

CALIFORNIA

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The day waits for Edda to make a decision. "What shall we do, *mein Liebchen*?" she asks Stewart, who sits in his high chair wearing corduroy pants and a shirt folded once at the sleeves. "Do you want to go to the pond with *Mutti* and make the duckies a little bit happy?" And when he nods yes, she feels somewhat more certain about the next step. "We take them some bread crumbs," she says, taking heels of dark rye from under the sink.

It is only September, but already the air feels cool, and before Edda puts Stewart into his stroller, she finds a jacket for him. She's walked these blocks by the college every day since she and Raymond moved to this town in the Rockies. They'd been married eight weeks when he said he was taking the job. They were living in California then, and Edda had known for some time she was pregnant.

Even in blizzards, she goes on walks with her son—bundles him up and pushes him down Warburt Lane and Beatrice Avenue and other streets whose names sound to her rather strange. Sometimes she sees a familiar face, the wife of another professor or an elderly gentleman sweeping his porch, though she rarely does more than wave. In school English was always her best subject, but here in America people talk quickly and sometimes—often—she still makes mistakes. Raymond likes to correct her. "Adverbs end in *ly*," he says. This summer she took lessons while he was away. "I'm going to England and France to photograph manuscripts," he told her. He said it was no place for a toddler, that she'd be more comfortable if she stayed at home, and at first she believed him.

Four nights ago, two days before he was supposed to return, he called her. It was half past one in the morning and, when Edda picked up the phone, she fumbled with the receiver. "What's going on over there?" he asked, and she apologized as she tried to turn on the light. He announced that he was extending his trip and rushed to get off of the phone.

There was a bit of static on the line, and before he hung up, Edda heard him say something that she did not understand. The word—or was it a phrase?—had a strong *R* sound, something with an *R* and a *B* or maybe a *V*. She did not return the receiver to the cradle right away. The sound of the dial tone was strangely comforting and she wished that someone else would say something to her. She imagined the voice of a friend, someone to talk to. In California she had rented a room from an elderly woman who liked to make large pots of soup. The woman's name was Sylvia and sometimes Edda thought about calling her on the

phone. What would Edda say? Would she tell Sylvia the truth? *My husband is going to leave me. I can tell by the way he flirts in front of my eyes. By the way he refuses to touch me.*

Edda had seen Raymond meet a woman at a party last spring. The woman was poised and refined, and Raymond had walked across the room to get her a drink. Everything about her was perfect, even her name. Edda had studied the woman, Miss Elizabeth Brown, had watched her smile and laugh at Raymond's jokes, had envied her teeth. Of course that was the kind of woman Raymond should be with. Edda had told Raymond from the beginning that she herself was not right for him. She told him he should be with someone with a background like his.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, "none of that matters." And for a time Edda decided, against her better judgment, to believe him. "I love the fact that you grew up on a farm," he told her, though the place where Edda lived during the war was not a farm.

"We lived in a hut near a large forest," she told Raymond on their first outing together. "There was no running water, but we had fat rabbits that we kept in a cage."

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Outside, she breathes in the crisp air. When Edda was a girl, her mother would take her up to the mountains on this kind of day to pick berries that were blue and black and bright red. They would each carry a basket and her mother taught her songs from the *Gewandhaus* choir.

Sometimes, on mornings when Edda feels more certain, she stops by the baker's store and asks the man with the beard if he has any bread she can feed to the ducks. Even to him, she calls them her duckies, and he smiles and hands her a loaf.

Edda zips Stewart's coat up to his chin. She ties off the bag with the scraps she's collected and tucks it into her pocket; today she won't stop at the store. She is only twenty-eight years old, but already she feels she has made certain mistakes that cannot be undone.

All summer long she has used her savings to pay the girl down the street, a high school student, to tutor her. "Even if it is a small thing, please correct me," Edda said. "It is very important that I make not so many grammatical errors." She meets the girl three times a week. Yesterday they were practicing the past perfect tense: *On Tuesday Eloise ate baked potatoes, but last week she had eaten nothing but ham.*

Edda wonders if perhaps she should drive to the store this afternoon to see whether they have fruit for a pie in celebration of her husband's return. She maneuvers the stroller onto the sidewalk and walks past the angular hedges and lawns.

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At the lake, the ducks know that Edda and Stewart have brought something for them. Even before Edda has untied the knot in the bag, they begin greeting her. Stewart's hands are too small to break the bread into pieces, so Edda helps him, handing him bite-size chunks. "Be a big boy and throw it as far as you can," she says, and then she applauds and gives him a kiss. "Make sure the little ones get a bit too. They're also hungry."

"Duckies," he says. And then he tries to say the word *hungry*.

The waves here are nothing like the waves on the shore of the ocean. As a girl in Germany, she spent so many nights imagining what it would be like to walk without shoes on the beach. She had seen photos of long strips of sand, with girls in bikinis and boys driving open-air cars, and she promised herself that when she was older she would move to a place with a beach. "In California," she wrote to her mother on a postcard after she had come to America, "it is always sunny and nice." She made a point of showing her mother how much English she'd learned.

In the distance, Edda sees a woman walking, at the edge of the water, arm in arm with a man. The woman wears a tailored wool coat. Edda sees the man stop and pick up a leaf from the ground. Above him, a branch of bright yellow leaves hangs low. Edda watches as the man tucks the leaf behind the woman's left ear.

Soon, for a few short weeks, trees everywhere will light up the mountains with colors like pumpkins and squash. The forests will take on brilliant hues and then, suddenly, everything will change and the leaves will fall to the ground.

Edda imagines Elizabeth Brown's scarf in the wind—Raymond kissing her on the lips. She imagines him touching her hair. *Her hair will have been touched by his hand.*

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Edda has pushed Stewart around the lake twice now and feels the cold on her skin; the wind is picking up and clouds are gathering in the sky. "Perhaps tonight it will snow," Edda says, "and tomorrow, before Daddy gets home, we can build a snowman in the front yard. We will use a stick to make a nice nose and a rock for each of his eyes."

Stewart is asleep in his stroller; her words seem to float out across the lake like snowflakes, dissolving into the air.

Edda's legs feel heavy. The tips of her fingers are beginning to numb. She picks up her pace and pushes the stroller back home, along the sidewalks of tree-lined streets with houses where mothers peel carrots and put casseroles into their ovens. Edda envies these women—women whose husbands come home after work with something to say, women whose children play in the backyard while their parents sit together reading the paper. Sometimes, she sees these women at the grocery store, women who stand near the bins of apples exchanging gossip and notes, and she thinks about reaching over to touch one of them. *What is it like?* she wants to ask. *Do you make love every night? Does he caress your cheek when you cry?*

Perhaps Raymond did not go away to meet this Elizabeth Brown. Perhaps he did fly to Europe to photograph manuscripts for the book he is writing. Why be so suspicious? She is silly, letting her thoughts run away from herself. Tomorrow Raymond will return and things will be fine. She will make a nice dinner to welcome him back. She will make him the lasagna and three-bean salad whose recipe she found in the journal that comes to their house. When she and Stewart get home, she will make a list of the things she'll need from the store, and she and Stewart will drive to the market. She will put on a nice outfit and Stewart will sit in the cart. When she's dressed up no one can tell she is different.

Strawberries are expensive at this time of year, but she buys three baskets of the ripest, most delicious strawberries there are in the store.

After she's given Stewart his evening bath and tucked him under the covers, she goes down to the kitchen, where the pie is still warm. The air in the house smells quite sweet; she can almost taste the strawberries and the pie crust, which somehow—miraculously—cooked golden brown. She imagines Raymond's face when he sees that she has made him a pie. She pictures him taking a bite.

In bed, she can't fall asleep. Across the ocean, in Europe, it is almost certainly morning.

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Edda chooses something in gray—the wool suit Raymond bought her five months after he first approached her. "She needs to look dignified," he told the attendants at the boutique, and Edda was flattered by the attention: women showing her fabrics, helping her try on pantsuits brought out on nice hangers. Edda had never been to a store with such thick carpets and beautiful mirrors.

At the airport, Stewart sits in his stroller in a blue sweater, his hair nicely combed to the side. Edda stands beside him, watching the people step off of the plane. Men in suits, carrying briefcases, women in high heels and hats. Edda is glad that she and Stewart are dressed well; Raymond will see them and not be embarrassed. He will come off the plane, in his long coat, with his leather satchel, and he will see his wife and his son waiting for him. She will embrace him and ask him how his flight was. She will tell him that she and Stewart missed him and made him a pie. She arranges the words in her head.

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In front of her, a crowd has pushed closer to the place where the people emerge. The collar of her outfit scratches her neck; her palms feel damp.

"One in each shade," Raymond had told the clerks, and Edda's first reaction had been delight because of the cost involved and because she knew that all of this was meant as a gift. She could not believe this man was being so generous, though the colors of the outfits were not the colors she would have chosen. The colors were quite glum, and the fabrics weren't nearly as soft as she had hoped; standing in front of Raymond when she came out of the dressing room, she'd already noticed the wool rubbing her skin.

Raymond had taken Edda shopping in his new car, and afterwards, when he drove her back home, he surprised her by going into her closet and taking out the dresses she had bought one by one—the orange dress and the red dress and the one she had finally purchased, after trying it on seven Saturdays in a row, that was the same color as the pink of a small animal's nose. Before she had even taken the new clothes out of their boxes, he'd put her entire wardrobe into a large plastic bag.

"What on earth are you doing?" she cried when she saw the fabrics bunched up in his fist.

"It's all trash," he said, his eyes looking just like a stranger's. "It makes you look cheap."

Later, after he had left for the night, Edda went out to the sidewalk to look for the bag with her clothes. She hoped that Raymond might have left it near one of the garbage bins. She searched both sides of the block and then, as she went back to her room, she told herself that it did not really matter, that there were more important things in life to worry about. And she was right. There was a child to think of. She would be a mother, and Raymond was marrying her.

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Edda wonders whether she has made a mistake. She opens her handbag and looks again at the small piece of paper on which she wrote the number of

Raymond's flight: TWA 302 11:23. She looks up at the sign near the doorway where, until a few moments ago, the passengers from her husband's plane were still disembarking. The numbers she wrote down on her paper are identical to the numbers on the rectangular pieces of plastic.

"Everything is fine, *mein Schatz*," she tells Stewart, who sits in his stroller, sucking his thumb. "Daddy is getting his things. He must have been late to the airport and was forced to sit at the back of the plane." But even as Edda formulates each of these sentences, she knows that the fact that the passageway is now empty and the people who were waiting alongside her have all been reunited with their husbands and friends makes her explanation unlikely. Raymond is not at the back of the plane. Raymond would have come down the walkway quickly, carrying a bag in each hand.

Could it be that she wrote down the wrong flight number? She'd been sleeping, dreaming about the rain and the smell of eucalyptus, when the phone rang. Perhaps, as she fumbled with the pen, as she pressed the dry point into the piece of paper on top of the nightstand, she had reversed two of the numbers. 320? Was there such a flight from New York to Denver arriving at 11:23? Surely the airline would not have two flights arriving at the same time. Was such a thing possible? Edda was new to the world of airports and flights. Her only trip on a plane had been with Raymond himself, after their wedding, to Chicago, where Raymond's family lived. She'd been nervous to get on the aircraft, nervous and excited—and, as the plane lifted off, she squeezed Raymond's hand. Her trip to New York eight years ago had been by ocean liner, and from New York to Los Angeles she had traveled by bus for nearly five days, sitting next to a woman whose mouth was also too small for her teeth.

Perhaps it was the time she'd written down incorrectly—instead of 11:23, Raymond might have said *ten twenty-three* or *one twenty-three*, though *eleven* sounds nothing like *ten* or *one* or any other hour, except perhaps *seven*. Could he have arrived at *seven twenty-three* in the morning? She pictures him waiting impatiently, looking at his watch. By now he would have gone berserk, screaming at the top of his lungs when he saw her arriving so late.

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"Excuse me, ma'am," Edda says to a woman in a uniform. "Would you be so kind and tell me whether the flight is now empty?"

The woman turns out to be friendly. She tells Edda that the passengers have all disembarked, but she offers to help Edda find out whether Raymond was booked on this flight. The woman's name is Michelle, a nice name, the kind of name Edda would choose for a girl. The woman is tall—the same height as Edda—though she wears high heels, and Edda's shoes are flat on the bottom. Michelle has brown hair and make-up that is nicely applied. She is young—a few years

younger than Edda, Edda thinks, as she pushes the stroller, keeping up with the woman, with Michelle, as they move through the terminal, past shops with bright lights, selling books and packaged candies and magazines with colorful photos on the front cover. The woman peppers Edda with questions: Did Edda's husband spend the night in New York before catching his flight back to Denver? Did he take TWA from London to New York? Could he have perhaps missed his plane and taken a flight that afternoon? What was the name of the hotel where he had stayed on his trip?

These are the things, Edda thinks, that she herself should have asked. It would have been natural for a wife to ask her husband whether he would spend the night in New York before flying back home. The plane from London to New York would have arrived in the late afternoon and Raymond would not have been able to catch a flight from New York to Denver at such a late hour. *What is the name of the hotel where you will stay?* she could have asked. Or *Will you stay overnight in New York, at a hotel, perhaps, or with friends?* Surely, he would not have made a fuss if she had asked him this question. Such a question would have been natural in this situation.

As Michelle turns to walk away from Edda, Edda wants to say something else. For a moment she wonders whether she should walk alongside Michelle and ask more advice. Perhaps Michelle would take pity on Edda and invite her along. Come home with me, she might say. You and your son can spend the night in our house.

Edda stays where she is. In the distance now, she thinks that she can see Raymond. She sees a man, about Raymond's height, with brown hair walking next to a woman. Could this be the same woman he met at the party? "Elizabeth was quite something," he'd said to Edda on their way home. "Wasn't she beautiful?" Edda remembers feeling, at the time, confused by his question. Confused and almost ashamed. She was unsure how to respond. Edda wonders how a woman like Michelle would have reacted. Would she have stood up to Raymond in this situation?

Edda studies the couple and then, before she is certain, she surprises herself. She turns and leads Stewart away, towards the long corridor with polished white floors.

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On the drive back, Edda hears nothing. She is hungry now and quite calm. When she opens the front door to the house, the warm air touches her face and she smells the sweet scent that still lingers there.

Without removing her coat, she goes into the kitchen, takes two plates out of the cupboard, and cuts two pieces of the pie—two large pieces: one for Stewart and

one for herself. "Here, *mein Schatz*," she says to him. "We need to eat something. Eat as much as you can."

They sit at the kitchen table, eating in silence, and then, when they are finished, Edda goes upstairs to her room. She takes out the suitcases and begins packing their things.