

Chapter 1
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I love Elvis. His music is the best I've ever heard in my entire life. I know Elvis from the TV, when there was a documentary on about him. At first I thought it was pretty boring, and only didn't switch channels because I had stomach flu and every movement made me feel even more sick. I just lay there, staring at the TV that Mum had switched on for me so that I didn't feel quite so alone. In the documentary, Elvis got fatter and fatter because of drinking all that alcohol. Makes you bloated, so the presenter said. And he was bulimic and once ate twenty hamburgers before a concert, only to throw them all up again. As I heard that, I immediately had to lean over my bedside bowl again. At that moment, I suddenly felt a deep affinity with Elvis.

When I was able to look up again, the presenter said: »Elvis apparently died on 16th August 1977 as a result of his addiction to prescription drugs.« I immediately sat up in bed. 16th August was my birthday. And then the presenter said that Elvis didn't die at all, but just faked his death to escape from the Mafia. He was a secret agent working for the FBI and had done a deal with the Mafia as part of a sting operation. When they'd realised that Elvis wasn't some fool who'd been conned out of his money, but an agent who was going to blow the whole thing apart, they wanted to get rid of him. So, the day before the Mafia guys were due to be handed their arrest warrants, Elvis had done a disappearing act. The documentary showed a man with grey hair and gold-framed glasses. He was sitting in front of a wall of books; a sub-title across his stomach read: »Allan McMorren, internationally renowned graphologist«. This internationally renowned graphologist was leaning back at his desk, holding a Biro in his hand, as he looked into the camera and said: »Graphologically speaking, there is no doubt whatsoever that Elvis filled in his own death certificate.« I thought that sounded pretty spooky, but also kind of cool. Of course, if Elvis had faked his own death, it made perfect sense for him to have filled out his own death certificate too. Elvis had also left a number of clues for people who are able to interpret them, said the presenter. For example, his gravestone reads »Elvis Aaron Presley« with two As in Aaron rather than one, which is how Elvis actually spelled his middle name. That, the presenter said, was meant to tell his true fans that he wasn't really in the grave. What a brilliant idea, letting people know by means of a spelling mistake. Then I missed a bit of the documentary because I was busy wondering which letters I could insert or leave out on my gravestone if I were

to fake my own death at some later point. Though my death, faked or otherwise, was probably not of much interest to most people. And if I wrote »Anje« or »Atje« on my gravestone, it would be just my luck for people to think that I simply couldn't spell, rather than that I wasn't in there at all. When I started listening again, there was a woman talking on the documentary. She was claiming that Elvis had rung her to say that he was living as a recluse in Michigan. And that some special people who were coming to Graceland for the thirtieth anniversary of his death might get to see him. He meant me.

Once I was up and about again, I immediately got hold of loads of Elvis's music - and, believe me, he couldn't just puke. He was also a fantastic singer. The great thing is that there's an Elvis song for every occasion. Well, that is, mainly for occasions when you're madly in love and a) get the one you want or b) don't get the one you want; and occasions when you're no longer madly in love because either a) you've been betrayed or dumped, or b) you've betrayed or dumped someone. Though the latter is not terribly likely.

Dad doesn't like Elvis. »It's just music for dullards«, he says, pointing out that Elvis even went to see President Nixon to offer his help in the fight against the pernicious hippy culture. »But Elvis's pelvic thrusts caused a scandal!« I always retort. Dad then looks disparaging and says: »for your grandparents, perhaps. It's Granny music!« - and, what's more, says that it's silly to sleep in Elvis bedding, to wear Elvis t-shirts and to take an Elvis lunchbox to school. Everyone at school thinks so too and is always asking me what kind of *schmalz* I keep in there - the kind you eat, or the kind Elvis sings - but of course I don't tell Dad that. Mum says that I'm just at the age when girls start having crushes and that it's all a »healthy precursor to real sexual relationships«. Exactly how healthy it is for girls of my age to have their mothers talking in front of the whole family about their precursors to real sexual relationships doesn't bother her. However, what's even more irritating than Mum's sexual relationship lectures is the way she comes barging into my room with a heap of CDs, saying that she's got me a bit of »groovy« music to listen to, because girls of my age shouldn't be listening to schmaltzy Granny-songs and I'd be bound to make a couple of friends if I listened to something different. The groovy music she has in mind is Queen and Bruce Springsteen. They were groovy twenty years ago, when groovy was still a groovy word. But, of course, I don't tell Mum that. I just pretend that I'm listening to the CDs, and then give them back a week later. Then Mum smiles happily and thinks that she's an incredibly brilliant mother who's using incredibly groovy methods to save her daughter from a life of outsider-ness. Oh well, if it makes her happy.

For my own part, there's only one thing that would make me happy: going to Graceland and meeting Elvis. I know that he'd say something vitally important to me. Something that would totally change my life.

When Mum said a couple of months ago in the family council that we were going to America in the summer holidays, I almost had a heart attack. I thought: this is an omen, it's my chance, I'm going to see him. I immediately raised my hand and said that I wanted to propose going to Graceland. You can't just talk in the family council: you have to put your hand up. And when it's your turn, the other people have to let you finish. »It's a tool for creating a democratic and open family spirit«, Mum had said when she introduced the family council idea - and she ought to know, because she's a couples and family therapist. We have our family council once a week, and I normally hate it because you have to say how you're doing, and I can never think of anything to say other than how I'm really doing - and I'm not going to say that. So I spend the whole week thinking up something to say, like how I want to do TV time differently or whether we can't try a different yoghurt. Mum always gives me the evil eye then, and says: »Antje, you're hiding things! Be open and honest!« and then spends at least the next two days being cross with me. Klara always says she's afraid of her rabbit dying, which does the trick. Maybe I should conjure up some animal or another. Unfortunately, though, I'm not six years old, so a hamster probably wouldn't help me much in the family councils. Not even an entire army of hamsters would help me.

However, I thought of plenty of things to say at the America family council - only Dad immediately forgot the rule about letting people finish, and interrupted me mid-sentence. »I'm not going to Memphis if all those nutcases are there and they're charging three times the price for a motel room!« I replied: »So you'd go to Memphis if there were no nutcases there and the motel rooms didn't cost three times the normal price?« Dad had snorted angrily and said that family council rule number three was that you weren't to twist someone else's words. After that, I said at every family council that I wanted to go to Graceland, and after a couple of weeks the family councils were suddenly dropped. Mum and Dad had presumably decided that our family was quite democratic enough without them.

And his mama cries ... Elvis sings in my earphones as we arrive in Pittsburgh. »Are you excited?« Dad asks. »It's been ages since you last saw Nelly!« I pretend I can't hear him, and hear Mum saying »Antje's listening.« That's supposed to mean that I'm listening to music on my Discman, and that's why I can't hear anything. »Are you listening?« Mum always asks when I don't respond and she thus presumes I'm wearing earphones. By that, she means »are you listening to music«, and that makes

Mum the only person to whom I can truthfully give the answer »no«when I'm asked »are you listening?«

So. »Antje's listening«, Mum says to Dad. »Oh, right«, Dad says, and slows down. Mum bends over him in order to see out of his window. »There it is.« She's pointing to a brick house with a white roof. I let Elvis croon his final *and his mama cries*, then I press the stop button and take my earphones out. I can already see Nelly and her parents standing by the garden gate, waving. I feel almost as sick as Elvis did after his twentieth hamburger. Nelly and I had been at school together for our first year of junior school when her father was working on a research project in Germany. As our fathers were colleagues, Nelly and I were supposed to become best friends. Since I was very well aware, though, that nobody would ever want to be friends with me in a million years, I simply ignored Nelly. Nelly moaned to her father about me, and he moaned to my father. And Dad moaned to me.

And now there was going to be this big reunion of these two best friends. Dad switches the engine off and undoes his seat-belt. I act as if I'm having difficulty untangling the strap of Klara's booster seat, and take the opportunity to look surreptitiously out of the window. Nelly has long dark hair and is wearing a short denim skirt and a white t-shirt. Unfortunately, she looks as good as she does in the photos that the Fitzmartins send us every Christmas. They're not any old photos of the kind that you'd send to grannies and old aunties; no, they're properly printed cards. On the front is the whole family standing by a waterfall; underneath, it says *Peace to the World - the Fitzmartin family*. Looks like an advert for the Jehova's Witnesses. »Stoppit!« Clara has noticed that her seat-belt isn't tangled at all, and starts pulling at it herself. I let it go and try to take the jar away from her that she's been clutching throughout the whole journey. She collects her piss in the jar, which I find pretty revolting. »Klara's just going through a phase in which she's realising that her urine belongs to her, and she wants to collect and save this product«, Mum explained. I still think it's revolting. And embarrassing to boot. At home, Klara has an entire shelf in the bathroom devoted to her piss-pots. She even got Mum to stick stickers to the jars with the date on them, to say when she produced their priceless contents. I try to snatch the jar, and Klara starts howling. Nelly's mother sticks her head into Klara's side of the car. »Hey, what's up? Aren't you getting out?« Then she spots the jar and takes it from Klara, who's still thinking that she only has to defend her jar against me, so doesn't react quickly enough. When Nelly's mother realises what's in the jar, she hastily puts it down on the parcel shelf, murmuring: »disgusting«. I can hear Mum outside the car saying something about urine being a product. »Hey!« I turn round and see Nelly. »Hello«. I get out. Nelly hurls herself at me and pulls me towards her. Just before we actually touch, she pushes me away again. Her mother has the same hugging technique; only her father shakes hands

with me. I have to fish my hand out of my pocket first because Dad has dinned it into us beforehand that Americans don't shake hands, and the quickest way to 'out' yourself as a German in America was to go around trying to shake hands with everyone. Ah well, maybe Mr. Fitzmartin has said beforehand, »if I remember rightly, those Germans go around shaking hands with everyone within a hundred-mile radius - so I'd better do it too, to make them feel at home«. I leave him standing there holding out his hand for ages because I can't get my own hand out of my pocket.

Either the Fitzmartins haven't tidied up or they are genuinely hungry. Once we've all said hello to one another, we don't do anything like go inside. Oh no. Mr. Fitzmartin declares that they'll take their car and we can follow on behind them, as we are going to eat all together at an Amish market. »You'll love it«, says Nelly's mother, and laughs.

In the car, Dad tells us what the Amish are, while Mum has her forehead glued to the windscreen and keeps saying »right!«, »left!« and »get into the right-hand lane!« »The Amish live just as they did a hundred years ago!« says Dad. »No electricity, or any other modern conveniences!« He sounds as if he had fifty tourists sitting in the back, rather than just Klara and me. »The Amish,« Dad continues, »emigrated to America from South Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries. Even today, they still speak a south German dialect; it will be interesting to see if we can understand them!« Despite having lived in North Germany for years, Dad has a bit of a thing about South Germany - or, more precisely, Swabia - because that's where he comes from. Dad left Swabia such a long time ago that he's forgotten that everything's not that great there either. He's turned into a real Swabian patriot. For instance, he doesn't ask the baker for »a bread-roll, please«, but says: »I'd like one of those things that we call a barm-cake at home, but which is called a bread-roll here.« The shop assistants always give him a funny look, and I back away and loiter behind the bistro tables, hoping that they don't realise that I'm the daughter of that weirdo man.

»Turn right!« yells Mum. Mr. Fitzmartin hasn't indicated. Presumably making one last sudden and hopeful attempt to lose us. Dad wrenches the steering wheel round, and I'm thrust against Klara's booster seat. She whines her usual »stoppit«. Dad makes a quick recovery; he has to, as there's something for him to bang on about after all - and he's not one to miss such an opportunity. »The Amish are a subgroup of the Mennonites, if you're familiar with them«, he says, looking at me in the rear-view mirror. »Yep, I'm familiar with them«, I say, »they're those young men who go round all tarted up in suits, trying to convert you«. »They«, says Dad, »are mormons«. In the mirror, I can see the corners of his mouth twitching behind his beard. Right yet again. I look out of the window and see endless fields. Rather nice,

actually. »The Amish still don't have cars!« Dad's mouth seems to have tired of smiling, and now needs to move again. »Like them there?«I asked, pointing to the open jeep that's coming towards us. At the wheel are two men with beards and broad-brimmed hats. Dad looks at the Amish men in the jeep as if they were driving along for the sole purpose of annoying him. »The exception that proves the rule!« he then says.

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