



Excerpt from

Maren Wurster's

Hier bleiben können wir auch nicht

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We can't stay here either
by Maren Wurster
Part one

I opened my eyes, lifted the latch, and pulled open the large wooden gate. A paved, covered walkway led into the garden. As I surveyed the garbage cans, the piles of junk, the crates, the walker, the wheelbarrow filled with broken glass, I thought back to that first viewing. I'd clocked all the trash then, too — all the things I would need to get rid of. The house had already stood empty for many years, but abandoned items were still strewn about everywhere. The realtor had shrugged when I'd asked about the bed in one of the rooms. Instantly, I'd pictured an elderly man who'd died there in his sleep.

“Come with me,” I took Marie’s hand and we walked together into the garden. It was walled in on three sides and overgrown. The grass in the back was illuminated by the morning sun, a bright trapezoid streaming down, a smattering of yellow leaves already dotting the lush green. Ivy had spread above the entrance to the kitchen. A branch blocked the door, only snapping when I yanked on the handle. In one corner of the kitchen, there was an integrated stovetop, a dishwasher to the right. There were dust bunnies on the stone floor, stirred up by the air and the presence of people.

“This is our kitchen,” I said.

Marie drew in her shoulders. She was cold despite the warm summer day. The door to the hallway scraped against the floor and led to the front entrance, which could only be opened from the inside. From the outside, the lock was broken.

“You’ll need to replace the cylinder,” the realtor had said.

“Or always enter through the garden,” I’d retorted, amused by the idea. Sure, it would have been nice to have one of those old front doors that I could open with a long black key. But it wasn’t that type of house. It may have had that traditional look of half-timbered white brick, but it was actually built in the 1960s. Not a true old house, just one made to fit in alongside the others in the town.

The two rooms connected by the hallway were both dark. Marie stayed glued to my side. The windows to the street were hidden behind motorized shutters. They clanged and clattered as they rose, sending down a shower of twigs, dust, and feathers. I was sure that I’d never touch that switch again, never again shut out light from these rooms. I opened the windows.

We then walked up the narrow staircase to the floor above. Upstairs was just as sticky and dark. There were two doors. I felt Marie’s fingers twitch against my palm.

“I want to go back down,” she said.

“We need to air this place out,” I said.

Marie tugged on my hand, shifting her body so that I had to counterbalance her weight. When I opened one of the doors, we were accosted by a terrible smell.

Marie buried her nose and mouth in the crease of her elbow. “Mama, come on,” she said.

I flicked on the light. There was a mass of feathers on the floor in front of the window. Flies scattered from the dead crow, its head bowed toward its breast, as if it had died in its sleep. Where an eye had once been, there was now just a gaping hole, frayed around the edges. Its whole body was pitted, its skeleton exposed from its supple middle. It was covered in a white slime, its plumage stuck to it. The overall impression was one of wetness. Suppressing my urge to retch, I covered my mouth and stepped past the bird to get to the window. I opened the shutters and then the window. Marie was still by the door, staring at the dead animal.

“We’ll take care of the crow later. I imagine it got disoriented and died here,” I said.

“Where are his eyes?”

“That’s what happens when the body breaks down. All that’s left in the end is the bird’s skeleton.”

“I want to go back down,” Marie said.

“Yes, let’s go.”

We returned to the hallway.

“Does Papa not have *his* eyes anymore?” Marie’s expression was somber.

“Let’s go sit in the garden.”

“Does Papa not have his eyes anymore?” she repeated.

“Probably not. His body would have broken down in the grave too.”

“But then, how does he see me?” Marie’s mouth was agape. Even as she looked at me, waiting for an answer, I could see her focus twisting inward, some hazy picture coming into focus. I ushered her to the stairs.

“But you said he could see me. You’re a liar!” She shouted, clambering down the steps.

“Papa *does* see you.” I hurried after her. Marie ran into the garden, jamming her foot into the ground.

“His soul is what sees you.” I laid my hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off. “The soul never goes away. Papa’s soul is always there for you.”

“But with no eyes.”

Right, I thought.

Marie had managed meanwhile to make a hole in the ground.

“Hey, look at that,” I said. “You started a grave for the crow.”

Marie clamped her hands over her ears, her elbows jutting out. I couldn't see her face, but it looked as if her gaze was fixed on the wall opposite. I scanned the garden. There was a marshy-looking hole, which must have been a small pond at some point. And in one corner, there was a stone terrace. It had an oven, chairs, and a table with only one leg leaning against the wall. My stomach felt queasy.

That evening, I made up our bed in the small room downstairs. The air mattress first, and then Marie's sheepskins on top, the ones I always had with me. She'd laid on them ever since she was a baby. The first time she rolled onto her belly was on one of them. I hung the cloth with the butterflies in the window. I had sewn it for her before she was born. I wasn't any good at sewing, but I had felt it was important that I make something for my daughter with my own two hands. That perhaps one of her earliest memories could be of butterflies floating in the breeze.

“It's late,” I told her. “And this is a special night.”

Marie cuddled up next to me. I scooted the blanket under our bodies so that we were both wrapped up and snug. Only her little head peeked out.

“What we dream tonight will come true,” I said. “That's what happens in the first night in a new house. So we should do our best to dream beautiful things.”

Marie's body was warm and soft. When one of us moved, it shifted the mattress, jostling us this way and that until the rocking settled and we came to lie still.

From this very spot, our home would emerge, a place where we could stay. There was a lot to do, but we had everything we needed to do it. At night, we could retreat to our bed and during the day, we would tackle all the necessities. Clean, arrange the furniture, sort everything into cabinets. The foundation was there: A home that belonged to us. I had been able to pay every cent of the purchase price. No bank was involved. No other soul had a claim to these four walls. They were ours and ours alone. Our safe space. Marie's safe space. I'd long had the feeling — in fact, I'd had it since the moment she was born — that I needed to protect her. That it was my duty to give her as carefree a childhood as possible. But it was Tom's death that allowed me to realize it. His death and his money.

“How'd he get in here?” Marie asked.

I opened my eyes. “Who?”

“That bird.”

“Maybe a window was open...”

“But they were all closed.”

“There could have been a hole in the wall.”

“What kind of a hole?”

“In the brickwork maybe.”

“But *where*?”

“I’m really not sure.”

“The door was closed.”

“Maybe it squeezed through the gap under the door.”

“But *why*?”

“I don’t know, Marie,” I said, hearing the strain in my voice. I realized how exhausted I was. “Should we bury it in the garden tomorrow?”

“No. I don’t want to see him again.”

“I understand.”

“No you don’t.”

“What don’t I understand?” I touched my hand to her cheek.

Marie turned her face to the side. “Nothing,” she said.

“Please, talk with me. Tell me what I don’t understand.”

I had imagined that Marie and I would be able to talk about everything, Tom’s death too. But the moment I tried to even broach the topic, she clammed up. As if she didn’t trust me.

“Please, Marie.” I was only making it worse. She didn’t want to talk, and I knew it. She turned her head away from me, taking the blanket with her.

“Talk with me, please. I asked you a question.” I tugged on the blanket.

Marie remained silent, and I could feel my anger start to simmer, flushing through my chest, coursing down my arms.

“At least say good night.”

She held her silence, stubborn.

“Marie,” my voice bounced off the walls of the empty room.

“Good night,” she said.

“Oh, so you *can* talk.” I twisted the skin between my fingers until it hurt, and my anger subsided.

“Marie, I’m sorry. Sleep well,” I said after some time had passed. I willed her to have sweet dreams, and then stared up at the ceiling.

A little while later, her body succumbed to sleep, her limbs curling up. She slipped away to dreamland, her breath deepening.

Gingerly, I stood up and went outside, grabbing the shovel I’d spotted against the garden wall. I walked upstairs and came to the door which fit just so in its frame. Even though the window had been open since the afternoon, the smell was still unpleasant. I inspected the walls. There was no hole, just two recessed windows, a graveyard of flies on the ledge. The radiator was just below it. The exposed pipes were neatly finished at the points where they disappeared into the wall.

I tried to shimmy the shovel underneath the bird, but at first it just dragged on the ground, leaving a dark trail, until it flopped onto the blade, which gave the impression it was still alive. I stopped. One wing was twisted in the wrong direction. I was worried it would break off, but it didn’t. With the shovel balanced straight out in front of me, I crept down the stairs. Back in the garden, while debating where I could dig a hole, I hummed a hymn we sang at Tom’s funeral. *Arise and shine, arise and shine, arise and shine, for your light has come...* His mother had heaved sobs, and Marie had looked at her, a little annoyed.

Tomorrow we’d make a cross and put out a candle. Marie and I, together. I walked over to the garbage cans, opened one of them, and slid the crow inside. It landed with a thud in the darkness. My head throbbed.

“To hell with you,” I said.