

Esther Maria Magnis

WITH  
OR  
WITHOUT  
ME



A Memoir of Losing and Finding

**WITH OR WITHOUT ME**



**Esther Maria Magnis**

TRANSLATED BY ALTA L. PRICE

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**Plough**

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*“The Nothing is spreading,” groaned the first. “It’s growing and growing, there’s more of it every day, if it’s possible to speak of more nothing. All the others fled from Howling Forest in time, but we didn’t want to leave our home. The Nothing caught us in our sleep and this is what it did to us.”*

*“Is it very painful?” Atreyu asked.*

*“No,” said the second bark troll, the one with the hole in his chest. “You don’t feel a thing. There’s just something missing. And once it gets hold of you, something more is missing every day. Soon there won’t be anything left of us.”*

— Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*

**RED**

1





**A thorn had scratched my leg.** It was from a blackberry bush. I had spotted three red dots in a field of yellow grain, and immediately sent my bike's silver handlebars, whose pink plastic grips gave me blisters because they were too small for my hands, swerving toward the side of the road. I had hopped off, letting my bike fall into the grass, and jumped over a little ditch. I'd heard a ripping noise – a thorn had torn a red gash into my leg, and a thin line of blood emerged. It wasn't much, just enough to turn the cut bright red without oozing out any farther to run down my leg.

I didn't care. Because there were the poppies, within reach. I wanted them. The wind was barely audible, the day and the fields were dozing in the sun, and the flowers' delicate petals fluttered as I yanked their roots from the soil, squashed their stems between my hands and the handlebars, and rode home. One leaf was lost on the way, and another as I pulled up to the door. And then, in the vase that evening, the blossoms drooped and the petals fell to the table. I tried this over and over as a kid. I'd always pluck another poppy, and was always a little disappointed when it wouldn't bloom as bright or as red in our kitchen.

Behind my closed eyes it was also red. From there, it was easy to sink into sleep. It was dark, too, but

not dangerous; I knew this darkness, and found it comforting. Only when someone turned on the light, or I tried to sleep at the beach – then it was too bright. Otherwise, I liked the red behind my eyelids.

I had a calendar with nature photography where I discovered a red frog amid bright green leaves. I couldn't believe it was real. I asked Mom, and she said it was, and that nature is full of amazing colors. She read me the photo caption from the calendar, and told me about the crabs in Africa whose red carapaces looked like caravans of little tanks crossing the road, back when she met my father.

I just can't imagine large red things in nature. I can picture bloodbaths, when whales with white bellies swim up to the surface, but I don't really want to call that nature. Maybe it is nature, I don't know. It depends on how you perceive human beings and the things they do.

The first thing my little brother and I asked to do was pet the puppies. Our babysitter's parents had a farm, and two weeks before, their dog had had a litter in their green-tiled spare bathroom. Once we heard about it, we begged her every day for permission to see the newborn pups.

It stank in that bathroom, I bumped my head on the sink, all the little creatures were crawling about, and I asked if I could take one home with me, but the babysitter disregarded my question. Apparently I was supposed to ask my mother or father first.

Right next to the bathroom was a kitchen, and a bunch of old men sat on benches in the nook. There was a huge yellow ashtray on the table, like in a pub. The kitchen was filled with smoke. The men laughed as our

babysitter walked us past the doorway. “Kids suit you,” one of the old grandpas said.

“Cut it, Dad,” the girl said, and I was astounded that the man with so few teeth left could be her father. I was four years old, and somehow I’d already grown fond of Westphalian farmers, despite being creeped out by their huge, chapped, red hands, which always crushed the fingers of anyone they greeted.

I had a tic: I couldn’t help clearing my throat whenever they spoke their Low German dialect, because to me their rolled r’s made them sound like their throats were blocked with phlegm.

“We’re just going to visit the piglets, and then I’ll take the kids home,” our chubby babysitter said.

“Atta girl,” said one of the men on the bench.

The piglets were in a crate right behind the kitchen, in a dark little passageway. One wall of the crate was just a bunch of nailed-in planks, so at first you could only hear a muffled, high-pitched snorting and a light bumping sound against wood and a shuffling of straw on stone. The only light came from a red lamp in the crate, and you could see the little snouts poking out of the slits between the planks.

Johannes held my hand. The babysitter walked with us, right up close to the crate, and I peeked through one of the slits.

The red light made my eyes feel too hot to look, or maybe the piglets’ skin was too warm. In any case, it felt like a layer of something was coating my gaze, and nothing looked as real as I might have hoped. But my little-kid heart melted when I saw the pinkish-red creatures and how they wriggled excitedly, wagging their wormlike tails.

I just wanted to pick them up and kiss their little wet snouts and pet them and rock them in my hand and lather them with pink shampoo and hug them close. I wanted to bring them home and put them in my baby doll stroller so they'd never grow up.

"Can I have one, please?" I asked, exactly as I had before, with the puppies.

The babysitter laughed. "One of the piglets? Forget about it, kid."

"But you have so many! You could give just one to me and Johannes. Right, Johannes? You want a piglet too, don't you?"

My little brother beamed and nodded. He always thought my ideas were good.

"You can't need all of them, so you can give one away to us," I said, and stuck my arm far into the crate, sleeve rolled up high, so I could pet as many as possible, all at the same time. Johannes pushed up next to me and thrust his arm along mine and patted around, pawing at the piglets I would have preferred to have to myself.

"But what are you going to do with all of them?" I asked the babysitter.

"Well, they'll be raised for slaughter," she replied, and I felt my mouth form the "slaugh-" and the "-ter" as I tried to silently echo what she'd said; both syllables felt brutal but also grown-up. In any case, I sensed it was a word adults might be annoyed at being asked about. So I didn't ask. I couldn't have, anyway, because in the meantime Johannes had peed his pants and the babysitter had taken him to the bathroom. I wanted to stay with the piglets, so I was left all alone in the room, which as a kid gave me a strange sensation that was at the same time exciting and oppressive.

I can't remember how long I stayed there, nor what I actually did during that time. But I remember the squeal.

It sounded like someone had thrust a jaggedly sliced tin can into the mouth of a screaming woman. It rattled from the windpipe, through the nose, groaning, arising from the belly and suddenly growing shrill, reaching the highest, airiest pitch.

It pierced the hallway door, a towering, dark double door directly opposite the kitchen door. This was the door Johannes and the babysitter had vanished behind and, as my initial fright subsided, it was the door I had to go up to. I was afraid of annoying the adults. It was just like with the word "slaughter," which I didn't dare ask about, because it clearly wasn't anything for a little kid, but this time I simply *had* to go and see.

As I stood on my tiptoes in order to reach the iron doorknob, I was more afraid of being caught than of seeing something scary. What kind of scary thing could I have dreamed up, anyway? I had no pictures. I wasn't allowed to watch the news, hardly watched TV; I'd only been in this world a mere four years. But somehow even little kids can sniff it in the air when something's up, and I just had to see for myself, even if only by peeping through the crack of the door.

As I bent forward on tiptoe and leaned against the door, it swung open slowly, heavily, yet unstoppably, crashing against the hallway wall. I stood in the door-frame and could smell blood steaming up from a kind of tub. Above it hung a sow, slashed open, and I wondered whether that was what had squealed. Her feet were bound by a noose hanging from a huge hook, and the men were pulling red stuff from her belly.

My memory is filled by a red haze; in some spots it's as dark as the red behind my closed eyelids. The men wore aprons – they were towering figures. They were incredibly focused, and I just stood there and stared and kept staring, the way you stare at a math problem you're supposed to be able to solve.

“Somebody get the little one outta here,” yelled one of the men in a blood-covered apron. He had a knife in his hand. I wasn't afraid of him. For me, he was the epitome of a grown-up: a massive, serious, busy stranger.

The door was shut again, and through the slit I heard someone shout, “Anni! Dammit, Anni, keep an eye on the brats!”

Anni came back, holding Johannes's hand, and drove us home. I wasn't traumatized. I was fed meat as a child. Sausage and a slice of bread. *Kinderwurst*, a fun-shaped baloney, at the butcher. I had no choice, no way of opting out. Just like my baptism. In both cases, nobody asked me. The first thing I drank was milk. Then came pureed vegetables and, with my first teeth, meat.

From the very beginning, I went along with it.



# 2

**“Vain,” someone whispered.** “You’re a vain one, all right.”

As I turned around, I clenched my hair tie between my teeth. Both hands were at the back of my head, holding up my ponytail. My hair had gotten mussed up during playtime. I just wanted to quickly straighten it out again, and now I found myself staring at an old woman’s face.

She held one child by her right hand, another by her left, and they were standing behind me at the entrance to church. She said: “God doesn’t care about superficial things like your beautiful hair. Here’s how it’s done.” She let go of the children’s hands and bowed her head. She bore a blue-haired perm under a hat that looked like a homemade knit purple tea cozy. Then she clasped her hands together, and looked back at me.

“Not like this,” she said, rolling her eyes and patting her hair with a few gestures that I supposed were meant to signify vanity, and repeating, “Oh, my hair – aren’t I so cute?” Then she thrust a hand into her purse, dug out a handkerchief, quickly wiped her mouth, put it back in her purse, and just as speedily took the children’s hands back into hers. Usually kids were allowed to go to catechism on their own, but she pulled them along with her, passing all the rest of us to go up to the benches at the very front.

This woman was a deputy in the classroom where children were prepared for their first communion. I never had to deal with her after that, but I was afraid she might be a direct deputy of God.

I just wanted to look put together while entering church. I didn't want my ponytail to be hanging askew, starting just behind my right ear and then flopping forward all by itself, while the hair on the other half of my head danced in the air like haunted spaghetti after my wool pullover had given it a static charge.

I was the only child who didn't become an altar server after celebrating first communion. I didn't want to. "I do *not* want to serve the priest," I told my mother.

"You are not serving the priest, you're serving God," she had replied, but at the time, that had struck me as an excuse. The entire Mass centered on the priest. He stood behind his altar just like my teachers stood behind their lecterns, and we had to kneel in front of him.

It was similar with confession. I was actually excited at the prospect of taking a seat in the confessional, until I found out that we first communicants had to have the initial conversation directly with the priest, because someone had decided the confession box was too impersonal. Maybe. I'm not sure. Maybe our church just didn't have a confessional. But people told me the same things about confession that they had told me about altar service – namely, that you weren't confessing your sins to the priest, but to God. But now, talking face-to-face with the priest, it sure didn't feel like that. The night before my first communion I lay in bed and hoped and prayed that I would find God the next morning in church. We first communicants had to stand in a half-circle around the altar, facing the congregation. Everyone looked at

us. A host was placed into our hands, and on the count of three (once the priest was back at the altar) we had to place it into our mouths. Something about it made me feel ashamed. As I chewed, I looked at my feet.

All in all, my parents were fairly understanding of us kids when we were bored by church. I even got the general impression that most people found church somewhat less perfect than they'd have liked. When I was growing up, in the eighties, there was just something in the air – a sense that something was unfinished. That some goal hadn't yet been reached.

I'd heard it said that too little was being done for the youth.

Sometimes during Mass a band at our church would play catchy tunes like “Laudato sí” and a song urging us to plant a tree that would give us shade, and build a house that would protect us, or something like that. I didn't really understand it, but I did my best to warble along, tapping my feet to the beat as the drum and flute stumbled through the stanzas. Moments like that weren't boring, which was good. But I never would have voluntarily gone to Mass just to hear the band, that's for sure. It was just something for the kids who had to sit there anyways.

The real revolt in our household occurred when my parents tried taking us to an ecumenical service for a second time. As soon as she heard the word, my sister Steffi protested loudly, and I whispered something about “ecumenical bullshit.” My mother was angry.

“Your father and I have an ecumenical marriage. There are countries where Protestants and Catholics are at war. I don't ever want to hear anything like that from you again.”

“Ecumenical.” I repeated the word quietly, rolling my eyes.

“You’re so mean to us!” Steffi groaned. “Please don’t make us go. The last ecumenical service went on for ten hours. It was awful. Can’t we *please* just stay home?” At some point my parents finally took pity on us, gave in, and left us at home.

In fact, the first such service we’d gone to had lasted two hours. First the Protestant pastor had blathered on about how great ecumenism is, and then, just as everyone had sighed with relief as he left the pulpit, up came the Catholic priest and repeated the same thing: “It’s good that we’re here,” and all that stuff. Yeah, everybody thought it was great that we were all there. Everybody but us kids. Nobody stood up, except during the Our Father and the Apostles’ Creed, which the choir recited sluggishly. A few of the Protestants stumbled at the spot where they say, “I believe in the holy Christian church,” instead of “I believe in the holy catholic church.” There was no standing, no kneeling, no nothing, really – everyone was basically glued to their pews. For hours. It’s etched into my memory as a form of physical torture.

We usually went to Catholic Mass on Sundays, but we’d also gone to a Protestant church fairly often, since my father was Protestant.

Even as a child, I remember noticing how much freer and lighter my parents would sometimes seem, plopping back into the car when a church service was over. I’ll never forget how my mother once cheered out loud as we got home. She popped an old black-and-white movie into the VHS player, sat back in her leather lounge chair, propped her feet up, and said, “Well, my dears, sometimes it’s just so nice to have done something, isn’t it?”

Actually, I liked God. I often found him boring in church, but aside from that I found him fundamentally intriguing. There seemed to be something insane about him, and also something gentle.

He was clearly fond of John, who ran around the desert half-naked like some exhibitionist, covered only partially by camel hide, yelling his lungs out and munching on locusts. And he seemed to like that revoltingly crazy possessed man, who was totally out of his mind. He even spoke with the devil. He gave orders to the sea. And he bled on the cross – from his head and his back, and he was covered in filth and welts. He seemed pretty wild.

But then, at other times, I got the feeling that he wore glasses, knotted his hair into a bun, had a long beard, and stared dead ahead, empty-eyed. I had once heard a pastor say that God didn't like it when kids went out to play soccer on Sundays instead of going to Mass. I found this thought deeply distressing. It wasn't like the Sunday soccer matches had been organized by us eight-year-olds. They were scheduled by the coaches and a few of the parents, and as kids we were supposed to listen to them, weren't we? I found that pretty ignorant on God's part. Sort of stuffy. Or more like grumpy. But then those moments passed. I squirreled them away in my memory, but they didn't override my interest in him or my attention. Because as a kid I mostly just found him extraordinarily beautiful. And extraordinarily friendly. And weird.

There was a moment – I was still quite little, maybe five or six – when I was all of a sudden absolutely certain that he existed. I think the gratitude I felt for the sheer beauty of that moment bound me to him for a long time.

It was one night in Spain, on the Atlantic coast. I was alone, on a promenade. My parents and siblings were in the restaurant behind the sea wall lining the beach. My father was a businessman whose international trade work frequently took him around the globe. He often brought us – the whole family – along. We kids sometimes had to be there for his meetings, and get along with his coworkers’ kids. We were always polite and attentive. We would teach each other how to say things like *table, napkin, waiter, knife, fork, spoon, fish, shrimp*, and *ice cream* in one another’s language. I always liked the smell of the Spanish girls’ hair – it struck me as festive. That evening the client was a good friend of my father’s. I already knew his two sons – they were much older than I was, and already absorbed in the adults’ conversation, in English. Steffi and Johannes were still spooning their ice cream out of coconut half shells. I didn’t want any. I was bored.

“Don’t go too far, Estherle,” my father had said to me as I stood at his side, stroking my fingers on his tie and asking if I could leave the table. “Nope, I won’t. I’ll be just outside.”

The other businessman looked at me the way foreigners look at kids speaking German with their parents – quizzically, bemused – and then said something nice about me to my father, in English. I already knew. I grinned, a little embarrassed but also flattered by the attention. He winked at me. I tried to wink back, but couldn’t.

As I stood at the table, the ocean suddenly came to mind. It had been right behind that wall the whole time. I wanted to go and see what it was like all by itself, without beachgoers, by night. I slipped through the

narrow aisle between the tables, past the glass-door freezer full of gigantic gawking fish on top of crushed ice, and through the restaurant's swinging doors. Out into the orange glow of the streetlights. Then I turned the corner and headed onto the promenade, and there, black and vast, lay the sea. The promenade was actually a boardwalk, about three yards above the wide beach. The surrounding terrain was full of large sandstone rocks rising up from the dark sand below. I could smell it. I went a little farther, just beyond the streetlights' reach.

I stood before the infinite sea, with no endpoint anywhere between the left and right corners of my eyes. That's how far the beach stretched. I walked over to the rocks, which came up to my bellybutton, climbed onto one, and sat down with my legs dangling over the edge. The rock was warm. Muted strains of music from the restaurant reached my ears. Spanish music, and voices of people who go to dinner around ten thirty at the earliest.

I could only barely make out the hazy shape of the waves in the darkness, but I heard the sound of their breath as they heavily exhaled onto the shore about a hundred yards away, rolled themselves over the sand, and then sharply drew air back in through pursed lips. That's what it sounded like. There were no lights, just the moon on the water, shining from far behind me. I hummed along with the sound of the waves, and looked out across the broad beach all the way to the narrow strip in the distance, where the gleam of the water ended and the dark of the sky began. The cosmos. I don't know whether I already knew that word. While I was watching, the depth of the heavens – something you glean when you stare at the stars – began to grow right in front of me. It was a sensation I'd never known; it was utterly



new to me. The sound of the waves didn't soften, but seemed to take another direction. Their whoosh was no longer toward me, to my little place on top of the rock, but rather outward into the distance. The rocks and the sea, the glimmer on the water's surface, the stars and everything behind me – all of this lay at the feet of what was bearing down from the new depth of sky.

I felt like an unnoticed part of this whole, and found it beautiful. I waited, and watched, though I had no idea what was actually happening.

Inside of me, without consonants, without vowels: my name.

The world wasn't stepping back, but I was stepping forward, out of it. Out from the night, because my name was echoing within me. The entire time. And with certainty, though without me saying it.

It had a gravity that was loving and at the same time absolute, unconditional. Not the way an adult might look at a child. And in its lingering gaze there was something indescribable, something heartening, that gave me the feeling I had to take myself seriously. A knowledge of myself that I couldn't fathom. Encouraging and at the same time approving, authorizing. I was so astonished that I have no idea how long I sat there. And then all of a sudden I was pretty sure, and burst out: "You're God?" Thinking: "That's God? That's what adults mean when they talk about him?" And because I found his devotion and affection so touching, I raised my hand from the warm rock and gave him a little wave. And because I felt so grateful, I decided to give him a little gift. I stood up on the rock and composed a prayer.

I rest, I dream, I go to sleep,  
dear God, protect me and keep me  
always in your hands . . .

And then I faltered, because I didn't know how to put it. ". . . Keep me always in your hands, so that I can find the way. The right way. I must find the right way." I strolled along the beach, then stopped and looked out to sea again, my gaze returning to the horizon. But the only glistening I saw was the moonlight. The waves whooshed onto the beach. God was gone. It was a letdown, and I couldn't understand. "Well, he could've stayed a little longer," I thought.

"Steffi?" I whispered that night, right after we'd gone to bed. She hadn't fallen asleep yet. Mom had just turned the light out and left the room.

"Steffi?"

"Yeah?"

"God is super nice."

She was quiet for a bit.

"How's that?"

"He thinks I'm good. You too, probably. He's super nice."

"Yeah," she whispered back, "I think so too."

All my childhood prayers rhymed. As I entered adolescence, they were mainly a bunch of blather. Well, not entirely. Before every math, chemistry, physics, Latin, French, or English exam I prayed with the intensity of a beggar. If I got an A, I cheered. "Awesome, thanks!" If I got a C, I was silent, with that awful feeling many people know – the feeling you get when you've prayed and rustled up the necessary faith only to find yourself

facing the opposite of what you'd asked for. At times like that I either thought, "Well, you didn't study hard enough. That's what you get. God wants you to give it your best, and a blow like this should make you smarter." Or, "What? Damn it."

It was at this age, around thirteen or fourteen, that I slowly began growing apart from God. It was simply a separation. No waving, no goodbyes.

It was as if we were at the airport, standing on one of those moving walkways. We were looking at each other, and then we were carried off in opposite directions. Without a word.

The more sermons I heard, the more I got the feeling that I could no longer live and act according to his expectations – and that we no longer had that much in common.

This feeling was only exacerbated by the crazy claims and excessive expectations of some sermons. Some struck me as the recitations of tightrope walkers, so high and lofty, set in such a politically charged world, going on about Africa and foreign relations, that as a teen I thought: I can't do anything about all that. God doesn't need me. It's not that I was shrugging my shoulders. It was just utter helplessness. And it was supported by generalizations and commonplace phrases that I found nutty, and that I eventually grew sick and tired of. Someone would say, "We mustn't look away, we must get involved." And I'd think: How long do I have to gawk at the TV, how long am I supposed to stare at the pictures in the newspaper, before nobody can accuse me of looking away? And just how am I supposed to get involved?

The same phrases could be heard both inside and outside the church. I don't know who was trying to outdo whom. I remember once in school, we were supposed to protest the Gulf War, and "get involved." I didn't. I went home and asked Dad where Iraq was, and what was going on there. They'd neglected to cover that in school.

In church, depending on the priest and the sermon, God seemed to be someone who wanted the world to take on a specific shape. Listening to one priest, I got the feeling that the kingdom of heaven would dawn only if and when everything went back to being as it was in his youth in the Harz mountains, in the seventies. Listening to another priest – or was it a pastor in the Protestant church? – I got the feeling that God's will seemed to be, mostly, that the conservative Christian Democratic Union be voted out. Still another railed against greed. Even that struck me as stupid. Not in itself. It was more that every time I'd sit through Mass, watching the congregational leader nod, I'd wonder, "If everyone here thinks the same about everything already, why do they all have to come back here every Sunday to have it fed to them again?"

The feeling I was grappling with was not humility. Humility is a wonderful feeling. You can be humbled by things that are larger and more beautiful than you, things you gladly fall silent before, things you're happy merely to be in the presence of.

This wasn't humility. All the things that God apparently wanted from me were impossible. After all, it's not as if I had Chancellor Kohl's telephone number.

And I held it against the church. I took offense at the idea that I was supposed to be like your typical eco-activist high school teacher, or like a buttoned-down kid

from back in the seventies who giggles at phrases like “making out” and who thinks singing “Kumbaya” around youth-group campfires is super-rebellious.

My encounter with God hadn’t been that. I still had no idea what he wanted, but I was interested in him; somehow something bound me to him. His divineness. His reality. But a lot of what I’d heard about him had turned him into a stuck-up moralizer who, just for fun, had come up with the idea that people should go to church every Sunday. Why? No idea! It’s just what you do. More and more, my relationship to God began to resemble a worn-out, rubbery old piece of chewing gum that had been chomped on for too long.

I knew you should love your neighbor. I also knew the question: “But who is our neighbor, dear congregation? Who is our neighbor? It is the outcast, the beggar, the leper, the prostitute . . .”

But I hadn’t, not even once in my entire life, seen a prostitute. A beggar, sure, but not in my hometown. And leprosy? I didn’t know anyone who had that. Such neighbors seemed far away indeed. That might be practical for people who are accustomed to the idea that God doesn’t have anything to do with their daily lives. But for me, as a teenager, it wasn’t. I hoped and intuited that God belonged to this world here. I wanted him to like me, because I liked him, because I found him important. But, in all honesty, somehow, by the age of fourteen, I had also come to understand that it’s good to be nice to my actual neighbors as well. To my classmates and friends when they’re struggling; to comfort and help them, if I could. I really didn’t need to go to church every Sunday to be reminded of that.

And since everything I heard said in such sermons could also be heard on all the talk shows and everywhere else – sometimes in different words, but usually the same formulations – the notion that maybe going to Sunday Mass was utterly superfluous began sneaking into my mind, little by little. The world had enough morals. They were constantly flung at us, from all directions. That we should show consideration to minorities and take care of the weak, and that politicians are bad people. For that, you didn't really need to go to Mass – the young atheists in my class were right about that. “You can be a perfectly good person without believing in God.” True. Just like you could also be an annoying moralizer without going to church.

On TV you could watch women with heavy blue eye shadow and enormous earrings jangling next to hair that was long on one side and undercut on the other, yelling at each about how “this system is wrecking the earth, humans are the destroyers, down with TetraPak!” And you could go to a sermon and hear exactly the same thing.

And so I was often astonished at how such huge swaths of society went out of their way to draw a line between themselves and the church. I found that there was just one tiny step separating the Christians I knew from everyone else. They all wanted to save the environment. They all wanted to be tolerant toward other religions, though also to see a little less of the pope. They all wanted church to be a little more relaxed; it all came back to our common “humanity,” and so on. Even the images hanging in the showcases in the lobby of our little church looked exactly like the ones from UNESCO and similar organizations: a big globe ringed by children of

all different skin colors holding hands, nice and colorful. Images like that were popular everywhere back then.

“Paint peace.” That’s how I painted it. “Portray love.” That’s how I painted it. “Today we’ll explore reconciliation.” That’s how I painted it. It worked out great, as long as the teachers were always different and as long as we were asked to paint, not to debate. I muddled my way through these pictures in various classes and always got an A. By then I knew that no teacher could possibly resist an image like that: they presumed it portrayed what we kids yearned for. Whereas I presumed it portrayed what my teacher yearned for. Final grade: A. Thanks.

The only thing that made the church different from society at large, as I saw it then, was that the church believed that Jesus was very important. But even there, the more that Catholic and Protestant descriptions of him swirled around in my head, the more I lost interest.

I had plenty of other friends. As a fourteen-year-old, I really didn’t need another – certainly not an invisible one, much less one who looked like a Middle Eastern pacifist in sandals and a long beard who, I figured, couldn’t possibly take much of an interest in me, since I was neither a prostitute nor a tax collector. Plus, we had a Mercedes I was sure wouldn’t fit through the eye of a needle. The more low-threshold the version of Jesus was that we were being offered, the less my friends and I could relate to him. You might as well just file him right next to Gandhi under the category “guys who were all right.”

And when I heard the general intercessions during Mass, provided I could understand them – they were often recited by children who couldn’t really read yet, or had a heavy lisp, or were unable to decipher words like



“Chechnya,” or were simply too short to reach the mic – I increasingly noted that even the church itself didn’t really have much confidence in Jesus.

“Lord, in your goodness: many are ailing; send people to their bedsides, who will bring them a comforting word.” I wasn’t totally stupid back then. I knew that this intercession, fully formulated, went on like this: “We’re not asking you to do the impossible. Since you usually don’t do much of anything, and so as not to wear out the stories of miracles performed by Jesus, maybe you could just send some nice people to the bedsides of the sick. It’s pretty much a request you can’t refuse, and no one will accuse us of spreading hope where there is none – we’re just holding down the fort. You need us. Because we can do something, and you can’t.”

I remember one of the grotesque songs we had to sing. It went something like this: “God needs your arms, because he has none. He needs your hands, so he can take action. Tra-la-la, shoo-be-shoo-be-doo, oh yeah.” It made sense to me at the time; at least it was totally reasonable to think like that. But God grew increasingly smaller. And I was more and more astounded that the world and the church couldn’t stand one another. When it came to believing, the bar really wasn’t so high anymore.

There was just one point that I could have identified back then on which the church and the world took starkly different positions: guilt and sin. Take the word “sin.” People hated it, or found it laughable. Before my first communion, as I prepared for my first confession, some of my friends’ parents even made fun of the idea: “What sort of evil can such a young child have committed?” the mother of one of my girlfriends wondered. I solemnly

nodded, while remembering, for a second, the frog I'd once tried to squeeze into a toy car even though it was obviously too tight a fit; and the little girl my sister and I had once dangled out of the attic window, just because we knew she'd wail and then we could console her and take care of her like a real mother would.

Or guilt: people were always sensitive about that. I'd heard it said that guilt was what was used to control the masses during the Middle Ages. And before the Middle Ages people were especially afraid, because it was "so dark," as we'd all learned from Ken Follett. So people accused the church of playing games with guilt.

Meanwhile I heard it said on TV and in school that people are influenced by their environment, and that there is actually no such thing as guilt, in and of itself. That people had invented the idea in order to fill the confessionals. "How hypocritical of the church," I'd heard. And sometimes I thought, "how hypocritical," too.

The real problem, of course, was bad genes and bad childhoods. Or so people said. And the fact that old-fashioned notions of guilt were still in circulation, and that people were still looking for scapegoats – well, there again, people said, the church was actually the guilty party.

But church and society were of one mind above all regarding their chief concern: correct behavior. The church's opinions were always explained and justified by interpretations of the word of Jesus. Those of society – I don't know – by values, which were around here somewhere, since someone had written them down once. I lost my sense of what God wanted of me in life, beyond traffic laws and all other basic laws, social action, and a

heart and soul that aren't totally screwed up. Sometimes I still prayed to God. I held still, and listened.

Sometimes I sat in my little pink room, alone on my bed. Next door, Dad was napping; Mom was down in the kitchen. I could hear pots clattering, and Steffi on the phone, and my thoughts would turn into a prayer. It would stem from these sounds, it would resonate. It was rare, but sometimes the world even seemed to come to a halt, to turn off for a moment, and an unbridled, perfect, consummate “yes” would express its agreement, even though I wasn't doing or saying anything. I was just sitting on my bed. A plain and simple yes. But if I'm honest, no matter how nice I found that to be, in the long run, it was too little. Because God didn't want sanctimonious prayers, he wanted actions, as I had learned.

This attitude infected my faith.

# 3

## **Empty plates lay in front of us.**

“Children . . .” Dad didn’t look at us – if he did, it was only for a second, so as to keep his gaze from meeting ours and dragging us down into the abyss opening up just behind his eyes. It was midday, and we were seated at a round table in the room next to the living room, which was all decked out for Christmas. I was fifteen.

The oldest furniture in the whole house was in this room. It even still had an old hatch in the wall, for the dumbwaiter that connected the former kitchen and the cellar. The world outside was as quiet as always on Christmas Day, when everyone stays indoors with their families. I sat on the other side of the table, with my back to the bay where a bunch of black-and-white pictures of my great-uncles and great-aunts hung on the wall, as well as big round paintings of my great-grandmother smiling next to her husband and my somewhat sterner looking great-great-grandparents. To my left sat Johannes, near the curtained entryway to the living room. Steffi sat to my right. Mom had set a tureen of soup on the table, then silently sat down next to Dad. He looked almost bug-eyed.

“Children . . .” Another three seconds passed. “We have something really, really – we have something . . .” and

then his voice choked, his eyes teared up, and we stared at him, scared. Dad never cried.

Mom took Dad's hand without looking up, and held it tight. We were frozen with fear, and I stared at the parting on her bowed head, a white line between her black hair. Finally she spoke, in a quiet voice. "We have something very sad to tell you." Dad's sobs interrupted her, but then he got ahold of himself. I couldn't breathe – it seemed as though a nightmare were taking shape, growing in toward us, from every direction, and then the walls dissipated, leaving just the five of us, seated at the round table, suspended in darkness. As quickly as it had appeared, the nightmare could have retreated – the walls, floor, and ceiling could have returned and the room gone back to being a room. But then Dad said he was going to die soon. He said the doctor had given them bad news. He had cancer, it was untreatable, and nothing more could be done.

My sister let out a soft shriek. She didn't cry, but her voice was so high that it seemed to be coming from her nose, if not from between her eyes. "Then what did he say? What did the doctor say?"

"Three weeks, maybe three months," Dad said, and from twenty yards away – no, even farther, from far, far off – I heard my sister crying – no, whimpering – and my brother, equally far away, cried, and Dad too – and inside me a stone rose from the pit of my stomach into my throat, the stone that had just been punched into my stomach, as if I weren't a girl but a guy with a knife whom you had to punch like that, as if I didn't have a soft belly and would never have gotten into a fistfight, as if I were a trained fighter who would recover from a blow like that in a few of days, as if it wouldn't tear me

apart, as if the fist were mistaken and had hit the wrong person, since surely no one could ever have meant to punch a child so hard they'd puke.

"But I don't believe it," the stone in my throat banged out, and my eyes spat out a few tears, and I took another breath. My body had to recover. It was like it had suddenly fallen asleep, like a cramped foot, with no circulation.

All around me everyone was crying and sobbing. Mom, Steffi, Dad, Johannes – each like a kid from a different family, unknown to one another, as if someone had thrust them all together, naked, in the same room, with the door locked, and each had responded with their own special form of fear. Like kids unable to comfort one another. The empty porcelain plates shone bright white. I'd gotten one that didn't have any pink petals painted on it.

He'd fight for us, Dad said, his head between his hands, and then he looked straight up at me, his face all red and wet with tears, his nose dripping, his teeth clenched, and one hand balled up in a fist. "I'll fight this damn cancer," and he nearly spit out the word "fight." "I promise you, I swear, I'll do anything to stay here with you," he said, and as he did so, he looked at me as if he were tearfully asking my forgiveness.

Dad's father had died when he was seventeen. He knew far better than we kids the horror he'd be fighting against for us.

# 4

**My memory only picks up** again a week or so later. Up in the mountains. I'm hiking, looking down at my boots. I can't remember any further back than that. The snow crunches under my feet, a bitter-cold wind is blowing, and the crisp, glittering crystals sting as they strike my face.

I smell the scarf covering my nose. It smells of the wardrobe it lives in all year when I'm not wearing it – of Dad's winter hat and after-shave, of Mom's leather gloves, of my brother's hair, our dog, and my sister. We're away from home. We've driven seven hours, out to our cabin in the Black Forest – my grandmother's home.

And now we're way up in the meadows. Surrounded by nothing but pastures, lying pristine and fallow, high above the villages in the valley below. Not a soul in sight. Small snowflakes whirl over the mountain ridge, and my mind is empty. I have a snapshot, taken when we reached the summit – Mom, Dad, Steffi, Johannes, and me. Who took it? I have no idea. Even then, my mind was devoid of all thought. Maybe someone just set the camera's timer. I hear the phrase "the last family portrait" in my head, and then it's all silent again. The wind blows incessantly, whistling, and you can't talk because it's so cold, and for a second you're astonished it's so blindingly bright even though you can't see the sun and it's cloudy all around,



and the only spots without clouds are all snowy. White mountains, white sky. We walk by three ancient, gnarled trees I've known since I was little. They're bent, as if buffeted by a gale. One side has hardly any branches, and on the other the branches look as if they're being sucked in by some invisible force. Like women with wind at their backs, parting their hair on the back of their heads, blowing it forward so it flutters horizontally around their faces.

Somewhere up there, I notice it. Somewhere up there, while I'm walking and staring at my boots and the snow, I notice that something inside me is thinking of God. And has been for a long time already – the entire time. Except that my mind is empty.

# Where is God when your loved one gets cancer?

*With or Without Me* is an unsparing and eloquent critique of religion. Yet Esther Maria Magnis's frustration is merely the beginning of a tortuous journey toward faith – one punctuated by personal losses retold with bluntness and immediacy. "If God is love," she writes, "then it's a kind of love I do not understand." She dares to believe anyway, although her questioning won't let up. She fiercely dismantles both the clichés she's heard in church and the endless philosophizing of her parents' generation.

**Magnis knows** believing in God is anything but easy. Because he allows people to suffer. Because he's invisible. And silent. "I think we miss God," she writes. "I would never want to persuade anyone or put myself above atheists. I know there are good reasons not to believe. But sometimes I think most people are just sad that he's not there."

*With or Without Me* is a book for everyone – believer or unbeliever, Christian or atheist – who refuses to surrender to the idea that there are easy answers to the big questions in life.

**THIS BOOK IS UTTERLY NECESSARY.** Breathtakingly honest with unflinching rawness, *With or Without Me* is a must-read for anyone who has ever pondered the meaning of life.

—L. S. Dugdale, MD, author of *The Lost Art of Dying*



**Esther Maria Magnis**, a German writer, was born in 1980. She studied comparative religion and history in Germany and Italy and has worked as a journalist. She now lives and works in southwestern Germany.

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