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Brotsuppe

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MELANIE DRANE

Brotsuppe

We agree I’ll pay by the week for meals and one room behind the kitchen. Every morning, Herr Neugebauer stirs Brotsuppe on the electric coil, porridge from stale bread rinds, lumps softened to paste in scalded milk—the same breakfast he’s eaten since his childhood between world wars. He says bread is holy, a blessed feast, and then he hums, trimming back the blue roses that grow wild in the loaf.

In September, he waits for the old plum tree in the garden to rain small, hard blue fruit, Zwetschke that cling to their stones. All night I listen to plums dropping on the tin roof of the tool shed. By morning, wasps hover over the lawn, swarm above geranium pots, until the plums burst their swollen skins in the grass, sticky red syrup glistening where they’ve been broken. Herr Neugebauer’s still humming, won’t give up a single piece, takes a rusted paring knife, sits on a stool by his blue aluminum pail, cutting away the bad parts. On Sundays, he adds boiled plums to my Brotsuppe. For lunch, there’s compote, more brown and wrinkled plums; at dinner, he slices Pflaumkuchen, tells me the value of saving whatever you can: “Just eat a bruised banana with your eyes closed, it’s delicious.” He sucks his false teeth, hums. Plum season has ended, it’s cold now. Mornings when the radiator begins to hiss
and thump in my bedroom, I hear him humming through the kitchen wall. Today I'm up early, there's sun over the garden; from my window, frost on the bare branches of the plum tree. Today Herr Neugebauer's breaking into words, so happy, he's singing something about bread, singing it again louder when I enter the kitchen—I'm still learning

German, have to concentrate to understand. Herr Neugebauer's startled to see me—he's in his bathrobe, dark longjohns on his skinny legs, his lips almost blue, Brotsuppe scorching on the coil. Our eyes meet, as he breaks the law and sings the Horst-Wessel-Lied out loud:

*Millions look to the swastika full of hope,*

*The day breaks for freedom and for bread.*

The scent of weedy, long-stewed coffee rises like smoke. Herr Neugebauer lights a cigarette, turns to say: "Songs never hurt anyone, you understand? We just wanted to sing again, even now I only want to sing again. You won't move because of music, will you?"

I'm silent at the table, head down, chewing bread rinds I can't swallow. The tablecloth's dusted with a fine snowfall of crumbs, outside, blue jays wheeze in the plum tree.