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Amongst Loners

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ANGELA

8

She screamed. But it wasn't the triumphant holler she was hoping for – it sounded hesitant, almost scared of itself. Her next effort was a definite improvement, although it faded into the walls even more quickly than the apartment's usual noises. Not until her third try did she feel a proper scream rasping in her throat, exploding from her mouth and ringing gloriously in her ears. It was as if she had given voice to a new word – a perfect, joyous sound entirely appropriate to the occasion. After all, it wasn't every day Simon passed an examination. Somehow everything seemed more familiar than ever: every Swarovski seal on the stainless steel shelves; the smell of wax polish intermingled with the delicate scent of aromatic candles; even the worst dust magnet in the flat, the glass coffee table near the front door.

She noticed a ball of dust underneath the escritoire in the hallway. She fixed her gaze on it for a moment, smiling, unconcerned. There was no cleaning cloth to hand, no broom nearby – it could wait. All that mattered today was Simon; now he had cleared the final hurdle, he'd be starting his course in Leipzig this autumn. She had a bottle of Merlot ready to toast his success, and in less than half an hour her son would be in his mother's arms.

She was about to pull the key from the lock when the doorbell rang. The clock on the wall above the writing desk told her it was only eleven – Simon and Katrin couldn't possibly be here yet. Precariously balancing the weight of her shopping basket on one upraised knee, she managed to take the intercom receiver from the wall and hold it between her shoulder and ear, but the doormat slipped on the parquet flooring, giving way underneath her standing leg. She overbalanced, the groceries cascading to the floor, two stray tins of tomatoes clattering down the step leading from the entrance hall to the living room. Just in time, instinctively thrusting out a hand, she managed to grab the receiver. The cord strained as it took her weight. A crackling sound came from where the cable disappeared into the intercom unit, and the wire stretched a little more. She snatched at it with her free hand, pulling in an attempt to regain her balance. It was an almost impossible struggle, and she quietly whimpered, her body seeming to rebel against the effort. As she tried to reach forward once more, the flex came away from the wall with an abrupt dry snap. Splaying her hands in desperation, she managed to twist her body backwards to avoid the coffee table, but was unable to prevent herself crashing heavily sideways onto the floor.

7

It was darker by the time she opened her eyes. Had she been asleep? There was an open window at the far end of the room, and the curtain gave what looked like a tired wave. She could hear the wind outside, and imagined the leaves quivering in the breeze and the trees bracing themselves against it. Her face felt like it was burning, a tingling sensation filled her head. She heard the doorbell ring again, and tried to prise herself up with her arm. But it wouldn't move. Nothing moved.

The scattered shopping surrounded her where she lay. A bottle of olive oil had collided with the strawberries, and pink rivulets filled the gaps in the wooden floor panels. There was a distinct smell of ground beef. The

butter, now a deformed, golden blob shining disconcertingly close to her chin, was smeared all over the area under her nose. Not much further away, the ball of dust – the shape and colour of a rain cloud, its gossamer body held together by a skeleton of hair – was pirouetting in a draught of air. A breadcrumb and a fleck of black lint formed squinting eyes above the amorphous gaping hole that constituted its mouth.

“Are you aware of the fact that *two thirds* of accidents occur in the home?”

She was concentrating on moving her legs, tears of exhaustion streaming down her cheeks.

“You have to start *small*, and work your way up. Just look at *me* – I was once just a speck of dust, you know!”

Easy does it. Slowly. Watch your breathing, like when you’re doing your fitness walking. In her mind’s eye, she ran her hand over her head, down her neck, along her collar bone and across her shoulder, slipping down the upper arm, then the lower, before stopping at the back of her hand and pointing an authoritative finger. Move, index finger, blast you – *Move!* Just give me some sign of life, won’t you? Can’t you at least twitch? She wasn’t sure if anything was happening, and the dust ball executed a delicate feather step.

“Looks *bad*.”

The children would be here any minute. They’d come running to her, gather her in their arms and carefully help her to her feet.

“*Typical*. Forever hoping, hoping, hoping, even when it’s *obvious* you’ll soon be pushing up daisies.”

All she needed was some ice cubes on the back of her neck, a sip or two of red wine, and five minutes peace and quiet.

“Don’t be such a fool!” The ball of dust was performing repeated back flips. “Hope was invented by *losers*.”

To hope is human – her grandfather had unfailingly used those words when, ignoring her parents’ protests, he launched into one of his interminable tales describing how he had survived two world wars.

“*Human?* Is that supposed to be good or bad then...*eh?*” The dust ball performed a grand jeté before landing gracefully next to the butter. “Angie, my *dear*. You’re not *seriously* pinning your hopes on your *all-too-human* husband and your two *delightful* children, are you?”

She took a deep breath and blew as hard as she could. The ball of dust was whisked away, carried headlong down the hallway, and, at long last, there was silence. Until the filthy apparition abruptly re-materialised directly in front of her left eye, the hole that formed its shapeless mouth now squashed flat into a corrugated grin.

“Have you forgotten what happened the week before last? We’ll soon see who’s *happy* around here!” It exploded into a thousand tiny specks, burning her eyes, streaming into her mouth, nose and ears, and swirling around in her head; to the accompaniment of hoarse laughter, she was dragged into a vortex of floating images. A familiar face flickered past: she recognised Erich’s expectant expression. He called out her name and applauded, the sound echoing in her head, his hands held out towards her, then engulfing her in

an embrace, sending her spinning back to an almost-forgotten memory.

6

It's a Wednesday, one of those in-between days somehow: thunder in the air but not actually raining, muggy but cooled by the occasional gust of wind, continuous glaring light notwithstanding the thick blanket of cloud. She's leaning against the wall in the living room, wearing high-heeled leather boots and a cherry red dress with black lace adorning the sleeves, plunging neckline, and short hem. She has cleared her throat once too often. The oppressive silence is slightly alleviated by the lodger next door busy at his piano exercises. Of course, it's perfectly understandable that the children couldn't make it. They are independent now, grown up and living their own lives. They can hardly be expected to drop everything, interrupt their studies and sit for hours on a train every time there is a little celebration. It's hardly a big deal, is it? But it would have been nice.

"Heeeere it comes!" Roaring like a stadium announcer, Erich finally brings in the birthday cake, and he and Angela stand side by side at the dinner table to inspect it. From this bird's eye view, the marzipan cake, topped with the number 45 in garish icing circled by flickering red candles, resembles nothing more than a speed warning for traffic. Forty-five – it *is* a warning. It's a warning she already knows from the cellulite on her thighs and the dioptre measurement of her new glasses. Forty-five – the last landmark before the big Five-0. Forget forty-nine; forty-five is the final signal before the concluding dash to the end of the line. Forty-five means a five-year dress rehearsal in your forties for ten years of being in your fifties: a free sample of old age.

She stares, mesmerized, at the icing until Erich gives her an affectionate nudge, challenging her to blow out all the candles. Fortunately, there are only twenty, but she still needs three attempts. It's not until Erich takes her hand and leads her away that it occurs to her she's forgotten to make a wish. Her present is waiting in the kitchen: a refrigerator with a shining black lacquer finish that takes up half the room.

"Tatatataaa!" says Erich.

With missionary zeal, he describes the American XM 9000's features, pointing here, pressing there, lifting this bit and folding back that bit, while turning and clicking various buttons and knobs. There is enough space behind the vegetable drawer to store an entire crateful of beer – twenty bottles! There are eight different cooling levels, from *cool* to *freezing* all the way to *arctic*! There's an integrated machine in the door that produces crushed ice or ice cubes as well as soda water!

"For cocktails," Erich explains, popping an ice cube in his mouth and crunching it between his teeth.

She clears her throat. "Take care. You don't want to get an upset stomach."

"Well?" says Erich. "Do you like it?"

She won't sleep with him tonight. Before she can bear to have him close to her, she will have to block out the thought of that eager smile, which will take a few days. And it's not just his facial expression that leaves a lot to be desired. She can't remember when she first noticed he has a pair of tits to rival her own. It wouldn't do him any harm to spend an hour or so sweating in the fresh air: north along the bank of the Isar, across the

embankment, along the bank southwards, across the bridge and home again. But when she's going fitness walking and suggests he gives it a try, even if it's just the once, he always points out how arduous, stressful and draining his job is. "It's true, I sit at my desk all day, but you know how it is. At my age, it's not as if..." She never bothers listening to the rest of the sentence. She can complete it for herself.

...It's not as if I need to accommodate your feelings... feign interest in helping out around the house when I get home from work...bother carrying on with pillow talk after orgasm... tell you that I love you. Obviously, these were not his actual words. Erich would never say such things, but these are the thoughts he must carry about in his head, probably in a compartment of his mind labelled 'common sense' – an essential part of the brain, according to Erich. Once a month, usually on Sunday, he talks to the children on the phone, but always passes the receiver to her after a few minutes; once a month, he transfers enough money into the kids' bank accounts so they won't need to work while they're studying; once a month, they have an argument about whether or not he is properly fulfilling his paternal duties. He doesn't read Simon's short stories, and he didn't participate in Katrin's flat hunting. "But I never read books. It's just not my thing," is his way of dodging the first issue. "We have completely different tastes," dismisses the second. He frequently adds: "And anyway, you're so much better at it than I am," although he knows that she's perfectly well aware of that. Ever since her first positive pregnancy test, she's never had the slightest doubt that she will always do an exemplary job as a mother. She got up at 3 am to change the kids' nappies. She told Simon about the birds and the bees (Katrin had learned everything from teenage magazines by the time she was eleven). She gave them both a shoulder to cry on, tender hugs and kisses, understanding nods and compassionate looks with wide, knowing eyes. She encouraged Simon to apply to a creative writing course in Leipzig. She talked Katrin out of hosting a candlelit dinner, supposedly to discuss her future career as a German teacher, when it turned out that her daughter's prospective dining companion was a hunky professor with a full beard and a wedding ring. She defended Simon, and occasionally Katrin, too, against petty-minded teachers, bullying children, and their father; sometimes, even against herself. Yes, she has always been a bloody good mother, always will be. And Erich? Well. He's just a father. Full stop.

It all comes flooding back yet again at the sight of the smug look on his face as he continues his presentation of the fridge. He's lucky – she manages to conceal her fury somewhere it won't be noticed, behind her anticipatory thrill at tonight's dinner at the Einbachmühle, the swanky restaurant across the road, where they'll have candlelight, champagne...the works. It must be months since she did anything but prepare a dinner that was destined to be wolfed down while watching the evening news with Erich. She feels slightly unsteady. The heels on her boots are unfamiliar, as though she's standing on stilts.

"And you know the best thing about it?" exclaims her husband, clapping his hands. "The people at the electronics showroom are taking the old fridge as part payment. They gave me a three per cent discount! So – do you like it?"

"Yes, I like it, Erich. It's lovely. But tell me – when was the last time we drank cocktails?"

"Oh, there are loads of things we haven't tried out yet," he says, in a tone of voice she doesn't like at all. He grasps her breasts from behind and presses himself up against her.

"Not now."

Suddenly, she feels something rising in her gullet. Pushing him aside, she runs to the bathroom and leans over the toilet bowl.

A knock at the door. “You alright in there?”

She retches, but her stomach is empty. She hasn’t eaten – she’s been saving her appetite for the restaurant. Exhausted, she stretches out on the bathmat. To her surprise, she finds herself wishing she could vomit.

“Order something from the Chinese takeaway!” she shouts through the door.

“You alright in there? Is there anything I can do?”

She listens closely to every word. If she wants to know what her husband is thinking, and not just what he wants her to think, she has to catch every nuance of his phrasing. And at this moment in time, on the eve of her forty-fifth birthday, she knows that Erich is delighted with her suggestion: that there is nothing he’d like more than to cancel the evening out; that even during the entrée he’d be suggesting they have desert at home, it’s only across the road, and, besides, it wouldn’t do any harm to save a few euros.

Another knock. “Darling? Do you want me to come in?”

She locks the door. “Can you order me some soup? Just something plain, okay?”

“Are you sure that’s all you want? After all, it’s your birthday.”

In a different family, those might be the loving words of a concerned husband. But it’s your *birthday!* With Erich, she can almost see his shrug through the door: it’s *your* birthday.

“Angela?” She can hear rattling coming from the kitchen. “Where do you keep the number for the Chinese?”

She splashes water on her face, dries it off, and takes a cursory glance in the mirror. How long has she had these wrinkles that seem to be pulling at the corners of her mouth?

“Angela? Can you hear me?”

Oh yes, she can hear him! Why the hell is she still in here, anyway? Chinese? Glutinous sweet and sour chicken? To hell with it – not tonight! She brushes her teeth. She rouges her cheeks, puts on fresh lipstick and mascara, retraces her eyebrows and sprays *en passant* – her favourite perfume – on her neck. Today there’s a birthday to celebrate, damn it. Forty-five years of Angela. She’s going to have salmon carpaccio and duck breast, fillet of beef, and the most expensive dessert on the restaurant’s menu.

“Darling?”

Her hand almost reaches for the door handle.

“*Angela!*”

She lies in the bathtub, still in her dress and high-heeled boots. The running water drowns out the sound of

Erich's voice. She is soon submerged. It's warm and quiet. It feels good.

5

“*Shit!* The human male – and such a *humane* specimen, too! Well worth the wait, if I may say so!”

The daylight tore into her as she snapped her eyes open. She was awake – she was awake! – still in the entrance hall, and, as far as she could tell, in exactly the same position. The curtain in the living room was billowing in the wind, and she could feel the gentle breeze caressing her skin. It tickled the hairs on her arms – surely that was a good sign?

“Forget it.” She couldn't see the dust ball anywhere. “It's just your nerves saying *bye-bye*.”

A stabbing pain came from inside, travelled along her spine. She gasped for air.

“*Nasty*, isn't it? We'd better get a move on. Why don't we check in with your charming *brood* next?”

4

All the shadows in the bedroom are flickering. The only light is from the sparse collection of red and white candles on the windowsill. She has squeezed into her daughter's birthday present, a skin-tight black negligee, and is lying on her bed while Katrin, draped in a pink bathrobe, refills their glasses from the third bottle of prosecco before sitting cross-legged beside her.

“I look like a seal,” she tells her champagne glass, the bubbles tickling the tip of her nose.

Katrin rolls her eyes. “You can stop talking like that right now! You're beautiful, do you hear, *beautiful!* You're the sexiest forty-five-year-old I know!”

“That's a contradiction in terms.” She plucks at the silky material. She only likes what she sees from the hem down: her slim, taut calf muscles seem half as old as the rest of her body.

Katrin gives her a teasing nudge. “So the two of you ate a Chinese takeaway and watched a movie on telly? Is that *really* all you got up to?”

Her daughter is apparently the last living female in the northern hemisphere who still believes marriage means happily-ever-after. She has no idea where Katrin got this notion.

“It was a good movie. ‘Dolores’ – have you seen it?”

The sound of snoring can be heard through the wall. They both giggle.

“Does he always go to bed this early?” asks Katrin, draining her glass in one gulp.

“Only when you come to visit.”

“Perhaps we should ask him if he'd care to join us.”

“Katrin,” she says, topping up their glasses until the foam overflows onto the mattress. “Are you seriously suggesting we ask your father to join his wife and daughter in a candlelit discussion about relationships?”

Katrin nods.

“In that case, I’d like to know who the bloody hell I’m speaking to. What have you done with my daughter? Where is she?”

Their laughter is so loud that for a moment it drowns out the snoring next door.

“Here’s to you meeting *your* Prince Charming one day,” she intones solemnly, clinking her glass against Katrin’s.

The corners of her daughter’s mouth twitch almost imperceptibly when she responds.

“And, one sunny day, may you bring *your* Prince Charming back to life with a kiss!”

This time they sip gingerly from their glasses, quietly humming and hawing. Her daughter’s frozen smile reminds her of an airline stewardess. All of a sudden, Erich’s thunderous snoring is so deafening it’s as if he were lying there between them.

“I’ve met someone,” confesses Katrin, inspecting the turquoise polish on her toenails. “That’s why I didn’t come to the birthday party.”

“It’s not that driving instructor with the crooked teeth?”

“Marco is a fantastic guy.”

“I’m sure he is, if you want a career in dentistry.”

“Don’t worry – I haven’t seen him in ages. But I still can’t tell you who it is.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because he told me not to.”

“So, you like him more than he likes you.”

“Huh?”

“One lover always loves more than the other.”

“That’s a stupid platitude.”

It probably came out bitchier than intended, she understands that. Katrin has never had much of a stomach for criticism – or prosecco, for that matter.

“You’ll learn – one sunny day,” she mumbles, but she doesn’t really mean it, either.

Katrin puts down her champagne flute. “Who do you love more, Simon or me?”

“That’s different.”

“Just out of interest – Simon or me?”

“Sweetheart, can we please change the subject?”

The hiss Katrin makes as she slides off the bed, pulling her robe tighter, is quiet but unmistakable. “Need a wee...” She stalks out, slamming the door behind her.

It’s better for Katrin to learn these lessons now, rather than during the course of a quarter of a century of marriage. She knows only too well what it’s like when love is unequal. There’s her husband. There’s the children. And there’s the callow youth who inveigles her with embarrassing love letters. A few weeks ago, two men from the Bad Tölz carpentry came to renew the parquet flooring. The older man was a taciturn chap, but his apprentice was a handsome young thing who always seemed to be in the same room as her, whether she happened to be cleaning windows or slicing carrots. At first, she had assumed it was just coincidence. He was very friendly and took a great interest in everything, although some of his questions were rather personal, like how long had she been married, and did she still look forward to her husband getting home from work? On the day the job was finished, he presented her with a bouquet of thirty-seven – thirty-seven, she counted them – blood-red roses, and asked her out to dinner. She thanked him awkwardly, and asked how old he was. He said he was twenty, and she couldn’t help but smirk at this blatant lie. He seemed to take this as an affirmative answer, so she said, in an affectionate, maternal tone:

“My dear boy, you don’t *really* want to go out with me.”

“Don’t I?” His whisper made her wonder if his voice had fully broken yet.

“Of course not,” she continued, shaking her head and reluctantly handing back the flowers, after inhaling their bittersweet perfume one last time. “What you want to do is invite some nice young girl to the cinema.”

How wrong can you be? Since then, he had written every day, page after page, all filled with romantic dreams and all addressed to her! The fantasies invariably involved the two of them in some secluded paradise, in a snug forest cabin, under a cosy woollen blanket. Angela and Philip – in love. Love, love, love. Nothing but love. She throws all the letters in the bin. That is, after she’s stolen a quick glance at them – that can’t do any harm, surely? She knows Philip Thelen is, technically, a stalker. And a particularly persistent one at that – this has been going on for weeks. When she meets him at the front door, she doesn’t say a word to him. She listens for a while as he describes his endearingly fanciful hopes: if they could have just one night together, if she would respond to his letters just once, utter a solitary rapturous word of encouragement, have a coffee with him at the baker’s, a chat on the way to the supermarket, give him a single loving glance. Just one.

She knows the correct way to behave. She never encourages Philip Thelen in any way. She stares at the doorstep. She never invites him into the house, doesn’t tell anyone about him. She refuses to even think

about him. But she can't help dreaming about him. She dreams about him often: she can't remember when she last dreamed about a man like this.

Katrin swoops back into the bedroom, wearing jeans and a polo neck. "Have you seen my gloves?" she asks, matter-of-factly.

"Why? What's going on?"

"A friend just called. I have to go to Munich."

She sits up. "At *this* time of night?"

Their eyes meet, just for a fractured moment. Katrin's eyes seem glazed, moist. "They must be here somewhere," she sniffs, rummaging in the wardrobe before getting down on her knees and looking under the bed.

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" Katrin's winter coat is draped over the back of a chair. She digs around in the pockets and retrieves her daughter's suede mittens.

"Oh, *there* they are," says Karin, snatching them from her hand. "Thanks."

Five minutes later, they are standing in the porch across the road. Their breath looks like smoke in the orange haze of the street lamp. Katrin is nervously shifting her weight from one foot to the other, like she's performing a faltering jig.

Angela has tossed Erich's anorak over her negligee. "Wouldn't you rather stay the night?" Her pleading tone sickens her, but she can't help it. "Who calls you at this time of night anyway?"

"*Mama!*"

"It's just that...can't you at least admit that no one really called."

Katrin is pounding her feet on the cold paving. The last time she remembers her acting like this was when she was eleven, and adamantly refused to let anyone brush her curly hair. For some reason, the memory makes the negligee seem tighter, cutting into her hip and restricting her breathing.

"If you're so clever, then why did you marry him?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know *exactly* what I mean! You hate each other's guts. Why are you together?"

"That's not true," she retorts, as if she were putting straight a simple misunderstanding. "We don't hate each other. It's just that we've spent half our lifetimes in each other's pockets."

"But..."

Her daughter interrupts herself, and turns to leave.

She calls out. "Katrin!"

"What is it?"

"I love you both. You know that," she whispers. "I love Simon, and I love you just as much."

Katrin nods, her face betraying no emotion. Then she speaks, loudly, like a judge passing sentence. "Don't forget – many happy returns on your *forty-fifth* birthday." Her voice is clipped, every stressed syllable echoing in Angela's ears long after her daughter has been swallowed up by the night at the end of Buchnerstrasse.

3

"So long, farewell, Auf Wiedersehen, goodnight..."

Although, or perhaps because, she was lying motionless, it was as if she was withdrawing into herself, seeking sanctuary in her innermost being, the same place where her joy at Simon's success was hiding. She could hardly wait to greet him: he looked so handsome when he was happy. If only it were more often.

"Clever girl! I was just about to get to *him*. The last item on our agenda. You'll soon see – there isn't the *itsy-bitsiest* reason for you to hang about any longer. You needn't worry. You'll definitely go to Heaven, considering how deadly *boring* your life has been."

As soon as she got better, the first thing she was going to do was clean the apartment from top to bottom, every nook and cranny, making every floor slat shine, every damn millimetre, even if it meant going down on her hands and knees until every last speck of dust was obliterated.

"Oh no, dear lady!" The rattling voice clanked in her head, echoing near and far. "Today's it's *your* turn to be obliterated."

2

The ink is royal blue, the paper wafer thin, almost transparent, the handwriting so elaborately ornate its author might have learned to write in the nineteenth century. *A passing lad a rose blossom spied, A blossom on the heath growing*, she is reading at the letterbox in the morning. *'Twas so fair and of youthful pride*, she has only slipped on her bathrobe for the short journey to the hallway, *Raced he fast to be near its side*, and although she feels a little chilly, *He looked on it with joy o'erflowing*, she remains rooted to the spot. *Blossom, blossom, blossom red, Blossom on the heath growing*, her eyes leap from one line to the next, as if she was twenty-five again, no – a fifteen-year-old, *Rose blossom on the heath*, she crumples the paper in her firm grip, *Rose blossom on the heath*, the sweat from her hands smudging the ink.

Philip Thelen.

Back in the kitchen, she doesn't waste another thought on him. Erich wishes her a good Saturday morning

with a yawn before disappearing behind the paper. While pouring him a cup of camomile tea, she tells him that Katrin went back to Munich in the middle of the night.

No reaction.

Philip Thelen.

In the living room, she turns on the radio, flops onto the beige armchair by the window, her favourite place, and allows her gaze to escape to the view outside. The presenter, a Germanist literary critic with a reedy nasal whine, is discussing 'You, Yesterday', the much-heralded new novel by a renowned Berlin author. In truth, she isn't particularly interested in literature. The last time she read anything of any length, it was because her son had written it. But something the presenter says catches her attention: writing course. The author will soon be teaching at the institution she persuaded Simon to apply to a few weeks ago.

Sometimes she is distressed by the thought of Simon fending for himself in Leipzig. Her son has always been terribly introverted; even in kindergarten, his teachers called him 'reserved', as he preferred surrounding himself with a castle made from wooden blocks to playing with the other kids in the sandbox (she recalls his rebuke, which Erich still loves to quote, especially when they have visitors: "The other children never stop gabbling!"). Simon never really left that fortress. When they speak on the phone, she seems to take on Katrin's role, and he Erich's. It's almost impossible to wheedle anything out of him about his life. She wouldn't dare ask about girls, she knows none of his friends, and they've hashed and rehashed all the Leipzig sights ad infinitum. That leaves the climactic disparity between Upper Bavaria and Saxony. And his studies, another touchy subject. During the last five years or more, he has changed courses at Leipzig University so often it's almost as if he'd made up his mind to get a taste of every subject on offer. At first it was German and history of art, then – on Erich's recommendation – business studies and economics. After that it was theatre studies and his subsequent unsuccessful application to the Academy of Visual Arts – or did he take philosophy before that? – followed by two weeks of communications and media studies, and now the waiting and worrying about his application to the writing school.

Philip Thelen

Silently, she closes the door to the kitchen, where Erich is noisily folding the economics section. She turns up the volume on the radio, planting herself next to a loudspeaker, and lets the critic's hymn of praise for 'You, Yesterday' sing in her head. "It is lamentable that there is no new generation of fresh, young talent coming through in our country. What will happen when the great names have passed on? Please call the following number if you'd like to give us your views on this crucial subject."

Without knowing quite what she's doing, she has picked up the receiver, tapped the number into the dial, and can hear the ringing tone. A nasal voice answers: "...and our first listener is already on the line."

"Hello?"

"Good morning! You're live on air."

"That was quick!"



“We like to think we have our finger on the pulse here, you know! To whom am I speaking?”

“Angela. My name is Angela.”

“And what would you like to share with us this morning, Angela?”

“You were saying, weren’t you, that there are no young people writing anything worth reading?”

“That’s exactly right. And the sad and unfortunate fact is I’m not the only one who thinks that way.”

“Well, I happen to know a young man, his name is Simon, who is a very talented writer. He may be a little bit shy, but underneath that he has a great talent just waiting to be discovered. I’d stake my life on him.”

“And how did you get to hear about this Simon, may I ask? Through a book? Or a reading?”

“Simon is my son.”

“Oh – you’re his *mother*?”

“Yes.”

“Well, in *that* case ...”

“Do you think that means I can’t tell if he has talent or not? If you give me your address, I’ll gladly send you something of his.”

“Perhaps we can discuss that later. So, tell us more, Angela. Your son is a writer, you say?”

“Ever since he was thirteen. Short stories and novels. He even won fourth place once, in a writing competition in a literary magazine. The name escapes me at the moment...”

“And you like his writing?”

“I don’t always understand everything. But that’s just me – I don’t read enough.”

“Isn’t that true of all of us? But seriously, how do you feel about your son being a writer one day?”

“Proud. But that’s not all. It’s probably hard for a man to understand. This may sound daft, but it reminds me of when I was in the delivery ward, and I heard his first scream. There was so much love and anguish and hope in that scream, an extreme family emotion, I suppose. There’s no word to describe it.”

“Perhaps your son might dream one up? Is he around, by any chance? Can we speak to him?”

“No, he lives in Leipzig. He ...” she hesitates, “he’s doing a course in writing...”

“You *don’t* say. Well, I wish him the best of luck with that. And you...”

“He hasn’t called yet.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ve kept it to myself, so Erich and Katrin won’t get cross with him. But still, it’s not easy. I’ve got used to the fact he doesn’t give me a present any more, like he used to, when his cheeks were chubby and he called a lorry a ‘lolly’. He gave me gift vouchers back then, or some of his pocket money. But he could have at least called. After all, it was my forty-fifth birthday!”

The presenter gives an embarrassed cough. “Well, Angela, what can I say? Today’s youth, eh? I’m sorry we don’t have longer...”

“You’re right. He’s young, that’s all. It’s all right...” She starts, but the taste is so bitter she can’t finish the sentence. It’s all right? ALL RIGHT?

Philip Thelen.

“Damm!” she yells. “Damm. Damn. Damn.” What she’d really like to do now is recite ‘Rose Blossom on the Heath’. She’d like nothing better than to announce: “This was written by Philip Thelen.” It’s only when she hears the words blasting from the radio and into her ears that she realises she has been speaking out loud. “And Philip Thelen is my boyfriend – my lover!” It slips out, just like that, the wonderful noise ringing from the loudspeakers into living rooms, heads, cafés and lorry driver’s cabins all over Bavaria. “First my husband gives me a fridge! An XM 9000, would you believe!” She feels good, she feels strong. “And then I get a nightgown, which I know my daughter really bought for herself.” God in Heaven, this feels good. There is a tingling excitement in her breast, like when she had her first kiss. “I bet she’ll be wanting to borrow it next week!” Her voice is almost failing her, rising in timbre, getting too high to be taken seriously. She brings it back down with a single word. “Philip!” The receiver drops, and her head bows. “And my son doesn’t give a damn about me.” She strides through the kitchen, determinedly but without haste, and into the bedroom, ignoring Erich’s muttered request for another cup of camomile tea. She locks the door, slips out of her clothes, carefully folding them over the back of a chair, sticks her earplugs in her ears, draws the curtains closed, and crawls under the bedclothes.

She cries. Silently.

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When she opened her eyes again, the ball of dust had disappeared. Her heart was beating harder – it must have been in anticipation. She had won. The dust ball had lost, and she had won. Who cares what may have happened yesterday? She wasn’t going to let any memories drag her down. After all, the second half of her life lay ahead of her. It would be wonderful, the best half. No more braces or maths homework; without the pill, wedding plans or labour pains, she would be able to reap the rewards of her life so far, starting with a small party to celebrate Simon’s success. She wouldn’t need hope for that. No: she – mother, homemaker and wife – she *was* the hope.

Something either warm or very cold, she wasn’t sure which, suddenly crawled across her skull towards her face. She could only manage to open her right eye. The curtain was hanging limply in front of the window.



Then, before she was able to send another command to her index finger, the image blurred before disappearing completely.

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English translation by Ruth Feuchtwanger