

1. ELLA

“Alone at last,” thinks Ella, dropping onto the grey sofa that dominates the lounge.

Miss Liese hisses indignantly and darts to safety.

“Sorry, little mouse, I didn’t see you there. Come and have a cuddle!”

Miss Liese is offended.

Woe betide Ella if she dared call Miss Liese ‘little mouse’ in front of her sister Maggie.

Ella makes herself comfortable and turns on the television.

The news.

Ella quickly turns the TV off again. She can’t stand these frightening international news reports.

Miss Liese makes a cautious approach. She softly places one paw on Ella’s thigh, then another, and finally settles into Ella’s lap, purring quietly.

“See, little mouse, I didn’t upset you after all,” says Ella, scratching the scruff of the cat’s neck.

She has both the flat and the cat all to herself for the first time in months. She can’t even remember how long it’s been since the last time.

It was all so overwhelming. After Heinz died, the others suddenly appeared. The others, who came to comfort her and never left.

Heinz took a long time to die, even though he always said he had come to terms with his illness. And Ella had not wanted to let him go.

They had been attached at the hip for forty years. “You’re like Siamese twins,” Maggie had always complained. “There’s no separating you. Dreadful! I don’t have a sister any more, just a sister and her husband.” Ella’s comeback was to accuse Maggie of envying

their happy marriage.

Sometimes it was too much even for Ella. Like when Heinz reproached her for spending more time with the children than with him. Or when she hated him for spending hours with Tommy, solving cryptic crosswords, instead of with her, finishing their jigsaw puzzle.

“You’re so childish,” Lilli had often told her parents.

Lilli, who was now travelling somewhere in Indonesia and only contacted Ella briefly every few months. Lilli, who had consoled her mother during her father’s slow passing, and then disappeared from her life almost entirely. Much to Nelly’s infuriation. Nelly was Ella’s niece. Maggie’s late-arriving daughter and Ella’s closest confidante. Ella had cried on Nelly’s shoulder about her own grown-up children Lilli and Tommy, about Maggie and Luise and Rada. She had recounted her the quarrels in her unexpected flatshare. On the Sundays when Nelly came to dinner. Sunday after Sunday, all year round.

But Nelly was on holiday now – together with Maggie for once – and her other flatmates had scattered in all directions for a long weekend.

“Alone at last,” sighs Ella again, scratching Miss Liese’s slender black head with the patch of white over her left eye.

She would get up when it suited her, she would walk around in her nightie all day and watch rubbish on TV at lunchtime. She would grab something unhealthy from the world’s biggest purveyor of fast food and carry the grease-soaked paper bag and its toxic contents back home to share with Miss Liese. She would treat herself to the sweetest sweets she could think of, and eat at least one bar of chocolate per day, and she wouldn’t watch a single news report.

In a nutshell, she would do everything that Maggie disdained, Luise disapproved of,

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and Rada simply didn't understand.

Ella looks contentedly down at Miss Liese, who is purring loudly now.

In doing so, her gaze falls upon the clock. Only half past eight?

The day has only just begun. Why is she already up?

Why have she and Miss Liese already had breakfast? Why is she sitting here on the sofa with no idea what to do with herself?

She could get dressed, stroll to Café Meierei in the Volksgarten and drink their traditional soured milk. She could take a book and sit and watch the people passing through the park.

She could walk through the city and get some more coffee. She can never have enough coffee at home.

Another point of contention with Maggie, who will only ever drink black tea with milk, and calls Ella a philistine for her coffee addiction.

But she doesn't feel like doing any of that.

When Heinz was still alive, her days had been clearly structured. In the final months of his slow passing, she had spent a long time reading to him every morning and every evening. He had no longer had the strength to read for himself.

She had read him the entire *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and thought that this Tolkien fellow must have been quite the Nazi with his blond, blue-eyed horse warriors and dark, hunchbacked villains. Heinz had no time for her misgivings. He loved fantasy novels and had no interest in their deeper meaning. "If I want something profound, I'll read Handke or Sartre," was his response to her allegations. So Ella had kept her thoughts to herself and read him *The Lord of the Rings*, while he kept nodding off and waking up

again as soon as she stopped reading.

Sometimes Lilli or Tommy had taken her place to read to their father. Then she went on a walk for a few minutes or simply lay on the lounge on the balcony and stared into space.

She had met Heinz at university. He was five years older than her and already an assistant professor in the German Studies faculty when Ella crossed his path in her first semester. He always said it was love at first sight. Ella, meanwhile, always claimed that he hadn't noticed her at all at first; she had had to chase after him for ages before he gave in.

“But Lali, you know I was still living with Elfie back then,” Heinz had always said when the topic came up, stroking Ella, or Lali as he had called her, tenderly on the arm. “I couldn't have just walked out on her overnight ...”

“The cow,” Ella had always muttered in entirely unjustified jealousy. After all, Heinz had left “the stupid cow” for her in the end.

Sometimes Ella still thinks about this Elfie, with whom she had never exchanged a single word. The spurned woman later married Heinz' greatest rival in the German Studies faculty, Professor Rudolf, which Heinz had taken as a terrible affront, prompting Ella repeatedly to remark that men really are nothing more than babies, unwilling to share even beyond the grave.

The Professor had left Elfie a few years ago, and she had proceeded to drink herself to death. And Ella felt something a little like guilt, even though she told herself it was impossible to know what would have become of Elfie and Heinz had Ella not crossed his path in the corridors of the German Studies faculty all those years ago.

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They really had been like Siamese twins. Once Heinz had finally noticed her and confessed his love, they had become inseparable. For forty years they hadn't spent a day apart, hadn't slept a night in separate beds.

Then Heinz got sick.

During her pregnancies, Ella had often moved in with her mother for days at a time, and Heinz had come every evening to be with her.

Her mother saw each new grandchild as a gift.

Her daughter became a saint to be waited on hand and foot, and Ella enjoyed suddenly feeling like she had as a child, when something hurt and her mother had simply cradled her in her arms.

Maggie was abroad back then and only occasionally came to Vienna to visit. When she found her older sister completely under their mother's thumb – with Heinz always close by – she had often turned away in disgust. Sometimes she had even accused her mother and sister of having forgotten her entirely, just because she wasn't with them day and night.

"I miss them," Ella says to Miss Liese, who gives her an understanding look with her deep-green eyes and then nudges her with her wet nose because Ella has imprudently stopped scratching her behind the ears. "I miss them so much, Mama and Heinz, and I know that's absurd. Mama never said that she missed Grandma. Well, Grandma was an old witch. But why do I miss them so much? Heinz, that's obvious, he was my soulmate, my rock! And Mama? I just want someone who isn't constantly telling me everything I'm doing wrong.

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I feel like I'm caught in a vice between Maggie and Luise ...”

While Heinz was still alive, she had rarely seen Maggie. Her sister had spent years travelling the world with her diplomat husband. Ella had often envied her that. But the marriage had broken down when Maggie was in her mid-thirties and Nelly just four years old. From then on, Maggie had made her own way. Always somewhere in the world. Sometimes she had left her daughter with Ella for days at a time. And Ella had shared her niece, the youngest in the family, with her mother. Ella's mother, “Grandma Gerti”, pitied more than loved her youngest granddaughter, which is why Nelly preferred to live with Ella. This often made Grandma Gerti cross, and sometimes she had accused Ella of spoiling her niece more than her own children; she had told her she ought not always give in to Maggie, who should take responsibility for her own daughter. “And what about the father, the fool? He has a beautiful daughter and prefers spending his time with random floozies,” Ella had answered.

Heinz had accepted his niece Nelly's presence, even though he had been slightly jealous. He had loved Lilli and Tommy and was fond of Nelly, but had never quite understood his wife's enthusiasm to take in her niece.

Before the next generation had come onto the scene, Ella and Heinz had tried to reinvent the world. They had been on the front lines of the student protests in 1968 and had got on their parents' nerves, asking why they hadn't stood up to the Nazi thugs in their day. Ella's mother had always responded that it wasn't as easy as it is for her, Ella, now. Nothing will happen to her if she takes to the streets, while back then every act of resistance put your life at risk. “I'd like to have seen you back then, you know? When a stupid joke could get

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you sent to a concentration camp,” she had said angrily.

Ella’s father had stayed silent. Everything Ella knew about his experiences in the war she had learned from her mother. Kurt had been drafted as a 16-year-old in the last year of the war and had deserted almost immediately. A farmer in the north had hidden him “until the calamity was over.” The young Gerti had fled north with her mother, the old witch, who came from there, to escape the bombing in Vienna. Gerti’s father had fallen in Russia. That’s how Kurt and Gerti had met. “In the hay barn,” Grandma Gerti had often said to her grandchildren’s hooting laughter, and it had always made Ella cringe. “Mama took against him,” Gerti had also said. “Grandpa Kurt was a traitor to the Fatherland, she said. Because he hadn’t wanted to catch a bullet in the head when he was no more than a child!” Ella and Maggie were very proud of their dad, the deserter. Kurt was an extraordinarily mild-mannered man, letting Gerti order him around and regarding his daughters with a certain wary respect, as if he couldn’t believe they were really his children. He had idolised his wife, who was four years his senior. His daughters, meanwhile, had always contended that, more than anything else, he was intensely afraid of her and her angry outbursts.

Kurt was young when the cancer took him, and Ella and Maggie had mourned him so keenly partly because their domineering mother now had more time to terrorise them. Shortly afterwards, Maggie had left for Peru with her then-husband. Ella stayed and witnessed her mother’s grief and her resulting ill temper at close range.

When the grandchildren came and her mother grew older, their relationship turned on its head. Her mother softened, and sometimes it was Ella who now shouted at her mother in the knowledge that she was the stronger one. And then, when Lilli and Tommy had

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grown up and even Nelly was not a baby any more, Grandma Gerti had died. Unexpectedly, and quickly.

And suddenly Ella had caught herself thinking that she was the head of the family now. It scared her. Moreover, her daily routine suddenly evaporated. Over the last ten years, she had become used to calling her mother every day at around five in the afternoon, when she had got home from school and relaxed a little. Her mother told her about her day, and Ella complained about her unteachable students, who didn't even know who Heinrich Böll was. Ella was just four years retired when her mother passed away. No more daily phone calls. No pangs of guilt for neglecting her mother. No more weekly Sunday visits. It all could have come as a relief, but Ella was surprised to find that she missed it. A gap had suddenly opened up in her life, a gap even Heinz couldn't fill.

Heinz, who occasionally liked to remind her how she had suffered under "Grandma Gerti", especially when the latter had intruded into their lives with her unforgiving frankness. When she reproached her for not taking enough care of her, the poor, old, lonely grandmother. When she accused her of turning her beloved grandchildren against her, because, as they grew older, they seemed less and less interested in visiting their grouch of a Grandma.