

Schöffling & Co.

*Although Everything is Over* by Franziska Gerstenberg

Translated from the German by Lucy Jones

Shortly before 11th September 2001, East German Charlotte and West German Simon meet and quickly enter a relationship. But soon after the birth of their daughter Greta the first cracks start to appear and only intensify with the birth of their son Karl. Soon it becomes clear that the relationship can no longer be saved. Splitting up both the family and the house they live in seems like the most logical only option...

pp. 117-131, told from the perspective of the teenage-daughter Greta

'So you're getting a divorce?'

'We can't get a divorce, Greta. We're not married.'

Karl stares at his bread roll. He's only taken one bite but still, his face is smeared with raspberry jam.

'Then I don't get it,' says Greta.

Simon and Charlotte throw each other another look, and then they explain again.

After all, it's quite straightforward. What part of it doesn't she get? There are two adults and there are two children. A pretty neat division. Because the adults aren't getting along, they have to keep away from each other. On the other hand, there's not much money. But then there's the house, which is big enough, as big as two flats, a house where everyone has their own room. Shouldn't that be enough for them to keep away from each other?

'Please, Greta,' says Simon, reaching his hand across the table before taking it back and offering her the bread basket instead.

Because it's obvious who'll get whom. Greta is Daddy's girl and always has been, and Karl is Charlotte's baby.

'So I won't have a brother anymore?' she asks. 'And dividing up the house? How are we supposed to do that?'

'You can keep your room,' Charlotte repeats for the third time, 'everyone gets to keep their room.'

'And there are two bathrooms,' Simon says, leaping to her aid.

'If you take the downstairs bathroom,' she says to him, 'then you can have the side of the back porch that gets the sun.'

'Then we just have to organise the kitchen. Lucky that the oven's in the middle.'

'And the living room. Don't forget the living room.'

Greta looks from one parent to the other. Charlotte's cheeks are red and Simon seems awake now, charged with energy as if this is a trip he's been dying to go on. And Greta knows that the living room is important to Charlotte whereas she and Simon don't feel strongly about it. When they're not in their rooms, they sit in the kitchen if anywhere.

Karls slides off his chair, runs around the table and clammers onto Charlotte's lap. She hugs him and lowers her chin onto his head and thick blond hair as if she wants to say: See? Karl agrees.

'Please, Greta, ' Simon says quietly. 'I can't stand any more arguments.'

Outside Greta hears birds and other sounds she can't identify. Otherwise, all is quiet. She wonders for a moment why her parents are consulting her in the first place. They've already decided everything. For the longest time, they couldn't agree on anything, but now, all of a sudden. . .

'Dividing up the house. . .' Orange pulp sticks to her juice glass. She sits up straight. 'Like in a game?'

If only Charlotte and Simon would stop exchanging those knowing looks. They never do it normally – it's totally weird.

Simon hesitates, 'Yes,' he says eventually. 'Perhaps we could turn it into a game. Couldn't we, Charlotte?'

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Hardly a week later, Greta stands in the doorway of the downstairs bathroom and asks: 'Is it dry yet? Completely dry? Can I touch it?'

Things that had been the same forever took no time at all to change. For years, her parents had talked about renovating the smaller bathroom. They'd blamed each other because it was unusable but neither had ever got around to doing anything about it. But then, it all happened very quickly. Simon replaced the broken washbasin and painted the walls; Charlotte scrubbed the shower cabin until it looked like new. Because the floor tiles were cracked and stained, they'd painted over them too, including the grouting. The label on the tin said that the paint took five days to dry before you could walk on the floor. So they'd carried on their work in the living room, moving around the furniture. Now the sofa stood on the left and both armchairs on the right; on the left were Charlotte's shelves and on the right, the metal lamp that had belonged to Simon since he was a child, or so he'd told Greta. He'd taken a picture off the wall and pushed it over to Charlotte's half with his fingertips, where she'd immediately hung it up again. Simon's old stopwatch was still lying on Charlotte's shelf. Greta had bent down and stuck it in her pocket.

In the kitchen, they made rapid progress too. The oven and sink were in the middle and could be used by everyone, although not at the same time, just one after the other. There was one shelf on the left and one on the right. 'As if it was meant to be,' said Charlotte. Simon let Greta decide which cups and plates she wanted to keep. They had fetched the folding table down from the attic, then the folding chairs, and had dusted them off with a damp cloth. In the end, the kitchen looked crowded with the two tables, and they had to shove and shunt everything around until the chairs could be pulled out without the legs getting jammed.

A second fridge is now the only thing they still have to buy. Greta is standing in the doorway of the new bathroom, hopping from one bare foot to the other. 'Are you sure it's not sticky anymore?' The paint is still shining as if wet, just like when they'd first applied it.

Simon shrugs. 'Just try it. The worst thing that could happen is we end up with your footprints on the floor.'

At that, she squats down and glides a finger over the white paint. Her fist pumps in the air. 'Dry!' The paint feels cool to the touch. Everything else is hot this summer. The too-bright sun dazzles them in the transformed rooms, making them blink.

Charlotte sits down on one of their chairs in the kitchen and, for the first time, looks unsure. 'So now we've finished, haven't we?'

Oh no, they're far from finished. Greta has an idea. The best idea ever, which came to her in the freshly painted bathroom. She dashes down to the cellar, around the corner and to the spot where she knows Charlotte stored the red paint that she used to do up the landing last year. Greta picks up the large pot with both hands.

'Lines,' she pants once she's back upstairs.

'What do you mean, "lines"?' Simon asks.

'In the middle of the shared rooms. So that everyone stays on their side.'

Her parents say nothing. Because they don't react, Greta pries the lid off the pot; the paintbrushes are still lying in the bathroom.

She gabbles because she's just been racing about. 'We need rules. If it's a game, we have to know who's playing by the rules and who isn't. In the end, we have to be able to decide who's won and who's lost. If you cross the line, you're dead!'

With dogged determination, almost angrily, she begins upstairs. Karl is playing in the middle of the landing and his Matchbox car gets caught in the gap between two floorboards. Greta tells him to

go to his own side. How handy that Karl and Charlotte's rooms are next to each other, just like Greta and Simon's. She simply has to draw a straight line down the entire length of the landing. She doesn't have to think about what to do with the patchwork rug; she simply shoves it over to Charlotte's side. Then she dips the big paintbrush into the paint.

But it's not quite as simple as she thought. The line is crooked in three places. The places where she didn't have enough paint left on the brush are plain to see and there are a few drips to the left and right. Whatever. Greta is now sweating and wipes her forehead with her sticky red hand.

Karl is sitting with his Matchbox car on the wrong side, staring at her.

She points at him. 'When I'm done downstairs, I'll explain the rules to you, OK?'

Not a peep from the kitchen. She presses her lips together.

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'Where's my teapot?'

The line is already several days old. It's quiet in the house but Greta is closely watching Charlotte through the half-open kitchen door as she rummages around for her teapot, even lifting a newspaper as if it might be underneath.

'Have you moved it to your side?'

Simon has only just come out of his room. Greta watches as he briefly raises his eyebrows before he shrugs and opens the cupboard belonging to him and Greta. He passes Charlotte her teapot. 'Why didn't you look here yourself?' he asks.

Greta pushes open the door and enters the kitchen. She raises her hand. No, no, no! How often does she have to explain it to them? Charlotte can't look herself because that's against the rules. No one is allowed to cross the red line. Rules are rules. Greta's outstretched index finger jabs the air. Over there, stuck to the oven, is her list.

She turns her fingers to her eyes and then back to point at her parents, then laughs long and hard. *I see you*, she indicates. *I'm watching you*.

But her parents don't feel like joining in her laughter. They don't look at Greta or the list of rules. They stand about in the kitchen with lost expressions, as if they've forgotten what they were about to do.

Charlotte gives herself a little shake. 'Greta's right. If this is going to work. . .' She puts the teapot on the kitchen top and turns on the kettle, which makes its usual deafening racket.

Greta covers her ears and slams the door.

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Karl is waiting for her in the hallway. The big game has quickly led to many little ones, and this one is called *Who stumbles first*. It goes like this: Greta and Karl race against each other as fast as they can, she on her side, he on his. The red line snakes down the centre of the stairs. It runs across the middle of the kitchen but Greta has drawn a doorway for Karl and Charlotte which she simply jumps over. In the living room, a few bends and bumps in the line divide the room evenly.

They don't start the race in the kitchen because their parents are in there – well, now just Charlotte as Simon has gone back upstairs. Apart from that, they run the whole course until they're gasping for breath and can't speak, and Greta makes sure neither of them touches the red line.

Of course she's faster than Karl: now and again, she lets him win and he doesn't even notice. When she's bored, she thinks up other stuff, like throwing a ball to each other in the living room across the line. Or they pretend something invisible has grown between them and they feel around this living wall with their hands. During the first few days, however, *Who stumbles first* is the most important game, a race around new obstacles, and when Karl is at nursery school, Greta plays it alone, racing against time. Like the compass was her most precious plaything for a while, she now carries around Simon's old stopwatch. She already knows she'll never give it back. At some point, she'll stow it in the tin box below the back porch with the other things.

Karl stumbles over one of the patchwork rugs on the top landing. 'No!' he shouts, 'not again!' He punches the wall and disappears into his room. And Greta, the winner, purses her lips and whistles airily as she walks downstairs.

By now the kitchen is empty. She fetches a glass of ice-cold milk from the second fridge, which has now been installed.

She thought up and wrote the rules that are now stuck to the oven that stands in the middle.

*Breakfast: Charlotte and Karl, 7–8 o'clock*

*Breakfast: Simon and Greta, 8–9 o'clock*

*Lunch: Charlotte 12–1 o'clock (at weekends with Karl)*

*Lunch: Simon and Greta, 1–2 o'clock*

*Supper: Charlotte and Karl, 7–8 o'clock*

*Washing up to be done straight away!*

*Everyone has to keep their half of the kitchen clean!*

*The line always counts!!!!*

She wrote the list on a page from her notepad. The holes at the edge are torn. On the second page, there's a table of results with a column each for Simon, Charlotte, Karl and Greta. Here, penalty points are jotted down if someone breaks the rules. Except there are no penalty points, just small red crosses.

Greta finishes her milk, squats down on the floor and adds a few new rules.

*Whoever comes into the kitchen first decides what's played on the radio!*

*Mail is to be placed on the hob!*

Simon comes in, starts cooking above her, then at some point asks, 'Can you give me a hand?' She jumps up. He gives her the sharp knife and asks her to cut the courgettes. Her ears glow. She observes very closely the way Charlotte opens the door of the back porch, then sees *this*, none other than *this* knife in Greta's hand and already opens her mouth in protest. Then she swallows her sentence, dithers and goes back out again.

'When does your shoot start by the way?' Greta asks.

Simon has accepted an acting role for TV.

'Not for a while,' he says.

She thinks about how they'll eat together later when the courgettes are done, and then they'll sit facing each other at the folding table, as they always do now, talking or not talking. In any case, Greta doesn't have to eat salad if she doesn't feel like it and that's already a huge improvement.

'Everything will be great when you're police inspector, Dad.'

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That same evening, Charlotte scalds her hand. Her screams can be heard throughout the house. When Simon and Greta rush into the kitchen, Charlotte is standing by the sink, the kettle is lying on the floor, there's water everywhere and Charlotte is staring at her hand that is turning fiery red by the second.

Simon bounds over to her. 'Show me.' He touches her arm. 'Cool it,' he says.

He tests the water temperature by putting one finger under the running tap and holding Charlotte's hand under it. Charlotte groans and grips the sink with the other hand. Her face is so white that Greta feels a bit sick herself.

'Why do you need hot water in this heat anyway?' Simon whispers.

Charlotte tries to smile. With two wet fingers, he brushes the hair out of her face. Then he says to Greta, 'Will you check the time? We have to keep cooling this for at least ten minutes.'

Greta, who hasn't yet moved, nods and pulls the stopwatch out of her pocket.

They are all so shocked that an accident like this could have happened in the first week, and that's why they are all allowed that evening – Greta explicitly says so – to cross the line. Simon leads Charlotte to the sofa, covers her burn with a piece of white lint and bandages her hand.

Greta snuggles up to her mother. 'Does it hurt a lot?'

'Honestly. . .' Charlottes says, with a sharp intake of breath, ' . . .yes.'

Simon opens all the doors in the house and puts on a jazz record upstairs, turning the volume up loudly so that they can hear it downstairs, all three of them, their legs and arms entwined on the sofa. Just like in the old days. Except Karl is missing.

'Karl,' Greta calls out.

He stands close to the door, moulds himself to the shelf and stares at them. It's already late and he's in his pyjamas. Normally at this time, he's in bed.

'Come here, Karl-over-there.' She reaches her hand out towards him.

But Karl pulls his shoulders all the way up to his ears, and shakes his head, his chin almost touching his chest. When he turns around and runs out, he stays on the right side of the line.

Charlotte gets up from the sofa to go down to him.

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The days pass, many days, but the clock in the kitchen has stopped. No one feels it's their responsibility to get the clock to work again. Perhaps because it's above the sink, which is exactly in the centre of the room. When Greta tries to work out how much of the holidays are still left, she keeps getting muddled. When did Marie fly to Egypt? Ever since she's been living in one half of the house, she misses her friend twice as much. At school they always sit next to each other, their bare arms lying side by side on the table. Sometimes one flicks her fingers against the other's skin. Then they both burst out laughing although it hurts. It's their own pain, no one else's.

But what would happen if Marie visited her now? There are no rules for this scenario. Is Marie only allowed to stay on Greta's side? And if Marie stepped over the line, would it mean a penalty point for Greta because she's her guest?

A horn sounds, cutting through Greta's thoughts, probably from the street or one of the gardens. It's that loud trumpet noise that started the summer the World Cup was hosted by South Africa. Greta watched two matches on a screen in the park with Simon back then. And many people sounded their horns around them, not louder or softer but constantly, a steady noise. And even now it's over, she still hears that sound around the estate; they have survived the final.

Greta thinks of noise, of music and that Marie doesn't need to come over to her house. Mostly, when they meet at Marie's, she's just been to ballet class or has to do piano practice – Bach, Mozart or whatever their names are – on the black gleaming instrument in the living room. Later they close Marie's door and turn on *Bad Romance* by Lady Gaga or hold a banana like a mic in front of the mirror and sing like Lena, who Marie likes better. Greta remembers how she once put a banana between her legs and fooled around. She thinks of the two boys who shouted after Marie in the schoolyard, *You butt-fucked chicken*. Marie was really upset. But Greta told her that chickens don't even . . . well, fuck. Simon explained to her what *fucking* meant: *moving quickly back and forth*. But birds don't have penises. They just squeeze against each other and then the cock trips over his own wing feathers, which looks silly.

Everything with Marie feels like ages ago.

Then, one Friday morning, there's whispering going on across the top landing although no one is speaking. When Greta opens her door, Charlotte passes her from the right with a rigid expression, carrying sheets and bed linen in her arms. Karl comes out of the bathroom and passes Greta from the



left, wearing only his pyjama top, red-faced. Greta realises he's wet the bed. It used to happen regularly but not much anymore. Karl doesn't look at her and disappears into his bedroom.

Soon afterwards, Charlotte takes him to nursery school before she goes to the florist. Greta doesn't see the two of them leave the house but she hears the door slam, followed shortly by the unmistakable clattering of the garden gate, the sign that she has the house all to herself. She goes downstairs, padding through the rooms. Simon still seems to be asleep.

Alone, Greta systematically patrols each line. Now that some time has passed, she realises she should have made more of an effort. There are areas, corners and angles that belong to no one. So no one feels they are their responsibility. She runs a hand along a dusty shelf; on the floor below is a pile of crumbs, bits of dried pasta and lint balls.

Still in her nightdress, she steps onto the back porch. It's a surprisingly cool morning as if the sun has lost its way in the night and, now exhausted, has to recoup its strength before it can glow again. It's the first sign that summer is passing. Greta shields her eyes with a hand. Outside, there is more evidence of decline. They didn't divide up the garden, and so the lawn has grown rampant, trash is caught in the hedges and no one has been watering the shrubs. Charlotte even seems to have given up on the fresh strawberry patch. Its dry leaves hang limp on the ground and a few of the plants have lost their balance; their roots stick up in the air. Perhaps Charlotte imagined strawberries for a whole family, not a half.

At the far end of the garden, difficult to make out through the pine trees, is the summerhouse. It wasn't allocated to anyone either, Greta realises.

She goes back into the house. The list she wrote is still stuck to the oven but she hasn't looked at it for a while or filled in any crosses. They've all got used to the new routes and rules, and they barely slip up. Greta remembers that she wanted to play a game that didn't stop. Uncertainly, she opens the fridge, then closes it again.

Simon comes down the stairs, yawning.

'Have to go back to sleep again in a bit,' he says, 'I'm still tired.'

He's begun rehearsing in the afternoons and evenings and sometimes continues half the night. When Simon's learning his lines, his door is shut and Greta respects that. Few situations make him angry but being disturbed when he's working is one.

'Have you had breakfast?' he asks.

'Yes.'

He takes a bottle of juice from their fridge, then sticks his fingers into the cornflakes box, and stuffs a fistful of dry flakes into his mouth. Greta can't help laughing.

'When your series starts,' she says, 'I want to watch it. Like, you're going to be on every week?'

'Hmm,' he goes. More cornflakes crunching between his teeth. 'Let's talk about it when the time comes.'

'That's so typical,' she says, 'You're an actor and I'm not even allowed to watch TV.'

'Not my fault.'

'Then whose is it?'

'Evil, politically dodgy German TV.'

'Pah,' she snorts. 'That's all going to change when you're on it.'

Now it's his turn to laugh. He puts down the box of cornflakes and takes the milk out of the fridge. 'I know for sure that you haven't had breakfast. We'll do something together later, okay little Miss Twiggy? Give me an hour.'