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Rostfrei

Rustproof

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Life starts at 97!

Juliane Knop, aged 97, is fed up. Her husband has been calling her the same irritating pet name for 80 years; her son, now 67, still wants her to do his laundry, and her grandchildren are only after her collection of novelty mugs. So Juliane makes a break for it. In the middle of the night, she leaves her farmhouse for the big city, where she makes surprising connections - not least to the internet ...

translated by Anne Stokes

Chapter 1

Our life expectancy will also continue to increase in future. What appears to be a blessing at first glance also brings many problems and raises a number of questions. For, as people age, their physical fitness diminishes markedly. Suddenly, their regular routines become increasingly problematic. Or they might even lead to painful and serious falls and accidents. Stairs, in particular, pose a danger within your own four walls. With a Lifta stair lift you'll remain mobile in your familiar surroundings. It's comfortable, reliable, and, above all, safe. Expensive and extensive alterations, or even the need to move to a care home, can be avoided with a Lifta in many cases. www.lifta.at

It isn't that I feel old. No, I didn't put that quite right. I meant to say that I don't feel old all the time. In any event, I still feel young enough to fling a stair lift that's still in its original packaging at my daughter's head, which I don't do, of course. But I'm fuming.

I'm ninety-seven years old and I won't be on the scrapheap for a while yet, even if that might be expected at my age. I'm a clean person, and I don't need any help washing myself. I'm active, and no, I don't need a stair lift. I've also never wished for a stair lift. I don't like stair lifts. I hate anything of the sort. I wouldn't even let anything like that through the door. Not on your nelly. But I am a very progressive woman. I don't insist on being driven to the shops. I take the bus or ride my old bike. I don't have a driving license, unfortunately, possibly because my husband Heiner always said I didn't need one.

"D'you like it, Mah?" asks Eleonore, who, at eighty, could do with paying a bit of attention to her figure. You shouldn't let yourself go in your old age. I stare at my daughter and, for the first time in my life, wish to gradually lose my eyesight. If anyone needs a stair lift, it's Eleonore. Weighing in a twenty-three and a half stone, she can barely stand for longer than two minutes, certainly also owing to her painful varicose veins, but definitely due to her weight. Eleonore was never much to look at. None of my children would ever have won a beauty competition, perhaps because there weren't any sixty or seventy years ago. Only the Miss Germany contest.

I look at my children one after the other and shake my head without them noticing. It's Monday the 12th of May. My ninety-seventh birthday. And here they all are sitting around, pretending to be thrilled about my good health, but if I dropped dead right now, their grief for a cow with blocked milk ducts would

definitely be a lot greater. My husband Heiner, no, my lord and master, would - as always when money's at stake - scratch himself behind the ear and contemplate how he'd now get through all our savings on his own. My nine children would jump for joy and hold out their hands for their share. Then they'd pack up the remains of the cake I'd baked and take it home with them. So that nothing goes to waste.

"The cake's not sweet enough." My son Edgar, the youngest at 67, looks at me accusingly.

I look out the window, at the beautiful landscape of Schleswig-Holstein, over the meadows and fields and acres of farmland, which have given me work and trouble from early in the morning until late in the evening my whole life long. If I had to describe my daily routine, I could clear whole forests and turn the pulp into paper, and still there wouldn't be enough to write on. The word 'lie in' is just as alien to me as 'knocking-off time'. I haven't had a weekend off in my entire life. I've slogged away like a plough horse for as long as I can remember. Other women retire at sixty-three. At sixty-three, I refurbished the cowshed almost singlehandedly and patched the roof of the barn. Amongst other things.

We live in Gross Vollstedt, a small dump in the district of Rendsburg-Eckernförde. I know the thousand or so inhabitants by name from going to the bank. The younger ones move away as soon as they can, most of them anyways, but the old folk remain. You can't get very far with a stair lift after all. Even after they die, they stay on. They lie in our little graveyard, and after the wreaths and bouquets of flowers have withered away, the coffin has settled, and the wooden cross has been replaced by a marble headstone, they fade from memory slowly but surely. The thought of rotting away in an old wooden box and having no one to talk to apart from worms and other beasties isn't a particularly cheery thought. But I'm not there yet.

"There's plenty of sugar in the cake," I say, putting the 67-year-old baby of the family in his place. He ignores me and stares huffily at the floor. Edgar still lives with us, and I still do his laundry, iron his shirts, change his sheets and wash the floor of his bedroom, which still looks as though a ten-year-old lived in it. Heaven only knows why Edgar never wanted to marry and have a family. Maybe he's cleverer than I give him credit for. He watched his parents and thought to himself something along the lines of "I'm not going to make the same mistake." He's quite right. And I'm still fit. I'm still able to clean his room.

It's Eleonore's turn to speak again: "Well, aren't you happy?" she wants to know.

I make a pleasant face and hope she doesn't notice that I'm putting it on. "Of course, thank you very much." Before I sit in that Lifta stair lift, I'll tear down

the top floor. I've always wanted a bungalow anyways. For as long as they've been about, I've fancied living in one.

But I was never asked.

My name is Juliane Knop. No, not Jules, Juliane. Juliane Pauline Johanna, to be exact. I'm not tall but small, five feet two to be precise. I was a little bit taller before, but I've shrunk with age. I have bright, dark eyes, although I don't like the term 'bright' at all, but people always say that my eyes are 'bright'. My build could be described as wiry. I've always been able to eat whatever I wanted, I never put on any weight. And I've always worked a lot as well. My hair is snow-white and I have finger waves. And glasses, because I'm shortsighted. Most of the time, I wear work trousers and a pullover, but if I go out, I put on a suit, and nylon tights, too, of course, with medium heels. On the farm, I wear wellies mostly.

And today I turned ninety-seven.

I'm married to Heiner. Have been for eighty years, and for eighty years Heiner's forgotten our anniversary, and for eighty years he hasn't congratulated me on my birthday. In fact, he'd forget that, too, if the kids didn't show up in droves with our grandchildren and great-grandchildren - only, of course, to check up on how long it's likely to be before I'm lying here gasping, waiting to receive the last rites.

I don't really like my family. I've slaved away for them all my life, and none of them ever noticed or appreciated it. Everything I did was always taken for granted. Whenever I had a baby, I was up working the following day. I cooked, baked, fried, and grafted away in the cowshed, and had to beg for any help I got. They're a shower of ingrates. They've always made fun of me and have never taken me seriously, which is in large part my husband Heiner's doing. He was forever showing them that they could treat me like a piece of dirt.

Yes, Heiner.

Since our wedding day, Heiner's called me "Mah". I was seventeen at the time. To be called "Mah" at seventeen can bring you down. He's a bit taller than me and much fatter, almost beefy, I'd say, and he's got broad shoulders, but almost no neck. He's hardly a hair on his head, his lips are thin, but the most awful thing about him are his shifty eyes. I never could stand Heiner's eyes.

There's a hammering sound from upstairs. Faint at first, then louder and louder still, and then so loud that a little bit of plaster flakes off from around the light fixture.

Elise. My mother. At one hundred and fifteen, my mother's the oldest inhabitant in Schleswig-Holstein, and probably in the whole of Germany, if not the entire world. Elise doesn't want to die. "I've still got it guid here," she'll say in a

carefully cultivated Holsteiner dialect, before devoting herself to her favourite pastime - eating. My mother's problem is that she has to eat all the time. During the Second World War, she was buried alive for a while without anything to eat, and after they dug her out, she probably thought she had to make up for it, in other words, by eating the whole day long. She even gnawed through two of her hearing aids, swallowed one of them in fact, and I've no idea where all this will end. The health insurance company won't play along much longer, that's for sure. Three times already I've had to have it out with the people at Barmer, who no longer considered me of sound mind, it emerged during our conversations.

Elise won't enter into any discussion about this. Maybe because she never has her hearing aid turned on, on the few occasions when she hasn't just swallowed or gnawed on it. "I dinnae want that" she'll say, and there's no point arguing with her. She can't hear what you're saying after all. Because she doesn't want to hear it.

My mother was always headstrong. She considered Kaiser Wilhelm superfluous. "Costs us all a fortune all that Kaiser nonsense. It's no use to anyone!"

She met Hitler once in person, when he stopped off in Rendsburg during a tour of Schleswig-Holstein. She always relishes telling this story, and every time she does, it gets worse. Originally, the story went that Hitler's car had been parked with its back-right wheel on top of Elise's foot. Elise, of course, let out a scream, the car drove on a bit farther, so it wasn't parked on her foot any longer, and one of Hitler's men apologised graciously to her, and even offered to drive her home, if she wasn't able to walk back herself on account of her injured foot. That was all there was to it.

Mother dredges up this story every chance she gets. Even on her birthday or at Christmas. On these occasions, the mayor, the parish priest, Red Cross volunteers and the rural women's association all sit around with a smile that resembles a facial paralysis, and, in some cases, they have to hear for the fiftieth time how mother smacked Hitler in the gob, ripped off his insignia, and scratched the car with it. And when she's in particularly good form, a disoriented Goering and / or Goebbels turn up. Oh, and Eva Braun features occasionally as well. She supports mother in the story, flashes her sparkling eyes and finger waves at the others, and leads Elise into a café, where she orders her a hot chocolate and then starts bitching about her partner Adolf, who methodically peels the calluses from his feet over lunch.

I often wish that mother would change, but I can wait for that until I'm blue in the face. Then again, I also like her direct manner somehow or other. It's a pity that I don't take after her in the slightest in this respect. I've always swallowed

my feelings. And, unfortunately, I don't simply let them take the bread out of my mouth. I break it up willingly and distribute it among the family.

It's seven o'clock. My sons and daughters all look over at the clock. Two hours have passed and now they want to leave. As usual.

"Have you got any preserves left?" My son Fred rubs his potbelly. "There's nothing like yer Mah's."

Of course I have preserves. I've also got cured meat and sausage and tons of other things, but wouldn't you have thought that a young man of sixty-two could earn his own bread and butter? He probably can, but he's simply too lazy to do so. And with a wife as active as Lene at his side as well. The only problem is that Lene doesn't cook. When she blew up the gas cooker, her cooking days were over. And for years now she's been ordering everything, and I mean everything, from some frozen food company, which costs them a fortune, and Fred can't stand the sight, smell or taste of the stuff any longer. That's why he tries to weedle something out of me every chance he gets. And I always give him something to take home with him, of course.

Elisabeth, one of my granddaughters, stands up and walks around the living room. She stops in front of my old Biedermeier writing bureau, and appraises it inquisitively. As per usual. Then she turns around to me, as per usual. "When you goin' to throw that auld thing out?" she asks slyly. As per usual.

"I don't want to throw the auld thing out," I say pleasantly, as per usual.

"Why are you holding on to all this old stuff," Elisabeth says, pointing at the richly ornamented Empire cabinet, the art nouveau living room suite that no one sits on because it's an art nouveau living room suite, and at various other things that have been in my mother's side of the family for generations, and which I'll certainly not be handing on to some moronic old thing in her mid-fifties, who not only has garden gnomes fashioned after political figures on her front lawn but also *inside* her ugly semidetached home. My beautiful, old upright piano with integrated brass candlesticks standing next to a smoking, deformed Helmut Schmidt gnome doesn't bear thinking about. Besides, no one in this family except me can play the piano, apart from 'Chopsticks'. Normally, the conversation between Elisabeth and me is over at this point, but this time she oversteps the mark.

"How long do you actually intend to wait until you finally part with all these things?" she says. "You'll not last much longer in any case. It'd be better if you share the crap out fairly right now, so we're not all fighting around you when you're lying in your coffin."

I get up, sweep Elisabeth's sherry glass from the table, and plant myself in front of my granddaughter. "Let's just see which of us is lying in the coffin first," I say quietly and, I hope, firmly. "Now clear off!"

Elisabeth is staring at me as though I'm a ghost. "How dare you ...," she turns around to the others. "Go on, you lot, say something to her, too."

No one says a word. And no one picks up the sherry glass either, or feels obliged to fetch a floor cloth from the kitchen, to wipe the wooden floor.

Only Heiner pipes up. A minute later. "It willnae be much longer, lass," he mutters to himself. "Just you wait, it willnae be much longer, then we'll huv peace from ma wife." He looks at me, bored, as though expecting me to do him the favour of dropping dead on the spot.

That's it. I turn around and leave the living room and my family, go out into the cowshed, and sit down on a worn-out milking stool. Moni, one of our best cows, is due to calf soon. I stroke her taut belly and start to think.

Thinking. I ought to have done that a whole lot earlier on.