

Siblings

By Anne Richter

Translated by Stefan Tobler

‘You look after our father,’ whispered Ruth. ‘I live too far away. I can’t.’

She kicked at the ground with the toe of her shoe, as if she wanted to dig up the turf. Undecided as to whether to stand next to her brother or not, she observed his face from the side. It looked like the face of a handsome unknown man in which, had he smiled, she might have noticed something familiar. Fred nodded, looking the other way. He seemed to have aged in the last few years.

It was a bright day with an almost summery sky. Dark pine trees stood out on the horizon. In winter the woods looked like they were from a fairytale, while now in the spring Ruth saw the tips were bunched together, little arrows pointing heavenwards. Down below, behind the cemetery’s fence, grasses and wild flowers grew – yellow, violet and rose.

By now the mourners had left the low chapel and assembled in small groups on either side of the dirt path that led from the chapel to the cemetery gates. At the gates a man from the undertakers opened the hearse’s hatch. He was thickset and pale and used the sleeve of his jacket to wipe his forehead and throat. The other employee put the urn in the hearse and went to sit in the passenger seat. The first man closed the hatch. None of the mourners turned to look.

Since Ruth had left Thuringia all those years ago, she had only seen Fred now and then at Christmas and exchanged oddly tongue-tied small talk with him over the Christmas dinner.

The last time they had met was at the same place as today – for their grandmother’s funeral six months ago. And just like today the hearse had driven on ahead of them after the funeral towards the small town’s other cemetery where the urn was to be buried.

Ruth walked past her father and her uncle's wife towards the gates, slowly following the hearse. In balcony flower boxes on blocks of flats red geraniums and yellow pansies were flowering garishly on the façade. She saw a little petrol station to the right which she had not noticed in November, when snow lay on the ground, although she had walked along the same road. It was the only major road in the town, the road which led not only to the next town but connected all the towns of the hilly region. This was her grandmother's, father's and uncle's region. Her father had left, while his younger brother Uwe had stayed. At first he carried on living in their village. Then he went looking for work in the small town less than half an hour away by bus. He soon married; his wife bore a son, Steffen, and left Uwe soon afterwards, to move to West Germany.

Later he married Luise, who came from another village in the region. It was around then that Ruth's mother divorced her father.

In the years in which Uwe lived alone with his son, he sometimes visited his brother. For these visits he was put up in the children's bedroom. He would sleep in Fred's or Ruth's bed, which later appeared monstrous to Ruth. Her nightie, still a child's pale, crumpled nightie; the smell of alcohol wafting off him; her nausea and her certainty that it was impossible to creep past his bed in the dark and open the window; her fear and his snoring, which she often listened to for minutes, waiting for a suitably long interruption so that she could fall asleep again – she remembered all of that as she walked over to the other cemetery.

Reaching it, she went through the gates and walked straight to her grandmother's grave. Her uncle's name had already been carved into the gravestone.

*

The November evening must have been about twenty years ago. Before Ruth had gone to bed, she had peeked in on the two men sitting at the living room table. Two empty bottles stood in front of her father, who seldom drank beer, while five stood on Uwe's side. Her father was leaning forward and laughing. Ruth could only see the back of Uwe's head: a few grey hairs, sweat on the fleshy nape of his neck, strands of hair which looked like they were stuck on. Her father

touched Uwe's forearm and told him something about a stolen bar of chocolate, which he had shared with him one spring on a grassy slope, did he remember? Uwe laughed: he had felt sick when he saw their mother approaching across the field. He had looked at her fingers, scared, at the hard, tough skin. A mother like that, from hell. Her father lifted his hand and replied vehemently, 'That's no way to speak.'

Ruth had already fallen asleep when she heard an angry roar she knew to be her father's rage, mixed with short, punchy phrases she did not recognise. Fred's bed was empty but she knew that he was sleeping in their parents' room. She listened to the voices and tried to understand the words. Tinkling, light sounds rang out, then one scream, and a second. She got out of bed and pressed herself to the doorframe. She saw froth on the table, the sharp edge of the neck of a bottle, brown shards, a long slit of a wound in her uncle's cheek. He was standing calmly and absentmindedly in the middle of the room, holding a handkerchief below the left-hand side of his chin. The handkerchief became more and more soaked until the blood started to drip onto the carpet. Uwe tried to catch the blood in the palm of his hand. When his hand involuntarily brushed his cheek, he smeared the blood on his skin, and that was when Ruth wondered why he did not move, not go into the bathroom, why he stood there silently instead of calling for a doctor. The smell of beer hung in the air. Her father was sitting stock-still at the table.

Then someone grabbed her by the arm and was tugging her away. Mum, she thought, but it was Fred. He put both his hands over her eyes like a blindfold and slowly pulled her back out of the doorway. When Fred took his hands away, her father was pushing his face down into the shards.

*

The stocky man from the undertakers squatted down and lowered the urn into the little square cavity. His pale hands had had a bluish red tone in the winter. As he straightened up and crossed his forearms behind his back, his gaze remained on the two urns.

The mourners, who made a ragged semi-circle around the grave, started to form a queue. Ruth joined the end of it. She watched as one after another the others stepped up to the grave and stayed there for a few seconds. Two people stood between her father and her. When he moved up close to the grave and looked down, first his hands, and then his body began to tremble. The wounds had taken a long time to heal. Later there were scars on his face. Weeks after the argument there had been a despairing howl of laughter on the phone as he said to his brother, I lost my face, what about you? And then months later, months in which he had become more and more tense, Uwe had visited unexpectedly. On the last day of his visit her father had tentatively placed a hand on Uwe's forearm. It had irritated Ruth to see it.

Although she never prayed, Ruth put her hands together, pressing the balls against each other, and watched her father's movements. She was afraid that he would lose control completely, but after he had stood there for a few moments silently, as if he did not know what to do next, he took the spade and after holding it in midair for an instant, pushed it into the bucket of soil, took just a little of it and dropped it into the grave.

As with Fred earlier, Ruth could only see his face from the side, but even so his features showed a feeling of futility so clearly that she wondered what her father's face could have looked like had peace been made, since it seemed belated gestures were pointless.

A second bowl stood on a dark metal stand next to the bucket of soil. Her father lent forward, reached deep into the bath of fresh, colourful rose petals and scattered a handful on the grave. As he walked to the back of the line of people, Fred left the group to go over to him. He embraced him, without hugging him close. Ruth could not help remembering that both of them had, for a time, once had the same dark hair.

Much earlier, when her uncle used to visit, Fred had been blond and she had had short hair and been tall for her age, although always much shorter than him. He had always beaten her in races, at chess and at table tennis. They had sometimes played table tennis at summer camp, and once at home when their parents had been renovating their small two-bedroom flat and the dining table

had been put in the children's room while the living room was being painted. Old newspapers and tarpaulins covered the floor, brushes and buckets of paint were the room's new and only contents. The room's glass door was almost always left open, the paint fumes filling the whole flat.

At first the table just stood pointlessly in the children's bedroom. Then one day Fred fetched two table-tennis bats from his toy cupboard, drew a line down the middle with white chalk and, in a commanding voice and holding his hand horizontal in the air, set a height under which the little ball was not allowed to go. He threw Ruth one of the two bats. She began to play and Fred decided when the ball had definitely gone into the net, while Ruth concentrated on hard, well-aimed shots. She felt her arm stiffen, her mouth go dry, and yet also a strange energy, a desire to fight.

After the third round Fred smiled at her triumphantly, rested his weight on his hands and swung himself up onto the table and sat there. He threw his bat in the air, watched it spin around and caught it. Ruth stood on her side and hit the edge of her bat against the wooden tabletop. Her blows gained a rhythm, became louder.

'Stop it, it's my bat!' said Fred.

Ruth looked at him. She had triumphed over him this time. She was beating out a song, apparently happily, a march between cupboards, beds and the clutter of toys. Fred's Matchbox cars from the West, his puzzles and his cuddly toys, their chess figures which were scattered randomly on the carpet, black and white all mixed up, some of them under the table and others between their half-crumpled drawing paper. She changed the tone. Flat side, thin side, flat side – she turned the bat around and smacked the handle against the wood. Quick as lightning, it was wrenched from her grip. The music in her head was interrupted, and Fred banged the thin side into her ribs. She jumped, then bent over double. The pain made her grasp for the bat. For a moment they tugged in opposite directions, but as usual Fred was stronger and he ran down the hall and into the living room with both bats. He swished the glass door closed behind him and pressed his body against it from the inside. Ruth pushed against the door from the hall, pressing down on the handle as she did. 'Open up!' she shouted with Fred's laughter echoing around her in the hall. He had turned around and was

rubbing his bum against the glass of the door and cackling away. Angrily Ruth raised her bare foot and kicked at the door. Fred jumped immediately and gave out a yelp, then he flung open the door and bent down to Ruth, who had sunk to the ground and was holding her foot in her fingers. Fred dragged her upright. 'Quick, into the bathroom!' and 'I'll get a crust of bread – you have to eat it, so new blood forms!'

The blood left a thin, highly visible trail as Ruth hopped on one leg into the bathroom, where she sat on the edge of the bath. A little puddle formed under her feet.

Ruth just sat there until Fred came in and rolled the leg of her tracksuit up above her knee. She had rested her heels on the side of the bath with her white toes pointing to the ceiling.

A trickle of blood flowed towards the drain. Ruth clasped the edges of the bath and thought of her parents. She felt Fred gently unclasping her hand and putting something in it, before guiding her hand to her mouth. She heard again, 'so new blood forms!' and bit into the piece of bread. It was hard and tough, and the longer she chewed on it the sweeter it tasted. And she chewed and chewed, while Fred rinsed her foot with the showerhead, caressed it with warm water, and turned the drops that were waiting to fall from her foot into a watery reddish river, until she had eaten all of the crust.

*

Once Ruth was standing in front of the grave, she found it strangely easy to throw in some earth. The rose petals felt soft. She stood there for a moment, as the others had done, and looked at the gravestone, the names of her grandmother and uncle, before quickly walking away to go and stand far from the crowd with her back to a grave of someone unknown to her. She could see in the distance the porcelain factory's now disused chimneys. They towered above even the highest of the trees and fitted well with the silence of the cemetery.

A few years before her grandmother had moved out of the village into the old people's home in the small town, on one of Ruth's visits she had met Uwe and his son at her grandmother's house. The two had been arguing about whether it

was fortunate or unfortunate that the chimneys were no longer smoking. While they argued, her grandmother had washed the dishes in silence. Not only could Ruth see that the circular movements she made with her dishcloth were more halting than normal, but also that she put down the plates, cups and saucers as carefully as if they were little animals whose lives should not be endangered.

After her grandmother's funeral Ruth spoke to Uwe for the first time in years. The close relatives gathered in front of one of the pale yellow tower blocks, lingering a while in front of the entrance, where the snow had been cleared away. In the end they climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. Ruth looked at the tidy little two-bedroom flat in which Luise and Uwe had lived, at the porcelain figurines behind the glass doors of the wall unit, at other figurines on the television. Dusting them could not be easy. On the other hand there was a smooth leather sofa and an adorned wooden table. The kitchen was right next to the living room. There was no dividing door. Ruth could not see any pictures of her grandmother.

The mourners formed small groups at the table and on the sofa. Luise served cake, poured coffee. While Ruth ate and drank, she looked down into the valley, at the snow-laden branches of the trees and at an elongated cube of a building with its chimneys: the abandoned porcelain factory. The closely set rows of windows looked undamaged. Only the light coloured plaster was graffitied. Ruth wondered who sprayed walls in this little town of almost no young people.

Uwe and Luise had worked in the factory, although only she had mastered the techniques of turning, moulding, pressing, firing and glazing – Uwe had worked in the office.

Someone's coffee cup clattered. The sound was of a fragile material; a sign of life in a dead place. Ruth traced the fine lines on her plate, blue blossoms, pale, simple and all similar. The same pattern on her cup.

She heard Uwe say that he was off sick and that Luise would have to take on his shift in the new company. He was sitting with his back to the kitchen, where Luise was busying herself. His hair was grey, the skin of his hands was cracked, and he had a bellicose expression on his face.

Her grandmother had always been sensible, Uwe said. Even when they had suggested she move to an old people's home. Sensible and strong – still, he was happy that no one had told her about his bowel cancer.

When he spoke he had neither an awkward nor a pompous manner, instead he spoke like a man who has learnt how to talk properly about his problems. Ruth listened to him and nodded, and suddenly it seemed easy, with a glance at Luise's strong back, to ask about the therapy he was going to have. Nine sessions of chemotherapy, with two weeks between each one. It sounded perfectly normal, as if he were talking about what he was going to eat tomorrow for lunch, or about a planned holiday.

'I'll ask Steffen if he can help me tomorrow evening,' said Luise.

'What kind of a company is it?'

'Computer parts,' replied Luise. After a while she added: 'Then they go to America. It's in the next village. We get little parts from a factory in the West; we put them together; and then we send them across the ocean. And every six months we get a special offer for a new computer.'

'And where does your son live?' Ruth asked her uncle.

'Next to the factory,' replied Luise. 'But he doesn't have a job.'

Uwe said, 'Mum could have put the parts together, even though she was almost blind.'

Ruth got up to help Luise tidy away the cups and plates. Her gaze alighted on her father, who was looking at his brother without saying a word.

*

The rite over, the undertakers began to fill in the hole, shovelling in time with each other. Hesitantly, Ruth went back to the group, stopping next to her father and Fred. The mourners headed for the gates in dribs and drabs. As there was no formal end to the ceremony, some of them looked irritated and indecisive as they left. Luise stood near the grave and stared down into it. Shovelfuls of earth were gradually covering the blossoms.

Without discussing it, Ruth, Fred and her father started to walk. It seemed to Ruth as if the landscape enveloped her, protecting yet not consoling her. She

noticed how close to each other the trees grew and that their trunks, unlike when she was a child, did not change colour at a distance.

At the cemetery gates her father said he had phoned Luise often these past weeks.

The chemotherapy had started shortly after their grandmother's funeral, he continued in a muted voice. Luise had often driven Uwe to a clinic in the nearest big town. It was the first town beyond the former border. Each time he returned more exhausted. Scarcely had he recovered a little, and off they went again, to get another dose. After the fourth three-day stay he suddenly became feverish. He felt dizzy. He had to lie down on the back seat of the car. When they were almost home he said to his wife, 'Please drive me back. I have to talk to the doctor.' Luise turned round immediately. Uwe could not sleep, his fever was too high. His head was red. He was only pale around his mouth.

At the clinic he staggered out of the car. A few minutes before the end of the consulting hours, Luise led him to the oncologist's door and knocked. The doctor answered with a loud 'Yes?' Luise pushed her husband into the room. The doctor looked up briefly. She said, without changing her tone of voice, 'Have you forgotten something?' If Luise had not been holding onto Uwe, he would have fallen to the floor. Silently she pulled him to the examination table and helped him up onto it where he lay with his legs tucked up.

Luise had looked at Uwe's shoes at the same time as the doctor. To check if they were clean, her father said.

Then she saw the doctor look up at the clock and give a disapproving nod. Uwe was gasping for breath. He felt terrible; could barely breathe; perhaps she had noticed, he said, squeezing out the words. And while Luise looked once again at the numerous certificates on the walls and the cupboards, the doctor said that it was completely normal to feel like this after chemotherapy. 'Think of the future, look on the bright side, you have to develop a more positive attitude.'

If Uwe had been able to smile at that moment, considered her father, then he would have done so. An expression like that would have seemed familiar to him, after all the years in the GDR.

The doctor handed Luise a referral to a pulmonologist. As the fever did not abate the next day, they drove to the specialist. His clinic was not far from their

house. He examined Uwe's lungs thoroughly and found out that there were no metastases. 'You can be happy,' he said with the faintest of smiles. 'See how things are in a few days.'

May had begun, and when they came back at midday, the air was shimmering above the grass. Although he was shaking, Uwe let his gaze wander over the wide, colourful meadows and the woods hedging them in. He said in surprise, 'When this fuss is over, let's go on a trip, shall we?'

Luise replied, 'To Italy or Morocco, or the Alps, if you'd like to go hiking.'

She remembered a day when she and Uwe had visited his mother in the village. They had a laptop for her, which they had bought on special offer. After saying hello, Uwe had put the computer on the kitchen table and booted it up immediately. With quick and deft clicks on certain points, picture after picture had appeared, until travel offers came, a number of mountain tops, a bright, clear lake, snow-covered rocks, then reddish towers, white sand.

Holding logs under her arm, heading for the attic, her grandmother had shaken her head and said, 'What would you do there, my boy?'

And as if he suddenly understood his mother, Uwe nodded towards the woods and said, 'But first we'll go for a walk again.'

Her father's voice was rough. Uwe did not go back to the oncologist in the end. Luise drove him straight to the small town's hospital, where they diagnosed that he had a lung infection.

The doctors gave him one course of antibiotics. Then a second. And a third. And a fourth. He wheezed and did not speak. He opened his eyes less and less. Blood samples were taken. Violet marks formed around the prick points. The doctors looked for the pathogen. Meanwhile they gave him a fifth course of antibiotics.

Outside it was warm and fresh. In the hospital room it was hot and muggy. Luise sometimes felt nauseous when she walked in. She was relieved when Uwe was given a room to himself, because now only his own smell surrounded him. The bright May meadows and the tall trees, the petrol station, the blocks of flats with their smooth surfaces, the dirt tracks and the paved streets of the small

town all shrank while she settled in next to him. The human, bodily smell in the room, something both sweet and sour, gradually seemed to disappear.

Uwe was not going to need to move to the intensive care unit, she blurted out quietly but shrilly on the phone a few days later. Hearing it, her father said, he had leapt from his armchair by the telephone table, to overcome the paralysis that threatened to take control of him. He had set out immediately, and had arrived at the clinic half an hour before Uwe died.

They were the only ones still at the cemetery gates. The undertakers went past, the stocky one first, with his irregular, heavy steps, followed by the other one, a thin young man who briefly raised his head and nodded once at them without saying a word. They gave a corresponding goodbye. Her father had just finished telling them about Uwe.

Ruth would have liked to say something to Fred. She could feel his body beside her and thought of one of the trips that they had gone on together, of the packed days in Marseille. Dog-tired, they had stumbled through alleys smelling of fish, eaten couscous and ratatouille, mingled with the locals, always looking for new impressions, as if they thought they didn't have much longer to live. Each night they drove to the sea, plunged into the waves and later their wet bodies fell on the sand. On the last evening Ruth said, after she had taken a long swig from the bottle of wine and laid down on her back, 'If I look up at the sky for a while, I feel as if the stars are moving.' And after a moment's silence in which they could only hear the distant cars and the regular roar and crash of the waves, Fred replied with a level voice, 'That's just what they are doing.'

'I'm going to go back now.'

'I'll walk you to the station,' her father immediately replied.

They left the cemetery and reached the road which went past the garage to the railway station. As there was no footpath, Fred and Ruth walked close beside each other, hearing their father's hurried steps behind them.

'The place I live is so different to Marseille,' Ruth said out of nowhere, looking for an echo in Fred's eyes. Without smiling, the siblings looked at each other.

'I've never understood why you moved out there,' Fred said and pulled down the corner of his mouth a little. 'To the West.' He raised and then lowered his voice on the last word, expelling it from his mouth. Ruth turned to Fred and crooking her arm, held out her hand indecisively.

'I don't want to die there,' she said.

Fred stood still, grasping her forearms with both his hands and holding them so tight that Ruth felt the same pain she used to feel when he held her arms behind her back in a fight and she could do nothing to stop him.

He looked at her for a long while. She met his gaze. His hands slid down to hers. Warm, rough hands which did not let go of hers, but which enveloped them without pressure. Even back then Fred had often had bitten fingernails. Ruth began to stroke his hands, and finally to hold them in hers. She felt his knuckles, dug her fingertips into soft parts of his palms, then she looked away.

Their father had gone on ahead. He didn't turn around. He became smaller and smaller at the edge of the road.

'I'll look after him,' Fred said.