

Miriam Georg

GATEWAY TO THE WORLD: Dreams (Vol. I)

Das Tor zur Welt: Träume

- 220,000 copies sold of Vol. I and II of *Gateway to the World!*
- The new dramatic two-part series in a unique setting - the Hamburg emigrant halls.
- 500,000 copies sold of her previous saga *Elbleuchten* (Vol. I) and *Elbstürme* (Vol. II), with rights sold to Czech Republic (Dobrovsky), Russia (AST) and Spain (Planeta).
- English sample translation available.



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Two women as different as ebb and flow. Connected by fate and the hope for a better life. And united by more than they can imagine ...

Young Ava from a farm near Hamburg has just one goal – to find her family in America. In order to be able to travel there, she works tirelessly in the emigration halls in Hamburg. She doesn't even have time for the photographer Wilhelm, who lays his heart at her feet. When she finally manages to get the money for the ticket together, she is duped and loses everything. Claire – worldly and brave – manages to work out who is the head of the group of fraudsters. But does she not need him as a support for her own causes? There is a thin line between bitter hostility and passionate attraction ... Ava and Claire. Two loves, two lives. Connected forever by fate.

Miriam Georg, born in 1987, is a freelance proof reader and editor. She has a degree in European literature as well as a master's degree with a special focus on Native American Literature. When she is not on one of her trips, the author lives in Berlin Neukölln with her deaf dog Rosali and her book collection.

MIRIAM GEORG

Gateway to the World: Dreams (Vol. 1)

Sample translated by Alexandra Roesch

1892

Altes Land

She dreamt of the sea again. It had always been there for as long as she could remember. Somewhere at the edges of the night, it drifted through the depths of her consciousness, like a song that you can't get out of your head. In her room, between sleep and wakefulness, she had a momentary sinking feeling in the darkness. She felt the water pulling at her hair, filling her lungs. An endless depth beneath her feet. And although she knew that in her dream she had just drowned, there was no fear. On the contrary, it felt calm. Calm and warm. As if it was meant to be.

As if she were where she was supposed to be.

Ava awoke with a sigh on her lips. As soon as she felt the straw poking through the sheets, became aware of the musty smell of the wood, heard the cows snorting on the other side of the wall waiting for the morning, she longed to return to her dream. For a moment she pictured an image. A wide curtain was blowing in the wind. A woman and a man stood in front of a house and smiled. There was a smell of warm bread. Sighing, she turned over, but just then the first cockerel crowed outside.

It can't be that time already, she thought desperately, like she did every single day she could recall. She had only just fallen into bed, had only just thought that her back could not stand another minute of work, that she could surely sleep for a hundred years and still be tired.

But the cockerel crowed a second time and the cows on the other side of the wall began to restlessly paw the ground with their hooves.

She sat up and listened to her inner voice. Everything hurt, her head was thick and heavy, her eyes burned. Sometimes in summer when the days were so long, as if they would never end, she imagined she was the sleeping princess from the storybook in the parlour. The wind would die down, the thorns of the rose hedge would wind around the house, swallowing it and all its inhabitants, and she would sleep. Sleep until she was no longer tired, sleep without the burning desire on waking to sink back into the night. And instead of the prince coming to kiss her awake, she would dream of the sea.

And what lay beyond.

'Ava!' Ruth pounded her fist against the wall. 'Move!'

Never did she say: 'Good morning', never 'Up you get' or 'It's time'. Always this 'Move!', a barked command from the next-door room, as if it were too much to waste more than one syllable on her. They could delay a little longer, the cows would tolerate it. But if they got up late, it only lengthened the day and made the next morning all the more difficult. There was no window in Ava's room, but it was still dark outside anyway, and she could already smell the morning.

In summer, the scent of wet hay and dew wafted through the cracks in the first hours of dawn. Traces of the meadows, the birch trees and the water from the ditches mingled in it. And although it was a beguiling scent, she didn't like it. It brought the world to her. And she was too tired to take on the world.

Ava stretched her feet in the air in front of her in the dark, yawned, wiggled her toes. Someday I will wake up somewhere else, she thought as she reached for her bodice and dressed with mechanical movements that were as familiar to her as the thoughts that ran through her head as she did so. Someday I will have a window and my own washbowl, my mattress won't smell of mould, I won't have to milk a cow in the morning, I won't have to make a fire, I won't have to clean vegetables, I won't have to cut peat.

Someday.

Just like the sea, the word was always with her. She whispered it to herself when reality threatened to overwhelm her. It gave her strength to believe that everything could change.

As she crept across the hall, her tin of chalk and camphor for brushing her teeth in her skirt pocket, she bumped her hip against the sideboard and something fell, clattering. She stood quite still. A loud snore came from the bedroom, then a creak. When silence resumed, she closed her eyes for a moment. The skin on the back of her neck prickled. She thought she smelt brandy, but then she shook her head. She smelt brandy everywhere nowadays, it seemed to envelop the house like a cloud, creeping under the cracks in the doors, haunting the rooms at night in invisible swathes, and when she loosened her hair from her bonnet in the evenings, she sometimes sniffed it and thought she detected a fine note of alcohol.

Ava didn't have to go outside to get to the stables, the cows lived in the same building as she did; only a door separated the humans from the animals. But she had made a habit of stepping out into the yard every morning. The fresh air cleared her head. Now, as she pushed open the door, two of the chickens fled towards the manure heap.

The lonely call of the curlew drifted across the meadows. The moor smelled of mist. Ava liked the smells everyone liked, old paper, rain on warm stone. But she also liked the way the cows smelt after the night, warm and sour at the same time. How her own skin smelt after the sun had burnt it over hours in the fields. How the steaming ditches smelt when they were freshly dug and the clods of earth lay on the meadow. And she liked the smell of the morning mist because it was unlike any other and vanished as soon as you tried to breathe it in.

She stopped by the herb bed. The willow bent low over the fence, as if it would lie down to sleep, exhausted, at any moment. It was the hottest summer Ava could recall. Even now, in the early morning, she could feel the heat rising from the ground. They had to water. There was a field behind the cow pastures where radishes, cabbages, leeks, Turkish peas and tubers grew. When something was ready, Ava and Ruth carried it to the farm in panniers. Often they would sit up late into the night, tying the turnips and preparing the Brussels sprouts. She was glad that the harvest time was over; carting the manure, hoeing in the dry soil and finally loading the barges at dawn was hard, sweaty work. They sold their vegetables to the market women from the village, who then took them to the hop market. It meant they lost a large part of the profit, but they had no time to sell it there themselves. And there wasn't enough of it either.

There was a hint of salt in the air.

Ava had never seen the sea. But she knew that the waves never stopped and the water changed colour. It adapted to the sky and its moods. Julius had told her. He was one of the farmhands on Beeks farm and had travelled far and wide, in Prussia during his journeyman years, in Holland as a harvest hand, and whenever he spoke of it, Ava hung on his every word.

On a map in the town hall, she had seen that the Elbe opened up like a flower between Friedrichskoog and Cuxhaven, widened, and then suddenly was no longer a river but the Wadden Sea.

And then the North Sea.

And then the Atlantic.

And somewhere beyond the Atlantic, America began. So she had heard, at least.

Sometimes you could smell the salt in the wind, and when the tide washed against the dikes of the Este, there was part of her that rejoiced. It was as if the sea was coming to take her away. I can't go with you, she thought every time. I have to milk the cows, cut the peat, and churn the butter, until one day I collapse and don't get up again.

Ava didn't know what day it was, but the corncrake had stopped calling a fortnight ago, and that told her it must be the end of July, maybe August. Soon autumn would come. And then winter.

The autumn was not so bad, she liked the haze in the air, the cawing of the migrating birds in the wind. She and Elsa collected chestnuts and coloured leaves and gave them to the pigs in the sty. And although it was always damp in the autumn and they had sore throats and feverish cheeks, Ava knew from her grandmother that it could be a lot worse. Grandmother had often told her how it had been for them, one of the first generations in the marshlands. All her brothers and sisters had died of consumption, and her father often said that grandmother was so small and delicate because she had never had enough to eat. When she was a child, the family did not even have an oven and had to carry the unbaked bread across the meadows and marshes to the village bakehouses. In the beginning, most marshland farmers lived with their animals in huts made only of birch logs. The logs were tied together at the top and then covered with sods and heather, at least that was what grandmother told her. Later they built the first houses, tiny little cottages. In the summer it was so warm that the tiny houses were like ovens. In the winter, several centimetres of ice covered the walls. In those days, they had to start by cultivating the marshlands; the ditches were not dug and therefore not navigable. There were no roads either. The children had gone begging, they had been that hungry. We are a lot better off, Ava often thought, and tried to hold on to that thought.

But the winter was not good. The winter was long and dark and cold. In winter, they darned clothes, twisted straw for the gaps in the roof and wove baskets and mats to sell in the spring.

And in winter, their father had no work.

Ava greeted the pigs in their sties, sat on the bench in front of the kitchen window for a precious minute and watched the fog creep over the dike in the distance. Very soon the sun would disperse it. Grandmother always used to say, 'The elves dance in the mist'. And Ava saw it. She saw how they turned and tilted in a silent circle. And she wished she had time to watch the mist elves as long as she wanted. Until the sun wandered across the fields and they dissolved into the hazy nothing that they had come from.

At that moment a bony finger tapped against the glass from the inside, and she stood up with a jerk. Dreaming was only permitted at night.

The day was there to work.

As she washed herself and brushed her teeth over the bowl in the kitchen after Ruth, in her mind she went over the tasks that were waiting for her. It was the beans' turn today. Ava and Ruth would salt them in the stone pots and hang the other half in the parlour to dry under the ceiling beams. But before that, just like the day before, Ava had to help out at the Hinderks for a couple of hours as a hay maid, a drudgery she still felt in her arms days later. Until yesterday, they had been laying out the freshly cut grass in the meadows so that it could dry in the sun. It was turned several times a day. In the evening, the grass had to be raked up and stacked and then spread out on the meadow again the next day. A game that was repeated until it was time to bring it in. They were late this year. The field workers often started at three in the morning, and yet they could barely keep up. Soon they would also start tramping, a job reserved for the women. They sweated terribly in the hot barn, barely able to breathe as they trampled on the hay to the point of exhaustion. Ava got tired just thinking of it. And there was more than enough to do on the farm. She remembered that someone had to go to the chandler's, they had run out of slaughter fat, and they also needed oil. And vinegar for the beans. They hadn't had coffee for a long time, not even on Sundays. But Ava had got used to the taste of the chicory substitute.

What she couldn't get used to was the food.

There were plenty of vegetables, but the Geest landscape was so barren that hardly anything grew except potatoes, cabbage and turnips. And vegetables did not fill you up. It filled your stomach, but after an hour's work, Ava was hungry again, and by evening her hands were shaking. There were always fried potatoes, flour dumplings from the pan or milk with dark rye bread crumbled in it. In the mornings, her father got some ham on his bread, sometimes *mettwurst* sausage, and Ava usually watched with a growling stomach as the morsels disappeared into his mouth. There was hardly ever anything left over. And if there was, Elsa got it. Ava herself ate bread with butter or lard every morning, just like Mette and Ruth. She understood that her father had to have the best bits, because he worked the hardest. And yet she would still have done anything for a piece of his ham.

Ruth was from East Frisia, and when the farm had been more profitable and they could afford normal food, she had made *spekdikken* on holidays and New Year's Eve. Fragrant pancake batter was baked in lard and topped with slices of *mettwurst* sausage on one side and pieces of bacon on the other. Just thinking about it made Ava's stomach rumble and her mouth tighten. She and Elsa had always been given some. Occasionally they had even sprinkled some sugar over the top. It had caramelised with the fat and formed a crispy brown layer. But there had been no sugar for a long time now, only syrup. They also only used suet to bake things, which stuck to your tongue and burnt your mouth. Today, too, she would make *stippbrot* again. You dipped bread in a pan of hot suet meaning you didn't need a spread. A pauper's meal. That's what they were, even if no-one ever said so. Poor people.

Marshland farmers.

The servants were long gone. Only Ruth remained.

At least they wouldn't starve. The land provided. But it didn't spoil you.

Ava was so thin she could grasp her waist with both hands, her dress patched so many times that the fabric was already unravelling under her arms. In church, she stared with envy at the fine Sunday dresses of the well-to-do farmer's wives, made of crepe, piqué and even cheviot fabric, which were fashionably tailored and only served one purpose: to show how well the people in the *Altes Land* district were doing, how fertile the soil was, how exclusive the peasant upper class, which included the large landowners, was. The Geest and the Marsh were only close to each other in terms of land. In church, it became clear how far apart they actually were. But they did not go often anyway. The journey was too long, time short. And the marshes did not recognise Sundays. Neither did the cows.

'You're doing the old one today!'

Ruth was in a bad mood. Ava could see it in the way she was frowning under her bonnet and flinging things around. She glanced towards the hallway. It was unthinkable that he should be woken up by noise from the kitchen. But she couldn't blame Ruth for being in a bad mood; she had been on the farm for twenty years and often had such bad back pains at night that she whimpered in her sleep. And there was just another day of work ahead of them, work that should have been carried out by a dozen hands but was now being done after a fashion by them alone. And then came another day. And another. And there wasn't even any good food to look forward to.

Ava silently put the watery porridge to heat above the fire. Her grandmother couldn't chew bread.

Ruth clamped the three-legged milking stool under her arm. 'I'm going to the cows. Don't let her keep you again!'

'She's stuck in her room all day. You know how happy she is when someone comes to see her,' Ava replied quietly.

'And I'm supposed to do the milking alone?'

'You can go and see her too.'

'She doesn't want me. Last week she threw the cup at my head.'

'She doesn't mean it.' As always, Ava felt the need to defend her grandmother. In recent years, the old woman had become a terrible burden. But Ava remembered her grandmother before the illness. She had patiently taught her the letters, read to her, recited the poem to her in a low voice:

Sleeps a song in all things ...

'It's for people like you,' her grandmother had always said when Ava cried, smiling with her watery blue eyes and wiping away the girl's tears. 'For people who see more than just dirt and work.'

Ava had always dreamt herself away. It was instinctive. She would be kneeling in the vegetable patch, pulling up potatoes, and her gaze became entranced, turned inwards, her thoughts began to wander. Everyone except grandmother hated that about her. They sensed that she longed to leave and resented it. Perhaps because they envied her. But how could one not yearn to leave a life like this?

Ruth growled something incomprehensible, took the milking pails and went to the door. 'You're just as much a maid as I am, so stop trying to get out of it!' she hissed.

'I am not,' Ava whispered into the hearth. But only after the door had closed behind Ruth. 'I am not a maid, and you know it full well.'

For a moment she watched the licking flames, as she stood motionless, wooden spoon in hand, a voice whispering in her head: *But what are you then?*

Ava had come to the Moorhof when she was five. She knew that the poorest peasants in the empire still sold their children at auction, and she shuddered every time she heard about it. Her story was different. She was only supposed to stay temporarily. Her parents wanted to start a new life in America and would get Ava back as soon as they could.

That's what Mette told her. In the beginning, at least.

Out of the corner of her eye, she was distracted by a movement. There was something in the corner next to the shelf. She put the spoon aside, stepped closer, her brow furrowed and bent down. There was a mouse sitting alongside the broom. It was shaking, its fur raised. When Ava bent down lower, she saw that a white liquid was dripping from its eyes. She quickly took up the dustpan and pushed the animal onto it with the broom, then carried it out to the manure heap. She should have killed the mouse with the shovel. But she carefully set it down on the grass next to a dandelion, looked around and quickly went back into the house.

As she came back in, the door to the bedroom opened.

'Good morning, Mother!'

Mette's eyes were like little black pearls. With an angry expression, she put a finger to her lips. Ava had spoken softly; after all, she knew what happened when her father was woken too early, but Mette still paused, worried, and listened for a movement behind the door. When nothing happened, she breathed an audible sigh of relief, shuffled to the table and sat down, groaning. Her face was so puffy in the mornings that she was barely recognisable. Ava knew from her grandmother's stories that she had once been a beautiful woman to whom everyone turned to look. There were no traces of this beauty left. Mette's forehead was deeply furrowed. Ava would have liked to do something good for her, to take some of her worries away. But she didn't know how. And she had so much of her own work to do that she couldn't keep up.

'It's the child's birthday in eight days,' Mette mumbled, glancing towards the hallway. 'You'll need to go to the grocer's and get the paper.'

Ava knocked on the low door and opened it carefully. The cupboard was so small that even Elsa had to pull her legs up in there. But she preferred to sleep here in the hallway rather than on the bench in the kitchen or with Ruth, who flailed around in her sleep.

Elsa's chest rose and fell slowly under her bodice, her eyelashes casting twitching shadows on her cheeks. She needed time in the morning, found it hard to wake from her sleep, and if she was rushed, she started to cry. Ava understood that only too well.

'Elsa.' She gently stroked her sister's hair from her warm forehead. 'Elsa, wake up.'

Elsa groaned. She blinked without really seeing Ava and turned back to the wall.

Ava smiled. It was the same every morning. ‘Come on, the cows are waiting. The pigs are already awake. And the geese. And do you know what I saw earlier? Mist elves, back at the edge of the forest. I just caught a mouse in the kitchen. You miss everything when you sleep so long,’ she said in a low singsong voice and stroked her sister’s back. She said nothing about school. Elsa hated school, she couldn’t get used to it, she wanted to stay on the farm in her familiar surroundings.

Slowly the girl sat up. There were purple shadows under her eyes. Like every day, Ava wished she could let her sleep.

Elsa rubbed her eyes with her little fists and started into nowhere for a moment. Then the child slowly let herself sink down against Ava, and for a while they just sat there. Ava knelt in front of the straw mattress and held her little sister tightly, rocking her back and forth gently and waited. She smelt the sleep on Elsa, the child’s warm sweat, the slight mould of the straw, the peaty haze of the walls.

‘Do you know it’s your birthday soon?’ she whispered in Elsa’s ear, and she felt her sister nod.

‘When?’ Ava asked softly, and Elsa shifted away from her, thought for a moment and then held up eight little fingers.

Ava nodded. ‘Correct!’ she said proudly. ‘Only ...’ she pushed against each finger with her own fingers, counting as she went ‘... five, six, seven, eight days.’

A smile danced around the corners of Elsa’s mouth. But it disappeared as quickly as it had come. Birthdays had not been happy occasions on the farm for a long time.

Ava looked at her sister. The gnawing worry of hunger they all lived with, the unspeakable fear of their father’s slowly advancing madness that had entered the house with the brandy and the debts, already showed in the little child’s face. Elsa’s forehead always seemed to be drawn in sorrow, her blue eyes widened in fright. Like all of them, Elsa made herself small and invisible when her father was around. But sometimes it seemed to Ava that she now made herself small and invisible when he wasn’t around too. That it would eventually become her nature. Elsa was not like her. Elsa was loud and curious. Cheerful. And Ava feared that these qualities would slowly disappear if her sister kept them locked inside for too long.

[...]

[Circa 50 pages later – Due to dramatic events that took place on the farm, their father has suddenly decided that they are to emigrate to America. Ava, Mette, Elsa and father are now in Hamburg. Grandmother could not accompany them.]

Hamburg stank to high heaven. A sickening miasma drifted through the city from the canals and waterways. It pressed into the alleyways and windows, settling on Ava’s tongue like a foul mist. What is it, she thought as she walked through the streets. What stinks so badly?

The sun stung her eyes. It burned her skin, made her head sluggish and heavy. Ava had never experienced such heat. Nor had she ever seen the water in the Elbe so low. In the past, she had occasionally gone into town with Ruth or Mette to run errands or to sell things at the market,

but then the river had always meandered through the town, glittering and powerful. Now it seemed as if the water had given up the fight against the sun.

Once she arrived in the city, she had to carry her own things, and Ava now understood why she had only been allowed to take the bare necessities. After only a few minutes, her arms were shaking under the weight of her luggage.

Her father asked around and found out that there were barracks at the America wharf that were specially designed for people who were emigrating. But the man at the ticket office said that if you were a local, you didn't have to go there, and it was more comfortable in the city. After a long search, they found accommodation at the Blue Ox Inn. They moved into two small, windowless rooms on the upper floor that smelled of mould, but Ava was still excited. She had never slept alone in her own bed before.

The trip down the river and the search for accommodation in the heat had taken its toll on everyone. Her parents wanted to rest, and Elsa was also so exhausted that she just sank onto the bed with a pale face.

But Ava was too upset to be tired. The many people in the city, the ships, the prospect of what was about to happen, sent a bubbling tension through her. So Mette sent her to run some errands. She gave her coins for food and warm clothes, because the man in the office had said they would need them, and Ava ran off, clutching the money tightly. Father wanted to buy the rest just before they sailed in the special shop for emigrants.

As she wandered the streets, soaking up everything around her, she thought of her grandmother in her bed. Although the thick walls and the small window would keep the sun out, the heat would creep into the house. Hopefully Beeks had already fetched her; her grandmother hadn't even had her breakfast that morning, they had left so early. The thought of the old woman, her delicate, wrinkled hands, her toothless smile made something tremble very deep inside Ava. She was so helpless. All her life her grandmother had worked for others, and now they had just left her behind. Ava felt tears burning behind her eyelids.

She was out all day. She queued up to buy the goods they needed for the crossing, made her requests in a polite, slightly trembling voice, and finally returned with the bulging bag thrown over her shoulder. Although Mette didn't know exactly how much money she would spend on each item and Ava didn't get a receipt for everything, and although she hadn't eaten or drunk anything since the morning, she didn't buy a French roll at the bakery or a lemonade at the market, even though her eyes lingered longingly on the goods. She hadn't even considered it.

When Ava returned and entered the taproom, the landlady was wiping the windows, her thick arm moving roughly. She had pushed her straggly grey hair under a scarf and sweat was running down her face and neck. The smell she emanated made Ava nauseous.

'You're all dusty. Did you get everything?' The woman straightened up and put her hands on her hips. Her voice was so loud that Ava winced.

She nodded. 'Yes, thank you, I got everything.'

'Polite little thing for a peasant brat, I'll give you that.' The hulking landlady gave her something like a half-smile. 'How old are you?'

'Fourteen,' Ava replied, swallowing dryly. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, making her voice raspy. Still, she didn't dare ask for anything to drink.

The landlady screwed up her face. 'Fourteen and you get to go to the New World. And I'll be stuck here until I drop dead. Although I work my backside off here.'

Ava would have liked to tell her that she had also worked her backside off every day of her life too, and she would have liked to ask why the landlady didn't go to the New World herself. After all, ships left the harbour in Hamburg almost every day. That's what the man in the ticket office had said.

The woman sneezed twice into her sleeve. 'Damn this dust. People drag half the harbour in here. And those damned petrol carriages. The windows were black! Black, I tell you.'

'Has my family been downstairs to eat?'

'No,' the woman replied gruffly, because Ava didn't respond to her complaints.

'Why not?' asked Ava in amazement. 'Do I look like a maid? What do I know? If they don't come down, I'm not going up.'

Ava glanced at the ceiling. Mette and her father must have been angry that she had stayed out so late and no one had woken them up. 'Could I perhaps ... have a drink?' She couldn't stand it any longer. When the landlady put her hands on her hips again, she stammered, 'My father will pay for it later.'

She wasn't at all sure that her father would pay. But she was dizzy with thirst, and in the cramped dark room it was even hotter and stuffier than outside. Her calves throbbed, and she didn't know if she would get anything for dinner.

The landlady grunted softly. 'I should hope so too. I'm not handing out charity here!' she barked, and Ava winced again. But the woman went behind the small counter and got a glass of brown beer for her. It wasn't cold, but it was still the best she had drunk in a long time. In fear that someone might take it from her, Ava drank it in greedy gulps; a small trickle ran down her chin to her neck.

The landlady watched her, frowning. 'Slow down, girl,' she muttered. After Ava had emptied the glass, the woman hesitated for a moment, then filled it again. 'It's on the house,' she grumbled so unkindly that Ava didn't dare thank her.

Her parents were not well and Elsa was also ill; she was curled up in bed and did not want to talk to Ava.

'Sunstroke,' Mette murmured and waved at her to leave her alone.

Ava went back downstairs and asked the landlady for dinner. She listed what was available and Ava ordered the cheapest, potatoes with cabbage. She was so hungry that she ate it almost without chewing.

That night she lay staring wide-eyed into the darkness, listening to the sounds of the city. The vast, unknown future lay before her like a mirror, reflecting only the images of the now and hiding everything else beneath its milky surface. Her father had said that they might be going to Iowa, and Ava tried to say the word softly. It was so foreign on her tongue that she couldn't manage it. She wondered if the cows in America looked the same as the cows at home. Whether milk and cheese tasted the same. Who she would be in this New World. No-one from their part of the world looked like her, no-one had her straight nose or her grey eyes, her dark, almost black hair curled on her shoulders. Sometimes, when she thought about this fact, she felt as if she had simply fallen from the sky. A raven child, pushed out of the nest and picked up by beings different from herself. All humans were somehow connected to others, had grandparents, cousins, nieces,

aunts, a network of family members in the world, that they belonged to, whether they wanted it or not. Ava was alone. And even though Mette and Father had been good to her before everything got so bad and the smell of burning wine settled in the corners of the house, she had always felt it. That she was an outsider and no-one really belonged to her.

At some point Mette came over because Father was so restless. She lay down with Elsa. Light filtered in from under the door, and Ava looked at Mette's sleeping face, which was still furrowed with worry even in her dreams. Her forehead was puckered up, her eyes closed as if she had to force herself to rest. Ava reached out and danced with her fingertips in front of her mother's nose, tracing her features. She listened for Mette's breath and thought that somewhere in this world her real mother must exist. A woman who perhaps had the same crooked little fingers as she did, her pointed earlobes or her crooked incisors. She wondered if her mother liked wind as much as she did. If she also loved the taste of pears and the screeching of cranes in autumn. But it didn't matter.

Her mother hadn't wanted her anymore. She had cut the ties that bound them.

The next day Ava had breakfast alone with the landlady in the taproom. She had ordered bread and cheese and tried not to enjoy the taste too much.

'What's the matter with them?' Just like Ava yesterday, the landlady looked up at the ceiling suspiciously.

Ava could only shrug. 'Sunstroke,' she replied. 'We came into town via the Este and Elbe River.'

'Yes, no wonder in this heat,' the landlady replied, then she served other guests and left Ava sitting alone at the counter.

Outside, the heat actually seemed even more unbearable than the day before. Mette had sent her to the emigrant shop, and on the way back she kept thinking about her grandmother. Hopefully she had a cool, shady room for herself at the Beeks'. Maybe there was even someone who read to her.

Slowly, Ava climbed the stairs with her bag of clothes and walked along the well-worn corridor of the old inn. She pushed down the door handle to her room and a startled sound escaped her. The stench was so horrible that she flinched and put her hand over her mouth. Then she ran to her sister's bedside with a cry. Elsa was lying in her own vomit, her mouth still half open. She wasn't awake, but she wasn't asleep either, moaning and wailing to herself with her eyes closed.

Ava grabbed her by the chin and turned her face towards her, wiping the vomit off with her apron. 'Oh my goodness, Elsa, what's wrong with you?' she muttered. 'What is the matter?'

'Ava, I've soiled myself,' the girl whispered. Her eyes were glazed.

Ava lifted the blankets. And now she knew where the horrible smell was coming from. The whole bed was full of excrement; the diarrhoea had spread to the foot of the bed. Ava could not believe what she was seeing. She had hardly been gone three hours. How could Elsa have become so ill in such a short time? It smelled so foul that she could hardly breathe in. Everyone had diarrhoea and vomiting in summer from time to time, but something in the smell that was pressing on the room, something in Elsa's glazed look, her waxy white face and her whistling breath told Ava that this was no normal upset stomach.

'We have to call a doctor! Elsa, I'll be right back,' she said, but Elsa cried out.

‘Don't go!’ she whimpered, trying to hold her hand tightly.

Ava gently pushed her down onto the bed. ‘I have to, Elsa. I'll be right back.’

Her sister struggled, reaching for Ava's hair, her small fist clawing into it. Ava saw the fear in her eyes.

‘Elsa, I promise I'll be right back,’ she said in a calm, firm voice that she hoped didn't show how unsure she felt herself.

Determinedly, she prised her sister's little fingers apart and freed her hair from their grip. She gave Elsa a kiss on the forehead. Her face was covered with a wet film. Then Ava went out, with her throat tightened, ignoring Elsa's crying.

Where is Mette? she thought as she hurried across the hall. Why wasn't she sitting by her sister's bed? Her scalp hurt where Elsa had pulled out her hair in her fear.

‘Mette?’ She knocked softly on the door at the end of the corridor. ‘Hello?’

She was answered by a strange groan. Startled, Ava backed away. Surely her parents wouldn't be ... in broad daylight? But then she heard her name softly. She pushed down the door handle.

The stench was even more horrible than in Elsa's room. It hit her so unexpectedly that Ava could not help gagging. Her parents were lying on their beds in the semi-darkness and she saw at a glance that the chamber pot in the middle of the room was overflowing. In two steps she was at her mother's side.

‘Ava!’ Mette could hardly speak and her lips were crusted. ‘I'm so thirsty,’ she whispered.

‘I'll get some water!’ Ava grasped the ice-cold hands. Then she looked over at the next bed. Her father didn't move, his chest barely rising and falling, as if he was having trouble getting enough air into his lungs.

‘I've never seen anything like it,’ Mette whispered. ‘It comes out the bottom and the top. Ava, I didn't make it to the pot.’ Mette couldn't look her in the eye. ‘And father...’

Ava just nodded. She didn't have to look at the next bed to know what her mother meant. ‘Elsa is sick too, Mother. I have to get a doctor!’

‘For God's sake, do you know what a doctor costs in town? Without insurance. Father will kill us if we spend so much money on a little tummy upset,’ she whispered.

‘But...’

‘Water, Ava!’ whispered Mette, clutching her hand so tightly that it hurt. All at once her eyes grew round. ‘Oh, here we go again! I can't ...’ A horrible gurgling sounded from under the covers.

‘What should I ...’

‘Get out!’ cried Mette. ‘Get out, Ava.’ When Ava hesitated for two seconds, Mette spat at her ‘Get out!’

She saw the shame and pain in her mother's eyes and stumbled backwards to the door. ‘I'll get some water,’ she whispered, trying to ignore the horrible noises coming from the bed.

‘Don't tell anyone! Not the landlady! She'll kick us out!’ Mette shouted after her as her body contorted.

For a moment Ava stood in the hallway, not knowing what to do. Slowly she went down to the taproom, sat down on a chair and wrapped her arms around her upper body. No one paid any attention to her.

‘Has anyone ever heard of such a thing? We haven't had it in town for twenty years. People are always quick to spread panic.’ The landlady stood at a nearby table, her arms laden with dirty dishes. She gave an exasperated sigh and shook her head.

‘I heard it too!’ An old man at the counter slid from his chair and looked around for attention. He had a pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth and spread bluish fumes into the room. ‘A ship carpenter and a cigar worker from St. Pauli died yesterday. And a journeyman bricklayer. He was working on the sewer and died in Eppendorf. They say there's something in the water.’

‘Nonsense.’ The landlady shook her head. ‘How can you be so sure? Drink your rum and shut up.’

‘Well, that’s what they said in the tavern,’ he grumbled, but obediently raised the cup to his mouth.

‘Our water was always good!’ the landlady replied. ‘Why should it suddenly go bad?’

‘What do I know?’ grumbled the old man, making an angry gesture with his hand. ‘I’m just telling you what they are saying.’

‘Whenever it gets hot, the papers always say there are cases of cholera,’ a woman in a maid's uniform interjected. In front of her on the table was a half-full coffee cup. ‘It’s quite normal. Nothing to get alarmed about.’

‘That's what I'm saying.’ The landlady clicked her tongue and said in her heavy dialect: ‘Another nice cup of coffee?’

Ava's eyes darted back and forth between them. She stood up and approached the landlady. ‘Excuse me, please. What is the woman talking about?’ she asked quietly. ‘What illness?’

The landlady looked at her in amazement, both arms full of dishes. ‘Cholera,’ she said with a shrug. ‘But that's just talk.’

‘What's cholera?’ asked Ava quickly as the landlady turned towards the kitchen.

‘Diarrhoea,’ grumbled the woman. ‘And vomiting. Only it doesn't go away. You die from it. But there's no more cholera here. Whenever a few people get the shits from rotting meat in the summer, panic breaks out. Do you think I'd have your family in the house if I believed there was cholera here? I would have closed up a long time ago.’

Ava stood there for a moment, feeling the fear flowing through her body in hot little waves. Then she did something she had never done before. She ignored Mette's instructions and ran to get a doctor. She didn't know how she was going to pay him. But she thought of Elsa's small, sunken face and knew it was the right decision.

‘She must be admitted to St. George's immediately!’ The doctor, whom Ava had found after frantically asking around in the streets, examined Elsa for only a few seconds.

Ava pressed her palms together. ‘What's wrong with her?’ she asked fearfully.

Elsa was unresponsive, her breath a low whistling sound.

‘I don't know, diarrhoea. But a particularly severe case, it seems to me. She has lost far too much fluid, her circulation can't cope for much longer.’

Ava's thoughts raced. ‘Doctor. My parents are in the next room. They are also terribly ill,’ she said, not daring to look the man in the face. ‘But I wasn't allowed to fetch you. We have no money. If my father finds out ... I ... can't pay you,’ she said, so quietly that for a moment she was

not quite sure she had spoken at all. She would have liked to vanish into thin air. But the fact that Elsa had to go to hospital confirmed to her that she had done the right thing.

The doctor eyed her with a furrowed brow. 'I'll talk to your parents about that later. For now, show me their room.'

Ava hesitated. It wasn't just the question of money. It would certainly make Mette and her father terribly uncomfortable if a stranger saw them in this state, whether he was a doctor or not. Her parents were very private people. 'Mother says it's just an upset stomach and it will stop soon...' she stammered, but the doctor was already at the door.

'That may be. But you can also die from rotting meat. Show me the room.'

Ava couldn't tell him that they hadn't had meat for ages. She pointed to the door at the end of the corridor, but did not dare to go in. Instead, she sat down by Elsa's bed. Ava hardly recognised her, her cheeks were so hollow. Her normally beautiful, rosy childish lips had lost all colour.

'It's going to be all right,' she murmured. Elsa was still lying in her own filth. Ava had not dared to ask the landlady for help, and it was terrible to know that Elsa had been suffering all this time in this state.

'Ava?' whispered Elsa. Her eyelids fluttered but she was too weak to open her eyes properly.

'I'm here!' Ava took her hand. 'I'm here, Elsa.'

'Don't touch her!' The doctor's sharp voice echoed from the doorway, Ava winced and let go of Elsa's hand, which fell limply onto the blanket.

'You'll catch it. It's a miracle you don't have it yet.' The doctor looked worried. 'Your parents refuse to go to the hospital.' He shook his head with tired eyes. 'There's nothing I can do about that. But we'll definitely take your sister with us.'

Ava walked beside Elsa as two orderlies carried her down the stairs a little later and loaded her into the ambulance carriage in front of the piercing eyes of the landlady and all the guests. 'Can I ride with you?' she asked. 'She's frightened when she's alone!'

The older of the two paramedics looked at her doubtfully. Then his eyes flitted over Elsa's face and his expression changed. 'Let's make an exception. You can sit up front.'

'What have you dragged into the house?' the landlady called after her as Ava climbed onto the coach box.

'Don't worry, I'm sure it's nothing serious,' the man replied in her place.

'There are rumours of cholera. There's nothing to it, is there?' she called back, and he laughed.

'Well, I'd know about that! Come on now, the little one needs an infusion!' The coachman cracked his whip and the horses pulled away.

Ava saw the landlady's grim face disappear in a cloud of dust. She hoped she would check on her parents, and at the same time feared that she would throw them out of the inn if she found out what state the rooms were in. She felt terribly alone. Someone had always told her what to do. Now, suddenly, there was no one.

It was terribly hot on the box. After only a few minutes, sweat was running down Ava's entire body. The horses glistened and snorted unwillingly.

'What temperatures. I've never experienced heat like this before,' grumbled the coachman, and the orderly next to Ava nodded.

'No wonder people are getting sick, everything's rotting away.'

'I wonder if they have the same thing as the one from Altona?'

'It seems they've had a handful of cases in Eppendorf today. These kind of things always make the rounds.' The orderly was silent for a moment. 'I heard that one of them died.'

Ava flinched so violently that both men gave her an alarmed look.

'Don't scare the girl,' the driver grumbled. 'Don't worry, little one, I'm sure your sister has something completely different. And now she's getting help.'

Ava pressed a hand to her stomach. She wasn't sure if she was dizzy from heat or fear.

'Here, have a sip. You're not going to get sick too, are you?' the coachman asked, handing her a tankard.

She drank the warm water gratefully. 'No, I'm just tired ...,' Ava said, realising the moment she said it how very true it was. She was completely exhausted, but she had no time to rest.

When they arrived at St George's Hospital, it was as if someone had suddenly spun time faster and made the world louder.

'She's hypothermic. Breathing impaired. The radial pulse is barely perceptible,' said the nurse who had received Elsa and had immediately grabbed her wrist.

Ava ran after them down the corridors. They pushed Elsa on a stretcher trolley into a room with dozens of other wooden beds, then carefully lifted her and laid her on a mattress at the far end of the room. After a few minutes, which seemed like an eternity to Ava, a doctor finally appeared. He listened to the nurse's summary with a serious face.

'Another case?' he asked, his mouth twisting. 'We give a bismuth preparation. It seems too late for mercury chloride in her case. And do a tannic acid enema. That seals the intestine and regulates emptying. But first an ether injection, we have to get the circulation back up again.' He bent over Elsa, and Ava saw his face contort with worry.

'Well, little one, what are you getting up to?' he said softly, and Ava almost cried with relief, he seemed so friendly, so genuinely concerned about her sister. It's going to be all right, she thought. If this doctor looked after her, nothing would happen to Elsa.

He straightened up again. 'Run her a hot bath, Claudia. And she must drink a lot. If she gets muscle cramps, give her morphine. If she collapses anyway, we need a saline solution as an infusion. She probably can't make up for the fluid loss on her own.' He shook his head. 'I'll check on her later.'

At that moment, his eyes fell on Ava, standing forlornly beside the bed, kneading her cold hands. 'You're her sister?' he asked, and as always when someone assumed that, even though they looked so different, it gave her a warm pang.

Ava nodded.

'Don't worry, we'll do everything we can. I am Doctor Bonnhofer, I will take care of her. But now you have to wait outside. We have to treat little Elsa.'

'What's wrong with her, Doctor?' asked Ava.

The doctor faltered. 'She has ... Well, we don't know exactly,' he replied. But he didn't look her in the eye.

Ava waited in the corridor for hours. Nurses came and went, new patients were admitted, a man pushed plates of food past her on a mobile trolley. The smell made her shiver. She hadn't eaten since the morning. Because she was too tense to sit still, she paced up and down the corridor.

A door at the end of the corridor was ajar, and as she passed it, she heard Dr Bonnhofer's voice. Of course she shouldn't eavesdrop. But something in Dr Bonnhofer's voice made Ava stop and step closer until her ear almost touched the door.

'The medical council has ordered that we are not allowed to diagnose cholera under any circumstances.' Another man's voice sounded angry. 'The shipping traffic must not be brought to a standstill.'

It was quiet for a moment. Then Dr Bonnhofer spoke. 'It's cholera, Gerhard. The microbiological diagnosis is clear. Our pathologists saw the pathogen under the microscope and grew the pure culture on nutrient gelatine. In the first few days it was difficult, you know how it can be, we didn't have enough germs capable of development and could only report the suspicion to the medical office, but not the proof. And our only competent bacteriologist was on holiday. The director didn't want to take responsibility, I can't even blame him. But in the city's pathology department, they've already found bacilli on three dead bodies.' He paused, then Ava heard him groan. 'Oh God, and we only have three thousand beds in this city. And four ambulance carriages. That means people will all be brought in far too late, and ...'

'Let's not get ahead of ourselves. If you ...'

'We had fifteen patients with vibrio in their faeces today,' interrupted Dr Bonnhofer, and the other voice fell silent. 'Fraenkel also confirmed it. He returned from holiday yesterday and immediately started investigating. The medical authorities must finally make an official report.' He spoke so forcefully that Ava shuddered.

'There is no doubt?' The other voice sounded concerned.

'Cholera asiatica. No doubt,' Dr Bonnhofer replied firmly, and Ava could hear even through the door how difficult it was for him to say these words. What he said next made her freeze in mid-breath.

'We have a little girl here with the worst symptoms I have ever seen. I don't know if she'll make it through the night.'

Ava wasn't allowed to see Elsa again that day. 'She is too weak. But she is in good hands here. Go home and come back tomorrow,' said a nurse, stroking her arm.

Before Ava could protest, she had already rushed over to the next patient, and with a heart as heavy as lead, Ava staggered back through the dark city to the inn. She forbade herself any thought of Elsa. Instead, she thought of Dr Bonnhofer's warm, friendly voice. He would never let her sister die.

'The doctor says she has an upset stomach. From the meat.' You shouldn't lie. But the landlady kept the door shut and pestered Ava with questions. If she didn't let her into the building, there would be no-one to look after her parents. Besides, she would have to spend the night on

the street, and she was so exhausted that she could hardly keep her eyes open. 'And you?' the woman asked suspiciously. 'Why aren't you sick?'

'I didn't eat any of it,' Ava replied, telling herself that it was true after all.

The smell in her parents' room had become even worse. Mette seemed a little better, but Father was unresponsive.

'What about Elsa?' asked Mette with dry lips.

Ava decided not to tell her what she had heard, it would only scare Mette unnecessarily. 'I wasn't allowed to stay with her, they said to come back in the morning,' Ava explained, and Mette nodded, dropping back into the pillow with glazed eyes.

Ava helped her parents as best she could, emptying the chamber pot, trying to clean the floor, and fetching fresh water. "

'Go, I'll wash him,' Mette said, sitting up in a daze.

Ava nodded and staggered back to her room alone. She pulled the sheets off Elsa's soiled bed, balled them up and threw them in the corner. It was so dark that she opened the door to the hallway at some point so that at least a little light and fresh air could get in. The clatter of dishes and the murmuring voices from the taproom calmed her. Ava sat down on the floor next to the door, drew her knees up, crouched down and tried not to think. She sat like that until morning came.

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She rose with the first rays of the sun and the sounds of the street. Every bone in her body ached, but her concern for Elsa drowned out all other feelings. When she tentatively knocked on her parents' door, Mette called her in with a weak voice. 'It's not getting any better, Ava. He needs to be fetched too,' she whispered.

Ava faltered at the thought of what the landlady would say. But she saw that Mette was right. Her father's breath was only a hoarse whistle, the chamber pot she had washed out the night before was once again filled to the brim.

She felt as if she were experiencing everything twice over. She pushed past the landlady through the taproom and ran to the doctor. This time he didn't even come with her, but immediately ordered the ambulance carriage.

'It's going to take a while,' he said, 'St. George's is apparently overcrowded, and they don't have enough carriages.'

Four, Ava thought. There are four. For the whole town.

'We could also have him transported by hackney carriage. What condition is he in?'

'Not good,' Ava replied truthfully. 'I think...' She hesitated. 'I think he would soil the carriage, doctor.'

The doctor nodded, concern flitting across his face. Then he sighed. 'Very well. Go back and wait there, they will come eventually.'

'I have to see my sister. She's still in hospital,' Ava said.

'Ah, yes. I'll call there and save you the trip, in case they don't let you see her yet.'

He picked up the black receiver of the phone. Ava watched him spellbound. There was no phone in the village, they had never seen anyone use one. Suddenly a voice came from the line, asking who to connect to, and Ava flinched. The doctor winked at her.

‘St George's, please.’

It was quite a while before he had someone on the phone who could give him information. When he asked about Elsa, the nurse on the other end of the line first had to look up the file, and he drummed his fingers impatiently on his desk. Finally the phone crackled and the nurse was on again, saying something Ava didn't understand.

The doctor stiffened. ‘During the night?’ he asked and then nodded while the woman explained something. ‘I understand.’

He said goodbye and hung up. Ava noticed that he avoided looking at her. Suddenly, she felt as if the room was dissolving into tiny dots before her eyes. She pinched her thigh so hard with her left hand that a hot pain ran through her leg.

The doctor moved his chair closer to the table and folded his hands. Then he cleared his throat awkwardly. ‘I'm very sorry, little one.’ Finally he looked her in the eye.

And although it shouldn't have been possible, although it was absolutely impossible, he said what she had already known he would say, from the second the strangely tinny voice sounded in the phone and he flinched ever so slightly. Ava saw the doctor's face as if through a tunnel, his voice turned into a strange mush. He said the words, but they didn't reach her properly.

‘Do you understand, Ava?’ He cleared his throat. ‘Your sister died last night. There was nothing more they could do for her.’

The next few hours were a sea of pain. Somehow she made it out of the doctor's office and back to the inn. She remembered Mette's face when she told her, first the look of disbelief, then the understanding in her eyes.

Then the screaming.

At some point Father was picked up by the ambulance carriage, the landlady was furious when she saw the state the rooms were in. But when she understood what had happened, pity crept into her eyes. ‘Such a pretty little girl,’ she murmured. She fell silent, helped Ava strip the beds, wiped everything up, and gave them a new room, which even had a small window.

Mette wanted to go to Elsa; she lashed out when they prevented her, and after a short time she turned white as a sheet and pressed her hands to her stomach. She gave up all resistance and sank to the floor, whimpering like an injured animal.

Ava tried to visit her father in the hospital, but they told her that no-one was allowed to see him and sent her away. When she returned, Mette was asleep, her face turned to the wall, and although Ava nudged her gently, she did not move. They now shared a room and Ava lay down next to her mother and listened to the emptiness Elsa had left behind.

Ava woke up with a jolt. She didn't know where she was. In her dream, Elsa had stretched out her small arms to her, sobbing and pressing herself against her neck. Ava could still feel her, her sister. She smelled her skin, heard her crying. It took a few seconds before she remembered that Elsa was dead. Then it all came crashing back.

The fact that her sister was no longer on this earth, that she would never grow up, was so horrible, so incomprehensible, that Ava pushed it away with all her might.

She stretched her stiff limbs and wiped from her cheeks the tears that the dream had left behind. At that moment she would have given anything to be milking the cows now and braiding Elsa's hair later. Ava clenched her teeth so hard that it hurt, stood up and smoothed the holey sheet. Confused, she looked around. It was so quiet. The bed beside her was empty, the blanket rumpled.

Why had no-one woken her? Her head was thick and heavy, dots of light danced before her eyes. Maybe Mette had already left and tried again at the hospital, she thought as she used the chamber pot. In the last few days her condition had improved, and although she was still weak on her feet, they had tried together again and again to be allowed in to St. George's. But they had not been allowed.

Ava looked around. A strange restlessness had come over her; she didn't know exactly where it came from. Then she realised with horror what was wrong.

The shadows on the walls were wrong. It must be almost noon, the sun was so high. Ava had never slept until noon in her life.

'Mette?' she called.

She went to the door and looked out into the corridor. The old grandfather clock showed a quarter past eleven. That could only mean that Mette was feeling better and had already gone to the hospital. Ava bit her lips. Why hadn't she taken her with her?

She got dressed as quickly as she could and ran down the creaking stairs.

The parlour was full, guests were sitting at all the tables and talking to each other. Almost everyone was discussing the disease that had suddenly broken out in so many places and still didn't seem to have a name.

'If it were cholera, they would have announced it long ago,' one man shouted. "What good would it do them to keep it a secret?"

'But they've been crying out to Prussia for help for a long time,' shouted another.

'What nonsense, how would you know?'

As Ava stumbled in, a few glances lingered on her. There was pity in almost all of them. People must have heard what had happened to her family. She went to the landlady, who was serving a plate of beans to the toothless old man, and cleared her throat.

'Excuse me, do you know where my mother is?' The landlady turned and looked at her for a moment. There was something in her gaze that sent an icy chill through Ava's body. No, she thought, and wrapped her arms around her chest to protect herself from the news. Not Mette, too. She had been feeling better.

'Come with me,' the old woman said in a rough voice and led Ava into the kitchen. She could hardly put one foot in front of the other, she was so afraid of what she was about to learn.

'Sit down,' muttered the sturdy woman.

Ava sat down as ordered, even though she would have preferred to remain standing. She would have liked to shake the woman so that she would hurry up and tell her what was going on. But the landlady took her time. She poured milk from a wooden jug into a cup and handed it to Ava. When she cut a piece off the sausage hanging on a hook next to the pots, Ava knew that her mother was dead and she began to cry.

But to her surprise, the woman dug something out of the front of her apron and handed her an envelope. Ava took it with clammy fingers and immediately felt that there were coins inside.

‘Your mother paid me to give you a message,’ the woman grumbled. ‘I don't think it's right. It's a shame to leave a child alone.’ She sighed and wouldn't look Ava in the eye. ‘Girl. She took a boat early this morning, one of the fast new ones. She didn't have enough to buy you a ticket, too. She was afraid the port would close and she wouldn't get out. And she's right, I'm surprised they let her anywhere near a ship, the way she looked.’ She shook her head and wiped the sweat from her brow with her apron. ‘She left you money and told you to find a job in town and save up for the passage. She's waiting for you over there.’

Ava stared at the woman without understanding, the cup of milk in one hand and the sausage in the other. ‘She's ... gone?’ she whispered. The words simply made no sense. ‘Mette has gone?’

The cup of milk slipped from her hand and fell clattering to the floor.

‘But she was still so sick!’ cried Ava. She couldn't imagine anyone letting her mother on a ship in that condition.

The man in the ticket office looked at her for a moment as if he didn't know how much he could tell her. Then he leaned forward and motioned for her to come closer. ‘They want to get rid of the infected!’ he whispered, looking around with a flickering gaze. ‘You don't know this from me, but the Chief of police has ordered the ships to be allowed to sail.’ He shook his head as if he couldn't believe it himself. ‘So many children on board. They'll die like flies if it's true about the cholera. Even if they get there, they'll never let them ashore in America. They'll be ships of the dead. But the main thing is that the city is rid of them for the time being.’

Ava stared at the man. Mette had really gone. She had left her all alone. ‘When will the ship be back?’ she cried, her voice breaking and she tasted the salt of her tears on her dry lips.

The man suddenly looked frightened. ‘Don't cry, girl. It doesn't mean that your mother ... now really. Here, take a handkerchief,’ he stammered. ‘I don't know when the ships will return. It will take a few weeks. But I can tell you that they won't let them back on land here either, if they still have infected people on board ...’

Ava took the stained cloth. Her fingers were trembling. ‘But what are they supposed to do then?’ she whispered. Her throat was so tight she could hardly speak. She hiccupped softly and the man looked at her with pity.

‘They will wait until they have all died,’ he said after a long hesitation. ‘I am sorry, girl.’

Waiting in the sweltering heat outside the hospital all day, Ava told herself that Mette was trying to protect her. With so many infected people on board, she must have feared Ava would catch it. Mette had been desperate, didn't know what else to do and was surely planning to get in touch with her as soon as she arrived in America. She could understand why Mette had taken the chance

and not waited for Father. Her life by his side was hell. But then, as Ava crept up to her room in the evening and stretched out next to her mother's empty bed, a thought that had been lurking somewhere in the back of her mind all day, but was too horrible to acknowledge, ran through her mind.

How would her mother know where to contact Ava in Hamburg? How would Ava find her in America?

The certainty spread like poison through her body. Ava stared into the darkness for a long time and let it seep into her. Mette was gone.

Then she lay down, closed her eyes and cried until dawn in quiet, stifled sobs. For the first time in her life, Ava did not long to be somewhere new. For the first time in her life, she longed to return to where she had always been, to the peat farm. To her family.

After a night of disturbing dreams, Ava staggered drunkenly down to the taproom. She found the landlady all alone.

‘Where are the other guests?’ she asked, puzzled, stopping in the doorway.

The woman sat slumped at the table, startled as if Ava's voice had brought her out of deep thought. ‘Gone,’ she whispered in a raspy voice. ‘All gone. Left town. Took to their heels and left.’

Ava sat down beside her, eyes wide. ‘Why?’ She looked outside. Now she noticed that the street was strangely noisy. People were hurrying back and forth and someone was shouting something she didn't understand.

‘Because cholera is in Hamburg!’ The landlady's eyes were like glass; she didn't seem to notice Ava at all. ‘They've officially announced it. Old Hinrich was right. Has anyone ever seen anything like it? They're already spraying chlorine, the milkmaid said. That we have to be told that our water is not good!’ The landlady shook her head. ‘But there's no longer any doubt.’

‘Who says so?’ Ava didn't understand a word.

The old woman blinked, she seemed to regain consciousness. ‘That Robert Koch they brought from Berlin to fight the epidemic. They're already digging mass graves in Ohlsdorf!’ The landlady looked at Ava, her eyes wide with fear and disbelief. ‘They say the bodies have to be buried within twenty-four hours or they'll contaminate everything even more.’ Suddenly a jolt went through the old woman. ‘You have to pack your things, I'm closing,’ she announced, and Ava was startled. ‘I'm going to my sister's in Altona. The city is not safe.’

For a moment Ava just sat there. Then she nodded feebly, went upstairs and took two of the coins Mette had left her. She packed her bundle, thought about what to do with her sister's and father's things, decided she didn't know and left them where they were. It wasn't much anyway. Slowly she descended the stairs and gave the money to the landlady. As she stepped out onto the street and pulled the door shut behind her, she heard the woman slide the latch from inside.

It was as if she had fallen into a nightmare. Hamburg was unrecognisable. She stumbled through the alleys with her bundle and didn't know which way to turn. People seemed to be in a panic, carriages thundered past her, a pungent smell was in the air, and only when she saw the carriages pulled by men dressed in white did she understand that it must be the chlorine the landlady had spoken of. A boy ran past her and pressed a leaflet into her hand. Ava stopped.

Announcement

Urgent warning against the consumption of uncooked food, as well river and tap water and milk that has not been boiled.

Hamburg, 1 September 1892

The Cholera Commission of the Senate.

She fought her way to the hospital, but there was such chaos that she couldn't even talk to anyone. Unobtrusively, she slipped past two nurses and tried to find the room where her father lay. But before she got far, someone called out, 'Hey, what are you doing here? Don't you know how contagious this disease is?' 'But my father is lying here! I have to see him.' Her father was all she had left now. She had to see him.