

# THE HOUSE

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## INDOORS

My childhood home was large and empty. In the front it led to the city, to Mühlweg, to the other houses. In the back it opened to the whole world. I grew up by a large window, underneath which was the river Usa, our river, beyond which lay the field, and above which was the sky. When I lay in bed I saw the branches of the large linden trees standing on the other side of the river Usa. In summer its leaves blew in the wind. In autumn they colored my entire room. In winter the branches stared like skeletons in the dark. In spring they harbored the birds and were filled with song. Back then I did not recognize any birdcalls. At the time their song was still undifferentiated and uniform. I first learned the calls when the room, the house, and the world to which it opened, were all lost, just as the sound of the Usa, which was my life's sound. This constant gurgle that had instilled a rhythm in my mind, against which I could not defend myself, was perhaps one of the initial causes of my illness.

When I was a small child, my parents took me to the doctor because I didn't speak, they say, for a long time, not a word, and I made abnormal movements. They believed it was severe

nerve damage. I only partially passed the eye test. My eyes always slid off the object of observation. At the beginning I was able to focus on it, then I slid off, they say. At night I lay in bed and coughed everything out of my body. That was also explained by nerves. I was an exhausted child who during the night transformed into a barking dog. The doctor must have examined me and said the behavior I exhibited was generally a sign of some kind of mental impairment, but I was clearly not mentally disabled, just exhibited relevant behavior. I was a silent child who couldn't stay put on a chair, and when I lay in bed, I closed my eyes and opened them again, and for hours rolled my head on the pillow back and forth, from left to right, and right to left again. That frightened my parents. To them it appeared as if I was enclosed into my world.

I do not have any memories of my early days in the house. But I always picture the same image of me sitting in the stroller in the foyer, in our house hallway. Maybe my great-grandmother had just brought me home from the ducks at the pond in Bad Nauheim, and now I was sitting there in the stroller and taking in the world with my mouth closed and rocking my head back and forth. They say that I even made these motions with my head in the stroller. A huge, empty space below, covered with marble tiles exuding a great chill. Then the long hallway to the right. Down the hall it is completely dark. Ahead, but still at some distance from me in the stroller, the huge suspended steps covered with the same marble tiles as the floor. Behind me, light streams in through the open door and light also comes down from the upstairs, as if up above there was some kind of heaven, another realm. In this image the foyer looks like a huge stage of theater, an architectural piece in a cool, geometrical order without actors, with only me inside. In this way I see my stroller as in a universal space in which each moment stretches from the borders of the far walls and into the fuzzy darkness. The only material which makes up this

universe is the far wallpaper on the walls and the countless tiles on the disappearing expanse of the floor. Maybe this foyer numbed me with its stillness and enormity or I gazed at it in wonder and I doze off.

Looking down from the ground floor into the wide, open basement steps in the middle of the foyer; it was as if gazing into a gorge. It was a dark, sinister opening. On Uhlandstrasse the basement had been behind a door in the house. At my great-grandmother's you had to go down the stairs and then open a wooden door painted with yellow enamel to reach the cellar. But here they had to prevent me from falling into this cellar gorge. Did this unknown darkness gaping before me every day attract me, did it repel me and frighten me? I must have occasionally seen someone descending, anyone, my father, my mother, my uncle J., or a specter that became thinner against the cellar light as if it was going towards its disappearance below. When he went around the corner of the stairs, it was gone, nothing less than as if it had been lost forever and extinguished as if in an extermination machine. A few minutes later the specter would reappear, become more voluminous, the person returned to the world, or was resurrected, maybe now with a case of beer or a bottle of wine or a laundry basket in their hands. The light was fixed above the landing in such a way that the person ascending received an aura around their head and a halo on a particular step of the stairs. Then the figure was back in the foyer. The last thing that happened was that the light suddenly fell away and the cellar's descent, until just a moment ago illuminated in every corner, once again lay in gloaming and down in the blackness. At the time I could barely have understood that the cause was a light switch that the person had flicked. Presumably for me everything appeared to be a law of nature that I stared at like the sagas and fairy tales that I was told.

It was different when someone ascended to the second floor. Then they ascended into that diffuse light that came from above and became increasingly brighter. That was the ascension into heaven; up there in the second floor they were received in an illuminated atmosphere as with a blur. By the way, this blur was solely due to the fact that there was a large window across from the stairs, and the doors next to it, which opened to a large room facing south, were usually open. Down in the foyer there was only a dark pane of milk glass, and the doors to the other rooms down the entire hallway were always closed. When someone went up I wasn't afraid for them, even when they did not come up for hours, like our sewing maid Mrs. Däschinger. (Mrs. Däschinger would sit up there entire afternoons sewing away in a large, bright balcony room). So the foyer was a Manichaeian device dividing the world into light and darkness with all the connotations such as the sublime, on the one hand, the uncanny, on the other, maybe even good and evil, et cetera. In this way, the new house created its own mythology for me. Even today visitors are regularly surprised when they enter our foyer for the first time and see the basement steps in front of them. And how much more must it have shocked me as a toddler.

Before the move I had lived in another world. There was the spa park in Bad Nauheim where I must have been very frequently, my grandmother's house on Uhlandstrasse, where we had lived in a small garret apartment before our move, my great-grandmother's apartment where I must have spent the most time. This world, my first, was the world of my grandparents and great-grandparents. Even at five or seven years of age I still preferred to be in my grandmother's house or with my great-grandmother. Perhaps that is why I always first picture this image in the foyer when I think of our house because it marks the transition that I experienced then, the transition between the old world and the new. I sat in the vestibule, still unable to speak, perhaps my great-grandmother has only gone into the kitchen or to the back closet, which can't be more than

twenty-five feet, but in that moment, when I was sitting there (if it's autumn, the cold air and the October or November light is streaming in behind me through the open door), the space around me closed and lifted me into its geometric, wide, empty cosmos. I picture it like a painting by Paul Delvaux. I don't know that my great-grandmother has only gone around the corner and will reappear in a few seconds; this idea, this notion does not appear in the image.

At the time the house was newly constructed on the plot of land where our old apple orchard had been. The interior had hardly been decorated; I suppose the only thing in the long distance of our foyer was the front coat rack, a black-painted metal crate with protruding hooks that had always terrified me in the following years because they reminded me of the hooks at our butcher's, butcher Blum. In contrast, the garret apartment in my grandmother's house, where we had lived before, was downright tiny and full of nooks and crannies. There the walls and doors were close together, you never saw further than perhaps three or four yards, and everywhere there were objects, installations, tables, chest of drawers, mirrors, chairs, rugs, vases, flowers, *et cetera*. Great-grandmother lived in an even older house than my grandmother. On the third floor she had an apartment she would always carry me up to. I would usually stay in the kitchen. There everything was full of bowls, old jugs, preserving jars, tins, cabinets, a large table in the middle of the room. In part the furnishing still came from great-grandmother's parents in the 1920s. This was another world, a world dated by its smell, sounds, creaking wood steps. I don't know if she still had homemade sauerkraut in the cellar – I have no living memory of my great-grandmother and just know her from photos and stories. I also only know the creaking wood step from later. And yet I had heard them daily during my first years of life. In my mind I still have a very distant image of great-grandmother's kitchen, rather of the large kitchen table, but maybe this is also just because my sister later regularly told of how she had hid underneath the table when great-

grandmother got dressed and how she looked up from there at great-grandmother's large, old breasts. Apparently she did this frequently.

As with every early childhood, a collection of very diverse stories and anecdotes are told in my family. I do not know to what extent they are true or whether they are true at all, even if I am at the center of these stories as the child named Andreas or rather *Andi*, as they called me. This Andi was an uncomplicated child in his first few days. Even the birth itself had been really easy. As always, my father had commuted to Frankfurt with the company car; the labor had started in the morning and this was always followed by the anecdote with the milkman, who had taken my mother to the maternity clinic. He is just setting the milk jars in front of the door and my mother asks him if he couldn't take her to the clinic. Failing that, she might have taken a taxi or called my uncle J. It is not recalled if a bag with the necessary things for the stay at the clinic was ready, but it is likely. It was her third childbirth, after all, so everything would have occurred with a certain routine. At the time our family lived in an apartment in Nieder-Mörlen, a neighborhood in Bad Nauheim, and consisted of four people: my parents, and my two siblings. My mother lived there for several years as a housewife, mainly occupied with the children and the household, and perhaps she exuded happiness and satisfaction and also pride in her marriage, her husband, their own apartment, the children and the overall picture that she presented to herself and her environment. In a certain sense it all must have been the fulfillment of a projected life plan, and I suppose, at the time, in the momentum of the first years of marriage, that which she called her happiness was still more or less unbroken. In the beginning she would have considered her wishes to be completely true. The children were small, and they could be cared for. They were apparently still not people, and the household around them was set up for the children and for the husband's homely comfort who, on the other hand made the whole household

financially possible. Although I don't picture these first years as idyllic, but rather as years of a certain kind of happy surprise, as if everything could really be as agreed upon, and as if the happiness promised by marriage was actually possible. However, I can't draw a lively picture. I would have to place my mother in the car on the way to the salon or confectionary shop in town, where she picks up the chicken *vol au vent* for Christmas Eve (pre-ordered), would have to place her at the stove or sitting on the couch where she is breast-feeding one of her children, would have to place her at the wringer where she presses the towels, would have to place her in church or kneeling, or going forward for communion, and above all that I would have to place the higher ideal of marriage that auratically illuminates all of these individual life details, at least for those concerned. Next to the permanent absence of her spouse with his various constructive activities for the family, taking out insurance policies, building loan contracts, opening accounts and preparation of tax returns, political work in city council. And I would also have to place him, when he is there in the evening or on the weekends, next to his wife on the sofa or church pew, and their two children between them. They must have been driven to Uhlandstrasse or to my great-grandmother in the Usavorstadt neighborhood of Friedberg. Perhaps with shared potato pancakes on the stove, the eggs from the henhouse on the property of the masonry company workshop. My first concrete concept is the milkman, with whom my reckoning of time starts. I see a woman who has settled, has her daily routine, and is on good terms with the milkman, two, three kilometers from her closest relatives, who surely keeps in touch still has daily contact with these relatives, talks with them on the telephone and speaks with them about upcoming events. However, in addition to the story with the milkman and the easy birth, about which everyone was glad, there was also my grandfather's funeral and, another couple weeks before, that of my great-grandfather, which resulted in the company suddenly without a head. At the time of my birth the

director's position at the Karl Boll masonry works was vacant, and my mother was supposed to assume it.

The milkman, then. Perhaps there were frequent conversations when he brought the milk, in passing, and the milkman was served liquor, just like the mailman. He follows my mother's wish and probably found it a change of pace to drive a very pregnant woman to the clinic in the last minute; but it also became clear to the milkman during the ride that the birth could have happened right then and there, in the milk wagon, so he was quick about it. Otherwise I might have been born in a milk wagon, on the B3 highway somewhere between Nieder-Mörlen and Bad Nauheim. It happened very suddenly, and I (Andi) would have been there. I was an easy birth, the milkman baby, the simple creature, and supposedly laughed immediately, was pleased, about the world, and now the sunlight, but in the first moment I probably had cried for my life, like all other children. Presumably in the maternity clinic there were at least five or ten born on that day, and everyone smiled at them and let them cry and then laid them down and called in the next woman in labor. I was already routine for my mother as well. That evening then my father, showing up in the company car with a bouquet, and possibly, since everything was so easy with the third child, they already drove back with me to Nieder-Mörlen the same evening, and then the following motions with me were routine and had been practiced, and putting me to bed in the sheets in which the other two children had already been put to bed. Another child had arrived. Another one. There must have been beautiful weather that day in the Wetterau region, it was the fest day of Saint Giles, the patron saint against sterility, the Black Death and mental illness; in the evening an eight of the moon only reached the sky, and they watched the evening news on television, in which the country commemorated the declaration of war twenty-eight years before to the day (on a Friday, like my birthday). At the time the Second German Television channel, ZDF, had been

broadcasting for exactly one week. It is said that even in the following days I was a simple, uncomplicated child with a sunny disposition.

It is said that the whole family supposedly paraded by in the first few days. Which means Grandmother and Great-Grandmother from Bad Nauheim, the Grandfather from Frankfurt and the Grandmother from there, the brother and both of my father's sisters, my mother's younger brother, Uncle J., all of my Frankfurt uncles and aunts with their offspring, who were all larger and capable of walking; all of them filed past and looked into my bed and stared at me with happy faces, some of them perhaps only anxious and dutiful, some of them enthusiastic, shoving their hands in my face. Then cards were written, I was entered into the baptismal registry, and the whole time I laid around, was fed and cleaned and had my diapers changed. By then my mother had to take care of the company, and I had my first move, to the small garret apartment in Uhlandstrasse.

The anecdotes about the first phase remained pleasant. Of course I hardly screamed at all during the first few weeks, and I wasn't ever imposing. So I went from hand to hand, that's how I picture it, till I landed with my great-grandmother for the first few years, And my father was congratulated in his company and they extended their hands to him and shook his and drank champagne with him. At first I was admired as any other child, and it was like a duty for every child's that had finally been accepted because anything else would have been some kind of treason, and sheer, unbelievable egoism. Adorable too: My grandmother, who became my first significant attachment figure, always said *my little boy*, when she talked about me. She was supposedly completely crazy about me, from the beginning, but it should be noted that nothing else could have been told in the family. Surely no one said that my great-grandmother only took the infant grumbling and complaining because then it would have been necessary to justify why a

child had been passed off to someone who would apparently rather not have anything to do with the child. So because I was with my great-grandmother the whole time of course she must have loved me above everything; otherwise the family wouldn't even tell the story. We were also only ever told the stories that could be told with a good conscience, as in every family. Today I know that 1967, the year of my birth, following the death of both old Bolls, my great-grandfather Karl and grandfather Wilhelm, led to a complete restructuring of the family under the aegis of the married-in lawyer and former tax official, my father, through which completely new distribution of roles was created, like for my uncle J. for instance, for my mother suddenly became head of the gravestone company as well, a fact without which the large house on the property of our company never would have existed. Perhaps I grew up entirely differently than the pleasant anecdotes tell.

In the meantime we lived on Uhlandstrasse. My great-grandmother picked me up there, bundled me up and pushed me onto the street that hardly any cars drove on yet. She pushed me to the right, down Uhlandstrasse with its villa-like houses, built around the turn of the last century, in whose front yards roses bloomed, and in front of every house trees grew and let their leaves fall, maybe even the leaves swirled around me and made me happy. Then, after a few meters we reached the mineral trench, the *Solgraben* at the end of Uhlandstrasse.

The *Solgraben* belongs to the picture of my childhood. At the age of five, or six I often stood at the *Solgraben* holding my great-grandmother Gusti's hand, gazing into the red, clear water and watching the deposits on the bed of the narrow trench that appeared to me like a living being. Sometimes it was out of commission, then workers shoveled it out, it became overgrown by salt deposits so that the water could only move with great effort, or it was clear and the bed was cleaned, then ducks swam on it. Perhaps the leaves floated on the water in the autumn, and

the houses and the trees reflected in its course and created the impression of depth, although the water was never more than five centimeters deep in the trench. I loved the *Solgraben* back then.

But now I'm still just a half-year or a year old and in the stroller at my great-grandmother Else's place. I can't say what the *Solgraben* represented for me during this first phase because of course I don't have any memory of it. I can only say that it was there and when my great-grandmother sat on a bench on its bank and held me on her lap so that I could see everything around me, that it had always looked that way, and that of course it had already been a part of me and my life.