

## **One Hundred Days with My Grandmother**

Francesco Micieli

For Jonas, Matteo, Matilda, and for my father, who no longer counts time.

*I closed my eyes and folded my hands. Providence determined how I would say goodbye.*

*Patti Smith, Just Kids*

You've got to keep turning me, she said, otherwise the flesh will start to rot. The way she lay there, she looked like one of those mummies I had seen in photographs in thick books.

I'll still live one hundred days, that's what a voice in a dream told me. During these one hundred days you'll come to visit me every day, and every day I'll give you a thought to take with you, one that should help you to be content. She looked at me with her small needle eyes.

She can shoot darts with those eyes and kill vipers, my grandfather had said, laughing, when he was still alive.

I hide my face behind my hands, tears bursting on the stubble of my beard. Grandmother had not picked the right time for such dreams. I was vulnerable, had no possibility to protect myself. Was at an age where I moved back and forth between childhood, youth and adulthood.

Content, not happy. Happiness doesn't interest me, she continued while I gently turned her. Her skin was dried out and hardened, reminiscent of a tortoise. My grandmother looked like one of those ancient animals. A beautiful, affectionate ancient animal.

There was a knock at the door, almost in rhythm with my grandmother's breathing. A health-care worker, no other label occurred to me at the time, danced into the room, she looked so light, so young, so alive with beautiful skin. Nurse, the usual term, sounded strange in my ears. The idea of protection and support seemed old fashioned. There was the individual and competition.

Medication.

Medication, repeated my grandmother and opened her mouth. She must have looked like that as a small child, when she still knew nothing and could hardly guess what life had in store for her, when she did not even know the word life.

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The next day grandmother lay there like a wilting flower. I tried, our small radio played Schumann, to work out what flower she could be. In the end, I was left with marguerite and camomile. A wilting chamomile.

The music of Schumann was the right accompaniment for the days with my grandmother. He composed hope and grief at the same time. Back then, I still know this precisely, I wished for the language of Marguerite Dura, in order to recount this last encounter, yes, her language would lend to these days the requisite enchantment of a vanishing everyday world, a *vie matérielle*.

What's the flower up to there on the bed?

Turn me, she laughed, the underside already smells quite peculiar. It smelt like nothing, I smelt nothing, I washed my hands, rubbed in the disinfectant, and turned my grandmother, who then smiled at me quite happily and pressed a kiss onto my forehead. In that moment I became the little boy who performed dreamt-up feats for her during walks, and took her praise as an incentive to do still more, or to pretend to do so. With her I had learnt that it does not matter whether one dreams something or really does it, that life is a continuum between dream and reality.

Look how high I can jump! Oh, grandmother, you're so little down there!

Mind you don't fall!, she said to me with feigned worry. Sometimes neighbours who dropped by asked me if I still do my dangerous stunts.

As if she were able to guess my thoughts, she said, you're certainly already waiting for my pearls of wisdom, the ones I'd promised you, but today I'm tired and weak, please keep hugging me for a moment. She hardly still possessed a real body, she felt like a fragile creature, but I nevertheless felt the force of a tremendous power penetrating all my emotions.

It were as if my grief had not been wholly sufficient, my face contorted itself once again and my shoulders quaked, then the door opened, a registered nurse -- I had looked in a reference book -- walked in, she had deep blue eyes and a high forehead, and pressed a piece of paper into my hand. From her, she said, she knew she wouldn't want to talk today, and wrote this down for you. I thought I felt grandmother's smile on my shoulder and relaxed our embrace. Gently, I laid her head onto the pillow and read, while the nurse reset the intravenous drip, what she had written for me. The handwriting trembled more than her hand.

Never look at others in a way that compares yourself to them, look at them simply as others, even when they are quite close to you. I, your grandmother, am for example another who is quite close to you, but you should never think that you would like to become like me or better than me. Comparison leads to unhappiness.

I carefully folded the page and slipped it into my jacket pocket. Grandmother had fallen asleep; the nurse had left. I knew then that I had been given a mission, the mission to collect her wisdom.

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It was a hot day. The city seemed as if in a state of emergency. The girls were half naked, the boys wore shorts and looked a bit helpless in doing so. As if they had lost a sports match. Boys and girls belonged to my grandmother's vocabulary. And I quite happily used this vocabulary. Grandmother had already been waiting for me, in order to tell me that she was very upset today, her husband had appeared to her in a dream, but had not invited her for a coffee. Can you, after you've turned me, sing me something? I need to get rid of my anger.

I mimed a guitar and sang her *Blowin' in the Wind*. There was a campfire feel in the room, grandmother wore the look of an impertinent girl, even though her eyes hardly shone anymore. There it was, the memory that can conjure us all into another time.

I had brought along a thick notebook, on the first page was the note the registered nurse had given me. Now I waited for grandmother to pass on her knowledge, her recipe for life, as it were. I was also waiting a little for the nurse to come by and press a piece of paper into my hands: Will you come to dinner with me?

Go now! I'm tired out from the memories. Your grandfather has spoilt my day. I want to sleep.

At home I decided to write down my modest experiences with her, just as she had kept a booklet about me, about my progress. The first sound, the first smile, my first word: Ana, of which we did not know, was it banana or gramma?

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Grandmother loved numbers and counting. She tried to package everything into numbers.

One hundred days. Today you've come in ten times. You've asked me seventeen times how I am! You're twenty-two years old, so count to ten before you say anything. She had a notebook in which she recorded her life in numbers. Trips, sins, good deeds. Twice to Paris, once in London. She counted until twenty and then, like the French, with the multiplication of twenty. One can picture it better that way. Up until twenty I had my best time, she often said and also laughed. Just look at how good you have it!

But I'm already twenty-two.

When she forgot numbers, she grew sad. Sometimes the numbers for certain experiences escaped her and she had to look in her notebook. This irritated her.

She lay there and covered her face with her hands. Those hands were a topography of labour and tactile encounter. They appeared to me like a map leading to a hidden treasure.

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The flower bouquet was huge, but the desire to overdo it still greater. Ninety-three years. Perhaps she was even older. Back then, records like dates of birth or death had not been taken very seriously. Birthdays were also not important. One often forgot them.

Oh! I've never received a bouquet of flowers from a man before! How lovely! And what are we celebrating?

I turned her and whispered, today is your birthday, into her ear.

It's my birthday?

She took my hand and said, only young people have birthdays, but your flower bouquet is truly beautiful, almost like in the paintings your grandfather liked so much.

My grandfather liked paintings?

When he was in the war, I sent him cards with scenes of flowers on them, from a catalogue series called *Gardens of the World*, one could cut them out.

From my bag I pulled out a small bottle of Prosecco and two

plastic cups. \*\*\*\*\*

I had brought with me the documentary film about Vivienne Westwood. I thought this film might afford her a certain life energy. Grandmother had never worn one of her dresses, but Westwood's T-shirts with slogans very much appealed to her, I had once brought her one from London and she had used it for a long time as a pajama top, looking splendid in it. She admired Westwood's manifesto. I missed out on writing a manifesto, she said.

Is one written against or for something? Against the capital that enslaves and exploits everything and everyone and that fools us into thinking that it isn't so? Or one for a good world where money is distributed in a way that lets everyone live free?

We sat there and looked with wonder at my computer, wonder at the clothing, at the images, at the children who read parts of the manifesto aloud. I had brought grandmother a vitality tea. She drank it with absolute duty, and let me believe it could be of benefit.

Grandmother came to no decision about the manifesto. I'll let it go, I can't even give you an important sentence every day. How should I write a manifesto?

I only smiled at her. She knew it was not because of the sentences that I spent these days with her, these days she had designated the conclusion of her life. I was with her in that dark forest, where the clearings grew ever more rare.

The dark forest revealed to us unfamiliar nature. Unusual forms that brought to mind ghost-like drawings.

We fell into a deep sleep, from which we only awoke in darkness. I no longer had any idea of where I was, and for a moment I did not know who the old, pale woman was who breathed next to me. The air was damp-warm, I sweated, lay there for a long time, as if a great burden of fatigue and sleep weighed down on my chest. I would have loved to fall asleep again, because the darkness of sleep seemed more agreeable to me than the darkness of the unknown during wakefulness.

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My girlfriend asked me why I wanted to spend so much time alone with my grandmother. I laid an arm around her bony shoulders and drew her towards me. She did not respond to my embrace; she was present and that was it. I still precisely remember that I felt as if paralyzed, and if I had not been such a timid person, I would have likely screamed out loud. An objection. A more precise perspective on things.

As I stuck my gloves into my helmet and parked the Vespa in a rain shed, I felt very light and happy, without really knowing why. I bade a friendly greeting to the woman at reception. She no longer asked where I wished to go, she already knew, and sometimes she called Regards to your grandmother as I passed, today she did not do that. I opened the door, had already prepared a first sentence, How is my queen, but instead of the wilting flower I saw only

bedsheets thrown into disarray, a soft impression of her body

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on the mattress. The window was open, it smelled of freshly mown grass. Had she gone out the window? Had she escaped? Impossible, there was nothing near the window on which she could have supported herself, not even a sill. She would have quite simply fallen down; one would have heard a muted impact and after the muted sound the still more terrible breaking of bones. Then, they would have stopped me at reception.

I hurried back into the corridor, went to the personnel desk for the section, assumed a frightened face. There she was again, the woman with the eyes that reminded me of an endless expanse, of a landscape in which I had once already been, they could also seduce me into saying something kitschy. I only read the name, Katharina, and said, Katharina, my grandmother!

Afterwards, something strange happened. There was a huge turmoil. A disorganized something occurred, one could feel it. There was no plan for such a situation. This something crept into every brain. Everyone fumbled around somehow. They looked terribly worried. From the rooms, the other patients rang, they seemed to have received the wave of discord. In the tumult and in the belief that it was now a fight for survival, some of them began to scream. Others bellowed out prayers. As if in a trance, I opened a small door that stood directly before me, and there, in the linen closet, in the freshly laundered linen, I found my grandmother. She was sleeping. As I made to carry her back, she had hardly any weight left, she awoke and smiled at me.

I was looking for the soul of the world. Here in the closet? It can hide anywhere, in all things. Don't forget, the soul of the world is everywhere.

She tried to discourage her tears with a trick from her childhood, she pressed both thumbnails into the soft flesh under the nails of her index fingers. I was struck by the image of us at the big table in the old kitchen. We were eating fruit that we had gathered. We had been good gatherers. One should greet each fruit individually, she had said. And we had greeted every fruit. Arrival and



farewell. The food seemed to us completely different, more correct, in harmony with everything.

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I laid my grandmother gently onto her bed.  
Soul, she whispered, and fell asleep.

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There were days when I had to try with all my strength not to think about the fact that soon everything would be over, that I would not have my grandmother near me for much longer, that this room, which had also become a room with my dreams, and which had filled itself with so many memories, would soon be vacated, cleaned, disinfected, and neutralized. For the next story. My life at the time was a kind of chrysalis, in which my grandmother and I found ourselves. The signs from outside came from far away, from another planet or another galaxy. The signals came to us late and only in diminished form, that is why I was so surprised when an assistant doctor stood before me and whispered into my ear, I must pass on this message to you, it comes from your grandmother.

I still want to take a trip.

I listened to her breath, it had the speed of waves on a small seaport during a heavy gale, flap!, flap! The breaking of the breath in the room. I was the little boat being moved back and forth.

It was only right that I was there for her. She had also done everything for me. I turned her gently to the other side.

I'm like a bread dough, she said.

Her hair was a complete mess, and she had scratched her forearms bloody.

She waited for me in a state of great distress. I need to get out of here, absolutely! But that won't work, you can't live without care anymore. That's not true! I can also live without care; I just have to want it. Calm down! What's happened then? They wanted to send me a

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chaplain, a minister, can you imagine, a minister! Okay, my body may need some ministering, but not my soul! That least of all. It knows what it wants. Didn't you tell them that I don't believe in God? That I'm just too lazy to leave the church? Didn't you tell them that!

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I remained standing by the door, heard my grandmother speaking and even laughing now and again. What was happening? Did she actually know more people in the home than I had thought? Or did she speak with the nurses like that? I quietly opened the door. Grandmother was alone, but the chairs were arranged around her bed as if people would sit there.

Ah, finally, you're here! You're late today. We have visitors. Your grandfather is here. Your great uncle. He's just telling about his time in Dachau. How he froze there! You can't imagine! There was a queer ice age, the thermometer showed heat and he had frozen, frozen like never before in his life. Isn't that right?

I looked over to the chairs. My great uncle sat motionless. Nothing happened. Give them your hand, my grandmother said. I felt the pressure of their hands. Beautiful, masculine hands. A tie to another world penetrated me, as if I had, here in this room, been hooked into it.

My great uncle told me how in his last years he could no longer watch films about the Second World War, because with age the memory had become so

strong, as if it were taking place in the present.

My grandfather kissed me on the forehead.

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The third chair in the room, on the left-hand side of the bed, was for me, I knew that, so I sat down there and looked over at the empty chairs, now standing opposite, over at my great uncle and my grandfather.

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She starred at the ceiling and said nothing. I could not decipher her protest, not today, it just was not possible. My thought ways were blocked, my circuits out of order. I had also not had much to drink the evening before. Late into the night, I had tried to retrace my great uncle's path from soldier to so-called traitor.

I attempted to look her in the eyes, she had pulled across a veil, nothing penetrated, nothing could be divined.

Her pulse was normal. Her breathing calm. I examined her as if I were a doctor. Nothing noteworthy.

Have you lost your speech? Shall I find it for you? I turned her. Maybe it's under your body. She let everything happen, without making a sound. Could she now be slipping away from me forever? Sealing herself into the remains of her being, becoming inaccessible?

Springtides, it occurred to me. She had tallied up many a springtide. What an expression for this wonderfully fine, fading flower. She let me feel my complete helplessness, all that knowledge will not help you now, for this not even you

know a remedy, I had thought. I was silent.

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Today they were back for a visit. Grandmother was explaining to her deceased spouse that there should no longer be any men, because only they could have precipitated all the wars, all the devastation, only they are endowed with a suicidal gene. Only they with their pompous names.

The chair of my grandfather stood silent. Not a sound.

She had looked into the eyes of men who tell only of killing, into blood-soaked eyes. She had looked into the eyes of the man who had abused her daughter.

Abysms, scumbags, sewer rats!

She screamed.

Not all are like that, my great uncle tried quietly to object. Today he wore his prison jacket with number. But I could not decipher it. Every time I tried to read it, it vanished from my head. As if I would not know the numbers anymore, as if I had to learn everything anew.

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I brought her the requested blouse. Yes, you must look for the one with the flower pattern, it should be hanging next to the red blouse.

It had now become much too large, the flowers fell into folds, but I had to admit the colours suited her very well. For a short moment she once again had this radiance in her eyes, with which she had in the past demanded impossible things from me. Hopefully she will not want to ride with me on the Vespa, I thought. The helmet would fall from her head, and she would not have the strength to cling to me. To fly away, a flower with flower pattern, being borne by the wind. I want to take another trip, she had said.

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You know, I have to negotiate with them for the place I get, I want to be between your grandfather and your great uncle.

The chairs still stood as they had been arranged yesterday, probably she had requested this from the nurse. I smelt the hair oil of my great uncle. Is it really the case that one comes to one's own, doesn't one begin a new story with completely different people?

She reflected for only a moment and said with certainty No, the path one has, by chance, taken carries one forward, forever. I did not want to contradict her. Not while she lay there in that blouse. Shall I give you a bit of make-up?

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I awoke with the feeling of needing to escape, to abandon everything, to flee somewhere far from the place where one now is, away from oneself, from one's own life. It was a cool morning, the wind in my face scratched open my skin. A welcome pain. To now do nothing but drive on, to never again stop.

As I opened the door a torrent of words hit me. I thought she was visiting with the men again, her hair was electrified and went in all directions, seemed somehow even more diaphanous and thin. No one was there. The chairs were not standing around her bed. I'm arguing with myself, she greeted me. It's about the word homesickness. Homesickness isn't nostalgia! What your great uncle had in captivity was homesickness, because there's despair, anger, and

fear in it. That's what he felt! Even if he was always careful to stay human. Polite, obliging, sharing with the others. In that kind of place no nostalgia can arise. Nostalgia is an emotion for snobs. You need to be basically doing well before you can treat yourself to nostalgia!

Her hair became even more crazed. I stroked it over, tried to smooth it, to smooth her waves. She must have had a visit after all. Quarreled with my great uncle. Strange how often he figures into her transitioning life, more often than my grandfather. What are

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you whispering there, she wanted to know. Have you ever felt homesickness? The word was invented by Swiss mercenaries.

The way she had packed the bread for me, with special care, as if there were something very delicate to protect, in order to then tuck it into my jacket pocket, and the way she said every day, I baked this for you, and the way I waited for this sentence and had to smile afterward. I had remembered this morning ritual earlier, when I was crisping up the ready-bake bread rolls. I showed her one of the rolls and said, I baked this for you, trying to imitate her intonation from back then, which did not succeed and made me come off as ridiculous. On her face a slight angel-smile could be detected. One of the doctors from the home had called me in order to tell me that her values were miserable. Hardly any blood, no B<sub>12</sub>, no iron.

My schoolmates teased me, all you brought again was bread, hard bread? I let them run aground on a mild smile. I had learnt this from my great uncle. You should always smile back mildly when someone provokes you, only like this is a human a human. Whoever thinks only of themselves will not survive in war. There was only one time it did not work. They had thrown my bread into a puddle. So you can finally eat soft bread! I turned into a beast, my grandmother said to her female friends several days later.

Why didn't she call her deceased female friends to her?

I tried to slip a bit of bread between her lips. While I did this, perceptions and sensations of taste came, passed through the walls of reality and eddied my time into confusion. I saw my grandmother from before my birth, plainly dressed, her shoes worn, but waiting with dignity and tremendous grace for the end of the war, so she could go with her husband to Argentina. Great grandmother cried. You mustn't leave. I don't want to be alone. I'll kill myself if you go.

Don't leave, whispered my grandmother, her breath was very weak. I had brought my Walkman and played *Balada para un loco* by Astor Piazzolla for her.

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A doctor came into the room, he comes from pathology, he said, and went with a resolute stride, almost athletic, to my sleeping grandmother, gave her a kiss on the forehead, her head looked so small, like that of a child, as he bent towards her, then he came to me and pressed a note into my hand.

Do not believe those who tell you the economy is a natural law. They are only protecting profits and injustice.

The doctor had already disappeared, without saying goodbye to me. Were these thoughts really from her or had she requisitioned the entire home to attach a note of wisdom to me, as if I were a teabag or a matchbox?

I could not wake her in order to ask, the many restorative injections she had been given had tired her. I sat there with the note in my hand and seemed to myself much like her. Before she was brought here, she sat all day on the doorstep of the house. Like Limentinus, the god of thresholds. Until she fell

over.

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The injections had had an effect. She was quite eager for action. The nurse said, you should get used to these ups and downs, there won't be any normality anymore. Behind her wildly bundled hair I spied a poster. At our place, it's like being at home, it said, it invited one to feel cozy. The voice of my grandmother surprised me with its force. Soon we'll be able to get out and do something together. I recognized the sly wit of the governess from my early years. When I lived with her, she asked me every day, what shall we do today? Afterwards, however, nothing happened. I did what I had to do or wanted to do, and grandmother as well. Mostly she palavered the whole day away with her friends. We had not done anything, and still she said in the evening, my goodness, what another good day today, we did so much!

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Into what I saw before me, I tried to read my memories of my grandmother. Her homesickness, her sighing. She yearned for home, for being at home.

Our home is your haven, the advertisement also promised.

Yes, soon we'll get out and do something, I said as I kissed her on the cheeks. She looked like an inner tube without air.

What'll it be then, grandma?

Paris, said my grandmother.

Sometimes I would like to try seeing with her eyes.

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Resounding out of the old family Walkman, *Il est cinq heures, Paris s'éveille*. My grandmother asked me why I was playing this song for her.

Yesterday we decided that we'll take a trip to Paris.

She repeated my sentence, as if she needed to sample it, taste it, see whether it had enough salt. Then she was silent.

I asked her why she never prepared chairs for her deceased female friends, she looked at me astonished, even a little incensed. Don't you know? With her hand she motioned that I should sit her upright. The shirt fell from her body, her breasts were a faded outline. Not all the dead are equally suited to assist you with the crossing. My female friends would be like people smugglers. They would forget me, leave me laying somewhere, maybe in an in-between space. Frightful! You would hear me begging for years. No, the

crossing is a serious business. Only your grandfather and your great uncle can help me with it. 16

Tears trickled onto my upper lip, I was beaten tender, her words had reminded me of her imminent end. I hated myself for this sentimental side of mine.

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Katharina appeared with a large suitcase at the door of the home. She was to look after the medications and also to monitor at all times whether the excursions we wanted to make were accountable. The doctor had championed the view that anything that could do grandmother good, is good.

Is there such a thing as a happy death?

We were brought by the home's shuttle service to the train station. The

wheelchair of my grandmother was very light, I used the wrong measure of strength to lift it.

Do you remember, I always carried you on my back, you were swaddled somehow in a cloth?

She watched me like a small girl as I lifted her into the chair. The train station was overflowing with people. Because of this, she grew quite tense and insecure. Uhh, I don't have a good feeling, she sighed.

But we're here and taking good care of you, the nurse tried to reassure her. When my grandmother saw the TGV, she recognized her bad feeling reflected in this monstrosity, as though it had emerged from the dark side of her soul. No one in the world can bring me into this devil's machine, that's for sure, I'd rather croak right here on the spot. She could mobilize an astonishing amount of force when she refused something.

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Katharina called two work colleagues whom she knew were free, and went to Paris for three days with them. I asked her to film everything, so that we could later also make the trip.

Back in her room, my grandmother admitted that she had been afraid that grandfather and great uncle would have grown lonely here, not to mention that we had not even bought them tickets, since of course there were no tickets for ghosts. One can just imagine if she had had to die in Paris or even in that preposterous contraption, without their help who knows where she would have ended up?

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Everything that separates us from others and from which we are constituted

comes from outside. The animals, the plants, the fields, our nourishment. We often forget this, because we are too concerned with ourselves. With our bodies, our property, our desire for power.

With my thumbs I imitated two candles, lit them, knelt down before her bed, yes, my priestess, shall I go forth and proclaim this message? Grandmother laughed. A laugh from earlier times. A laugh from a photo of our first holiday to a place with a healing spring.

I don't want to be a priestess, but I mean what I say, even if it's simple and naive. We've hardly even grown out of the conflicts of the playground and we have to already decide over life and death. Because there's too much power in our hands. You should ease up on yourself, I said. Right now I have no power, and how much I'd love to restore your health, but it's not possible. You see, no power! I showed her my empty hands. You idiot, she said, and let her gaze rest on me, I'm not unhealthy, it's just that I need my energy right now for the other side, there are even more people there than here.

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For a long while we remained silent next to each other, then she fell asleep. I had brought a book in order to read her something. I wanted to leave the book there for her. Maybe grandfather would want to read her something.

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When she called me, it was because she wanted to ask me to bring her something from the flat. I do not believe she acted according to a plan. Probably a memory presented itself to her that she was then unable to let go of. The calls always followed a fixed pattern. Is someone there at my place? Yes, I'm here. Then, long silence. Oh, how lovely! I need something from home.

I had to bring her the small shoebox with the letters. It was not a lot that she had saved. The letters of my grandfather. There were three or four. If one wanted to be precise, one could not call them letters. They were instead listing that grandfather had sent her. Lists of things that he had seen or done, and a list of emotions.

Also in the box was the final letter of my great uncle to grandfather, the letter he had written before he was taken prisoner and jammed into a train.

What do you want with these?

I want to burn them. They won't need to exist anymore once I'm gone.

We received permission to make a small fire on the terrace. I just needed to have a fire extinguisher nearby. The day was cloudy and rather cool. Winter was giving notice. Grandmother, sitting in her wheelchair, protected by many wool blankets, looked perfectly happy as she peered into the flames.

I had learnt grandfather's list of emotions by heart, I did not want to lose them. His beautifully curved handwriting was stamped like a picture into my memory.

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Dear Rosa, I have tried in a list of emotions to express what I am missing. I do not know if they are really emotions, or if they are simply things, things that seek one out when one finds oneself in an unnatural situation. War is unnatural.

The warmth of your body, the glow of your eyes, the fineness of your skin, the tranquility of peace, your coffee, the sound of your voice, that no one yells anymore, that no one calls me by my surname any longer, the animals, a freshly made white bed, to never again be cold, to be properly dry for once, to be clean, to be able to sit back, without fear, grandmother slept as I quietly read out the letter, though at one point she grew restless, so I had to stop for a moment. I had gotten it into my head that the contents of this letter must be

read aloud so that it would remain present for the crossing.

To not stink like wet clothing, to be without enemies, to not have to think about whether one will shoot when one looks into the enemy's eyes, ordinary life, the field, the barn, sun-ripened tomatoes, our wine, the laughter after drinking wine, you're singing.

The rest of the letter had been smudged by a liquid and rendered illegible. As a child I had imagined that it had been the tears of my grandmother. Big, salty tears. And that there, where there were only smudges, her virtues were listed, so many virtues that she could only cry tears of joy over them. No doubt her smile had also stood on the list.

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She wanted to give me photographs that I would only be allowed to look at when she had died, they were mock images of the wedding with grandfather that had never happened. They had been married without a church wedding, shortly before enlistment into the war. She had been pregnant. With my mother in her belly.

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She gave me the envelopes as if she were giving them to the child in me. That is how I momentarily felt. The room seemed to me much larger. My steps were uncertain. She became the big, strong woman whom I had adored as a child. She saved me from the darkness, from my anxieties and my uncertainties. Give me your hand, I whispered.

Remember, it's important to have good people for the crossing, start preparing yourself now.

The word was coming up more often in our conversations, and I was afraid that with the word the event also pressed closer.

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In a dream, with grandfather, she had visited the spot where she could cross over. It was a lovely place, not at all dangerous. One feels peaceful as soon as one enters it. We stood on the terrace in the cold. I held her quite tightly, so that she would not fall. I think I'll have to go there in the wheelchair, she said, even though I'd like to stand on my own feet. We looked in the direction of the mountains. On such clear, cold days they could be seen so well that it was like they had been slightly enlarged and just freshly pasted onto the horizon. Strange that we hold the mountains so vigorously in our souls, and yet they're heaps of stone, frozen stones. Maybe it's because we carry in us a memory of the formation of our landscape, all those thousands of years have been stored somewhere and make us feel happy when we look at them. With the love of your grandfather I experienced something similar. Whenever I looked at him, I fell in love with him and, at the same time, with the first human on this earth. Again and again, he excited in my thoughts of the first human.

I gently lifted grandmother into the air, so she could see still deeper into the mountains. I'm cold, she said, please bring me back to my room.

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The room seemed perfectly dark to us, and grandmother was feeling somewhat chipper and did not want to return to the bed, even though she was cold. I turned on the light and lit the candle with the orange aroma. Oranges were my grandfather's favourite fruit. I wrapped grandmother loosely in the many wool blankets and pulled off her thick pullover. Now she stood there like an emaciated prisoner.

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Had grandmother kept her pledge so far? Had she given me a thought every day? I had written down many of her statements, but had little desire to look through them, I had pasted the notes into a notebook, *Insights of my Grandmother*. Ah, yes! The notes! Someone should please give me a note again sometime!

As I entered her room it smelt like an enchanted forest of plastic trees with artificial fragrance. Pine needles, moss, wild garlic, liverwort, sweet woodruff, anemones, hare's foot clover, and Italian arum, and amidst all that the sweet aroma of urine and wounded flesh.

Grandmother was completely cold. You're completely cold. Would you like a hot shower?

I prepared the temperature of the water as one would with a bath for small children, tried to judge the right temperature on the inside of my wrist. If it seemed comfortable on this spot, not too cold not too hot, one could risk the bath. I carried grandmother gently into the shower. You've become a feather. Now I'm a wet feather. A sad, wet feather.

Her pubic hair had fallen out. She looked like an aged girl.

A nurse came in. She helped me guide grandmother out of the shower, apply the necessary ointments. What a joy to have such a grandchild! she said much too loudly

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into my grandmother's left ear. As she left the room, I saw that her name was Miriam. She pressed a note into my hand.

Outside the cannons are roaring.

I did not understand what this was supposed to mean. The sentence better suited my great uncle. Or should I take it as a warning that I am now in a protected phase of my life? Free from the reality of the world? I only occasionally saw from a distance the bulletins of the newspapers, headlines, Thousands of Refugees Arrive in Munich, Seventy Dead in Lorry.

Grandmother had fallen asleep; with the scent of the forest the scent of soap and ointment had now blended itself. She smiled in her sleep. She would soon be freed from all reality, she knew that. I watched my grandmother, held an ear to her face to hear if she was still with me.

I sat down and remained motionless, listened to noises without keeping track of my thoughts.

Grandmother lay there, but her eyes were now open. She had plainly directed her eyes at me. And yet she appeared to be sleeping deeply. Her breathing was quick and shallow.

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She apparently had suffered acute pain in the night. It's hard to say why or from where the pain came. The nurse looked at me seriously as she said this. A serious face for a serious communication. The nurse carried the name Alexandra, in training. They had given her morphine to ease the pain, a bomb had also been applied to her skin.

Is there balm in Gilead? I looked at grandmother. She seemed inaccessible. Her eyes were wide open, but I could not judge to where she looked. Then she flew into a trance like torrent of words and spoke of a beach, of a youth choir who called to her.



I pictured it to myself. Grandmother on the beach. In a lovely flower dress. Her hair open, carried by the wind, she does not walk, she floats, the youth stretch their hands out towards her.

The scene shifts, she seemed to be worried. Will you have enough to eat when I die?

Who speaks then of dying? No one dies from this pain! said my grandfather, who suddenly sat on his chair. We're not ready yet. We haven't scouted out all the routes yet.

The sentence reminded me of Walter Benjamin, he had scouted out the route to Port Bou in his flight from the Nazis. Was it similar with the other side of existence? In order to get there did one have to know the routes? And, if possible, to scout these out sufficiently beforehand?

Now I heard how my grandmother spoke of a flower. I could not understand everything. She spoke indistinctly, with a heavy tongue.

Don't worry, grandfather said to me, things will turn around again. It'll be better tomorrow. The nurse said maybe it would be better to let her rest, so that she can recover. I'm supposed to give you this. On the slip of paper it said, I'm making a brief journey.

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So Katharina arrived with a professional theatre setup. She looked sweet as she strode into the room with all the equipment. The moment had arrived. My grandmother was to make up for the missed trip to Paris. I too had properly prepared, had made popcorn,

compiled reading material, yes, it's nice if you read something, Katharina had declared. I did not want any travel-guide material. I had chosen the book from

Patrick Modiano, because it had been important at a certain point in my life, had, so to speak, embossed my existence. I would have quite liked to read from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, but grandmother was too weak for that kind of mental exertion. In addition, I chose a short excerpt from a letter Benjamin had written to Max Horkheimer on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1935.

I have, compared with my living costs in April, since returning to Paris, greatly restricted my budget. So I now live with emigrants as a boarder. Apart from that, I have succeeded in gaining the right to a lunch table organized by French intellectuals. I only mention in passing that I must renew my *Carte d'identité*, without having for that purpose the required 100 Francs.

The film began with the faces of Katharina and her friends, who smiled into the camera and greeted grandmother. Then it became dadaist, expressionist. There were legs, bags, floors, pigeons, statues, a zoom on the Eiffel Tower, a shot of a crêpe, women's stockings, hats, the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Élysées, Montmartre, the Seine, a croissant, three glasses of champagne draped around black olives. The Eiffel Tower again, this time atop the Eiffel Tower, tourists with the German flag. Stop! I said, because I had once more to recite something from memory:

Matthews understood no German, but admired the Germans because they looked so prosperous and moved conspicuously with complete light-heartedness through a city into which they had once marched.

The three beautiful faces again, before the words *The End* ran across the screen. Grandmother had watched, mesmerized, and eaten all the popcorn.

She clapped. Katharina bowed and then quickly cleared everything away. Thank you, she said, thank you for this lovely trip. Grandmother was suddenly tired, earlier, I was always shocked by these abrupt attacks of fatigue, believed she was dying.

I laid her onto the bed, her head seemed to me too large in comparison to her body, which continued to disappear. I would like to put my flat at the disposal of a refugee family. Can you arrange that?

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Again this grueling cross-examination. Did I, through my companionship, give back to her everything that she had done for me? And was that the right question? Was it about giving back? Should I not just be there, the way a thing is there, simply according to natural law?

As I opened the door, I saw that she was not alone. On the edge of the bed sat a woman who wore her long, unwashed hair savagely, and who had the expression of a dying swan.

I'm your great aunt from America. Finally, I get to see you! You look good! You've grown tall! What are you doing here?

I'm looking after my grandmother, I responded, and felt caught out with my ill thoughts.

She must be so pleased you're looking after her. She surely gives you a huge welcome every day! Oh, it's you, my dear! she must say to you.

I heard how grandmother laughed. I looked at her. And as I wanted to turn back again to my great aunt, she had disappeared.

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She did not want me to tell her about earlier times. She got upset when I tried to do this. I explained her refusal to myself like this, that she had run through her own history for long enough, now it was time for her to draw a line under it, a border across which no one was allowed to pass, and if so, then only with her permission, only she possessed the right to say, come let us recount these events from my life.

She also had taboos; the death of my parents was her greatest taboo.

Only once did she say to me, it's not right for someone to survive their children. After that, her grief never again became speech. It grew in her like a black flower. I have a black flower in my belly, she said.

You know, she said, it doesn't matter to me if my name goes forgotten, if no one knows who I was anymore. Quite the opposite, I find it comforting to know that one disappears into the endless sea of history. Perhaps someone fishes me out someday and says, look there was also this woman, and she lived like this and like this. And in the end, she had a growth that spread everywhere, even into her brain. There are great people who disappear from society's memory, those who among the billions of people can claim only a tiny club of those who haven't forgotten. Who remembers Wisława Szymborska?

I am a tranquillizer. / I am effective at home, / I work well at the office, / I take exams, / I appear in court, / I carefully mend broken crockery -- / all you need do is take me, / dissolve me under the tongue, / all you need do is swallow me, / just wash me down with water.

Perhaps we'll meet each other someday in the giant sea.

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You take away my loneliness.

I turned her carefully to the other side. The pain was horribly powerful, despite the medication she had to take.

You take away my loneliness, and I'd like to give you a keepsake. Your grandfather loved the story about the farmer and his donkey, who on their way home got caught in a storm. It was a snow storm, I think, like there seldom is in this region, so one is not prepared for it. After a while, they could go no further, they had to stop and seek shelter. One could no longer see, they could do nothing other than stay standing where they were, they were snowed in. The donkey was quite happy about it, even though he did not like the snow at all and his fur already felt completely stiff, he surrendered himself to the cold with a kind of longing for death, because he had for his whole life disliked the drudgery, the relentless toil, and all the beatings. To the time that humans called life, he felt no commitment at all. The farmer, in contrast, still busied himself with many plans that were vitally important to him. He wanted to expand his land, acquire more cattle, build a new barn, test out a resistant strain of maize. He wanted everyone to think he was a successful man. So he had no intention to die, and also no time for it. It seemed to him senseless to have to go in this way. The farmer tried everything to conquer this storm and this bitter cold, he performed many excessive and futile actions, crawling in the end under the donkey in order to stay warm and so not have to die. The donkey readily allowed everything to happen. He had never before encountered his master as so affectionate. At noon on the next day, both were dead.

And I'm the donkey, your grandfather said every time at the end of  
  
the story. And I'm the donkey.

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There were days when nothing worked anymore. On these days I felt an intense despair, which pressed down so powerfully on my chest that I could hardly breathe. My doctor called them panic attacks. These were usually also the days when my grandmother no

longer wished to live. At such moments she reminded me of the small fledgling we had found and whom I, then the child living with her, wanted to feed, I wanted to be its mother, because this bird was also me. Grandmother helped me. We tried to feed it with drinking straws, but nothing stayed in its beak, everything came back out, the poor bird could not swallow and its life slowly expired.

When I looked at my grandmother on such days, I understood with all hardness the word expires. She was expiring, like the bird, who in the end could only lay on its side, could hardly hold its eyes open. Life slowly left, once in a while there was a sputter, only just briefly.

As if to take away my dark thoughts, she sang. I saw that she had visitors. My great aunt was on the edge of the bed. Soon I'll no longer be able to come, I heard her say, and my grandmother responded to her with a song. It was an invented song.

You are a man, you are a woman, still young. You should somehow establish yourself. Who said that life must be lived with courage?

Yes, I had no courage, but that's not what I'm missing, said my great aunt, I was also the only one among us who married in a beautiful white gown. I never found myself in a situation where I would have had to have courage.

Everything was so easy. Without my really having to do anything, my life functioned. Husband, flat, children, dog. And now look at me! How restless I am!

My grandmother wore no shoes and no socks and sat like a Queen of the Mummies in her wheelchair. Her feet were figureheads on a ship's prow. We were the ship of the dying pirates. Ahoy! Ahoy! We were barefoot like many other people on this day, all over Europe, as a sign of our solidarity with the Syrian refugees, in order to signal to them that we were trying to understand a little of what they had experienced on their way here. The refugee family who lived in her flat was also present, and the entire staff marched with us. Grandmother was an artist of persuasion. The local press took a photo

of her in her wheelchair, as leader of the small demonstration. The next day, it was on the front page.

That was her last photo. I remember quite precisely the change in her expression, she must have had this thought at the same time as I did. My last photo.

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The fact that there, where our lives and deaths had earlier taken place, very different languages, different ways of thinking will now be lived, was seen by grandmother as a gentle tempest that takes everything with it and makes way for something new, that is how she put it.

If she had to build an ark, she would want to save the greatest and even the most melodramatic emotions, would want to rescue the last speaker of a dying language and perhaps give up Verdi, she would not want to admit a single competition onto her ark, not athletic, not literary, not social, and also not economic, while she listed them off, she touched her fingers, as if to give the whole thing a calculated weightiness. The world has become a circus.

As I tried to write down her thoughts, I completely forgot that she really lay there and that her life now consisted almost entirely of spoken words, and that her body had become like the forgotten donkey of Saint Francis. She should not sink into the great sea of forgetting. I had stepped in to prevent this. It was clear to me that I was fooling myself, that I was a Don Quixote, because if nobody opened my notebook, my sentences would be lost forever. Sometimes I thought that I had grown pale and thin and I carried her death inside me.

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What are you writing there, she asked, suddenly wide awake and with a tone as if she had caught me sneaking sweets?

Nothing, I said, just some sentences, nothing, but she had not waited for my answer and had fallen back asleep.

The horrible pain left her looking tired and tense. The dosage of pain medication was raised. You're my diva, I heard myself saying. We had agreed to speak little. I played *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* for her. We need kitsch and good music; she had whispered into my ear. Who has forbidden us kitsch? She liked Wyclef Jean's version the best.

The chairs stood empty. We both knew grandfather and great uncle were negotiating. We knew they were looking for a good path to the other side. They spoke with Charon, or were themselves Charon and were building the reed boat.

Grandfather, great uncle.

We looked at the empty chairs and discovered in ourselves an inkling that time was closing in on itself.

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I no longer know how it came about. I only remember a sentence that suddenly stood in the room.

From the silence of horses one should learn.

She had placed this string of words into our daily waiting. We were masters of waiting, we sat next to each other and waited, waited for it to be time for bed, and for me to go home. At home, I waited for sleep, which almost never came. It was as if I were in a



seventy-day jetlag. She had planted the sentence in a way that surprised us both, and we both knew that we now had to pursue it.

The next day, we were in the horse stable of the farmer neighbouring the home. I stood there; my grandmother next to me in her wheelchair. I loved the smell. The horses, however, did not conform to the sentence. They were not silent; they were not still. They struck me as loud. Loud, without words. Grandmother marveled like a small child. Hush, she said. She whooped the name Ottavio, one of the horses came to her and licked her hand in passing. I decided to read to her passages from Cormac McCarthy when we were back in her room. All the Pretty Horses. You'll like him, a marvelous author, authentically written and eloquent. Eloquent, she repeated, that's not what we are, we with our dialects that lay claim to a big part of our expressiveness, so that little is left over for writing. Yes, we can't bring the power of dialect to harbour in the so-called written language.

McCarthy is a horse person, a horse enthusiast, he surely knows this silence you know and I don't understand. Grandmother looked at me distrustfully, like someone who tells you in the next sentence, I don't believe a word you say!

Without horses I'd never have made it in this world, as a child I was with them every day in the stable or in the pasture. They gave me the strength to live and to grow. I wanted to stay a child and to die as a child. But they pulled me through and I grew older, and later they showed me your grandfather. Yes, we met through the horses.

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Breakfast still lay on the tray. It smelt strongly of coffee and toast. Ever since I had known her, she has had coffee and toast for breakfast. This mixture of aromas elicited in me a feeling of being protected, for a long time the smell reminded me of my childhood with my grandparents, the good humour, the belief that everything in this world is big and beautiful. She had not touched a thing. Not hungry? She was silent. Her brow was

damp. She had thrown the bedsheet to the side. On her upper thigh I saw large spots, like fried eggs that had been left for too long. When she realized I was examining her, she simply said, he's at work in me again. That is how she described it. Cancer was a workman who did things that threatened her. He did things that would bring her death. I dabbed the sweat from her brow with a bath towel the American great aunt was supposed to have brought over, a man on a Vespa watches an alluring woman who crosses the piazza in a tight dress, below in red letters: this is amore.

How do I look? You look gorgeous. Do you think they'll take me with these spots? The spots will definitely please grandfather, I said, such a lovely woman like you. She smiled, as if she had come from far away and as if she had just now recognized me. And I waited for her to say to me, Oh, it's you, but she said nothing, only smiled. You'll dress yourself nicely and no one will see the spots, it's even possible that the spots will just disappear if you pay them no mind.

I did not know if she heard me, if she was on standby. A nurse came in, pointed to the gold-black of the flag in her hair so that one could decisively assign her a nationality.

A good life means that one can die without noticing, my grandmother suddenly said, and I did not know from where she had this sentence and why it now came from her mouth. The scene reminded me of a television series.

She said she is like a probe that has been sent into the universe, each person is such a probe, and life is the signals they send to other people. And the less life there is there, and the more the instruments are shut down so that not too much energy is used, so that the control center can still steer them, all the more the probes distance themselves, until the signals become so weak that no one can receive them any longer, but the signals are there, and they will be sent forever out of the interstellar emptiness.

Grandmother pressed a small picture of Pioneer 10 into my hand. This is for you, she said, I saved this for you, on the back was an advertisement for silk

stockings.

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The stars! she cried out; we've forgotten the stars. When I was your age so many stars could be seen in the sky. Sometimes I would go outside with a wool blanket, lay back and look up, until I disappeared into the signs made from stars. It really is wonderful that they form themselves into signs for our eyes, as if they knew that we search for images, that we create images for ourselves.

In her cellar I found some old army blankets. As I came into her room grandmother was already in the wheelchair, dressed like an astronaut, Alexandra stood next to her, she loves the stars and owns a telescope, grandmother declared, and Alexandra's eyes are stars.

To me, we looked like people from a different time, from a past world. A small group of time travelers who, lost in a field, set course for the stars.

Grandmother also wanted to lay on the blanket, we heaved her out of the wheelchair. Her body, in this expanse, looked even thinner, her astronaut clothing hung on her like slackened skin.

I only just realize how much I miss earth, she said, dry earth, moist, loamy earth, to dig in with the fingers, I almost lack the strength for it, but look, I'm doing it, the fingers are now in. A beautiful goal, to become earth. I hope I'm not too poisonous for the plants that should grow from me.

Grandmother flower.

Alexandra gave her a cup of warm tea and let her look through the telescope, but she saw hardly anything because she was unable to close the other eye. I

look at my grandmother, that is enough for me. The Big Dipper picks me up and carries me with it, she laughed.

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A car came along the road toward us, so that the headlights broke the connection to the sky, it stopped, a man got out, looked in our direction, got in again, and drove off, after which a vast darkness reigned. Only after a certain time could we again distinguish the lights in the sky.

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In her loveliest voice, as if she had remembered the voice with which she must have once spoken to grandfather, she explained to me that she will soon be able to go home. The doctors had made a mistake, and now they've seen it and are letting me go. The nurse who administered her medication and readjusted her in the bed, on this day her name was Irene, showed no reaction to what grandmother said. I also wanted to be so professional and said nothing. Don't tell me that you're not pleased! Aren't you pleased? The Syrian family can still keep living at my place. I don't need much space. One room is really enough for me. When she realized that I said nothing to that, she let the nurse cover her and fell asleep. I thought at the time, she fell asleep so suddenly in order to punish me.

I still remained by her side for a while and read her a little from the newspaper she had received.

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These days, I thought while I looked out over the landscape stiffened with cold, they had reported once-in-a-century temperatures, but there was no all-clear signal expected, the climate warms up over the long term, these days should have turned on something definite, on a feeling that one has only once in a lifetime, but in its place came something else, there reigned a world in which I

did not know how to cope.

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All of a sudden it was there, the invitation to dinner. Just a small note on blue-lined paper, without name, without date, without location. Will you come to dinner sometime? I would like that.

I flipped and turned the piece of paper, I sniffed it, I searched for secret signs so as to discover from whom the invitation came. Perhaps a conversation would spring up with the author who had invited me over the question, for example, of whether it would be possible to show my grandmother the sea. She would love to experience one last time the sunrise, the cry of the seagulls, the feeling of endlessness, this standing-on-the-edge-of-the-great-being.

What are you doing there, my grandmother asked, she appeared to have come out of a dream, aren't my two lads here? She attempted a smile, her skin was not yet awake, it acted as if it had been stressed for too long in a hot bath. I gave her our daily kiss on the forehead, on this spot her great power could be felt, it always seemed to me that I received something from it with every kiss.

[paragraph/section break? end p. 68]

It stayed one of those days where I wanted to vanish, to not be there at all. To step back from life for a whole day, to take a break, to turn everything off. Grandmother had fallen asleep again, she seemed a shadow, just as if she too may have wanted to retire for a moment, step back just briefly. It won't be much longer, a voice said, I expected the on-duty doctor, as I turned my great uncle stood there, he went to his chair, sat, soon we'll be ready, his words were not necessarily directed at anyone, but it seemed as if it were important to him to speak them.

This here is a good place, here there are only the forces of life, even when it has to do with death, in the camp there were only the forces of destruction, I knew they would never be able to give me life, they came out of a darkness in

which no life governs, they were the caretakers of death, so they couldn't break me. Only what can give life can take you from one life into another.

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He always made such lovely speeches, whispered my grandmother. In the room it was just the two of us again.

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I found her looking quite distraught. The day was sunny and lit her room so strongly it was as if a stage-light technician were at work. Grandmother's bed stood in the center, and light and shadow performed as if some natural force wished to create a special drama. The end is coming, she wrote for me on this day, with scrawled handwriting on a slip of paper. I read the sentence aloud, my voice sounded wrong. That I can no longer recall the face of my mother, she said quietly, it threatens me, I can hardly breathe, she's not allowed to disappear, only I can still keep her for this world. I wanted to tell you what she looked like, now it's no longer possible, my mother is disappearing forever!

She cried. I embraced her. Keep hold of my face, she said.

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I had prepared well. I wanted to shorten the day for her by reading aloud. I love your voice, she said, and, you know, if I don't hear everything because I fall asleep now and then, it doesn't matter, because the words also reach me in sleep, they ensnare me, they take my pain from me. How I came to *The Swimmer*, by John Cheever, I no longer know. Someone had given me the book. An ex-swimmer resolves, on a warm summer day, to swim home. Twelve miles through all the rivers and swimming pools that lay on the path home. After a few pages, grandmother said she feels the effect, her soul is becoming perfectly restless, yes, it's like that, it's like swimming home.

She fell asleep briefly while I read on, her delicate snore was a good metronome. As Katharina, the nurse, entered, she awoke with a sentence on her lips.

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We swim home when we die. No one knows how many years we'll afterwards be gone. Your grandfather has already been underway for ten years with your great uncle. They're playing the revolutionaries.

Grandmother smiled at the nurse. She stood up, gave her hand, and they walked in the direction of the shower.

And then, looking in at the window, he saw that the place was empty.

That's a sad ending, protested my grandmother, I won't come to an empty house, people are waiting for me, you already know that. Come here and dry me gently with the towel. I asked Katharina if the dinner invitation was from her. She only looked at me and said nothing. I carried grandmother back to her bed.

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She was already dressed and she sat on grandfather's chair, she had placed a hat casually onto her now very small head, it's from Miriam, she said, the beach hat from Miriam, I still want to visit the sea before I die. Swimming home. I've reserved the car. I was struck dumb, she surprised me again and again with her back and forth between near death and wholly alive. She held a sailor's cap out to me, it is from her friend, you should put it on and take me to the sea.

I'm swimming across the county, Ned said.

Why, I didn't know one could, exclaimed Mrs. Halloran.

In the car, she explained to me how much she valued my generation, who make no distinction between old and young, who just are and accept people as people, and don't exclude them because they look different or have a wrinkled skin. I looked over at her

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and discovered a large pair of rose-colored glasses on her face, she looked like a magic toad. Yes, not like us, she said, we were narrow-minded, we thought that, after thirty, nothing more should come, we were arrogant and conceited because of our adolescence, and of course that wasn't our fault. But grandmother, that's not at all true, that was only later, much later, but she was not listening anymore, sea, she said. Sea.

We had decided to take the direct route, as direct as possible, without detour toward the sea. I would have preferred it if we had been able to prepare for the trip, but the time pressed, grandmother had said, she felt that the moment had arrived, now or never, and the word never from her lips had contracted my throat, I knew I had to act, and now we sat in the car, poorly equipped, only enough pain medication was on hand so she would not have to suffer so much from the exertion. It rained, and the back and forth of the windscreen wipers tired my grandmother so that she fell asleep after a few meters and appeared to have savage dreams, because she jerked her entire body and fought back with her hands against something threatening. I pulled into a rest stop and also fell asleep.

When I awoke, because someone was knocking on the window, I did not know for a long while where I was and what I was doing here, as I discovered my grandmother next to me, I first thought, she's dead, but then I heard a faint snoring, and the memory came to me like an old friend one meets unexpectedly on a journey. We're going to the sea! I just wanted, well, when I saw you in the car, yeah, then I thought, then you should ask if they need help. No, everything's okay, I said, and felt the fine rain on my face. Thank you! The man moved off in the direction of a kiosk. I opened the door and ran after him, you're our savior, you're running a kiosk in just the right place, I need two coffees and chocolate bars.



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Already in Thun, at the foot of the Alps, grandmother had grown impatient. She said her back ached, as if someone were jabbing a sharp knife into every bone of her spine. She

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tried to be strong, but she suffered, she suffered horribly, I saw it, and she was also sad, sad that it was now completely clear she would never make it to the sea. Her entire store of energy was no longer enough.

I parked between the train station and the ship's landing, the rain had stopped, a strong wind had arisen and wiped away all the clouds, everything now appeared over illuminated, grandmother looked splendid in her wheel chair with her sunglasses, a proper diva. In this light one also did not see her pain. She asked a taxi driver if the sea was far away, no just over there, look, there, very close, is the sea. I'll bring you there. The taxi driver pressed a small tin into my hand. Sea salt stood there in jaunty handwriting. I looked at him astonished, did he know more than me? Was he an angel, sent to fulfil an impossible wish for my grandmother? He reminded me of a figure from a piece by Durrenmatt we had seen in school.

He brought us to a lake front that was a bit overgrown, bushels of grass grew out of the sand and looked like the last of nature's sentinels in a struggle against the water. He might just as well have chosen a pretty Mediterranean beach.

The taxi driver guided us to a place where the sand was white and glittered, as if it had been gilded. He brought blankets from his car. Perhaps you're cold, the weather here changes quickly. He kissed my grandmother's hand. She smiled and asked, is it you? The taxi driver seemed not to hear the question. He briefly disappeared and reappeared with a picnic basket. Here's my number, call me and I'll come get you. Before he disappeared, he opened the tin of sea salt.

Grandmother smiled and held the hand he had kissed to her left cheek.

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And suddenly, as if by some inexplicable magic trick, the other shore disappeared before us, the waves rose, and a salty, warm wind sprang up and brought to us the smell

of pines and eucalyptus. Here it is, the sea, the sea, said my grandmother. She squeezed her eyes shut and looked out into the expanse. 40

The sea, the sea, I thought of a poem by Ungaretti, I had chosen it for my final school exam, so as to compare it with the translation of Ingeborg Bachmann. And now the poem seemed to have become quite timely, a poem that would have needed to be read in all the boats coming across the Mediterranean.

Without dreams, an uncolored field is the sea, / The sea.

As I laid out all the blankets, we had received the wind stirred everything up. The waves tumbled over and made this rhythmic slapping that triggers in me the assuredness of an ever-recurring bond with our origins. The wind also carried over to me the joyful cry of my grandmother: To now die!

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I remember a boat trip on a small lake in an alpine valley. My uncle and I were rowing quite contentedly. Everything looked pin sharp to us, the mountains, the meadows, and the houses clinging to the mountain ridges, the small boat cottages that had been transformed into holiday boxes, the walkers and their dogs who moved as if in a marionette theatre, when suddenly a storm swept in out of nowhere and made everything disappear, it took the whole tranquility

with it too, only threatening water could still be seen. We had almost died back then.

Grandmother gave me her hand, she coughed, her body seemed to be leaving her, I took her in my arms, in the distance I saw how the taxi approached us.

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After our unwanted, early return, we remained persistently silent on the topic, but we both knew there would never again be a major trip. This knowledge opened an abyss in me, I felt it physically, I saw how my chest opened, exposed my heart, and, again and again, the blood ran over everything. We were at our wit's end and found no language that could have communicated to us the new reality. The sea had become the ultimate end of our possibilities.

We saw the image of the sea, and this image seemed to us like an old lighthouse in which the light threatened to go out, so that we would go missing forever and would never find what we desired.

We did not know if the hundred days had already been reached, perhaps, so we thought, we have cheated them and have already passed well beyond the hundred days. Precision is for healthy people, for us a precise intuition is enough, my grandmother wrote for me on a slip of paper.

The doctor hurried into our room and was quite upset, above all he berated me, he found me irresponsible, where he powerfully emphasized *responsible*, my thoughts were in the abyss and with the waves at the lake, I remembered a dream, I boarded a bus with my new bicycle, I had to go to the airport, but there was a lake with gigantic, oceanic waves that threatened to wash the bus away, grandmother said, leave the boy in peace, it was my idea, I felt like a boy, she coughed terribly, I thought, I see blood, blood that sprayed from her

mouth, or was it just an image?

The doctor pulled my grandmother to him and gently tapped her on the back, don't choke, he said, I embraced her too, don't choke.

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The time had come into which grandmother could pass like a meteorite slipping into the atmosphere, vaporizing, vanishing, traces in the ground, but mostly composed of light

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for a fixed period of incandescence. My grandmother was able to just be, she could look into time without dividing it. When we spoke of time, great uncle always said he'd been born twice, once before the war and once after the war, in between had been a kind of pre-death. I thought they always looked regal in their ancient bodies when they made such speeches.

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I beheld the tiny cadaver feet of my grandmother, they pointed to a crack in the plaster. I saw a cat that lay at her feet, without ever leaving the bed, and when the cat left the bed, I knew the woman in the bed, who was my little grandmother, had died. I stood up quickly, climbed onto my Vespa, and rode to her.

Well, that had been it now. I stood there and wept.

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I could see both towers, that of the parish church and that of the television

tower that was no longer in use. Their spires were cut off by low-hanging fog. Only their lower halves could be discerned.

I had of course assumed that I would still be travelling to her for a long time. And in that instant, it seemed to me, the circumstances had quickly consummated themselves, very quickly, there was no planning, no *what-to-do?* had been possible. I had not been able to follow every one of her thoughts, I had not been in every one of her worlds. I had told her that I love her, but perhaps I had not found a path into those spiritual realms, was unable to do what she had demanded of me. I had disappointed her.

I opened the window, very quietly, so that she would not wake, from the noise and from the wind that swept into the room from outside, as if it still had something to settle. Her

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tiny feet remained still. I felt I had a long struggle behind me. It had to do with the sense of being foreign, with the onset of a loneliness and a longing that could not be named.

Someone says, if you like, we can take care of the arrangements. I cannot assign the voice, I only turn the word around in my head, remain with arran and range and gem and ments, and am barely able to escape from it again. A hand touches my back, I read Tanja on the name tag, she presses the letter into my hand and says my condolences, her hair is much longer on one side and gives her face something quick, don't delay me, I must keep on.

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Letter.

I remember the days that slipped by as if no sun had risen, as if there had been no wind, as if no heat, no cold had occurred. Days where nothing happened and

one knew precisely that one had to endure this day, to get through, to just scrape by, as they say. In the evening one would then say, what kind of day was that? What did I do? And one would discover that there was nothing to discover, because nothing had happened. A day for deletion. Yes, there were days one could delete. What would happen to the time that had been deleted? Could one claim it again? Call it back? Deletion would mean to deposit the time in a time bank. Is there such a place? Is there someone who asks us at life's end, how many deleted days do you have? Or is it the case that the life after our life is made up of deleted days? That the soul need only wander on for so long, before the deleted days have been used up? Stop thinking like that, my second voice says. There is no life after life.

Days where nothing happened were, in my imagination, hot days, such brilliantly illuminated days that everything dazzled and nothing could be distinguished, as if one were in a desert, left alone to oneself, without a horizon. So bright that one's own hand dazzled. So hot that no thoughts were possible. The Inferno. One is quite alone on such

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days. But, in all honesty, I will want to have all the days back, yes, and you must help me with this.

Katharina and Alexandra had dressed her in the beautiful dress she had chosen for the crossing. Say if you need anything, I needed nothing. Nothing kept hold of me. I would have wanted grandfather and great uncle to come once more, in order to tell me that this other side really exists and that everything was successful, so as to pull me out of this infinite hole that I felt inside myself. I only now realized what foothold had been given to me by the daily repetition of my actions. Everything had happened according to a specific pattern, as if there would have been a law that conveyed how my life was to look. This pattern caused a feeling of eventlessness and eternity at the same time. Death was part of this. She leaves so that I have space, she had said to me. I did not understand what she had meant by that, but today, as I opened the door and saw how she looked almost like a little girl in her lovely, delicate dress, I grasped at once what everything meant, she had wanted to leave me a portion

of her lived time, in this way she had wanted to enrich me.

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The rain lashed my face, the storm was called Irene or Panta Rei, I no longer knew exactly. The pain hammered in my head. I tried to protect the ashes of my grandmother and held the vessel, in which she was confined, under my jacket, tightly against my body. The ashes are all that remain on this side, she had written to me in one of her notes. An entire life in an urn. Plain, without any ornament, the name concealed. I went alone to the internment of the ashes into the wall. It had been her wish. No big commotion, like at my birth: my mother, the midwife, and I.

And now I stood there with the ashes of my grandmother under my jacket, the cemetery's South German stone mason, who was supposed to seal the entirety with handsome stones, stood ready, stones we had taken from our last excursion. As we laid

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her into the niche the stone mason said, go ahead and take a bit of ash with you, one never knows.

He took a small tin, which looked similar to the tin with the sea salt, and filled it with ash.

As if in a distinct picture, I saw her with my grandfather and great uncle crossing a place at the river. Her dress was wet and shone as if illuminated by a headlight, or was it a film with Super-8 motion?

When the spot had been walled shut, I felt absolutely wretched and weak, the sweat moistened my scalp as if I were standing in rain.

The South German stone mason said to me, I'll drive you home, I let it happen, even though I did not know where that was.