

POST CARD



The
King of China
TILMAN RAMMSTEDT

TRANSLATED BY KATY DERBYSHIRE

Write here.

My grandfather was dead by the time I got his second-last postcard, but I couldn't have known that. I'd put it aside unread, just as I'd put all his previous postcards aside unread. Almost every day they lurked in my letterbox amid the bills and circulars and then formed an increasingly precarious pile under my desk, which I covered with an old newspaper. Not that it helped much—I knew perfectly well what was hiding underneath.

For the past ten days, almost everything had been taking place under my desk. I crawled round on all fours, my knees padded with washing-up sponges, venturing only into parts of the room not visible from outside. I slept under my desk, I made myself sandwiches there, I drew a night sky on the underside of the tabletop and waited for the two weeks to pass, for me to be credibly back from China, so that I could find some kind of explanation for what needed explaining—one explanation for my grandfather, one for Franziska and one for my brothers and sisters, provided they hadn't discovered me by that point. I had to come up with something as quickly as possible, so there was no time for postcards. They'd just have to wait, and my grandfather, I believed, would have to wait too, and then came the phone call and there was no need for waiting any more.

I hadn't answered the phone, of course—I hadn't answered the phone for ten days by that point—but I heard a woman on the answering machine asking me to call

back. 'It's urgent,' she said, but I had an idea that it wasn't true, that I was dealing with the most un-urgent thing in the world. I called back nevertheless, and my grandfather turned into a dead grandfather, his postcard turned into his second-last postcard and I turned into something very confused and very monosyllabic. 'Yes,' I said a few times, and 'No,' and 'Fine,' but nothing was fine, because although I had one less problem to deal with there were now plenty of new ones, and I hung up, plucked the second-last postcard from the pile and believed I was sad.

On the front of the postcard was a statue of a fat man seated on an elephant in the middle of a golden flower and the back was once again crowded with my grandfather's tiny, gnarled scrawl. I'd always found it difficult to decipher but now, I discovered, it had degenerated into absolute illegibility. Even through a magnifying glass, I couldn't make out any recurring words, nor even identify the vowels. By the time I gave up trying, I'd unearthed a 'fine', a 'mountain' and a 'morning' or 'moaning' or 'moving'—I wasn't quite sure which.

Only the last sentence was written clearly, larger than the rest and in capital letters like the address, etched so deeply into the card that their mirror image protruded from the elephant on the other side. 'You should have come with me,' they said, and my grandfather had added a wedge-shaped exclamation mark after them to convince me once and for all that his words weren't a mere polite phrase, an expression of affectionate regret, but a severe disappointment, an accusation, a threat. And because this was now his second-last postcard the threat rang out all the

more, as if he wouldn't have died if I'd accompanied him, as if his heart wouldn't have stopped all of a sudden, or if it had, then at least in China, but best of all not at all. If I'd gone with him all he'd have had to do was hold on to me briefly—'Nothing, I'm just a bit dizzy,' he'd have said—and I'd have taken him to a park bench and bought him a bottle of water because I wouldn't have come up with anything else, because nothing else would have been necessary. 'I'm fine now,' my grandfather would have said a few minutes later and taken out his comb—his greatest concern would have been his hair.

'You should have come with me'—how those words annoyed me! I heard him saying them, emphasizing the 'should have', his eyebrows arching downwards, looking at me afterwards as if he expected an answer, the right answer of course—Yes, you're right, Grandfather, I should have gone with you, it was a mistake, you're right as usual. My grandfather liked being right. My grandfather had always known everything beforehand, or so he claimed—you should have taken an umbrella, you should have looked at the map, you should have learnt more languages, you should have washed that shirt separately, you should have ordered the steak. My grandfather was always offended when no one had listened to him, but no one could listen to him because he only ever told you what you should have done differently after you had done it. But no one ever asked him, he said, and now look, you're all wet, and now look, we've got lost, and now look, I'm dead.

Yes, I should have gone with him, and no, I hadn't gone with him, and I knew it looked as if I'd abandoned him, I

knew it looked as if I'd betrayed him and I also knew I could have explained it all to him somehow, but now there was no need for that any more. And I didn't have the slightest idea whether it was appropriate to be relieved.

It was plain to see that the second-last postcard didn't come from China either. It had a German stamp on it and the picture of the fat golden man had been torn out of a travel brochure and stuck slapdash over a free postcard, one corner already come unstuck, revealing a polar bear underneath. Almost all the cards my grandfather had sent me over the past few weeks had been adapted that way, sometimes not even that. Some of them had pictures of mediaeval churches on them and the printed text 'Greetings from the Westerwald Mountains' had been partially crossed out and replaced with a handwritten 'Shanghai'.

Of course, I was hardly surprised that my grandfather hadn't made it to China after all. Eight thousand kilometres—the car was too old for such a long trip and my grandfather too was too old for such a long trip. Most of all, he'd have needed a passport, and it seemed my grandfather didn't have a passport with him, no identity card, no driving licence, not even his loyalty card from the supermarket. They hadn't found anything on him, the woman had told me on the phone, only a half-written postcard with my name on it. And why couldn't he have finished writing it? Why couldn't he have just popped it into a post-box? Then no one would have called me, then I could have imagined him having a great time in the car—probably chatting to an attractive hitch-hiker he'd picked up at some picnic area or other—then I wouldn't have to get to the

Westerwald as quickly as possible to identify my grandfather. And then I wouldn't know how far away he still was from China in the end.

China—China of all places, as if there was no North Sea coast, no Harz mountains, no Rügen island, no France, no Lake Garda—it had to be China; China and nothing else. 'I don't want to discuss the matter,' my grandfather had said, and I'd said that suited me fine because I didn't want to discuss the matter either; China was out of the question. And I folded my arms and my grandfather did too. Actually he only had one arm, the right one, but he could wrap it round his left shirtsleeve so cleverly that it looked as if he had two intact, folded arms. And then we gave each other a long stare, my grandfather as determined as possible and I as derisive as possible, to show him what an absolutely ridiculous idea China was, and then my grandfather said, 'I'm going to die.'

That's not a sentence to be taken too seriously, not in retrospect either, not even now that my grandfather had proved himself right once again. So I said, 'You're not going to die,' although, of course, that was a lie whatever the case. But I didn't want to allow his line of argument, I didn't want to be made into the person who turns down last wishes, I wanted to stay objective because in objective terms I was in the right, of course, and China was absolutely impossible, but being in the right is no use when it comes to dying people. My grandfather knew that and so he'd started dying early just to be on the safe side. My grandfather, you see, had been dying for as long as I can remember, probably even longer, and he only stopped