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Translated from the German by **Juliane Scholtz**,
Recipient of the 2025 Gutekunst Prize of the Friends of Goethe New York

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The World Between the News

by Judith Kuckart

Translated by Juliane Scholtz

Everything has happened, but not like we remember.

Dachshund

She had once tried to draw
a horse
on the roll of paper
covering a beer garden table.
Instead, the result was a shapeless **something** with four stumpy legs.
“A dachshund? For me? Thank you!”
Liz stuck her pencil behind her ear.
It was worth a shot, at least.
Her blood coursed through her veins
like a river of warmth
a river of joy.
She laughed.
She could have become a dancer,
but **definitely** not an artist.

You'll Always See the Same Person Twice

By the time she arrived in S., Ellen had survived World War II, escaped from Poland, and made a stop-over at a large farm near the town of Riesa. There, near Dresden, she worked as a stenographer for the local government branch of the Socialist Unity Party. The family, who with their seven kids had recently fled to Germany, was soon forced to move again. When the farm was forcibly collectivized, they moved westward and leased a new farm. This farm lies on the outskirts of S., on the edge of the Ruhr region.

S. is small. You'll always see the same person twice in a day.

Ellen likes to flirt and flirts a lot. She is bold, darkhaired – she could have become a dancer. She gets married, then divorced, and soon meets her second husband: a German sergeant. In 1958, she gives birth to a child. When her son is three years old, her sergeant husband is transferred to the States. The three of them move to Military Road in Arlington, Virginia.

Just across a gurgling river lies Washington, D.C. There in the White House lives John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States of America. Ellen and her family also live in a white house, a smaller one – with a rickety rocking chair on the wooden porch. That rocking chair stays out there even in the winter.

"We used to have chickens," Ellen often says, laughing.

When asked about her job, here in this new country, she claims she is a model. As a hostess in a club on Capitol Hill, she gets to know the 35th President of the United States. They begin an affair in early summer of 1963. She is 26, he is 46. The FBI accuses Ellen of belonging to an organized ring of German Playgirls, who excel at partying, orgies, and prostitution. Accused of being a spy, Ellen is labelled a threat to national security. Meanwhile, Kennedy is busy with the war in Vietnam, a war which will last for years. Kicked out of the United States, Ellen returns to Germany with her husband and child. There, she gets a divorce. The courts find her solely responsible for the split. She moves back in with her parents on the farm on the outskirts of S.

A Sunday walk in S., 1959

Ellen R. milks the cows, feeds the pigs, works in the turnip fields, raises her son, and goes to bed early. On Fridays, she uses a small van to deliver orders of eggs, vegetables, sausages, and (occasionally) half a pig to people in the city. Her son sometimes rides along.

He's not old enough yet to go to school.

I'm not either.

He speaks English.

I don't.

Sometimes he comes with his mom to our apartment, clutching her hand. We live on the ground floor of an old pink apartment building. The building was once part of the abandoned factory next door. Now, this former villa (which once belonged to the factory owner) is just another run-down house in S. Our apartment is big, but also dark and impossible to heat. The rent is low. Every Friday, my mom offers a cup of coffee to the woman who brings us eggs and blood sausages in a jar.

Ellen looks like my mom – she looks foreign.

The hallway between my room and the last room in our apartment is fifteen meters long. The living room is the only room with heat, from a wood stove. It's warm in there, on this November day in 1963. In all the other rooms, you can sense that there must be a stove **somewhere** in the apartment. It's cold in my bedroom, which was once a storage room for garbage cans. It's eight p.m., I'm six years old, and from the end of the long hallway, I hear my Mom screaming. Fifteen meters later, I fling open the door. On TV, a dark-haired woman in a pink hat scrambles over the trunk of an open-topped limousine, trying to escape her fate. She is screaming too.

This woman, far away in America, looks like my mom. Just like Ellen R. does – a beautiful woman.

Late that night, Mom comes into my room.

Now we're at the other end of the hallway.

Her hair smells freshly washed.

She hugs me.

"Not so tight, Mom."

When Kennedy was shot, first in the neck and then in the head, he remained sitting upright. He was wearing a corset, for medical reasons. Three days after his assassination, Kennedy's funeral mass is held. He is buried in the National Cemetery in Arlington, Virgina, where a gurgling river separates the White House from all the other white houses – the ones with rickety rocking chairs adorning the porches even in winter.

Is that truly how it was?

Are those memories stolen, invented, imagined, or extracted from other tales?

On the day of her husband's funeral, Jackie Kennedy wore a black hat, a black outfit, and a thin veil over her face. She held her children's hands: her daughter on the left, her son on the right. Outside the Capitol Building, the trees were bare. Here and there a bit of snow slid off the corbels. Inside the Capitol, a male choir sang in Latin while mourners from all over the world climbed the steps to the entrance. A security guard chewed gum.

Did the snow also slide from S.'s two steeples that day: those squat ruins, whose spires were blown off in the last war?

Was there really a television at the farm in November 1963, along with all those cows, pigs, and turnips?

Did the invisible wall between Ellen and her parents grow higher that day, built upon preexisting foundations?

Did Ellen go to bed early, as usual?

Did her son sleep next to her?

Did they speak English to each other, there in the dark?

Did Ellen sing to drive away her fear?

Or did she cry?

Tax Office in S.

The tax office in S. lies diagonally across from the train station, where the high-speed trains run through without stopping. As they approach, the tax office pops hideously into view. And as the trains depart, the reverse occurs – if the passengers choose to look behind them.

When I'm at the yoga studio – with my heart near my thigh as I do the "downward-facing-dog", one thing always pops into my inner eye: the tax office in S.

"I want to read about that in your next book," my friend told me recently. "The tax office in S.? Always? That could only happen to **you**!"

Apple Tree

In the year I was born, it was so hot that June that people didn't dare leave the strip of shade cast by the roofs of each house. Outside of that strip, people acted like it was a death zone: one that would pulverize hedgehogs, frogs, and birds, squash stray dogs, and flatten deer, cyclists, and hobos.

I was born on Bloomsday night, although I wouldn't know that for a long time. On that night of June 17th, my mother, Liz, lay in the Catholic hospital in her last labor pangs. My father, Leo, was across the street in the *Kolpinghaus*, the Catholic hostel for young workmen. He and his colleagues were trying to lift a young woman – a vegetable seller at the Otto Mess grocery store – onto their shoulders. The tunes of Fats Domino and Little Richard accompanied them.

A few days later, my father goes to the registry office in S. while my mom carries me home. Liz doesn't talk much. She prefers to sing, sometimes in an enchantingly beautiful way. She has no need for change. She still paints her fingernails the color of mother-of-pearl.

"I'll never get a job again," she proclaims often and unasked. "Why else did I get married?"

She has different plans for her daughter. The girl will remain single, become a teacher, live off her own income that will provide her with a twelve-piece Blue Onion china set and a garbage chute in the wall. On the way back home from the Catholic hospital, Liz carries her baby. Her sister carries the shabby duffelbag. It is still hot – so hot, in fact, that they barely talk to each other. They normally don't do much of that, anyway.

They lay me under an apple tree in the courtyard.

I remain an only child.

“What will you name your daughter?”

“Judith,” says my father. An older man – another new dad – had overtaken him on the registry office steps. “And what about you?”

“Martina. Are you sure you want to name her Judith?”

“Why not?”

“Oh … you never know what kind of situation you’ll find yourself in.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a Jewish name.”

“Judith?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now that you mention it….”

My father, Leo, was a thin-lipped copy of Anthony Perkins. The other man was simply old. His appearance wasn’t special.

The German flag flew above the registry office as the younger man held the door for the older one.

“I’ll tell you what,” said the old man. “You name your daughter Judith Martina, and I’ll name mine Martina Judith.”

I don’t know when my father remembered – whether right then or else much later – that the man next to him was 25 years older than him. That man hadn’t even lived in S. for 10 years! His family had once owned a lovely department store near the market square – then they didn’t, and eventually they did again. I don’t know what happened in the natures of such wildly different men that caused them – consciously, yet not so – to name their daughters in that crisscross fashion. Judith Martina (me), and Martina Judith: the girl who would be my best friend for a long time. One of those fathers was young and couldn’t decide whether brass music or jazz sounded prettier. The other father was almost elderly – and probably not far from wise.

I can picture the two men pausing for a moment on the steps of the registry office and tilting their heads back. As they do so, they overlook the German flag waving above them to focus on something else: the two steeples of S., whose spires were blown off in March 1945, in the war. The two men must have felt great peace, staring with raised chins at something almost touching the sky, surrounded only by celestial colors.

My mother became pregnant three times after I was born. It was always in the summer, and each time it was a stillborn child. At my grandmother's insistence, the last baby received an emergency baptism even though it was no longer breathing. The boy was buried in his grandfather's grave – inside of a shoebox, someone later claimed. During her pregnancies, Liz suffered from insomnia at night and nausea in the morning. The doctor recommended an over-the-counter sedative and sleep aid that "would cause no side effects". Thalidomide. In the Catholic hospital's maternity ward, Liz's tiny, white face shrank further into the depths of her pillow after each stillbirth. I fed her condensed milk with a spoon. "Bear Brand," proclaimed the label. She had to become strong as a bear again.

I never knew that grief feels so much like fear.

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