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English sample translation

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Liberation

My mother's side of the family comes from around the Ruhr River. We used to go there once or twice a year for about two weeks at a time. When a relative on my mother's side got married or died, we'd sometimes go up to the Ruhr three times a year.

We went by train until I was eight, after that by car. Our first car was rather old when my father bought it, and every time we went on a fairly long trip something on the car went kaput, so there was always a big to-do. Once we even had to be towed into the city where my relatives on my mother's side lived. And even more, my father often used to get lost. My mother, you see, couldn't read a map in the car. In the first place, she didn't understand a thing about maps, and furthermore, she couldn't read in the car because she'd get sick to her stomach right away. I'd be sick to my stomach in the car, too, especially in the back seat. And I always had to sit in the back, because if my mother did, she'd be a lot sicker than me. Sometimes my mother happened to get so sick in the front seat that my father had to stop, and then my mother would toss her cookies out one window and I would out the other.

Otherwise, I don't remember as much about our car trips as I do about our train trips, though they were a lot earlier. I remember that the train went along the Rhine for quite a while, and that I always looked forward to seeing the Lorelei Rock, and that once I saw, very clearly, a wondrously beautiful woman sitting on that rock and combing her hair. I always thought it very unlikely that the sailors actually did dive off their boats in droves just because somebody was singing up there. But I later came to understand that it wasn't just because of the singing.

When we went by car, we didn't go along the Rhine; at any rate, I can't remember a single thing about that. Just the Autobahn service areas where we'd make a stop and eat the whatever we'd brought with us.

When we went to my mother's home town for a visit, we'd stay at Aunt Ria and Uncle Walter's, my mother's brother, now deceased. He'd been engaged to another woman before he married my aunt. Mother told me that a long time ago. But

the other woman was from Hamburg, she said, and was a Protestant, but mother's family were all Catholics. He ended up not marrying her after all, mother said, because that would have made for a mixed marriage.

His second fiancée, the one my uncle really did marry, my Aunt Ria, was a Catholic, of course, but it's said she was very much the spendthrift and used to run up debts. Especially when she was a very young lady, it was said, she didn't pay her bills in the store but put it on credit, which met with the stern disapproval of my mother's family, and, by the way, of my father's as well.

Aunt Ria and Uncle Walter had three children: two sons, one older than me by a year and another by three years, and a daughter much older than me.

When I was thirteen, my aunt's two sons had a party room in the cellar of the housing development where all my relatives still live today. It was lined with cardboard egg containers and had an empty beer barrel for a table, and a record player. And an old sofa besides, and any number of old automobile seats. It was down there that I fell in love with Paul. Ali Langer was the one who was in love with me. But Ali Langer was a year younger than me and still had a baby face. My two cousins used to make fun of Ali Langer because he'd stand in front of my aunt and uncle's front door all day long, waiting for me.

Paul was two years older than me and had long hair. He had the longest hair of any boy I'd ever known. And he not only had long hair but long curls, too. Blond. Paul Heitchens, that was his full name, had a big mop of blond hair. And blue eyes. He was wearing bright blue corduroy pants when I met him, and a blue-and-green striped shirt. He had a really stubborn look about him. It was love at first sight.

I'd got my second Christian name from Elfriede, Aunt Ria and Uncle Walter's oldest daughter, and my parents held her up to me as a shining example for as long as I can remember. She always made disparaging remarks about my cousins' party cellar. She called it a "smokehouse" because the place was always smoky. (There was one tiny window, but we always kept it shut because we played the music so loud.)

Elfriede taught religion in school before becoming a municipal politician for the Christian Democrats. She wound up as secretary to the bishop of the city where my family on my mother's side lives. The bishop was also the president of a missionary society, and my cousin often went to South America and Africa on the

society's behalf. She always chose to wear skirts and white blouses. She never married, never had a boyfriend. Elfriede would often try to draw me in to having a discussion. About religion, for instance, and later on it was politics. But the simple fact was that I was more interested in my cousins' party cellar.

When I came back from a dance one evening, and Paul hadn't had one single dance with me but danced all the time with Conny instead – she was two years older than me and had big brown eyes and wore black net stockings – and when I was sitting in the party cellar and trying not to bawl, and my cousins were trying to cheer me up with talk of Ali Langer, who'd been standing at the front door for hours, they said, but I just knew that Ali Langer wouldn't be able to cheer me up, and when Paul finally came to the party cellar after taking Conny home and sat down beside me on the old sofa and put his arm around my shoulder, and when that very minute my parents happened to come home with a bunch of relatives, and when they all came down to the party cellar because they'd had something to drink – something they'd never have done otherwise – and had just come to have a look-see, as they put it, while standing around giggling – we weren't to let them bother us, they said – and when my mother asked Paul if he was Old Man Heitchens's son, and Paul said, "Yes," and when my cousin Elfriede took one look at Paul and said that Paul was enough to make you throw up but that his parents were awfully nice – then I knew in a flash that Cousin Elfriede would sell her own grandmother. Even back then I swore I'd never say another word to her, ever again.

Two years later, the last time I visited my relatives from the Ruhr, I saw Paul again. He still had long, blond hair and blue eyes, and he still had a stubborn look about him. But he'd gotten engaged, right out of the blue. In fact, a lot of things were different. The party cellar was air-conditioned, and there was wicker furniture now, instead of the car seats. Even Ali Langer had changed. He didn't have a baby face anymore and – you notice this sort of thing right away – he had on the very same knee-high boots Paul did. Conny, who wasn't going with Paul anymore and was now a regular in the party cellar, was snuggling up to one of my cousins.

All the boys were wearing high boots, as it so happened, and that year they were definitely in, apparently. The girls were wearing blue net stockings. Only Elfriede was the same as always. She'd never really understood that I didn't like her

and came right over to say hello. She'd just become the bishop's secretary and tried to talk to me about liberation theology; but I didn't utter a single word.

Then I found out later that she's supposed to have played a major role in seeing that the mission money was not passed on to any missionaries and bishops who practiced liberation theology. As a matter of fact, she's even supposed to have said herself that rather than having the collection money go to people like them, it would not be given to anybody. Word is, that amounts in the millions have been kicking around in Swiss bank accounts for years, while the blacks in Africa have been starving.

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