

Katja Oskamp: *The Penultimate Woman (Die vorletzte Frau)*

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When I first met Tosch, I was thirty, and he was forty-nine. The age difference was nineteen years. Our relationship lasted nineteen years too – a strange coincidence. For the former, nineteen was considered a lot, for the latter, not so much. A mere nineteen years. Nineteen of the eighty or so years an average woman’s life lasts these days. Until almost the very end, I had the impression that we’d only just met, but that we were about to get to the heart of things sometime soon. Later, I wondered whether it was true to say that Tosch was the love of my life, and at what age we might be entitled to make a statement like that. I’ve always had a soft spot for playing around with numbers – nothing complicated, just simple home-style adding up and taking away. In my head I did some sums, and I embraced the question of whether everything would have turned out as it did if, in those nineteen years, Tosch hadn’t become ill and if, in those nineteen years, I hadn’t grown older.

ONE

Bang

Tosch was Swiss. He was a visiting lecturer at the institute in Leipzig where I was studying. He became my teacher, and I became his student. I sat in his drama seminars, rapt and mute. Tosch talked about theatre. The other students didn't give his stories the respect they deserved. I did, though. I knew about theatre.

Six months later, when I had to take an exam he'd be marking, I threw all my ambition and determination into preparing for it. Not for the marks. I wanted to impress Tosch, to win him over as a friend, to be seen by him, right down to the last detail. I set out a few bold theories, drawing parallels between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Tosch gave me top marks. Afterwards he invited me to dinner. We talked about theatre again and told stories, so finely tuned to each other it must have looked like we were plotting together. We moved on to a bar and drank a lot. As Tosch was pushing his full schnapps glass back and forth on the wooden table, eking out his pleasure, he reminded me of Karl, the actor thirty years my senior and my first love. From that moment on, I trusted Tosch like a faithful pet. I revelled in the sight of him: not that tall a man, but strong, with a beard, the beginnings of a paunch and builder's hands. He offered me a cigarette. The first puff made me dizzy; from the third, it tasted phenomenal. As we left the bar, I grabbed Tosch between the legs. That was unexpected.

With a bang, Tosch laid me on the bonnet of a car parked in front of the Joseph bar. He connected with the woman I'd been before I had a child. I helped, where I was able.

Dead

Tosch said, 'Before I met you, I was dead. My cock was dead.'

He was married to an actress who had no work. They lived in a Swiss village, in a house that Tosch had bought, 'brick by brick, toiling at the wordface'. The offer from Leipzig came just at the right time for Tosch, who'd done some teaching at an American university. He wanted to get away from his wife. She regularly threatened to kill herself and several times she almost managed it. Once, in desperation, Tosch called his analyst friend. He yelled back down the line at him: 'I don't appreciate being disturbed on holiday! Listen, I'm standing here on the beach and out there on the water a rubber dinghy's swaying about. You and your wife are sitting in it. She's stabbing the rubber dinghy with a knife. You can either go down with her or try and swim to shore: your choice. And now goodbye!'

Tosch often told this story, and he clung to it whenever the actress with no work terrorised him. Her instinct for destruction hung over Tosch like a shadow. He tried to hide that shadow. From me and from Paula, my daughter. But the actress with no work had a mental health condition, no children and plenty of time to write emails to me: mostly at night, crude abuse full of hatred, with line after line of red exclamation marks. It was the first time I'd ever had emails like that. I laughed off the shock at first; after all they were just postcards from the land of madness. Then I got used to it and simply filed the emails in a

folder for Tosch's divorce. Many years later, when it was done and dusted, I deleted them all.

More dead

I said, 'I was more dead than you, Tosch.'

At the age of twenty-five, I'd landed Paula's father, a Dutch conductor, at a theatre in Rostock. In the orchestra pit, he behaved like a raging lion tamer. Black tailcoat, hair dripping with sweat – quite a view from behind. I thought it was love and got pregnant. My belly and breasts quickly grew. One Friday after rehearsals, I told the director I felt a bit funny; just to reassure myself, I wanted to go to the women's clinic. I said I'd be back for the evening rehearsal.

I told the doctor about the funny feeling; I was examined and then I wasn't allowed to get up; I was given labour inhibitors through a cannula, a liver sausage sandwich for dinner and then, after another examination, a gown, a shave and anaesthetics. They wheeled me off to a place where it was all green. The last thing I heard and took in was 'Her waters have broken'.

The birth, which wasn't a birth at all but an emergency caesarean in the thirty-second week, catapulted me out of everything I knew. Paula weighed 1620 grams, lay in an incubator and was almost impossible to find among all the tubes and wires. There was nothing I could do but sit with her, express milk and make sure everything was clean. I fell headlong into the world of disinfection. No one told me what Paula's chances were. The conductor caught me at that weak moment in time and I agreed to a wedding.

For a long time, I felt a mixture of panic and bitterness. I didn't cry once in those weeks when I was going to the premature baby unit at the children's hospital twice a day. In the few photos I have from that time, I look cheerful, maybe even serene, a distant look on my face. A smile as camouflage. I did everything right. I did well. I simply had no idea what was going on. The only thing I knew for certain was that I was to blame for Paula's hideous start in life.

I was probably in shock, even after Paula was eighteen months old and well fed, and we'd moved from Rostock to a village in Saxony-Anhalt because I'd been accepted on a course in Leipzig. By that point, Paula was out of the woods, the doctors said, the conductor said, my parents said and my friends said. They said it was time to return to normality. I failed. I didn't trust the peace. My anxiety over Paula remained.

The marriage to the conductor turned out to be a disaster. By then he was unemployed – the only reason he was able to move near to Leipzig with me. It was a generous gesture of loyalty, and proof of what he always said: he didn't care where he lived and he was at home wherever he might be. He could create a home for himself anywhere on Earth. A man of the world, without a single root. He mocked me for my East German origins, even though he'd ended up living in and being supported by the East, which he considered nothing but a backwater full of halfwits. In return, I mocked the conductor for still bringing up his appalling childhood in a Calvinist parsonage at the age of fifty in the hope of claiming extenuating circumstances. He was supposedly suffering from depression and nothing could help, neither therapy nor pills, as he'd already tried it all.

He'd swapped the conductor's baton for a wooden spoon, and he made a mess in the kitchen while my war against germs took on a life of its own. He cooked while I cleaned. To the point of utter exhaustion. An end-terrace house is large: cellar, ground floor, first floor, attic. Patio, garden, carport. And every day, the battlefield that was our kitchen. I cleaned to provide Paula with hygienically flawless conditions and to remove all traces of the conductor. To tell the truth, I wanted to establish perfect order on the surface, in the irrational hope that inner order would return, at long last.

The conductor didn't hate me. The conductor hated his parents, who had been dead for many years. And I didn't hate the conductor; at worst, I looked down on him. But there was someone I did hate: myself.

My body had become alien to me and remained so: a bloated form with no eyes to cry from, severed nerves and plenty of dead tissue around the scar under my belly. I had my hair cut short like a Deutsche Bahn ticket inspector's, and I thought that looking so crap was just what I deserved. Life was messed up; I'd messed it up myself, through and through.

A stirring

When Tosch was new to the Institute of Literature and I was still in the end-terrace and the depths of marital frustration, he set us a task in a seminar. We had to pair up with another student and go off to another of the Institute's vast rooms and prepare a short performance. Tosch handed out photocopies of Robert Musil's *Tonka*: we could pull it apart, dance to it or even eat it – whatever we wanted. I loathed that kind of hands-on project, and I always classed what people called 'performance art' as just a breeding ground for dilettantes. I went off with another student, the last one left as he was especially lazy and uninspired. In a foul mood, I looked at the pages. Tosch ran from room to room with a tray, handing out coffees from the vending machine to each group. The minutes went by. Nothing came to mind. The act of turning my nose up at the task had hollowed out my brain. Just before our time was up, I tore all the dialogue out of the text so we had lots of shreds of paper, and I snapped at my partner to help. Then everyone went back to the seminar room to present their results. When it was our turn, the other student and I stood in the middle. I threw all the scraps of paper on the floor. We took turns fishing a scrap out of the heap and reading the sentence aloud. I was annoyed with my stupid idea, which meant I had to bend over and show everyone my ample behind, which I always hid with great care under long jumpers. I resigned myself to sucking up the mess I'd made of it and told myself I didn't belong there anyway: in reality I was nothing more than a housewife and a cleaner.

After our performance, Tosch spoke for a little bit too long in praise of our highly expressive dialogue of Musil's random phrases, which, absurd though it was, proved that a good, enduring text has its theme in every sentence: it is present throughout, and irrepressible. Then the seminar came to an end. The students left the room, but Tosch remained seated, not moving a muscle. It wasn't like him: he was usually one of the first to go out for a smoke by the barrel-shaped ashtray in the hallway.

Later, when we were huddled together in the Joseph and we'd begun our confessional phase, Tosch needed three glasses of schnapps to make him come out with his story. While I'd been bending over for the scraps, he'd felt a stirring in his cock. I didn't believe him; to me my bottom was too unattractive for it to possibly be true. 'You're talking

out of your arse,' I said, pleased with my wordplay. Tosch came back, quick as a flash: 'I thought you were a smart arse.'

Tosch went out of his way to get close to me. I misinterpreted most of it. The ticket inspector with no sensation in her belly noticed none of Tosch's advances. She didn't feel flattered, and she didn't flirt. This genderless being didn't respond to erotic signals. Where the sparkle of libido should have been, there was a blind spot deep inside me, scrubbed into me with harsh cleaning products.

'I was more dead than you, Tosch.'

In the weird competition over the extent of our deadness, the two of us agreed that we'd both been dead. The competition's only purpose was to let each other know time and time again how, that night when we hit it off in the Joseph, it was an explosion of love.

Laying ourselves bare

When all my rational powers first made me aware that I was on the verge of cleaning away all traces not just of the messy conductor, but also of my daughter and finally myself, I asked the father of a friend at the time, who was a psychiatrist in Berlin, for advice. He recommended a Leipzig psychiatrist, who referred me to Dr T.

We sat opposite each other at first, but soon I was lying on her couch, the classic Sigmund Freud type, once initially, then twice, then three times a week. Dr T would sit in a comfortable armchair behind my head and take notes.

Over the course of three years, I dumped tons of material onto Dr T. For the entire first year, I ranted about my mother on an endless loop. Dr T must have been bored to death. But when you're lying on a Sigmund Freud couch, you can't see if the woman in the armchair is picking her nails or taking a nap. And it doesn't matter. A good therapist is someone who wakes up at the right moments.

While Dr T knew everything about me, I knew very little about Dr T. She'd studied physics and worked as a physicist before retraining as a psychoanalyst. She didn't have children, which suited me just fine: I could be her child, her only child, her favourite. Later, I valiantly admitted to myself that I wasn't her only patient. Dr T may have been childless but in a way, she had plenty of children.

Once she told me a story. She'd previously run courses to help people stop smoking, which had been a great success. During the breaks, she'd gone outside to have a well-deserved cigarette. Not in secret: everyone could see her. Dr T didn't want to stop smoking: she just wanted to run the courses. She won my heart with that story, once and for all. And with her gravelly laugh that oozed rebellious potential.

When I grabbed Tosch between the legs, Dr T had already softened the first dead layer of crust within me. I'd been having treatment for a few months and by that point I was leading a triple, or even quadruple, life. In my rattly Renault 5 with its choke and its child seat, I'd flit between Tosch's bachelor pad, the end-terrace, the nursery, Dr T's practice and the institute. In the seminars, which had now moved on to prose, I was even more mute than before. I'd stare at Tosch's open shirt collar, from which grey chest hair was peeking. Back then, I didn't know Tosch was claustrophobic, for one thing, and for another, that he viewed all the buttons the world over as his enemies. When I found out, it didn't make me

love him any less. Tosch needed air around his neck and only did up the buttons he absolutely had to. He preferred having someone else button up his buttons.

Whenever we could, we arranged to meet at the Joseph and we made confession after confession, not sparing a thing from each other, telling nothing but the truth, opening our hearts for better or worse. 'I'm laying myself bare to you. You're laying yourself bare to me.' I remember that phrase coming to us. Afterwards, in his bachelor pad, we fell on each other.

At four in the morning, I dashed back to the end-terrace in the Renault 5, slept for two hours at my husband's side until Paula woke me up and the day began. Breakfast, nursery, institute, analysis.

Eavesdroppers

At the very beginning, in his bachelor pad, Tosch was reluctant to show me his hearing aids. He was ashamed of wearing them, so he didn't wear them, but he wanted to lay himself bare to me, to let me know what a sad sack he was, what I was getting involved with. He was fifty; he'd begun his replacement-parts phase.

I told him my grandma Martha had worn hearing aids all her life, bulky things with wires curling from her ears down to an angular plastic case tucked inside her bra. Unfortunately, despite the aids, Grandma Martha was still hard of hearing. Nevertheless, she bought herself a record player, along with one single record, which she listened to again and again at a bloodcurdling volume: 'La Montanara' by Vico Torriani, 'La Montanara' over and over again. Grandma Martha was addicted to it. She stood in her Leipzig living room, singing along with a bad vibrato and genuine tears.

Tosch told me that in the 1970s he'd lived in a commune in Berlin's Kreuzberg district, in a crumbling tenement block near Görlitz station. He'd been studying philosophy and drinking, just like his flatmates, all of them teenage dropouts who'd escaped conscription and their stuffy parents' homes in the West German provinces. They wore nylon shirts and flares, read Marx and explained the world to each other, gesticulating like revolutionaries. There was only one TV in the house; they sat in front of it and watched a frothy entertainment programme, solely for the purpose of analysing it. They exposed the hypocrisy of the bourgeois concept of culture through pop songs, and Tosch, as a Swiss radical, was at the forefront. Then Vico Torriani came on, a guitar swinging back and forth like a bell's clapper as it dangled from his neck, behind him a buxom women's choir humming, and bringing up the rear an Alpine panorama: the sun setting over Swiss peaks. The West German philosophy students sneered and ridiculed the kitsch sight before them. 'Can you hear La Montanara, the mountains are calling you...' The Swiss man went quiet, all his arrogance deserting him. Tears ran down Tosch's face. An acute attack of homesickness.

Unlike the itinerant conductor, Tosch always knew where his home was. And he always wanted to know where my home was, and he always devoured my stories.

Grandma Martha and Tosch never got to know each other, but they crossed paths in 'La Montanara', between their sobs. And in their hearing aids.

Tosch put them in the palm of my hand, there in his bachelor pad. I played around for a while with the dainty models, sang the praises of modern technology and said, 'Put them in, I want you to hear me.' Tosch was visibly relieved and from then on, he always wore

them, getting new ones every few years. We called them the 'eavesdroppers'. The eavesdroppers remained because they were brought out into the open, right from the start – the epitome of our agreement to lay ourselves bare.

A straight fail

Two things tormented me on Dr T's couch.

First, my lack of tears. Dr T once remarked that if I needed to cry, I should just go ahead and do it. I saw this as a task that had to be fulfilled. I thought I had plenty of reason to cry. If analysis went well, you really lost your composure, thrust your head into a cushion, kicked, sobbed, whimpered: that was what I thought, and that was what I wanted. But I couldn't cry. I'd forgotten how. Clogged tear ducts, some kind of veto in my head. This meant a straight fail in the subject of crying, which was, of course, bound to bring my overall marks down.

The second, far greater torment was the thought of Paula. You could read it and hear it everywhere: the first three years of life are the most crucial in terms of attachment. In a child's first three years, they get so much from their mother: physical closeness, serenity, security: the feelings that make them stable and strong later in life. Paula was almost three, and I thought I'd thoroughly messed up her early years. With a mother who constantly cleaned and hated herself, no child would be able to grow into a healthy adult. It was too late to put things right; now all that mattered was damage limitation. I wished that Dr T could help me at least mitigate my failure of Paula in the years that were left. And that, however it worked out, she could absolve me of my guilt.

A new style of father

Not that I neglected any of the things a mother has to do. I fed, swaddled and caressed Paula, gave her suppositories to bring down her fevers, carried her to the doctor, applied cream to every single one of her chickenpox spots. I settled Paula in the nursery, dressed her up as a little devil for carnival, did puzzles with her, sorted beads, painted pictures. I splashed around with her in the bath, cut her toenails, bought her pretty dresses. I snuggled up with Paula for hours, made her laugh, comforted her.

I did all that and yet I wasn't really there. I was missing something – what was it? Control over what was happening. Sovereignty. It was also fair to say I wasn't an adult myself.

On top of these feelings, the conductor attested to my inabilities: I couldn't cook, I couldn't handle money, and I fussed over Paula too much. He was an old hand at raising children – a little too demonstratively for my liking, and especially so when we had guests. They'd be greeted with an alcoholic drink and then had to watch the conductor cook. He'd have Paula balanced on his left arm, and in his right hand a flaming pan, flambéeing some meat. The guests would gasp and then they'd all have to heap endless praise on his exquisite dishes.

The conductor would haul Paula around, singing counting songs to her and making jokes until she laughed, much to the delight of his audience, who were mostly female. They thought he was cool. Unconventional. A new style of father. He'd already changed nappies and raised three children in the eighties, the conductor explained, and on top of that, all his children would grow up with classical music. 'You stupid progressive Dutchman,' I'd think to myself.

It was only once I'd left the end-terrace forever that I understood: we were two mothers. He received far more applause for his role, while I was just doing what every mother does. He enjoyed being admired and gazed at in wonder, and he carried Paula around with him like a cute accessory. It was only with her that he became visible. The fifty-year-old dad clung to his two-year-old daughter. She embellished him, just as his black tailcoat, white bow tie and red cummerbund had once done. If these ornaments were taken away, the hundred-kilo man disintegrated into a heap of depression, into dust that I would happily have swept away.

Teeth

Laying ourselves bare, all our foibles and peculiarities.

Tosch found it more difficult. He'd had a proper upbringing, and he was used to dealing with things on his own. His father was a lawyer and a politician; his mother wore high heels, large hats and a thick layer of makeup, fulfilled her official wifely duties and never touched her son. When Tosch was eleven and a half, she put him in a Catholic convent.

Tosch had secrets, and it took schnapps to make him spill the beans. He'd sit there squirming, just giving hints at first, and only feeling brave enough once he'd had another schnapps. He'd slam it down on the table: a desire, a fear, an ailment. I was never indignant, never horrified. At most, I'd be aroused (when he came out with sexual fantasies) and I'd think, 'Keep talking.' Or 'Tell me something I don't know, Tosch.'

From the word go, teeth belonged in his confession catalogue. Ever since I'd first known Tosch, he'd been anxious about his teeth. As a child, he was fitted with braces of proportions just as brutal as Grandma Martha's hearing aids. If little Tosch and his mother ever bumped into someone the politician's wife wanted to chat with, she'd whisper to her son to keep his mouth shut.

Tosch had seen many dentists over the years: wires and retainers, anaesthetics and impression moulds; he had inflamed, bleeding gums and a receding tooth bed; everything wobbled and moved around, threatening to fall out. None of it was visible: he had perfectly normal teeth, maybe even handsome teeth. But for Tosch, when it came to his teeth, it had been five to midnight for decades. That dream we all have from time to time – the one where we spit out our teeth one by one like Tic Tacs and run our tongues over our bare pink old-timer gums – didn't just haunt him at night. Every so often, Tosch had to tell me about his unresolved dental problems; it made him feel a little better.

At some point later, Tosch decided he was tired of going through all those dental sessions and paying thousands of Swiss francs for his teeth; the bloody things could just fall out as far as he was concerned. Deciding to let the ravages of time have their own way can be liberating.

Perverse

In the Joseph, our regular drinking hole by now, I would regularly bubble over: I unreservedly told Tosch about my trips to Dr T and talked almost with pride about my cleaning compulsion, which controlled me less and less and inspired me more and more, and which, according to Dr T, was a 'great symptom'. As it subsided, it – and the lack of it – became fascinating to research.

Tosch discussed Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst, and perversion. The Lacanian definition of the word 'perverse' is etched in my memory: if its syllables are reversed, you get 'vers père': 'towards father' or 'back to the father'. Tosch said that all sexuality is perverse: if it isn't, it's dormant. Without breaking taboos and without a fair amount of fear of doing so, without the courage to look towards perversion, human beings would never be able to find the sexuality they seek. Tosch had immersed himself in the subject by reading, visiting brothels and gathering experience; I was curious, mainly about the practical aspects. Ever since my desire had been reawakened, I was craving everything that touched on the filth I'd wanted to banish from my life only a short time before: once again I became an intrepid pioneer of physical love.

While we were in the Joseph, Tosch said, 'If you completely cut off your masturbation fantasies from the person you're living with, it marks the end of the relationship.'

Whenever we could, we'd experiment, in his bachelor pad or hotel rooms in cities where Tosch had literary events. Our being head over heels in love, our hard-earned trysts and our happiness at having escaped our deadness all fuelled our desire. From the very beginning and far beyond, our love was a physical love. The right scents, the right touch, the right pain. But what was special was the way we talked: we explored our sex life verbally and theoretically. We'd draw out the previous night of love in a heated discussion, and it was there that we'd prepare the next. Our dialogues sizzled, and our brains became erogenous zones.

Just as frankly and proudly as I told Tosch about Dr T's findings, I told Dr T about the experiments with Tosch. Dr T enjoyed hearing about them and, as a classic Freudian, she was impressed by Tosch's knowledge of Lacan; she probably found this part of the analysis the most interesting.

The conductor and Tosch had been born on exactly the same day: one in a small Dutch town, the other in a small Swiss town. When the conductor's fifty-first birthday, which was also Tosch's fifty-first birthday, was nearing, Dr T asked me what I'd be giving them. 'One an egg cup,' I said, 'and the other handcuffs.' Dr T laughed her coarse laugh; 'That settles it,' she said.

Pendulum

The pendulum idea first came to me when I was in my early thirties.

I swung like a pendulum between Tosch and Dr T, whom I secretly chose as my ideal parents. I swung between superego and id. I swung between the end-terrace, where I was a

mother and wife, and the institute, where I had my first successes as a student. I swung between two men – an excess that later seemed a luxury.

It took a while for the pendulum idea to mature into its full beauty. For me to become a professional pendulum. For me to realise I was playing different roles, like an actor, and each of these roles was bound to a place, my stage setting, and to a disguise, my costume. I expanded my repertoire and understood: the paths I took and my changes of location were crucial to my metamorphoses. I became the sum of my roles, between which I swung, just like Vico Torriani's guitar.

Cast iron garden table

I learned of Karl's death from the local newspaper, as I was flicking through it at the breakfast table in the end-terrace. I shut the paper and then opened it again. It was still there: a short report from the German Press Agency. I told the conductor they were claiming Karl had died.

'That alcoholic actor you were with?'

The conductor had no idea who Karl was.

I folded up the paper, tucked it in my bag, got Paula dressed, grabbed her backpack, strapped her into her car seat and set off in the Renault 5. I dropped Paula off with a kiss at the nursery and then drove straight to the bachelor pad, sobbing tears and snot as I clutched the steering wheel.

'Tosch! Karl's dead! What should I do?'

I waved the newspaper at Tosch; I wanted him to see it with his own eyes. Tosch, still sleepy, took me in his arms and held me tight. Then he told me what to do: ring the theatre, ring Karl's grown-up children, go to his funeral. I followed his instructions and banished any qualms or doubts that were in my head. By doing what Tosch told me, I suppressed my shock as well as my indignation. They should have let me know and forewarned me. They should have told me about his death, which, like any death, was too big for just one person's head. I'd always imagined I'd see Karl again one day, when the pain had subsided, when our lives had moved on enough. I'd always thought there was still time.

In my memory, neither the conductor nor Dr T figured when it came to Karl's death. In my memory, I got through Karl's death on my own, and with Tosch. He guided me. He talked to me about Karl, he wanted to know everything and he couldn't get enough of my stories about Karl. Tosch knew him from hearsay; his dramaturge friend had raved to him about Karl's stage presence, his comedy, his melancholy. Tosch even dreamed about Karl, sitting with him in heaven, drinking at Tosch's mother's cast iron garden table. Karl's death also showed me the kind of man I wanted to be with.

I said my goodbyes to the conductor and went to Berlin for the funeral. It was an event that pushed me to the edge of my limits. The worst of all was the sight of the tired little boy, Karl's son, in the arms of my successor. Afterwards I sat in a café at the Ostbahnhof with tears in my eyes, waiting for the train and writing what I'd been through in a notebook with a shaky hand.

Back in Leipzig, I read my scribbles to Tosch. He said, 'Keep writing. Finish the story.' Two years later, it became the last story in my first book.

Under one roof

Tosch invited us to spend our summers in Switzerland. Once we spent two weeks in a village in the Appenzell region, another time ten days in a hotel in Flims, and then, when Paula was nine, Tosch ran back joyfully to our expensive holiday apartment overlooking Lake Lucerne and announced that the farmer over the road (whom he knew from a winter he'd spent writing there) had offered us part of his house for holidays. From then on every summer, we went to Morschach for six weeks. During those holidays, we did what other people do all year round: we lived together under one roof.

To start with, Paula went to the barn at half past six every morning in her wellies and enthusiastically helped the farmer and his wife with the milking. But she soon adapted her sleep-wake cycle to Tosch's and gently slid into his slipstream. She read thick tomes until well after midnight and slept until noon. I remained an early riser and relished the fresh coolness of the mornings. Sometimes I'd rise with the sun and walk through the surrounding fields, go up into the forest or do a few exercises. I'd sit down at the kitchen table with the window open, switch on my laptop and write. At half past seven sharp I'd hear the farmer's wife's broom scratching across the farmyard. Sometimes she'd come over to water the geraniums or start some laundry off. We'd have a little chat, the washing machine rumbling in the background.

Tosch and Paula would sit down at the breakfast table when they woke at around twelve. Tosch made sophisticated plans for the day, but first he liked to write for two or three hours. Paula happily crept back to bed and carried on reading, or she visited the kennel, where she'd play with Fido and Rambo, the two hunting dogs. I'd lie down for a nap.

In the afternoons, we toured Lake Lucerne by steamboat, strolled along the lakeside promenade or took a pedalo out onto Lake Zug and jumped into the water. The hikes Tosch planned also began in the afternoons, at a time of day when serious hikers have long completed their routes. We took cable cars or cogwheel trains up steep slopes, followed paths that may or may not have been signposted, and as we walked alongside pastures, crossed mountain streams, circled mountain lakes or hiked across sunlit plateaux, Radio Dachshund broadcast its unrivalled programme, always with the same panel: Tosch the presenter, Paula the donkey and me, the dachshund Waldi.

'Hello listeners, and welcome to our show. And here they are, it's the Oskamp girls with their beloved opening yodel!'

'Riptiri jolladiho riptiri jolladiho riptiri-o-i-hollajoiti jollajoiti holla jäijoujäijouti hollajäiti tihollajäiti tihollajäiti holla jäijoujäijouti hollajäiti ti-o-ti hollajäiti.'

'And now, dear listeners, I'd like to introduce you to today's studio guest. It's a donkey. And this donkey's got something to tell us about. Hello, dear donkey, please tell us what's happened.'

'A gorilla bit my ears off.'

'Oh dear. How terrible.'

'I'm Waldi, the dachshund from...'

Sigh. 'Shh, Waldi. So, dear donkey, how could this have happened?'

'I'm Waldi, the dachshund from nextdoor...'

'Waldi! Out! Now, dear donkey, please tell us how this could have happened.'

'A gorilla bit off...'

'I'm Waldi, the dachshund from nextdoor. I'm getting very old now. Would you have a...'

'Waldi! Out! Our donkey would like to...'

'...a tin of dog food? I'm Waldi, the dachshund from nextdoor. I'm getting very old. You wouldn't have a tin of dog food, would you? I'm Waldi, the dachshund from nextdoor...'

'Waldi! Help!... Well, dear listeners, that's it, tune in next week when we'll be back again.'

'Riptiri jolladiho riptiri jolladiho riptiri-o-i-hollajoiti jollajoiti holla jäijoujäijouti hollajäiti tihollajäiti tihollajäiti holla jäijoujäijouti hollajäiti ti-o-ti hollajäiti.'

Pick me up

Before he left, Tosch had sat at the kitchen table in the farmhouse and given me instructions: he gave me blank cheques and power of attorney, handed me his unopened mail to answer and a list of the most important people to whom I'd need to pass on the facts, without distinction or digression. But what were the facts?

On the day of the operation, I was in Berlin waiting for the call that would bring relief. The urologist didn't call, but the phone did ring non-stop. Concerned friends and acquaintances wanted to know the operation's outcome, which I didn't know myself. Then the urologist did finally get in touch: the operation had taken much longer than expected; he'd removed fifty-two lymph nodes. Whatever that meant. Tosch was still alive.

He rang as soon as he came round from the anaesthetics. Pretended nothing had happened. As time went on, knowing his proper upbringing and his survival strategies, I was able to interpret his little hints and I could tell he was in pain, struggling on the loo, forcing himself to shower, loathing his catheter like the plague.

Then, suddenly, Tosch called from the cardiology ward. 'Heart problems,' he announced, 'everything's under control.' Later, he told me how he had been seized by panic in the middle of the night. A nurse didn't take his alarm seriously, so he had to make it clearer: 'If you don't call a doctor right away, I'll ring the police!' Tosch was wheeled through corridors, pushed into lifts and freshly wired up on a cold metal table when the monitors sounded the alarm and an entire horde of white coats galloped in at the last moment to intercept the heart attack Tosch was heading for with a pulse of two hundred beats per minute. His calcified blood vessels were dilated with balloons, and the next morning the surgeon woke Tosch and happily offered him an espresso.

Tosch called himself a double patient; his biggest problem was not pegging out in the place. He took over his own patient management, luring in nurses, bribing orderlies and fooling both the computer system and the reception staff. Note to self: if you want to survive hospital, you must be on top form.

Then Tosch discharged himself. He ordered his sister to come to the hospital, and she took him to her house in Basel, where she lived with her husband and son.

'Pick me up,' he said to her, 'get me out of here.'

I drove to Basel on a sweltering day and found Tosch covered in blue, red, purple, green and yellow bruises. The sight of him was much more shocking than his voice had sounded on the phone. Tosch, trembling, threw himself around my neck, before giving me his next instructions. I ran around Basel in search of a Sunday pharmacy and the appropriate incontinence items, then I packed up Tosch's clothes, ordered a taxi and then on the Monday morning, I boarded the train to Berlin with him, while in reality he was incapable of walking or sitting down. Tosch hung on to me, and to my words: 'We can get off at any time and get a hotel room, in Freiburg, or Fulda, or Kassel-Wilhelmshöhe.' Every little bump in the tracks was like a lightning bolt in Tosch's sore nether regions.

I was familiar with that feeling: fifteen years earlier, I'd dragged myself along, edging sideways like a crab, and climbed into a friend's car to get from the women's clinic in Rostock to the children's hospital's premature baby unit.

Now, on the train, we went to the disabled toilet together every hour on the hour.

'Take the backpack with us.'

'What?'

'My manuscript!'

In the toilet, Tosch lowered the braces I'd bought him; I crouched down in front of him, took off his shoes and various garments and Tosch stood in front of the toilet bowl and pissed blood. After a mini orgy of disinfection, I helped him put everything back on, and very slowly we walked back to our seats, me loaded down with Tosch's thick novel manuscript in the backpack.

Once we reached Berlin, my father was waiting in his car at the Ostbahnhof. One last major undertaking to get in, get out and climb the stairs, before Tosch was back in his nest. At home in his bachelor pad. His own loo, his own bed. The healing could begin.