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### The Exo-Phony: Exploring Transnational Identity Through Multigenerational Narrative

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Mutterseelenallein: A Memoir of a Mother Tongue

An Honors Thesis presented by  
Sophia Angele-Kuehn  
to the Department of English  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College  
New London, Connecticut  
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## Contents

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| In the Beginning .....              | 6  |
| The Hills Are Alive .....           | 10 |
| The Dirndl .....                    | 20 |
| Half-and-Half .....                 | 34 |
| Alma Mater .....                    | 48 |
| Bärln .....                         | 69 |
| The Tree and the Hill .....         | 86 |
| Photo Credits and Bibliography..... | 91 |

*I was suspended rather than rooted. I had two sides, neither well defined.*

– Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*



## In the Beginning

Maria grabbed my hand and bent down beside me in fake amazement. “*Schau*, Sophia, *Ameisen!*”

I spread my fingers apart to wiggle free from my aunt’s grip. “Not *Ameisen* — ants!” All the adults around us laughed, including my mom.

Maria shook her head and smiled at the memory, brushing her thumb through the petals of a rose as if it were a little girl’s cheek. “You see, Sophia, you didn’t want to speak German!” She was referring to one of the rare occasions that she visited my parents in the U.S.

*I was four!* I wanted to turn to her and shout the words, but I couldn’t — speaking in English would have validated my aunt’s point. And although I have learned some of the language since then, I didn’t know how to speak my mind in German. Instead, I kneeled on the grass to hide my frustration and nipped a dead bud away, shaking the entire bush.

I couldn’t even remember that moment seventeen years ago, when Maria visited our house in the Hamptons – our family’s very first home. It wasn’t a mansion, but a white wooden one-story in the woods. We didn’t have a garden, but tall pine trees, bamboo, and wild rhododendron bushes. The ants we spotted had probably been on the porch deck, whose wooden slates were always gritty with the sand that my sister and I brought back in buckets from the beach.

I continued to pull and attack the perfect roses in my aunt’s garden that mild July at her house in Bavaria. I had a month-long *Sommerpause* from my internship in Berlin, which had closed for vacation like most offices in Germany. My aunt and uncle agreed to take me in per request of my mother.

My gloved fingers searched through the leaves for another bud to pull, no, not “bud” —  
“Do you know, these are called *Hagebutten*, Sophia. How does one say in English... rose  
*hips*? People make perfume from them,” said Maria, trying to catch its scent under her nose. Her  
white blond hair rose up in the wind.

I tossed the hard hip into the metal trash can behind me. Its seeds would never bloom  
again.

Maria touched a particularly flaming rose. Its petals wavered at the pressure. She  
wrapped her fingers around them, and pulled. The rose exploded in her hand.

*It's not my fault that I didn't learn German.*

My mother is German, and my dad is German. Her parents were German, and his parents  
were German. Following that logic, I am German, and my younger sister is German. But it's  
more complicated than that.

I tried to console my past four-year-old self: I was just asserting my vast knowledge of  
English for my age. And is it so clearly divided, anyway? German and English, right and wrong,  
mother's tongue and mother tongue? Putting blame on the toddler instead of the thirty-five-year-  
old mother as to why the toddler isn't bilingual isn't fair. It takes a village to raise a child. But  
does it take a village to make a child learn the language of its parents? Who should be blamed?

I realized that it was my aunt and I who were blaming my mother. My mother, who left  
her farmhouse in Baden-Württemberg to “try something new” in the States with a Fulbright  
grant, easing herself away from her family and her mother tongue. My mother, who worked in a  
German language-learning institute in Chicago after getting a degree in library science. My  
mother, who met my father, who wanted to learn the language that his immigrant parents from  
Berlin tried so hard to forget. My mother, who looks just like me.



“This rose is very special. Eden Rose.” Maria cupped a few flowers, breathing in their warm scent. Their blush-pink petals were packed tight together, their beautiful heads too heavy, swooning across the metal arbor.

Ever since I touched down in the Berlin Tegel airport in May, I was acutely aware of the empty space beside me where my mother had always been. In every encounter that I had, I didn’t have my mother’s voice to speak for me, my translator, a narrator of my feelings. Even after taking German classes in college, I felt that I couldn’t speak for myself. Instead, I was my mom’s temporary replacement, a reflection. In my aunt’s garden, I felt recognized as her daughter, but treated as a foreigner. I wanted to fly home, but this was my motherland.

There are 95 varieties of roses in my aunt’s garden. The roses have different colors, heights, and petals, yet belong under the same family name. It’s a Garden of Eden, where my aunt is God. I obeyed her and cut off that which grew out of reach, or escaped the borders of its plot, or mingled with other sorts of roses, so that we could promote the growth of the one bush. What seemed like a natural paradise that friends could envy during a kaffeeklatsch was in fact the efforts of sweaty afternoons spent trimming a wild beauty. My aunt needed the beauty of perfection: in her garden, in her family, and in her language.

We continued to prune and think side-by-side, our hips occasionally bumping as we bent down, our faces and feelings hidden by our sun hats.

It’s very satisfying, holding the pruning shears in your right hand, the two halves swung open, and then squeezing your fingers together so the metal hooks grasp under the hard swell and the small fuzzy leaves beneath with a *clip!*

Maria was teaching me to cut away that which was dead in order to grow something more beautiful.

Soon, rose branches will grow brittle and the leaves spotted. We must rip up the old roots and start on new territory again. We decide where to plant the seed.

## The Hills Are Alive

Darkness, and then, light.

We see a book lying on a crocheted tablecloth in a pool of golden light. On the cover, surrounded by an intricate golden pattern, there's an image of sharp white mountains in the distance, and goats with sharp horns and golden bells around their necks. One goat lies on a snowy hill, comforted by a bare-legged girl wearing a short summer dirndl.

A strange hand reaches out to open the book for us.

*“In the beautiful Alps that lie South of the great Black Forest of Germany, on a bright June morning, two figures trudged up the steep path that leads from Mayenfeld to the little village of Dorfli.”*

Magically, we see the very thing that was just read, rendering the words useless and our imagination pointless. There is indeed a small girl and a woman walking up a path on the side of a steep mountain. It is sunny, it is green, there is blue. Everything, besides the two figures, is as silent and flat as an acrylic painting.

As soon as they enter the town square, the girl, frustrated and uncomfortable, throws down her jacket, rips off her cotton scarf, even pulls down the skirt of her dirndl.

The woman, who is her aunt, shakes her. “Heidi! Put those on!”

“Oh not everything, I'm so hot!”

So begins the film *Heidi* from 1937, starring Shirley Temple. It's America's Sweetheart, playing a little Swiss girl in the hills of California.

Seconds later, a dehydrated Heidi puts her mouth under a drinking fountain, and a yodeler with a walking stick approaches, singing a throaty and high-pitched melody.

Heidi immediately responds, trying to imitate him, scooping the vowels of this strange new language around her mouth, until breathless and confused, she gives up.

After some more water, she walks back to her aunt, but accidentally drops her clothes. A goat sees this opportunity and charges, knocking Heidi down into the dust.

The audience laughs, and understands: Although she tries, Heidi can't adapt to her new home. Her aunt disagrees, and abandons the girl with her grandfather, who closes the door in Heidi's face. With a huff, Heidi lets herself into her new home.

Zoom out, out of the movie, to a very real blond-haired girl sitting on the floor of a house in the Hamptons, her chin tilted up towards the static of the television. Her name is Sophia. Soon she will forget almost everything about this film, besides the name of the little girl, and the mountains.

It must have been my mother who pushed the *Heidi* VHS tape into the television set, because in this memory I am six years old and want my mother to do everything for me. But my mother didn't stay in the living room while my 4-year-old sister Johanna and I watched, simultaneously playing with our Barbies in imagined worlds come to life. *Heidi* offered us the perfect setting as an Americanized *Heimatfilm*, or homeland-film, where doll-faced girls find love and friendship in an idyllic adventurous landscape.

But Heidi's life isn't so idyllic. Her Aunt Dete dumps her in a foreign town with a foreign relative. Just as Heidi is beginning to fit into her new life, Dete comes back to take her away. During this scene, I must have hugged my Barbie close to my chest like a baby. How could Heidi's aunt control her like that? Heidi could handle herself just fine. Even though Heidi would

settle into her new home with her aunt, she could never forget her grandfather, and the mountains.

Even with the film's opening scene of a golden-edged book, it didn't occur to me until my college years that *Heidi* was first a novel. *Heidi* was also a shortened version of the complete German title of the book *Heidi: Her Years of Wandering and Learning (Heidis Lehr- und Wanderjahre)*, which sounds more like a middle-aged woman's memoir than a children's book from 1881. The title must have attracted the parents. The strong female lead and pretty pictures must have attracted the children.

The opening sentences of *Heidi* the book actually start like this:

*“The pleasant old village of Mayenfeld lies in a valley at the foot of lofty mountains. From it a footpath leads through shady, green meadow to the mountains and on up to their summit. As the path ascends, the land grows wilder and the meadow grasses soon give place to mountain plants...”*

From this description, the reader could be standing in a number of countries, surrounded by flowers, waiting for anybody, alone. There is no speech, nor time, only presence.

\* \* \*

This is the beginning.

*In the center of a village that lies North of the Black Forest, a red farmhouse lies nestled behind a church. From it, a long, straight road cuts through flat farmland until reaching a fenced-in meadow. In the meadow, brown cows stand, flicking their tails, eating, the sun warming their downy ears.*

*On a hazy July afternoon, a 9-year-old-girl with blond hair walks down this road, alone.  
Her name is Elisabeth.*

*After passing acres of empty, bounteous land, she reaches the meadow. She opens the front gate, where the cows were already waiting, and lets the cows pass her, giving some a slap on the back with a little wooden stick. But they know where to go, walking along the right side of the street. Elisabeth reaches down and flaps the hem of her apron back and forth under her face, because it's so hot.*

*And they walk, for ten minutes, twenty. Cars occasionally honk as they pass.*

*The cows near the end of the road, where it intersects with the village's main street in front of her family's farmhouse. Elisabeth's older brother had been peeking from the lace curtains in the living room for the last ten minutes. He had been waiting until the herd was in sight, so that he and his father could run outside and stop traffic.*

*And the cows would be led back into their Kuhstall, and then their milk would be taken. The next morning, someone would walk the cows back to the meadow so that they could feast on open land.*

*And this was done daily.*

We cross the threshold, and close the front door.

My mother stops describing her childhood in Southern Germany (or Upper Swabia, from her point of view). I'm also quiet, hoping that she'll keep talking even though we're no longer outside walking the dog down the street, but inside the walls of our house. Her words had formed a story in my head, like a memory that I never had. But while I had probed her for details on her life before she came to the U.S., my mother disappeared. She continued to walk beside me, but

she seemed to float in between time and space, trying to translate her German life into English. When I asked her a question, she took her time before answering yes or no, as if she were resurfacing from her memories. Sometimes she would even stop walking, and stare at me with wide, unfocused eyes.

While Heidi's story always begins with her walking up a mountain hand-in-hand with her aunt, my mother was alone when she left her village for the meadow, and later, for America.

\* \* \*

I was 16 years old when I hiked the dusty paths hugging the Alpine foothills, wearing an oversized windbreaker which my aunt had forced upon me, despite the warm sun. I was not alone — my mother and sister were behind me, and ahead were Maria, her husband Rudi, and their daughter Vanessa with her boyfriend.

We had all been staying at Maria's house in Bavaria before my cousin Anna's wedding — one of the rare occasions that necessitated my family buying expensive plane tickets. To save some money, my dad had decided to stay in the U.S.

On one sunny day in April, we embarked on the two hour-long drive from Bavaria to Neuschwanstein Castle, located near the Austrian border. A popular and proud symbol of Germany, Neuschwanstein inspired Disney's very own fairy-tale castle in California.

While I stood on the path looking down on the clusters of red-roofed houses, sharp highways, and bleached strips of farmland, I couldn't help but think of the landscape of *The Sound of Music*. You heard of it: It's the true story of an Austrian nun who becomes a governess of seven children and later falls in love with the wealthy, widowed father. At the end of the 1965

American film adaptation, the father refuses to join the German navy under the Nazis, and the whole family has to flee their homeland, ending the film on a bleak note. But there's one scene from the film that sticks in my mind of Julie Andrews at the climax of her happiness, alone and spinning herself on the hills in front of the Alps.

But I wasn't on a hill, breathless with joy and love. I was on a mountain walking in between a loving but fragmented family.

I pulled out my phone from my pocket to take a picture. The view was like a painting; the height, dizzying, and beckoning me to step off the worn path, away from my aunt's protective arms, and take flight.

\* \* \*

When someone tells me how much they like the sound of German, I'm surprised but pleased. Instead of agreeing, however, I try to get them to change their mind, as if they had made a mistake. I usually respond with how melodious the Italian language is in comparison: "Like singing a song." A usual stereotype of the German language is harsh, guttural, and almost impossible to wrap your tongue around. But secretly, German has always sounded familiar and happy to me. If I were to describe it, it's how the female elevator voice is meant to sound like in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* when Harry visits the Ministry of Magic: cool, crisp, and reassuring.

One of the hardest and most essential words in the German language is three letters long: *Ich*. As in, "Ich bin Sophia, ich bin einundzwanzig Jahre alt, ich schreibe gerne...." It is one of the first words you learn in German 101, the first thing you say when you introduce yourself to a



stranger, the first sound that escapes your mouth when you think out loud, wonder out loud, ask out loud. It is the signifier of the signified, the stamp of your existence, the hissing *I*, the sharp-cutting *C*, and the guttural *H*, in one syllable. *Ich* means “I.”

Not too long ago while I was writing on my laptop, my sister stuck her head past my bedroom door while she played with our King Charles Spaniel dog Bruce. She picked up a paper strewn on my floor from when I was organizing the schoolwork from my classes. It was a list of German songs from the Berlin Kabarett in the 1920s.

I came over to her to read the song I remembered the best: “Wenn die beste Freundin” by Marcellus Schiffer. In an exaggerated, sing-song dialogue, two women vow their close friendship to one another.

Johanna tried to imitate me, mumbling along in a playful way. Instinctually, I caught her mistake. “Johanna, can you say ‘Ich’ for me?”

“Eeck!”

“Ich?”

“Ick!”

“Ich! Ich! Ich!” I emphasized the word’s wild, throaty hiss.

“... Ihch?” Johanna smiled. “Will you teach me?”

Like a toddler first seeing its reflection in the mirror, learning its first word, and writing out the first crooked letters of its name, we continued to shout our existence to each other, and laughed.

Since I have started learning German as a first-year student in college, my sister remains the sole member of my immediate family who doesn’t know the language. Like me, her first foreign language was Italian, which she learned in the same middle school that I attended. Then

she switched to French when she started attending an all-girls Catholic school in Connecticut. Now as a sophomore in college, she can barely speak one sentence in French, even when I ask her to translate a word or an expression that I come across, craving to hear the language's viscous vowels and cold consonants.

I never learned French, but I love the sound of it. As a result, I've developed my own version of it — a nonsense language made up of meaningless sounds which I use while singing along to the French songs on Spotify.

During my internship in Berlin, the rhythmic whispers and suspended sentences of singers like Vendredi sur Mer, Françoise Hardy, and Clio spoke volumes to me as I danced alone in an empty apartment. Besides English, Italian, and German, French seems to me the one language that can express perfect sadness.

\* \* \*

Sometimes while walking through my house, I will boom the opening notes of “The Sound of Music” in a falsely operatic voice. Unfortunately, no one in my family ever responds to my calling, or sings along.

After one of these impromptu performances, I search for the lyrics of “The Sound of Music.” I didn't know all of the words — only the longing melody and the image of Julie Andrews spreading out her arms in a field of wildflowers. It was as if the words hadn't existed for me, until now:

*The hills are alive with the sound of music*

*With songs they have sung for a thousand years*

*The hills fill my heart with the sound of music*

*My heart wants to sing every song it hears.*



## The Dirndl

I couldn't breathe. Correction: I couldn't breathe *in* and fill my lungs with a deep breath of stale barn air. My body adjusted: short breaths in, long breaths out. I placed both of my hands in the dips of my waist, feeling how the cotton molded seamlessly into my skin.

I didn't know how long I would last.

I was trying on dirndls in a *Stadel*, or barn, that had been converted into a traditional costume shop run by a mother-daughter duo. Aptly called Trachten Stad'l, the store sells *Trachten* or dirndl dresses, lederhosen, women's lederhosen, blouses, button-down plaid shirts, leather shoes, heart necklaces, and purses for all of your traditional costume needs.

Dirndls are popular in Bavaria and Austria. Nowadays, they are more costume than traditional. The simple dresses that Alpine peasant women once wore in the nineteenth century have evolved into a brightly colored, promiscuous, beer-holding image of the German woman.

I sighed heavily and rejoiced at the extra room under my rib cage.

Only one hour earlier, I had been pressing the prongs of a fork against cake crumbs left on my plate. Maria and I had been eating raspberry *Himbeerkuchen* in lounge chairs in her rose garden, enjoying the sunshine after a busy afternoon of pruning.

Maria observed her garden, an arm resting behind her head. "My friend told me that there are dirndls in the Trachten Stad'l for €30. We should go visit one day."

I nodded, and gulped down some frothed milk from the cappuccino Maria had made me.

"A mother runs it with her daughter..."

My uncle Rudi walked into our circle of shade with his mug of black coffee. “The mother is much hotter,” he sighed, easing himself into a chair. His gray cotton shirt was soaked through under his arms.

Maria sipped from her mug. “Yes... the mother could be the daughter,” she said thoughtfully. “The daughter isn’t very pretty.” She glanced at me, pursed her lips and put her arms to her side, adding imaginary weight to her small frame.

“Sophia doesn’t need a dirndl,” said Rudi. He turned towards me. “Where would you wear it? Dirndls have become too...” he motioned vaguely. “... anyway.”

“But not all dirndls,” said Maria. “Some are quite fancy. Some people even wear dirndls at weddings.” She gave me an aside smile. Rudi dismissively waved his hand.

Maria now turned toward me, propping her head up with her hand. “You know, Sophia, if you find a Dirndl for €30, I will buy it for you.”

“Oh, no,” I said, politely. I never knew how to respond to someone who wanted to buy me something. But how could I say no? Every time I biked home from the school where I volunteered as an English Assistant Teacher, I would eye the poster hanging over the front door of the Stad’l. It was a photo of a blond girl laughing in a rose pink and green dirndl.

Maria nodded, and got up from her chair with resolve. I stood up while Rudi remained seated. “We’ll just see what they have,” she decided. It was Friday, and I guess her hope of finding a good deal wouldn’t last long. After we put our mugs into the dishwasher, I ran up to my room to slip on my worn Adidas sneakers and grab my phone, leaving behind my wallet.

Like most of the buildings in the town, the Stad’l had a light-yellow stone façade and a red tile roof. We walked down the stone path to the front door, passing a small wooden cabin with heart-shaped cutouts in its double doors, and a wrought-iron trellis supporting dusty pink

roses. One stalk had slipped loose, and waved comically in the air above the ground. “Trachten Stad’l” was painted in hot pink letters on a slab of wood nailed above the front doors, which were framed by dark green ivy.

We stepped inside and a bell rang.

As if expecting the reason behind our visit, the clearance rack was directly to the right of the door, with €30 scrawled on a fluorescent pink paper star taped to the side. Ashamed, I looked up at the rest of the store.

I couldn’t tell where the store ended. Under long wooden beams, thin wall-dividers made out of pressed wood-chips sectioned off the dirndls from the lederhosen, and the dressing rooms from the cash register, which faced the front doors. In a room on the right, two long racks of colorful dirndls were pressed together beneath another rack of short-sleeved white blouses, with black and long-sleeved blouses far in-between. Everything was placed with precision. Silk dirndls outfitted with blazers, heeled boots, and feathered hunting caps were stationed at each corner and hung from columns. Sitting on a shelf was a stuffed pheasant and a fully clothed, headless mannequin. A limp fox skin was draped around the woman’s shoulders. I imagined petting the fox, but decided against it.

A heavy-set woman with kinky, dirty blond hair (the daughter, I presumed) was hurriedly walking past us until Maria flagged her down. “*Entschuldigung*, my niece here, who is from America, was interested in trying on some dirndls.”

With a quick glance at me, she escorted us to the dressing rooms. All of them were occupied. I heard two girls chatting behind a curtain. Along the wall, a mother was waiting on a bench with a purse in her lap. I felt her eyes examining us.

Maria picked out the shop owner, who was re-folding checkered men's shirts. Slim, petite, and with a black pixie haircut, she seemed younger than her daughter. The only similarity between the two was an annoyed grimace. Maria introduced us and the woman walked us over to the sales rack again, explaining that those were all that were left. She pointed at the end of the room to an open door with a red % sign. There were more discounted options in there.

While I stood watching, Maria browsed through the small selection of size 38 dirndls with matching aprons, murmuring words of praise for each one. In my opinion, they were all ugly. We picked out three.

We still needed a blouse, and walked into the Separated Room of Sale. There, the dirndls were €60 or more. The short blouses, which are only meant to cover breasts and shoulders, cost as much as the dirndls. One blouse with puffy sheer sleeves embroidered with tiny white flowers caught my eye. I hesitatingly showed it to Maria, and she added it to the pile in her arms.

Each changing room was constructed out of unpainted wood-chip walls and a heavy white curtain, which I carefully pulled closed behind me. Maria and the shopkeeper politely chatted outside while they waited. In the stall next to mine, I heard the two girls giggling at the lacy blouses they were trying on. I slipped off my old sneakers. The floor was stone cold.

After successfully buttoning closed the elastic-banded blouse, I grabbed a checkered red, white, and blue dirndl. I momentarily bunched the foreign fabric in my hands, as if to make myself acquainted. The cotton was cool, thick, and starched — like a tablecloth. After five minutes of pulling and straightening and breathing, I surrendered and called out to Maria, “It’s too small!” The two front flaps that were supposed to be zippered together hung open, exposing my blouse.



“Can we look, Sophia?” I brushed aside the changing room curtain. They yanked it open and stepped inside.

“*Hier.*” The shopkeeper came up behind me and, with her hands on either side of my chest, pushed my breasts together. With an upward *swip!* my aunt zipped me inside of the corset.

The two women examined my body. Maria muttered some positive things, the shopkeeper stood with her head to the side. Like all those who are aware of another’s self-consciousness, she had a thoughtful expression and didn’t meet my eyes.

“And now the apron...” Maria tied the blue and white-patterned apron around my waist. “And it’s important how you tie your apron: If it’s on the right, you have a boyfriend, and if it’s on the left, you’re single...”

“Can I tie it in the back?”

She shook her head once, firmly. “No – that’s only for children. Or sometimes older women.”

I put a hand on my stomach. I could feel the ends of my rib cage. “It’s a little tight...”

Maria exchanged words with the shopkeeper. “She says it’s a little too big.”

The woman nodded. She pointed at my sneakers. “*Sie braucht die richtigen Schuhe.*” She looked at my miserably small chest. I crossed my arms. “*Und,*” the woman said, turning away. “*Sie braucht einen BH! Bitte!*”

\* \* \*

Maria decided that she wanted to document each of the three dirndls I picked out, to ask her friends' opinions on them later. Looking for the perfect place to do a photoshoot, we wove through the customers standing in line at the cash register and walked outside and around to the back of the barn.

There was an enclosed trailer covered with an advertisement for the store. It was a photo of the mother and daughter. The daughter looked pretty, smiling and posing in a cream dirndl patterned with small roses. Her sun-streaked cork-screw curls hang over her shoulder. A white flower stuck out from behind her ear. She faced the camera, but placed a hand carefully on her mother's shoulder. The mother was kneeling on the ground in a corset and lederhosen shorts, helping a young man saw through a fallen tree.

In front of a wooden door with a sign that said "*Dies ist KEIN EINGANG!!*" ("This is NOT an ENTRANCE!!") and next to a dish of cigarette butts on the stoop, I stood with my arms to my side and squinted, smiling at the phone camera. A sliver of my black Forever 21 bralette peeked out of the white blouse.

We went back inside, and I tried on the second dirndl: bright red with a zig-zag chain closure in the front and a black and gray apron. This one was tighter: the thick cotton fabric fit almost like a second skin. I looked down at my waist with surprise, unfamiliar with the sight and sensation. We left the store and went outside again, stepping past the pair of young girls. I saw how quickly their eyes skipped over my dress, stopping at the bow tied on the left-side of my waist.

"*Oh ja, hier Sophia, vor den schönen Blümchen.*" Maria directed me in front of a pot of red flowers that matched my dress, and snapped a photo. We both looked at the photo. It looked almost theatrical, as if I were playing the part of "Young Peasant Girl #3."

When we came back to the changing area, the shopkeeper was waiting by a wall of white dirndl bras. After an astute glance at my chest, she pulled off a lacy white A cup push-up, and held it in front of my chest. Dangling between the cups was a silver charm of a pretzel.

*“Probiere es an.”*

Maria translated for me: “Is it okay if you try it on, and she can see if it fits?”

I quickly took the bra from her hand, and went back into the forgiving darkness of my stall. I had never worn a push-up before. After I wiggled out of the red dirndl, I pulled and snapped the thing on. The sides of the bra seemed too exposed, the fit small, the straps tight. I pulled on my black leggings and slipped into my shoes before opening the curtain into the white fluorescent lights.

This time, I got to stay inside my stall, and the shopkeeper walked in. She had me turn around, straightened the straps with cold hands, and nodded. I reminded myself that all this was normal. Maria stepped up to me and asked, *“Passt?”*

I shrugged, unsure if I was supposed to feel comfortable.

*“Now put on the dirndl.”*

The last dirndl was light pink, with an atrociously bright Kelly-green apron. Maria and I went outside again to take a picture. We looked at her phone. I looked cute.

Maria swiped through the pictures of the last two dirndls. “So which one?”

I frowned at the idea of having to choose one. I liked all of them, but I didn’t love any of them. “Could we look at the other dresses?”

*“Which dresses?”*

*“The dirndls, in that room.”*

Still in the dirndl, I went through the front door and quickly flipped through the bigger and smaller-sized dirndls on the clearance rack. What was I looking for? I was looking for the German girl I wanted to be, a happy girl with two long blond braids, boldly drinking out of a stein under a candle-lit tent at Oktoberfest.

I couldn't find her.

Maria and I drifted over to the more elaborate displays. A dark blue silk dirndl invited me to come closer, until I flipped over the price tag: €350.

We walked back to the changing area. Maria sat on the bench, which the mother with the purse had just vacated. All the changing rooms were empty, the store quiet. It was almost 6 pm. We had spent almost two hours in the store, and all the customers had already left. I slipped back into my American clothes. The fabric was cold and loose. I slowly hung up the warm pink dirndl, and retied the apron around its waist, on the left side.

Maria and I asked the shopkeeper if she could reserve the dirndls for us in case we came back. The shopkeeper slowly put the dirndls on a clothing rack behind the cash register, besides an expensive-looking one wrapped in plastic.

Maria and I walked out of the store onto the sidewalk, the light from the setting sun warming our backs. I looked at my aunt's tired face, then looked back at the Stad'l and the frozen smile of the German poster girl.

\* \* \*

The sun was still setting once we arrived at the back gate and walked up the stone steps. Rudi emerged from the vegetable garden carrying a bucket of Kohlrabi, or German turnips. He asked how it went. Maria showed him her phone, and the pictures of the three dirndls.

She swiped to the red, white, and blue dirndl. “This one?”

He shook his head, and wiped the sweat from his wrinkled, tanned forehead.

She swiped to the red and black one. “How about this...”

He nodded, without words, almost sad. “*Ja.*”

“How about...” She swiped to the rose pink one and enlarged it with her fingers.

“*Nein* — the second one.” He walked away, carrying his bucket.

Maria zoomed in on the photo of me in the red dirndl one last time, then flipped her phone case shut. “You can sleep on it, Sophia, hm?”

I felt detached. I had looked at myself objectively besides my aunt and uncle as if I were looking at old baby photos. I admired the smile that showed my teeth, the windswept waves in my hair, the curves in my legs. What had felt like wearing a costume at the time now looked like something natural, fun, and comfortable. I was just a girl, smiling in a dirndl.

I was reminded of my prom photos from a few years before. I was wearing a red and black ball gown with dark pink flowers brocaded all over. At \$63 from Bon Ton, it was the most expensive thing that I had ever owned. My hair was up in pinned curls, showing off the bronzer and blush that I had dabbed onto my face for the first time in my life. My mother was thrilled. Later that night, she had forwarded the photos to her sisters, along with an explanation of what “prom” was. My mom later told me that Rudy had told Maria I looked like Romy Schneider in *Sissi*.

“Who’s that?” I had asked.

My mom pulled out her iPad and Googled “Romy Schneider Sissi.” *Sissi* was a trilogy of movies from 1955 about the real story of how a Bavarian teenager turned into Empress Elisabeth of Austria. There were countless headshots of a rosy-cheeked, ruby-lipped girl. My mom was shocked that I had never heard of her before. “My sisters and I loved watching *Sissi*. Romy Schneider was famous for her beauty, Sophia, so that’s really a compliment.”

While Rudi washed off the turnips in the kitchen sink, I walked up the staircase to my room. I slipped off my sneakers, and the thin black socks which had been sweated through, and fell onto the bed. I looked at my phone.

I spent the rest of the afternoon on Pinterest and Google, examining other girls’ dirndls. I looked up popular colors and cuts, compared the puffiness of blouse sleeves. I read people’s blog posts about trips to Austria, and scrolled through paintings of Bavarian day-laborers in fields. I noticed how the sleeves of the women’s blouses were rolled up, and how the sides of their dresses were cut open and then sewed back together with torn strips of fabric to fit.

Just like all the times in my life when I felt conflicted, I wanted my mom’s opinion. I clicked on her profile picture in WhatsApp — a photo of blue hydrangeas, her favorite flower — and slid down from my bed to sit on the wooden floor. I looked at my watch, and counted back five hours to Eastern Standard Time. I hoped that she was off of work today.

“Sophia!”

I almost teared up at hearing my name said right. “Mommy!”

“How are you? Is everything okay? It looks like you and Maria went looking for dirndls today...?” Maria must have already sent her the photos.

I summarized the experience for her, and how we had left the store empty-handed. “They’re only €30, and Maria even offered to buy me one. But then Rudi asked where I would even wear a dirndl.”

She was quiet. “I think a dirndl would be a nice memory of your stay in Bavaria. They are not that expensive.” She took a deep breath. “I think... in 1996, before you were born, I once had a chance to buy a traditional embroidered Jordanian dress, when I had to pick up Daddy after his trip in Jordan. And now I regret not having bought one. Somebody took the time to take me to a private home where they sold these dresses, and I tried several on but I couldn’t make a decision. It would have been a good memory, a souvenir. The store is near Maria’s house?”

“Yes, it’s just down the street —”

“Oh wow! Then get it, Sophia. It’ll be a good memory.”

\* \* \*

The next day, I took a leap.

“Can we go to the Trachten Stad’l today?”

Maria looked up from the rose bush she had been pruning, and pulled off her gloves, blowing some strands of hair out of her face. “It’s a little late. Do you know which one you want, Sophia? The pink one?”

“The red one.”

She jumped on board. “It’s Saturday — how late are they open?”

I went on my phone and opened Google Maps. “They close in an hour.”

“Then let’s go now!”

I jogged up the stairs to my room for my shoes — this time, a pair of black flats. I grabbed my purse, and slipped in my wallet.

Maria and I practically ran down the stone steps from the garden to the street, where we crossed and walked along the sidewalk until reaching the Stad'l. The roses weaved between the trellis seemed to have become even bigger and more beautiful. We walked inside the store. Thankfully, the dirndls were still behind the cash register. No one was there, so I went ahead and pulled them off the rack.

“Try it on!”

“Wait!” I walked back to the sales rack near the front doors. I couldn't leave without making sure that I wasn't forgetting the Perfect Dirndl. But after flipping through, we noticed that nothing had changed from the day before. To be safe, I selected a bright green dirndl with a polka-dotted black apron.

We ran into the shopkeeper in the dressing room area. “Don't worry,” Maria told her. “We found them.”

But this time, all three rooms were occupied. The shopkeeper led us to the other side of the store to a large storage closet, which looked like it was once an animal pen. Workbenches and boxes lined the walls. It was freezing.

Maria nodded. “I'll wait outside, Sophia.”

I locked the door, pulled on it, and checked the lock again. There was a door without a lock on the other side of the room. Terrified that an unsuspecting staff member would walk through, I pulled off my bra facing the opposite wall. I carefully piled my clothes on top of my shoes on the cement floor.

I first tried on the green dress with the black apron. It was a size too big, too comfortable.



I then slipped into the red dress, more easily than I had yesterday, as if it had still retained the shape of my body.

When I stepped out, the shopkeeper looked pleased. *“Das hat mir am besten gefallen. That one was my favorite.”* I looked at Maria, who nodded, and it was decided.

Once I changed and we stood in front of the cash register, I turned toward Maria. “I can buy the blouse. And the BH.”

She was rustling a hand through her purse. “No, no, the blouse and the dirndl go together.”

“Then the BH.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Again, we were the last customers in the store. Right after the shopkeeper rang us and folded the clothes, she walked out from behind the counter to the jewelry display, picked apart a necklace from a peg, and dropped it into the hot pink shopping bag with satisfaction. She handed the bag to me, and smiled. *“Dankeschön.”*

Once Maria and I stepped out into the hazy July afternoon, I peeked inside the bag.

Maria bent over. “What is it?”

I detangled from the folds of fabric a black ribbon necklace with a silver heart pendant.

Maria smiled, gushing. “Oh, a present! Very nice, Sophia. Very traditional.” The outfit was complete.

Once we arrived home, I unfolded the dirndl on top of my bed, and arranged the necklace on top and the bag next to it to take a picture for my mom. I remembered to flip the sales tag up, showing the reduction price from €179.90 to €30.00. The lighting was just right.

“How pretty! Good decision, Sophia. That was very nice of Maria. Now you have a wonderful memory. What a small size, Groesse: 36. Not many women can wear such a small size,” my mom texted back, with a smile emoji and heart.

I felt a little pride, and then concern. I remembered how taut the dirndl had stretched over my back, across my stomach. Its enveloping tightness would be a constant reminder that it didn’t fit me, and that I would never fit in.

For a week, I hung the dirndl outside of the door on my closet, and then next to the floor-length mirror, until finally inserting it between my worn American clothes. When the dirndl was hanging outside of my closet, I couldn’t stop looking at it. I kept retightening the apron around the dirndl’s waist, tying a bow on the left. Once I tied it on the right. I hooked the chain necklace around the closure in the front. I kept the tags on. One day after midnight, when my aunt and uncle were asleep in their room next to mine, I silently slipped into the dirndl and watched myself in the mirror. I thought I looked like the barmaid in a Manet painting.

I forwarded the photos on WhatsApp to my friends in the U.S. One wrote back, “Omg these are incredible! And you look amazing in that outfit — you kind of remind me of an American girl doll or something cause it’s just so well put together!”

I Googled “Dirndl American Girl Doll”, and ended up finding Kirsten Larson, an immigrant from Sweden.

*Huh, I thought. An American girl.*

## Half-and-Half

### - PART I -

*“Wir kommen alle aus halben Familien.”*

“What?” I said, although I had understood her perfectly.

Vanessa smiled at me across from the campfire in a light, joking way.

It was a smoky evening in early July, the sun long gone. I was sitting in the backyard of Maria and Rudi’s neighbors, who had invited us to come over for the father’s birthday party. The family had three daughters who were around my age: Kati the fantasy writer, with lush dark curls and an excited glint in her eyes; Pati who had a frazzled brown ponytail, thick arms and nylon shorts; and Tessa, who was a musical prodigy like her father, and painfully thin from a terminal heart problem. Vanessa was a friend of Kati’s. Her family was from Calabria.

She tilted her head to one side so that her straight hair draped further down her shoulder. “We all come from half families: we’re half-and-half. *Halb-und-halb*.” She placed her glass of homemade Mojito on the lawn and pointed at those of us sitting on the logs pushed up to the campfire. I was first. “German-American.” She pointed at Kati. “German-Spanish.” She pointed at herself. “German-Italian.”

I looked down at the fire. Was I first a German, and second an American? Or first an American with a German identity? “Half-and-half” would mean something equally divided, the first just like the second, but still separated. “Half-and-Half” is a hyphenated identity just like my hyphenated last name, created from my parents’ German last names, which neither of them

wanted erased. It's a hidden hyphenation, until someone opens up one of my passports. *Deutsch und Amerikanisch, Amerikanisch und Deutsch...* I am all Deutsch, and all Amerikanisch.

But I smiled in agreement. "That's true." We all looked at one another, five girls sitting in a circle, feeling an invisible bond connecting us all.

"*Es ist nett bei dem Feuer, ja?*" Vanessa's shoulders climbed up, taking in the fire's comforting warmth.

When I had first found out that Vanessa was part-Italian, I tried speaking to her with the language skills that I had acquired the previous fall while studying abroad in Bologna. As I mentioned this she listened to me with wide eyes, and I stumbled over the excuse that I give to every native speaker I meet: "*Sfortunatamente, ho dimenticato la lingua a causa di tedesco...*" I received the usual reassuring compliment from her on how good my Italian was, regardless of the intrusion of German in my brain. We continued to chat in German.

Nevertheless, I felt as if I failed an oral test that I had graded myself.

\* \* \*

As the evening carried on, more and more people joined us on the logs. Their faces became indistinguishable as the night pressed closer and closer to the fire. At one point, the father sat next to his daughters, drunk on joy, conversing with his own friends. The daughters giggled and disappeared, sensing that it was time for their birthday gift to him. They returned from the house, passing out handouts with the lyrics of a song. I squinted. An English song!

Kati sat down again and started strumming her guitar, softly singing the words. Pati and Tessa joined in on the refrain, reading off of the same paper, swaying in their seats. The father watched them, motionless.

Maria leaned in to me, her hot breath in my ear. “Do you know this song, Sophia?”

I shook my head. This was a personal song, one of those soft-spoken melodies that speaks to only a few people, while it remains foreign to the rest of the world.

When it was over, the father smiled, almost embarrassed, and gave his daughters a one-armed hug. He went inside the house to grab his own guitar, and tried to find a song that her daughter could also play: “Dust in the Wind,” then “Downtown Girl,” then “Hotel California.” Once they played “Hotel California,” everyone — including Maria — sang along. I listened, amazed, as I watched mouths that were conversing in German suddenly echo the words of the Eagles. Even though I didn’t know the lyrics, I imitated them:

*How they dance in the courtyard*

*Sweet summer sweat*

*Some dance to remember*

*Some dance to forget...*

While the dad tried out some chords and tuned his guitar, people were lightly chatting with one another and drinking — all except me and Rudi, who was eying the guitar. I knew what he was thinking.

When I was eight years old, I received my first guitar for Christmas. As a kid, I had always watched Hillary Duff, Aly & AJ, and Hannah Montana on Disney Channel, and listened

to all of their albums on repeat on my Sony Walkman CD player while lying on my bed covers after school. I wanted to perform and express myself as openly as they did. I asked my dad if I could get a guitar.

My dad took to it immediately. That summer, he enrolled me in a month-long course at a music school in New Haven. The following Christmas, I saw the black guitar case propped up next to the tree. I was ecstatic. Much to my disappointment, instead of a cool ombré country guitar that Miley Cyrus strummed on her porch, I received a small Spanish guitar with an intricate tribal pattern surrounding the sound hole. I mustered up a smile.

My dad stood over me as I knelt next to the guitar, plucking out a few strings. “I signed you up for lessons with an instructor who lives in the neighborhood, beginning January.”

The guitar lessons confirmed my fate: I would be learning how to play songs like “Greensleeves” and “Jetzt gang i ans Brünnele” from a German songbook called *Lieder der Welt* (Songs of the World), which my dad had found on Amazon. Every Saturday morning, I was dropped off at the apartment of my elderly guitar instructor, where he lived with his wife and chihuahua. When my dad came to pick me up after an hour, there would still be tear-stains down my cheeks, caused by the throbbing calluses on the tips of my fingers, the ache in my hands, and the strain in my eyes from picking apart the small black notes wedged in between the lines — a full decade before I would admit that I needed glasses. The mental critique with which I bombarded myself capped off this painful attempt to memorize and fluently perform a language that I didn’t want to learn.

Although my father was paying for the private lessons, he had bought the guitar using the money I received from a friend of my dad’s. This “friend” was in fact the founder of the classical rock group Trans-Siberian Orchestra. Like every year, we had gone to their winter concert that

December with free tickets and VIP passes. My dad had helped the founder write some song lyrics in Latin.

After the concert, my family had gone backstage to hang out in a lounge with the musicians. So when Paul O'Neill thumbed out a few \$100 bills and offered them to me and my 6-year-old sister, I didn't accept it, but looked at my dad. I still remember the bodyguard in the room smiling tightly and shaking his head. "Take the money. You'll need it later."

My family isn't a particularly musical one, but we all have our different tastes which we like to share with each other — especially when we're in transit. My mother enjoys the mix CDs that her sisters mail her as gifts from Germany, more so than what the radio has to offer. I fondly remember as a kid riding in the back of her old white Volkswagen Passat, listening to one of these mixes, which included Laura Pausini's moody "Resta in ascolto", the operatic "Luna" by Alessandro Safina, and my favorite, the French "Inch Allah" by Salvatore Adamo. Meanwhile, my dad preferred to play in his Silverado truck the guitar riffs in songs like "Cuccurucucù" by Franco Battiato. Whenever he pushed in Battiato's CD into the stereo in his truck, my foot would start tapping against the rubber floor mats, and I would secretly smile into the sun-streaked window.

While studying abroad in Italy and Germany, I searched for these songs whenever I felt homesick. Sometimes, these songs would come to me on their own. A few years ago, when I was in Lutherstadt Wittenberg taking a summer course on East German Literature, I was walking down the main street in the Altstadt area and decided to step inside of a bookstore. The store only encompassed one room, so I could easily spot the Jane Austen novels lined up in the English Romantic period section. I wanted to find my mom — a serious fan of Jane Austen — a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* in German. While opening covers and comparing books, I noticed

the music that was humming from two speakers from two corners in the room. I froze. I could tell that the song came from my childhood, when I was only a few years old. But the name escaped me. It had the pensive lull of Peter, Paul and Mary's song "Puff the Magic Dragon" (another childhood favorite) — if "Puff the Magic Dragon" was in German. I was so sure that my parents would know every song that they ever played me, that I didn't bother asking the man standing in front of the cash register to tell me what was playing. (And at that point, I had only known German for two years.) I paid for the book, and grasped the song in my head, repeating the instrumental refrain so that I wouldn't forget. Later that evening I called my mom, even singing the tune to her through the small holes in my phone. She didn't know the song. After we hung up, I hummed the tune to Google Assistant, even typed in a description of the song in the search bar. Nothing. My song didn't exist. I had lost something meaningful to me, and no one could find it for me. But I can still feel its melody in my head.

So, I continued to take the weekly guitar lessons, if only it was a way for me to connect with my dad as I slowly left childhood behind. However, the lessons only lasted to middle school, when my dad was laid off from his job and money was tight. By the time he found a new job, I was involved with other clubs and extracurriculars. But guitar had never left my mind, and I still listed it as one of my hobbies on the usual first-day-of-school questionnaire from my teachers. When I started college and heard about the free music lessons the music department was offering to students, the old guilt came back to me. The guilt would have only grown if I ignored the opportunity, even when it meant upgrading to an adult-sized guitar. I still remember how my instructor laughed when I came in to auditions holding my tiny guitar and opening the dark green cover of *Lieder der Welt* to the melodies I still remembered how to play. They call it muscle memory – a memory in your body, not in your head.



I quit after two years. I still kept that first guitar.

Rudi has a few wooden guitars too, and when I mentioned that I played, he let me try each of them out to find the one that had the best sound. I already had my adjustable foot stool which I had packed in my suitcase, just in case, but he brought me his music stand and put it in front of the window in my room.

One night over dinner, Rudi asked me, “Do you sing?”

I shyly shook my head. “I used to be in choir – uh, *ich war mal in einem Chor* – but I just play the notes when I play guitar.”

He leaned back in his seat in dramatic amazement. “But you can’t play guitar without singing!”

“It’s classical guitar.”

He waved his hand at me in disagreement.

Now, with about fifteen people around the campfire, he raises his voice to announce that I could play guitar.

The dad turned toward me, surprised. “Oh, *bitteschön!*” He held out the guitar toward me.

“*Oh, nein.*” I laughed it off and shook my head.

“*Aber bitte!*”

“*Nein, danke – ich kann nicht.*” My smile was strained, pleading.

The third time he lowered his voice so that only I could hear, and said more forcefully, in English: “Will you please play the guitar?”

He thought that I was just being modest. But I meant it: I couldn’t play, not like him, or how the others would want me to. I couldn’t remember. I would get a note wrong, ruin the flow

of the song, turn heads. The force of his request made me even more determined to refuse. I didn't say anything.

He looked toward the fire and swung the guitar under his arm again, and started to strum. I looked over at Rudi, who was sitting on the same log as me. He kept his head down, trying to keep his large frame balanced on the thin log.

Looking at him, I was reminded of another time when I had been asked to play the guitar for entertainment. I was ten years old, and my family was staying at Maria and Rudi's house for Easter, along with all four of my cousins and their respective boyfriends. We had all just finished eating dinner in our straight-backed chairs in the dining room when Rudi asked me to play something on his guitar.

I didn't want to. At that age, I had only learned one song by heart – the first one listed in *Lieder der Welt* – and I didn't think I could remember it now. I shook my head, going farther down my seat. Rudi asked me again. I slipped out of my chair, but only to sit in my mother's lap and wrap my arms around her neck as quiet tears came out of my eyes – the only way that I could say “no.”

Talk sprung up around the table. Rudi tried covering his tracks: “Well what's wrong with her? Can't she play?”

I still remember how my mother looked as she held me on her lap, without meeting my eyes: apathetic, stoic... a clear mask over her embarrassment. My dad changed the subject.

Ten years later, sitting next to the comfortable campfire with strangers who didn't know me, I still refused to play. That night, music was a different language – not English, German, nor Italian, but a language that could be understood with mutual ease. But I refused to speak it.

People began leaving right before 11 pm, although they probably would have stayed longer if they didn't have a life to work for tomorrow morning. Maria, Rudi and I left too. This meant leaving the only people that I would befriend that summer in Germany who were around the same age as me.

Pati, Kati, and Tessa smiled as I waved goodbye. Vanessa particularly expressed her sadness that we only got to meet each other now, even though she's good friends with my neighbors.

"We'll see each other again," I assured her, only half-believing it. She didn't answer, probably thinking the same.

After Maria, Rudi and I returned home and slowly walked up the staircase to our rooms, I stood in my room for a while, staring at Rudi's guitar leaning in its stand. I picked it up, sat down in my desk chair, and quietly played a song from memory, letting my fingers move on their own, just to know that I could. I gently touched the strings, barely making noise so that my aunt and uncle wouldn't know.

While playing, I would sometimes bring the sleeve of my Aeropostale jacket to my nose, where I could still smell the smoke from the fire.

## - PART II -

When Maria's daughter Nicola marries her Italian fiancé Jacopo, my family makeup will further be divided from halves into quarters. But is it a divide, or simply a new addition to the family?

My family and I first met Nicola and Jacopo when they visited us in Connecticut in 2017, after their trip to New York City. They had already been dating for five years, and while I had seen Nicola almost every time that my family visited the U.S., it was the first time that I would be meeting Jacopo face-to-face, and speak with him in his native language.

After we ate a dinner of Trader Joe's ravioli with German sausage, my parents quickly found out that Italian music was a way to understand and connect with Jacopo (although he spoke perfect English and German). My mom hurried to get her iPad, and they played for Jacopo snippets of their favorite Italian songs from YouTube to ask if he was familiar with them: "Resta in ascolto" by Laura Pausini, "La crisi" by Bluevertigo... And Jacopo smiled and laughed good naturally, showing off his brilliant white smile, as he recognized each and every singer, even asking us if we knew a song that made him emotional every time he listened to it, called "Domani 21-04-09" — a 7-minute song sung by 56 Italian singers, including Franco Battiato, Bluvertigo, and Laura Pausini. Jacopo explained how it was released to raise money to rebuild the city of L'Aquila after a deadly earthquake hit it in 2009. It was a bestselling single across the whole country. As the video played, Jacopo sang a couple lines lovingly. My parents weren't as moved.

The second time that I met Jacopo, I was staying at Maria and Rudi's house. He and Nicola would be driving up from Munich, where Jacopo worked, to spend the weekend at her mother's. Maria spent the morning making *Sahne-Himbeertorte* — raspberry cake covered with whipped cream — and I baked my American-German *Johannisbeerscones*. When we heard their car come down the driveway, I followed Maria outside in my socks.

Nicola hadn't changed much from the last time that I had seen her three years ago, with wavy blond shoulder-length hair, sparkling eyes, and a tall, relaxed frame. Growing up, I was

proud to have her as my cousin, and that some of her genes were a part of me. She was pretty, she was cool, she was successful. She was German. I wanted to be her, but I was already her. We shared the same DNA, but had lived different lives.

Nicola smiled in excitement when she saw me and we hugged, my cheek grazing her earring. Jacopo also embraced me, yet more loosely.

After we completed the mandatory German ceremony of the *Kafeeklatsch* — coffee, cake, and conversation — we decided to take a rejuvenating walk on the Roßfeld trail. This trail is technically called *Astrolehrpfad*, or an astrological nature trail, that goes along the *Riesrand* — the remnant rim of a 16 mile-long meteorite crater which the town currently resides in. At certain intervals on this path, someone has posted informational signs with the names of planets, starting with the sun, and ending a few kilometers away in another town with Neptune. The light-years in distance between them have been scaled down to distances that humans can better grasp. In a hike, one could cover half of the solar system.

The path was also heavenly: the sky was a milky blue strewn with puffy Monet clouds, and the hills were alive with talking trees filled with birds, and the moving, grassy farmland that seemed to drown the faded red roofs of the town in the distance.

In this otherworldly place where earthly bounds become insignificant, Maria decided to practice her Italian. She and I walked down the gravel path a little ahead of Nicola and Jacopo, who were both wearing sunglasses and holding hands. At that moment, we were passing by a waving grain field.

Even though Maria had only started learning Italian once Nicola and Jacopo's relationship had lasted for a few years, she hazarded a question about the grain field: "*Qual... tipo di... grano è questo?*"

Jacopo paused before answering. “*Non sono sicuro... forse un tipo di grano duro per farina?* Some kind of grain for flour?”

We all hazarded our guesses on what kind of grain was growing in the field. Nicola was already fluent, her high-pitched voice breezing over the Italian vowels. When it was my turn, my brain froze and stuttered. It tried to switch gears from German to Italian, only to discover that the latter was rusted. I mentally scrolled through the right words in my head like a slot machine, until managing to stammer out an entire Italian sentence — with German word order. I was immediately embarrassed. After nine years of language study and a semester in Italy, I could barely say a sentence.

Maria switched back to German, just to validate what Jacopo and Nicola had said. Sensing my quiet embarrassment, Jacopo asked about how my dog Bruce was doing. He remembered him well from when he visited. I instantly brightened, and told him about how my dad liked to hike almost every day now with Bruce.

Seeing an opportunity, Maria interjected with another exercise. “*Come... come si dice, ‘Mein Vater und Bruce wandern fast jeden Tag auf dem Berg?’*” How does one say, “My father and Bruce walk almost every day on the mountain?”

Jacopo listened, waiting. My mind blanked. Maria elaborated: “*Non lo so... come di... dirlo in italiano.*” And then Maria and I both created the sentence together: “*Ogni giorno Bruto e mio padre fanno...*”

“...*una passeggiata,*” Jacopo offered.

“*Una passeggiata...*” we repeated after him.

“*In bosco,*” Jacopo finished.

The conversation shifted, but I continued to think about our German-Italian translation. If I had said the sentence perfectly right away, maybe Jacopo would have applauded me and my Italian accent, like the way I rolled my r's in "Bruto" and "*padre*" — which I'd also used to help me imitate the Bavarian dialect that I encountered in town.

The longer I thought about it, the angrier I became. I didn't like how my aunt had figuratively held my hand as we repeated after Jacopo, with the gentle tone of her voice — the same tone that she probably used to speak to her class of twelve-year-olds when she was an English teacher at the local secondary school. But I had believed that Italian belonged to me — that I was the first person in my family to learn it. Finally, Italian was something I knew that Maria and Rudi didn't. As we walked, I tried to focus on taking pictures of the landscape, to let the jealousies escape my mind. Again I felt as if I had failed a test, and the chance to show that I wasn't behind and slow to catch up, as I was with German, but ahead.

But I couldn't be mad — Maria was too loving, too humble. When she makes a mistake in Italian, she likes being corrected. She keeps a small notebook in the house with all the new Italian words that she learns.

Maria did the same for me with German. Whenever I ask what a word means, she takes out a pen and writes it along with its article and plural form on a notepad that she keeps on the kitchen table. Therefore, every day at breakfast I could be reminded of important words like *die Muskatnuss* (nutmeg), *der Schlag* (stroke), and *der Schnittlauch* (chives).

While staying in her house, Maria acted as my dictionary, my translator. At home, I stuck by her side as she became a substitute mother to replace the one that I had left behind in the U.S. Most of the time, it was a relief to have a parent again and share some of the burden of living and

working abroad in a foreign language. Other times, her presence was a reminder that I was not at home speaking with my mother, but with my aunt who was also my teacher.

We continued to walk along the *Astrolehrpfad*, stopping to read each sign that we passed, casually translating the scientific German words into Italian for fun. I eagerly stepped up to the challenge, since at that moment in my brain Italian had finally wrestled down German as the dominant second language.

While gazing at a pixelated image of the Milky Way, Maria asked Jacopo how one said “*Sterne*” in Italian.

“*Stelle*,” I answered without looking at her, my fingers laced behind my back.

Although I felt that I was doing what they expected of me, my didactic remarks made everyone quiet, as if they felt embarrassed — for me.

This walk in Germany was not unlike all the walks I share with my mother in Connecticut. Usually, we will walk down our quiet neighborhood street, or drive to a walking trail. It was only in these places where my mom felt comfortable to speak in German with me. At home, whenever I playfully asked her something in German, she would look caught off guard and confused, and after a struggling pause, respond to me in English.

It’s easier to cross language borders when we’re far from home, away from its familiar constraints.



## Alma Mater

How can I describe to you what it feels like to take the first hot mouthful of a home cooked meal in a foreign country? Perhaps you have already felt it, once. Like the first drop of a mother's milk in your slowly widening mouth, what does food do to our souls and bodies if not nourish and delight?

It was a balmy August night, and I was sitting at a table in the narrow hallway, waiting for dinner. I had just arrived at my new apartment in Bologna that evening. One of my three Italian suitemates, Frederica, had just finished cooking *pasta con sugo di polpette di nonna*, or, grandmother's meatball pasta dish. When I first looked down at the steaming, red plate of comfort food, I realized that the classic spaghetti and meatballs dish that I grew up eating was actually American: Italian meatballs aren't round, but flattened, with its flavors enhanced only slightly by a fresh tomato sauce mixed with rigatoni noodles cooked al dente. On the side was a ripped chunk of an Italian baguette. I looked at the three girls sitting with me at the table with surprised fondness. They avoided my gaze.

Once I took the first spoonful, I almost cried. The heat filled my mouth up, making words unnecessary, and I could almost taste the love and care mixed into the meatballs. Here I was, being fed a meal by strangers whom I had just met, and with whom I would live for half a year of my life.

\* \* \*

A week before I flew to Italy, I couldn't stop crying. While printing out my boarding pass, making photocopies of my German and American passports, and tightly rolling clothes into the only suitcase I would be bringing with me, I felt a suffocating weight in my chest that became only less heavy when I lay on the floor, my hands on my stomach, and let go of some tears. Usually during these attacks of sadness, the house was empty with my mom being at work, my dad napping downstairs, and my sister sleeping well into the late afternoon.

During this last week, I went on hikes every day with my dad and dog. I thought the changing surroundings and constant movement would distract me from the prospect of leaving home, but once we finally reached the top of a trail, and beheld the view of the various hills slowly fading out under heavy clouds, the idea of going beyond these walls made me even sadder. Even though my friends and mentors assured me that Italy would be beautiful, I couldn't bear to think of missing a cozy New England autumn.

I wanted to study abroad in Italy instead of Germany to honor the first language that I fell in love with. In high school I studied Italian and Latin side-by-side, and I promised my proud teachers that I would go to Italy my junior year of college. While I had gone to Germany throughout my childhood, the only time that I had gone to Italy was for spring break, when my father took me along with a group of his high school students to Umbria. I was sixteen years old, and still shy. That memory had been reduced to the thunderous rumble of rolling suitcases on cobblestones at 6 am, gorging myself on cream-filled croissants for breakfast, an early morning mist settling on low hills, flimsy floral scarves from Florence, cool evenings leaning over a balcony, and the fragrance of Bath and Body Works' Secret Wonderland mist.

Flying to Milan and catching a train to Bologna was less of a dream. At the JFK airport, my parents had to pay a couple hundred dollars to check in my lone suitcase, because its cost wasn't automatically covered in the price of the flight.

After my suitcase had disappeared on the conveyor belt, it was time to say goodbye. "Four months. I'll be back before you know it," I told my parents as I hugged them, swallowing the tears that had already begun to leak out on the car ride there.

"Yes, it'll go by so fast, Sophia," said my calm mother, looking me in the eye. "Enjoy it."

I walked past them to get in line at customs. I kept on looking back. The last time I looked back, they were gone.

When I finally fell into my tight plane seat, the soft, flirty notes of Dean Martin's "On An Evening in Roma" floated throughout the economy cabin. But the actual flight was less promising. When I tried shoving my stuffed backpack into the carry-on compartment, my arms trembled and gave out, and I almost crushed the dozing Italian lady underneath. I was also mildly surprised to realize that my Italian adventure would begin with terrible food — mashed potatoes and carrots floating in a runny sauce — as well as a less-than-exciting movie selection. (The cheap earbuds the stewardess gave me kept fading out on the left side, even when she gave me a new pair.) I ended up sitting beside a chatty nurse with stiff blond hair who was heading toward Sicily for her month-long vacation. Her relaxed American voice sometimes got lost within the roar of the recycled air of the cabin, but her intimate presence and unperturbed personality calmed me. I fell asleep with my head turned toward the window.

At Malpensa Airport, I quickly boarded one of the express trains that headed toward Milano Centrale, where I could catch a Frecciarossa high-speed train to Bologna Centrale. A month in advance, I had been nervously planning out all the steps that I had to take after stepping

off of the airplane. I found a map of the railway system and its timetables, even Googled what Italian taxis look like. But something always goes wrong on these sort of trips of self-discovery.

The Milano Centrale train station was an imposing, vast, gray space with one wall opened up to allow the trains to come in. I walked up and down the various platforms, my backpack sinking further into the bones of my shoulders, still trying to look relaxed like a native, like an Italian, to throw off the pick-pocketers that everyone warned me about. I saw that “Bologna” only appeared once on the split-flap board, but the train number was different from the number on my pre-paid ticket. Was the train late? Was it not coming? Did I have enough time to grab a coffee? I asked a curly-haired woman slouching at one of the various help counters located in between the platforms. She scrutinized my ticket for two seconds, then nodded me through the gate to the graffiti-painted train behind her.

I panicked. The sign above the train said Bologna, but everything looked wrong. I spotted a tanned man in a t-shirt leaning outside of the open train door, and asked him if this train was going to Bologna. I showed him my ticket. He nodded, and waved me in like a conductor. I explained how I had a seat reservation.

He grinned. “*Non ti preoccupare. Puoi sederti ovunque* — don’t worry.” He waved his hands at the nonexistent labels on the seats. He stepped off and carried my luggage into the carriage.

I needed to trust him.

I sat down in the middle of the mostly empty train, and the man rolled my suitcase next to me. I rolled it even closer, wedging it besides my legs and the window. I stared outside of the window, only half-sitting, wondering if I could still jump off the train and grab a coffee at one of the stands on the platform. The man who helped me came around again, this time with a friend.

“He’s also going to Bologna,” the man said in English, with his hand against the back of the younger stranger. “He can sit with you.”

I was surprised, and slightly touched. “*Ciao*, uh, hi...”

The stranger looked self-conscious, but smiled shyly. He sat across from me, but in the aisle seat while I sat next to the window.

Although he spoke perfect English to me, I insisted on speaking in Italian, which he also knew, although we had to repeat ourselves a few times. In this strange, stilted, bilingual conversation with long silences in between, I found out that the stranger came from Gambia. “Like the Italian word for leg – *gamba*,” he joked, patting his knee. He even took out his black iPhone to show me where Gambia was located, on the western coast of Africa. “*È molto piccolo* – very small.” He explained how he was trying to find an apprenticeship. That he’s been in Italy before. He traced the path that he had taken with his finger.

I politely nodded, and not knowing how to respond, I took out my own phone to type “Connecticut” into Google Maps. I showed him, and pronounced the harsh, cutting sounds of “Connecticut” — completely unlike the smoothness of “Gambia” — which he repeated after me, smiling.

“*Ah — ma è anche molto piccolo!*” he exclaimed.

“*Sì...*” Connecticut was also small — just a piece of the world, located on the other side of an ocean.

Instead of the promised one hour on my ticket, the train ride took four hours. During the whole time, I had to pee, but I couldn’t leave my suitcase behind, or roll it along with me. While I sat in the sunlight, my eyes started to shut and my head felt heavy. The man asked me if I was tired. I yawned, then nodded. Two hours. Three. Every time the train stopped I opened Google

Maps to check how many towns away I was from my new home. The man stayed relaxed, and scrolled through his phone. I willed myself to keep awake.

When the train finally slowed down and stopped at Bologna, he looked toward me, but I was already out of my seat and moving. I had texted the program director, with whom I was supposed to check in, that I would be running late. The man walked alongside me, helping me find my way to the exit, even carrying one end of my heavy suitcase up the stairs.

Once we arrived in the dimly-lit, marbled lobby, he told me how it was a pleasure to make my acquaintance.

I smiled, balancing on the balls of my feet to contain the agony of needing to relieve myself, and said the same.

He held up his phone: “Facebook?”

I frowned. I didn’t have a Facebook account, and I instinctually didn’t want to give away my last name to a stranger. I didn’t know it then, but Facebook and WhatsApp would later help me keep my friendships growing across borders.

I shook my head no. “*Ciao.*”

He nodded. “*Buonaserata, ciao.*”

I walked away from him. While I had acted distant and confused, he remained friendly and polite. Why did he tell me where he came from? Why did *I* want to tell him where I came from? Is this what happens when you board a train, leaving behind your home, your country, your language? You share a piece of yourself with anyone who will listen? It must be something about the unfixed nature of trains, and the stationary passengers who are nonetheless all moving together, that allows for an escape from the self.

I thought that I would be alone on this journey. I was surprised to find out that I wouldn't be.

\* \* \*

After I left Bologna Centrale, I flagged down a taxi to reach the study abroad program's office. When I first stepped into the warmly-lit space, I was immediately welcomed and embraced in a bear-like hug by the director, as if I were her daughter. I visibly relaxed under the warm pressure. When I explained what had happened, she told me that I must have taken a regional train instead of a high-speed express.

After I picked up my key, the taxi drove me through central Bologna. The taxi driver was a young woman with her dark hair in a high bun. While keeping her eyes on the road, she politely asked where I came from, and if I was on vacation. I told her how I was studying abroad at the university for the semester. My eyes silently watched the people walking outside. I squinted against the sunshine that would sometimes invade the comforting dark interior.

She dropped me off in front of my apartment building on Via d'Azeglio. I walked through heavy black doors and a chandelier-lit tunnel until emerging into a sun-lit, mossy courtyard. After climbing a flight of stairs, I unlocked my front door and dropped my backpack onto the floor. My shirt was damp with my own sweat, my hair crimped from the exhaust that hangs low in the streets.

My three suitemates stood up from the sofa at the end of the hallway. They had been waiting for me, and immediately introduced themselves: Ludovica from Sicily, Federica from Campania, and Aurora from Verona. Ludovica and Federica were finishing up graduate

programs at the university, and Aurora at 19 years old had just started. I was supposed to have only two Italian suitemates and an American one, but the American dropped out of the program at the last minute. The three of them looked tired and wary, but mildly intrigued.

They quickly realized that my Italian was rubbish. While they set the table, already familiar with where everything was located in the kitchen as I leaned against the wall, they spoke quickly to each other in a clipped Italian that I had never heard before. Perhaps they hoped that I would understand. Perhaps they hoped that I wouldn't understand. Perhaps they didn't want to speak to me as if I were a dumb child.

After we finished our somewhat quiet dinner and leaned back in our chairs, Aurora suggested that she walk me to the office for my orientation tomorrow: "We can get breakfast at a café before we walk there."

"*Grazie mille*," I said, and meant it.

The next morning, Aurora and I sat at a table in a cool alley away from the hot morning sun, my goose bumped legs crossed under the table, her tan legs stretched out onto the street. While I probably had bags under my eyes, Aurora's fresh face looked even tanner in her white Patagonia fleece, framed with her thick, straightened chestnut hair. Like the night before, she immediately began talking to me in English. I responded in Italian. She waved her hand: "It's okay — you can speak in English with me." She explained how she had lived in Wisconsin for a year in high school as an exchange student. She was also taking her economics classes at the university in English. I gave in to her request, missing the feel of English in my mouth.

Even after months passed and my Italian improved, Aurora never stopped speaking to me in English. I began to get offended whenever she did, thinking that her motive was that I couldn't understand her when she spoke Italian (which was sometimes true). Then again, I thought, it's



probably been years since she's spoken with a native American her age. Perhaps while she was living among the beautiful, tree-covered hills of Wisconsin, she wished that someone would speak to her in her mother tongue.

My second Italian meal was a soft croissant dusted with powdered sugar, and a frothy cappuccino complimented with a small glass of *acqua frizzante*. As soon as the barista brought our breakfast to the table, Aurora happily took out her iPhone and said in English, "Now we take photos!" I didn't have an Instagram, but I saw that there was something in the aesthetically organized breakfast that promised a good day. I took a sip from the cappuccino and made a face. Aurora tossed me a sugar packet.

That morning, as we walked through the university streets, I was finally able to examine Bologna up close. It was as if I were looking at a still life — *natura morta* — even with all the moving people. The buildings touched one another, the people touched one another. Every surface connected to the next in an uninterrupted line. There wasn't any green or blue, only shades of red, orange, and yellow slightly dulled by exhaust. Everything was a dusky sunset, or a cloudy dawn. In the fall, these red facades would replace the red trees that would stand over my house in Connecticut.

The university's hyphenated Latin-Italian name also had some warmth to it: Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna. Established in 1088, it's the oldest university in Europe, and one of the oldest in the world, and accordingly has been called the first mother of higher education. Its name promised nourishment and attention. However, I would soon discover that its embracing mobs of smoking students and choking smog would make my throat burn, and I longed for the heat of my own mother.

\* \* \*

Language runs a rhythm in my brain. The comforting folds of the dark classroom and my withdrawal from two espressos numb my synapses. My brain becomes muggy, as if it were trying to walk underwater. My body falls into sleep.

The melodic tides of Professore Ledda's Italian lecture on the third cornice of Dante's Purgatory lulls my brain to an unknown location: I was no longer at the Università di Bologna, or in Italy, or in Europe. Instead, I was floating in an unknown place, unanchored, uncolorful, shot through with sluggish sparks.

It's a struggle between body and mind. My eyelids flutter closed while I fight to keep them open. My skin becomes numb, my limbs relax and my body tilts slightly to one side. Voices color the images that attempt to become physical inside my head.

And then with a great heave that strains my temples, I resurface. I can see, I can hear everything. There is a hyper focused clarity, where all my senses are elevated. I reemerge into the physical world. I can feel the presence of my friend Elizabeth from Skidmore College at her desk on my left, and hear her left hand whispering across the grooves of her notebook paper.

I look down at my own notebook, and am surprised to see that I haven't stopped writing. In my handwriting, I see the exact moment where my consciousness has left: the words stretch between the lines, or have fallen completely off the page onto another.

I continue to copy lines of Dante's poetry, which help ground me to the paper, to the desk, to the warm plastic pen between my two fingers. In that moment, I realize that spoken language isn't rooted — it exists in the air. We have to see it with our minds, with feel it in our hands, until we enter the undefinable, uncomfortable *sprachlos*.

\* \* \*

Dante used a hybrid Latin-Italian language to write an epic poem that transcends the boundaries between earth, hell, purgatory, and heaven. His *bilinguismo* — which bridged the language of the church with that of the common people — established Italian literature. It’s a language that finds new meaning with each century of interpretation. It’s a language that never gets old.

On the first day of Professore Ledda’s course “Love and Knowledge in Medieval Italian Literature,” I learned that Dante had studied at Alma Mater Studiorum before he was exiled for his political beliefs. Just as I walked over Bologna’s cobblestoned piazzas and sheltered underneath its cool porticos from the sun, he had too.

If Dante conveyed vitality, Professore Pezzarossa and his course “The Italian People Between Old and New Migrations” conveyed a dead past. Pezzarossa was a lean skeleton of a man. His tanned skin stretched over his sharp cheekbones, and he had an agonizingly slow voice that barely filled the cavernous lecture hall. His lectures on out-of-print memoirs from the 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed like an invocation of the dead. But like Ledda, he had a strange emotional attachment to the lives of the authors listed on our syllabus, which included nobodies like Marisa Fenoglio, who as a young bride in the 50s emigrated with her husband to a remote town in Germany, leaving her loving Italian community behind; Tina De Rosa and her novel set in Little Italy in the 40s and 50s; and Massimo Toffoletto who wrote an autobiographical story about a university student who leaves Italy for Norway under the Erasmus exchange program.

My notes for this class are more animated than those for Dante. Everything is hastily scribbled down, and each page is spotted with circled stars and arrows and asterixis. These memoirs also spoke to me, as if I knew that I would come to write my own memoir situated between the old and the new.

\* \* \*

I hesitatingly tipped the glass and let the bitter, sparkling wine fill my mouth. I grimaced, but forced myself to swallow it down, feeling the bubbles burn my tired throat.

It was my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and Frederica and Ludovica took me out to an eatery called “Senza Nome,” or “No Name.”

“*Ooh... è una sorpresa?*” I asked when they told me where we were going, smiling in on the secret.

Ludo looked me in the eye, and explained in English: “No — like that’s the actual name.” It turns out that the owners of the place were deaf. When we arrived, I noticed that there were two pages of helpful phrases in sign-language taped down in front of the cash register. Ludovica ordered two glasses of sparkling Lambrusco, speaking slowly in Italian. I could barely hear her, the place was packed.

I actually wouldn’t become a full adult for another week, but in a couple of days I’d be in Tuscany, where a wine tasting was on the itinerary. But I’ve always wanted to drink my first glass of wine slowly, in a low-lit restaurant, after my family sings happy birthday and are watching my face to see how I react to my first mouthful. But I was in Italy with two Italian

suitemates. As I posed smiling with the wine glass, Federica took pictures to capture the moment. Once I took a drink, Ludovica noticed my grim expression and looked hurt.

After I had my first taste of adulthood, we walked back home. It was a clear November night. Around the shadows of the orange lights strung between buildings, I watched couples walking arm-in-arm and students sitting on the sidewalk and leaning against the *portici* columns. They didn't seem to care about anything. Their relaxed composure made me feel out of place.

Federica, Ludovica, and Aurora (who had joined us later) spoke in breathless Italian with each other. I was only partially interested in following their conversation. I figured that they were hungry for the normal tempo of their language after talking with me.

After a rousing round of "*Buon compleanno a te,*" Federica asked me how one would say "*Buon compleanno*" in German. I had told them a long time ago that I was part-German.

I thought about it. "*Alles Gute zum Geburtstag.*"

Federica imitated the harsh sounds, laughing at herself.

"But it doesn't mean '*Buon compleanno*'... it means... '*tutto bene per il tuo compleanno.*'"

Federica asked me to say it again. She tried to fit the phrase into the nearly universal Happy Birthday song, and failed.

I stayed quiet. This was one of the most important birthdays of my life, and I hadn't celebrated it with my parents.

A week later on the night of my birthday, Federica made me a tiramisu and stuck candles into it. Ludovica, who had noticed my daily diet of baguette sandwiches and muesli, gave me a cookbook of recipes from the Emilia-Romagna region.

\* \* \*

First, we saw a flag waving on the TV screen. Then, the stirring notes of the “Star-Spangled Banner” filled the restaurant as a waiter walked toward our table, carrying a platter of a roasted turkey wrapped in prosciutto and lit up in a halo of sparklers. Four charred American flags were stuck into its back. The waiter carefully placed it on the table in front of ours, and stood back with a proud smile. All of us American students all looked at each other in delight and mock embarrassment — someone had already leaked the secret that our director was planning a special surprise for our Thanksgiving dinner. On cue, our director herself hovered over the backs of our chairs, her cheeks red, asking if we liked the *sorpresa*. We innocently nodded. Our Italian suitemates sitting next to us continued to chat amongst themselves, as if it were perfectly normal.

The other patrons in the restaurant stood up out of their chairs to record the strange scene with their phones.

I watched them chat with their families as I ate a plate of boiled potato wedges, the stuffing which wasn’t stuffing, and the cranberry-free cranberry sauce.

I ate it all.

\* \* \*

On the night of an Italian-American dinner at our apartment, I was grimacing from a urinary tract infection. My three suitemates and our four guests were oblivious to my pain while

I prepared and cooked my classic mac and cheese recipe, helped set the table, sat down, laughed, and sipped wine in the narrow hallway on a still October night.

Two other American girls from the program were located in the apartment above us with their two Italian suitemates. For some time we had been making loose plans to get together in some way, until Isobel from Miami came up with an “Italian-American dinner.” Isobel would bake brownies, her suitemates would buy the wine, Federica would cook red cabbage risotto, and I would provide the main pasta dish. We would cook meals from our respective countries, come together, speak Italian, and eat.

But after I got out of class earlier that afternoon, I desperately had to use the bathroom. And it would still take me a good fifteen minutes of walking until I reached home. I decided to go for it. I was sorry to be reminded of the things I kept forgetting to bring to an Italian public university restroom: a fresh packet of tissues and hand sanitizer. There was no toilet paper and soap in the bathroom. I stuck my hand in my jeans pocket, and only found crumpled, used tissues.

Upon unlocking myself out of the graffiti-splashed bathroom, I felt a slow burn. Once I reached my apartment, it grew sharper, like a knife stabbing my body in half. I took Advil, which barely numbed the pain, and hoped that whatever it was would pass soon. The next day, I would Google my symptoms and realize that I had to use the email of the doctor that the director had given us. But that night there were more important things to worry about.

I put on a smile. I even chatted with Isobel before dinner, although to alleviate some of the pain as she talked, I slowly slid down to sit on the couch.

I even managed to prepare the pasta for two hours. After I found out that cheddar cheese didn't exist in Italy, I used a combination of Parmigiano-Reggiano, Emmenthaler, and Provolone, and was quite pleased with the result.

I asked Federica, the cook of the apartment, to taste the finished product. She smacked her lips over her finger. "Hm... needs some nutmeg."

I blanched. Nutmeg? "No — I never put in nutmeg. It's mac and cheese."

She nodded. "Yup — it needs just a little nutmeg."

I shook my head. No nutmeg. She shrugged.

After I dished out the gray-white macaroni noodles onto everyone's paper plates, I closely watched everyone's expressions. Isobel lingered on every forkful as if she were eating heaven. The two Italian girls from upstairs ate more slowly and carefully.

I ate my mac and cheese ravenously. It tasted like home, but different. I guess I should have put in some nutmeg.

\* \* \*

*Let it happen... just let it happen...*

I had to let go.

The Tame Impala song had been circling around my head since I had first heard it at Café Vetro yesterday afternoon. It played inside of me as if it were on a track, as if the voice were my own, humming in between my ears. Sometimes it played silently in the background, other times it drowned out the rhythm beating around me in conversation. It skipped like a broken record. I couldn't find the stop button.



It was an orange December night. My Italian friend from Spain, Irene and I had just watched Jafar Panahi's latest movie *Tre Faci* or Three Faces at the local cinema. It wasn't an uplifting kind of movie. While we walked along the cobblestoned street towards my apartment, I told her how I felt stressed about final exams, and annoyed with my inhibiting cold, and depressed at the idea of leaving everyone and everything in ten days. She had a kind, sad look on her face, and said, "*Cara, goditi tuoi ultimi giorni qua.*" I nodded. We said goodnight. I entered the courtyard, and noticed that the window on our floor was dark. My suitemates were out, and I didn't know where. I walked up the stairs, unlocked the door, walked to my room, and took my shoes off. I stayed in my room. I turned off the main light and kept the desk light on. It was only 9 pm. I scrolled through my phone. I texted my suitemates. Aurora was with her family in Verona, and Federica and Ludovica were out with friends. "*Mi dispiace!!*" They wrote back. I opened my window, stuck my face out, and strained to hear some signs of life under the orange streetlamps.

The void that they had left behind in the apartment pulled on something heavy and long forgotten in my chest. My heart felt as if it were being pulled apart, as if someone far away was still holding on to a corner of it and hadn't let go. I took a deep breath. I looked up the open hours of the gelateria down the street. It was still open. I quickly pulled my boots back on.

It wasn't too cold outside, but I put my gloves on and hid my chin in my scarf. The street was deserted and quiet. I walked into the gelateria. Inside, there was a mother and son sitting on a bench, furiously scraping at the corners of their cups of gelato.

After looking at the menu, I decided to get something hot rather than cold. I asked the tall man behind the counter if I could have the *cioccolata calda*. He nodded, and studied my face. Small or large, he asked. Large. Was that all? I nodded.

I felt the burn of the paper cup through my gloves. I walked slowly back to my apartment so it wouldn't spill, hoping that the night would cool it down. I wondered if I looked like a beggar, holding a paper cup out to strangers, hoping for some kindness. Once I got inside, I sat down at my desk and tentatively swallowed the thick chocolate syrup, the magical potion given to cold children after they get home from the snow. The liquid was just a bit scalding. I downed it, shaking the cup to catch the last drops in my wide mouth. I waited for the serotonin to kick in. Nothing. Silence.

Instead of happiness, the hot chocolate made me sadder.

I don't know quite when it started, but I lay back down on my bed, and started to cry. My nose ran and my chest heaved, trying to catch a breath. Tears streamed uncontrollably down my face. My cheeks and forehead burned red. My body trembled, and I pressed the palms of my hands over my eyelids to stop the tears and wailed, "Oh God, what's wrong with me!"

I was scared of myself.

After four months, I was finally letting myself break down. I was rubbing away the façade of my smile, and wiping away the maturity I had covered myself with since walking away from my parents.

I was in Italy, and I didn't completely love it, and I just wanted to go home.

I fell asleep with tears still leaking down my face, my blanket pulled to my chin, my face turned towards the window as the night air washed my face.

\* \* \*

*"Sei italiana?"*

I laughed. “*No, americana, e un po’ tedesca.*”

“*Oh, parli bene.*”

I trusted the man in the beanie and quarter-zip jacket when he eagerly asked if I needed help, and rolled my two suitcases up the escalator to the train platform. It turned out that he just wanted some money.

It was three days until Christmas Eve, and the flight going from Milan to JFK was almost empty. Once the few people on the flight discovered this, they got up to sit wherever they wanted. The chair next to mine was empty, so I tucked in my legs and drifted in between sleep and wakefulness while gazing at the Alps poking through the clouds outside my window. They looked like tree roots without a trunk. I squinted to see if there were any people in the villages nestled between the mountains, to see if they really did look like ants. But I couldn’t see any people at all.

For lunch, I was served gnocchi in a sauce of *pomodoro e basilico*, and vanilla pudding sprinkled with toasted almonds. I watched Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar*.

Tucked into the pocket of the seat in front of me were two books that I had brought with me to Italy: a copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s memoir *In Other Words*. While Harry Potter was a familiar comfort in times of change, *In Other Words* was a mirror to my emotions. Lahiri, who was born in London to Indian immigrants, was instantly attracted to Italian during a trip to Florence after college. Her bumpy twenty-year study of the language and eventual move to Rome with her family were all an attempt to solidify her transformation into a different writer with a new voice, and by extension, a different person. Thus, she wrote *In Other Words* in Italian. Her English translator Ann Goldstein adds yet another voice to the monologue.

Like how Lahiri felt whenever she returned from the U.S. from Rome, I immediately missed Italian. English sounded dull and fluttery. Americans moved around the airport too quickly and too obviously. And the wet ham folded into my Starbucks sandwich lacked the delicate peppery flavor of *prosciutto*.

I stayed at home during the month-long winter break, thinking about what had happened in Italy. While rolling out the dough to make *tortelloni di ricotta e spinaci* for dinner, or watching Samin Nosrat bake focaccia and drink Ligurian olive oil on Netflix, I spoke in Italian to myself, saying whatever was on my mind with a flourish, much to the annoyance of my younger sister and the fascination of my mother. Maybe I did it to comfort myself, or to prove that I could speak it.

I scrolled through my photos. I texted my Italian friends on WhatsApp. I nibbled on frozen pizza from Stop & Shop. I slept until noon. It snowed.

From time to time, I'd look at the present that my suitemates gave me before I left: a blue velvet picture frame with a photo of us the night of my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. We're standing above my tiramisu birthday cake, our arms around each other, almost falling over because our smiles are so big.

I hadn't known how much of myself I would discover by leaving home, and how much I had lost when I returned.



## Bärnin

“*Einen Cappuccino, per favore.*” I slapped my check. “Uh, I mean — *bitte!*”

The barista at the Ampelmann Café on Ku’damm smiled and shrugged. ““*Per favore*’ works too.”

I stepped away from the counter as she steamed the milk. I felt as if my mind had been doused in cold water. Ever since I arrived in Berlin for my junior-year summer internship, I’d wanted to speak Italian. Unfortunately, useful phrases like “*ne vale la pena*” and “*non ti preoccupare*” which I had picked up while studying abroad in Bologna in the fall didn’t have a direct translation into German. Daily exchanges with the Italian natives had grounded certain sentence constructions in my head, including how to order a coffee.

I drank the cappuccino outside at a table under an umbrella, although the low morning sun crept threateningly up my bare legs. After three sips, I was done. I didn’t even need sugar.

In ten minutes, I was standing in front of the wrought-iron gates of a red-brick neoclassical villa. A path lined by tall pink rose bushes led to a pair of tall open doors. Another path led past a fountain to a secret garden and a few wooden tables shaded under flopping beige umbrellas. A waitress darted in between chairs, carrying a platter of coffee cups and heart-shaped *Waffeln*. I saw songbirds.

This alcove of paradise located off of the shopping boulevard Kurfürstendamm, or Ku’damm, was where I would intern for the next three months.

It was a “Literaturhaus,” a place that presents both German-speaking and international authors to the public through art exhibits, readings, Q&A sessions, and over dinner. It was where

different backgrounds and languages could connect and converge to grow into a heightened understanding of what's happening all over the world, and how writers interpret it.

I wanted to do that, to become that kind of author with that kind of job. But instead, I would be given a desk in a back-room where the sunlight never hit, an old PC that hadn't been updated in years, and an endless list of publishers to email (in German) for free copies of books. If I was lucky, my directors would let me have an extra copy.

Instead of reading the German novels that slowly collected on my nightstand, most of my days were spent listening to my own thoughts as I walked around the city and rode the U-Bahn. Everything became familiar and comfortable. I was both a tourist and a Berliner. Germans would address me in stores and on the sidewalk as if I were one of them, then be thrown off guard once I opened my mouth. More often than not, they would continue to speak to me in German rather than switch to English. It was easier for both of us to pretend.

Berlin also has a divided identity. On the subway I heard an average of three languages. On the street I'd pass by Turkish döner kebab shops, Italian pizzerias, and a couple Starbucks and McDonalds. Kurfürstendamm's sidewalks are filled with both businessmen hurrying to find lunch and families of tourists meandering past shop windows. The entire world seems to live in Berlin. The official language just happens to be German.

Before arriving, I had always thought of Berlin as an image on a postcard: a brightly-colored, modern city dominated by the shining TV tower. But Berlin isn't as it seems. Its friendly façades have been built over time to hide sadness and anger. Even the Literaturhaus is like a Garden of Eden secluded from a grim reality. Berlin's identity has always seemed unstable since it was Berlin-Cölln in the early thirteenth century. From the Weimar Republic to Nazism to the Cold War, it has always been teetering between two rival sides competing for control, two

halves who wished for a stable whole. The physical evidence of this struggle is mostly hidden, but lives in the quiet *Stolpersteine* plaques embedded in sidewalks detailing the lives of former residents, in between the silent coffin-like slabs of concrete in a memorial to murdered Jews, and within the fragmented remains of a bombed church.

Until recently, I hadn't known how much Berlin was part of *my* hidden identity.

\* \* \*

I opened up the library's search bar and, not knowing what else to put, typed in my own name.

"No records found."

My fingers hovered over the keyboard. I was delaying the inevitable.

I typed in my father's name. The computer pondered my request a little, wondering how much to show me, and then: Two articles, two books. One at Wesleyan.

"Cool."

I simplified the search even further, to one word, a surname. And then I found it, the book that I hadn't known existed:

*Mixed Blessings: An Almost Ordinary Life in Hitler's Germany.* And underneath, my dead grandfather's name.

I checked out the book.

A couple days before, I had been drafting a proposal for a German-based research project that would be funded by a center at my college. I had just discovered the little known but all-encompassing word "exophony," or the phenomenon of writing in a language other than one's



“mother tongue.” While my mother stacked old copies of *The New York Times* on our breakfast table, I was spouting ideas about researching the Italian-German dynamic in Switzerland, the lack of creative writing programs at German universities, even Vladimir Nabokov’s emigration to Berlin in the 20s. I was interested in all of them but didn’t feel connected to any of them. Then my mother mentioned that my German grandfather wrote a book in English.

I looked up from my laptop. “What?”

She nodded. “When he came to the U.S. he had to start from scratch, work blue collar jobs, but he moved up the career ladder. He mastered the English language and became an editor very quickly... I think he was in charge of communications for the prestigious American College of Surgeons? He wrote all these articles on Catholic writers, the Holocaust, Heinrich Heine... His favorite author was Heinrich Heine...”

I was stunned. An exophonic writer in my family. “What was his name again?”

I barely remember my grandfather. One of my clearest memories of him was when my parents, sister, uncle, and aunts got pancakes at a restaurant not too far from the Chicago suburb where my father grew up. I was maybe seven years old. Halfway through digesting a giant pancake, I closed my eyes and lay back in my high-backed wooden chair. Tired from all the adult conversation around me, I decided to take a nap. But I continued to listen hard, staring at the colorful darkness of my eyelids, waiting for the moment until my relatives noticed me. Years later, I discovered that someone had in fact taken a photo of my snoozing, slouched body and my smiling grandfather sitting next to me.

That’s it.

Heinz Kuehn passed away in 2006 at the age of 86. I remember how hot the sun was shining during his funeral.

I had grown up seeing my grandparents only a handful of times before they passed away. As for my mother, this was one of the many psychological consequences of choosing to leave behind a home or, as for my grandfather, being forced to leave because your country no longer recognizes you as one of their own. As a result of both my mother's move to the U.S. and my father's move away from Chicago, I didn't have a supportive network of cousins whom I could play with as a child. I never spent an afternoon at Grandma's, or Thanksgivings with the family. For my entire life, my idea of "family" has only been intimate: my mom, my dad, my sister, and me. Although we would visit her whenever we flew to Germany, I've never spoken with my grandmother — I didn't know German, and she never learned English. The only conversation I remember us having is when my parents left her house for an errand, leaving me and my sister behind. I was fifteen years old. It was awkward. She talked to us while fixing up some toasted *Brötchen* with butter. While my sister stayed quiet, I responded to her by repeating the only German word I knew: *Vielen Dank*.

She passed away in 2013. Maria called my dad, and my dad told my mom. At first she couldn't believe it. Then she cried in her room.

Throughout my childhood, my distant family had largely been reduced to voices on the phone. My mother loved to chat with her sisters for hours in German almost every weekend. Sometimes I would pass her bedroom door and listen to the sounds of their smiles and laughs. Meanwhile, my dad usually calls his siblings on holidays or their birthdays. Recently, they've liked sharing photos on WhatsApp. There's less talking on the phone.

Communication: It's how we cherish someone else's existence. Until you can't anymore. Then, only memories live on.

\* \* \*

Heinz Kuehn was born in Switzerland, but spent his childhood and adulthood in Berlin before he decided to emigrate with my grandmother and their two young daughters to Milwaukee. Before my dad was born, they moved to a suburb of Chicago. With the rise of Nazism, Heinz had been deemed a *Mischling* in his passport, or a “mixed breed.” His father Richard was Roman-Catholic, and his mother Rosa was Jewish; thus, he was “a mixed breed of the first degree.” Before Berlin fell to Hitler’s dictatorship, his mother had already fled to England in 1939, narrowly avoiding the concentration camps. Her sisters and close friends didn’t have the chance.

After my grandfather was pulled from the University of Tübingen because of his “new” identity, he decided to educate himself by reading books on theology, philosophy, and literature, mostly huddled under a blanket in his basement during bomb raids.

Under close Gestapo supervision, he spent most of the war in Berlin in the State Labor Service digging ditches instead of fighting with his country. He found a temporary fellowship of other men just like him. His mixed identity saved his life. It also killed his mother’s kin.

With his mother’s religion negated, he embraced his father’s Catholic beliefs at the age of 14 to help give him strength. Eventually, my grandfather would write a comprehensive study on angels.

I hadn’t even known I was part Jewish.

One weekend when I return home from college, I see his book lying on my desk. It’s the only copy that my parents own. I casually flip through it, and a photo and newspaper clipping fall out. It’s a photo of my grandfather, smiling with his arm crossed in front of Checkpoint

Charlie. The elegant cursive on the back says “Berlin, May 1990.” The newspaper clipping is dated from May 6, 1998, celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of my grandparents. The name of the article? “Building a love out of rubble.”

My hand slides down the smooth pages and over the olive linen cover. I notice for the first time a few glossy pages in the middle of the book. They’re photos of my grandfather, his parents, his aunts, his children. My dad as a baby. It’s like a family photo album — *my* family photo album. And on the title page, there are written words — the same cursive and black ink from the photo and clipping. It’s a message for my mother:

*“With my warmest wishes for joy and happiness, and in gratitude for her quietly cheerful presence in my life.*

*Heinz*

*February 18, 1989.”*

The message was written one year after his book had been published, one year into my parents’ courtship, and eight months before the Berlin Wall fell, which reunited East and West Germany.

“I think his parents were thrilled when they found out that I was a German, and a librarian, just like his mother,” my mom tells me as she flips grilled cheese sandwiches over the stove. I watch her flip the open-faced sandwiches over so that the cheese sizzles against the pan. Just like in Germany.

Why did my family wait to show me his book? When were they going to show me? Or had it been forgotten on the shelf? Why did I have to discover it by myself, two years after I made the decision that I wanted to learn German, my mother’s tongue, the language my mother never taught me?

But that's not quite right – I remember being able to recite the German numbers, one to ten, when I was young. If I learned this through my mom, or through one of the various German-language children's books given to me by my mom's sisters and friends, I don't know. But I do remember how proud I was to recite those ten words from memory. It gave me hope that I could learn this strange language on my own and not simply listen, mute, as my mother spoke with everyone around her except me.

I hadn't known what I wanted to find when I first typed in one of the halves of my surname in the search bar. Perhaps some recognition of myself in a place where I had increasingly begun to feel like an insignificant sophomore who had extended herself too far. I hadn't known that while searching for myself, I would discover someone who also wanted to feel complete, and make himself known. Not as a German-American, or an American-German, pulled in two directions between two languages, but one person with a pen and a story to tell.

Throughout the Prologue, my grandfather also wonders why he wanted to write this story. In the last paragraph, my grandfather speaks directly to me: "... I have tried to express in the pages that follow, for my children and grandchildren, for my friends, for all those who care to read, for whatever reason, about one man's experience of a cataclysmic period in mankind's history."

Oh, grandfather. I didn't know. But I'm listening.

\* \* \*

Before my junior year of college ended, I called my mom over the phone to tell her that I had just been interviewed by the Literaturhaus director, and offered an internship for that summer in Berlin.

I could hear her leap off the sofa. “What! What! Really? Oh, Sophia, Berlin... !” She reminded me about my grandfather, and how much Berlin was rooted in my family history. I had never heard my mom be so happy for something that happened to me. After we hung up, I had never felt happier with myself.

As fate would have it, my grandfather’s apartment had been just a few blocks down from the Literaturhaus. I never searched for his address, however. Who’s to say if it still stands? And if I had stood in front of it, maybe taken a picture or two, it would have just been a cold building, a shell. I wouldn’t find him inside.

For the length of my stay in Berlin, my parents set me up to live with my father’s sister, Angelika, who had only recently moved to Berlin after retirement because she also wanted to get closer to her roots. (Although she was born in Germany, she had quickly forgotten the language once her parents moved to the U.S.) She had just rented an apartment in Tegel, on the northern outskirts of Berlin. She was also living in the same apartment building as another family member: my dad’s cousin’s daughter, Rebecca, who lived with her husband and son in their apartment downstairs. Her husband kindly picked me up from the airport. But it was a stranger who was hugging me.

Although we were all family, we didn’t feel like family. Before reading my grandfather’s memoir, I had always associated Germany with my mother’s side of the family. My mom had always insisted that I was “all” German, even though I was born and grew up in the U.S. But

now, I was caught in the middle of yet another divided world, one where I spoke English upstairs and German downstairs.

Upstairs, I wasn't American enough. I wanted to practice my German with Angelika, who had a solid grasp of German, although she preferred to speak in English to me. Perhaps she noticed how unbalanced our conversations were from the start: she had known German longer but took longer in forming sentences, while I could respond quickly yet knew less vocab. Or maybe she saw too much of my mother and less of her brother in the soft features of my face. Even though we could easily speak with one another when we used English, our exchanges felt mandatory and polite. In other words, I was treated like a short-time guest, although I would be staying in my aunt's apartment throughout May, June, and August. In July during summer break, I would take the train from my father's Germany to my mother's Germany, where her sister Maria would welcome me with open arms, ready to offer me a new German identity in which I would never feel completely comfortable.

Downstairs, I felt too American. Rebecca's family didn't know any English, which usually resulted in sometimes funny misunderstandings, and sometimes hurt feelings.

I remember one humid night in August, Rebecca had invited some of her friends to a barbecue. Once I came back from my internship, exhausted and hungry, I grabbed a plate of the leftover *Würstchen* and *Wassermelone*. Since the dining room table was filled with food, I went outside to find an empty spot besides the guests at the picnic table. Rebecca didn't greet me, but I saw her look at me. I inserted myself into a space that didn't want me, and tried to follow a conversation that didn't involve me. Her guests smiled at me like they knew who I was, but didn't ask. I soon felt a creeping burn and discovered that my ankles had been bitten red by

mosquitoes. I left not only in embarrassment at never being introduced, but also in barely contained agony over my slowly swelling ankles.

I hid behind closed doors in the living room and played with their kittens on the floor, until Rebecca texted me. Her friends said they wanted to meet me, the American in the house.

I told her no. I was in too much pain.

\* \* \*

As legend has it, the origin of the city's name "Bärin" comes from the German word *Bär*, or bear. As a result, wherever you see hordes of tourists, you will also see various souvenirs featuring the Berliner Bear.

Bears are also a thing in my family. We saw a black bear lumbering across our backyard — twice. As an ongoing joke, my mom likes to give my dad bear-related presents, like a light switch plate made to look like the bark of a birch tree with a small bear hanging onto the top.

For one of his birthdays, I gave my dad a hand-carved wooden ornament of a brown bear. After running his thumb over the grooves for a while, he told me that he had a Berliner Bear from his father. He went to go get it from his study.

The bear was four inches tall, and made out of glossy cream-white porcelain. It stood on its hind legs, its arms loosely suspended in the air, as if ready to defend itself from attackers. There were hairline cracks where its arms had been broken off and glued back on. On the bottom stamped in green ink were the words "Bavaria" and "Made in Western Germany." My dad carefully placed it beside my wooden bear.



\* \* \*

My mother often tells me the story of how she got a Fulbright to study library science in the U.S. She tells me how one day she saw a poster at her university advertising Fulbright, and how she thought to herself, “Why not?” She tells me how at the interview with the Fulbright Committee she wore a knee-length navy skirt with the finest navy sweater she could find, and how she had spent days coming up with answers to all the possible questions that they could ask her, including: “Why did you want to go to America?” Her answer? “America is the wonderland of libraries.”

“It was the best thing I ever did in my life, besides marrying the right person.” She’s cleaning out the pots in the kitchen sink as I watch from the counter. “It was so liberating.”

What did she need liberation from?

The clearest answer that I ever received about what it felt like for her to leave home lay in the poem “Frische Fahrt” by Joseph von Eichendorff. One of my cousins had sent it to her, and she was hooked. She read and reread the poem. She spoke it to herself, her tongue rumbling over the consonants and whispering over the vowels.

It’s a two-stanza long poem from 1810 about taking a “Fresh Ride” on horseback through an invigorating spring dawn. It’s a breathless poem, a poem that doesn’t look back: “*Fahre zu! ich mag nicht fragen, / Wo die Fahrt zu Ende geht!*”

One cold night in April, she lies down on the sofa as she reads the poem out loud once more to me and my sister. We’re crouching behind her on the wooden floor, hypnotized. When she finishes, my mom turns behind to look at me. “I like this poem so much because it reminds me of when I went to the U.S., and left behind my parents. I couldn’t look back.”

\* \* \*

There's an epilogue in the last pages of my grandfather's memoir called "English Lessons." He describes a scene from his daily life. It's 1952, just four months after his family has settled in America, and the milkman has just rung the doorbell. My aunt Angelika, who was then just a little girl, answers the door: "You better talk to *me*. You see, my dad doesn't speak English very well."

My grandfather ponders this hilarious and also sad moment where his children have become more "flawlessly bilingual" than he. Although he was a writer in Germany, he not only has to adjust to living in a foreign country while leaving behind the psychological consequences of Nazism and World War II, but engage with his new community. He learns his new home language the same way that a newborn learns theirs: by listening. Without the help of a textbook or a language course, he also learns English by comparing it to his knowledge of German, Latin, and French; by utilizing a pocket dictionary; and by speaking without fear of making a mistake. America and its language soon become a liberating breath of air. His curiously fluent writing eventually makes appearances in *The Sewanee Review* and *The American Scholar*. In 1957, he'll take the oath of U.S. citizenship. In a perfectly symbolic gesture, the Berliner President John F. Kennedy himself will present him with two Silver Anvil Awards for creativity, professionalism, and excellence in the field of public relations.

Soon enough, his mother tongue fades along with his troubled past: "German, conversational German, suddenly sounded harsh, clipped, aggressive, and cantankerous. It evoked sad images and painful emotions that I thought had begun to lose their destructive force."

A language can encompass an entire history. A split from a language means a split from that history. Rather than abandoning his mother tongue for another, my grandfather felt that his mother tongue had abandoned him.

He and his wife decided not to speak German to their children, even though English was difficult to learn. But when my dad left home, he decided to teach himself German. After majoring in English in college, he wanted to go to graduate school to study Latin and Greek. The Department of Classical Languages required that its doctorate candidates know two other foreign languages. He decided on French and his mother tongue. While looking for a German tutor in Chicago, he met and fell in love with my mother.

Berlin made me realize that I felt most at home at home. My mom, dad, sister and I were all different, but we had the same blood. We spoke English at home, yet German and even my dad's Latin will often come up in casual conversation and jokes. We allowed each other our private realms to express ourselves while living under one roof. They are my one family and my home.

*Heimat* is one of the most notorious German words to translate into English: the associative feeling with the word carries it far beyond the page. Basically, one would translate it as "home" or "home country." But if you're "at home" you're *zu Hause*. And "home country" can also be *Mutterland* (motherland) or *Vaterland* (fatherland). If someone is acting *heimlich* they are acting secretly, and if something feels *unheimlich* it feels uncanny. To use all of these words, you need to know what home *doesn't* mean.

Although it's fascinating that *Heimat* has no perfect translation outside of German, it's not a lingual phenomenon but a reminder that culture and national history can't be translated.

Everyone has a different definition of what “home” means, how it feels in your mind and how it tastes on your tongue.

So swallow the word down, and clear your throat. It’s time to speak a new *Heimat*.

*We are, I believe, rediscovering the existential union between life and language, a union that goes much deeper than accuracy of grammar, the choice of the right word, or elegance of style. Something is happening reminiscent of my own discovery of English, a language I learned and learned to love, that became my truly native tongue, the tongue of my nativity into a new life.*

– Heinz Kuehn, *Mixed Blessings*



## The Tree and the Hill

In my aunt Maria's Garden of Eden, there are two trees. Like her flowers, they don't escape her pruning shears.

A few weeks after arriving at her house in July, I had witnessed my uncle on a ladder with a long pair of shears in his hands, trimming the sides of one of the trees. I watched him, horrified. "*Aber was macht ihr?* What are you doing?!"

My aunt smiled at my lack of gardening knowledge, stirring the ice cubes in her apple juice with a spoon. "Too much shade kills the roses. Sometimes we have to cut back the branches."

I thought about crying. Their idea seemed unnatural, pretentious. I left my glass on the patio table and went upstairs to my room.

Let me explain.

Trees help define what home means to me. My college's unofficial mascot is a tree. At my house, my backyard is a forest. Whenever I stay in a place that doesn't have a tree immediately outside the window (like in Bologna) it automatically becomes foreign. I can't attach myself to it.

But then one evening on May 15, 2018, my definition of home changed. Four minor tornadoes ripped across New Haven County, ripping up full-grown trees from their roots and destroying 120,000 properties. Our house was unscathed, but our neighbor's wasn't. They had to live in a hotel until Christmas.

While the storm was raging at home, I was studying for my final exams. That evening in New London, there was a torrential downpour and a murky green sky, but it passed quickly. My

dad called me once the winds died down to ask if I was okay, and tell me that they had no power and that trees were down everywhere. He told me there had been a tornado, and I didn't believe him. Things like that didn't happen to us.

When I came home for summer break the next day, my neighborhood, which had looked the same for the last ten years of my life, was suddenly unrecognizable. My dad picked me up using my mom's car, which she had driven from work, going against the firefighters' warnings so that she could be home. A fallen tree soon blocked her path, and she had to walk to a nearby colleague's house to sleep that night. When she finally came home the next morning, she was mildly traumatized.

My dad, sister and I had to carry my boxes of books and clothes from the bottom of our street up the hill to our house, all the while quietly pulling back branches for the others to walk under, walking across neighbors' lawns past ditches, and climbing over six tree trunks.

I felt as if someone had uprooted my home.

My aunt and uncle visited my parents the following September, while I was studying in Bologna. They saw our "garden" and decided that they needed to intervene, although it was just a typical American lawn overgrown with moss and sprouting chestnut trees. They also "discovered" our two rhododendron bushes, which are actually quite common in New England, yet rare in Germany. In order to ensure their growth, they cut down our Hawthorn tree. They said it was stealing too much sunshine.

When I came back home from Italy and looked outside of my bedroom window one afternoon, I realized that where there was normally a ten-foot tall tree which would bloom a beautiful white in the spring was just a stump, overshadowed by the bare rhododendron leaves.



I wept. My sister, who was excited to show me something on her phone, walked into my room, then stopped to ask what was wrong. I shook my head, leaning against the window, staring at the stump. I left to find my mother in the living room. My face was streaked with cold tears, and I was blubbering about Maria and her stupid garden. My mom lay down on the sofa, and I lay down beside her. The swell of her chest replaced the spastic rhythm of mine. “They meant well, they wanted to help, and they know more about trees than we do,” she breathed. The tree, which had been a constant presence in my childhood, was gone. My mom wouldn’t blame her sister. Her home was not a tree.

Whenever I have to walk past the stump, I avoid looking at it, as if it were an open casket at a funeral. I hope that the rhododendron bush will cover it.

Two years later, I finally pay my respects. I look closer at the stump, frown, and crouch into the dirt. Growing out of its trunk is a slim branch, covered in ruby leaves.

I hope it takes its time. I’m in no hurry.

\* \* \*

From my view outside the sunroom window, I can see a hill. The town calls it “Sleeping Giant Mountain,” but it is so far away and the top so round that it would be an embarrassment to call it anything but a hill.

I hadn’t been able to see the hill until the tornado knocked down the trees in our backyard. Now there’s a crooked wasteland in the woods beyond our pool, but a few trees still stick out in the sky between my house and the deep valley before the hill.

Every time I look outside the window, I wish that all of the trees had been knocked down. I love trees, but now I want to see the full shape of the hill, the rugged scars sloping down its shoulders, its purple-gray hue. I want to see the fall colors of its soft tufts of trees, and when the sun falls, I want to see the pin holes of light from the next town over, and the one next to that.

I reach out a hand toward the window. My fingers press against the glass.

I don't want to see split trees. I don't want to see the buried giant. I want to see further.



## Photo Credits

- 5 1<sup>st</sup> View from Air Italy Flight 901 flying from Milan to JFK. December, 2018. Photo courtesy of the author.
- 19 My mom at seven years old in her Sunday dirndl, walking with a friend away from home. 1970. Photo courtesy of Josef Angele.
- 68 A Shaky Selfie at Dinnertime. October, 2018. Photo courtesy of the author.
- 85 Heinz Kuehn taking his turn in deconstructing the Berlin Wall. May, 1990. Photo courtesy of Chris Kuehn.
- 90 2<sup>nd</sup> View from Air Italy Flight 901 flying from Milan to JFK. December, 2018. Photo courtesy of the author.

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