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ABSCHIED

Living alone for the first time was glorious. I was grateful for my new life where I could eat pumpernickel bread with plum butter for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and stay up until 3:00 AM reading Günter Grass. I had escaped the tyranny of my parents and my high school teachers, who although officially denazified, had tortured me with their fascist teaching methods. At the University of Münster most of my professors were Marxists. Gripped by the radical ambiance, I joined a socialist cell. Six weeks into the winter semester we went on strike and boycotted classes.

After a long day of revolutionary activity—inspired by Jerry Rubin and the Yippies, we had crowned a pig president of the University—I came home to crash on the sofa. It was November 21, my forty-seventh day of living away from home. When the Dutch Pirate Radio Veronica started to play Barry McGuire's *Eve of Destruction*, I sang along with enthusiasm. I didn't understand most of the lyrics but *Yeah, my blood's so mad feels like coagulin', I'm sitting here just contemplatin'* sounded great.

The telephone's harsh ring aborted my reveries. I expected my landlady to complain about the noise. But it was my mother. "Your father is back in hospital. He might not make it this time," she said. I felt her weariness through the telephone cables. She didn't sound sad or anxious, just tired to the bone. "You have to come home right away," she said.

My father had been sick for the past two years. Blown up to 300 pounds, he was responsible for his sorry state by his stubborn insistence on gigantic portions of food high in starch, fat and sugar. As he gave up, everyone else in the family gave up on him also. He wanted to die. It was just a matter of time. We had run out of compassion and waited for the inevitable.

I took the bus directly to the hospital from the Moers train station. I dreaded having to see him at *Krankenhaus Bethanien's* Medical Clinic II, a unit few people left alive. The entrance hall was full of rubber trees and snake plants, the standard decoration for every German institutional building. The

receptionist on duty was a chubby rosy cheeked matron with big ruffled curls that made me wonder if she slept with rollers the size of Coke cans. She knew me and handed me the visitor's pass without asking where I was headed. I took the pass, and then walked along the long corridor toward the elevator.

The moment I got off the elevator I was in the grip of unconquerable trepidation. The smell of disinfectant, ubiquitous clinical white and the deathly silence, made my stomach queasy. I sped up as I passed by the nurses' station to avoid the spurious cheerfulness of Sister Hildegard. She might invite me to the evening service in the chapel. I had declined her first offer two months ago: "Thank you so much, but I'm no longer a member of the Church. I signed myself out when I was fourteen." She had given me a stern look as if I had personally offended her and made it her mission to bring me back into the flock.

Sister Hildegard sat behind the desk surrounded by rubber plants. Immersed in her TV guide, she failed to notice me. The door to room 142 was left ajar. Stepping in was a Herculean task. Although I had been visiting on and off for the past two years, it had never gotten any easier. As I peeked in, my father's roommate, Herr Wischnewski, winked at me. He had worked at the Friedrich Heinrich coal mine for forty years and had been diagnosed with black lung disease. The doctors had cut out one of his lungs. He had forced me to listen to his sad tale several times: "They opened me up and discovered cancer. The inoperable, progressive kind. There was nothing they could do, so they just sewed me up again." He was waiting for his Maker to take him home and had already saved enough money for his funeral. The drawer of his nightstand contained a list of all people he wanted invited to the memorial service. Like my father's previous roommates, he too would leave in a coffin. Herr Wischnewski, akin to all the other patients I had encountered, was lonely and bored. The patients lived from visit to visit. In between they watched TV.

I forced a smile, straightened my spine and stepped in. "Good afternoon Herr Wischnewski, how are you today?"

He gave his standard answer. "Ready to call it quits."

"It can't really be all that bad. You look so much better than you did two weeks ago." I tried to humor him. Waiting for death was gloomy enough. I went over to my father's bed, shook his hand and placed a bag of oranges on the metal night stand to his right.

"How are you?" I asked.