

Translated excerpt

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Burying Grandma

Translated by John Reddick



Frau Mattuschke took a deep breath, wiped Mina's finger clean with her dishcloth and set about making hot chocolate. As she did so she started crying, sobbing that a hot chocolate wasn't necessarily going to help very much, but she felt that at this point she really had to do *something*, and we all felt that right now a hot chocolate was exactly what we needed.

We all sat down together on the big family sofa in the living room with fleecy blanket across our knees, drinking out of large bowls. No one spoke, but as I looked across at Annie I saw her surreptitiously wiping away a few tears with her pyjama sleeve. Tears were running down Frau Mattuschke's face as well. But she didn't wipe them away. I too was swallowing hard, and so all three of us sat there on the sofa in floods of tears, each for themselves, but somehow also together. Mina wasn't crying. She had fallen asleep and just lay there between us without a care in the world.

This granny was a completely unknown quantity for all of us, for Mum and her mother had had very little to do with each other. In fact nothing whatsoever for years and years. Annie had probably seen her once a long time ago. And she remembered very clearly that Mum and Granny had constantly rowed on the phone. How could this woman possibly just turn up here out of nowhere?

All we knew was that she had been living abroad for ages and that she wrote detective stories that were set in places like Mexico, India and the polar regions. Detective stories, then, that were quite unlike the detective films we watched with Frau Mattuschke, which were nearly all set in Germany; some of them even in Hamburg, where we ourselves lived.

The search for this granny was itself almost like a thriller. For starters Frau Pretschinsky hadn't been able to find an address whereby she might have been contactable. And it certainly wasn't an easy thing to find, for *this granny* wrote under a pen name. I already knew what that meant thanks to watching TV. If a writer's real name was 'Willy Wutzke', then it made sense for him to choose a different name. After all, who would buy a self-help book by someone with a name like that? So someone called Willy Wutzke might call himself 'Johannes Meister' instead, and that would immediately make people think that he knew a lot about life.

The real name of *this granny* was Ruth Winkler - that much we knew. But Ruth Winkler was nowhere to be found. She wrote under a completely different name. But it was down to the police to find out what that name was. For the only way to make contact with this granny was through the people that published her books. After all, there aren't all that many female writers of detective stories. So the police were no doubt busily checking out publishers and would soon strike lucky and Frau Pretschinsky would be given her phone number. She would be able to contact *this granny* at long last. Tomorrow Mum's mother would be with us. Even right now she couldn't be all that far away.

There was also the question of Dad's parents. But that was a completely different kettle of fish. For some reason they had lived a very long way away for ages and ages. We knew them both, of course. But they no longer knew us. Whenever we went with Dad to visit them in the care home things always turned out pretty badly. Sometimes Granny took me aside and asked me, 'Martin, who's that strange man you've brought along with you?'

When asking this question she would always point at Dad, whose name is Martin. Time stood still for her at such moments and she was right back in the days when my Dad was a little boy, and sometimes much, much further back than that. And then she would tell us exactly what she had been up to at school, and explain that the doddery old man sitting beside her on the sofa, while very nice, insisted on calling her

‘Margot’ even though her actual name was Paula. He would keep on mumbling all the time that they would miss the next flight if she didn’t get on and pack her suitcase at long last.

Sometimes Grandpa also said things to us, such as pointing at Granny and telling us that ‘this lady here wants to marry me sometime soon’, but unfortunately he didn’t know how to explain to her that he was already married - to Paula.

It was all so crazy somehow. I sometimes had building bricks decorated with the heads of animals and people, or with the midriffs of animals and people, and others with legs and feet - or with hooves and fins and such like in the case of animals. So if you piled them on top of each other you could make proper figures out of them - or make strange creatures with a cow’s head, a fish’s body, human legs and the feet of a duck. And I guess that’s what it was like inside the heads of Granny and Grandpa: everything was muddled up, nothing was in its proper place.

The one person who seemed to understand everything was Mina. On our visits she would sit between the two of them holding their hands, listening to their words or burbling on about her stuffed toys.

Although these visits to Granny and Grandpa were always a bit weird, I did enjoy them. Perhaps precisely on account of their weirdness. There was always cocoa and cake, Granny and Grandpa seemed to be enjoying themselves, and they even finished up with that *funny man*, i.e. Dad, getting a kiss, perhaps because he didn’t seem so awful to them after all. He would even smile then, though during the course of the visit itself he would sometimes look very sad.

From time to time Granny even came across as almost normal, and she would say things such as, ‘I really am all over the place sometimes’. And she was quite right somehow.

But now it was a question of the other granny coming. The one we didn't know. The one who didn't know us. The one we didn't *want* to know! The one that Mum had had no contact with for years and years. Mum's parents had separated when Mum was Mina's age. That much we knew. Mum had stayed with her dad, and her mother had started writing novels and swanning around the world – all because of her detective stories. Every now and again she would come on a visit.

Mum had only just met Dad when her father died. So dying was happening back then as well. But of course we never knew this grandfather. We didn't even exist then. So logically enough it didn't really cause us any sadness.

Then at some point Mum didn't want to get any more visits from her mother. So we never got to know this granny, who in any case was somehow always very far away. Only Annie had seen her briefly on one single occasion – *very* briefly, for Mum had immediately slammed the door once she saw who was standing there. I think door-slamming is a thing in our family.

Anyway, leaving aside Granny and Grandpa in the care home, *this* granny was our sole relative. And provided she wasn't as totally dodderly as Granny and Grandpa in the old people's home, then she was our only chance of not ending up in a children's home or a foster family.

Unfortunately Frau Mattuschke couldn't adopt us as she was too old. Which was strange really, as she was surely no older than *this granny*?

Chapter 5

We decide to detest *this granny*

The next morning was already the second time that we were having breakfast without Mum and Dad. The three of us had all slept in our parents' bed, and Annie and I were

beginning to feel surprised that Mina wasn't asking after them. When Mina popped to the loo, Frau Mattuschke - who had slept on the sofa again - seized her chance to say that she had read somewhere that sometimes when people were completely rattled by life they would invent their own private world, and this would continue until such time as things made sense again.

This reminded me of Bruno, my stuffed bear. Bruno and I had sometimes felt afraid during the night and I'd always had to settle him down. Of course it's clear to me now that Bruno - being a stuffed animal - wasn't actually afraid, and this fact had probably been clear to me at the time. But when I offered him my mumbled reassurances it always helped me to get off to sleep. And it helped Bruno too.

It had perhaps already dawned on Mina that things might not be going all too well with Mum and Dad. But so long as she wasn't actually sure about that she was perhaps just pretending that everything was ok. At any rate she was the only one of us who tucked into her bread and jam with relish. Annie just poked around in her muesli while I had to force myself to drink some tea just to please Frau Mattuschke.

'What do you think *this* granny looks like?' asked Frau Mattuschke as she stirred her coffee, addressing herself to no one in particular in the kitchen.

'She'll look ridiculous and *be* ridiculous!' pronounced Annie. 'Someone that Mum didn't want anything to do with can't be anything other than ridiculous. I bet she'll be slippery as an eel and dead cool, a sunglasses-and-furs type, with zero interest in kids. After all, she didn't want Mum and just abandoned her. As soon as she's had enough of us she'll just disappear and leave us on our own.'

So that was that. There was suddenly a ring on the doorbell. Somewhat startled, we all looked at each other. It was this ridiculous granny, no doubt. Frau Mattuschke stood up and went out into the hall. I peered round the corner to see what a ridiculous, cool, slippery granny in sunglasses and furs actually looked like.