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title **Alone against the Soul-Snatchers**

Original title Allein gegen die Seelenfänger

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document type translation

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## Escape

I woke up with a heavy head and a stifling sense of oppression. Every morning I hoped it had all been just a nightmare, that with a sigh of relief, I would discover that this fear and pain were just fragments of feelings from a forgotten world, with no explanation or reason. But all I could see was my fate grinning mercilessly at me: a hideous grimace.

It crept up on me when I had just turned thirteen. I can't remember having done anything I should be punished for. I was a perfectly normal girl who grew up in a typical family in an ordinary village in Switzerland; full of hopes, longings and dreams, much like any girl that age born onto the sunny side of the street. There was no way of knowing that one day I would be flung into the shadows. I had no special mark on my forehead, neither was my soul particularly dark.

Mystics would say I was carrying a heavy karma; I had run up a huge debt of blame in a previous life. You were a whore, a thief, a liar, torturer or murderer, might be their diagnosis. The people around me believed these sorts of ideas, but I had my doubts. How could I be responsible for something from a previous life I couldn't even remember?

Today, eleven years later, I know that fate takes account of nothing and nobody. It attacks you like cancer, just like that, without warning or reason.

Benno lay next to me and breathed deeply. The duvet covering his heavy body rose and sank with the rhythm of his breath. This man was part of my fate, or was he my fate? At least when older men are lying down you don't see their double chin so much, I noticed matter-of-factly.

I turned over again, wanting to go back to sleep. Sleep was my one ally, except when he made a pact with a nightmare. He lay like a soft veil over my soul, covering up the pain. How often had I wished the night could last forever, that everything which reminded me of this existence might be erased. I longed to wake up one morning and discover with relief that I had forgotten everything that had happened over the past nine years, that I was just a normal young woman, brimming with confidence and *joie de vivre*.

Something drove me out of bed. Janet, our medium, was already in the bathroom standing in front of the mirror. She had a head-start over me today. I sighed: no, please, no! I sensed her mood each day immediately. One look at her face was

enough. She was often in a foul temper; you could clearly see the crows' feet around her eyes, and she looked ten years older. She hated every single wrinkle of her face.

When she was in a bad mood, my day was more or less ruined; her dominance weighed on each and every one of us. To my surprise she was in a very good mood this morning. She was obviously still fired up from the previous night, when our spiritual master Ramtha had spoken through her. The message that our spiritual ascent was going according to plan seemed to have given her a lift.

When Janet was on good form, her thoughts forced themselves out unfiltered at full speed. 'It would be so wonderful if you would finally realize that the key to your happiness, where you will find fulfilment, is with Benno. You can only grow if you open yourself up, place your whole trust in Benno and surrender yourself to him. He is the one who knows what is best for you, what will boost your spiritual growth. You know he does everything he can to make you happy. Then you'll find your purpose again within our family,' she declared. 'Why can't you stand by him? Don't you realize how amazingly privileged you are? The other women in our extended family would give anything to take over your role.'

Please, I groaned silently, please! Not again, not before breakfast! Her transcendental lectures turned my stomach. When she slipped into the medium role, and felt called upon to massage my soul with her spiritual and worldly wisdom, all I wanted was to give her a good shake. She blossomed visibly on these occasions, no longer Janet with the crow's feet, worrying about her figure. Janet the medium drifted through a higher plane; she dreamt up fantastic blueprints for an ideal world. She loved to see the astonished, grateful eyes of the other family members, and she forgot her problems with me.

Looking at her now in the mirror I almost felt sorry for her. She was warming to her subject, waxing lyrical about the value of my youthful innocence, in the spiritual and worldly sense. I was barely listening. Actually I was very conscientious and believed in our project, but I was thoroughly fed up of her lectures; by now I knew her lines of reasoning off by heart.

The worst thing was that I was her favourite victim. Whereas most other members of our extended spiritual family longed to receive personal instruction from Janet, I was more generously rewarded with it than I liked.

Janet and I had a special relationship. There were moments when she must have wanted to strangle me, or catapult me to the moon. I felt the same about her, but

I was much too intimidated even to begin standing up for myself. Her creepy moral lectures always had the desired effect. For nine whole years I had been subject to her influence and manipulation. The destructive process began when I was thirteen. Whereas others could sometimes take cover I was always right in the firing line, although I don't actually like being the centre of attention; I'd rather watch from a safe distance.

My undoing was that I was young and pretty; I soon attracted the attention of a man who also happened to be our medium's partner.

Thinking about it now I can see that Janet was in an unenviable position; she didn't have it easy either with me nor with Benno, and certainly not with herself. To be a human being and a medium at once was impossible. No-one can live simultaneously in two worlds and house two souls in one body without paying the price, not if they are as vain and uptight as Janet. But back then I still didn't understand all that; I was far too young and caught up in our system.

I was a big challenge for Janet. As our medium it was her job to foster my spirituality, but she also had to make sure my feminine side developed; that was what Benno wanted. And that was exactly what she was afraid of, that I might become an attractive, self-confident woman, a woman who would rise through the ranks and usurp her, not in a spiritual capacity; in a physical sense. That, and not the quest for enlightenment, was usually what it was really about – especially when she was crazy with jealousy.

Basically she must hate me, I thought, as I watched her face in the mirror. Perhaps she did, not as medium but as a woman. As our spiritual leader she smothered me with love, almost suffocating me, but as a self-obsessed older woman she probably could have strangled me.

I hopped impatiently from one foot to the other. From time to time Janet picked at a strand of hair, or smoothed her face. When delivering a particularly significant insight she turned round and regarded me like a conductor in front of his orchestra. Although she claimed to be clairvoyant, to sense and hear everything, she didn't hear my silent curses.

Sometimes I realized I was being mean; she did make a colossal effort. But I couldn't suppress my feelings or rustle up any sympathy for her. It wasn't as if I'd ever asked her to be our medium.

I found it incredibly annoying that she felt the need to do her difficult job first thing in the morning, today of all days. I hoped this wasn't a bad sign. In my mind I was already miles away. My unease turned her lecturing into an ordeal. I mustn't lose it now, I told myself. Otherwise she would find ever more reasons to torture me with her persistent preaching. How could someone keep talking the same rubbish for so long? She must slowly have realized that so far we had hardly achieved any of these lofty ideals.

Janet doled compliments out like sweets, which I had found flattering, back when I was still impressed by what she said. But Janet couldn't or wouldn't accept that I was no longer a child. I was no longer the compliant little girl looking up to her and Benno in awe. I had experienced a lot in our little house where the leadership team lived, above all in the bedroom. Our noble ideals evaporated when Benno's bodily demands had to be met. Then I caught a glimpse into the human abyss which made a mockery of our spiritual goals.

That didn't bother Janet. She was the only one impressed by the visions she dreamt up in our little bathroom. 'Your personal development in our spiritual project has helped you to keep hold of a childlike quality, which really is heavenly,' she announced with glowing eyes. 'A part of your innocence has been retained in a wonderful way through your mysterious relationship with Benno.'

Janet believed she had found the key to my behaviour. 'You will see that everything will be alright again, like it used to be.' When I was still the perfect, keen little Lea, I thought, always at the service of our spiritual leader.

Janet, always on a quest for eternal youth, had drummed up all her powers of persuasion to bring me back into line. My actual needs didn't come into it as far as she was concerned. No-one asked me what I wanted or wished for, certainly not Benno, although he claimed to be doing everything possible for my wellbeing, material and psychic. And the others, the thirty or so ordinary members, were all trapped in the treadmill themselves, busy trying to satisfy Benno and Janet's impossible demands. That went for for my parents too; they were so blinded that they hadn't noticed how I had been psychologically bullied and manipulated over the years.

For ages I didn't realize what was going on. For ages I made the effort to fulfil their expectations. I applied myself doggedly, just to win a little love and appreciation, without realizing the price I was paying. The reward was a constant stream of spiritual teaching.

I had been grateful to all the members of our extended family for this ‘great gift’, above all Janet and Benno. They had accepted me into their spiritual project, restricted to the chosen few. They had shown me the way to the higher planes, with the promise of immortality. I was a young person allowed to join the leadership team and I had expressed my gratitude by conforming and obeying; I had owed it to them, or so I believed for a long time.

It was years before I had the slightest inkling what was going on, a few more years before I realized what this was doing to me psychologically, and even more before I dared trust my feelings.

In her unique theatrical way Janet managed to transport our bathroom to a higher plane, and along with the Spartan bedroom I shared with Benno, it made up the inner sanctum of our leadership team on the Maya Ranch in the small Central American state of Belize. Sometimes a dozen members were squeezed into the tiny room; Benno, enthroned on our double bed and usually naked, was surrounded by men and women, hanging on his every word, perched on the edge of the bed and sitting on the floor. Apart from a rug and a chest, there was nothing much in the room; we were after all meant to be loosening ourselves from all ties.

Janet carried on with her lecture about my youthful innocence: ‘You embody perfectly the link between childlike innocence and adult experience and wisdom,’ she ranted. ‘You must help us adults to rediscover the child within ourselves; show us how to be spontaneous, laugh, dance, and sing.’

I began to boil up. One more word from her and I would explode. I couldn’t bear it any longer, this slimy talk of higher purposes.

I badly wanted to put my fingers in my ears and run outside. No, that’s not who I am, I screamed inside; you have no idea about me.

Suddenly something inside me began to rebel, with a force I hadn’t felt for years. I knew it was now or never. I made a decision; this couldn’t go on. I had to escape.

It was as if the energy I had held down all these years suddenly erupted. I was often depressed and thought about suicide, but now it was as if my paralysis had evaporated. I was wide awake. I looked in the mirror and noticed an untypical decisiveness in my face. Janet’s words couldn’t touch me any more. My body tightened. I was electrified and began to sketch out my escape mentally. I nodded

mechanically so that Janet didn't get suspicious. Just get through it, I thought; then you're out of here.

I can't remember how much longer Janet carried on trying to ensnare me with words that morning. At any rate I seized the first opportunity to escape her mental clasp and find a quiet spot. I needed to get a grip on my excitement so I could think clearly, but it was still difficult to concentrate. Thousands of ideas were shooting round my head, all revolving around the same word: freedom!

I pictured myself hand in hand with Eddie wandering through the streets of Belize City. Then I imagined embracing him without letting go. I held him tight and enjoyed being close to him, feeling his warmth. My knees began to tremble. Then I cried, tears for a nine-year nightmare. My legs fell from under me. Eddie held onto me and put me down on the grass... One thing at a time, I warned myself; right now you are still a prisoner.

Eddie was a handsome Belizean policeman who used to visit us at the ranch from time to time. At some point he fell for me, which didn't escape Benno's notice. I soon drowned in his dark eyes. He seemed so unaffected, always cheerful. Secretly we shot each other loving glances. He noticed that we were an odd bunch and that I didn't seem comfortable there, and indicated that he would like to help me, but he could have no idea what a dramatic situation I was in.

I was in a trance; where had this energy suddenly come from? Two hours ago I had still been apathetic, paralysed by helplessness. And now I was bubbling over, trying to pull myself together and not lose my head. I could have shouted out loud: it's over! Finished! You've had your last chance. I'm not going along with your sick rituals any longer. Soon I'll be free, free, free!

Once I had calmed down a bit, I walked over to our ranch's main accommodation building. Heiner was bent over his shopping list. I stood in front of Sibylle's mobile phone, which was charging, and slipped it into my trouser pocket. My heart was beating fast. Heiner looked up at me, surprised. 'What are you doing here at this time of the morning?' He asked.

'Benno has lost a mail. I need to see if I left it here,' I lied, and sifted through a few papers. My answer seemed to keep him happy and he turned back to his list.

I slipped cautiously out of the house. Stay calm, I told myself. The sun was blinding me. Normally I loved the tropical atmosphere and the lush vegetation, and would inhale the intense aromas deep inside me, but today my senses were responding

to my inner state. I still felt so excited that sweat was forced out of every pore in my body.

I looked around me self-consciously, as if I were searching for someone, but luckily I didn't see anyone. Without anyone noticing, I reached the little wood nearby and crouched behind a tree. I looked at the display; the reception was good. With trembling fingers I dialled Eddie's mobile number.

'It's me, Lea. Benno is going away tomorrow. I want to escape. Can you find me somewhere to stay?' I burst out. Impatiently I waited for Eddie to answer. There was silence; he seemed to be thinking about it. Please, please, I begged inwardly, unable to bear his silence.

Eddie seemed taken by surprise, and there was no way I could have warned him. He would probably find it hard to understand why all of a sudden I wanted to leave the Maya Ranch, the group, my parents, Benno, and everything else I was so familiar with: my beloved horses, Zorro the funny little raccoon, and of course my brother Kai.

The ranch was my whole life. We had dedicated the last seven years to creating an earthly and heavenly paradise there. It was meant to be an ideal world, a project which was the opposite of the materialistic world 'out there'. Our extended family was striving to achieve a perfect synthesis between spiritual growth and ecological living. We worked seven days a week to make this happen. '*Arbeit macht frei*,' we convinced ourselves in criminal stupidity, not realizing we had set up our very own concentration camp. We believed wholeheartedly in our spiritual experiment, our lofty mission to lead ourselves and humanity to the light above.

We had built an ark for ourselves and our animals in the idyllic tropical landscape so we could pursue these goals undisturbed. Everything we needed to live we squeezed out of the earth, living in harmony with nature, and with the help of several German firms who supported us in the belief we were a relief organization. The Belize authorities and politicians helped us too, including the prime minister himself; they were all drawn into our delusion that we were saving the world.

Finally the long-awaited answer came: 'I'll work something out.'

'Thank you,' I breathed into the phone. 'You're my saviour.' I was so nervous I could hardly speak. 'Can you pick me up midday tomorrow at the end of our airstrip?'

‘I’ll be there,’ Eddie said. I would have loved to talk to him for longer, but the risk of getting caught was too great. I ended the conversation.

A hot and cold shiver shot through me. The relief seemed to drain all the energy out of me. What would become of me if I did succeed in escaping?

I went back to the main building. The coast was clear. Heiner was still brooding over his shopping list. Would he try to axe a few jobs again, to save costs? He looked up when I came in. Without waiting for him to ask, I said, ‘Benno wants me to print out the lost mail again.’ Heiner was content with this. Relieved, I saw that he hadn’t noticed the phone was missing. As I took the mail from the printer, I leant over the charger and plugged the phone back in.

I was fourteen when we bought the enormous ranch. The practical set-up of the ranch was what really excited me, not the search for spiritual enlightenment. Our property stretched over nearly fifteen square miles and included gentle hills with tropical forest and meadows. We cultivated an orange grove and bred local plants. There were six hundred cows grazing our meadows and we bred horses, which was my responsibility. It was when I was out riding with my brother Kai and our Belizean foreman, checking on the herd, that the reality came closest to the dream. We would pause by a stream, tumbling over rocks, or lie in the grass by a lake and gaze at the huge clouds. But over time I stopped appreciating the beautiful landscape, and slipped deeper and deeper into a dark despair.

My first love was for the animals. With the horses I knew where I was. There wasn’t a catch to the affection they showed me. They were very dear to me, and I often came to them for quiet consolation. I helped foals into the world, brought up a young raccoon, cared for a wildcat and bottle-fed a fawn. They often helped me out of my dark moods, but they couldn’t send the shadow which hung over me right away.

I placed all my hope in Eddie. Love and desperation gave me the strength to take a step in the dark. It was crazy really; I hardly knew him. Because I was constantly under surveillance all we could do was give each other furtive looks. There was something magical about his dark eyes. His uncomplicated manner was very attractive, and he radiated happiness.

What a contrast to our group. We left nothing to chance. Everything, absolutely everything, had spiritual significance. I stared at Eddie as if he was from

another planet when he first visited us. He bristled with self-confidence, whereas we constantly held ourselves back, never ignoring a psychic signal or missing a single oscillation. We did laugh sometimes, and tried to be very cheerful, but it was always an artificial, forced laughter, a contrived cheerfulness.

With Eddie I realized immediately that he was at one with himself and the world. He was terribly attractive. The fact that he was a policeman boosted my trust in him. At first I was unsure. So what if a red-blooded Belizean makes eyes at you, I told myself when my fantasies threatened to run out of control. Over time I grew to understand that this was more than just casual flirting. I could see that in his eyes. He went to a great effort to see me when he could. I could see he was considerate because he showed caution and didn't land me in a difficult situation by behaving recklessly.

Then there was the handful of mails we exchanged in secret. Eddie had slipped me his address. I managed to send him a few short messages which he answered saying he loved me. All the same, I was wary at first. I knew that I was now relying on a man I hardly knew, yet instinctively I felt I could trust him.

I stuffed a few clothes into a bag and a rucksack. I didn't possess much more, because personal possessions were seen as an expression of material bondage within our extended family. It wasn't hard to part with the rest of my clothes; I wanted to leave it all behind me anyway.

I hid the bags in the wardrobe. For a moment I thought about what would happen if my preparations were discovered.

I had already had a foretaste, about three months ago. I had dared to announce tentatively that I would like to leave the group.

Benno was alarmed. He hadn't failed to notice that I had changed and become more and more withdrawn. Although I continued to act as if I was fond of him, he seemed to guess that he revolted me. But he went completely off the rails when he discovered I had fallen in love with a Belizean official. Benno, normally so composed, was beside himself.

As our spiritual leader, he always made an effort to appear masterful and in control. Over the years I actually began to believe that he could read our thoughts when he chose to. He instinctively knew our weak points and in a few moves he could trap us in a checkmate. When chaos broke out within our group he never lost sight of the bigger picture. All eyes were turned dutifully towards him, and we waited for his words of wisdom. The worst disasters were just spiritual tests to him.

I know now what drove him to utter desperation. I had dared to rob him of his power over me, and at the same time withdrawn my love. That was monstrous, his worst case scenario, and all brought about by the young woman he had put the most effort into conditioning.

Benno saw red. He raised himself up threateningly in front of me and took his loaded gun from his waistband. 'If you leave me I will shoot myself,' he said in a trembling voice, and put the barrel of his Beretta in his mouth. His eyes flared.

I stared at him aghast. I knew he was capable of extreme reactions. He lived on the edge and I would have put nothing past him, but I hadn't expected him to put himself in such a vulnerable position.

The realization shot through my head: one small movement and it would end with a perfect catastrophe. I would be held responsible for his death, for jeopardizing the fate of our whole extended family, who in turn felt responsible for the whole of humanity.

I couldn't take this pressure, and fell to pieces. Benno sensed my fear; he saw it in my eyes. I wanted to calm him, but I couldn't come out with a single word. My pleading look had the right effect in the end; hesitantly Benno took the pistol out of his mouth. Weakly, with a look of desperation, he begged me never to leave him. In tears now, he promised me his life and all his love. He was prepared to put everything he had in my hands; his entire experience and all his spiritual knowledge, everything.

I was dumbstruck. I nodded. He had pulled it off again. Slowly I began to recover from the shock. I felt powerless, completely at his mercy. Benno was twenty-five years older than me and he knew me inside out. He was a virtuoso who could play us helpless, pliable individuals like a piano. He was a true master at this; he could always find the right strategy to overwhelm and intimidate us, and this time he had realized something more was needed to bring me into line.

The worst thing for me was that Benno reacted like a wounded deer; he panicked. He now knew what I secretly wanted; that I longed for freedom. And now that he no longer trusted me my life really became hell.

I did everything I could to get out of his clutches. There was only one way; I had to feign affection for him. In his acute state of jealousy he couldn't get enough of this. I had long since learned to indulge him, everywhere and all the time. It was torture.

The memory of this dramatic scene reigned me in again as I prepared my escape. I had to be on my guard. This had become clear after another recent incident. Over supper Dominik had asked me if I would cut his hair. He was a young German civil service worker doing his compulsory stint with us on the ranch. Normally my mother would have taken care of this, but she was over in Germany at the time. In order to minimize his jealousy, I warned Benno in advance.

He scrutinized me, and when the time came he wouldn't let me go. Did I really have to cut Dominik's hair, or was I just looking for an excuse to meet up with a local man, he asked. Not again, I groaned silently, but gave nothing away. I hated having to justify everything and come up with white lies.

As Dominik didn't belong to our group Benno let me go in the end. He didn't want the 'civi' to find out too much about our group's life.

As soon as I had cut Dominik's hair I came straight back to Benno. I grew tenser and tenser as I approached the house. The bedroom was submerged in darkness. Benno was sitting on the bed; Janet lay next to him. There was a grim atmosphere. Benno looked at me darkly.

'You will now have to go through hell, Lea,' he began. My throat tightened. I struggled to keep a grip on myself, and tried to calm myself down. Just don't lose your nerve. You have to get through this somehow.

'Janet has an important message for you!' Benno said.

You coward, I thought. You always send our medium in first so you can hang back, observe the situation and strike at the right moment. This time you won't get away with it.

Janet allowed herself plenty of time, and a torrent of words cascaded down on me. As ever her moral lectures were peppered with psychic arguments. Her speech had no effect on me. The ethereal waffle about spiritual growth and my crucial role made it clear to me once again that I needed to leave at the earliest opportunity and get out of this bogus world. Benno stared straight ahead and raised his head from time to time with a wounded expression to check whether Janet's words were having any effect on me.

Janet finally came to the point. 'It's about you and Benno. You must start to realize that you are living in a very special relationship. The connection between you is something unique, not only for yourselves, but for the whole family and our

spiritual experiment. Benno is the experiment's guardian and you hold the key to its magic. Your union shows us all the way to the higher planes,' Janet declared.

She was in her element. Solemnly she entreated me to stay with Benno and fulfil my obligations with humility. I listened to her patiently, but inside I was fuming. Just don't answer back or object, I told myself. Otherwise Benno will freak out completely.

I knew how I could intervene in the situation. It required a great effort of will, but I went slowly over towards Benno, looking deep into his eyes. My humble look was convincing. His expression brightened slightly. As I stroked his face I noticed that his tension eased away, but I was still surprised that he immediately seemed content; he had obviously been yearning for a gesture of reconciliation.

This grotesque scene made me aware how emotionally dependant on me Benno was. Our spiritual leader, who claimed largely to have freed himself from earthly ties, lived in fear of losing me. This man, who could have been my father, was suddenly standing trembling in front of me. The man I had looked up to for years as a figure of intellectual and spiritual authority was now begging for my love. Or rather, he wanted to extort it from me. The great spiritual leader who believed in relinquishing everything, was helpless.

His weakness gave me strength; it gave me the energy to play out the reconciliation scene to the end. Soon our little bedroom was filled with a feeling of relief and harmony. Our medium was clearly exhilarated. She believed her words of warning had led me back to Benno and done him a great service.

I sensed the matter wasn't settled as far as Benno was concerned; he required proof in bed. I should have known it. All too often I had seen that only an orgasm could wash away the final remains of jealousy or an argument. I was to feel deep within me who I belonged to, who I had to obey. He wanted to feel me surrender unconditionally to him.

Benno whispered in my ear that our union was a sign of our spiritual fusion. I knew this argument. He had used it again and again at the start of our relationship. 'Sex is the most intensive way two individuals can join together,' he said at the time. This declaration of love was to serve as the esoteric justification behind the 'higher need' for him to sleep with a thirteen-year-old girl.

I went along with it all and played ball, as far as I could. I knew Benno and I knew exactly how I had to behave to avoid arousing his suspicion. He tried hard to be

sensitive, but I still found myself swearing silently. I had learned to play the role of his lover and feign affection and I abandoned my body to him.

Although it was routine I still took special care to appear attentive and alert. If he felt his manliness was threatened I would have to demonstrate some passion. He had often complained that despite my youth I wasn't very passionate. Today I couldn't afford to be careless.

I realized the most important thing would be to fake a convincing climax. I didn't wait too long, then began to make a lot of noise. It was soon clear that my strategy had succeeded. As I stroked Benno mechanically, my mind was miles away.

Next day I got up and went straight to my horses. I loved the path which led to them. Now I was taking it for the last time. It ran past the sleeping huts, which looked like huge A's with their pointed shape and their steep roofs reaching almost down to the ground. The path ended at our medicinal herb garden. The smell of the fresh herbs and spices lovingly cultivated by our gnarled old Maya, Felice, made a pleasant contrast to the sticky tropical air.

Henry grabbed my attention with a deafening grunt. Henry was a young roebuck who always saw me coming from a distance. Along with Lisa, the young fawn, he came running up to me and welcomed me boisterously. I had raised both of them; Lisa I had actually fed with a bottle. They were hoping to get a tasty treat from me. I looked forlornly at them and tickled Henry between his horns. This is my last visit, I thought. As if he sensed my departure, the young roebuck couldn't get enough affection.

I tore myself away from the two lovely creatures and walked past our vegetable garden to the stables. The horses were already waiting for me, standing by the paddock gate. Even the children who helped me groom them at the weekend had turned up. I teased them as usual before we set to work.

I prepared the food, while the horses pushed into the stall. Imagine if I hadn't had them all these years! By now there were around fifty geldings, stallions and mares. They were my substitute family; I could offer them love without being disappointed. Every time I fetched them from the paddock to feed and groom them they showed me affection.

Although I was probably seeing them for the last time, I wasn't so very melancholy, too preoccupied with my upcoming escape.

I looked at the time constantly, as if I had no choice. I did my best to do my work properly and not be conspicuous. I felt as if my plan to escape was written on my forehead. I brushed the horses. Although they all had a special place in my heart I didn't have the energy to say goodbye to each one individually, but as I brushed my favourite, Braveheart, I had a heavy heart. I had raised the young stallion lovingly and patiently and I stroked his nostrils as I said goodbye. A tearaway, normally very nervous, he let me caress him for ages.

I went through my escape again and again in my mind. Had I forgotten anything? Had I considered all the dangers? What would I do if Eddie stood me up?

My running away would explode like a bomb on the ranch, and endanger the whole experiment, that I was sure of. The lover of our spiritual leader, the hope of the whole family, just slinks off! I didn't dare imagine how Benno and Janet would react, nor my parents. But I wasn't giving them much thought. After all, we had learnt to overcome ties, including ties to family members.

My running away would at least open some people's eyes, I hoped. I was sure my father would be upset and blame himself. Whether my actions would shake my mother up I wasn't sure. She had sewn herself up tight within this world of delusion, and dedicated herself too completely to the spiritual project.

Then an empowering thought came to me. They would be afraid, afraid of me; Benno above all. I am not usually at all vindictive, but I admit that it was nice to feel I might get revenge. For years I had suffered psychological torture, Benno's great big body on top of me, isolation from the rest of the world. I had suffered psychologically and physically, was alone among the extended family. Now I felt strengthened by the thought that the all-powerful, unshakeable Benno would get to share some of the fear I'd been forced to live with all those years. I even hoped the fear would tip over into panic. Perhaps he would flee Belize immediately I thought, taking the next flight to Germany. Or perhaps it would be too risky for him to return to his homeland; perhaps he would take cover in some South American country... Stop, stop, I warned myself. I'm happy if he is simply afraid of me, his 'little Lea', and has to think about whether he is still safe on the ranch, whether the police will come and raid the place and take him away in handcuffs.

Was I getting up false hopes? I was sure that in his imagination at least, these scenes would unfold. I pictured Benno without his mystical aura, without the put-on spiritual affectations, unprotected and vulnerable. It was a sorry sight. In front of me stood an awkward, obese man without charisma or charm, a lonely leader feeling his way through a wood like a blind man, stumbling and unable to find his way out.

It must have been about half past ten when I got back to the little house where I had spent the last few years. Benno was standing on the veranda, deep in conversation with Jochen, his best friend in our extended family.

I greeted Benno warmly and hugged him. He gazed gratefully into my eyes. He was astonishingly relaxed and seemed untypically sentimental. Just as well, I thought, and gave him a kiss on the forehead.

And now be a good boy and go to the hangar like a heroic pilot and a happy lover, I ordered him silently. A glance at the clock showed that he should have set off already. He had probably waited for me, to say goodbye. My pulse raced. I badly wanted to ask him when he was leaving, but I held myself back.

When he finally lumbered towards his beloved aeroplane, a whole film played in front of my eyes. I breathed out with relief. Another hurdle preventing my escape had been removed. I counted the seconds to distract me from my nervousness. Then the long-awaited sound came; the Cessna's motor wailed. The plane shot down the runway and took off. I looked triumphantly after Benno. Bye, bye, see you never again! Let's hope that's the last I see of you, I shouted after him in my head, as his plane disappeared over the horizon.

I was within schedule and went to the house to check on Zorro. The little raccoon was my baby; I had bottle-fed him. The parting from him was the most painful, but the little furry animal seemed to have guessed I was escaping and wanted to put a spanner in the works at the last minute. I was his mother after all; when he wasn't sleeping he was usually hanging from my apron strings.

When I came into the house the maid was running Janet's bath, a sacred ritual for our medium. Zorro was gyrating round her room, leaping all over the place. She couldn't help but laugh at his antics.

Suddenly Janet shouted, 'Lea, look what Zorro has done now!' Without her noticing, the cheeky rogue had slipped into the bathroom and was splashing around in her clean bathwater.

Janet's mood changed abruptly. She hit the roof, furious with me. Why now, of all times? I started getting nervous; it was time I got a move on, but Janet was ranting at me in full flood. This really is your last chance to fluff yourself up and talk down to me like a little girl, I sighed to myself.

Janet let the dirtied bathwater drain out and calmed down gradually. Her tone became friendlier and she invited me to have breakfast with her. Now of all times! I agreed, against my better judgement. On edge, I went to the kitchen building, with Janet and Zorro in tow. Our chef Norbert had already made breakfast; he knew our medium's habits.

After taking a couple of sips from my coffee, I said I needed to go to the toilet and quickly stood up. Luckily Zorro was worn out from all his playing and had crawled off to sleep.

As soon as I was out of sight I ran to my room. I tore open the cupboard door, grabbed the bag and the rucksack, and looked cautiously out of the window. There was no-one around. I hurried towards the little wood. Hearing steps on the gravel path, I paused instinctively. It was Carmen carrying a basket of washing into the house. My heart beat like thunder. If she had turned her head in my direction my escape would have been over. I was so wound up I began stumbling. My bag was actually very heavy.

I summoned all my strength and ran on towards the runway. From time to time I looked around me nervously. Had Janet noticed my disappearance already? Had the alarm been raised?

As I reached the turning area I looked hard at the other end of the runway. I could make out a car, driving to and fro. I just hope that's Eddie, I thought. Although I was already out of breath I didn't allow myself a pause and I didn't dare look behind me again either. As if our spiritual master Ramtha was breathing down my neck, I raced on. After a while the car stopped. The driver had noticed me. It had to be Eddie! I was suddenly filled with happiness, an overwhelming feeling of joy came over me, euphoria even. I was free! I thought I was dreaming; despite my bags I felt so light it was as if I had overcome gravity. The nightmare was over. Even if Janet had now realized I was gone, nothing could happen to me now. Eddie was a policeman after all, and he wouldn't let me be dragged back to the ranch by force.

As I reached the fence at the end of the runway Eddie hurried towards me. I threw my bags over the fence and climbed over. We got into the car quickly, Eddie gave me a kiss and drove off.

I could hardly believe it. My escape plan had succeeded. I'd done it! Benno was up in the air and had no idea what was going on down here on the ground. He would probably have done a nose-dive at full-throttle and rammed his plane into the ground. He would be white-hot with rage that I had fled into the arms of a Belizean, one of the black local men, who he had always talked condescendingly about. They are 'low-frequency', he had said, 'that means they have lower oscillations and are mentally and spiritually backward.' Actually they are friendly, open and helpful, I thought to myself. Eddie held my hand and pressed it.

We had hardly set off before I jumped out of my skin. One of our ranch vehicles drove past us; my brother Kai was at the wheel. I ducked but noticed that he was deep in conversation with his passenger. 'That was close,' I gasped. Now I regretted that I wasn't able to say goodbye to him, but I knew he wouldn't have understood what I was doing. He would probably have blown the whistle on me, out of loyalty to the group and to Benno.

## **Happy Family**

It all began when my mother Lisa got interested in spirituality. I was still a child at the time. I grew up in a village in Switzerland, and thanks to my parents I had a nice, well-adjusted childhood. Thanks also to my brother Kai, one year older than me, who I got on very well with. The village was a tiny, self-contained dot on the landscape. We knew everyone in the neighbourhood, near and far. Our semi-detached house was in the centre, close to the little bakery. Our immediate neighbour was Farmer Heiri who bred sheep and worked as a shepherd in summer. We called him by his Christian name. The great meeting-place was the playground attached to the nearby kindergarten; half the young people in the village met there. We were proud of our village, a place where social cohesion was alive and well.

My brother and I were quite certain we had the best parents ever, and we could really be said to have been a model family. Andres, my father, was a respected architect. He had his own office in the village, only a stone's throw from our nice big

house. My mother looked after us lovingly. Her creative talents were a blessing; she was constantly making things with us. Our household also included three cats, several toads, ducks and chickens, which populated our garden.

And then there were my mother's parents, who lived right next door. We went in and out of their house as if there was no wall in between.

The local children also felt at home in our house; there was always something going on. My mother had infinite patience with this gang of rascals. Our favourite hideout was the large conservatory which our father had built according to ecological principles. The big windows provided lots of light; the tiled floor and all the wood created a cosy atmosphere. We lived in a model house designed by my father and featured by an 'ideal homes' magazine.

I idolized Kai right from the start; he had always been my hero. In 1991, when I was 11, two of our cousins joined our family because their mother was on her own and needed to concentrate on her career. Reto and Ben were like brothers to me. We soon became an inseparable foursome. Our adventurousness knew no bounds. There was no sign that our family idyll might one day come to an abrupt end.

My mother was the strong character in our family. She bubbled with energy and always knew exactly what she wanted. I remember that she was almost always cheerful, liked by everyone and seen as a perfect, loving mother. She gave me and Kai lots of space and supported our development.

Her temperament was in strong contrast to our father's mild-mannered nature. He was gentle, shy and often a bit indecisive, and he was happy to defer to our mother, who had a firm grip on the reins. They suited each other well; for many years the division of roles worked fine, but she did demand more and more space, and after a while complained that he didn't earn enough.

For a long time everything proceeded smoothly. When I was about eight things began to change. My mother became increasingly preoccupied with spirituality. Family life didn't seem to fulfil her any more; she started looking for new challenges and new things to occupy her life. As far as I can remember, her interest in esotericism began during a yoga course. She concentrated more and more on the quest for the purpose of life. This led to tension between her and my father. He could tell that she was unsatisfied and was trying her luck on a higher spiritual plane.

In the spring of 1992 the situation got worse. My father just couldn't do anything right for my mother.

One day when I came back from school I was surprised to see my father and my aunt sitting in the living-room. I could tell something was wrong straight away. 'Where's mum?' I asked, worked up.

'She's not feeling very well,' my father answered. 'She's lying in the yoga room.'

'Can I go and see her?'

My aunt nodded, but she warned me to be very quiet, which made me uneasy.

My mother was lying on a mat. I lay beside her and looked at her sorrowfully. Tears came to my eyes. 'What's wrong with you?' I asked. She pointed to her stomach, which was swollen up. She told me her symptoms, but didn't know the reason for the terrible pain she was in. At any rate she couldn't eat. Despite all this she didn't want to call a doctor. Since becoming preoccupied with esoteric questions she no longer trusted medical professionals and wanted to heal herself alone. She believed that medication was poison and would weaken her own powers of self-healing. She accused conventional medicine of failing to heal the patient and simply repairing the body.

By now we had accepted that the only things she trusted were alternative medicine and her own powers of healing. It would have been useless to force her to see a doctor, so I suffered alongside her and hoped the pain would go away soon.

A few days later a spiritual impulse directed her to the woods. My mother believed that the frequencies were more intense there and the power of the earth would boost her healing process.

Andres and I took Lisa to a nice spot near a stream. I was very disturbed and worried about my mother. She was bent double with pain. The situation seemed serious. She hadn't eaten for days. We placed a yoga mat on the mossy ground and my mother snuggled up in her sleeping bag. Luckily we were having mild spring weather.

I hated to leave my sick mother alone in the woods. What would she do if the situation became acute? Would she then have enough strength to get back home? Lisa assured us that this was the right place for her to generate renewed energies; she felt safe there. We left her a bottle of water next to the mat and hoped she would at least drink enough liquid, but she said she couldn't stomach any water either. I cried as I left her. She started crying too.

We hoped she had made the right decision. There was nothing we could do except support her in it. My mother could be very stubborn and she always got her way. I was so exhausted there was no question of me going to school. I was afraid my mother might die.

When I visited Lisa next day in the woods, she was no better. She still had stomach cramps, but she did seem a little more optimistic. In a thin voice she told me about what she had felt and experienced. Her stories were some consolation to me. Ramtha, an ascended master who now only existed in spirit form, had been with her the whole time, she told me. He had shown her a special light, which she could now see everywhere in nature. Lisa had read a couple of books about the 'master of the wind', as he was called, and was pleased she had been privileged to encounter him out there.

She had already told me and my brother Kai about Ramtha a while back, and about the American medium Judy Z. Knight who possessed the ability to make contact with Ramtha. The medium placed her body at his disposal, and accepted the inevitable discomfort so she could channel the teachings of Ramtha, who had lived on earth over 35,000 years ago. It was his goal to give us spiritual guidance so that we would achieve the ascent into the light and the higher planes.

Ramtha prophesied that there would soon be a turning point, Lisa told us; an upheaval accompanied by all kinds of catastrophes similar to the biblical apocalypse. Now I understood why our larder was so full and why Andres had bought gold; Ramtha had prophesied that money would soon be devalued.

When Lisa first told me about the turning point I was scared, but soon I saw the world in a different way, and I was quite proud. Had our family been initiated into secret knowledge about the coming changes? I felt somehow chosen. The longer I thought about it, the more fascinated I became about the turning point. I could hardly think about anything else and tried to imagine what would happen to the world.

I visited Lisa most days. Her healing-place in the woods was about ten minutes from our house. The path passed by a pretty meadow full of colourful flowers.

Lisa had seen many signs of the big changes coming, which she told me about next time I visited her. Although she was very weak, she seemed taken up by her psychic experiences. For her there was no doubt that she had come close to experiencing the transcendental light prophesied by Ramtha, in fact she believed she had become part of the mysterious energy herself and that she would achieve the

ascent into the cosmic dimension. It sounded like she would soon be leaving us, for ever.

I was very upset, afraid I would never see my mother again. Day after day passed by, but Lisa still didn't come home. I gradually came to terms with the idea that she would dissolve into this mysterious light. The thought opened up a numbing emptiness inside me. Andres tried to hide his worry and pain in the presence of us children, and to be there for us.

Eight days later, as I was lying in my hammock in the living room, gazing out of the window lost in thought, I could hardly believe my eyes. Lisa came walking through the garden, her legs barely supporting her, heading for the house. I ran up to her. She was back! All the fears I had had about life without my mother were gone.

Lisa and I fell into each other's arms. I cried with joy. Then I noticed that she could hardly stand up straight. She couldn't speak either. She took a pen and paper so she could communicate. That's how I can remember exactly what my first question to her was: 'Lisa, can you eat and drink again?' When I read her answer, I shouted with joy: 'I'd like to try', was what it said. From her shaky handwriting I could see how weak she was, but she gave off such warmth and kindness that I took heart. She needed lots of peace and quiet, she said, and the stomach pains hadn't completely subsided, but she felt much better.

When Andres came to tuck me into bed that night, he looked very relieved. He was very thankful that Lisa was back with us, he said. But we would have to accept that she would withdraw from us a lot of the time now, to meditate. I was still so moved by her unexpected homecoming that anything was better than the constant worry about her.

With time our everyday life settled down. Lisa meditated a lot, but not all day. When she withdrew to her yoga room, we stayed quiet. She was capable of staying in the same position for an eternity, but she still took care of us and the housework.

The tension between Andres and Lisa increased however. She withdrew further and further from him and set up home in her transcendental world. Andres was hurt. It also pained him that Lisa wasn't physically attracted to him any more. I sensed the conflict and was afraid they might get divorced, so I asked my mother why Andres was sad and if they were going to split up. She reassured me that they still loved each other, but in a different way from before. They were putting most of their energy into

their spiritual development. Worldly matters didn't interest them much now, because they distracted them from their spiritual goals.

I talked to Andres about it. My father was upset that spiritual enlightenment had become more important to Lisa than the family, he said. Although he was trying to accept the new path Lisa had chosen, her extreme approach hurt him.

That was typical for Andres; he had always accepted everything. I can't remember him rebelling or losing his temper even once. He was always considerate towards Lisa and set his own needs aside.

One day Lisa came home very excited and showed us a leaflet. It was an invitation to a spiritual festival in Zurich where the teachings of the mysterious spiritual master Ramtha were to be channelled. Lisa was over the moon. Her spiritual master was making contact with a medium right in our area! Her enthusiasm was infectious. I got excited myself and wanted to experience this miracle too. I kept studying the leaflet. The motto of the festival was 'Ramtha within you'. Andres, my brother and my aunt Mona wanted to take part too. I was annoyed that the price of the seminar was so high. I can still remember that I asked Lisa why that was; it must surely have been in Ramtha's interest that as many people as possible got to hear his teachings. Lisa replied, 'If someone really wants to take part, then money should be no object. Anyone who wants to hear Ramtha's teachings will find a way to raise the fee.' That made sense to me.

It also said in the leaflet that Ramtha particularly welcomed children, because they were spontaneous and were grounded in their hearts. I thought it was great that he had time for us.

The medium who channelled Ramtha's messages was called Janet. She was a thirty-nine year old German woman and gave seminars mainly in Germany and Austria. Now she was coming to give a two-day workshop in Zurich. I tried to picture how Janet would receive the teachings and pass them on to us, but the longer I tried to imagine the scenario, the more uncertain I became. How come Ramtha was a male being but the medium was female? And Ramtha was very old. Would the ancient spirit then be wearing women's underwear? How did it feel to the medium when Ramtha used her body? Was she aware of what the spirit was saying?

There were around eighty participants in the hall at the exclusive hotel. I got more excited with every minute. I could hardly believe that I was allowed to be a witness to such an event. I sat on the edge of my seat in the large hall and peered

around me furtively. I didn't see many children. Lots of the adults seemed to know each other and were chatting in a very friendly way. There was almost a party atmosphere; the sense of anticipation was tangible. Suddenly gentle music could be heard, and then the medium strode majestically down the aisle. I turned round, full of awe. I had expected a portly, venerable lady, but I was disappointed. A rather small, not very attractive older woman with a bulbous face made her entrance, accompanied by a blonde, angelic woman who would have made a much more convincing medium; but from her sycophantic behaviour it was clear straight away who was the important one. The blonde seemed to be a servant who escorted her mistress to her appearances.

The two women reached the stage and the medium sat down awkwardly in an elegant armchair. She looked almost lost in it. The angelic woman left the stage.

The medium introduced herself as Janet. She looked down at us with a friendly smile then gave us a short introduction informing us what the order of events would be. The main thing would be calling up the spirit of Ramtha and welcoming him to our group. Janet therefore asked for our mental support.

Most of the visitors now closed their eyes and focussed their energy on Ramtha. I was torn. On the one hand I wanted to do what Janet said, even if I didn't know exactly how to go about it. At the same time my curiosity was too great to let me close my eyes. I was too keen to see what happened on the stage. Although I suspected the spiritual being wouldn't appear in person, I wasn't absolutely sure of this and didn't want to miss the moment under any circumstances. In the end though, I obeyed the medium.

Time seemed to stand still. I heard Janet breathing deeply. I squinted briefly at the stage. The medium was sitting motionless, with closed eyes. Her face was constricted.

Suddenly I was startled by a loud scream. Jaaa, Ramtha yelled into the hall. He had made his presence known forcibly through Janet. Without thinking I open my eyes wide and saw that Janet was sitting upright her chair, staring as if in a trance. Her voice and her expression suddenly looked masculine. Now Ramtha is speaking through her, I thought, and got even more excited.

The spirit's performance was impressive. He didn't make declarations of universal wisdom, instead concerning himself with individual course members. Ramtha held a mirror up to them and ruthlessly uncovered their weaknesses and spiritual inadequacies. I found that unsettling. In my imagination Ramtha was a wise,

kindly father figure. Now he was shouting into the hall, hurling insults and nasty comments at the people in the room.

Some of the participants left the room indignantly, which annoyed me; the accusations didn't come from Janet, but from a spirit being who saw and knew everything. Ramtha certainly didn't pull his punches, but he must have his reasons for this behaviour, I thought. I didn't feel comfortable either, but I wanted to absorb everything and understand it.

There were also more friendly moments. We were all asked to take each other in our arms. I found that embarrassing; I had to tell complete strangers I loved them. As I am a bit shy I found that difficult.

That night Ramtha pursued me in my dreams, in muddled up stories and scenes from the seminar. The spiritual ascent to a higher plane turned out to be one big nightmare. Spirits pursued me, trying to scare me. One terrible scene tore me out of my sleep.

Ramtha/Janet had shown us an exercise we should do when we were overcome by fear; we simply had to raise our arms in the air, make a vibrating movement with our hands and let out a deep 'Ohm'. The exercise came back to me now and I tried it out. I was relieved to find that it actually worked.

The second day of the festival once more demanded my full attention. I sat on the edge of my chair again and hoped I wouldn't be put through the hoop by Ramtha. The spirit being gave me the creeps. To be honest I was a little afraid of him. He came over as manic and very impatient in Janet's body. The medium gesticulated wildly, stomped round the stage and hurled Ramtha's teachings at us. We were really stupid, he complained, trapped in our materialism, and spiritually unenlightened; dim people without a clue about the higher planes. At the same time Ramtha used words and expressions I had never heard before. I took this to be one more sign that he was not from this world and was imparting unknown wisdom to us.

Then Janet asked every participant who thought of themselves as stubborn to come to the front. Ramtha challenged the people who weren't sure, making some very rude accusations; more and more people joined the stubborn group. I asked Lisa whether I wasn't sometimes a bit stubborn too. She nodded. I gathered up my strength and went to the front too.

Finally there were only a few people left in their chairs and these were the people Ramtha now shamed; they were the really obstinate ones, the spirit claimed.

Two of these ‘stubborn’ people tried to defend themselves and sparked off a heated discussion. I was certainly very glad I had joined the majority and wasn’t one of the silly people now being given a talking to by Ramtha.

At the end of the seminar the blonde woman came back to stand next to the medium. She was called Sibylle, she said, and announced that Ramtha and his trusted friends were planning an eight-week summer camp during August and September at a country estate in Austria. All the festival participants were warmly invited to take part.

On the way back home we discussed our impressions excitedly. Lisa and my aunt were captivated by Janet and the teachings of Ramtha. They were in such high spirits, they almost lost their voices. My father looked thoughtful and didn’t say much.

By the time we got home the two women were both certain they would go to the camp. My father still wasn’t sure. It was all too sudden for him, and perhaps he also didn’t dare say anything critical in front of the two enthusiastic women. He probably couldn’t have done anything to counter their euphoria anyway. There was no way my brother and I could go to the camp; we had to go to school.

Soon everything became very chaotic. My mother was already hovering on a higher plane and could hardly wait for the camp. Andres was caught in a moral dilemma. He was afraid he might lose Lisa for ever. We encouraged him to go with Lisa and so, with a heavy heart, he registered for the camp. As they didn’t want to leave me, Kai and my cousins alone for two months, they decided just to go for a fortnight.

Kai and I were excited about being left to our own devices along with our cousins, with the house to ourselves. Our first thoughts were that we could watch as much TV as we wanted and eat pizza every day.

The excitement was spoiled by the new school situation. I wasn’t going to school in our village any more; I had to get the train every day to Winterthur, which seemed like a big city to me. Not only this, I was the new girl in the class; all the others knew each other already, and I was a year younger and had to do a probationary period.

I looked forward to the day when my parents set off, but then when they actually left I was a bit nervous. Anyway we managed fine and enjoyed our new freedom. The time passed quickly. I hardly had the chance to miss my parents as we talked to Lisa on the phone a lot and I was able to tell her how it was going at my new school.

We had almost got through the whole fortnight then something went wrong on the last Friday morning. The alarm clock went off, Kai turned it back off again and we lay in bed a few more minutes. When I opened my eyes again I got a fright. I'd missed my train. Kai just grinned and said it wasn't the end of the world, but I felt terribly guilty. How could I oversleep during the probationary period?

Crying my eyes out, I rang Lisa at the camp. She calmed me down and said she was coming back on Sunday night and not to worry.

That Sunday I waited impatiently for her. Although it got later and later I couldn't sleep. I heard the church clock strike midnight. I was beside myself with worry but at the same time felt guilty; not only had I been absent without an apology, I would now turn up exhausted to school.

Finally she came home. Lisa was beaming as she took me in her arms. 'There's no need to worry about school, Lea,' she said. 'From now on you don't have to go there any more.' I couldn't believe my ears and I looked at her in disbelief. 'Yes it's true, Lea,' she confirmed. 'We are all going to the school of life.' I was confused. I didn't understand what Lisa meant. 'You will be going to Ramtha's school of enlightenment.'

The school issue wasn't quite so clear-cut after all. Andres still wasn't sure if he should give up his architecture practice and join the Ramtha group. 'If you don't want to come and join Ramtha's family Andres would stay here with you,' Lisa told us. But I couldn't imagine our family being split apart, so it was soon clear to me that we should all go to Austria together. I was very worried about my pets, the two rabbits and the guinea pig, and I found it hard to imagine leaving our lovely house. Soon, however, everything had been decided, and Lisa really did take us out of school.

**Lea Saskia Laasner, Allein gegen die Seelenfänger**

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Translation by Steph Morris

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