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Peter Stamm / Jutta Bauer
Why we live outside town

Translated by Allison Brown

1. When we lived in the house with the blue lamp the sun shone brightly every day and we had to keep the curtains closed. We heard music from the dance school on the top floor from morning to evening and in spring it sometimes smelled of lilac. The blue lamp in the hall was always burning, even during the day, and when we went to bed we kept the doors open, so we could see the lamp. Sometimes we heard steps and did not know whose they were or where they were coming from, and then it would be quiet again for days. When it rained we heard the water that flowed down the rain gutter, and the drops that fell from the leaves of the tulip trees.

The father read four newspapers, the mother bought three chairs, the grandmother knitted two pairs of striped socks for each of us, and the grandfather lost a pair of sunglasses. But the sister was always sad. That is why we moved to the trolleybus.

5. When we lived in the aunt's violin the floor creaked with every step. When the aunt played gypsy songs the furniture toppled over. And when she played folk songs the grandmother sobbed in secret. When the aunt practiced, the tones always went up and down and we had to cover our ears. The mother hung the laundry on the strings, and the father shouted "earplugs!" but did not utter another word, since he did not like where we were. It smelled of wood and rosin and old varnish, and when the violin was in the case it was dark and stuffy and we could not go out. Sometimes we sang when it was light out and the aunt was playing. And it was beautiful and sometimes truly wonderful.

The grandfather knew the names of all four strings, the sister learned three songs by heart, the father bought two plugs for his ears, and the mother baked a Black Forest cake. But the aunt stopped playing the violin. That is why we moved into the hotel.

10. When we lived in the movie theater we never got up until the afternoon. Every evening we had a lot of guests. We ate only ice cream and popcorn and sometimes peanuts that we found between the seats. We drank coffee and Coca-Cola. Sometimes there were films for grown-ups and our parents sent us outside. On Tuesday we saw old films that had no color and no sound and on Sunday afternoon we all watched cartoons together. All the restrooms were full between showings and after every movie we had to sweep the floor because the people threw away everything they were finished with. Sometimes the commercials were better than the movie, and people kissed instead of looking at the screen.

The mother saw the same movie forty times, the father did not come until after the commercials were over, the grandfather understood only half of what the actors were saying,

and the grandmother lost her favorite earring and never found it. But the sister wanted to emigrate to Casablanca. That is why we moved into the rain.

18. Ever since we have been living outside the city things have been getting better and better. We live in a big house that looks just like the houses to the left and right of it. We do not have a yard, but there are flowers growing behind the house. The bicycles are kept in the basement. We are not afraid of the dark. We can hear the bells chime from three churches and sometimes we can hear the wind and sometimes the rain. A lot of things are the same every day and some things are always different. We miss the grandfather a lot, but the uncle comes to visit every Monday. Then he tells us what he read or what the woman from the cheese shop said. The aunt recently wrote that she started playing violin again and that she would like us to visit her someday.

Our house has four corners, our year has four seasons, we moved outside the city four years ago, and this is where we live and where we will stay for a long time.