

Iglhaut, by Katharina Adler,
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LUCK

'He'll never make it, though,' objected Prickl.

Valeria raised her arms and said, 'Well exactly. A fortnight for free and all to yourself!'

Though that sounded plausible, she hadn't fancied the idea. Especially when Uli, happy now after all, had turned up at her door to tell her the competition organiser had agreed to the 'engaged couple's' trip, as per the 'wedding planner's' requirements.

He had even bought himself new sandals, where some nail clippers would've been the pressing purchase. Began pondering whether he should go to the tanning parlour to get ready: the Egyptian sun was going to challenge his 'Nordic complexion' in entirely unknown ways.

Nordic. Prickl shook her head: Uli was the 'stay-at-home' skin type. Which was another reason why his unexpected busyness was bothering her.

There was already talk in the front building. Frau Ivanović (3rd floor, on the left) waylaid her in the courtyard: A honeymoon before even walking up the aisle... would never have occurred to her. But anyway.

Tildi Rolff (3rd floor, on the right): 'I never cease to be amazed how the enlightened citizen likes to holiday where there is little regard for basic rights.'

Jasmina from the supported flatshare (1st floor, on the right): 'With that gorg' hunk ? Feeling left on the shelf, Frau Prickl? I mean, I'd sooner let my clam dry up than get him to water it.'

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Prickl saw Jasmina off with a snarl. She wasn't disinclined towards coarseness per se, but *getting your clam watered* was a bit excessive.

Frau Ivanović, again: 'You two marrying, jój! Nobody here noticed, the secret love affair. You are surely about to move in together. You know, my nephew is frantically searching. So, you tell me right away when your flat's free, yes?'

Even the garage in the courtyard, where Prickl had set up her workshop, even this garage seemed to have an opinion on her trip. Things were constantly dropping off the wall these last few days: the angle finder, the saw; nothing was in its place anymore. But what was that supposed to signify? The garage was keeping itself under wraps.

Come to think of it – the author from the top floor was also maintaining a low profile. That wasn't unusual in itself. Same as there wasn't a peep out of Quereletta (2nd floor, garden building). There could be as many reasons for that as days in the year. Or just one: Querele. And the couple on the ground floor were too preoccupied to take an interest in other people's good fortune – they were her favourite neighbours of all.

The cherry tree branches were tapping on the roof with apparently nothing special to contribute. Prickl bent over the trestle table (order 12). That old varnish needed to come off the table-top. Early silver strands fell into her face: she stuck them under the hairband she wore for working. *Holiday*. A sound as from an unknown language. A holiday, she thought, was only restful if you were left in peace. Uli was all right for a cig-break chat, you could give him that. Within the confines of the backyard. Beyond that, it was a bit wearing talking to him, had to be said.

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Sanding the varnish off this table was a difficult task. Prickl applied the sander one more time, pressing harder. Uli's flapping tongue alone! He'd been telling absolutely everyone about their 'trip together'. 'Just by-the-by', no doubt. Though how could anyone believe that she would... with him?

Love, to Prickl, was a few cracked timbers, a couple of splinters – at any rate it cut an entirely different figure to that twig-like Uli. *Feeling left on the shelf*. That Jasmina hadn't a clue! And Frau Ivanović with her ideas. That nephew could wait in vain for her flat in the garden building. A gem, it was, with a south-facing balcony! They'd have to carry her out of there, feet-first. If anyone was moving in with anyone, they were moving in with her. The very idea: in with Uli, with his one hob in the kitchen and repurposed-oven bookshelf? A hoarder was what he was, with a collection of postcards from World War One and a penchant for atlases depicting long-vanished borders. Even for somebody like Uli, there was surely the right woman somewhere, but a Prickl was not the one.

She dragged the sander energetically over the table legs. Besides, she could still bail out, she told herself, she would have to, if Uli was serious after all. She'd made promises to nobody and had no obligations. If she did, then towards Ms Merkel, at most.

PILOT

Monday. The table was newly glue-laminated, still wet with fresh varnish in the garage. No further order was forthcoming. Monday, and Uli still on tip-top form about setting off with her

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on Thursday. Prickl, on the other hand, had her doubts: winning first prize – in a crossword puzzle. Wasn't that more than improbable? Maybe it was one of those wins the small print revealed to be a swindle? It would be just like him to fall for something like that, Prickl thought. Hope began to bud.

Tuesday. An e-mail from Uli with an exuberant greeting in Arabic, which Violet Tawfeek (1st floor, on the left) had translated for him (and then translated back for Prickl). Please find, attached, the plane ticket and info sheet from a tour operator on when and where they would be met after landing.

Prickl mixed herself an Old Fashioned. She had taken a very close look at the document. The plane ticket was not a forgery, her details were correct. She had even checked with the airport hotline that there really was a charter flight on Thursday. Everything in perfect order. Unfortunately. Was she now going to have to borrow a suitcase and find somewhere for the dog? Ask Valeria to water the flowers and impress upon her not to touch the spirits?

With the next sips, came the insight: She had not been taking the whole thing seriously enough. The glass got emptier; her soberness waned. To compensate, a new hope wheeled drunkenly upwards: her neighbour had suddenly seized new courage and was going to redeem his prize by himself. Wasn't it *his* crossword puzzle? He, and only he, had been the winner! 'Off you go, Uli! Get on the plane, and leave me at home! That's how you meet someone who's right for you,' Prickl called out to the watercress on her windowsill.

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Hangover all of Wednesday. But then that evening, the turnaround came. Valeria's plan was a success. A ring at the doorbell. Uli, inconsolable, cursing his body that was suddenly weak. He was wheezing: tickly throat. Very likely a high temperature too. He was holding a book he had purchased specially for the excursion: she absolutely had to read it in his place.

Thursday, shortly before dawn, Prickl in bed with her own concerns: When had she last gone anywhere, herself? She had never even made it to the capital thus far. Her most recent flight? Years and years ago. She had gone carbon-neutral long before it was a thing.

'Yes, all right,' she said aloud into the darkness. 'Prickl's kidding herself!'

WORLD TRIP

Ms Merkel stayed put demonstratively outside as she entered the snack bar. Herakles, at the counter out front, listened wide-eyed to her tale of woe. 'A small car?' Took her hand. 'No!' Shook his head over and over. 'The dentist is Death's little brother. Once he's got you, you're a goner.'

'Mine's a *she*,' Prickl interjected.

'Even worse, because women are even more thorough than Death!'

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‘Herakles!’ his mama admonished from the kitchen, kneading the dough as though trying to tame mortality and quash all prejudices against her gender by-the-by.

Herakles let go of Prickl’s hand and tore a sheet off his order pad. ‘We’ve giving discounts now,’ he said. ‘You can also start a tab, other customers do.’

Prickl took her purse out of her jacket pocket. ‘The coffers aren’t empty yet. I’ll have the stew, please.’

Herakles hesitated. ‘The stew is... delicious. Though the skepasti with belly pork is divine today, simply: Mmmh-ahh!’

‘I don’t doubt it, but...’ Prickl pointed at her dully throbbing cheek.

Herakles, full of concern, ladled a big portion of soft beans onto her plate, carved a blossom out of a radish, and planted it in the centre with care. Meanwhile, Prickl set a bowl of water in front of Ms Merkel outside and sat down at the plastic table by the counter. The telephone in her jacket pocket buzzed. Dori wanted to hear how it went at the dentist. Was she sure she didn’t need his trainee’s assistance?

She’d answer that later, she texted back. Even though Herakles could have no inkling who she was writing to, there was this tacit agreement that the two of them, lawyer and snack-bar owner, knew nothing of each other and wanted to keep it that way, as though they only coexisted, like Schrödinger’s cat, without Prickl there to observe them.

She gazed at the blossom sculpture in the stew. So exquisitely carved, like true devotion was blossoming out of the veg. On occasion, Prickl was enthralled by trifles like this.

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Her preferred move would have been to turn round to Herakles: Come, let us disappear together, off to somewhere else! To an island, where nobody's heard of drudgery and penury and we can both just bob on existence's waves.

She didn't turn round, though. Because a Prickl never turned round, but was constantly resolved upon what lay ahead. She therefore began mulling over the savings that needed to be made in the days to come and how to advertise her workshop more effectively online.

Frau Ivanović had come into the snack bar. She called out a greeting – 'Ciao, mama' – in the direction of the kitchen and nodded at Prickl, nowhere near as amicably as recently. Why was she so peeved – ?

When Ivanović's skepasti was ready, she did ask, though, if she could join Prickl at the table. Prickl nodded, pushing her radish-blossom to the edge of the plate. Her neighbour's sandwich hadn't had anything like that carved for it by Herakles. That notwithstanding, Frau Ivanović ate her skepasti with a relish that Prickl couldn't help but take personally. Once full, she stood up, wiped the gravy off her mouth with a serviette, and put her plate back on the counter.

'Oh, by the way,' said Frau Ivanović as she threw a few coins in the tip mug. 'There's someone asking after you at the workshop. From the church it seems. About the wedding, is it? Which apparently isn't happening, though. More's the pity!' And off she went without saying bye.

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Prickl stood up hastily, wondering which was more annoying: the pointed remark, or that Ivanović had only now seen fit to inform her about the customer.

Herakles laughed.

‘Ivanović is so sweet. She really took that engagement thing seriously.’

‘Very sweet.’ Prickl handed him her plate. ‘And thinks she has to rub it in on top of it. You could have weighed in, you know.’

Heracles raised his arms. ‘Me? I’d only have said something wrong... And then we’d have had new rumours.’

Prickl flicked something into the tip mug too. She walked out of the snack bar, whistled to Ms Merkel, who had curled up beneath the day’s specials, and went back to the yard.

Long white robe, a veil. The woman waiting looked like an elderly bride herself. ‘A lengthy break, and just before closing.’ There was a mocking tone to her voice. ‘Nice for some...’ She extended her hand nevertheless.

Prickl shook it tentatively, then opened the garage and said, over her shoulder: ‘So, what is your business, Sister? What brings you to me?’

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Order 13

Restoration of three historical wood figures

What had brought the Sister to Prickl? A desire long cherished by Mother Superior, which, with time, had become a command: would Sister Amalburga please attend to the figures in the cellar. Not for the chapel – the carvings were not that significant – but for the passage on the way to it.

Amalburga liked the corridor the way it was, actually: austere, the walls whitewashed, a worn sisal runner over the herringbone parquet. What was more, she was busy. First, morning prayers at shortly after six, and after that she had unscrewed the syphon under the sink. She'd been confronted with an acrid slick, food remnants in the pipe, hardened into lumps. The smell was still clinging to her habit, and she had also cricked her neck under the sink.

Amalburga rolled her shoulders, stretched her neck. The water was draining again at least, was no longer stagnant, murky and oily: a clear right-spinning vortex down the drain. She rewarded herself for this with a jam sandwich and another one, though she knew rewards like that led only to an even tighter habit. She had passed on sugar in her coffee. It was tolerable, with not much more flavour than hot water. Specially for Mother Superior, who could barely stomach caffeine these days.

After breakfast, Amalburga clamped her plate and cup between two beer glasses in the already full dishwasher and looked out into the passage. Mother Superior was already crutching along to the chapel. Sister Imani was still sitting at the breakfast table and rubbing

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balm into the raw patches on her hands. On the window ledge next to the herbs, the guinea pigs chirped in their cage. Imani had christened the pair 'Luke' and 'Leia'. With their creamy-white fur, they looked like little Jedis, she thought.

Greedy they plucked the proffered parsley out of Amalburga's hands. She blew them a final kiss, closed the cage and hurried next to Sister Imani through the passage to the next prayers.

Wintery morning sunlight streamed through the chapel window; Amalburga kneeled in the last pew. Mother Superior's throaty recitation, Sister Imani's soprano murmuring: Amalburga abandoned herself to the prayers, warm whispering against stony echo. The sun's rays wandered, cut through their concentration, made Sister Imani's blue habit bright.

Amalburga watched from behind as her fellow nun kept carefully spreading her fingers, to protect the raw sections of skin. Ruby-sore hands. For months, Imani had been unable to clean, type, had been barely able to pray. Their hopes were now set on healing solar rays, if the intercessions were no help and cortisone was no good either.

The sun moved away from the chapel window more swiftly than prayers passed by. Eventually, Mother Superior hoisted herself off the pew at last and crutched back to the bedchamber she called her *infirmarium*. Amalburga looked after her with a sinking feeling. When she, the staunch believer, died, that would mean the demise of more than Mother Superior.

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Amalburga set off towards the school block. She had no class to teach today, but there were still e-mails waiting in the secretary's office. She wanted to check assembly-hall occupancy, to ensure there would be no more clashes between theatre club, choir and the seniors' computer group. When the seniors didn't get the space they had rented, they smelled a major conspiracy straight away – it would be miracle if the Vatican, at least, wasn't behind the over-occupancy.

Everything was still quiet, with the pupils ensconced in their classrooms. Usually, she enjoyed the life that came coursing out of the rooms when the bell for break time rang. Lately, though, the hormone-driven yelling and trampling had become too rattling and strident for her. In the staff room, she took a pair of leggings out of her cubby hole, pulled them on under her skirt, over her tights, and stole out.

The cemetery was not far away. A solitary hunched figure sat amid empty bottles on a bench, clawing her hands through her crusty hair. Amalburga would have gladly sat down and joined the drinker, but not today. She kept an arrow-straight course across the front part of the cemetery. Gravel paths, mud and a trampled can. She kicked the can up to the rubbish bin. A sweetish smell. Some of them in the senior classes drank soft drinks like this even before first lesson. She had no need for that amount of energy: some stronger coffee would suffice.

The remoter part of the cemetery was reached via a narrow passage. A lapidarium lined the entrance. The gravestones were no sites for mourning. They were memorials, on which long-forgotten names could be read and beneath them, professions that were now no

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more: battle-painter, senior counsellor of mines, medallist, heraldist, hackney coachman.
Amalburga's favourite was *love-letter delivery man and confidant for secret matters*.

She stepped up to Christ Crucified. He towered on a stone pedestal. She knelt down, for the third time following early prayers in the dormitory and chapel. The stone was cold; Amalburga's knees got damp immediately, despite the tights and leggings. She folded her hands, tilted her head back because the veil was heavy. A vertebra cracked. She had been neglecting her physio programme lately.

As she was trying to initiate the dialogue, a heavy-breathing runner rumbled past her. She turned round instinctively. The calves on him! Brawny packets on the back of the leg, tensing step by step. He, unlike her, had been neglecting nothing. Amalburga wiped her nose on the back of her hand and was about to turn back to Christ Crucified. Caught a scent of coffee. An espresso like they had at Alighieri, that would be good medicine now for the heavy eyelids and the dizziness from her neck. Standing at the counter, she could chat with the owner or tease the trainee. Yassin got annoyed so touchingly.

Dear God, what was wrong with her today? She skipped a few bits in her tête-à-tête and stood up. Upright wasn't any better, not without some strong coffee. Past a bare black poplar at the cemetery's northern exit, past a chestnut tree, the hornbeam up ahead. To Amalburga, trees were the most beautiful plants under the sun. She counted them and named them. Trees lined her days.

She stepped out of their leafless shade onto the street and walked straight to Café Alighieri. The owner nodded at her. Without being asked, the trainee prepared a caffè doppio

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and placed it on the counter in front of Amalburga. She gulped it down, and asked the owner to put it on the tab for today. 'But I need the money at the end of the month,' the owner said. 'God's wages never paid anyone's overheads.'

The caffeine brightened Amalburga's nerves, it gave her mischievous streak a nudge. She pretended not to have heard the comment above the machine's noise, lay one hand on the other, and turned to Yassin. 'You're kitted out beautifully again today,' she said to him. 'What a smoothie. Who's it for?'

Yassin blushed, stroking his clean-shaven temples. Amalburga was pleased she had managed to discombobulate the boy again. But then he bowed playfully. 'Only for you, esteemed lady!' he replied. 'Even when love's unrequited, a man can keep hoping.'

Amalburga paused and gave a thumbs-up. 'Oh, that took you a moment, though, you rogue.'

'Rogue?' queried Yassin.

'Rascal, sly dog, scoundrel,' thesaurusised the owner. 'All the things you're not. Don't let the Sister tell you otherwise.'

Amalburga nodded approvingly. 'Listen to her. The boss is always right. How many cups do I owe you for? Five?' she asked and was already out of the door.

'Eight, Sister!' the owner called out behind her.

Back in the convent, Amalburga pulled her bunch of keys out of her skirt pocket, opened the door to the cellar, and put on the light. Dampness and tanginess – there must be

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incense still stored somewhere. Up ahead, the saint figures. She would take care of them the very next day. Or if not, then definitely the day after that.

TIME JUMPS

The idea was to have something light in the evening, the anaesthetist had advised her during the consultation. A friendly man, he'd been, with soft, new-shaven cheeks. He had shone a torch in her eyes and had a listen to her lungs. She'd be sure to handle the anaesthetic no problem, as long as she had an empty stomach. Food might get inhaled out of the gullet, otherwise.

TRAGIC DEMISE:

KIDNEY DONOR DAUGHTER CHOKES

Not a headline a Prickl wanted to leave behind. And yet headlines like that were coming into her head. Father was firmly against it, too. According to him, his ex-wife was making enough money from her online orders for some dialysis – and a waiting list, he'd said.

Prickl hadn't quite grasped the connection between Mother's business success and her donating a kidney, but hadn't contradicted him either. Said she just wanted to wait and see whether the preliminary tests showed she was even suitable. Because that's what Mother had asked. Find out if it's possible in the first place.

Mother, her aching back warmed by a heat cushion, had previously explained to Prickl that she'd activated all her resources: 'Tinctures, laying on of hands, light and colour therapy,

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remote reiki, power stones, electro treatments, cupping. I've been to the shaman, the spiritual healer, taken cosmic showers with a medium. And as you know, that Tirtze Braunschagen is a decent druid really.'

Mother had sighed and closed her eyes. 'Textbook medicine. Absolutely the last resort.'

Textbook medicine and her – or rather, one of her kidneys – now, that was something that did surprise Prickl. She and her mother did not look alike, and had differing opinions about everything that mattered. How could it be that their blood and organ values matched so closely? The values, apparently, practically belonged to identical twins.

'That what the doctor said?' Father asked. 'You, her twin, but a generation younger?'

'That's kind of how he put it, I've cut it short it a bit,' Prickl said.

Father looked worried, the way he used to when Mother had been at the 'Buddhist Meet & Mingle' and not come home until the next morning.

'In any case I'm glad she's finally given up her alternative treatments,' countered Prickl. 'You haven't seen her, the way she's deteriorated lately. Her swollen legs, how tired she is.'

'Tired. Can't be! That woman drove me to insanity with her energy.'

'Well that's precisely why I'm glad it's right. I could have had some condition to stop it happening, you know.'

Father despondently let his clamshell phone snap shut.

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'She's ill-using you,' he said. 'Daughter on hand with spare parts.'

'It's my decision,' came his daughter's rejoinder. 'I gave it careful consideration. There was a psychological pre-consultation and a check with the ethics committee too.'

'Psychologists and ethicists. They only ever have their eye on the feeble. And if there's one thing your mother can do, it's pick her moment to be feeble.'

Before the kidney donation, Prickl had only had two surgical interventions. The first was because of a hernia. She had been ignoring it for more than a year, with no idea of what exactly that bubble next to her pubic bone was. She couldn't remember who she'd been in bed with at the time, but she still recalled how they had pressed the little balloon through the hole in the tissue until it popped up again.

Whatever had they been thinking? They'd been playing with her gut!

The doctor who subsequently did her op had come recommended by one of her clients. If she was honest, it wasn't necessarily his reputation, but his name that had pleased her at first. Then Herr Prof. Dr de Vil's practice had totally convinced her. Fresh thank-you bouquets everywhere and a wall hung with framed autograph cards by Champions League winners with hernias. Alongside them, Olympic bob-sleighters, triathletes, Wimbledon last-16s, and presenters; a popular film actress was there as well. To all of them he guaranteed, following an out-patient intervention – as Herr Prof. Dr de Vil's website proclaimed – a return to training a mere week after the hernia operation.

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Prickl was impressed to read that a photoshoot or a long-haul flight was a proposition again after just 48 hours.

The second opinion, with an unremarkable name, had held out the prospect of one week in hospital and five more weeks of bed rest. So she paid the extra to Herr Prof. Dr de Vil, for whom her sickness fund contribution was too small. The route to the private lakeside clinic alone had meant a 45-minute taxi ride, though there had also been the few hours under post-op observation in a room more hotel than hospital. There had been a cake buffet and, in the drive outside the palatial entrance, Herr Professor's Jaguar Cabriolet with golf bag on the leather seats.

Prickl found that, in particular, oddly reassuring: anyone who could afford golf club membership and such a repair-prone car had to be diabolically good at darning holes.

'Frau Prickl.' Prof. Dr de Vil's voice clattered forcefully through the handset like an old petrol-driven motor. 'Get home safely?... Any after-effects from the anaesthetic – no?... Got the cool packs for your groin handy?... Yes, a chilled beer bottle will do the trick too. But the contents will have to wait until the day after tomorrow.'

The telephone call – which she had felt to be very considerate – was, naturally, charged for as well. And in the end it had been quite some time before she could stand in her workshop again. What kind of hard nuts were those bob-sleighters and actors?

For the follow-up examination she hauled herself to the city-centre practice of Herr Prof. Dr de Vil, and limped past his wall of fame. Maybe celebrity conferred superpowers?

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Professor Doctor was very happy with the way the wound was healing; he pulled out the stiches, and called after her when she left: 'Do me just one favour, please: can you not drag your leg so much!'

The devil! Prickl, who had barely hobbled into the practice, followed the doctor's heed and walked to the tram stop – the junior shot-put champ couldn't have done it more nimbly. She sat down in the tram-stop shelter. She crossed her legs. Suppressed a yelp.

Probably not quite there yet, then.

For her second intervention, she had cycled in. On registering, the porter at the entrance had said, 'have fun'. She had been impressed by his dark humour, though it was a bit soon for any laughing for her.

Before the operation she had been handed a gown, disposable knickers complete with sanitary towel, and compression stockings. Two tablets to get ready for the op. She had waited in a cold room with a hard chair and a hospital bed for which she was still too sprightly.

Orders in the outer room of the theatre were: Onto the couch, please, legs up!

How were left leg and right leg doing in their holders, then, a theatre nurse wanted to know; he asked her, any problems with ankles, knees or hips. She said no, and then the nurse tentatively parted the leg braces to see whether they could open her lower abdomen wider during the operation. She felt jabbing on the back of her hand: the anaesthetist, failing to find a good vein. She confronted Prickl with a choice: 'Mountain or sea?'

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Beg pardon? What a question. It takes both – right?

A misunderstanding. The anaesthetist wasn't wanting to hear quotidian philosophy.
But: 'To make going under easier for you, would you rather picture a lovely scene by the sea
or up in the mountains?'

So, in her imagination, Prickl stretched her strapped feet into the sand. Hands –
secured now too – and head were lying on a meadow just beneath the summit. Waves and
alpine violets. Or saltwater in the eyes and stinging nettles in the knee pits, more like.

As Prickl was coming round again in the recovery room, she'd cried. Weeping had made
her thirsty; the sister handed her a swab dipped in a lemony liquid which she was allowed to
suck on. Meanwhile she could feel the blood running out of her lower abdomen. She knew,
though, that would pass, and then this here would be just a memory and perhaps forgotten
soon.

There was none of that after the kidney donation: no blood, only her belly was curiously numb.
She was nauseous, too. The nights before the operation had been torturously long. From far
away, sleep had kept on at her: Mountain or sea, sea or mountain?

Get away with your great outdoors! There's always the pub.

Sleep had not been satisfied with that riposte. It had slunk off, hurt, leaving Prickl with
plenty of time for much too much thinking. Suddenly, she was convinced Mother wouldn't

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survive transplant day. Prickl's nocturnal turmoil! Harmonious relations between them were hard to achieve, but she mustn't be allowed to die!

The next night, however, brought panic over one kidney not being enough for Mother, she'd immediately snatch the other... She knew it was nonsense – thought she knew the roots of it, too. Those would have been evening phone call from her father, who had made one more attempt at dissuading her from her 'undertaking', as he called it.

And then, thank goodness, it was over. Through her queasiness in the recovery room Prickl heard the op had gone smoothly, and soon mother would be through it as well.

What mother?

For a brief moment, she was mentally in the second intervention. No-one here wanted to be a mother. What had she come here for, else?

Simultaneously a bed was rolled alongside hers, and the Pricklbrain returned to the correct time. The woman in the next bed resembled her mother, only sunken: eyes shut tighter than in sleep, mouth slack atop her shoulder. Into the woman's hand dripped the same fluid as into her own vein. Daughter's and mother's heart tones beeped in turn on their ECGs.

FAVOURITE ITALIAN

Mother had her maimed hand bandaged and immobilised in a sling, and determination furrowed into her brow. 'And now Piccolo Principe, please. Chop chop.'

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'Pardon?' asked Prickl. 'And what about your hand?'

'Never mind my hand. Come along!'

Prickl kept her foot wedged down on the accelerator, which caused the engine to snarl. She was impatient. The plan had been a flying birthday visit, not lengthy inspections of recent and poorly healed wounds.

Aforementioned Piccolo Principe (Mother's favourite Italian, apparently) was on the other side of town. She would show the way, Mother said. She reached for her jacket on the back seat, to hide the dried blood on her blouse. She painted fresh lilac on her lips. Thus reconstituted, Mother chattered on as though nothing had happened.

The chances are, she explained, you'll meet prominent politicians or someone in film at the Piccolo Principe. Not that the owner's one for bragging about her diners. Discretion's all a part of doing business.

And business was thriving, it seemed – else the owner couldn't have opened the Alighieri as well. The Alighieri was somewhat less to her taste, though, Mother said. The atmosphere's entirely different to here and it's got a different kind of clientele.

The restaurant was small and there were no tables free. Mother's brow now furrowed alarmingly as she was forced to admit she hadn't made a booking, unfortunately. The owner was not in. The manager looked in the bible-thick reservation book on the lectern and bobbed his head sceptically, which caused Mother's mood to teeter more.

'We can sit at the bar while we're waiting,' Prickl said hastily.

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It could be three quarters of an hour, the manager cautioned.

‘We’re in no hurry,’ Mother said and made a beeline towards the counter. Prickl could hardly keep up. ‘You’re her favourite restaurant, you see,’ she offered to the manager by way of an explanation. He held a hand to his chest as though he’d never heard anything so wonderful, and turned to the next person in line.

Mother laid the bandaged hand on the counter as she would a pricey handbag. ‘What a good idea you had,’ she said. ‘I also like the bar here better than the one in the Alighieri. The staff there’s a real hotch-potch. You’ve only got Italians working here. It’s just so incredibly authentic.’

She had already ordered two aperitifs. The barman put ice cubes and orange zest in glasses the size of bells. Her mother watched in such raptures as he did so that you’d think bliss was in the making.

Authentic. Prickl was so over the word. Several of her customers had asked for authentic furniture, and all of them had meant something different by it. When Elsbeth was still alive, she always seemed to be on the lookout for ‘authentic characters’. Was she, Prickl, authentic because she’d only moved house twice in her life? Was it authentic that it was often too much effort for her just to put on mascara? She hadn’t even combed her hair with her fingers just now in the car, when Mother was straightening her own ‘do and painting her lips. If she wanted to she could, though. Oh, yes – even stiletto-heeled shoes. Authentic was a veneer word. Promising to look at, but cheap at core.

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Prickl looked around as the barman served their Camparis. Red-cheeked conversations beneath a firmament of painted planets and stars. On the wall, a snake that looked like a hat. No – like a boa constrictor, digesting an elephant.

It's actually quite lovely sitting in drawings from a storybook, Prickl mused. Except no-one apart from her seemed to have noticed. There were no celebrities among the people sitting around, as far as she could tell. Just diners expecting to be treated like VIPs.

Prickl took a sip from her glass. The iced aperitif went straight for her molar. She clasped her cheek. Worried, Mother asked her what was wrong. Prickl told her about the lasagne.

'So you didn't notice there was still a bone in the mince when you were browning it?' Mother queried.

'Came straight from the butcher,' Prickl countered, evasively. 'Not the sort of thing you...'

Mother stroked Prickl's shoulder. 'You won't get that happening to you here at the Principe.'

Prickl had pushed away her aperitif. Mother moved it next to her glass. 'The pair of us, in the wars and yet here we are,' she said contentedly. 'Isn't it lovely?'

She beckoned over the barman and asked for another aperitif, no ice for her daughter, this time.

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The herby liqueur went down more easily and made Prickl talkative. Did Mother know she'd just come back from holiday, she asked.

Mother nodded. She'd rather have heard it from her, of course, and not through Father.

Luckily, the barman pointed at a space in the far corner right at that moment. There you are, see, we're getting a table! The manager cleared away espresso cups and rumpled linen serviettes. Mother slid off the bar stool, ordered her daughter to bring the drinks to the table, and took voluble leave of the barman. A procession between tables and chairs, past elephant-snake and hat. Mother turned towards Prickl. Really friendly chap, by the way, she whispered – the barman. Comes from Apulia.

The manager clasped his hands to his heart: She'd had no need to carry the glasses over herself! He'd have brought them over to them!

He pulled out the chairs, helped Mother to her seat, and gave the table one more flick of his cloth.

Mother had practically downed her second Campari. 'Have you noticed him too?' she now asked.

'Who?' Prickl asked back.

'The author.'

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Mother nodded in the direction of an older gentleman. White linen suit, silk scarf; back-combed hair and a beard. He was sipping his rosé and listening, not terribly enthralled it seemed, to a younger man in tight jeans and a colourful waistcoat.

‘Of course you don’t recognise him! Why should you?’ There was enthusiasm in Mother’s voice. ‘Germany’s Salinger, our Pynchon! He never appears in public. Nobody really knows what he looks like. Written a global bestseller, though. It’s too dark for me. I prefer his comedies. Delightful, they are. Really brilliant.’

Prickl took another, closer look. ‘If he never shows himself in public though, how do you know what he looks like?’

Mother winked at her. ‘Someone gave me the tip-off lately. Seems it’s his favourite Italian too.’

‘How often do you come here, then?’

‘Lots,’ Mother said, shortly.

‘And who do you meet when you do?’

‘Ah, a detective now, are we?’

The ice in the Campari Mother had laid claim to had melted. So Prickl risked another sip of it, then replied: ‘Grouch in the morning, diplomat at noon, detective by night.’

‘Oh, you,’ said Mother. ‘I’ll let you in on it, though. I am in the best company a person can be. That is, with me. I have something to eat, treat myself to a drink or two and

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contemplate the walls. Love it, because it used to be my favourite book. How often I read it – must have been a hundred times.'

Prickl, already a bit merry, leaned over to Mother. 'You never told me!'

Mother was delighted to have a residual air of mystery. *The Little Prince* was the most important book for the restaurant's owner as well, she went on. Even as a child she always said it was her Bible. And then she opened the Piccolo Principe. Her staunchly Catholic parents only forgave her the blasphemy, apparently, when the place began doing so well. 'Success usually beats tradition.'

That had the ring of an ultimate truth.