

Wortzähler: 14601

**And I want to turn all illness away from you**

Eva Mesin

Eliza curled her fingers in annoyance. She was in pain and it wouldn't go away, even when she tried to ignore it. They were always there and no painkiller in the world could help her. Her hands resembled the claws of birds of prey and she struggled to grasp objects and hold them properly. On days like this, she just wanted to crawl into bed and lie there until the evening, until her husband came home and she could take her frustration out on him. He endured this with stoic patience and let her moan and rant and even understood the hatred she had for God and the world.

Sighing, she put the secateurs down on the steps of the patio where she had been pruning the roses and stood up with difficulty. Her limbs felt sore and it took her a moment to straighten them. Her muscles were stiff and she could only move very slowly until they were ready to carry her again. She cursed softly. Since the last push, she felt that her movements were becoming more and more erratic and wooden. Either it got better with time or damage remained. It was always a game of chance. Yes, she could be lucky or she had to give up another freedom and accept that some things could not be reversed.

„Mathilda!“ she shouted irritably. Then she took a deep breath.

„Mattie, could you come here for a minute?“ she tried with a less abrupt tone. A moment later, her daughter came through the patio door from the living room.

„Yes, Mum?“.

Eliza sighed and pointed to the floor in front of her.

„Could you hand me the secateurs, please? I'm afraid if I bend down one more time, I'll be frozen in this position for the rest of my life.“

Mattie nimbly picked up the shears and handed them to her.

„Thank you my darling.“.

„Mum, can we still go to the playground today?“.

Mattie had only turned eleven in October, but she hadn't yet shed her childish disposition.

Eliza rolled her eyes in annoyance.

„Do you have to do that? Aren't you already too big for that?“.

Mattie looked at her longingly out of big, dark eyes.

„Oh, please mum! Today is such a beautiful day and I'm just sitting here all the time playing on my mobile phone. My friends are far away and I'm bored!“.

„When I was your age...“.

„Yes, yes, I know, there was no internet then, there were no mobile phones, you could still keep yourself busy. But now I'd rather go to the playground and I don't dare go alone.“.

That was also typical of her daughter. She was still very dependent for her age and even if Mattie had dared to go to the playground unaccompanied, Eliza wouldn't have had a good feeling about it. How often did she still have to remind her daughter

to look left and right when they crossed the road? Her head was simply too much in the clouds and she didn't pay attention to these things. So it was out of the question to let Mattie go off on her own. But she didn't really want to spend the next hour or two in the playground watching her daughter on the swings either.

„Mum, please!“.

Eliza was too tired to get involved in a discussion and perhaps it would even do her good to sit in the sun and top up on vitamin D. It was supposed to be the miracle cure for her illness. It was supposed to be the miracle cure for her illness.

„All right, I'll just freshen up and then we can go to the playground, if you like. But only for an hour, do you hear?“.

Mattie jumped excitedly from one foot to the other.

„Of course, I'll change quickly!“ she said and ran into her room.

„But please wear trousers if you want to swing, I don't want anyone to see your knickers, okay?“ Eliza called after her tiredly. Sighing, she set her aching bones in motion and went into the bedroom, where she opened the wardrobe door. She took out a pink T-shirt and black leggings. After stripping off her sweaty and soil-stained clothes, she put on the T-shirt first and began to pull on her leggings, exasperated.

She sat down on the bed and set about the painstaking procedure. She had no problems with her right foot, it could be lifted and bent and she found her way into her right trouser leg straight away. On the left, however, her movement was restricted and she had to contort herself on the bed until she had slipped the leggings over her left leg. Oh, how angry it made her that she was barely 38 years old and already so limited by her illness. In addition to the bending restriction in her left leg, she also had a lifting weakness in both feet and climbing stairs became a torture. Nevertheless, she tried to remain optimistic and be grateful that she was not yet in a wheelchair. The prognosis was good that it would stay that way for a while and if she was lucky, this cursed disease would not bring her to her knees.

But it was just as possible that her illness would take a form that would only worsen and one day leave her with a disability that she could no longer easily cover up.

She felt too young for such rubbish! Again she quarrelled with God and fate. She had not had it easy in her life, she came from a strict, fundamentalist home and until her marriage she had had to put up with her manipulative, scheming mother, who took away every kind of freedom that other people had taken for granted.

No sooner had she built her own life and enjoyed the self-determination that came with moving out of her parental home and no longer being dependent on her mother than fate struck again mercilessly. It began with the fact that one day, even within minutes, she saw differently in her right eye than in her left. Somehow the colours were suddenly brighter, like laundry that had been faded from too much washing. She had never been a fan of going to the doctor and so she waited, as she didn't

have any major complaints at first. But then a grey haze gradually covered her vision until she could only see with one eye as if through a thick fog.

That was the moment when her husband could no longer remain silent and persuaded her to go to an eye clinic. They immediately kept her there and prescribed her intravenous cortisone shock therapy, which she tolerated very badly. But it was the only way to save her sight, as the doctors had told her. At the same time, further examinations were ordered and she even had to undergo the hated MRI, which she had been terrified of. In the end, the tube turned out to be half as bad as she had feared and she even ended up admiring her own courage, which had enabled her to lie still in the noisy machine for almost an hour and a half. A few days later, after she had already returned home and was able to see well again in her right eye with a minor impairment, she received the diagnosis: multiple sclerosis. She took the news in her stride, because apart from the optic neuritis, because that was what she had been suffering from, she had not had any major limitations up to that point. In addition, the doctors had already prepared her for the fact that her symptoms were due to an autoimmune disease before the final diagnosis. Four foci of inflammation had been found in her brain and one of these lesions had led to the flare-up that had finally revealed her illness.

She had spent the first few days reading about the disease on the internet and decided that she would fight it by eating right and living a healthier lifestyle. Medication was out of the question for her, as it had side effects that could not be healthy in the long term. However, her optimism began to waver the more she had to deal with her illness. On a walk with her family, they passed a young woman who had just been lifted out of the car into her wheelchair, and she saw her husband look down at the ground in dismay. He later explained his reaction to her insistent question by saying that the young woman was his colleague, who also had MS and had not been able to walk since her last attack. After this experience, Eliza fell into a deep depression. She hated herself for being obnoxious to her husband and especially to Mattie, rejecting anyone who tried to distract her from her self-pity. She didn't want distractions, she wanted to lick her wounds in peace and slowly come to terms with the idea of one day being severely disabled. On some days, she laughed in the face of fate and resolved to be full of zest for life and plans one day, even in a wheelchair. On other days, she imagined how she would take her own life if her quality of life became too limited. She was still in the phase of changing emotions and it was a burden to her that she couldn't forget the illness for five minutes because she was constantly reminded of it. Be it through her diet, which had to be anti-inflammatory and as free of animal products as possible, or through the pain that ran through her limbs, stabbing and throbbing, as soon as she exerted herself physically. How was she ever going to come to terms with this and get on with her life as normal? Sig-



hing, she stood up and examined herself in the mirror. She still looked very good, had a good figure and an attractive face and she was also educated and clever. She could admit this without overestimating herself. But even this was to be impaired as the disease progressed and her cognitive abilities declined as the MS progressed. This was what she was most afraid of, as her intelligence and knowledge were something she had previously been very proud of. But this side of the disease was now gradually making itself felt, because on some days she had trouble finding words, she found it harder to think and she had difficulty making connections between two things. She imagined how her knowledge was stored in different blocks and she had to connect these blocks together like Lego bricks, and on bad days she couldn't manage to build these bridges.

She was brought up as a Christian and came from an evangelical home and now she hated God, with whom she had struggled all her life. How could a God who supposedly loved his children like a father hand them over to such horrible diseases? And to hell with the argument that God was testing his own and that illnesses were a consequence of original sin. Anger flared up inside her at the thought and she sent some ugly curses towards the heavens, which she hoped Mattie didn't hear.

At last she was done, both with getting dressed and with her tantrum. Tired and listless, she called her daughter. She came running up cheerfully and together they made their way to the playground, which fortunately was only a few meters behind their house. It was a small and dreary place, consisting only of two swings, a slide and a traffic circle, but Mattie was very happy with it and immediately took one of the swings. Eliza sighed. Her daughter could spend hours swinging and daydreaming. She settled down on a bench and dug her smartphone out of her pocket. She opened her Facebook profile and scrolled boredly through the latest messages from her friends and the groups she had subscribed to. She had mainly joined cooking pages, but for the past few weeks she had also been a member of various MS groups, which made her grimace. As always, the posts were about the desperate first postings of newcomers who had just received their diagnosis and which drug had the least side effects. Eliza had long gone through these questions and scrolled bored through the posts. Then she preferred to look at the blurred food pictures. Some of the dishes were so lovelessly slapped onto the plate and looked so unappetizing that even that didn't bring her any joy. It was hot and the sun was beating down on her head with full force. Her vision blurred and she saw through her right eye again as if through a veil. This didn't shock her any further, as they knew by now that heat could trigger a kind of pseudo-shock in her. Signals were transmitted more slowly by the nerves in heat, even in healthy people, and in MS sufferers there was also damage to the nerve cords, which could revive an old attack. However, this usually only lasted until the body had cooled down again.

Screw it, she thought. She had always been a sun worshipper and she wouldn't let this illness spoil her enjoyment of the sun or the sauna, which she still visited regularly.

She leaned her head back, closed her eyes and turned her face defiantly towards the warm rays of the sun. Today was a day on which she was once again ready to declare war on fate. She stayed like that for a while and fell into a sleepy, enraptured state. The rhythmic squeaking of Mattie's swing lulled her to sleep and for a moment she drifted off. Then she heard a noise that startled her and made her open her eyes. A mother pushing a buggy with a little boy had entered the playground. Next to her walked a girl, about Mattie's age but of a stronger build than her daughter. Waist-length light blonde hair bounced up and down in a narrow plait.

The woman and the girl were both wearing long dresses and Eliza rolled her eyes inwardly. The town where she lived was also home to members of a fundamentalist sect. Characteristic of the women who belonged to this Christian congregation were the long dresses and skirts and long hair, which they were not allowed to cut or dye. What an irony, Eliza had fled her fundamentalist home and wanted nothing more to do with God, and she and her husband and daughter had chosen the very spot on earth where these people were up to mischief. Unfortunately, they only found out about this when they bought their house four years ago. Moving again was therefore out of the question. So she and her husband made jokes as soon as they saw one of the parishioners and did their best to avoid these people.

Everything in Eliza immediately tightened and she straightened up with a jerk. The young woman, who had put her red hair up in a loose bun, smiled kindly at her.

Eliza decided to be on her best behavior and she nodded a greeting to the woman. That was all she wanted to do with these God-fearing people. The woman's daughter jumped up to the swing frame and started swinging next to Mattie. In no time at all, the two girls struck up a conversation as they soared side by side into the air, accompanied by their animated conversation and laughter.

Great, thought Eliza. Couldn't Mattie make friends with one of the neighbor girls who were „normal“? She found them hard to get along with, but a cult kid like that took to her straight away. She didn't know whether she should stop it straight away or wait and see. After all, they were just two girls in the playground having fun together. Nothing more. When they went home, everything would be forgotten and Mattie would probably never have anything to do with the girl again.

„Hello.“ The woman pushed the buggy towards her and sat down next to her on the bench.

Eliza tried in vain to make herself as small and inconspicuous as possible so as not to have to start a conversation with the woman. In vain.

„Is this your daughter?“ the woman asked kindly.

What a superfluous question. Eliza nodded indignantly.

„She’s very pretty.“. The woman smiled kindly at her.

Eliza gave herself a jerk and smiled back, but then quickly averted her eyes.

„Are you here often?“.

„Yes, when time permits.“.

„We just moved here recently. My name is Kathy, by the way.“.

„Eilza, nice to meet you.“. She refrained from shaking the woman’s hand.

„And this is Freddy.“ The woman pointed to the little blond boy who was dozing off. „And my daughter’s name is Mary.“

„The cheeky little fruit that’s making the traffic circle smoke is Mattie.“ Eliza pointed her head in the direction of her daughter.

They sat side by side for a while and were silent, which was fine with Eliza, because she secretly feared that the young woman was only making contact with her to engage her in a conversation about God. She knew the scam, after all, her parents had also been proselytizing all those years when she had lived with them. Always on the lookout for new members for the church. „Do you live near here?“

She nodded. „Just behind the playground in the cross street.“

„Have you lived here long?“.

Eliza shook her head.

„Only for a few years.“.

„It’s such a lovely place, isn’t it?“.

The woman just wouldn’t give up. Eliza had no interest in continuing the conversation.

„It’s fine,“ she replied curtly.

„Does that hurt?“. Kathy glanced at Eliza’s finger. She hadn’t even noticed how cramped she was holding her hands. Of course she was in pain again, but it was already so much a part of her life that she could almost forget about it. Almost. Now she was angry, because she didn’t want to show any weakness in front of this woman.

„No, it’s all right.“.

She sat up and loosened her muscles. A sharp pain shot through her back and she groaned.

„Medication doesn’t help, does it?“. Kathy looked at her sympathetically.

What could she say to that without being unkind and rude?

„I was in a lot of pain a while ago, too, and no doctor could help me. Then I found a way to get well again.“

„Let me guess, you found God and the pain was blown away.“. Eliza’s voice dripped with mockery. „I know you don’t want to believe me, but that’s what happened. Here, I even have a picture of myself, this is what I looked like a while ago.“.

Kathy took out her cell phone and scrolled around for a while until she apparently found the photo she wanted to show Eliza.

She held her cell phone out to Eliza. Reluctantly, she glanced at the display. It showed Kathy sitting in a wheelchair. „At some point, I couldn't hold myself upright because of the pain and I couldn't walk. That was shortly after Freddy was born and no doctor I've seen has been able to find a reason for my illness.“

„Then you moved here, became a member of our local sect and suddenly you were jumping around like a young deer again.“

Eliza sighed, bored.

Kathy smiled mildly at her.

„No, it's not a cult. They're wonderful people who took me and my family in straight away and taught us God's word. We got to know Father Christian. He is a true man of God.“ Kathy's blue eyes took on a dreamy and enraptured expression.

„He can perform true miracles, God's power flows through his veins and his spirit. He is God's servant here on earth.“. She closed her eyes, her chest rising and falling faster. Then she took a deep breath and looked at Eliza.

„He healed me and he can heal you too.“.

„Okay, that's enough now! Mattie, come on, let's go.“. Eliza stood up, taking several attempts before her legs were ready to carry her.

Kathy put her hand on her arm.

„Please, I didn't mean to insult or hassle you. I just want to help you.“. She looked up at Eliza pleadingly.

„If you are willing to open up, our meeting is tonight at seven. You are welcome to come along without obligation, you won't be forced or persuaded to do anything, just let God's love work on you, he will help you!“.

Eliza had to pull herself together not to shake Kathy's hand off in disgust.

„I know you mean well, but please leave me alone! I've had enough experience with your god and the best thing that could have happened to me was to turn my back on him.“ She turned back to her daughter.

„Mattie, come on, we want to go home!“.

After dinner, her husband retreated to his study to finish some tasks for his work and Mattie sat down on the living room couch with her tablet and chatted with her friend.

Eliza cleared the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. She went over the afternoon's experiences in her head. The woman, this Kathy, had actually been quite nice and she almost felt guilty for being so harsh towards her. But she didn't want to have anything to do with evangelical Christians again for the world. She disliked them because of their complacency. They believed that they lived the only true faith and regarded all other religions as unworthy and false. They believed in a Creator

who preached love and wanted to be seen as a loving father by his children, but sent them to eternal damnation and hell, where they would suffer torment for all eternity if they did not pay him the tribute he expected from them. What loving father behaved like this? And how could such a deity call himself the God of love? This God from that harmful book, the Bible, disgusted her and she would rather burn in hell forever than ascend to his heaven. Assuming he really existed, and she hoped and prayed to all the other powers in the universe that this was not the case.

She dropped a spoon as she was about to put it in the cutlery basket of the dishwasher. She bent down and something struck her as odd. In her right eye, she felt as if a veil had covered her vision. She closed her left eye and looked at the tiles beneath her feet. They had been laid in a colorful oriental pattern, just the way she liked it. Normally the colors were bright and colorful, but when she looked at them through her right eye, the colors suddenly seemed washed out, somehow faded, much lighter than she perceived them with the other eye. Startled, she straightened up. This was how the optic neuritis had started when she had had her first attack. Back then, the flare-up had resulted in five days in hospital and high doses of cortisone via an infusion, combined with an MRI and other unpleasant examinations.

That couldn't happen again now! She wouldn't be able to bear having to go back to hospital and having this devilish stuff forced through her veins! Tears welled up in her eyes. „No, please don't!“ she whispered. Who was she actually praying to? She didn't want to believe in God, in a God who only loved those who praised him and sent everyone else to damnation. Involuntarily, the image of Kathy popped into her head, who had been in a wheelchair a while ago and seemed to be healthy again. What if there was something to what she had said?

No, that was nonsense! There was no such thing as miracles. She stroked her eyes and tried to calm down, to breathe more calmly, not to panic. She squinted and opened her eyes again. But she couldn't ignore it, a gray haze was slowly creeping into her field of vision. She wanted to go to her husband and talk to him about what she should do now. She didn't feel mentally fit to lie in hospital for days on end again and be at the mercy of the doctors and nurses. She had had too many bad experiences and had no trust in medicine or, even more so, in the doctors. Her last hospital stay had shown once again that she was only interesting as long as she was a paying patient, as soon as she walked through the hospital door she could collapse dead at the hospital gates and no one would care. She couldn't go back there.

What was she going to do? She looked at the clock. It was just after six. A completely crazy thought flashed through her mind. What if God did exist and he would help her too? Would he forgive her for turning her back on him and hating and cursing him?

That was crazy! It couldn't be that she would buckle so quickly and forget her years of hatred for the Creator of the Bible and run to him as soon as her life went down the drain. But what if there was also mercy for her? Should she try?

„You owe me one!“ she said to the heavens, shouted to her husband that she had to leave quickly, grabbed her car keys and rushed headlong out the door.

The town hall was a low, two-storey, plain and simple building. It resembled a country house and looked more like a hostel for tourists than a meeting place for Christians. That was probably part of its function. She could well imagine that guests from other churches passing through would find accommodation here for a few days. She remembered from her childhood the travelers who had been hosted by her parents and who, on certain occasions, visited the church where her parents and she were active members. She shuddered at the thought of going back into the clutches of an evangelical church, if only driven by her despair. She decided to take a quick look and turn back immediately if anything seemed strange. At the same time, she also remembered the good moments from that time when she still went to church. The gatherings, the family get-togethers, the celebrations they had prepared together. In those moments, you could forget how hypocritical this world was, how much contempt for humanity prevailed behind the friendly posturing and expressions of love from the parishioners. As a child, she was not yet aware of this and was happy about the friendship with the other children, the Bible lessons with the nice man who answered her questions and the get-togethers with songs and prayers. Only later, when she grew up, did she realize what a fear had brought the people together: the fear of punishment and retribution from a vengeful God. That and the contempt they had for those who thought differently united them as a tight-knit group, from which Eliza grew more and more distant as she grew older.

Now she was once again standing outside the doors of a place of worship that she secretly loathed, driven by curiosity and the desire to find a way to get well. She shook with disgust, at the church and at herself. In her anger and grief, she was again ready to betray everything she was convinced of. This congregation stood for everything she rejected. She turned and wanted to run back to the car, get in and drive home to her husband and Mattie. She would be able to deal with this illness without divine miracles, she didn't need a lying deity to do it.

At that moment, a pain ran through her limbs that made her howl. Like knives that made their bloody way into her muscles and were turned over several times.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she curled up, clutching her arms.

„Are you alright?“. Eliza blinked and through a veil of tears she recognized Kathy leaning over her, her arm around her shoulders.

She sniffled, wiped her eyes and straightened up again.

„Yes, everything's fine. I'm just not feeling well, I think it's better if I go back home.“. She turned to leave, but Kathy gently held her back by the arm.

„Oh, please. You've made it this far, now it's only a few more steps until you're free of your suffering. Please, stay, come inside, the prayer session is about to start.“.

Eliza looked into Kathy's blue eyes, which pleadingly searched hers.

„Please, trust me, you won't regret it.“.

She sighed devotedly.

„All right, but only because you've been so nice to me so far and I've behaved really ugly towards you. But as soon as it gets too much for me, I'm leaving!“.

Kathy smiled warmly at her.

„Of course, no one is forcing you to stay. It's all completely voluntary.“.

I disagree, thought Eliza, but she remained silent. She followed Kathy into the rectangular building, where the other members of the congregation had already gathered.

They looked at her kindly and nodded happily. It was hard to feel uncomfortable, because the people here seemed to welcome you into their midst with open arms. No suspicious looks, no blatant curiosity, just friendliness and the blissful smiles of enlightened people who were looking forward to welcoming a new member into their community. Nevertheless, Eliza's stomach tightened uncomfortably. She knew it all too well. In her congregation, too, newcomers were welcomed with joy, but the hard part usually came later.

After crossing the reception room and the corridor, they stepped through a double door into a large, brightly lit room.

Chairs made of smooth, light-colored wood stretched out in several rows in a semicircle around a pedestal, behind which a man-sized cross, also made of light-colored wood, had been placed.

Some were already sitting expectantly in the rows of seats, looking benevolently at Eliza and her companions as they stepped through the double doors. Eliza lowered her eyes, uncomfortable with attracting so much attention, and made her way to one of the chairs in the back row.

„No, not there.“. Kathy took her gently by the arm and led her past the row of chairs to the very front.

„No, I don't want to sit there!“.

Eliza tore herself away, already regretting that she had come here at all.

„Please, don't be afraid, nothing bad will happen to you here. But those who need help should sit very close to God's servant, our father Christian, so that he can pray for you.“

Eliza shook her head and wanted to run away, but at that moment a tall man appeared next to her, stepping out of an adjoining room.

„Is everything all right?“ he asked in a mild voice.

Eliza looked at him and couldn't get a word out. The man's height and straight posture were intimidating at first glance, the short white hair combed back gave the angular face a stern appearance, but his gaze captivated her. Deep black eyes bore into hers with such intensity that she could only stare at him silently, unable to move. The man turned to Eliza's companion.

„Sister Kathy, could you stand by our new sister and be there for her during my sermon? If she feels unwell, please give me a sign immediately.“ He turned back to Eliza. „We want you to feel good and safe in the house of the Lord and to be filled with his grace, just like all our parishioners. If you are not feeling well, I will be there immediately to catch you with God's strength.“ He smiled at her with loving gentleness and Eliza relaxed a little.

Then he turned and strode to his chambers.

„Let us begin now,“ he raised his strong, melodious voice. „Brothers and sisters, please rise! Let us praise the Lord with a song followed by prayer!“

The men and women of the congregation immediately rose to their feet and joined in a song that obviously did not need to be announced in advance. Like robots running a memorized program, Eliza thought mockingly, but the melody, with its power and performed by dozens of voices, still swept her away. The song began like most well-known church hymns, but swelled with a power that sent the men and women into ecstasy. Even Eliza could not escape its effect. The hymn now resounded like an incantation, a prayer to an entity that had nothing to do with the Christian God she knew. She did not recognize the words, she did not understand what it was about, she was unable to comprehend what was going on around her. She barely noticed how her heartbeat and breathing accelerated. She was caught up in a maelstrom of sounds and waves that ran through her body. Dizziness seized her, everything spun around her. Heat rose in her body, making her face and chest flush. She felt short of breath and panicked because she could no longer inhale properly. Nevertheless, she stood rooted to the spot and was unable to break free from the spell the melody cast over her. Just as she feared she was losing her senses, the singing died down and stopped abruptly. Eliza blinked in confusion. As if awakened from a nightmare, she looked around, expecting to find herself in the middle of Dante's Inferno, dragged down to the deepest levels of hell by the strange music. She was all the more surprised to see the men and women of the congregation sitting demurely and quietly in their chairs, as normal as at any other church service she had ever attended. She was the only one standing in the room and continued to look around in a daze.



Suddenly she doubled over in pain and gasped loudly for air. The pain came so suddenly that she couldn't control herself at first and groaned softly.

The pain shot through her limbs and she feared that her legs were about to give way under her and she would fall forward. Startled, she grabbed Kathy's arm, who caught her and supported her as she tried to regain her composure.

Brother Christian immediately interrupted the prayer he and his congregation had been saying together and turned his attention to her. With a worried face, he stepped down from his podium and approached her.

That's all I need, Eliza thought, but the pain in her body was so intense that she couldn't move. She even feared that if she tried to take a step, she would immediately fall lengthways.

Brother Christian was now standing in front of her, looking at her with genuine concern.

He bent down to her, so close that she could feel his hot breath on her cheek.

„What's wrong with you, sister, what can I help you with?“.

Despite her suffering, she laughed bitterly.

„I'm afraid, brother, you can't help me with that,“ she said with difficulty between lips pinched together in pain.

He smiled mildly again and gently placed both hands on her shoulders.

„I may not be able to, but the Lord will deliver you from your suffering,“ he said softly and gently.

Then he raised his eyes to the ceiling and began to pray in a loud and powerful voice. „Lord, we have gathered here today to pray for the healing of our sister who has responded to your call and joined us on this day. We humbly beseech You to hear our prayers and send Your mercy to this woman. Take away her pain and heal her from her suffering. For as it is written in your holy book of James: ‚If anyone among you is sick, let him call for the elders of the church to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will help the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has sinned, he will be forgiven.‘“ He bowed his head and looked Eliza in the eye with such intensity that she threatened to fall to her knees before him. His gaze spoke power, but also a fire that threatened to consume her alive.

„Now free yourself from your sins, sister, plead with me for forgiveness and the Lord will come upon you with his grace and take away your torment. Are you ready for that?“

Eliza wanted to rebel, to protest out of habit and turn against this man's faith, but his gaze bore into her thoughts with an almost physical force, penetrating her and for a brief moment she had the impression that he was raping her soul with his spirit.

Full of fear and intimidated, she could only nod, sensing that any resistance was pointless from that moment on.

„Then so be it,“ he spoke softly and stroked her face with one hand.

A lightness came over her so suddenly that she staggered forward. As if her head suddenly became completely empty and floated several meters above her body. Strong but gentle hands caught her and she sank into Brother Christian's arms. A scent of sandalwood enveloped her and she surrendered to the feeling of complete weightlessness.

It took her a while to realize that it wasn't just her head that had been taken over by this lightness, but her whole body. The pain withdrew from her limbs and seemed to fizzle out into nothingness. The dizziness subsided and what remained was a feeling of warmth and relief that spread from the center of her body to her entire body.

She straightened up and was no longer dependent on Brother Christian's help.

„I don't feel any more pain...“ she mumbled dazedly.

She blinked.

„And I can see properly again!“ she realized in amazement. „There's no more veil...“.

Brother Christian smiled that mild smile again, which was both captivating and intimidating at the same time.

„And Jesus said to him: ‚Go, your faith has helped you. And immediately he received his sight and followed him on his way,‘“ he said to her quietly. Then he turned to the congregation and raised his voice:

„Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received it for free, give it for free“.

„Hallelujah!“ shouted the congregation and they rejoiced and praised their God.

Eliza hummed as she combed her hair. Her dark, half-length hair fell in shiny curls over her shoulders. She tucked the strands into a bun, sighing. It would be a while before the fashionable hairstyle grew out and she could wear her hair long again, as God had intended for women. She would just have to be patient. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and saw a radiant young woman with rosy cheeks and eyes shining with a lust for life. It had only been two weeks since she had attended Brother Christian's meeting, but since then she had been doing brilliantly. Her complaints had disappeared and had not returned for even a minute since. Out of gratitude and with newly awakened faith, she now attended the meeting of Bible-believing Christians every evening and rejoiced in a God with whom she had struggled all her life until her revival.

But now her faith had returned and became deeper and more unshakeable every time she saw Brother Christian perform miracles with God's help. Why his following

was not larger and why word of his miracles had not spread long ago could be explained by the fact that the members of the congregation were required to keep quiet. Brother Christian emphasized that those who were to find him would do so without him having to advertise his faith and the signs he worked. After all, Eliza had also found her way to him in her greatest need because the Lord had willed it so. Brother Christian refused to become a figurehead for God's work and to give the impression that he was getting rich from his deeds. This had convinced Eliza of his worth almost more than the healing she had experienced.

Today was also a special day. She had her six-monthly routine MRI scan and Brother Christian was convinced that God's miracle would also be visible on the images. Eliza still had doubts and she scolded herself inwardly for them. She still had to work on that, but it would be enough for her if the MRI didn't show any worsening of the inflammation. That alone would be a sign for her and she would be grateful for that.

Humming, she put the hairbrush away and took one last look in the mirror, then set off for the radiology department.

Three hours later, with light steps and indescribable joy in her heart, she stepped out of the elevator of the ten-storey building, the top floors of which housed her neurologist's practice and the associated radiology department.

„It's unbelievable, there must be a mistake.“. She still remembered the doctor's words as he compared her MRI images with previous scans.

„That can't be right, foci of inflammation don't just disappear like that,“ he mumbled to himself in disbelief.

„That's never happened before,“ said the assistant doctor, who was standing next to him and looking at the images with Eliza's doctor.

Eliza laughed to herself and after the two doctors had hesitantly confirmed that they could no longer detect any trace of her illness, she left the practice praising the Lord.

If ever she had needed confirmation that she was on the right path and that God was indeed working in her life through Father Christian, she had now experienced it. She prayed with joy and emotion, tears of gratitude streaming down her cheeks as she walked the distance home. She had five miles to walk, but the happiness that had taken possession of her would not have allowed her to sit on a bus and endure the journey in peace. She wanted to move, wanted to feel that she could no longer feel anything, that her legs were carrying her, that no pain was running through her limbs, that her spasms were no longer restricting her movements. She wanted to run, dance, announce to everyone that she was more limber than ever before in her life. To enjoy the energy of life flowing through her limbs and that she was alive and well.

She was going to evening mass tonight and she had decided to take Mattie with her. She was sure that her husband would be skeptical despite the miracle she would present to him, namely her newfound health. He would dismiss it as a placebo effect because she wanted to believe and her psyche contributed to a short-term feeling of well-being. And the MRI scans? Probably a mistake, she would have to do them again and then see that the disease was still there. He would hardly be convinced that God had performed a miracle on her through Father Christian. But Mattie was young and impressionable. Although that sounded terrible. No, it had to mean that she was still willing to be steered in the right direction, and she would do that from now on. Mattie was also going to let God into her life and experience and praise His glory. She could hardly wait to introduce her daughter to the new community and especially to Father Christian.

„No, mom, I don't want to go there!“. Mattie pouted and looked to her father for help.

Damien put his arm around his daughter.

„I don't mind you taking her either. It's fine if you're enthusiastic about your new faith, but don't drag Mattie into it!“

Eliza rolled her eyes.

„What harm could it do her to do something with her evening other than watch movies and play games on her iPad? Let her do something for her faith life too.“

„We agreed that we wouldn't influence her in any direction and that one day she would be free to decide what she wanted to believe in.“

„Well, she probably won't be able to decide if she doesn't learn about different directions.“

Damien shook his head.

„You may be right, but it doesn't have to be a sect that she has to have her first experience of religion with!“

Eliza looked at her husband indignantly.

„It's not a cult!“.

„Honey, look at you!“.

Damien looked her up and down.  
 „Since you joined that cult... sorry, since you started going to those Bible nights, you've changed! My once fashion-conscious wife now only wears baggy, long denim skirts, shapeless blouses and her hair in a bun. These people tell you how to act and dress! That's control over your life! You no longer have the opportunity to express your individuality the way you want!“

„If I don't have to suffer any more pain and get my health as a gift in return, then that's a very small sacrifice.“ Eliza snorted.

„But darling, don't you realize how small the women are being kept in this meeting? What's the name of that idiot whose teachings you have to live by? Who sees

women as a by-product of Adam and only sees you as the embodiment of sin and seduction? Braham?”.

„William Branham. And Brother Christian has revealed to us that we women have also been absolved of these sins through our confession to God and Jesus.“ „From sins invented by a supposed God. Jesus, who saves you from made-up sins!“. Damien’s voice dripped with mockery.

Eliza took a deep breath.

„Why don’t you come along, then you can see for yourself that this is by no means a sect, but a community that is there for each other. And Mattie would make friends with people her own age who would do her good. Not like the girls in her class, who are already running around with piercings and colorful hair and showing their belly buttons to half the world!“

„That’s enough now, Eliza! You can do what you want, but you’re leaving our daughter out of this! I won’t allow her to be brainwashed in the same way as you!“.

Eliza wanted to protest, but Damien cut her off with a forceful gesture.

„That’s my last word! Mattie stays here!“.

So she kept quiet and waited until her husband had left for his late shift at work.

„Mattie, get dressed!“ she ordered her daughter.

„But Mom, you know what Dad said!“ . Mattie’s eyes filled with tears.

Eliza was about to reply angrily, but then she changed her mind. She took Mattie in her arms and looked her in the eyes.

„My darling, your father doesn’t understand how good these people are and what an enrichment it is to have them in our lives. Just look at me. Your father doesn’t believe in miracles, but you were always by my side when I wasn’t feeling well and now look, I’m not in pain anymore, I can move again.“ She laughed and twirled her daughter around.

„And I can even dance and romp around with you, I’m finally enjoying life, I’m fine. I can be there for you again, just as you always wanted me to be!“ . She hugged her daughter.

„Wouldn’t you like to experience what it’s like to be free of all your worries?“.

Mattie looked at her doubtfully.

„Yes, but...“.

„Oh, darling, do me a favor and just come with me today. That’s all I want, just an evening of your time, where you can get to know the people who mean so much to me now! And you got on really well with Mary back then, she’ll be there too and I’m sure you can play together.“

Mattie looked unhappy, but shrugged her shoulders.

„Okay, Mom, if that’s what you want...“.

Eliza clapped her hands happily.

„It's going to be wonderful, I promise!“.

When they arrived at the parish hall, the members of the congregation were already streaming through the wide double doors into the hall, where Father Christian was already waiting for them.

Mattie had still needed all of Eliza's persuasion to reluctantly follow her mother. Damien would certainly be furious if he found out that she had taken Mattie against his will, but Eliza was prepared to make this sacrifice for God and Jesus. After all, her daughter's salvation was at stake and she was prepared to part with Damien if necessary. Father Christian had already told her that a mixed marriage between a believer and an unbeliever would not work in the long term and that God would forgive her if she separated from her husband. Until now, she had been reluctant to do so, but it increasingly seemed to be the only right way if she wanted to save Mattie's soul.

She pushed her daughter further forward, to the front row, even though Mattie told her she felt uncomfortable so close to the pulpit. But Eliza wanted Father Christian to see that she had brought her daughter with her. Maybe he would pray for Mattie before the meeting. She was convinced that if her daughter experienced his powerful charisma up close, it would be easier to convince her to follow the church's path.

The people took their seats and gradually silence returned to the hall as Father Christian stepped up to the pulpit.

Eliza held her breath. Something was different. The stern but kind expression on Father Christian's face had given way to anger and rage. His eyes flashed as he looked down at his congregation. The dark gazes blazed with a disturbing fire. All compassion had drained from his features, which were now furrowed by deep creases. Dark shadows had formed under Father Christian's eyes and he spoke to the congregation with a bitter edge to his lips.

„Sinners!“ it boomed loudly and thunderously from his mouth.

Eliza and those present flinched at the pastor's bellowing voice and involuntarily ducked their heads.

Father Christian embraced the entire congregation with a sweeping arm movement.

„You are all sinners!“ he shouted with fury.

„Look at you, you bastards, at whose feet I have thrown our master's precious pearls all these years! You have trampled on them, spreading your excrement over the master's words! Look at your wives!“ his piercing gaze, from which Rage spoke, looked at every single woman in the congregation.

„You all look like whores! You act like whores! You are whores! Eve brought sin upon mankind and nothing has changed to this day! Full of arrogance and pride you sit before me today and you have learned nothing!“.

Some of the parishioners sobbed out loud, the people were frozen and looked speechlessly at their pastor, unable to move.

„I have been preaching the Lord's grace to you for years and you are still living in sin!“. Saliva spurted from his mouth as he emphatically spouted the words to his congregation.

„The world is perishing because Eve wanted to be clever and successful! She allowed herself to be seduced by the serpent and conceived Cain with him, the first sinner in human history! And we are still living in this sin today because a woman could not control her sexual urges. It was the job of men to control women, but you are all too weak, you give in to your wives and let them rule over you. You are despicable!“.

Pale and trembling, the men continued to stare at him wordlessly. Some lowered their eyes in shame.

Eliza didn't understand what was going on. Father Christian was strict, but he was also kind and had so far distributed God's love and power among the members of the congregation, calling on them to stick together. He had an open ear for all the people in his congregation. What had happened? How could he be so full of hatred?

„You give your women their free will and they become more and more sinful, they turn away from you and God and plunge the world into ruin!“

Something stirred in Eliza. A feeling of indignation and anger spread through her. Suddenly she no longer understood how she had been able to submit to this community. She realized that, as a woman, she would only experience contempt and mistrust from Father Christian. All the good nature was just a farce; in his eyes, her gender would keep her trapped in the role of sinner forever. She grabbed Mattie's arms and wanted to leave the room with her.

„Sit down!“ it bellowed from the pulpit. She stood rooted to the spot and looked towards the exit in panic. She noticed that some of the members, the pastor's closest confidants, had lined up in front of the exit.

A terrible fear took hold of her. Apparently there was no escape. She thought feverishly about what she could do to save Mattie and herself from the church, but she saw no way.

She motioned for her daughter to sit down again and, her heart racing, she took her seat. She had to calm down and take the first opportunity to escape as soon as it presented itself. Until then, she had to keep a cool head, which proved difficult given the fury with which Father Christian was shouting at the congregation.

„Our Lord finally wants to judge the world, he can't stand sin any longer! He wants to punish sinners, but the dark forces of evil are preventing him from doing so!“ His voice dropped back to a normal volume and now took on the imploring tone that his congregation knew from him.

„God spoke to me last night in a dream when I saw the sins of women in the media again and despaired over so much wickedness and fornication! He spoke to me and gave me comfort, my dear children“. His words now became ingratiating, conspiratorial.

„He told me that your sins, even the sins of his enlightened children, rob him of the power to bring the world to its just punishment. He cannot save his church until you turn from your sins. But, my children, you can help him!“.

A murmur went through the congregation. The congregation hung spellbound on the preacher's lips.

But Eliza was no longer deterred. The whole situation was heading towards something that made her stomach shrink into an icy lump. She was afraid, afraid for Mattie, who was slumped over, crying silently and clinging to her mother's arm. Eliza patted her daughter's shoulder reassuringly, but she knew that nothing about this situation was normal anymore. She glanced into the hall again and saw that the pastor's confidants had also lined up at the windows of the hall. There was to be no escape, she thought. Something terrible is going to happen here and none of us should leave this room alive, she realized.

She wanted to pray for help, but to whom? Every spark of faith had gone out again and she was on her own.

The events of the Jonestown mass suicide immediately flashed through her mind. Will they also be forced to be poisoned? She wouldn't let them do that to Mattie, she had to find a solution to at least save her daughter!

She heard the rest of the pastor's words as if through a veil of mist.

„God has told me that you can all save yourselves, men and women alike, if you follow your calling. And your calling, my children...“. He paused meaningfully, looking all the members of the congregation in the eye.

„Your calling, my children, is to help God bring about the end of the world!“.

A cry went up through the congregation and Eliza thought the ground would open up beneath her and swallow her up. He's gone mad, she thought dazedly. „It is our task to open the gates of hell, my children, and summon the demons of the underworld to judge and devour the sinners!“.

Eliza feverishly searched the room with her eyes for an escape route.

She spotted a window that was not yet guarded by Father Christian's henchmen and stood half open. Too narrow for her, but Mattie would fit through. Eliza reached for her daughter. She sought Mattie's gaze and made a slight movement in the direc-



tion of the window. „When I say ‚run‘, you run to that window over there and try to squeeze through!“ she whispered hoarsely to her daughter.

She stood up and motioned for her daughter to do the same. Slowly, she started to move, but as soon as she had taken a few steps, she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder, clawing into her flesh and holding her down. One of Father Christian's followers was holding her.

„Now, Mattie, run!“ she shouted, and her daughter hesitated at first, but then took off running towards the unguarded window. Eliza tried to free herself from the steel grip of the man holding her, at the same time watching her daughter run to the window. Mattie had almost made it and although some of those gathered rushed after her to catch her, she was nimble and agile and skillfully dodged them.

She'll make it, Eliza thought hopefully, she'll be right by the window!

In fact, it seemed that Mattie had given the creditors the slip and was only half a meter away from the window when a tall, broad-shouldered man, whom Eliza knew as Peter and who was one of Father Christian's closest confidants, suddenly grabbed her and lifted her up as if she weighed nothing.

„No!“ cried Eliza, as Peter carried the wriggling and struggling Mattie to Father Christian. Eliza, for her part, was still desperately trying to free herself, but the man now had her in a chokehold and she had no way of escaping.

The pastor scowled at her, then turned back to the congregation.

„The woman has brought ruin upon us and it doesn't matter whether she acts as a child or as a grown woman, everything she does is doomed to ruin and death. Therefore, I urge you now to make the greatest sacrifice that God requires of you. Sacrifice your firstborn daughters in his name so that his will may be done and his purpose fulfilled! So that your daughters' lives have meaning in death and they can be washed clean of their original sins. This is the only way you can free your daughters whose souls belong to damnation! Now fulfill God's commandment and open the gates of hell with me, so that sinners will burn in hellfire forever and we will be saved!“.

To her horror, Eliza saw the blindness in the eyes of the congregation, how each and every one of them absorbed Father Christian's corrupt words and how they became the only truth that fell on fertile ground in the souls of the assembled people. The people seized their daughters, who, full of fear, begged their parents to let them go, but had no chance of escaping.

„Come! Come with me, I'll show you the way to salvation!“ cried Father Christian ecstatically.

Eliza pulled and kicked, but she was unable to free herself from the man's grip. She watched in horror as Mattie was also grabbed and dragged along with the maelstrom of people blindly following Father Christian, their faces blank as if they were under a spell.

„Mattie!“ she screamed, „I’m here darling, I’m going to set you free!“. Before she could say another word, the man holding her punched her in the face. She immediately tasted blood as her teeth dug into her lips from the blow. She could only watch helplessly as her daughter was pulled through the door that led to the back of the church. But it wasn’t long before she and her guard entered the room where Father Christian used to prepare his sermons. The priest stood in front of a wall while his parishioners squeezed into the narrow space, each eager to see what the father had promised to show them.

„You’ve probably wondered why we built our church here over 40 years ago,“ he raised his voice again.

Almost theatrically, he raised his arms and looked at his congregation.

„This place is sacred and it was God’s providence that I discovered it back then when I was looking for a new location for our church. God led me here to show me the entrance to hell. Once disguised as a former mine, which had been abandoned after serious accidents, I recognized its true calling. Here, my children, is one of the gates that I was to guard and keep sealed to this day. Here is the entrance to the realm of Satan and his demons!“.

A murmur of awe and astonishment went through the congregation. Father Christian turned to the brick wall behind him and reached for a particular brick that was at eye level with him.

Immediately, a previously invisible door in the brickwork opened. Eliza stared spellbound at the spectacle unfolding before her. She was still looking for a way to free herself and Mattie, but Father Christian’s words and actions had captivated her so much that she was momentarily distracted from her plan. What diabolical events were being set in motion here?

But there was no time to worry about it, she had to rescue Mattie from the clutches of these madmen. Again she tried desperately to free herself from the clutches of the man who held her upper body like an iron vice and held her tightly against him. Her efforts were in vain and sweat poured down her body from panic and the effort to escape the man.

Mattie stared over at her, pale as a corpse and with terror in her beautiful, big brown eyes. How she would have liked to say something comforting to her, to reassure her, but she was incapable of it.

Think, she admonished herself. Think, you learned that at some point, back then, in that self-defense course you took as a bored housewife. She almost laughed bitterly.

But her brain cleared and she gradually remembered the moves she had been taught. She was still sane enough to realize that the moment had not yet come to use her knowledge. She might be able to free herself from the guard’s grasp if she

did it right, but the moments of freedom would be brief before she was overpowered by the other members of the community. She bit her lips in disappointment until they bled again. As painful as it was, she had to wait and hope that the right moment would present itself. If that moment should come at all. At this point, she had no chance of helping Mattie, she had to hold out.

In the meantime, Father Christian had opened the door completely.

„Come, my children, and follow me! I will show you the glory of the Lord who will come upon us very soon!“.

And with that, he disappeared into the doorway. The congregation, who had fallen into a stunned stupor, broke out of their trance-like state and suddenly started moving. Everyone wanted to follow their preacher and they now rushed towards the door, their faces contorted in madness. A commotion broke out and the mass of deluded people forgot the commandment to love their neighbor, because everyone wanted to be the first to see Father Christian's secret. They bumped into each other and some older members of the congregation fell, but no one paid any attention to them. Instead, they trampled over them.

„Mattie!“ cried Eliza in a panic, afraid that her daughter might be hurt by the onslaught of lunatics. She immediately lost sight of her daughter in the crowd and was dragged along by her guard.

Behind the door, a steep staircase led down into the depths and Eliza was brutally dragged down by her guard. Still struggling and losing her footing, but held fast by the man's strong arms, she escaped certain death from a broken neck had she fallen headlong down the stairs. However, her body was bruised and she suffered bruises that made her cry out in pain.

The stairs were lit by light bulbs set into the wall every few meters. In front of Eliza and behind her, the parishioners, caught up in their fanaticism, pushed after their leader. She was afraid she wouldn't be able to breathe as she was surrounded on all sides by people pressing against her body. The stairs seemed to lead endlessly into the dark bowels of the earth and after an eternity of being trapped between the pushing and shoving mass of bodies, Eliza finally arrived at the bottom of the stairs. Here the room opened up into a vast vault and although they had advanced many meters into the depths of the earth, Eliza could finally breathe again. Her guard dragged her to one side of the room, where she came to a dazed halt in his arms, trembling and gasping for breath with a racing heart. Her consciousness returned abruptly when she caught sight of Mattie in the tangle of people on the other side of the vault.

„Mattie!“ she cried hoarsely and powerlessly. Her daughter was also being held, she had a wound on her cheek from which blood was dripping, but otherwise she seemed unharmed. She raised her eyes and looked directly at Eliza. There was so

much horror and fear in Mattie's eyes that it broke Eliza's heart. How could she help her daughter? She didn't stand a chance against this crowd of fanatics who would crush her immediately if she managed to free herself. Tears of rage and despair streamed down her face. Everything was so hopeless. And if she hadn't insisted that Mattie accompany her, she wouldn't be in this situation now. How could she have let herself be so blinded?

„My children, come to rest now!“ Father Christian raised his voice again when the members of his congregation had gathered in the vault. The size of the room made room for everyone and they looked expectantly at their leader. Since she couldn't do anything at the moment, Eliza took the time to look around.

The ceiling of the vault was very high and the ribs that supported the ceiling branched out in a star shape above their heads. Despite the remarkable architecture, Eliza had the feeling of being in a crypt. The musty, foul-smelling odor that carried with it the days of countless eons made her gag. This tomb was old, very old, and it exuded something evil and sinister. Eliza turned her gaze to Father Christian and only now did she become aware of the structure behind the priest.

Behind him was a relief carved in stone and Eliza's eyes widened as she took a closer look at the stone sculpture and realized what an abomination loomed before her eyes. A monster staring out of hundreds of blind eyes, its face distorted by several fanged, slavering mouths, glared maliciously at her. Like demons from hell that had merged into a single, vile monster, petrified in one movement, as if they were about to pounce and devour the people in front of them with their countless fangs. Dozens of clawed tentacles grew from the pockmarked back, each holding a damned soul that tried to free itself from the claws in pain and faces contorted in agony as the monster crushed and miserably destroyed them.

Eliza shuddered at the sight and bile rose up her throat. She averted her eyes, the face of this devil was too horrible. „This, my children, is the power that will rise today to fulfill God's plan of destruction!“ Father Christian's voice rang out like a menacing thunder that filled all the senses.

„God has commanded me to open the gate and finally unleash Beelzebub so that mankind will receive its punishment! We have been chosen to rule over the survivors in the millennial kingdom after the apocalypse! So help me now to put God's plan into practice!“.

He looked down at his congregation, looked each individual in the eye.

„Bring me your first-born daughters, the sinful and corrupt souls of the feminine, bring them to me now!“.

Unrest arose among the members of the congregation. But every protest was nipped in the bud and the weeping and pleas of the girls, who were grabbed by their parents and brought to Father Christian at the front, rang out unheard.

„No!“ cried Eliza when she saw that Mattie was also being dragged to the priest by her guard.

In front of Father Christian now stood half a dozen young girls, still children but already on their way to becoming young women, just like Mattie. She realized that Kathy's daughter Mary was also among the girls.

The priest scowled down at them.

„So young, so sinful! Like Eve, who allowed herself to be seduced by Satan and thus brought destruction upon mankind. Your sacrifice shall now finally wipe away this guilt!“. With that, he stepped back from the relief and instructed his guards to line up the girls in front of the statue.

His congregation watched, spellbound and captivated, as he began a strange chant. They held their breath and listened to their leader. The strange song began softly and swelled more and more into an obscene melody. Eliza felt her hairs stand on end, so shocked was she by the grotesque psalm that Father Christian sang to the relief. Dark words whose meaning she did not understand, but which left the priest's throat dangerously and gutturally. She shivered to the core when she saw the relief begin to move. The chant seemed to breathe life into the monster, but it was only when Eliza's horrified gaze was completely captured by what was happening in front of her that she realized that the relief had actually cracked and that bright light was now shining through it. The portrait opened wider and wider and a gigantic shadow appeared behind the wall. It writhed to the bizarre chant, which was now performed loudly and thunderously by the priest. Eliza was horrified to see that the congregation had joined in the chant, just as entranced as Father Christian, and a ghastly choir rose up in the crypt. The chilling melody reverberated off the walls and rose to a deafening crescendo as the relief collapsed, gradually revealing the monster hiding behind it. Mattie screamed and her fear tore at Eliza's heart. Her daughter was standing right in front of the entrance to the strange dimension, the Gates of Hell, which had just been opened. She already recognized the monstrosity lurking behind it, ready to force its way into her world and take whatever sacrifice it was offered.

Eliza could no longer stand idly by. She hoped and prayed to whomever it was that the people around her were distracted and that now was her chance to save Mattie. Her guardian was also transfixed by the gruesome spectacle and Eliza seized the moment. She let herself fall. This surprised the man, who had loosened his grip anyway because of what was happening around him, and he reached out to pull her back against him. At the same moment, Eliza thrust her hips backwards, throwing him off balance. She grabbed his wrist and freed herself from his grasp. A blow from her elbow caused him to stumble for good, and at the same moment she turned to him and kicked him in the crotch. The man cried out, fell to the ground and writhed in pain.

Suddenly the ground began to shake as if shaken by an earthquake and an inhuman, unearthly howl filled the tomb. The last pieces of the sculpture collapsed and the monster, which had previously been visible on the portrait, now manifested itself before everyone's eyes.

Father Christian reverently raised his arms to pay his respects to the god of the underworld, but at the same moment one of the huge tentacle arms reached out and struck the priest dead. Bloodied and crushed, the priest now lay before his congregation.

Inhuman screams of madness rang out from dozens of throats as the congregation awoke from their trance and realized what was really happening before their eyes. Head over heels, trampling each other, they took flight. Parents rushed forward to save their children from the monster, but it was too late.

One girl after another was seized by the tentacle arms of the hellish monster and devoured by its countless mouths.

„Mattie!“ Eliza cried out in agony. Her daughter stood frozen in front of the monster, her guardian long gone.

Eliza rushed to her daughter and the moment the monster grabbed Mary, who was standing next to Mattie, she yanked her daughter back, away from the monster that was squeezing the poor defenceless girl in one of its fangs lined with countless teeth.

„Mom!“ Mattie cried out, sinking into her mother's arms.

„We don't have time, we have to get out of here!“ Eliza screamed.

She looked around in panic. There were trampled corpses all around her, while the members of the community were desperately trying to escape up the stairs from Beelzebub, who had now begun to seize and devour all the people.

Eliza ducked under a tentacle that was hurtling towards her just in time, then, with Mattie by the hand, she too rushed towards the arch, through which a crowd of people were pushing and squeezing to reach the saving stairs.

She was caught up in the pressing bodies of the others and had to pull Mattie towards her to prevent the girl from being separated from her and trampled underfoot. In dismay, she saw that there was no escape through the archway, too many people had become trapped in the narrow staircase. She struggled to free herself and her daughter from the crowd, but was mercilessly wedged between writhing bodies. This was the end, there was no way to escape. She pulled her daughter protectively to her, took a deep breath and awaited certain death when the inhuman screech of the monster sounded again and a huge tentacle arm swung down on the people in the archway. Countless bodies were shattered by the force. Only a divine power prevented Eliza and her daughter from being killed. But now a gap had opened up in the passageway.

Eliza pushed Mattie in front of her, climbed over corpses and reached the passageway just in time before the monster's next tentacle swung down and crushed the remaining people in the tomb to a pulp.

Tugging and pushing, Eliza carried her daughter up the countless stairs to the surface, terrified of being seized by the monster after all.

Suddenly, just before she reached her destination, an unbearable pain shot through her limbs and she collapsed on the stairs, screaming in agony. All her strength left her and her legs were no longer able to carry her.

„Mom, what's wrong?“. Mattie was about to exit when she realized her mother was no longer behind her and turned to face her. When she saw her mother huddled on the floor, she rushed back to her.

„No!“ moaned Eliza. „Keep running, save yourself, you're almost there!“.

Mattie cried and tried to pick her up from the stairs, but she wasn't strong enough.

„Mom, I'm not going without you!“ she sobbed.

Eliza cringed even more with another wave of pain.

„Yes, you're going now!“ she screamed at her daughter.

Then, a little more gently, „Please, Mattie, you can save yourself. That's all I want. Please, darling.“. She looked at her daughter pleadingly.

„All you have to do is go through the door and then through the building and out into the open and you'll be safe. Please, do this for me!“.

With the last of her strength, she straightened her upper body and hugged her daughter weakly.

„I'll be fine, darling, but any sacrifice I make will be for nothing if you don't save yourself. Go! Please, go!“ she implored her daughter.

Mattie sobbed and didn't want to let her go, but she gently pushed her daughter away.

„Go, please go now!“.

Mattie stood up, still looking down at her hesitantly, but Eliza continued to urge her to leave. Mattie wiped the tears from her eyes, then turned with a desperate look on her face and ran out the door to freedom.

Eliza sobbed hopelessly and with relief at the same time and slumped down.

Behind her, the monster howled and the building shook to its foundations. In horror, Eliza saw that the steps below her were sinking and the stairs leading into the crypt were collapsing.

Just a few more moments and she would plummet into the depths and be buried by tons of rubble. She only had to cover a few meters to get into the meeting hall and save herself from the collapsing lintel, but she had no strength left in her limbs. Still, with the power of desperation, she clawed her fingers into the dirt floor beneath her and pulled herself inch by inch away from the collapsing basement doorway. She moaned and cried out as the pulling and tearing pain coursed through her nerves,

but she didn't give up. Screaming and raging, she dragged herself on, her nails tearing from the exertion and with bloody fingers she clawed further into the ground, dragging her useless body towards the exit. The ground beneath her shook harder and harder and she felt parts of it give way, chunks of earth falling into the abyss below. The building above her was shaken as a deafening screech from the depths shook the walls.

Eliza could barely see anything as dust trickled down on her. Her eyes watered from the dirt, which also settled into every pore of her skin. Soon the ceiling would come crashing down on her and hopelessness gripped her heart. She was making very slow progress, her legs were useless and her arms were struggling to pull her forward. Either the falling debris from the ceiling would bury her or she would fall into the abyss with the pitiful remains of the floor beneath her.

With a final effort, she pulled herself towards the hall. Sweat poured down her body and her fingers left bloody tracks in the floor, but she managed to drag her body out of the passage to the cellar just in time, because the floor behind her collapsed with a crash and into the depths. Gasping and breathing heavily, she lay there for a moment, for she had not yet escaped. The monster raged beneath her, tearing the crypt to pieces, and the meeting room in which she had collapsed shuddered to its foundations. Soon the entire building would collapse, she was far from safe. But how was she supposed to make the long walk into the hall and to the exit?

She caught her breath, then her fingers tried to find a foothold in the floor so that she could drag herself further across the ground out of the building. But the floor here was laminate and her bloody fingers lost their grip and slipped.

Panicked, Eliza tried to get up, but her legs gave way beneath her and she lay helplessly on her stomach. She wouldn't make it, her body was useless and good for nothing. Sobbing with rage, she punched the ground beneath her. It couldn't end like this! She had to find a way out. Although she had the consolation that Mattie had obviously made it out of the church, she wasn't going to grow up without her mother. Blinking through a haze of tears, she looked around for something that could help her. Another tremor now shook the hall as well and Eliza's body was thrown around with nowhere to hold on to. She landed on her stomach again with a painful thud and groaned in agony as her ribs cracked and the pain forced the breath from her lungs for a moment. She laboriously sucked in her breath again and tried to clear her head. She didn't want to give up yet, she was still prepared to fight. She straightened her upper body with the help of her forearms, as far as her failing limbs would allow, and looked around again. To her left, in her immediate vicinity, she saw a dark object on the ground. She blinked the dirt and tears from her eyes that were obscuring her vision. Gradually, she saw more clearly and realized that the object was a knife. It might even have come from the guard who was watching her and who had lost his



weapon in the crowd. Eliza held out her arm for the knife. It was just out of reach and she had to reach out as far as she could so that at least her fingertips brushed the handle. Just a few more millimeters, she told herself. If the next shock came, there was a risk that the knife would slip out of reach, so she had to do everything she could to reach it now. Every fiber of her body ached, her muscles, impaired by her illness, groaned under the strain, her nerve endings, their myelin layer already disturbed by the MS, wanted to refuse her command to act. With a groan and a final jerk of her body in the right direction, her fingers reached the knife handle. Her fingers pulled the knife closer and her sweaty hand closed around it. Then she grabbed the knife with both hands and rammed him into the ground. The knife dug into the laminate and Eliza was able to pull her body a little further towards the knife again. She repeated the procedure, driving the knife another centimeter into the floor and pulling her body forward bit by bit. Now the whole building shook and her hands slipped from the handle. She lifted her upper body in a final desperation, reached for the knife and pulled herself further, but her goal seemed so infinitely far away, impossible to reach. Nevertheless, she did not give up and worked her way forward bit by bit, while the ceiling above her began to crack and chunks of stone fell around her. The earth was now shaking incessantly without interruption and the structure of the building was gradually giving way. By now she had managed to drag her body out of the meeting room and was now in the vestibule, only a few meters away from the exit. But she realized that she would not make it in time. Nevertheless, she laboriously pulled herself onwards as the building collapsed around her. The walls gave way, the ceiling came loose and Eliza was buried in rubble and dust many meters before she was safely rescued.

Rubble and chunks of stone crushed her into the dust, squeezing the air out of her lungs. Her chest had no room to expand, and a boundless panic rose within her as she tried hopelessly to breathe in and oxygenate her body, but it was no use. Fear and horror filled her as her body demanded air in agony and she could no longer give it to it. Suffocating was not an easy death, nor a quick one, and the fear that possessed Eliza was more than her soul could bear. It took long minutes of her body screaming and raging, begging for release, until darkness gradually descended over her and she gratefully drifted into the arms of unconsciousness, knowing she would never wake again.

She surrendered and welcomed death. But something shook her now and she tried sullenly to escape the new sounds and movements around her. Something grabbed her painfully by the arms and pulled and tugged at her. It hurt and she didn't want it to, she had long since resigned herself to her fate and just wanted peace and quiet. But this was denied her. Suddenly the pressure on her lungs eased and dusty air, which made her cough, flowed into her lungs again. She coughed, felt like she

was suffocating again and wanted to howl, like the very first breath she had taken when her life had begun so many years ago, the first breath her lungs had taken when she was born. But she couldn't escape and was forced to keep pumping oxygen into her chest until she was finally able to take her first shaky breath. Tearful and still semi-conscious, she opened her eyes and looked into the eyes of a man in uniform who continued to pull her out of the rubble, up into the fresh air, up to freedom.

„Mattie, could you pass me the glass from up there in the cupboard?“.

Eliza smiled at her daughter as she handed her the requested item and stroked her mother's arm. Eliza winced briefly.

„Oh, sorry mom, I forgot you were still sensitive about that.“.

Eliza shook her head.

„It's all right darling, the wounds have long since healed. Would you push me into the garden? I can't quite get to grips with the technology yet.“

Mattie nodded and pushed Eliza and her wheelchair into the garden. It was a beautiful summer's day, warm but not too hot, and a gentle breeze brushed Eliza's arms and tousled her hair. The wind carried the scent of lavender and peonies to her. Monarch butterflies were cavorting on the asters, stretching their purple heads towards the sun. One butterfly detached itself from the group and flew directly onto Eliza's nose, where it remained for a moment before flying on. She laughed, the first liberating laugh in months.

It had been 3 months since she and Mattie had escaped the clutches of the cult, and as well as the physical wounds, the mental ones were gradually beginning to heal. Mattie had escaped unharmed and it was thanks to her youth that she had come to terms with the terrible experiences very quickly and was able to lead a carefree life again. Eliza was grateful for this and also for her recovery. She had spent three weeks in intensive care before she was finally out of the woods. In addition to the nightmares, she had retained the paralysis in both legs, which was probably irreversible. With the death of her father Christian, her MS had now returned, worse than before, but she felt grateful that she was still alive and accepted her fate. She had been saved shortly after the church of the Assembly of Bible-Believing Christians had collapsed on her, and apart from broken ribs and a bruised lung, she had probably been very lucky. Unlike the majority of the congregation, who had been buried and crushed under tons of rubble. The few who had managed to escape were now scattered to the four winds, having fled the town in a hurry. The authorities were baffled, dismissing the events as a gas leak that had led to an explosion and the tragic collapse of the church.

And Eliza? What else was Eliza supposed to tell them? Of course, she was also questioned, but she said she couldn't remember anything. And she had given Mattie the same advice. Who would have believed their story?

The monster that had appeared so briefly in her world had obviously retreated back into the depths of hell. Eliza hoped that the peace was not deceptive. But who could say what the future held?