

*'It is easy to celebrate the well-known and famous,
but it is the unknown ones who make history.'*

Walter Benjamin

*I am light
Travelling in empty space.*

*I am a diminishing star
Speeding away
Out of the universe.*

from 'The Unloved' by Kathleen Raine



Rychwalski family, 1908. Middle row standing: Moses Rychwalski (centre);
on his right Max, Mally, Siegfried and Marie Greiffenhagen

DECEMBER 2005

Restless. I was feeling restless. Unable to settle to anything. Then a chance happening set things off. That's the only way I can explain it. Serendipity.

* * *

I am standing by the garden door holding a pair of trousers that have lost a button. I really want to be outside, but what can you do in a garden in early December? Shrubs are waiting for the sun to come out long enough to reach their roots and nudge them into life. As am I.

It's been more than two weeks since I wore these trousers. If it was a question of cooking, I'd have done it straight away. I find cooking meditative, the rhythm of chopping soothing. My mind takes wing, floats, and there's a meal at the end of it. But sewing I hate.

So I go to the kitchen, open the fridge, clear out the veg drawer and throw into a saucepan carrots, onion, celeriac, leeks, potatoes, all the winter root stuff, plus dried herbs because the fresh ones have withered to nothing – another good reason for spring to roll on – pour in stock and add garlic for zing. While the soup is

THE MEMORY KEEPER

simmering, I step out into the last sad patch of daylight and plan for spring.

Hard to imagine that rose stump will send out shoots, or the jasmine skeleton spill over the fence, full and fragrant once again, or that only a couple of months ago I ate my own figs. Does the fig need repotting or is it best left? At least it's hardy, unlike the geranium which I wrap in more fleece and tuck back against the wall.

Now it's completely dark. I go inside and eat my soup.

If it was the Middle Ages, I'd piss in my pot, chuck it out the window, snuff out the candle and go to bed. Darkness would have come as a relief. Electricity and technology give us too many choices and I don't fancy any of them, certainly not sewing. So I turn on the TV to distract me. That's the best way. Catch myself offguard and deal with that button before I realise I've done it.

I grab the remote and land on Channel 4 just as a large man steps into the boot of a car and – presumably of his own free will because he is smiling at the camera – folds himself up and allows himself to be shut inside. The camera then pans over lines of cars until all we see is a giant car park full of parked cars. No one allowed in or out as that would spoil the game. Channel 4 has challenged a group of psychics to find the very car with the man inside it.

This is just the kind of distraction I need to help me concentrate on threading the needle. I glance at the television as, one by one, the psychics succeed, almost succeed, just fail or fail miserably. In between smug psychics and cross psychics come commercial breaks and mini psychic tests for us, the viewers, at home. I jab the needle in and out of the cloth,

DECEMBER 2005

do every test and score two out of ten. What else did I expect? I have never felt even slightly psychic. By now the button is more or less on, so I go to bed.

Actually, I don't. I mean to, but on the way – and this is the odd thing, as I've really no idea why I choose this particular moment – I turn on the computer and type into Google my mother's maiden name: Rychwalski. An unusual name in England but not in Eastern Europe, nor the USA. I have searched before, not in any purposeful way, more like surfing for anybody I might have heard of, even though common sense tells me by now they must all be dead.

I scroll down until two entries bring me up short: Max and Amalie Rychwalski. My grandparents. What on earth are they doing on my screen? I click and enter the website of the district in Berlin where they used to live. Bleibtreustrasse, number 32. I read that two '*Stolpersteine*' have been placed in the pavement outside their block of flats. What on earth are *Stolpersteine*?

Another click. A picture unfurls and I am back in the cinema of the 1950s watching *The Ten Commandments* with Moses – Charlton Heston – brandishing two tablets of stone hot off the press from God. But, instead of ten Thou Shalt Nots, I read on one:

HIER WOHNTE
AMALIE RYCHWALSKI GEB. MESERITZ
JG. 1878
DEPORTIERT 1942 THERESIENSTADT
ERMORDET 13.11.1942

THE MEMORY KEEPER

(HERE LIVED
AMALIE RYCHWALSKI NÉE MESERITZ
DATE OF BIRTH 1878
DEPORTED 1942 THERESIENSTADT
MURDERED 13.11.1942)

and on the other:

HIER WOHNTE
MAX RYCHWALSKI
JG. 1864
DEPORTIERT 1942 THERESIENSTADT
ERMORDET 31.01.1943

(HERE LIVED
MAX RYCHWALSKI
DATE OF BIRTH 1864
DEPORTED 1942 THERESIENSTADT
MURDERED 31.01.1943)

I stare at the screen, shocked by this sudden meeting with my grandparents, shocked by the word ‘murdered’ (*ermordet*). My parents had never used it. ‘Died’, they would say on the rare occasions the fact was mentioned. Or ‘perished’. But not ‘murdered’. ‘Murdered’ is such a stark word.

You’d think after fifty years I might be used to it. Getting on with life, walking down the street, queueing at the checkout, thoughts of bulldozed bodies nowhere near the surface of my mind, when suddenly a picture, a headline, a phrase overheard in passing and whoosh! My grandparents appear.

I was eleven when I found out the truth. I had already

realised my maternal grandparents must have died, but didn't know where or how, unlike my father's father who had dropped dead of a heart attack before I was born. No mystery there. He and my paternal grandmother – the only grandparent I knew – had managed to escape from Germany to England in the nick of time.

'At least they weren't killed there,' my mother had commented, implying there were degrees of severity to death in a concentration camp. Theresienstadt was a transit camp; it had no gas chambers, and her parents were not shot, so no single action had ended their lives. It would be many more years before I found out what had actually happened to them.

I dash to a long-closed cupboard, extract a file of family papers and rummage till I find two yellowed Red Cross death certificates. Back at the computer I compare dates. They tally exactly. Then I see something else: 'Dedicated 30 November 2005.' Today is 4 December 2005. Their *Stolpersteine* were placed last Wednesday. Only four days ago.

Now, look. I am willing to believe there are people who really are psychic – in fact, I have a friend who says she gets premonitions in the form of images – but not me. I have always been down to earth. Sensible. Logical. I was like it as a child, from birth for all I know. Surely this is simply a coincidence?

Recently I had been thinking about my mother's family more than I had done for years. Only a week earlier I had got out her family photos, as if looking at them might help me put my finger on something – a sense of unbelonging that I have had all my life and which latterly I had been feeling more strongly. Maybe this time the photos would help me get to grips with it. I had gazed at my grandmother,

THE MEMORY KEEPER

soon to be married, exquisitely dressed in figure-hugging white lace, the height of fashion in 1903. In another photo my grandfather is deep in conversation with my mother. By then he must have been in his seventies, bearded, with thick eyebrows and deep furrows down his cheeks. Even under his homburg hat he looks like an Old Testament prophet.



Hilda and Max

The unbelonging felt like a block of ice lodged in my gut. Much of the time I was unaware of it. But every now and then while I was growing up that feeling would surge through me, and looking at the photos helped to shift it. They were kept in a shoebox in the cupboard under the TV set. I would take them out and spread around me a whole black-and-white family of great-aunts, great-uncles and cousins. My doll-like baby mother, Hilda, with her older brother Ernst and sister Charlotte. My grandparents, Max and Mally, always referred to by their first names. Mally was short for Amalie. Her older sister had been named Emilie. How odd, I thought. Emilie and Amalie. Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

DECEMBER 2005

I watched Mally change from wild-haired girl in fancy dress through wasp-waisted bride to plump young woman in plus-fours and stylish jacket posing next to Max, one foot on the rung of a toboggan. Later still she became a stout matron, carefully dressed in matching hat, gloves and handbag, but with deep shadows under sad eyes.



Mally and Max

My grandfather Max changed less than she did, constantly tall, bearded and balding. He rarely looked at the camera except in the posed shots. I liked catching him engrossed in the newspaper or reading a postcard he had just written. In one tiny snap he and Mally stand by the sea. In the foreground a striped towelling robe lies crumpled on the sand. I doubted it belonged to Max; in his suit and bow tie, he

THE MEMORY KEEPER

was hardly about to strip and swim. In any case, if Max had owned such a robe, it would have been folded and crumple-free. Tidy and fastidious was how my mother described him, with a special cup to keep his moustache and beard clean. His hands were sweet-smelling, nails well cared for.

As a child I used to crouch over the shoebox and stare until the figures jerked into motion, like a newsreel that had stuck and restarted. I imagined stroking the fur of Mally's collar, holding Max's large hand, so like my mother's. At such times my black-and-white grandparents seemed more colourful than the family among whom I was growing up.

That included my mother, the monochrome version consistently more fun than the one I lived with, usually too tired, busy with chores or struck down by a migraine to join in my games. Only in the shoebox could I be sure of finding the ironic, energetic woman who pulled faces, turned cartwheels, wore jaunty hats, posed in palazzo pants and halter-neck swimsuits by sunny Berlin lakesides in the days before England.



Hilda

Three separate eras marked my childhood landscape. My parents had survived the exciting, glamorous, dangerous world of Before – escaping Nazi Germany, meeting in England as refugees and dodging the Luftwaffe's bombs – whereas I was born in the grey, dull, safe, post-war era of After. Gradually I became aware of a third period, shadowy and hard to locate, which came after Before but before After and, as far as I could tell, only affected us, not the families of my schoolfriends. They, born like me after the Second World War to parents who had lived through it, remained untouched by that third era which could lower the temperature at home by several degrees.

That icy world of In-Between, although rarely mentioned and hard to grasp, shaped my everyday life. If I felt angry or fed up, I tried not to show it and eventually, by biting my lip – or, more often than not, feeling bad because I failed to bite it – I began to lose touch with strong, loud, multi-coloured feelings that were bound to be awful. Good feelings were bland, beige and unthreatening. I refrained from asking the one question about my grandparents I most wanted to ask. And then, one Saturday when I was eleven, I asked it.

Normally I took awkward questions to my mother, like could the rumour spread by the boys at school about sexual intercourse actually be true? I tackled her with that the following morning while she was cleaning the fireplace, and she confirmed it while still sweeping the ashes. Might, then, she and my father have another go at giving me a brother or sister? Apparently not.

This question, though, I had to ask my father. He was sitting on the bottom stair, his shoes lined up before him

THE MEMORY KEEPER

ready for their weekly clean. I dithered by the front door as he opened the tin of black Cherry Blossom. I waited till he'd done the first pair, the next pair, the last . . . 'Mummy's parents!' I blurted out. 'What happened to them?'

He scooped out a dollop of polish that even I could see was far too big and smeared it on, spreading it round and round. Some stuck to the laces. 'They were taken to Theresienstadt,' he muttered without looking up. 'We didn't know much during the war. The news didn't get through. It came afterwards.' He tried to wipe off the excess polish and got it all over his hands. Savage brushing followed. 'I hid the articles from Mum, of course.' Suddenly he stood up, leaving shoes and cleaning stuff in a heap, and went into the kitchen.

I found them whispering by the sink. My mother gave me the swiftest glance before continuing to scrape potatoes. 'It wasn't the worst camp,' she said. 'At least they weren't killed there.'

'So if they weren't killed,' the question burst out before I could stop it, 'how did they die?'

She put down the knife, her shoulders hunched and rigid. 'They had no food!' she said, her voice unusually shrill. 'They starved.'

Half an hour later we sat down to lunch. Fish, peas, new potatoes. I tried not to think of my grandparents' hands – those caressing hands I liked to imagine holding me close – reaching for scraps. Not the worst camp. Please let starving be better. I stared at my plate and chewed and chewed, but swallowing was hard.

* * *

And suddenly here they are, my starved and murdered grandparents, on my computer screen. I don't know how long I stare at their names, as if waiting for them to tell me what they're doing there. What are *Stolpersteine* anyway? I click and learn that the word is an invented one. It translates literally as 'stumble stones'. The artist who created them, Gunter Demnig, is my contemporary, born in Berlin in 1947, his work inspired by anger at the crimes committed by his father's generation. In an earlier project he had laid a ribbon of brass across Cologne to remind inhabitants of the deportation route of their former Roma and Sinti neighbours, neighbours they had meanwhile seemingly forgotten or chosen to forget.

Stolpersteine honour the individual. They are small, square, brass-covered blocks inserted in the pavement outside the front door of Holocaust victims' homes. Passers-by come upon them by chance and, by pausing to read the inscriptions, bring the murdered person back from oblivion to the very spot where they last lived and walked freely.

I wonder if someone is doing that right now for Max and Mally. What time is it? Nearly midnight here in London, the early hours of Monday morning in Berlin. Freezing cold, I should think. Bleibtreustrasse lit up and empty. I imagine a young couple wrapped around one another walking unsteadily along the street. She drops . . . what? Keys. Giggles. Tries to pick them up but he's quicker and holds them out of reach. She's still looking at the spot where the keys landed, a small brass square in the pavement etched with an inscription. She reads it and the one next to it. 'Look!' she says.

THE MEMORY KEEPER

‘Yes!’ I shout at the screen. For the first time since they were deported, my grandparents have been brought back to their rightful home.

In 1995, when Gunter Demnig laid his first *Stolperstein*, it was an act of defiance. Anti-authority. Anti-bureaucracy. A cloak-and-dagger job. Drilling into the pavement without permission. But in the meantime town councils throughout Germany have embraced and supported the project. Anyone can commission *Stolpersteine* – a surviving relative, the current resident of a victim’s house, anyone.

So who commissioned my grandparents’ ones?

A contact number is given next to their entry on the local municipal website. The following morning I phone. A woman answers. I tell her my name, ‘but that won’t mean anything to you. My grandparents were Rychwalski, Max and Amalie, known as Mally . . .’ I tail off. Why doesn’t she say anything? ‘So I wondered: who could have arranged this? I’m their only grandchild, you see. There isn’t anyone else. The end of their line, you might say.’

I hear a sound like a deep sigh, as if she had been holding her breath until she could hold it no longer. ‘We only just placed them!’

‘But who are you?’

Another silence.

‘Hello?’

No answer. She seems to have gone away.

Then a man comes to the phone. ‘Knoll.’

Herr Knoll tells me . . . Quite honestly, I don’t know what he’s telling me. I’m trying to listen, but a voice in my head keeps butting in: ‘This is incredible. Who’d have

thought it? A complete stranger doing this for Max and Mally. Really, who'd have thought it?'

'Why did you pick my grandparents?' I eventually say out loud.

Herr Knoll must be repeating what I missed the first time round, and he is speaking very slowly. He is a Freemason. So was Max – that's news to me – both members of the same Lodge. A Lodge founded by gentiles and Jews. Many were victims of the Nazis. Herr Knoll is placing *Stolpersteine* for all of them. And their wives. 'If only I'd known about you. But there was no way I could have done.' He pauses. 'Have you any family photos? Can you send them? We only have names and dates. Birth and deportation. Sometimes of death. If known.'

Lists of absences. That's all he has. He needs to fill the emptiness. Of course he does. 'Yes, I'll send you photos.'

An hour later I receive an email from a Frau Lenck of the Coordination Office *Stolpersteine* Berlin.

'Dear Frau Kohnstamm, I handle *Stolpersteine* requests for the 12 districts of Berlin and liaise with volunteers who do the research in each one. Herr Knoll now looks after Wilmersdorf/Charlottenburg, the district where your grandparents used to live.'

She goes on to say that *Stolpersteine* are mushrooming throughout Germany, with more requests now received from the current residents of a building where victims once lived than from surviving relatives and descendants.

Amazing. After decades of silence, of keeping off the subject because those days are over and done with so let's sweep them under the carpet, Germans are now rolling up that carpet to take a good look. Ordinary people are getting

THE MEMORY KEEPER

to grips with the grim, haunted by their legacy. Until now I had been completely alone with mine.

‘Please be assured,’ Frau Lenck concludes, ‘that in this city where your family suffered so much, they are not forgotten.’

I burst into tears.

PART 1:
BERLIN, JANUARY 2006

REACHING THROUGH THE WALLPAPER

‘There are known knowns. There are things we know we know.’ At a press conference in 2002 Donald Rumsfeld, the then US Secretary of Defense, was fielding questions on Iraq’s supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction. ‘We also know there are known unknowns,’ he went on. ‘That is to say we know there are some things we do not know.’ Then came the punchline: ‘But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know.’

His much quoted, much mocked answer made perfect sense to me. It captured exactly my growing awareness of the fates of my grandparents and much of the shoebox family. Until I was eleven and tackled my father while he was cleaning his shoes, the world of In-Between was a colossal unknown unknown. Trying to steer clear – of what? – I sometimes unwittingly put my foot right in it and caused my mother to explode. In those early days of After she had not yet completely screwed down the lid on her cauldron of rage. But as soon as I had learned the bald facts, unknown unknown progressed to known unknown. From then on I was impelled to find out more, while

THE MEMORY KEEPER

keeping a weather eye open for signs of steam escaping from under my mother's lid.

I developed extraordinarily sensitive antennae, on high alert when my parents, huddled together, muttered in German. Until I was twelve and started learning it at school, German was the language of secrets from Before and In-Between – apart from a few children's stories and songs that they taught me – my mother taking short, tense drags on her cigarette, my father sitting on the edge of his armchair, crouched over the old Royal typewriter balanced on the pouffe while he pounded away on its keys.

After I had discovered Max and Mally's fate, I asked my mother if she still had any of their letters. 'No,' she replied, leading me to believe that in the three years between her arrival in London in December 1936 and the outbreak of war there had only been the odd phone call.

Many years later – in October 1987 to be exact – I learned that couldn't be true. An Israeli cousin had phoned me early one morning with the news that my uncle Ernst had suddenly died, and I immediately booked a flight to Tel Aviv. Neither of his sisters came to his funeral, although I wasn't entirely surprised. Both my mother and Charlotte used to grumble about how uncommunicative their brother was, lazy and difficult to be with. And by then my mother herself was frail. Yet their lack of sadness at his death, of any show of regret, I found shocking.

I was the closest family member there – Ernst had never married and had no children. In his flat after the burial I felt uncomfortable going through the belongings of such a private person. At the bottom of one cupboard I came

REACHING THROUGH THE WALLPAPER

across a folder entitled *Alte Briefe* (*Old Letters*). Inside was a sheaf of correspondence in *Sütterlin*.

Ludwig Sütterlin had developed his script from older cursive ones, and from the late nineteenth century it was widely taught in German schools. Apart from marked distinctions between upper- and lower-case letters, a lower-case letter might also be written differently depending where it appeared. For example, the 's' has three versions – for the beginning, middle and end of a word.

The only bits I could read were dates and signatures in modern script. 1938 . . . 1939 . . . Vater . . . Mutter . . . I shivered. Max and Mally had come to meet me at last. That is when I realised: if their pre-war letters to Ernst had got through, my mother must also have received some.

Back in London I dithered. Had enough time passed? Should I show them to her? Might it even do her good by providing some catharsis? I picked one letter at random – but, oh boy, what a mistake that was. The very sight of their handwriting sent her scuttling deep inside herself. So I stuffed the letters into my own cupboard, and for the next eighteen years there they stayed, waiting for Herr Knoll to commission my grandparents' *Stolpersteine* and for me to stumble across them.

The deaths then came every two and a half years: my father in 1990, and then in 1992, aged seventy-seven, my mother. Hers was a slow decline from cancer. While she still had the strength, she began to talk about her childhood during the safe years before Hitler. I suggested recording her memories, and she was happy to talk on tape. As usual, I avoided the Nazi era, but then, to my surprise – and perhaps because she knew she didn't have much time left – she

THE MEMORY KEEPER

approached it herself. She described a much older cousin whom she had liked. ‘Alfred wore a patch because he lost an eye in the First World War, and I kept trying to pull it when he played with me. He gave me an orange, and I thought it was a ball because I’d never seen an orange before. He married a country girl, and they had one child after another. All perished.’



Alfred Rychwalski

‘Your family was really decimated,’ I said.

‘Yes, well, I worked out how many . . .’ Out poured a list of parents, uncles, aunts and cousins. At one point she hesitated, and I prompted her: ‘Aunt Marie?’ She shook her head. ‘She comes later. I do the uncles first.’ In that moment I realised she was recalling them in strict order of age, first Max’s side, then Mally’s, slotting in the corresponding cousins

REACHING THROUGH THE WALLPAPER

as she went along. We counted a total of twenty-two. 'And that's only the immediate family,' she said. 'There were also many friends, people you were close to. Yes, quite a handful.'

Afterwards we sat together in a new kind of silence. I have never forgotten that silence, the privilege of sharing it with her. For the first and last time my mother had revealed to me her private litany of the murdered. Twenty-two members of her closest family.

Clearing the house after her death, I found not so much as a postcard from Max and Mally. All she had kept from Before was the trunk that had carried her own belongings from Berlin to London.

In February 1995 I flew to the USA to say goodbye to her sister Charlotte. Matter-of-fact as ever, even though terminally ill with cancer, she greeted me with two plastic bags bulging with papers. 'You're the family archivist,' was all she said. 'Here you are.' No explanation. No nothing. I flicked through her teenage diaries, mountains of love letters, some letters from my mother, a few impenetrable ones from Max and Mally, and their faded birth, marriage and, finally, death certificates issued after the war by the Red Cross. One month later Charlotte herself was dead.

Then a strange thing happened. Having spent my life straining to pick up clues about my grandparents and the shadow family, I found myself with a whole hodgepodge of material and couldn't bear to look at it. Most of the papers I was unable to fathom anyway, and now that everyone who could have guided me through them was gone, I didn't know what to do. Sometimes I took the folders out, but each time felt a great weight descend on my head. So much loss. Everyone dead. The ones I had

known and those I was never able to know. Even my mother's silly schoolgirl notes to her sister didn't help. *'I'm sitting in boring biology. We're doing mammals with teats and such-like. What's more, I've an enormous pimple on my chin – look!'*, with a lurid illustration. I had loved it when that light-hearted mother popped up in my world too, dashing into the garden to hang toffees from branches of 'The Sweetie Tree' for my friend Michael who ran straight to it every time he came to tea. Meanwhile all I seemed able to do was stare at the papers, frozen, before pushing them back into the cupboard. Over the next ten years, there they stayed.


Now, though, my grandparents' fates no longer belong to me alone. Herr Knoll wants to know what kind of people they were. Isn't that what I've always wanted, too? Max and Mally deserve to be known at last as the *Menschen* – human beings – they used to be.

He's asked for photos. Photos are easy. I've been looking at their photos since childhood. I pick out one of Max and Mally's wedding day, another of the whole family by the seaside.

Next I go to the cupboard, then stop myself. Yet last night I hadn't hesitated. As soon as my grandparents flashed onto my screen, I ran to it without thinking and pulled out their death certificates to compare dates. But now, in the cold light of day, I can feel the old tightening of my stomach at the thought of unearthing it all. Do it fast, I tell myself. That's the only way.

I yank open the door and empty everything out. I'm looking for something in my uncle Ernst's papers that I know I once managed to read. My grandparents' last Red Cross message saying goodbye.

REACHING THROUGH THE WALLPAPER



Deutsches Rotes Kreuz
Präsidium / Auslandsdienst
Berlin SW 61, Blücherplatz 2

15. SEP. 1942 3963

ANTRAG
an die Agence Centrale des Prisonniers de Guerre, Genf
— Internationales Komitee vom Roten Kreuz —
auf Nachrichtenvermittlung

REQUÊTE
de la Croix-Rouge Allemande, Présidence, Service Etranger
à l'Agence Centrale des Prisonniers de Guerre, Genève
— Comité International de la Croix-Rouge —
concernant la correspondance

1. Absender *Max J. Rychwalski, Berlin Wilm.*
Expéditeur *Sachsische Str. 27*
bittet, an
prie de bien vouloir faire parvenir à

2. Empfänger *Ernst M. Rychwalski*
Destinataire *Tel-Aviv (Palästina)*
BenJehuda Road. 24
folgendes zu übermitteln / ce qui suit:

(Höchstzahl 25 Worte!)
(25 mots au plus!) *Vor Abreise recht innige Grösse Küsse.*
Sind gesund, hoffen von Dir dasselbe. Benachrichtige
Schwester. Marie vorher abgereist. Hoffen
später Wiedersehensmöglichkeit.
Dir Verwandten Alles Gute

Eltern

(Datum / date) *22. August 1942*
3. Empfänger antwortet umseitig
Destinataire répond au verso

(Unterschrift / Signature)
Max J. Rychwalski
Eltern.

‘Before departure fondest greetings kisses. Are well, hope you too,’ Max wrote in clear, modern lettering shortly before they were shipped off to the city the Führer ‘gave’ the Jews, as a notorious 1944 propaganda film referred to Theresienstadt. ‘Tell sisters. Marie left earlier. Hope possible meet again. Best wishes to you, relatives. Parents.’ Twenty-five words exactly, the maximum allowed by the Red Cross.

‘Are well . . . Marie left earlier . . .’, as if they were about to join Max’s sister Marie on holiday. The Nazi Government had told them veterans of the Great War and the privileged

THE MEMORY KEEPER

elderly would continue living normal lives, breathing fresh air, playing cards, listening to music and dancing. They all wanted to believe this final lie. So they packed their best clothes and best shoes, bought train tickets as instructed and waited to be collected.

This is a first for me. I've dived into the cupboard's darkest corners, pored over the bleakest piece of paper and not been overwhelmed. Because at last I've got someone to share it with. An unknown couple in Berlin have seen fit to commemorate my grandparents. Am I simply to send information and leave it there? No, that won't do at all. Now that I've finally started moving, I can't stop. I shall have to send me.

I arrange a date to meet Herr Knoll and book a flight to Berlin.

* * *

A few weeks later, on a bright morning in January 2006, watching clouds cast shadows on a snow-capped forest far below, I think back to the light summer nights of childhood as, wide awake, I stared at the pink roses, green leaves and gold stems of my bedroom wallpaper. I would listen to our neighbour mow his lawn, my mother clatter saucepans in the kitchen, my father sing the *Pearl Fishers* duet with Jussi Björling or laugh as he poured drinks for friends. Life was continuing downstairs without me, so this was my time to get to know Max and Mally, and for them to get to know me.

Max I imagined as the God we learned about at school but who had no place in our home. The problem was, if he was all-seeing and all-powerful, he might see into my mind

REACHING THROUGH THE WALLPAPER

and know my every thought. That made me uncomfortable, especially as my mother had told me Max was stern and a stickler for tidiness. He was bound to disapprove of something. Had I left my knickers on the floor? I sat up and checked. No, the floor was clear.

Anyway, tidy or not, he'd love me if he could only know me, wouldn't he? After all, I was his only grandchild. And Mally looked like a cuddly sort of grandmother with a lap you could settle in.

I half shut my eyes till the wallpaper quivered. With just the right gap between upper and lower lids, if I peeped through my eyelashes, I could imagine the rose buds opening and the stems beginning to sprout tendrils that snaked down to the living room to draw my grandparents out of their shoebox and pull them back upstairs.

At first, I heard distant muttering in German and a cough from my grandfather. Some hesitation behind the roses. Finally the stems parted, they squeezed themselves into my room and looked around. I willed Max to hold out those large hands and sweep me up so I could stroke his beard. I imagined sinking into Mally's softness and kissing her round face. Again and again I reached out to them, but my fingers always closed on emptiness. Eventually, sadly, my grandparents would melt back through the roses and drift down to their shoebox.

* * *

This same January in 2006 the NASA spacecraft *Stardust* shoots a capsule back to earth to land in the desert of Utah. It is the end of a seven-year mission to collect particles from

THE MEMORY KEEPER

the tail of a comet. Analysis of the dust is about to challenge current scientific theories about the beginnings of the solar system – that comets were formed in its icy outer reaches – by revealing minerals that could only have been produced at its centre by the intense heat of the sun. A hot, turbulent whole, the scientists will conclude, had suddenly fragmented and been hurled out into space to form smaller, frozen bodies.

As the plane lands at Tegel Airport I am still unaware of *Stardust's* mission, its collecting probe like a giant tennis racquet at the end of an outstretched arm sweeping through space to trap comet dust. All I know is my own world has shifted. For the first time ever, I have reached into icy nothingness and found my hand seized in a warm grasp.