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Mediocre Homesickness

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I

It is early evening and still light. The city is nearly deserted. Most people are on vacation or are sitting in garden cafés. The heat presses onto the roof tops. I could go into my apartment but it is nearly as warm there as outside. Yesterday evening, I walked around town until the fatigue made me feel very light. At last, I sat down on a bench and even fell asleep. Ranting teenagers awoke me twenty minutes later; that was unpleasant. It is not easy to be a loner. A dress shoe is lying on the street, sole up. Out of a side street comes the sound of a car driving over a plastic bottle. I am passed by a clerk with a suitcase hanging off his shoulder. The suitcase pulls down so hard that the shoulder strap pulls the backside of the suit downward, giving the man the appearance of a walking misfortune. I am a little disgusted by the sagging lower lips of some joggers who wheeze by. The doors of many pubs are wide open. Briefly I step into some pubs and quickly turn back. Soon I will no longer feel like doing this and will sit down on a chair somewhere and order a glass of beer. I turn into the Wormser Straße and spy the Sportlereck a little ways off. I was in this bar twice last week. Already on the second occasion, the barkeeper amiably raised his hand in recognition. The door and windows of the Pils-Stübchen are open wide as well; the noise of the patrons reaches the street and mixes with the noise of other taverns. The games of the European soccer championship have been shown on television for about a week. In most bars, the television sets are turned on. Semi-automatically, my steps lead me through the door of the Sportlereck, although I have no interest in soccer. I even try to catch the bartender's eye so that he can recognize in me that stranger who is getting reasonably familiar. In the Sportlereck, a large screen has been installed against the right wall; at the front end, nearly above the bar, hangs a second, regular television set. The clamor is especially loud when two different games are shown simultaneously. Tonight, the large screen shows Germany against the Czech Republic. The pub is full although the game has not yet begun. I find a seat up front, close to the screen. Men in muscle shirts come in, squeeze between the coat rack and the bar toward the front and sit down on a wooden bench. An overweight half-breed comes into the bar; some people yell: Hansi must have a beer right away. I order a white wine and a mineral water. Some women massage their husbands' backs. The women are the ones who scream the loudest. The game is kicked off; the bartender places a large beer in front of the man named Hansi. Right off, most of the patrons are unhappy with the German players. Get your eyes checked, one of the men calls after a player. It can't go on like this, the man next to me says. After half an hour the announcer says: Germany does too little. A spinster at the next table says: Sometimes the danger lurks where you can't sense it. In between, men go outside and walk around for a

while when they are too excited. I sit in the middle of the general uproar. The bartender brings new beers and says: If the Germans don't kick a goal right away, they will get socked in the eightieth minute and then it's curtains. The tremor gets stronger, the announcer says.

During half-time, I briefly wonder whether I should not go home after all. I am only slightly entertained by the soccer game. I watch the spectators, not the game. Especially the screaming women impressed me during the first half. Many of them get to their feet when they are excited and curse the players. In the beginning of the second half, whistles sound in the stadium. I am a little worried that the German team will lose the game. I don't even know a single player by name. Only as a child did I have a slight understanding, if only because I did not want to appear clueless in front of the other children. Again a German player shoots a bit off the goal; the noise and the indignation in the pub are drastic. A man leans across my table and says: That looks like 74, now comes the counterattack, then a goal and then it's over, Sparwasser back then. I nod as if I know what he is talking about. The tremor increases, the announcer says. A man offers me five euros for my seat in front of the screen; I refuse. The spinster disappears into the bathroom and smiles at me upon her return. The clock ticks without mercy, the announcer says; it is getting tight for Germany. The mood in the pub fluctuates wildly. Up until now, the majority of the spectators were on the side of the Germans, but now more and more spectators are fans of the Czechs. Suddenly a terrible screaming and screeching. The Czechs have shot a goal. The Germans, these slowpokes, screams a man and pounds on the table. The screen shows a sea of Czech flags. Many spectators pay and leave the pub. Suddenly, I see that an ear of mine lies underneath one of the tables up front. It must have dropped off during the uproar. Apparently no one noticed. I do not want to draw attention to myself by haphazard behavior; I go to the bathroom and look into the mirror. It is true, my left ear is gone. Apparently I lost it during the fright of the screeching. I see that my ear lies on the ground like a small, light piece of pastry that a child has dropped into the dirt. Briefly I wonder whether I should pick up the ear and take it along. But I can not really think; I am petrified. I am becoming a bit nauseated; I can not make any decisions. Scantly I comb my hair over the spot where the ear was before. I leave the bathroom and make an effort not to look back at the ear I am leaving behind. As a matter of fact, there is already by now a large distance between the ear and myself. I squeeze through the pub and pay at the bar. I struggle to make myself understand that I have been living in a tragedy for a couple of minutes now. During the last few years, I have lived in tragedies on and off. Thus, the tragic experience of life is not new to me. But this time it seems to be a malevolent tragedy. Do the others see my horror? Luckily, only a few people are out and

about. One of my innermost problems is that I no longer want to come into contact with the complexity of life. Only a few days ago, I decided to arrange my days in such a way that I will find myself only in simple relationships with simple people. Ridiculous! I tell myself what just happened: In the extreme noise of a pub you lost an ear. As people will, I already am beginning to put my misfortune into perspective. There are a lot of people who are missing a leg, an arm, or a finger; why should there not be someone who is missing an ear? The inner incoherence of my perspective lies in the fact that I have seen many legless, armless, handless people, but never a one-eared person. But as it is possible to get used to the others, one can get used to a one-eared man. Then I would no longer be as conspicuous as I appear to myself just now. In the future I will be able to spend time only in quiet surroundings. That means that my days will become complicated. Again and again I remember the image of my ear lying on the grimy floor of a sordid pub. A few sobs strain themselves up my throat. For a while I observe the entrance of the building where, on the fifth floor, I occupy a one-room flat with bath and kitchen. There is no movement. A blue plastic glove lies between two parked cars. At one point a young woman walks by. In her left hand, she is carrying an animal cage containing a screaming cat. I am standing at a corner and am entertaining stupid thoughts. For example, I already find it appropriate that *one*-eared persons live in *one*-room flats. At the same time I do not like it when I look down upon my own life disparagingly. People are sitting in front of their televisions; the noise of the spectators drifts to the outside through the open windows. I wait two more minutes, then I unlock the front door and step into the elevator.

I manage to reach the door of my flat unseen. A small spider has invaded my flat through the open window and is running along the ceiling. I sit down on the bed and do not turn on the light. Slowly movement is generated in the apartments and stairwells all around. Many inhabitants go back out into the street after having watched television. The loud talk of intoxicated people puts me in a bad mood. I step to my window and take up the tomato that has been lying there for a few days. Now and then I play with the thought of throwing the tomato at the people who talk loudly and boisterously out on the street. But I do not find the courage. I replace the tomato on the windowsill and sit back down on the bed. In the slowly increasing silence I now hear only the occasional groan of the elevator. I realize that I am as alone now as probably never before in my life. At the same time I do not want to make a fuss about my loneliness. I am comparatively well educated and have known for a long time that loneliness is inevitable. A significant reason for people's loneliness is that many lonely persons ... oh, no, I do not want to contemplate this old junk. The radio is playing The

Marriage of Figaro, a broadcast from some festival. From the flat above me the sounds of love-making reaches me. At first I hear the creaking of a bed frame then the woman's groaning. I turn the radio off because I want to hear the groaning more clearly. Just a little while ago I wanted to meet a woman. Now and then she sits in the tram with me in the mornings and looks at me receptively. But how do you speak to a strange woman? Maybe I have forgotten how. When I had gotten a few sentences ready, the woman no longer took the tram. Elegantly she rode her bicycle past the train. Now I have to wait until winter comes and the woman takes the tram again. The futility made a strong impression upon me. But now, with a missing ear, perhaps, I will no longer have a chance. The woman's groaning in the flat above and the groaning of the elevator are getting mixed with each other. I have to laugh a little, but not long and not loudly. After a while, the groan of the elevator stops and the woman's groaning continues. The creaking of the bed frame and the woman's groans have arranged themselves rhythmically. Now the woman's groans give way to a strange calling. If I were the woman's husband, I would wonder what the calling means. I am not the woman's husband and still I ask myself what the calling means. After some time a strong, ox-like noise that presumably comes from the man emanates. After that the love-making is apparently over; all noises end. Actually I imitate the woman's groans on the inside of my mouth, only quietly, of course; I do not want the couple above me to think that things are continuing down here. The feeling of abandonment is increased in doing this. In order to alleviate this, I take a bath. On the small bathroom cabinet rests a flash light. The former tenant of the flat forgot to take it along. Although I have lived in this flat for over a year, I have not touched the flash light until now. When I see the water rise in the tub, I feel that taking a bath will intensify the feeling of abandonment. I shut off the faucet and let the water run back out. In the mirror I look at the left side of my face and slightly lift the hair above the missing ear. In the place where my ear was before, a little moisture has appeared; there is no blood. For a little while I wonder whether I should go back to the pub and look for my ear. Ridiculous! Someone will have swept up the ear with a broom and a shovel, and subsequently it disappeared in an ash can. With this vision of my future misfortune my chest involuntarily constricts. In a window in the building across, a light blazes on. A man carrying a plate and a glass across a room becomes visible. I allow as well that persons living across can look into my room, and I turn on the light. During the opera intermission the director is interviewed. Passionately he speaks out against this and that. A window that is illuminated behind a tree looks as if the house that it belongs to is very far away. The passion with which the opera director rants against problems

of art is absurd and funny. But I like to listen to him, as, because of it, I do not have to take my own sobs as seriously.

The next morning I decide not to go to the doctor for now. I have no pain. In the place where my left ear was before, a little bit of bright pink fluid has appeared; that is all. My first stroll takes me to the pharmacy on the Richard-Wagner-Platz. I buy an ear flap and a box of gauze bandage. After-wards I return home and tie the ear flap and a thin layer of gauze around my head. If someone at the office should ask, I will answer that I have caught an ear infection. The ear flap looks surprisingly good on me. The gauze sticks out a bit from under the black flap. The flap makes me into something of a pirate and swashbuckler. You can not see that the ear that (assumedly) lies underneath has disappeared. I am getting used to the ear flap quickly and, then again, I do not. I touch the ear flap several times and shiver a bit. The crows are circling more tightly above the rooftops this morning than usual. They darken the sky and fill up the air space with a horrible croaking. If I were superstitious I would think of my own funeral now, but I am not superstitious. I look into people's faces from far away and wonder whether anyone will ask me about the ear flap. The arrival at the office goes without problems. Twice I give my prepared statement about the ear infection. Frau Kirchhoff says: you still have a second ear, after all; then all is quiet. I work as a controller in a pharmaceutical company and these days, as during each month's end, I have to take care of revenue and cost controlling of the main products. This is an uncomplicated compilation of sales and cost data, necessary so as not to lose sight of the individual budgets. I am so familiar with the work that I can allow for a splitting of my awareness. In the foreground I draw up columns of numbers with about one third of my consciousness. In the background I am using about two thirds of my consciousness to reflect upon my new situation. I have never heard or read that people lose individual body parts and wonder whether this is the case in old or new illnesses. Because I don't want to be-tray myself I do not want to ask anyone, at least not for now. Frau Bohnekamp, a researcher, nearly always wears a sleeveless silk blouse and no brassiere. Her small breasts jiggle with every step. Today I can let these excitations run off into the void much better than even a year ago. Frau Bohnekamp tells me of her friend Sabine, who has been staying true to her boy-friend for over three years, even though the boyfriend sleeps not with her but with other women. Despite all that, he loves her, says Frau Bohnekamp, but he is afraid to commit himself. He sleeps even with his secretary, a rather stupid person, says Frau Bohnekamp, but my friend forgives him these trespasses because she hopes that he will lose his fear by means of these excesses. Frau Bohnekamp adds: people do not get married for love anyway but because of boredom. Frau Bohnekamp does not go into details and, instead, reads

out loud the menu plan of the fast food restaurants in the area where some colleagues usually take their lunch break.

In the spring when Frau Bredemeyer also wore a sleeveless blouse, I let myself get carried away and made an attempt to get better acquainted which I regretted shortly thereafter. I wanted to ask Frau Bredemeyer out but she responded coolly that it was probably better for me to give my attention to my wife and my child. I was so dumbfounded by this rebuff that I apologized and returned to my desk immediately. Yes, I am (still) married, and, unfortunately, I made the mistake of mentioning my marriage two or three times in the office. I spoke about the fact that my marriage is a marriage only formally and this presumably not much longer. I admit that this statement was also a message to the many single women in our office, to whom I wanted to recommend myself as a (how can I say this) candidate for a relationship in this informal manner. Even as I spoke, I noticed that speaking like this was embarrassing. It is depressing that I have no idea how much longer the agony of marriage will drag on. I can even understand Frau Bredemeyer's rejection by now. A simple intention to separate can be more asphyxiating than a marriage, if it is drawn out and not put into action. My wife was born in the South of the Black Forest and grew up there as well. Her most distinctive characteristic is that she can not imagine a life outside of the Black Forest. Once upon a time I was so swept up in her praise of the simple life in the Black Forest that I followed her to the Black Forest. Edith has never lived any-where else and will never want to nor be able to live anywhere else in the future. I admit that she made this condition understood from the onset. It was not clear to me what it means to surrender myself to a person with such a strong notion of homeland. About ten years ago, at the moment of getting married, I was comparatively young and imagined myself able to live *everywhere*. On top of that, I liked being able to show Edith that I was compliant in love. An indescribable sweetness lay in bowing to another person's pressure in love. Nothing is left of all these spells. On the contrary, we argue about problems we did not even know about several years ago. Three weeks ago, during my last weekend visit in the Black Forest, a conflict arose about the question of when best to shower. Edith takes a shower in the morning; I take a shower at night. Whoever showers in the morning, I said, allows grime to cover him all day long and has nothing left of his cleanliness in the evening. Whoever showers in the evening, however, loses all the grime of the day and is clean for the night. Even now, in the office, I am irritated by the intensity with which Edith demands that in every last detail I am to live exactly as she does. Unfortunately I have not been able to get beyond these ponderings about marriage all afternoon. In the evening, after business hours, I am slightly malcontent and ill-humored. Most likely the failure of the marriage is the reason

why my interest in the appearances of life is shrinking. My complacency about the normal every day, mixed with the fright over the loss of my ear, at times becomes so strong that I nearly begin to cry. Quickly I step into a driveway then or behind a parked truck and calm down. At least for now, in passing, while walking through the streets, I have forgotten my marital pain. I watch a man with a briefcase leave a building, and who, while walking away, is waving to a woman remaining behind in the window of a ground floor apartment, a small child in her arms. The child is wearing a pajama and is already half asleep. It is too small to wave, therefore the mother takes his tiny, right arm and waves it back and forth. The child is surprised by these actions and is looking at the mother with dismay and surprise. Yes, in exactly this silent wonder life is passed along! Both laugh about the child, the father from the distance and the mother nearby. I am puzzled again by people walking by with stuffed backpacks. Whatever are they always carrying along? More mysterious still are people with empty backpacks on their backs. I have never seen anyone take the backpack off in order to stick some item into it or to take something out. The backpacks at least give me the idea that I have to purchase some things. My refrigerator is nearly completely empty. I decide to go to the supermarket in the Kurfürstenstraße that is close to my flat. I admire the beautiful old villas with their large balconies that are never used by the inhabitants, because the noise and dirt from the street have become too intense. A single, out-of-place seagull is flying across a square and sits down on a light post. A bus passes by, comes to a halt at a bus stop; three persons get off, two climb in. The bus drives off; the seagull watches after the bus. Has anyone ever seen that; how a seagull watches after a bus and gets a painfully beautiful sea gull's face? I would like to be such a sea gull for one minute. I could cope with an elderly woman then, who is carrying a dachshund in her left arm and is entering the supermarket in front of me. The woman lets the dog lick her all over. It looks disgusting but two children think the dog kisses cute.

In the super market a man in a wheelchair is following me. The wheelchair radiates a significance that I do not want to accept. And yet, I know that for a little while, ever since I have been missing an ear, I, too, belong to those people carrying a strange sign that is covertly observed by others. Only children observe openly and directly. The two who enjoyed the dog kisses stare at my ear flap and giggle without trying to hide it. Looking for cover I stop in front of a huge bread rack, next to me a man is groaning loudly. When he turns to me briefly, I see that his uppermost shirt button has broken in half. Even a shirt button can break; I had not known this. The two button halves tenderly hang down next to each other and make a strong impression upon me. Again I do not know which bread to buy. Haphazardly I pick up a

loaf of whole wheat bread and accidentally read the word whole weep bread on the package. Yes, if there was the appropriate whole weep bread for everything that has broken in two! At the deli counter I watch a young mother rub her chin in the soft down of her child's head. The woman buys a quarter pound of smoked ham, a quarter pound of paprika sausage and a pair of frankfurters. The clerk tells the mother to take the plastic wrappings off the sausages at home; the sausage won't sweat so much then.

It is the first time that I hear that sausage can sweat; I can hardly believe it. The mother thanks for the tip, apparently there really is such a thing as sweating sausage. Because I don't know which sausage to buy, I also ask for paprika sausage but by mistake I say panica sausage. I laugh slightly, artificially of course; the clerk smiles understandingly. I also ask for a quarter pound of salami and a quarter pound of mortadella with mushrooms. I wait in case the clerk will give me an unusual tip as well, but she does not say a single word to me. I also buy a glass of pickles, half a pound of butter, a pint of milk, a bottle of red wine, a tube of mustard, two bottles of mineral water, then I walk toward the exit on the left side. At the very moment when I turn into the register aisle, one of the cash registers is closed down. This causes the customers' cue to lengthen in front of the remaining register and I have much too much opportunity to contemplate the happenings around me. A man lifts a case of beer onto the conveyor belt, then two bottles of vodka. Despite the fact that the man repels me, I like the wallet that he takes out of his suit coat just then. It is old and so scuffed at the corners that it has to be held together by two crisscrossed rubber bands. Strangely, the wallet exudes a slight encouragement for me. I would like to tell the man that he should not under any circumstances buy a new wallet, for in this broken wallet lies the expression of his life's grandeur. And I would add that he ... no, of course not, it is all ridiculous. I study the embarrassing images so intently because with their help I am preparing myself for the lack of commotion that will go along with my probably impending death. Since I have one ear less, I fantasize about bringing my life to an end now and then. But after a while I realize that my life does not care about my inner decisions and just goes on. This is a bit embarrassing but no one notices. I notice a tiny breadcrumb in the left eyebrow of a child. This detail forces a tiny amount of tears into my eyes. I enjoy these moments despite the fact that I am standing next to a sales display for baby food and that I am slightly disgusted by the smell of the baby food. Under the impression of disgust, my inner world goes silent; this happens rarely enough. I have known for a long time that here lies a kind of happiness; if, suddenly, it is impossible to know what to say or to think. In the moments when I place my things onto the belt in front of the register, a large, dirty pigeon comes flying into the supermarket. It flutters along the

narrow shopping aisles, looking for empty ledges and corners to sit down upon, and it swirls up a huge amount of dust. I am uncertain why I am delighted by the way the dust clouds slowly rain down onto the displays and the customers.

At home I quickly unpack the food and pack it into the cupboards. Carefully I take the plastic wrappings off the sausage. Quietly I speak to the finely cut sausage slices: Did you have to sweat so much now, you poor things! By chance I look out of the kitchen window. Because I live on the sixth floor, I am able to see a buzzard momentarily taken off its course by a gust of wind. The natural movement of a bird that is flying ahead being forced by the wind to drift off to the side is indescribably beautiful. Moments later I am disappointed with myself and call myself a show-off in modesty. With that I mean people who are impressed by their own lack of needs; like Frau Grünwald in the office. On the weekends she goes to the park with her child and is delighted by the chirping of the tiny chickadees all around. Good God, I think, now you are beginning to imitate Frau Grünwald.