

Extract from Susanne Ayoub's

Engelsgift (Angel's Venom)

translation Victoria Kristoffersen

Susanne Ayoub was born in Baghdad and moved to Vienna at the age of six. After studying Drama and History of Art she worked for the Austrian national broadcasting service as a producer, dramatic advisor and director on radio and television. She has written plays for the screen, radio and theatre. Engelsgift (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, 2004) is her first novel. She lives as a freelance writer in Vienna.

Engelsgift (Angel's Venom) is the story of Marie Horvath, an author in present-day Vienna, who plans to write a screenplay about the sixty year old case of Karoline Streicher, who was sentenced to death in 1938 for the poisoning of her newborn daughter, aunt and a lodger. Karoline had previously been accused of insurance fraud, along with her husband Ferdinand. She was not sentenced and was released due to lack of evidence. Marie interviews Karoline's son, Hermann, who gives Marie a completely new version of the story and claims that Karoline was innocent. His mother was a beautiful woman, who badly mistreated him; however, she was not a murderess. Marie becomes obsessed with listening to the old man tell his story, and realises too late that he has his own plans for her.

The section presented here is towards the end of the book, when Karoline and Hermann contrive a coincidental meeting with her aunt, Sissy Gollner. They eventually move into her apartment and Sissy succumbs to a mysterious illness, leaving Karoline to do what she likes with the apartment and furniture.

The story of Karoline Streicher is based on the real-life case of Martha Marek, who was accused of cutting off her husband's leg with an axe in order to claim invalid insurance. She was guillotined for poisoning her husband, baby daughter, great-aunt and lady's companion with rat poison. Like Karoline, the murders were commit-

ted in order to claim insurance money. The son of her lady's companion became suspicious and this resulted in the bodies being exhumed. At the time – 1938 – the Nazis brought the half-Jewish ancestry of Martha into play, suggesting that this was why she was so evil. She was sentenced and became the first woman to be executed in thirty years.

The main characters in the translated section are Karoline and her son Hermann. They move in with Sissy, Karoline's long-lost aunt, as they have hardly any money to support themselves. Ferdinand, Karoline's husband and Hermann's father, who died of a mysterious illness, is also mentioned, as is Gudrun, his sister, who refused to let Karoline and Hermann continue to live with her.

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Sissy Gollner was heavy-breasted and wide-hipped under her wrinkled black silk. She smelt of perfumed dust and peppermints, which she sucked on constantly in order to disguise her bad breath. Despite her considerable weight she had a swinging, youthful gait and lively, round eyes, which, like her hair, were chestnut brown. Even the freckles on her skin were of that unusual red-brown shade.

What my mother expected from me, and which I put into practice, for better or worse, was a seemingly chance collision, through which one thing would lead to another, until the family relationship was fortuitously – and wholly unexpectedly – uncovered. I had been given the job of dribbling my ball in front of me over the gravel-scattered path: a beardless lad with his toy, running too fast. Enthusiastically and ambitiously trying to get hold of the ball, I was to slip and fall onto both knees, quite hard, so that I bled, and, frightened and in pain, start crying as loudly as I could. All this had to play itself out at the feet of the unknown woman, who would then have no other option but to help me up, allowing my mother to come running with many words of gratitude, and who would then turn out to be the long absent Karoline, whom the Loew family had lost track of many years ago.

I did as she had beaten into me. I dribbled, threw the ball and ran after it. However, it did not go in the direction that I had intended, rolling instead under the clipped hedge and disappearing into the unusually high grass behind it. Karoline's gaze bore through me and promised awful retribution, so I hastened on without the ball to the woman wearing a black silk dress under her Persian lamb coat and a mink hat she aired from time to time with the aid of a hair-dryer. Without much thought, I let myself fall down in front of her, face down, with such force that the worn out material of my trousers tore and both my shin bones and my palms were pricked by the needle-sharp gravel stones. I didn't have to feign any pain and cried out at the top of my voice.

Sissy's hand went to the brim of her hat. With astonishment, she

looked at the whimpering child who had forced the squirrels she had been feeding back into the trees. She regarded me as one would take note of an irritating, albeit everyday misfortune: a torn button or a broken dish, or even a bothersome vermin. She made no move to help me to my feet. Rather, she wanted to make a quick escape but I prevented that. I let myself roll onto my back, a grotesque thing, bleeding, with raised and thrashing legs. This was brought to an end by the appearance of my mother. Like a flash, she swept down on me, grabbed my ear and shook me until I stood up on my own, tormented yet alert. This all happened incidentally, without a word or glance from her. It was to show a measure of upbringing to the woman who stood opposite her and whom Karoline now addressed, in order to placate her and to establish the conversation before she could escape.

"I must apologise for him," Karoline said very solicitously. She gave Sissy her most charming smile. "He's the clumsiest in the family. He certainly hasn't inherited it from the Loews. I don't know what to do with this scoundrel." In mock despair she shook her head above me, all the while watching Sissy's expression out of the corner of her eye.

Had she taken the bait? It didn't look like it. Sissy rounded Karoline and me with hurried steps and aimed for the park exit, through which the first shadows of dusk were already falling.

"Oh yes," Karoline bravely continued, "it's already quite late. The Schönbrunn Park closes at nightfall, doesn't it?"

Sissy nodded, still silent and Karoline strove to keep up with her, all the while holding me captive, as if I, like the squirrels, could escape in a single bound.

"May I ask you something?" she began anew and I squirmed inwardly, embarrassed by her intrusive approach.

Sissy sighed weakly instead of answering. She drew her fur coat tightly around her shoulders and set an even faster pace. But Karoline kept on her trail.

"In my childhood I had an aunt. I haven't seen her for many years, but I still remember her. You're the spitting image of her. Her maiden name was Sissy Loew."

Now Sissy could do nothing else. She had to stop, whether out of amazement or defeated by Karoline's obstinacy. Her chestnut brown gaze made an unhurried once-over of Karoline's shabby appearance, the old-fashioned grey winter coat and the clumsy shoes of crumbling leather, both paid for by the social security office for the needy, as were the clothes she was wearing. Finally, Sissy's gaze fastened on Karoline's mouth, the evading black eyes and her red hair, shining in the sunset.

"You're Karoline?" asked Sissy, a trace of astonishment in her voice,

like a summer breeze rippling over a calm expanse of water without causing further movement.

"Aunt Sissy!" Karoline nodded radiantly, deeply relieved. "My God, isn't this a coincidence!"

"D'you think so?" Sissy asked sceptically. She turned towards me and cast me a short gaze which affected me unpleasantly. "I read about your case in the paper at the time. It was very embarrassing for the family. One can only hope that it blows over with time." But a flicker of curiosity had crept into her eyes and didn't go unnoticed.

"He's dead," said Karoline. "I'm all alone with my boy."

Sissy didn't turn round a second time. She surveyed the squirrels, which were darting back and forth on the deserted avenue, searching the ground for leftover nuts. "I suppose you could come and visit me, if you'd like," she finally declared in a drawl. "It's quite relaxed and there's no standing on ceremony. I live a very secluded life. Not at lunchtime, as my household isn't prepared for guests. But for coffee."

Karoline almost shouted with happiness. "Gladly!" The desperately longed-for invitation had been extended at just the right time, as we arrived at the Hietzinger gate. We were almost the last visitors. The gatekeeper gestured to us to hurry with impatient waves and jangled the great bunch of keys in his hand. "When would it suit you? Sunday? Or preferably on a weekday?"

Karoline finally conjured a small smile in Sissy's closed face. "That's entirely up to you. I'm always available after five."

She passed Karoline her fingertips in a contrived manner. She nodded to me, undecided how and if she should address me. With that she left, with a lengthened, sprightly stride and we stared after her: hungry, dishevelled birds of prey, who have spotted their target but have by no means defeated it.

Summoning up all her strength Karoline curbed her impatience. "Don't worry, you'll still get your money," she barked at the friendly Mrs Seibold (our landlady in Radetzky Street) when she appeared on Sunday with the new weekly bill and, without a word of admonition – only commenting on how quickly time flies from one month to the next – placed it on the chest of drawers. The patient landlady's expression changed; she was offended and astonished and retreated before Karoline could say something to hurt her.

"I'm not grateful," Karoline hissed after her once the latch had fallen in the lock. "I hate you, you whingeing old cow. Just drop dead!"

We were hungry. There was nothing to eat in the room apart from a piece of bone-dry bread, which lay in a china dish and had to be sprinkled

with water to soften it once more. No other dinner awaited us. The next day was a Monday, payday at Auersheim Insurance. But Karoline would not risk another visit before she had at least a single business deal to show for her efforts. "Sunday is as good a day as any for a visit," she said to her reflection in the mirror, with whom she had become used to holding dialogues since there was no other company except for me. We hardly spoke to one another. I only opened my mouth to answer her questions and she never wanted to hear anything else. She only took an interest in my school work.

"The most important thing is peace," she declared as I did my homework. "I would so like to have studied. Things would have turned out completely differently for me. But there was neither a penny for books nor enough time for an idea that went beyond everyday life. Back then education was something for the rich, three crosses sufficed as a signature for the poor."

Number 7 Altgasse stood alone like a faded tooth in an old lady's mouth. The houses to the left and right had recently been pulled down and the ground on which they had stood looked as though it had been set alight, covered with a layer of damp red clay. Karoline didn't wait long. When the ringing on the door remained unheard by the concierge, she hurried up the staircase, two steps at a time. "She can't turn us away," she said to me or to herself. She shuffled in her shoes. She ran her hand over my parting, not tenderly, but to smooth it out. Then she reached for the mighty doorknocker, which was held in the jaws of a lion, and put on an expression of familial affection.

"I may be quite old, but I'm certainly not stupid," said Sissy Gollner a quarter of an hour later to Karoline. "I don't believe a word of the story you served me up. We didn't meet by chance and you didn't suddenly recognise me again. I remember very well, Karoline, how old you were when I saw you for the first and last time in your childhood: a four week old baby in your parents' apartment in Inzersdorf. You lay in the bassinet and slept."

Sissy's voice did not seem annoyed. It was a clear, rational comment and could hardly be denied. Even if Sissy had forgotten a later visit, Karoline could have been no more than three years old, since that was when she had left her parental home.

Karoline did not attempt to make any excuses. A leather armchair stood opposite the sofa on which her aunt rested; half sitting, half lying, with a velvet pillow at her back. She sank down onto it, expelled a deep breath and covered her eyes with the back of her hand, as if she was on the verge of breaking into tears. I had been ordered to fall onto my knees in

front of Sissy and beg her for a bit of bread, but I pretended not to have noticed Karoline's hint.

A mistreated child learns from an early age to recognise the signs of displeasure and disapproval. I knew long before Karoline that Sissy Gollner had a cold heart. She seemed good-natured because of her build and her mild, doe eyes but that was deceptive. She was completely indifferent to her surroundings and deeply bored by everything she encountered. Composed and resting in the safety of her fortune, she lived out the monotony of her days. Those who provided her with change were welcome and those who appealed to her sympathy were shaken off with a bored shrug of her shoulders.

"I'm at my wit's end," Karoline began with her complaint. "You've heard of my case from the newspapers, but what does that mean? You can't imagine what we all had to endure. Those newspaper reporters have no conscience. Whether someone's life is destroyed for a headline or not is all the same to them. They lie in order to buy their audience; they take delight in every dirty trick they can think up."

"Do you mean by that," Sissy drawled and let a curious gaze run over Karoline's face, "that you were all innocent? But who..." she had to swallow in her desire to learn more, "...then who chopped off Ferdinand's leg?"

There was no more talk of coffee. Her aunt also seemed to have already eaten her evening meal. She sipped at a glass filled with a dark liquid; a liqueur which she didn't offer to us. Our stomachs growled noticeably loudly whenever there was a break in the conversation. Karoline struggled to answer all Sissy's questions satisfactorily. I stood behind her and held onto the headrest of the leather armchair with both hands as my knees could no longer carry me.

The apartment smelt like Sissy herself, slightly sweet and dusty. Dust hung in the dark red velvet curtains at the windows; it rose from the upholstered furniture and from the worn out Persian carpets. Every inch of the room was covered with decorative doilies in all shapes and sizes, on the mantelpiece as well as the windowsills, the seats of the chairs and even the walls, where they hung like framed pictures with embroidered epigrams. She didn't seem to have any staff, or maybe they had been given Sunday afternoon off. Sissy herself had come to the door to receive us; though not exuberant, she made no attempt to get rid of us. The build-up of dirt in the corners of the room pointed to a neglected household. Perhaps she was not simply unwilling to help us, but was not even in a position to.

"I had to start work as an insurance agent," said Karoline. "But there isn't anyone who wants to buy insurance from me. People have as little to eat as I do. I've walked my feet raw." The despair in her voice was not

feigned. She opened her large, black eyes and looked at Sissy. "Shall I be honest with you, Aunt?" She was honest; she, the eternal and blessed liar. Candour was her last trump but I believe she was also too exhausted for any pretence. "I know that you're well-situated financially. Buy an insurance package from me, Aunt, I'm not asking anything more of you. If you take the big combo, you can save a third off the premium. It'll make no difference to you and I'll be saved." She didn't ask for my sake. The glances that Sissy had cast me in Schönbrunn and now again in her apartment brushed icily against my brow like water droplets falling from the gutter. Karoline hadn't failed to notice.

Sissy remained totally silent for some time at that, and so too did Karoline. She only cleared her throat every now and then in order to drown out the noise of her empty stomach.

"My dear child, unfortunately I can't help you at all," Sissy finally said. "In this respect, as in every other, I've been very spoiled by my husband. He's really provided for everything and left all of his affairs in the best of order. I don't know the details, but I do remember that there's a household and a burglary insurance, broken glass, fire, provision for old age and health care too of course. You're welcome to cast a glance over it so you don't think I'm trying to make excuses."

With the surprising momentum that was typical of her ungainly shape, she got up from the sofa. Karoline followed her to the bureau and stood next to it, gnawing at her lower lip, while Sissy collected together the insurance policies.

Without looking at the papers more closely, Karoline asked faintly: "But you don't have life insurance though, do you Aunt?"

Sissy straightened herself up with a small smile at the corner of her mouth. "That wouldn't really make any sense," she replied. "I have no one to whom I could leave anything. Or," she paused and her smile thinned, "or had you perhaps thought of yourself?"

Hot red flew to Karoline's cheeks and told its own tale. The question of children didn't help either.

"I don't have any." Sissy returned to the sofa. "But you asked the caretaker about me, so that certainly isn't news to you."

Karoline stood where Sissy had left her, empty-handed and numb from embarrassed shock. She had lost. There was nothing more that she could say to convince Sissy Gollner to the contrary. "I'm sorry."

She went to the door, defeated. I made a servant's bow before Sissy and went to follow but she held me back.

"Stay where you are, brat. I want to talk with your mother some more."

Karoline turned towards her with disbelieving eyes, glistening grate-

fully.

"You're the spitting image of my brother," said Sissy. "I wonder whether you've also inherited his character. He was a ne'er-do-well and a dreamer. I'm certain he didn't come to anything in America either."

"America – so that's where he is?" asked Karoline. Once, many years ago, she had held the Burgenland people in contempt for wanting to leave the Lafnitz valley for an uncertain America. Today, her situation was so hopeless that she would have clutched at any straw.

"Supposedly he bought a hotel in Massachusetts – in a Shaker Village. But don't ask me what that is," said Sissy and bedded herself down comfortably in her velvet pillow. "I can try and find the letter again. But it's been twenty years since he wrote."

"I see." Disappointed, Karoline shrugged her shoulders. "I'm certainly not like him. My life has been too hard for dreaming. And if I were useless I would have sunk long ago."

"Hmm." Sissy scrutinised her with a lethargic gaze and I thought that if anyone, Karoline looked like her fossilised aunt. Then Sissy came out with her suggestion. She was looking for a lady's companion, she said, someone who conversed with her, took care of small errands, read to her after her walk in the afternoons since her eyes were getting weaker by the day. Greta, the charwoman, only came once a week to clean the apartment and the rest of the time she spent alone. "Actually, it's only right and proper to take a relation into one's home instead of a stranger," she said with her cold smile.

Karoline nodded in agreement after each of Sissy's remarks, eager and hardly comprehending what her aunt was suggesting and whether she could really be so lucky. She had no choice of course anyway. "But," she finally said, after her aunt had finished, "...permanently in the apartment, how is that to be understood – that we should move in here with you?"

And Sissy's heavy body tensed on the sofa; she raised herself towards me with an extended index finger. "Not him," she said decisively. "I absolutely cannot tolerate children in my vicinity."

However much it hurt her, Karoline couldn't move into the Altgasse without me. She had no one left onto whom I could be foisted.

The tea is too bitter, I muttered into my pillow, in my tears, in my sleep. It was in my evening prayers, in my memories; and it gave me fresh strength to act. Ferdinand despaired: he knew what was happening to him but didn't put up a fight. It was too much effort. Gudrun played fate, Ferdinand played along. I was no longer enough of a child to submit myself to it. I had Karoline's fighting spirit in my blood and, for as long as I could re-

member, I had learned to hold Ferdinand's weakness in contempt. The women had taught me: they were disparate, irreconcilable, my enemies. I didn't dare put up a fight openly. If I wanted to survive, I had to be cleverer than them all, carrying out my plans in secret. I had a model to imitate – no – I had two.

Sissy Gollner's hands never kept still. Restlessly, she pulled at this and that, smoothing, pushing, opening and closing, picking up and putting down and only found peace in a single activity: embroidering doilies with colourful threads, one after another, one after another. She was plagued by a continuous disquiet which seemed to torment Karoline, since the disquiet of the old lady transferred itself to the younger like an infection. However, while Sissy could calm herself with her needlework, Karoline fell into a state similar to St Vitus' dance if she spent too much time in her vicinity. She became more dangerous for me than ever before, unpredictable in her barely suppressed anger. If one looked at the objects with which she struck me, it seemed as though she almost had a desire to kill. She broke my right upper arm again as she had before my father's death.

I didn't dare go to school with it. I knew that the teacher was only waiting for an incident. Standing in front of the classroom door, I had eavesdropped as the class representative complained about me on behalf of all the other pupils. He said that I was dirty and my clothes stank: no one wanted to sit next to me. Sometimes I muttered to myself, strange things, and I had once claimed that I was the child of a fire-breathing mythical creature, a wicked dragon that could break the bones in the bodies of small children. What the teacher's reply was, I didn't hear. I ran away, all the way home. I was ashamed of myself and hated them all; even those who meant well by me, maybe them even more than the others. What else could I expect from my God-fearing, child-loving and lame-brained teacher than a concerned report which would land me in the children's home without delay? Even if he didn't report it, he would have to take me to a doctor or the hospital. And who would pay for my treatment there?

Even Sissy Gollner, who only bore my presence with many feigned sighs, noticed my pitiful condition. Karoline squeezed her eyes shut at the sight of my shoulders pulled painfully high. A crease, a thought or worry line, appeared between her eyes, where it gradually left behind a furrow and, together with the two fine lines which led from the sides of her nose to her mouth, created a new face. The soft cheeks of youth became narrower, the lower lip, on which so many worries gnawed, filled and pushed against life defiantly, the upper, in contrast, which had been charmingly curved, sometimes pinched itself to disappearance. But she was still so beautiful

that people had to stare after her, and those who didn't know her were spellbound and later amazed that evil had come to the world in such a lovely shape.

I avoided them both. If what she had created had become clear to Karoline, she could conceive the idea of cleaning up for good and wiping all trace of my existence from the earth. Nothing good had ever come my way from Sissy Gollner – if one ignored the fact that she had saved me from terrible hunger and impending homelessness.

I got out of her way whenever I could. I was useful in the household. The charwoman had been dismissed: instead, Karoline and I took care of any work which arose. I was not irreplaceable. On any day, I was certain Karoline could be of a different mind and prefer the warmth of the Altgasse to the sub-let room down by the canal where we still lived. Sissy tolerated me in her home because I scrubbed the floor in the early mornings before I went to school, chopped the wood for the kitchen and cleaned out the oven and filled it with briquettes. In the afternoons I washed the crockery and took care of the shopping, as well as all the other work she instructed me to do. She tolerated me, but she would never let me sleep under her roof. It wasn't even a personal dislike. More like the strange whim of a person who was unhappy in her skin and needed a scapegoat for the discomfort from which she suffered.

My position was only secure because Karoline hated her aunt almost as much as she hated me, however, in contrast to me, she had to hide her feelings conscientiously. I was her excuse for not moving into the Altgasse, though Sissy Gollner had assured her free bed and board if Karoline would at long last get rid of her tiresome child.

Sissy Gollner's second passion was sweets; an obsession for acid drops and sherbet, chocolate-coated dragées, coconut tarts and, her most favourite, confectionery filled with liqueur or with nougat, cracknel and marzipan. On our first visit to her apartment, I immediately discovered the empty box of chocolates next to the sofa, the chocolate crumbs and the small colourful splinters of broken lollipops, and longed to dip a wet finger into the sweet leftovers.

She never offered me any of her titbits. Nor Karoline, but she didn't set any store by sweets anyway. My mother didn't like to eat. She was afraid of getting fat, an unrealistic worry in the time of hunger we were enduring. Sissy had told Karoline that her mother, Lotte, now at an advanced age, had completely lost her shape, and Karoline, who had Lotte's figure, firmly believed that the same would happen to her if she wasn't careful. I, how-

ever, hung on the unquenchable lips of Sissy and longed for the sweets with which she stuffed herself like a languid honeybee.

The visit to the confectionery shop was part of my daily shopping rounds. I bought 200 grams of almond dessert and just as much of fruit, which had been candied and dipped in chocolate, as well as a bag of marzipan potatoes and a box of liqueur confectionery to satisfy Sissy Gollner's enormous appetite. I seldom dared to steal a piece, as she controlled the entire shopping by carrying out spot checks with the kitchen scales, weighing everything from the onions to the treats, because she didn't trust me an inch. In this way, she immediately discovered my first theft. There were 50 grams of candied fruit missing and as much as 70 grams of the almond dessert. She had squeezed her fat body into the cracked black silk dress and made her way to the confectioner. Only a quarter of a kilo of Hofbauer sweets as compensation brought an end to her irate, business-harming screeching across the counter. Despite this, the confectioner continued to protest his innocence and from that Sissy knew I had cheated her. She didn't pursue the matter, but remained observant. Nevertheless, time and again, I took a morsel of the forbidden treats, but fear of the consequences spoiled all sweetness until I finally left them alone. Instead, I gave myself another pleasure.

I woke up at night and raised myself from the pillow. "Mama!" I shouted into the ear of the sleeping woman. When she opened her eyes she immediately understood that there must be a good reason for this atrocity, as nothing else would have made me do it. "I heard something." Fear made me shake, fear of Karoline. "A rat. Here in the bed. It ran over the cushion. It sniffed at my face. I'm sure I felt its whiskers on my skin. Can you hear it, Mama?"

We listened with bated breaths. The room was full of noises in the first glow of morning. The creaking of the wooden boards, the old, torn down wallpaper which rustled in the draught and the bedbugs behind it, their cracked bodies concealed in the dust of the wall. In front of our window, the city awoke slowly, gently whispering.

"Yes." Karoline breathed. I felt her trembling at my side. Her hand groped for the matches.

I straightened myself up and peered through the diffused, watery light which quickly illuminated the floor. "Is that it?" I asked and pointed to the dark corner of the room with an outstretched index finger.

"For God's sake – where?" Karoline sprang out of bed and jumped in huge leaps back and forth across the room in her bare feet, but all for nothing. The rodent made itself invisible. No trace of mouse or rat droppings in-

licated its presence. Sometimes a noise could be heard, but it eluded her every time.

On the very same day Karoline went to Isaak Kohn, our faithful chemist. There were shops which were closer, but we had no cash, as Aunt Sissy only paid in kind. At Kohn's one could buy things on credit, and, in addition (something which gave Karoline a mischievous pleasure) in Gudrun's name. That was, she thought, only fair repayment for the hostile and selfish way Gudrun had behaved. The rat trap was put up as soon as Karoline came home, the Thallopaste spread onto a piece of bread, the contraption deposited in the corner where I had seen the rodent. The animal, however, was cunning; it didn't allow itself to be caught. Karoline suspected it was because we didn't have any bacon fat to tempt it with.

The soft caramel melted fast, the dark chocolate was held in a warm hand. A thin child's finger drilled a small hole in the bottom of the chocolate, licked out the nougat filling, replaced what had been lost, and closed the hole with a gentle pressure, smoothing the chocolate quickly, before it once again solidified. No trace was left behind.

Sissy liked to speak of "before." The beautiful house in Mödling was described *en detail*. The furniture, the garden, the upper class guests who had entered and departed her house. Mr Gollner, a notary, lived with his wife in ever increasing harmony, childless, happy, and content. Until death came between them and the idyll came to an end. After only experiencing May breezes for fifty-five years, Sissy endured autumn storms for the first time. She wanted to die from it. But she lived. Her health was unshakeable, despite the pain gnawing in her breast and the grief which turned her inside out. He was gone. She had been left behind, alone. Only the needlework and the sweet supplies, which were never allowed to run dry, provided comfort.

Yet gradually, subtly, a change appeared in her. It began soon after we arrived in the Altgasse. She complained that her hands were becoming heavy. Particularly in the mornings, after waking, she was affected by a numbness she had never experience before. Often she lay like that until it was time for lunch, on her back, looking at the dancing sunlight on her ceiling reflected from the water glass onto the bedside table. She suffered from an unquenchable thirst, but hardly drank anything because swallowing was so difficult and water barely moistened her throat before she felt an aversion to it. Food also nauseated her, and so she nourished herself increasingly from the small chocolate pieces, which I faithfully piled in the confectionery bowl on her bedside table without taking a single piece for my own

stash.

I had finally won her trust. Maybe she even regretted that she had been so hard on me and had wanted to get rid of me. Now, at her sickbed, I showed myself as a patient and inventive conversationalist. I read to her from a book or a newspaper, reported a little on the gossip which I had picked up while shopping, or I remained quiet, depending on how the patient was feeling. My broken arm healed slowly and hurt with every exertion, but I never complained. I filled Sissy's water glass, emptied the bedpan and made sure there was a varied assortment of sweets.

Karoline urged Sissy to consult a doctor. "If you want to get out of bed again this year, don't wait any longer in doing so."

But Sissy didn't hold doctors in high esteem. They only thought about their bills and consequently prescribed all sorts of nonsense. That was why they had so many optimists, who had done as medical advice ordered, on their conscience. As an example she gave her husband, who had lived well for twenty years with his feverish gall bladder, until he let himself be talked into having an operation by a surgeon and died under the knife.

Only when Sissy's stomach began to swell (despite the fact that she hadn't partaken of anything and even a gulp of water came back up as frothy green juice), only when the smell of cooked food made her vomit, only then, out of a sudden fear of death, did she give in.

We waited in the anteroom, Karoline and I, uncomfortable and silent as always when we were alone with one another. Karoline was hindered by the proximity of the doctor from behaving as roughly towards me as usual. This made her indignant. She also feared that Sissy would be admitted to a hospital and that then we, during her absence, would not be allowed into the apartment. Sissy's familial feelings extended as far as having someone who was useful to her, no more, Karoline was convinced of that.

The examination lasted a long time. At the end a thin whimpering came out of the bedroom that became louder after the doctor left her. He explained Mrs Gollner's condition, all the while constantly shaking his head. It was, in short, an incurable cancer, in its last stages. The very next day an ambulance would come and take the patient to radium therapy. In some cases, he said, such a radium treatment could bring the desired effect, burning the tumour. In our aunt's case, her whole stomach was infected with metastases, therefore a cure was all but impossible, but medicine had seen remarkable success. Therefore nothing was to be left untried and one should not let go of hope.

"You mean she'll die?" asked Karoline, after she had followed the doctor's twitches for some time with a sceptical expression, all the while strug-

gling to grasp the sense of his roundabout explanation.

He went to explain his diagnosis a second time, but she interrupted him. "Yes or no?" she asked urgently. Her voice sounded hoarse and choked, as if something had burst in her larynx. I saw the black fire in her eyes. The dragon had had a long sleep. Now it awoke at the smell of blood.

The doctor swallowed, twitched, and shook his head even harder. He saw that which he did not want to see in the eyes of a close relative. He, who fought for life, could not bear Karoline's joy at the bad news. "Until tomorrow then. The ambulance will come at eight o'clock. I'll check on her again in the afternoon."

Instead of keeping quiet after such a clear snub, Karoline pulled on his sleeve. "I want an answer," she said shamelessly, though she didn't realise it.

"I'm not God," the doctor barked at her. "And moderate your tone, or do you want Mrs Gollner to hear us?" With a furious tug, he freed his arm from her grip.

She smiled after him, absent-minded, sunk in a mental exercise that she had not practiced for a long time. Velvet, strawberry-coloured and mauve, Reseda-green crêpe de Chine, a long top, reaching almost to her hips, the skirt knee-length in contrast, and shoes to match, and stockings with woven-in thread, sparkling like metal. That's what one wears to tango. *One, two, two-step, right and close.* That's what it said in the *Bild der Frau* women's magazine, which Karoline devoured week after week; the marriage counselling and particularly the fashion section, *haute couture* for the Viennese of today. Finally the fulfilment of her wishes was almost tangible. She smiled. The doctor never forgot it.

After twenty-eight treatments, in which Sissy Gollner lost every hair on her head, the doctor ended the treatment. The invalid's skin had turned a violent carrot colour from the radiotherapy, shrivelled and raised in blisters like roasted meat that has been left in the oven too long. She couldn't move a muscle in her face, which surprised the doctor somewhat, as such symptoms were not normally attributed to the side effects of radiotherapy, but then human nature was just as inconsistent. Only a well-timed operation would have been able to save Sissy but this stage had long since passed, even before the first consultation.

He held his lecture at the sick-bed. The patient, he said, could no longer understand anything; she had already fallen into a coma. I doubted it. Sissy lay flat on her back; the balloon-like swollen stomach bulging over her, high as a mountain, so one couldn't see her head from the foot of the bed. However, if one approached from the side, one could see her wide-

open, shocked eyes, two gleaming red-brown chestnuts in the crater-like landscape of her ruined face. A terrible realisation was present there. She couldn't share it with anyone.

Karoline spent the days restlessly pacing Sissy's apartment. Nothing escaped her probing gaze, which allocated a price to every object: the modern Art Nouveau furniture, the Ming vases, the cashmere rugs, the Augarten Porcelain, which, unfortunately, was not fully preserved. She didn't wait for Sissy to die but began to sell the household goods without delay, costing her the last sympathies of the neighbourhood. Behind her back, the old, well-known song rang out. They asked themselves whether Mrs Gollner's sudden sickness was natural or not. Sympathetic glances swept over me on the daily walk to school. What could poor Mrs Gollner expect from such a beast of a woman, who treated her child like that, gave him punches which broke the skin, kicked him and slapped him in the face, until they could hear his cries from miles away?

When I returned from school I hurried to Sissy's bed. I was tireless in my attentiveness and, if there had been witnesses to my charitable nursing care, no one would have presumed that two fantasies consumed me continually and made the long hours pass in an instant: the hell-fire raging in the stomach of the old witch bringing her nearer to death with every breath without releasing her and the thought that Karoline would have to atone for all this suffering. One fantasy brought me more comfort than the other.

Only one thing cut through my ugly thoughts and wishes: a meeting I never forgot. In the school breaks we were sent into the yard where we ran around under supervision and could let off a little steam. I never took part in the break time amusements, since none of the other pupils wanted to have anything to do with me. My outward appearance was too repulsive; my affectation too strange. Set apart from the others, I waited for the school bell to call us back to lessons. I loved the hours at school, no matter what the subject was. The other pupils ran happily from school every day; I could have listened to the teacher until nightfall. The single exception, as surprising as snow on a warm June day, was a girl I got to know at school.

The primary school for boys in Masing Street lay side-by-side with the girls' school. The school yard was used by all the classes together; the right half belonged to the boys, the left to the girls. Mutual games did not take place, or any conversations. The school management did not wish for it and it was not missed by the children. At this age, the sexes didn't try to mingle. It didn't make any difference to me. I stood at the edge of the yard and waited for the break to finish. I no longer know whether I wanted to belong. I don't think that I was particularly upset by it, as I had nothing in

common with the others. They didn't share my experiences, I didn't share theirs. I had not learnt to play. I was a child without a childhood.

One day I noticed a pair of eyes staring at me through the wire fence, which separated the boys from the girls. This happened often, as my unkempt outward appearance awakened astonishment. This gaze, however, I noticed immediately, was not horrified or disgusted. The girl on the other side of the fence looked at me sadly and with sympathy. She stood alone, an outcast like me, a deathly-pale small angel with skin like glass and weak violet eyes. When she smiled, the sorrowful expression disappeared from her face. The moon appeared in place of the sun and was allowed to shine. I never learned her name; I never spoke with her. I don't even know if her soft otherworldly smile ever returned.

Our silent meetings continued for some weeks, then she was gone and never came back, and I thought to myself that death had come for her, and that now she no longer had to suffer in the school yard with children who were made of such different material, but could now travel through the night on a moonbeam. But this vision was not meant to bring tears. An aching sweetness pulled at my heart, a feeling that I liked to recall.

Aunt Sissy took her time in dying. She had lost all her motor skills and could neither take nor expel food. Nonetheless, even if the doctor (who confused my perseverance in nursing with affection) called it a coma and comforted me by saying that in her condition, she was no longer suffering, I was convinced of the opposite. I saw the suffering in the reddish pupils. I saw the accusation on her dumb lips and in her hands, curved like claws, which she couldn't fold to pray, wishing for relief.

For three months she lay hidden behind the balloon of her stomach, which swelled higher and higher, defying and braving all medical explanation by her existence, which did not want to cease. The windows in the apartment stood open day and night, and still the smell of putrefaction hung thick enough to cut the air, so that even people who went past outside in the street, pressed handkerchiefs to their mouths.

Karoline was on her feet and out and about all day converting Aunt Sissy's movable possessions into money. She could not remain in the apartment, not only because of the disgusting smells of the invalid, but also because the bright future, which had unexpectedly opened for her, was so close and yet unreachable, while Death neglected to come for his over-ripe prey. The earlier restlessness now gripped her twice as much and forced her limbs to move like windmill sails. Whether she wanted to or not, she had to get out of the house and convert her energy into some kind of activity, and if in the evenings there was nothing with which she could occupy

herself, she reached in desperation to Sissy's left-over needlework and embroidered her impatience into flowers and diamonds with colourful thread.

When Sissy Gollner finally closed her chestnut eyes for good, the apartment in Altgasse was almost cleared out. Karoline had only spared her bedroom, all the other furniture had been sold or given to the commission and the un-saleable items had been given away. Karoline and I slept on a mattress in a warm corner next to the kitchen stove, as I had done previously in the Streichers' house on the allotment.

After the swollen body had been dumped (with difficulty) into the coffin and taken away in the undertaker's car, the last interested people appeared and bought Sissy's white lacquer bedroom furniture. Karoline had just enough time to remove the stained mattress on which her aunt had breathed her last. The infernal stench of decay which had come from the living corpse still polluted the apartment; therefore she quickly brought an end to the business transaction. Two hours after her passing, even the bed in which she had suffered for so long had been removed. Immediately afterward we left the apartment.

There was no will. Apart from her father who had disappeared and remained so, Karoline was Sissy's only blood relation and therefore the sole heir to her great fortune. Karoline didn't fulfil Sissy's last wish to be buried next to her husband. Without hesitating, she sold off the Loews' family tomb. Sissy Gollner was buried in the central cemetery, in a pine coffin and with a plain gravestone made of sandstone, dully polished. She was given a third-class funeral.

Monash University
vkri6@student.monash.edu.au