

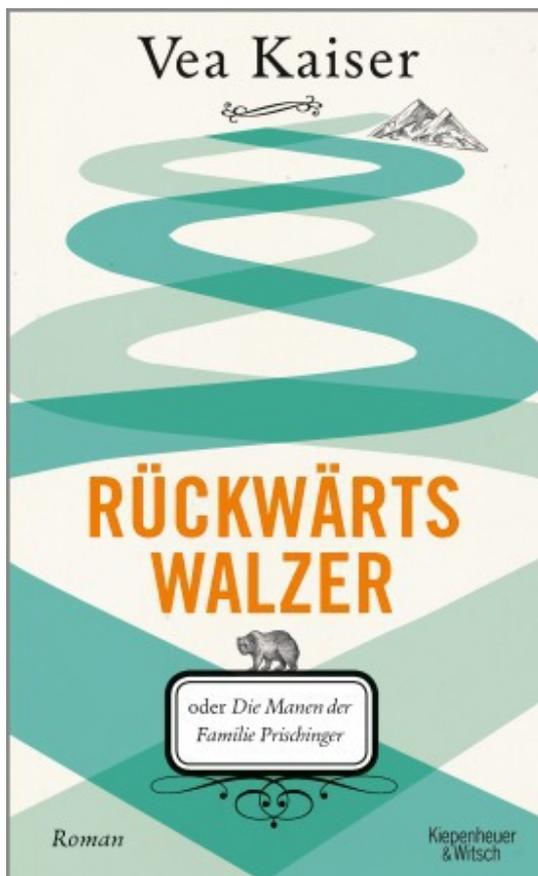
Sample translation (pp. 7-51)

BACKWARDS WALTZ

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1. Unwelcome visits (Vienna)

For the past few weeks, there had been two kinds of knocking in Lorenz Prischinger's life. The good kind and the bad kind.

The good kind of knocking announced things he expected, such as a long-awaited mail delivery or the arrival of his girlfriend Stephi. The bad kind came unannounced and might mean that the financial authorities, the health insurance or – worst case – the bank would turn their threats into action and send the bailiff.

When there was a knock on the door to Lorenz's apartment at 10:23 a.m. on that Friday in March, the mail had already arrived and Stephi was in Heidelberg, where she'd been teaching at the university for the past year. Lorenz dropped his yoghurt container including spoon and froze.

The knocking took on an insistent note.

Lorenz bit the knuckles of his hand. The payments to the financial authorities and the health insurance had become due six weeks ago, but he'd used up all his savings and hadn't earned a penny yet this year. For a long time, he'd collected the letters, reminders and registered mail without caring too much and just waited until they would continue filming the detective series in which he had the lead role and the pilot episode of which had just been aired.

The knocking turned into a hammering.

In a reflex, Lorenz killed the kitchen light even though it wasn't visible from the corridor and snuck into the dressing room. He exchanged his pyjama for jeans and t-shirt and pondered what to do. He could wait until the bailiff gave up, provided he kept quiet, or he could step up to the door and face the music. The hammering got more aggressive. Lorenz had a third option: climb from the balcony to the neighbour's terrace, from there jump onto the wall surrounding the courtyard, and thence escape via the yard of the adjoining house.

'Mr Prischinger, the postman told me you're home!' a voice rang through the apartment door. 'Open up!'

The stranger's voice had an unpleasant, obstinate quality; the accent was from somewhere in the Danube region. Lorenz went out onto the balcony. He'd filled his ample free time in the past few months with reading, watching series on the telly and going to the gym. He'd never been in better shape. Provided he focused properly, it shouldn't be too difficult to climb down along the railing of his balcony and get to the courtyard across the neighbour's terrace. On the other hand, the weather was dismal

and wet. What if he slipped?

‘Mr Prischinger! You’ll have to let me in at some point!’

Lorenz spat across the railing. It was a long way down.

So he went back inside.

Bemoaning his situation, he flitted to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, sprayed on the most expensive perfume he owned and combed his hair. He’d recently learnt from a documentary that most of the passengers of the Titanic had put on their finest cloth before going down.

By now, the stranger outside the door was hammering incessantly.

Lorenz straightened up, suck in tummy, push forward chest, he was a thirty-one-year-old man and a successful actor, he’d find a way out of this.

Thus composed, he opened the door.

‘Finally,’ said a surprisingly small man wearing olive-green horn-rimmed glasses and a dark bomber jacket sporting the logo of a dog sports club. *A heart for Fido* was printed on the chest pocket, and paw prints ran across the shoulders. This was not how Lorenz had pictured a bailiff. And indeed, bailiffs probably didn’t look like this, for the man who now shoved an identification card under his nose was none.

‘Licence fee information service, LFIS in short, Mr Prischinger, do you own a television set?’

‘Say what?’ Lorenz asked, stunned. While he was a student, he’d always feared that the LFIS would one day show up on his doorstep and dish out some punishment because he hadn’t registered his TV. And now, when the LFIS actually turned up, he couldn’t think of a more welcome visitor since he had sold his TV to an acquaintance three days ago for some cash, and because the broadcaster had cut him off anyway.

‘Licence fee information service, Mr Prischinger, do you own a television set? Owning a television set without registering it is a crime in the Austrian Republic.’

‘I do not own a television set.’ Lorenz smiled as if someone had taken about forty kilos off his shoulders.

‘Why are you grinning?’ the LFIS man asked.

‘I am happy to see you,’ Lorenz said.

‘Nobody is happy to see me,’ the LFIS man replied. ‘Mr Prischinger, may I convince myself that you do not own a television set?’

Lorenz had nothing to hide, and so he took the LFIS chap on a tour of his beautiful three-bedroom apartment, proudly showed him how lovingly he had renovated everything last year, offered him a cup of coffee and then saw him out again.

‘Have a good day!’ Lorenz called and watched the dog paws on the back of the jacket traipse up the stairs to the neighbour’s. Then he closed the door and went into

the bathroom.

When he saw the new and extremely expensive bath mats which the postman had delivered shortly before the arrival of the LFIS man, Lorenz felt shame wash over him like a monstrous wave would wash over sleeping sun worshippers baked a golden yellow on the beach.

The bath mats were extraordinarily beautiful, soft to the touch and even ecologically friendly, although normally Lorenz would not give any importance on that category. The geometric design in yellow, white and grey was a superb match for the white tiles on the walls and the black Italian marble floor, which he'd had put in as part of the refurbishment. But he hadn't needed the mats – after all, he'd bought a new pair of bamboo carpets only last years. He hadn't intended to buy more bath mats at all, he'd just browsed that accursed designer platform on the Internet for an elegant solution to storing his blankie. However, during his online research he had found those delightful tea light holders. The site had suggested to combine these with placemats which, notwithstanding the fact that he didn't know how to cook, he immediately knew he simply had to have, together with brass napkin rings, and then of course he needed to have napkins for those rings. And new water glasses. Lorenz could not recall how he had ended up with the bath mats, but in any case, he had also bought a serving table and some decorative picture frames. He had not found a storage solution for his blankie, which is what he had been looking for in the first place.

Lorenz was already painfully familiar with the pitfalls of online shopping. A digital shopping cart never felt as full as the one you push along in a shop, and on top of that everything was cheaper online. Lorenz was aware that being a member of the Prischinger clan he basically had a genetically preconditioned weakness for special offers, and in addition he was really bad at maths so that he was incapable of calculating taxes and delivery fees before he got to the end of the order process. Of course, the final amounts were visible before you confirmed your credit card data, but emptying the shopping cart with which he had already bonded emotionally? No.

'I know, I'm broke,' Lorenz admitted to his bathroom before switching off the light in embarrassment and closing the door behind him.

And so, Lorenz' good mood vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He'd been really lucky this morning. But his luck had a use-by date.

Lorenz had really tried to live more modestly. Ever since he'd received the notice from the tax authorities and the health insurance for payments to be made in arrears, he had made an iron resolution not to buy anything he did not really need. But Lorenz and his resolutions, well, that was a tricky thing. Every year on New Year's Eve he resolved to lose five kilos. Year after year, he gained two kilos. For the past fifteen years

he'd meant to read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. So far, he'd only managed the beginning of the *Iliad* and half of the *Odyssey*.

Lorenz had many strengths. Being consequential was not one of them.

Depressed, he slumped down on the unmade bed in the bedroom. He turned to look at the little box on the bedside table with the photos of Stephi and him, which she'd had framed before she moved to Heidelberg. Stephi and Lorenz after the premiere of *Don Carlos*, Stephi and Lorenz at the Vienna Festival after the closing night of *Intrigue and Love*, Stephi and Lorenz in Zurich, in Kassel and in Bochum, where Lorenz had starred in guest performances over the past years, and more photos of the good old days when Lorenz was still doing theatre and Stephi taught Latin at the university in Vienna. Most of the photos showed Lorenz in costume or at least still in make-up, Stephi had braided her shoulder-length, light brown hair and perhaps applied a bit of lipstick. Lorenz was an artist, he was always floating three metres above everything, and Stephi was his oak, with her roots deep in the ground. She decided where they had dinner and what they ate, whether they would go to the cinema or to the theatre. She booked the travels and organised activities with friends. She admonished him not to spend money he didn't have, cooked soup and bought chocolate when Lorenz had one of those days when the duvet felt so heavy that he could not get up.

Ever since Stephi had gone to Heidelberg, he felt like a helium balloon cut loose.

Lorenz wrapped his arms and legs around the squashed body pillow. He toyed aimlessly with his mobile phone and tried three times to call Stephi even though he knew there was no point. When Stephi was at work, and she was, every day from eight in the morning until seven in the evening, she switched her mobile to silent and the Internet off. During that time, she was lost somewhere between 300 B.C. and 400 A.D. She didn't even have a mailbox which he could have called to at least hear her voice and leave her messages.

The weather was lousy. He had no money. Why then should he get up? Lorenz decided to watch some series and to wait until Stephi was available to Skype with him. He grabbed his laptop and downloaded the new season of a hospital series. While the computer was busy working, Lorenz went to the kitchen and looked for something to eat. He found cornflakes, stock cubes and Stephi's mixed nuts. He was allergic to those.

Back in bed, he closed the curtains. After two episodes, he opened a second browser window and rededicated himself to the quest for a storage solution for his blankie. Just as he was about to make a bid for a limited print of a street artist on an auctioning portal, the computer stopped streaming, and Lorenz regained consciousness.

'I have a problem,' he whispered to himself, closed the laptop, jumped out of bed and decided that this could not go on. He dialled the only number that might help

him in this situation: *Aunt Hedi landline.*

The phone rang three times before Uncle Willi, his aunt's partner, answered.

'Markovic and Prischinger?' Willi shouted at the top of his lungs.

'Hello Uncle Willi. It's Lorenz.'

'Who?' shouted Willi, who considered himself extremely healthy and refused to go see a doctor, let alone have a hearing test.

'LORENZ!' shouted Lorenz.

'Oh, Lorenz! Why don't you say so!'

'Uncle Willi, can I come to dinner tonight?' Lorenz had been getting his meals in Hedi's kitchen ever since his first semester, and he knew of course that his question was purely rhetorical.

'Is the Patriarch orthodox? Of course, you can, my boy, you haven't come to see us for so long. We talk about you every day. Mirl and Wetli are also here,' said Willi.

'The ladies will have kittens!'

And indeed, his aunts were talking excitedly over one another in the background. Lorenz couldn't understand a word, and that calmed him down immediately. How good to know that some things never changed and that in these tempestuous waters that constituted life, there was a safe harbour for him.

'Looking forward,' he said and hung up. The first step to escape his misery had been taken, Lorenz thought contentedly.

When he set out towards South Vienna in the late afternoon, it was raining cats and dogs. Lorenz grabbed his warmest alpaca sweater, protected his neck with a soft scarf that was really Stephi's, and after a moment's hesitation dialled the number of the taxi company. He had actually promised the bath mats to use what cash he had left in an economical manner, but Willi and Hedi's apartment was in the 23rd district, a mix of residential ghetto and industrial zone, right on the border to Lower Austria, whereas Lorenz lived in a prime location in the centre, close to Mariahilfer Straße, Vienna's famous shopping mile, right in the hip cultural centre of the 7th district.

'Twenty-third, please,' he said as he got into the back of a black Mercedes.

'Dionys-Schönecker-Gasse number eight.'

'All the way to the 23rd, from here?' asked the taxi driver, a middle-aged Chechen or Bosnian with a reddish-blond, curly beard. 'Is really expensive! Whole city! Subway is faster!'

'It's your gain – you should be happy!'

The taxi driver shrugged and switched on the indicator.

'But not debit card,' he said.

‘Of course not,’ Lorenz replied. His debit cards had been cancelled anyway.

Hedi, Wetti and Mirl were his father’s younger sisters. While his father had remained in Lower Austria, close to the village where they’d grown up, the three sisters had moved to Vienna in the Seventies and had been inseparable ever since. Their headquarters was in Hedi’s kitchen, although Wetti and Mirl had their own apartments. Lorenz found the 23rd depressing. The watchful eyes behind lace curtains reminded him of the permanent surveillance by the neighbours in his home village, out in the countryside. He felt pity for the low, old farmhouses from the days when Liesing was still a suburb and not a district of Vienna, left to decay. The bare industrial sites and shopping malls created a sad atmosphere. What hurt him most was the discrepancy of what Liesing was in comparison to what it could have been. Before the war, this was where the Rosenhügel Studios had been, once the world’s most eminent film studios. If Austria hadn’t joined Nazi Germany, the big blockbusters of today might not be coming from Hollywood but from the 23rd district. Perhaps the *Oscars* would not be called *Oscars* but *Gerhards* or *Herberts*, Lorenz thought, but at least they’d be within his geographical reach.

‘Thirty-seven euros,’ the taxi driver said as he stopped in front of the violet apartment block in the Dionys-Schönecker-Gasse.

‘Forty,’

‘Receipt?’

‘No thanks.’

‘You can set it off against your taxes!’

‘You are an exceptionally smart taxi driver, aren’t you?’

‘I was an accountant in Bosnia,’ the man said.

‘And I have reached my destination,’ Lorenz replied, annoyed, and slammed the car door shut behind him.

He hurried down the curved path to the entrance of the building, which was owned by a collective. Underneath the pergola he nearly collided with an older, broad-shouldered gentleman who was clutching a plastic bag and had a bunch roses wrapped in cellophane jammed under his left arm. The man stared indecisively at the doorbell panel.

‘Who are you looking for?’ Lorenz asked helpfully.

‘Oh, but – you are Lorenz Prischinger, aren’t you?’ the man said, and just as Lorenz was about to give him one of the autograph cards he always had in his jacket pocket – just in case – he saw the logo on the plastic bag: *Butcher Ferdinand*. It wasn’t that he’d been recognised but that he had failed to recognise Mr Ferdinand, who had a butcher’s shop on the other side of the street. Lorenz had been sent there countless

times by his aunts to pick up an order. But he had never seen Mr Ferdinand dressed like today: instead of the usual white clothes with plastic apron, he wore an old-fashioned suit and smelled like someone had emptied a bucket of aftershave over him.

‘Very smart suit! How are you?’

Mr Ferdinand looked around.

‘I am on my way to your aunt,’ he said.

‘Me too,’ Lorenz said, surprised.

‘Not Ms Heidemarie, but Ms Maria Josefa,’ Mr Ferdinand whispered nervously. Lorenz was puzzled. What did Mr Ferdinand want from Mirl? ‘I wanted to bring Ms Maria Josefa some veal cutlets, she likes those a lot,’ Mr Ferdinand said and lifted the bag. There were at least two kilos of meat in there. The blood pooling at the bottom of the bag was showing through the white plastic.

‘Well, then come on in with me,’ Lorenz said and rang the bell. Mr Ferdinand kept a safety distance of two metres behind him as they climbed up to the first floor, where the door to Hedi’s apartment was already wide open. Lorenz crossed the threshold and inhaled the delicious aroma emanating from the kitchen: a mix of caraway, garlic and what Lorenz thought corn starch would smell like if corn starch had a smell.

‘Jeeze Lorenz!’ Hedi clapped her hands and rushed towards him. ‘Why are you just standing there like a mushroom? Come on in!’

‘I’ve brought a visitor,’ Lorenz said while Hedi pulled him down so she could embrace him. She was a lot smaller than Lorenz, only five foot two, and so she had to look past his right upper arm in order to see the second guest.

‘Mirl, it’s Mr Ferdinand!’ she shouted loudly before releasing Lorenz from her embrace and greeting the unexpected guest. ‘Welcome, Mr Ferdinand.’

Lorenz watched the butcher perform a mock kiss on her hand. Lorenz himself had learned how to perform the perfect mock kiss on the hand only a few years ago, thanks to the instructions of a venerable repertoire actor. The second Mirl came around the corner, Mr Ferdinand let go of Hedi’s hand and his entire face lit up. Just like one of the sausages dangling from a hook above his sales display and lit by the uprights from the ceiling, Lorenz thought. He would have liked to observe this scene for longer but Hedi dragged him to the kitchen. As they passed, Mirl pinched his cheek and then stepped outside the door, closing it behind herself and Mr Ferdinand.

‘It’s been too long since we’ve seen you here, my boy,’ said Hedi.

‘What is Mr Ferdinand doing here?’ Lorenz asked.

‘Cheers, Lorenz, is it raining this hard in the city as well?’ asked Wetti and kissed him on the cheeks, one left, one right, as they entered the kitchen. Her carrot-coloured

hair was even more of a mess today than usual.

‘Yes,’ Lorenz replied, ‘but the wind is not as strong.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Wetti and did what she did best: she stared into space as if she could see a map of Vienna unfolding in thin air. ‘Us here in the southern part of Liesing are in a spot where the low plain of the Vienna Basin and the Pannonian Steppe meet. And because they cut down all the trees in southern Vienna during the industrialisation, the wind can attack without meeting any obstacle.’

According to his father’s stories, even as a little girl Wetti, who used to work in the Museum of Natural History as a cleaning woman, had found natural phenomena more interesting than human ones. Lorenz, on the other hand, was far more interested in what was going on outside the door.

‘Does Mr Ferdinand come often to see Mirl?’ he asked as he squeezed himself into his regular seat on the kitchen bench, looking towards the window.

‘Did you bring my salad bowl?’ Hedi asked in reply, and that was the end of that topic. Hedi’s partner Willi had dubbed Hedi’s kitchen *Tupper Cemetery* because every time Wetti and Mirl came to visit, they brought Tupperware filled with food or ingredients but never took the bowls back home. Every time Lorenz visited, he would be given a container of ‘provisions for later’, and although there was enough Tupperware in this kitchen to store food for the coming of Armageddon, Hedi was really fastidious about Lorenz bringing all the containers back next time he visited. Last autumn, in a moment of neglect, he had thrown out a resealable salad bowl. He had abused it as a container for crisps, when a few of his colleagues from the theatre had come round after rehearsals for some wine and some joints, until the set designer had felt so sick that she had barfed all over the crisps. Lorenz had disposed of the bowl in a black bin bag – and hadn’t confessed this to his aunt, for in his aunt’s world, nothing was ever thrown away. Lorenz was more than familiar with this attitude, as his father also hoarded anything that might potentially still be of use, which was why it was impossible to park a car in Lorenz’s parents’ garage.

‘I am so sorry, I forgot the bowl again. Next time, I promise!’ Lorenz lied, as he had last time, and resolved to surf the net for precisely such a bowl in the evening.

Mirl entered the kitchen with the bag of veal cutlets, which she placed into the sink in order to transfer the meat into a Tupperware bowl.

‘Where are the flowers?’ asked Lorenz.

‘What flowers?’ Mirl said and turned her attention to the refrigerator. Ever since Lorenz could remember, Hedi’s fridge had been filled to a degree that made one think she had to cook for the entire residence.

‘The flowers Mr Ferdinand had under his arm.’

‘What do I know.’ Mirl actually managed to fit the veal cutlets into the refrigerator even though it was already full to the brim.

‘Aunt Mirl, I’m lonely. Stephi is in Heidelberg. Let me share some of your good luck.’

Mirl looked at him as if he had asked permission to cut off one of her toes with rusty secateurs.

‘Don’t worry, Lorenz, you’ll get plenty of veal. No one will deprive you of food.’

Before Lorenz could reply, Mirl shouted, ‘Jeeze, the soup is boiling over!’, quickly fumbled with the knobs of the electric stove, shifted saucepans around and grabbed a piece of kitchen roll.

‘For heaven’s sake, Aunt Mirl, you’ll get burnt,’ Lorenz said, jumped up and just managed to grab Mirl’s hand before she started to scrape off the burnt bits from the hot stove with her gel-manicured fingernail. In contrast to Wetti, who always looked a mess, and Hedi, who was very practical, Mirl attached great importance to her appearance. No matter what the occasion, she always dressed exquisitely, wore jewellery and had her hair piled up in complicated structures. Even though she was in her late sixties, Lorenz had never seen even a strand of white hair on her. Wetti’s orange mop showed bits of grey here and there, and Hedi only took colouring her hair seriously when she had lots of time and wasn’t busy playing Mother Theresa for any of her elderly neighbours – regardless of whether these wanted her help or not. Mirl, on the other hand, had regular appointments at the beautician’s on the Wiedner Hauptstraße, where week after week she underwent treatment for her hands, feet, face, bust and whatever else one could undergo treatment for. But actually, that was probably a necessary countermeasure, Lorenz thought as his aunt scraped the burnt bits off the stove with a scraper wrapped in an oven cloth, given that Mirl was obsessed with cleaning and using toxic detergents, in particular those that were forbidden in the EU. Ever since he’d witnessed her distribute room spray, disinfectant and an indefinable white powder in the tram, he no longer came out here to the 23rd district together with her. He preferred the germs of the local public transport by far to the chemistry set in Mirl’s crocodile-skin handbag.

‘Come here, my boy!’ Uncle Willi said, squeezing past the aunts to the kitchen bench in order to sit down next to Lorenz and give him a tight hug. Willi smelled like fresh from the shower; he’d probably just done sports.

Hedi handed them two cans of beer across the table.

‘Well, Lorenz, what’s new?’ Willi asked while the aunts discussed whether to add chives to the soup, open a jar of red beet, or chop up a cucumber.

‘Not much,’ Lorenz said truthfully.

‘Are you in a play again?’

‘Not for the time being.’

‘Are you making a movie?’

‘Nothing planned at the moment.’

Willi frowned. He’d been living in Austria for forty years now; all that was left of his accent was the trace of a sharp ‘r’, and yet he remained a Yugoslav pessimist who didn’t trust anything that hadn’t been sanctioned by Comrade Tito.

Willi took a sip of his beer.

‘So how are you paying your bills?’ he asked.

Lorenz also took a sip of beer and folded his hands in exactly the same way as Willi. People who wanted something from others had a tendency to imitate those; he had learnt that in acting school.

‘Since you’re bringing that up,’ he began and then, after hesitating briefly, continued: ‘Could you maybe help me out? Just temporarily? With a couple thousand, to get me over the next few months?’

‘A couple thousand?’ Willi said, knotting his bushy eyebrows. ‘Hedi and I have misspent our savings in Nina’s online shop. All I have left are ten thousand euros in the account for my funeral, and I can’t give you those. You know that I want to be buried in Montenegro, in the place I was born.’

Hedi hit him on the head with the kitchen spatula.

‘Don’t say misspent!’ she said indignantly. ‘That’s our daughter you’re talking about!’

‘Her vegan online shop is still nonsense,’ Willi replied.

Lorenz was about to add one of his usual jibes about Cousin Nina’s vegan madness but reconsidered upon thinking of his own financial misery and tried to catch his second aunt’s eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ Mirl replied quickly and took a sip from her cup, a precious piece of Lily Porcelain. ‘I can’t help you either.’

Lorenz knew better than to even try asking Wetli, who was lost in contemplation of a sprouting onion. Unlike blossoms or leaves, Wetli had never considered bank notes worthy of collecting.

‘Never mind,’ said Lorenz, mustering all his acting skills in order not to let his disappointment show.

‘Soup!’ Hedi said and heaved the saucepan onto the table. Mirl took over the ladle, and Wetli handed her the plates.

‘We’ll start shooting the series soon anyway,’ Lorenz said with exaggerated cheer.

‘The main course is pork loin wrapped in bacon and a dried-plum-and-garlic sauce,’ Hedi said.

‘What series?’ Willi asked.

‘Mr Ferdinand gave us a particularly nice batch of pork loin yesterday, and that at forty per cent discount, among neighbours!’ Mirl said.

‘The series where they showed the pilot only last week! You know, where I play the misunderstood genius brother of the female detective, who secretly helps her solve her cases while everyone thinks he is crazy.’

‘In Old High German, the word for *loin* is kidney, and that is why we call the area around the kidney loins,’ Wetti said and added: ‘In Germany they call this part of the pig kidney roast. I think pork loins sounds much more appetizing than kidney roast.’

Willi pushed aside his soup plate and took a pile of free newspapers from the windowsill. He did sport almost every day, tried every athletic trend, whether Bikram Yoga or Float Fitness; from May to September, he regularly went swimming in the outdoor pool and for the rest of the year in the indoor one; and afterwards he dedicated his time to the crossword and other puzzles in the free newspapers in order to stay fit mentally as well as physically. Willi handed Lorenz the open paper and pointed out an article.

‘Isn’t that your series?’ he asked.

Upon reading the headline, Lorenz spat the soup back onto his plate.

‘Don’t you like the soup?’ Hedi asked while Mirl and Wetti made a point of slurping loudly. ‘There’s even some chicken feet in there, just how you like it best!’

Lorenz heard his aunt’s voice. But her words didn’t register until Mirl fished a foot from the saucepan with her fork and dangled it in Lorenz’s field of vision.

‘Here, you can suck off the skin.’

‘Go away and leave the poor boy alone with that silly soup!’ Willi said, his voice stricter and louder than usual.

‘Lorenz, is everything alright?’²

Lorenz leaned back and shook his head. ‘No,’ he mumbled. ‘The series will continue without me.’

‘That was already in the paper last week,’ Wetti said, and Mirl fished more chicken feet from the soup.

‘Ferdinand gave us a fifty per cent discount on the chicken feet,’ she said.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Lorenz whispered in disbelief.

‘We thought you knew,’ Willi said. ‘Surely the station boss or the producer or one of those people talked to you about this.’

Lorenz shook his head in disbelief. Nobody had called him. Nobody had informed

him that his role had been cancelled because after the pilot was aired, there had been irate audience reactions, saying it was sexist that a female detective needed a man to solve her cases. He had to read about it in a free newspaper! Nobody had apologised for having raised false hopes and then leaving him in shambles. He had been counting on the money. With rising panic, he recalled the moment in the morning when he thought the bailiff was outside his door. How should he pay his bills? His parents had invested several ten thousand euros in his career over the last few years, they had even paid the expensive private acting school, and now they were broke themselves. And he didn't want to ask Stephi, yet again.

'Aunt Mirl,' he whispered, 'are you sure that you can't lend me any money? Didn't you get a really good settlement after the divorce from Uncle Gottfried?' Lorenz was annoyed that he was forced to ask his old aunt, but the rent would be due soon.

'No, Lorenz, I really have no money I can lend you,' said Mirl and stared into her teacup.

'Never mind,' Lorenz said, more to reassure himself. 'Stephi is earning enough, I'm sure she'll help me out again.'

Willi looked at him as if he had suggested breaking into the apartment of Ms Bruckner, the unfriendly neighbour who took her cat for walks on a leash. Within the collective residence rumour had it that Ms Bruckner had stashed away a quarter million underneath her mattress, for fear of foreigners robbing the bank.

'Boy, you can't ask your girl-friend for money.'

'Why not? Stephi and I love each other!'

'Go find a job instead. I think there are summer jobs at the swimming pool, helping at the entrance. Do you want me to ask tomorrow?'

'You want me to work at the swimming pool?' Lorenz asked, scandalised.

'Are you going to eat your soup, or should I clear your plate?' Hedi asked.

'Uncle Willi, I am an actor. I can't work at the swimming pool!'

'Why not?' Willi asked.

'Main course?' Hedi asked.

'What if I suddenly receive an offer?' Lorenz said. 'When you get a casting call, you often have to react within the next two hours.'

'Yes, but what if you don't receive any offers? If there's no call by Mr Casting?' Willi replied.

'Stop being such a Yugo pessimist!'

'Stop being such an Austro dreamer!'

'Be quiet, you two! At my kitchen table, people don't argue, they eat,' Hedi said and placed a serving plate with meat and a saucepan with potato dumplings in the

middle of the table. A delicious aroma started spreading.

‘Do you think I am a bad actor?’ Lorenz asked.

‘This is not about whether you are good or bad. It’s just that you are not successful. Otherwise you wouldn’t have to beg for money from your family.’

‘Do you want me to leave?’ Lorenz asked, miffed.

‘No, I just want you to take an example from Tito. He was as successful as he was because he dropped those ventures that didn’t work. Tito never got on the wrong track. It is obvious that acting isn’t working for you, so do what Tito did: try something else.’

‘Uncle Willi, I am an artist, not a politician! Every good artist has to go through hard times every now and then. That is part of what it means to be a good artist!’ Lorenz was just about to bite into a dumpling when Uncle Willi slammed his fist on the table.

‘Lorenz, the world is not what your parents told you,’ he said just a little too loudly. ‘You are thirty-one and broke. You should look for a proper profession and for a girlfriend who lives in Vienna, not in Heidenheim.’

‘Stephi lives in Heidelberg, and long-distance relationships are great! And in any case, only a few days ago Dad told me on the phone that he was sure I’d be cast sometime soon. My parents are proud that I am an actor.’

Hedi sighed. Wetti whistled through her teeth. Mirl pursed her lips.

‘Lorenz, aren’t you finally old enough to understand that your parents will always be proud of you, no matter what you do?’ said Willi.

‘What are you implying?’ Lorenz asked.

‘Do you remember when you got your first printer?’ Willi asked and continued before Lorenz had a chance to reply. ‘The only reason your father bought the printer was to print certificates for you. *Certificate for the Best Cyclist, Certificate for the Best High Diver, Certificate for the Best Spaghetti Eater*. Do you really believe you always were the Best High Diver, the Best Spaghetti Eater, the Best Whatever-Next?’

‘Leave Dad out of it!’ Lorenz was beginning to get angry.

‘Please drop it,’ Hedi interrupted. ‘This isn’t getting you anywhere.’

‘Why not? You say yourself that Sepp is spoiling the boy too much.’

Hedi pushed her hair behind her ears, got up from the table, reached for a kitchen towel and started drying off the rinsed ladle.

‘At least I am talking to my parents,’ Lorenz said and got up. ‘Your own daughter has been avoiding you for years. She didn’t even invite you to her wedding!’

Stunned, Willi stared at an undefined spot on the wall. Mirl and Wetti looked at him, distressed, Hedi made a lot of noise with the plates and cutlery, and Lorenz stormed off to the toilet.

He locked the door, folded down the lid covered in pink towelling, sat down and

pulled out his mobile phone. Stephi didn't pick up. Lorenz bit his lips. Willi and Hedi's daughter Nina was the only natural redhead in the family and had been difficult from childhood on. For a few years now she'd been a militant vegan and called people with a normal diet that followed the WHO guidelines *murderers*; if, like the Prischingers, you ate meat almost every day, you were a *serial killer* in her eyes. That's probably why she'd been in such a hurry to marry her pale, almost translucent vegan boyfriend Rainer, just so she could shed the name Prischinger. Lorenz knew only too well how much it had pained Willi not to be allowed to lead his only daughter to the altar. And he was ashamed that he had used the conflict with Nina just so he would have something to reply to Willi.

Again and again Lorenz dialled Stephi's number, and with every failed call his shame gave way to anger. It was Friday evening. What on earth was there in Heidelberg that was more important than a desperate partner in Vienna who was facing ruin?

On the seventh call, Stephi's voice responded.

'Lorenz?'

'Oh Stephi, finally.'

'What happened? Everything okay? Are you okay?'

'No, nothing's okay.'

'What's going on?'

'Stephi, they're making the series without me, and I've had an argument with Uncle Willi!'

Lorenz waited for Stephi to reassure him that all would be well, that she would get on the night train right away, or the first flight in the morning, to spend the weekend with him.

'And that's why you call me?'

'I don't know how to pay next month's rent, and Uncle Willi said I should look for a job. He implied that I am a bad actor!'

Stephi was silent. Surely, she was thinking about how to calm him down. Then she said:

'Lorenz, sometimes you are the most selfish person on this planet! You know that today we had the guest lecture by Glenn W. Most, which I have spent months preparing for. I was talking to him and he was just about to offer me first-name basis when my mobile started ringing like mad. Most is the God of classical philology! Do you understand how important this connection is for me?'

Lorenz flinched. He had completely forgotten that today was the day of this strange lecture. Ever since she accepted the job, she had been raving about how in Heidelberg she would finally be able to arrange for a visit from Glenn W. Most,

something the university in Vienna had never supported. Lorenz was about to apologise to Stephi, but then he bit his tongue.

‘Stephi, it’s just that I’m not doing very well. Surely you have five minutes for your partner?’

‘Precisely. YOU are not doing very well. It’s always only about YOU!’

‘Which of us is so selfish that she won’t spare five minutes for the other?’

And then Stephi did something Lorenz had not expected: she just hung up. Lorenz chucked the mobile onto the bathroom floor. He didn’t even manage to smash his phone properly because in an analogy to the toilet cover, soft, green, fluffy terry cloth protected the tiles. Life was mean and unfair.

2. The Prischinger Flea Circus (1953)

At the beginning of the 1950s, Sepp Prischinger was twelve years old and already fully aware that life was mean and unfair. His sisters Mirl and Wetti as well as the twins Hedi and Nenerl knew it too. However, contrary to his siblings, Sepp had no hopes that this would ever improve.

Sepp knelt on the corner bench and peered across the cornfields through the narrow kitchen window. He had already looked in all the nooks in the pigsty, the hen pen, the house where the must was pressed, and the vegetable garden; he'd run up the hill all the way to the forest; he'd observed the road through binoculars, but no matter where he looked, the twins were not to be found.

Behind him, Mother was stoking the fire on the stove. In a moment, she would put a saucepan with water from the well on it, fill it with potatoes and tell Sepp to fetch his siblings for supper. And then he'd have a big problem. Because he had lost the twins.

After morning mass, his mother had told him to watch his siblings because she had to do laundry and Mirl had to help her. Sepp had to do homework. He didn't like doing that, especially not on the first warm day of early summer, but he was a conscientious boy. The teacher, who had returned from the war with one leg and one eye missing, gave him additional homework every day – only him, none of the other pupils in the class made up of six- to fourteen-year-old children. If Sepp managed to solve all the tasks, he would be able to go to grammar school soon, and if he finished that, he would one day earn enough money to be able to support a family without worrying. Sepp was the oldest of the Prischinger kids. He could still recall the days of deprivation. The year 1946 had been particularly dry, the winter inhumanly cold and once all the storage that Mother had so wisely accumulated had been stolen and taken to the city, there was nothing left to eat even out here in the country. For hours, Mother had told him and his siblings about the dishes for which the recipes were collected in the family's cookbook, written at a time when the high and mighty still came to their inn to eat. Sepp had chewed on bark and imagined he was eating those delicacies Mother promised to make for them once things got better again.

It had never really got much better. Sepp had retained a chronic stomach problem from the famine. Whenever he ate too little, or the wrong things, there were stinging pains in his stomach that seemed to admonish him to hurry and finish school so he could earn enough money for enough food.

That afternoon, Sepp had constructed a desk for himself in the farmyard, using

wood from an old fence and bricks, with a cutting board as table top, so that he could do his homework while the seven-year-old twins were playing. Mirl was a year younger than he and all she was thinking of was to marry an important man from the city one day. She did her homework diligently and without protesting because she hoped this would make some rich prince fall in love with her and he would sweep her away to a castle with lots of servants. Sepp thought that that was highly improbable and illogical but knew better than to point this out to her. The other three siblings were exhausting enough as it was.

While Sepp was sweating over his homework, Mirl applied curd soap to the stubborn stains on her dress, and nine-year-old Wetli crawled through the grass to observe heaven knew what. When Wetli was focused on some animal or other, she would not move an inch for hours on end. It was generally assumed that she was feeble-minded, but Sepp wasn't so sure about that. The teacher said her brain was underdeveloped, said she had too much air in her brain because she'd been born during the war and Mother had not produced enough milk for her. However, Sepp suspected that Wetli's poor grades resulted from the fact that she was far more interested in the birds nesting in the big cherry tree next to the classroom window than in letters and numbers. Wetli knew where which hare or marten was burrowing, where which mushroom, shrub or herb was growing. If her brain was too small, how could there be space for all that knowledge?

At his desk in the yard, Sepp drafted an essay about Jesus expelling the merchants from the temple, and the twins were playing marbles. Sepp kept calling out to Hedi to make sure Nenerl didn't stick any up his nose. But when he started to work on his fractions, they were suspiciously quiet, and as he finished the last task and looked up, they were gone. He immediately dropped everything and went to look for them, but he could not find them anywhere.

His last hope had been to find them in the corn field; Nenerl, who always dreamt of being a circus director one day, would often chase mice there which he would then lock in a cage in the cow stable and try to train them. No trace of the twins. Sepp had a suspicion that they might be where the children were not allowed to go, under any circumstances: in that part of the square farm building that had, until the end of the war, been an inn and that was now occupied by the Russkis.

What should he say to Mother?

Perhaps he should simply confess that the twins had scarpered. It wasn't his fault, after all. They had snuck away with evil intent! The twins were old enough to look after themselves. At least Hedi was. Nenerl would never be.

Yes, life was unfair.

Other children received rewards for doing their homework. During the final years of the war, the Oberhuber family from Vienna had lived in the inn, because out here in the country one was safe from the bombs. The family had three sons: Gottfried, Bertram and little Adolf, who was only ever called Dolfi since the war had ended. While Sepp had to help his mother around the clock, the boys from Vienna didn't have to lift a finger but only played in the yard all day long. They didn't even get a beating when they came in dirty or with torn trousers. And when they did their homework, Mrs Oberhuber did not only help them but even rewarded them. And when there was nothing left, she could have given as a reward, she had taken a little notebook and written down all the rewards she would give her sons once times would get better.

His own mother had never helped Sepp, let alone rewarded him. If he now confessed that he had lost the twins because he was concentrating on his homework, she would slap him. If he was lucky. If he was unlucky, there would be no ham for him tonight. If he was very unlucky, no supper at all.

Sepp was convinced that things would be easier for him if his father had returned from the war. Then the twins would do as their father said rather than run rings around him, their brother. Father would protect him; he would ensure that he could go to a grammar school and get enough sleep so he would be able to pay proper attention at school. Moreover, Father would chase the Russians from the farm, who ate all their food and forced their mother to clean up after them. But Sepp knew: life was unfair.

Father would never return.

The Russians would continue to fill their fat bellies, while the children were licking potatoes.

Sepp would never be rewarded for being a hard-studying boy. He couldn't wait until he was finally able to leave this inn in order to earn money by honest labour. He did not want any special treatment, just to be paid for his work.

The water bubbled on the stove as if it wanted to chase the potatoes from the saucepan.

'Sepp, be a good boy, go and get your siblings,' Mother said lovingly, and Sepp's intention to tell the truth instantly disappeared into thin air. Perhaps he would be lucky for a change, he thought as he ran through the chamber where his grandparents used to live and which they now all shared for sleeping, ever since the Russians had appropriated the living quarters of the inn, and then continued through the laundry room into the yard.

The yard consisted of an area of hard soil at the northern side of the square farm

building; beyond this, hills planted with flax climbed upwards to the woods. When Grandmother had still been alive, she had often told stories about how the farmhands and maids had been busy out here, doing the laundry, plucking chickens, peeling whole sacks of potatoes, carrying out maintenance works on the machines and in general whatever needed be done in and around the large farm inn. Instead of telling them goodnight stories, Grandmother had given detailed accounts of the inn's days of glory. Such as how, during the Emperor's reign, all kinds of soldiers had spent the night here. Which merchants and travelling salesmen, even musicians and ministry representatives had stopped over on their journeys between Bohemia and the Danube region. Textile merchants who had been to the world-famous imperial-royal spinning works, weaving mills, and dye works in Bohemia, Moravia and the *Waldviertel* in northern Austria, had gifted Grandmother with the most exquisite pieces of cloth as a sign of their respect.

All that was left of those good old days were the remnants of the machines, sticking up from the ground in the back yard like filleted skeletons. Once the farmhands had used them to till the large fields of mixed agriculture. The good metal and the most valuable equipment had been taken by Father's comrades a long time ago, despite Father's embittered struggle to stop them, at which point one of them had slammed a rifle butt in his face. The image of a hunched over, bloodied man was one of the last memories Sepp had of his father. The comrades had sworn to bring everything back after the war, but that had been a lie. They hadn't even managed to bring themselves back from the war. Whatever was left here was worn or broken. The hay loft was mouldy, the wine press eaten by rust, and the remains of a plough sank deeper into the ground with every month as if the earth wanted to take revenge for all the wounds it had suffered by eventually swallowing the plough.

In midst this graveyard of better times, Wetti squatted and studied the bottom of a preserving jar.

'What are you doing?' Sepp asked and knelt down next to her. Wetti's braids were so long that they reached the ground; she was the only one of the children who refused to let Mother cut her hair.

'Isn't it gorgeous?' Wetti asked and held the preserving jar out to Sepp, so close that he flinched back.

'Go away, Wetti, leave the beetle alone!'

Sepp never knew whether what one said to Wetti actually ever reached her. Lost in thought, she stared at the jar; the large stag beetle inside was furiously knocking its horns against the glass.

'This species is called stag beetle, because in some male specimen the antlers are larger than the rest of the body. That must be a drag, having such large antlers. Because

of that, they can neither bite nor chew, only suck and lick plant juices. The males with the biggest antlers only survive if they have females that enlarge the holes in the bark of oak trees for them so they can lick the sap. They have those antlers so they can fight each other for the females. But in fact, the females can do far more damage with their chewing implements than the males with their antlers.’ Wetti was still fascinated by the preserving jar.

‘Wetti, do you know where Nenerl and Hedi are? Mother is getting supper ready. If I don’t find them, I’m in big trouble,’ Sepp said.

Wetti got up. She often moved as if she was sleepwalking; she seemed to live more in her dreams and thoughts than in the here and now. Actually, it was a miracle, Sepp thought, that at night Wetti lay on her stomach like a rock. Mirl was always kicking about, Nenerl talked, and when the full moon shone, Hedi was running rings around the two mattresses on the floor which the five of them shared by lying across the width.

‘The Lord got a lot of things wrong,’ she said with a sigh, unscrewed the lid of the jar and let the bug escape to freedom. ‘If the Lord had been a bit smarter, he would have used the material for forming the antlers to make more females. Then the males would not have to fight for the females, and everyone could take care of their own food.’

Sepp was getting impatient.

‘Wetti, the twins!’

‘Sepp, the stage beetles!’

Sepp bit his tongue.

‘Look, Wetti. If everyone takes care of their own food, then the males and the females don’t need each other anymore. And then they don’t make little stag beetles any more. So, the Lord was very smart and did everything right.’

‘No. The Lord didn’t consider that males and females can also have children without being dependent on each other. The females can raise their children without the males. Just look at Mother. She has no male either. I believe that actually females are better able to take care of the children when there is no interference by the male. Look at the stag beetle: the female has to provide food for him so he can fight with other males. That’s no different with humans. The women have to cook for the men so that then they can kill each other.’

Sepp was getting angry.

‘We’d be much better off if Father were here.’

Wetti looked at him with big eyes.

‘And why do you think that would be the case?’

‘Because he would chase off the Russkis.’

Wetti shook her head.

‘Mirl said the scar on your neck is from Father. He beat you with his belt because you spat out food.’

Sepp reached for his neck with his hand and remained silent.

‘I think you want the Russkis to leave rather than Father to come back. Because, once the Russkis are gone, Mother doesn’t have to cook and clean and iron for the soldiers any more but can take care of us. Then you can do your homework while Mother looks after Nenerl. The Russkis are males too. And they are here because the German males have asked them to go to war with them. And that proves that the Lord has made a right mess with regard to males and females.’

‘You’re insane!’ Sepp shouted.

At that moment, Mirl emerged from the passageway leading to the laundry room, dragging the twins behind her by their collars.

‘SweetLordGraciousGodThankYou,’ Sepp whispered gratefully.

‘Sepp, this is all your fault,’ Mirl scolded him. ‘The little ones were with the Russians, and now look at this!’

Mirl was a serious-minded girl with clear plans for her future, able to goose-step with more precision than the soldiers next door. The twins, a head smaller than their big sister, had trouble keeping up. Hedi cast her eyes down guiltily. Nenerl held his head high and grinned like a freshly lacquered rocking horse. His ear was bleeding.

Sepp knelt down in front of him and examined head, neck and face.

‘Nenerl, for Heaven’s sake! You are so stupid. Mother will kill me,’ he said, wiping off the half-dried blood with his handkerchief. There was a wound in Nenerl’s ear, small but impossible to miss.

Sepp reached back and slapped Hedi in the face.

‘I told you you must stay with me!’

Hedi started to cry, and suddenly Nenerl ducked his head between his shoulders and butted Sepp in the stomach like a goat. The older brother fell to the ground, retching for air.

‘Leave her alone!’ Nenerl shouted and started kicking Sepp until Mirl and Wetti managed to get in between and pull him off. Even Hedi helped.

‘Nenerl, calm down,’ she pleaded, ‘it doesn’t hurt at all.’

Sepp knew she was lying and let all his fury loose on her as a sign of gratitude for this lie. Nenerl was five years younger than Sepp, but he could hit much harder. Nenerl knew no pain. And if you don’t know pain you are not shy to inflict it on another.

Slowly, Nenerl calmed down and just kept staring at Sepp until the older brother cast his eyes down. Two years ago, chicken pox had wreaked havoc with Nenerl’s face.

For normal children, this was a harmless illness where the skin puffed into boils. Nenerl, however, nearly died of it because at night he would scratch open all the boils and not feel it when he got as deep as the bone. His skin had got inflamed everywhere; at that point, the Medical Russki, who wasn't a real doctor but had worked in the field hospital for a long time, had tied him to Mother's bed with ropes so that the inflamed skin could heal. They had fixed even his head with a belt to prevent him from banging it on the bed in his fury. Hedi didn't leave his side for a moment. She didn't even go to the toilet but used a bedpan. She lay down next to him and did not move a millimetre, as if she too had been bound.

All doctors who had ever examined Nenerl emphasised how lucky he was to have a twin sister. Nenerl himself could not feel pain, but at least he realised when Hedi suffered. And that stopped him from engaging in the worst of stupidities.

However, even she had not been able to prevent this hole in his ear now.

Mirl was only eleven, but the frown line on her forehead was that of a mature woman who had already had to cope with too much anger in her life, as she said:

'Nenerl hammered a nail into his ear! Hedi just stood there and watched!'

'That's not true!' Hedi shouted. 'I asked the Medical Russki and he said that it wasn't dangerous. Nenerl even held the nail over a candle until it shone red, and then doused it in schnapps. Because of the germs.'

'Everyone was watching. It was *grandioski*,' Nenerl said and proudly straightened up. 'When we're grown up, we will travel the world and earn so much money with our shows that we can have five-course meals every day.'

Only now did Sepp notice the potato sack Nenerl was carrying with him. With a grand gesture, Nenerl emptied it in front of his siblings. A mountain of glittering sweets wrapped in colourful paper piled up – caramel toffees, tin foil, chocolate.

'You took sweets from the enemy?' Sepp asked.

'Maschko and Maschka will conquer the world,' Nenerl replied, taking a bow like the circus director he wanted to become one day.

Maschko and *Maschka* were the names the Russkis had given the twins when Nenerl, assisted by Hedi, started to perform small artistic feats to show that he knew neither fear nor pain. *Maschko* was Russian for Little Bear.

Before the war, many Russians had used to hunt bears. Among the soldiers there were many stories making the rounds, such as the one where a hunter had fired five shots at a bear in its winter den; the bear had got up and attacked them as if it had simply been pricked by a needle to wake it from its sleep. They told the story of old bears that, when they were skinned, had showed up to twenty bullets in their body. Or the one of a bear that, despite a dagger in his side, had grown to be over a hundred

years old. And because Hedi was his twin sister, they called her *Maschka*. Little She-Bear.

The Russkis had no nickname for Wetti, because she didn't exist for them, just like they didn't exist for her. Sepp was jealous of this; he himself avoided any contact with the enemy, which had earned him the nickname *Fritz*. At least that was better than Mirl's: *Kapnuk*, Little Gnome. Because she was always so serious and could erupt in fury if something didn't go her way. Once when Mirl had had to fill and roll beef roulades for the Russians in the inn's huge kitchen, Nenerl and Hedi had snuck into the kitchen and, when nobody was looking, they had shortened the prepared pieces of string for tying the roulades with scissors so that Mirl failed to tie up even a single piece of meat. This had incensed her so much that, like water boiling under a closed lid, she had started to scream so loudly that some of the Russians had grabbed their guns and come running.

At first, Nenerl had snuck over to the Russians only occasionally, Hedi in tow, to perform his tricks in exchange for sweets, but for the past half year he'd been spending more time with them. Six months ago, the men had dragged in a truck painted in lots of colours that had belonged to a circus, and in the truck, there'd been a bear. The animal had been trained and according to Nenerl, it could ride a monocycle and do somersaults. Sepp didn't believe that and thought that this beast, kept in the barn by the Russkis, was the devil. But Nenerl was magically attracted by the bear.

'Nenerl, you must stop these circus performances,' Sepp said. 'One day you will hurt yourself so much that no doctor will be able to put you back together.'

Nenerl shrugged his shoulders.

'Don't you want any sweets?'

Sepp shook his head.

'I do not take sweets from the enemy! They have abducted our father and maimed the teacher!'

'The teacher is an evil man,' Wetti said. 'He drowned five kittens in the rainwater tank.'

'Let's vote. Who wants me to stop my performances?' Nenerl asked. Sepp and Mirl lifted their hands.

'Who wants me to go on?'

Nenerl's hand shot up, Hedi copied him and then Wetti followed suit, hesitantly.

'There's a place reserved for you in the hottest fires of hell,' Sepp hissed at her.

'I have my doubts whether hell actually exists,' Wetti said noncommittally and held out her hand for the sweets that Nenerl now shared out between Wetti, Hedi and himself.

'You don't want any, you said,' Nenerl said to Sepp.

‘I have changed my mind,’ Mirl said. ‘Go on with your tricks, but don’t tell Mother I said that.’

Upon this, Nenerl gave her some sweets too.

Sepp left empty-handed and told himself he didn’t care, after all there would be supper in a moment. But when they siblings entered the kitchen and Mother saw Nenerl’s ear, she was so angry that she sent them all to bed without food.

Two weeks after Easter, a recurring event came to pass: the Oberhubers came to visit. Ever since Mr Oberhuber had been released from prison and rehabilitated, they showed up on the Prischinger farm every year, all of them, to express their gratitude for the help during the war and the time immediately afterwards.

However, the Prischinger siblings always argued about whether these visits did indeed express gratitude. Mirl and Sepp thought they did. The Oberhubers brought all sorts of gifts, which admittedly consisted mostly of worn clothes which the Oberhuber boys had grown out of for Sepp and Nenerl, and of material for Mother to sew something new for the girls – even though she’d only really had time to do that twice. The material from the last visit, and the one before, were still untouched, wrapped in silk paper at the top of the cupboard.

Nenerl, on the other hand, did not like the Oberhubers. He called them greedy parasites.

‘If Mum had not fed them all and let them live here during the war, none of them would have made it,’ Nenerl repeated ever since Mother had announced that the Oberhubers were coming to visit, even though Nenerl hadn’t even been born when the Oberhubers had first appeared on the farm and exchanged jewellery for food. Jewellery which then the Russian had taken from Mother, which had confirmed Sepp’s fundamental belief that at the end of the day, it was all the Russkis’ fault. Not that of the Oberhubers, a well-reputed family from Vienna whose children went to grammar school. They were something better, Mother always said. Hedi of course sided with Nenerl, and Wetti couldn’t care less about the Oberhubers ever since she’d learned that they didn’t have any animals.

There was no sign of the three younger siblings while the two older ones were cleaning the living room for the Sunday visit.

‘Do you think Gottfried is already growing a beard?’ Mirl asked, polishing glasses while Sepp emptied the ash from the oven. Not half-heartedly like on any normal day, but very thoroughly.

‘What do I know?’ Sepp relied with an indifference which belied the fact that he occasionally examined his upper lip for the first signs of a beard.

‘Mother says that if Gottfried has a beard, he might marry me,’ Mirl said.

‘I know,’ Sepp said.

Truth was, Sepp didn’t know what to think of that. Gottfried was the same age as he was and already twice as wide. When playing football, he immediately got out of breath, whereas he didn’t seem to need to breathe at all when he was eating, such was his capability of greedily shovelling food into his mouth.

‘Mother says the Oberhubers live in a huge house. Just imagine, I’ll be an elegant lady then! In the city! With a maid!’

Sepp didn’t think much of Vienna. Out in the countryside, there were the Russkis; in the city, there were the Russkis, the Brits, the Americans and the frog-eaters, as the teacher had explained. Sepp did want to leave the farm, but not for Vienna. Krems was sufficient for him. And he couldn’t really picture Mirl as a lady in the big city. Sometimes, when she was scrubbing at the burnt bits in a saucepan for half an hour, doing that cheered her up, like other girls were cheered up by dolls or dresses. What on earth would she want with a maid?

On Sunday, at eleven on the dot, a turquoise *Opel Kapitän* honked the horn and stopped in front of the veranda, where the Prischinger children had already assembled according to height.

Sepp looked down at the ground. Why did they have to honk the horn? There was so little out here that anybody would be seen from afar anyway. But the honking of course lured the curious Russkis from the inn, and now the enemy stood there smoking and observing the new arrivals.

As if the Oberhubers weren’t already fat enough, Mother doled out one delicious dish after another. Mirl and Wetti had to serve the food and Sepp had to keep filling their glasses with young wine. Hedi and Nenerl sat on chairs in the bedroom in front of the open door and pulled faces whenever they thought nobody was watching. Mother was at the stove. The Oberhubers were sitting round the table and left no room for the family.

‘Oh, this soup is delicious!’ Mr Oberhuber’s praise sounded above his sons’ loud slurping.

Sepp watched them eat and couldn’t help but wonder whether perhaps Nenerl was right and the Oberhubers were in fact not a little ungrateful in the face of his mother’s magnanimity. She had spared no efforts to conjure up a three-course meal for the guests. Sepp, Wetti, Mirl, Hedi and Nenerl were not even allowed to eat with them but had to serve them, watch them eat, and be content to have left-overs later, if there were any.

‘This soup tastes like the strength our beautiful Austria is regaining these days, my dear Mrs Maria,’ Mr Oberhuber said. Sepp watched little Dolfi lick his plate.

‘Soup is symbolic for our country! During the war there was only thin water with the last remnants of herbs, after the war every chicken leg was boiled a hundred times, but now Austria’s dining tables are groaning once again under the weight of this traditional thick soup, Mrs Maria, rich and strong, ready to face the new future!’

‘He doesn’t sound like one of the ancients but like one who believes they’re coming back,’ Wetti whispered to Sepp as they were doing the dishes.

‘You shouldn’t say things like that!’ Sepp hissed.

As a main course, Mother had prepared roast pork, the real thing, using the best cuts from the belly, the most delicious and fatty piece.

‘So crisp the crust,’ Mr Oberhuber proclaimed, his mouth stuffed full, as if the Prischingers weren’t able to hear the delicious crunching noise the crossly baked pork belly made between his teeth. Sepp’s stomach was growling. ‘Hard on the outside and soft on the inside, strict against the neighbours, rigid at the border, but inside all soft, to our own people, a mediator between East and West, yes, that is what our Austria will be as soon as we have our treaty!’

Sepp watched his mother listening very attentively to Mr Oberhuber and felt the injustice even more. This man was blathering about this treaty that was going to be signed soon with his mouth full, and Mother kept showing interest and asking questions; any of her own children, if they’d said only so much as a word with half a bite still in their mouth, would have received a good scolding.

‘Now that Stain is finally six feet under, this rabid dog who I hope is roasting in a red-hot hell, well, it’s only a matter of time now,’ Mr Oberhuber was proclaiming.

‘You really think so?’ Mother asked.

All three sons shamelessly asked for a third piece of meat. For her own children, Mother would allow a second helping only at Christmas, if at all, and now she was dishing it out to these fatsoes, adding four dumplings, pickled cabbage, and vast quantities of juice.

‘It won’t be long now, I can promise you that, Mrs Maria, and then everything will become easier, and then it will be possible for you to find a proper doctor for your monster.’

Out of nowhere, Wetti appeared at the table and screamed at Mr Oberhuber: ‘Nenerl is not a monster, he is our brother, you asshole!’

Of course, within less than a second Wetti received a ringing slap in the face from Mother.

‘Into your room! Now!’ she said. ‘You’ll stand in the corner and not move an

inch!

‘Unfortunately, there are no doctors for a feeble mind,’ Mr Oberhuber said regretfully and looked at the food piled high on his plate. ‘Mrs Maria, this is delicious, but I am full. Could I take the rest home and enjoy it for supper?’

‘Of course, excuse me,’ Mother said, got up and loaded the remaining pork on a plate which she wrapped in a kitchen cloth and put on the table.

After coffee and cake, and after Mr Oberhuber had also asked for two sides of poppy strudel as well as eggs, vegetables and a fresh loaf of bread, and after they’d all had too much to eat to go for the walk in the fresh air, as Mr Oberhuber had announced they would do countless times, they finally climbed back into their turquoise car, said good-bye, graciously accepted the effusive thanks Mother gave for the beautiful material and clothing, and drove off.

Everyone had to wave until the car disappeared. Then Mother let out an audible breath.

‘Dolfi shat into his trousers before giving them to me,’ Nenerl said.

‘Then I will boil them,’ Mother replied.

‘And there are holes,’ he added.

‘I’ll darn those,’

‘The bottom is all torn!’

‘Okay, then throw it out. You’ll get new ones when the cloth trader comes by.’

‘Really?’ Nenerl asked, nonplussed.

Mother nodded, and then she asked:

‘Who would like some roast pork?’

Instantly, the siblings bounced up and down; only Sepp remained still. He didn’t want to get his hopes up. He had seen what the Oberhubers had eaten.

‘But they have finished every last morsel,’ he said.

‘Only of the first lot,’ Mother said. ‘I haven’t served the larger piece but kept that in the laundry room. Where it’s safe. I’ll put it in the oven for another half hour, and then each of you will get a slice.’ She smiled lovingly. ‘Perhaps even two, and if there’s enough, three.’

The children ran to the laundry room, and indeed, there was a beautiful, untouched pork roast. They circled their mother as she carried the roast to the kitchen and placed it in the still warm brick oven, nestled in between the stove and the flue.

‘Half an hour,’ she said and added more wood to stoke the fire. ‘Please, you must never think that these people from Vienna matter to me more than you. Nobody matters more to me than the five of you. But Oberhuber said it, and even the Russians

are saying it: there will be a treaty soon, and once the Russians are gone, we have to fend for ourselves. Then there will be no one paying rent for the inn and no one who can dress Nenerl's wounds. Mr Oberhuber has set up things well for himself. He knows important people, and we may still need him,' she said and left the kitchen.

The siblings sat down at the kitchen table; none of them wanted to leave and risk missing the moment when the pork roast was served.

'That would be wonderful, if we could get rid of the enemy soon,' Sepp said.

'Whatever,' said Wetli. 'Did you see? There are robins nesting in the front garden.'

'I can hardly wait for Gottfried to grow a beard,' Mirl giggled.

Hedi rolled her eyes.

'You want to marry that guy? He didn't say a word to you! And he is fat.'

The fury line started to form on Mirl's forehead.

'Gottfried isn't fat, he's just got strong bones. And if you think you can badmouth him to me so you can have him for yourself, well forget it!'

Hedi rolled her eyes again, so violently so that Sepp feared they might get stuck.

'I'm just saying. There's better ones out there,' Hedi said.

'You don't have to get married,' Wetli chimed in now. 'Or have you ever seen animals with wedding bands? Me neither. But all the more happy animals.'

Sepp leaned back and drummed his fingers on the table top while his sisters argued about whether it was better to marry Gottfried, or someone else, or to be an animal.

In the meantime, Nenerl just sat quietly in his corner, staring into space.

'Nenerl. Everything okay?' Sepp asked. You never knew with his little brother whether he had perhaps hit his head and something inside had gone out of whack. The sisters looked at him in fear.

'I'm thinking,' Nenerl said.

'What about?' Mirl asked.

'How we can steal the bear from the Russians,' Nenerl replied, and Sepp laughed out loud.

'Think about it! If the Russians really do go back to Russia, Mother will not earn money any more. So, we'll have to open our circus as soon as possible. Sepp, you'll be our accountant. Mirl, you'll have to get better at rope-skipping. Wetli, the cats have to be trained more quickly. Hedi and I will do the *Maschko and Maschka* gig, and then we'll have the bear. That will fill a whole evening's programme and earn us some money so we can keep the farm. You know how Aunt Christl always said that Mother will have to sell it all once the Russkis are gone.'

Hedi nodded.

‘Yes, I’ve heard that too,’ she said.

‘I don’t care,’ said Mirl. ‘I’m moving to the city anyway,’

Nenerl got angry.

‘And what about us?’

‘We’ll all find something,’ said Sepp.

Nenerl shook his head.

‘And what? Didn’t you see what happened to the Allenhuber family? The father went missing in the war, and Mrs Allenhuber had to sell the farm and send all the children to work on other farms,’ Nenerl said. Sepp flinched. The little one was right. Nenerl continued:

‘If we all live on different farms and have to work, then Sepp won’t go to grammar school and Mirl won’t go to the city. And Wetli will be sent to the loony bin. Do you want that?’

All siblings shook their heads vehemently.

‘There you go. That’s why we need the bear, and that’s why we have to start a circus,’ he finished. And just before Mother entered the kitchen to announce that the celebratory meal was ready, Nenerl said something that would remain with his siblings for the rest of their lives:

‘Nobody gets left behind.’

[END OF SAMPLE]