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Opening Extract from...

Paralian

Not Just Transgender

Written by Liam Klenk

Published by Matador

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Paralian

Not *just* transgender

Liam Klenk



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Please be aware throughout the unfolding of my tale that even though it is essentially a true story, it stems from my surely very subjective memory, my heart and soul. My tale is driven by honesty, yet is also a reflection of my emotional perceptions. You are about to experience my very own version of reality, which in some cases may not match described events exactly. I make no claim to scientific accuracy and no harm is intended to any described individuals.

I have tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity and protect their privacy I have changed the names of individuals throughout. I may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

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For Frida

My beloved oma – she was born on 14th of October 1909 and passed away on the 26th of December 1996. I am quite sure that without her strength and inner peace to guide me through my early years, I would not be here today, would not be able to write these words for her, for myself and for all of you.

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Introduction

For twenty-five years, I dreamed of writing a book about my life. Life itself however, and my quest for home swept me along, not leaving me time to at the same time let my experiences flow onto paper. When I got stranded on the shores of Hong Kong in the fall of 2013, I finally took time to stop and breathe and I realized that all my life experiences in the last forty years had led me to that moment. And now I am finally mature enough to share my story with the world.

Doors have opened all along the way, leading me on an unforgettable journey. This quest for home was always shaped as well as driven by two major factors – the people I met along the way and water that carried me, both literally as well as metaphorically.

I believe I have something to give to the world, something very basic, yet precious – hope, and an unwavering passion for life. I hope with all my heart you will not be able to put down this tale. I hope you will read all or parts of it more than once. I hope it will make you smile and laugh and cry, that it will make your heart feel both heavy and light, and, above all, let you feel without a doubt that no matter what happens to you, life is precious and so much worth living!

As my unique journey continues, I hope that from now on it will become a literary journey as well. My mind is bursting with stories. I have waited too long to share them with the world.

This is for you, dear Reader, straight from my heart.

"What would an ocean be without a monster lurking in the dark? It would be like sleep without dreams."

Werner Herzog

1

River Enz

Our small town was a monotonous, urban forest of grey concrete high-rise buildings from the Sixties. Just as dull as the man-made surroundings were the conversations of the adults around me. They complained about their neighbor's shrieking parrots, or gossiped about those who dared hang up their freshly-washed underwear on the balcony.

Growing up in this incredibly drab but safe town in Southern Germany, I became a nomad in my mind, long before my body was ready to be one. Outwardly, I seemed a well-adjusted, quiet girl who did what was expected of me. I smiled, greeted older people on the street, held doors open for others, and happily played with Lego for hours at a time. Inwardly, a storm was raging. The turmoil started from a very young age. Who was I? What was I? Where did I come from? What was my purpose? Had my brain been a muscle, I would have experienced a constant ache. Yet I found no answers.

I observed my parents, their appearance, behavior, and constant discontent. I wasn't quite able to shake the feeling of being different from them. I was too dark-skinned, too dark-haired, too optimistic and soulful, and too much of a tomboy to belong to these people.

Confused and lost, I kept to myself and escaped into my imagination. I would explore entire continents without leaving my small room. I would accompany the heroes of my adventure books on their journeys. Or I would lie on my bed, close my eyes, ignore my screaming parents, and imagine wild adventures. Evil forces would chase me. Eventually, they would manage to catch me. They would enslave me, chain me spread-

eagled to the ground and torture me to gather information from the hidden depths of my mind. I would be held captive in caverns directly underneath the safety of our house. None of my family would ever come to my rescue. I would endure and, with stubborn strength, never reveal a single precious thought to my unknown captors. Then, after months of braving torture and near starvation, I would manage to escape my bonds – free and proud to have prevailed against all odds.

Tales of loyalty and brotherhood struck a deep chord with me. I rejoiced in stories of strong warriors who never gave up, who did anything for their brethren, no matter how dangerous their quest might prove to be.

On my afternoons off of school, I would roam the forests and, more often than not, the dense underbrush on the shores of the river Enz. It was a narrow, timid river, a soothing presence in our quiet town. In my imagination, the harmless Enz grew to Amazonian proportions, wild rapids making the deep, wide river immensely dangerous for me to cross. Yet I had no choice; a tribe of merciless cannibals on the opposite shore had caught my blood brothers. I would swing on ropes and build shaky stone bridges. I would even attempt to jump from tree to tree across the torrents. On countless evenings, my parents would shake their heads at the little, muddy apparition coming home for dinner.

The more I read, the more I internalized ideals of honor, truthfulness, loyalty, persistence, integrity and compassion. I hoped to prove strong enough in real life to live up to these ideals. I dreamed of one day being able to come to someone's rescue.

As I got older, I progressed from adventure stories to philosophy. At thirteen, I admired Jung and Schopenhauer. At fourteen, my romantic heart and inquisitive mind delighted in Immanuel Kant's *Categorical Imperative*. I didn't understand half of what the man was saying, but his philosophical concepts of freedom of mind, autonomy, duty and responsibility touched my young heart.

One thought of poet and philosopher Christian Fürchtegott Gellert in particular stayed with me: "Lebe, wie du, wenn du stirbst, wuenschen wirst, gelebt zu haben." (Live, so you can die, secure in the knowledge of having lived as you desired.) I had stumbled over something very important but couldn't get past the old-fashioned sentence structure. So as not to forget, I took a big brush and painted the odd sentiment crudely on the wall of my room. Over time, I understood. Why didn't he simply

say, "Live your life fully, without regrets"? I promised myself to do just that, no matter how scared I might be at times.

I was almost twenty-one years old when I was finally presented with the grand opportunity to be a knight in shining armor. I was studying in far-away Zurich at the time and only visited my dad on the weekends. Imagine my surprise when he cleaned out my childhood room and Timotei, a handsome Romanian man I had never heard him mention before, moved in with him. Konrad explained how the young man was one of a group of Romanian asylum-seekers who might soon be sent back to their country. Timotei needed a home and my dad was trying to help. I was very proud of him. Timotei became a part of our family and an anchor of hope for Konrad.

Throughout his eventually failing marriage to my mom Hildegard, my dad had been a shadow of himself. He was depressed and very rarely enjoyed life. Timotei, who was twenty years younger, granted Konrad a second adolescence. He literally seemed to shed several decades. Suddenly, he was going dancing and clubbing with his buddy. On my weekend visits, I would be in bed long before Konrad and Timotei came home from whichever hip dance establishment they had explored that night. My dad beamed with happiness and laughed more than I had ever seen him laugh before. His usual, predominantly melancholy disposition had changed.

Then, after only a few months of bliss, the harmonious life he led with Timotei and his Romanian friends ended all too quickly. I could read fear in Konrad's eyes, which evolved into outright panic. Timotei's petition to be granted asylum in Germany was inevitably denied. Since he was unable to prove to the authorities that his life had been threatened in Romania, they didn't see him as having escaped political persecution but rather as someone who had left his home country simply hoping to find a better future elsewhere. At his final official court hearing, he was informed he would shortly be deported and sent back to Romania.

My dad and I had long conversations over the phone about how we could help Timotei. Konrad was in tears. It was breaking my heart to see him so hopeless, as if the world would end the very next day. I tried my best to counsel and console him. We thought about legally adopting Timotei and then – I do not know who thought of it first, my dad or me – we began considering marriage. I remembered my adventure novels, and

my readings of Jung, Gellert, Kant, Schopenhauer and their peers. My firm, romantic belief in selflessness, truthfulness, and courage in the face of adversity had only grown stronger over the years. Here was a chance to act, not just think and talk. Yes, I was ready to leap on my white steed and charge into battle.

While I brimmed with youthful enthusiasm, Konrad felt like he had let the genie out of the bottle. He was torn between my well-being and Timotei's. What made things even harder for him was his awareness of my innocence, deep trust and loyalty. He knew I was clueless and had not yet learned to read between the lines: my dad was keeping a secret from his family. If we let the momentum whisk us away and went ahead with my marriage to Timotei, my dad knew he would have no choice but to reveal his secret. Would I embrace what he needed to tell me? Or would his disclosure mar a father-daughter relationship that was more like a deep friendship? He felt like a seeker of treasures who, in order to reach the end of the rainbow, needed to sacrifice more than his goal might be worth.

One evening at dinner, as we toasted to my coming marriage, my dad said, "Cheers! And I need to tell you something: I am gay. Timotei and I are in an intimate relationship." Unbeknownst to me, he had been madly in love with Timotei long before his lover had moved in with him. Well-muscled and proportioned, with soulful, dark eyes, Timotei was admittedly quite the catch. He had a good sense of humor, coupled with sparkling intelligence and boundless self-confidence to boot.

At first, when I realized this had never been about helping a Romanian refugee, I felt betrayed and used. My dad simply wanted me to marry his lover so they could stay together. Then again, what better way could my dad help someone than by loving him?

I couldn't help but be inspired. Seeing my dad, thinking back on his behavior over the past months, I realized he had been privileged, at the age of forty, to experience a romantic love affair of the kind usually reserved for teenagers. I was truly happy for him – especially since I had witnessed my parents' catastrophic marriage, and knew it had made my dad phobic of deeper connections. Naturally, I wanted to help him stay connected, happy and rejuvenated.

After Konrad's coming out, we took every opportunity to talk on the phone and discuss our options in more detail. There weren't many. My dad couldn't marry Timotei himself. It was the early nineties: two men

marrying each other was not yet possible. Only three more weeks, and a couple of police officers would be knocking on our door to escort Timotei to the airport.

This scenario was inconceivable, to both of us. A wave of boundless idealism drove us forward. We looked at each other like two alchemists on the verge of discovering the *Philosopher's Stone*. We felt united in our goal, bold and passionate. I felt oddly important, with the power in my young hands to help two people I deeply cared about. It was time to don my shining armor and prepare to sacrifice myself.

After weeks of bureaucratic preparation, our wedding day arrived. The German authorities were unaware of me only visiting on weekends. Technically, Timotei and I were supposed to share a household. On paper we would. In real life, I would continue living in Zurich.

We got married in the medieval town hall of our small community. Konrad, being a very emotional man, added real credibility to the proceedings. Tears of true joy and happiness streamed down my dad's cheeks, despite his full knowledge of our marriage being for his benefit, rather than being the celebration of a life-time commitment between his daughter Stefanie and a handsome, charismatic Romanian man. His sentimental heart must have treasured the two people he loved most in this world uniting for a common cause. Timotei, Konrad and I celebrated under the warm summer sun. During this short peaceful moment, sipping a strong coffee together under a clear blue sky, our sense of family seemed almost real.

Only two days later, it was time to return to my studies in Zurich. I hugged Konrad and his lover goodbye. I hoped for the best but mentally prepared for the worst. Planning our wedding had given me a chance to get to know my "husband" better. He was a smart man who knew how to create opportunities. I sincerely doubted his professions of love for my dad. Still, Timotei's deportation had been avoided. I was happy with what we had accomplished, no matter where it might lead.

Truthfully, I had benefitted as much as the two men in my life. Legally an adult, I had still no concept of who I was. I was lost in my body, eagerly devouring book after book to make sense of my existence. On most days, nothing made sense. Taking action, helping my dad and Timotei, helped me breathe meaning into my life. For just a brief while, chaos reverted to consonance.

Timotei opted to take our family name. Unsurprisingly, with a German name and his new visa status, it became easier for him to find jobs in his profession. He was a very talented mechanic, specializing in sports cars. With each passing month, Timotei felt safer from losing his foothold in his chosen home.

The more independent he felt, the more he broke my dad's heart. At first, he tried to hide switching back to his true sexual orientation – females, preferably long-legged, big-breasted blondes. Still unsuspecting, my dad saw less and less of his lover. Eventually, Timotei became bolder and stopped pretending. He still cared for my dad, but more as his friend and son than his lover. Konrad began to see more than he wanted to see when Timotei began bringing some of his many blondes home with him. Timotei was utterly oblivious to the emotional pain their love-making in the room next door caused my dad, who couldn't help still being madly in love with his son-in-law.

Timotei started to enjoy his life, and began frequenting rougher establishments. With each of his drug-related arrests, and ever more loan sharks circling my dad's building, I started to feel the burden of my responsibility of being married to a virtual stranger. What would I do if my spouse got himself into serious trouble?

Inevitably, my dad and Timotei grew further and further apart. They tried to switch from being in love to simply being father and son. But for Konrad, the pain of loss was too intense. He couldn't help but fluctuate between being heartbroken and love-struck. For legal purposes, my quasi-husband stayed registered at my dad's home but he came home less and less often. Soon, he moved in with one of his girlfriends. My dad reverted to his former dark, melancholy self.

I felt the futility of my sacrifice, but soothed myself with the knowledge that at least I had taken action and tried to help. The biggest worry I had was: whether Timotei would keep his word and divorce me after five years, the legally-required period we needed to stay married so he could acquire a permanent visa for Germany.

Konrad worried his heart out. He battled with his conscience and realized that he had complicated his daughter's teenage life through a peculiar marriage arrangement. At the same time, my dad had created a situation where his ex-lover might inherit half of his estate, should anything untoward happen, thus partially disinheriting his daughter.

During his frequent panic attacks, Konrad was ready to pull the plug and pleaded with me to file for immediate divorce. He had been

the one who had initiated our union but for the last two years of my marriage to Timotei, it was I who kept it all together. I dealt with Timotei's unpredictable behavior while at the same time reassuring an increasingly frantic Konrad that all would be fine in the end. Naïve faith and stubbornness prevailed as I held on like a bulldog to a stinking bone, wanting to finish what we had started.

So my handsome Romanian husband and I waited until the mandatory five-year mark of our marriage was finally reached. By then, I was getting tense myself. What if he disappeared? What if he contested the divorce?

Thankfully, Timotei kept his promise to part ways amiably without any obligations. To my surprise, our divorce was swift and bureaucratically unproblematic. I was free. I promised myself never to repeat the experience and hoped Timotei would use his chance wisely and find true happiness in Germany.

Coming out of the courthouse on the day of our official separation, the three of us enjoyed a final cup of coffee together, mirroring the events of our wedding day while relief as well as a sense of happy ending flooded us.

As I walked the long way to the train station, enjoying the sunny path along the River Enz, I wondered: was this what a commercial diver perceived when stepping out of a decompression chamber? Thousands of atmospheres of pressure fell away from me instantly. I felt as light as a feather, tap-dancing in the soft, soothing afternoon light.

In Zurich once again, I pondered how life could sometimes be as wild as my imagination. More than one genie had wiggled out of the bottle while Konrad had been organizing my wedding to his lover. Apart from homosexuality, another revelation had been made.

In Germany, it is customary to have two certificates documenting a child's birth. The birth certificate divulges only the essential details of name and birthdate. The other certificate is called *Abstammungsurkunde* or parenthood certificate. It lists all the details suppressed on the birth certificate – who your parents were, and any changes to your family history that the state might have discreetly documented.

In planning the wedding, my dad had discovered that a wedding was, unfortunately, one of the few events in a German citizen's life for which the more informative document had to be unearthed from the bowels of the German filing system. The citizen who got married would

see his parenthood certificate for the very first, and very likely the last, time in his life.

When the envelope arrived in my dad's mailbox, he opened it and immediately felt as if he had been handed a poisoned fruit. The official document stated it plain as day: I had been adopted. The burden of finally sharing the truth with his teenage daughter had fallen into his lap.

My parents had missed the moment during my childhood when it would have been easy to explain the adoption. As an inquisitive three-year old, I had probed my adoptive mom with questions and asked, "Mom, where did I come from?" It would have been easy to say, "We couldn't have children of our own but wanted so much to have a little girl just like you. We chose you. We are meant to be together." Instead she had answered, "Well, you came out of my tummy, of course."

Now, twenty-one years into his daughter's life, Konrad faced the choice of keeping the adoption hidden by cancelling the wedding and losing his lover, or divulging another secret and going ahead with the wedding plans. He opted for the wedding, his lover, and a revealing of the long-suppressed truth. Part of him was grateful to be forced to put an end to a string of lies that, like Pinocchio's nose, had grown longer and longer over the years.

During one of my weekend visits from college, my dad sat me down on his comfortable couch and explained how they had found me, a cute little orange girl in a Stuttgart orphanage – orange, because I was addicted to carrot purée as a baby. Besides mother's milk I would eat nothing else, until the carotene turned me into an orange-complexioned heartthrob. Konrad and Hildegard had fallen in love with me and visited every week. I had smiled at them with such vivid, soulful eyes that, after a few months, they had decided there was nothing to do but take me home. They had fostered me until I was one year old. After the official trial period was over, they legally adopted me.

I had been stunned into silence by my dad's news. Sitting there on his couch, I felt as if I was sinking into an abyss, frantically trying to swim back to the surface but being dragged downward ever further by a weight too great to resist.

For years, I had puzzled over being the only dark-haired, darker-complexioned person in our family. My emotional make-up and character

didn't quite seem to fit with the rest of my family either. I had kept searching for similarities between my parents and me, as every child does, and had found none. But my mom Hildegard had been very convincing as to our shared blood. She had scared me with stories of how her multitude of hereditary afflictions would manifest themselves in me as I grew older. She had a large goiter on her neck as well as suffering from acute asthma. I had inherited both from her, she insisted, and would suffer as she did eventually. No matter how unpleasant the knowledge, no matter how lost I felt, and whatever life threw at me while growing up, at least I had always been secure in the knowledge of who my family was. It proved to be quite dysfunctional at times, but it *was* a family. But now, with my dad's revelation, the truths on which I had based my life shattered into a million pieces.

I had always been terrified of becoming my mom, as I got older. The knowledge of her multiple hereditary ailments had suffocated me. Now, despite the heaviness in my heart, I had to admit: I felt happy not to be her blood relative. I battled feelings of immense relief, guilt, utter confusion, and grief. More than ever before, I felt literally uprooted. Conflicting emotions tumbled through my heart like stubborn, prickly tumbleweeds.

2

Amniotic Fluid

Thoughts about my heritage dominated my days and nights. Back in Zurich, I buried myself in work for my projects, socialized like there was no tomorrow, and watched multiple movies each week, all in an attempt to distract myself and free my mind of the nagging doubts and confusion.

The soothing smells of stale popcorn and flat Coke in Zurich's historical movie theaters relaxed me. When the lights went out, I focused on the stories of my favorite characters and cried hot tears for their happiness. My pent-up thoughts would release like the steam from the valve on a pressure cooker. After two hours in an alternate universe, sinking ever deeper into softly-padded seats until I could hardly extract myself, I was able to see the promise of a better tomorrow. My storm of emotions would calm considerably, and the prickly tumbleweeds would come to rest for a brief time, giving me respite.

Processing the information Konrad had given me would take years. Regardless of how I intellectualized the situation, for a few months I was shell-shocked. It was as if, instead of a gentle revelation, a hand grenade had exploded on my dad's comfy couch. Nothing helped, except picking myself up and taking decisive action. I needed to start searching for the two individuals who had created me and meet them at least once so I could better understand my identity and origins.

The process of finding them, however, proved to be a long and winding road. Since I was legally an adult, the German authorities freely handed over their file on my biological parents. My excitement waned

considerably when it consisted of only one page, filed in 1971, bearing the scent of withering old leaves. Printed on it was the Italian home address of my biological father. A yellowed black-and-white passport photo showed him sporting a very interesting Seventies hairdo – something between an Afro and a wildly growing bush. Last but not least, my biological mother's German address had been included as well.

I continued staring at the scant information while my brain caught up slowly. In awe, I focused on my biological father's address: Taranto, Southern Italy. So, I was half Italian.

I scanned myself in the mirror, my dark complexion, my shock of dark brown hair, and my almond eyes. A big part of the puzzle fell into place. My eyes flitted back and forth between my father's passport image and myself. I longed to dive into the picture, to see him, feel him, and smell him. We looked incredibly alike.

Stereotypes of Italians came to my mind such as temperamental, impulsive, emotional, and loud. In my imagination, I traveled to the town of Taranto. I saw a clear blue sky, and a big marketplace teeming with enthusiastically gesticulating, laughing people, burning under the hot Mediterranean sun. My eyes twinkled as I laughed out loud at my own reflection. I was impulsiveness personified. Emotional, romantic, and passionate, I longed for dazzling, warm rays of sunshine.

The German authorities let me know in no uncertain terms that locating my biological father quickly would be completely impossible. Since I didn't speak a word of Italian, I would need to learn the language *Matrix*-style, or bring an interpreter while searching the region of Apulia in Southern Italy for him. It didn't help that his name was one of the most common Italian names imaginable.

I was cautioned to be sensitive while investigating his whereabouts. My sudden appearance could wreak havoc with the conservative family life typical of Apulia. The last thing I wanted was destroy my father's life. After much deliberation, I decided to leave him alone until I had both the time and the resources to investigate subtly, without making waves. For now, just knowing about my Southern Italian genes was enough. I felt like Pixar's *boundin'* Jackalope.

My biological mother was another story. I decided to make a serious attempt at finding at least this much of my heritage. My birth mom seemed to have stayed in Germany, yet had become a veritable nomad

in her early years. Each time I would track her to a city of residence, it would turn out she had moved yet again. After six months of driving all over the map on my weekends away from college, I was up to a count of twenty moves. I started to feel like a lost wanderer in the Saharan desert, stumbling from mirage to mirage in hope of shelter and water.

Only half an hour from where I grew up, I finally stood in front of a doorbell with my birth mom's name on it. By then, I felt so dehydrated from my walk through the desert that my brain needed a moment to grasp what was happening. This was no mirage. I triple-checked – but the house didn't disappear. Her printed name remained on the doorbell. It wasn't faded, but new.

I turned to look at the sleepy little village, expecting fanfare and fireworks to immortalize the moment. But nothing stirred. Closing my eyes, I snapped a picture with my heart and committed the moment to memory.

The apartment building my biological mother lived in was painted a soft blue, reminding me of a shallow lagoon. Time seemed to stand still to give me a chance to breathe and observe for a moment. I had found what I had been looking for. Now I wondered what surprises awaited me. I felt exhilarated and scared out of my wits. I wanted to both storm inside and run as far away as I could get.

I didn't ring my birth mom's doorbell that day. Instead, I walked back to my rental car across the street and sat staring at her house entrance for a while. After half an hour, a woman came out of the house. She was petite with dark blonde hair, elegant yet modest in appearance. Turning around for just an instant, she seemed to scan her surroundings. She was beautiful and held herself with dignity. At the same time, she seemed cautious and wary of the world. I knew without a doubt: this was my biological mother. But I stayed in the car, my entire body quivering with the strain of keeping myself from running after her. I watched her walk down the eerily quiet street, wondering whether she could sense the close proximity of the child she had lost so many years ago.

As soon as I arrived home, I composed a long letter to the woman I had seen, asking her if she would like to get together for a chat. Two days after receiving my letter, unable to contain her excitement and curiosity, my biological mom called me.

We set a date and I returned to the blue house. Again, I stood in front of probably the most important doorbell of my life. I was more thrilled

than scared at this point. I just had to see her, and maybe, by doing so, find another piece of the puzzle.

My biological mom lived on the top floor of the four-story apartment building. There was no elevator. With every step up, my heart soared and fluttered a bit more. My legs were made of feathers and lead at the same time. Finally, I reached her floor.

In the doorway of what looked like a modest little apartment stood the same short, forty-something, elegant lady I had observed the weekend before. Her eyes were careful and guarded yet also filled with wonder. Her expression was vivid. She looked me up and down and said, "Oh my god, you are so tall and pretty!" I was instantly amused, since I am only five foot six and stood in front of her in my usual, rather boyish attire: tennis shoes, faded jeans, and an old red tank top. My hair was cut short and, as always, I wore no make-up. My biological mom took a hold of my hand and pulled me into her little rooftop domain.

We felt comfortable right away. Since I had learned about my adoption, I had never felt any anger towards her. Life happens, and often we find ourselves in positions in which we are forced to make very tough choices. I understood that my being raised by adoptive parents wasn't anybody's fault. Blame is definitely never an answer to the obstacles we encounter. Nevertheless, I had been worried how I would feel when we actually met. But now, here I was and I just felt happy – and curious to finally unveil the mystery of how our story had unfolded and, most importantly, how I had come to be.

While preparing some strong Italian coffee in her tiny kitchen, my biological mother, Sandra, couldn't stop looking at me. As soon as we settled on her couch, she poured some coffee into delicate cups, made of china, and asked me with amazing straightforwardness, "Are you angry with me?"

"No, not at all," I reassured her immediately. "I am just very glad and amazed to finally be together in the same room."

I had not arrived with any expectations – of the situation, of her, of anything. I savored the moment and treasured the opportunity to find out more about her and, maybe more about myself at the same time. Sandra hadn't started talking yet, but I already recognized impulsiveness and an emotional intensity in this woman that seemed all too familiar.

In her charming and soft Swabian accent, Sandra explained, "I thought about you every day, all my life, especially each year on your birthday. I

never stopped wondering where you were and whether you were happy. I thought your parents would tell you about the adoption. And I knew the authorities don't allow adopted children to legally search for their birth parents before the age of eighteen. So when your eighteenth birthday came and went, I was on pins and needles for months – but nothing happened. That's when I finally gave up hope and figured you probably hated me and didn't want anything to do with me. You can imagine my surprise when three years later, your letter arrived in my mailbox. It was almost too good to be true. Why didn't you contact me? Are you sure you aren't upset with me?"

At this point, Sandra had tears in her eyes. I could see clearly how shaken up she was by our encounter, how hopeful and afraid she was, all at the same time. I answered gently, "My father only just told me about my adoption. I never knew. As soon as I heard, I wanted to find you. It's taken me a few months to track you down. And no, I really am not upset in any way. Honestly, I feel like I am floating on clouds right now."

I proceeded to tell her a little about my life and my current studies in Zurich. Sandra listened in fascination, hungry to hear more and more about my life. She couldn't stop herself from telling me every few minutes how happy she was to finally see me and how beautiful I was. I felt overwhelmed, happy, and a little bit helpless in the face of her emotions. Her smile was so wide it could have encompassed an entire universe.

Our words tumbled out faster and faster, like excited children spilling out of a school's front door. Finally, pouring some more of her aromatic Italian brew, Sandra sighed deeply and said, "It will hurt, but I think now the time has come for me to dig up some bitter-sweet memories and tell you the story of your origins."

1969 was the fateful year during which my birth mom's life had begun to change forever. She was seventeen years old at the time. Friday evening was disco night out with her friends. On a Friday like any other, Marcello, a charming young Italian man with a haircut closely resembling an exploded chicken began flirting with her. He was only eighteen years old and one of many Italians staying in Germany to earn money to support their families back home. Sandra felt herself instantly drawn to Marcello. He had a gentle manner, a sonorous yet calm voice, and very beautiful eyes brimming with soul and fire. His exotic masculinity paired with his gentle nature made him safe yet exciting at the same time.

My birth mom's parents were very conservative. Harsh rigidity and intolerance ruled Sandra's life while growing up. Her bristling teenage spirit welcomed a hot love affair with a charismatic Italian man. Their romance would constitute a grave rebellion against her parent's values.

What started out as an act of rebellion swiftly bloomed into a full-blown love. To avoid the wrath of Sandra's parents, all meetings between the young lovers took place in secret. Marcello's parents were just as conservative and unforgiving. Even though they lived in far-away Taranto, Marcello had to be careful to avoid other Southern Italian immigrants. There was always a risk of being recognized by someone who might report his unmarried union with a German girl to Marcello's strictly Catholic family.

While reminiscing about her parents, Sandra remembered an interesting detail about them. "I almost forgot to tell you: my mother was French. I guess this makes you half Italian, a quarter French, and a quarter German." Considering that, on a visceral level I had never been able to identify with German culture, I was far from unhappy to hear this surprising news.

Sandra's father had been raised in a very devout German family. Her mother had grown up in an isolated, catholic parish in the Pyrenees. My birth mom's parents were extraordinarily inquisitive about their daughter's movements, imposing strict curfews on her. It took all the creativity of a young soul desperately in love to continuously invent new ways to be able to see her boyfriend. Sandra and Marcello's first six months together were spent in hidden corners, on park benches, dark alleyways, and anywhere under the stars where they could find a moment of solitude. For both teenagers, it was their first intimate relationship. They explored each other and puzzled over their increasing sexual drive.

The subject of sexuality had always appalled both of their parents. It was not to be discussed. Period. Their children would live properly and hence discover intercourse after marriage before having children of their own.

As good at heart as their parents' intentions might have been, their actions left Sandra and Marcello utterly clueless and unprepared for their sexual relationship. They had overheard conversations about sperm cells leaving a man's penis at the moment of orgasm and then rushing off to… somewhere. Allegedly, the arrival of the sperm cells at their coveted

destination caused women to become pregnant. This summed up the extent of my birth parent's knowledge. 1970 was still far away from the age of Internet and both teenagers were too ashamed to ask anyone or buy themselves a book explaining fertility and contraception.

Besides their painful awareness of committing a sin by having sex out of wedlock, they felt nowhere near ready to consider having a family of their own. Sandra gave me a sad smile. "Marcello was a romantic gentleman. He promised to always be there for me. If I should get pregnant despite our precautions, we would run off together."

I asked, "So what did you do to avoid pregnancy?"

She sighed, "Our naïve young minds came up with a very simple and – to us – very logical solution. We figured if Marcello's sperm cells never managed to enter my body, then they wouldn't be able to cause any trouble. Marcello promised to be cautious and always pull out before his orgasm."

"Oh," was all I could think to say. I worked hard to suppress rising giggles.

By the beginning of 1970, Sandra had had enough of the paralyzing, conservative pressures at home. With the small amount of money she earned as a sales clerk in a women's clothing store, Sandra claimed her independence. Against her parent's wishes, she moved out into a very cheap and rugged little apartment. It was located on the ground floor just next to a major traffic intersection in Stuttgart. The walls were bare and so thin you could hear someone blowing his nose farther up the street. The ancient wallpaper smelled of garlic and threatened to fall off the walls. The rough wooden floor was stained and splintered, creaking loudly with every step. For Sandra and Marcello it was heaven. They had finally found a sanctuary.

By now, their love seemed larger than life. During their many sexual encounters, Marcello kept his promise and did his very best to prevent his sperm cells from swimming on their merry way. Each time the young lovers reached consummation, he would remember to pull out as fast as he could.

Close to midnight, on a Saturday in August 1970, Sandra and Marcello were wrapped in each other's arms, in physical and romantic ecstasy. Marcello was nearing orgasm, desperately trying to keep a clear head so he would be able to react quickly when the moment came to, unfortunately, pull out once more.

Five drivers were on their way home. Four of them had enjoyed a great night with their buddies, getting drunk, flirting, and dancing their hearts out. The fifth driver was a factory worker, coming home late from a weekend shift. They all moved towards the intersection where Sandra had found her little haven. The drivers' paths were meant to cross for just an instant before seeing each other speed off towards their final destinations, leaving only the lingering roar and stinking exhaust of their engines in their wakes. All the drivers were racing along at well above the legal speed limit in an attempt to make it home before their dazed minds gave in to exhaustion and intoxication. They hurtled towards each other, each opening their windows wide to let in the cool night air, one of the drivers slapping himself hard to snap awake for yet another minute.

The factory worker had pulled a tough fifteen-hour shift. He lost the battle for consciousness at the precise moment when all five drivers converged in the intersection. His eyes closed and his hands let go of the steering wheel. Instead of speeding straight ahead, his battered Volkswagen Beetle changed course, crashing head-on into the oncoming vehicle. The remaining three drivers registered their predicament but the alcohol had reduced their reaction times to slower than the crawl of a slug. Two more cars crashed into the ruins of the first two vehicles. Metal bent and screeched. Lives unavoidably ended as the cars piled on top of each other and merged in ways they were never supposed to. Only one car escaped this mayhem. Catapulted into the air by the collision with the four other cars, it continued on a new trajectory.

Meanwhile, Sandra and Marcello were submerged in their own universe. The fifth, airborne car continued on its deadly, graceful path. At some level, the lovers' minds must have registered the sudden tumult beyond their flimsy bedroom walls. Still, Marcello and Sandra remained oblivious as they entered into the beautiful, almost suspended state of simultaneous orgasms.

Marcello felt a delightful wave of heat and energy rushing through his body just as the fifth car reached its final destination – Sandra's bedroom wall. It impacted in a cacophony of noise and falling debris. Instead of pulling away from her, he instinctively wrapped his arms around his girlfriend in the hope of shielding her from danger.

So. This was it. This was my moment. Marcello's sperm cells hurried to my mom's egg cell… and without even knowing it yet, an innocent teenage couple were on their way to becoming my parents.

Only a moment later, Marcello's penis softened inside of Sandra. My biological parents slowly gathered their courage and sat up in bed. They were dazed but unharmed. The apartment, however, was a field of destruction. Dust and debris were everywhere and sirens were blaring in the distance.

Six weeks later, they both knew without a doubt that the night of the accident had brought more than death and destruction. Sandra was eighteen and Marcello, nineteen. My biological father panicked, feeling far from ready to become a parent in a foreign country. He gave Sandra his address in Italy, and told her to contact him should she, for whatever reason, not want to raise their child. His family would take care of me. Having delivered his message, he turned and escaped home to Italy as quickly as possible.

Sandra hadn't heard half of what Marcello had tried to tell her about his family taking the child in. She was furious. The love of her life had betrayed her, running home to mamma, abandoning her and her unborn child. Without giving it any thought, she tore his address to shreds and flushed it down the toilet, destroying along with it any chance of getting in touch with Marcello or his family. Now, because of her impulsiveness, she would have to get through the pregnancy and deal with a newborn child on her own.

My birth parents were both just children themselves at the time. They were clueless, overwhelmed by what was happening to them. No one showed them kindness or helped them in making their decisions.

Following Marcello's panicked exit, a desperate Sandra went to her parents for help. They were disgusted with their daughter. In her parents' conservative eyes, the one thing worse than having sex before marriage was a woman bearing a fatherless child. They disowned her, showing neither kindness, nor forgiveness, nor understanding for her teenage digressions. Throughout the long months of Sandra's complicated pregnancy, her parents never inquired about her or her soon-to-be-born child. To them, we were both dead.

Sandra had only her work as a junior sales clerk with minimum salary. When she found herself unable to continue work due to complications with her pregnancy, with nowhere to go and no one to turn to, she was forced to approach social services. A shelter for pregnant prostitutes in Stuttgart offered my birth mom shelter. They welcomed her but made it

clear that, like all the other women of ill repute harbored at the shelter, she would only be allowed to stay until she had given birth. Afterwards, she would be on her own once more. Sandra nevertheless braved the strong tide against her and was determined to bring me into this world.

Meanwhile, it seemed I was not quite so sure about entering the world, or maybe a bit too sure, depending on how you want to look at it. The great number of complications my biological mother experienced during her pregnancy culminated in an early birth – a full five weeks too early.

On the 9th of April 1971, when I struggled to come out and glimpse the light of day inside the prostitute shelter, I weighed a meager three pounds three ounces. I was immediately put in an incubator and fed with special formula to help me develop properly and give me a chance to survive. And, stubborn little me – I did.

As a developing fetus Sandra's amniotic fluid had given me shelter. I had now brusquely left this protective environment way too early, surely missing its warm embrace and easy weightlessness the moment I left it. Perhaps this explains why my entire life has revolved and developed around water. From the moment of birth until today, a terrestrial life centered on gravity has proven hard for me in many ways. Thankfully, many bodies of water accompanied me, countering gravity and grief with their transparent hues of blue, turquoise, brown, and even black. Water was where I found myself. Immersed in its warm embrace, I found my greatest passion and happiness. Water soothed me, carried me, inspired me and gave me strength.

After weeks of watching me grow in the incubator, my birth mom was delighted to finally be allowed to hold me in her arms. She felt a deep love towards me and did not regret her decision against an abortion. As soon as she and I were well enough, however, Sandra faced a cruel wall of bureaucracy.

The prostitute shelter asked her to leave. Sandra had never managed to accumulate any savings, and had no possessions of any kind. Her job and apartment had been lost. The authorities impressed upon her the urgency of her situation and the impossibility of raising me by herself. Her parents insisted on keeping their silence and stayed in the shadows. Legally, Sandra was still a minor, and as such, without her parents to support her, the authorities had the last word.

When I was one month old, I was taken away from my birth mom and transferred to a state orphanage. Sandra was given no choice. On the day the orphanage keepers whisked me away, she held me in her arms for the last time, and gave me my very first name: Corinna.

Sandra was not allowed to visit me because the officials were afraid we would become too attached to each other. They thought it best to severe all mother-child ties immediately so I would bond more easily with an adoptive family. In their eyes, a married couple with enough resources and good social standing to ensure security for my young life was far preferable to a young single mom who was barely able to take care of herself.

Soon enough, a wealthy couple visited the orphanage in search of a child. Konrad had told me it was love at first sight. At five months old, he and Hildegard took me home to foster me for a few months and see how we got along. Only the closest of relatives knew I wasn't theirs. The female fashion of the time favored very bulky garments. Their few friends and neighbors readily believed the story of my adoptive mom's "pregnancy". People congratulated my parents on their adorable offspring, ooohhh-ing and aaahhhh-ing as they went. They expressed their amazement at how much I looked like my adoptive dad. On my first birthday, the wealthy young couple legally adopted me. My first name was changed to Stefanie.

For many months after losing me, Sandra went through emotional torture of the worst kind. Nevertheless, she picked herself up, found work as a sales clerk in another clothing store and tried to move on with her life. During the first years, my biological mother held on to the irrational hope of being able to get me back if only she did well enough. She tried to locate me but, to protect the adoptive parents as well as the child, adoptions were strictly anonymous.

Over the years, our paths must have crossed many times. Sandra loved spending her weekends at the idyllic Lake Monrepos in Ludwigsburg. This same romantic playground of former kings also happened to be one of the favorite weekend getaways of my adoptive parents. I can imagine them passing each other every so often, perfect strangers, who never gave each other a second glance, unaware that the little orange-tinted toddler in the stroller connected them so intimately.

Sandra's luck never turned. She married another charming Italian man and had two daughters with him. I was delighted, hearing for the first

time about my half-sisters. But my joy at learning of my growing family quickly turned to dismay when Sandra described how her husband had beaten and abused her. She had found solace in alcoholism and denial. When she wasn't drinking, she was busy lighting one cigarette after another, dulling her senses even further.

Then, one day, her older daughter, Gabi, approached her and said, "Mom, I don't want to kiss you anymore. You reek of alcohol even in the early morning. You need to sober up and help us. Daddy has raped me for years, but now he has started on Petra." Barely conscious in her alcoholic daze, Sandra lashed out at her daughter, backhanding her across the face. "You little slut! Stop lying to me like that!" Gabi stared back at her in shock. Then she nodded, turned around slowly, and went into her room to pack a small backpack. Half an hour later, she walked out the door, never to be seen again.

Sandra woke up to reality at the bang of the door. But it was too late. She had lost another child. With only her youngest daughter Petra left, Sandra finally found the strength she needed to overcome her paralyzing fears. Terrified, after twenty years of hell, she grabbed Petra and a suitcase. She moved out into the small apartment in which we now sat together, and filed for divorce.

She seemed to have escaped at last. Then one night, my birth mom heard a small noise. She woke to find her husband sitting at her bedside, pointing a gun to her head. He warned her to strongly reconsider leaving him and quietly disappeared into the night. Sandra persevered and divorced him despite her mounting fear. Exhausted, she reached the end of the line and suffered a breakdown. Child services came to collect my younger half-sister to place her in a foster family. And so, my biological mother lost her third child.

I looked at my birth mom while she poured yet more coffee into the fragile, beautifully crafted cups made of china. After five refills, my stomach cramped and struggled with a caffeine overdose. I was amazed, appalled, and at a loss of how to respond in the face of all this tragedy. Sandra told me she was nearing the end of her therapy and would soon be reunited with her youngest daughter. She clutched my hand as if letting go would make me disappear in a wisp of smoke. My birth mom and I hugged for a long time in the early evening light, and slowly parted ways with the promise to never lose sight of each other again.

After so many hours of talking, I felt as if we had just run a marathon together. I was out of breath and utterly exhausted. Life remained a mystery and seemed to become ever more complex with each passing year. Amidst all the cruelty and waves of emotion crashing over me, I sensed beauty, magic, strength, stubborn optimism, a powerful will to survive, as well as a strong wish to be a positive force no matter what obstacles life would throw at me. Giving up was not an option and never would be.