

Edgar Selge
SO YOU FINALLY FOUND US
Rowohlt Buchverlag
304 pages / 19 October 2021

A twelve-year-old boy tells his story: that of a life shaped by prison walls and classical music.

A child grows up in the early 1960s, in a town that is neither large nor small, in a middle-class family that spends a lot of time making music together. The father is a prison director. It hasn't been that long since the end of the war, and the parents' dedication to music and literature is an attempt to make up for what they call their lost years.

Yet the boy sees cracks everywhere in this orderly world. He listens attentively to the political debates between his older brothers and parents at the dining table. But he remains an observer. He increasingly takes refuge in the worlds offered by his imagination. This boy, whom the author sees as a distant brother, tells us about his life and, in so doing, discovers his view of the world. Every now and then, when the 73-year-old Edgar Selge speaks as himself, it becomes clear that the shadows of the generation that lived through the war reach all the way into our present time.

Edgar Selge's narration is breathless, physical; it takes risks. It is filled with wit and musicality. Whether as Bach or Beethoven, Schubert or Dvořák, a military march or gospel, music wraps itself around the story like a second narrative, accompanying its unflinching push for freedom.

Edgar Selge, one of Germany's foremost character actors, was born in 1948. He grew up in Herford in eastern Westphalia. His father was a prison director. After studying Philosophy and German Language and Literature in Munich and Dublin, and Classical Piano in Vienna, he completed his actor's training at the Otto Falckenberg School in Munich in 1975. Selge has received numerous awards for his work. He is married to the actress Franziska Walser; the couple have two children. *So You Finally Found Us* is his literary debut.

- 160,000 copies sold!
- Recommended by [New Books in German](#).
- Rights sold to the Netherlands (De Arbeiderspers).
- Extended Sample translation available.
- Awarded with the City of Fulda Prize for the best German-language debut.
- German Audiobook Award 2022 in the category "Best Narrator".



EDGAR SELGE

SO YOU FINALLY FOUND US

HOME CONCERT

I'm off to practise, my father says, disappearing into the piano room and shutting the door behind him. He spends every spare minute at his grand practising. I stay in the hall, with nothing much to do. But it's not as boring as all that. I can listen, or I can hold conversations in my head. And sometimes someone comes by and talks to me.

My father is practising for the home concert. As soon as one is over, the next come onto the horizon. We pretty much live between concerts. It actually consists of two performances each time. In the morning come the inmates from the borstal next door. Not all of them of course. There are four hundred. But around eighty certainly. My father makes a selection; as governor he has a good overview. In the evening my parents' friends are invited, academic couples from our small town.

On those days there's a lot of shifting furniture around. The borstal lads, as we call them, bring their chairs with them for the concert. This means our furniture has to be moved out of the way: tables into the corners, chairs and armchairs alongside the sofas against the wall. Before the evening event our own furniture has to be rearranged into a concert setup. And afterwards it all has to go back in its original place. All this rearranging is dealt with by four lads under my father's direction. The week before is stressful. I pick up on that because I spend so much time out here in the hall. It's pretty long, like a bowling alley, and everyone has to walk past me. You can grasp the tension in handfuls. My father still has to master the tricky sections and practises the same passages over again obsessively. Sometimes slowly, sometimes fast. Some of them get better, some refuse to yield, some remain risky.

My mother feels the pressure too. She's up to here with the preparations. Although food is not the main thing, not at all – it's constantly emphasised that the concert isn't about food – it's still nice to offer people a little something. And the inmates shouldn't be deprived either. They get liver sausage sandwiches and apple juice.

But what stresses my mother the most is dealing with the professional violinist. He comes a few days early, from Hamburg, stays with us, and rehearses with my father. He is fussy about food. As soon as he arrives everything revolves around him. He's an artist, calls the shots and sets the standards – not solely in musical areas but altogether. My father should be grateful he gets to accompany such a musician. He's very lucky. And although he normally radiates self-confidence, funny and quick-witted with it, he panders to this artist without question.

For her hospitality my mother receives a free lesson from the Hamburg violinist. For that she needs to prepare properly, but barely has time to practise. Nevertheless she is grateful. A lesson from such an outstanding virtuoso is quite something. But afterwards she goes around with tearstained eyes. His merciless criticism of her playing upsets her. And when I meet her in the corridor like that it upsets my stomach. There's no talking to her and she just shakes her head when I ask what's up. But she has her own opinions about everything and will not be deterred. At the dining table she disagrees with the violinist where she sees fit, but does it so that my father doesn't get the feeling the man's freedom of speech is being restricted.

Late at night, when my parents have gone to bed, from their bedroom I hear my mother saying things such as: I think we might be allowed to point that out without him feeling we're undermining his status as an artist.

Whether my father dreams of being a pianist, I don't know. He is pragmatic and only gives thought to problems he can find a solution for.

I suspect he is wholly content being what he is: a prison governor who plays the piano very well.

Once, while I'm standing in the hall listening to him practice, my brother Werner passes by. He stands next to me, in front of the double doors to the living room. His eyes light up, he puts his finger to his mouth and his ear to the door.

Listen to this, he whispers.

Inside we can hear a tak, tak, tak, tak...

It's the metronome. Otherwise silence. Dad is probably still absorbing the beat he's set. Then he starts. A Mozart piano sonata, A minor, not for the concert – he's playing it for fun. He immediately finds the right tempo, expressing himself naturally as if telling a story.

Wait a minute, Werner whispers.

And it's true – in the second theme with the semiquaver runs dad is speeding up. He's left the metronome beat behind.

Hear that?

I nod.

He's playing too fast, no doubt about it. You can tell straight away because he's ahead of the metronome. But he carries on playing, unperturbed. Clearly he prefers his own speed.

My brother laughs quietly. He isn't listening to it! he says. It doesn't bother him in the slightest! Can you tell? He's got no sense of rhythm at all. Werner shakes his head repeatedly, can't stop laughing, leaves me standing there and shuts the various doors behind him to go and practise cello in his room.

He has recently become a music student. I'm still at junior school.

Ok, so our father has a rhythmical deficiency. That doesn't help me much. He is strict and demands respect, whether or not he plays faster than the metronome.

The next time my father retreats to his piano room, I stand behind the door again. Listen, I think, perhaps he'll be out of time with the metronome again. But nothing comes. No metronome, no piano. Just footsteps on the carpet.

I look through the keyhole; there's no one around this minute. I'm amazed at the image in front of my eyes: the picture frame is shaped like a Ludo figure, at its centre my father, walking in aimless circles around the carpet. Something is bothering him. He finds some fluff on the ground, picks it up and places it carefully on the table. He walks towards his favourite painting, Rembrandt's Man with the Golden Helmet. It almost looks like he's talking to the painting. Then he strides to the grand, turns round looks straight at the door I'm behind. I start, but I'm not that stupid; he can't see me. He places a hand on the black lid of the grand and... takes a bow. He is standing alone in his piano room bowing towards the door I'm looking through! All the while he's smiling like an old cat and nodding repeatedly in all directions. In mine too. As if I was an auditorium full of people! The thought flashes through my mind that he's a lot like me.

Now he pulls his handkerchief out of his trouser pocket, wipes the sweat from his palms, sits down at the keyboard, tosses the handkerchief deftly onto the music stand, next to the metronome, and plays his Mozart sonata.

Again he pulls of that theme beautifully. Easily. Effortlessly. With that inner agility which makes notes into music in the first place.

Who can I tell what I've just seen? My father is a serious man. I can't embarrass him! Perhaps he does dream of being a pianist after all.

The inmates walk from the borstal door to our flat in single file. Each is carrying a wooden chair in his hand, while the warders stand at a few metres' distance on the little cul-de-sac and watch that none of them make a run for it. The orders resound through our flat: Put the chairs down quietly! Don't bang the chair legs on the parquet like that! Keep off the furniture by the walls! The inmates in their blue overalls fill our rooms with their voices and smell, three large rooms: the dining room, piano room and study, connected to each other by sliding doors. A few borstal staff are already sitting in the piano room on the two fitted sofas right and left of the door: the psychologist, the two chaplains, the doctor and several social workers and teachers, most with their wives, the

Catholic chaplain with his sister. All except for Fräulein Arens, the only woman who works at the borstal. She is a social worker, runs the inmates' theatre group and comes from the Rhineland. My father calls her a clever woman because she can talk at meetings without using notes, even when the minister from Düsseldorf is present. She is sitting on her own.

The warders are standing along the walls and down the hall in green regulation jackets and caps waiting till it finally starts so they can sit down too.

Then my father comes through the piano room door with the violinist from Hamburg, both in black. They bow to the applauding audience, get settled with their instruments and sort their music out. Finally my mother comes in and sits on my father's left to turn the pages. Then there is a moment's silence. My father raises his bushy eyebrows and looks over the rim of his glasses to the violinist, who lifts his bow. And our classical music adventure begins.

Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann. Sometimes Brahms.

Simply violin sonatas.

My father making music in the midst of his inmates: I've described it to so many people, again and again, differently each time, my whole life long.

Now I'm sitting here writing it down. Let's hope I don't get lost in the words. The more precise I am, the more distant I feel from myself.

The inmates come one after the other through our front door. It's a deluge. Eighty young men. Both sections of the door are opened so they don't bash into anything with their chairs. They board our flat like a ship.

I wish they wouldn't clomp about like that! my mother says in the kitchen, where she is spreading slices of bread. She's worried about the parquet. We'll have to have it sanded and varnished again.

Why can't he do his concerts over there, in his institution? He's got heaps of room there!

My mother isn't really like that. Something else must be up which I don't know about.

It's perfectly clear why our father brings the inmates over to us. Prison walls and stone floors make too much echo. Like churches. Here the ceilings are over four metres high, with wooden floors, heavy curtains at the windows and there's a large Persian rug under the piano. The three rooms have a combined floor space of 120 square metres. The acoustics are incredible!

Also: being on the inside of a prison isn't for everyone. The professional violinist might be scared. All those cell-lined corridors, bars everywhere. Every door has to be unlocked and locked again before the next door can be unlocked and locked again. It's annoying. Sometimes you hear shouting. Visitors find it disturbing.

I think there's another reason though, why dad likes to have his lads over to our flat. They need to see what a family is like. They need to see how we live. He is proud of his four walls. My mother must know that really.

The inmates wear hobnailed boots. How could they not clomp on the floor? And they're not allowed to stop and take a good look around when they come in: wow, it's nice in here! They have to keep moving and make room for the ones following them. They aren't invited personally. We only know a few of their individual names.

They are prisoners. They are the masses, uniformed masses. Musicians rather like playing to the masses. The masses applaud vigorously. The masses can be frenetic.

The academic couples who come in the evening act cautiously as storks. And they whisper the whole time. Their voice catches in their throat when they cry out, Bravo! This is like a rally in comparison.

Here, one of them shouts, at the top of his voice so everyone can hear, It's my sideboard! My sideboard! I made that! He spreads his arms out and tries to span the entire width of the six-door birch cupboard in our dining room. I think, he'll get a bollocking from the warders any minute. They're not meant to touch our furniture. But the uniformed warder is the carpentry teacher. He stands next to the lad, looks at the sideboard and says, Nice work. You did a good job there. The boss bought it. That's an honour. You should be pleased. Now sit down.

And he does sit down, but still can't control himself. I made that for the apprenticeship exam! he shouts to the whole crowd he's sitting with. Got a distinction for it.

And now Frau Selge's keeping her silver in it, his neighbour says.

You can check, another said.

I lined all the cutlery drawers – with velvet!

Then he catches sight of the Van Gogh, the framed art print hanging right above his sideboard. A pear tree covered in white blossom in a field. It upsets him. Clearly the picture lends the piece of furniture a significance he could never have dreamt of while making it.

Now more and more inmates realise between them they've made everything here, every table, every cupboard, the bookshelves, corner cupboards – fine pieces, lots of walnut. Every chair is made by them, and the fitted sofas too. And they lovingly designed the radiator covers, like little toy prisons. They even sanded and varnished the parquet. We're surrounded by some incredibly hard work.

These are all their apprenticeship exam pieces. The uniformed carpentry teacher strokes a wooden rod running down from a fabric lampshade: This is the only piece of wood in this flat which hasn't passed through my hands. The inmates who hear this laugh.

The two black grand pianos are the only foreign bodies, an old Blüthner and a new Steinway. Two instruments which demand respect, on shiny brass wheels. My mother's mother sent the Blüthner straight after we moved in, from Berlin, so the music carried on.

We didn't have much. We were refugees, from Königsberg in East Prussia. We had been through a lot. Not me, of course – I was only born in '48 – but my parents, my brothers.

Originally we were Berliners. My mother came from the affluent, civil servants' area around the TV tower in Charlottenburg, west Berlin, Hölderlinstraße; my father from Lichterfelde. He came from a family of musicians; she from a family of music lovers.

They bring a real Berlin concert atmosphere to this little East-Westphalian town!

The war has been lost and national pride is at an all-time low. They have only survived the aftermath of the war by the skin of their teeth, yet the arts have remained intact. They are convinced of that. Even though there is not a single Jewish artist left in the country.

Culture is at their core; it is unshakable. Their heads are filled with poetry, above all my mother; music is in their blood and their fingers, above all my father.

Our parents have some stubbornly life-affirming resources to draw on. Somehow there's still so much energy there. Everything must be put right, condensed – feverishly and intensely. They still know what words like nation, identity and belonging mean.

And now they've discovered morality, especially the distinction between truth and lies. Here the focus is on me, because I am showing disingenuous tendencies. My parents are determined to rid me of them. At some point they won't be around any more. There'll be nothing more they can do for me.

I'm sitting amongst the inmates waiting, like everyone, for it to start. I have a great seat: first row in the middle, between the sliding doors. My feet are dangling into the piano room. I've got a good view of the musicians and of the packed room beyond them: forty inmates, chair to chair. And then there's the forty behind me.

But what's driving me crazy is the way they're all watching me. It's hard to cope with. Where do I end and where do the inmates begin?

Finally I lose my cool and feel a snigger coming. I suck my cheeks between my teeth till it hurts so that no one realises. Probably looks stupid, but somehow I have to hold it together. They're staring at me, I think, staring at me. The thought dominates all others.

Where have my older brothers got to? I've never asked either of them how they really feel amongst the lads. Music is always the main topic in our family, not the inmates; they're just part of the picture, like the neighbours, and the borstal next door. We're very much the people on the outside, which is fine by us.

And it is fine. We treat the inmates with respect, expose them to classical music, involve them in family life. They work for us, make our furniture, heat our house, keep the garden tidy, grow vegetables for us. Sometimes one of them makes a run for it, locks the warder – who was supervising him stoking the stove – in the basement, grabs one of our bicycles and scarpers.

Yes, it happens. Even amongst the ones already on day release, with a job outside the borstal, who leave it early in the morning and return late afternoon. Just at that point they run away, right before their release. Obviously they're caught. They're sent to another institution, for an extra year's sentence, at least.

I get terribly worked up about that. Why don't they wait? It won't be long till they're free!

My father raises his brows, gazes into the distance and nods imperceptibly to himself. Normally he deals with my questions swiftly. Not this one. He shrugs his shoulders. There are clearly some unresolved feelings lurking in him. It's not so long since he was a prisoner of war. He can understand the runaways. He knows what it's like as the release day approaches, after all that time, the day you've been dreaming of throughout. He grasps his chest with both hands, his neck, shows me the oppressive feeling of being in a cell which seems to be getting smaller and smaller. You just want to get out. Out! Out!

I still can't understand why someone would run away today when they are being released tomorrow. That's prison for you, he says patiently. Once the door has been locked behind you, and bolted from the outside, you start counting time in a different way.

Aha, I think. A different way of counting time.

They begin with Bach. My God it's beautiful when the violinist opens a Bach sonata with those rich bow strokes. Right from the first bars the music opens a door. I can hardly keep my legs still for delight. The violin glows and shines. Its tone is freeing, creates space. It's strong, life affirming. You breathe differently straight way. I'm proud to live in a family where I can hear this in the flesh. It's beyond beautiful. My parents call it sensual. To me a violin tone like that is a seduction. It's an invitation to enjoy pleasure the like of which doesn't otherwise happen in my life. All the violinists who play with my father have vibrato and bow strokes which make my jaw hang in amazement. And the violin sonatas, from Bach to Brahms, make it explicit that human beings are libidinous beings. This unsettles the assembled company.

It disturbs the inmates, who are obliged to sit still and listen. They are sitting opposite me. I observe them from my front-row seat. I notice how life comes into them, how each of them has to decide if they like it or not, if they want to open up to it or not.

Fräulein Arens, for instance, cannot help but smile. She has a ginger lady-moustache which now broadens with a sunny glow. The priest's eyes light up, Rev Kubis with the wooden leg. His wife tries to control her lips. Everyone is affected by the music and has to respond to it.

Now I can see both my big brothers' heads. They fit in well amongst the faces of the inmates. Martin, the oldest, is currently doing his school certificate, then has to do national service. Werner doesn't need a school certificate because he's studying music.

Martin and Werner: they'll both be leaving home soon, my parents say. It sounds terribly final. Leave home? Will they never come back? I ask.

Only to visit. Get used to the idea now and focus on your little brother from now on.

Suddenly I realise how influenced I am by my older brothers, every day, by their voices, their rebelliousness, their opinions. Without them daily life in our family would be lifeless. I immediately picture myself floundering between my parents, these two tanks whose manoeuvres I can never understand.

Take some interest in Andreas, they keep saying and give me an area of responsibility. That makes me panic. How can I play with my little brother? I don't play any more! I don't even want to! I want to be with the older ones, watching what they do.

As consolation they give me a knife for Christmas. It's a fixed blade knife with a staghorn handle in a leather sheath you can fix to your belt. For the outings with the Young Men's Christian Association. What's known as a travelling knife.

Is the blade really sharp? is my first question at Christmas dinner.
Try it outside! Not inside! They all shout: mum, dad, Martin and Werner.

Who was I then? I feel no different today than I did in the hallway as a child. I rarely get bored. I bore holes into the air with my gaze. I talk to myself. I'm the same dreamer.

That daft reflex question shoots through my head: can you see prison in the faces of prisoners? Is there a trace of their crimes in there? There must surely be something you can identify of the deed they've done. Their criminal energy must be expressed somewhere.

Criminal energy – if only I've never heard that expression.

Dad often shoots his mouth off. He doesn't notice I'm sitting there, then afterwards he's hopping mad that I heard everything. He doesn't notice me because he's talking so intently with my mother and my older brothers.

He's talking about Tino, the child murderer. He's been talking to Tino again and he's shocked at how delicate he is. Just a heap of misfortune. Tino barely says a thing. He's all clammed up. He's committed the worst crime imaginable yet he seems to lack any kind of criminal energy. When you see him among his fellow inmates he looks like he's been locked up by accident. I've been talking to him till I'm blue in the face trying to get him to speak again, my father says. He needs to be here in the family! He needs to come to the home concerts. He needs to understand that life carries on. What is criminal energy? I ask dad.

My high, piercing voice makes him jump. He is furious he's talked about Tino in my presence. He's managed not to notice me yet again.

Why aren't you in bed? he shouts. There is no such thing as criminal energy! If you really want to know what it is, take a look at yourself! The lads in the borstal here, especially the ones who come to our home concerts, all have good reasons for serving their sentences. And I'll hear no more about it!

Yes that's true. Compared to Tino I feel like a weak-willed small-time crook. My white lies and petty thefts are insubstantial. Tino has substance. Lamont too. My father respects them. It's because of their personalities and their crimes. The one is inseparable from the other.

To be on the safe side I'm banished next Sunday when my father reads aloud from *The Brothers Karamazov*. He's got to the chapter where Grushenka seduces Dimitri. Apparently it includes all sorts of things I shouldn't hear under any circumstances.

Edgar will just get the wrong end of the stick. He's too young for Dostoyevsky altogether. So just get to your room!

Why? I ask, bewildered. In my imagination Dimitri is my brother Martin, Ivan is Werner and I'm Alyosha. But of course no one in my family knows that.

I was looking forward to this chapter. Can't we just wait and see what happens? I ask my father.

Out, he says. I know what's coming. If we're not careful you'll be telling all sorts of stories to the neighbours. Away with you!

I go and stand just outside the door. But there I can barely understand a thing. I have to picture it all for myself. Above all the passages about Alyosha – I urgently need to know what they say, so I know who I am.

Of course I pass on lots of what I hear at our dining table to the neighbours. The warders' wives who make me hot chocolate in the afternoons are very curious. And when my father gets going he always says more than he meant to.

Against his better judgement he recently let slip that Frau Joswig, who lives above us with her husband and sons and comes for a bath in our tub once a week, only has one breast. He had to mention it because he wanted to demonstrate that I couldn't have seen her naked through the keyhole as I claimed, otherwise I would have noticed she only had one breast. That proved I must be lying.

I was just looking at the black triangle between her legs, I said truthfully. She was drying herself at the time so she was probably holding the towel over her breasts

She's only got one! dad shouted.

I passed on the story about the breast and eventually it got back to my father via Herr Joswig. I was in a lot of trouble then.

You just can't say anything when Edgar's at the table, my father said remorsefully. Basically all we can do is eat our soup in silence.

Criminal energy. How that expression claws away at me.

Could be I'm taking everything out of context, as my father says. Could be I'm connecting things which have nothing to do with each other.

Tino, whose crime of murdering a child rid him of his speech, has nothing to do with Frau Joswig, who lost one of her breasts – is what dad would say. But it's not like that in my head. There the image of my father biting into a white-fleshed peach on the sunny Chapel Bridge in Lucerne, dripping juice all down his front and looking delighted about it, takes equal prominence next to the image of Tino, the child murderer, and the naked Frau Joswig drying her breast in our bathroom. Here, in these rooms, at this concert, they belong together: my father at the grand piano, accompanying a Bach sonata, Frau Joswig sitting in the corner sofa with her arms folded, squeezed up next to Fräulein Arens and Rev Kubis, and Tino, who I can see in the first row, straight ahead of me on the other side of the piano room. The wild gigue in the final movement of the Bach sonata connects us, and the pervasive tone of the violin does everything in its power to give these various lives a shared meaning.

Tino's face looks thoroughly trustworthy. He can't be more than nineteen, but I see him as thirty or older. It's broad, pale and still, with a benevolent expression. I can gaze at him incessantly, as long as he doesn't notice. Right now he's leaning forwards, his elbows resting on his thighs, holding his head firmly with his hands. The music is pouring into him and just as I have to bite my cheeks when I can't handle other people's gaze, he has to hold his head tight because he can't handle the beauty of the music otherwise.

Sure I look for clues in the inmates' faces. I would really like it if life and its circumstances were painted onto people's faces so that you could translate their expressions back into the story of their lives. But life moves through people's faces in other ways, invisible. You can maybe sense the force of past events, nothing more.

I know next to nothing about the inmates. It's disgraceful how little I know. What does it mean, someone is a child murderer! Murderer altogether! What a monstrous word some people have to lug around with them, like a mark of Cain. And they all look so different: funny, serious, frightened, withdrawn, forthcoming. Some have eager, childlike faces, others look exhausted by life already, condemned to grief.

Lamont, for instance. Where is he then? I haven't seen him at all yet. Perhaps he's sitting behind me.

Like Tino, Lamont looks much older than he is and has a long sentence to serve. He will never run away before his release date. I don't think he can even picture himself outside of prison. Maybe one day they'll have to drag him out to freedom.

Unfortunately he'll only be staying with us till he's eighteen. It's possible my father can keep hold of him a little longer, but he would have to justify that clearly to the juvenile court judge. By twenty at the latest, youth custody is over. Then adult sentences begin. There, even my father's hands are tied. And harsher practices are in force at adult prisons than at ours. The reoffending rate is high. It's there that a lot of people really learn what criminal energy is.

[...]

KIDS' ROOM

I wake to hear my father groaning under the shower. His voice sounds bleak, bereft, and turns my stomach in an instant. This has been going on a few minutes now. No sound from the boiler; he's having a cold shower.

He clearly thinks no one can hear him. Perhaps he's remembering other times, the winter in Russia. Perhaps he's trying to toughen himself up, courting hardship. Perhaps he's thinking it all got too cosy again too quickly. He says that sometimes.

Yesterday over supper he was talking about the war, about Belarus, about the partisans who cut off the German soldiers' ears: in the morning when we came out of our tents we found our comrades' ears in the snow. We gathered them up and went on the hunt, following the trail of blood each time, but not too far, so we didn't fall into a trap. We never found any of them again. The fear of becoming one of the ones who were never found again – with or without ears – made us stick together.

Now the boiler in the bathroom next door lights up, howling and spitting continuously. My father yelps, yelps repeatedly. He's punishing himself. He's probably turning the cold tap further and further down now.

I look at the wall to the bathroom and hope desperately he turns the boiler back off. His yelps are more unbearable than his groans.

I lie on my back, look up at the ceiling. He carries on yelping.

Our ceilings are four metres high. In this narrow walk-through room it's like lying at the bottom of a mineshaft. There are three doors, to our parents' room, to the dining room and to the bathroom, and a tall, narrow window with green curtains. It's really only a place to pass through. Here I lie, here I live, together with my little brother.

He's been dead nearly fifty years. I keep having to remind myself I never slept a single night in that room without him. That's how removed from my life he seems now. It shocks me.

Sometimes I lean over to Andreas' sleeping head to sniff the hair around his fontanelle. I pretend it's the smell of his brain.

He is squatter than the rest of us, has softer skin. His face is unusually rosy. Our slow son, mum says cheerfully, stroking his head. Our phlegmatic son, dad says, but not without affection.

Andreas blooms the instant he sees Werner. In summer Andreas wears a little pair of blue swimming trunks. When Werner comes home from Detmold, he always tells the same story: when I turned into our road this afternoon what do you think I could see, even from far away? Andreas already knows what's coming and beams.

Suuuuch a tiny pair of trunks and suuuuch a long pair of legs!

And Werner illustrates the legs with a broad gesture and the trunks with a tiny gap between his thumb and forefinger.

Andreas is helpless with laughter and Werner has to tell the whole thing again. Then Andreas sits next to his older brother, takes his gentle cellist's hand in his child's fingers, plays with it and won't let go. A paw, he says happily to himself.

Our quiet little brother has found an ingenious way of softening our father's harsh instructions. When he's ordered to finish what's on his plate, he says, I'll have to ask Hans Bubi. He gets up,

goes into the kids' room, closes the door behind him, then returns in thirty seconds and says, Hans Bubi says I must finish my supper right now.

Dad just shakes his head and says, as long as you finish what's on your plate.

Yes, Andreas says, if Hans Bubi says so, then of course I'll do it.

At that Dad doesn't move.

Next time Andreas returns from his room having sought advice, Dad tries to play along and asks, so what did Hans Bubi say?

Andreas doesn't like it when another person calls his invisible friend by their names and replies, Hans Bubi wasn't there, only his brother. He said I should eat up.

And, Dad asks, what's his brother called?

He doesn't want to say his name.

Even the time which elapses till Andreas does what's asked of him wears the head of our family down.

When he comes home from school he just drops his things one after the other: his satchel in the middle of the hall, his anorak in the corridor, gloves and scarf a few metres further. He only takes his pullover off at the dining table, and drops it on the floor next to his chair. A long trail from the front door to his seat at the table.

Dad reacts immediately.

Andreas gets up. He picks one of the things up, but very slowly and only ever one thing at a time.

Then he sits back at the table and waits for the next instruction.

I'm amazed. That would never have occurred to me.

Of course Andreas never wakes up when our parents stomp through our bedroom at night to get to their bedroom, talking to each other as if they were walking down a country lane.

Aren't you asleep already? they ask cavalierly. There's not a sound from Andreas; it's just me who whimpers, how am I supposed to sleep if you walk through the room talking? Then they turn it straight down a notch and whisper, you ought to be tired by now! Now go straight to sleep. Then they close bedroom door behind them, and carry on talking.

They run through the whole day's gossip: who said what to whom and why. And all in this strained whisper, out of consideration for my sleep. The whispering grates my brain more acutely. My ears hurt from so much overheard parental life.

Finally the sentences get shorter, the pauses longer, then I hear their breathing as they sleep. A weight falls off me and I enjoy the darkness, the silence and the sliver of light through the curtains.

When the Busch circus is in town, on the Lübberbruch right round the corner from us, I open the window in the night and get to hear the lions roaring if I'm lucky. Sometimes one of the inmates replies from a solitary cell. Then I sense some of the wildness in us all.

This morning Andreas is nowhere to be seen. It's quiet in the bathroom next door.

No idea why no one woke me up. I get up and pull back the green kids-room curtains to release myself from the underwater light. Outside there's a hazy sun. Autumn. Very nice. Could go out. On the wall to the bathroom is a huge blackboard made by one of the inmates and screwed in with Rawlplugs for all eternity, crammed with words none of which I can decipher. Andreas is left-handed. The adults are of the opinion there are some things you have to do with your right

hand. Writing is one of them. Andreas writes expansively and fluidly on his blackboard – but solely in reverse.

I take the little hand mirror lying here and read what it says on the blackboard: ‘Andreas is bathing. Trespassers will be prosecuted.’ Crazy how clearly and precisely the letters have been drawn – just that they all face the wrong way. He was probably practicing writing a note he wanted to pin to the bathroom door.

I look out. The window looks onto the garden, my arena, where I have played the last few years. I’ve used every inch of it to play. I’ve transformed all of it. Nothing is itself any more. The pear tree on the lawn is Field Marshal Kesselring’s bomber, the fork in the branch his pilot’s seat, the lawn below sometimes Rotterdam, sometimes London, sometimes Warsaw, all bombed umpteen times, rebuilt and destroyed again. The garden path can be the river Scheldt, or the Thames, or the Vistula, as required. The lawn is covered with the dead of the European capitals and the rubble of their houses, and with the unripe pears from my father’s favourite tree, his Louise Bonne. They had to serve as bombs, which led to a confrontation.

Field Marshal Kesselring said a prayer for every corpse strewn on the lawn, after I’d raised each neighbourhood to the ground. And Errol Flynn, the sea hawk, has ploughed through this lawn in his pirate ship, stabbing countless enemies with his lilac branch. Some of them perished so noisily the neighbours appeared at their windows demanding peace and quiet. As his reward, Errol pressed Gina Lollobrigida up against the pear tree and kissed the bark hungrily. And on the terrace, with its white garden furniture I signed the Potsdam Agreement, three times: as Stalin, as Truman, and as Churchill. France wasn’t involved at that stage.

And why not? But now I’m sick and tired of Rotterdam and Gina and Churchill and the rest of them and I’m finding it hard to turn it all back into what it really is: a pear tree, a lawn, a garden path, etc.

It all started in the rockery at the back years ago, I think, when Andreas suddenly came into the world. I just stood up there, gently and gingerly, on the top stone of the rockery and did nothing, didn’t move or speak, just decided in my head: I am Hannibal.

And as if by themselves the Alps spread over our garden in front of me, and I could see as far as northern Italy, although it was only the sandpit, and behind me I could sense the breeze from the thirty African elephants – fanning me with their huge ears. And in much the same way you can barely hear elephants coming on their big pads, my parents and brothers had no idea what momentous episodes in world history were happening in front of them. They shouted at me not to stand around like a lemon, to come and help for a change and carry a few chairs out so we could all eat something on the terrace by the lawn. I did as I was told. And neither Hannibal nor I batted an eyelid. Of course we’ll carry some chairs out, we said.

And so I parted company with reality.

But now I want to return to it. And that starts with the kids’ room: I have to leave that room! I have to get away from Andreas! I’ve infected him with my mania for transforming everything and now with him around I can’t progress.

Also it’s not a proper room. It’s as if our beds have just been placed between two enormous transistor radios with no on/off buttons; from left and right endless radio drama, from our parents’ bedroom and from the bathroom.

Why can’t I have Werner’s room? He’s only here at weekends. It’s right next to the front door, with two windows, one onto the front steps and one to the street. In the day he can see who’s

coming and going. It's annoying, but it's interesting too: other people, the outside world. At night I'd have peace and quiet, and I could climb out of the window down onto the steps and go to the cinema, to the late night show. That would be real freedom.

Or Martin's room up on the first floor. He only comes back to visit. He does have his girlfriend here in Herford, of course. They do need someone to go.

It's an amazing room up there, huge but secluded. You have a great view: onto the street and the vegetable garden, the prison nursery, past the streets in the outskirts and the new blocks on Ortsieker Weg towards the Schweichler Berg and right to its summit, the Egge, where the radio mast is. That's freedom too.

There I could read novels in peace, could be free of my father's lecturing voice, just read whatever I wanted, as fast or as slow as I liked, shut the book again and put it aside, flip back through it or just read the same passage over and over again. I could read some sentences out loud, skip pages or jump straight to the end, see if a sentence that's lodged in my ear from my father changes when I read it myself.

There are already so many titles I'm curious about: Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*, this story about Jacob and his sons from the Old Testament. I already know that from Sunday School. I could just have Herr Mann retell it for me. And Dostoyevsky's *The Adolescent* sounds like just the book for me. They took Hamsun's *Hunger* off me because of the sticky jam I left all over the pages. I could read the amazing opening of *Remembrance of Things Past* time and time again, and conquer one more sentence each time. And *The Shadow Line* by Joseph Conrad, who wasn't really called that, was really Polish and was always at sea, has been waiting for me for ages. And from time to time I could glance out towards the horizon, rest my gaze in the distance on the radio mast on the Egge.

Would my parents let me move that far away, to the first floor? They're probably afraid I'd forget them up there! And my homework too.

How am I going to get my own room? How can I sort it out so I've got a door I can shut behind me?

Now my father is scrubbing the bath. He's really going for it. I can hear the continual boom as the tub of Vim and the scrubbing brush hit the enamel, hollow, vigorous thuds, like in a Tchaikovsky symphony. And the whole time he's swearing to himself, griping about the tidemarks the rest of us have left. He might well be railing against the Social Democrats too. I can't hear that clearly. That's because of the way he's speaking. When he's ranting, only the spikes of his rage poke out, mainly consonants and sibilants, no vowels. Yes, judging by the dynamics he must be taking aim at the Social Democrats right now.

Recently at lunch he flew off the handle because they had put forward a motion in parliament against the limitation period for investigating Nazi murders. Crimes against humanity. He blew his lid, went red as a lobster. I was really scared – for him and for us, because I was sitting so close to him. The rhythm of his raging gripped me more than the content. The pauses between sentences were so tense they nearly burst: Will it never end! ... They want penance! ... Penance till the end of time! ... They're not interested in the camps! ... In the SS! ... It's the judges and the state prosecutors! That's who they want! ... Decent folk! ... Who were doing their duty! ... Who obeyed orders and the law! ... We'll never be happy again our whole lives! ... These lefties!

... Vindictive to the core! ... These know-it-alls! ... These hypocrites! ... They want a witch hunt! ... They just want revenge! ... So they can fill all our posts with Social Democrats! Then he stood up, although he still had food on his plate, walked through one room to the next, to their bedroom – through my bedroom in other words – and slammed all the doors behind him, continuing to shout, which we could still hear through all the walls. He was raging. I hope his heart can handle it, Mum said. The skin on her face tautened and a single tear ran down her nose.

I felt sorry for her. Him too. Both of them.

Who's he talking to now? I asked, then wondered why my voice always came out so shrill and not deep as I imagined it.

My God, mum shouted, astonishingly animated, he needs to let off steam sometimes!

Martin and Werner snarled, but it wasn't clear at whom.

That was quite something. And it isn't over. There's something going on to do with the Nazi period! With coming to terms with it. Light is being shed. Something's in motion and it's upsetting him.

My parents are continually shaking their heads in disgust. Do they have to bring everything out into the open? Couldn't they just give it a rest?

Clearly the world is getting uncomfortable for him. If Brandt gets into power my father says he will kill himself. Better dead than red; then the Russians will be upon us. No two ways about it. They're already in charge in Düsseldorf, the reds.

Every single Social Democrat upsets the apple cart for him, including here in Herford, and in the borstal. Storm clouds are gathering over him. And Werner? And Martin? Are they a threat too, the new generation? Will they confront him with his party membership card? And me? Am I part of it or not?

Hopefully he won't project his anger onto the tidemarks in the bath. Hopefully he won't ask who's responsible. It is in fact me. Last night I couldn't be bothered to clean the tub.

Suddenly I hear his voice from the bathroom. He's opened the door and he's calling me. In a moment, everything I've just been thinking about will become minor and insignificant.

Why have I been standing here so long dreaming, instead of getting dressed and making myself scarce? Now he's calling me into the bathroom. I feel too flimsy in my pyjamas.

He's calling me again. Get in here! Come and clean your teeth!

That's all I need. Alone with him in the bathroom! That's the last thing I want. I want nothing to do with his naked body. It's covered with black hairs. His pallid white skin shows up behind them. Like on a chimpanzee. When they stare intently at me in the zoo while their nibbling a peanut, I think: they're really just humans, they're caged humans! And in the next moment they leap up at the bars of their cage and reach for my collar.

I don't want to go into the bathroom with him under any circumstances. But I have to show my face at the door otherwise he'll come in and get me.

Luckily he's got his pyjamas on.

Come here to the sink and clean your teeth, he says, and directs me to a gap between his stomach and the edge of the sink.

I don't think there's enough room there. But I don't say so.

He senses my resistance: don't pull a face like that. There's plenty of room for two here!

He is mistaken. It's not true. There isn't room. I can see that. But it's as if I'm nailed down. I can't get a word out.

He holds out my toothbrush: don't stand around like that! Here's your brush.

No choice, I think. No way out.

I do what he says. Or rather my body does it. I'm not sure who is in charge of me right now.

My father has moved a little footstool over, which I'm meant to stand on so I can reach everything better. Reluctantly, I step onto this little stool. I squeeze myself into the narrow gap he's left free for me. It isn't big: half my arm's length between the edge of the sink and his stomach.

When I bend forward to reach for the toothpaste I feel an unfamiliar, hard thing against my bottom. It's his penis. That shouldn't be there! Now I realise what I was afraid of.

Put a good load of toothpaste on your brush and give your teeth a thorough clean, he says, and presses closer towards me.

What is this? What does he want from me? Surely he's an intelligent man. Where is that man who commands respect, dressed in a suit normally? Should I say: this hard thing against my bottom is upsetting me? I can't manage that. I can't speak to him about his stiff penis. I just can't do it. I don't even want to hear what his answer might be.

In the mirror I see my helpless face. I see him too, above my face. His gaze blinds me. I look away, press myself against the edge of the sink. But that doesn't help. There is just my own penis. I'm all the more aware of it against the cold porcelain.

I scrub hard at my teeth so he can't find fault with my brushing. As I brush, his penis slides all around across my bottom.

As soon as I'm finished I slip straight out to the door. In a flash.

In my room I go straight to the window.

Is he calling after me? Have I missed something?

No, there's nothing else. Just the impression of his penis against my bottom. That sticks to me. My heart is pounding and my breath is speeding. All mixed up. Luckily the garden is there outside the window. Look out. Just look out. What can I see?

The garden wall, the washing-line poles and the sagging line. The badminton court. The loose net. The sorry posts. The carpet hanger. The sandpit under the apple tree. The garden wall. The shed. The terrace. The white garden furniture. In front of it the curved rose bed. And the lawn. The pear tree, and right at the far end the mini rockery, three stones high, which ends at the hedge with the neighbours.

I lean against the window pane with my forehead, turn it from side to side. It makes greasy marks – nothing to do about that.

List, just list what I can see: wall, washing poles, sandpit, badminton court, lawn, pear tree, shed, bench, sandpit, path, hedge.

It does me good. The single words. They're calming. I speak them softly as I go: wall, lawn, pole, post, net, shed, lawn, pear, hedge.

My diaphragm is happy with me. My heart has stopped beating so fast.

I probably took to the stage so I could place words one after the other, nothing more. When I get to the point when I'm just placing one word after another, disinterested even, but not

loveless, a warmth spreads through me. And suddenly I'm in a position to engage with my fellow actors.

It's his voice which speaks through me – the voice of my father. I only recently realised this. I was listening to an old tape recording. He had recorded a Mozart sonata on one of the old reel-to-reel tapes, and he was announcing the Köchel number and the titles of the movements. I got a real shock. For a moment I thought, surely that's me!

But it was him. Him!

We have a diary of his, from the war, just a few pages, twenty maybe. My mother tore the rest out.

You won't understand it she said. Especially you, Edgar. You'd be quite capable of having it all published! I'd rather throw it in the bin right away.

What's left is a description of his visit home to Königsberg for Christmas '42, a touching declaration of love for his wife and my older brothers, and his mother, and his brothers. He was coming from Belarus and had twelve days' leave. The journey took him from Orsha via Vitebsk and Bialystok and through the delousing to East Prussia, a journey he made carrying two heavy suitcases and a rucksack all full of things to eat: plucked poultry, geese and ducks, cuts of venison, skinned rabbits – tightly packed, layered one on top of the other and pressed down, naked, bloody and wrapped in newspaper. He dragged these suitcases through railway stations, up and down stairs, all for the family – and for his elder brother from Hamburg, who was visiting Königsberg at the time. On his return home he was to stop off in Berlin and leave a goose for their father and a duck for his father-in-law and take a rabbit for himself and his nearest and dearest. For his own mother in Königsberg, who lived round the corner from him, on Trommelplatz, my father had a saddle of venison in his rucksack. And for my mother and brothers at Ziethenplatz another goose and a duck. And for their friends who would come by over the next twelve days there was something too. And for himself of course, because he did love to eat meat. The lean years were yet to come. Perhaps he sensed that.

'Another meal just like in peacetime!' he wrote repeatedly in his diary.

And where did it all come from, everything they were eating?

The Germans were fighting a war of sustenance against the Soviet Union. Whole regions were declared 'eat-clean zones'. The Russian eaters were either shot or dispatched to the Reich where they were to exhaust their physical strength in German munitions factories. Anyone old or weak or useless must starve to death. Slowly, because the Russian administration must still be kept in place until the war was won.

'Many millions of people will undoubtedly starve in the process, as the provisions required for us are removed from the country,' it says in the Supreme Army Command guidelines. 'The Russians have withstood poverty, hunger and frugal living for centuries. Their stomachs are flexible, so no misplaced sympathy! Do not attempt to set German living standards as the measure and alter the Russian way of life. The occupied territories should be extensively plundered and their goods co-opted to supply the German armed forces and the German people.'

'A man is acting correctly,' wrote Walther von Brauchitsch, commander in chief of the army, 'when he sets aside completely all personal emotional impulses and grabs all that he can, ruthlessly and remorselessly.'

On 12 January 1943, when our father returned to his squad in Orsha after twelve days of Christmas holiday, the diary breaks off. The final sentence reads, 'because without victory there is no life left for us.'

After lunch I have to wash up, a duty I'm stuck with. Martin and Werner are allowed to vanish into thin air as soon as we've eaten. The housemaid either goes back to her preliminary nursing school at this point, or only arrives in the afternoon.

My mother is too delicate. She risked her life for me, in a lung clinic in Sauerland. She insisted on bringing me into the world against the wishes of the doctors and my father. I have to be thankful for that. She couldn't breastfeed me. Pregnant farmer's wives all around Bilon supplied me with their milk, pumped-out, superfluous milk which they sold and delivered to the sanatoriums and lung clinics throughout the area.

Every day Mum is given butter for her bread, while the rest of us eat margarine. She has to drink cream although she doesn't really like it. All for her lungs. She is carefully monitored and weighed, although she isn't actually too thin. Every day, with visible disgust, she slips half the portion from her plate to her husband or to us children. I can't eat that much, she says, exhausted.

But you have to eat, Dad says, despite accepting the meat she's put on his plate. He is always hungry. But anything Mum has given me he puts back on her plate.

After lunch he accompanies his wife to bed. She needs sleep, or at least to rest in bed – for her lungs. He escorts her, otherwise she won't go. Otherwise she sneaks back into the kitchen and potters around clearing up.

Dad makes her a hot water bottle because Mum always has cold feet. The hot water bottle is a way to entice her into bed. But before this, while the water on the gas cooker is still heating up, he has to hang the kitchen towel up. And this towel hangs in a very awkward spot.

The hook is on the wall by the kitchen sink, the sink I am standing at. My hands are already burrowing in the dirty, soapy water amongst the cutlery the scraps from the plates. Behind me is the cupboard where the pots and pans live. So I am hemmed in between the sink in front of me, the wall to my left and the saucepan cupboard behind me. The only way out is the small gap to my right.

My father sees me in this trap. He doesn't say: move out the way for a second so I can hang the towel up. On the contrary. Without a word he presses me against the wall so he can reach over me or past me to hang up the towel. And as he does it I feel his hard penis yet again, from the side, against my right hip.

I try to dive under his arm, to escape, but he says, just stay where you are! I've almost got the towel on the hook.

Give it to me, I beg him, I'll hang it up.

But your hands are all wet, he says. The towel will get wet.

He just doesn't let me go. He deliberately misses the hook and laughs about it and shouts, what a silly towel! It just doesn't want to go on the hook!

I go red and break into a sweat. I look at my mother. She is standing at the door, shaking her head, amused by the funny antics Dad is getting up to.

At last the towel gets hung and the two of them withdraw with the hot water bottle to their bedroom.

The washing up is piled behind me, dirty frying pans, burnt-on saucepans. My mother doesn't really concentrate when she's cooking. Her thoughts are on poems, bible quotations, watchwords for each new day from the calendar page she tears off every morning and places by the kitchen radio to remind her.

All well and good, but now someone has to wear their fingers to the bone with the wire-wool sponge scrubbing the crusty saucepans clean again. And that person is me. Andreas helps me by drying up.

He is so incredibly slow it drives me crazy. Instead of drying up he plays races with the wooden spoons, the spatulas and the salad servers: meat mallet versus soup ladle, 1000-metre race. Ladle is in the lead, but mallet is catching up.

Andreas storms through the kitchen, sometimes placing the ladle ahead, sometimes the meat mallet. At the same time he commentates like a sports reporter: meat mallet is on the home stretch! Soup ladle is lagging behind!

You should be drying up! I scream at him. I just want to get it over and done with.

But Andreas sticks his lower jaw out, like my father when he's practising difficult passages on the piano. And sadly, like me too.

You look like a right moron! I scream, and copy him.

Andreas looks briefly annoyed – his tongue hangs out – but it seems the race is more exciting.

Final sprint! he cries and storms through the kitchen again: meat mallet has hidden reserves! Soup ladle is out of breath. Oh yes, soup ladle has collapsed!

Andreas flings the ladle to the floor and hits the air jubilantly with the mallet. He chants rhythmically: meat mallet! Meat mallet! Meat mallet!

Stop it! I yell, and grab the spatula. Look out – do you want to see how this does the long jump?

And the spatula hits Andreas' cheek. I shout: that was the six metre line!

Andreas runs bawling out of the kitchen and slams the door shut. I turn back to my mountain of washing up.

Then he storms back in, with a ski pole in his hand. He is hopping mad: I'll poke your eye out!

His face is contorted with tears.

Really I should put my arm around him. Why can't we pull together?

I can't manage to calm him down. He's in the danger zone already, making lunges and waving the pole at my eyes.

I dash for the toilet, in the hall by the front door.

Andreas is standing in front of the locked toilet door yelling when you come out I'll stab you to death.

Silently, I unlock the door again but leave it closed, then open the window and jump out into the flowerbed.

No idea what happened to the washing up.

At some point, I don't know when or where, my older brothers confirmed that, yes, they had had that too. Calmly, they explained about them and our father. They recognised what I'd experienced.

So it really happened. It wasn't my imagination. It took place. A few times in fact – not every day, but every so often. Then not any more.

What a comfort that my brothers told me that. I can't ask for more.

STOMACH PAINS

Have you washed your hands? my parents ask when they catch me looking at their books.

Yes of course, I reply automatically.

Let's see!

If they're 'filthy black', as they put it, I'm sent straight to the bathroom. Scrub them with soap and a nail brush. Then show them again.

Now you're welcome to take a book down, my father says, with a gesture worthy of a chamberlain. He indicates the bookshelves. He might as well add: His highness the book will see you now!

But by then I'll have gone off the idea.

My parents have just gone into town, so I go into the piano room, with filthy hands, and take down a book I've had my eye on for some while.

Like children's books it's slightly taller, not as thick, and bound in stiff card, its pages made of yellowish, hard paper. Wartime paper, it's called.

It's about soldiers 'in action' and it's written for the people back home who want to know where their sons and husbands are fighting and, if they have fallen, where they are buried. That's what it says on the back cover.

A dramatic front cover, like a film poster. Even the title, *Embattled Rome*, has a wild design.

'Embattled' stretches right across the book, in handwritten script, shaded with charcoal, so that the letters smoke like rubble. 'Rome' is in typescript. Beneath it is a drawing like something from an art lesson: a broken-off Roman column with a German oak wreath circling it, a black pine, sea and mountains sketched out in green and dark blue. Right at the bottom it says, 'Accounts from the battles of Monte Cassino – with 32 colour plates by the author'. His name is Wilhelm Wessel.

When I open the book a folded sheet falls out: nine signatures on a blank page, originals, in ink.

This is it! This is what I've been looking for. My unwashed fingers have found the place in the bookshelves. As ever when I land on a clue about my family's past I feel more secure.

Years ago, watching from the dining room, I saw my parents standing right here with this book and this sheet of paper excitedly reading out names. It must have been these signatures.

Important people probably, and I think my parents were of the opinion they had been done an injustice.

Someone has written a dedication down the whole first page of the book. The handwriting is tricky, hard to decipher:

To Chief Prosecutor Selge,

I offer this small token of my deep gratitude. During your brief sojourn here your nobility has assisted myself, and my companions in destiny, in forgetting previous indignities, and has alleviated the privations of our imprisonment.

May your and your family's future path be lit by a lucky star!

Werl, 28 September 1950

Kesselring, Field Marshal of the former German Wehrmacht

On the insert with the nine signatures it says:

God's blessing and our best wishes for your new home.

October '50

The 'new home' must be where I am standing, here in Herford. And the incarceration of which Kesselring writes, the prison in Werl where we used to live. We moved there from Bückeberg, in a tearing hurry, because our mother didn't want to see the sandstone front step any more, because of Rainer and the hand grenade.

I heard that in Werl our father was a kind of boss, briefly. He couldn't have been a real one because the real bosses were the occupying forces, in this case a British colonel. Vickers, he was called. He soon kicked our father out. Selge is too lax, he decided.

I had heard this sentence from our mother, who clearly didn't consider it something to be ashamed of, and repeated it at lunch. Our father still didn't really enjoy hearing it, and put on a haughty face to hide his feelings.

He had been responsible for supervising the higher officers imprisoned there, most of them generals, and apparently he fraternised with them. Now I know that this word comes from 'frater' which means 'brother'.

The move to Herford was about ten years ago. I have one or two clear memories of Werl. But no one believes me. The adults are all of the opinion you can't remember anything properly before your third birthday. At the earliest! In my case they talk of delusions. What am I supposed to do? I guess memories aren't there for other people to believe in.

When I look at Field Marshal Kesselring's handwriting, I have to say, that man is not without delusions of his own. He signs his name a bit like Herbert von Karajan. Tall, parallel letters like a thunderous squadron of planes.

I know Karajan's signature from the little book with caricatures of musicians. It must be shelved somewhere around here. My father got it for his birthday, one of those mini books published by Insel. Werner told me the artist was an anti-Semite. The Jewish musicians all refused to sign it – perhaps because the caricaturist had seized on their noses. The other musicians had obediently signed their autographs beneath their likenesses. In his afterword the artist claimed the Jews didn't have a sense of humour.

Karajan was drawn as a propeller plane. He must have been flattered because he doesn't just direct the Berlin Philharmonic, he is also a pilot. Our father laughed his head off at the plane with its Karajan haircut.

Werner immediately objected that Karajan had joined the Nazi party twice, to be sure of not missing out.

That spoiled our father's fun.

You'll be lucky if you ever play under Karajan's baton.

I'd rather play in a hotel orchestra, Werner cut in, than be conducted by that pompous buffoon.

That pompous buffoon, our father replied, trembling now, is currently traveling the world with an army of musicians to regain Germany's place at the forefront of global recognition!

Well of course, Werner said, that's what German music is composed for: to serve on the front, to achieve global recognition for Germany. Up there with Volkswagen basically.

After that it went quiet.

Reflecting on Karajan and Kesselring's signatures I fail to notice that my parents are now standing back in the room, two metres away from me, directly below the ceiling light. I didn't hear the front door, or hear them taking off their coats. And I've missed whatever they said in the hallway too.

They seem different actually, standing there with serious looks on their faces. They don't even notice my dirty hands and the book with the sheet of paper in it.

We turned back on our way into town, says my father. Mummy has such bad stomach pains she has to go to bed.

I nod, shut the book and put it back on the shelf. The sheet with the signatures slips out and lands right at my father's feet. But they don't notice. I look at my mum. Why doesn't she go straight to bed? She stands next to my dad, immobile, holding both hands to her stomach. Between her eyebrows is a vertical crease. Her lips are tight. If you didn't know about her stomach pains you'd think she was concentrating hard on something. Her gaze is turned inside. Our mother gets these stomach pains once a year, mostly in November. Every time she stands there just like this. Sometimes she quietly asks if someone could make her a hot milk. Her hands are always one on top of the other against her stomach, as if she were trying to staunch a wound. And she always gives the impression of utmost concentration. Now it's time to stop messing around. We switch in an instant. In her expression I read the secret message that tomorrow is judgement day and for the next twenty-four hours I have the chance to start afresh and put everything right. And my brothers and my father also become friendlier and more generous. We all offer to help with the housework, each seeing the concern in each other's faces, each aware that the family is really just her and without her the rest of us are just a pile of pointless male existence.

Our whole life is just a fragile edifice we now realise, amazed now that we keep forgetting it. Can I make you a cup of hot milk? I ask my mother. She shakes her head almost imperceptibly. Quietly, she says, I just want to go to bed.

But she doesn't move. And my father rapidly abandons his attempt to accompany her into the bedroom. A tiny gesture from her indicates that she doesn't want to be touched. Or pushed. From now on she will decide herself. And we will respect that and just watch her.

I think her stomach pains are her ultimate reckoning with us. She's had it with us.

She has a pronounced atlas vertebra and a very long neck. My father had an art postcard framed, of a renaissance painting showing a lady with a distinctive atlas bone, an idealised image of our mother, according to him. The picture hangs next to his desk. When I feel his blows during my Latin lessons I stare at it and focus on the story of Atlas, who couldn't let the globe fall although it weighed a ton.

Standing beneath our living room lamp now, her forehead with its vertical crease says one thing only: enough! This can't go on.

Again and again she suppresses her stomach pains with the rolling treatments. And then we think, now they're gone and they won't be back. But each year, by All Saint's Day at the latest, they're back. Sooner or later they burst through. They stab their way out systematically, these shooting pains, from the inside out, and their battle cry is: All wrong! Got everything wrong in life!

Husband: wrong!

Every child: wrong!

Edgar: a disaster!

Herself: just not made for family life!

Maybe not even for men!

She should have been a vicar's wife – married to a female priest.

A nursery teacher, companion to another teacher – a woman.

A poet, companion to another – another woman.

Sitting each evening with her colleague discussing poems.

Not spreading her legs for a man.

Not this family. Not all this housekeeping.

Not this barbaric eradication of her real talent: her way with language. Because she had it, you know. She could have made something of it.

Instead she runs the gauntlet of household chores, a daily obstacle course.

The Sisyphean tasks, the ghastly cycle of meals: clean the house, get up, plan the meals, go shopping, get out the pans, the knives, the boards, chop vegetables, trim beans, prepare meat, heat water, fry onions, make sure nothing burns, carry the whole lot back into the kitchen after the meal and wash up, keep the floor clean, take out the rubbish, beat the rugs, make sure the kids have enough clothes to wear, darn, sew, take things to the cleaners – there's no end to it. Strip beds, make beds, clean windows, write lists of everything needed, organise who will buy what where, feed the birds, deal with the fruit that arrives by the truckload in crates on the kitchen doorstep from the allotments, cook it, bottle it, juice it, sterilise the jars – jam and endless compote. And the effort it takes to persuade the others to help, which they never do off their own bat, meaning it's all left to her.

It's all left to me! That's the story of her life, a story told in sighs. Like the story of the golden goose. She will never be free of the pans, the beds, the brooms, the shopping lists, the laundry – she's stuck with the lot.

When she's lying exhausted in bed at night, her husband lies down next to her and reminds her: Herr Whatever will be paying us a visit tomorrow. Perhaps you could bake a little Streuselkuchen. These Streuselkuchen! Which mother-in-law has always baked better than she has, the base always thinner, the Streusel thicker, sweeter, more buttery, melting sooner in the mouth. Mother-in-law has frequently tried to teach daughter-in-law how to make Streuselkuchen which melt in the mouth like that, how you get the base of the Streuselkuchen so soft it's already down your throat before you think: But I've still got to chew the base. No with a base like mother-in-law bakes you can concentrate fully on how the Streusel melts so ethereally under your palate. So the base shouldn't be too hard, but not too moist either. Something is always wrong with it.

And this conversation you have to make with the visitors. As bland as it gets. But you have to put on a bright expression the whole time, as if they've just invented the light bulb. Whether things are going well, going badly; battling the political situation about, even though everyone agrees already, never too in-depth. No thoughts provoked or developed. No one really listens. Everyone plays at listening. Everyone puts interested faces on but nothing reaches their hearts. Not hers anyway.

Her husband doesn't notice; he has his music, his piano. He can happily make small talk with guest to unwind. When he's had enough he yawns like the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion, upon which every guest makes their escape and doesn't return in a hurry. He could at least put his hand over his mouth!

Recently her husband invited six psychologists to look round his prison. He brings up a bottle of wine, his Kröver Nacktarsch. She says to him, I'd like apple juice. I can't handle wine. The acidity eats at my stomach. Gnaws at it. You know? He obediently pours her an apple juice, everyone raises their glasses. A fine wine, he says, and the stupid psychologists nod. One of them says Spätlese, which is nonsense, and she takes a sip and nearly spits out her first mouthful.

What's this you've given me?

Apple juice, he says.

But it's totally fermented, she complains. And after the next sip she says, You've given me wine, not apple juice. And he gets really cross and points to the glasses: Look at them, he says, all the same colour except for yours.

I know what I'm drinking, she snaps at him. This is wine!

I know what I'm drinking too, he replies snootily. We all know what we're drinking. Cheers!

And they raise their glasses again, these daft psychologists and her husband, with his weak sense of taste, and she picks up the bottles from the tea trolley to examine them, apple juice in her left hand, wine in her right, holds them up against the light and smiles: This wine bottle is almost full. But the apple juice is empty. You've poured yourselves apple juice and none of you have noticed!

He gives her a look which says: divorce. To show him up like that! Has she taken leave of her senses?

And then the youngest of the psychologists says, Excuse me, I think I've got apple juice too. And my father takes a drink and then looks at the others and says to my mother: You're undermining my confidence. And it doesn't sound good, the way he says it. A wife mustn't do that, undermine her husband in front of other people. It's against the rules. And now, one after the other, all the psychologists say very cautiously: I have apple juice in my glass too, but it really doesn't matter, Dr Selge. It tastes very good, very fresh, Dr Selge. And she reaches for his glass – she's had enough by this point – takes a large drink and cries out: here is my apple juice! And she gives him her glass, and he drinks some. And? What does he do? Instead of apologising? He just beams and cries, Yes, that's the Kröver Nacktarsch! That's the wine I love. Isn't it wonderful! So have you really all got apple juice? Why didn't you say? And he fetches a carafe and tips the apple juice out of all the glasses into it and fetches new glasses – we have plenty enough wineglasses – and pours them all wine and they all toast each other again and he laughs that one could make such a mistake.

His self-confidence! It has always upset her. This self-confidence, when in reality he's way off the mark.

When he first asked for her hand she said no. And stuck to her guns. Although everyone was disappointed. Her father had been particularly looking forward to this son-in-law: a lawyer like himself, talented pianist, liked a good pun, healthy views, nationalist, good looking. To impress their cousins he flung Meißner plates in the air and caught them like a circus artist. What more could you ask for? Someone you could play every violin sonata with, whip through them. He could even play the César Franck sonata at speed.

It could have been so good.

But his daughter had said no. And was proud of it. No, no, no.

And yet she hadn't reckoned with the men. A year later, when she was in a crisis, not sure if she should study literature or theology or perhaps become a nursery teacher instead, when the Führer was redefining the role of women, the nation was enjoying its great upsurge and everyone was

asking what women could do for Germany, her own father wrote behind her back to this piano-playing lawyer or law-playing pianist to say it might be worth asking once more. This time the proposal might be accepted. His daughter, Signe, didn't know what she was doing with her life right now. If he was too forward this time, if he was very understanding, the answer might be different this time.

And Edgar – yes my father's name is Edgar – invited her to Rosenkavalier and in the third act, during the duet between Oktavian and Sophie, it happened. It's thanks to this duet that she is standing here with her stomach pains under the living room lamp. In the third act, when Oktavian sings,

Sense only yourself, just sense yourself alone
and that we are together!

and Sophie sings along,

It is a dream, can it really be
that we are together!

he simply placed his hand on hers, without pressure, and she didn't withdraw it, because he was looking at her at that moment. And he really did have lovely, deep blue eyes, and his gaze was soft and earnest, and there was no going back.

And they got engaged and he wrote touchingly long letters and very gently outlined how it would be, their life together, making music together, and how they would flourish as part of the greater German race and yet remain special. In his letters he introduced his friends, painting them in the most delicate shades and hoping she would soon find a little affection for them.

Why hadn't she seen this grim little dead-end-street from afar? Why hadn't she noticed someone was deciding everything in advance? The whole future set in concrete. Because he always knew in advance what he wanted to do.

Her body knew. In the wedding photograph she looks like a lamb being led to slaughter. And she didn't want to sleep with him at first.

He didn't force her. That was his good side. He really had the patience of a saint. It finally happened in the 'Wilden Mann' tavern in Meersburg on the way to their honeymoon on Lake Constance. There she went along with it, this husband and wife being 'one flesh' thing he was always talking about – it said so in the bible – and which he recently started claiming a wife was legally obliged to comply with. He said in general. But in reality he meant her. She could tell that much. So at some point she went along with it. Found it quite nice too. But never as nice as he did.

They are still standing next to each other under the living room light, and she can't decide whether to make a move towards the bedroom. A bolt of pain shoots through her face. She's just been stabbed. From inside.

It's her bloody sense of duty! It messed up her freedom to choose. That's why she hadn't withdrawn her hand at the opera.

He's standing there now, this public prosecutor from Königsberg, putting on a long face, worried that her stomach pains will cut her out of his life.

It was all part of the great national upsurge, when mothers were treated like prize cows, '33. She had liked all that: away with the decadent elite! Socialism and nationalism finally united! Yes, standing up to the Jews, she'd liked that too. Time they finally did some work, she thought. Of course she knows it went terribly wrong. She isn't stupid. And no monster. But she has no taste for grief. She clearly senses the scale of the abyss. But grief? No, she's too proud for that. She saved the family. During the war. And afterwards. She and all the other women saved what was to be saved of Germany. Not the men, attacking Poland with their chests all puffed-up then squandering everything with their idiotic two-front war. These madmen who couldn't stop warring. The state they came back from Russia in! What miserable specimens! Ragged and gaunt – that would have been alright, but where was their fire gone? Limp, soulless ghosts. And they still wanted to go to bed with you!

Then he studied theology, her husband, after the collapse. That was something! She was keen on that. He worked as a nurse. The sisters gave him little packages, so his family at home had something to eat. He took the Hebrew exam. She could have been a vicar's wife. She could have run a vicarage, done good deeds, exemplified Christianity.

But no sooner had her husband got his clean bill of health, his denazification certificate, he returned to law. Commuted to Hamm every day, to the regional high court. Left her alone with the children. Then Rainer found a hand grenade. Gone, her favourite son. And Werner injured. Had to get away from Bückeberg, just away. Never see that sandstone step again.

Next stop Werl, the prison. He was part of the management. Under the occupiers. Under colonel Vickers. Her husband was allowed to look after the generals, the war criminals – victor's justice, no doubt about it. All condemned to death, then pardoned, soon afterwards released – but still a monumental disgrace that they were imprisoned at all! They sat round in the prison garden with her husband reminiscing. While she stood over the stove.

And yet she's the one who knew exactly how neutered officers felt. Not him. She knew. Her own father sat around at home for over twenty years, writing poems, making violins and painting, because the imperial military court had to be disbanded after the first big lost war. She grew up in the atmosphere of that humiliation, with a mentality which saw every attempt to express a contrary opinion as a reproach.

So she's standing in front of me, my mother, holding her hands protectively over her stomach. But it all seems to be escaping. It keeps coming out.

So they're standing under the living room light, with their terribly earnest faces, in which the wrong decision still means something. My mother with her disappointing life, and my father with his fear that his life with her might break apart.

I feel his fear too, and her obligation to do her duty – her anger at this obligation, never expressed – frightens me so much I completely forget her love.

When the exhibition about the Wehrmacht's crimes in the Soviet Union opened in Munich my mother went along and brought me back the catalogue.

You can keep it, she told me. You won't go anyway. You can at least learn something from the catalogue. I've done what I said I'd do – I was there – but I don't want to look at this any more. I don't want to carry this heavy thing back to my flat. I felt sick in the exhibition as it is.

Then she crossed her hands over her stomach and asked if I would make her a hot milk: I'll lie on your sofa till then, if I may.

I'm horrified and blame myself for not accompanying her. She stood for two hours in the slush on Munich's Marienplatz queueing to get into this exhibition, got shunted past countless photographs and text panels, then stumbled home and called on us on the way. At the door she fell into my arms and I just about managed to get her onto a chair.

I might as well throw my whole life in the bin, were her first words. Nothing but criminals, all around me. Your father. My father. Our armed forces. The generals we looked up to. Von Manstein. Kesselring. Men who strived to be honourable above all else, who put their lives in the service of Germany, all criminals we're now told!

I tried to steer her into more rational waters and said that the exhibition was mainly about the war of extermination against the Soviet Union.

But she wouldn't hear any of it. She no longer wanted to make a distinction.

The phrase 'War crimes of the Wehrmacht' was etched so deeply into her that two weeks later she was admitted to hospital with a perforation of the stomach. She was eighty-three. The stabbing pains had finally hit their target.

She survived the operation.

Whenever she has her pains, I think: It's my fault. I've been talking too much about the Jews again.

Once I showed her a photograph of the scratch marks on the walls of the gas chambers. This was 2000, three years after her stomach operation, nine months before her death. Like a twelve-year-old I walked to her flat and demanded she look at this photo I had just seen in the newspaper.

It took her a moment to realise what she was looking at, during which time I told her about the Kapos who waited outside the gas chambers while the Zyklon B was disseminated inside. One of the Kapos, some of whom were also Jews, described how they'd heard the people scratching at the walls as they asphyxiated. And how for many of the people in the gas chambers, standing at the walls, it had taken half an hour till the gas reached them, piped in from the ceiling. And he described how he had to pull the corpses apart because in their fight with death the naked humans had got so hooked up amongst each other. And how they knocked all their gold teeth out of their jaws before shoving the bodies into the ovens.

I carried on talking, in front of the stove in my mother's kitchen, like an expert, like a historian specialising in the holocaust, because I had just discovered this photo.

While my mother, the picture in one hand, reached for the kitchen chair to sit down.

I kept going, saying that the Jews' journey from the ramp where the trains pulled up and they had to jump out of the trucks, to their cremation in the incinerators, took no longer than two hours. That when they leapt off the trucks the families and friends held fast to each other's hands. That the new arrivals didn't yet know what was coming to them. That they saw that the SS men had walking sticks in their hands and Alsatians on leads. That this wasn't a good sign. That minute by minute they realised this place was not the labour camp they had been expecting. That above all

else they didn't want to be separated but at any cost to stick together. That this was the reason they held hands, children and their mothers, children and their fathers, siblings, friends, girls and boys, strangers who in the seconds it took to realise what awaited them, formed bonds. That the SS men suddenly raised these walking sticks, which had earlier seemed so incongruous. That they used these walking sticks to beat all the hands holding other hands. That the sticks came down on these hands forcing them to let go. That the SS had to decide in an instant who would be gassed and who was still capable of work, who should be sent for medical experiments. That anyone who would probably live a little longer was driven in columns to the barracks, at the double, where they had to strip naked, were hosed down with cold water and within minutes shaved – devout, modest Jews, their heads and groins shorn bald, by strangers, hundreds of them in one room.

And that they then had to go to the tables to be tattooed and had their number carved into them. That a kind of sack was thrown to them which they had to pull over their head, a sack with holes for the head and arms, made of hard cloth. And that within half an hour human beings had been turned into anonymous creatures.

One survivor, around my mother's age, of a similar class, similarly dressed to her, with a similar vocabulary, perhaps from Charlottenburg in Berlin, once said, 'It took just half an hour before everything human about us was gone.'

I was just getting to that sentence. I wanted to repeat it to my mother. But I didn't get that far, because she already felt such bad stomach pain she asked me to leave her flat. She couldn't take any more.

No sooner was I outside I wished I'd held my tongue.

How naïve I was! Of course I showed her the photograph because I wanted it to have an effect on her. But when I saw the effect, I just felt guilty.

I apologised later. But she just laughed. She had to be able to take it, she said. Just that her stomach wasn't so robust any more.

Now she shifts from the spot under the living room light and walks towards the bedroom. A wave of release must have swept through her.

My father bends down and picks up the sheet with the nine signatures. With no hint of a rebuke he says: Put this back in the book where it belongs. Otherwise we won't know where it is.

IN MARTIN'S ROOM

Martin is back, has been for several days. He's had a serious accident. Now he's recuperating here. I reckon we're honoured he's sleeping up there in his room for a little while. Any day when the whole family is together under one roof is very exciting. Even if I'm more likely than ever to be overlooked.

Martin has actually started his literature degree already, in Freiburg, but he wanted to join one more reserve duty training exercise to become a reserves lieutenant, as they get bigger severance payouts. That was when the accident happened.

I have been told in no uncertain terms to leave him in peace and not embroil him in conversations. But I'm just waiting for the right moment to visit him. I urgently want to discuss something with him, something I feel very strongly about.

Martin knows me well, but he can still listen to me as if I were a stranger. I really appreciate that. In this house everyone treats me as if I were a cookbook lying open, full of terribly familiar recipes. They finish my sentences. It's infuriating.

I've never told anyone the thing I want to tell him. I've never spelt it out. It's a problem I know is there but I really don't want to express it in words. I'll wait till I'm already talking to Martin then I'll launch in. We'll see where it leads.

Martin looks very different. His movements are perfectly normal, and he's all there mentally, speaking the same as ever, a little louder perhaps, but his head is bound up in a bandage, including his ears. Only his eyes, mouth and nose are free.

The wound is on top of his head. The doctors have placed several layers of muslin over it, under the bandage, so his nice-shaped head is now taller than usual.

When we went to visit him in the army hospital in Detmold he'd put on his uniform, probably just for our benefit, and was sitting on his bed.

What order have you just joined? I asked him as we entered the sickroom.

My parents weren't in the mood for jokes.

Martin laughed and saluted: Mars Invasion. I'm the vanguard.

He was delighted to see us and started describing his accident immediately.

His brigade was the '21st Lipperland', stationed in Augustdorf. That's twenty minutes' drive from Detmold. On the morning of the accident his tank, a M47 Patton, had just come back from the workshop. The mechanic had replaced the torsion bar springs on one of the hatches the wrong way round.

Martin gave us a detailed explanation: those lids on tank hatches are meant to flip open in an instant in case you need to look out, but to close them you have to put in some effort. With this hatch it was the other way round. But no one realised that.

We set out with the lid up, he said. For tank practice we go to the Senne heath, to the eastern part of the Westphalian Basin in other words. You could also call it the declivity on the southern edge of the Teutoburger Forest.

I pointed out that the Romans marched through here with Varus before falling into the trap set by Arminius, the Cherusci chieftain.

My parents asked me not to interrupt Martin.

Martin described it all in minute detail, and didn't stint on the technical terms; post-ice-age sand deposits from retreating glaciers had left undulations on the ground there, perfect for practicing tank driving, for exercises, manoeuvres, shooting and so on. In his tank they had two machine guns and an artillery gun, for five soldiers.

That I never knew, that one of those tanks was more of a mini-bus.

Martin was the machine gunner and sat at the front right. When the accident happened he had been looking out through the hatch with the incorrectly-fitted lid at the sandy landscape of the Senne heath. He was wearing just a hat, no helmet. That was perfectly in line with regulations.

My father took his glasses off and massaged his eyeballs hard with his thumb and forefinger. He would have preferred a shorter version. My mother's gaze was fixed on her eldest son; her eyes juddered. She was finding it all unbearable.

The broader undulations weren't so tricky for tank drivers, Martin explained, it was the tighter ones that got you. They could quickly make you seasick. At the first tight undulation that morning the hatch lid had snapped shut like a rat trap. The razor-sharp periscope prisms shot right past his face. Missed me by a whisker! Martin cried. Incredible luck! A centimetre the other way and I'd have been the next Rainer.

Our parents had to sit down immediately.

Of course, Martin said, I'm relying on my fellow soldiers' accounts of what happened. I wasn't aware of a thing. Next thing I knew I was here in bed.

Because there are only two chairs in a sickroom like that I was allowed to sit next to Martin on the bed. It was an interesting arrangement: the two of us on the hospital bed, our parents against the wall opposite, on two chairs.

That was the moment they realised that the children who survive also whisk their parents along with them through every twist and turn of their lives.

Now there's clattering coming from up in Martin's room; he'll be finishing the bookshelf he's making to go over his desk. This is my moment.

To find an easy way into the conversation, I grab the book Field Marshal Kesselring and his 'companions in destiny' gave my father. I skip up the bare wooden steps and knock. Yes, that's how we do things. Even my father knocks on his children's doors. He's already turning the handle as he says it, though, and by the time you say, come in, he's already in the room, casually saying: I did knock.

I wait properly for Martin to summon me in.

It smells of glue and wood shavings, of cigarettes and coffee. He makes that himself up here on a little hotplate. As I suspected, he is working on his furniture.

It's impressive, and reminds me of the high altar in a cathedral, perhaps because there's a framed photo of his laughing girlfriend in the middle of the top shelf, smiling down at us; a dizzyingly tall bookshelf rises above an elegantly curved desktop. All the surfaces are held up by four long bamboo canes, joined without any metal screws, just with lengths of red raffia tied through holes in the shelves.

Come and help me tie the knots, Martin calls out straight away. Press your index finger down here, nice and firm, while I tie it up.

Strange feeling, getting my hands mixed up with his, tying knots, my nose that close to his bandage and his tiny snippet of face. It smells strange, of rubbish and surgical spirit.

And? What did you want to know? He gestures to the book with his elongated head while he ties another knot.

I'm interested in what connection these people have with our family, I say.

Martin takes the book, casts a swift glance at the signature below the dedication and says, Kesselring wrote that. You know who that is?

Yes I say, he was the air force general. He razed Rotterdam to the ground, gave London the 'Blitz' and bombed the Warsaw ghetto.

Martin is impressed. Full marks, he says, where did you learnt that?

Dad mentioned it once.

I see.

Martin gets back to work, hammering tiny steel nails into a bamboo cane so the pieces of raffia didn't slip off.

I thought you didn't want to use any metal, I say.

I won't get away with using none at all. And I really need to get it finished now. I've spent enough time on it. He puts the hammer down and picks the book up. I'll start with the dedication, shall I?

I nod, although I already know it off by heart.

Martin reads the dedication out loud first. Then I pass him the folded sheet with the names of Kesselring's 'companions in destiny':

Von Manstein
Von Mackensen
Gallenkamp
Mälzer
Simon
Kesselring
Von Falkenhorst
Schmidt
Wolff

Martin's nose suddenly goes as white as his bandage. I know all of them, he says. I can seem them in front of me. I met them once.

I'm hoping for an enthralling story and look around for something to sit on. Unfortunately there's only a footstool. That will do nicely.

Martin sits on his desk chair. It's on casters and it's adjusted to its full height. He puts his legs up on the pale oak desktop. He's wearing jackboots.

In 1950 I was exactly your age, he begins. Dad was making his farewell visit to Werl Prison and took me along. He wanted to shake the generals' hands one more time. It had been his job to look after them, a job our father was glad to do. All of the generals were given a second cell to use as a living room, as well as a pageboy to put their boots on in the morning. They were also given books, chocolate, brandy, wine, and above all cigarettes.

And what were the generals like? I ask.

Listen here, my brother says, looking sternly at me, if I tell you my memories now, I want them to remain my memories. I'm the one who went with Dad to visit the generals in the prison. Please don't change that. I don't want someone suddenly telling me about how my younger brother visited the generals serving time in Werl Prison with my father!

Have no fear, I say.

Martin raises an eyebrow: yeah, yeah!

Then he gets going: Well, after a year our father was given his marching orders, big time. The prison was totally overcrowded, mainly with ex forced labourers, Poles. In May '45 they didn't know where to go and no one wanted them. Eastern Poland had been annexed by Russia and they were occupying western Poland. This country was complete chaos, people heading in all directions: over four million Russian prisoners of war who had to be sent east, millions of German refugees from the eastern territories flooding into the west, hundreds of thousands from the camps, who weren't popular either, and didn't know where to go. Everyone stole food; no one had enough to eat. But only Poles could be certain they'd be locked up if they were caught. If they raped a farmer's wife and beat her husband to death, they were shot, at four in the morning, in Neheimerstraße, behind the prison, up to the end of '46.

Martin pauses for a moment.

But the generals were given a second cell, he continues. Dad even planted a little prison garden for them to smoke in. And on his last day at work there he brought General von Manstein a record player and some records. He was like a child, waiting to see the look on Manstein's face. Allegedly Manstein used to listen to Mozart in the evenings on the battlefield when it was over for the day, or during a night-time pause in hostilities – In his tent.

Even when he'd lost? I asked.

Even when he'd lost. Towards the end of the war it made no difference if they won or lost. Generals ply their trade; they shunt masses of people around. That's their business. Afterwards, when the

soldiers are dead, the generals start from the beginning again with the next generation. All in all, human beings are quite prepared to slaughter their children. Not much has changed since Zeus and Uranus.

Martin makes a quick gesture as if he needs to be sick, to remind me that Zeus, the last of Uranus' children to be eaten by their father, just managed to leap back out of Uranus' mouth and survive. Oh yes, he laughs, it's a deep fear all fathers have of their children! Then he carries on with the story: When we stepped up to the big iron gate Dad was holding me in his right hand, and a Philips record player in his left, one of those hat-box fold-out ones. They want to see you, he whispered. They asked specifically for you. It's so long since they last saw a child. Your oldest son is twelve now, isn't he? they asked. Yes, do bring the twelve-year-old along!

So I got to meet them. And I was amazed how harmless they looked – our parents' heroes, whose rooms our father now had the keys for. They were slouching around like teenagers, in dusty rooms full of potted plants, smoking for all they were worth – American cigarettes.

We've been put on ice, they repeated constantly, rubbing their hands together.

Dad tried to console them: the chancellor is coming to visit soon; a country will always need generals.

They grinned at that. And then he explained why Colonel Vickers had given him the boot and that sadly he would not therefore be there when Adenauer came.

Kesselring said, don't take it personally, Dr Selge, you've done a good job, and patted our father on the shoulder.

The others murmured, yes, like an echo: good job, good job.

And what did they say to you, I asked Martin.

Not a lot. They didn't know where to start with me. They gave me friendly nods: you'll be one of us one day, won't you?

Dad stroked my hair. I still remember that. He was proud of me.

As we were leaving Kesselring handed him this book, saying there were nice pictures in it by his war artist; we could use it as a guide book should we travel to Italy again. By the way, where did you find it? Martin asked.

Right there in the bookshelves.

My brother took a long, deep breath. But that's not true, he continued. I'll never be like them! They're murderers. Who knows how many millions of deaths they were responsible for, just those nine sorry specimens with their flowerpots. I'll become a first lieutenant in the reserves, take my severance pay and go back to Freiburg. Anyway my mind's already been on literature for ages.

Why didn't become a conscientious objector? I ask cautiously.

I'm not a shirker! Martin exclaims. Anyway I need the severance payout. Dad isn't giving me much – two hundred and fifty a month. You can't get by on that. You'll understand one day.

Martin takes his uniform jacket off now and looks at the list of names again.

You know, they were always scurrying around distrustfully behind each other's backs. They hardly talked, just eyed each other – and smoked.

Why were they distrustful?

They were each jealous the others might be released before them. Von Manstein and Kesselring had the best chances. They were originally sentenced to death, then they were given life, and year by year their sentences were shortened. By '53 they were out.

And why did it happen so quickly?

They were needed. Adenauer wanted them on his side to help with his election campaign. The generals had millions of followers, former German soldiers who felt let down, like our father. Anyone who could get them out of prison would win those soldiers' votes. Officially it was about forming the new Federal Armed Forces; if Kesselring and von Manstein helped set up a parliamentary army, perhaps it would turn Nazi soldiers into ardent democrats. That was Adenauer's gamble. And then there was the yanks: they were still relatively inexperienced in modern warfare and wanted to benefit from German tactics, because we were renowned throughout the

world in the art of war. Von Manstein was the inventor of the Blitzkrieg, in Poland. He gave his soldiers Pervitin by the truckload.

What's that? I asked.

A drug, amphetamine: German soldiers were able to fight for three days and nights on the trot without sleep. In France, von Manstein led the Germans from Flanders to Paris within a week with his sickle-cut plan. And you know all about Kesselring's heroic deeds.

Why was Kesselring sentenced to death? I wanted to know.

For shooting hostages. During his Italian campaign Kesselring had over three hundred Italians shot, in the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome, as revenge for an attack on German soldiers. Over three hundred! Can you believe it! For thirty German soldiers. Always ten times as many, plus a little extra like at the butcher's. That's how they calculated it. And they shot the elderly and children too. And seventy-five Jewish hostages. You can bet there's nothing about that in his guidebook of heritage architecture.

And von Manstein? I ask.

Martin waved dismissively and gave me the book back: Manstein! After seizing Crimea he had fourteen thousand civilians shot, Jews, Romani and Crimean Tartars: the massacre of Simferopol. You heard of it? He was still called as a key witness at Nuremberg. Not as a defendant! It was only in '49 that a British military court sentenced him to twelve years in prison. In '53 he was released, on the initiative of Churchill and Adenauer. Now he lives at his country seat.

And the others?

Some of them are still inside – Simon, for instance. He was an SS general, commander of the first ever concentration camp, Sachsenburg, diehard patriot to the bitter end. Two days before the war ended, in Brettheim, near Ansbach, he had the mayor shot because he'd disarmed a couple of Hitler Youth to save their lives. But two days later he handed himself straight in to the Yanks. The cruellest ones are always the biggest cowards.

Martin pointed to the dedication: Colonel Wolff, the last one on this list, was an especially nasty piece of work – commander of Rome, negotiated with Pope Pius to make Rome an open city, to protect the architectural treasures. But before that he'd had train-loads of Jews sent to Treblinka and cynically wished them bon voyage.

They're travelling hangmen, every signatory, murderers and hangmen. And they're wishing our family a lucky star to light our way to the future! When they say 'light' they must be thinking of rocket flares and exploding missiles. All they're capable of is killing. They see themselves as the great grandsons of Clausewitz. Democracy makes them puke. Most of them are aristos anyway and still haven't accepted that the divine right has ended. They were pleased as punch because Hitler finally gave them some power. But after '45 they pretended to know nothing about it. They put all the blame on the SS, leaving the army looking innocent throughout. Their strategy worked.

I'm totally flabbergasted. I've never seen my brother like this. I've never heard him speak this way. Did you learn all this in the army? I ask.

But Martin isn't finished: There are people who were born to practice the art of war their whole lives long. They're just waiting for the opportunity to apply their knowledge. And there are politicians with nothing better to do than bring about this opportunity, because they can't imagine the world except in a state of war. They think that's how it has to be. They lecture at us for so long, in the end we believe them. And then they use us as cannon fodder.

And today? I ask. What's it like today in the Federal Armed Forces?

Martin puts his cigarette out.

Our parliamentary army is there solely for defence, for peacekeeping – according to the constitution. But basically you're right; the amount of things we're meant to be defending keeps growing. Take the Yanks in Korea – at some point we'll have to join them. I can't wait to hear what arguments they'll be using as we stumble into our first foreign assignment, and which thug will be behind it!

Martin fetches us an eggnog. He mixed it fresh yesterday. I'm allowed a sip.

He apologizes that it hasn't been bottled up yet. He pours it from a milk churn into two coloured glasses. We toast each other. Our height difference is considerable and I notice this eggnog is stronger than the one our parents drink, but of course I'm not an expert.

Martin lights another cigarette, blowing the smoke off to the left and right of my face. I get the impression he doesn't mind at all having someone as young as me to talk to. He certainly doesn't treat me as too stupid to follow what he's saying.

I decide this must be the moment to say something about myself. Suddenly I feel very childish, afraid of disappointing him.

I often sit in the pear tree on the lawn behind the shed and pretend to be Kesselring, I begin.

Oh, yes? Martin keeps his eyes on me. And how do you do that?

Well, I imagine the pear tree is a fighter jet.

Do you now?

Yes, I sit in a narrow fork between branches – in the pilot's seat. There are a few short branches nearby I use as joysticks and levers to control the hatch for dropping bombs.

Aren't you a bit old for that?

I was worried he'd ask that.

I even make the sound of the planes' engines, I say quietly.

Let's hear it, Martin says. What does it sound like?

I give him a little demonstration, making my lips vibrate, but I don't get carried away. It's already pretty embarrassing.

And you enjoy that? he asks.

Well, you have to imagine what I can see.

What can you see?

The lawn is Rotterdam, and the garden path is the Scheldt. The apple tree outside the kitchen is the aerial escort. The poplars down HansasträÙe, which I can only see the tops of, are distant squadrons.

Martin is beginning to have his doubts, at least in the section of his face I can see.

I'm sorry, I say. I can't describe it any better. I'm in radio contact with these trees and I give the orders to open the hatch in the floor to drop the bombs.

And then?

I look for a suitable target – over the roofs of Rotterdam.

You can't be seeing Rotterdam! he says firmly. You aren't seeing a picture of Rotterdam the way it used to look!

I have to reflect for a moment.

You're right. It doesn't really matter what I see. I just feel this enormous urge to drop bombs. And then the lawn isn't exactly a lawn any more, just a blurry expanse. And then I say to myself: that's Rotterdam down there.

In other words, you're not looking properly.

Yes, I say, that may be. But I still pretend I'm 'taking a look'. Also I make loud explosion noises.

Can you make one now?

I'd rather not, but I can try.

And using the word 'kaboom' I demonstrate an explosion, so that Martin can get the impression of a bomb on impact.

Ok, I get it, I get it! he shouts. And then?

I get hot. I'm reaching nub of my problem. But first I continue my description: Kesselring leans right out of the aeroplane and gazes at the destruction.

That wouldn't work, my brother interrupts me. You can't lean out of a plane like that. It would crash.

Ok, I say, well for me it works. I can also land quickly, get out and take a walk across the fields of corpses, among the smoking rubble. I just do it because I feel like it.

Martin blows the air out over his vocal chords.

I say some prayers for one or two of the dead, I say.
 All on our lawn?
 Yes, of course.
 You can see corpses on the lawn?
 I want to see them, and then they're lying there, among the pears. I attack using real pears.
 As bombs?
 Yes, I say, you know exactly what I mean. I pull unripe pears off at random and drop them on Rotterdam.
 On the lawn, he corrects me.
 Yes.
 And what does Dad say about that? It's his favourite tree!
 Actually, he was suddenly standing on the garden path during one of these attacks, I say.
 On the Scheldt river, says Martin, who has entered fully into my imagination.
 Precisely.
 So Dad was walking on the water like Jesus, you mean.
 Yes, but not peacefully. He yelled at me, asked if I'd taken leave of my senses.
 I can well imagine, Martin says.
 He shouted, Come down from there this instant! But to be on the safe side I stayed in the tree and confessed I was in the middle of bombing Rotterdam. Strangely he nodded and calmed down immediately. He bent down, gathered up a few pears and said they were his Louise Bonne and I mustn't do that again.
 So when you bomb London or Warsaw, what's the difference? Martin asks.
 Basically nothing, I say. Then the garden path is the Thames or the Vistula.
 And what effect does the change of name have on you?
 The amount. Just the amount of it. More cities, more bombs, more rivers, more dead.
 More prayers, Martin adds.
 Right, I say. I want to drop bombs and say prayers.
 Martin fishes his next cigarette out, offers me one.
 Thanks, I say, but I'd rather not. It'll make me cough.
 But you don't mind me smoking, do you?
 Of course not.
 Why are these games a problem for you? Sounds as if you enjoy them.
 His match fizzles and bursts into a vigorous flame.
 Because I don't want to play them any more.
 Then drop them.
 That's just the problem. The games are playing me.
 Could you explain what you mean.
 I look at Martin, hesitate, then say, It's a compulsion.
 I'm incredibly proud I've thought of this expression. That's the good thing when you don't think about what you're going to say in advance. 'Compulsion' was the word. I'd never have thought of that before.
 I walk through the garden, I tell him, and as soon as I see the pear tree I want to be Kesselring. My walk changes without me doing anything. I can feel Kesselring's belly, his jackboots, his uniform. The minute I see the pear tree, I'm already saying to a non-existent person: Adjutant, prepare my plane for a reconnaissance mission! This non-existent person nods briefly and says, Jawohl, Field Marshal Kesselring. Then I raise my hand, smooth out an invisible glove and greet General Jodl from a distance.
 Jodl? Martin asks. He spent the whole time at Hitler's HQ.
 Yes but right now he's outside on the airfield.
 You mean the sandpit.
 Behind the sandpit. I like his name – that's why he's there too.

God oh God, Martin says. This all sounds very weird.

It's just an example, I say. My brain is overpopulated. There are as many people there as I can think of words. I can't say a few words without imagining a stranger's face... It's not funny. I pause. Now it's his turn.

This reminds me of Dad's dwarves, Martin says thoughtfully.

What dwarves?

When he was working as a nurse in the psychiatric clinic at the Bethel hospital after the war there was a former bank manager in the secure unit. Dad liked to meet him in the corridor and get him to explain how the stock market functioned. In the middle of the conversation the bank manager interrupted himself: Dr Selge, look down there by the door to my room, can't you see them? There are all these little dwarves coming out, new ones each time. They want to eavesdrop on my stock exchange tips then go off and speculate themselves. But they're afraid of you, Dr Selge so they're running off and tumbling down the stairs over there. It's a wonder no one tries to prevent them! Normally I chase them out of my room with a broom but one or two always hide in there and hold the door open for the others next morning.

There is a pause.

I'm not seeing dwarves, Martin. The lawn stays a lawn for me. I choose to see rubble and corpses. I want it that way, you understand?

Could you paint the corpses then? Or the rubble?

Good question. You're right, I say, I couldn't. Strictly speaking I'm just playing: I destroy, kill, then say prayers. Destroy, kill, pray. Always in that order: destroy, kill, pray.

Suddenly I feel tired.

Martin nods, smokes and thinks about it.

It's gradually getting dark. Someone is throwing windfall apples at our window from the street, but missing. They splosh to the left and right against the wall of the building instead.

That'll be Sausi Beier, Martin says, come to pick me up for handball.

Handball? With your head? You can't be in goal at the moment!

Of course I can't. But I want to watch. Also there's an epileptic there. He can lend me his helmet.

But what about the concussion, Martin! You've fractured the base of your skull.

I don't think it was the base. I'll take care. Don't worry.

But that's more dangerous than Herford Roulette.

Whatever, he says. You just focus on not killing so many people.

Sure, I say, and keep quiet.

Who else do you pretend to be? he asks after a while.

Dr Baumann, I reply.

Martin laughs: great name! I'd like to meet Dr Baumann.

You already know him.

Who is it?

He's sitting in front of you.

I've probably said that in a comically grave voice because Martin laughs so much his bandage wobbles: I'd never have guessed!

I feel like I'm in a lift going down. The eggnog is probably to blame. If I tell him this story he's really got me over a barrel. Still I start to tell it. Suddenly I don't care what the consequences are.

Dr Baumann is a schoolteacher, I say. In the attic, just over there behind the table tennis table, there are some old chairs, a table and a few boxes. That's his school: 'The Attic Grammar School', a senior school for difficult students and reluctant learners.

Martin is fully alert.

One of the boxes contains Baumann's grading books, little notebooks like calendars in which teachers record their student's marks. You can buy them in bookshops. Baumann has three, each full of names from two or three classes. Every class has twenty students. At three classes per book

that makes around a hundred and eighty names Baumann has to know off by heart. A lot of work at the beginning of the academic year.

I glance over to check; Martin doesn't seem bored. Dr Baumann, I continue, goes up to the attic to his school for difficult students and does my homework, as it were, by grilling each student. He's generally seen as a good teacher but he can't perform magic. By the time he's completed all my tasks he's handed out quite a few Ds and Es. The last one gets an A, and I hope by then Dr Baumann knows my lessons. Next day in real school I still fail, big time. Then I get cross with Baumann and warn him he has to be harder on his students.

Martin's eyes are wide.

Who is it giving Dr Baumann his warnings?

The head.

Does he have a name?

Dr Rothaus, I say quietly.

And then I also tell Martin I recently had to endure a very unpleasant Latin lesson in Dad's study. After that I couldn't make it up the stairs. I was that done in. I think that's called 'instantaneous depression', isn't it? I ask.

I look at Martin, but he says nothing.

On the bottom step I didn't know which way to go: left, right, straight ahead or back. Suddenly Dr Rothaus approached me. He touched me on the back of my shoulder. I didn't want to give you a fright, he said, but it's lucky I've met you! We've been talking about you in the staffroom. I wanted to thank you, on behalf of everyone. We're thoroughly delighted you're with us. You have one of the most difficult classes up there. No one wants to teach them, but since you've been teaching the class the students are transformed. You really are a magnificent teacher! I just wanted to say that. And now I'd like to wish you all the best for this lesson.

Strangely these words really helped me. I was able to climb the stairs, everyone in my class stood up and greeted me, and I said, Let's not do Latin today, let's do religious studies. And I asked my favourite student, Uschi Brandenburg, to tell us all something about the creation myth, who she thinks is guilty in the apple story with the tree of knowledge. Or if anyone is guilty at all. It was a super lesson, very harmonious.

Now I can't sink any lower, I think, and I get so tired I slip off the footstool, stretch my legs out, and just manage to support myself on the footstool with my upper arm.

I'll fall asleep soon, and in fact I want to.

Dr Baumann is a dreamer, Edgar, I hear Martin say – without judgement. But I'm afraid you need to make a plan for how to handle reality. Dr Baumann certainly won't manage it.

Martin's words sweep through me like a text I've long been waiting for. Every sentence affects me yet remains alien at the same time.

Your reality is your father, Martin says. He is stronger than you. And it will stay that way for a while. You have to address that.

Martin reflects for a moment, and I feel like I'm at the doctor's. I'm excited to find out what's wrong with me.

Find a student to give private tuition to, he says, a real one. You can tell him everything he needs to know, a real, living student, someone a year below you. You can try and explain the ablative absolute or the accusative and infinitive or whatever to him, so that he understands it. Can you imagine what a sense of achievement it will give you? Also that way you'll earn some money to spend at the cinema.

It was nice the way Martin said that. I could have told myself that. But I didn't. And if I had? If I'd said it to myself? Would I have acted on it? I would first have had to believe in it. Believing in what you know is a difficulty of yet another order.

I say thanks to Martin and go to bed.

Waking up in the night I hear a smothered discussion between my parents. Because they're speaking into their pillows at speed, I can't tell what they're talking about. All that talking seems to tire them and soon I hear their breathing as they sleep.

It's bright and exciting. No one has drawn the curtains. Outside it's a full moon. Everything is glowing.

I get up, wedge my pillow under my arm, drag my bedclothes after me and walk down the corridor and up the wooden stairs to the first floor, step by step. The moon shines through the window on the staircase, precisely the colour of eggnog. I feel sick again. As the bedclothes are draped so invitingly down the steps below me, I lie down on them for a rest. The shadows on the opposite wall are gigantic.

Then I knock on Martin's door.

Come in.

He's sitting in bed. Astonishing moonlight in here too. Martin's elongated head is leaning in the corner. With his bright bandage he looks like an extra window.

Can I sleep here on the carpet? I ask.

Of course.

Isn't your girlfriend coming tonight?

No, he says. Her father is watching her and she can't escape. Sometimes her mother lets me in through the window but that's tricky at the moment with this bandage on my head.

I have another question, I say. In his dedication, Kesselring talked about Dad's nobility. What did he mean by that?

Martin considers for a moment. You can forget that word, he told me from his moonlit corner. It's poisoned for ever. The Nazis co-opted it – just for themselves, for their kind. You have to understand that, and think about the Jews and the camps!

We can't use a word like that any more? I ask my brother.

No, he says, we can't. We can never use it again. We have to find other words if we want to say something positive about people.

I think of the music students Werner sometimes brings home to us, the violinist Jack Glatzer for instance. The day he came to visit, Werner explicitly said to our parents that Jack was Jewish – American – but his first language was German. He had relatives who had been gassed in Auschwitz. Our father raised an eyebrow, nodded, and said, in the voice of someone eating humble pie, We're only going to play a few trios. And then I told Martin about Herr Brand the lawyer and his sister. I don't know them at all, Martin says.

I say that we didn't know them either. They must have heard about our home concerts. One day we just received an invitation; we were to visit them – just like that. Mum and Dad were totally thrown. They're Jewish, they said, a bit bewildered, an old Herford family. Herr Brand had added that he played violin; they could play some music together. Come on, we'll give it a go, Dad said. Perhaps it'll work. And we went to visit them. The invitation was for the afternoon, so I was allowed to go along.

On the way they reminded me: They're Jews. Be careful what you say! As if I was the one who might say the wrong thing. Me of all people.

I never realised there were such nice old half-timbered houses in Herford, with a garden leading down to the river Werre and a brick veranda, overgrown with ivy and wisteria: an afternoon from another era.

The white-haired lawyer and his equally white-haired sister moved almost soundlessly and a little bowed among their old furniture, nineteenth-century, upholstered in velvet. We drank our coffee from Meissner china. There were cakes with spices I'd never tasted. They spoke more softly than we did, and were very friendly, but it all felt a bit staged. I'd never seen our parents so stiff, so awkward. The conversation kept stalling – as if the Brands didn't speak German.

Till they started playing music.

At some point Herr Brand got his violin out and took Dad to the baby grand; he actually held him by the arm and led him, as if that were easier than speaking with each other. Dad didn't know where to look and the first thing he did was lift the piano lid, as if at a concert.

Herr Brand played the violin very nicely, but of course he was less professional than Dad. He kept breaking off, retuning his violin and saying to himself, I'll have to play that a little slower.

It was Beethoven's Spring Sonata.

My God, how long is it since I last played that! Herr Brand called to his sister.

She got up and closed the piano lid again. Otherwise I won't be able to hear my brother at all, she shouted over Dad's music stand – but with humour. You play so powerfully! And my brother does have such a nice tone!

Dad clearly took that as an affront. He doesn't like it when people tell him he plays too loudly of course. He responded immediately with: The piano sounded rather faint.

It was stored in a damp cellar throughout the Nazi period, Herr Brand explained. It had to be reconditioned first. We've not been back that long.

Where were you then? I asked.

Dad threw me a stern look.

Abroad, Herr Brand said calmly.

Then they continued playing.

His tone really was nice, but they had trouble with the rhythm, my father and Herr Brand. The syncopation at the start of the third movement, the Scherzo, where the violin and the piano keep exchanging bird cries, was so muddled it made me laugh.

No one else laughed.

So then I had to bite my cheeks again, but mainly because throughout this section Dad kept screaming, Ow! Ow! Ow! as if his fingers had got trapped.

The sister tried to start a conversation with Mum on the sofa, but it never really got going. And in the end Mum said she couldn't listen and speak at the same time. A bit later she repeated that she could only do one thing at a time; it was one of her weak points.

We left early. I would have liked to stay longer.

Seems it's just not possible, Mum murmured to herself on the way home, pity.

Over in his corner Martin has closed his eyes, but he is awake and makes a 'hmmm' every so often. That's a very sad story, he says at the end. The Brands extend the of friendship but our parents can't accept it.

Then he slips down and finds the most comfortable spot between the walls for his ghostly head bandage.

I won't get anything more from him today, I think, take my bedclothes, mutter a goodnight and leave his room on tiptoe.