

Translated extract from

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Backwater Blues

Translated by Zaia Alexander

I hate my life. In three years I'll be twenty, that's half of forty. In eight years Carl will be ninety, and I'll be twenty-five, and I might still be here. With him. I don't even want to think about that. The reality of it is totally enough.

Carl is standing stark naked in front of me. Foam covers his bony shoulders like snow. He's shivering a little even though it's warm in the bathroom. The mirror is fogged up, a strip of steam is floating under the ceiling. I dry Carl's back because he can't do it himself. You could fill books with all the things Carl can't do by himself anymore. Carl staggers and reaches for the wall. In sixty-five years, I'll be as old as he is right now.

"Here, you can rub your own balls," I say and hand him the towel.

"Balls is good," Carl mumbles and giggles.

Sometimes Carl understands everything, even raunchy sayings. His head is like an old radio, when the dusty tubes start to glow, he suddenly tunes-in again. But usually he only manages simple sentences; on bad days just a few words like eat or sleep or cake. Carl is going downhill fast. If one day his brain goes completely out of commission, we won't be able to talk at all. I'm not sure if I'll miss that.

I began an apprenticeship with Carl as a gardener when I was fifteen. My mother thought it was a great idea, but that was only a temporary solution, the easiest way to get rid of me after my father died. Carl wasn't actually allowed to train apprentices anymore. His brain was still worked perfectly back then, but he was old, had a bad knee, and just puttered around the garden for fun. Somehow my mother managed to work it out with the authorities. I guess with all the drop-outs and unemployed teens in the area, the officials don't give a shit what I'm doing around here. The main thing is I've got a roof over my head, don't hang around, and don't take drugs.

Carl taught me how to plant flower bulbs, cut back roses and transplant saplings. I learned how to make good compost and how to get rid of

aphids. I can tell the difference between a Woodland Pink and a Cheddar Pink and can handle a hoe as well as a rake. What I have not learned is how the world works out there or what a naked girl feels like.

For a whole year, my mother drove me to a vocational school in the city, an hour there and an hour back. She's a singer. During that time, she used to perform with dance bands at parties, business events and weddings. But actually my mother is a jazz singer. She did gigs with a quartette in clubs and pubs all over Europe. Piano, saxophone, bass, drums, and her. In the publicity photo, she's wearing a long black dress and black gloves that reach all the way to her elbows. Her four musicians are wearing tuxedos and bow ties, and all of them smile for the camera. Under the picture in curvy letters is written BETTY BLACK & THE EMERALD JAZZ BAND. My mother's maiden name is Passlack, Bettina Passlack. She thought it sounded too much like small town Neu Ruppin, and too little like New York. She had never used Schilling, my father's last name. In her passport she's called: Bettina Schilling-Passlack, but in the music world she's only known by her stage name. She gets around a lot, travels all over Europe, from Palermo to Helsinki, from Alicante to Warsaw. But she never made it big. No idea, why. Maybe she lacks ambition, the drive. Or a good manager. Or she's got a mediocre voice. And jazz? I mean, who listens to that stuff?

After the bath I help Carl get dressed and make us lunch. Carl sets the table. Frau Wernicke, the nurse who comes and sees Carl once a week, told me I should give Carl small tasks, so his brain has something to do. One of Carl's tasks is to set the table three times a day. Frau Wernicke says it's a kind of training to increase his mental capacity, but in Carl's case it doesn't seem to really be working. He usually forgets something, a spoon, a cup, both napkins. Often, he puts two forks next to each plate, but no knife, or he sets coffee cups instead of glasses of water. Sometimes he stands in front of the empty table and can't remember what he's supposed to do. Then I have to take out the dishes and cutlery for him and show him how to do it. If he has a really bad day, and stands

there playing with a spoon, I put him in his chair and have him cut scraps of paper. He never forgets how to do that.

Today Carl is having a pretty good day. Knife and fork are on the wrong side, and aside from the coasters and napkins, he hasn't forgotten anything. He's wearing black socks, gray baggy trousers and a white shirt. If he would have shaved, he'd kind of look okay. I take the napkins out of the drawer, stuff one in Carl's collar and roll up his sleeves.

"Thank you," says Carl. On average, he thanks me about ten thousand times a day, whether I help him put on his slippers, butter his bread, or clean his glasses.

"Dig in," I say.

"Thank you," says Carl. The cookie jar next to him on the floor is filled with thumbnail-sized snippets in countless shades of blue.

I turn on the radio next to the sink when I'm sleepy in the morning, or if I'm cranky at night from the day and I don't feel like listening to Carl's eating noises, his snorting and slurping, chomping and smacking his lips. But at lunchtime all the stations just play crap, so I let it go.

"Week in Review," says Carl.

"What?" Sometimes Carl uses words I'd never heard him say before. It totally weirds me out, and it makes me remember how he used to tell me stories before his brain turned to mush.

"That's what Selma would say to that. Week in Review."

Carl puts on his hat and three seconds later he'll ask me where his hat is. But every now and then a few wires in his head unravel and an old dusty memory flashes through.

"We're in the armpit of the world, not at the English court," I say a little too meanly. I have my bad days too. Today is one of them. In the morning, Carl had glue in his hair; some egg yolk dropped onto his

freshly laundered pajamas at breakfast, and later he refused to take a bath like a little kid.

"Tastes fine to me," says Carl. Irony and cynicism bounce right off of him. Only when I yell at him, does he wince and stare at me in shock. And then it makes me feel really bad and I apologize to him and peel an apple or tangerine for him.

"Well, that's all that matters," I say.

I've only seen my grandmother from photos. She left Carl before I was born. Why he's thinking about her today is beyond me. I'm sure he didn't come up with the expression Week in Review on his own. Today's lunch is a mix of yesterday's schnitzel, cabbage from the day before yesterday, rice from Tuesday, and marble cake from last week. Week in Review seems to be an apt name for it.

"Don't forget to take your pills," I say, and shove the saucer with the pills towards him.

"Thank you." Carl places one capsule after another on his tongue and washes them down with a sip of water.

Every once in a while, not that often, I imagine how it would be if Carl died. I hardly ever wish I'd find him dead in his bed. If my grandmother hadn't left him, she'd be stuck with Carl. Whoever said you're in control of your own life didn't have a clue. And I'm sure they didn't have a senile grandfather to care for.

After lunch, I take the Tuk Tuk out of the barn. About three years ago I saw a report on TV about Indonesia; they've got thousands of Tuk Tuks driving all over. Horst, one of the farmers in the area, gave me a busted Moped. In return, I had to fix his milking machine. I'm pretty good with technical stuff; I learned how to repair things at Maslow's garage and reading manuals. I took my first test drive three weeks later with the Tuk Tuk. I painted it and added some trimming later, and I like to stick all sorts of things to the sides of the cab and on the roof: coins, pieces of

glass polished by wind and rain, plastic toys from cereal boxes, useless keys, chess pieces, snail shells, hubcaps, a pale mouse skull. Sometimes Maslow gives me something or Horst or Willi or Otto. For example, the red taillight from a car that no longer exists, a bottle cap from Italy, a cufflink, a dog tag. Sometimes Anna gives me a cheap rhinestone brooch or a broken hair clip that glitters in the sunlight. Every week there's something new.

I park the Tuk Tuk in the shade and go back into the house. Carl is sitting on a stool in the kitchen looking down at his shoes. His hands are resting on his knees; wrinkled and spotted, and covered in blue veins. I've seen photographs of him as a young man, he's a strong, cool-looking guy with a full head of black hair and clear eyes that betray no doubt or confusion. The photos are in a box in Carl's closet, and I can't believe they are of the same person sitting right in front of me who can't remember how to tie his own shoes.

I try not to think about it, but that's what scares me the most: at some point it's going to be me sitting on this crappy stool unable to remember anything about my life. Because I never had one.

"It's easy, look," I say to Carl, kneeling in front of him and tying his left shoe.

"Thank you," he says.

"Now you do the other one."

Carl hesitates, then takes the laces in his fingers, awkwardly crosses one over the other, and then can't figure out what to do next. "And now?"

"Take it and thread it under the other one," I say.

Carl makes a couple of meaningless movements in slow motion and groans as if he was doing hard labor."

"Never mind." Before he gets totally tangled up, I take the laces out of his hands and do it myself.

"Thank you," says Carl.

I put the helmet on his head, tighten the chin strap firmly and follow him with the cookie jar filled with paper shreds. My grandfather thanks me for that too.

An old VW bus is parked in the barn. Actually, it's just a rusty car body under a tarp. The seats are leaning against the wall; a makeshift cover made of fertilizer bags protects them from the dusty dirt blowing through the cracks in the boards. The motor is lying in a wooden box as if in a coffin. Every couple of weeks Maslow drives by with a replacement part, sometimes nothing comes for months. At this rate, I'll be thirty by the time the bus is restored.

Carl will be ninety-five. The way he stands there in the midday light, the helmet on his head, staring mindlessly into the distance like an ancient astronaut, I have no doubt he'll reach a hundred.

I help Carl into the cab and put the cookie jar between his legs.

"Where are we going?" He asks.

He has asked me that twenty times today.

"To Anna," I say, and he smiles as if that's great news.

I sit on the scooter and kick start the engine. It turns on immediately. I don't think I'm much good as Carl's caregiver, but I'm not too shabby as a mechanic.

I stop in front of the shop and walk over to Carl. He's acting clumsier than usual because he's holding onto the cookie jar with one hand while trying to get out. I take it from him and catch him by the arm so he doesn't fall. About a year ago, I didn't pay attention for only a second and he fell. He sprained his right hand and couldn't brush his teeth for a month. For an old man, Carl has surprisingly good teeth. I wish his brain

would be in as good shape as his teeth. Maslow once sold me an electric toothbrush that was lying around his shop for years. At a special price for employees, otherwise I couldn't have afforded the thing.

Carl was afraid of the buzzing machine and refused to open his mouth. First I tried to persuade him, but that didn't get me anywhere. At some point I yelled at him to stop acting like a little kid. Then he closed his eyes and opened his mouth. The procedure got him so scared, he went catatonic. He looked like a lunatic, an epileptic with foam spewing from his mouth. The next day I brushed his teeth with the electric brush, and again he acted as if I was trying to kill him. It went on like that for about two weeks straight. One day he saw a TV commercial with a woman brushing her teeth with an electric toothbrush and from then on he was okay with it. He got a little scared when he held the buzzing thing in his hand for the first time, but then he chuckled and watched with fascination as the toothpaste flew all over the place.

The grocery store in Wingroden is a hair salon and post-office all in one. In the shop window they have a dusty model toy of an amusement park with booths, trams, a Ferris wheel and a painted lake with small row boats and dead insects lying on it. On a yellow sign peeling off the window pane is written: GROCERIES MASLOW and POST OFFICE. Attached to the door is a handwritten poster: HAIRCUT ON REQUEST.

In the shop are canned goods, instant soup, greeting cards, candles, nails, pencils, spades, and thousands of other things a person who lives here might possibly need at some point. On the shelves are also some useless items: disposable cameras and inflatable neck pillows for airplanes. Nobody in this town travels anywhere.

Over the door a bell rings softly when you enter the shop. Carl raises his head and smiles surprised every time he hears the tone, and acts as if he had never heard it before.

"Thank you," he says, and I never know if he is thanking me for opening the door or the bell for ringing.

"Be right there!" Anna shouts from the storage room behind the sales counter.

Nobody knows how old Anna is. I'd say she's about thirty-five, but Maslow says that's not enough. Alfonso and the other farmers think she's just a kid, but to them anybody under fifty is a child. Jojo doesn't care how old Anna is. He says he'd love her even if she was eighty. That's totally idiotic. But you never know with Jojo.

Carl points to the jar filled with chunks of nougat and looks at me. He can barely set a table, and sometimes he can't even remember his name, but that he gets a chunk of nougat whenever he gets a haircut, then he's suddenly got a memory like an elephant. Sometimes I suspect Carl is just pretending to be more absent-minded than he really is. But then I'll find him in his room in the morning, naked and shivering, because he took off his pajamas and can't remember his clothes are in the closet. Or he sits on the porch crying because the door got jammed and he thought I had locked him out. Then I know he's not pretending. He always gets really embarrassed when I have to show him where his underwear, socks, pants and shirts are for the thousandth time. When I find him on the porch, he always smiles at me as if I've forgiven all his mistakes and all the bullshit he's been up to and take him back.

In those moments, I never really know what I'm feeling for Carl. On the one hand, he's my grandfather and just about the only relative I have. I should actually love him and be glad he exists. On the other hand, he's the reason I'm stuck in this dump and why I've turned into a cook, chauffeur, caregiver and a damned girl Friday. It would be a lie to say I love Carl, but I haven't been stuck with him long enough to really hate him either. Most likely I feel pity for him. Pity and a last bit of affection for a helpless old man, the father of my father.

In a corner, the dairy case is humming quietly. There's a poster warning against rabies. A wooden shelf divided into four squares is attached to the wall, small letter boxes because mail hasn't been delivered here for years. Above each slot is a name tag: KURT, WILLI, HORST, OTTO,

ANNA /GEORGI, JOJO, CARL/BEN. The other thirteen slots are empty; one of them still has HERMANN printed on it, but he's been dead for five years. When I was a kid, each slot had an owner. Eighteen slots, twenty-five inhabitants. Otto was married back then and there was a gravel quarry that had an owner and his family. The quarry is now a lake and rusty conveyor belts and dilapidated wooden huts are lying all along the shore. In the summer, when I can't take the heat and boredom anymore, I drive there and splash around in it. An excavator shovel is lying on the bottom of the lake, the jagged edges look like a monster's muzzle.

When I was a little kid, I used to spend most of the school holidays with my grandfather. Spring, summer and fall. The nursery was still in business back then, and for a kid from the city it was like having a huge adventure playground. There was a wooden shed full of machines and tools, a water hole covered with boards from where you could dive to Australia, and a greenhouse that transformed into a crashed airplane, a pirate's hideout, or a dungeon in a fortress. And there was grandfather, who depending on what was needed for the story, was an enemy soldier, a primeval monster or the Sheriff of Nottingham.

My grandmother Selma was gone by then and Henriette, Carl' sister, came and helped him in the garden and around the house from April to October. During the winter months she lived with Kurt on the farm, cooked for him and washed his clothes. Henriette always pampered me like a prince, every morning she made me pancakes, sewed me a Robin Hood cap made of green felt, and built a space helmet made from empty detergent boxes. She was big and round as the tree next to the shed, I could see all the way to Kyrgyzstan and the Indian Ocean from there with Carl's binoculars. She died a long time ago of appendicitis, but I still miss her.

Anna arrives from the storage room and puts a cardboard box on the counter. Even though she always looks tired and kind of sad, she's very beautiful. A few years ago, I was in love with her the way a little boy can

fall in love with an older woman, but that's over now. Every time I see her wearing her light blue smock, I get a little nervous, but I don't stammer anymore or break into a sweat. I leave that to Jojo, who lives in another world, in a film where Anna is married to him and not to Georgy the crazy Russian.

Sometimes I wonder why Anna doesn't beat it. She's the only woman in this miserable dump and she deserves better than this dusty shop and poor Georgy, who sits around drinking all day and cutting himself with a knife. Maslow says marriage means staying together even when the going gets tough.

But Maslow has never been married, so what does he know about marriage?

"Hey, you two." Anna takes a chunk of nougat out of the jar and hands it to Carl.

"Thank you." Carl turns the chunk in his hands and looks at it reverently before he closes his eyes, purses his lips and cautiously nibbles on a corner. I always have to look away when Carl does that because he looks so geeky. Like a weird dim-witted hermit in a fairy tale in which the good fairy grants his wish and gives him his favorite food once a year. Or like some weird rodent that found a special treat.

Anna closes the curtain that separates the barber shop from the hair salon and washes her hands. Carl sits on the chair. Only now do I realize I forgot to take off his helmet and go get it.

"So, Carl, how's the leg doing?" Anna asks, as she lines his collar with white paper.

"Yes," says Carl.

I think his brain totally turns off, while he's sucking on the chunk of nougat.

"Not bad," I answer for him.

Anna giggles. She fastens a colorful, wildly patterned cloak around his neck. She looks at me as if she's waiting for something. "The leg. It's not bad." She smiles, then she makes a jerky motion with her hand as if to shoo away an annoying insect.

"Oh. Got it. The leg isn't bad." I smile back, but Anna has turned around and taken a comb and scissors off the shelf. I sit on a chair by the window with a magazine and act as if I am reading. Anna tells Carl a story, something from the newspaper that always arrives two days late. She knows Carl doesn't understand anything, but she keeps talking to him, calmly almost affectionately and way too softly for his old ears. Carl sits there like a dummy. He stuffed the rest of the nougat into his mouth and he lets loose a deep, humming sound.

Hermann Lüders, the guy who owns the gravel pit, had a wife named Ilse and a daughter. Jette, who was a year younger than me, was skinny and mean, but because we were the only kids in town, we spent a lot of time together during vacations. We weren't allowed to play on the grounds of the gravel pit, so all that was left was the nursery. I showed Jette the connection to the other side of the world, the view from the tree and the plane wreck, but she didn't like to get dirty and thought it was stupid to sit in an empty rain barrel pretending to be cooked by cannibals. Her favorite role was to play a stewardess, who survives a plane crash in the jungle and has to take care of the injured pilot. The injured pilot, of course, was me. She bandaged my head, an arm or a leg, and she wanted me to moan in pain so she could nurse me back to health. She had seen that in the movies. I didn't like lying around injured with a rolled up sleeve or pant leg, and I didn't like it when Jette dabbed my brow with a handkerchief. At that time I couldn't have imagined that all these years later I'd have never kissed a single girl; I might have given it a go with her, even though Jette's lips were thin and cracked and I couldn't really stand her.

Sometimes I dream about Jette. It's always the same dream: Our airplane crashes in the jungle just like we always played it. I'm lying on the

ground and Jette dabs my forehead with her handkerchief. Then a snake appears behind her. I want to warn Jette, but my mouth won't make a sound and the snake wraps around Jette's neck. I can't move my arms to help Jette. Her eyes keep growing larger and her open mouth suddenly turns into a cave, a black pit that I fall into. I feel myself falling and right before I hit bottom, I wake up.

Translated by Zaia Alexander