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WHERE LOVE BEGINS  
(ALLER LIEBE ANFANG)

A novel

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*It's like this* – Stella and Jason meet on an airplane. A small propeller plane, not a long flight. Stella is coming from Clara's wedding. She caught the bridal bouquet, that's probably why she's so distraught; and she had to say good-bye to Clara, that's why she's feeling so forlorn. It was a beautiful wedding. From now on Stella is on her own. Jason is coming from a construction site. He was laying tile, that's why he's so dusty. And he worked all night long, driving to the airport at the crack of dawn; that's why he's so tired. The job is finished; he'll be looking for a new job. Fate or whoever, has seated Stella next to Jason, row 188, seats A and C. Stella will save the boarding pass for many years to come. Jason is sitting by the window; the seat next to him is empty. Stella's seat is on the aisle, but in spite of that she sits down next to Jason. She can't help it.

Jason is tall and lean, unshaven; his black hair is gray because of the dust. He's wearing a rough woolen jacket and dirty jeans. He looks at Stella as if she'd taken leave of her senses, looks at her angrily; she startles him. So direct, unceremonious. Nothing that could have been dragged out. If Stella hadn't caught Clara's bridal bouquet – jasmine and lilacs, a luxuriant abundance tied with a silken ribbon – she wouldn't be so breathless. Glowing cheeks, a shocking lack of detachment.

Stella, my name is Stella.

She says she has a fear of flying. I don't do well flying. May I sit next to you; please, could I just stay here sitting next to you.

It is the truth. Jason's expression changes; it doesn't exactly soften, but it changes. He says, You don't need to be afraid of flying. Please sit. My name is Jason. Sit down, stay.

The plane rolls down the runway, speeds up, takes off, and flies. The plane flies up into the pale, distant sky, breaking through the clouds. The earth below them, an earlier life are left behind. Jason's hands are dirty and stained with paint. Turning the right one palm up, he holds it out to Stella. Stella puts her left hand in it; his hand is rough and warm. He pulls her hand toward him and puts it in his lap, closes his eyes. Then he falls asleep. Later this will be like an omen. Stella could have figured it out back then – she is afraid, and Jason sleeps. Sleeps even though she is afraid. But he would say he slept so that she could see, being afraid was absurd. Back then she didn't understand this.

As the plane lands, he opens his eyes and smiles. Such very dark eyes, almost black, with a far-away look. But he is smiling. He says, See, Stella, you made it. He now takes her hand in both of his, and then he kisses her hand, the back of her hand, hard and sure.

Will we see each other again, Stella says. Shall we see each other again.

Yes, Jason says. He says it without thinking about it – Yes.

Stella writes her phone number on his boarding pass. Then she gets up and flees. She climbs out of the plane, down the metal stairs, back to earth without looking back even once.

It is cool, raining. Impossible to know how it will go on from there.

Jason phones three weeks later. Stella never asks him what he did during those three weeks, what he was thinking about for so long; what conclusion he finally arrived at.

## I

*The house is in a development* in the suburbs. It's a simple house, two floors and a mossy tiled roof, a picture window next to the front door and a conservatory out in back. The lot isn't a big one. A jasmine hedge secludes it from the street. A tarpaulin has been stretched over the sand box, and three chairs have already been set up around a garden table standing under a plum tree still bare of leaves. Fragile, yellow flowers in the short grass, maybe winter aconite. At the edge of their garden, begins a rank meadow, an uncultivated field. It's been like that for who knows how long. At some point they'll build new houses there. But so far the garden just runs into the meadow, and stinging nettle and wind-grass grow right through the fence.

Stella and Jason's house. This is Stella's and Jason's house; it's the house Jason buys when Stella is pregnant with Ava. A house for a family. Not a house for always. We'll move from here someday, Jason says. We'll move on.

It smells of soil and wet gravel in the conservatory. An orange blanket is draped over the sofa. Children's books, wax crayons, and a teapot on the little table in front of it; on the rug, a single shoe of Ava's next to a stack of magazines. From the sofa, the view through the windows goes out into the garden and beyond the

fence out to the field. The grass is still a dull wintry green. It looks like a body of water. The wind seems to reach with its fingers into the grass, the water. Clouds scud by rapidly.

When Ava sits in the sand box and Stella watches her from the sofa – Ava is baking a cake out of sand; she decorates the cake with shells and gravel; then, calmly and direct, not pleading, she offers some of the cake to someone whom Stella can't see – she sometimes has to suppress an impulse to jump up, snatch Ava out of the sandbox, and flee with her into the house. As if a whirlwind were approaching across the meadow, something formless, something big. Why is she thinking this?

It's your subconscious, Jason says when she tries to talk to him about it. Just your subconscious, or that of your people, the subconscious of generations.

Just your subconscious.

I don't know if I can follow you, Stella would like to say.

She'd like to say, Maybe it's also a wish? Maybe it's some wild longing.

But that's not how she talks with Jason. Hardly likely.

A screen door swings into the kitchen from the conservatory. The kitchen is bright. A stove and a sink under the window; in the middle, a table with four assorted chairs; and above the table, a lamp with a little paper horse suspended from it, twisting in the breeze. Postcards on the silvery refrigerator. Disorderly dishes in a kitchen cabinet on whose doorknob hangs a bunch of dried lavender tied with packing twine. The far wall is painted blue; in front of the blue wall, on

top of the chest for their winter boots lies a sheepskin on which Ava wants to sleep sometimes but so far has never fallen asleep on. Empty bottles, more magazines in the corner behind the door that leads into the living room; the other door next to it leads into the hall; from the hall you can also go into the living room and beyond that, into Jason's room or to the front door and outside.

The picture window is in the living room. There's a low armchair in the living room by the window where Stella reads in the evening, not caring that, after it begins to get dark, it's as if she were sitting on a stage. She reads whatever comes to hand, reads everything; she comes across a book, opens it, and dives in. There's also something awful about that. Sometimes Jason says, You'd die if someone were to take the books away from you. Would you die? Stella doesn't answer him. In the middle of the day, between the things to do, to be dealt with, to get behind her, she'll pick up a book and read a page, two pages; it's like breathing; she almost can't say what she's just read, and it's really all about something else. About resistance. Or about opposition. Maybe it's about disappearing. It might be.

Stella's books pile up around the armchair. For some time now Ava's books have also been piling up around the chair. Children's books of thick cardboard.

*This is the blue door. Let's see who lives there. We'll just knock. Knock!*

In the hall there's a stairway going up to the second floor. The mail is lying on the bottom step, on the steps above that are Ava's hat, bicycle keys and chalk, a little plastic horse, a super ball, a broken kaleidoscope, a dinosaur skeleton, and on the last step there's a child's change purse embroidered with colored beads.

Fourteen steps, Stella has known this ever since Ava has been learning to count.

Upstairs there are three rooms. The master bedroom, a room in the middle for Stella, and Ava's room. There the light in the globe is still on, and a mobile of stars and moons hanging from the ceiling lamp sways in the draft. The bed stands against the wall. Close to the edge of the bed there's a small depression in the tidily smoothed bedspread – Ava was sitting there in the morning while Stella plaited her hair into two stiff little black braids. The stuffed animals lean neatly and importantly against each other, a tiger and a cat, a disheveled little hedgehog. Ava's stack of memory cards on the red table is distinctly larger than Stella's. A wrinkled princess dress is draped over the rocking chair. On the bookshelf, a series of framed photos that sometimes seem to Stella like a butterfly collection, impaled, time held fast, the desperate and also crazy beauty of single moments. Ava as a baby. Ava with Jason in a boat among the reeds. Ava on a chair downstairs in the kitchen, sitting ramrod straight in plaid pajamas with matted hair. Ava on Stella's lap, and after her midday nap. And a photo of Stella and Jason by the sea; some day that photo may mean something to Ava, her parents by the sea in the one brief year during which there was no Ava yet. Unimaginable, and at the same time simple.

The door to their bedroom isn't quite closed. Inside, the bed isn't made, the blankets lying one on top of the other, the pillows not fluffed up, the sheet has slipped down. The curtain at the window is still closed; sunlight falls on the floor in a narrow stripe next to Jason's shirt, Stella's book.

In Stella's room her desk stands by the window. A postcard from Clara is propped against a glass vase on the desk. There are also books on the desk, stationery, a ballpoint pen lying diagonally across the line: *My dearest Clara, the morning is so still, so quiet, as if a catastrophe had occurred somewhere, and I go downstairs and open the front door because –*. The clock on the windowsill ticks pointedly into this stillness. Gift-wrap is spread out on the guest bed, Xeroxed schedules for Stella's work week, blouses that need to be ironed. The sliding window is open. The wind blows into the stationery, riffling through the sheets of paper.

Three panes of leaded glass are set into the front door, two lilies and one seagull. The panes were a gift from Clara to Stella when she moved in. For Ava's birth. For Stella's wedding, for the move, as a second good-bye. Clara is Stella's best and only friend. Why do you have only one girlfriend, Ava says. One is quite enough, Jason says then; he says it for Stella, and Stella says, So it would seem.

You can't see either out or in through the leaded glass panes. You can only see out through the little window to the right of the door, out to the garden gate. A wrought iron gate in a wrought iron fence. Jason bought the fence along with the house and wanted to rip it out immediately; luckily he hasn't gotten around to it yet. Stella is glad about the fence. The fence holds quite a few things

together here, the garden, the house, the books, Ava and Jason, her life. It isn't as if it would all fly apart without the fence, but Stella considers boundaries important -- distance, space for herself. The little window next to the front door is a frame for the view of the fence, the view to the garden gate. You have to put something there, Clara said, a Madonna or something like that; but Stella hasn't found anything yet that could stand there.

This is the house on a day in Spring.

There's no one there.

Stella is out; she works as a nurse; her patients live in houses in the new development on the other side of the wide street.

Jason is also away; he is building a house by the lake.

Ava is at her kindergarten. She's in the blue group; she has a blue flower sewn on her little coat so that she won't forget, and she wears the blue flower like a medal.

The garden gate is of course locked.

The street is empty, no one in sight; the little birds in the hedge make almost no sound.

## 2

***Three Weeks Later*** Stella is home. The middle of the day, twelve o'clock.

Stella is often at home in the middle of the day at twelve. She has three patients on her weekly schedule, Esther, Julia and Walter; She usually does the early shift at Esther's and the day shift at Walter's; her shift at Julia's depends on Julia's husband, Dermot, on the state of his health; recently his health has been poor. But that particular day Dermot feels able to take Julia to the doctor by himself. And so Stella stays at home. Is able to be home alone in the middle of the day.

The middle of the day in the development is calm, quiet. The houses all stand there deserted; the people don't come back till after work. Stella likes being alone. She's good at busying herself, with the garden, the books, the household, the laundry, long telephone conversations with Clara, the newspaper, with doing nothing.

Before, she used to live in the city with Clara in an apartment house on a street with many cafés, bars, and clubs; people sat on the sidewalk directly outside the front door at tables under large umbrellas and awnings, and their voices and conversations, their worries, speculations, promises, their outrageous

remarks about happiness and unhappiness resounded in the night all the way up into Stella and Clara's living room. Never. Forever. Ever again, never again, till tomorrow, good-bye. That isn't so long ago. Stella can't say that she misses that life.

Nowadays she likes being alone; before, she didn't like being alone. It's that simple; only she doesn't really know just when this change actually took place. And how, suddenly or gradually? In the course of months, or from one day to the next, from one day that Stella has forgotten to another day. It's the same with Clara. Clara lives in a water mill, a thousand kilometers away; she has two children now and is just as addicted to being alone as Stella. That's because of the children, Clara says. They devour you. Stella thinks of that in the mornings when she sits at the kitchen table with Ava, watching her eat a banana, drinking tea with honey.

Clara says you devour us. Is that true, Ava?

Ava's laughter sounds astonished. Indignant and a little as if she'd been caught unawares.

On the days Stella is free in the middle of the day, she takes Ava to her Kindergarten by bike. Riding back home, she leaves the bike in the front yard, unlocks the front door, enters the hall and feels a distinct thankfulness, as if everything around her were temporary, as if there were no certainty at all of permanence. She couldn't really say how she spends these mornings, these three or four hours. She cleans up the kitchen. She washes her hair. She writes a postcard to Clara, reads a little in the newspaper, reads a book, washes Ava's

things, goes through Jason's mail and the bills, tends to the plants in their clay pots on the window sill, pressing an index finger into the soil around the roots and breaking off the little stems that have finished blooming, just the way Jason always does. Standing at the kitchen window, she looks out at the garden toward the meadow, at the formations of dark, luminous clouds above the city far away. Then she makes a pot of tea. Turning on the radio, she listens to a travelogue, then turns the radio off again. She goes upstairs and puts the ironed and folded laundry away in Ava's bureau. Standing in Ava's room, she regards the still life on Ava's table, an apple with a bite out of it, a memory card, thin colored-pencil shavings, a juice glass. She'd like to clean it up; she'd like it to stay exactly as it is. She has to leave in a quarter of an hour. She has to go. She's got to leave right now.

Three days later Stella is home alone in the middle of the day. She's washing the dishes when the doorbell rings. Her teacup, Ava's cup, two plates, a large knife and a small one; at three minutes before twelve Stella is washing a glass. The doorbell rings. She rinses the foam off her hands and reluctantly turns off the faucet. Drying her hands on the dishtowel, she goes into the hall, looks at herself briefly in the mirror; she'll never forget that at noon that day she was wearing jeans and a wrinkled, gray shirt spattered with water, her hair clasped together in one of Ava's barrettes; she's a bit tired, doesn't want to open the door for anybody, doesn't feel like talking either; she won't forget any of that.

Stella turns the key in the lock, at the same time looking through the window next to the door out into the garden, toward the fence, to the gate in the fence. Of course the gate is locked. She is about to open the door, but then she carefully removes her hand from the door handle. There's a man standing on the street outside the gate whom she's never seen before. A young man, maybe thirty, thirty-two years old. Not the mailman, not the newspaper boy, not a deliveryman of any sort, and not the chimney sweep either – a man without any gear, no bag, no backpack, not carrying a bouquet of flowers – a man wearing light-colored trousers, a dark jacket, no identifiable characteristics. An apparition. His hands are in his trouser pockets. His head is cocked to the side, and he's looking toward the house; looking at the front door, maybe the window next to the front door.

What keeps her from opening the door, walking through the garden toward him and opening the gate, just as she would normally do.

I don't know, Stella will later say to Clara. Can't answer that question. I didn't open the door; I stopped short, recoiled. From what?

The man out on the street waits. Then he takes his right hand out of his pocket and rings again, and suddenly Stella feels – it almost makes her angry – that her heart is speeding up, slowly, steadily, as if her heart understood something that Stella has not yet understood. Without taking her eyes off the stranger, she takes the receiver of the intercom down off the wall, holds it to her left ear, and says, Yes.

The man outside on the street bends down. Stella has no idea how loud or soft her voice sounds out on the street; she can't recall ever having used the intercom before. He says something into the contraption; she thinks she hears his voice at her ear at the same instant as she hears his voice from the street. The voice at her ear sounds distinctly hoarse. Like the voice of a person who takes pills, who is on medication, no doubt about it. Stella can hear it. She knows all about that.

He says Hello. We don't know each other. You don't know me. But I know you from having seen you, and I'd like to talk with you. Do you have time.

It isn't a question. Not a real question, and it also sounds rehearsed, something memorized.

Do you have time.

Stella holds the receiver away from her ear. Is this supposed to be a joke? She's almost not quite sure that she heard him right. The man outside stands bent over slightly in front of her intercom waiting for an answer. He won't say it again. He won't repeat it; she understood it correctly.

So she holds on tight to the receiver and says loud and clear, I don't have any time. Impossible. Do you understand me? We cannot talk together; I don't have any time at all, none.

Too bad, says the man outside her house. Oh well then. Maybe another time.