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In Between

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In Between

For Aaaaaaaaaaandyyyyyyyyyy

Chapter 1

My son ... dead.

Yes, she could say that.

Mon fils ... mort.

She's never said that before. Not that she feels like it, today of all days, uttering a sentence like that. Just the thought of it stings her eyes so much that she blinks, several times, very quickly. But crying—no, she doesn't cry. Everyone knows that Brigitte Weichmann never cries. Not even at funerals. Not even at her own son's funeral. Hans wanted to hold her hand, hug her. That fool! As if he didn't know her. As if they hadn't been married for twenty-eight years. As if hugs were part of their lives. As if either of them had needed it.

Brigitte is getting restless; it will soon be her turn. Soon she will have to say who she is and why she is here, who or what she has lost. In French. She smooths her skirt. Once more and once more. For a long time, this foreign language has not been foreign to her—quite the opposite. After all these years of learning, she has now arrived home. This is how it feels, this language that first belonged to Michael. And because it belonged to him and he

loved it so much, Brigitte wanted it too: to have it, to live it, to carry on through it, to be able to carry on. There had to be some kind of connection left! But she doesn't have to talk about that, it's not important, not for these unfamiliar grieving people.

Or for Michael.

Right?

Maybe she should just get up and leave. Visit the antiques fair. Buy a mirror. In Clermont, a woman had lost her reflection, her ability to see herself. She called it her own personal blindness. Brigitte thought about it for days. And now she wants, she must have, a mirror. Pretend that's why she's here in the first place.

Three people have introduced themselves so far. One dead eighty-year-old mother, one leg amputation, one false pregnancy. Wait until you actually have the child, Brigitte wants to shout to the young woman. Brigitte isn't allowed to say it, but she never wanted children. Nevertheless, you have them when you get married. Hans. Hans was her first boyfriend, her first lover. When you're married, you have to bring children into the world, especially in a rural area, especially if you're as rich as Hans. The business needs an heir. So, Michael came along. Michael, who was never interested in Hans' furniture factory. Who once said that he needed art in his life, not mass-produced goods.

Michael.

Hans didn't understand it. Hans loved his business, always thought his furniture was something special.

But Michael, no, not him.

Michael.

His face is the first thing I see before I open my eyes in the morning. *Son visage est la première chose*.

That would work too. That's beautiful. *Son visage*. That's per-

haps too beautiful. How does she come up with things like that? She's not a poet. She could possibly write it down, but say it—no, better not. Ridiculous. It's always better to stick to the facts. Hans would agree with her. Or would he?

Que je vois.

Hans has no idea about the language and had made fun of her expensive French lessons. But Hans has changed. He has become softer. He even cried. Right after that, he cried morning, noon, and night. He went into Michael's old room and laid down on the bed where Michael hadn't slept for years. *Quand j'ouvre mes yeux*. Ridiculous. Pathetic. She had to leave. She realized that immediately. When she said goodbye to him, he also cried. He had lost so much weight in those few days that he was barely recognizable. He begged her to stay with him. He scared her with his drama. "Michael wouldn't have taken over the business anyway. You'll find someone else," she had said to him, surprised at his uncomprehending gaze. Then she shrugged her shoulders, and like that, she was gone. France had beckoned! She didn't even hug him. Those eyes, she couldn't look him in the eyes. She'd never noticed until then that he had Michael's eyes. Yes, exactly like that. Hans had Michael's eyes. Not the other way around. What is Hans doing now? Will he still be sniveling, after a year? Hans. Her Hans? Did she ever call him that? Think about him like that?

Or is it: *que je voie*?

This uncertainty irritates her.

And she doesn't like this room. It is so ugly and bare and unsentimental that she should like it, but she doesn't, and she doesn't know why. A wall of windows facing the backyard. Twelve chairs in a circle, more stacked in a corner. And a table next to the door for refreshments. Two pictures without frames that look like they

were painted by kindergarten children. That's all.

My son is dead.

That could be it.

Mon fils est mort.

Yes, that is clear and emotionless and true. One can say that. She can say that. Nothing stings anymore. The verb makes the difference. Forgotten is *son visage* and the grammatical dilemma.

Son visage, how could she forget it.

Maybe she really should just get up and leave. As usual. And visit the antiques fair. She could do with a little beauty around her right now, beauty and the past.

And keep an eye out for the reflection.

She watches her frantic hand almost with disdain. If she could at least spot a stain on her skirt, then she would understand it, this feeling, this urge. These tireless movements.

Brigitte raises her head, her eyes, at the exact moment when the door opens and a man comes in—late or lost, she doesn't know, and she doesn't care.

He stops at the door. Something is wrong with him.

He is young.

He is not Michael.

Nobody is Michael.

You would have thought that after a year of searching, this should have been a matter of course.

She doesn't care about the young man.

Because at the next opportunity, she will get up and leave. And buy herself a mirror from the eighteenth century. At the fair. Perhaps. Something golden, something old, something everlasting.

That helps. This thought helps her.

Being able to find something that once seemed lost, it helps.

Christian stares at the long black hair. He is so startled that he stops in mid-breath. It feels like an eternity before he notices the broad shoulders and massive upper arms beneath the long black hair—and he can breathe calmly again.

A moment of fear.

A moment of hope.

He sneaks up to the circle in the middle of the room, like a child who thinks that just because he doesn't want to be noticed, he will go unnoticed. From the doorway he had already spotted three free chairs. He had struggled with the choice, then sat down gently on the one closest to him. Nevertheless, all eyes are now on him. He smiles. He remembers what someone once said about him and wonders if shadows can smile.

Never mind. Never mind anything—especially that.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"Excuse me?" shouts an old man opposite him. The woman next to the old man tilts her head towards the man's and shouts in his ear. "Excuse me. He said ex-cuse-me. All good!" She smiles to the crowd and apologizes in turn. "Our cat has left us." Her eyes are red and moist. She pats the man's hand. "But first the parrot flew away, remember?" ... "No, the first thing to disappear was the goldfish, it was so beautiful and golden ..." "No, the parrot was the first, then came the fish, I didn't like it, it never looked at me, never." The woman eyes the man as if he had put on a red cardboard nose. "Nonsense, he loved you, he missed you when you were away, when you were traveling, he almost cried." She continues to pat, faster and faster. Christian thinks it must hurt. The thin skin becomes redder and redder and more and more cockscomb-like. Finally, the man looks at her too. "He

cried? Really? You never said that, why didn't you tell me? Then I could have cried for him when he swam away from us ..." He starts to weep. Christian wishes he was invisible. "He knew that you loved him too, he knew that ..." "And what about the hamster? And the tabby cat? Did they love me too ...?" The woman smiles sheepishly but with a hint of happiness at the circle of distraught faces: "We've always been blessed with our little children, so lucky, so much love." She shakes her head and closes her eyes. And the wrinkled skin on the back of the hand can finally recover, return to its pallor.

Christian looks around and meets the gaze of the woman next to him. She raises her eyebrows; her face is serious. Christian grimaces.

"Gooooooooood, fiiiiiiiiiine." The man in the dark blue jacket slaps his thighs loudly and stands up with a flourish. "Weeeeeeeeeell, let's take a little break, there's coffee, tea, and croissants over there. Yes, a deep breath is just the thing right now!"

Christian doesn't need coffee, tea, or croissants, and his breathing is fine again, thank you very much. He is more indecisive and uncertain than ever about coming here. It was his family who persuaded him to do it. His mother had even cried, whispered the forbidden name in his ear, maybe then everything will be all right again, she had said, and Christian didn't understand what she meant. What is supposed to be fixed, and how? He agreed so that he wouldn't have to endure all their pitying looks and would be left in peace, at least for a moment. There were so many of them, and he was standing all alone in front of them. He didn't stand a chance. And they all smiled broadly at him and assured him that they only had his best interest at heart. How could he say No?

Knowing very well the “best” means something different for each of them.

And now this. A madhouse, which doesn't surprise him in the least. He gets up, goes to the table, and suddenly stops. He is confused.

"This is your first time here."

The woman who had been sitting next to him hands him a cup of black coffee. He takes it without hesitation and nods. The woman is older, he can see that now, and tall, very tall and blonde, very blonde and very strict in her skirt and blouse—so everything is fine, he doesn't need to be afraid.

"Me too." She doesn't smile. She doesn't look friendly or courteous or embarrassed. She has an open face, hard but open. "My name is Brigitte Weichmann." She pronounces her name in German, and her German accent is immediately noticeable, even though she speaks fluently. She doesn't shake his hand, but she is full of expectation: she wants to know his name, and she wants him to finish his coffee—and he is already overwhelmed. "All right, then. I see." She turns her back to him but doesn't walk away.

"My name is Christian Rolland. And I don't drink coffee," says Christian quickly, hoping it sounds as funny as he imagined. Maybe he can repeat it later in the group. Because mentioning her-who-must-not-be-named is out of the question. He can't do that. "I'm a notorious tea drinker." Her back is raised and tense. Christian wonders who she has lost. Her budgie? Mean, mean—but sometimes that helps. Sometimes you have to be mean, Christian believes. And as long as she can't read minds ... And somehow, he feels the need to protect himself from this back, this back that suddenly seems more German to him than Thomas

Mann. More German even than Goethe. Even if that's not true, not really, because both were cosmopolitans.

He has to protect himself from so many things.

She slowly turns back to him, takes the cup from his hand and places it on the table. A woman who doesn't shy away from decisions, he thinks, not entirely without envy. She looks at him seriously. Maybe she can after all ...

"I have to get out of here. Are you coming with me, Monsieur Rolland?"

Christian lets her lead him through the room, to the door, out of the building, as if they were connected by a string. As if she were the golden goose and he the eldest of the three greedy sisters. He smiles. Where would he be without books and stories, and if the plan, his great plan, his wish were to come true, then life would make sense again.

And she-who-must-not-be-and-so-on would be forgotten.

Sure.

"So. Let's enjoy the sun," she says and looks at him, again so open, again so hard and serious.

"We could eat cake."

"I don't eat cake, but suit yourself. I'll have a coffee. This one was unaccepting."

"Unacceptable," he says without thinking. "Sorry," he adds immediately.

She nods. "No, that's fine." And after a short pause, she repeats: "Unacceptable."

Now it is his turn to lead her, he senses her strangeness, she does not resist. They reach the park and the café in silence and sit down outside, she in the sun, he in the shade. The trickle of water in the fountain fills their silence. Long black hair passes by,

but no, no worry, everything else is wrong, completely wrong.

After they have placed the order, Christian leans back in his chair and closes his eyes. As if he were alone. Or together with his best friend. He is already thinking about what he should say to his parents and siblings and all the others who feel called upon to interfere in his life. He is certainly not grateful to them. But he can't get rid of them. As if they were flies and he an open honey-pot, he calls in vain for a lid, a dark place. Maybe he should move away after all. Because of everything. You can sell books anywhere.

When he opens his eyes, he is not prepared for her mocking smile.

"What?" He almost preferred her back.

"Two pieces of cake, not bad." She is not wearing sunglasses, and she squints against the bright light.

Christian shrugs his shoulders.

"How old are you, Monsieur Rolland?"

"Why?" he asks back.

"Just like that."

"Who cares." Too harsh, too harsh. Mean sometimes, yes, but only in thought, not harsh, no, neither in thought nor in words.

"Yes. Probably."

His cakes arrive and his blackcurrant juice and her coffee with milk, and he is distracted.

"What's that called?" She points to the juice.

"*Jus de cassis*."

She closes her eyes briefly, as if she should have known. There is silence again.

"So, does it taste good?"

He nods, his mouth is full.

"Good. Fine."

He eats greedily, as if he hasn't had breakfast.

He doesn't let the flaked almonds in the cheesecake melt in his mouth, he simply swallows them. If only his mother knew! The water is rippling, the birds are quarreling emphatically. The magnolia in front of the patisserie is about to lose its blossoms. Or does it let them go? A big difference. Christian knows this, because he has suffered a loss and is not letting go, and both are painful. The efforts to do the right thing, over and over again, also hurt. Would moving away mean fleeing? You can flee, but you can't escape. It must be because of all the books that he is so decidedly wise. He grins with his mouth full.

"So, how old?"

"Where are you from?"

"From Germany. And you?"

He looks at her suspiciously.

"From Dijon. Dijon is my city. And that of my parents and grandparents." He marvels at his words. It sounds as if he is particularly proud of it.

"Nice."

"And what are you doing here?" He hears the hostility in his voice but can't help it.

"I'm just passing in."

He nods but doesn't correct her this time. Because something else doesn't sound right in her statement, something that has nothing to do with grammar. It's not a lie, just a diversion. Like a false lead in a detective story. He looks at her with interest. No resemblance. No, none at all. But his interest is growing.

"Your city smells special."

"It's two thousand years of history."

She looks at him impassively.

"And all the green, of course. Especially now in May."

She takes a sip, her left hand strokes her skirt several times, even though there is nothing there. He stares at her hand as if he expects to be hypnotized.

"So?"

"So what?"

"So, how old?"

It's not worth it, the resistance, he thinks, he doesn't have the strength, he should be more economical.

"Thirty-five." A deep sigh, as if disappointed in himself.

She nods, her eyes fixed on the invisible birds.

Older than she thought. She had hoped he was Michael's age. She always does, with all younger men, she always thinks of Michael, even if there is no resemblance. She hadn't seen Michael for a long time—two years. And then the accident happened, and then it was too late. How did it come to this? How could it come to this? Two years! Munich wasn't that far away. Theoretically, he could have visited them every weekend. He didn't have to go to the sea when he was longing for water—they had the lake on their doorstep. The famous Lake Starnberg. He didn't have to go to the sea to drown. In a foreign country. If it had at least been French waters, she could have understood that. Perhaps. Michael was infatuated with France; she could never understand his obsession.

And now she's here. Lost her son, won his France. She could scream—but Brigitte Weichmann doesn't scream. And screaming in French would be a completely new language, or so she thinks. She has been on the road for almost a year. In the beginning ... No, that's over, the beginning is over. Both beginnings are over.

How quickly that happens sometimes. And sometimes it seems endless. And then it is over. And that's a good thing. She firmly believes in it. Most of the time.

Brigitte forces herself to look at the young man. *Jus de cassis*. She must remember that. She almost stares at him. Not because she likes distractions, no, just because she's an honest person. So honest that it hurts, that it hurts everyone. But she believes in it, in honesty. And she's polite too. And he's sitting here opposite her. Young, but not young enough. Thirty-five. Still young, old enough. And Michael didn't drown. It was an accident. He smashed his skull to a pulp on a rock, broke all his bones. That's what she was told. She doesn't know. She wasn't there. She hadn't been to anything Michael had done for a shameful number of years. That's what she told Hans. He was a stranger, they didn't know him, not anymore, not at all. Hans had said that wasn't true, but he knew it too. They had lost their son years before the accident. Why hadn't she gone looking for him back then? Why only now—when she can no longer find him? Is it even possible to find anything? And why can she still not feel ashamed? Time was not her friend. Or Michael's. Or Hans'. Maybe it runs in the family. Maybe it's Time itself. Maybe it's a closed society, and maybe money doesn't help, and relationships don't help either. And maybe tears are all that's left, but she doesn't think so. To be sure, she would have to ask Hans.

Her first thought is: "Who is Hans?" She thinks it in French. *Mais qui est Hans*? She doesn't pronounce H, but she's still not French. A year is a long time. Or not. Sometimes it seems as if there is no time at all, which is of course nonsense. No time! As if. Sometimes thoughts, first or not, make no sense. Sometimes life is so simple, albeit disturbing.

And if you become blind to your own reflection, what then?

"And you?"

Brigitte looks absently at the man in front of her. She is not dreaming. She hasn't dreamed since Michael's death. Not in any state. And she knows very well that this man has no answers for her. About Hans. About life. About time. Not to mention Michael.

"Excuse me?"

"How old are you?"

Yes, his voice is challenging, amused and challenging. Or is it just the language? As if that were important! And what's it to her?

"Forty-eight."

She takes a sip, the coffee is already cold, she orders another one.

"You look younger."

No, he's not being flirtatious, he's genuinely surprised. As if that matters! She has no intention of thanking him. It's not his doing. It's not her fault. She often wishes she were dead. Very often, sometimes several times a day. As if the wish were nothing special. As if it were her food, a meal replacement. She turns her eyes away from him, looking for the birds that have been replaced by other, larger ones. Everyone is replaceable, no one is irreplaceable, they say. If he could at least give her the two answers! About the time, about the tears. It shouldn't be that difficult.

"I have to go soon. Work is calling."

He smiles, and she hopes it is a nice kind of work, something that gives him great pleasure. This surprises her, because joy has never played an important role in her life. Duty, yes. Duty and responsibility to the public. To the family. To tradition. She's not

ready to call it shit yet. But *merde*, she could say that, it's just a word, a word, not a feeling. Not a prohibition. Not a parenting issue. Just any word. Language is a miracle in itself, you feel different in a language that is not your mother tongue: freer, freer and richer.

Until you remember that your son is dead. *Mort*.

Mort or dead or deceased or perished. Whatever.

He requests the bill. Brigitte lets him. Because she has money, and in her, some say "twisted," logic that means: if she can—she doesn't have to. Her husband is wealthy, so she is too. That's what she decided many, many years ago. Till death do us part. The only question is “Whose death?”.

Hans seems so far away; he too could be dead.

Hans, from whom she has suddenly stolen his H.

Hans. Of course she remembers him. Hans was her husband. She can't say with conviction that he still is. Michael's father, father and creator, that she knows with absolute certainty. There has only ever been Hans. That's how it is in her world. The money hasn't changed that. And now Hans may be dead too, and she doesn't know, and who knows when or if ever she will find out. How would anyone be able to track her down? No one knows that she has left the country. So how? By placing an ad or a missing person announcement on the radio. Sure, if only she read newspapers, German or French! And she's never liked the radio—too much music, too much distraction. Hans knows that. Or has he forgotten everything? But if he's dead, it won't make any difference anyway.

Her thoughts, a forest.

A forest by the lake. By the water, by the deep water.

"I have a small bookshop near here."

She would never have thought that she could get so lost in it, that she could lose herself!

He has already stood up and put his billfold in his pocket. There's something in his gaze, Brigitte can't interpret it, she never could, she claims that it's impossible to understand other people's gazes. She always asks questions, she wants to be sure, she is a woman of clarity. As if there is such a thing! Clarity, my foot!

"Can I come with you?" she asks, as if this is expected of her, as if this man expects this of her.

"Do you like reading?" he asks back, confident that he knows the answer.

"No, I don't read," she admits without remorse, unwilling to fool him.

He is confused, she can see that. He makes a gesture but stops it and gives up.

"Can I still come with you?"

As if a bookshop, his bookshop, might be a place of answers. On the other hand, she has never tried it.

"So, can I?"

The antiques fair is forgotten. There are such and such mirrors. And then there are mirror images. And suddenly she thinks that these don't necessarily have to do anything with a mirror, nothing at all.

He shrugs his shoulders and leaves the table, slowly, not angrily. She can easily catch up with him. She silently lets him lead her, once again. And they are already there, it's not many steps—one hundred and fifty-eight to be exact, she counts—she knows the way, the area, five days is a long time for a city that's not too big and her hotel is just around the corner.

He unlocks the door to the shop, turns over the "Closed" sign.

Books everywhere, no empty spaces. A small work area with a computer and cash register. A tiny reading corner by the window.

Brigitte knows she should say something, but she can't think of anything. Except banalities. Books are not her thing. Books are Michael's thing. Were. Yes. After a year, still, it's all about him. She can't think of him in the past.

"I love old movies, old musicals." That will have to do. Her life is not empty. On the contrary, it's music that makes life worth living, they say.

And furniture. Furniture is the constant of the world, of Brigitte's world.

She sits down on the bench in the corner, which is obviously intended for children. Christian turns on the computer and pretends she's not even there. A pile of books is waiting on the table to be sorted. Or sent off. What does she know about the book business!

She notices a shelf with CDs. Audiobooks, she thinks, and stands up, and walks towards them as if she weren't reading books, but listening to them, yes, of course, day and night, night and day! She is surprised to discover that they are music CDs after all. She searches for Christian's gaze and raises her eyebrows.

"Every book needs its music," he says quite naturally, and Brigitte is relieved, she is certain: his work is his life. Perhaps not quite so theatrical, but almost. This makes her happy. She wishes him only the best. He is not Michael and never will be, but she wishes him a wonderful life. And if she were a crybaby, she would be ... But no.

And being able to be theatrical, even if only sometimes, is good. It brings Michael closer. She could almost ... But only almost. *Mon fils*.

The door opens and a young woman enters. She has big eyes that see no one but Christian. Brigitte can't even smile. She smooths her skirt.

"I'll go then, thank you, Monsieur Rolland."

She turns around at the door, meets his eyes and he smiles. Brigitte doesn't smile back, it distracts.

She leaves the store with the feeling that she is sharing a secret with this young man. Ridiculous.

When she returns to the hotel, she will immediately look for the next town.