

Translated excerpt

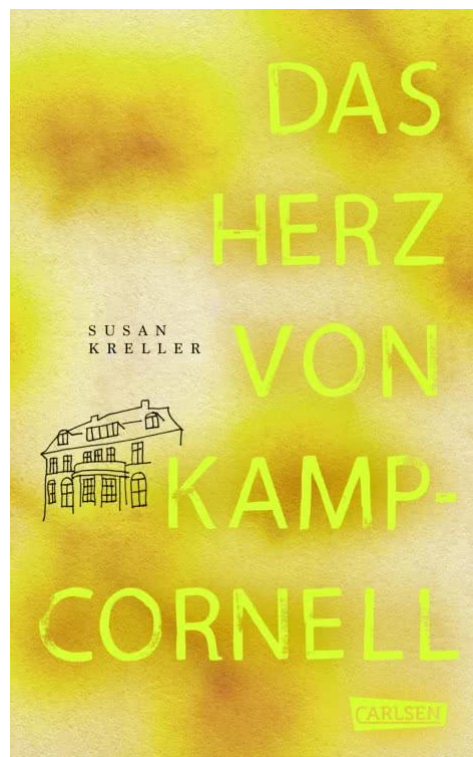
**Susan Kreller**  
***Das Herz von Kamp-Cornell***

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***The Heart of Kamp-Cornell***

Translated by Rebecca Heier



**The Heart of Kamp-Cornell (pp. 46-60)****Chapter 3**

[...]

Outside under the lamppost, the pig goose had reappeared: mottled gray, ruffled up, and hunched over – every orthopedist’s nightmare. The goose stood in a soft, translucent light, though the lantern above it wasn’t even switched on. Still, that was often the case with light fixtures that weren’t actually giving off light, but just hanging from the ceiling or stuck on top of poles. The mind supplied the light, making it possible to see things the darkness normally swallowed up.

Or things that weren’t even there.

But the goose was definitely there. Neck elegantly curved, it sashayed back and forth under the non-illuminating lamp, strutting its stuff, throwing nary a shadow. In response, Penelope tilted her turquoise-coifed head and remarked: “Typical cereopsis etcetera. But I still don’t understand what it’s doing here. They’re only found on Australian islands.”

“How do you know so much about these ... pig chickens?”

“What?” Penelope asked. “Oh, pig geese – Cape Barren geese. And all birds. I know about them from my sister.”

“Gabriella?”

“Lydia.”

“But ...,” Edin interjected, loud enough to cause Penelope to move a couple more millimeters away from him and then say, somewhat brusquely: “If you wanted to ask if we left her at home, no, we didn’t forget her. Nobody forgets Lydia. She can’t even be forgotten anymore. Lydia is dead.”

Now Edin pulled away from Penelope, far enough to make room for an extra half-person. He was thinking of how Penelope and her sister Gabriella had been introduced to him and the others: as triplets, namely, even though they themselves had insisted they were simply sisters.

“The ... third triplet,” Edin hesitated. “So did Lydia ... well, did she, like, die at birth?”

Penelope gave a slight stomp. “She died at death!” she shouted. “While she was dying. Three years ago.”

The noises that had eventually ceased started up again, possibly triggered by Penelope's restrained stomp. There were footsteps, maybe furniture being moved, metal hitting against metal. The snip-snip of shears. A DIY home improvement project. Scaffolding construction.

But the noises were so muffled, so ill-defined, that they could just as easily have been something else, noises of a strange presence that had wandered into the wrong house by mistake. And indeed the sounds had something unsettling, something alarming about them, something befitting a triplet who died while dying.

"I'm really ... sorry," said Edin, and it was good that these words passed so softly over his lips, because then they couldn't just disintegrate, the way they usually did when uttered.

Penelope didn't answer him. Didn't thank him. Didn't nod like someone who had to listen to these words punctually every two months. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Penelope Melitzky didn't sniffle, didn't sob, didn't roll her eyes. She just stared out the window, her gaze following the goose, walking with it, now changing direction with it. That was all.

"Gabiella," Penelope finally explained to her reflection in the dark windowpane, "took over chemistry from Lydia – formulas, experiments, flame tests. All that stuff that nobody understands. I do sketching for Lydia. And I took the birds, too. And I have no fear. Of anything at all, by the way."

When she'd finished speaking, Penelope flinched and reached for Edin's hand, which, because he was standing so far away from her, she could only reach by stretching her arm out. Her hand was trembling. Penelope was trembling. Because a new sound had emerged in the night. Only one, but a very loud one that reminded her of an enormous spoon dropping into an enormous soup bowl.

Edin squeezed his cousin's trembling hand and said: "Okay. Yeah. I get it. You two have taken on your sister's hobbies."

Penelope just looked at him.

Said nothing.

"You two have taken on your sister's hobbies."

"I heard it the first time," said Penelope, yanking her hand out of Edin's. "Do you always have to say everything twice? And hobbies, what rubbish! We haven't taken on her hobbies. We've taken on Lydia. So let's go now. The noises are coming from below. I've had enough of this. I'm going down. I want to see for myself."

"You really want to go down there? No way! You can't be serious about ..."

But Penelope was already on her way.

She didn't turn around.

Her trembling was over before it had even really got going.

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Something had woken her up. She suspected her vertebrae, but they all seemed to be behaving themselves. In spite of the thin camping mat, Ann Melitzky was lying almost comfortably on the floor of the big, dark room. She'd known where she was immediately; she hadn't been thrown for a second. She was in Kamp-Cornell. She was there where she never wanted to be. Never again. Because this house in which she now lay was not a good house, not one where tranquility reigned.

Still, she'd obviously managed to get through the previous day, the one she'd been dreading for so long. She'd survived the first round with the friendly inhabitants of Kamp-Cornell, those people she'd feared, her heart pounding, and silently cursed as a child. And the house that had terrified her for so long she'd also survived – for a dozen hours, anyway – and she was still alive; maybe feeling a little sleepy and out of place, but still here.

Here.

And something had woken her up, infiltrated her sleep, carefully folded itself into her dreams like stiffly beaten egg whites into a French meringue. The large room in which she and most of the others had made camp was located above the nearly empty living room where her father lay. Up here was where the “sewing and music room” had been – the “music” represented by nothing more than one measly recorder while the “sewing” boasted two rusty sewing machines, only one of which worked.

Now it was all gone: the music and the sewing machines and the person who used to sit at one of them. Instead, there were only mattresses and camping mats strewn around, a few bright spots of moonlight, people by night. Kinfolk by night. Strangers. The room made Ann imagine a dormitory in an orphanage somewhere far away, in Maine maybe, Saint Cloud’s. A roof over your head, but your heart left exposed. Something like that.

It was so dark in here that she couldn’t tell whether the sleeping bags contained real people or whether they’d just been fluffed up. But Ann knew that two Melitzkys were missing: her sister Rosalie and Rosalie’s unfortunate son, Johnny; the two of them were in their own room on this floor.

There!

She could hear something between the soft snores of her sisters and the silent wheezing of the children; now she knew why she’d woken up. Never had she been able to forget why she’d woken up with a start every single night she’d spent in this house. During her childhood. The nights of her childhood. Those were the worst. At bedtime, she always pulled the blanket up over her head in fear, but that blanket wasn’t any protection at all. Sooner or later, the sounds had always come, night after night after night, and her parents always had some sort of grown-up, logical way of explaining them, or, much more frequently, said they were just a figment of her imagination.

They never took her fear seriously.

Never fluffed it up to keep it from weighing her down.

Stop!

There it was again. Several noises, all at once, and none belonged in this house, especially not at such a deep dark hour. Nor were they typical of the residents of Kamp-Cornell who took care of Victor Melitzky, who cared for him even at night, up to now. Because starting tomorrow, Ann and her sisters would take care of their elderly father – whether the neighbors wanted them to or not.

Ann Melitzky rose from her camping mat. Now she really did feel something aging, something angry in her back, and she felt her way through the dark room to the door. She would find out yet where those noises were coming from!

Now she would find out.

Only a few more minutes.

Decades too late.

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Lu Winnefeld was not a night person, never had been. But you couldn't be everything. Lu just didn't like wandering around at night like a startled ghost when everyone else was sleeping, even if "everyone" had always consisted of exactly one person: her mother. And sometimes not even of her. The night and Lu had very little to do with each other. That was for sure.

It wasn't even as if Lu was afraid of the dark or that she couldn't function without daylight. Nighttime was simply not her time. At most it was an additional something that you had to book in advance, and she never booked it. Only when the night was over did Lu's world start up again, every morning anew.

So why was she now standing in the gloomy room where a goodly number of her relatives were sleeping? Lu was standing here because the room was no longer gloomy, but weakly illuminated by her smartphone's flashlight, and because she had discerned in that light that only a small goodly number of

her relatives were still lying on the mattresses and camping mats: her mother, her Aunt Kalinka, and her cousin Gabriella. All the others had vanished. Aunt Ann. Edin. Penelope. Apparently, they hadn't been able to sleep, which wasn't hard to believe since Lu herself kept having the strangest dreams, then waking up in a panic and with tears in her eyes, tears she couldn't even remember having actually cried. When?

The dreams weren't what Lu would call nightmares. They all featured the overly friendly residents of Kamp-Cornell, but always in different situations – with changing backdrops and various costumes – and always grinning from ear to ear. Although these residents in their dreamed state were exceptionally nice to Lu, and the dreams all had something goofy and lighthearted about them, the first thing she felt after waking up was something akin to fear, something unsettling, something that was hard to put a finger on, something that made the night harder for her.

And now Lu Winnefeld was freezing horribly. The room was ice-cold, and it smelled like a disused farmhouse: musty, aged, with a hint of old mattress. Only now did Lu notice that the house was making noises. She could hear them clearly. Much as if it was cracking its neck, like the boys in her class used to get a kick out of doing, preferably when the teacher was talking. One of them would stretch up his arms, cross them in the air, and then start moving his head from side to side, in slow motion, making such loud noises that kids two classrooms down could hear them, and the janitor would have to stop whatever he might be doing just to concentrate on being startled. Or so it was said. And as far as Lu knew, all her male classmates had survived.

She bent over, slipped her sockless feet into her sneakers and stood up straight. She was ready. If all she did was keep waking up, what was the use of going to sleep? She might just as well go looking for her rogue relatives. Carefully, lightly, on her tiptoes. The old floorboards in the room still creaked at every step, but no one lying there seemed to take enough notice to be robbed of

sleep. There was a short, smacking sound that came from Lu's mother, but apparently she hadn't found it worth waking up for.

The stairwell was even colder and creakier than the room. Fortunately, there were no sleepers here or anything else that could be easily disturbed, so Lu no longer had to be extra careful. She could hear voices coming from downstairs – whispering, lots of muttering and buzzing, and the house still hadn't stopped its bone cracking. Step by step, Lu descended, down to the noises, gripping the wooden banister, all the while using her phone to light the way.

Was she afraid?

No.

Lu Winnefeld was not afraid.

And there they stood. Outside the door to the enormous room where the man recently revealed to be Lu's grandfather lay in the right-hand corner of the back wall, she saw a pathetic little trio of watchmen, who didn't look capable of even watching someone, let alone guarding them. Lu's cousin Penelope was clutching, from a safe distance, the arm of her cousin Edin; Edin had laid his hand on the back of his mother, Lu's Aunt Ann, who was wearing a billowing, granny-style nightgown and had an ear pressed against the old wooden door.

Although they shared a connection, the three eavesdroppers seemed ill at ease, had a faulty connection, and turned around, visibly relieved, when Lu asked: "Hey guys, what's going on here? Is the racket coming from in there?"

"Maybe," said Edin.

"Maybe," answered her Aunt Ann.

"Where else?" asked Penelope. "That's the only room we haven't checked. Besides, I can hear that it's coming from in there. Everybody can hear it."

"And what about that room over there," asked Lu. "Have you actually been in there?"

"That's not a room," her Aunt Ann answered. "That's a closet. And don't ask what's behind that other door. The one to the left of it."



“And what’s behind that other door?” Lu asked. “The one to the left of it.”

Ann Melitzky sighed, shook her head, shook it a second time, just to make sure. Then she said: “That is, well ... that is the ...unused room. None of you are allowed to go in there. Got that? We were never allowed to go in there, either. And we still don’t. End of discussion!”

The discussion hadn’t even begun yet, at least not that Lu had noticed, but regardless – she still had one more question.

“But you still checked it, right?”

“Yes,” said Ann Melitzky quietly. “We did open the door and look in. The unused room was rather ... unused.”

Obviously, the unused room was not one of her aunt’s favorite subjects, so Lu hurried to add: “Yeah, well, you guys are right. The noises must be coming from the living room. Yes, I think I can hear something, too. So, what the heck? Why don’t we just take a peek?”

She had to pry Penelope’s hand from Edin’s arm in order to reach the door. And as Lu put her hand on the ornate door handle, Penelope suddenly turned around and stomped off with a puzzling ire toward the kitchen, announcing emphatically as she strode: “I am hungry. I’m sure I’ll find something left in the kitchen to eat!”

But it still took a little while for Lu to gather enough strength in her hand to actually press down the door handle of her grandfather’s room. And when, finally, she was standing there with Edin and her Aunt Ann in that great big room, something occurred behind her, over in the kitchen. What occurred was a long, slightly squeaky scream, rhythmically accompanied by the rattling of a metal pot lid. The scream sounded turquoise and scared to death. And when the scream and the rattling had echoed away, Lu heard their exact opposite here, in the dark room of the grandfather. Who was breathing peacefully and seemed to be sound asleep. Who was totally alone. Totally without a night attendant. All

three of them perceived this opposite that had occupied the room like a mute army: a pure, powerful, absolute silence.

## Chapter 4

The toaster coughed up two smoking slices of dark rye bread. The burnt smell permeated the chilly kitchen air and hung in the faces of a medium-sized group of breakfasters. All in all, the morning was exactly the way gray mornings needed to be. Gray. Above the sink, the faucet dripped with the patience of a Scottish whitework embroiderer, but the sound of the evenly spaced drops did nothing to coax even one drop of conversation from those present. Silence and chewing, chewing and silence, and the feeling of already having had enough of this day that had issued forth from such a bleak night.

In truth, though, not all of those present had personally participated in the terrible night. Rosalie and Johnny Melitzky, for example, in their private room and in their very own beds, had evaded it by sleeping, as did Bernadette Winnefeld – with the tiny difference, however, that she hadn't had a room to herself and besides that, had lain on a hard camping mat, so that she was now aware of more bones in her body than were actually there.

Kalinka Melitzky and her triplet daughter Gabriella had also slept a few hours, but were afterwards wide awake, as one always is when a thirteen-year-old girl keeps screaming that she's not afraid and that someone must immediately throw these chicken heads out of the house.

All those who hadn't slept that night quickly agreed that the pot with the four chicken cuts of the uppermost kind must have been a regrettable oversight on the part of the country butcher, a small, annoying mix-up that probably happened to half the country butchers in the world at least once.

But looking at the mournful breakfast party now, you'd almost think that none of them bought into the theory of the chicken-head oversight. And that was the case! But the others were also distressed. Those who had slept the night

away. The kitchen was filled with downcast Melitzkys and Winnefelds. You could hear their listless chewing, hear the scraping of burnt crusts off dark rye bread, hear the fingertips of four adult sisters moving in time to the faucet's drip-drip, tracing small letters that had been etched in the wooden table eons ago.

In contrast, the noises of the previous night were as good as gone. From across the hall in Viktor Melitzky's sick room came the voices of several villagers, once again selflessly taking care of the gravely ill man. Ann Melitzky closed her eyes, exhaled, and then struck the table so hard with her open hand that the message was clear: This here was a slam long overdue!

Again.

A slam decades too late.

One that belonged to another time.

But it was a slam that the Ann from that other time, the one who lived here as Ernestina and Viktor Melitzky's daughter, would never have dared, though even back then there would have been millions of reasons for it, at least as many as those intrusive neighbors. Back then, and now. And enough was enough! Ann Melitzky slammed the table once more and shouted: "So. No more shilly-shallying! Rosa, Berni, Kalli. And everyone else! How many half-eaten casseroles are in that rattletrap refrigerator?"

Johnny Melitzky jumped so high at his aunt's question that his chair fell back with a crash to the floor. Taking giant steps, he moved toward that rattletrap refrigerator, but for a thirteen-year-old he was slow to arrive because on the way he kept touching things, even pressing his thumb in the butter repeatedly. Arriving at his destination, he pulled open the heavy door of the fridge, and Lu Winnefeld called out, while rolling her eyes: "Guys, could we please just skip this subject?"

But Johnny wasn't the sort of person who skipped subjects or anything else. That was something that would never have occurred to him – perish the

thought! Because Johnny Melitzky conducted his life correctly. He knew how to avert dangers and thereby prevent disaster: through accuracy.

Johnny Melitzky kept count.

He kept count of life.

And as he stood straight and stiff by the refrigerator, ready to give a lengthy speech and clearly not of this world – at least not quite – it wasn't hard for those in the kitchen to imagine what school must have been like for him. Oh, Johnny. It was plain as day this schoolboy had never been able to avert a single danger and prevent disaster, not even through accuracy.

Let alone speed.

But when Johnny Melitzky swiftly slammed the refrigerator door shut and then reported with the confidence of an experienced technician that there were precisely seventeen casseroles in there, you could have thought he really was of this world after all.

What he failed to mention, though, was that on the previous evening, after everyone in the house had gone to sleep, he had meticulously sorted and arranged the casseroles according to the degree to which they had been eaten. What he failed to mention was that he had known since yesterday evening that the casseroles totaled seventeen. And what he failed to mention was that he hadn't been able to save a single soul with this effort, least of all his cousin Penelope, who was still looking pale and scared.