: she did the shopping for herself and her children, they ate everything she chose without criticism. And Armin did the shopping for himself. This time he treated himself to a glass of the expensive yoghurt with the expensive fruit filling for dessert and stuffed it thoughtlessly into the overflowing refrigerator.

The next day he wanted to eat his yoghurt. But he could not find the glass he had been looking forward to.

Surprised and unsuspecting, he inquired with his family.

"Where's my yoghurt?"

In surprise, Silvy's children asked back:

"Why your yogurt?"

Ninth tributary

"Sandra" and "Arno"

The first visit to his ex

Sandra and Arno had met a year ago. By then, Sandra was in her late forties, divorced, and had children. Arno was in his early fifties, also divorced, and also had children. He had already moved to Munich after a few months of their relationship.

Now he wished that Sandra would go with him to Northern Germany once to meet his three girls in their home. For a long time Sandra had postponed the meeting. His girls were 12 and 17 and 19 years old and lived together with their mother Corinna on the outskirts of Hanover. This is where Corinna's new boyfriend Björn had his house, and this is where the five lived.

Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Frau Holle had already crossed Sandra's mind several times. She was about to become a stepmother!

In fairy tales it was always the stepmother who was so evil. How would she, Sandra, now fill this role? But the girls had their own mother. And she didn't mean to be mean. Still, Sandra would have liked to define her role more precisely: Either way, you have to be. One way or another, you will behave in this or that situation. "Anticipation" came to mind. She learned it in sports. Before a competition, athletes used to play out their well-trained movements in their heads.

Was she in a competition? With the children? No, not with the children. More like Corinna. Who was Corinna that Arno had been married to for 20 years? The one he talked about so much? With whom he had raised his beloved daughters, with very different rules than Sandra had had in her marriage. Was she pretty, that Corinna, prettier than she was, Sandra? More efficient? More intelligent?

Arno and Sandra had just taken the risk of admitting a new relationship. Did this new one have a chance against the possible comforts of the previous relationship, and if so, how far was it completed? In so many books and films there were so many other exits of an old love. Would Arno succeed in letting her go completely? And did he have to? How much did Corinna still belong to his life? Sandra herself had found the time together with her husband to be a very formative time for herself. Twenty years as well! That could not simply be cut out of life.

She felt how her senses were confused at the thought of Corinna. How she would have liked to have been simply superior to the situation: Now I'm his girlfriend, me, only me... At the same time, she felt as if she had been a teenager. Hadn't she matured at all?

The opportunity for a meeting arose after a hiking holiday in Alsace. "We could go north from there," Arno suggested. "We're already halfway there!"

Sandra couldn't take it anymore. It had to be done. At least she could make sure they didn't take the motorway, but the Palatinate wine route. So she could get a few more hours of delay. To the left and right of the romantic road, sunlit, extensive vineyards stretched out, where countless harvest workers picked the ripe grapes. As they crossed the lovely villages, Sandra and Arno were delighted with the broom farms they had heard so much about: During the harvest season, winegrowers were allowed to use their own house and garden as private taverns and offer travellers their wine with a home-made meal at the garden table.

"If you want to taste, you are welcome to do so. Then I'll do the driving to the end," said Arno. Sandra had run a delicatessen with her ex-husband, and wine tasting had been a daily routine for her.

Now she enjoyed tasting here too, in private, without any business background - and bought: Finally she had a suitable souvenir for Corinna! That was authentic! For many years she had been selling Federweisser in her shop every autumn. Yes, a five-litre canister like this was just the thing, together with the tarte flambée she and Arno had already bought in Alsace.

The sun had long since set, now it was time to step on the gas. The blue motorway signs showed fewer and fewer kilometres to Hannover. Thoughts buzzing again. Were there still old things between Corinna and Arno that she would now feel? Would jealousies or competition arise? And the children, I'm sure they were happy about their dad. But also about them, Sandra? Would Arno also stand by her here, or would she then be an unnoticed appendage for him? Where else could she turn to when she was not feeling at all well?

But Corinna and Björn received the two very warmly. They had prepared a dinner and gladly accepted the presents. The girls lovingly clung to their daddy. The house radiated friendly cosiness. Corinna turned out to be a faithful caring mother and good housewife. Nevertheless Sandra felt uneasiness rising within herself. What a chaos she had in the car, from the long, varied journey with the many stays in different places. Finally, yes, finally she wanted to occupy herself with her interests, for which she had had no freedom during her marriage. That brought along disorder, all along the line. Full of curiosity she had thrown herself into new realms. So what if order fell by the wayside? But here, in this house, she was brought back into a life she had wanted to strip off.

A great discord had just divided her inside. Detached from the old life and not yet arrived in the new one, free, but hovering over an abyss. So deep was it, so dark it suddenly seemed to her. Would she ever make it? With Arno, her Arno, who came from this Corinna?

Corinna lived in a tidy world, each pot had its own lid, each cup its place in the cupboard. And how beautifully she had set the table! How pretty everything was here. As pretty as Sandra had been in her old marriage. Splash. There she was again.

Could she ever find her way out? Or find her way in? Get into what? Was there any real alternative? Nomadic tents, that's basically where she longed for, out into the extreme, into a wilderness where only nature gave her rules and no culture. But no, yurt houses were not common in Central Europe. She could not suddenly push her own young children into another world! They had just enough problems to find their way in their new life after the separation of their parents. But she had a responsibility. Surely she only needed a short break. Then everything would go back to normal, as before, completely normal, in the right direction, phew, further. Would she ever be able to cope with all this!

Sandra held out the whole evening with friendly conversation until she was assigned a freshly made bed with ironed bedding. Her own sleeping bag? Out of the question! See you tomorrow at breakfast.

How perfect Corinna was! In the morning, when Sandra got up and went down the stairs, she found a beautifully laid breakfast table.

As soon as she got up, a sweet, fruity smell was in her nose. It smelled even stronger down here. Hm, drink a glass of cool, juicy Federweisser now? She was on vacation. But no, that could make an all-too-inclusive impression in this house.

Bjorn had already left for work. Now Corinna, who had already started the washing machine, sat with them.

"Can you smell it?" she asked. "This morning at five there was a big bang. It literally knocked Björn and me out of bed!" All of a sudden Sandra knew what had happened.

"I had such a neck when I walked over to the coffee machine," Corinna said. "I had to fetch a bucket first! With a dustpan I shovelled in the sauce. And that made a lot! Several times I wiped with clear water. Bjorn and I cleaned up for almost an hour.

When they went into the kitchen after the bang, they found it flooded with white liquid. In the middle of it was an empty white plastic canister.

Sandra should have known. She felt redness rise to her face. How many bottles and canisters of Federweisser she had already poured out! How many temps in the shop and strictly dependent on the Autumn Festivals: Always open the lid! Always leave the top open so that the fermentation gas can escape!

That this had happened to her, of all people, here of all people! Her of all people! Her habits, her previous grip - had she thrown everything overboard too carelessly? Nothing seemed to work anymore. She was already too far removed from the old and familiar. Where was Arno?

"How sorry I am," she brought out, burying her face in her hands. "I should have unscrewed the top last night.

Five liters. Sweet and sticky! Running on flat ground! "It's all right," Corinna said indulgently. Which made things even worse for Sandra's feeling.

Only when they were in each other's arms did a sigh of relaxation escape her. "Thanks," she said.

"It's all right," Corinna said.

"Thank you," Arno also said, and put his arms around both of them.

Tenth Influx

"me" (and the kids)

Lisa and the advertising panel

If one sat with us in the forester's way on the guest loo, one could deal in detail with the advertising metal sign at the front wall for lack of other distraction. Werner had received it as a gift from a liquor dealer. There was still space on this wall in the house, so we hung it up there. The sheet metal picture was DIN A 2 size and showed a snapshot: Sea, stormy seas, distress, you could feel the ship's planks breaking all around you. In the middle of raging waves, a man's head emerged from the water just gasping for air. He should be desperate, but he's not: sparks of joy sparkle in his eyes, because, lo and behold, only a little way away from him is the typically green, typically round bottle of "ABC" herbal liqueur. The advertising message was clear: ABC, you are my salvation!

The head of the man who was saved from the shipwreck was narrow, almost gaunt, the wet hair slapped against his face, his beard dripping. The dark-grey eyes looked clear and vivid under high foreheads and arched eyebrows out of the roaring sea.

During one of the moves in the following years, I decided that the advertising panel would find no more room in the new house, and it was disposed of. But the picture ...

Since then, the earth has been orbiting the sun many times. Chernobyl and the Gulf War worried the people, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the turnaround in the Eastern states changed the view of the world, the millennium and the world economic crisis made a lot of noise, Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden left this world, the children's school-leaving certificate and marital crises kept the family busy, several birthdays were cancelled and the phase of changing partners of our children passed into the phase of firm relationships. My grown-up children already began to wallow in nostalgia, and my first grandchildren were born.

On rainy Sundays the extended family sometimes met for slide shows. With children and family photos from the past.

"Oh, it was so nice when we were kids and lived in the forest ranger's lane!"

That Sunday only Lisa and her brothers Markus and Benjamin were present, all three without a partner. The crispy Sunday roast pork had just been gobbled up with lots of Oh! and Hm! and Fein! and just as many bread dumplings, the kitchen was clean again and on the screen appeared children's pictures from that very Foresterweg time.

When suddenly, while looking at a photo, a surprised silence appeared.

The slide showed Lisa, about eight years old, who had positioned herself in the guest toilet next to the ABC advertising panel and waved happily into the camera.

"He looks just like Tommy," it broke out of Markus.

Silence again.

Yes, the resemblance to Tommy was obvious.

"I didn't dare to say that," grinned Benjamin, "Lisa could jump in my face!"

Now Markus laughed out loud:

"I don't believe it! Lisa has caught the man from the advertising panel, how cool is that!"

Careful silence again.

We all looked at Lisa.

She was slightly flushed.

"Well, yes, I had noticed that before. But I was afraid to talk about it." And she distracted us, striking a stern tone:

"Mom, what do you think? Are there any stories from my childhood that I should know about? That's broadcasting, isn't it?"

"Ha ha, Sigmund Freud says hello," joked Benjamin.

I would have liked to laugh about this connection as well, but I preferred to hold back. I noticed how embarrassed Lisa was.

But then she too could laugh.

"That went well, didn't it? Not every woman is as lucky as me - and finds the man!"

Lisa has already given me a wonderful grandson, but she is no longer with Max, his father. I guess the longing for the man on the sign was stronger.

Apparently only Tommy, with the narrow face, hair and beard like in the picture, with the dark grey eyes under arched eyebrows and high forehead, corresponded to her unconscious desires. The ideal image that had transported her into adulthood in a hidden corner of her heart, without her knowing it.

She has been with Tommy for three years now.

A grandson of the two is on his way for me.

Maybe I should bring Tommy, our Prince Charming, a bottle of ABC herbal liqueur!

Eleventh tributary

"Rosi", "her husband", "Achim"

Rosi and the books

Rose's parents came as German nationals from a very rural area of south-eastern Europe where, instead of going to school, there was much else to do: look after the cattle on the pasture, bring in the hay, thresh hemp to weave linen cloths in winter. Or to tend the sheep, whose wool was spun on long winter evenings by the young girls, their mothers and grandmothers on the spinning wheel in the big room.

The fact that the young Elisabeth, who later gave birth to her Rosis, could not spell properly did not bother her at all.

Or maybe it did a little. After all, Elisabeth sent her Rosi, when she was ten years old, to a grammar school. She was to learn more in Germany, where Elisabeth was sent as a refugee during the Second World War, than she had learned herself.

Rosi's father Johann had grown up in the same region. In 1928, when he was four years old, his own father had left the family in a wave of emigration to Canada. As a result, Johann's mother was forced to run her small farming business together with her two children. As a small boy, Johann took care of the cows in the fields, while his older sister and mother processed the grain and animal products for market days in the next town and for the daily meals at home.

Outside in the cow pasture Johann felt free, there he could play with other guardian boys, build slingshots and aim for birds, tear out the legs of arachnids, throw cats around by their tails, or even just carve pipes out of willow branches or hang on to his thoughts.

The fact that he was the only son of a single woman and had to help with the harvest during the day in summer was a common excuse for the village teacher, and Johann used it gladly and often. The fact that his mother could no longer pay the school fees beyond the fourth grade did not bother him at all, because he hated having to sit still in school. He much preferred being outside, with the animals.

As a result, Johann could spell even less than his later wife Elisabeth, whom he only met after the war in the West in a place where refugees had gathered. However, he too apparently felt his school shortcomings so often that he told his children: "Learn, child, you should be treated better than me.

Yes, they were both ambitious, the young parents. To offer their children a good, solid home was a primary goal for them, to use the existing school system in Germany for their children a great need.

However, they were basically unaware of what it meant to give their children an education.

They could not understand why the girl was taught to read novels at the grammar school. Novels were untrue stories. Anyone who read a novel had been a particularly despicable person in their village. So now her twelve-year-old Rosi was wasting valuable time reading novels when she was supposed to do her schoolwork and learn something. She spent her time with lie stories! The things that were written in the books, one had heard horrible things! No, her Rosi shouldn't read such things!

So Rosi read her books in secret. She pretended to do homework the whole afternoon so she wouldn't have to help her mother. And under the math notebook, which was opened for camouflage, there was an exciting girl's or adventure novel.

The mother Elisabeth was tied up in her own business, because she had decided to supplement her husband's meagre unskilled labourer's wage with a hot shortage business, for which she provided a room in her house. Thus Rosi was free in the afternoon from constant supervision. And the novel was quickly folded up and disappeared into her school bag as soon as she heard approaching footsteps. So she could wonderfully devour one book after the other.

When all the classmates already had their own ID cards for the public library, Rosi was clear: she didn't even need to ask her mother for the necessary signature. She would never approve of something so disgraceful. What else could she do but imitate her mother's signature on the application form for access to the books of the world?

In the long run, the parents got a little used to the sight of her reading girl, because sometimes it was convenient to see the child picked up when one had other things to do. But that reading was something forbidden, something that was useless, something that spoiled the character, these words of the parents became firmly anchored in the growing girl.

It is not surprising that Rosi, as a grown woman, married a man who detested reading. The dyslexic was and who also considered reading books a waste of time? Who always shook his head disapprovingly when she read a book? No wonder that Rosi, when she had children, stopped spending her precious time reading books?

But nobody could take the fun out of reading. Even if she no longer allowed herself this pleasure out of prevention against the annoying reaction of her husband - the longing for reading remained. And for a reading couch in the living room. Her husband again only shook his head when she talked about it. "Why have a reading couch if no one's going to sit on it to read?" After all, he had bought the two sprawling armchairs. You could sit comfortably in front of the TV. A reading couch!

And when the children grew up, and Rosi had an afternoon off here and there, she started writing too! She had the idea of having her own desk for it. In the middle of the daily business! Because her husband had gone into business for himself. And instead of supporting him in the business, she wanted to spend her valuable time writing books, when everyone knew that there was no money to be made! How simple-minded his wife was!

At least she managed to read a book now and then between business and raising the children. During the spellbound reading she sincerely hoped that her husband would not come home at this moment until she had finished this interesting chapter. She couldn't stand his snide look.

Rosi kept up her marriage for almost twenty years. It didn't break up just because of a lack of reading opportunities.

Only gradually did Rosi, as a divorced woman, dare to buy a book in a bookstore. To cuddle up on the sofa she had bought herself and just sit there for several hours - and read. In the years that followed, she took the time to become aware of her wishes and desires. Yes, her new husband should enjoy reading. He on one couch, she on the other, so they should lie next to each other in the evening, each with his book. Reading from it to the other in particularly good places. In funny places laugh together, in sad ones you can tell why you cried now. Yes, she wanted to pay attention to that, only such men she wanted to get to know on the Internet partner search page. Do you like reading? Yes. So I'll write to you.

Achim was such a man. He enjoyed lying on the couch with his wife and reading. He liked the way she set up her writing place and followed her need to write. He enjoyed reading her stories, encouraged her to write and accompanied her to readings by well-known authors. Rosi now wrote often and she wrote a lot.

But who is surprised that Rosi didn't make any progress shortly before the stories, the novel, were finished? That she then suddenly dropped everything she had written and was quite sure that she had to get a job and earn money now, right now, because you couldn't survive on a book like that. That Rosi filled folder after folder with her notes and later created file after file. And one thing was certain: nobody could use all this! Who cared what she wrote.

So Rosi grew older. Her children were long gone. And began to urge: "Mama, you are becoming incredible. Even when we were little, you talked about writing a book. Now we still don't have one!"

Rosi grabbed it. No, she didn't want to look a failure to her children, what a terrible dowry she thought. She had to make it. At least one book.

But once again she slipped away. She had to earn a living! How was she going to find time to write books. She had to do her work! At most she could only have an exciting book on the screen next to the program opened for camouflage, when the boss was busy.

"I really believed you when you said as a child that you wanted to write a book," her big daughter Lisa said to her one evening when Rosi came to visit her and they were lying on the couch reading. Lisa seemed indifferent.

"Mama, you're becoming unbelievable...", she whispered again deep inside her. "Mom, you're losing your credibility." Louder. "I really believed you when you were a child." That night, a shiver ran down Rose's back. and ended in a violent jolt.

Three of Rose's girlfriends wrote books, and they made a living at it! Wasn't there another old pattern haunting her, Rosi? That stopped her from fulfilling her wishes?

And now finally let's go! She asked her friends to help her. The friends hatched a plan and declared Rosi to be a case of hardship: whenever she did not deliver the agreed number of pages in the given time, she would have to invite her friends to a wellness weekend in a spa hotel. That could get really expensive!

She understood the hint.

And a few months after that visit, Rosi was able to present this booklet to her daughter Lisa.

Twelfth inflow

"me" and "you"

Survival

Our four children have repeatedly informed me about your condition. He has not left me untouched. For a long time, you and I had no contact with each other. You had moved back to your parents' home in Nuremberg. I stayed in Munich. We consciously avoided further arguments about incompatibilities in our attitudes to life. Not for nothing did we choose the devastating path of our divorce mud wrestling fifteen years ago. And rather endured this than another life together.

Of course, our children also live under the threat of your illness. From childhood on, they have experienced as a matter of course that they have been taken to all important and unimportant, sociable and lonely, business and private occasions: Beer, wine, champagne, liquor, plenty of it.

Our house was always admired for the exquisite drinks we had to offer. The wines were from excellent wineries, which you yourself selected in Italy and France, later also in California for your wine wholesale. The champagnes you tasted directly at the wineries in Champagne and had them delivered from there; the cognacs were all aged for many years in oak barrels; with the expert selection of your Calvados varieties or even your Grappe you also earned great recognition among connoisseurs.

And what am I doing here? The first thing I remember in my revue is exactly that: the abundant consumption of alcohol. Camouflaged by quality.

The chic aperitif before the meal, the great beer to quench your first thirst and to let you enjoy the following big menu, the rare vintage champagne. Then the noble white wine for the fish starter, the rich velvety red Burgundy for the main course, followed by the even older, even more mature Bordeaux as an extension. In between, an old Norman Calvados was inserted against the "Trou normand", the Norman hole, - hahaha -, which helps over to the dessert, which was served in the company of a lovely fruity Sauterne or a Gewürztraminer.

The final espresso corretto, "corrected" with a shot of grappa, could not be left standing without a tasting of mature vintage cognacs.

The frequent guests at our house enjoyed this and went back to their lives happily drunk after such an evening. But for us it was almost everyday life.

Eating and drinking, that was your purpose in life and your livelihood. Your delicatessen shops bear witness to that. And I certainly basked in the admiration that we enjoyed.

Not much was missing then, and I would have gone down with you. I left you just in time.

I am glad that I had the energy to take this step. To be even more honest: that my hormones made this step feasible. To get out of our entangled, interwoven, intertwined marital relationship, which was tightly woven by children, money, business, and family ties. I nolens volens first had to fall in love with another man, that the great power of this emotion could give me the strength to assert myself and my needs against my own feelings of obligation, just as I imagined a good wife.

Admittedly, my behaviour was not "right", and even today my sense of honour says so. When my Asian friend Saya showed me a new perspective, I was very grateful and it eased my conscience a lot: The other man, she said, was an angel for you, who redeemed you. The other man, he was then only an interim solution, but for me he was a he-solution from the clutches of co-dependence.

I understand very well, that was a slap in the face for you. Infidelity is unfair. I don't think it's easy for anyone to be abandoned in this way called betrayal. It's always been important to you not to see anyone but yourself on the winners' rostrum. Is that what took so much strength from you? Or was it the superiority of your father, your mother, your home? You aspired to them - and could never reach them. You can never copy another life.

But I'm only guessing here. Conjecture about why you slipped.

Back when our separation seemed inevitable, you quickly took advantage of Giulietta's affection and married the fourteen years younger woman.

Of course she, who was only a few years older than our eldest son, wanted to have children with you. You apologized to me while your son Matteo was away. You didn't have to justify it to me. I was even glad that Giulietta "took over" you. I was relieved that I no longer had to meet your emotional demands, which were very demanding on me.

Outwardly you showed a great certainty: I am doing everything right. The way I do it is good for all people and for the world. This gave you visibly great strength, even charisma. I also admired this attitude in you.

Today I know that you have hidden your great vulnerability underneath. You did not give others the chance (not even me as a wife) to show you love of the heart, because it could teach you weakness. So you have already taken precautions, like a bull, by turning your horns against us. And as if you wanted to reinforce your strength like this animal outwardly, you took on a large girth.

When Chiara was born, your sixth child, many around you shook their heads. So what, one can say, it is his life. But somehow those who knew you had the impression that you were not the rider in your life.

Now he has taken you, the Angel of Death. At 59. You fought back for a long time. Months ago, the doctors had given up on you. Your kidneys weren't working, your liver wasn't working anyway.

Your children wrote on the ribbons on your wreath: "You live on in us." The wreath was covered with flowers.

Yes, I loved you too. In all the ways I could. Coming from my own entanglements. But if I thought then that love meant sacrifice... It didn't work. It took me a long time to get a different perspective on love.

In the past years I took a lot of time for myself and was allowed to reach this realization: Love is altruistic. But it also needs care and nourishment so that it can continue to flourish. The breeding ground for our mutual spiritual fertilization, for a common development, had dried up. Before we knew it, we were helplessly exposed to the lack of water. We had not stocked up, because we preferred to give priority to our work in the shop or to fun moments distracting from difficulties.

"Mama, the way you really think daddy wouldn't have put up with you anyway," our children said when I came to apologize for leaving you.

In the course of the past few years I have been able to live out my attitude to life, which at first was probably limited by old family patterns:

I am I and I belong to no one in this world. I like to open up to other attitudes and only accept what is good for me.

I am I through my life history. It is my perceptions that stand behind my thoughts. My emotions, which have been formed by my experiences, my genes, my family history, my childhood experiences, my siblings and perhaps even my constellation of stars; my environment, my suffering and my preferences, my talents and my weaknesses; my decisions in my life, the right and the wrong ones; developments that have resulted from them, good and problematic ones.

Out of all of this my self and my personal flow of life has emerged.

This includes you and your influence on me in almost twenty years of marriage.

Why do I still think about you so intensively after so many years since our separation? I would not have to, after all it was I who wanted to get away from you.

It's because of the way our children's lives flow. No matter how grown up and independent they may be.

Our lives back then are in them as childhood experiences. And, like it or not, affects the decisions they make today. They were able to experience many things as very beautiful. I wish that everything would have been just beautiful for them. And the ugliness?

What I would like most of all is to be able to contribute with good thoughts of you, so that they do not have to try out the palette of unpleasant life experiences themselves in every detail. But that I can offer them a shortcut with my insights.

For them I would like to be able to say: It was all good. I have provided myself with the joy and fulfilment that was possible for me. Is that selfishness? Is that arrogance? No, it's more like "over-liveliness".

I can, may I live with that.

For me and for mine and yours and our children.

They're wonderful. I thank you for that.

Towards the mouth of the river.

The chestnuts are ripe

Strolling through an avenue of chestnut trees that was recently hit by a storm: who can resist the attraction of the freshly fallen, shiny brown fruit? Who can really go on and not have some chestnuts in their coat pocket at the end of the path?

After a long weekend in my project office, I arrived at the big company with power and energy. I immediately line up my beaming prey in front of the screen. I spontaneously decided to go home early this evening and take a walk in the park to relive the uplifting mood of the morning.

When it is noon, I see my morning wish vanish with all the work; today it will be late again until I can go home.

My eyes fall on my row of chestnuts. Only in some places is the beautiful shine still present. Still beautifully smooth, but in the meantime dull and matt, the brown balls lie before me. And I have already thrown the leftovers from last week from my coat pocket into the wastebasket, because they had not only become dull but also shriveled.

Do it, now the chestnuts on my table are begging me. Go to the park today! Today you can still enjoy the joy that autumnal nature wants to give you. Work will never send you out. The inbox is magical. It's always bringing in new mail. But remain the master of magic yourself!

Which you cannot influence, however: Tomorrow the sun may be covered by clouds and a source of joy may be gone. Therefore: Do it today! Fulfill your wishes and enjoy their realization, now.

Because before you know it, five years could be gone and your shine could be dulled, the chestnuts say to me and draw my attention to their elder sisters in the wastebasket. If you don't pay attention to the limited time you have available, your life could even shrink.

Thirteenth inflow, or

Wide is the estuary delta of the river of life

Our jeans

We sat at the table in the same constellation as we did from tenth to thirteenth grade, but in those days we were still sitting in rows of school desks: Conny next to Marion, Christiane next to me, then Witha - unfortunately, Annette was already missing next to Witha. She had died of lung cancer seven years ago. Amelie took her place that day, 26 years young and Withas daughter.

"Didn't you have any advanced courses?", Amelie asked.

"We were the last school year in Bavaria, where the old class system was still allowed. That was exactly forty years ago now," replied Christiane, a former maths teacher at a Munich grammar school, now in early retirement. Amused, she looked at young Amelie - she wore a piercing on both eyebrows, and her right arm was covered with tattoos up to her fingertips.

"What are you young people trying to say?"

"I don't know, I had them done when I was 16. It's just cool."

"That's how we felt then too," she defended Witha, the mum. "Remember our jeans? That was our symbol of rebellion against the old people."

"Jeans?" Amelie asked. "Regular jeans?"

As if she had stirred up a hornet's nest, the four of us answered all at once:

"Our jeans, they weren't normal."

"They transported our rebellion against our parent's generation."

"I wore my jeans day and night. They were hard, dark blue cotton, real denim. with a huge punch. Double-stitched, remember? None of which could be sewn on at all, so as not to create the normal stitching our parents' cloth trousers had." It was Marion, with a smile on her face.

"The jeans were so tight that we had to lie on our backs on the bed so that we could zip up the zipper and then button up with our stomachs down." She made a torturous movement towards the stomach.

"And you couldn't actually sit down in it, you could only bend slightly, and then the force of gravity helped," laughed Conny, who had landed as a doctor of physics in the research department at BMW.

"That's how they had to be, so tight. Only then were they real jeans that transported what we were looking for: A feeling of freedom."

"Nice feeling of freedom, so tight," Amelie laughed.

"Yes, but to our parents, it was a monstrous thing. They hated it. Trousers that only went up to the waist and were so tight that they exposed the buttocks and thighs in an outrageous way."

"My mother tried to convince me with common sense: it constricts the genitals and impairs fertility," she said. "Then I won't need to take the pill any more," I replied. And my mother became even angrier. 'What, you're taking this pill?!'"

Laughing gloating at the table. And as Amelie looked on uncomprehendingly, Marion, who worked as a freelance pharmaceutical rep, added:

"It had only been a few years since the birth control pill was prescribed by a doctor - and only on health grounds - It was still quite new on the pharmaceutical market and had not yet been sufficiently researched, let alone tested enough times. Nevertheless, it was very much in demand. But the general public still considered it to be the devil's own indecent stuff."

"I hate to think how long we wore our jeans and didn't wash them!" Christiane recalled.

"That's right! How disgusting we were! Back then, I was always messing around with my mom because she always wanted to wash my jeans. With her beautiful new economic miracle washing machine. I hid my jeans from her every night.

"Yes, how disgusting we were!" exclaimed Witha, but full of enthusiasm. "For at least three or four months I wore them every day, everywhere, from morning to evening, preferably at night. And I rubbed my hands so hard on my thighs that they got even baconier.

"Yes, they had to be really greasy."

"When you took them off, they had to stand still like a pillar of salt before they were authentic."

Giggling at the table.

And then again, Marion. She shook.

"How horrible we were then! Those jeans must have stunk everywhere we went, and in the classroom too!"

"That was the smell of your generation," Amelie said, amusing herself.

"After all, we changed our panties every day. It wasn't like our parents.

Jeans was a never-ending topic for us. We thought of more and more. That we had seen in photos how young people, not much older than us, met with other young people in the park for Sunday leisure time - but all neatly dressed in suits, shirts and ties. That we always spoke of our jeans in the plural - in correct English. That also made us different from our parents' generation: they didn't have English lessons at school yet. And further, that today jeans are used in the singular and are also something completely different, namely comfortable, with a high stretch factor. Picked up by fashion designers. Witha, today's lawyer, added that in combination with a chic blouse it could even be worn in a law firm.

Then Conny again: "My father could not even pronounce the word. He always said Tschinns, Tschinnshose.

"He himself always wore only 'cloth trousers', with braces," Conny continued.

"So did my father," Christiane remembered. "Without suspenders, his trousers would never have held. He had put a huge belly forward, which gave his trousers the shape of a right-angled triangle. The right angle at the curve of the spine, at the vertex at 90°. The hypotenuse led from the navel to the heel." She used her finger in the air to follow her oral description.

We giggled, yes, yes, the math lady, but we had the image of our fathers clearly in mind.

"The hypotenuse clearly visible through the precise folds of the temple," she added.

"Oh, my mother was an expert at ironing creases," Conny remarked.

That, we agreed once again, was not possible with jeans! Ironed and with creases at the front and back! That was contrary to all the rules of our lives! We had to talk about that here and now even more.

"And there were people of the older generation who thought they were progressive and bought jeans. "Not in jeans stores, as they were then, you remember, but in..." - and here she raised her eyebrows and her voice for a particularly pejorative emphasis - '... men's and women's outerwear store'. They were carefully creased at the crease and hung with folding trouser hangers. These people always ironed the creases in when the jeans bulged out over legs and knees. Whenever I met people like that, I would run away again as quickly as possible."

Amelie, who had come to our meeting in a pantsuit and had smiled at our enthusiasm time and again, shook her head slightly indignant.

"You must know that we really wanted to set ourselves apart from the generation before us. For us, cloth trousers and creases were the epitome of stuffyness. And for us this was always connected with traditional right-wing ideas. Remnants of the Nazi era, which the 68ers revolted against a few years before us. Because the old Nazis were already sitting on all committees in the young Federal Republic. I also remember the many men with only one leg, with only one arm, shot down. They still very much determined the street scene of my childhood," I said.

"In the end we supported the communist workers' movement with our jeans," Witha thought aloud. "Jeans were originally working class trousers. Who among us was not left-wing-minded in the seventies! We just didn't want to be so right-wing like our parents had been! "Extremely, as youth is, we drifted to the exact opposite camp."

"And what is left of our eventful time?" An uncertain look from me into the circle. Witha knew at least one answer.

"Well, quite a lot! By establishing our jeans in society, we finally introduced the modern leisure society. Perhaps our young people will have to question that again today. Many a young person now longs for the order that we threw over so permanently back then."

"Oh yes, I'd love to go to the park on Sunday to play volleyball with my trousers and creases," laughed Amelie mischievously. "That would be order, real order!"

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