



## *Prologue*

This story is not my story. I'm not sure who it belongs to. It is lying there in the street, it sleeps in our house, and yet it's always one step ahead of me. If I write this story down now, it's in the attempt to exorcise it. I want it to find peace and to let me catch my breath too. I've been running so long. I'm tired, weary. The little boy next door is sitting in my lap. Yesterday he bit his lip. The blister has filled with pus.

I remember a time when I was awake and alive. I see myself. A bounding, freckled child. I run as fast as I can. The soles of my feet pound on the asphalt. My heart is beating in my mouth. I run to feel how strong I am. My legs stick out of my short blue shorts. I am proud of the fact that a boy wore them before me. I feel brave in these shorts. The summer air caresses my legs. The gravel on the tarmac digs into my soles. My feet lift off from the ground. I am floating a hand's breadth above the asphalt. I glide round the corner, down the small alleyway to the black stream. I see fish through the planks of the wooden bridge. Dark streaks against a white background. The water is brown and peaty, the bed is sand. I fly all the way to the woods. I spread my arms and swim through the air. I am happier than is allowed. I float over things, over people, the television. Then I plunge downwards. I'm falling. My scream wakes me.

Come back soon, we need to investigate it, the doctors say. But there's nothing to investigate. My body is strong. It's something else that is oppressing me, choking me, nearly stopping me from breathing. I hold onto the story because nobody tells it. Saying nothing is part of the family. It's hard to describe, hard to grasp, because saying nothing doesn't consist of silence. My parents and I talk about this and that. The truth falls through the cracks. It falls down deep. No sentence catches it. They say death is an end to life. But there is a life beyond death. People live on in the stories we tell each other. Even things we don't talk about live on, they come back in another form.

This story is also a play. The cast are: my parents, Judith and Hamid. My little sister, Elly, sits breathing down our diminutive father's neck. My mother holds me by the hand. Sunshine lights the stage. Then Elly disappears. She retreats into the dark backdrop. A gravestone thunders down onto the stage. We cry, wail, tear our hair out. Each one of us tumbles on our own, alone, into the blackness at the back of the stage. Finally a transformed Elly appears. She is much older, her eyes are dark. We stare at her. Then my mother puts her arms around her and embraces her. We surround the girl, shield her with our bodies. We are vampires. We disembowel her. All that remains is a bare skeleton. A small child appears. It laughs and picks up a broom. It sweeps the stage clean. Then it throws the broom into the audience, crosses its legs and sits down, and says: so far, so good.

*((pp 39 - 51))*

### *Below Zero*

My sister disappears on a slightly overcast afternoon in June. I imagine how it happens. I see Elly wheeling her bike out of the garage. Her outline is clear and sharp, the background out of focus. She fixes her sport bag to the luggage rack. In it is her judo suit with the green belt. My sister is younger than me. I am thirteen at the time, she is just eleven. We live in a small town. Elly's club meets in a sports hall in the nearest big town. She cycles there on her own across the fields. The wind sweeps through the wheat. From above it looks like waves on water. Elly stands on the motorway bridge, she looks down at the field. The wind ruffles her dark, almost black hair.

I wasn't there. But that's what it must have been like. We always used to stop for a minute up on the top there. We would wave to the long distance lorry drivers on the motorway, look over at the fields, to the blue cap of the Taunus mountain range on the horizon. Sometimes we would see a kestrel or a buzzard circling above the fields. Often the cars would come to a standstill under the bridge, a long queue with countless glowing red eyes, or a lorry driver would beep his horn. A deep rutting

sound. Elly and I used to laugh. We would quickly start pedalling, standing up as we sped off with our bums high in the air, down the cycle path on the other side of the bridge.

The sports hall is in a suburb of Rüsselsheim known as the Grove. I like the name. It sounds so adventurous. The Grove is the area where the workers from the car factory live. In the past a number of people threw themselves off the top of the high rise blocks. These days anyone who wants to kill themselves here drinks themselves to death, or takes an overdose. No-one makes a show of suffering any more. These days the buildings are freshly painted, janitors tend to the green spaces, keep the hallways clean, remove graffiti. The Grove is flourishing, while the rest of the town declines. Time is running out for cars. Soon people will be catapulted from town to town by a kind of solar-powered pneumatic tube system. Their souls remain in the same place though. I read about it in the newspaper. Our mother went to school in the Grove too, just like us. But it was a different school back then. Her teachers warned her that if she didn't study hard enough she would end up working on the car assembly line. In her youth that was the highest form of punishment. These days my parents wish they earned as much as the workers on the assembly line. Hamid and Judith both went to university. They never mention it explicitly. But when they talk to each other it's a competition to see who knows better or at least can sound more clever. My father is an architect, specialising in escalators, my mother writes sustainability reports for large companies. Before my sister and I were born, she worked in an agency. My parents both pore over their

computers for hours, their backs hunched. If anyone asks me, I say my parents are freelance. Generally people don't have anything more to say then. Freelance professionals, free from all restrictions and pressures. I think it sounds intimidating. I say it as if it is. I don't like questions. I think of Elly.

Before she disappears on that June afternoon, my sister crosses at the traffic lights on the edge of the Grove. On the opposite site of the junction is the police station. Elly doesn't pay any attention to it. The only sighting of her is at the next lights, just before the sports hall. A female witness later recalls seeing my sister, the small dishevelled girl with almost black hair on her red women's bike. The sports bag falls off Elly's luggage rack right in the middle of the road. The witness is sitting in one of the cars that brake for my sister. Elly flings her bike down on the side of the road, runs back to her bag and picks it up. That's the last I hear of her. Her trail goes cold here.

The caretaker in the sports hall says he didn't see my sister. The other girls stroll past him. He casts an eye over them. These giggling, long-haired child-women. Hair like whips, silver chains on their teeth, shiny pink nail varnish, denim shorts which barely cover their bums and ripped black tights underneath with holes as big as your head. The caretaker tries not to notice them. The girls whisper among themselves, laugh out loud. They run into the changing room. They leave the door open. They clamber into their judo trousers, tighten the drawstring. My sister would normally be among these girls. But she is missing. The other girls slip into their

stiff jackets with the lapels their opponent has to grab during the fight. They tie their different coloured belts. One by one the girls enter the dojo with the grey mats on the floor and the mirror on the wall. They form a long line and turn their faces to the instructor. On his command, they all bend first their left knee, then their right. They extend their feet, placing their insteps and big toes one on top of the other. Their knees gape, one fist-width apart, their hands rest on their upper thighs. Their arms hang loosely by the side of their body. The instructor scans the long line. On the left at the end kneels the girl who has the brown belt already. The other girls have lined up to her right according to the colour of their belt. There are lots of girls with white, yellow or orange belts there. My sister would sit roughly in the middle. But she isn't there. My sister is one of the best in her age group in the club. Her favourite throw is the shoulder throw, seoi-nage. My parents believe the sport will help if anyone attacks her. They chose judo rather than karate because they believe judo to be the more gentle, intelligent sport. Judoka use their opponents' strength against them. They don't attack, they defend themselves. That's what my parents believe. The instructor is in his mid-twenties. He has an angular Viking face. All the girls have a crush on him. They try to fight against him as often as possible. They want him to sweep them to the floor. My sister thinks that's pathetic. She would never submit willingly. The instructor wears a black belt. He studies the girls. Deep in his throat he forms the words. Mukuso, he calls. They all close their eyes. They collect themselves, chase away their thoughts, just for a few seconds. The instructor calls: Rei. He and the girls bow to each other. They pause briefly with their foreheads on the ground. They breathe in the plastic smell of the mats.

Maybe at that moment my sister is already dead. Maybe she is crawling, injured or raped, through some bushes, the branches scratching her cheeks. Tears burn in her eyes, but she is too afraid to make a noise. The attacker's sperm drips from her. She is half naked. He is still there, somewhere behind her in the bushes. He is lying in wait. Panic constricts her throat. She knows she can't get away. She is shaking. Her sobs stick in her throat. Something howls. She jumps when she realises it is her. She hurries on, crawling on hands and knees. Then a hand closes round her ankle. My sister kicks out. She defends herself. But the hand slowly pulls her back into the thicket. Maybe it's a gang of youths who surround her in that moment. Maybe it's not one man on his own, maybe it's several men, or a couple. A woman who lures my sister under a pretext and a man who then drags her onto the back seat of a car. There are so many images, so many stories. It's always a young girl, the main perpetrators are always men. That seems to be the rule. Or maybe nothing actually happened to my sister at all. Maybe she just turned off on her way to the sports hall, maybe she cycled back or along to the next motorway exit. Her bike is never found either. It disappears like her, without a trace. She hadn't packed anything more than her sports kit. Nothing is missing from her bedroom. No trousers, no skirt, no toothbrush. There is no goodbye letter. We don't get any contact later either. She doesn't call. She doesn't email. It's like my sister is swallowed up by the ground. No-one sees her, no-one demands a ransom.

My parents and I search for signs of a plan. We want Elly just to have run away. We wish her to be alive. We cling to that. We talk about the days prior to her disappearance several times. The police officers also keep asking us about them. They compare our versions. They question the neighbours. In the majority of cases perpetrators come from the victim's close social circle. First the police suspect my father of having a mistress, then accuse my mother of having a lover. The investigators speculate that my sister had discovered the new relationship. They insinuate that Elly was disposed of. She was probably getting in the way. My parents can hardly speak for rage. They are furious. How could the police suspect them of a crime? My mother wants to pour her heart out to a journalist friend. My father urges my mother to keep a clear head. Instead they discuss engaging a private detective. They withdraw a sum of money for that purpose from Elly's savings account which our grandparents keep topping up. It was meant to be for her education. Even before Elly's disappearance we very rarely received visitors to our house. More than a dozen of our relatives live in the same small town. When we met them, they would greet us, but Elly and I didn't even nod. We don't know them. Our mother never introduced us. Sometimes my sister and I would go to our school friends' houses for a visit. We never invited them into our playroom. I don't know why. It wasn't as if it was forbidden.

Now my parents and I glide wordlessly past one another. We don't touch, not even in the narrow hallway or in the doorways. My parents don't cry in front of me. Only once do I hear my mother sobbing, behind her closed door. She won't allow herself

to cry, because my sister Elly is still alive. That's our rallying cry. We hold fast to it. We know that the probability is violent crime and death. The police search the area with sniffer dogs after a worker at the sewage treatment plant claims to have seen my sister. Later the man is treated for psychosis.

Secretly I picture my sister lifting her bike under the tarpaulins of a truck and getting in the front. This vehicle takes her to France without harm. Travelling like this, Elly reaches the sea. The waves rage, the wind drives the flecks of foam from the spray onto the wet beach. My sister's hair blows in her face. In a shopping centre in the small seaside town on the Atlantic coast she comes across a group of vagrant youths. She follows them obstinately. One boy pelts her with empty cans. But she doesn't give up. When the police come, she flees with the gang. After their getaway together she belongs to them. During the day she begs with the others, at night she snuggles up to her girlfriend, a French girl, in their army sleeping bag. I hope this girlfriend has her wits about her, is smart enough to know how to break in without getting caught and how to get false papers. This girlfriend looks after Elly, I'm sure of it. My sister's skin has a touch of caramel, summer and winter alike. I am envious of her. Along with her light eyes, the dark soft waves of her hair. When she laughs, her whole body heaves. Laughter bursts out of her. It rocks her. I keep calling to mind the details of her body. But whenever I try to describe Elly in my thoughts, she slips away from me. I can't force her voice into my ear any more. Her face is changing more and more into the one in the photo albums, the unreal face of the prints inside, copied and filed away, slowly fading. Only at night, when I'm

asleep, can I see my sister as she is and feel her vitality. In the morning when I wake there are a few precious moments when I don't yet know she has disappeared. Then the memory hits me like a blow.

(...)

((pp 81 - 99))

*Elly*

My sister has been gone a long time now. It was four years ago on this Thursday in June. I am older now. It won't be long before I'm an adult. I long for that every day. But I'm not allowed to go out without saying goodbye. Sometimes I climb up the hunting platform with the elder of the two boys next door. We lie in wait, and when a deer appears in the clearing we press our faces up to the slit in between the boards. We make use of those few seconds to lean our shoulders softly against each other or to let a finger creep right up to the other's hand. I feel the boy's warmth. He smells of hay. When I've finished school, I want to go to Australia to be an au pair. I practise sometimes with the boy next door's younger brother. He can't

remember my sister. He was too young at the time. I love him for that. I bury my nose in his fine, almost white hair. His hands are plump. I put chocolate coins in them. Then the phone rings. It rings inside me. The sound is shrill. It vibrates in my skull. I turn hot, then cold. The ground opens up.

The phone rings. My sneakers are outside on the terrace getting drenched by the drizzling rain. I'm staring out the window while I peel potatoes for a bake. I still need to practise for a vocab test, so I'm peeling them in a hurry. The telephone doesn't stop ringing. The sound seems to be getting louder and louder. It echoes. The knife slips. Blood pours from my thumb. My mother beckons me to answer the phone. She doesn't want to speak to anyone. I lie and say she isn't in. I'm sucking the blood from my cut when the female police officer on the other end of the line says: We have found a person who fits the description of your sister. Other officials have said something similar a few times before. It was always a false alarm. But this time it's different. My parents are speechless when I tell them.

The voice on the telephone says the person concerned is a girl approximately fifteen years old. Not very tall, thin, with shaggy dark, almost black hair. She was found lying in between beach huts in a Danish seaside resort. The beach was deserted at the time, back in October, the huts there were locked up. The gulls circled above the foamy sea. A few cars were parked in the street by the beach. The owners didn't get out, they just reclined their seats, and closed their eyes or stared at the sea through the windscreen. One of these parked drivers discovered the girl.

She was wearing a black binbag over her clothes, probably to keep out the damp. She had built a camp behind the huts on a set of tyres. She didn't say anything when the man spoke to her. She immediately tried to hit him with an iron bar. He managed to restrain her. Soon police officers and youth workers were on the spot. The young girl didn't speak. She babbled. She attacked everyone.

The police took the girl to the clinic. The doctors there didn't rush her, they observed her, had to feel their way forward. The girl cowered in the corner of the treatment room. She even relieved herself there. She hardly touched the food they brought. The doctors didn't get any response from her for days. Eventually they took the girl to a supervised hostel. A young female doctor sat down next to the girl, over and over. Every day she got a bit closer. At first the girl went behind her chair and snarled. After five days she accepted the doctor's presence. The girl didn't do much during the hours the doctor sat there with her. She rocked back and forth or pulled strands of hair over her face and contemplated the ends. Sometimes she would bite her nails a bit or scratch the crook of her elbow. The doctor felt sorry for the girl. She put her in mind of a frightened animal. But the girl knows how to write, so they discovered after several weeks. A police officer called around various aid organisations and ended up comparing the girl with Elly's picture. Our telephone rang.

My parents say it's impossible. This girl can't be our daughter. There must be some mistake. They try to compose themselves. The prospect is too enticing. We can't

get our hopes up, it takes too much out of us. We can't cope with another disappointment. It's better to assume the worst. Our vocal chords rasp. We clear our throats. But the lump is too low down. We can't shift it. We discuss which one of us should fly to Denmark. In the end my parents both go. They book separate flights in case there is a crash. I am supposed to carry on going to school like nothing has happened.

My mother has frozen meals for me. Every day I heat up the contents of one of the Tupperware tubs. The block of brown ice turns into goulash, the red one into tomato soup. I spoon the food from the tub and wipe it out with a slice of bread. I don't tell anyone about the phone call. Then everything would come true. I don't believe in miracles. I try to put one foot in front of the other. I get through the day bit by bit. By the evening I can't remember what I did in the morning any more. I watch TV until the sun comes up again. I can't sleep. Something tingles under my tailbone, I can't switch off. I run through the woods to tire myself out. I go as fast as I can. I gasp, my blood thunders in my ears. The treetops above me are spinning. I trip over a root. My chin splits open. I smell moss. Pine needles stick to my face. My mother's voice hammers in my head. She says it's true. We've got her back. It's unbelievable. I ask Judith if she is really sure. My mother flies into a rage and tries to cut me off, but then she interrupts herself and says I'll see soon enough. They are coming back with Elly the day after tomorrow already. I bang my sneakers together.

The nose of the aeroplane icon is pointing down. I'm standing behind the stainless steel barriers where I alternate between staring at the sliding door and staring at my watch again. Every few seconds the door glides to one side, releasing bunches of people with their suitcases on wheels and their baggage carts. Over the tannoy passengers with foreign-sounding names are requested to make their way to their flight. Outside on the apron a mobile stairway docks onto an Airbus. Then the sliding door made of opaque glass glides to one side. I see my parents first. They are pushing a baggage cart. A girl is sitting on top of the cases. That must be my sister. I don't recognise her. She has pulled the hood of her sweater up and is wearing sunglasses. I can't even make out her figure. Her jacket and trousers swamp her. Then suddenly there are flashes. Photographers jump in front of the baggage cart, shouting loudly, gesticulating, one even reaches for her hood. But Elly clutches it tightly with both hands. My father takes my hand and pulls me away. We flee from the photographers. We run through the airport. The crowd parts before us. We only shake the press off on the motorway. I ask my mother whether her former colleagues might have got wind of the arrival time from her? She used to be a reporter many years ago. She shakes her head. I can tell by her cheeks that she is clenching her teeth. I squint at Elly, who is sitting next to me on the back seat. She has taken her sunglasses off. I don't know what I am supposed to say. So I say I'm glad that you're back again. Elly looks at me, but I don't recognise her. She looks older than fifteen. Her skin is taut over her pointed chin. It is wrinkled around her eyes. Don't be scared, my mother said on the phone. She has had terrible experiences. They have changed her. The Elly I know has been extinguished. I

don't like it. The new Elly next to me looks tired and tense at the same time. One hand is resting on the door handle. As if she wants to jump out of the moving car. I stare silently out of the window on the other side.

My parents and I observe Elly like an animal at the zoo. An invisible pane of glass separates her from us. Elly remains deadened, turned in on herself. She doesn't tell us anything about her life in the past four years. Our parents know the story from the doctors. They suspect that Elly had been kept captive in a cell, without light, with very little nourishment or water, deliberate abuse. Perhaps there was more than one captor, perhaps she was passed around or sold. In any case she is severely traumatised. The assessor prescribes complete rest and recuperation. No loud noises, no physical contact, no pressure. I feel guilty for seeing her tormented. It's as if I had betrayed my sister with my thoughts, as if I'd brought her to it. But I didn't do anything. That's what my parents reproach themselves for: for not doing anything. I was still a child when my sister disappeared. My memory is unreliable. My mother and my father are happy that we have Elly back again.

I keep looking at my returned sister. Her thin hair, the parchment colour of her skin, the way she splays her little finger when she holds her fork. She moves around the edges of the rooms. The middle is uncomfortable for her. I guess she is afraid of feeling exposed there. She cuts corners so fine that her sleeve sometimes gets caught on the door handle. I tell her that I don't play tennis any more, or do athletics or trampolining any more. I don't mention judo. It doesn't feel

appropriate. I don't do any sport any more, apart from shopping. Without spending any money. That's also very strenuous, I claim. Elly nods. She is trying to find an American radio station on the internet. She refuses my help. Finally the sound of a drawling presenter in bubblegum-American, followed by a thumping pop song with a female singer whose voice keeps breaking. Elly listens to American college radio. I ask her how she knows the station. She shrugs her shoulders and says everyone knows it. I follow her gaze to the shelves on the wall. The two blue vases are standing there, presents from our grandparents. Elly points to them. Laurel and Hardy, she says, and laughs. One vase has a long neck, the other is spherical. I use the vases as hand puppets. Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who's the fairest of them all? I nudge Elly with the neck of the vase. She purses her mouth. That's so babyish, she says. But I don't back down. I repeat the words. Eventually she sighs, stop this nonsense. Before she would have tickled me into submission or declared that she was the fairest of them all, and we would have strutted around in front of the mirror for an imaginary casting. An electric sander screams into life in the garden next door. Our neighbour is bending over the window frames he has taken out. He is wearing a dust mask. The shavings fly up into the air. The draughts threaten to rip the papers from the pinboard. Elly asks me to shut the window. I briefly consider refusing, then stand up. The sander sounds quieter but doesn't fall silent. Elly is shivering. I tell her it will definitely be warmer tomorrow. I persuade her to come for a walk. She trudges alongside me with her head bowed. Before she practically used to bounce. She has hardly grown in the past four years, but her hands are old. There's not much more to see of her. The new Elly covers herself

up. Even at home she never takes off her hoodie. When mother creeps into her room at night to stuff the sweater in the washing machine, Elly wakes up immediately. Guiltily my mother puts the hoodie back. After that Elly doesn't even take it off at night any more.

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My younger daughter is back. I still can't really believe it, I tell my friend from the radio. She nods encouragingly and brings the microphone closer to my face. I clear my throat, swallow. The clock ticks. The corners of my mouth are cracked. Probably due to the smiling. What kind of feeling was it when you saw Elly again for the first time? My friend's voice sounds unctuous. It is dripping with compassion. I was scared, I say. My voice goes up at the end of the sentence. I'm almost asking a question. In actual fact I don't remember my feelings. I see Elly before me, as she enters the bare room. The way she gazes at the floor, hardly daring to look Hamid and me in the eyes. He squeezes my hand. I am rooted to the spot. Elly has changed completely. She slides along the wall like a shadow. Thin, pale, her hands shaking. I had never seen her so anxious before. But I knew: that's my child. I growl the sentence. My friend's eyes open wide. That's what she wanted to hear. I bet she is mentally making a note of this point for a cut in the recording. She bites her lips. Did you not hesitate even for a moment? No, I say, not for a moment. I didn't need a blood test to know. Quite the opposite, I was ashamed of myself for doubting during the years she had disappeared. For

believing she was dead. I regret that. She is alive. She is so incredibly resilient. I'm proud of her. She is fighting her way back into her life right now. Of course we are trying to help her. But it's not easy to put yourself in her place. The hardest thing for me is leaving her in peace. Obviously we're not going to throw a party for her. I'm clear on that. But finding the right tone of voice to wrench her out of the void when her gaze drifts off, that's not easy. My friend nods. She has children of her own. I can't convey to her quite how far removed my Elly is from them. After the interview I am completely exhausted. Back at home I open the windows and the door to the terrace. The wind blasts through the house. I knock on Elly's door and open it at the same time. Elly is sitting on the edge of the bed. It looks uncomfortable. As if she is expecting to be taken away any minute. I'm so shocked I can't get a word out. She is here. She is really here. We look at each other, and it's Elly who comes and nestles into me. I hesitate, then place my hand on her ribs. I can feel them even through the thick hoodie. Her breath goes in and out.

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Sometimes I try to remember how we were before. How my sister and I used to play, the way I would tell her who she was. Little Red Riding Hood, the kraken, Pluto the hellhound or Peter the Stork. The way she followed me everywhere, and only occasionally refused to play along. The way we threw the apples to the horses on the meadow, but neither of us ever admitted that we were too cowardly to offer

them on our outstretched hand. I was the big sister and even on holiday I told Elly what to do and what not to do. We built dens out of twigs and went to sleep in them. Our parents only found us after the sun had gone down. Back then they weren't concerned, just amused. They spent half the day dozing in the sun loungers in the garden. Our mother would flick through a magazine, our father stared into space. He liked that. Just being there. I think he was listening to the birds, the horses snorting, watching them chase away midges by swatting them with their tails or shaking their torso. In the afternoon he would get up and make limeade from sugar, soda water and lime. There was no shop. The village consisted of a single long strip of road with no asphalt, more like a sandy track with cobblestones in places. Prettily restored farmers' cottages with timber frames and chickens behind a fence. Beyond that nothing but forest. We rarely caught sight of the residents. We kept to ourselves. One time my sister and I found cockchafer larvae in the ground, thick white grubs. We dug them out and put them in a jamjar, screwed the lid on tight. Every day we looked at them. Then we opened the jar, because we were afraid the creatures might die. But when the cockchafers finally hatched, we weren't there. They flew away without us. The family we were back then doesn't exist any more. Even after Elly's return nothing will go back to the way it was before.

Back then Elly and I used to act out the Greek myths too. She was Zeus and I was Europa, who allows herself to be abducted by the father of the gods disguised in the form of a bull. Those stories are taboo now. They are all far too gruesome. My

parents turn the television off when the news comes on. They don't watch crime series any more. They get rid of everything which could remind Elly of her captivity. There are no keys in our house any more. All the doors stay open. We don't go to the zoo, because the animals there are penned in. We avoid petrol stations with missing posters. If my father catches sight of one, he keeps on driving. If Elly so much as coughs my parents rush her to the doctor. They insist on staying in the room during the examination.

Elly doesn't have to go to school yet. Our parents are looking after her at home. But it's open season now. The police would like to interview Elly. They want to investigate the criminals who abducted Elly. She shakes her head. We can see that she still feels threatened. Sometimes a sentence escapes her, an attempt at conversation. Her voice sounds strange, bruised. It takes a long time for her to thaw even slightly. Eventually she forces herself. Comes to join us at the table, on the sofa or the terrace. We show her photo albums and ask if she remembers. Do you remember when? In the theme park, when the dolphin pulled you along in a boat. When you forgot your bag on the first day of school. When you scratched the chicken pox until it bled. When we were all happy. Elly listens, sometimes she even asks questions. She asks whether Granny is still such a crosspatch, and whether Grandad is well. She asks what her friends are up to, what happened to the neighbour's cat. Finally our grandparents come for a visit too. Our grandfather immediately hugs Elly. She stands there stiffly and allows it to happen. He holds Elly's hand and talks about her birthday four years ago. Elly smiles behind her

sunglasses and listens to him attentively. Our grandmother stays in the background. She watches Elly carefully, but doesn't approach her. Eventually she shakes her hand formally. Our mother pulls her mother into the kitchen. I hear her hissing in there. Our Granny retaliates. She says, have you lost your minds? That's not your child. Our mother throws our grandparents out. Our Grandad is sad. Afterwards we play cards. Elly lets us win once each. Our father notices and admonishes her gently. Elly looks at him in horror and leaves the table. My sister always used to fight until the last card, the very last trick. She used to be mortally offended when I won. Our father repeats the litany that Elly has changed. Something doesn't feel right to me.

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