



**Martin Kordić**

**Years with Martha**

288 pages

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**A tender and compelling novel about power relationships and the question of balance in the world**

The story begins in the late nineties in western Germany. Željko, who everyone calls Jimmy, is fifteen when he falls in love with Martha. She is a professor in Heidelberg, and he lives with his parents and siblings in a two-room flat in Ludwigshafen. Martha has what Željko most longs for: books, education, and sovereignty. He visits a theatre for the first time with her, and she speaks with him as no one else does. Željko's world expands through Martha's love. But what world is he entering, and who is he leaving behind in the process? Where are the boundaries between desire and exploitation?

*'Years with Martha is a great love, migration and coming-of-age novel. Full of surprises, poetically charged and of unobtrusive complexity. [...] It is one of the great novels of the season.'* *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, Martin Oehlen*

**Martin Kordić** was born in 1983 in Celle and grew up in Mannheim. He studied in Hildesheim and Zagreb. He has worked as an editor in publishing houses for over ten years, initially in Cologne and currently in Munich. He received the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize as well as the Alfred Döblin Medal for his first novel *My Idea of Happiness* (Hanser 2014). *Years with Martha* is his second novel.

## Sample translation by Bradley Schmidt

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### 1

**The first time I saw Martha** was on my mother's fortieth birthday. At the time, I didn't know that her name was Martha – I only knew her as "Frau Gruber".

The birthday party was to take place down in the fellowship hall, which was the basement in the building in the back courtyard. The members of the Peace Center met there several times a week for sewing classes or Bible study. Although it wasn't recognizable from the outside, the building belonged to a church congregation or a Christian association – I don't know what exactly. It was somewhere among many other brown buildings in Ludwigshafen.

My father was the janitor here and my mother was the cleaner. In return for the work, we were given a two-bedroom apartment in the front building, where we could live for free: my father, my mother, my big brother Kuno, my little sister Ljuba and our parakeet Lothar, who was named that because Lothar Matthäus was the best soccer player.

My father's main job was in construction, not as a janitor. He was always away at a job. Together with my mother, he made enough money to be able to pay for me to go on class trips, but I only saw my father on the weekends. When his body was too broken for the construction site and he finally sat around in sweat pants in our living room watching television, I had moved out long before and lived far away in another city. But that's a story I want to tell later.

At the time I thought this was all very normal and so the day my mother celebrated her fortieth birthday, my father was in a mobile crane in Frankfurt, moving formwork for the platforms for the airport's new long-distance train station. My brother was doing an apprenticeship as an industrial mechanic at BASF, and would otherwise sit around with a cousin in his car repair shop or play soccer for the FC Croatia Vorderpfalz. My sister was still very young. She was either at school in second grade or helped my mother with cleaning or cooking. So when something had to be fixed during the week in the rooms belonging to the Peace Center, I usually filled in as the janitor. Just like on the day that Martha and I met for the first time.

After I got out of school, I picked Ljuba up from after school care and then helped my mother set up the fellowship hall. We pushed three tables together, draped plastic table clothes over them and spread small real crochet tablecloths over that. My sister cleaned the basement toilet.

I fetched silver-colored serving trays with ham and cheese from our apartment and carried a heavy tray with home-made sweets into the fellowship hall. My mother and sister had spent two days preparing everything together.

"And then the cake!" She called over to me.

And that was the first unusual moment on this day. Because a cake meant that someone was invited who must be a more refined person than we were, than my mother, my aunts, my cousins, and the women from the cleaning crew from the hospital.

"For Frau Gruber," my mother said. "The one from Heidelberg."

My mother had purchased a Black Forest cake that I was now to pull out of the fridge and arrange. My mother had spent days baking complicated cookies and other sweets with my sister, but was afraid that Frau Gruber from Heidelberg might consider our food inferior. So that's why she bought a frozen cake from the supermarket. My mother wanted to please Frau Gruber from Heidelberg. My mother wanted for Frau Gruber from Heidelberg to think that we were good foreigners. My mother was Frau Gruber's cleaning lady.

Without even knowing Frau Gruber, I knew exactly that she would immediately go for our ham and our breskvice, while I'd still be eating the half-frozen Black Forest cake to make my mother happy.

"Isn't Heidelberg closer to the Odenwald?" I asked.

But when I realized the visible fear in my mother's eyes that she would make a fundamental mistake, not understanding something about this country after over twenty years, I said, "No problem, Mom, I love Black Forest cake."

Shortly after the first women had arrived at the party, I was called to the building in the back yard. The basement toilet wasn't flushing, and I was supposed to repair it. Because I had no clue about plumbing, but wanted to seem manly, I fetched the tool box. I banged the tank with the pipe wrench, then a couple times against pipes under the toilet, so that all the women heard that I was working, and then I decided to lock the toilet for the party.

"There's something wrong with the sealing ring," I said, because that was a word I'd picked up from my cousin who worked in plumbing and heating.

I locked the door, pocketed the key, and went back into our apartment in the front house. I pushed up the little latch on the door so that everyone didn't have to ring the bell. So one after another, the women who had to go to the bathroom over the course of the afternoon went into our apartment, all of my aunts and cousins, several co-workers from the cleaning crew in the hospital, and finally Frau Gruber as well.

I recognized her immediately.

Frau Gruber had real blond hair. At first I thought she had white hair. But then I realized that it was a mixture of blond and white hair, from which I deduced that they couldn't be dyed. As if emphasizing the veracity of her color, Frau Gruber had freckles in the middle of her face that I really liked.

Frau Gruber wore a light blue pair of jeans and a worn out turtle neck, although it was already quite warm. Maybe Frau Gruber felt like my mom before the birthday party. Our Black Forest cake was her worn out turtle neck.

"Hello," I said. Frau Gruber was frightened. She'd been looking around in our hallway and hadn't noticed that I was sitting on my bed and reading the newspaper just a couple yards away behind the curtain at the end of the hallway. The curtain was only halfway closed and the area behind that was my bedroom.

"Hello," Frau Gruber said. "I'm looking for the restroom."

"Right over there," I said, and pointed at the door in front of my bed.

Frau Gruber walk towards me. She stopped in front of me and waved at me.

I waved back.

Then Frau Gruber went past me to the restroom and I looked at her behind.

Nothing happened for a long while. I continued reading in my newspaper and wrote down words that sounded like education and intelligence onto small cardboard cards, words that I didn't know at the time. When I was considering which newspaper I should take from my stack next and ultimately reached for the weekly with the chess problem in the column, I realized that Frau Gruber still hadn't come out of the bathroom. I also hadn't heard any noise.

"Is everything ok, Frau Gruber?"

No answer.

"Frau Gruber?"

"Yes."

"Is everything ok?"

"Could you maybe go away?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't go when you're sitting on your bed in front of the door."

I jumped up and walked down the hallway, but then I turned around one more time.

"My name is Jimmy!" I called, even though that wasn't true. "I'm in the kitchen!"

Only two minutes later, Frau Gruber was also in the kitchen. I was sitting on the bench in the corner, she was standing in front of the microwave. Frau Gruber had a red face and apologized to me. I had a red face and apologized to her.

Many years later, we would still tell each other the story of how we met again and again and always had to laugh. However, it was unbelievable embarrassing for both of us at the time. For Martha because she felt stiff and square, and for me because I'd put Frau Gruber from Heidelberg in such an unpleasant situation.

Before that day, I had simply never met anyone who had a problem peeing right next to my bed.

It was only many years later that I would become aware of what made the day I'm about to tell you about so special. At the time, it was a completely normal Saturday during summer vacation, which I was spending at home with my little sister. My father had gone off with Kruno to visit used car markets, and my mother was cleaning in the hospital. Ljuba was sitting on the floor in her pajamas in front of the TV watching cartoons when I woke up and went out of hallway into the living room. First I opened the bird cage and topped off Lothar's bird food, then I went into the kitchen and made two big bowls of Honey Smacks for Ljuba and me.

"Hey!", I shouted two or three times, "hey!", until my sister heard me, jumped up, and came over to me because she finally remembered that she hadn't had breakfast yet.

We were lying on the couch together, eating Honey Smacks and watching TV. I could have grabbed the remote and changed the channel. But because my big brother always used to do that with me, which was why I already knew Knight Rider, Magnum, and The A-Team, I just watched the cartoons at the age of fifteen that I hadn't been allowed to watch as a small kid. I liked it when Ljuba was able to watch her shows, was amused by something or afraid of something, and then crawled into my arms.

At some point my little sister usually wanted for me to play a video cassette, which she couldn't do herself. That Saturday – I can remember it exactly – we watched Richie Rich, the story of a very rich boy who has everything a child could want: his own amusement park in his backyard, his own McDonald's in his house, and all the toys in the world. But no friends.

We'd already seen the movie a couple times. It's a funny movie, and I think it's the last one with Macaulay Culkin as a child actor. The boy he played had to find friends for the first time in his life because that's the only way he can beat the bad man and defend the millions he expects to inherit from his family.

"You know what I'm going to make now?" I said to Ljuba during the movie.

"Hmm?"

"Coffee."

"You're crazy," Ljuba said and kept on watching the TV, only noticing me again when I held my coffee cup up to her face.

"Do you want to try it?"

Ljuba took a sip, made a face, and even to this day I've never drunk a coffee as strong as that one.

"You know what we're going to do after the movie?"

"We're going over to the Peace Center and cleaning it?"

"Right," I said. "But do you know what we're going to do after that?"

Ljuba's eyes started to light up even as I was asking the question.

"We're giving a secret concert?"

"Right."

"With a fan and gauze bandages?"

"With everything we have."

I stood there in the middle of the room, my gaze frozen to the floor, my entire body tense. The Peace Center's fellowship hall lay before me in the silence and darkness. I counted out the rhythm that was about to break over us, snapped my fingers, and following this command, Ljuba turned on the floodlight lying on the floor that now cut through the darkness, and shined at me head-on. I knew there was now a shadow of my body, magnified several times, behind me on the wall, and because I was only wearing bike shorts and an undershirt, it must have looked like the silhouette of a naked human, now cast against the wall and over the large crucifix. I snapped again. Ljuba started the CD.

The song began, as if an enormous gear was very slowly being put into motion, as if railroad worker were hitting the tracks harder and harder with their tools. I moved to the song like a robot where someone had just pressed the start button for the first time and it now needed exactly a few measures to free itself from its paralysis, resulting in its kicking through an invisible shell and an angry upper body turn.

The drums kicked in.

With every boom, the feeling of the past weeks hammered harder and harder into my body. I responded to the first movements with my right shoulder, then added the left one: one, two, three, four. Then the voice of Michael Jackson rang out, whispered with tension: "The way she came into the place I knew right then and there, there was something different about this girl." I slowly moved my hand along my bike shorts, first right, "The girl was bad," then left, "the girl was dangerous." I cast my right arm to the side, extending my index finger toward the ceiling. I marched through the fellowship hall like a soldier, head up, head down, the chorus started in, and now the energy coursed through my body so much that I ran back and forth from right to left. Every time I stopped right in front of the wall, as if a whole sold-out stadium was spreading out in front of me, I wanted to reach the final row with this same energy, my left hand behind my back, upper body down, my right hand snapping away, upper body up. I jumped around as if I were dancing around a fire, and calling to the gods, one, two, three, four. The breathing pushed my arm back and forth. I moved several meters toward my sister with the same sidestep, rocking my head, and my sister, who was also wearing bike shorts and an undershirt, started to make the same motion with

her upper body as me. I took Ljuba by the hand, she stood next to me in the middle of the song, then there was just breathing, no more words, simply “hooouh, hooouh,” always on the one and the three, “hooouh, hooouh.” My sister and I danced together and next to each other, illuminated from behind, “hooouh, hooouh,” our silhouettes meters high on the wall behind the altar, always taking a step forward with every breath, “hooouh, hooouh.” I demonstrated the dance moves and my little sister followed me. I danced twelve songs, and Ljuba danced twelve songs with me.

We had started the concerts together because we’d only been allowed to turn on the heater in our apartment in the evening. Heating was expensive, so we were freezing during the day. Sometimes we could see our own breath while watching cartoons and acted as if we were smoking cigarettes.

So when Ljuba and I clean the fellowship hall together on the weekends because our mother was cleaning somewhere else, we simply cranked up the peace people’s heater up and pressed our bodies against it until it got too hot for us. After cleaning, we stayed there, and because it was so nice and warm, and because there was a stereo standing there, we listened to my CDs, and because there was so much space, we started dancing.

We were always afraid that everything would come to light because of our concerts. That it’d get out that we were stealing heating, that it’d come out that we were using the stereo system, that they’d find out that it wasn’t our mother who was cleaning, because she was cleaning somewhere else, that then it’d get out that my father wasn’t even the janitor, because he had to work at a construction site somewhere else, that child protective services would put my little sister and me in an orphanage because of all these violations, and that the rest of us would get kicked out of the two room apartment.

There wasn’t a browner, more run-down building in all of the city that our family could have moved into with Lothar.

Our secret concerts had become more daring from week to week, we were more and more confident. We used a fan as a wind machine, a LED floor lamp as a spotlight, and the mask and bandages my mother had stolen for us while cleaning in the hospital.

Over the months, we had even managed to slide on our knees simultaneously in some songs; left leg up, right leg up, upper body moving to the same rhythm.

In the breaks Ljuba jumped for joy and clapped her hands. She was completely crazy about dancing. It almost seemed as if she’d been forbidden from dancing all her life and could now finally catch up with everything she’d always wanted to dance. She was unstoppable. I always had to lead her to show how she could use



her body more consciously, how to dominate the music with her body and not the other way around. In my hands I felt the power Ljuba carried inside herself, which threatened to uncontrollably burst out of her at any moment, and which seemed to have no relationship to her little second-grade body. She was truly tiny.

The highlight of every secret concert was the song that played during the credits of Free Willy. A slow song. Ljuba and I both loved the movie, and we both loved the song, so it was always the grand finale. We had rehearsed everything to perfection, even that Saturday during the long vacation, and everything worked out exactly the way we had seen it performed in a concert video.

A golden belt belonging to my mother hung loosely over the black bike shorts. In addition, I now wore one of my father's white shirts, open, the sleeves rolled up, undershirt below that, and my right hand wrapped in a bandage.

The song starts with dramatic singing by an adult choir, after more than a minute transitioning to a child's angelic voice singing a solo. Ljuba was this child, moving her mouth so that it looked as if she were singing. Then a piano starts and sets a rhythm that is immediately picked up by an entire gospel choir. Ljuba was also this gospel choir.

Then there's only a drum, the piano and a rattle accompanying the voice of Michael Jackson. I was Michael Jackson and sang almost eight minutes about never-ending friendship, touching my cheek with my right hand, as if I were holding onto a headset.

The song built up again, becoming louder and louder, more and more powerful, entirely as if someone had lit a fire that becomes always larger and finally unstoppable.

With the concert we'd seen on TV, at the beginning of the song Michael Jackson is standing in front of a car sprayed with graffiti, surrounded by children in tatters. In the background, several choirs are spread out across risers, looking like Egyptians from the time of the pharaohs.

We also tried to convey this mood to the Peace Center's fellowship hall, and that's why Ljuba was wrapped in a cleaning rag and held her hands pressed together in front of her upper body as if she were praying.

Toward the end, the song becomes as quiet as it was at the beginning. Two children bring a globe and a large book onto the stage. A little boy is led to Michael Jackson. He's a sign language interpreter. This boy was Ljuba, who was now standing right in front of me. Michael Jackson is no longer singing, he is speaking against a tapestry of sound that has gone quiet. His voice repeatedly breaks, he has to pull

himself together. The boy translates everything that Michael Jackson says into sign language.

Ljuba was now making these movements with her hands in front of me, which the boy is also making in the concert. An angel slowly descends from the stage's sky. While Michael Jackson is speaking his final words and a tear is running down his face, he is embraced from behind by an angel, completely disappearing in its wings.

Now I was the angel, and I wrapped myself around my sister. We remained standing this way for a couple seconds after the song ended.

It was completely silent. The fellowship hall lay before us in silence as if the final words of humanity had just been spoken there.

I noticed that Ljuba was breathing unevenly. My little sister was crying. She cried softly into the rag she was wrapped in.

Then she broke away from my embrace, turned to me and looked at me with moist eyes.

"Please never go away," she said.

I hardly understood her.

And after a while she said again, "please never go away."

To this day, I don't know why my sister suddenly felt so greatly the sorrow of parting and why I couldn't think of anything else to say in that moment.

"No one can break Michael Jackson."

Now Ljuba was crying and laughing at the same time. It was so contagious that I also had to laugh. I stroked my thumb over her cheek, hot and wet. We hugged and pressed against each other so hard it hurt.

5

The first time I suspected that Frau Gruber might feel the same way about me as I did about her was when a drying facility at the edge of our neighborhood exploded and Frau Gruber burped her name – although the two things are completely unrelated.

Until that point, chemical accidents had mainly been of interest to me because they had taught me what was being produced in our neighborhood's factories.

The drying facility that exploded was a manufacturing plant for ironing starch. Sometimes it seemed to me like Ludwigshafen produced everything imaginable – or, to put it differently, everything unimaginable: packaging adhesives, baby diapers, cassette tapes, oil field chemicals, dog food, industrial varnishes, washing detergents.

I only understood much later the place where I grew up, that it was the largest chemical site in the world. At the time, it was only important not to inhale any poison.

When the phone rang, I was sitting under a clip-on lamp on my bed in the hallway, reading a two-year-old issue of *Psychology Today* and waiting for the washing machine to finish. It was just before midnight, and electricity was cheaper after ten. My mother and Ljuba slept next door to the marital bed, my brother slept in the living room, my father in Frankfurt in a construction site trailer.

I only had to stretch a little because the telephone was in my hallway and I was able to fish the receiver into bed with me.

"Hello?"

"Hello ... This is Gruber, Martha Gruber."

There was a long pause because, on the one hand I was very pleased to hear Frau Gruber's voice so late in the evening. On the other hand, I was so surprised that I didn't know what to say at all.

"Should I wake my mother?"

I was getting annoyed with myself even as I was saying it.

"Yeah, no, I ... On the radio they were just saying that there's an incident near your ..."

"Yes?"

"Didn't they announce anything?"

"We're all asleep ..."

That very second, in fact, I could see flashing blue lights shining in from the outside for the first time, and I could now hear the announcements from the Bahnhofstrasse.

"Yeah, they're coming now," I said and stood up to take a look into the living room. "Please wait a second."

Kruno was lying on the sofa, snoring. Lothar was fluttering around nervously on the floor of the cage. The window was tilted open, so I quickly closed it. I checked in on the parakeet, but everything seemed to be okay with him. The water dispenser was filled, and enough food was in the bowl. I poked Lothar with my finger, and the brief touch calmed him.

Then I went into the bedroom shared by my mother and little sister. They were holding each other, asleep. Here the window was tilted open as well, and I closed it.

"I'm back now."

"What happened."

"I just closed the windows."

"Good."

"Move into enclosed spaces. Close windows and doors. Turn off ventilation systems. Move into enclosed spaces. Close windows and doors. Turn off ..."

The car drove past our building, the announcement becoming quieter again.

"... Alright, now."

"Yes."

"We're all doing fine."

"Very good."

"That's just BASF, it happens sometimes."

"I can imagine."

"Yes?"

Frau Gruber laughed on the other end, so I laughed too.

"I'm sorry that I called so late because of it," she said. "I just wanted to hear if you were ok ..." there was a lull, and the longer it lasted, the louder my heart beat. "... and your family."

"We're all fine," I said immediately. "Thank you for calling, Frau Gruber."

I could hear Lothar fluttering in his cage, and then Frau Gruber and I didn't say anything for a long time. All we could hear was ourselves in the nocturnal silence, and the washing machine next to my bed on the spin cycle. I could hear into the room Frau Gruber was staying in, and I could hear her breathing.

"Frau Gruber, what are you doing now?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"I'm reading. And you?"

"Me, too."

"Good."

"Yeah."

"So then I'll see you again tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Sleep well."

"You too, Frau Gruber."

"Good night."

"Good night."

In the driveway to the Grubers' estate, I knelt on the ground and scraped away the moss between the flagstones with a crack weeder. It was a back-breaking task, but I didn't mind. Over the past few weeks, I had built up some muscles on my upper body from working for Frau Gruber, and my facial hair had grown fuller. Although I wouldn't be able to grow a mustache for quite some time, I was proud of the fuzz. There was even hair growing on my chest and shoulders now, but I shaved it off.

It was the day after the explosion at the drying facility and the day before Edita was supposed to fly away with her father for a week of vacation.

Frau Gruber was busy taking care of some last-minute purchases for her daughter. This meant that in addition to my work, I had to keep an eye on Edita, who was running around on the street with her friend.

I saw the two girls ringing the doorbell a couple houses over. Someone opened the door and the two of them said something. Then the woman disappeared into the house and handed them two glasses of water.

However, I only realized something was off with the kids when they rang the bell at another villa shortly later. Once again, a woman came to the door, and she also disappeared into the house, only to quickly return to the door. Now the woman gave the girls two slices of bread. I could hear how the children politely thanked her and saw that they immediately took wild bites, as if they hadn't had anything to eat for weeks.

I stood up and motioned for the girls to come over to me. They actually came.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Edita said.

"People here want their peace and quiet. Why are you ringing doorbells everywhere?"

"Yeah," the other girl said.

"What do you mean, 'yeah'?" I asked.

"We're playing poor children."

Now I also saw that they were barefoot and had even smeared their faces with some of the moss I'd scraped away.

"We're begging."

"Poor children don't beg," I said.

"But we're playing poor children."

"Then you're playing it wrong."

I went into the living room and the two girls scurried behind me. I stopped in front of the sectional sofa in the corner. Edita and her friend also stopped and looked at me.

"Take a seat."

The girls obediently sat down next to each other on the love seat.

"Everyone on their own cushion and feet on the table."

The kids were happy, lounging on the sofa and placing their small, dirty feet on the glass table in the middle. Then I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

"We're not allowed to watch television."

"But you have to," I said.

I tossed Edita the remote, which she carefully turned around in her hand.

"And now," I said, "you need something decent to drink."

I went to my backpack in the hallway and rummaged around in it. The girls peeked out from behind the sofa to see what I was doing.

"For watching TV!" I called out. "And Edita, you'll need to flip through the channels, turn the teletext on and off, a few channels forward, a few back – see what's on."

I could hear Edita actually switching from one channel to the next and the girls giggling away.

I returned to the living room with a bottle of off-brand cola.

"We're not allowed to drink that," Edita said. "Besides, you already drank out of the bottle."

"We'll drink from this bottle. Because then we don't have to wash any glasses. We don't have a dishwasher, either."

"I see," the Edita's friend said, and stretched out a hand.

I gave her the bottle and she took a sip without wiping the rim, then handed the Coke to Edita.

"You know what's missing?"

"Huh?" The girls said. I didn't know if they were playing their role, or if they were pulling my leg.

"Chips."

"They're in the kitchen above the wine fridge," Edita said. "But I can't reach them."

They were all on board now.

I went into the kitchen, opened the candy cabinet, and found teddy bear-shaped chips inside. I looked for a large bowl, and even found ketchup in a small glass bottle in the fridge. Having collected everything, I sat down with the kids in the living room. I dumped the whole bag of chips into the bowl and dumped some ketchup on top.

The three of us were lounging around on the sofa, munching on teddy bears and drinking Coke. Then I taught the girls how to swallow carbonation and burb on command. We all tried to burp out our names – Edita only managed "E-D," which was alright for starters.

At some point we were so exhausted from all the eating, drinking, goofing around and watching TV that we all dozed off for a while. We even fell into a deep sleep.

I only awoke when someone started flipping through the channels. It was Frau Gruber. She was sitting at the end of the sofa where I was lying, my feet on her lap. Frau Gruber had placed the bowl with the bear chips on my legs, and kept grabbing a few and dipping them in the ketchup.

"Sorry," I murmured, and sat up.

Edita and the visitor were still asleep.

"Don't worry," Frau Gruber said and kept on watching the TV. "Everything's ok."

I picked up the Coke from the floor next to me and held the bottle out for Frau Gruber.

"Can you burp your name?"

Now she looked at me.

"First name is enough," I said.

Frau Gruber took the bottle.

Frau Gruber drank.

Frau Gruber took in a deep sip of carbonation.

The question on my mind during that time was not if, but when we would kiss for the first time, and in the end we chose the most romantic moment available, knowing that if we didn't kiss then, we would never kiss.

However, the week that Frau Gruber and I were alone at her estate was initially defined by an unexpected distance, as if a bridge between us had been lost in the absence of Frau Gruber's daughter. It seemed as if neither of us could now find the courage to jump into the water and swim toward each other.

It was Frau Gruber who took the first step at the end of the week when she followed me into their personal library and offered me some plum brandy.

The Grubers' library impressed me. There were book shelves stretching from floor to ceiling, covering two walls. Photographs hung on another wall, paintings leaned against it, and there was a reading chair in front of these, a chess set, a music stand, and a globe.

There were only two books at our house: the Bible and Günter Wallraff's working-class exposé, *The Lowest of the Low*. Above the corner bench in our kitchen hung da Vinci's *Last Supper*, with a huge rosary stretched around its gold frame. In the hallway, my father had hung an aerial photograph of the large construction site at the Frankfurt Airport, which had been handed out as a Christmas present to all the operators of construction machines. My father was very proud of it and had the photo framed.

Here was the difference.

Here, in the Grubers' library.

Not in the house.

Not in the pool.

Not in the garden.

Not in a Black Forest cake.

It was this room.

It was access to this room.

Regardless of how many jobs my parents would have – here I saw everything I would never be able to get from them. Here in this room, I thought at the time, lay hidden what had to be the precondition for being a smart person.

I hoped that I could learn something just by standing around in the library, that something from the special spirit of the room would permeate me and help me. I also liked the strange photos the Grubers had hung randomly on one wall. I was



standing in front of this wall of pictures when Frau Gruber appeared next to me with two glasses of plum brandy and started to stare at the wall as well.

"Is that you?" I asked and pointed to a black and white photograph showing a little girl on a sailing dinghy. Sitting toward the back, she held the tiller in her hand, her gaze focused upward toward the sky and the position of the sail. The girl was seven or eight years old.

"That's me," Frau Gruber said. "When I was a child, I was always sent to my grandparents on Lake Starnberg during summer vacation. If you don't want to die of boredom in Bavaria, you start sailing, or hiking, or yodeling. If you stay there for too long, it's nearly assured that you'll do all of the above."

Frau Gruber smiled at me and held out one of the shot glasses.

"I'm fifteen," I said. Then Frau Gruber drank her brandy, then mine, bent over and placed the empty glasses on the wooden floor in front of us. It was the first time Frau Gruber was wearing only her dark blue bathing suit in the house. Her shoulders were covered with freckles.

"I especially like this picture," I said, walking a couple steps over and pointing to a color photograph of Frau Gruber as a young woman. She was standing in front of a gas pump, leaning against a white Porsche convertible. She had her hair open, wore a reddish orange long-sleeved dress that was buttoned all the way up to her neck, but hardly came down to her thighs. Her hands were balled up and stuffed deep into the pockets of her dress, feet in black leather sandals with heels, and white knee socks. As a young woman, Frau Gruber stood in front of the Porsche as coolly as a cowboy leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette in the evening sun at the end of a great adventure.

"The dog on the back bench," I said, "who is not at all interested in the picture, just looking out of the car as if he wanted to finally drive off again, the gas pump, the absurdity of the whole scene. It looks like you are simultaneously stressed out and absolutely calm, like it's an insult to pose for a photo in that moment, as if you were on the run and shooting commemorative pics in a frenzy and full of adrenaline, as if there were a body or at least a suitcase full of money in the car, as if this photo wasn't a vacation pic, but a trophy for later. Frau Gruber, the photo looks dangerous."

Frau Gruber laughed.

"Not bad," she said.

She was pleased.

"I'm seventeen in the photograph, standing on a country road eighty-six kilometers from Rome. The Porsche is more or less stolen, and I don't have a driver's license," she said, not divulging who participated in this exciting undertaking, who took the picture. "You have a good eye for people."

I kept on looking at the picture, not knowing what to say now. I would have loved to have looked at Frau Gruber and answered: No, I don't have a good eye for people, I have a good eye for you, Frau Gruber.

But I didn't dare.

"The most I'll do when I'm seventeen is be standing at the gas station in Oppau next to BASF, working. No Rome, no Porsche, no dog."

"It's all from my father," Frau Gruber said, a little too fast. She spun around toward the room, as if she wanted to indicate the affluence and simultaneously accentuate that she had nothing to do with it, strictly speaking. "It's all inherited."

I changed the subject, as the situation was making me uncomfortable.

"I wonder what happened to the dog."

"It died," Frau Gruber said.

Now we were both standing in front of the photos in the library and said nothing for a while, thinking about the dog and the end of life.

I pictured how the dog had been shipped off to the grandparents in Bavaria in its old age, hip problems making it lame and increasingly sluggish as it took a lap around Lake Starnberg, only managing half the distance in the end, until it finally had to be carried by Frau Gruber's grandparents in order to have any life left at all.

At some point, Frau Gruber breathed heavily into the silence.

"Are you tired?"

Frau Gruber was silent for a while.

"I'm trying to be to your liking. That takes strength."

I looked at Frau Gruber. She looked at me.

"Just be who you are."

It was the day we pushed open the door to a world we wouldn't be leaving in the years to follow. We didn't know that at the time. But what we did know was that something had to happen now.

And so, later that same afternoon, when I had just finished my work on the trees in the garden, was gathering my backpack in the hallway and saying goodbye, Frau Gruber asked me to accompany her to the theater the following evening.

"If I have to burp with you, then you have to go to the opera with me."

"Then we'll play smart grown-ups?"

"Have you ever been to the opera?"

"Is Peter and the Wolf an opera?"

Frau Gruber laughed.

"Should I talk to your mother?"

"Absolutely not. I think it won't be a problem if I tell it like it is."

"What is it like?"

"Frau Gruber is inviting me to the opera because I've done such a good job the past few weeks."

"That sounds reasonable."

Now I was standing in front of Frau Gruber, my backpack slung over my shoulder.

"One more thing," she said.

She took a deep breath, inhaling and exhaling heavily, looking past me for a long time at first, and then, from the very first words she spoke, Frau Gruber looked me in the eyes as if she were climbing inside.

"Would you have any misgivings if we kissed?"

I felt too many things all at once.

"Not now, of course," Frau Gruber quickly added, as if to reassure me and maybe even herself. "More as a matter of principle."

"No ... No, I think ... As a matter of principle, I wouldn't have any misgivings ... I ... I think ... We like each other and ... I mean ... I like you."

We stood in front of each other, in the middle of this strange moment. Frau Gruber looked at me as if she felt bad for putting me in this situation. As if she'd just realized that this was not at all a good idea, as if she were regretting something. At the same time, I actually had no misgivings, on the contrary. Everything felt good and right. I was just very excited.

I left the house and went along the path to the main gate. I knew that Frau Gruber was standing in the front door, watching me go. Just as I was opening the gate and stepping out onto the sidewalk, she called my name.

I turned around.

"I, on the other hand," Frau Gruber called out to me, "have grave misgivings!"

A warm gust of air blew through the birch trees in the driveway. Frau Gruber said something else, half to herself, half to me, and in a way that I could have understood it well if the rustling of the leaves above hadn't been so loud. The words I believed to have understood, standing there on the sidewalk, robbed me of sleep that night.

"But I also want to so dearly."