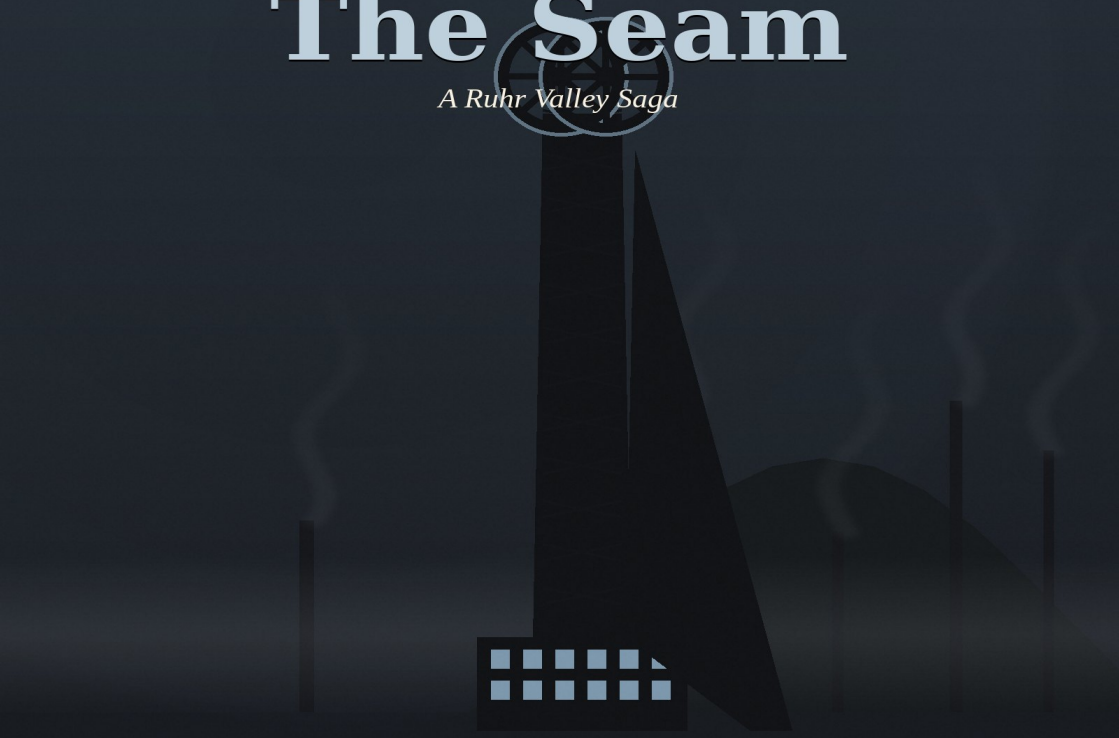
VOLUME THREE

## Turning Away

*Voßlohe, 1962–1989*

# The Seam

*A Ruhr Valley Saga*



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Novel · written with Claude Opus

# The Seam - Turning Away

*Drama / Family and Social Novel*

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# Chapter 1 - Turning Away

In the year sixty-two Voßlohe looked like prosperity itself. The wounds of the war were overgrown, the rubble cleared or built over, the shop windows stacked with goods, the first cars in front of the houses, and the colony, once grey and poor, had grown friendlier, painted, with proper bathrooms now instead of the privy in the yard. The economic miracle had reached the district, and whoever had lived through the hunger winters scarcely trusted the peace that had come so suddenly and so full.

But beneath the prosperity the ground was already beginning to sway, and those who knew did not yet speak it. The cheap oil came, from Arabia, from Texas, in tankers, and it was cheaper than the coal one wrested from the Ruhr mountain at eight hundred metres' depth, with human strength and human lungs. Heating oil instead of coal, oil in the power stations, oil in the factories. The first pits in the district reported losses, the first spoke of closure, and the word August had never heard as a boy went round: coal crisis. That the coal, which seemed eternal, which had made and fed and ruled the district, might itself come to an end, not in the mountain but on the market, that was a thought the people of Voßlohe did not dare to think, and yet they thought it, at night, when the wheel turned and they did not know for how much longer.

Marga was twenty-eight now, married to a man who worked at the post office, and she worked in the wages office of the Morgenstern pit. It was the nearest a woman could come to the mountain: not down, never down, but into the administration, to the

figures, to the lists, into the pit's memory made of paper. Marga kept the wage accounts, and she was good at it, exact, fast, and she saw, as her mother had foretold, more from her place than many who were below: she saw the figures of the whole pit, saw the production costs rise and the coal price fall, saw the scissors opening, and she understood earlier than most that these scissors would not close again.

Jakob was twenty-four, unmarried, a hewer at Morgenstern, like the father, like the grandfather. He was a good butty, well-liked, sturdy, straightforward, one you could rely on at the face and in the kiosk. He did not think of coal crises and scissors; he thought of the next shift, of the girl he wanted to marry, of the motorcycle he would buy. For Jakob the pit was eternal because it had always been there, and a man does not think about the end of what has always been there.

August, fifty-four now and looking older, no longer rode down. The lung no longer allowed it; miner's lung, the occupational disease that took every old hewer sooner or later, had him in its grip, and he sat out his days on the house bench, coughed, and watched the headframe whose wheel turned, all his life it had turned, and he felt, with the certainty of the dying, that it would not run much longer, not for him and not for the pit.

"Turning away," August said once, when a young hewer from the neighbourhood left the pit, dismissed, with a severance, a turning-away bonus, as it was called when a man turned his back on mining. "Once turning away meant a man left because he'd found something better. Today it means the pit doesn't need him any more." He coughed. "Soon they'll all turn away. Not because they want to. Because they're made to." And he looked at Marga, who brought him

his food, and Jakob, who came from the shift, and thought that his children would live through the end, the end of the coal, the end of the world they had been born into, and that no one had prepared them for it, because no one had believed this world could end.

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# Chapter 2 - The Recruited

They came in sixty-four, by train, out of Anatolia, young men with cardboard suitcases and addresses on scraps of paper, recruited through an agreement between two governments, one of which needed workers and the other work. The district needed hewers, for the German boys no longer wanted to go down; they had other ways now, in the economic miracle, ways up top, into clean trades, and so one fetched those who still wanted or had to go down, from Turkey, from Anatolia, from the other end of a world they had never seen.

Hasan Yıldız was one of them, twenty-six, from a village near Kayseri, where there were stones and goats and no work. He came with the resolve to stay three years, earn money, return, and build a house, and he rode down at Morgenstern, into the same shaft Wilhelm and August had ridden into, into the same depth, the same darkness, and the mountain did not ask where a man came from.

Jakob got him at the face. It was chance, or it was none; one assigned the new men to the experienced hewers, and Jakob was experienced and counted as easy-going, one who made no trouble. At first it was difficult; Hasan spoke hardly any German, did not know the mountain, and Jakob had to show him everything, with hands and feet, and it went slowly, and many another hewer would have cursed at the foreigner who held him up. But underground, Hasan learned it quickly and Jakob had never known it otherwise, only one thing counted: whether a man held the face, whether one could rely on him, whether he was there when the roof came. And Hasan was there. He was a good worker, brave, reliable, and after a few weeks

the foreigner had become a butty, in the old, hard sense of the word, one to whom Jakob entrusted his back and who entrusted Jakob his, and that was more than any friendship up top.

Up top it was different. Up top the Turks were the foreigners, who ate differently, prayed differently, looked different, and not everyone in the colony was friendly. There was mistrust, rumour, sometimes open hostility. Housing was scarce, and that now foreigners came and needed housing too did not please everyone. One heard sentences one had heard in the war, about those who were different, and some who had themselves once come to the district as Masurian or Polish immigrants, whose grandfathers had been called Sczepanek and Wójcik, now said of the Turks what had once been said of their own grandfathers, and did not notice the irony.

Hasan planned the return, year after year anew. One more year, he said, then the house, then back. But then he brought the wife over, and then the children came, almost German children already, who learned Ruhr German in the colony's yard and knew the snow and the slag heap and the miner's song, and for whom Turkey was a holiday land, strange and hot, not home. And with each year the return grew more distant, a dream one nursed in order to bear the staying, and Hasan stayed, the way so many stayed, in a country that had called them and not expected them to stay.

Marga watched the new men come, from her place in the wages office, where now the foreign names too entered the lists, Yıldız, Öztürk, Kaya, beside the old names, Kortmann, Schäfer, Imhof. And she saw something that gave her pause: that underground a solidarity lived that knew no borders, none of language, none of faith, none of passport. The butty was the butty, Turkish or German, because the mountain made all equal, because the roof did not ask whom it

crushed. And she thought of her own family's history, of the feud with the Brasses, of her father's silence, of the stroke he had spoken of, and she sensed, without yet knowing it, that somewhere in that family history precisely this solidarity had been betrayed that here, underground, between Jakob and Hasan, lived again, as if nothing had ever happened.

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# Chapter 3 - The Dying of the Pits

It did not die with one blow, the district. It died pit by pit, over years, a long dying, and every closed pit was a piece of death that moved nearer to Morgenstern, to Voßlohe, to the Kortmanns.

First it was the small ones, the unprofitable, the old. Then larger ones. The shafts were filled, the headframes blown up or sold, the workforces dissolved, paid off with turning-away bonuses, retrained where possible, or sent into early retirement if they were old enough. Whole colonies suddenly stood at a pit that no longer mined, and the people who had known all their lives who they were, because they were miners, suddenly no longer knew it.

In sixty-six they founded the Ruhrkohle AG, the RAG, into which almost all the pits of the district were combined, one single great enterprise meant to organise the orderly retreat, to administer the dying, in a socially acceptable way, as they said, a word meant to soften the harshness and only named it. The old independence of the Morgenstern pit ended; it was now part of a corporation, a number, a line in a balance sheet, and balance-sheet lines, Marga knew from the wages office, were struck out when they were red.

Jakob and Hasan feared for the shift, as everyone feared. Morgenstern still ran, still mined, but everyone knew it was a reprieve, not a permanence. Families moved away, to where there was still work, or into the new industries one tried to lure into the district, with modest success. The young went first; the old stayed, because they could go nowhere else, and clung to a pit that no longer needed them, the way one clings to a dying man one knows is going

and yet cannot let go.

August lived through the beginning of this dying and grasped it more deeply than the younger, because he had lived through the whole world that was now ending. He had survived three wars, two inflations, the dictatorship, the collapse, and always the coal had remained, the mountain, the wheel, the one certainty under all catastrophes. That now the coal itself was dying, that the eternal was finite, struck him deeper than anything else, for it took from what he had suffered and done its meaning. He had sent a boy to his death for the production, for the coal, for the figure. And now the figure was worth nothing, the production at an end, the coal a discontinued model. For what, then, the boy's death? For what the betrayal, of which he sensed it existed, further back, with the father? Everything the family had built on, the whole fault, all of it had been incurred for something that now vanished, and that was the last bitterness: that the guilt remained and what one had taken it on oneself for passed away.

"It was all for nothing," August said once to Marga, coughing, on the house bench. "Do you understand? The whole drudgery. What did we do it for. For the coal. And now no one wants the coal any more."

"Not everything was for nothing," said Marga. "You lived. You raised us."

"Yes." August looked over at the headframe. "But some things we did that need not have been. For the coal. And the coal passes, and what we did does not pass." He coughed long. "That stays, Marga. That's the only thing that stays."

Marga listened and laid it to the other pieces, the stroke, the name, the silence, and she felt that the father was near to saying something, the whole of it, and that the time for it was growing short, as short as

the time of the pit, and that she would soon have to ask, before it was too late, before both fell silent, the father in death and the pit in decay.

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# Chapter 4 - The List

It happened during a work no one liked to do: the sorting of the old holdings. The RAG had the archives of the combined pits put in order, room made, the old weeded out, and because Marga sat in the wages office and was exact and knew her way among the old papers, she was given the task of going through the holdings of the Morgenstern pit, the memory made of paper that reached back into the last century.

It was dusty, lonely work, in a cellar room beneath the wage hall, among shelves full of files, wage books, output lists, protocols. Marga read herself into it. She was curious, she had always been curious, and here was the whole life of the pit written down, generation upon generation, and she leafed and read and found the names of her family, Wilhelm Kortmann, August Kortmann, wage line upon wage line, a life in figures.

And then she found the lists of nineteen-hundred-five.

They were the files of the great strike, which for some reason had been kept, perhaps because no one had ever looked at them again. Strike protocols, correspondence of the directorate, and among them a folder marked "Disciplinings." Marga opened it. It was a list of names, men who had been dismissed after the strike, blacklisted, banned across the district, and beside each name a note: ringleader, spokesman, agitator.

And at the very top of the list stood: Heinrich Brass.

Marga read the name, and something contracted in her. Brass. The feud, the not-greeting, the old story no one spoke of. Here was a

Brass, blacklisted, nineteen-hundred-five, and she read on, and on an enclosed sheet, an internal note of the directorate, in the copperplate hand of a clerk, stood the sentence that changed Marga's life: that the names of the ringleaders had been "supplied from a reliable quarter within the workforce," and that the informant, "a capable hewer," had been promised in reward "the prospect of an overman's post."

Marga sat quite still in the dusty cellar. A capable hewer. An overman's post, in reward. Nineteen-hundred-five. And her grandfather Wilhelm Kortmann had become overman, precisely in those years, the thin boy without a father, of whom the family had always told that he had made it by diligence. She searched further, with trembling hands, and found it: a second sheet, a note, an initial, a hand, and the initial was "W. K.", and the date fitted, and Wilhelm Kortmann's promotion date, which she knew from the wage books, lay three months after the disciplining of Heinrich Brass.

There was no proof in the strict sense, no signature, no confession. But there was enough. There was more than enough for a person who forgot nothing, who had heard the father speak of a stroke at night, who had felt the not-greeting of the Brasses all her life. The pieces fitted, all at once, the picture Marga had been gathering since her childhood became complete: her grandfather had broken the solidarity in the strike, had betrayed Heinrich Brass, had got the rise for it, and on this betrayal stood everything, the house, the modest prosperity, Marga's own secure childhood, her place in the wages office, everything.

She held the list in her hands, long, in the dusty cellar beneath the dying pit. She did not take it; that would have been theft, and Marga did not steal. But neither did she simply lay it back into the folder, to be weeded out, to be forgotten. She knew, in that moment, that she

had to do something with this list, that she would not be able to keep silent like her father and her grandfather, that the silence the Kortmanns had passed on from generation to generation would end with her, because she could not do otherwise, because she forgot nothing and now, at last, knew everything.

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# Chapter 5 - Ruth Brass

Marga needed weeks before she found the courage, and for a long time she did not even know what she actually wanted to do. Accuse? There was no one left to accuse; Wilhelm was dead, Heinrich was dead, the strike was over sixty years past. Make amends? What could one make amends to a dead man? But simply to continue the silence, to lay the list back and forget, the way her father and her grandfather had kept silent, that she could not do either. So she did the only thing that seemed right to her: she sought out the Brasses.

It was not hard to find them. Otto Brass had died a few years before, old, embittered, honoured by the party and the union as a persecuted man of the regime, but he had descendants, and one of them was Ruth, his granddaughter, a woman in her mid-thirties, a teacher at the secondary school and active in the union, one who bore the name Brass with pride and knew the family history, or what the family told itself.

Marga wrote her a letter, factual, brief, that she had found something in the pit's archive concerning the Brass family, from the year nineteen-hundred-five, and whether they could meet. Ruth answered, coolly, briefly, that she could meet, and they met in a café in town, two women whose families had not greeted each other for three generations and who now sat at a table, stiff, full of old coldness.

"You're a Kortmann," said Ruth as she sat down, and it was no greeting, it was a statement, almost a reproach.

"Born Kortmann. Yes."

"Then you know our families have nothing to say to each other."

"I know they've said nothing to each other for generations," replied Marga. "I don't know whether they have nothing to say to each other. That's a difference."

Ruth looked at her, surprised by the clarity. "What do you want, Frau Kortmann?"

Marga laid the copy on the table, the one she had made for herself, word for word, of the disciplining list and the note and the entry with the initial W. K. She had taken nothing from the archive, but she had copied it all, and she pushed it to Ruth and said: "Read it."

Ruth read. Marga watched her read, saw the other woman's face change, from coldness to tension to shock. Ruth knew the family legend: that her great-grandfather Heinrich had been blacklisted in the great strike, betrayed by one of his own ranks, and that the family had never recovered, and that the traitor was said to have been a Kortmann. But it had been a legend, a tale passed on without being provable, a wound without proof. And now the proof lay before her, black on white, copied from the pit's archive, by a Kortmann.

"Why," said Ruth at last, and her voice was no longer cool, "why do you bring me this? A Kortmann. Why do you dig up what incriminates your own family?"

"Because it's true," said Marga. "And because in my family silence has been kept for three generations. My grandfather kept silent. My father keeps silent, he's dying and keeps silent. And I can't keep silent any more. I don't know what's right, Frau Brass. I don't know what one does with such a thing. But I know I can't lay it back and forget it. That would be the fourth. Four generations of silence. And at some point someone has to open his mouth."

Ruth sat there, the copy in her hand, and in her face many things struggled: the old hatred, which now had a proof and was allowed to rage; the shock that the legend was true; and something else, unexpected, a reluctant respect for the woman opposite her, the traitor's granddaughter, who had come to bring her own family's guilt to light.

"What do you want to do," asked Ruth.

"I don't know," said Marga honestly. "That's why I'm here. It concerns you as much as me. Perhaps more. I didn't want to decide it over your head. It's the story of your great-grandfather. You should have a say in what becomes of it."

And that, Ruth thought, that no Kortmann had ever done: let a Brass have a say. She put the copy away, slowly, and said: "I have to think about it." And they parted, the two women, without reconciliation, without enmity, with a shared burden that lay between them like the list on the table, and neither of them knew whether war would come of it or peace, but both knew the silence was over.

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# Chapter 6 - Jakob Underground

While Marga wrestled above with the past, Jakob lived the present below, and the present was a water inrush in the east field.

It came without warning, the way water often comes: an old, forgotten body of standing water behind a thin layer of rock, and when they hewed into the seam, it broke through, a black, cold flood that shot into the roadway and swept everything along. Jakob and Hasan were furthest forward, at the face, and the water came between them and the way back, rose fast, and for a moment there was only panic, the verdict of the mountain, the drowning in the dark, eight hundred metres below the sun.

But they did not lose their heads, neither of them. Hasan knew an old ventilation rise, a cross-cut upward, of which the maps no longer spoke, but which he had discovered on an earlier shift, and he pulled Jakob with him, through the rising water, up into the rise, and they climbed, in the dark, the water beneath them, until they reached a higher level and were safe. Without Hasan's knowledge of the forgotten rise, Jakob would have drowned. Without Jakob's strength, who steadied the slighter Hasan at the difficult spots, Hasan would not have got up. They saved each other, by turns, in the dark, and came out alive, and in the washhouse, scrubbing the water from their skin, they looked at each other and laughed, the laugh of the survivors, and Hasan said in his Ruhr German with the Anatolian ring: "Us two, Jakob. Mountain don't get us."

That was comradeship, in the oldest, hardest sense, the same sense in which Heinrich Brass had once torn the young Wilhelm

Kortmann by the collar out of the roof, sixty years before, in the same mountain. The mountain repeated itself, the way it always repeated itself, and created the same situation: two men who saved each other's lives, without asking, without reckoning, without asking after origin or faith or passport. Only this story went on differently from that of Wilhelm and Heinrich. Jakob would not betray Hasan. The thought would never have come to Jakob, as little as the thought would have come to him of forgetting to breathe in his sleep. The butty was the butty. That was all. That was Jakob's whole philosophy, and it was, without his knowing it, the counter-design to everything his family had on its conscience.

That evening Jakob came home, weary, alive, and Marga was there, she was often there now, with the sick father, and she saw at once that something had happened.

"Water in the east field," said Jakob curtly. "Hasan and I, we only just got out." He said it without drama, the way miners said such things. "Hasan knew an old rise. Without it I'd have stayed down there."

Marga looked at her brother, the straightforward, simple Jakob, who owed his life to a Turkish butty and did not think for a second that the Turk was a Turk, and she thought of the list in her bag, of Wilhelm, who had betrayed his butty, and she said, almost involuntarily: "Jakob. Would you ever betray Hasan? If it got tight. If you had to choose between him and yourself."

Jakob looked at her as if she had asked something mad. "Betray? Hasan?" He shook his head, slowly, not understanding why she asked at all. "Marga. The man saved my life today. Underground you don't betray anyone. Never. Sooner bite off your own tongue." He went to the basin. "What kind of question is that."

"Nothing," said Marga. "A stupid question."

But it had been no stupid question. It was the question around which their whole family history turned, and Jakob had answered it without knowing, with the matter-of-factness of one who had never fallen into the temptation and perhaps never would, because he was made of a wood that did not betray. And Marga grasped that it existed, both, in the same family, in the same blood: the betrayal of the grandfather and the unconditional loyalty of the brother, and that the one did not cancel the other, but that it meant nothing was predetermined, that everyone chose anew, that the fault was inherited and the loyalty too, and that what mattered was what one made of it when the hour came.

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# Chapter 7 - August's Last Word

August died in autumn, slowly, of the lung the mountain had taken from him, ton by ton, shift by shift. He lay in the room, at the window from which one saw the headframe, and fought for air that no longer came, and Marga sat with him, day and night in the last weeks, because Lena, herself grown old, could no longer manage alone, and because Marga wanted to be with him before it was too late.

She had not yet given the list out of her hands. She had spoken with Ruth Brass, once, twice, and they were still wrestling with what to do, and Marga wanted, before she decided, to hear the one thing only her father could tell her. So she asked him, on one of those last nights, when he was clear, clearer than for weeks, in that lucidity that sometimes comes just before the end.

"Father," she said. "I have to ask you something. About Grandfather. How he became overman, back then, nineteen-hundred-five. And about the Brasses."

August looked at her, long, and in his eyes there was no surprise, almost relief. "You know it," he said.

"I found the list. In the archive. The disciplinings. Heinrich Brass. And the note that the names came from someone in the workforce, who became overman for it. Three months before Grandfather became overman."

August closed his eyes. For a while there was only his breath, the rattling. Then he said, and this time he did not break off, this time he said it whole, because he was dying and the dying man no longer

needs the silence: "Yes. He betrayed them. In the strike. Heinrich Brass and the others. He gave their names, in the counting house, in the night, and for it he kept the house and the shift and became overman. My father. Your grandfather. On that everything stands, Marga. The house you grew up in. The money that paid for my wedding. Everything. It rests on Heinrich Brass's ruin."

Marga held his hand. "Did he tell you?"

"Never. In words never. But I knew it, long. One knew it. Mother knew it. Otto Brass knew it. Everyone knew it and no one said it." He coughed. "And I," he said, and now came the heaviest, "I did it too, Marga. Not the same betrayal. A different one. In the war."

And he told her of Tadeusz. Of the Polish boy who had saved his life, at the face, under the roof. And of the order to work the west field, the firedamp-prone one, and of the stroke he had not made, the one stroke that would have struck Tadeusz's name from the list, and of the explosion, and of the dead boy on the yard. "I could have saved him," said August. "With one stroke. And I didn't do it. Out of fear for my position. Like my father. Exactly like my father. The apple doesn't fall far, Marga. We Kortmanns, we save ourselves and let the other fall. That's our inheritance. That's what you carry in you, whether you want it or not."

Marga wept, quietly, and held the dying father's hand, and in her there was horror and pity and something greater than both, a clarity. "You're wrong," she said. "That's not our only inheritance. Jakob would never betray Hasan. Never. That's Kortmann blood too. You didn't only pass on the betrayal, Father. You also passed on Jakob, who is loyal to the death. And you passed on me. And I will not keep silent."

August looked at her, and in his dying face there was something that looked almost like hope. "What will you do?"

"I don't know quite yet. But I won't bury it. Not like you. The silence ends with me, Father. That I promise you. Whatever I do, I'll do it in the light."

August pressed her hand, weakly, and said: "Then it wasn't all for nothing. That I made you." And a few days later he died, at the window, with his gaze on the headframe whose wheel turned, and Marga closed his eyes and remained sitting, long, with the whole truth in her now, the truth of two generations, the grandfather's betrayal and the father's failure, and with the promise she had given and would keep, cost what it might.

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# Chapter 8 - What to Do with It

After the funeral Marga and Ruth Brass sat together again, this time not in the café but in Marga's kitchen, for the matter had grown too big for a public place, and they wrestled with the question that had no easy answer: what does one do with a truth that benefits no one any more and harms no one any more, because all who are concerned are dead?

Ruth wanted to make it public, fully, at once. "My great-grandfather was slandered," she said. "For sixty years it was said in the valley, in the district, the Brasses, they were troublemakers, agitators, who had only themselves to blame for their ruin. And the truth is that he was a decent man who fought for the workforce, and that a traitor from his own ranks destroyed him. That belongs in the light. That is the least one owes him."

"And what good does it do him," asked Marga. "He's dead. Heinrich Brass has been dead for forty years. No scandal rehabilitates him any more."

"It serves his memory. It serves his descendants. It serves the truth."

"And it shames my descendants," said Marga. "My brother, who can do nothing about it. My children. It shames half a valley, for you know, Ruth, my grandfather was not the only one. Whoever came up a little in those years probably also failed to make a stroke, or named a name, or looked away. If we open this up, where does it stop?"

She was tempted, Marga felt it, tempted to let it rest. It would have been so easy. No one knew of the list except her and Ruth. She

could lay it back, into the archive, to be weeded out, and everything would stay as it was, the memory and the shame and the silence, sixty years settled, comfortable in its bitterness. It was the same temptation that had bound her grandfather and bought her father, and Marga recognised it: it worked not through threat but through reason, through the quiet voice that said it was better for everyone to let the heavy rest. So all the Kortmanns had kept silent. So the whole district kept silent, about so much. Silence was cheap, and talk was dear, and Marga understood for the first time fully why three generations had chosen the cheap.

She chose the dear. But she chose it her way, not Ruth's.

"I won't make it a scandal," she said. "No exposing, no accusing, no pillory. Nothing gets better from that, it only breeds new hatred, and our families have had hatred long enough. But neither do I bury it. That's the third way, Ruth, between silence and scandal: we name it. We give the truth where it belongs. A chronicle is being written for the pit's closure, a history of Morgenstern, a hundred years of mining. It belongs in there, all of it, the strike of nineteen-hundred-five, the disciplining, the betrayal, with names, certified, readable. Not hidden and not blown up into a scandal. Simply true. Simply there. Whoever wants to know it can read it. Whoever doesn't, need not. But it is no longer hidden."

Ruth thought a long time. "That's less than I wanted," she said at last.

"I know. But it's more than any Kortmann ever admitted. And it's what I can carry without doing new harm. Heinrich Brass gets his name back, clean, in the chronicle, forever. And my grandfather gets his too, beside it, with what he did. Both names, both truths. That is justice, as far as I can give it."

And Ruth, after a long silence, nodded. "Good," she said. "I'll go that way with you. But we write it together, Frau Kortmann. A Brass and a Kortmann, together. So no one can say it's the revenge of the one or the whitewash of the other."

"Together," said Marga, and they shook hands, a Kortmann and a Brass, for the first time in three generations, across the table on which the list lay, and it was no reconciliation, not yet, but it was the beginning of something greater than the feud they had inherited, and smaller than the forgiveness neither of them had to give: a shared looking, a shared naming, the end of the silence.

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# Chapter 9 - Rheinhausen

In the winter of eighty-seven the district rose once more, a last great time, and it rose for the steel, not the coal, but it was all one, for coal and steel were siblings, and when the one died, the other died with it. In Rheinhausen, on the Rhine, the Krupp steelworks was to be closed, a works with ten thousand men, the heart of a whole town, and the workforce resisted as the district had not resisted in a long time, and their resistance became a beacon for all who would no longer accept the dying of industry.

They occupied the bridge over the Rhine, the Bridge of Solidarity, as they called it, and day and night they held it occupied, in the cold, with fires in barrels, and the whole district came, from all the pits, from all the works, to show that one was not alone, that the old solidarity was not dead, that the many were still the many.

Marga went there, with Jakob and Hasan and, to her own surprise, with Ruth Brass. They drove together, in one car, the Kortmann and the Brass and the Turk, the three lines that should never have met by the logic of history, and they stood together on the bridge, in the crowd, in the smoke of the fires, and it was cold, and it was full of people, and it was, Marga thought, the opposite of everything her family had on its conscience.

For here it was, the solidarity that Wilhelm Kortmann had betrayed in nineteen-hundred-five. Here, eighty years later, on a bridge over the Rhine, it lived again, unbroken, the standing-together of the many against those who decided over their heads. It was too late, they all knew that; Rheinhausen would be closed, one way or

another, the decision had been taken elsewhere, in boardrooms, in balance sheets, and no bridge in the world would overturn it. But they stood all the same. Not because they could win, but because the standing itself was the thing, because a person must straighten up, even knowing he will fall, because dignity lies not in victory but in not giving up.

Jakob and Hasan stood shoulder to shoulder, the way they stood shoulder to shoulder underground, and sang along when they sang the miner's song, the old song, Glück auf, Glück auf, der Steiger kommt, and Hasan knew it by now, sang it with his Anatolian ring, and no one found it strange, for here, in this moment, no one was strange, here all were only one thing: people who would not let go of what was being taken from them.

And Marga looked at Ruth Brass, in the glow of the fires, and Ruth looked at Marga, and between them passed something, an understanding. "Look," said Marga. "This. This is what my grandfather betrayed. This is what your great-grandfather fought for. And look, it's still here. Eighty years later. They can't kill it."

"No," said Ruth. "They can't kill it." And after a while, more quietly: "Perhaps that's the best rehabilitation for my great-grandfather. Not an entry in a chronicle. But that what he died for is still alive. Here. Today. On this bridge."

They stood until deep into the night, in the smoke and the cold, and it was a defeat they experienced there together, for Rheinhausen fell, the way everything fell. But it was a defeat that transformed something, between the two families, who here for the first time stood not against but beside each other, in the service of the same cause for which a Brass had once died and been betrayed by a Kortmann, and which now, eighty years and three generations later,

brought the two lines together again, on a bridge that bore the name that said it all: Solidarity.

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# Chapter 10 - Hasan

When the closure of Morgenstern was decided, the ground swayed beneath Hasan Yıldız for the second time in his life. The first time had been when he left his village, a young man with a cardboard suitcase, out into a world he did not know. Now, a quarter of a century later, he lost the world in which he had become at home without quite having noticed it, and stood again before nothing, an old man this time, with grey hair and a ruined lung and children born here.

"I'm going back," said Hasan to Jakob, in the washhouse, when they talked one last time of the end. "At last. Turkey. Build a house. Like I always said." But he said it without conviction, and Jakob heard it, and both knew it was not so.

For the village near Kayseri of which Hasan had dreamed for twenty-five years, that no longer existed as such. Those he had known were gone or dead or had themselves moved away, to the cities, to Istanbul, to Germany. His children were no longer Turks, not quite; they were Ruhr children, spoke Ruhr German, knew the snow and the slag heap and the miner's song, and Turkey was for them a holiday land, strange and hot, not home. If Hasan went back, he went alone into a past that no longer existed, and left his children behind in a future that was theirs.

"Stay," said Jakob. "Your children are here. You belong here, Hasan. As much as I do. Better perhaps, for I chose nothing, I was only born here. You decided for the district, every day anew, twenty-five years long. That's more home than mine."

Hasan looked at him, the old butty, who owed him his life and to whom he owed his own, and something in his face loosened, a burden of twenty-five years, the burden of the ever-postponed going-back. "Maybe you're right," he said. "Maybe this is my village now. Voßlohe. Who'd have thought." And he laughed, the laugh of the miners, that fit so badly into the end and for that very reason made it bearable.

He stayed. The way so many stayed who had come to go and stayed because life had held them, with children, with friendships, with twenty-five years underground that mark a man like nothing else. It was no triumphant decision, no happy arrival; it was a sober staying, a resigning himself to what was, and a late, quiet dignity in it: that staying too is a choice, no failure, but a resolve.

Marga saw Hasan in those days, taking leave of the pit, and she thought of Tadeusz, of whom her father had told, the Polish boy who had wanted to go home and was not allowed to, because they had dragged him off and sent him to his death. And she saw Hasan, the Turk, who had wanted to go home and did not, because life had held him, in freedom, with children, with a butty who stood up for him. Two foreigners in the district, two men from afar, the one destroyed in war, the other staying in peace, and between them lay forty years and the whole difference between a time that used people up and one that, with all its flaws, let them live. It was no perfect peace, the district of the guest workers, there was mistrust and strangeness to the end. But Hasan was allowed to stay, allowed to grow old, allowed to watch his children grow up, and that was, measured against Tadeusz, measured against what people could do to one another, an immense progress, and Marga registered it and was grateful for it, quietly, without glossing it over.

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# Chapter 11 - Reconciliation

The chronicle appeared in the spring of eighty-nine, a slim volume, published for the closure of the Morgenstern pit, a hundred years of mining in Voßlohe, and in it stood, in a chapter on the great strike of nineteen-hundred-five, the truth that Marga and Ruth had written down together, soberly, with evidence, without triumph and without whitewash.

It stood there that in the strike the solidarity of the workforce had been broken, that names had been betrayed, that men had been blacklisted, at their head Heinrich Brass, an upright unionist who had fought for the workforce and been destroyed for it. And it stood there, provable and verifiable, that the betrayal had come from within the ranks, from a hewer who rose to overman for it, and that this hewer was called Wilhelm Kortmann. Both names. Heinrich Brass, rehabilitated. Wilhelm Kortmann, named. The truth, black on white, for anyone who wished to read it.

There was no scandal. That was what Marga had wanted, and so it came: the district received the truth the way it received everything, with the old, composed gravity. A few old people, who still knew or sensed, came to Marga, quietly, at the door, in the street, and said it was good it was out now, that their father, their grandfather had always known something of the old story and never dared to say it. Some Kortmann relatives no longer greeted Marga, were ashamed, felt betrayed by the one who had exposed the family. Marga bore it. It was a small price for a great silence she had ended.

But the most important thing happened between her and Ruth.

They stood, when the chronicle had appeared, together at the grave of Heinrich Brass, which had fallen into ruin, forgotten, untended for sixty years, because the Brasses had been too poor and too embittered to care for it. Marga had had the stone restored, at her own cost, without fuss, and now there stood again a name, legible: Heinrich Brass, and the years, and beneath them what Marga and Ruth had chosen together: "He held to the workforce."

"I can't forgive you what your family did to mine," said Ruth at the grave. "That's not for me. Heinrich would have to forgive, and Heinrich is dead. And honestly, I don't want to forgive you either, for forgiveness would be too easy, it would make it smaller than it was."

"I don't want forgiveness," said Marga. "I've done nothing I'd need to ask forgiveness for, and for what my grandfather did no one can forgive me, because it isn't mine. I only wanted it named. That it stops being hidden. No more."

"That's enough," said Ruth. "That's more than I'd ever have expected from a Kortmann." And she looked at Marga, and in her look there was not forgiveness and not enmity, but something new, something that had never existed between Brass and Kortmann: respect. "You know what's strange? My daughter and your nephew, your brother Jakob's son. They know each other. From school. They're friends, I'm told. Perhaps more." She smiled, for the first time. "A Brass and a Kortmann. Imagine."

"Imagine," said Marga, and she too smiled, and over the restored grave of Heinrich Brass, which now bore a name again and a truth, the two women shook hands, a Kortmann and a Brass, and it was no final stroke and no grand reconciliation, but something simpler and more durable: the end of a feud no one would inherit any more, because the next generation was already overcoming it, without

much ado, the way children overcome things that seemed insurmountable to the old.

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# Chapter 12 - The Last Shift

On the day of the last shift the whole town came to the Morgenstern pit, for it was not only the end of an enterprise, it was the end of a world, the only one Voßlohe had ever known.

They rode down one last time, the last shift, and Jakob was among them, and Hasan, and the others who were left, the old, who had grown old with the pit. They rode down in the early hours, the way they had ridden down all their lives, in the cage that dropped, and the square of sky disappeared above them, first grey, then greyer, then nothing at all, one last time. Below they did what had to be done, secured the roadways, laid down the tools, and then they stood one last time at the face, at the seam, man beside man, in the light of the lamps, and no one said much, for what was there to say.

"Glück auf," said Jakob at last, and this time it was no wish for the ascent but a farewell, the last Glück auf of a hundred-year story.

"Glück auf," said the others, and Hasan too, with his Anatolian ring, "Glück auf," and then they rode up, for the last time, and the cage lifted them, and the square of sky grew above them, first nothing, then grey, then day, and they stepped out into the light, for the last time as miners, and outside the town was waiting.

Up top everything was gathered. A brass band played, the flags of the union, of the clubs, and thousands of people, the families, the old, the children. Marga was there, and Lena, old and bent, in a wheelchair, who had lived through the whole century, from the wedding in the crisis to this day. Ruth Brass was there. Hasan's family was there. The whole town was there, to take its leave.

And then the wheel stopped.

It was the moment all had waited for and none wanted to bear: they shut down the winding, one last time, and the wheel of the headframe, which had turned since Wilhelm Kortmann had been a young hewer, which had turned through three wars and two inflations and a dictatorship, which had turned above all catastrophes, indifferent and tireless, the wheel stopped. It ran slower, slower, and then it stood still, and over the town lay a silence no one knew, the silence of the stopped wheel, the same silence the great strike had once brought, and the passive resistance, and the collapse, but this time it was a final silence, for this time the wheel would not start again.

The brass band played the miner's song, and a thousand people sang along, Glück auf, Glück auf, der Steiger kommt, and many wept, old men who had never wept wept openly, for with the wheel their life stopped, what they had been, what their fathers had been, what their sons would no longer be.

Marga stood in the crowd, between Jakob and Hasan, behind Lena's wheelchair, and looked at the still wheel, and she thought of all who should have stood here and stood no longer: of Wilhelm, who had kept the wheel turning at the price of a betrayal; of August, who had sent a boy to his death for the production that was now ending; of Heinrich Brass, who had died for the workforce; of Tadeusz, who had never been allowed to go home; of Bertha and Otto and Käthe and all the century had used up. They were all here, Marga thought, in this still wheel, all the dead of the hundred years, and they were all gone. The wheel stood still, and with it history stood still, the whole burden and the whole guilt and the whole loyalty, everything held its breath for a moment, and then it was over.

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# Chapter 13 - The Old Man, Opened

Before they finally shut down the pit, there was one last descent, a technical one, to abandon the roadways, switch off the pumps, leave the mountain to itself. For when the pumps fell silent, the mine water would rise, slowly, year by year, and flood the roadways that had been kept dry for a century, and the mountain would take back what man had wrested from it.

Marga was allowed to come along. It was an exception, and she owed it to Jakob and to an overman who turned a blind eye, and to the fact that the pit was dead and the old prohibitions with it. A woman in the shaft brings ill luck, it had been said, all her life, and she had stood at the gate and never been allowed through. Now, with no ill luck left to bring, with the pit already lost, she was allowed down, one single time, the woman who had been refused it all her life.

She rode down, in the cage that dropped, and the square of sky disappeared above her, first grey, then greyer, then nothing, and Marga, fifty-eight years old, experienced for the first and last time what the men of her family had experienced every day, for a hundred years: the falling into the mountain, the stomach that stays up, the darkness that the light only briefly pushes aside. She understood all at once much that she had never understood, understood it bodily, and she thought of Wilhelm, of August, of Jakob, who had ridden down here, day after day, and of what the depth does to a person.

Jakob led her. He knew the way blind, the way his father and his grandfather had known it blind, through the roadways, in the heat, in

the dripping of the water, and at last they came to a place before which lay an old, walled-up roadway, sealed long ago, the old man, the worked-out, abandoned district.

"That's one of the oldest," said Jakob. "They closed it before the First War, the old foreman says. Grandfather was still young then."

Marga stood before the wall, behind which lay the darkness, the old man that no one would now enter, in which there was nothing but hollowed rock and the water that would soon rise. And she grasped, without anyone telling her, that this was the place, that behind such walls, over the course of the years, everything had been walled up that the family and the district had buried: the grandfather's betrayal, the father's unmade stroke, the hundred years of guilt and silence, all given over to the dark, given back to the mountain, in the hope it would stay there.

But it had not stayed there. That was the truth Marga now embodied, she herself, a woman in the shaft, before the old man: what one walls up does not stay walled up. The water rises, and one day it finds a wall that does not hold, and releases what it has covered. She had opened the old man, not with her hand, but with the truth, with the chronicle, with the naming. She had done what Wilhelm and August had not dared: torn down the wall before the water tore it down.

"Come," said Jakob. "There's nothing more to see here. Just old mountain."

"No," said Marga. "Just old mountain." And she looked a moment longer at the wall, behind which lay the dark and soon the water, and then she turned away. For it was really only old mountain now. She had brought the story to light, and now that it was named, it was no longer a secret and no guilt that pressed in the dark, but only past,

readable, closed. Out of the secret had become geology again: stone, water, dark, finished. The water could rise. It would release nothing that was not already free.

They rode up, one last time, and the square of sky grew above Marga, first nothing, then grey, then day, and she stepped out into the light, the woman who had ridden down, and breathed the upper air, and above her stood the wheel, still now, forever, and it no longer asked who had turned it and at what price, for it no longer turned.

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# Chapter 14 - The Fall of the Wall

In November eighty-nine, a few months after the wheel of Morgenstern had stopped, the Wall in Berlin fell, and Marga saw it on television, the way everyone saw it on television, the people dancing on the Wall, the border opening, a world coming to an end while another began.

It was a strange simultaneity, and Marga felt it deeply. In Voßlohe a world had just been buried, the district of coal, the century of mining, the still wheel. And now, in the same autumn, another wall fell in the east, and another division ended, and the newspapers were full of new beginnings, of future, of unity, while Voßlohe still stood in farewell. Two epochs tipped at once, the one into the end, the other into the beginning, and it was as if history had taken a great breath, breathed out in the west, breathed in in the east, and no one knew what the next would bring.

For the Kortmann family the end of the pit meant something it had never known: freedom. For the first time since Wilhelm none of them was bound to the pit any more. The house no longer belonged to the pit; one had been able to buy it, cheaply, in the RAG's retreat, and Lena, old, owned for the first time in her life the roof over her head, which no one could take from her any more. Jakob, without a shift, got a turning-away bonus and a retraining; he was too young for retirement and too old for a wholly new beginning, and he stood, like many, between the times, freed and adrift at once. Hasan, who had stayed, looked for work up top, found it, lost it, found it again. And Marga, who had settled the truth, who had broken the silence,

stood before a life in which the great task was done and now only life itself remained.

It was an ambivalent freedom. For the bond to the pit had been a burden, a yoke, for a hundred years: it had owned the houses, the votes, the lives, it had demanded and taken and used people up. But it had also held. It had given a place, a belonging, a knowledge of who one was: one was a miner, one belonged to the workforce, to the colony, to the solidarity of the many. With the pit that too fell away, what had given a hold, and what remained was the freedom that was also loss, the freedom of a person who no longer knows who he is, because what defined him is no longer there.

"What are we now," Jakob asked once, that winter, half in jest, half in despair. "If we're not miners any more. What are we then?"

Marga had no answer, not at once. She looked at her brother, the straightforward Jakob, who had been nothing but a miner, with his whole heart, and who was now nothing any more, and she thought a long time. "We're the ones who were it," she said at last. "No one takes that from us. We're the ones who rode down, a hundred years long, and brought up the coal the country was built with. That stays, Jakob, even when the wheel is still. It's not something you must be. It's something you have been. And been one is forever."

It was a meagre comfort, that winter, in which in the east the people danced on the walls and in the west the district buried its pits. But it was a true comfort, and Marga held to it, and Jakob held to it, and outside, over the town, stood the still wheel that no one turned any more, a monument already before it was one, and reminded them of what had been here, a hundred years long, and now was no more and yet, in its way, remained.

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# Chapter 15 - What Remains When the Winding Stops

The years that followed changed Voßlohe more slowly than one had feared, and more deeply. The colony was renovated, the old pit houses got new windows, new roofs, some were sold, to those who had lived in them for decades and now owned them. The pit grounds lay fallow for a while, a scar of concrete and rust, and then began the structural change everyone spoke of: they demolished, they rebuilt, an industrial park here, a technology centre there, and the headframe, which could have been blown up like so many others, stayed standing, listed as a monument, a memorial, a landmark, the last thing left of the Morgenstern pit.

The slag heap turned green. That was the image that moved Marga most: the spoil mountain that had grown over the town, a hundred years long, out of the waste rock one had hauled up with the coal and could not use, this black, bare mountain began to green, first with grasses, then with birches, with shrubs, and after some years it was green, a hill people climbed to enjoy the view, a local recreation area where once the refuse of a century had lain.

Marga often went up there, in those years, as she grew old. From the green slag heap one overlooked the whole district, the dead and the newly becoming, the shut-down headframes that still stood, the chimneys that no longer smoked, and between them the new, the business parks, the housing estates, the motorways. She sat up there, on a bench someone had put up, and looked out, and thought about what she had done, and about what had remained.

For this she had learned, in those years: that it was not the truth that redeemed. She had brought the truth to light, named the grandfather's betrayal, rehabilitated the name of Heinrich Brass, broken the hundred-year silence. And she had believed, half at least, that this would redeem something, that a burden would fall from the family, that a peace would come. But it had not been so. The truth redeemed nothing. Wilhelm was still a traitor, August still a failure, Heinrich still a destroyed man, and no naming made that undone. The dead stayed dead, the guilt stayed guilt, the district stayed dead.

What had changed was one single thing, and Marga grasped only late that it was enough: one had stopped administering. One had stopped holding the water over the path, the truth behind the wall. For three generations the family and with it the whole district had held its breath over sunken things, had kept silent, accounted for, inherited, and now, with the kept-silent named, with the walls open, one could at last breathe out. Not relieved, not happy, not redeemed. Only honest.

And that, Marga thought, from the green slag heap, over the dead and the newly becoming district, that was perhaps all a person could achieve: not to expunge the guilt that could not be expunged, not to wake the dead, but only to stop hiding them. The solidarity that Wilhelm had betrayed was not dead; it had only changed its form, from the shift into memory, from the workforce into the history now told honestly. Heinrich, Tadeusz, Wilhelm, August, all got what was possible, the only thing Marga could give them: a name, no verdict. They were named, all of them, with their guilt and their loyalty, and they were no longer hidden, and that was the legacy Marga left behind, the only one that held when the winding stopped: the truth, spoken, and the breath, at last let go.

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# Chapter 16 - Glück auf

Years later, on a clear autumn day, an old woman walked across the green slag heap, leaning on a stick, and with her went two children, a boy and a girl, who held her hand and plagued her with questions, the way children do.

The old woman was Marga. And the children were the new: the girl was a Brass, Ruth's granddaughter, and the boy was a Kortmann, Jakob's grandson, and they were second cousins or something like it, for Jakob's son had married Ruth's daughter, a Kortmann and a Brass, and out of the two lines that had not greeted each other for three generations, one had become. And in the boy's class there sat also a girl called Yıldız, Hasan's great-granddaughter, and the three played together, Kortmann and Brass and Yıldız, and none of them knew that this would have been unthinkable a hundred years before, and that was the best of it: that they did not know it, that what the old had paid for with blood and silence was a matter of course to them.

"What's that, Grandma?" asked the boy, and pointed over to where, above the roofs, above the green and grey district, a single headframe stood, still, the wheel motionless against the autumn sky.

"That's a headframe," said Marga. "They used to mine coal there. Deep down out of the earth. Your great-grandfather rode down there, every day, and his father, and his father. A hundred years long."

"And why doesn't the wheel turn any more?"

"Because they don't mine coal any more. That's over. Long over. Now it's only a monument. So one doesn't forget what was here."

The girl, the little Brass, looked over at the still wheel. "Was it nice, in the old days? With the coal?"

Marga considered. It was a child's question, and it demanded a true answer, for children noticed when one lied. "No," she said. "It was not nice. It was hard. The men worked themselves to death, many died, underground, of the lung. And much injustice happened here, in the old days. People betrayed one another, because the times were so hard." She paused. "But there was something good there too. The people held together. Underground one looked out for the other, no matter where he came from. That was called solidarity. And that was the best of it, the only thing perhaps that was really nice."

"Do we hold together too?" asked the boy.

"I hope so," said Marga. "I hope so very much."

They stood a moment and looked over at the still wheel, the old woman and the two children, and the wind went over the green slag heap, over the district that had let the coal go, and Marga thought of all who had been here: of Wilhelm, who had betrayed, and Heinrich, who had been betrayed; of August, who had looked away, and Tadeusz, who had died; of Jakob and Hasan, who had saved each other's lives; of Otto and Ruth and Bertha and Lena and of herself, who had broken the silence. They were all here, in this still wheel, in this earth, in these children who held her hands and did not know on whose shoulders they stood, and to whom one would one day have to tell it, not as a wound, but as a story, honestly, with guilt and with loyalty, so that they would know where they came from, and do better what the old had done wrong.

"Glück auf," said Marga softly, to the still wheel, to all who were no longer there, to the children who were there.

"What does that mean, Grandma?" asked the girl. "Glück auf?"

"It was the miners' greeting," said Marga. "When they rode down, they said it. It meant: come back up. Come back alive. It was a wish that one would see each other again." She took the two children more firmly by the hand and turned away from the still wheel, toward the town, toward life. "Come," she said. "It's getting cold. Let's go home."

And they walked down the green hill, the old woman and the two children, away from the still headframe, which stood behind them against the autumn sky, the wheel motionless, a century motionless, and over the district that had let the coal go and with it at last the fault, lay the clear, cool light of a day that mined nothing any more and hid nothing any more.

## Über dieses Buch

*The Seam - Turning Away*
Ein Schreib-Experiment von aban news, Kapitel für Kapitel mit Claude Opus verfasst und redigiert.
Riedmatt, der Stausee und alle Figuren sind erfunden; Ähnlichkeiten mit realen Orten oder Personen sind Zufall.