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**Romeo & Romy**

Novel

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Roman)

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## PROLOGUE

### 1.

There would be corpses. That much was certain.

At least four, no, five actually, but at best, you would really only remember four of them. Because one was so pale, so insignificant, that you would come close to being consumed by pity, since even during his lifetime nobody had been interested in him. Thus, he should have at least earned a mention in death. But the truth was that no one would remember anything about him, not even the fact that he had died. That was unfair, but it was just part of human nature: the predilection for the dramatic, the fireworks displays, the spectacles, the loud noises.

Well, there would be corpses.

But how? How did one die rightly? So that one's own death touched others? It was already late morning, and she was still lying in bed, thinking about nothing else except: How did one die rightly? It must be *authentic*, unavoidable. Planned, though the plan should not be noticeable as such. Its facets illuminated, its effectiveness enhanced by the greatest possible charisma. But how? Loudly? Quietly? Obviously? Subtly? You should never leave

something like this to chance, but at the same time, under no circumstances should anything mechanical shine through. The trifles were the deciding element, the details, the... no, it was the heart that decided it! It had to stir the heart, otherwise the supernova of pain would turn into a string of firecrackers.

She finally got up and studied herself in the mirror: this hair! This rat's nest had definitely earned her death. And not a single person would wonder if it were justified or not. Besides that, she knew her thighs were too fat and her breasts were too small, her nose too large, and her eyebrows too thick. Is this how someone whose name should blaze brightly across the firmament should look? Whose death should be meaningful, not to mention the life that had gone before it? The legs too short, the backside too broad, and a dress that made her look like someone who could plunge a dagger into her heart for everyone to see - even if all you did was step across her twitching body, while making sure to not get blood on your shoes. Today of all days, on one of such importance, she felt as if too-thin ice were groaning and cracking under her feet, as if she were only a split second away from plunging into the water, never to surface again. No supernova, no spectacle, only a soft *splash*, and she would be gone, and no one would be able to say when and where they had last seen her. Or even what her name had been.

Outside, spring was herding fresh scents along the streets, while the sun daubed countless, lovely shadows on the asphalt. Even the allegedly sullen residents of the small city deep in the western part of the Republic looked around with brighter, friendlier eyes. However, all that Romy could think was that it was too warm, too friendly, too blooming. Weather that would invoke the wrong mood: not an ominous storm, but a buoyant summer night's dream. Horrible!

She crossed the street, lost so deep in thought that she failed to see the car: squealing tires and the scent of burning rubber, right before a bumper tapped her lightly on the knee.

She was alive!

She stared through the windshield at the driver, palely strangling the steering wheel, and felt grateful. She had come only a hair's breadth away from a premature death! Under a VW Polo. And in *this* dress!

She turned down the pedestrian zone and immediately sensed a surge of confidence, of downright pleasure in the very act of breathing. She found herself unexpectedly enjoying

the sunbeams dancing across her nose. Someone called her name and pantomimed crossed fingers in her direction. She waved back with a wide smile, all the murky thoughts instantly dispelled. She sped up, winding her way through the streets and alleys of the small city toward her goal.

Today was a glorious day.

A perfect day to die!

They would stir every single heart, and there would be nothing mechanical about it. They would expire in a fireworks display of passion. All five of them. And afterward you would even recall the one, which would please him to no end, especially since the poor devil tended toward melancholy. But not today! He would trump them all, and nobody would forget him.

There he was already, the poor lad.

How he was waving at her!

And she at him.

How he was running toward her!

And she toward him.

How they were running toward each other!

And as she reached him, as he fell in her arms and she in his, he hiccuped through his tears: "He cut me from the fifth act!"

Ah, only four corpses after all.

## 2.

Death was not the only act that could be cruel, so could the cutting of roles. Actually this was even worse than death, at least for actors of distinction. And otherwise. Just yesterday, during the dress rehearsal, he had fought like a lion, made his lines sparkle, reached every last one of them, and given up the ghost dramatically. And today? Today they cut him from the final act. Because the director claimed that it would disrupt the dramaturgy. Because he claimed that it would be a distraction from the actual showdown. And because he claimed that he seriously wondered what had driven Shakespeare to include this character in the

last act.

“Shakespeare!” cried Count Paris in indignation. And then with even greater indignation: “Shakespeare!”

Count Paris’s actual name was Ralf, but at this moment, in costume and the heat of passion, he was a marvelous Paris.

Romy tried all she could to console the inconsolable: “I think he should have stayed true to the work!”

Paris nodded vehemently: “Indeed!”

“A bitter loss for the fifth act!”

Even more vehemently: “Indeed!!”

“I’m so sorry!”

He collapsed into her arms again: “Oh, Romy... you’re the soul of this cast. You hold everything together - without you we’d all be lost.”

This was an ever-so-slight exaggeration, but nonetheless, it made her happy. Linking her arm in his, they walked into the theater through the backstage door.

Excitement pulsed in the changing rooms and passages, along the steps, ladders, and catwalks high over their heads. An actress scurried by, half-clothed, as a dresser held onto the edge of her skirt. The latter would have released some choice expletives, if she had not been gripping pins between her lips as she tried to shorten the hem. Over there, an actor was vociferously proclaiming his lines, obviously dissatisfied with the intonation of his words. On the other hand, the lighting designer down on the floor was arguing with the lighting technician up under the ceiling about the positioning of the spotlights. The stagehands were standing in a corner, enjoying their union-guaranteed break, although it always looked as if they were on break when the stage manager was nowhere around.

In the midst of all this, Romy tugged Paris behind her like a child, passed a group of extras and the makeup room, where two makeup artists were tending to the actors and chatting. They walked up a short staircase and reached a long corridor, at the end of which the director, Peter von Teune, was just exiting a room. With billowing scarf and irritated countenance.

A narrow hall, flickering neon light, white walls.

A short pause.

Then they gathered speed and rushed toward each other like knights at a joust.

“And you think you can change his mind?” Paris whispered quaveringly.

“Of course!” Romy whispered back over her shoulder.

“He looks angry!”

“He always looks angry!”

“Maybe I wasn’t good enough?!” Paris hissed fearfully.

“You were grand!” Romy hissed back.

“Indeed!” Paris cried quietly. “Indeed?!”

Only a few meters now, but then a thought suddenly struck Romy: God, why is he so tall now?! Practically a giant.

“You look great, Romy!” von Teune bellowed amicably.

For a moment, she lost her train of thought, and then he forged by them. Without even slowing down, trailing in his wake his fluttering scarf and a whiff of Dior.

They looked after him.

“Cast meeting in five!”

He was gone.

They were left standing there.

Still grasping Romy’s hand, Paris’s head drooped before he burst forth with: “If you stab us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?”

Romy touched his cheek soothingly: “You would’ve made a marvelous Shylock!”

Paris’s lips trembled: “But I’m Paris. And they won’t let me die!”

With that, he ran off.

### 3.

The rest was sulking.

Not like a child who had been wrongfully punished, but like a man who had to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders without anyone even noticing it. Furthermore, this man simply could not believe how unjust, how ungrateful, yes, how egomaniacal the world could be: to be more precise, his colleagues. They were all standing on the stage and

listening intently to what the great master was saying, but nobody was looking at *him*. Romy presented him with a smile, but he did not want it. No one should smile at him anymore. Never again. He would just stand here and fade away.

The others, however, could hardly keep still. They were literally bursting with excitement, with stage fright and the desire to perform. Following von Teune's words was clearly a challenge. They were mentally going through their lines, fidgeting, shifting weight from one foot to the other, or surreptitiously seeking out the eyes of the ones they liked. Just like Romy gazed at Romeo. And Romeo at Romy. Sometimes roguishly, sometimes furtively.

He looked so good!

Von Teune finally released them, and they scattered like a brood of pecking hens into which someone had boisterously leaped. Romy kept her eyes out for Romeo, but she could not find him. She suspected, though, that he had not lost sight of her, and so she sauntered along the stage curtain, descended a short flight of steps, collided with a pretty, blonde actress, whose eyes flashed before she cocked her chin and stalked past her, lifting the hem of her costume so she would not step on it.

A second later, Romy felt someone grab her arm and pull her inside a niche.

"Romeo!" Romy laughed. "By whose direction foundst thou out this place?"

"By love that first did prompt me to enquire. He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes."

That sounded so lovely! Shakespeare.

He looked at her.

And she at him.

"You're stuck!"

He sighed: "Shit! It's always this stupid spot!"

"I'm no pilot..." Romy prompted.

He nodded: "...yet wert thou as far as that vast shore..."

Then he drew her close to him for a kiss: "Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take. Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purg'd."

She pushed him back with a giggle: "Save it for the stage!" She freed herself from his arms, bent over his left shoulder, and whispered: "Break a leg, my handsome Romeo!"

A lingering gaze, a gentle touch, and she was already hurrying away.

“O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?” he called longingly.

Romy turned around: “What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?”

“Th’exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine.”

She laughed: “See, you’re doing just fine! But wait, I forgot something...”

She returned.

“Turn around!” she ordered.

He obeyed.

She then kicked him in the rear.

“Ow! That was really hard!” he griped.

“This is your stage debut. It brings good luck!”

He rubbed his backside and smiled wryly: “I know. Will you spit over my shoulder one more time?”

She bent over his left shoulder and said: “Break a leg!”

With that, she walked off again: “I’ll see you on stage, Romeo!”

“Juliet?!”

She turned back in bewilderment.

“And what love can do, that dares love attempt.”

She smiled and threw him a kiss.

These minutes before the premiere.

The tension, the nervous laughter, the soft murmurs from the gradually filling theater behind the curtain. Costumes were adjusted, sweat blotted, last-minute voice exercises completed. Then shortly before the curtain rose, von Teune joined them, and he too wished them all broken legs. Perhaps everything would have gone just fine if he could have left well enough alone. Perhaps he should have simply walked off the stage with symbolically crossed fingers. But that is not what he did. Instead, he turned back to his actors once more and said: “And don’t forget. Fifth act, scene three. Pick up after Count Paris’s death! Well then: Break a leg!”

It was as if he had slipped up behind poor Paris’s back and sunk a dagger into it. He, whom no one had consoled, whom no one had defended, who had been tossed carelessly on

the floor like a used tissue. Now this too. One final humiliation.

Too much!

Like the last sound from a dying man, a word crossed Paris's lips, the one thing no actor within a theater was supposed to say! It was quiet but still loud enough for Romeo to hear it. He stared in horror at Paris, who himself was shocked at what he had just said. Hand covering his mouth, he dashed from the stage.

Romeo looked around: What was he supposed to do? The others had heard nothing, as they stared from the wings toward the stage and the curtain about to rise. Why was there nobody close by who could help him? Who could have offered advice? He did the first thing that came to him, and that was not very much: He twisted his shoulders to the left, knocked three times on wood, and sensed that this was nowhere close to enough. He was doomed!

If only Romy were beside him! She would have known what to do in a situation like this. She could have helped him! She was always there for him - the spirit of his performance ripened under her attentiveness. It was her eyes, her soft whisper, that meant the world to him. She was his Juliet. Without her, he could never be Romeo!

There she was! In the wings!

She was hugging everyone and whispering *Break a leg!* Just like everyone was hugging her and whispering *Break a leg!* She waved at him, crossed her fingers for him to see, and then walked down the steps, hurrying under the stage to a tiny space that held only one chair, one text board, and one light.

His Juliet.

The prompter.

The curtain lifted - the play began.

4.

The knowledge that no one could stop the fiasco was a little too much for someone whose debut was supposed to be the start of a major career. And thus, from the very first sentence, everything inside of him that had once been Romeo began to melt. Soon there was nothing left on stage of the lovelorn Montague from Verona, and in his place was only Ben Rogotzki

from Oer-Erkenschwick, whose greatest success had been a popular advertisement for laundry detergent. This had, incidentally, helped him to land this engagement out in the country, where people placed more value on fame than talent. Together with a pretty, blonde Juliet, who had been seen on television several times and whose face somehow seemed familiar but whose name was never on the tip of one's tongue. These two were supposed to turn *Romeo and Juliet* into a major attraction. And at least for the premiere, this plan had worked: the house was sold out.

But already in the first scene of Act I, right after the scuffle between the Montagues and the Capulets, Ben sought repeatedly to make eye contact with Romy, and she tried to lift him up, to set the scene for his devotion and bliss. But without success. His sentences lacked vitality - yes, you could even say they were wooden. This is why they remained separated from each other, regardless of how alluring her gaze was.

And they had been in such harmony!

In the dress rehearsal, there had been no one but the two of them! Through the strength of her quiet voice, she had practically freed herself from the tiny, mere twenty-five centimeter-high prompter's box and rocketed onstage as Juliet Capulet from Verona, captivating through her passion everyone within sight of her eyes. She had cried, laughed and suffered more than anyone before her. A giant of the theater world - and nobody could have taken their eyes off of her, least of all Romeo.

With every one of his senses, he had felt her love, her pain, her yearning, her hopes, struggles and fears, despite the fact that he could only see her eyes from the stage. But that had been enough to give his performance wings, because she was on his side. There was suddenly a link between them that only death could sever. And when it reached that point, Ben died a stage death filled to the brink with love.

Just like Romy.

During the dress rehearsal, down there in the theater's machine room, life exploded while it dwindled on the stage. Down there, the heart, the blazing conflict that had moved people to tears for centuries, beat.

Today, on the other hand, the premiere audience sat there completely unmoved, because it sensed neither love nor despair. What it did feel was the minute-by-minute, growing estrangement between Ben and the stage Juliet. The billing and cooing with that

bitch in the prompter's box had been irritating enough during the dress rehearsal. Worse yet, since yesterday, Ben had been behaving like an idiot with her - flirting, dallying, paying court - without even once noticing how his silly behavior hurt the *real* Juliet. And now the sighing and cooing was emanating once more from the prompter's box. Unfortunately, Ben was now missing his cues and acting like he had just returned from a night out with the guys.

Because of that, the play picked up speed, almost to the point of frenzy, so that the first kiss in the first act did not seal the destiny of two lovers, but rather it seemed as if Juliet was just biding her time until she could ram a dagger into Romeo's ear.

It was not yet a disaster, but it was right on the brink of it. Was this the curse? Or just a series of unfortunate circumstances? In any case, someone shoved a folded note into the hand of one of the stagehands, who was absorbed in checking his Facebook messages. That someone requested that this be given to Romy first *after* the performance. All that got through to the stagehand was that the message was meant for Romy, and so he handed the note through the door into the tiny prompter's box, just as Romeo and Juliet were starting their first balcony scene.

Juliet: "How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore? The orchard walls are high and hard to climb..."

Romy held the small note and wondered what was so critical that it required instructions from the director? Had she spoken too loudly? Or too quietly? It was unusual for someone to be given a message during an actual performance. She glanced up and saw a very jittery Ben.

Romeo: "I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes, and but thou love me, let them find me here..."

She unfolded the note and read:

OMA LENA HAS DIED.

PLEASE COME RIGHT HOME!

ANTON

She stared at the lines, unsure if she had understood what the two sentences really meant,

but then the certainty detonated inside her mind with a dazzling flash. And in the silence that followed the explosion, the pain surged toward her like muffled, increasingly loud rolls of thunder.

Juliet: ““By whose direction found’st thou out this place?”

Romeo: “By love that first did prompt me to enquire. He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes.”

He faltered, glanced inconspicuously into the prompter’s box, searching in vain for the familiar eyes, but they were nowhere to be seen. And there was nothing to hear either. No whisper, no lines.

Romeo came to a grinding halt.

Seconds passed, and nothing happened.

Juliet hissed under her breath: “I’m no pilot...”

But Ben did not hear her.

His eyes were glued to the prompter’s box, which did not go unnoticed by the viewers on the floor and in the boxes. Here and there, the first chuckles over the dropped lines could be heard, and in the meantime, a furious Juliet began to whisper the lines to her Romeo so loudly that the first row could say them along with her. Though obviously Ben could not.

Romy’s hands were trembling. She had not realized that she had stopped breathing, and so she released her anguish in a mixture of disbelief and sheer breathlessness: “NO!!!”

She wept.

Romeo and Juliet stared at the prompter’s box.

The scene had frozen into a still life.

Romy was unable to resume her task, nor could Ben find his way back. After what felt like an eternity, Juliet angrily stalked off the stage.

Curtain.

5.

Naturally, the curtain rose again after a couple of minutes, but the performance was

irrevocably ruined. Even worse: the incident seemed to have infected the entire cast. Not a single person could deliver a satisfactory performance, except perhaps for Paris, who put up a valiant effort even without his stage death. However, after the show, he vanished quickly without joining the other cast members in drowning the wayward performance in prosecco.

Ben was also not in the mood to celebrate, despite the fact he was otherwise always in the mood to celebrate. He finally tortured his Romeo through to the end, by which point the audience was ultimately relieved by his death, since it released both them and himself. Afterward, Juliet spent five minutes screaming at him in the dressing room, before she stormed out of the theater, slamming the door behind her.

In any case, nobody had booed. There had even been a smattering of applause, albeit quite reserved. It almost looked as if the actors were simply left standing on stage, while the audience members hurried toward the exits, hoping to get home in time for the primetime crime show.

However, on the following day, a newly composed Romy, Ben, von Teune, and the stage Juliet were summoned to city hall, where they met a visibly strained events manager, Herr Schubert, who was ostentatiously flipping through the region's only daily newspaper. There was no arts section, so all cultural events were covered in the regional section of the paper. And a glance at the headline, which contained something about "scandal," revealed that the discussion about the premiere was not likely to be a very friendly one.

"I think we need to have a chat about what happened yesterday," Herr Schubert began, as he carefully folded the newspaper. "When we, Herr von Teune, discussed what we could offer our audience here, we agreed that it should be something recognizable, very grand. And with *Romeo & Juliet*, it seems to me that we had a sure thing with the grandest, most recognizable work in theater history. That's the gist of it, right?"

Von Teune nodded hesitantly: "Right."

"A play that is so famous that, not only the general public, but also every single actor should know it, right?"

"Right."

Herr Schubert stared furiously at von Teune: "Then why didn't your actors know it?!"

Von Teune straightened his shoulders: "Look, Herr Schubert, I can understand that you're upset by what happened yesterday, but I..."

Impassively, Herr Schubert read aloud to the group: "Ben Rogotzki, also known as Dr. Fresh from the laundry soap commercial, acted like a barkeeper in a hobbit pub and treated Shakespeare's text like a baby does its diapers. The only consolation is that his knowledge as Dr. Fresh should be of great assistance in the cleaning process."

Juliet could not bite back a brief, amused smile. Von Teune said nothing, while Ben protested: "Man, folks out here are snarky!"

Herr Schubert ignored him: "On the other hand, the role of Juliet should have required an empathic, shimmering delivery. This character was portrayed by Constanze Strasser, who is also known from the afternoon series *All My Children*. With the same degree of sensitivity as a cruise missile, she ripped through the drama, and for the first time in theater history, the over-taxed audience came a hair's breadth from premature applause, when at the end of the play, she was good enough to finally kill herself."

Constanze's eyes sliced Herr Schubert into paper-thin carpaccio. Along with the newspaper he was still holding.

Herr Schubert was completely unmoved: "Herr von Teune, are you still convinced that your actors were performing the same play William Shakespeare first created back in 1597?"

Von Teune said nothing.

"Could you please do me a favor and explain what caused yesterday's disaster?!" Herr Schubert asked.

"I can't explain it, Herr Schubert. Everything went like clockwork in the dress rehearsal."

Constanze snorted contemptuously.

"Yes? Frau Strasser?" Herr Schubert pressed.

Constanze folded her arms across her chest and answered waspishly: "Why don't you ask the prompter?!"

Romy could feel the gazes that seemed to bore into her from all sides, as she flushed in shame and dismay. She was not quick-tongued, and Constanze's ego, which was rushing ahead of her like a bow wave, swept away her miniscule amount of self-confidence.

“Unfortunately, there was a horrible misunderstanding with a stagehand...” von Teune came to her rescue.

Herr Schubert nodded charitably. He had already heard about the death of Romy’s Oma.

“That’s not what I meant!” Constanze protested.

“What do you mean, Frau Strasser?” Herr Schuber inquired.

“That she doesn’t know her place. That’s what I mean!”

Romy’s head fell, as she tried to turn invisible.

“Constanze!” von Teune admonished soothingly.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t see it, Peter?!” Constanze snarled angrily. “She wanted to be Juliet!” She turned toward Romy: “But I’m Juliet! Me! Got it?!”

“Frau Strasser!” Herr Schubert reprimanded. “This has nothing to do with jealousy...”

“I’m jealous? Me? I’m not jealous. Why would I be jealous? Of her?”

“Of course, you’re jealous!” Ben grumbled. “Because Romy is a much better Juliet!”

“She’s the prompter, you hobbit! The prompter! And sadly she has sent your wits through the spin cycle.”

“Oh, I see now, here it comes! That is sooo cheap!”

Constanze smiled spitefully and nodded at Romy: “Cheap? Hey, that’s right up your alley!”

“You are so unprofessional!”

“*You* are the unprofessional one!”

“No, you!”

Constanze turned back toward Herr Schubert, as she angrily blew back a strand of her bangs: “I’ll tell you something: I’m the only professional on this cast!”

“Good to know. We could’ve used an actress yesterday...” Herr Schubert responded. Eyes like lasers - laboratory-quality incisions.

“Could we possibly get back to what happened on stage?”

Ben folded his arms: “It was the curse.”

Now all eyes were on him.

“What kind of curse?” Herr Schubert asked.

“Well, the Scottish curse!” Ben replied.

Herr Schubert sighed: "See here, Herr Rogotzki. Here in this region there are no curses. There are cows. Bad weather, occasionally pigheadedness. But no curses."

Von Teune explained: "This is something very specific to the theater, Herr Schubert. As you know, certain superstitions are common among theater people, some stronger than others."

"And?"

"These include a couple of things that you're never supposed to do prior to a performance. For example, whistling."

"Did someone whistle?" Herr Schubert inquired.

"No."

"Herr von Teune..."

Peter von Teune waved dismissively and then continued: "There's something worse than whistling. At least among theater people."

"And that would be?"

"Macbeth."

Herr Schubert looked from one to the other in amazement. Ben was the only one nodding vigorously.

"What's that?"

"You aren't supposed to utter this name aloud."

It was clear from von Teune's face that he himself was not really happy with this explanation.

"We're talking about Shakespeare's Macbeth?"

"Yes."

Herr Schubert leaned back in his chair: "And it brings bad luck if someone says it?"

"Absolutely!" Ben declared.

"Idiot!" Constanze hissed quietly.

Ben turned toward her: "Compared with you, Yoko Ono is Mother Teresa!"

"Oh, a few days ago, you seemed to enjoy this quite a bit!"

"I was drunk."

He suddenly felt Romy's eyes in his back and did not dare to turn back around.

"Could we possibly set aside this childishness?" Herr Schubert begged. "And get back

to the other childishness? Macbeth?"

Ben answered: "Count Paris whispered this to me. Right before the performance."

"And that was enough?" Herr Schubert asked in disbelief.

"It doesn't take much!" Constanze cut in.

"Just like you..." Ben countered.

And again he could sense Romy's gaze in his back - how unpleasant. It made no difference to him that Constanze was looking daggers at him.

"Then we could say that we were lucky to have settled on *Romeo & Juliet*. Just imagine what would've happened if we'd staged *Macbeth*!"

Herr Schubert had taken refuge in sarcasm. In his eyes, this was the only way to survive this conversation without lasting brain damage. By this point, he had a feeling that there might actually be a curse, one that involved being locked up inside a room with actors and not being able to kill them. Or himself.

Von Teune explained: "Theater actors always refer to the *Scottish play*. Or to the *Scottish king*... Listen, I know how this must sound to you..."

"You have no idea what this sounds like..." Herr Schubert interrupted biting.

"I promise you that starting now, we will have everything under control. A lot of things collided yesterday. Today we'll pick ourselves up, and the play will be a great success..."

"But without the prompter!" Constanze interjected.

"Yoko!" Ben bellowed.

"I'm serious. Without the prompter."

Von Teune's tone turned conciliatory: "Constanze, we should deal with this less emotionally..."

"I'm totally clear on this," Constanze declared curtly, "but the reality is: I'm the Juliet who's selling the tickets! The people want to see me. If you disagree... please do!" She stood up and walked to the door: "There's only one Juliet in this play. Me or her! There's nothing else for me to say."

She left the room - this time without slamming the door.

For a moment, no one knew what to say.

Then Herr Schubert cleared his throat: "Could you please leave us in private?"

Von Teune nodded briefly and stood up.

“But there has to be another solution...” Ben suggested halfheartedly.

Herr Schubert replied: “We could swap out the Romeo. That would be one compromise.”

Ben gulped before leaving the room, head bowed. He still did not dare look at Romy.

They were alone.

“What would you do in my place, Romy?” Herr Schubert inquired gently.

Romy felt tears spring to her eyes.

“I’m very sorry for what happened with your grandmother. But as you just heard, this has nothing to do with that.”

She nodded.

“How long have you been with us?” Herr Schubert asked.

“Almost two years,” Romy choked out.

“And you weren’t always the prompter, right?”

Romy shook her head: “No.”

Herr Schubert fell silent.

Then he continued: “Your contract with us runs through the end of the play...”

She wept and nodded simultaneously.

“The only thing I can do for you is to release you from your duties. You’ll continue to be paid through the play’s run. As I said: I’m very sorry. You’re a nice person.”

Romy rose and wiped the tears from her eyes.

He shook her hand: “You’ll be a wonderful Juliet someday. But unfortunately not here.”

With that, Romy left his office.

And the theater.

## THREE GRAVES

6.

The fact that the Großzerlitscher found themselves thinking more and more about death was not attributable to them not liking their small village enough, but the very opposite: They liked their village much too much! The pride they took in their home was clearly justified, since Großzerlitsch was a lovely piece of ground replete with medieval cottages in an idyllic setting, tucked in the middle of the Erzgebirge close to the Czech border. But it was hard to reach, lying far off the beaten path. So far off that the village's young people had left many years ago. The only ones who remained behind were the elderly. Yet that was not the reason why they had taken it into their heads to die as quickly as possible. It was the beautiful home, even if one could not enjoy it after death, and a certain stubbornness on the part of the municipal government in Kleinzerlitsch that were speeding the Großzerlitscher toward early graves. Oma Lena's death had lit additional fire under this situation.

Romy did not know about any of this, as she disembarked at the train station with her two large suitcases. She dragged her luggage all the way to the small square in front of the station before a young man helped her carry them, accompanying her to *Roter Hirsch*, which made the best food for miles around. Großzerlitsch had *Muschebubu*, but the selection here was nothing special.

She got a seat by the window from which she could look out onto the highway, the train station, and the passing cars. Once again, much had changed here since her last visit. Building facades had been fixed up here and there, new shops had opened around and about, and from the train, she had caught sight of several new houses. Kleinzerlitsch had grown a little again. Tourism had brought some money into the area and, with it, a degree of modest prosperity. The town had a nice nutcracker museum, several shops featuring Erzgebirge folk art, a couple of restaurants, mainly in association with a hotel or bed and breakfast. Grocery and clothing stores. And, of course, the highway with its constant traffic. Kleinzerlitsch's lifeline.

Things were happening here!

About four hundred years ago, Großzerlitsch had been located on a trade route. Today it was Kleinzerlitsch. And that was why Kleinzerlitsch was not only much larger, but

it was also an incorporated municipality and held administrative authority. All of this had contributed to the Kleinzerlitscher being more open, industrious and optimistic. In the eyes of the Großzerlitscher, the Kleinzerlitscher had flat out sold their birthright. And that was why it did not matter to them in the end where they were buried. However, this did matter to the Großzerlitscher.

Romy boarded the bus, which made trips twice a day to Großzerlitsch, leaving the hustle and bustle behind her as she traveled into a shadowy forest full of tall spruces. In the rain and the cold, these often crowded next to each other, draped in fog, looking for all intents and purposes like giant soldiers crouching close to each other and smoking. Soon they were driving up a steep mountain and then back down, along a narrow asphalted road, hoping to avoid any oncoming vehicles. If any were encountered, then the situation quickly resembled that of two ants meeting each other on the edge of a ruler.

The view into the Großzerlitsch Valley made up for the somewhat arduous drive. It was quaint and green, edged in woods and meadows. It almost looked like God had picked up a handful of houses, and tossed some of them onto the steep hillside and distributed the rest along the road, where they waited in silent rows until the day passed. Most of them were clad in wood or slate and featured lattice windows, as well as chimneys.

In the middle of the village, fed by a small brook, was what had historically been the village's fire pond. However, there had not been any fires for a very long time, and besides, there was now a hydrant. From this central spot, narrow, mostly paved paths and lanes meandered in all directions like veins, passing the buildings in the center and continuing up to the houses on the slopes.

The asphalt road ended shortly beyond Großzerlitsch. Dead end. With sufficient space for a bus to turn around.

Romy got off and waved once more at the bus driver, who had helped her carry her suitcases off. Since she had been the only rider, it had cheered him up to play the cavalier.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.

It was not just the clear, fresh air that caressed her cheek so familiarly. It was as if her senses registered, in addition to the cottages, lanes, and gardens, those who had always made this their home. She heard their voices, their laughter, their moaning, and their sighs

like a continuous whispering of old stories, like the rustling of leaves or the dancing of pollen in a sunbeam. Like the color that was slowly fading on the facades.

Home was not what you could see, but what others could never see.

A glance at her watch revealed that she was late, so she simply set her suitcases inside the bus stop and hurried on. There was no need to worry about her belongings. Rarely did anyone drive by, and if so, they would not steal any suitcases.

Another peculiarity to Großzerlitsch was the graveyard. Wedged in between lovely, ancient walls, it was bordered by various properties, so that you could actually say that it was a central part of the village. And there was no church. It stood in Kleinzerlitsch. The Großzerlitscher did not miss it, since they had never been especially pious.

Even at a distance, she could hear the pastor's preface, and she soon caught sight of the Großzerlitscher grouped around the casket like a bunch of black grapes. Anton was the first to notice her, and he waved unobtrusively: He had saved a spot for her. First there, next to him, with a view of the simple oak casket, did her heart again grow heavy, and she wept throughout the entire funeral. Anton kept a comforting arm around her, while the others attempted to at least throw her encouraging glances.

The casket was lowered, and a shovelful of earth added by each of those present concluded the ceremony. Gradually the Großzerlitscher turned back toward the exit. Only Romy lingered a moment longer at Anton's side, staring at the heartless hole in the ground, which would soon be filled by two municipal employees.

Oma Lena was no longer there.

For Romy, the thought was hard to accept, because she had always been there for her. Even when she had moved far away, Romy had always had the feeling that she was by her side. And now she was dead.

"It's good that you're here!" Anton said, as he softly wiped a couple of tears from her cheeks.

"I can hardly believe that she's gone," Romy replied.

"Are you coming along to *Muschebubu*?"

"Yes."

They walked toward the gate. How tightly crowded the graves were! How close the gardens and houses were to the graveyard. Romy knew that many of the residents liked to

gaze at the graveyard from their windows, because it was so still, so peaceful.

“They were all here,” Romy continued.

Anton nodded: “Yes, except for Theo. He had to take care of the funeral meal. And of course, his mother.”

They reached the small gateway. “It happened so fast,” Romy began. “Was she sick? She never said anything.”

Anton turned toward her.

He seemed to be searching for an answer but was unable to find one. So all he said was: “No, she wasn’t sick.”

He wanted to keep walking, but Romy grasped his sleeve: “What happened, Anton?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Romy.”

“But, Anton, it does. To me!”

He looked at her. Again this searching. Then he seemed to give up and answered briefly: “She killed herself, Romy.”

He saw her gaze and knew he could not bear it long. He quickly spun around and left.