

**Miku Sophie Kühmel**

**Kintsugi**

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A weekend.

A house on a lake.

And four people who think they know each other.

Miku Sophie Kühmel tells the humorous yet melancholy story of four lives, of a modern family. Of the certainty that beauty lies in the imperfect. And that life goes on. As it always does.

*“I wanted to write about the relationships we have with others – and with ourselves. Because living means moving, and sometimes the things you considered indestructible break in the process. From Kintsugi we can learn that ahead of us there might be the chance of turning the shards into something new, stronger and more beautiful, and to grow because of it.”*

Miku Sophie Kühmel

Kintsugi [金継ぎ] is the art of putting something broken back together with gold.

Miku Sophie Kühmel was born in 1992 in Gotha. She studied at the Humboldt University in Berlin and at New York University, including with Roger Willemssen and Daniel Kehlmann. Since 2013, her short fiction has been published regularly in magazines and anthologies. She has recently also been writing for radio and for podcasts, which she produces. *Kintsugi* is her first novel.

translated by Jen Calleja

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By the time they reach the house, the light is already a mustard yellow and the shadows are long. At the end of March the days are shy, and twilight comes early. There's hardly any snow left, their car is parked on dry, crunchy gravel. Max sticks his arm into the hollow tree at the edge of the road right up to his shoulder and pulls out a set of jangling keys, two letters and a takeaway leaflet offering a discount on gyros, pasta, Nasi Goreng, donner kebabs and sushi.

The house stands there shingled in black, plain and scarred, just as they'd left it. Right behind the forest path at their backs, the pines tower up out of the sandy soil, as mute and consumptive as ever, and in front of them, only a few steps away and with the small house in between, the lake lies silent and motionless and black. The peace nestles coolly in their ears. Both men just stand there for a moment and breathe and are alone together. Then Reik takes the keys from Max's hand, and they submerge themselves into the familiar darkness of their house. They unpack the car, Reik manoeuvres a wicker basket full of provisions into the kitchen, the time display on the oven glows at his eye level, he lowers the creaking basket down onto the counter, switches on the small light on the extractor hood.

He gives the rooms on the ground floor the once over: kitchen and living room, which seamlessly flow into one another, but haven't been checked according to the Chi River at least. He's glad that he prevented Max from arranging the entire house according to Feng-Shui. Little by little, all decorations had migrated into the rubbish anyway, every little figurine and every superfluous flower vase or fruit bowl, all unused. If it had been up to Max, Reik knows that there would be nothing more than a couple of Dieter Rams floating shelves filled with carefully dusted books, and smoothly polished pieces of furniture like the Vincent Van Duysen sideboard; there would be nowhere to sit comfortably, let alone put your



feet up.

Reik, in contrast, had liked to pin postcards on the walls even in his student halls, leave passionately screwed up pieces of paper where they landed on the floor for months on end, content to awkwardly choreograph himself around his litter, until Max started regularly staying over. At first he had held back, and only then tidied a little using his fingertips when he could no longer stand the scattered paintbrushes and paint pots, chip packets and cigarette ends, books and stones and shells brought back from excursions and the small skeletons of paper clips bent out of shape. As soon as they lived together however, not a single thing lay unarranged, everything was given its own place, even the cheese and the butter and the spring onions had their set spot in the fridge. Flocks of chaos were confined to one kitchen drawer (children's drawings, old envelopes, rubber bands, bags, clips, corks, and so on), the inner workings of the linen closet and the atelier, to the roof.

Here, in their holiday home, everything is set out as if on a chessboard. Nothing is left to chance. Max has just set off back down the path to the car, for a few seconds Reik listens to his long, soft steps on the gravel. A grin flickers across his face; an opportunity. He looks around in the semi-darkness and his gaze falls on the Van Duysen sideboard (a present for Max's thirtieth birthday) and on the careful arrangement on top of it: First, there's the fist-sized, cast-iron teapot. Then there's the bowl that could nestle in the palm of your hand, stone-grey and rough on the outside, smooth and moss-green on the inside. And finally, the small bamboo brush, its bundle of wafer-thin, dead straight bristles placed face down. They are arranged in a triangle, almost as if the fragile objects were looking at each other and, when no one was listening, carrying out whispered conversations. Reik gets down on one knee in front of them, tongue between his teeth. And before Max's quiet humming becomes too loud, before the front door a few metres to his left swings open once more, with a determined motion of his hand he turns the brush over and pushes the teapot just a hand's breadth to the right. The bowl he only moves a little closer to the seamless edge of the sideboard. A small, secret risk that raises Reik's hackles. Then he stands again, pushing up



through his toes. Cuts through the open-plan kitchen-living room in three strides. Loads up the fridge with the weekend purchases while refraining from whistling.

At this moment, Max shuts the car and lugs the cloth bag into the house and up the creaking stairs to the library. He registers with satisfaction the sounds coming from the fridge in the kitchen; the dull clacking of the milk cartons being put in the door, butter paper gliding over the glass shelf, jam jars clinking high up in the wire grid. He carries the bag he's shouldering through the small room they named the library, even if that's a bit stuffy for it, over to the bay window, a semi-circular alcove with floor to ceiling windows. The lake down below now lies in darkness. Max gently places the bag down onto the knee-high table next to the armchair and stacks its contents, a non-fiction book, a textbook, two novels and a short story collection, beside it. They'd been driving the used Audi for a few years now, and the book bag had its designated place under the driver's seat. Even during his studies, the bag accompanied Max wherever he went. Plain in grey, a faded *Strand Book Store* logo on its front. That he could never choose one book, that there always needed to be a selection available, was a quirk he'd picked up from his mother. Reik isn't dependent on such things. After all, he can always find something to draw with, even if it's an old receipt he fishes out of the shopping trolley at the nearest supermarket, and a cheap pen that only withstands two, three sketches and then spends a long, dreary life in his coat pocket or in tote bags, until Max can't look at it any longer and takes it out while doing the laundry. In their first year together, Max had once given Reik an expensive, heavy ballpoint pen, one that wrote in rich navy blue, and a notebook bound with buttery soft leather, handmade paper – he hadn't known better back then. Nowadays, he gives the man nothing that could even remotely burden him.

Max stows the bookbag in the intended compartment of the closet and decks out the beds in fresh, white cotton, thick and fluffy like two plump clouds. And even though it's actually still a bit early for him he lies across them for a moment, enjoying the smooth, cool softness and the darkness of the coniferous forest that looms up behind the window. What



he can make out in the sky is hazy-blue, only a narrow, elongated cloud illuminated red by the still-setting sun over its shoulder.

For a few moments he forgets everything. The university, the last conference he'd attended, work piled on his desk at home and the silver glasses with the narrow rectangular lenses waiting for him on his return. Sure, he'll get used to the *Indiana Jones* jokes, Reik had been making them for years after all – even without a visual aid. But he knows that he'll always be bothered by the glasses, always and forever. The fogging up when you come out of the cold and into the warm, and the small pressure points on the nose, that he'll always look geeky and never casual when making a gesture to push them back up his nose with the palm of his hand or his fingertip. Because he's a bad actor, and these movements don't belong to him.

In slow motion he turns onto his back from his front, first his shoulders, a human spiral, flowing breath, the bedclothes rustle softly, a crack from between his shoulder blades. Then, Max is not surprised, first Reik's lengthened shadow wanders into the cone of light from the library in through the door and climbs over his body, followed by Reik himself. He's quite a lot shorter than Max, but strong. His short, hot fingers push insistently between Max's. Alert eyes examine his face, strands of Reik's dyed-black hair hang down to Max's forehead and tickle him.

They start kissing, and the cotton clouds billow up around them. Max almost disappears into a hollow, Reik crouches over his long torso only wearing his underwear. He grips Max's waist and turns his lower body towards him, so he lies down flat. Like it always does after the winter, Reik's stomach bulges out a bit. Not a lot, but enough that it's the first thing that Max feels when Reik lies on top of him and makes him smirk – more in any case than the injured, cloven-hooved and horned animal on Reik's chest, which he got back when he was sixteen, and which he still wears with pride today. Admittedly, Max is also the only one who gets to see this work of art. Reik's naked public appearances have become rare. The bed slowly absorbs the warmth of their bodies. Sleeping together is easy, it was fantastic from the very beginning and has helped in a remarkable number of situations. Max stops thinking about the glasses



and Reik about his new gallerist (she's not as hot as the old one and is much more ambitious). Reik gently runs his nose through the white hair on Max's temple, searching for his scent. And because it's time for games, he soon slides down him and opens his trousers with his teeth. This elicits a laugh from Max, something that's become more and more rare. And this is why Reik doesn't stop. He carefully peels off his clothes, letting each item fall to the side with relish and watches the dimples digging like arrowheads into Max's cheeks. When he's naked beneath him, the moon is in the sky. In this light Max's body is as pale blue as the cotton bedsheets around him, almost marble. His shoulders are broader and rounder than they used to be, the lines on his face are finer, as if outlined with a thin brush. He has completely lost his awkwardness – except for when he dances, Reik remembers. When he dances, he still stalks around disorientatedly, his big back becomes hunched, and he draws up his forehead, he fleetingly has child's eyes again. Right now, in this moment: none of this, only warm calm and a quiet trembling.

Though they're very different in size, it's not noticeable when Reik lies behind him, pushes himself into him, slowly and adeptly, lips loose on his neck. He no longer needs to ask when it's OK, how much, whether he's ready. It's very straightforward, just a little pressure, their skin close and rubbing against each other's and then jolts, breath tangled in the hairs on the nape of the neck, Reik's hands once more closing around Max's, twisting before his eyes, while they forget everything and only have this feeling, which, even after all the changes that have happened, is still always the best. It lasts a long time today, it's dynamic and gets faster and slower and soon it's very urgent, until they both come, and slump. They don't moan the other's name, they never have done. They never call each other Max and Reik either. It's usually I and you and we. Nor do they rub or caress each other, apart from when one wants to cajole the other. Sometimes they can be rather formal with one another. Once more turned towards Reik, his head in the crook of his arm, Max is so small and delicate in a way he isn't and couldn't be anywhere else. Caught, he lies there, follows the beating of their hearts, feels the drops

of sweat trickle from his armpit down his ribcage and he tells his sixteen-year-old self that one day everything will be fine. That someone will hold him, need him, and that there's no point secretly smuggling himself into this bar because though Reik visits it regularly, they wouldn't get to know each other there. That he must be patient, a few more years, even if he hates that – and even though he knows that his sixteen-year-old self would never have listened to the old man he's become.