

Picture Without Girl

Sarah Elena Müller

Novel

German



In her debut novel Picture Without Girl, Sarah Elena Müller broaches a sensitive subject: child abuse. The story of the child, neglected and left to suffer, wins over readers with its highly concentrated, poetic language. What goes on at the neighbours' house doesn't worry the parents. The mother is too busy devoting herself to her art, the father trying to save the environment. So their child goes to watch TV at Ege's place. Ege is a media theorist who collects films. He also films the child. In one of the films, the child discovers an angel. She holds on to the angel and seeks refuge in it while enduring her helpless silence. The adults do not see the angel; they look away altogether. In their quest for self-fulfilment, they have neither the time nor patience to deal with the child's suffering, and so they enlist a questionable healer to take care of her bed-wetting. Darkly, the child suspects that she is not an angel: 'It's her own fault.'

"The child wants to forget that her soul has a leak through which it is dripping."

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Bild ohne Mädchen

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Sarah Elena Müller, born in 1990, is a multimedia artist who works in literature, music, virtual reality, radio play and theatre. She is a ghostwriter for the Swiss dialect pop duo *Cruise Ship Misery*, in which she also performs as a musician, and leads the virtual reality project *Meine Sprache und ich* (My language and I) – a detailed examination of Ilse Aichinger's language criticism. In 2019, her scene book *Culturestress – Endzeit isch immer scho inbegriffe* (Culture stress – the end time is always included) was published by Der gesunde Menschenversand. In 2015, her short story *Fucking God* was published by Büro für Problem. As co-founder of the RAUF collective, she is committed to the causes of feminist authors in Switzerland. Her work is occasionally awarded prizes and residencies.

Photo: Laura Stevens

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Excerpt translated by Katy Derbyshire

LONG VIEW

The girl's grandmother stares at the corner. In the corner, the roar of the ocean. In the roar, the voice of a French singer, the wind her grandmother says will soon come and whirl everything up. And the undertaker comes for her grandfather.

The carer gives her grandmother a mauve pill to make the singer stop singing. But neither the surge nor the singing die down; her grandmother makes them push her wheelchair up to the corner so she can hear better. The high wind blows along the ships, or the slips of paper, her grandmother says, frowning at the singer's strange accent. Behind her grandmother's back, the girl's mother tugs at the wheelchair's handles to move her out of the corner, but her grandmother braces her feet against the carpet. There's no wind blowing, her mother assures her. Not yet, but soon, her grandmother replies, and won't let it go. Exhausted by the headwinds, her mother lets go of the wheelchair; her grandmother stays put in her oceanic corner.

In the hallway, her chin resting on her lower arms, the girl leans over into the photos on the dresser, immersed in the faces of her still-young aunts and uncles. The same aunts and uncles who ordered pizza the night before, something to fill their still-living bodies. The ones who then talked their way inconspicuously out of their parental home, the house containing their dead father and so much responsibility. Suddenly, life's logic seems to the girl's mother like the freshest of inspirations. Amazed, she moves one of the picture frames closer to the edge of the dresser.

'The later they were born, the more alive they look.'

She points at the young girl at the centre of the picture, at herself. The youngest of the six siblings is sitting on her lap, his cheerful moony face turned willingly to the camera. Her own eyes jab far out of the picture, out of the world. The photographer had told Mademoiselle to raise her chin a little, if she didn't mind. But Mademoiselle did not raise her chin, only briefly her eyes. The photo-

grapher, shocked at the sadness tumbling towards him through his narrow lens, forgot to press the button; Mademoiselle was looking away again, beyond the margin of existence, by the time the shutter clicked.

'The others have horizon eyes too,' the girl's mother remarks, running her finger over the glass, 'just less so than me. Less and less over the years; this brother here, three years after me, his eyes aren't looking quite as far. But at least to the nearest body of water.'

The girl takes the picture, holds it with outstretched arms and tries in vain to navigate her way into that brother's field of vision. His eyes too are leaving the picture, not touching anyone and heading for the distance.

'It's horribly crowded, living squashed into a square. And there was always another one coming along. They just didn't stop. Always another one. When you're the first, you're made responsible for everything the ones who came after you do. You have to grow up fast and teach the others the rules of the square. The rules, the boundaries and the price of everything. You get pushed to the front, ruthlessly.' The girl's mother marks out the square in front of her face with outstretched hands. 'That way of looking was the only way to escape. Focus on a point that's further away than what's closest. Beyond everything that forces itself upon you.'

The girl nods thoughtfully and puts the picture frame back on the dresser. When she turns to her mother, she is still staring between and through the palms of her hands by turn, her eyes almost imperceptibly switching from near to far. She didn't practise it, she says. It was like she inherited it. It just happened. The girl's mother lowers her hands, holds them out to her daughter, apologetic. Here, you see, it even happens with my own hands.

The daughter takes them, turns them over, gently releases the fingers from their stiff positions and presses her understanding into the cool lump of a maternal hand until it softens again, comes alive again. Over in the other room sits her grandmother, staring at the corner, beyond the world. In the picture frame, the siblings baulk. The girl understands that hands and walls give form to things. That one shape is a mould for the next. Grandmother, mother, daughter.

THE CHILD

SIGHTING

The child shakes off the stiffness of watching TV. Shakes the pictures and sounds out of herself so her parents don't notice she's been secretly filling herself up with them at the neighbours' house. Then she pushes open the living-room door with a fresh face.

In the living room, her parents are sitting on chairs with another adult. Having a Visitor, they call it. After Having a Visitor, her parents slump horizontal and sigh. The backs of their chairs prevent them from collapsing before that.

There is lots of talking while Having a Visitor. The adults want to look each other in the eye while they're talking.

Her kindergarten teacher is sitting on the corner seat. The child watches the conversation's hand movements for a long time, from the threshold. The teacher's say: Not good. Her parents' say: There's no need to worry. The teacher's hands say: Oh, but there is! Just before the child's fresh face freezes again, she is noticed and called to the table. She sits on the very edge of the chair and waits for a word to be said for her. A word that she knows and can reply to. She sits up straight even without the chairback.

The teacher's forehead has a steep furrow. At kindergarten, she had told the child to saw an Easter egg out of thin wood. But the child had not been mentally capable, the teacher informs her parents. Her parents look like they want to fall straight into bed. The child is glad of their chairbacks' support.

She remembers the little saw very well. The teacher had showed her how to saw with it, and as she did so the blade broke with a bang. The child got a shock, and the teacher said it could happen easily. For every broken saw blade, she said, the child would have to pay twenty centimes. Everything had its price, she said with a wink. And then the child had refused to lay a finger on the saw. She didn't have any money, and she was so afraid of a broken saw blade that she spent the rest of the day under a stool. From there, she had watched the other children breaking countless saw blades; amid constant jangling, the children waved the broken saw blades happily in each other's faces. Once the sawdust

and the broken saw blades had been swept up, the teacher dismissed the children with their eggs, not demanding any money from them. The child found it uncanny.

The teacher hasn't told her parents about the money while they are Having a Visitor. The child slides forward on the edge of her seat, anxious. She wants to say her word now. She wants to say that the teacher's forgotten to say a word. The money word. That everything has its price. And that she winked. But the teacher doesn't stop talking. She says development and psychomotor skills and good sense. Her parents roll their eyes; that's a good sign. The child is sent out again, told to go on the swing for a while.

The child examines the swing. It is fixed to the underside of the balcony. Through the open balcony door, she can hear her father's sensible voice talking sense into the teacher. Her mother's voice joins in.

The adults' various good senses step out into a forest clearing. They are stags. They circle each other, examining the ends of each other's antlers. The stags do that so they don't end up in an exhausting battle every time they cross paths. Her father told her that. Stags are noble. Stags weigh things up. They count things up. The child can't count, and nor can she pay. She can't pay the price. Her mother's good sense might sense, though, that the teacher's not telling the whole story. Her mother said stags have no understanding of numbers or ends; they sense each other's strength.

The child hopes that her parents' good sense will chase the teacher's good sense out of the clearing, and she's grateful to the chairbacks. Her parents will be very tired again after Having a Visitor.

She climbs onto the seat, swings back and forth a bit and feels the rough hemp ropes. The swing is a chair without a back; you hold onto the ropes instead. What would happen if she just let go of the ropes? Excitement tingles through her. Would she whip back like the adults? Would she be grown up in one fell swoop?

On the next swing, the child lets go of the ropes and falls hard on her back. Landing knocks the breath out of her. She stares at the gleaming sun and the swing like a pendulum in front of it. She's still inside her body,

she wants to scream but her chest is stiff like concrete. The sun shines in through her unlocked eyes. Her mother calls for her and comes onto the balcony. She leans over the edge. The child is lying on her back on the grass, gasping for air.

Wheezing through the snorkel, the child studies the foam layer above her. The bubbles crackle and sway gently to and fro. The shower hose bumps against the side of the bath, her bottom squeaks against the bottom of the bath, her heart thuds loud and strong. The child listens to her organs; they sound good. She knows her organs will accompany her into adult life. She closes her eyes behind the goggles. This is how it must have been. Dull murmuring and hammering outside, thuds and whooshes inside. She sees her former self as a tiny speck of human life, the way she's floating in the bathwater now, sees her current self eating potato cakes this evening and one day, much later, leaving the house with an idea, a plan or a task. Ready for anything, with a medium-sized bag full of tissues and other accessories for the day. And the organs inside the child will go with her and will speak inside her. The child feels: she belongs to herself.

Inside this feeling lives a second feeling. It is light, sad and beautiful. Like the pictures on the neighbours' TV. There and yet not there. The child can't hold onto the feeling, it drifts out of her chest, tacked onto a breath. It escapes through the snorkel and can't find its way back.

Under the foam, the child sobs. The window is open a crack; the feeling will get away. She wants her parents to catch it. Keep it, for later. The child knows something is happening that she can't understand. Presumably something even her parents can't understand. But they ought to. They ought to know what to do, about her kindergarten teacher, and the price that everything has. They said good sense. Show a bit of good sense.

Her mother's face peeks through a hole in the foam layer, two arms reach from far away for her shoulders and lift the child out of the water. Tears in her goggles. Her mother tugs at the snorkel's mouthpiece and a wail comes out of the child, like she's pulled out a plug. Her father pricks up his ears in the kitchen. He's pushing potato cakes around the frying pan with a wooden

spatula. What's the matter with the child? The potato cakes will soften the blow, her father assures himself. Her mother sits the rubbed-dry child down on the corner seat. All she saw was the snorkel poking out of the foam, she says, and she was sobbing out of the snorkel. Her mother casts a perplexed look at her father. He puts a plate in front of the child. But the potato cake takes no effect; the child is shaken over and over by cramps in her diaphragm, starts choking and wants to shout out.

Her father is talking down the telephone at his customers. Sometimes the customers get the telephone numbers mixed up and suddenly her father's in the middle of work. He crosses his legs and bobs one foot up and down, sinking deep into the sofa. The customers want her father to rescue, preserve or count a plant or animal species and to settle a quarrel with those who want the opposite. Her father jams the phone between his shoulder and chin and draws two sweeping circles on a piece of paper with his pen. The child knows there's a solution hidden in the middle, where they cross over. The plants and animals are counting on this solution. And her father has to find it.

His foot bobs on his customers' behalf. He uses an advisor's voice for his customers. Inspection ... mhm, yes. Common swift ... Right, this Tuesday. Possibly, at the meeting ... And in this situation, it's a good idea to settle out of court ... He speaks for a long time, laughs in between, someone else speaks for a long time on the line, the foot bobs, her father listens, his long legs stretching further and further out from the sofa. The child watches the foot's bobbing carefully, trying to deduce a rule or a deeper wisdom. But the bobbing remains unfathomable, without rules. It seems not to be a direct emphasis of what's being said. Her father asks, the customers answer, the foot bobs. The customer asks, her father provides information, the foot bobs.

The child wants to seek information from her father too. About the angel she saw at the neighbours' place. Whether she's a species. And whether she's rare and special and worth protecting. She wants her father to come with her to the neighbours' place and give the angel a name. To explain to her where the angel comes

from and what habitat she needs – not all this talking to others on the telephone and bobbing of his foot.

The child wants to hang from her father's ankle, heavy as a stone, to put an end to this incomprehensible movement, but she's afraid to. Perhaps the bobbing is what fuels her whole father. Perhaps all the cogs and the processes they drive inside her father get their energy from that foot. And if the child interfered with that cycle, her entire father might grind to a halt, unable to continue his work and solve the customers' conflicts on the telephone. Everything hangs on that bobbing foot, and that fact drives the child wild. She wants to warn her father the sofa is about to swallow him up while a rare angel lives with the neighbours, presumably never sighted before, probably even the only one of her species, and her father doesn't notice her because he's in an office powered by a bobbing foot.

Despairing, the child sits on the carpet and focuses on this paternal foot. How can she be sure it was an angel? The angel was blurry and appeared only briefly. Then Edgar had pressed EJECT and the videotape came out of the machine, nothing but ants seething over the screen. Edgar, shaking his head. Not an angel. It's not an angel. Just a picture. But when the child closes her eyes, the little white wings shine like flames in the dark. The angel burns behind her eyelids.

The child jerks her eyes back open. The paternal foot is still bobbing. When will the pause come for her to speak? Then her father braces himself up out of the depths of the sofa. The phone call is over. The foot's no longer bobbing; it's needed now for walking and standing. That calms the child for the moment, body parts now being used for their intended purpose.

CLARIFICATION

The healer leans over the child on the couch and stares into her eyes. The child stares back into the healer's eyes. Doubts rumble in her stomach.

She told the healer about the missing feeling when they were still facing each other on chairs. The healer nodded behind his desk and wrote everything down, which did the child good. But she feels different on the couch. The feeling is missing too badly, it's a hole that the healer's eyes fall into unchecked.

He will now deprogram the information on what's missing, the healer explains to the child. Through intense eye contact alone. The child clams up instinctively. Does the healer want to extinguish the angel? The child won't let her go.

Instead, she tests the healer. She reciprocates his staring, repeating in her mind: I am a whale. I'm not missing a feeling. I'm swimming in the ocean. If he really can read minds, this information will amaze him.

The healer breaks out in a slight sweat but doesn't react to the child's thoughts. After a while, he dabs the sweat from his brow and moves away. Has the child been taking her algae tablets like a good girl, he asks. The child nods. She'd crushed them to dust with a stone and tipped them in the frog pond. With plenty of water, the healer adds. The child lies still and peers over at the healer from the corner of her eye. He's looking for something in his desk drawer. Will the healer share the whale information with her parents?

'No,' the healer says casually, dripping scented oil into a burner. The child jumps. Did he really hear what she'd asked herself silently? Can you hear me, Mr Healer? she asks again in her mind, loud and clear. But the healer doesn't react this time.

A knock.

'That'll be your mummy,' the healer says.

While the child puts on her sneakers, the healer arranges a new appointment with her mother. They talk about the scent in the burner and its effects, eucalyptus, clarifying, cleansing, she'll grow out of the bed-wetting. But the missing feeling ...

The child stands by the window, her back to the adults, and fingers the curtain fabric. The healer's eyes rest lovingly on the tangled back of the child's head for a moment. A particularly stubborn one.

'Well then,' says her mother, and pushes her out of the office. Over her shoulder, the child casts one more penetrating look at the healer.

'The soul and the organs are closely connected,' her mother explains on the way to the bus stop, but the soul is as deep as a dark ocean, she says. Perhaps the healer can shed some light on the depths. The child thinks of the algae tablets in the frog pond. Of a spine-chilling fight between a kraken and an orca in the blackest darkness

of the deep sea. No healer can dive easily to such depths.

'I'm an orca,' she announces to her mother.

'A toad, more like,' her mother titters.

They meet her father on the bus, coming home from inspecting a golf course. The bus is crowded and the child gets sat down on his lap. Her father is immersed in conversation with the man next to him, and the child feels the bobbing paternal foot through the leg she is sitting on. Serious words shoot back and forth.

Ombudsman, negotiation basis, conflict parties, corruption risk, water pollution, corporate responsibility, long-term study, population reduction, problem-solving, confidentiality, ambiguity tolerance, decision delegation.

The child needs to pee. But the men are talking so emphatically that she doesn't know when she could interrupt to say she needs the toilet. She doesn't dare to say her own short little pee-pee words between the adults' long important words.

Her father's gone inside to change his wet trousers. Her mother's gone inside to reread the information leaflet for the algae tablets. The child hasn't gone inside. She's sitting outside on the doormat, eating raisins. The bristles prickle her calves.

The dark stain on her father's trouser leg; she'd like to forget that her soul's sprung a leak and is dripping out of it. If she was surrounded by water, no one would notice it. But there's no water far and wide. Heat and fields and the bristly doormat, over which Visitors step into the house to discuss the soul's connection to Easter eggs and organs with her parents. Who is it that connects the connections? Who is it that has such great strength?

Ants flit around the doormat. When there's nothing on the neighbours' TV, the ants run around there, too. Is there a connection between the ants? The child tries to follow a single ant with her eyes. If you knew what a single ant was doing and where it was going, you could get an overview of the ants' connection. And on top of that, something about the connection as a whole. If this ant here is that ant's daughter, does that mean the ant that just crawled out from under the doormat is this one's mother, the queen? But the ants run wild all over

the place. The raisins in her hand get sweaty.

The child bites a sticky raisin in two and puts one half down on the edge of the doormat. An instant throng ensues, and after a brief round of inspections one ant drags their find away, single-minded. Her eyes focused on the trembling raisin, the child hastily eats up the rest. She needs her hands free for the chase. She is a Doctor of Science. She will finally know what a single ant does. Not until the bearer drags the raisin into a sandy hole with one last jerk does the child raise her eyes. Where? How? She wasn't paying attention to herself. Rubs her eyes.

NAMING

Clutching the tin box with both hands, the child pushes open the heavy wooden door to the studio. Everything important is in the box. She almost trips over a plaster arm, used by her mother to stop the door creaking in the draught. Her mother is standing in the dust, busy with the revolving part of her sculpting trestle. Her ears covered by headphones, she bobs in time to the music. Now and then she sings snatches of words, ...velation ... misticristal ... oh yeah! Her long shirt floats around the tripod legs, the lines of her dance traced in the plaster dust.

The child takes a slim case of slide filters out of her box and fingers out the coloured squares to hold them up in front of her face, one at a time. The neighbour Edgar gave her the slides to look through and get a picture. If she's not allowed to watch TV at home, she might at least use them to put a bit of life into the bland portrayal of the world, he said. That much would be allowed, surely. She could clip the filters in front of a projector for a slide show, just for laughs, so the shapes drawn on them would be superimposed on the photos, and she'd have a different picture, he said. That was especially fun with vacuous holiday pictures. His partner Gisela, whose holiday pictures he was referring to, was standing in the doorway with two bags of shopping. One of her red curls had got caught in the corner of her mouth, a thin cut. Edgar didn't turn around; only the child read the feeling on Gisela's face. Her humiliation, a picture Edgar had long since lost interest in.

Through the slide's square, the child set her sights

on the clay model on her mother's sculpting trestle, screwing one eye shut. She moves the square back and forth, up and down, until the figure looks good inside it. The model is the predecessor to its future self. Once it's ready it'll be swathed in plaster, it will disappear and become a lumpy white shape. Then the predecessor's broken limbs will be carefully scraped out of the cracked-open mould. All that will be left of its body will be what surrounds it, her mother says, a delicate moment prone to losses. If her mother is impatient while doing it, an arm or the head can fall off the absent body. These parts are lost for the successor.

The child would like to enable the brown clay predecessor a life before it has to die as a template for its successor. Perhaps she can do something with the slide filters. She switches from the neutral slide to the first filter. Now the model is on a palm-lined beach. Pleased, the child switches slides. The model is in Christmas Land. The model has a life. In rhythmic sequence, the child holds each filter up to her face, humming.

Now the model's on the palm-lined beach, now the model's in Christmas Land, now it's behind a keyhole, and now it's in my heart. Now it's skiing, on a ship, flying on a plane, having a party, in an office with papers, and an animal through binoculars ...

The child falters. Her father notes down his observations of the animal world on paper. That makes them serious, and you can use long words to talk about them. But she herself can't yet note down her observations. She has to explain the missing feeling and the angel to her mother by speaking.

'I might have seen an angel at the neighbours' house,' the child attempts.

'Huh?' her mother calls out, lifting one headphone off her ear.

'I saw something. At Edgar's.'

'Saw what?' Her mother takes her headphones off and comes closer.

'The edges were blurry. I don't know exactly.'

'Mmmh.' Her mother kneads her face. 'It's starting already.'

The child looks down. What's starting? Watching TV and video cassettes makes you stupid and sad, her mother often says. Your eyes get weak from staring at

the screen. If the child insists, she can do it at the at the neighbours' place. Edgar's got enough technology over there to run his own cinema. From production to screening. Media here, media there. But Edgar mixes up and reverses the flow of imagination with his media, she says. Takes images from outside and confuses that process with an inner idea. Edgar even confuses himself with his ideas. Edgar lives in his imagination. Media, media, tut-tut.

The child remembers her mother's dismissive mouth. She doesn't like media. She likes it when imagination flows from inside. The child doesn't want to disappoint her mother. If the angel could appear again, perhaps here at home and not at the neighbours' place with the dangerously reversed media, she could show her to her mother.

She'll call the doctor later about her blurry vision at Edgar's, her mother comforts her as she rearranges the slide filters in her box, quiet and concentrated. There's help to be had, she says.

But the child has fallen silent. To revive her, her mother heaves an enormous picture book off the shelves, sits down in the plaster dust next to her and opens it up. The child abandons the box and inserts her legs underneath the heavy book cover next to her mother's. She gingerly turns the unwieldy pages.

'We must be careful; muscular characters live between the pages,' her mother murmurs.

'Who are they?' the child asks, rapt.

'Greek divine entities,' her mother replies. 'Look, this is Persephone, and the one with the pitchfork next to her in the chariot is Hades, the god of the underworld.'

'Are they farmers?'

Her mother laughs. 'Because of the fork? No, it's a bident. A symbol of power. But you can probably fork things up with it. All sorts of things ...' her mother continues, turning the next page, '... and here are Persephone's daughters, the avenging angels. They're not happy that Hades has taken their mother, without asking her. They've come to take vengeance. See? Tisiphone's swinging the flaming torch of insanity.'

Her mother's eyes are wide. The child's too. So there really are angels. But her mother extricates herself; she has to get back to work now. She leaves the child to

the book, pats the plaster dust from her thighs and puts her headphones back on.

The child feels pleasantly weighed down by the big book and studies the pictures more closely. The divine entities' edges and rims are clearly outlined. Their feelings are stiff and still on their faces. Horror. Concern. Confusion. Rage. The child reads the feelings. She recognises them. But the names her mother named lie strange on her tongue. The woman in the book is thrashing the man on the ground with a fire.

'What are their names?' the child asks quietly into the studio.

She's sure the angel she saw at Edgar's knows the avenging angels personally. Perhaps she can help her with the divine entities' complicated names? But no answer comes. Muffled singing from her mother's headphones. If she adjusts her voice, the child can answer herself.

'That's my mother,' she says in a deep voice. 'Her name's Tisifairy.'

It sounds right. That's how the angel would talk. The child takes a quick glance up, but her mother is facing her statue, humming to her music. She turns back a page and puts a finger on the pitchfork.

'And what's this?' she asks, to entice the angel back.

'That's my bident. For vengeance. I'm coming now to take vengeance.'

The child sneezes. Plaster dust swirls and she rubs it in her eyes with excitement. The time has come. The angel is coming. She forces her stinging eyes wide. The angel is kneeling on the other side of the book. A tiny sound escapes the child; she waves excitedly to her mother under her headphones. She waves back with a smile, puts a new cassette in her Walkman and turns away again. She's still here, everything's fine, she calls slightly too loudly over her shoulder.

'This is where the music's playing,' the angel grins. 'Don't worry about it. You can see me, and that's a start.' She blows plaster dust off her bident and taps the child's toes poking out from under the book. 'Nice feet.'

She's right. The child is glad to see her. At last she can look at her in peace. All she had left of her from Edgar's film was the bright spots of her wings. Now she can only guess at the wings; the angel's narrow shoulders protrude from the arm holes of a too-large black

leather waistcoat. Underneath it shimmers pale skin. The child is so in awe, she doesn't know where to start. She looks back at the book.

'Why's your mummy hitting that man with the fire? Is she mad at him?'

'Yes, my mother's often angry ... Her name's Tisifairy. She's swinging the flaming torch of insanity.'

Impressed, the child nods. Logical? Logical. The angel nods too. They get it.

'She's an avenging angel. She pours poison from the jug, too,' the angel adds.

The child eyes her closely. Compares her with the picture in the book. Snakes for hair and a billowing robe. The angel doesn't look much like her mother. Apart from the bident, there's nothing unusual about her and he has normal hair on her head.

'Don't look so dumb, I'm Tisifairy's daughter. Do you really think I'd still wear snakes on my head? That's way too old-fashioned. I'm not from the olden days! And I took the waistcoat from Edgar's. Suits me, huh?' Giggling, the angel turns a page. 'Look at this one. This guy with the bident, he's my grandad. He's the god of the underworld. He's called Heidis. And this is my grandma in the chariot with him. Her name's Perceptiony.' The angel chortles. 'And what names do you know?'

The child thinks about it. She knows the neighbour's names, Edgar and Gisela. Sometimes Madonna comes on the radio. And when snow falls in the village, the wooden huts at the bottom of the cable-car play a tune about Anton of Tirol. And everyone joins in. An-ton, An-ton, An-ton! 'He is so handsome and so great. So wild and oh so strong,' the child recites the words to the song.

'Him too?' asks the angel, fluttering her eyelashes.

The child blushes. The angel really is handsome and great and probably strong too.

'That Anton is a kind of god too. We can say my grandad's called Anton, not Heidis. Anton, the ruler of the underworld,' the angel proclaims.

The child is grateful for the angel tidying things up with the names.

'Have you got grandparents as well?' the angel asks.

The child nods. Her grandmother, who crosses the threshold in tiny steps with her Zimmer frame. Who shuffles the soles of her slippers over the doormat,

no resistance, no dirt. Her grandmotherly feet learned that motion. The motion is performed even though there's no dirt any more. Her grandfather, who sits in his armchair with his windcheater on, waiting for her. His agitated palms rubbing back and forth over the fabric of his trouser legs. Making a sound like the wind.