

## About hiking and storytelling

**1** My moist little hand in her firm big one. I have to keep walking to keep up with her. "Grandma, not so fast."

Immediately she slows down, smiling down at me. "Soon you'll be as fast as me. And one day you'll have to outrun me and wait for me."

I can't imagine that. But I don't have time to think about it, because Grandma points to a house in this village that is strange to me. A great-grand cousin of hers had lived there until recently. And he had been an actor in Hollywood. "In some American movie, you know?" Her tone tells me to be impressed. So I am. We have famous relatives.

"Grandma, the story. Please tell me the story."

"What story?" she asks, but I can tell by the laughter in her voice that she knows exactly which one I mean.

Still, I explain for good measure, "The one about the milkman."

She squeezes my hand and tells me - about the poor girl who was sent to a faraway land to serve as a parlor maid in a huge house by the sea. She felt lonely because she didn't know the language of that country. She learned it only by listening and trying. Sometimes she sat on the beach and cried tears of homesickness into the sand. But there were also things that the young woman liked. For example, there was enough to eat in this country. She hardly dared to write home about the delicacies. For although her relatives were farmers throughout, their meals were much more meagre than those of their servants. Especially at Christmas, her eyes glazed over. Huge turkeys stuffed with chestnuts, even for the servants, followed by a kind of pudding made of dried fruit and much more bent the tables. She liked the fact that every Saturday after tea time the staff were among themselves, dancing and having fun to American music that was frowned upon at home. And after a year, she especially liked that she was responsible for fetching the milk bottles in the morning. For they were brought in by a young man who not only had lightning blue eyes and straw-blond hair, but also a smile that rivalled the sun's rays. After a month, she learned his name: Harold. After another month, he rolled a cigarette and told her about his family in the north-east of the country. After half a year, he invited her to the Saturday dance in the village.

Grandma stops the narrative, as she does every time well before the finale, and knocks on my great-grandmother's door, whose homestead is the destination of our three-kilometer walk.

**2** My grandma hangs up the tea towel and looks at me. I nod. We slip into our sandals; she packs a bag and a pair of scissors. Without consulting each other, we take the path to the Traisen. As we walk

briskly along, I tell her about my sorrow that my best friend has chosen the other school branch. In the autumn I will only see her on the school bus rides and no longer in the classroom.

"But also, in the afternoons and at weekends. You'll always be friends, you'll see."

I want to believe her. We reach the river. The meadows are in full bloom. Plant by plant, she enlightens me about the aches and pains they can be used for. She lovingly caresses a chicory. "We used to make coffee from one of her relatives." Today, however, her desire is for St. John's wort. Pickled in oil and ripened in the sun, it makes a remedy for sunburn. And while she cuts and cuts, she tells the story of the man who happily ran his mill with his wife and three children until a lightning strike took his wife. He became infinitely sad, cared for nothing, not even for his children, who soon had to search for berries in the forest because they got very fat bellies from hunger. But in winter they found nothing, and so they knelt down and begged the Virgin Mary for help. Then a woman came along the way, colorfully dressed and with her mother's eyes, and she showed them an herb that suddenly blossomed in the middle of the snow. She gave them instructions on what to do with it, which the children dutifully followed. They gave the father a drink from the brew and he was able to laugh and work again. They lived happily ever after.

I don't know the fairy tale, I'm sure she made it up at that moment. I find it kind of embarrassing to be told fairy tales at my age. I love it.

**3** My grandma points to the ceiling with a smile. Once again, we marvel at the huge crystal chandelier. Its stones sparkle in all the colors of the rainbow, now dimming to orange, finally becoming white specks irradiated by the stage light. I am immersed in the story of the prince and the swan girl. On the one-and-a-half-hour bus ride home, I'm sad that the wonderful evening has once again passed far too quickly; it won't be until half a year from now that I'll be going back to the capital for another visit to the theatre. And I am infinitely grateful to my grandma for that. Because only two days ago I overheard an argument between her and grandpa. He reproached her that this subscription costs too much. But grandma remained stubborn. It was her own hard-earned money and it was good for the child. Grandpa didn't want to contradict that.

She taps her thighs with her fingers. I recognize the melody of the dance of the little swans. I imitate grandma. We smile and sway. And suddenly I am very small again, lying in bed with her, and she is playing with her toes, which she can move one by one.

I press myself against her, she puts her arm around me, asks in a whisper so the other passengers won't hear: "What flowers do you have in your wedding dress?"

"Marguerites."

"*I like it, the month of June in the year - with its lush meadows, from whose stalks the white blossoms of marguerites,*" she quotes a poem of hers.

"And have you found people now who like stories too?"

"Yes, I'm founding a club. A circle for people who like to write."

I am proud of my grandma.

**4** My grandma announces me and smiles at me. I am paralyzed. And I tell myself that it's nothing different from reading out a school essay, which I've done countless times before.

But of course, it's something different, because I'm supposed to recite a poem, I wrote myself to her literary circle. Everyone here writes, and has been writing for a long time. They will criticize me to the ground, even though that is not usual, but with me they will. I study every single face of the enemy.

And while I open my folder, while I seem to be sitting down in the right position, I suddenly see Romy Schneider's smile in front of me. I adore this woman, and now she is dead. I haven't told anyone yet, but I want to follow in her footsteps. I'm going to be an actress. I've been quite sure of this ever since I saw *Kabale und Liebe* at the Volkstheater in Vienna recently. Final scene, across the stage a mirror taller than a man, parallel to it a candle every twenty centimeters, she all in white, he in black trousers and a white shirt. That's what I want. I want to live and tell stories.

Today and here is the beginning. I take a breath. *The shells on the stone, the windblown snowflakes on my face, what do I want?* I fall into the flow of words, when I end, I am hot and cold at the same time.

Grandma smiles proudly at me.

**5** That's not my grandma lying in there. The coffin is much too small, at best made for a dwarf. My grandma was definitely much taller. The plethora of people distracts me from the mystery. Half the town seems to have come to the funeral. Countless shaking hands and wailing mouths wrap me in thick condolences. My grandmother was a member of the church choir all her life, yet the priest's words are strangely smooth, they seem abstruse to me. The funeral march through town catapults me into a Fellini film, the hole in the graveyard into a Wes Craven horror story.

I decide that none of this concerns me. My grandma is not dead, cannot be dead. It was only in the summer of a year ago that we went on a big trip together with my mother. The Dreimäderlhaus got laughing cramps when it failed with the lobster tongs and when it kicked a dog pile at sunrise. It enjoyed the Atlantic and indulged in crêpes.

And since then, I've also known that the story of the milkman has no ending at all, because it was prevented by Hitler's politics. My grandmother had to leave the villa on the Channel Island as a foreigner before it came to more than a shy kiss. But you and I could just give this story a happy ending! We could march down the river once more and make up fairy tales. It can't be over. My grandma doesn't want to go, I know that.

*Live,  
just be able to live again!  
Consciously  
feel existence  
with every pulse beat.  
To perceive the world again,  
to feel the happiness of being human again,  
and to bow in humility before the Lord.*

This is what she wrote only seven months ago, no longer recited herself, but published in the gleanings of her beloved Literary Circle.

The circle now wants to commemorate her with an evening of readings. It is a matter of honor for me to take part, although I feel nothing. The day has been one bad film so far. I stare into the candle, at the photo of her standing next to it. And without warning I hear her voice reciting a poem. It comes from the tape. She drones in my head. She dribbles down on me, my small hand in grandma's big one. I will never know now if once I really walk faster than she does.

I collapse.

**Epilogue.** I open the opera ball and want to tell my grandmother that I will now dance under the big crystal chandelier. But she has been dead for four months. My mother makes me a hairstyle. She discovers a white strand in my hair. It is four centimeters long.

I smile at my grandmother.