

The bookshelf

by Rebekka Korthues

I grew up in a little red house filled with books. Both of my parents love to read, and the proof piled up in every room. Current books in the bedroom. Books from the last ten to twenty years in the living room and kitchen. Old books from their childhood and college days on the shelf upstairs, next to my bedroom door. It was a cosy home, a safe home. But still.

When I was a child, I was afraid to sleep in the dark. Actually, it only started when my sister moved into her own room and I simultaneously began to know things about the world. About death. I learned about that when I was nine. Since then I have never liked being left in the dark. Not seeing what's coming. The dark was worst at night. So I would leave my bedroom door open a little, and my parents would leave the light on in the upstairs hallway when they settled in on the couch for their quiet evening. I could hear the TV, and sometimes, when I was still awake when their show was over, I could hear my mom in the bathroom and my dad setting the table for breakfast. Already pouring his muesli into one bowl and my mom's muesli into another. Filling water and coffee into the machine. Putting the butter on the table because my mom didn't like it cold and hard from the fridge. He would be the last one to go to sleep, and the first one to get up. I wonder sometimes what he was thinking, when he prepared the breakfast at night, or when he got up early in the morning, to start the coffee, to start the day for himself, for his family. His wife with the brain tumor and his three little kids. Was he tired? Was he angry, at life, at god, his employer for all intents and purposes? I don't think he ever was. In any case, he always started his day singing. And his singing would wake me up.

One night, when I was around 11, I was too afraid to go to sleep. The door was open a bit, so light came into the room. But still.

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Downstairs in the living room, the theme song of my parents' favourite TV show started, and I could almost hear the sofa creaking when my dad moved to rest his heavy head against my mom's tiny shoulder. I knew they were happy, finally by themselves, and I hated that I was such a coward. But I also knew I could not help myself. So I climbed down the cold stone stairs on my soft feet and entered the living room, half embarrassed, half relieved. My dad's eyes were closed — I had heard my mom joke that he always claimed to have followed the show to the end but never did. At breakfast she used to tell him the plot. Unlike my dad, my mother had the same trouble sleeping, being in the dark, as I did. We had drawn our similar conclusions from what had happened, but we never exchanged them.

„I cannot sleep,“ I said.

My mother was annoyed, I could tell. Her parents would have sent her straight back into the dark. She would have hated it, but she had chosen to forget how it felt to be a child. She had been forced to. My dad, too, but he had refused. His parents' crimes had only made him more stubborn to remain one.

„What a coincidence,“ he exclaimed and rubbed his big hands over his face to wake himself up. „Guess what?“

„What?“ I replied, moving my weight from my left tiptoes to the right ones and back.

„Just today I realised I had to sort the books.“

„What books?“ my mom exclaimed before I could, albeit in a tone somewhat different from what mine would have been.

„The books upstairs, of course!“

„Josef!“, she said, warningly.

„Dad,“ I said, excitedly. — And weren't we both so right?

I won, as I always did. (I know now. I was always his.) My father emptied his wine and slowly, wearily, followed me up the stairs. I dove into the warmth of my preheated bed, beaming at the dark. He

sat down on the floor, in front of the shelf filled with old books no one had touched in ages. And he started to take them out, opening them, moving his fingers through old pages with weird, oddly familiar smells. Making one pile, then another. Big books, small books. Paperbacks, hard covers. Maybe my mom's name and his, inside the cover, in big round letters written in ink, and with the excitement and arrogance of youth, even revolutionary thoughts maybe. Perhaps he stopped sometimes, and followed an image he hadn't seen in ages, before it got lost in the sounds of my eager breathing and my mom's angry amplifying of the TV's volume. But the walls around my dad's serenity — put together by so few desperately collected ragged bits and pieces — were impenetrable. He would just start singing to himself. So there he sat, for I don't know how long.

In my mind, houses were built, wars ended, men old inside and outside dragged themselves down desolate roads. Women planted cabbage and killed rabbits. Mines were worked, fires were built, and then cars. Women put on their first corduroy pants, students painted banners, teenagers left homes and never looked back. Boxes were packed, rings exchanged, wooden beams were sown. Baby clothes were knit, bottles warmed. New little red houses were built. Muesli was poured into bowls, and water and coffee filled into machines.

I fell asleep soon. But I like to think he did not stop when I was sleeping. That he stayed there, outside my door, moving books around. From one pile to the next, and then back to their original place. Blowing the dust off them as he went. All the while singing quietly to himself. And maybe a little to me.

