

Inconspicuous

A Novel

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Nora was an inconspicuous person. People only took notice of her when she got in their way. Otherwise she was simply overlooked. She, on the other hand, examined the people who came into her field of vision - as if she were looking for something in their appearance.

The world of things she perceived in the same way. The paving – in places made of expensive granite slabs. House facades between Art Nouveau and Modernism. A waiting bench. The linden trees. The streetcars with fronts like dogs' snouts. The shop windows with mannequins that were quite different from most people. But first and foremost, her attention was on the people.

She was walking along Bahnhofstrasse with her nephew Daniel, and after a while she asked him what people he had noticed on the way. Daniel could only remember unusual appearances, mostly women he found attractive. But he hadn't noticed the worker in the red overalls who was emptying the waste baskets. And he wouldn't have noticed Nora either if she had been a stranger to him. On the way, he sometimes glanced at her from the side, often doubtfully, when he didn't like what she was saying. She, on the other hand, observed everything and thought the boy was going through life blind and deaf.

She reproached him for merely perceiving what was announced to him in a striking way. What did

not immediately attract his attention, did not exist at all. She asked him if he at least thought about what he saw. Whether he took note of the things that were beneath the surface. No, he explained. If there was something that concerned him, it would come to him sooner or later anyway.

"And what good, pray tell, does it do you to watch everything closely and think about it?"

She didn't know the answer to that. To perceive the totality, to recognize differences and similarities, to rethink what she perceived, and to be able to establish connections in the process, that was simply part of her nature, she said. Perhaps it helped her to understand the world.

"And for what purpose do you want to understand the world?"

She had no idea, she confessed. She just did it, and it gave her satisfaction. She also made up stories about what she saw.

He thought and replied, "It's different with me. I can't just let my thoughts wander. I focus them on a fixed goal. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to get through my studies."

„And I benefit from that“, she said with a laugh. Daniel supported her in questions of computer handling. And to thank him, she had invited him to lunch. At her home. She would prepare a meat pie for him. He loved it more than anything. Surprising, really, since young people tended to be vegetarians. The recipe came from her mother's collection of inexpensive dishes. Her mother had used it before to lure the headstrong grandson to her house.

"Do the stories you make up have any relation to yourself?" wanted Daniel to know.

She paused. No, she didn't relate the stories to herself. She didn't do it any more than she did with all the novels she read. She made up stories because they opened up new puzzle pieces of human existence for her that were no less real than those in the world in which she lived.

"So what do these stories look like?"

She tried to put herself in the place of the worker who emptied the waste baskets. What was he thinking? It was good that people produced garbage, so at least he had a paid job? Or did he find his work pointless because it never led to a final goal? Perhaps he thought nothing of it at all. But if he did, he might share his thoughts with a colleague when they were having an after work beer. Or with his wife, when he started to think about it during a Sunday walk. Or he might talk about it with his son when being asked how he spent his day.

Daniel started to say something, but then fell silent.

At the main railroad station, they got on the street-car. On the way, she suggested that Daniel could visit his grandfather. Her father had problems with his hearing aids, and Daniel would certainly be able to help the old man.

"I'd love to, but I don't have time. I've got midterms coming up, so I've got to study my ass off. That's why I have to go back to the university right after lunch."

Nora looked through the window at the passing city. Autumn announced itself early this year. An un-

pleasantly cool wind brushed through the streets, the clouds hung low and gloomy over the houses, the daylight shimmered dully and seemed about to go out, the colors had disappeared, leaving behind a dirty gray view of the world.

When they got off at the streetcar stop near her apartment in the Seebach district, Nora saw a young woman waiting. She stood there, thin, pale and inconspicuous. Daniel didn't give her a glance, didn't see how she screwed up her face and covered one ear with her hand. „She's in pain“, Nora murmured, and now Daniel looked too, surprised that his aunt was interested in such a thing. Nora stopped. She would have liked to comfort the young woman with a few sympathetic words, to ask if she could help her, while Daniel urged her to go on. But a darkly dressed, white-bearded old man with light blue, watery eyes approached and stated, "You have pain in your ear, it shows."

The young woman groaned, "What's it to you?"

The old man patted her arm and explained, "I just want to help." He placed his hand on the young woman's ear. The bystanders – and now even Daniel – looked intently at the couple. Was the woman putting up with this? She let it happen and after a while exclaimed, "The pain is gone!"

The old man said, "See?"

"And what happens when it comes back? Can I come to you then?"

"No need, because you can heal yourself. You just have to want to, and think hard about driving the pain out of your ear."

It doesn't help to drive away the pain, Nora thought. There must be a cause, and it has to be addressed.

A streetcar pulled up, the two people got on, the young woman sat down at the window, still holding on to her sick ear and looking puzzled.

While Nora prepared the meal, Daniel looked around the apartment. He even dared to glance into the bedroom. He came into the kitchen. His expression radiated rejection. He said, "You should redecorate. With IKEA furniture. The whole apartment would immediately appear more friendly. Now it looks, excuse me, stuffy."

Nora wanted to know what was wrong with her furniture.

"Everything is old and worn, and thrown together. It's all right for a student digs, but you're fifty and you make a decent living."

Nora had lived in her apartment for twenty-seven years – her first after moving out of her parents' house. Initially, the two rooms had been almost empty. She had been able to take a few pieces of furniture with her that had come from her grandparents: a dining table and six Ticino chairs from the 1930s, a wardrobe, and one of the two marital beds, an ugly, antiquated rack with springs and a horse-hair mattress. Over the years, other pieces had been added, all inherited except for a modern bed she had bought herself.

Now there were pieces of furniture from her late mother in the apartment, and when her father had moved into the nursing home, more furniture had been added. And whenever her brother and his wife had bought something new, the old furniture had regularly ended up with Nora. At least she had dis-

carded older furniture with these gifts, otherwise the apartment would have been even more crowded. Her gaze roamed the living room. The dining table was larger than necessary, because she hardly ever had more than one guest. When she looked at it more closely, she noticed that the legs were already badly battered, and the tabletop was covered with stains that had perpetuated themselves so that they would withstand any furniture polish. The corduroy cover of the sofa also bore the marks of time. Once dark red, the fabric was now just brownish, and the ribs were worn away on the seats. The sofa was huge, but she lived in it. She would lie there and read, or watch a movie on television. And sometimes, when she was too tired to go to bed, she would pull the covers over her and sleep curled up. The next morning she stood in the shower with back pain and resolved never to do that again.

While she set the table, Nora tried to see the apartment through Daniel's eyes. The way he saw the world, he certainly missed design here. She had to admit that he was right. The apartment had been haphazardly filled and overstuffed in the process. The furniture was also impractical. It did not allow her to arrange things that belonged together. Yet she was reluctant to redecorate. She did not feel capable of carrying out such an undertaking. Everything spoke against it. She didn't drive a car, she hardly knew anyone who would help her, because she didn't dare call on Daniel for this as well. And she was afraid to spend money.

Daniel continued. "The apartment is gloomy, even

more so in this weather. The window size defies any norm, the rooms are too small, the balcony is puny, even without a barbecue on it. Why don't you move and renew your furnishings in the process?"

Nora sighed. Why change anything, she thought. She could manage her life with what she had. Moving would have been too much for her. Such matters are not for someone like me, she thought automatically, and it was as if this sentence had been impressed on her all her life.

"And another thing," Daniel continued, "there's not a single mirror in the whole apartment where you can look at yourself full size. Don't you ever check your appearance?"

Nora declared she didn't need that. With her, there was nothing to see. She knew the clothes she put on in the morning, she knew she was too fat, and she could see her face in the bathroom mirror. Apart from a day cream, she didn't wear makeup, and it wasn't for nothing that she had adopted a short hairstyle that didn't need any care.

Daniel shrugged and sat down at the table. She looked at him and realized in amazement that he – or anyone else – had never raised these issues before. And then she realized that Daniel was quite capable of noticing his surroundings when he wanted to, and even thinking about them. Stupid cow, she thought. And I live in this apartment day in and day out and don't even notice it.

She felt she should thank her nephew for his advice, even if she didn't follow it. Daniel grinned. "After all, I didn't follow your advice either. Remem-

ber how you recommended that I drink pure water for my pimples, a liter a day? I didn't do that because I didn't believe in it. I probably would have if I had found that tip in the newspaper or on a television program. Where did you get the idea, anyway?"

Nora explained that it was an old home recipe. She had found it in the novel of an American author. A Negro mother gave her daughter this advice. She knew, Nora continued, that no one today expected pure water to do anything. There had to be a medicine with as natural a substance as possible, sun-dried oysters or squeezed lianas from the rain forest, the juice filtered with sea sand, so that people believed in an effect.

"Now don't exaggerate, Auntie," Daniel exclaimed. 'Auntie' he called her only when he was upset. Then he saw that she was smiling and laughed along.

Over lunch, Daniel got to talking about IT. Nora's boss, attorney Grief, in whose office she did all kinds of typing as well as the bookkeeping, had put her, in addition to making coffee and managing the files, in charge of PC support, after the young lawyer who had been doing this job on the side left. She had wanted to refuse, but Grief had said that if she couldn't take on the task, he would have to look for someone younger.

She used a PC for her typing and bookkeeping. She had attended an introductory course in Windows and Office, and the accounting program did not cause her any problems thanks to her experience. Otherwise, she understood next to nothing about IT.

Grief had recognized this and granted her an advanced course at the firm's expense. Since he had paid for the course, Grief had decided that the additional function did not merit a salary increase.

Grief, who was sixty years old, refused to use a computer, and he was proud of it. This was done for him by his assistant Saskia. Apart from Nora and Saskia, there was a PC for the young lawyer who earned his spurs in the office until he got bored and made way for a similar successor. The young men could use the most important applications of the office program, but had no idea about the maintenance of the software. And if anything didn't work they were at a loss. They all thought that the employer had to take care of the smooth functioning of these tools by hiring a specialist.

The in-depth course had been conducted by a young woman. She had taken apart a PC in front of the students, showed them the hard drive and other components, and explained how the whole thing worked. Nora had liked that. She had learned to keep the software up to date and to install the necessary security programs, and in the end she was able to connect the three machines in the office, including the printer, to each other and to the Internet via a wireless network.

Nevertheless, the IT operations kept malfunctioning. Daniel had explained to her that the systems were not so sophisticated that they worked stably – whatever that meant. However, Nora had quickly noticed that the necessary information for solving everyday problems was readily available on the Internet.

If there was a major problem, such as the entire WLAN failing or a machine getting stuck, Nora used Daniel's most successful recipe: shutting down the equipment and restarting it. And only when that didn't work either did she call him.

Now Daniel gave her the advice to continue her education. "Your boss should realize the importance of this. I won't always be around to help. So you should tackle the next level of the course, and after that be able to reinstall a PC and solve any network problems."

Nora doubted that this proposal was realistic. First of all, she did not trust herself to develop further. Maybe if she had been twenty years younger. And secondly, Grief would not see why he should invest in Nora's further training, because after all, the firm had no problems with its IT applications.

Nora turned up at half past seven and unlocked the office. She was always the first. For this reason, she had been given her own key. However, she had had to sign a document written in the most beautiful legal language, in which she was threatened with serious consequences should she misuse or lose the key.

She switched on the light. Outside the windows there was still the gloom of a rainy autumn morning. The lighting was indirect. After his father-in-law and partner, attorney Nagel, had retired Grief had had the premises redesigned. Abstract paintings hung on the walls, and pedestals with equally modern sculptures dotted the room. The furniture was from USM-Haller.

Nora unlocked the archive room. She had a key for that, too. The only thing that remained locked to her were the lawyers' offices. But the gentlemen, including Grief, were so careless that they usually forgot to lock the doors. Nora switched on the wireless network and the printer. She checked that the printer had enough ink and paper. Then she booted up her computer. Once, as a service, she had also started Saskia's machine. Saskia hadn't tolerated this, but she didn't complain directly to Nora. In such cases, she always turned to the boss. Grief had called Nora over and told her that she had no business on Saskia's computer. Nora remained standing with raised eyebrows. "What?" Grief had barked.

Didn't she have to maintain Saskia's computer anymore?, Nora had asked. Grief had thought for a moment and then ordered that in the future she would have to do it together with Saskia. Saskia would enter the commands according to Nora's instructions. Nora didn't care, but the procedure made Saskia nervous.

At a quarter to nine Saskia arrived, and at nine Grief. He was wearing his dark blue suit with pinstripes today. That meant he either had to go to court or meet an important client. He brandished a catalog and stood with it at the reception corpus by Saskia's desk. Saskia immediately jumped up and joined him. Grief wanted a small seating area for his office, and the two eagerly delved into the furniture show. Grief's office was also furnished with USM furniture, except for a magnificent antique metal safe cabinet. The safe had a shiny black finish, a gilded lock, gilded feet, and a gilded superstructure with floral motifs. Grief was mighty proud of the piece. "The seating area is going to be in front of the safe, it definitely has to match," he exclaimed.

When they had made their choice, Nora approached Grief and asked if he had a moment. "Please", Grief said with a patronizing air, "what can I do for you today?" Nora was embarrassed that Saskia was listening in. She told them both it would be good if she could take an advanced course in PC support. The field was constantly evolving, she said, and sometimes problems arose during maintenance for which she had previously asked her nephew for advice, but he had less and less time. Saskia looked

doubtfully at Grief, who said he would think it over. Nora returned to her corner and devoted herself to her paperwork.

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The law office occupied one floor of a converted apartment building from the turn of the twentieth century. The apartment had been skillfully remodeled. Now it consisted of a large room with the reception area and the workplaces of Saskia and Nora. Adjacent to this were a meeting room, Grief's office, two other offices for the attorneys – one reserved for attorney Nagel, although he almost never appeared anymore, the second for a young associate –, the archive room, and the kitchenette and bathroom.

The ceilings of the rooms still bore the original stucco work. The floors had also been saved except for a cleverly imitated strip where a wall had been removed in the reception area. They consisted of French herringbone parquet. There were Art Nouveau tiles in the former kitchen and bathroom. The archive room had been separated from the former kitchen. The bathroom had its original size, about the same as Noras bedroom. The bathtub had been removed, the lavatory and lavabo were original pieces – the lavatory bowl was emblazoned with the words "Hanley, England." The shiny gold fixtures, however, were matching imitations.

Saskia's desk stood by the door to Grief's office. She answered the phone, handled Grief's correspondence, wrote all the contracts, and was available

whenever he wanted to talk to her. It seemed that Grief could not take a decision until he had discussed the process with Saskia. She, in turn, kept him informed of everything that seemed important to her. Sometimes she would jump up, run to the printer, grab an e-mail and storm into Grief's room with it. She might as well have put it in the letter folder she put on Grief's desk twice a day. However, she had gotten into the habit of treating all e-mail as urgent messages, because "otherwise people would have written a letter." If something seemed juicy to her, she would close the office door behind her, and Nora would see them laughing and grimacing through the glass door. When Saskia came out, the smile on her face still glowed. It was clear that she ran the firm with him, and not even Grief's retired father-in-law and partner in the Nagel & Grief firm had a similar significance.

Nora was not involved in the legal business, but she got to hear most of it, since she took the minutes of the client meetings from the dictaphone and wrote the pleadings. And when she organized and filed the files of a closed case, she did not fail to leaf through the whole dossier. Then she also saw the e-mails and found them all trivial and not at all mirth-provoking.

At ten o'clock Nora prepared coffee for everyone, and while she was busy in the tea kitchen, a guest arrived. She was an elegant, good-looking woman, about ten years younger than Nora. To Nora, the two women – Saskia and the client – appeared uniformed. Both wore an elegant pantsuit, the woman in beige, Saskia in black. Both were slim with femi-

nine curves, only their hairstyles were different. Saskia wore her blonde, long hair tied in a pony tail, while the client's dark, straight hair was styled in a bob. At least, Nora believed that was the term for such a hairstyle – she had not cared for hair styles since her youth. Saskia led the woman into the conference room and ordered Nora to immediately bring the guest a coffee.

Nora entered the meeting room with the coffee. The woman stood up and greeted her, to which Nora remarked that she was only a minion. "Oh well," said the woman, "you bring the coffee, that's the most important thing for me now. By the way, I'm Annie Jeanneret."

Nora was immediately impressed by the whole appearance, by the elegance and the self-confidence. Simply masterful, she thought, that's how I would like to be. When she returned to her seat, she saw herself fleetingly reflected in one of the glass doors. What a contrast! She herself was stout, gray-haired, used only the most necessary cosmetics, and was dressed comfortably and without taste. I am a gray mouse, she thought in resignation, and always will be.

Grief proceeded to the conference room while Saskia boasted with the announcement, "an inheritance dispute, there are two wills." She never usually did that, so Nora thought Saskia was as impressed with Ms. Jeanneret as she was.

Sitting at her desk, she only pretended to work. The experience had a lasting effect. Ms. Jeanneret's appearance had triggered something. Nora was a

calm person, but now an unusual restlessness had taken hold of her. It had to do with the contrast between her and Ms. Jeanneret. What's wrong, she thought. I have never wished to be different from what I am. Never thought it necessary or desirable to change. And now this. Suddenly she was aware of herself. That would have been all right, but the punch line was that she didn't like what she perceived.

She pushed the thoughts aside. Oh well, let's just leave the contrast as it is, she thought, and began to write.

Grief came out after an hour, said goodbye to Ms. Jeanneret, and said, "I'll have our interview transcript delivered to you at the bank in the next few days."

"Take your time, there is no hurry. I will be absent for the whole of September, so beginning of October will be fine I'll contact you when I return," said Ms. Jeanneret, smiling at Grief, then Saskia, then Nora, and left the office.

One morning at the streetcar stop, Nora discovered a note taped to the wall of the bus shelter: JASMIN HEALS YOU BY LAYING ON OF HANDS, next to it the picture of the young woman with the aching ear. Incredible, Nora thought, and decided to get to the bottom of it. She made an appointment with Jasmin and complained of lower back pain. It had been bothering her for two years, and each time it lasted a few days – shorter if she took an ibuprofen or rubbed her back with horse ointment.

Nora had been to the doctor about it. He had found no cause. "You probably adopt a bad posture sometimes when sleeping or sitting. A gymnastics program would do you good." But Nora shied away from that.

The young woman was going to receive Nora in her apartment. It was in a modern apartment block nearby. Not surprising, because they both got on the streetcar at the same stop. On the window of an apartment on the second floor hung a homemade poster with the same text as at the stop. According to the door sign, Jasmin's name was simply Eveline Kunz. The name "Jasmin" was pasted next to it.

She had changed conspicuously. Her ash-blond hair now shone henna-colored, and she wore a white dress that fell to her ankles. She smiled invitingly, grasped Nora's hand with warm hands, and led her into a room with a low bed and colorful, amateurishly painted mandala depictions on the walls. Jas-

min asked Nora to stretch out on the bed, "on your stomach, please," and put her hand on the small of her back. After a while, the pain was gone. Nora paid fifty francs and asked if she could come again if the pain returned. "But no," laughed the layer on of hands, "that is not necessary, because you can heal yourself in this way. You only have to want and firmly think that you drive out the pain from your body. Only if that doesn't work are you welcome to come back to me."

On her way out, Nora spotted another poster on one of the doors that read, "Your horoscope. Astrology may offer you more than you think."

Nora asked if Jasmin also did stargazing.

Jasmine laughed. "I don't. But my mother has occupied herself with it for a long time. Now we've teamed up. Every Wednesday, she comes here and sees clients who have signed up on her website."

Wow!, Nora thought on the way home. Well, the first part of her experiment had worked out well. Now came the second part. Could she heal herself? Heal herself, and possibly help other people? Nora thought about it and found that she would like to do something like that. The spark spread inside her. Suddenly she felt like starting a new life. Nora did not love her life, she took it as given; after all she had to support herself. The spark went out again immediately. To think that she could do something and change her life was much too daring. Such a thing was not befitting for someone like her.

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The pain in her back came back after a day. Nora put first one, then the other hand, then both on her lower back, stayed five, ten, twenty minutes, on weekends a whole hour in this uncomfortable position and imagined that the pain was a liquid that was pressed out of her body by the hands, ran through her fingers and returned to the earth, in which not only all bliss, but also all pain was stored. To no avail. In the end, disappointed, she found that the old man had imparted his healing power only to Jasmin, and Jasmin could not transmit it any further. Or was it perhaps true that Nora, out of timidity, did not trust herself with such an ability, which would have made her a new person? It had worked for Jasmin, but not for Nora. Was it that she did not believe in herself?

After this exercise, she went for a long walk that took her across the fields and through wooded areas on the outskirts of the city. The fresh autumn air cleared her thoughts. She was ashamed of the idea, all bliss and pain stored in the earth. This is mystical, and mysticism just doesn't suit me, she thought. And she had never believed in healing by laying on of hands, soberly considered. After all, it had not worked. After a short effect, which Nora explained to herself with suggestion, the pain had come again – exactly as if she had done nothing at all.

Nora understood, however, that people wanted to believe in powers that relieved their lot without any effort on their part, simply because they believed in them. Faith and superstition arose from the hope of escaping the hardships of life. There was nothing wrong with that.

And that it had worked for Jasmin, she now doubted. A doctor had probably cured her ear infection with antibiotics, but Jasmin had developed her business model from the incident with the old man.

Nora thought she had had a stimulating experience that she could now file away, but something lingered inside her. Had she not wished for a moment to start a new life? She remembered the contrast between her and Ms. Jeanneret. Then also, the thought of changing had occurred to her. She had begun to compare herself, which she had never done before. It dawned on her that there was a lingering dissatisfaction within her.

This did not remain without consequences. Nora noticed how she became unwilling and reluctant to work.

At one point, she snapped at Saskia when she didn't want to understand the steps she had to take to update her operating system. "You always ask the same questions, when are these simple procedures actually going to stick in your brain?" she yelled at the assistant.

Saskia was shocked. To be stomped on by Nora? Tears came to her eyes. She looked at Nora, apparently perceiving her for the first time as something other than a piece of furniture. And then she did the only sensible thing. She said, "Listen, I really don't know my way around, and it would really be better if you updated my computer without me in the future. Can you do it in the evening after I leave? I'll leave it on and you won't need my password."

Nora said, "This is how we'll do it," and went back

to her seat. She was confused. On the one hand, she was uncomfortable with her emotional outburst. You just couldn't let yourself go like that. On the other hand, she felt a quiet triumph because she had won something.

The triumph did not last. Discontent took hold of Nora again, mixed with resignation and dejection. She began to observe herself and her life in an unflattering way and decided to write down what she found out in a diary. That same day, she bought a luxurious Moleskine notebook in a bookstore on Bahnhofstrasse, the price of which seemed appropriate for the important undertaking.

She wrote about herself in the third person:

Nora Siebner is a fifty-year-old (she is one month away from this birthday!) single woman. She works as a secretary at the law firm Nagel & Grief in the city center, not far from Bahnhofstrasse. Is she privileged by a job in such a setting? Not really. No one thinks she's an exceptional woman because of it. She lives in a modest two-room apartment in a suburban neighborhood. Her landlady is Mrs. Häuptli. She owns the entire block of flats from the 1960s, which is rather paltry when you get right down to it. It was bought by her late husband, a master plumber, as a pension for a wife who clearly enjoys her status as a property owner. Even if the apartments are puny: Mrs. Häuptli always has a full house, since – Nora has to admit – the rents for an apartment within city limits are still affordable. As a child, Daniel misunderstood the name as "Räupli" [little caterpillar], and since then Nora has called her landlady "the caterpillar". She crawls around the house like a caterpillar, stalking her tenants and scolding them for the slightest infraction of the house rules.

In her free time, Nora reads novels from the neighborhood library and watches movies on TV. She likes to listen to classical music, on the radio or from CDs. She does not go to concerts, they are too expensive for her. She does not do sports. In fact, she is too fat, has an unflattering figure and pays little at-

tention to her appearance. She is in menopause, and she doesn't care. She wears her gray hair cut short because it means little effort in hair care.

All in all, she is an unremarkable, average person. What about her intelligence? She started high school, but gave it up despite good grades, to the relief of her parents, she notes today. Why did she do that? It was out of resistance, because she had never felt accepted. In general, the long education, the studies, the status: she felt more and more strongly that this was nothing for someone like her. So she did a commercial apprenticeship.

Why did she actually get the feeling of being out of place? Her father had been a simple postman all his life, her mother a seamstress. The fathers of her colleagues were doctors, directors, bankers – at least authorized signatories. In 1980, none of that mattered anymore. No one said, you don't belong here. Only she herself said that. If only because of the language of others. Siebners had a dozen books in the living room cupboard (the bookshelf was smaller than the house bar, understandably so because her grandfather owned an orchard and was a keen distiller of schnapps). Today, after thirty years of intensive reading, she has the certainty that she has mastered the German language. Actually misstressed instead of mastered – stop, if someone introduces new terms, then it is certainly not Nora Siebner.

Let's move on to Nora's professional career. Career? Her salary has increased every time she has changed jobs, except for the last one, and she has stayed longer in each position than in the previous

one. But there is no trace of a career. She started out in the office of a master electrician. There she met her fiancé Franz. Because of Franz, she switched to another workshop. The third job – her best – was with a shipping company, which unfortunately went bankrupt at the turn of the millennium. After that, she was hired by the lawyer Nagel in the law firm Nagel & Grief as a commercial assistant.

She is a master in her field, no doubt about it. She does the paperwork efficiently and also does the accounting for the office (barely fifty entries per month!), and for a few years now she has been taking care of the maintenance of the IT equipment.

Maintaining the firm's IT is one of her responsibilities because no one else in the firm feels like doing it. That seems to be the common thread in her job description. At least she was able to scrounge up a course on it at Grief. The firm's demands don't go beyond office functions and a wireless network. Thanks to Daniel's support, Nora manages this task without any problems.

The relationship with her boss and his assistant and right-hand woman is rather poor. It is clear that she is not part of the team. She serves a man in whose eyes she can be replaced at any time. When attorney Grief took over the management of the firm from his father-in-law and partner Nagel, he called her into his office, left her standing in front of his desk and explained to her that he depends on employees with whom the chemistry is right. So if Nora felt the chemistry wasn't right, she'd better leave. "Take it or leave it," he said. Nora took that to heart and made the

chemistry right by completely neutralizing herself. As a reward, she gets to hear from time to time that there is nothing wrong with her performance.

And what does she do in her free time, besides reading, listening to classical music and watching movies? She likes to travel, but according to her budget not as often as she would like. Every other weekend she spends with her brother Thomas' family in a village near the city. This does not mean that the relationship with her brother's family is free of tension. But everyone gets along.

And a relationship with a man? She had a few affairs when she was young. Before that, even an engagement that was broken off. A lasting relationship never developed. The bitter truth was that she could not capture the men she found interesting. And those who courted her bored her to death. Thus, no life relationship. She does not even have motherhood to show for it. At least she is godmother to her nephew Daniel, and thus has contact with the next generation.

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The diary was a stirring novelty. Until now, Nora had closely observed her environment, drawn conclusions from it, and gained insights. But she had never applied the insights to herself – as if there had been a taboo. She had read many novels that offered her the most diverse life plans. But she had not reflected her own life on them either. Now she was dealing with herself, and she recorded the whole process in a diary.

Like a teenager, she thought. I'm picking up where I left off in high school. Would my life have been different if I had thought about it earlier? Of course I thought about it when a turning was coming. When I gave up high school and chose an apprenticeship; every time I started a new job – which was a long time ago, I've been at Grief for seventeen years; when I moved out of home and started my own household. But those all happened on the surface; they were necessities that came up. They only formed my existence externally, gave it a framework. What lay beneath I disregarded.

Then Nora became aware of the crisis she was in. Astonished, she thought about it. It was a new experience. Her previous life had been stable, always following the same paths, with everyday successes and failures, everything bearable. That was because she had never wanted anything for herself. She had never set any goals for herself in life. She had firmly believed that it was not her place to want something that had not been assigned to her. Thus she had prescribed contentment for herself. Crises were something for dissatisfied people.

The crisis had gradually crept up and grown larger. It finally seemed to Nora like a huge black cloud in her head, an intrusive reminder that she was not happy. As the black cloud filled her head, questions surfaced. What is the point, where is the meaning in my life, does it matter if I exist or not? Yes, do I exist at all? At first she consoled herself with the insight, I have been thrown into existence, those who have done this are supposed to clarify the question of meaning. But that didn't help, the questions poured out of the black cloud and oppressed her.

She listened inwards, hoping for answers that would suddenly resolve everything and give her relief. Instead, she fell deeper and deeper into a melancholy mood. The questions surfaced, and rightly so.

At the same time, she was plagued by a persistent restlessness. She tossed and turned sleeplessly in bed at night, unable to express what she was missing,

what was bothering her, what was preventing her from sleeping. The worst thing was: she could no longer think clearly and fathom the situation.

Then her fiftieth birthday approached. Her brother urged her to throw a family party. "You invite us all to your big neighborhood restaurant, and then father will come and mingle with people again, too." Nora had no desire for people. She resolved to resist the symbolism of a special anniversary, to break out of the family tradition and forego a celebration for her fiftieth. Instead, she would drown the anniversary in everyday life with a good bottle of wine.

But the black cloud in her head urged her to make decisions. Nora decided to set herself a task. She applied to Grief for a week's vacation. The same ritual as always followed. Grief registered concerns. Right now there was an important trial going on, he could not do without the typist. As usual, Nora said nothing in response. Grief himself raised the objections she could have voiced herself: "But actually we always have this much work, there is hardly ever a week when we can do without you, and it is only a little more than a week. So, go and take your vacation."

She marched into a travel agency and said she was looking for a place somewhere south with a long, deserted beach.

The agent laughed. "I rarely hear it in so few words. Well, in the second half of September, most beaches are likely to be rather empty. The season is over. However, I can't guarantee swimming weather."

Nora said she didn't want to swim, but to go for long walks. "And the weather does not matter," she said.

"As they say, there's no such thing as bad weather, there's only bad clothes," said the travel expert. "But I have something for you there, Port d'Alcudia in Mallorca. Would you like a hotel room or an apartment?"

Nora screwed up her face at the phrase about the clothes, but she said nothing. She decided on a hotel room, booked the flight as well as the hotel and was given a pleasantly thin travel guide.

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The airport of Palma was huge, Nora walked to the exit past countless stores and wondered who bought all the stuff. She quickly found the bus to Alcudia. The ride took an hour. She looked at the land, parched by the summer sun. The bus passed through small towns, but otherwise there was mostly agriculture, now and then the carefully trimmed ruin of a former windmill. To the west was a mountain range. The sun was shining, and Nora enjoyed the light. Hopefully, it would illuminate her.

The hotel lived up to standard. Everything about it seemed boring, the facade with its small balconies facing the sea, the reception hall and also the surroundings. There was nothing playful here, functionality was important. Why not, Nora thought, it's enough for me, the main thing is that I can afford it. She was greeted amiably and settled into her small

room. The room had a console for the TV, but no writing surface anywhere. Instead, there was a small table on the balcony. This is where I will write my diary, Nora thought. She went straight to the beach for an hour's walk. The air was pleasantly warm, but there was hardly anyone there. She had the impression that it was mostly older Spaniards who were out and about, probably taking advantage of the off-season.

Every day she walked for hours along the beach, barefoot on the wet, pleasantly cool strip of sand over which the waves washed again and again. She soaked up the balmy air and the blue brightness of autumn, and thought about herself and her life. She watched the few people who were out and about like her. Strollers, hotel employees going about their duties on the beach, the two lifeguards checking the nearby water where hardly anyone swam. Everyone seemed to be involved in a purposeful life, connected to other people, while she saw herself only as an appendage, of her brother's family and of the law firm. An extra without a role of her own, who had to stand where the director thought a space needed to be filled.

She came to the conclusion that her life was pointless because she had never set herself any goals. She didn't know where the journey was going, in fact, she didn't even know the next stage of this journey. It's as simple as that, she thought in wonder. Was it really like that? Unfortunately yes, she admitted. The realization was all the more painful because it was all her own fault.

Didn't she want anything from life? Of course she wanted something. She just didn't dare. Now she felt

that she wanted to achieve something, but it was buried, she had to bring it to the surface.

But in what direction could she change? What could be a goal? She thought through all the possibilities, without a result. With her commercial training and work experience, and at her age, there was little opportunity for career advancement. It seemed as if she was stuck. She was desperate. But then she walked along the beach again for a long time, taking in the light and air and the water rolling in waves, and thought there must be some solution.

And suddenly she knew what she wanted. At a beach café, she watched a Spanish family. A grandson was explaining to his grandfather how to use his tablet.

Bingo! she exclaimed, thinking she could do this too. This kind of professional activity would fulfill her. She would delve into practical computing. Start an advanced training course. When Daniel had suggested it to her weeks ago, she had been skeptical. Actually, she was convinced that computing was a matter for young people. But why not for her? She enjoyed maintaining the office computers. Why not look for a job that she enjoyed?

She knew it would not be easy. But then she walked to the beach and let the vastness of the sea take effect on her. The vastness made everything feel small, her life, her destiny, her crisis. She said to herself: I am confident I will succeed.

Nora returned. The blue brightness had pushed the black cloud away.