



Translated extract from

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Visitation

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THE GIRL

No one knows she is here anymore. Everything around her is black, and she is at the center of this little black room. The absence of even a little crack to let the light in is supposed save her life, yet it also makes her indistinguishable from the darkness. She would like to have some sort of proof that she is still here, but there is no proof. She Doris daughter of Ernst and Elisabeth twelve years old born in Guben. Whose words are these now, in such darkness? Time passes as she sits on the small crate, her knees hitting the wall in front of her, and time passes as she extends her legs to the right and to the left to keep them from falling asleep. Time probably passes. Time, which appears to be carrying her farther and farther away from the girl that she perhaps once was: Doris daughter of Ernst and Elisabeth twelve years old born in Guben. There is no one left to tell her whether these words belong to no one and just happen to have wandered into this room, into her head, or whether they really are her own. Time has wedged itself between her and her parents, between her and every other person. Time has whisked her away and locked her in this dark little room. The only color remaining in the midst of this total darkness with her at its core is what she recalls – the colorful memories within a head forsaken by light, memories of someone she once was. May have been. Who was she? Which head was hers? Whose memories are these now? Does time, dark as it is, continue ticking even when you do nothing but sit? Did time continue ticking and even whisk away a petrified child?

Mount Gurken and Black Horn, Keperling, Hoffte, Nackliger and Mount Bulzen. And Mindach's Mountain. When her uncle lifted her way up onto the hump of the pine tree that one time, she really thought she could see all the underwater mountains whose names the gardener taught her and which she remembers to this very day. The sunken town's church was built on the highest rise. Its steeple loomed over everything else and, with the weather vane on top, almost touched the waves. And down at the bottom where the water was calm, down on the town's streets and squares, she could even spot people if she squinted, walking from place to place, sitting, or leaning against something. Through the

lake's sparkling surface she saw the silent jostling of all the inhabitants, sunk together with their town. Without having to breathe, they were able to move through the water naturally, sitting, standing or walking through their eternal lives no differently than they had while on earth. Perched up on the pine tree and holding tightly onto its scaly bark, she saw the fish swimming across the sunken skies above the town. After her uncle lifted her back down, her hands were all sticky from resin. So her uncle took some sand and rubbed it off.

While the girl sits in her little dark hiding spot and tries to straighten up from time to time without hitting her head on the ceiling, and while she opens her eyes as wide as she can, yet is still unable to see even the walls of her room, and while the darkness remains so encompassing that she cannot even tell where it ends – all the while memories light up in her head of days replete with colors spanning the horizon. Clouds, the sky and leaves, leaves from the oak, leaves from the willow that hang down like hair, dark soil between her toes, dry pine needles and grass, pine cones, scaly bark, clouds, the sky and leaves, sand, the earth, water and the boards of the pier, clouds, the sky and the glistening water reflecting the sun, and the water shaded by the pier. She can see it through the cracks when she lies down on her stomach on the warm boards to dry off after swimming. After her uncle was already gone, her grandfather took her sailing for two summers. Her grandfather's dinghy is still probably at the village dock. Tied up for winter for four years. Now, without knowing whether it is day outside or night, the girl reaches for the hand her grandfather offers her and steps off the pier onto the edge of the boat and watches her grandfather loosen the knots that secured the boat and toss in the rope.

All the windows of the house on Nowolipie Street where the girl is hiding are still wide open. Just days ago the rooms were filled with people who all desired to breathe, but now everything is completely silent. The people in the rooms are gone, and nobody is out walking along the street anymore, nobody pulling a cart, nobody talking, screaming or crying anymore. Not even the wind can be heard. No windows are slamming shut, no

doors. While the girl sits in her little dark room, shifting her knees to the right and to the left, and while outside of her little room the apartment remains quiet, and while beyond the apartment everything remains quiet in the street, in this street and in all other streets of the neighborhood, she nevertheless hears everything that once was: the rustling of the leaves, the rippling of the waves, the steamboat blowing its horn, the oars dipping into the water, the tradesmen working next-door, the snapping of a sail. From C major to G, to D, A, E and B, and all the way to F sharp, further and further away, on and on, sharp after sharp. But it is only a small step from F sharp back to C. Going from playing all the black keys to playing all the white ones is the shortest step of all. Sharps abound before landing back at C, the simplest of scales. That was how Uncle Ludwig explained it to her before leaving for South Africa, and it is also how now, in this absolute silence and emptiness, Doris uses her memory to grasp the time in which everything was present.

All that awaits her now is a little crossing. She will either starve to death here in her hiding place, or she will be discovered and taken away. No one who knew who she was now knows she is here. That reduces the breadth of her crossing. She has made it this far step by step, almost all the way to the end. But that means her passage must have begun somewhere, and at that beginning she must have been so near to life as she now is to death. The beginning must still have resembled a life. It must have been set somewhere in the midst of things, yet still unidentifiable as the first part of this passage whose terminus she now knows. When the willow is big enough to tickle the fish with its hair, you will still be here visiting your cousins, and you will remember how you helped to plant it. Was life still intact then? When she thinks about Uncle Ludwig, she always sees him, spade in hand, on the shore of the lake. When she thinks about his fiancée Anna, she always remembers what she would say before picking her up: Make yourself light! As if she could reduce her weight just by imagining. When her grandfather, glancing over at the hand towels his shop produced, locked up the bath house and left the key in the lock for his successor, she thought of his dinghy that would be staying in the docks that summer for the very first time. That fall, her parents brought her to an aunt in Berlin so her schoolmates would not tease her about being Jewish. Every Sunday for two whole

years she would sit at her aunt's kitchen window after coming back from church on Hohenzollern Square and write a letter to her parents. She never wrote from Monday to Saturday to save envelopes and stamps. The last time they all had dinner together with her grandparents, who were deported from Levetzow Street in the Berlin district of Moabit, her aunt cooked stuffed peppers. On New Year's Eve, her friend gave her a little bowl with cotton and lentils. She said if you kept the cotton wet, the lentils would grow into a miniature forest. At the wool collection in January she had give up her winter hats and big scarf, but hesitated to relinquish her little scarf, too, because she could tie it up like a turban and her ears would stay warm. But what if someone saw her? While their departure for Brazil was delayed yet again, she walked to school in loafers instead of boots when it was twelve below. She wanted to be ready for Poland, just in case, since she knew it would be even colder there than in Berlin. Her mother wrote her that she should burn the last letter she received from her father due to risk of infection. The law which would have allowed the girl to travel home by train for her father's funeral was not passed in time. The lake, where her uncle's property used to be and where she spent two summers with her grandparents after her uncle's departure, was exactly halfway between Berlin and Guben. Was she, Doris daughter of Ernst and Elisabeth twelve years old born in Guben, already half removed from her life at this point in her passage – or more, or less?

She has to pee, but she is not supposed to leave the room. That is what her mother told her before going to work. Her mother will not be returning. In the meantime, all of the residents of the apartment are gone, all of the residents of the apartment building on Nowolipie Street, and all of the residents of the neighborhood where the building stands. The neighborhood must be closed off by now since it has been completely quiet for a long time. But as long as her sentence is true, then her name is still Doris and she still exists: Doris daughter of Ernst and Elisabeth twelve years old born in Guben. So she gets up, hitting her head on the ceiling, and tries to pee so the board she is sitting on will not get wet.

Sienna, Panska and Twarda. Krochmalna, Chlodna, Grzybowska. Ogradowa, Lezno and Nowolipie, where the girl is hiding. Then Karmelicka, Gesia, Zamenhofa and Mila. If you die at twelve, do you reach old age sooner, too? There was less and less of everything. They had to leave more and more luggage behind, or else it was taken from them as though they were already too weak to carry everything that belonged to their lives, as though someone wanted to force them into old age by disburdening their load. Two wool blankets, no down, provisions for five days, wristwatch, handbag, no documents. That was how her mother entered the ghetto, with her in tow, and the sector of the city they entered had also been disburdened of a great deal. There were no trees, let alone a park. But there was also no river, no cars, no electric tram, and so few streets that you could count off their names faster than saying the Our Father. Even a child could reach on foot everything that was now the world. And this world shrunk more and more as the end approached. The small ghetto was emptied and closed first, and now it is the big one's turn. The southern section comes first, with the rest sure to follow. Don't be so wild, her father would always say to her when she slid across the parquet flooring. She is wild here, but here that means: not going in someone else's place, not showing up for roll call, playing dead instead of raising your hand to die, wanting to survive without drinking, without eating. She has never been wilder in her life than in this little room where she does not speak, does not sing, cannot stand up, and where her knees hit against the wall when she sits. She, Doris daughter of Ernst and Elisabeth twelve years old born in Guben, a wild girl, a deaf and blind old woman who can scarcely move her limbs anymore.

In Brazil you will need a sunhat, her father said. Are there lakes in Brazil? Of course. Are there trees in Brazil, too? Twice as big as here. And what about our piano? It doesn't fit, her father said, closing and locking the door to the container holding her desk, along with several suitcases of linens and clothing, and her bed and mattress and all her books. That container was probably still standing on the lot of some shipping company in Guben, but that was all so long ago that her bed would be much too short for her even if she were to

arrive in Brazil now, and her shirts and stockings and skirts and blouses would be several sizes too small. Packing the container for their move to Brazil put an end to their apartment in Guben. Afterwards, the girl was sent to Berlin, and the address of her Sunday letters to her parents changed repeatedly from one shabby area of Guben to an even shabbier one. But as long as there was the hope of emigrating, it mattered little to her and her parents that they were forced to pull the rug out from under their memories as they packed for Brazil. When her father was called into forced labor to build highways, their special tropical refrigerator was still in the container on the shipping company's lot. It did not dawn on her until her father's death that packing up their life into the darkness of a container anticipated the way her own life would once be packed, and that they both signified something final.

The only place which will have remained the same since then and whose appearance at this very hour the girl can describe, even from right here, from her little dark room, is Uncle Ludwig's property. Perhaps that is why she remembers the few weekends and the two summers she spent there more clearly than anything else. On Uncle Ludwig's property she can still go from tree to tree and hide behind the bushes. She can look out at the lake and know it is still there. And as long as she still knows something in this world, she is not yet lost.

In fact, however, weeks ago, on the very same day in June that her mother went to Gesia to sell her wristwatch on the black market, and while she herself was at the market on Karmelicka Street and came across the book her mother had refused to let her read for so long, a novel entitled "Saint Gunther, or Homeless", on that very day, as she was standing on Karmelicka Street, trying to hold her hold her ground in all the pushing and shoving while she carefully turned the book's pages and read and was so happy that the hawker did not have the will to either make her stop reading or buy the book – it was on that very day that their entire belongings, everything they had owned in Guben, were removed from the container in the opposite order that her father and mother had loaded it

two years earlier for their voyage to Brazil. Mr. Carl Pflüger and the specially appointed Chief Inspector Pauschel were in charge and had everything laid out to be auctioned off. On the very same day she stood on Karmelicka Street reading for as long as she could because she did not have the money to buy the book and because reading kept her mind off the stuffed peppers and the pancakes with apple sauce and even a little piece of bread and butter with salt, on that very same June day, about two months after arriving in Warsaw and without her knowledge, her bed, item #48, was auctioned off in Guben to one Mrs. Warnitschek of Neustädter Street 17 for 20 marks, her pot for hot cocoa, item #119, to Mr. Schulz of Alte Post Street 42, which was just a few doors down from where they had lived, and her father's accordion, item #133, to Mr. Moosmann of Salzmarkt Street 6 for 36 marks. On that same evening as she went back to her quarters just before curfew, on that same evening of one of the longest days of the year 1942, as a light, summery breeze gently blew off the newspapers which covered the bodies of the dead and wafted the smell of decay, on that bright evening as she walked home, weaving her way in and out as usual so as not to trip over the corpses, on that evening as the cries of all the children lacking parents rose from the entrances of buildings as they did every evening, on that Monday evening as her mother gave her the potatoes she traded for her watch, most likely the last potatoes she would ever eat in her life, by this time that evening all the sheets, items #177 - #185, that had previously belonged to Ernst, Elisabeth and Doris and which were sold in pairs for prices ranging from 8 marks and 40 pfennigs to 8 marks and 70 pfennigs were now lying neatly folded in the closets of the Wittger, Schulz, Müller, Seiler, Langmann, Brühl, Lemker, Fröhlich and Wulf families.

It is probably just as dark here as it was that time under the boat that capsized right before the shore as the village boy was maneuvering it to the pier. Before he went back to the village, the girl led him to the raspberry bushes up along the sand path. In return the boy later showed her how to swim. For the very first time she had the feeling that the water was carrying her, right there next to the shore where it was still so shallow that her feet skimmed the bottom while she swam. That was also the summer her neighbor showed her how to catch crawfish. Yet was there really any crawfish? And the lake, the boat, the

raspberry bushes? Was that boy still there when she did not see him? Was there anyone still left in the world except for her? She finally comprehends what did not occur to her until now: if no one knows she exists anymore, then when she does no longer exist who will there be to know about the world?

She did not notice that the floor of the old building where she is hiding is not completely flat, and since it is so dark that she cannot see anything, she also cannot see her trickle weaving out from under the door of her hiding spot and into the empty kitchen of the empty apartment on the empty street in Warsaw. By the time the special commando, led by a German soldier, comes to take possession of the apartment, the trickle has formed into a little lake on the kitchen floor.

Now, for the last time, she has to walk north along Zamenhofa, the sun in her back. Others she does not know walk along beside her. Now, luck has run out of luck. Now, everyone is going home for good. The shattered tables and beds of all those who have walked this way before lie in the shade of the buildings, strewn over the cobblestones of the empty streets that the rows of people are now traversing, block after block. Since the ghetto was never very big, the girl knows exactly what she is leaving behind. Saying the names of all the streets takes less time than saying the Our Father.

Schmeling is once said to have walked with a tree trunk across his shoulders the entire way from his summer house in the neighboring spa to the public bathing grounds in the village. That was how he trained his arm muscles, the boy from the village told her. She said she didn't believe him, and the boy said it was true because he was there when Schmeling arrived and tossed the tree trunk off his shoulders like it was made out of paper. Then he stretched and jumped in the water and swam so far out that you couldn't even see him. Somebody from the village yelled: Holy smokes! Our Schmeling is going

to drown! The boy said he believed him and begged the man to swim out and save the boxer. But it was only a joke.

Of the one hundred and twenty people in the freight car, roughly thirty suffocate during the two-hour ride. As a child with no parents, she, along with a few elderly people who can no longer walk and a few others who lost their minds during the ride, is considered a hindrance for the subsequent operations and gets pushed to the side directly upon her arrival, past a pile of clothing that is as high as a mountain, the Nackliger, she thinks and recalls the smile she smiled when the gardener first told her the shoal's funny name. A slightly cloudy, whitish sky, like at the lake right before rain, arches over her for two minutes. For two minutes she inhales the scent of pines she knows so well, except that she cannot see the trees themselves because of the high fence. Has she really come home? For two minutes she feels the sand under her shoes and a few small flints and quartz or granite pebbles before taking off her shoes for good and standing up on the board to be shot.

There is nothing more beautiful than swimming underwater with your eyes open. Swimming up to the shimmering legs of mother and father who had been swimming and were now wading back to shore through the shallow water. There is nothing more beautiful than tickling them and hearing the muted screams they let out to make their child happy.

The girl learned to play the piano for three years, but now, as her dead body falls into the pit, the word piano is annulled, and now the back flip the girl could do on the horizontal bar better than any of her schoolmates is also annulled, as is every stroke a swimmer makes and every time she reached for a crawfish and that little lesson in tying knots while she was sailing – all is annulled and labeled uninvented. And finally, at the very end, even the name of the girl herself whom no one, ever again, will call: Doris.