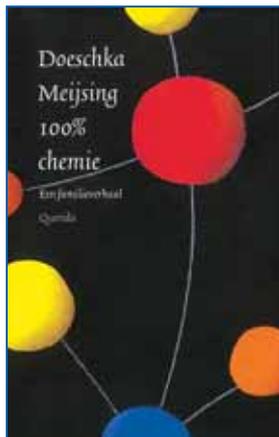


Doeschka Meijzing 100% Chemistry



DESPITE the astonishing success of the novel *The Second Man*, Doeschka Meijzing has resisted the temptation to repeat herself. This time she has written a small-scale chronicle of four generations of women in her family: *100% Chemistry*, following the trail back from herself to her mother Ilna, grandmother Bettina Bory and great-grandmother Maria Blumenträger. A story spanning more than a century, which in 1934, under the threat of

war, was to take the family from Frankfurt to the Netherlands.

This family chronicle is not told chronologically, but in leaps and bounds, with Meijzing balancing elegantly on the edge of fact and fiction, using family stories for her own ends; in the book the writer is constantly interrupted by her stubborn and powerful mother. 'You must always watch your step, when all your children are writers,' she says indignantly. 'They always twist the truth and make up all sorts of things.'

The argument between mother and daughter dominates *100% Chemistry*, and gives the book a light, contrary tone. Whether they are true or not, Meijzing has recorded the family stories wonderfully. She gives the 'German' period a mysterious shimmer, though there are glimpses beneath of the imminent fall of the West. And the anecdotes from the post-war period, in which Meijzing could draw on her own experience, are often hilarious. The most infectious descriptions are those of holidays in the 1950s, in which the Meijzing family invariably tried to drive across the Alps to Italy in an old, clapped-out car. They were hellish and exciting journeys from garage to garage, rewarded by the clear blue southern sky.

The novel's title is taken – how could it not be – from a pronouncement of her mother's. When, at the age of eighty-two, she hears on television one evening that human DNA has been decoded, she, a lifelong practising Catholic, says in astonishment, 'I think we're made up of a hundred percent chemistry.' Her daughter is alarmed, and says to her mother, that there must be something like 'the soul'.

This dialogue is the core of *100% Chemistry*. Given an acute lack of tradition, Meijzing has tried to put into words what links her to the women in her family. The bare facts are insufficient. Only in her imagination, mythologising, dreaming and speculating, can Doeschka Meijzing find the soul of her family.



photo Chris van Houts

Doeschka Meijzing (b. 1947) made her debut in 1974 with *De hanen en andere verhalen* (*The Cockerels and other Stories*), 'like a princess' as one critic put it. In her work she investigates the relationship between fiction and reality, which makes her a post-modern writer. As her work grew, realism gradually gained ground, as in *De beproeving* (*The Ordeal*, 1990), *Vuur en zijde* (*Fire and Silk*, 1992) and *De tweede man* (*The Second Man*, 2000). Meijzing is now regarded as a writer of stature, as witness, for example, the plaudits given to *De weg naar Caviano* (*The Road to Caviano*, 1996) and the award of the Multatuli Prize to *Tijger, tijger!* (*Tiger, Tiger!*, 1980).

Making the old brand new, and – like an expert chemist – welding together in language what has ostensibly fallen apart, this can be entrusted to Doeschka with complete peace of mind.

DE STANDAARD

Meijzing tells her story in a brilliant, capacious style and a richly nuanced composition.

TROUW

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The Second Man (*De tweede man*). Athéna: Kastaniotis, (in prep.)
Utopia (*Utopia, of de geschiedenissen van Thomas*). München: Knauer, 1989
Robinson (*Robinson*). Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 1988
Tiger aus Glas (*Tijger, tijger!*). München: Knauer, 1986.
Der Katze hinterher (*De kat achterna*). München: Knauer, 1984.



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An interview with Doeschka Meijsing

“Fear is a big driving force for writing”

by Elisabeth Lockhorn (27 April 2002, Vrij Nederland)

translated by Jeannette Ringold

“For the first time I have written a book has practically no fiction. This story is about the history of my family and my relationship with my mother. That is material for conflict. My mother and I have fought an eighty-year’s war. About seven years ago we reached a truce. I think she’s become nicer. Conversely she says the same thing about me. Whether the latter is true, I don’t know. It’s certainly true that I can control my temper better. It took me a long time to find the right tone for this book. The first versions were much more cantankerous, bitchier. Look at all that has been done to me. I had to fight to bring about a certain detachment and reduce my reaction to a chuckle.”

Your great-aunt Else wrote: “The most important thing for a writer is to be light-hearted.” From this book it appears that you have followed her advice.

“When I read her advice, my first reaction was: that is the sort of advice that I can’t use - after all, a writer has to go into depth. But in retrospect it was exactly the light tone that made the book. As if aunt Else ruled from her grave. It’s precisely the laconic tone that makes the other things bearable. When my lover read the last chapter, she had tears in her eyes, something that almost never happens. She said: ‘It’s almost kitsch, you fall almost over the edge, but not quite. That’s what great writers can do.’”

In the book you compare your mother to a phony customs official who guards the border between the present and the past. Why did that border have to be guarded so carefully?

“In 1934 my mother came as a thirteen-year-old from Germany to the Netherlands. Like many immigrants she closed a door behind her. As I have written: ‘Her past was in a box with a bow around it that would never be opened by her and which she guarded so forcefully that her children didn’t dare to touch it.’ It wasn’t until later that I realized that it was perhaps a way to keep the past for herself, not to lose it completely. There was another reason for her silence. The family situation that I’m describing takes place in the fifties. A time when people weren’t supposed to vacation in Germany, the time when Germans, if they asked the way, would get to hear: ‘immer gerade aus.’ Not exactly a time to be proud of your German ancestry.”

You write: “There are open and closed families, and then there is ours.”

“I think that until I was eleven we belonged to an open family, and that became drastically different afterwards. During our adolescence we became aware of our family history. And whoever notices something awkward on his or her body, and a family *is* a body, is inclined to hide it from the outside world.

We certainly talked about it in our family. And those were violent discussions. We'd ask: 'How is it possible that those Germans did that? Well, you don't know what it's like to be thrown out on the street or be dismissed from your job.' Conversely, if one of the children asked: 'But didn't the Jews let themselves be led like lambs to the slaughter?' my mother would grab an ashtray and throw it at someone's head. 'You can't understand how it was.' And how was it? 'That's too complicated to explain.' Those conversations always resulted in great chaos and powerlessness. And it really *is* complicated, even if for twenty-five years you've read everything you could get hold of, it's still almost impossible to comprehend. I was riveted when I read Sebastian Haffner's book, *Het verhaal van een Duitser* [Defying Hitler]. What I knew as loose fragments has for the first time become a whole."

"100% Chemistry" is also the story of your half-German mother who is trying to make her children more Dutch than the Dutch.

"When I was writing it, I continually caught myself thinking: isn't it dangerous to say this? I scolded myself: a writer isn't supposed to be so timid, but suddenly I realized that *this* was the feeling that had weighed on me all during my youth. You were the child of the 'enemy' and you had to watch out what you said."

Your father has a somewhat tentative place in the book.

"That's correct. That's how he is in my life. He is a man whom I don't understand very well. During my adolescence I was extremely proud of him, a charming, handsome man. But he never showed us who he really was. His whole life was totally devoted to our mother."

"He took us as part of the bargain," you wrote.

"Yes, perhaps that's not completely true, but we did have that feeling as children. My father is a romantic - he lives in a world of boyish dreams. The women in my family have a much better sense of reality. In our house the ship of state was governed by my mother. My mother is indeed someone for whom one trembles, even though she is barely 5 feet tall. She is very verbal and can unerringly find your weak spots. Although her Dutch always came out mangled, what she said always hit home. I can still be afraid of her. Yesterday when I was visiting her she said 'you've hardly eaten anything' - to which I reacted with: 'It's been like that all my life. When you sit next to me I can't eat.'

Because it's the lot of the writer to write unpleasantly about mothers, when the book was finished I asked Jan Kuijper, the editor at Querido, if my mother came off fairly nice. He hesitated: nice, not really, but unique. When I told her that she said: 'Well, I'd rather be unique than nice.'"

What kind of child were you?

"I don't really know. There are two contrasting images. My mother thought and still thinks that I'm a show-off and a dramatizer. I myself thought and still think that I was a lonely and isolated child. The fact that I could create my own world must have been,

I think, very threatening to her. I can still do that disappearing trick. For years on end, probably out of necessity, I had a talisman. I only needed to think: I'm Mowgli, and I'd be Mowgli. I'd let go of Doeschka and I knew I couldn't be touched. I did that for a long time."

Do you remember the moment when you knew that was no longer necessary?

"Yes, I was in the Landes in 1979. I was in a painful situation - of course something to do with love. After a quarrel I had walked out of the door, into the forest. If there is any forest where you can imagine being Mowgli, it's there. But suddenly I knew: I have to stop splitting myself off like that."

A reviewer described your books as "contemporary tragedies about friendship and betrayal."

"That is indeed true in my first book through *De tweede man* [The Second Man]. My books are often about friendships and the fact that people are disappointed in it. After my tenth book I thought: I should no longer do that. But it always slips back in."

Another returning theme is that of a circle of friends which takes the place of the family.

"It's a vital fact in a human life: you leave home, you build up your own world, you counterbalance the pain of family betrayal by feeling at home in a circle of friends. With that you 'vernein'[negate] as it were the first eighteen years that you spent with your family. Almost against my will I discovered after half a century that the bands are not strongest with the people who think like me, my friends, but with the people with whom I disagree about practically everything, my brothers, my sister, my parents."

How did you figure that out?

"My brothers and I, the three of us, became ill almost at the same time. Both my brothers got heart disease, and my liver failed. Suddenly I knew how painful it would be if something were to happen. It's not that I've suddenly become excessively fond of my relatives - we see one another at most twice or three times a year. These relationships are and remain tense, but I still think that no people love each other as much as this family."

You hovered on the edge of death. You were forbidden to drink ever again. Do you yourself think of that period in terms of before and after?

"Yes, I no longer need to be so very amusing or smart. I think more and more often: they either put up with me or not. Formerly I always had to leave the house, be among people to have my say. Now I'm excellent at being alone. After my fiftieth I've been increasingly bent on reading and studying. Really *lernen*."

Why do your novels practically never have a female principal character?

"A male character involves less fuss. He can take a freighter to Dakar - if you let a woman do that you have to invent so much around it that such an idea dies an early

death. A deeper issue is that I understand men better than women. Women are very inscrutable. They do devious things that I can't keep up with. And the emotional swings in women of child-bearing age are elusive. In myself too. Freud wondered: 'Was will das Weib?' It's something I too have wondered about for years. For a long time I felt more comfortable with homosexual men. I thought it was wonderful to meet a male mind without the threat of a sexual relationship hanging over it. Sometimes I find women a bit strange in what they expect from life. I understand men's humor and men's ambitions better. I also like the philosophical agility of men.

That can't be found in women?

Hesitates and then says: "There is only one conclusive remark about intelligence in women, and it's from J.H. Donner. During a public debate he said that women can't play chess. Women raced up to the microphone and said: 'That's discrimination. It would be just like saying that blacks can't play chess.' Then Donner answered: ladies, you didn't understand me, black men can most certainly play chess, but black women can't. I think actually that there are a number of things in which men are better. Playing chess, engines, electrical engineering, logical reasoning. Perhaps I like the company of men because there is a presence of knowledge that is beyond me."

Is there an ultimate goal that you have in mind as a writer?

"It's perhaps very arrogant, but after writing this book I have the feeling that I can do anything I want. I have the feeling that I had to write this book in order to be free to write other books. With this book, particularly the last pages, I've come closest to what I wanted to say."

These pages contain perhaps the most beautiful lines of the book: "After the eleventh year the red mass of the brain swelled in all of us to unmanageable proportions as if we were born again, but this time with water heads that stood wobbly on our fragile necks, and dismayed by that unruly growth, in turn we invented systems that had to hold this uncontrolled growth in check. But the systems took turns and these in turn assumed unbelievable proportions and got tangled up and became enemies of other systems. It was a wonder that we could still hack our way out of the jungle to the coast where the ship was moored that went to sea without a sextant, where each one separately wanted from time to time and over and over to jump over board again. Outsiders called it crazy or suicidal, but we didn't need language when we employed full sail in order not to sink on the open sea."

"That's where I threw a last glance on the character of the small community that I wrote about - like a director who touches the core of the cast of characters. With these sentences everything suddenly becomes transparent and dangerous. It's not for nothing that others say: they are crazy or suicidal. That's not only true in the book - I'm also saying something about reality. The 'we' of that book are an exceptionally difficult bunch. Each one of us has felt the typhoon rage within ourselves in our own way. Luckily we don't all have it at the same time. I've had a real depression only once, but I do have a tendency to depression. That's an odd emotional swelling that you have to

try to live with. I've accepted that I have strong tides within me. I try to go against them. To the front lines - that's one of my sayings. I can ad nauseam tell the anecdote of Napoleon who, when he was still corporal and was lying in the trenches, saw an officer standing next to him. 'Vous avez peur, caporal?' Whereupon Napoleon said over his shoulder: if you were as scared as I am, you wouldn't be lying here ... Fear is a big driving force for writing. Describing what you don't dare to. Balancing on that edge. The fact that you can influence your own fate is a thought that I find very pleasant.

Especially when life is hard, which I think it is anyway, you have to intervene. Finding a certain phrasing, a certain text can sometimes help. In difficult situations I say to myself: 'Doeschka, this world is a hospitable world.' And for me this sentence eliminates all fear."

Sample translation from

***100% Chemistry. A family story.* by Doeschka Meijning (Amsterdam: Querido, 2002)**

Translated by Jeannette Ringold

Stories

It's not entirely clear who plays the principal part in this story, my great-grandmother Maria Blumenträger or poor Pfiffikus, but the fact that both of them contribute significantly to its development is beyond question for everyone in the family. Generally not much attention is paid to poor Pfiffikus, but that's because during the years that his existence was considered significant he took on various guises without detracting from his role in the story.

It wasn't until later in life that I heard about poor Pfiffikus for the first time, and his lot was so meaningless and sad that I was at a loss for words. Later, during times when my mother was in a good mood I asked her again for the exact story of poor Pfiffikus, she answered that she'd never heard of a poor Pfiffikus, that I'd made up the story, and that it really took the biscuit - considering all the misery that the family had had to endure - to have even a single thought for poor Pfiffikus who in reality hadn't even been aware of what role he played in the whole piece.

My mother could not report more about her grandmother Maria Blumenträger than that during the first fifteen years of her marriage to Carl Bory, chief conductor on long-distance trains, she was an independent woman who ran a flourishing milliner's shop Am Rossmarkt in Aschaffenburg where her creations were in great demand among the well-to-do of Aschaffenburg, Alzenau, and even Frankfurt. If you kept on asking my mother where Maria Blumenträger came

from, from which region and from what relations, she was able - with great difficulty - to dredge up from deep down within her the fact that Maria had a brother who had struck it rich in America and had wanted to let Maria's daughter Bettina, my grandmother, come to America so that he could take charge of her education. Instead of Bettina, Maria herself made the crossing by steamship, and when after several months she was back on the Rossmarkt she spoke the following words: "That country is no place for my Bettina."

I myself could report from a very reliable source that when Bettina was in labour, Maria Blumenträger - as an old woman dressed in black - knocked at the door of the house in Frankfurt to give maternal assistance and wise counsel, whereupon the birth of my mother's little brother - until that moment touch and go - went smoothly.

"Where did you get that idea?" my mother asked indignantly, "you're again making up all sorts of things."

Whereupon I was able to produce a speech by my grandfather from 1972 in which, in a proud burst of creativity for his son, he had written the following lines of poetry: "All of a sudden there was a ring at the door, /from surprise we almost dropped through the floor/ For there she stood a frail recluse,/ the old, old mother from Wasserloos."

"Oh yes," said my mother, "that's right, my brother was born in a bucket. According to her mother's directions, Mutti had to sit down on a bucket, then the child would come without difficulty."

My mother knew much more than she pretended to know, but you had to find the right way to the stock, and usually her pipeline was jam-packed with the day-to-day rumbling and stumbling that she and my likewise eighty-two-year-old father undertook.

My mother's brother, during his working life a feared and admired member of the Economic Development Council, was therefore born in a bucket, and Maria Blumenträger had vanished into thin air after closing down the milliner's shop. I had to be satisfied with that knowledge. Wasserloos is at the western edge of the Spessart forest at the foot of the Hahnenkammburg, sixty kilometres or so from

Frankfurt, where Maria Blumenträger went to place her daughter on a bucket. In 1922 this was a complicated trip, especially because the former chief conductor of long-distance trains, Carl Bory, did not provide adequate transportation, and the yellow trolleys with an eagle and the black letters “Stadt Frankfurt” on them traversed the metropolis at only a crawl. That’s what she got for banning Carl to the back of the house during her good time in Michelau. My great-grandparents lived legally separated.

No one in the family says a word about where the Blumenträgers have gone. As for the Borys, several of my second cousins have tried to discover some family trees; from those it emerged that originally they were probably French Basques who with their trowels migrated via Alsace to the north-east in order to provide the churches and palaces in the southern part of Germany with the skillful stucco work displayed by the Baroque. It even appears that one of the second cousins who lives in Portugal spent a year in France when it was celebrating the two-hundredth anniversary of the French revolution. During that year, in order to secure a seat on the grandstand of the Champs Elysées, this cousin searched for possible Borys of aristocratic origin or for Borys who had played heroic roles in the French Revolution. All she encountered were fishermen and plasterers - “artists” as she stubbornly insisted on calling them - and she returned to Portugal empty-handed.

Not a word about the Blumenträgers.

Yet my great-grandmother Maria Blumenträger was a woman who ruled the world, even though it reached only from Frankfurt to Bamberg. She managed to endure Carl Bory mounting her six times under the old-fashioned red featherbeds, and all six times his aim was successful. After two young boys succumbed to “neurasthenia” as the result of a nasty flu, she remained behind with four sturdy little daughters. Carl had done his duty and could move to the back part of the “house with the fourteen saints” in Michelau, to a room that overlooked the dungheap and the wheat fields of the Steigerwald. There, in the company of poor Pfiffikus, he spent his days staring into the fire and dreaming of the long-distance train to Constantinople or of the war of 1870 when as a boy of fourteen he had

cheered the soldiers with a passion that he had felt leaping behind his ribs for the first and perhaps for the last time.

“Der starb euch sehr gelegen”[His death was convenient for you], was the only thing he said when one of his daughters brought him his daily noodle soup, and his eyes filled to the brim with tears of sorrow because his marriage had broken his revolutionary zeal or because the noodle soup was once again too thin. One of his daughters had such cherished memories of daily serving the soup to her father that later, during our stay with her, she would stand in the kitchen for days on end and produce exquisite smells and would finally conjure up on the table a steaming pan with white dry noodles.

Former chief conductor Carl Bory with his friendly wet eyes left no other traces in the family, and his name died out in Germany and could be found only in the flat hamlets of the Camargue about which Vincent van Gogh wrote that it seemed to him that he was moving through the landscapes of Ruysdael with bent, black oak trees that offered shelter to a few farms at the edge of the marsh.

On the façade of the house the earlier Borys had sculpted rough forms of patron saints to protect against all possible accidents and illnesses. ‘The house with the fourteen saints’ in Michelau was ruled by Maria Blumenträger. First only on Sundays, because during the week she held her tape measure up to the achievements of the girls of the milliner’s shop at the Rossmarkt in Aschaffenburg, but after the incident involving her second daughter Bettina, she shut down the atelier and came to the city only during the annual fair where she expressed herself condescendingly about the latest fashion in hats. The city grew rapidly in the new century; it smelled of new wood and paint; a lamp store was established in the milliner’s shop.

The reason for closing the milliner’s shop would enter into tradition as “that incident with Bettina.”

“That incident with Bettina” was held up to us as a warning of what could happen if children didn’t obey. As a thirteen-year-old immigrant from Germany my mother had several educational masterpieces in her luggage, for example *Der*

Struwwelpeter from which we learned to refuse our oatmeal with great persistence: “Ich esse meine Suppe nicht, nein, meine Suppe ess’ ich nicht” [I don’t eat my soup, no my soup I don’t eat]. Even the freshly dug grave for the hero Suppen-Kaspar, who starved to death, didn’t break our resistance.

Something puzzling always stuck to “that incident with Bettina.” If I asked my mother about it, she couldn’t give any information, just as she knew her own ancestry only through remembered catchwords and characteristic sayings that bubbled up in her like geysers in an innocent landscape, but which for the rest had no context or content. As a young girl she had taken up her new existence with so much vitality that the past had been silenced with one stroke and finally stopped existing except through outbursts, sudden idiomatic peculiarities, and regularly returning laments: “Mensch, Max, Meier was kosten die Eier” [What’s going on]; “Ach, hat er gesagt und ist er gestorben” [Oh, he said and did he die?]; or “that incident with Bettina.”

I asked my grandfather about it. He sharpened his pencils with a sharp knife, tested the points against “Ruysdael’s Dutch skies” as he couldn’t resist remarking, and said: “If only poor Pfiffi had lived, then your grandmother wouldn’t have had so much sorrow.”

On the thick, transparent paper I saw the garden house come into being under his hands; I saw how he made calculations in the margin with a thick pencil - strong black numbers that imparted nothing but their existence. He smelled of shaving soap from ‘The Gilded Hand.’ He called the garden house “the garden house.” But I didn’t get anywhere with “that incident with Bettina.”

A tip of the veil was lifted when one of my second cousins, the sister of the second cousin from Portugal who had scoured all of France for noble plasterers, wrote to my mother at Christmas that she had taken in a *reizendes* [cute] kitten that she had baptized Schlomo. My mother read the Christmas card aloud and my father said: “Schlomo? Didn’t that have something to do with that ‘incident with Bettina’?”

“Why she calls that cat Schlomo is a mystery to me,” my mother answered and she hung the card on a clothesline that was strung across the room, a habit

that she had resisted all her life - it being bourgeois, which was synonymous to “typically Dutch” - and to which she had succumbed during her very combative old age with my father.

My second cousin had christened her kitten Schlomo, and in this way new life was blown into the old story of Bettina, at least in our eyes - not in my mother's. Schlomo, Bettina, Pfiffikus - a sad tale began to develop that my grandfather's calculations could not get at. Something was written in the margin that called for deciphering.

“You're just inventing things!” my father called out as he looked up from his book when I questioned my mother in vain, “stop bothering your mother.”

Wild horses couldn't induce him to read another book besides the *Odyssey*, in Greek, whereby I had never been able to catch him showing any interest in its contents. He was interested in the letters, that finely drawn abracadabra with which he tried to close the gap of time that yawned between him and his school years, a dark hole in which all sorts of things that he had never wanted came to life, grew, and became diseased. His latest dream consisted of the old Greek alphabet and my mother's descent on the chairlift along the banister every morning when he waited for her in the hall with tea and Dutch rusk. The two of them were together.

Let me reconstruct it. No one tells you anything. During the course of the years you catch names, places, landscapes. You try to put a suit or a dress on the names, you look for the landscapes in the atlas. Why is the past a landscape where entrance is forbidden? They don't allow you to enter because they want to keep the region for themselves; they are phony customs officials. No, they are immigrants who have closed the door behind them.

Before the bronze bells of the Domkirche announced the Angelus and the light bells of the Sandkirche and the Christuskirche could turn it into a joke by peeling together, Maria Blumenträger had already taken the large scissors from the belt of her skirt and let the tape measure slide from around her neck. In front of the

mirror she stuck the combs back into her black hair and bit her lips. Sighing with relief, the girls of the atelier stayed behind and threw ribbons at one another. Rolls of gauze, cotton, and silk leaned against the wall, and an enormous veil lay over the mountain of feathers. Whalebones, patterns, and artificial fruit filled the tables, and the noontime sun danced in beams of dust between the sewing tables. Maria Blumenträger walked resolutely down Rossmarkt, turned left into Nadergasse, crossed Herstalstrasse, and reached Treibgasse where in Schlomo Nussbaumer's fabric store she sank down onto a wicker stool.

“Oh Schlomo,” she said, “always those bells.”

My great-grandmother was not the kind of woman who complained. According to my mother, who had caught sight of her only once when her brother dropped into the bucket, she had coal-black eyes and a gaze that made men and children tremble. One day a week she ran the house in Michelau, then she left for Aschaffenburg, a long daytrip on which she sometimes took along one of her daughters: the equally domineering Lina who during Maria's absence kept the household in Michelau going; small Elvira who charmed people; crazy, wild Rosa who would tear up everything if you took your eyes off her for a moment and who would go insane during the Allied bombardment of Berlin; and Bettina, Maria's second, mild-mannered daughter.

It was dark in Schlomo Nussbaumer's store. Sunlight didn't penetrate the dark passages that were formed by the bales of cloth. The store was a labyrinth where only Schlomo knew his way. Sometimes he disappeared in one of the passages, and then there had never been a Schlomo Nussbaumer; sometimes he'd emerge so unexpectedly that he would scare the living daylights out of you. It smelled of sweet cotton, of the excitement of silk and chintz, of forbidden things.

“Bells were made to ring,” Schlomo Nussbaumer said cautiously. As a foreigner he had been silent half of his life, and he wouldn't risk the second half by insolence. Everything was new during the thirty years of his citizenship, but that didn't mean that everything was safe. He didn't have a single optimistic thought about the new century. Come what may, prudence was required, even

towards Maria Blumenträger who sat with legs wide apart, using her broad lap for her gingerbread and coffee.

“All the Bory girls are wasp-waisted and have hips that please God,” my uncle who was born in a bucket once said to us during a family dance. We were at the onset of adolescence and looked the other way, offended or uninterested. We wanted no relatives, and certainly not one who came from Germany where the “Wirtschaftswunder” [economic miracle] produced much bigger hips than those prescribed by the Twiggy fashion. I did not yet dwell on Maria Blumenträger who waited stubbornly until the bells would quiet down.

Schlomo sneaked glances at her and cracked his knuckles. Perhaps he still dreamed intensely of this short stocky woman who for years had been buying cloth for her hats from him. He would never forget the first time she stepped into his store from the sunlight, took the fabric between her thumb and index finger as if she were the owner of the cotton plantations as well as the silkworm cultivation in China, and stated: “Schlomo, zur Sache, sie Schatz” [Schlomo dear, get to the point]. Provocative but cool, haughty but flirtatious.

He had bent forward to suppress his smile and asked how large a discount she wanted. But Maria Blumenträger who was considered an exotic beauty in the region and had been trained in Frankfurt, wouldn't hear of a discount. She was planning to set up a milliner's shop in Aschaffenburg and he, Schlomo Nussbaumer, would become her textile supplier. It had been a business agreement, but during the first years it had also been something else that wasn't talked about.

“It's becoming too much for me,” said Maria Blumenträger this time. “Lina is getting to an age when she needs guidance. I'll soon have to tighten the reins a bit at home. And I'm also fed up with those bells.”

She stood up and caught the crumbs of the gingerbread in the palm of her hand. She looked outside over her shoulder, at the sunlight.

“And Carl?” asked Schlomo while he looked at her neck above which the black hair was pinned up.

“Carl is going to the back,” she said, tired at the thought of her husband for whom she had run away from home – “poor Pfiffikus can keep him company there.”

Schlomo shrugged his shoulders and sighed. He had thought as much - the new century would bring nothing good. Looking into the sun he watched her go, leaving Treibgasse.

When Maria returned to the atelier, the girls didn't know where little Bettina had gone. Just a minute ago she'd been playing nicely with buttons and darning eggs. They had given her some of their midday meal, she hadn't been a bother to anyone.

“Here,” said the girls and as proof they held the glass darning eggs up in the air so that the sunlight bounced off them. “If I don't pay attention to everything myself,” said Maria Blumenträger and walked out of the atelier.

In a widely branched family story, all arrows indicate treacherous directions. Name one thing, one object, and you run breathlessly after an episode that in the end turns out to be a side-road or a blind alley. Family histories are labyrinths, especially when your ancestors send you intentionally into a maze because they themselves had lost their way so often.

Take the darning eggs that the girls in the atelier held up high in the sun. They sparkled in their thin fingers. The light refracted inside them and bounced against them; they were little jewels of innocence that were held up, multi-coloured alibis for the inattention of the girls. Weren't they small works of art, the round glass shapes in which dozens of small flowers let their colours bloom, the polished eggs with ingenious beauty inside?

Years after “that incident with Bettina” had begun at a slow time of the afternoon, my mother saw a marvellous flower egg like it lying under the counter of a haberdashery store in Frankfurt. At that time she was still so short that she couldn't look over the counter but easily underneath it. Next to the brown lace-up shoes of the saleslady, who somewhere up high was measuring braid with a yardstick, there lay - still and tempting - a blown glass darning egg in which pink,

yellow and blue anemones whispered to her: take us, take us. Above her head she heard her mother and the lady talking about a failed 'push' in Munich which caused a man called Hitler to land in prison, and she wondered why somebody had been pushed and why somebody had been arrested by the police.

Meanwhile the flower egg beckoned and tempted: don't leave me lying here next to the brown lace-ups, I've earned a better lot; I'll conjure up a thousand things for you; I'll fulfil all your wishes; pick me up and take me along.

Before my mother knew what she was doing, the egg had moved from the place near the lace-ups to her pocket, under the blue velvet flap of her coat, and the lady wound the measured braid quick as lightning around her stretched hand and put it in a paper bag, wished her mother a proper good day and gave the *Püppchen*, that was she herself, a thief, a pinch in the cheek, and then they were standing outside, her mother and she - the glass egg as a sparkling promise behind the blue velvet flap of her coat pocket and her head filled with barbed wire that confined her next to a stack of broken brooms.

Bettina was and remained gone, and no matter how Maria Blumenträger blamed herself within a few minutes for all the indiscretions that she had committed in her life, no one could say that the child looked like Schlomo Nussbaumer - it was a real Blumenträger girl; perhaps something was *not* her fault; perhaps she had miscalculated. Anyway, she could simply no longer tolerate Carl and Pfiffikus with their claptrap - a person needed nerves of steel these days; hadn't she adhered to her parents' religion with all her might? Then what did these bells want from her with their never-ending pealing? What kind of religion was it anyway if it didn't bring back your child? Bettina wasn't with the baker, nor with the woman who offered birdseed for sale, nor with the shoemaker who, sitting on his stool, happily drove nails into boots and sang "Ulla, Ulla, Uppa, Uppa."

The bells could no longer reach Bettina. At the edge of the forest she had jumped off the waste food cart, and now she skipped from patch of light to patch of light on the path that led her ever farther into the forest. Stock-still creatures hung in the air, their blue wings buzzed. A noisy little bird showed her the way.

She stepped and jumped past the horses' meadow, past the watermill and the witches' house, without awareness of the ever closer threat of the tall tree trunks that cautioned her: until here and no farther. She stepped right and left on the light spots that became fewer - there was no end to her game.

On an impulse that in children doesn't need a reason, she knelt down near a flat rock the size of her *Struwelpeter*. She thought of her dead brother in his bed with railings. She had placed his red and white drum next to his head on the pillow so that yonder they would also be able to hear that he was coming, but her mother had taken away the drum and said: "Ulli no longer drums."

Worms and ants were crawling around under the rock, centipedes and pill bugs like funeral coaches. The soil was black mud. There was no light where her brother lay now. "Mutti, how big is the new century? Bigger than the Steigerwald, bigger than the Spessart? How much light is there? As much light as all the stars and as much dark as the night? No one had said anything about mud and worms under the stone, how the place was crawling with them. She let the flat rock drop from her hands and followed the bird, now slower, deeper into the forest.

The boy's death had made her mother even more energetic. With a steady hand Maria Blumenträger tied black ribbons in the hair of her daughters and tied the laces of their boots so tightly that they couldn't accidentally come undone. With a coal black glance she made her daughters swallow their questions and forbade them to cry. Only Carl was allowed to cry because his eyes were always filled with tears anyway, and poor Pfiffikus whistled the first bars of Beethoven's Fifth and consoled him with the words: "Ulli is coming and will drum." But Ulli didn't come and didn't drum, and her mother flew even more bustling "auf 'ne Sprung" [with a quick stop] off to Aschaffenburg and on Sunday afternoon placed Bettina giddy-up on the pig in the merry-go-round, while next to her the empty swan cart with the red wings also turned. Don't stand there dreaming, *Bettinchen* my daydreamer, clean your slate, eat your gingerbread, don't get stains, why are you just standing there?

The trees in the forest pressed closer together; the sunlight managed with difficulty to appear between them from time to time. Bettina had to edge her way

through tall ferns, after that she came to a piece of dry forest floor carpeted with brown needles. She put pinecones in her apron and threw them away again. She climbed a steep hill and slid down it on the other side. She wanted to count one hundred tree trunks but stopped at sixty-four. She scratched open her calves where the flies had bitten her through her white summer knee socks. The road became long and the forest more and more forbidden.

All of a sudden she chanced upon a charcoal burner's hut. There was an open space in the forest. Between the trunks of the trees she saw the sun which stood lower and made longer shadows. A dozen scruffy charcoal burner's children, black as soot, had appeared from nowhere and looked at her with strange, white eyes. Some wore only an undershirt. They were barefoot. In the middle of the burned open spot in the forest a cone-shaped charcoal pile was smoking. Barrels with tar stacked on top of each other surrounded the open space. The children stood looking at her silently, some carried bundles of sticks and branches to cover the charcoal pile. From behind the hut a blackened man and a dirty woman appeared. In a shrill voice the woman started shouting in a foreign language; the only word Bettina understood was "child."

It was as though Bettina had landed in hell. They were the last charcoal burners, an impoverished lot who were still producing some tar for the boats on the Main, barely enough for a living. The smoke that stung her eyes didn't seem to harm them. Red sunlight fell on the black, smooth tree trunks that waited motionless, just like the children. Everything was still, nothing moved except for the thin, curling smoke from the charcoal pile. Suddenly she remembered fragments of conversations of her mother with the ladies who ordered hats: "sexual immorality," "children out of wedlock." She had ended up with cavemen and their locked up children who would throw her into the fire as soon as they woke from their spell and were unlocked. "Sexual immorality" - that giant cone covered with moss and branches in which the fire glowed must be something so incomprehensible.

At the woman's scolding, a second younger man appeared from behind the hut. He smiled with white teeth in his sooty black face when he saw Bettina. He

ordered one of the locked children to get her a mug of water and watched her drink. She barely understood him either, but with many motions and much pointing she figured out that he would take her to the very first farmer's house outside the forest. She followed him at a distance of two meters. She looked stubbornly at his red boots. She wanted to avoid his face with the white teeth; it wasn't until later she would want to recall it time after time. The forest began to drip with the red, setting sun.

“Whatever gave you the idea that my grandfather had a parrot?” my mother asked indignantly, “and that in a house with small children. Such an animal is a focus of germs.”

For my mother, bacteria and other germs were what the Goths and Vandals must have been for the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. She suspected that these things gathered in great numbers at the borders of her domestic empire and could invade at any moment and cause enormous destruction. Even before we children could say ‘boo’ she would drag us to get vaccinations against measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, polio, and smallpox. She put up with the relative danger of meningitis from the injection against whooping cough and smallpox. Anything rather than micro-organisms like bacteria, viruses, and fungus. She turned bedding and the content of closets with abandon, aired the whole house at the drop of a hat, and chased us into the shower at least once a day. She even went so far that she refused to change our diapers without placing a thin cloth in front of her nose; this would prevent all these dirty little bugs that she had caught at the butcher or the greengrocer from finding their way out of her mouth and throat to us, defenceless children. For a long time one of my brothers insisted that this had caused him to develop a contact phobia.

In the unlikely event that the little animals somehow broke through the borders of her territory, only brute force would do. All of us were kept at home from school for a month; during this month we walked around with our close-cropped heads rubbed with smelly malathion and wrapped? in white turbans made of nappies and had to stay away from the windows. A bunch of children with head

lice was the most shameful thing she could imagine, and with endless patience she pulled the fine-toothed comb through our hair without catching even one louse.

The war against the enemy outside could not match the hereditary heart condition to which she had lost her grandmother Maria Blumenträger and her mother at too young an age and which threatened inside her every time she caught us misbehaving or being noisy. “Ach Gott, mein herz,” she said and grabbed her left breast where the devil was carrying on. Petrified with fear we watched time after time how she might collapse at any moment, and it wasn’t until my father would come home from his work and at a single glance sized up the situation of a dying wife and languishing children and spoke the words: “The poor woman. She died of sorrow at the age of ninety-nine,” that the suffering was over.

Meanwhile my mother is eighty-two, and her heart has energetically kept up until now; it has never faltered, until today it has pumped her blood to all the extremities of her body with the regularity of a metronome. The threat of a cardiac arrest came to an end when it appeared that two of her sons actually carried the hereditary misfortune within them. It is impossible to fight genes.

“Who was poor Pfiffikus if it wasn’t your grandfather’s parrot?” I asked.

“Poor Pfiffikus, poor Pfiffikus,” she said, groping around in her memory where she turned lamps on and off, “that was something you’d say if you felt sorry for someone. It was an expression. But my grandfather and a parrot! And Beethoven’s Fifth! How could a parrot come by Beethoven’s Fifth? There was no radio there in 1900, and no portable phonograph either.”

“Perhaps they sometimes gave open-air concerts,” I volunteered.

“An open-air concert? In Michelau?” My mother had a great disdain for villages, and she considered any residential area with less inhabitants than the city of Frankfurt (where she was born) as a village. In 1934 she settled first in Apeldoorn and then in Eindhoven: villages. Even in the sixties when on Elandsgracht in Amsterdam a brand-new police station was built with as a special attraction the continuous elevators, she said with a sneer that continuous elevators

in the warehouse were part of her daily amusement when she was a seven-year-old schoolgirl. “Taking a parrot to an open-air concert, that’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard,” she said.

But I hadn’t said at all that my great-grandfather had taken poor Pfiffikus with him to a musical event; I had only let him whistle the first bars of Beethoven’s Fifth, even if he had heard them whistled by Albert Schweitzer in the jungle of Lambarene.

“At that time Albert Schweitzer was a professor in Strasbourg and had never seen a jungle yet,” said my mother, “and besides, Schweitzer liked Bach, not Beethoven.”

This way we got nowhere.

“Come, child,” said Schlomo Nussbaumer, and he led Bettina by the hand into his store. The farmers on the box shouted at their horse with long calls and clacked their tongues. Creaking, the cart on which she had been taken to Treibgasse started moving. Outside, the last light lay on the roofs of the houses. Inside, Schlomo lit the lamp. Then he left her alone in order to close the shutters. It was dark and sweet in the store; her shadow shifted as Schlomo moved. She touched the textiles carefully as if she was afraid to wipe off their colours. She was amazed at so many different fabrics. New dresses for the whole world.

“Come, child,” Schlomo said again, and he led the way with the lamp through small, dark halls; they turned corner after corner until they were in a back room where there stood a table and two chairs, and Schlomo’s day-bed. She sat down at the table and followed the grain of the wood with her fingers. She waited for punishment, the entrance of her mother who would lecture her with her black eyes and would list the sanctions that would be the consequence of her disobedience. She tried not to look at Schlomo who was busy in a small alcove. After several minutes she sniffed the smell of soup and she looked up. Schlomo came in with a candlestick and a white cloth that he spread over the table. He smoothed the creases with his hands.

“This is damask,” he said while his hands couldn’t stop smoothing the tablecloth, “from the far-away city of Damascus. When the candles are lit, you can see the light patterns of the warp and the weft. Watch for it later.”

“Shouldn’t I go to Mutti? Don’t I have to go home?” she asked.

“Your Mutti thought that you had started walking home, that she would encounter you at the edge of the city. The farmers have to go to the Heidenfelt Market - they’ll catch up with her. I think that you can stay here tonight.”

He placed dishes and bread on the table and lit the candles.

“Praised be Thou, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe who hallows us with His Commandments and has commanded us to kindle the lights,” he said and poured wine into the glasses. After that he said words in a language she didn’t understand and which enchanted her.

It was as if the words came straight from Damascus and from there flew straight into Schlomo’s mouth where they were turned into a dark whisper, where speaking and breathing could no longer be distinguished from each other. The soul flies in the words, she thought as she looked at Schlomo’s moving mouth; the soul is not an angel with wings but the black from Schlomo’s mouth, another black than that of the charcoal burners whose words had sounded hard and shrill. Damask is white velvet, she thought, and the words from Schlomo’s mouth are black velvet. She sighed, her breath escaped her, but when she looked up with a start, Schlomo’s eyes were open once again and he looked at her kindly.

“Here,” he said, and for the first time in her life she drank wine and was startled when the bitterness filled her mouth with hot breath. In order not to seem impolite she took a second sip and the bitterness prickled the roof of her mouth so strongly that she wanted to spit it out. But she found the slight distress rather pleasant too.

After Schlomo poured water over her hands and showed her how you sprinkle salt on your bread before putting it in your mouth, he served the soup. He listened to her story of the charcoal burners and how she had lost her way and about Ulli on his deathbed with rails. “When Ulli approached, you first heard his

drum,” she said. He nodded, and when she finished telling her story he said:

“Now you have to ask me for the story.”

She listened while staring into the flames of the candles. She looked at Schlomo’s face that was telling a story and at his hands that calmed the story when it became too intense, or opened when terrible things happened. She saw the angel with the sword go along the doorposts, and suddenly understood that Ulli was a first-born son. She listened to whether she could perhaps hear the rustling of the angel or the crying of families outside in the Treibgasse. As long as she was sitting near Schlomo she was safe. While she no longer understood exactly what Schlomo was telling about columns of smoke by day and pillars of fire at night, she listened to the sound of his voice and saw the candles become ever shorter and the flames ever longer. Her head was so heavy that she could no longer hold it up - it dropped and dropped until she touched the damask tablecloth with her forehead and the voice of Schlomo was lost in her sleep.

The next morning Schlomo closed the shutters of his shop. He opened the doors wide and invited her to sit on one of the two stools that he had placed on the street. It was already busy in the Treibgasse. Vegetable carts passed by on their way to the market. A shepherd drove two sheep ahead of him, and young men in long, green aprons pushed the beer barrels so that they rolled from the carts. Only the two of them did nothing and sat next to each other in the sun.

She felt comfortable in the sun’s rays and free from her mother’s obligations. The light bounced so glaringly on the cobbles that she had to squeeze her eyes shut. That is why she didn’t see the cart until the driver stopped in front of them. It was a farmer from Michelau who had in the very early morning delivered his hops at the brewery on the Rossmarkt and now was bellowing: “Get on!” She felt that she had bad luck, that the morning with Schlomo had been too short, but she stood up obediently and shook Schlomo’s hand. He placed his hand on her head. “Goodbye, child,” he said, “will you soon come by with your mother?”

While the driver manoeuvred his horse dexterously among the hustle and bustle of the street and she looked around once more at Schlomo Nussbaumer who was waving back, she had the feeling that this was the last time she would see him.

In the new century she went to boarding school in Miltenberg. The “English teachers” ran the girls’ schools in Aschaffenburg too, but Maria Blumenträger wanted to have her second daughter a distance away. Perhaps it was because of the dead boy that she didn’t want to look one of her children in the eyes anymore, perhaps there was another reason. At any rate she blamed Schlomo Nussbaumer who should never have kept the child under his roof for the night.

After all, he was a Jew. Once a Jew, always a Jew, no matter how amiable she had been to him, including the earliest time of their acquaintance. Just because her family had in the past changed from one religion to another, did that mean that she had to be kind to the cloth merchant? All that was so long ago, the new century made other demands; she now had to think of a more prosperous Germany. If in the past she had complained to Schlomo Nussbaumer about the endless chiming of the bells, it was because as a modern woman she had renounced religion. According to Darwin, man was descended from the apes, and if there was one thing that in her eyes was more contemptible than a Jew who didn’t eat pork, it was a monkey that rang bells.

We were more of a hare and rabbit eating family than one that ate pork. As I remember, there was always a wide-legged hare hanging on the inside of the shed door, and for years on end we pampered our children’s bottoms with rabbit skins that lay on the wicker stools on which we were expected to sit straight and eat without leaning on our elbows. Every other week my father went to the bingo evening of the town clerk’s office where he worked, and each time he’d come home quite tipsy with a hare in his hands. He must have learned skinning and cleaning himself. Also, in our living room there hung a life-size reproduction of the hare of Albrecht Dürer; the animal was alertness incarnate, with its erect ears and its hair-by-hair recorded shadowless existence.

Of course my mother said that my father won the first prize at the bingo evening at most once a year, but how did she then explain the dozens of rabbit skins that were scattered throughout the house? “Your father often brought home strange things,” she said.

That was true. At the drop of a hat he’d appear with an oil painting that he had picked up at a second-hand shop, or with an umpteenth second?-hand Persian carpet through which the wooden floor showed here and there, or with an easy chair that didn’t fit in the corner and that must have been used by monsters, or with a copper fire-screen with dancing goddesses - even though we didn’t even have an open fireplace.

“I don’t know where he dragged all that stuff from,” said my mother.

“To surprise you, to surprise you,” said my father.

It wasn’t until later, when we children had all left home, that she got rid of my father’s junk and purchased new things which are so ugly that they will make the next junk dealer “stinking rich.”

As for the hares - we pestered my grandfather repeatedly for the story “The three brothers.”

Once upon a time there was a man who had three sons and who loved all three of them so much that he didn’t know to which one he should leave the house that had belonged to his grandparents and to their grandparents. Therefore he sent the boys into the wide world and said: “Learn a trade, and whoever returns home with the best masterpiece gets the house.”

The first son became a blacksmith, the second became a barber and the third one became a swordfighter, and when it came time for the old man to die the three brothers returned home and discussed how they could best show their skill. At that moment a driver with horse and cart came by at full trot and the oldest brother jumped on the box, tore the horseshoes from the horse at full trot and shod it. That was skilful work, said the father. Then a hare came running across the field and the second brother grabbed his shaving basin, brush and blade, gave the hare a close shave at full speed without harming a hair on his body, and the father said: “That is skilful work.” The third brother stepped forward, drew his

sword while the rain started pouring from the sky and waved his weapon around so fast that not a drop of rain fell on his head.

Although the last example of mastery was far and away the most amazing - it even seemed very much like the kind of marvel that we heard about at school - yet we asked our grandfather time and again to give the house to the middle brother who had shaved the hare, because that was precision work that we could recount on our rabbit skins; and to oblige us my grandfather changed the story in such a way that the middle son became the youngest son, for such stories have their own laws in which the youngest always gets the best of it. Moreover, we were familiar with my grandfather's razor blade which was so sharp that we were only allowed to point to it. Our father had changed to Gillette blades in a holder with which a hare couldn't even be approached at ten meters.

There was no house to divide among us. The last house, "the house with the fourteen saints" in Michelau, had been lost in the money panic year of nineteen twenty-three, and my mother didn't see it again until she was quite old for the house had become a nightmare in her and in our eyes because of the story that Carl Bory, the softy, had in the end sold it at the exact lowest point of the financial collapse of Germany. One day he still had a roomy, comfortable house, and the next day he could from the money of its sale buy only a pig. Just imagine! First you have a roof over your head with everything that goes with it, even if you were banned to the back of the house, and half a day later you walk through the streets with a pig on a rope. To us it seemed the height of indignity and misery, and the public body of a pig, as a laughing piece of bacon with apron displayed at the butcher, has always filled us with deep aversion.

In addition to disdain for pigs, the affair with the house in Michelau had taught us early the worthlessness of money, for in her nightstand my mother kept stacks of brightly coloured sheets of money with dizzying amounts that had less worth than any nickel you could find on the street or grab from a table, but she saved them like the treasure of Ali Baba. Those were the pig marks that upon their departure from the Third Reich they had hidden at the bottom of their suitcases in the hope that people in the Netherlands would take these sheets of

paper seriously. If you're talking about fleeing: stash your memories in the hem of your skirt.

“That incident with Bettina” was never solved. Bettina revealed nothing about the summer afternoon when she lost her way in the forest and was taken to Schlomo's store. What had Schlomo done with her? Eat. But eat *what* - child - you can't just eat anything, don't you know what you eat? Just ate - and for the rest Bettina clammed up.

With an even more unyielding hand Maria Blumenträger ruled the household with the four daughters, three of whom returned home during vacations from their boarding schools in Amorbach, in Würzburg, and in Miltenberg. There they came: Bettina, Rosa, and little Elvira, from different steam trains they stepped down on the platform in Aschaffenburg where Lina the oldest waited for them with the “fox cart” - Maria Blumenträger wearing her most beautiful hat in the back seat. Then they jumped into the open carriage, the three daughters with their straw suitcases, school caps on their heads, all three with ribbons of different colours, the modest school uniforms buttoned high despite the already full summer; then Lina drove the fox trotters with clanking hooves through the city, past the store of Schlomo Nussbaumer, who saw the sun-drenched coach take the sharp turn onto the Rossmarkt and who thought how terrifyingly fast time rushed along to - yes, to what actually?