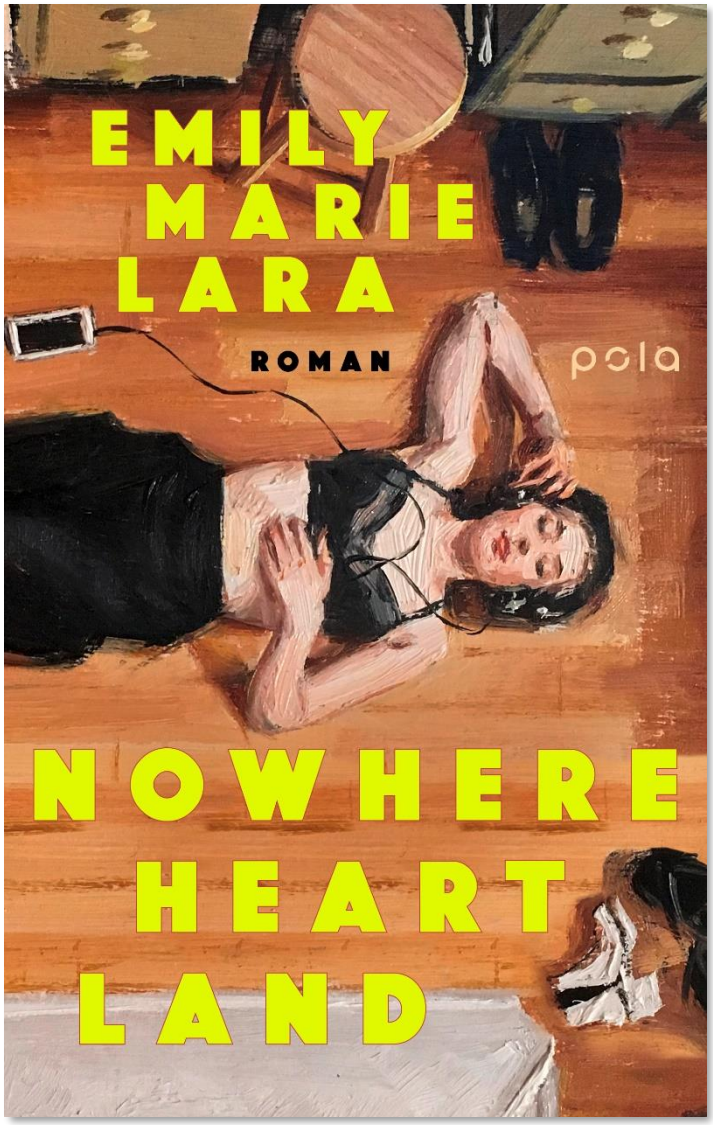
Emily Marie Lara
NOWHERE HEART LAND

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



Literary Novel
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OUTLINE

Just before her thirtieth birthday, Rosa returns to her home town for the first time in years. The medium-sized city in western Germany holds little for her; her mother died at twenty-nine when Rosa herself was still a child, and her grandmother, suffering from dementia, now lives in a care home. In London, where Rosa now lives, a workplace confrontation escalates and, plagued by both daydreams and nightmares, she loses her composure. The looming milestone of her thirtieth birthday – marking the time she will be older than her mother, Conny, was when she died – brings long-suppressed memories rushing back: memories of her home town, the lost sense of home, and the broken friendship with her boarding school friend, Leni.

After her A-levels, Rosa had moved to London, convinced she could leave the traumas of her past behind. But after a full-blown fistfight with a colleague, she is suspended from work. On the same day, she receives a phone call: her grandmother's care costs are rising, and Rosa needs money. She remembers the house in Germany, her inheritance – something she has never taken an interest in but now sees as a potential financial lifeline. When Rosa arrives in Germany, unemployed and struggling financially, little remains of her former life. Friendships have withered under the strain of diverging life paths, and the school that once served as both a surrogate family and a home for several years was demolished before her final school year.

Back home, while searching for documents, Rosa stumbles across an old calendar from her final school year. As she flips through its pages, memories come rushing back to her: memories of her mother, Conny; of

lost friendships; of the stern yet kind teachers and nuns; of eerie stuffed animals, rituals and escapes, internalised prayers, rules, and acts of rebellion. These were the things that shaped Rosa's youth – just as they had shaped her mother's before her. Conny, who had been a student at the same school, when she gave birth to Rosa. Conny was with her for far too short a time and revealed far too little of herself.

As the significant birthday approaches, Rosa, seeking stability and affirmation, reaches out to her former best friend, Leni. But Leni wants nothing to do with her, forcing Rosa to confront an uncomfortable question: how trustworthy are her memories, really?

Emily Marie Lara's debut is a work of stylistic brilliance, blending humour and tragedy to explore themes of family, female friendship, and loss. It is a fast-moving narrative that still takes the time to delve deeply into the inner world of a young woman, examining her spiralling loss of control and her journey toward rediscovering her own path.

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

1

That morning, I tap my Oyster card against the scanner, unlocking the metal turnstile. I push through; I can hear the creak of the mechanism above the music in my headphones. *Peter Grimes* this morning – a futile attempt to wake myself up – but the melody merely overlays the images from last night's dream. Around me, a parade of feet, coats, and briefcases heads for the overground train that connects our homes with the chaos of the city centre from London Fields station. The train hums, announcements crackle and the rails thrum occasionally – but I focus on the music, and my thoughts drift back to campus, hundreds of kilometres and an ocean away, drowsy, as though just roused by the school bell. The train pulls in. I sink into the red upholstered seats and someone jabs their elbow into my side. Across from me, a girl in a school uniform leafs through a book, glancing up briefly – in her face I see a flicker of my best friend Marlene's. My reflection in the window merges with hers, and suddenly, it's as though I'm seeing us together again: arm in arm, back at boarding school. Those years, and the thousands of days since, flash past like the white lights blurring outside behind the convex train window. London should have swallowed me by now. This city, pulsing with the hum of the Thames and the bass of endless club nights. I should have new friends – real people, flesh-and-blood, whose hands I can grip, who fill the nights with music, neon, and dry ice. But no. I'm still haunted by ghostly fragments of my school days, even here on the overground train.

Hoxton. The Greek goddess, the angel, the bear.

Whitechapel. People ride alongside me, reading ads for project management apps, listening to podcasts, dozing off. I stand up; the man next to me shifts abruptly, muttering to himself, and the girl follows me to the door.

Liverpool Street. The loudest place in the world. The tunnels reek of hot rubber and stale air. The rhythm of the music becomes more urgent. I'm chasing someone who's always one step ahead of me, running just fast enough to reach the top of the escalator before them and catch the incoming red train. I rush through the station as though I've overslept, as though morning prayer has already begun, as though I need to dart across the courtyard after Leni and the others, a jumper thrown over my pyjamas, the chapel windows glowing with early light, my breath clouding in the campus air. The Tube train screeches to a halt. I glance around. The same schoolgirl from before is next to me again, slipping her book into her coat pocket. It's a *Penguin Classics* edition, like the hundreds we had in the foreign language section of the school library. Pages yellowed with dust and the light of years gone by, the plastic laminate peeling at the edges, that distinctive sans-serif font with the black-and-white penguin logo on the spine. I follow the girl onto the train. "It's been over ten years," I tell myself as we rattle under St Paul's. But what even is time?

Oxford Circus. It's so packed I can barely breathe. This is London, the city screams at me from every poster and through the yawning mouths of the other commuters. This is the twenties – *your* twenties, *our* twenties.

Bond Street. Wake up, Rosa. Stop thinking about boarding school. About Marlene, Theresa, Conny. No time for nostalgia, for colours faded in an old art room cupboard somewhere in the forgotten heartland of Europe. The tunnel lights grow brighter. The city demands attention: *It's Thursday. It's now.*

Paddington. I follow hundreds of lightweight autumn jackets out of the train, past the playful typography on the tiles, up an escalator. It's cramped, it's crowded, a phone in every hand. I fumble for my Oyster card and, for a second, think I've lost it – that it's lying between the tracks, or wedged in the seat cushions of the first train, or stuck in the display cases of the science wing at the boarding school. But no, it's in the other coat

pocket. I hold it to the scanner, and the song in my headphones gets louder. Beneath the glass-and-steel ceiling, I take a brief breath. Here, in this station, London's professionals meet students from the suburbs and tourists come for a day's adventure in the city. They all blur together around the five shops in the middle of the station, jostling each other while studiously ignoring one another. A teacher shepherds a group of pupils around an advertising screen, their faces flickering under the bright images. This Anna Karenina station – this come-as-you-are landmark – is a revolving door to foreign cities and lives. The schoolgirl who looks like Marlene has disappeared. A City banker next to me nervously rakes her fingers through her hair, just as Theresa used to before exams. And then there's my mother, Conny, who should have arrived here once upon a time with an Interrail ticket and a cloth-and-leather backpack. I can picture her standing in this pale grey morning light. To avoid them all, I queue at *Pret a Manger*. Conny's ghost sometimes follows me as far as the overpriced station café but rarely makes it back out again. I leave the night behind at the counter, demonstratively buying a cappuccino and hanging my office keycard around my neck, cosmopolitan-style. To avoid losing my Oyster card, I stick it to the back of the keycard. By the evening, I'll have forgotten this trick and will search for it in a panic again. I remember every stolen glance and every rainy pause at the boarding school and forget what I did that very same morning.

I fill the walk along the canal by counting houseboats.

"It's Thursday," I tell myself – once, twice, three times. It's early September – on the fourth, fifth, sixth boat. At the end of the month, I'll turn thirty, on the seventh, eighth, ninth boat, someone is brewing malt coffee on the roof, its smell wafts up the bridge to meet me. Bloody hell. The nuns at school would have forgiven me for swearing in English rather than German, I think as I enter the office and nod to today's interchangeable security guard.

I take a last sip of coffee outside the lift, swipe my keycard against the glowing round switch, and turn up the volume on my headphones.

First floor: the City of Birmingham Orchestra plays Britten over the noise in my head.

Second floor: maybe it's my pulse; maybe I'm imagining the music and seeing ghosts, and none of it is real.

Third floor: maybe it's a brain tumour?

Fourth floor: definitely a brain tumour.

Fifth floor: an unknown number from Germany lights up my phone.

Sixth floor: Marlene? No, Leni's name would appear if it were her.

Seventh floor: some people still get calls from their parents.

Eighth floor: but Conny never had a mobile.

Ninth floor: a colleague points to my Oyster card and asks why I haven't switched to Tap & Go with my credit card yet.

Tenth floor: my mother hated technology and would've asked how the credit card knows where I am. Conny would probably forbid me from using Tap & Go, I think.

Eleventh floor: the number is calling again. With an area code and everything. Bloody hell, who still has landlines?

Twelfth floor: I hate it when it could be anything – the bank, the hospital, or a survey.

Thirteenth floor: who would you vote for if there were federal elections this Sunday?

Fourteenth floor: I've never voted. Around our graduation year, there were no elections. And since then, I've been here in Britain, where I'm not allowed to vote and wouldn't know who to vote for anyway.

Fifteenth floor: I'm a terrible person. I'm almost thirty and have never voted.

Sixteenth floor: Leni would despise me for that.

Seventeenth floor: I despise her for almost everything else.

Eighteenth floor: someone taps against my headphones. Greg, a horrendously incompetent colleague is breathing down my neck.

Nineteenth floor: he's booming something into my back about the presentation this afternoon.

The doors open, revealing a long corridor decorated with meaningless images, and ahead of us lies just another normal agency day – a day that belongs to the city and its insatiable appetite for consulting on the best use of TV campaigns. A day firmly rooted in the present. A September 8th. An empty field in the calendar. I take a deep breath. Greg

squeezes past me out of the lift and tries to continue the conversation. I let myself fall behind and veer off into our kitchenette right behind reception. No one's here yet; everyone is booting up their laptops now. The 9:20 AM flight from Heathrow rumbles above us. After three years in this job, I can name the short- and long-haul flights and their departure times by heart. The glass panes look slightly different every time. My phone rings again. I let boiling hot water flow from the tap over my teabag, but when the mug is full, it's still ringing. I press the green button with clenched teeth and say, unaccustomed to speaking German, "Hello, Rosa Konert speaking."

"This is Sister Marianne from Senior Residence Adventia," the voice says. "I'm calling about your grandmother."

I think I know what's coming. Black dress in the back of the closet, light makeup, an empty church – there's no one left anymore, apart from maybe that unpleasant neighbour couple – and then this one sonata, an urn gliding into the ground next to Grandpa and Conny. I lean against the agency refrigerator, and someone's birth announcement card falls to the floor. "Her condition has deteriorated significantly and, unfortunately, to such an extent that the costs for daily care and the premium package initially chosen now far exceed the amount in the framework contract."

In front of me hangs a picture of a poppy field. I imagine Sister Marianne sitting under just such a picture in a small town nestled among dark green hills – a place where time should still stand still. No Tap & Go, no commuters rushing through underground tunnels, no Pret a Manger. Just ghosts roaming the campus of a long-abandoned school. Marianne asks if I understood the details, then repeats a string of numbers – per month, proportionate, health insurance, private contribution for the premium package. I respond curtly; she hangs up, and the music in my headphones swells again. I sit at my desk with my tea. Perhaps I could offer the retirement home a few prime-time ad slots in the DACH region at a discounted rate, then use that to negotiate Grandma's bill down. To avoid hearing myself nervously swallow, I remove my headphones.

Two desks behind me, Greg's voice cuts through the floor: "That bloody thing's on the blink again."

Whatever he claims is broken definitely isn't. He just wants our teammate to lean over his laptop and, with two clicks, do what he could

have done himself. We're supposed to deliver the presentation together this afternoon. For three weeks, I begged him to send me his part, and on Monday, I finally gave up and did it myself. At this point, I don't care if the client likes the pitch or if my boss manages to call the broadcaster to book the slot. But I hate Greg with the kind of passion I once reserved for shoving schoolmates off the stage during theatre practice when they hadn't learned their lines. I hear him now, loudly chatting with another colleague behind me. Instead of listening, I open a property website to estimate how much my grandparents' house is worth. A large apartment that is rented out and the small basement flat add up to a figure – minus estate agent's fees – that I divide by the care package costs, until –

"House-hunting?" Greg asks from behind me. I flinch. Violently. He looks at me as though trying to copy homework and asks if I'll bring my laptop to the presentation later since his is, apparently, broken. "Whatever," I say, standing abruptly and brushing past him.

My teacup sits untouched on the desk, its steam spiralling against the ceiling panels and the windowpanes under the dove-grey London sky. I take the stairs three floors up, running. On the rooftop terrace, I light a cigarette. When I turn thirty in a few weeks, I'll have been here for over ten years. Both facts feel unbelievable. London still overwhelms me, layering rubber particles from tyres and concrete dust into my lungs - a tingling I only notice when friends whisk me away to the countryside, where the air suddenly feels crystal clear. I try to see where the city ends. At its edges, the four major airports stand out, their planes lifting off and landing every minute. Their jet fuel mingles with the smoke from wood-burning chimneys. Above me, the 9:48 AM British Airways flight blinks. My cigarette flickers a greeting in return.

I sit on one of the benches and swipe across my phone screen. Marlene posts on Instagram every few hours. We woke up together every morning in boarding school for eight years. It's been almost as long since I last saw her. I'd like to call her and ask if she could visit my grandmother in the nursing home some time. Grandma wouldn't recognise her - she'd mistake her for me, or for Conny, or one of the sisters. A plane flies over London into its landing approach, and I know that the tea in my cup on the desk is rippling.

*

"So, how is everyone today?" a colleague begins the meeting late in the afternoon.

"I feel like none of this matters," I want to answer. Instead, I look outside. From the small meeting room, you can look across Paddington Basin and watch the trains pull into the station. Greg and I stand. I pass a stack of documents along the table and position myself beside him in front of the projector screen. Our two bosses are bent over a display, pointing at something with furrowed brows. Greg stumbles through the dreadful intro, a colleague clapping a shocked hand over their mouth - finally, an appropriate reaction to his incompetence.

"I'm sorry, guys," says our boss. The unease in the room is almost palpable now. Greg ignores her, shakes his head, and tries to finish his sentence, poorly read off the slide – something about "incredibly affluent and attentive viewerships." No idea who let him get away with all those adjectives. It's one of the old slides, untouched by my corrections. My hand cramps with anger inside my jacket pocket. Our boss talks over him, her voice cutting through his. She looks around the room and says, "The Queen is dead."

Everyone pulls out their phones, as if it would only be true once it appeared on their own feed. The atmosphere becomes nervously amused. The Queen's gently smiling old face flickers a thousand times over on every screen outside the windows. She has outlived almost my entire family – Conny, Grandpa, and the old nuns at the boarding school, who all died in hospital beds with wheels, while the Queen played with her corgis in the palace. I stare at the years under her photo, *1926–2022.* Here ends the very last chapter of a story. I see Prince Harry sitting in the backseat of a limousine, his face in his hands, and I want to cry without knowing why. Greg clicks his tongue and shoves his hands into his trouser pockets. "Useless old cunt."

A few people laugh. Someone says, "Come on, mate."

Now it's just him, the room empty and white and his big, open, disrespectful mouth – and I slam my fist into the spot between his nose and upper lip. He should choke on it, on my fist and his teeth. It crunches more

than it cracks. I feel every bone in my hand as something gives way beneath them. Greg slumps briefly, then looks up, blood on his upper lip and chin. He is swaying. Someone yells, “Fuck!” The adrenaline makes my knees weak. Greg straightens and punches me back, hard in the collarbone. I lose my balance, stumble absurdly slowly, and, trying not to fall, slam my temple against the edge of the table.

The rest is grey carpet and the brownish-red stain spreading across it, slowly seeping from my hair into the fibres. My grandmother came from a family of band weavers; her seams are stitched into carpets all over the world, even in the boarding school – if they ever existed and it wasn’t parquet flooring after all, I think as voices around me grow louder: “Fucking hell!” Someone has to come up with the money for the premium care package and tell Grandma that England has a king now. She’ll be interested in that, even if she no longer knows why.

*

I tell my boss the leave of absence doesn’t bother me at all. *Yes, smart move*, let HR figure out how to handle it. I can already picture the junior HR staff frantically googling how to deal with a workplace brawl. I leave my laptop on my desk and avoid looking at anyone – not that I could see much anyway with my gummy left eye. At Paddington Station, I pick up some Lemsip flu capsules and a can of Gin & Tonic from M&S, mixing them together and gulping it all down right there on the platform.

“This is a Central line train to Woodford Underground Station.” To my left and right, I see the bear and the angel from my dream. With each station, as the driver announces the Queen’s death and reminds us to mind the gap between the train and the platform, their outlines become sharper. I look down at my hands. Blood, metaphorically speaking, is smeared across the theatre curtain, across the playbill of adults doing their office jobs. Up until moments ago, I was one of them. The headache churns my stomach. At home, I try to wash my face, but the pain is too much. I collapse into bed, my hair sticky and my keycard still strung around my neck. Sleep takes me instantly, pulling me into dreams of the boarding school, art class, and a walk with Leni through the Nützenberg forest. In the dead of night, I wake

and book a flight out of London – the 2:05 PM Lufthansa. There's only one solution: sell the house in *you-wouldn't-know-it*, Germany. At the gate, I message the lawyer handling Grandma's affairs and everything tied to the house, letting him know I'm on my way to sort it all out. He replies that it's all rather last-minute but mentions there have been interested buyers for some time now. He asks me to come straight to the office on Monday morning. Best regards.

I read his message from the back seat of the taxi as it climbs towards the house. The streetlights here dangle from wires strung between the façades, and the tarmac gleams a deep aubergine black. I've been registered at this address for years but have rarely been back. The key grinds a little as I turn it – when was the last time I even used it? Back in school, my grandparents lived in the lovely two-storey flat and rented out the smaller one. Until my A-levels, I had a room with them that I barely left, mostly to dodge Grandma's critical gaze. Lunch was at 12:30 sharp, always accompanied by her sharp tongue: "Just make sure you don't come home pregnant like your mother. She was exactly your age back then."

Instead of a baby, I came back with a university place in London. Grandma decided the big flat was far too extravagant for just herself and moved into the basement, brick by brick dismantling her mind in the process.

I tiptoe down the hallway, as though visiting a dozing elderly relative. The rooms remain untouched. Who tidied up so meticulously? Was it the neighbours interested in buying, or one of those costly cleaning services from Adventia? The bed has been stripped, but fresh linens wait neatly folded in the drawers. Lavender sachets rustle between the folds. I dump my travel bag into the bathtub and check if there's anything in the fridge. It's has been defrosted, and the microwave's clock blinks: 9.9.22 – the first day without the Queen, my first day back in the misty hills at the end of the world.

I'm home. *Let's talk, please*, I text Marlene before falling asleep.

2

The room is still pitch black. I'm not used to blinds like these. Without opening the message, I see Marlene's reply on my screen: *Where did you get this number?!* As if it were hard to find. I turn onto my side and flinch; my left temple still throbs faintly. I wrap myself tightly in the cardigan I found under the bed, slipping one arm through the sleeve before stumbling against the doorframe on my way to the bathroom. Ever since my head slammed against the tabletop, I've been plagued by a constant whistling sonar in my ear. The mirror reveals a bruise, gleaming plum-blue, its edges fading to green. I wash my face gingerly, dabbing around the temple until the meeting room lights, the arriving trains to Paddington dance behind my eyes. Seven hundred kilometres away, London is probably humming with weekend buzz. Meanwhile, I'm here, trapped in this shoebox of a German granny flat – one and a half rooms. I rummage through my bag but find neither a toothbrush nor makeup. Even the bathroom drawers are empty, save for a lone hairclip lying in a dried puddle of body lotion. There used to be a chemist's at the end of the street. In London, I could summon an e-bike courier with all of Tesco's toiletries delivered in ten minutes flat. Here, I just light a cigarette to mask the stale taste in my mouth at the terrace door. The hills, swollen from last night's rain, are slowly emerging in the morning light. The swirling fine dust mixes with my smoke. No one looking at this shabby little town, with its hastily thrown-up buildings and chaotic planning, would imagine old money or countryside school-trip charm. I was born here, but if someone

asks where “home” is, I think of the boarding school across the ridge at Nützenberg. It first belonged to Conny, then to me. Now, it’s just a blind spot on the map.

If I squint, it’s almost as though I can make it out in the hazy morning light, far in the distance. Then I snap my eyes open again and see only churches, scaffolding, factory sites, and the bridges slicing through the valley. I see the road – the one from my dream – where no buses ran anymore that night – and then, nothing. I should recognise the chestnut tree from my dream. Was it cut down when the power lines were strung across the valley and the abandoned schoolyard? The boarding school used to be a monastery school before it opened its gates to the displaced humanistic grammar school. Back when the town was divided up between two rival textile dynasties and there was no longer room for obscure Latin scholars by the 20th century. What happened to the stuffed animals from the natural history gallery? The bear, the fox, the hawk? I remember them but maybe I’m the only one. The boarding school is gone, and there’s no one left to ask. Conny, who became a mum too young, who died far too soon. Leni, who lives her life on Instagram, replies to my messages as if I were a stranger. Grandma, who only knows the present and doesn’t understand why there’s a London Underground map hanging in her room.

The thought of London hurts. It throbs in my head and pounds against the bruise. I feel dizzy when I think of the blood that has gathered beneath my skin. I bleed every month, and when I fell off my bike three years ago by the canal, I skinned my shin and forearm. It’s not the dark-red welling blood that shocks me, it’s the fact that I’m sitting here now because of Greg’s petty spitefulness with a badly healing gash on my forehead - because he couldn’t even manage to hit me properly in the face. A knot of shame twists low in my stomach.

I take a long drag from my cigarette and blow the smoke into the neatly pruned garden. It lies damp and still in front of me, almost taunting me with its perfection. There’s nothing to do but rummage around for the papers that must be somewhere in this flat, expensively furnished by Grandma and then meticulously cleaned before she left it behind. I’ve no idea what the documents look like, but I hope the lawyer will have what is needed to sell the house. I remember our grim meeting six or seven years

ago: the death certificates for Grandpa and my mother - oh goodness, so young, both you and her; the will, the land registry entry for this 1950s building, which is Grandpa's pension. And, neatly tucked behind the Adventia contract, a general power of attorney, just in case. Sensible, of course. "You know best what your Grandma would want." I step out further onto the terrace, staring up at the façade. The neighbours tend the garden, plant flowers in pots, clear the gutters. Maybe they understand what's important to Grandma far better than I ever could. The house doesn't care if I show up once every few years; it only needs me to be a name on the land registry, a function. To me, it's meant to be an insurance policy for hard times. How absurd that what my grandparents envisioned as a buffer against war or economic crisis has now become a safety net for my own idiocy – breaking a colleague's nose and getting myself sacked. Or, more precisely, paying for Grandma's room in the care home. Time's fear, fear's freedom, I suppose.

Back inside, I brew myself a coffee here in Grandpa's pension. There's no Wi-Fi here – why would there be? I turn on the radio, surprised I remember how, and more surprised to find a station already tuned in. Miley Cyrus is singing *Zombie* by The Cranberries. *But you see, it's not me, it's not my family*. Miley was a child when I was a child. While Disney was building her brand, I was stuck at a boarding school across the valley. We had only one landline in the main building, and the nuns confiscated our magazines every Sunday evening that others had brought from home. For a long time, I knew as little about Miley Cyrus then as she knew about me. Now here she is, covering classics on the radio. When I close my eyes, I still picture her swinging naked on that wrecking ball. Her voice is iconic, but it's the image from the music video that's entered the cultural canon – even for those, like me, who never actually saw it at the time. And no matter what she does, she'll always be twenty-one, swinging naked on a wrecking ball, unable to sing her way out of that image.

For the first time, I notice how low the sky hangs here. I'd imagined sorting the house out quickly, then sitting by the river with Marlene, reminiscing about schooldays. Instead, the day stretches out ahead of me – no internet, no company, no sunlight. After a second cigarette, I open the storage room to see what's left of Grandma. Narrow shelves stretch to the

ceiling, filled with the neatly sorted remnants of a life – the motto of this apartment. You could run a model railway in tight curves through the boxes, past the neatly folded rust-red curtains, Grandpa's dismantled car radio and jars of apricot jam.

When I step inside, the air is dry, swirling with dust. In a folder, I find car insurance papers spanning 1966-2006, a biography recounted in Polos and Passats. Next to it, a shoebox filled with old toys I used to play with, lying on my stomach on the terrace, my nose level with a little Playmobil family. I push the box aside and discover a removal box labelled in Grandma's careful handwriting: *Catholic Boarding School at Nützenberg – Students Corinna Konert (1983–1992) and Rosa M. Konert (2002–2010).* It's as if she knew she'd forget and wanted to leave breadcrumbs. A note to remind herself of her daughter and granddaughter's names, and where they went to school. I pull the box down and drag it into the living room. It's heavy and seems to be packed with calendars and old notebooks. Moleskine covers shimmer between layers of tissue paper. Decades-old ink stains. The stuffed hawk from my dreams clicks its beak. In the light from the terrace windows, I leaf through the pages. I recognise my mother's handwriting by the impatience with which my mother, as a schoolgirl, pressed the letters into the paper. Decades later, I run my finger along the reverse side of the same pages, tracing the shadows of her words.

I swallow hard. Susan Sontag's son once claimed she'd told him on her deathbed, "You know where my diaries are," implying tacit permission to publish them. I don't recognise any permission there. My mother died the same day as Susan, but not as a world-renowned intellectual. Conny was half her age, leaving behind a twelve-year-old daughter at her old school, inheriting her textbooks and a share in a turquoise-grey semi-detached house. Who thinks, at that age, about what happens to their school supplies and clothes after they die? When the teachers tried to give me her essays and photos, I refused. I thought it was polite, modest. I was terrified that if I accepted them, they would invade my dorm room, mingling with my own pictures and books, lurking under the bed, and seeping through the cracks in the wall panels – until, on a bad day, I would burn them all. For years, I regretted it, mourning the lost archive of Conny. I thought it was gone forever, together with the school. I missed it in the early hours, somewhere

between dreams and coffed. But here it is, tidily sorted in Grandma's cupboard: yearbooks, essays, fragments of our overlapping lives.

I pull the notebooks and calendars from the box, all the mottled black covers, spread them across the tiled floor, flipping through them one by one. The names in cursive under the dates: *Rosa, Conny, Rosa, Conny.* On top of the pile lies one of my calendars. My school things seem brighter, as if the materials in the early 2000s were somehow more vibrant than those from the late eighties. I hesitate, my hand hovering over her notebooks, before my curiosity wins out. I want a photo first – something I can send to Leni. *Look how small we were. Talk to me. Please.*

I leaf through ten, eleven, twelve years, landing on a note: *III.IX. – St. Gr.*

St. Gregor's Day was one of the big events at the boarding school, rooted in Gregorian chants and the traditions of Latin schools and meant we'd spend an evening standing in the courtyard singing songs. The boarding school was financed by the state, ordained by the Catholic church and inhabited by philologists, and all that culminated in early September in the Theatron, our tiny open-air stage. There was always only one class per year at the school with twenty children. So there must have been more than two hundred people there, standing out in the courtyard, the pupils, the teachers, the nuns, the three community service volunteers and the headmaster in his trench coat and the glasses that glinted in the autumn light. But I am not certain. The images of all the St. Gregor's day celebrations blur into one on the open calendar page in front of me, and there is no note of the fact that the three of us – Marlene, Theresa and I – slipped away from the floodlights in the courtyard that one year. We sat close to one another on a bench in the dark, tangled up with arms around shoulders and heads resting on laps and looked down at the town. The southern slopes directly opposite, inky black, Burgholz and Königshöhe, the forests, still unbroken by the power line. Deep, deep below in the valley, the river that meandered through the town, or maybe the town around it. This day condenses into a single word in a calendar, you might want to call out to the girls across the hill.

Theresa lit a cigarette, and Leni followed suit, fishing another one out of the pack. I refused, taking a deep breath before the three of us sank into

a grey-blue cloud. Just moments earlier, the wooden benches had carried the faint scent of coconut shampoo and mossy patina. The sky above me blurred in the smoke and sharpened again. The North Star, blurred, Little Bear, sharp, Sagittarius blurred, the Plough, sharp, Binary Stars, blurred.

I leaf through the pages of my calendar. The first page was blank. That can't be, there is no stamp. There should be a stamp. Our calendars were stamped every year in the library, without fail. I remembered the librarian, Theresa stood beside me with her A4 folder, and Leni with her collection of loose slips of paper. I even remembered writing my name under Conny's in her old schoolbooks, the stamps reading "Ex Libris," *something-something*.

I remember. I don't remember. I leaf through the calendar, and the people came back to me. Herr Pfeiffer, who must be retired now. Herr Reuters, reassigned to a high school downtown after the boarding school closed. Of Nützenberg, of Leni and Theresa and Conny, all that remains are calendar entries and cigarette butts that only now, ten years later, are slowly disintegrating . Before me sprawled a chaotic tapestry of sentences, pictures, moments, rules, kisses, tears, and long-forgotten presentations. It was a story no one could ever piece together in its proper order again. Yet, even without a stamp, it was real – Conny's story, Leni's, mine.

On one yearbook page: a photograph of the Greek goddess statue made of stone.

From the street, the boarding school introduced itself with two twin sandstone buildings. Barred windows on the ground floors, three storeys high, with sharp gables that pierced the skyline. The first house stood forward, its worn doorbell plate leading to the secretary's office, the caretaker's apartment, and the staffroom. To reach the school itself, you bypassed the main building entirely, walking through a gate on the right, skirting the shabby grandeur of the main house. Behind it, a path led under slender trees, past the second building, ostensibly plain with its vinyl flooring and classrooms. To the right lay the sports field, the assembly hall, and the open-air Theatron. Beyond the dark trees on the hillside emerged the forum – a later addition, a community building in red brick that housed the library, senior students' rooms, the observatory, and the art studios. In

its shadow stood chestnut trees and the replica of a Greek statue – Diana or Athena, no one really knew which.

The school itself was a persistent thorn in the town's side.

Newspaper clippings from the local paper spill out of my calendar. Just close it down. The costs alone. A boarding school for a handful of children from the catchment area? The food, the insurance, the entire concept seemed absurd. Just stop the funding, it wasn't in the budget, but it was pointed out that the treasurer was an alumnus. And anyway, the convent school was 400 years old, at least on paper. "We have standing here," they said, up on the hill. They wouldn't let anything negative be said about the imagined century old legacy.

An archive photograph, a man, a woman in a habit and a moose.

The delivery of the stuffed animals. An entire panopticon of empty glass eyes and immense bodies, cobwebs between the antlers. There were three hundred of them. The largest natural history collection in the state, donated to the nuns by the town's other Catholic school. A photographer came to record the silent zoo being carried onto the grounds. The bear on four roller boards, a wheelbarrow full of birds of prey. An embarrassed headmaster and a nun, who demonstrated the order's dedication to the school's science curriculum. "Just look at this gorilla," she said. "Splendid."

But the students avoided the gallery behind the biology room. The teacher rolled his eyes at us. "They're just figures, fur. This is *fascinating!*" But fascination didn't explain why the space felt like a cemetery. Nor why, at night, we swore we saw the fawn running across the courtyard, only to find it back with its mother by morning. I can picture the gallery, smell the floor.

The distinctive wooden floors in the lecture halls, paler near the windows and splintered along the grain, carried the scent of wax and forest. The corridors were framed by tall arches, low-hanging lamps draped in cobwebs. Bathrooms reeked faintly of chlorine, the smell of copper from the staircase railings, the tarnished picture frames, everywhere, depicting unknown cityscapes from a bygone era. Raincoats on hooks in the corridors. Up until fifth form, we weren't allowed to stay in the building during recess. We couldn't stay inside even during downpours. Fresh air was considered essential or silence in the corridors, something was always

deemed extremely important. The teachers and the nuns were agreed – one group demanded quiet, the other wanted to toughen us up.

Saturday**:** Buy tampons and concealer. Mornings began with a line of girls brushing their teeth in time to the static-filled music playing from an old, smuggled transistor radio. The smell of burnt hair from an ancient hairdryer lingered in the damp tile corners, mixing with the scent of deodorant. It would vanish the moment a nun slapped her flat hand against the bathroom door, pushing it open to herd us to breakfast.

Some teachers lived on campus, leaving as rarely as we did. Others drove up the hill each morning in their VWs to the carpark. Occasionally, someone ended their marriage in one of the garden sheds in the allotments below the main house. But no matter where anyone had woken up – whether in the junior and middle school sardine-tin bunk beds, the nuns' quarters, or the sixth form's double rooms – the day always began the same way: with a devotional in the chapel followed by a contemplative procession across the courtyard where the younger students raced ahead, shrieking, while the older ones trudged behind, shoulders hunched against the cold, to meet for communal breakfast in the assembly hall at 7.30. In the hall, dozens of tables stood against a backdrop of bright yellow wallpaper and an exhibition of the best art projects, surrounded by heavy chairs upholstered in rust-red material. The younger pupils sat in groups with the nuns, who ensured an orderly consumption of cereal. Only from the lower sixth onwards that we were permitted to sit at one of the long rows of tables. Behind us stretched a wall of windows looking out towards the south-facing slopes which were almost always hidden by fog that mixed with rainclouds in the autumn. Against this backdrop, everything looked like a Feininger painting, hazy, chiselled, cold.

A shaded drawing of a cell nucleus.

Not mine. I could never draw that well, though somehow it had ended up in my notebook. I wiped my finger over it, smudging graphite onto my thumb.

In biology, Leni and I sat next to a girl who habitually chewed on the split ends of her long plait. Standing before her was Frau Zank, whose gold tooth caught the sunlight when she spoke. "A cell repeats the same processes over and over again," she said, "the cell nucleus doesn't care

what it becomes – whether it's a pulmonary alveolus, a plant stem, or an embryo. But *you* should care, especially you gentlemen at the back. A being in embryo form costs more maintenance than a plant stalk, you must already be aware of that, and universities don't teach abortion any more either. My cousin had to practise on papayas. Completely unacceptable. You see, girls, if you're not careful, snap, that's what can happen when papayas aren't in season during the winter term."

The class stared at her in disbelief. And it would continue for what felt like an interminable thirty-five minutes.

Of course, we still had lesson plans aside from Frau Zank's rambling, stream-of-unconsciousness-style lessons, because, naturally, every aspiring member of the educated middle class must know the meaning of "endoplasmic reticulum" without having the faintest clue what it actually is. We all knew we didn't truly grasp what went on inside cells, but here was the report card, declaring that I took an exam to prove otherwise.

Theresa raised her hand. "Could you maybe go over that again? Perhaps with an example of how it works in the cell?"

"Child, what exactly do you think I've been doing all this time? Do you think I'm here for fun? If you're not going to listen, at least have the decency to wipe the board!"

The back rows erupted in stifled laughter as Theresa shuffled to the front to retrieve a sponge from the sink. It reeked of stagnant water.

"I always use that after the frog dissections," Frau Zank declared with a self-satisfied grin. Never mind that there hadn't been a dissection lesson since the nineties. Conny had seen to that with a grand protest, complete with a massive banner she and her friends had made and painted themselves – featuring a dead frog and the slogan: *Died for Frau Zank.* They'd draped it out of a third-floor window in the main building.

I leaf through her graduation yearbook. In one photo, Conny's holding up her hands painted red, the background a blur – the schoolyard behind her, the denim jacket barely covering her pregnant belly.

I stand, unsteady, and glance at the photo of my mother that's hanging beside the television. A teenage Conny poses in the nuns' herb garden, wearing a *No Future* T-shirt under her jacket. Her glittering eyes and exaggerated pout – eyebrows arched in defiance – send a jolt through me.

I remember the smell of the herb garden at school more vividly than my mother's expression. The nun wrapped carefully in a brown blanket, sitting in the half-shade, lingers in my mind instead. I think my mother had always been sharp-eyed and critical, just like in the photo. I tear the yearbook page documenting the dissection protest and pin it on the wall next to the other photo of teenage Conny. Alongside it hangs a picture of my grandfather astride a motorbike and my grandparents' wedding portrait. Perhaps I'll bring this collage to the lawyer – a visual record of my family, as if to prove that we truly existed.

The day after tomorrow, I'll sit in his office with my ever-blacker eye, dressed in one of my London office jackets, to sign the first of countless papers to sell this house. With that, I hope to breathe again, in a world without Greg and without those relentless calls from the care home. My gaze returns to Conny's photos. She wore a *No Future* T-shirt, and she wasn't wrong. All we share now is a past – and for the first time, it lies scattered and disordered before me.

A cigarette in hand, I leaf through the yearbook, searching for Frau Zank's picture. It's tucked away among the black-and-white staff portraits, each one small as a postage stamp and staged like a mugshot.

Teachers who interrupted our reading, smoking and snogging.

Teachers who made us laugh.

Teachers who hated us – and themselves.

Teachers who showed us endless slides of their holidays.

Teachers who let us roll their cigarettes for them.

Teachers who took us on woodland walks, turning a blind eye when we sledged down hills into allotment gardens.

Teachers who swore and banged on chalkboards, sending us scurrying back to the dorm for forgotten homework. *"How fast can you leg it, scribble a couple of keywords into the notebook in the common room, and get back here without losing your breath?"*

First Photo: Herr Pfeiffer:

He *was* the entire philology department: our Latin teacher, our Ancient Greek teacher, our Hebrew teacher. A tall, wiry man who seemed to flit between floors, knew everyone's name, and leapt from class to class, language to language, without ever pausing for breath.

“Now *that’s* a proper teacher the way you imagine them,” said Theresa admiringly.

“You can tell he’s not all there,” said Leni.

“A clever, empathetic man,” said Sister Franziska. “And rather dashing, don’t you think?”

“A relic,” said the equally aged headmaster.

“Wow, he’s still going? Then you’ve got nothing to worry about. He’s one of the good ones,” Conny assured me, glancing at my first-ever timetable at Nützenberg. She was twenty-eight then, I was ten, and Herr Pfeiffer was fifty-two – three generations fumbling through life together, linked ever since my first Latin lesson: *hic forum est, Rosa et Leni stant et circumspectant, Conny moribunda est.*

Second Photo: The Headmaster. A professionally shot portrait on a full page, accompanied by a list of his publications.

Surely, he had a first name, but we always called him "Professor Doctor," because he’d taped a self-laminated sign with his title on his office door. He loved grand gestures and solemn pronouncements but was utterly useless. This was especially evident at Christmas, when he couldn’t resist donning a red costume to hand out presents to the younger pupils. Meanwhile, his deputy and the school secretary scrambled to finalise the reports for the state government and to drive the nuns to their order’s convent because they were overwhelmed by the excessive festivities with the parents. I remember the headmaster standing in the entrance to the main staircase, looking at the choir, the youngest children at the front, the oldest on the upper steps, yes, yes, gloria in excelsis deo. I picture his deputy dishing the dirt: “That’s the Mackensen family in the front there. The father has promised to donate some computers if IT is offered as an A’ level,” grovelling, but delighted with the coup. The headmaster jovially spreading his arms under the chandelier, whispering to his deputy: “And where are we supposed to put them? We only have phone sockets in the main building. There is no point now.”

Third Photo: Ms Squires.

A tiny Scottish woman with an ivory cigarette holder, perpetually embroiled in skirmishes: with the nuns, whom she delighted in startling; with adolescent boys, who shrank under her piercing gaze; and with the

municipal office, thanks to her creatively parked car. We always wondered how she even reached the accelerator. She had dazzling blue eyes and a memory like an elephant – except for our names. She carried gin in her thermos flask and smuggled in original editions from Britain every summer, sparking rows with the librarian over missing receipts. “Do I look like a bloody tax advisor?” she’d snap, loud enough to disrupt our studying.

Fourth Photo: Herr Reuters.

I don’t know if I want to remember Herr Reuters. I picture a lanky, eternally youthful pastor with a broad nose, soft-shell jackets and soft-power ambitions glinting in his grey eyes during discussion groups. He led walks to the Bismarck Tower, organized disco nights for the lower grades, and took us on class trips to the seaside. He insisted we call him by his first name, but I refused. To me, he was Herr Seven-Thirty-Yoga-on-the-Sports-Field, Herr Non-violent-Communication training, Herr Forgive-Him-His-Trespasses-For-Everything that Leni told me about him with a dark face at the end of our time at the Nützenberg School: as we forgive those who trespass against us, Namasté.

A chill creeps over me. My stomach churns. I instinctively slam the yearbook shut and rummage in the kitchen cupboards for some schnapps. In the sideboard, I eventually find one of Grandpa’s ancient whisky bottles, dusty and untouched. I take a long sip and sit down again. Cautiously, I return to the calendars and the schoolbooks, placing each photo that tumbles from its pages into a pile. Leni had scrawled song lyrics into my calendars, and I carefully tear them out, pressing my fingers onto the faded ink until they blur. I take another sip of whisky and get to work. The pearl white living room wall turns a collage of blue fountain-pen ink and sepia, photo by photo.

[END OF SAMPLE]