

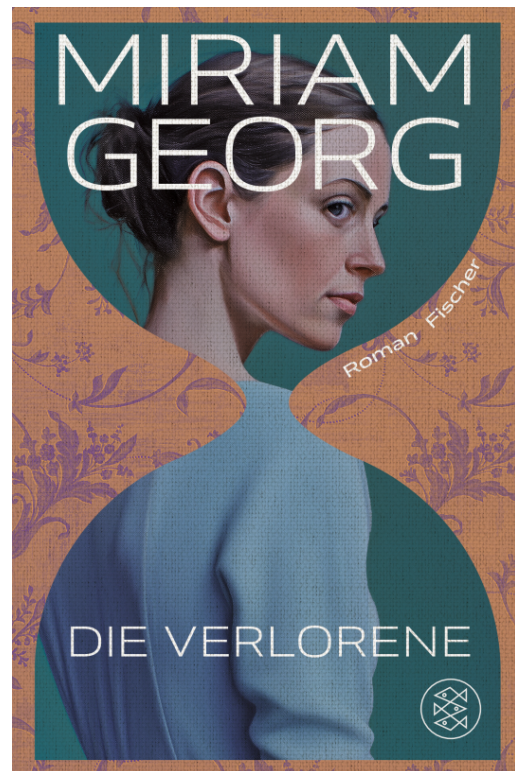


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MIRIAM GEORG

The Lost One

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The Past of Our Mothers. The Future of Our Daughters.

Laura often heard her grandmother Änne reminisce about the summers in Silesia – bathing the horses in the river and listening to the wind in the cottonwoods. However, the people in these stories stayed mysteriously in the dark. It is only when Änne falls into a coma that Laura realises she never asked the right questions about her grandmother's past and now it seems too late to find answers.

When Laura makes a discovery that sheds a completely new light on the life of the woman she thought she knew so well, she embarks on a quest to find her family's former estate. The trip uncovers a truth that not only shakes her understanding of Änne but also leads to new questions that delve even deeper into her family's history. Even though she struggles with the unexpected findings Laura uncovers the roots of a trauma that transcends generations.



Miriam Georg has sold more than a million books in Germany alone. Her Hamburg series became a hit in 2021, with rights acquired by Hachette France, AST, Dobrovsky and Planeta. Film rights have also been optioned. For "The Lost One", she drew inspiration from her own family history and her training as a systemic therapist. She has a degree in European literature and lives in Berlin-Neukölln with her deaf dog Rosali. You can find her on Instagram at @miriam_georg.

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Summary

Frankfurt, 2019

Laura, in her mid-thirties, has always wanted her own family. Now she has found the perfect man Jonathan and is pregnant, but the timing couldn't be worse. Her beloved grandmother, Änne, in her early nineties, is dying after falling during a seizure and not waking up. Suddenly, everything changes, and Laura realizes that she is scared of her pregnancy, suffering from panic attacks and nightmares. While at Änne's house in Frankfurt, Laura discovers a strange package with a picture inside, raising questions about its connection to Änne's seizure. What was believed to be an old epilepsy condition is revealed at the hospital to be a trauma reaction, hinting at horrific experiences in Änne's past in Silesia. As memories surface, her body reacts defensively, and the package came from Silesia. But who sent it? And why did it disturb Änne so deeply? Laura discovers letters to a former love that Änne wrote over many years but never sent, and questions who the old woman, she believed she knew, really was.

Ellen, in her early seventies, has always had a problematic relationship with her mother Änne. They love each other, but expressing it or showing emotions is impossible. Their striking resemblance doesn't make it easier. Änne kept the identity of Ellen's father secret throughout her life, and Ellen never forgave her for this. Although her mother is stubborn, gruff, and eccentric, she remains incredibly important to Ellen, a fact Ellen only realizes too late. When Änne dies without waking up and her daughter Laura simultaneously reveals her pregnancy, Ellen can't comprehend her own cold reaction to this news. She panics and is unable to mourn her mother. Despite being someone who constantly cries, Ellen suddenly has no tears left. She doesn't understand what's wrong with her. Naturally, she wishes for grandchildren, but her own pregnancy was very difficult for her. Laura's birth further complicated the relationship with Änne, who meddled in everything, yet was initially distant from Laura and struggled to connect with her granddaughter during the early years. Ellen suddenly fears becoming like her mother and wonders if she isn't already. Now, not only is she completely at a loss, but Laura, who always wanted children, suddenly seems to be questioning her life. Has Ellen unknowingly passed on all her fears and neuroses to her daughter?



Who sent the picture from Silesia? And why has Laura suddenly become afraid of being a bad mother since learning she's pregnant, despite wanting a child so much? As she is put on medical leave from her school job due to her pregnancy, her relationship with Jonathan begins to falter, and Ellen seems to be losing her mind, Laura makes a decision. She needs to get away for a while and wants to find out who her grandmother was before turning into Grandmother Änne, leading her structured, conformist life in Frankfurt. She will travel to Silesia. All she has is a name: Der Pappelhof. She has no idea if the estate still exists or who lives there now; Änne always said that her family had died and that she came to Germany alone. But someone must have sent the package...

Ellen hasn't been to the place where she was born since her early childhood. Her mother never really wanted to talk about the past. Whenever it came to Silesia, there was a wall of silence. Ellen had always attributed it to the war and eventually stopped asking. She only remembers dark hallways, weeping, screams, quarrels, fear, and the aftermath of a disturbing war. She also recalls blurry images of her sometimes weeping, sometime angry mother, which terrified her and always haunted her dreams. Der Pappelhof was not a good place. She only knows one thing: she doesn't want Laura to go to Silesia. But Laura is determined to uncover more about her family history and find out who sent the picture. And above all, why Änne could never talk about her home.

Silesia, 1944

The prisoner of war Karl arrives at Der Pappelhof. Born in Memelland, he joined the German Wehrmacht, later defected to the Soviet army, and was eventually captured by German soldiers. Having lost his family and endured years on the front lines, he is deeply scarred. Yet when he meets the young Luise, the landowner's daughter and completely unattainable to him, he falls in love instantly. For the first time, he feels life is worth living; something finally pulls him out of the deep abyss he's trapped in. Luise also seems to like him, though she is scared to approach him due to fear of her parents. But Luise has a problem Karl knows nothing about: her twin sister Änne. The two have always had a unique bond, their love and connection so strong that it threatens to become destructive. As they grow older, an even wider gap forms between them. Luise wants to live, plan for the future, but Änne can't leave the house;



no normal future awaits her. Anne suffers from epilepsy. When the war broke out, the family started to hide her. Epilepsy is high on the Nazis' list of unworthy life. Now, for years, Anne has been hidden from the villagers, and Luise lives a life of freedom for them both, recounting everything she experiences outside. She knows it can't last forever, but she also knows the extent of Anne's capabilities... Her sister has always been different, always possessive. Luise is the only person Anne trusts, the only person she speaks to, and Luise loves her sister no matter how difficult she is. But she can't live her life solely for Anne, feeling trapped in her love for her.

Anne learned long ago how to break free. She knows there is nowhere to escape to, but occasionally she leaves her prison, secretly wandering through the forest at night. During one of these outings, when she meets Karl, Anne immediately recognizes him thanks to everything that Luise has told her. And she hates Karl because she knows that Luise has fallen for him. Her biggest fear in life is losing her sister. Without her, Anne couldn't live. Following a mix of adventurousness and vindictiveness, she pretends to be Luise and seduces Karl, who doesn't even suspect she exists. Afterwards, she regrets what she did, but the harm is already done; Anne is pregnant.

When her father finds out, he beats Karl so severely that he dies from his injuries, which, given the chaos of war in 1944, has no legal consequences. However, he hides the body in the woods, so officially (and in the minds of his daughters) Karl is considered to have disappeared. Shortly afterwards, the father commits suicide. The birth of little Ellen takes place just before the war ends. The women in the family make the heavy decision not to flee.

Luise not only lost her great love; day after day, she has to live in a confined space with her family and watch her sister carry the child of the man she loved so deeply, constantly confronting the realization that the future she envisioned will never happen for any of them. Anne, in the mother role she never wanted, becomes more unpredictable; the tension within the family and especially between the sisters grows stronger with each passing week. Silesia is now part of Poland; no one is allowed to speak German anymore, people are dispossessed, names are changed, nothing is as it was before. To escape motherhood, Anne increasingly assumes her father's role, trying to care for the estate as best as she can.



As little Ellen grows up, the distance between Luise and Änne widens daily. Änne neither can nor wants to care for Ellen, so Luise takes on raising her. As Ellen starts resembling Karl more and more, Luise comes to love her as her own child, yet she doesn't allow herself to embrace these painful emotions. Because Luise and Änne look alike, Ellen can't distinguish between the two, calling them both 'Mama.' Already unbearable because of external circumstances, the situation becomes more challenging. Despite her continued love for Änne, Luise cannot forget what she did, holding onto Ellen as a lifeline. Eventually, it becomes clear that Änne sees Ellen as a threat, someone who might come between her and her sister. One day, she takes things to the extreme, bringing little Ellen into the woods to leave her there in the snow. She doesn't go through with it at the last minute, but Luise catches her and stumbles upon Karl's body. Any hope that he might have returned to her is gone, and Ellen is not safe with Änne..

Silesia, 2019

When Laura arrives at her family's place of origin, she finds Der Pappelhof has been converted into a hotel. The grand opening is imminent, and because the owner needs to leave for an urgent appointment, she permits Laura to look after the hotel. Alone in the large house, Laura quickly becomes uneasy, especially as an old man appears to be roaming around at night. Then she finds a grave in the cemetery...

Ellen finds out what is happening at the estate and follows after Laura, even if every instinct tells her not to. Once she arrives, the memories flood back. Memories of her two mothers, of Änne and her sister Luise. They find hints that challenge everything: Is Änne actually Luise? Was she even Ellen's mother? And why did she flee to Germany back then? Who is this old man? Gradually, the threads unravel, and Laura and Ellen discover that the old man is actually an old woman. But before they can speak to her, she passes away. The woman's husband remains behind, enabling Ellen and Laura to finally piece together how everything is connected: Luise had taken Ellen and her birth certificate and fled to Germany to protect her from Änne. Laura's "Grandmother Änne" was, in fact, Luise, while the old man (a.k.a. the old woman) was actually Änne. The sisters never met again. More than 60 years ago, Änne discovered where her sister lived, but she never contacted her, knowing that Luise had to live her own life and that she couldn't be a mother to Ellen. She let her go, enduring the pain of loss for a lifetime, making that her single truly altruistic act.



Änne always told her husband that her sister and Ellen were missing. By coincidence, before his wife passed away, he had found out that she knew where Luise lived and was the one who sent the picture. He had hoped that perhaps, in their advanced age, the sisters could reconcile and add context for Laura and Ellen in their quest to put the story together. But reconciliation wasn't necessary; the sisters' complex love for one another lasted a lifetime, with countless pictures and letters as a testament. Änne had painted Luise throughout the years, immortalizing her in hundreds of pictures that her husband perceived as self-portraits. And Luise ("Grandfather Änne") had penned letters all those years to her sister that she never sent. Luise always knew that Änne couldn't help her character, that she acted out of love for her. Just as they couldn't be together, they were always connected somehow.

In the end, readers know more than Ellen and Laura, but it's unnecessary for both to understand every detail of the past. The trauma that has manifested in different forms through generations has been resolved. They know that Luise ("Grandmother Änne") acted out of love and that she always tried to protect Ellen, giving up everything for her, never seeing her family again. And ultimately, Änne made the right choice for her daughter: letting her go. Finally, Ellen reconciles with her mothers, and Laura understands the complicated emotions that the women in her family have unconsciously passed down regarding motherhood. She can then release herself from these burdens and look forward to her own child.

The novel is told across two different timelines. Bit by bit, we learn what happened on the estate back then, unraveling the trauma that still grips Änne and Ellen. Simultaneously, we join them on their journey to uncover the truth and conquer their internalized fears. The question of how one's family history shapes the mother-daughter relationship threads its way through the book, along with traces of a transgenerational wound. False leads and multiple plot twists ensure that the suspense never wanes, leaving readers guessing until the very end what happened on the estate and how all the threads weave together.



Sample Translation: Fiona Graham

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Frankfurt, 2019

When Änne fell, she knew she was going to die. First the stool wobbled perilously, then it tipped over, her feet lost their balance and her arms flailed. The impact knocked the breath out of her before she could even squeeze out a startled shriek. Too old to be able to cushion herself by rolling over, she hit the floor like a stone: her body first, then, with a thud, her head.

She didn't die. Not immediately. Lying on the carpet, in the house where she'd lived for the past sixty years, she no longer knew either her identity or her name. Faces flitted by, laughter, voices. She was aware of what was happening, yet there was no pain or fear: it felt like snow falling inside her head. As her life trickled away, a cool blanket of nothingness enveloped her, blotting out her thoughts. Then, suddenly, there were images. A mill in the forest. Poplars in the wind. Horses bathing in the river. A young man. And a girl.

A wave of raw yearning engulfed her. Just one more time, she thought, as the images vanished and darkness came. Then the words, too, were gone. And with them the yearning.

*

Laura was outside the pharmacy when her mobile rang. Holding the plastic bag containing her purchases in one hand and her dripping umbrella in the other, she groped around in her knapsack, already thinking about what awaited her at home. Once she'd finally located her phone in a side pocket, her mother's name flashed on and off on the display. For a moment, she considered ringing back later. But ignoring Ellen just made her all the more persistent.

It took a moment before the meaning of the words got through to her. 'Laura, did you hear what I said?' her mother exclaimed when she failed to reply.

The bag slipped out of her hand, landing on the wet cobbles. 'Yes, of course,' she replied, bending down and hastily scooping up the small cardboard boxes. 'Oh God, of course I did, I'm coming.'



She turned round with the phone to her ear, her gaze sweeping the wet pedestrian area, almost empty on this grey morning but for a few determined shoppers who refused to be put off by the bad weather. 'Which hospital?' She had nothing soothing to say. She wasn't good at soothing people; besides, she didn't know what exactly had happened. 'She's had a fall,' her mother had yelled down the phone. 'Could be an epileptic fit ... found by her neighbour ... emergency doctor. Unconscious.'

Laura's throat felt tight. 'I'm on my way,' she assured her mother again.

'Well, get a move on!' Her mother put the phone down without saying goodbye.

The cab driver smiled at her in the rear-view mirror. 'Seatbelt on, if you don't mind.' His gaze wandered to the pharmacy bag she was holding, and with an odd sense of shame, which irritated her, she stuffed the bag into her knapsack and pulled out the seatbelt.

As usual, Frankfurt was far too congested, and it took them nearly half an hour to reach their destination. While Laura was queuing at the reception desk, with a burning sensation in her stomach, her eyes followed the minute hand of the clock as it moved from 11.32 to 11.54, when they finally told her where she had to go.

'There you are at last!' Her mother's voice greeted her as she stumbled out of the lift on the second floor. Laura had been looking up for signs indicating the way, and she started when Ellen suddenly materialised in front of her.

'I'm sorry. The traffic was terrible, and when I got to reception, I had to ...'

Her mother didn't let her reach the end of her sentence. 'Never mind, at least you're here now.'

'How is she?' Laura struggled to keep pace with Ellen, trying at the same time to stuff her scarf into her knapsack, as her mother pulled her along the corridor. She feared the answer.

'She hasn't come round yet.' So why are you chivvying me like this, she thought crossly, experiencing a simultaneous explosion of guilt and relief that her grandmother was still alive. 'What does that mean?'

'It means what it means. That's all, Laura.' Her mother was just as useless in a crisis as she was.

'But what did they say? They must have said something, surely,' she replied in the same impatient tone, before silently ordering herself to take some deep breaths.

'Nothing, you know how it is, they won't say a thing until they know exactly what's going on.' Ellen led her into a waiting room, gestured to her to sit down and headed promptly for the coffee machine. When she got back, holding two steaming plastic



cups, she stopped at Laura's chair and looked at her closely. 'So what's up with you then?'

'What do you mean?'

'You don't look well. Are you ill? Is there something wrong?'

'Everything's fine. I'm just worried,' Laura replied with a gesture encompassing the hospital and the present state of affairs. How the hell did her mother always know precisely when something was out of kilter?

Ellen scrutinised her suspiciously for a further moment with her schoolmistressy stare, which nothing escaped. The kohl under her eyes was smudged: her glasses reflected the overhead lighting. Her mother didn't look well either, thought Laura, she was pale, you could tell she'd had a shock. They sat down wordlessly side by side on the hard chairs, and Ellen handed her the coffee. Laura's nose told her the taste wouldn't be up to much.

Outside, the grey raincloud still hung over Frankfurt. For some minutes they both hugged their plastic cups silently, watching the people bustling around them, and looked up hopefully each time someone came around the corner. 'It's going to be a long wait.' Heaving a sigh of resignation, Ellen peeled off her softshell jacket. Laura had just been thinking precisely the same thing. But she kept her jacket on, even pulling it a little more tightly around her. Although it was May, the drizzly weather had lasted for almost a week now, and it seemed to be getting colder with every minute that passed. She'd already texted Jonathan from the taxi: now she pulled out her phone to send him an update. (No news, she hasn't come round yet.) He seemed to have been waiting for her message, replied immediately, and naturally he grasped the exact message that she'd left unwritten but conveyed anyway. (Änne's the priority. We've got time. Anything I can do? Want me to come over?)

Laura texted him a heart. (No need, Mum's here with me, nothing we can do anyway!) She didn't mention what they both knew: her mother wouldn't want him to come.

Laura put her phone away again. Jonathan was right, they had time. But even so she could feel the weight of the pregnancy test in her bag, like a ton.

Today of all days, she thought. Now of all times.



Crimea, 1941

The cold had given way to alternating rain and wind. The fog came every night, stealing in swiftly and silently, always from the sea, never from the south. Perhaps the sheer coastline south of them formed an impregnable barrier. The north presented no obstacles: there, the fog slid over mud and reeds, pouring suddenly out of hollows in the steppe.

It was evening. Somewhere out there, a gramophone was playing. Ponderous, melancholic melodies, a Cossack song, sounds like nimbus clouds. Karl and Ralf lay on their beds in the dark, listening. It was a dangerous mixture: the absence of light, the music. It felt as if his chest were too tight for him to breathe.

Presently there was a knock at the door, and he sat up thankfully.

It was the orderly with their supper. The man set the tray down on the table with a nod. Silently, he pulled a candle out of his bag and lit it. He and his like were already accustomed to the darkness in their hut, their shared silence.

Using his fingers, Karl placed chunks of sausage on a slice of bread which he ate standing up. He had to put some weight on his leg: it was no good lying down all the time. Ralf did likewise, but remained seated. When they'd finished, Karl slumped back onto his bed too, staring at the ceiling, trying to ignore the throbbing of his wound. In due course Ralf turned his upper body and blew the candle out again.

He awoke a few hours later. He didn't know who or where he was. Then he spotted the rafters, the windows in the darkness, recalled his rucksack beneath the bed, the belt on the chair beside him. I'm here, he thought, inhaling. Little by little the fear ebbed out of his chest.

He could smell the fog outside. It must be early morning. Something was amiss. The silence felt wrong. Wondering what had woken him, he fingered the bandage around his lower thigh, drew his leg up towards his body, and turned over to lie on his other side. The scar tissue forming as his wound healed now produced a tender, almost pleasurable sensation as it contracted.

The windows, covered by a curtain of medical gauze, were two rectangles of light in the darkness. Karl got to his feet soundlessly. By now he was once more able to walk without grimacing in pain. Slowly, he crossed the room and pushed the curtain aside. The moon hung over the rooftops of the little village. The fog reflected its light: it was lighter than usual, and yet the night was utterly impenetrable. He could see



nothing. The whiteness had obliterated everything, the fence, the path, the steppe that lay beyond. Ralf lay motionless, a shadowy presence in the darkness. Not a breath could be heard, not a rustle from the straw mattress. But Ralf was awake too, Karl could sense that. He knew that something was wrong too.

A creak came from the ceiling above him, as soft as a cat's footfall. Then someone whistled outside in the fog. Karl turned his head swiftly, narrowed his eyes, ducked down below the window: his body was trained to react instantly to danger of any kind. There came the whistle again, very light, very close. The sentries, he thought. They're in touch with each other. Something's up.

He glanced over at Ralf. Now that the curtain was letting more light in, he could see he hadn't been mistaken. His roommate was lying there with his eyes open. 'Partisans?' Now Ralf got up too and came silently to his side.

Karl shrugged. 'Here? In our spa town?'

He sensed Ralf's laughter rather than hearing it.

Karl's fingers tapped the window pane. There was something outside. Then he groped his way back to his bedside table. He located the knob and pulled the drawer open. His fingers immediately felt the coolness of the pistol, his trusty Luger P08. His hand rested on the weapon, but instead of picking it up he groped around among letters, bottles and boxes for his cigarettes. If he'd learned anything at all in this war, it was that almost everything took its time. You nearly always had time for a cigarette.

They sat on their beds smoking in the darkness. 'You noticed something's missing?'

Karl couldn't believe it had escaped him. The front had fallen silent.

'Well,' he said after a tense moment's reflection on what this might mean, 'I suppose the fog must be like pea soup over there too.'

'But they're even more on edge in the fog and they start taking pot shots.'

'Could be they want to avoid giving away their position.' He estimated the time at about four a.m., maybe half past. Shock troop time.

Ralf was silent for a moment. 'No. They know exactly what they're doing. These breaks – they're tactical. They eat away at your nerves. You must feel that too.'

As if someone out there had heard him, there was a loud rumbling in the distance, and the windows of the hut rattled almost imperceptibly. 'At last!' Ralf murmured.

'But that wasn't the artillery. It sounded like a tripwire explosion.' Karl got up again. He stubbed out his cigarette on the bedside table and went over to the window.



He was too nervous. Sitting on the bed, he pulled his boots on. He couldn't just sit there, he had to go and check. 'We need to be ready,' he said, opening the creaking door. Ralf reloaded his pistol, the click like a shot in the silence.

He could breathe more easily outdoors. Borysivka was marked in just behind the front on the map in the orderlies' room, so close that it appeared to be part of it. But that was misleading. You could see the real distance at night. The front was a greenish glimmer in the distance. Whenever the fog lifted, you could see it on the horizon, as if the aurora borealis had come down from the sky. Sometimes it would vanish for a split second, sometimes stars would shoot up, green or – more rarely – red, and here and there shots would arc high into the night sky like strings of pearls. A car engine roared. The vehicle was driving up an embankment, clearly visible.

There was a shadow in front of him.

Karl whipped round. A second shadow, a third. They were everywhere, in all directions. The silhouettes of the men drew inexorably closer. Within seconds they were surrounded. It all happened almost soundlessly, the white light making it completely unreal. When he grasped that it was over, that they hadn't a chance, his first feeling was one of relief. You've got me now anyway, he thought, almost in irritation. He wouldn't be coming back from this war in any case. Perhaps, if he was very fortunate, he'd step out of a train in his home town, greet people, walk down the streets of his childhood. But he wouldn't be coming back.

Living is a duty. Who was it who'd said that to him? Probably his father.

Tears ran from Karl's eyes. He'd been hit on the nose with a rifle butt and his vision was foggy now. He felt no fear; he no longer had any capacity for fear, only for fatigue and exhaustion. His shoulder was bleeding, his nose was bleeding, everything hurt, yet it still wasn't enough to kill him. That would be up to the Russians.

Ralf had died instantly. The weapon in his hand was all they'd needed as justification. Karl had seen Ralf collapse, and before he could think straight, he yelled out in Russian, 'Please don't shoot!'

They'd stopped, dumbstruck. Now he was surrounded by the shock troop: the faceless enemy materialised into individual people, faces, voices. They're men, thought Karl, as they started searching his pockets in the lamplight. Only men.

The young soldier ferreting through his jacket pockets was ashamed. Small red circles had formed on his cheeks, and although they were so close to one other, he avoided looking Karl in the eye. Emerging from the darkness, a Russian sergeant



came up to him. He looked like a grasshopper in his green camouflage uniform. 'Who are you?' he barked. 'What are you doing here? How come you speak Russian?' The man exuded a sour smell of sweat. The young soldier handed him Karl's wallet: the sergeant merely glanced at its contents, registered Karl's name, then passed it on. Yelling gleefully, the men pulled it to pieces, grabbing at the photos. His mother. His sister. They took out a scrap of paper too. A slip of paper with two words written on it in pencil. Come home!!

The paper fluttered to the ground. As the sergeant followed Karl's gaze, his eyes narrowed. He bent down, picked it up, unfolded it.

'My mother.' Karl gestured towards the scrap of paper with his chin. It was only a white lie. He was sure a mother had written the note, somewhere, in a different world. Something twitched in the green sergeant's face. He hesitated. Suddenly he yelled at his men, collected in the photos they were passing around, and gave them back to Karl, shoving them into his hands just as roughly as they'd taken them from him.

'Davai!' he yelled. 'Take him with you. We'll interrogate him. We can use someone like him.'

And the miracle happened. He wasn't shot, but led away instead.

Silesia, 1943

[...]

In that instant, an engine roared behind them. The only car in the village had been requisitioned at the very beginning of the war. Now there were only a few tractors in the area, and the horses, unused to motor vehicles, all started shying at the same time. By the time the men and Luise had got them more or less under control, the small truck had already parked beside the stable gate. It was one of the Wehrmacht's typical grey-green vehicles, which they saw quite often now. The front door opened and a uniformed man climbed out. 'Heil Hitler!' He strode over to them. 'I've got the new labourer you applied for.' One hand flew to his cap while the other held out a document and a pen to her father. The latter acknowledged the greeting with a mere nod, and Luise felt her skin burning with nerves. Her father looked at the document, not moving a muscle. 'I said I didn't want any Russians!'

The soldier just shrugged. 'Nothing we can do. The supplies are drying up, so now we're handing out Soviets as well, instead of shooting them.'



A stranger wouldn't have noticed, but Luise saw her father's face darken. After continuing to stare silently at the document for a moment, he took the pen and signed with a single brusque movement. The soldier went back to the truck and let down the tailgate. 'Get out!' he barked.

A young man jumped down. His boots were completely worn out: that was the first thing she registered. He was very thin, shaven-headed, and his hands were shackled. Luise scrutinised him in astonishment. Since the Wehrmacht had started the war on the Soviet Union in June two years ago, the foreign forced labourers in the village had been joined from time to time by prisoners of war, but the latter had remained exceptions. She'd heard that Russian prisoners were mostly shot straight away or sent to camps. They were very fortunate if they were allowed to work. The workers at Poplar Farm were mainly Polish forced labourers who'd been assigned to work here: so far, the only prisoners of war were two Frenchmen and a Belgian.

The man was tall and slim, his eyes guarded. He seemed to be clenching his teeth. The soldier grabbed the young prisoner's arm and led him over to them, removed his handcuffs and gave Luise's father a nod. 'There you are. Fresh from the Stalag. You'll need to feed him up a bit before you can get anything out of him, I'd say.' Nothing ever happened, yet today there'd been two unusual events in a single day. As always, Luise tried to register everything in precise detail for Änne, to observe things more carefully than she would normally have done. In the evenings, Änne was desperate for news: who had said what, how the animals were faring, the height of the cereal crops. Today she'd be getting more than the odd scrap of information about the farm and the weather.

The young Russian was still standing in front of her father, staring straight ahead, clearly waiting to be told what to do. A straight nose, brown eyes. His shaven hair was presumably brown too. An attractive face, although too thin. Suddenly he raised his eyes and looked at her. 'What's your name?' her father asked. 'Name?' he snapped, when the young man didn't react.

The prisoner started, his face stiffened, then he said something in Russian, clearing his throat. 'Karl,' he said finally, with a heavy accent. 'Name German – Karl.'

Her father glanced at the papers. 'It says something different here!'

'Name German – Karl,' the man repeated, staring.

'Well, it's all the same to me.' Her father shook his head. 'At least that's a name I can pronounce.' He let his gaze sweep briefly over the yard, but apparently concluded that he needed the men to hold the horses while the truck moved off again. 'Show him to his quarters,' he said to Luise. 'I'll see to him later.' 'You!' he barked in the



prisoner's direction. 'Go along with her!' He pointed at his daughter, then at the stables.

Luise didn't hesitate for a second. There was nothing more she could do here anyway: she was glad to get away from this situation. But as she was about to set off to show the man to the labourers' quarters behind the stables, her father shook his head. 'No. He's going to sleep on the floor where the farmhands used to live. We'll have nothing but trouble otherwise.'

Astonished, she considered protesting again. But she'd already taken enough risks for one day. And perhaps he was right. She wasn't at all sure how the others would react to having a Russian in their midst.

The soldier had set a sack down beside the young prisoner. The young man picked it up and looked at her, showing that he'd understood and would follow her.

Luise went into the stables, passing the empty horse stalls and climbing the worn-down stairs that led to the farmhands' quarters. His steps followed her.

She hadn't been up here for years. As children they'd played hide-and-seek in these rooms, but once they'd moved up to girls' secondary school, Father had forbidden them to come up here. Now there was no one here any longer. All young farmers, apprentices and farmhands were obliged to do military service. More than half the men who had once lived in these rooms were dead by now.

It was sweltering up here and it stank of mice. The farmhands and apprentices had been allowed to live just as they liked in their quarters. No one had taken the trouble to clear their things away after they'd gone: there were still mud-encrusted shoes lying around in the corridor, a plate they'd used for feeding cats, now black with dried mould.

'You can pick one of them,' Luise said loudly, gesturing towards the plank doors, then shrugging her shoulders so he'd catch her drift. The laws concerning prisoners of war were very clear-cut: they had to live in separate lodgings and couldn't sit at the same table with the family or accompany them to church; any contact beyond an essential minimum was strictly forbidden. They weren't even allowed to talk to them about anything but work. However, the rules had gradually been enforced less stringently over the years. They worked together throughout the day, and the war, which had never reached Silesian territory, had not hardened people's hearts against one another the way it had elsewhere, so there was still a little scope for humanity between the laws. The foreign labourers and prisoners working at the farm were given coffee and cake in the afternoons like everyone else: not served up in the farmhouse, admittedly, but brought to their lodgings. After work they could heat



water and wash in a tub in the stables, and they were permitted to write home whenever they wanted, not restricted to two letters and two cards a month, as the rules stipulated. However, they'd never had a Russian here before. Luise had no idea whether her father would apply the same standards to him.

The man walked slowly past her, took off his cap, and looked into the individual partitioned spaces, some of which, she saw to her horror, still had saucy pictures on the walls. A pin-up in a bathing costume, a woman pictured from behind, her upper body naked.

He seemed not to notice the pictures. In one of the little rooms, he came to a standstill at the window and looked out. Then, turning round, he uttered a couple of words in Russian, with one hand on his stomach and the other resting on his back. She realised he was thanking her.

'Don't mention it.' Luise took a step over the threshold. It was stuffy in here, even with the window open. There was a mattress on the floor and a rusty wash basin hanging from the wall. 'I know you can't understand what I'm saying, but I'm sorry you've got to live up here.' She made a gesture that encompassed the bare room, raising her shoulders to indicate that she felt bad about the conditions. 'I'll bring you something to eat in a while.' He frowned almost imperceptibly.

'Food!' she repeated, pointing at herself, then at him; then she pointed at an imaginary wristwatch and made a circular movement with her hand over her stomach. 'Later!' She smiled apologetically, as it was clear that he didn't understand. 'My father will send someone to fetch you for work tomorrow morning, I suppose. There's a lot to do at the moment, unfortunately, and we don't have enough men.' Though she was aware that she was confusing him by rattling on, she was too nervous to stop and endure silence in his company. A thought crossed her mind: I hope they won't make him work so very hard straight away. He's so terribly thin. It felt wrong to be leaving him here on his own. He couldn't be much older than she was. 'Well, I'll ... er ... be off then.' She smiled again. The man scrutinised her attentively, but his face seemed incapable of returning her smile. He nodded instead.

'Well, then, I'll see you later.'

Luise turned round hesitantly. Walking out into the gloom of the corridor, she stumbled over the plate of cat food. It hit the wall with a loud clink and she started in alarm, took two unsteady steps forward and bumped into one of the rafters. What happened next would affect the whole of the rest of her life. Later, she would



sometimes wonder how everything would have turned out if she hadn't fallen over. But she did. And something with a sharp point pierced the palm of her hand.

It hurt so badly that she let out a shriek. He was with her almost instantly. 'Are you injured?' Supporting her under her arms, he helped her to her feet, held her fingers up, examined the wound.

'There was a nail in the beam.' Gritting her teeth, her attention was so focused on the gaping wound, the blood and the pain shooting up her arm that she didn't immediately register what was odd about the situation. Then it hit her. 'You speak German!'

He'd taken hold of her wrist and was still holding her arm up. In the light that fell through the doorway, Luise saw him freeze. When he raised his eyes to look at her, they held an expression of disbelief. He looked so shocked that she almost laughed. But the look on his face stopped her.

They stood facing each other in the gloom of the corridor. It was so quiet that she could hear the clapping of hooves below her. The horses were being led back to their stalls.

He was still looking at her. His eyes flickered back and forth, catching hers: she could tell he didn't know what to do. Brown, she thought, confirming her earlier observation. His eyes were brown with green flecks.

Änne would want to know that.

'I beg you,' he said hoarsely, after looking at her mutely for so long that she'd begun to think he wouldn't speak again. 'Don't tell anyone.'

Luise stiffened. 'But I ...' She broke off in confusion.

'If you say anything ...' He took an audible breath. He was still holding on to her, but seemed oblivious. 'They'll send me back to the camp.'

Luise had the feeling he'd meant to say something else. Looking at his throat, she saw him swallow. He cleared his throat, swallowed again. 'You've got to get that bandaged up.' Clearly he was cursing himself for his blunder, yet he sought to pull himself together in her presence. 'And disinfected. It's not a deep wound, but the nail must have been rusty.' She had a sense that he was trembling very slightly.

In the same instant he appeared to register that he was still holding her arm. 'Oh, excuse me!' He let go of her and took a step backwards. Now the wound was bleeding so heavily that blood was dripping from her elbow onto the floor. 'Hands always bleed more. That doesn't mean it's serious,' he said quietly. 'I don't think it's a



deep wound.' She was too flurried to reply. Pressing her right hand against the wound in her left palm, Luise looked at him and tried to work out how someone who spoke German without a trace of an accent had ended up as a POW on their farm, after being captured by German forces. Was he a spy, a traitor? Was all this a case of mistaken identity? Shouldn't something be done right away? At all events, it was unthinkable to withhold this information from her father.

The man was taking shallow breaths now: sweat pearled on his forehead. Perhaps he too realised what he was asking of her, for he didn't repeat his request for help. 'You need to get that cut dressed,' he reminded her levelly, when she didn't move. She was reluctant to leave. There was so much she wanted to ask him. But her hand was throbbing so much by now that she couldn't ignore it any longer. Luise turned round and walked over to the stairs. He was standing in the doorway to his room, watching her.

'I'll bring you something to eat later.' She stood still.

It took a moment for him to reply. His voice was still quiet, almost gentle. 'Yes, you said. Many thanks.' It struck her that something about him seemed different: it was as if he had shrunk in on himself.

'Oh, yes, so I did.' Luise nodded. Her hand was excruciatingly painful.

She stepped down onto the first stair, then the second. His eyes followed her. The fear in them was unbearable. She hesitated. And when she spoke, the words that came out of her mouth astonished her. 'I won't give anything away. Don't worry.'

Silesia, 1943

[...]

Änne lay with her arms crossed over her chest, gazing up at the rafters. Listening to the muffled sounds from elsewhere in the house, she tried to picture what was going on downstairs. Although she never went out of doors, when it was dark and everyone on the farm was asleep she'd sometimes steal downstairs, tiptoeing so as not to set the floor creaking, and, with two fingers, push open the door to her old room, which had once held two sets of everything, but which now contained just one bed, one bedside cupboard, one writing desk. Then she would listen to the breathing of her sleeping sister, gazing at the empty walls that had once been decorated with the



girls' self-adhesive pictures and salt-dough figurines, and feeling like a ghost. Every last trace of her had been eradicated from this room. She had no substance, no meaning.

She'd calculated correctly: quiet footsteps in the corridor announced Luise's arrival, the door creaked and her sister came in. Luise's nightdress glimmered in the darkness, her fair hair was braided for the night: she held a pillow and a blanket. Ziska carried Änne's bedclothes downstairs each morning, as their mother had arranged right from the beginning. They were brought back up to her every evening. Without the bedclothes, the bed in the attic room looked like a relic from the time when the maids lived up here. That had saved them on the occasion when the police had turned up unannounced.

'What have you done to your hand?' Änne sat up in alarm.

'Oh, I caught it on a nail. It doesn't hurt now.' Luise had brought a candle with her too: she went over to the window to pull the blackout curtains shut.

'Just leave it be, please!' Änne propped herself up on her elbows. 'It's too hot – if you draw the curtains too, we'll be stifled in here.' Outside, a pale shimmer hung over the forest, but in here shadows were already lurking in the nooks and crannies.

'Alright then. Budge over.' Luise put out the candle and climbed into bed beside her, and Änne shifted to make space for her, as she did every evening. 'Oh, Lord, I'm just so tired.'

Since the men had gone, they couldn't keep up with the work on the farm, even though they had the prisoners of war and foreign forced labourers by way of compensation. Luise's hands were roughened now, the back of her neck and her arms tanned. Änne's conscience tormented her. Her sister needed every second of rest she could get. Even so, she wouldn't let Luise fall sleep too quickly. What was most precious to Änne was the time Luise spent together with her here, the hour when they lay beside each other in the dark while Luise recounted every detail of what had happened in the house, the farm and the village. Änne wanted to know everything: each evening she would ask questions, listen, soaking up the tiniest detail. They would talk until Luise's voice faded away. Luise would generally fade out between two sentences: suddenly she'd just be gone, her breathing would change, becoming more regular, and Änne would lie beside her with the sense of abandonment that always came over her when Luise wasn't there. She'd generally fall asleep too at some point, until one of them shifted and they bumped into one another in the narrow bed.



Luise would fumble her way downstairs in due course, as the bed was simply too narrow for both of them to sleep there all night, but sometimes Hela or Ziska would find them still there together when they brought breakfast up in the morning. They'd grumble, but not so much that the sisters had to fear serious consequences. Maybe they knew that Änne wouldn't be able to bear it if they deprived her of Luise's visits on top of everything else. It was thanks to Luise that she was still breathing, that she hadn't lost her sanity.

'It isn't half hot up here!' Luise kicked the blanket off, shoving it to the floor with her feet. 'Shall I go back downstairs and fetch us some buttermilk?' The milk from the earthenware mugs that they chilled in the farm's well on hot summer days was a treat they often enjoyed in the evenings. But Änne shook her head. 'I'm not thirsty.'

'The valuer didn't take any decisions today, he just examined them and wrote some things down.' Luise stopped. 'But Father says it's doesn't look good.' She'd already known that. Even so, her pulse quickened. Änne no longer knew what to hope for in the future, could no longer imagine a life for herself. Since the outbreak of war, everything had been so different that it had got hard even to cherish any hopes or dreams. But the thought of riding Lukas down to the river once more was a dream that had made many a moment easier to bear.

'We spent the whole morning digging up the first new potatoes,' Luise murmured. 'Even Mama helped, but we're still a long way from finishing. I've got the most terrible backache.' She groaned, trying to ease herself into a more comfortable position. In the past, they'd both taken coffee out to the people bringing in the potato harvest, distributed jars of gherkins, cups and bread with slices of sausage, then sat with the workers and chatted. They'd handed the women the vouchers they earned for each full basket of potatoes, and helped out a little from time to time. Now Luise worked with the others from early morning to evening. You had to follow the potato digger to gather in the crop, lug each full basket over to the van, lift it up and empty it, which took every ounce of your strength. The constant bending and lifting was back-breaking labour. Even their mother, who would never have worked out in the fields in the past, could no longer avoid joining in with the hard work.

'Supposing they have to send Lukas to the front, do you think we'll ever get him back?' asked Änne in a low voice.

*



Luise lay beside her sister in the darkness, her conscience pricking her because she wasn't thinking about Lukas. Because all she could think of now was the young prisoner of war with the brown eyes who'd looked at her as if he'd forgotten how to smile. She hoped he could sleep and that he wouldn't be kept awake all night by the fear of being sent back to the camp. She hoped she wasn't making a mistake in protecting this stranger, given that she knew nothing about him but his name.

It took a moment for Änne's words to percolate through to Luise. She'd never heard of people getting their horses back once they'd been commandeered by the military. 'Who knows,' she said cautiously. 'Father can try, I suppose.'

'He'll never do that.'

She knew she shouldn't say anything about Karl. But she felt as if she'd burst if she didn't.

'We've got a new labourer on the farm. A prisoner of war. He was with the Russians, but he speaks German. I found that out by accident.' She told her sister how she'd injured her hand and how he'd given himself away by mistake. It was silent in the room for a moment. 'Father doesn't know anything about it. And I promised him I wouldn't give anything away. His name is Karl.'

*

Änne felt as if she had only to stretch out her arm to be able to grasp it, this new name that was suddenly in the room with them, floating before her in the darkness. Karl. She tried not to show that panic was rushing through her like water. Luise shared a secret with a strange man. Suddenly it was hard for her to carry on breathing calmly.

Her greatest fear was that Luise would experience things out there without her. That she'd change without her, become an adult, while Änne stayed the same in here, preserved as if under a bell jar of rafters.

Her greatest fear was that Luise would get to know people in the outside world who would take her away from her sister.

She wanted to know everything: what he looked like, how he spoke, what he'd said. Luise answered her questions conscientiously, but Änne sensed unspoken things lurking in between her sister's words. 'He sounds nice.'

'He is nice,' Luise murmured, and Änne realised she was about to fall asleep.

'What does he look like?'



Luise hesitated. 'Tall, thin. He has brown eyes. Kind eyes. He's ... er ... good-looking.'

Änne held her breath. 'You've got to find out more about him tomorrow. How come he speaks German.'

'I know.' Luise's voice was barely more than a breath.

'You'd better go.' Änne nudged Luise's leg with her toes.

'In a moment ... oh, these blasted midges.' Luise scratched her arm, sighing softly, turned onto her stomach. 'My hand hurts,' she murmured.

Their knees touched. A little later Luise's breathing changed, becoming shallow and regular. It was only then that Änne shifted again, turning cautiously to the right to observe her sister's face. Luise's lips were swollen in the mornings: she pursed them in her sleep as if to kiss someone, lay on her stomach with her face turned to one side: she always looked as if she was intent on burrowing into the mattress. Änne would often lie awake at night pondering all the possible ways in which life might take her sister away from her. She didn't understand how losing people could be an intrinsic part of life, as if such loss were a trivial matter. You lost your parents, you lost your grandparents, your nursemaid, your teachers, even your animals. And as a woman, you even lost your home. But she cared nothing about all this, she could accept it all in the blink of an eye if only someone could guarantee in return that she could keep Luise until her last breath on this earth. She didn't want to live for a single second without her. The thought that she would marry and move away some day, that they'd no longer be able to be together every day, brought a burning lump to Änne's throat, a diffuse panic that took over every fibre of her being. I can't cope, she would think sometimes. I can't bear it.

She could only function together with Luise. Without Luise, she was all wrong, an oddity. She was a half. And when her sister had uttered the name of the new prisoner of war, the same feeling had stolen over Änne as when she pondered these things. The same diffuse panic. For there had been something else in Luise's voice. The merest hint of a possibility.

A possible way in which life could take her away from Änne.