

Andreas Pritzker

**Wherever the Road
May Lead**

A Novel

Translated from the German by
Alex Gabriel

Originally published in German as *Losfahren* by BoD,
Norderstedt (Germany), in 2016

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Produced and published by
BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt (Germany)

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ISBN: 978-3-7412-7610-1

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My father called yesterday and said simply, "Aaron died. Someone has to fly out there, and I'm too old. It would be best if you go, Alice. You know everyone there. I'll pay for the trip." Then he hung up.

Of course I would fly out for Uncle Aaron's funeral – he and Brenda had taken me in and treated me like a daughter. This was twenty-five years ago, and we haven't seen each other since then. At first we continued writing and telephoning to share important life events, but eventually it seemed like there was no longer anything important enough to be shared, as we all got bogged down in our uneventful everyday lives. The flow of words between us subsided. More recently, we sent each other only New Year's wishes, which gradually grew more and more concise – although the messages we exchanged always did convey affection.

And now, it irks me that I never went back to visit them. The curse of inertia. With the daily grind's constant trickle of things to do, I had allowed them to become immortal to me. Since there is no one in my life anymore whose loss would pain me endlessly, death itself is now virtually dead to me.

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When I inform Paula that I will need a week of vacation to go to Milwaukee for my uncle's funeral, she immediately frowns.

"You can't just slip away now – summer break is coming up, and June is always when we sell the most books. And who's going to take care of your music department? Besides, I already told you a while ago that

I was planning to take a few days off this week to go hiking in the mountains with my girlfriends."

That is a lie – she told me nothing of the sort. I'm convinced that she just made up this hiking trip on the spot.

"Regardless, I'm going," I assert determinedly.

"Why do you have to go? Why not your father or your brother? Why do they always dump everything off on us women?"

"Because I'm the one who's closest with my uncle's family. I want to go."

"Have you talked about this with Peider? What does he think about you just running off like this?"

"It's not really any of his business."

"Hmmm, not really any of his business. Despite the fact that you two have been together for quite a few years – although I'm well aware that not all that glitters is gold between you."

"Exactly. So it's my business, and only my business."

"But it's my business too, Alice. I know the labor laws, and if you just take off like this, then you don't even need to bother coming back – you're fired, effective immediately."

My co-workers would have either reacted angrily or burst into tears, but ultimately both would have yielded to Paula. At the moment, Veronika is in her favorite section, re-shelving the travel guides – she has pricked up her ears and now stands frozen in place with a stack of books pressed up against her chest. And the new trainee is behind the counter, with a horrified expression on her face.

I look at Paula, who has now planted herself in front of me and is staring at me indignantly. She is dressed elegantly, and I have no idea where she gets the money for such expensive clothing – none of us earn very

much here. And I feel like I'm already gone, far away from here. Whatever she is saying is no longer of any concern to me. "As you wish," I calmly reply.

I realize that what is happening here will have consequences for me. I can't ignore this – but I don't care. I look around the bookshop, sensing that this is the last time I will see all these shelves filled with brightly colored spines, or these tables covered with neatly arranged new releases. Everything is so colorful – and yet my daily routine here suddenly seems so drab and monotonous.

I feel an urge to break out and break away, and the confidence to finally be able to put an end to the perpetual squabble with my boss – my rival. I grab a plastic bag at the counter and head over to the storeroom, where the staff lockers are located. I change from my comfortable sandals into walking shoes – Paula wants us to use stylish footwear, and while it's true that a pair of classy designer shoes improves one's entire appearance, ultimately they're my own feet. I toss the sandals and a few other personal items into the bag and march towards the entrance without saying another word. In the glass door, I catch a faint glimpse of Paula's reflection; she is staring after me with her mouth agape. And then, I'm outside.

It's Saturday morning, and the downtown streets are still almost empty. A milky summer haze rests over the city, dampening the sunlight. Everything is calm, peaceful, pleasant. Wanting to soak up the mood, I let the trams pass me by and walk home through the quiet morning atmosphere.

I smoke a cigarette as I walk, thinking about what has just happened. The self-respect that my mother drilled into me tells me that I've done the right thing. I now let myself get carried away by a sense of freedom

that comes over me like a wave. At the same time, I'm gripped by a sense of melancholy, uncertainty, disorientation, of the blues. And I recall how, in these sorts of situations, Tex used to grab his guitar and sing Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" in his raspy voice. Freedom also means not knowing what comes next, he'd say – hanging in the balance, needing to find one's own way once again.

*

The familiar environment of home calms me down. I brew myself a coffee, arrange my flight to Chicago, and then call my brother. His wife Stefanie tells me that he's picking up some supplies at the hardware store, which tends to take quite a while. I tell her that Uncle Aaron has died, that I will be traveling to Milwaukee tomorrow, and that it would be great if Roland could look after our father.

I've been putting off the call to Peider. We're a couple, but we don't live together – and this was a prudent decision. Peider is a hoarder; he doesn't throw anything away. He only tidies up when his apartment is absolutely overflowing. And I'm the complete opposite. If we were to live together, his chaos would peeve me to no end.

Peider doesn't answer at home, so he must be at work at the publishing house. He picks up the phone there and says brusquely, "I'm knee-deep in a manuscript right now. There's no reason to disturb me – we'll see each other this evening." Then he listens to what I have to say. He's immediately concerned. Peider is always concerned whenever I decide anything. "Did you really think this through?" he asks now as well. "Can you really just leave Paula in the lurch like that?"

This reminds me once again that it was actually Paula whom Peider had gotten to know first. She had written up her travels in Provence, and then used her position in the bookshop to establish contact with Peider's publishing house. Well, that sounds too neutral – what really happened was that she put the screws on the company's rep, who had a thing for her. When Peider agreed to a meeting, she got nervous and brought me along. She showed me the piece she had written; I found it quite ordinary. Hundreds of people write about their big liberating vacations, chasing their dreams of freedom in Provence or in Tuscany or lately somewhere in northern Africa. When I told Paula this, she laughed and said I was just jealous of what she had done – and that I should wait to hear the opinion of the expert professional.

As soon as Peider sat down with us at the bar of the Hotel Storchen, he announced that, although the text did have its merits, it simply wasn't a good fit for his publishing portfolio. To break the silence that followed, I started asking Peider about one of the successful American authors in his portfolio. This opened the floodgates. Peider told me the whole nine yards – about how he'd gotten to know John, how he'd often visited the author's languorous fishing village on the East Coast, and how the author, who incidentally put on no airs despite his fame, would come to Switzerland as well, during which visits they would review the translations of his books. And they would dine royally – at the cost of the publishing house, of course, as John consumed alcohol on a scale that was beyond the income of a publishing editor. And he told all of this to me, as Paula sat there beside us. Eventually he bid us farewell,

after Paula had extracted a promise from him to allow her to organize a reading for John at her bookshop. As he left the bar, several pairs of eyes followed him. And it was no wonder – he looked good, with his curly hair, heavy stubble, and casual clothes. “Congratulations,” I said, “you’ve hooked yourself a nice one.”

Paula then suggested we stop off at a nearby pizzeria to eat and get wasted. Over the course of the evening, she told me that Peider was clearly interested in me and that she expected me to sweeten him up with regard to her text.

I laughed at her. “It’s your move. He was only talking to me because he’s shy and he thinks you’re too good-looking for him. There are guys who are intimidated by that.”

And Paula is indeed attractive, with curves in all the right places – her face is a bit expressionless, though that doesn’t bother most guys at all. I’ve also got a figure worth showing, my legs are perfectly fine, and a lot of men find me appealing – although I must admit that my nose is a bit too large, a hallmark of the Heftmann clan.

*

I would not have had any problem standing up for Paula. She had rescued me after I had given up my comfortable job as a librarian at the Institute of Musicology, which I had done because one of the professors there, Gysin, suddenly got possessed by the devil on our coffee break one day and took his bad mood out on me, with snarky remarks about female country singers. He said that he could never take those shrill, cowboy-hat-wearing women seriously. Shrill? I told him that he should have a listen to some of Lucinda Williams’

songs – there’s not the slightest hint of shrillness in them. He then proceeded to ridicule her, implying that she could neither write music nor sing. He claimed to know a few of her songs – which was actually true, as I had once, quite naïvely, tried to introduce the institute to her music. It had been a complete flop – such initiatives were unwelcome here, especially from a member of the support staff. My own musical education was simply not recognized here. Even before Gysin could put the finishing touches on his extremely disparaging and disdainful comments, I decided that I would put an end to the debate, once and for all, right there and then. I flung my resignation right in Gysin’s face, made a grand theatrical exit, leaving him there dumbfounded at what he had just brought about.

I used to get books for the library from Paula’s shop, so she knew me by then. When I let her know that she would be dealing with someone else at the musicology institute from then on, she told me that she could use another person on staff at her shop and that I would be a great fit. She was particularly planning on expanding the music section – and just like that, I had a new job.

*

Anyway, Peider went out with Paula a few times, until it became clear to him that the two of them didn’t have much in common. He wanted to make the break-up official – but, coward that he is, he decided to meet with me to ask me to break it to her gently. When I did so, Paula laughed and said, “That’s fine, as far as I’m concerned. There are plenty of good sides to Peider, but ultimately he’s just a softy.” I could have mischievously pointed out that this particular softy still hadn’t given in to her and published her text – or even

recommended it to others. But I held back, going along with Paula's decision.

Peider and I soon met up again; our topic of discussion was American literature. We hit it off splendidly. There was a bit of a spark, and a relationship soon followed. It was a relationship without any sort of dedication, however – made up solely of literary conversations, sex, and going out for dinner or to the theater. We rejected the idea of living together, for practical reasons. Peider lives in a nice apartment in a stately villa on the Zürichberg hill, while I own a small apartment, in Zürich's Seefeld district, which suits me just perfectly and which I would never give up.

*

Could I really just leave Paula in the lurch like that? "Oh, we've gone our separate ways," I reply to Peider – and can almost hear him go pale.

"What do you mean?"

"She didn't want to let me go, and I said I was going anyway, so she fired me."

"She fired you? And what are you going to do now without a job? How are you going to support yourself?"

Aha, Peider's afraid that I might end up becoming a burden on him.

"Whatever, I'll just find a new job when I'm back."

"Listen, Alice, this is not a good development. You should cancel the trip. I'll talk to Paula right away – I think I can make her change her mind and take you back on."

"Forget it – that chapter is closed already. And you know what? I'm glad. I'm traveling tomorrow."

"Do you think you can just escape your obligations so easily? A person has to take responsibility, even if

just on his or her own small scale. There has to be structure in a person's life. One can and should take steps to develop oneself professionally, but it should always be done in a well-planned and well-thought-out manner. Mentally, it's difficult to deal with this kind of break you're planning. Think it through once more."

Blah blah blah. What does he know? I've already made new starts several times in my life, when the circumstances urged me to do so – and I've always looked forward to them. And I've experienced painful breaks that were not the results of my own doing – and these I simply had to deal with. Anyway, a change of job might be a sort of break, but not a painful one for me.

"There's nothing to think over. And I'm not prepared to grovel at Paula's feet either."

To grovel at Paula's feet. I've got lots of odd turns of phrase in my everyday vocabulary, most of them quite visual – a product of many years spent reading novels. I've buried myself in books ever since I was a child. I've always read and will always continue to read, so help me God (sometimes I'm doubtful as to whether there is no God.) And it affects my way of speaking. Thousands of expressions are stored in my brain, ready to surface at any moment. Peider the editor wants me to eliminate them and to adopt a more standard way of speaking. But I refuse, even though I know that this irks him.

"Then you can expect our relationship to come to an end too, Alice."

Well, then! Peider's not the love of my life. Routine has kept us together over these last couple of years. Still, I'm shocked – at the same time, though, my eyes are opened to the fact that Paula and Peider have recently gotten closer. Paula brought Peider on board for a new project she conceived; always trying to model

herself on the famous Parisian bookseller Adrienne Monnier, Paula envisioned a sort of literary salon and she needed Peider's help. And he didn't mind her boosting the sales of his authors in return.

I kept my nose out of the project, as it didn't interest me – sort of a precursor to my eventual disengagement, I think now, as Peider awaits my reaction. “Well, if you say so,” I reply calmly. “I'll get my stuff from your apartment as soon as I'm back.”

He hangs up, obviously perplexed and irate. That went too fast for him. It's an old motif with us –we have a difference of opinion and can't reach a compromise; Peider wants to let it simmer for a while, tossing around every possible scenario until it's crystal clear to him that I'm just completely wrong and that this must finally be clear to me too. And I spoil his plan and pull the plug.

And again I feel that sense of melancholy. It seems like my current life is breaking apart, only because a past life has pulled me back in. A life that meant too much for me to simply push it aside. Needing to get up and about, I go for a jog along the lakeshore.

*

Later, I call my father and say, “Listen, don't expect me for dinner this week or next – if I'm already flying out there, I want to stay a little while longer.”

“Don't you need to be back for work?”

“No, I took a hiatus. But I'll get in touch before I catch my flight home – I'll definitely be back here for your seventy-fifth.”

“You always know what you're doing. Good luck, and have a safe trip.”

2

I take advantage of my U.S. citizenship at the passport control in Chicago. I acquired it through marriage, which I'm still glad about to this day – despite the occasionally tedious tax returns for citizens abroad. But I will always have a soft spot for a country in whose very Declaration of Independence the pursuit of happiness is enshrined. While non-citizens are backed up in long lines, with just a couple of counters open, there are enough counters open for citizens that my turn comes quickly. The immigration officer looks me over, and I imagine what he sees: a face that shows a readiness to answer back, a low-maintenance hairstyle – short and tousled, and grey eyes. I'm wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, my usual traveling clothes, as well as fashionable sneakers, although these are outside his field of vision.

Half an hour later, I'm driving a rental car up I-94 towards Milwaukee. Several small, serious-looking Asian men had been bustling about behind the counter of the car rental company. They had given me an upgrade, so I am now sitting in a spacious Dodge Charger – a rather muscular vehicle – as I enjoy my sense of place on the American roads. The countryside is bathed in bright sunlight. I run the air conditioning; the summer afternoon heat had been oppressive on the way from the terminal to the car rental office.

I didn't need the car to get to Milwaukee – but on the plane, thirty thousand feet above the earth, I decided to take advantage of this opportunity and travel through the U.S.A. again in the footsteps of my own past. I'd ditched my job and I was free – like a rolling stone.

Two hours later, I pull into the driveway of the Heftman mansion. (When Aaron moved here, he Americanized his name by dropping the second 'n'.) The property is located in the suburb of Shorewood, on the shore of Lake Michigan. Several cars are already parked along the neat stone-paved driveway – the condolence visits are in full swing. A black butler, probably hired for the occasion, opens the door and leads me into the large living room, with French windows looking out upon the landscaped gardens; Lake Michigan gleams through the strip of woods along its shoreline. Friends and members of Brenda's family from Boston are standing around and talking softly amongst themselves. From the snippets of conversation that I catch in passing, I know that they're talking about Aaron, about his illness and his death, about the things they remember him doing. Two maids are walking around with trays, serving coffee and muffins, but the seriousness of the occasion ensures that it does not feel like a party.

The living room alone is as big as my parents' city apartment and is still furnished in the classic Chesterfield style. Uncle Aaron had said that all that mattered to him was that the furniture be comfortable, but Aunt Brenda had insisted upon these furnishings.

Brenda and her children have withdrawn to a sitting area, where visitors are expressing their condolences. I'm greeted there with a big hello – a spontaneous outburst that is immediately muted by the atmosphere of mourning. Brenda is wearing a solemn black brocade dress. She looks just like she did back then, having hardly aged at all, with a round face and a double chin above her large maternal bosom. She hugs me close

and starts crying a bit; she does not want to let me go. Abby eventually extricates me from her arms.

Abby then hugs me as well. Then Sammy pushes in, kisses me on both cheeks, and points towards Frank. "You probably don't recognize him anymore, but that's Frank – he's twice as wide as last time you saw him."

"Nonsense," I say with a smile. "I've seen his family photos."

I take a look at the family. Frank has indeed grown fat – but it doesn't show much, thanks to his well-tailored suit. Abby is just as slender as before and is wearing a rather masculine-looking pantsuit; her face has picked up a strain of bitterness over the years, although this does disappear when she smiles. Sammy looks outrageously good, casual in spite of his suit – the ladies probably love him. All three are immediately familiar to me once again. I've only seen Frank's wife Kathleen and his sons Steven and Mark in photos – the ones that accompany their New Year's cards. Kathleen, unable to resist, reproachfully asks me why I hadn't visited the U.S.A. again until now.

"Oh, let it be," says Sammy.

"It just never ended up happening," I answer anyway.

The real reason is because I've always resisted anything that was expected of me, but that I did not necessarily consider necessary – a trait which has often led to conflicts with Peider and Paula and even my brother. They were often disappointed in me. The necessity of a visit during Aaron's lifetime escaped me – only now had his death made the trip necessary. And in the back of my mind, of course, I had always nurtured the thought of visiting the family again – why else would I have kept renewing my U.S. passport?

"And where's your family?" I ask Sammy.

"In Tucson. I'm divorced now. Hadn't had a chance to let you know yet."

"It's long overdue," adds Frank. "Letting you know, I mean – not the divorce."

"And you, Abby – you're still single?"

I see her brothers exchange a quick glance. "Well," Abby replies, "it's a bit complicated – I'll explain a bit later when we have time."

*

Father O'Neill is also here. He must have already said mass this morning, and he will undoubtedly lead the funeral service as well. Brenda comes from an Irish Catholic family, while Aaron didn't follow any religion – he was a freethinker, just like his brother. The children had all been baptized as Catholics for Brenda's sake, and eventually Aaron had decided to be baptized as well.

He told me all the details one evening, with a slight smirk on his face. He was led into the ambit of the Catholic Church by a young Father O'Neill, with whom he had developed a sort of paternal relationship. The baptism caused a minor sensation, as he was the proprietor of one of Milwaukee's premier clothing stores. Father O'Neill suggested that he take on a "Christian name", but Aaron declined. He explained that if the Catholic Church still believed in the Old Testament, then surely his name should be just fine. My father, incidentally, didn't care in the least about his brother's baptism. "Well, Brenda's pestering finally paid off," he said indulgently at the time.

Back then, Brenda also sounded me out about perhaps rejoining the Catholic faith – I'd left the church at the age of eighteen, a step which my father had

endorsed and my mother had accepted. Brenda arranged a few meetings for me with Father O'Neill. We flung our irreconcilable positions at each other, and I stuck to my doubts. I like clarity – and Christianity has come up with this splendid thing that could only create confusion. It says that Jesus is God's son. And that he had a divine father, but a human mother. And then, there's also a holy spirit that took care of the conception. The only clean solution to this mess would be to recognize three divine entities, but no – they want to hold onto the banner of monotheism, so they create this mysterious trinity structure that no one understands.

Given Aaron's prominence in the community, Bishop MacCabe also turned up at the triumphantly decorated, fully packed church for the baptism. Aaron called him "the old Maccabee" – always pronouncing his name accordingly. I found the bishop a rather vain guy, always invoking the dignity of his position; still, he didn't seem to have a problem with the nickname. Judah Maccabee, after all, had successfully hatched an insurrection against the pagan Seleucids, the bishop explained to Father O'Neill, who immediately relayed this to Aaron. Bishop MacCabe was extremely popular in his diocese; he was a skilled cook, who regularly invited his parish priests for delicious feasts with fresh-cooked Irish salmon and fine wines.

*

Father O'Neill, who is wearing a black cassock for the occasion, now hurries over to me and hugs me. "My little Thomasina!" he exclaims. Due to his age, and perhaps also the burdens of his post, he is now hunched over. His face hardly reaches my own anymore; it has also been embellished with hundreds of

little lines, which all smile along as he grasps me with both arms to get a good look. I remember how uncompromisingly we debated back then. When I challenged the Resurrection, saying, "Well, as I see it, someone just dug up the corpse," Father O'Neill just shook his head in exasperation and called me a "doubting Thomasina". The nickname stuck. I've got nothing against it – I'm still a skeptic to this day. And I exercise the right to decide for myself what to believe. In short, I believe only in facts that make sense. And yes, this qualification is necessary – after all, people are always being told "facts" that are not really facts at all, regardless of the level of conviction with which they are presented as such. And oftentimes the majority simply decides what is "fact", even when such things are simply false. So one needs to watch out – and think for oneself.

I thought highly of Father O'Neill – and I still do – for not rescinding his fondness for me despite our fundamental differences of opinion. He now asks how I'm doing, then looks me over and answers the question himself: "Taking life's blows, but still doing well." Then he needs to go tend to his flock. He hurries off to say the evening mass.

*

Aaron's vacant armchair sits in the middle of the room, opposite a TV of exorbitant dimensions. There was already one in the same spot back then. Brenda felt that a television didn't match the room's décor, so she had the first one placed in a cabinet. But the televisions kept getting larger, and she could no longer find any discreet pieces of furniture to hold them. Eventually she agreed to dispense with the cabinet.

The family has placed a poster-sized photo of Aaron

on the chair. It shows him as an old but still healthy man with close-cropped hair, a Heftmann nose and a healthy complexion. Aaron always had an aversion to old men with long hair. I remember seeing how he grimaced when one such customer entered his store. "Terrible," he mumbled – although he had to attend personally to the man, a prominent local politician.

Even in his free time, Aaron always wore a good suit – and it was very important to him that his entire family be well-dressed too.

Having eaten his dinner after a busy day at the store, he used to sit here, pour himself a whisky (which would be followed by several more), grab the remote control, and flip through his favorite channels. He would hold a dialogue with the world as he did so, delivering some legendary commentaries. When some communist made a pilgrimage to Fidel Castro and exchanged a brotherly kiss with him, Aaron exclaimed, "Losers of the world, unite!" He didn't like the communists because of their dogmatism, and he accused them of covert anti-Semitism too.

*

Meanwhile, night has fallen. The jetlag hits me, and I ask Brenda if it's okay for me to retire for the evening.

"Sure, dear. Your old room has been prepared for you."

She kisses me goodnight, and I head upstairs, take a shower, and go to bed. The window is open, and the moonlight and the sounds and smells of the night are just like they were back then. It feels good. And even though I miss Aaron... I'm back.

3

I wake up around four o'clock in the morning, well rested. A deep silence lies over the entire house. I slip outside in my swimsuit. The air is pleasantly crisp, and the bright, dark yellow sun is rising above Lake Michigan. There is a swimming pool on the sea-facing side of the house; I dive in and start swimming laps.

After getting dressed, I head for the kitchen. One of the maids who served food yesterday is there. She informs me that she works here full-time; the butler and the other maid had just been hired for the day. She prepares breakfast for me, and I read the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel at the large dining room table. The family members gradually trundle in, already dressed for the funeral ceremony.

At around nine o'clock, we head over to Saint Roberts Roman Catholic Church for the funeral, in three limousines rented specifically for the occasion. Father O'Neill leads the service. I also notice the old Maccabee – he has truly grown old by now.

The church is quite full. Father O'Neill announces to the community that their brother Aaron is now with God, where he is enjoying eternal life. God forbid, I think to myself. Eternal life? Aaron would be bored to death. Well, not literally to death. But suppose we could carry our present consciousness over to the afterlife – since the promise of an afterlife would make no sense otherwise. What a cursed punishment that would be! What would we do all day in the heavenly realms? And with no hope of it ever reaching an end? Come on, let's forget about all that. Death is quite a reasonable contrivance, especially when one can die having lived a full life.

In front of the coffin, which is drowning in a sea of flowers, the poster-sized image of Aaron stands beside a lectern. From here, Frank reads out his father's life achievements. I enjoy seeing that no tears are shed; the family accepts Aaron's death with a sober dignity.

We then drive slowly to the nearby Glen Oaks Cemetery in a solemn-looking convoy of black vehicles. The church had been pleasantly cool, and the cars are air conditioned as well. But outside, it's the heat of summer. The gravestones lie in rows between clusters of trees, and Aaron's grave is located right in the middle of them, far from any shade. There are several obligatory rites to be performed at the gravesite. I do not regret at all being a godless creature. Father O'Neill doesn't seem to mind the heat, probably due to thin blood at his age, but he takes care of business quickly – either to spare the mourners roasting in the sun, or simply due to his many years of practice.

Everyone then gathers at the elegant Pfister Hotel downtown for the funeral banquet. It was not only for family events that Aaron and Brenda used to bring us here. Rather, during my time in Milwaukee, Aaron would take the whole clan out to eat once a month – always at the Pfister.

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The mood gradually grows less heavy, as those gathered around the table slowly drink away the horrors of death. I think back to the past. When I was twenty years old, my parents sent me to stay with Uncle Aaron and Aunt Brenda. What they had in mind for me was a two-month summer stay, with the goal of renewing family ties.

They themselves were loath to travel. My father's

job as a land surveyor didn't require him to do so at all. My mother dragged him on a couple of trips – to Italy and to the Black Forest. There were historical reasons for this latter choice. After graduating from hotel management school, my mother had gone to work at a hotel in the Black Forest, where she met the young hotelier Tenz; they fell passionately in love and got married half a year later. They were happy for a while, even without any children on the scene – but after two years of marriage, Tenz figured out that he was gay. The two still loved each other, but decided that it would be better to separate, which they did without any big fuss. Tenz was probably plagued by feelings of guilt. Because of this – or perhaps simply because he still loved her – he paid my mother off generously by signing half of his flourishing hotel over to her. And so my parents vacationed there when they brought themselves to take (what for them was) a big trip.

Tenz died young and left his share of the hotel to his sister – who continued to run the hotel so successfully that my mother, who by then had already married my father, Marcus Heftmann, was able to bring some nice extra income to her marriage. And that's not all: after my mother died, "Auntie Tenz", who had naturally become like an aunt to us children, bought out the share of the hotel that my mother had left to her heirs. My father waived his own share of the proceeds, which meant that my brother and I each ended up with a truckload of money. We "invested in real estate", as my father put it: Roland, who had followed in my father's footsteps as a surveyor, was able to buy a house in a charming little village – while I, having returned from the U.S.A. upon my mother's death, bought a nicely renovated apartment in an old building in Seefeld.

So I flew to Chicago, where my aunt and uncle picked me up and brought me to Milwaukee. We drove along Lake Michigan, and I noticed that the lake was actually more like a sea, disappearing in the distance in the bluish summer haze. Having grown up in a small city apartment in Zurich, the house in Shorewood struck me as enormous. They live in a palace, I thought. The children's rooms were located on the topmost of the three floors – Frank was twenty-two at the time, Abby twenty like me, and Sammy fifteen. There was a room up there for me as well – it was the cleaned-out junk room, according to Sammy. I found it quite spacious, and I could see Lake Michigan if I leaned far enough out the window. I never imagined that I would end up spending two years there.

I enjoyed a great summer, free from any obligations – except for the fact that my parents were expecting me to choose a career upon my return to Switzerland. I still had not a glimmer of an idea about how I wanted to spend my life or earn my living. I simply indulged in the experience, being taken all around Wisconsin and Illinois by my cousins, going swimming with them in the lake – basically just getting spoiled. And I broadened the English knowledge that I had acquired in school, albeit mostly with youthful slang – we were too carefree to have any serious conversations. In my first few weeks there, I mostly just listened in, even when they tossed around their casual speech – but with time, I gradually started chipping in. And when I didn't know what to say, Uncle Aaron would give me a tip in Swiss German, or else simply act as an interpreter.

Naturally, we went to Summerfest – a music festival in Milwaukee that was bigger than any I had seen

before. And there, I happened to see Lucinda Williams' performance. When she sang "The Night's Too Long", it sent shivers down my spine. I was enraptured. After a few days of drifting about in a dreamy state, I started trying to learn more about the singer – Abby brought me to the right music stores and bookshops. My cousins started teasing me good-naturedly – and over dinner one evening, Sammy proclaimed that I wanted to be a country singer too.

"Why not?" asked Aunt Brenda. "It's a perfectly respectable – and in some cases even quite lucrative – profession." And that was the trigger.

That's it, I knew as I sat there – amazed at myself and at how this desire had suddenly come about. Then Uncle Aaron put the icing on the cake: "Sure, but you'll have to study music here in the U.S.A. – I don't really think it would work otherwise. You can attend our conservatory here. It'll be very convenient for you – you can stay with us, and I'll cover your tuition costs."

My cousins cheered – they found the idea sublime. And I was simply floored by how easily and bountifully things were playing out. The whole thing was like a fairy tale.

"Is that what you really want to do?" asked Uncle Aaron.

"Yes," I blurted out, already fully determined to go down this path.

He smiled, shrugged, and said, "Then I should probably give Marcus a call tomorrow."

My parents weren't thrilled at first. They were especially worried about the fact that I would be pursuing my project in a country that came off quite badly in our local news broadcasts. But Aaron was the older brother, and my father trusted him – and if I was going to pursue this sort of adventure, then at least it was

within the bosom of the family. My parents eventually went along with it, and later even found the idea quite splendid – after all, it was something they could brag about to their friends.

And so it was that I enrolled in classes for vocals and guitar at the conservatory in Milwaukee that autumn.