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[Excerpt from a novel]

Riga, 1900

With the beginning of summer they moved from their apartment in the city of Riga to their house at the sea. It had been this way as long as Sophie could remember. And even though the wooden house with its stained glass windows seemed so much smaller now — how, as a child, could she have believed that there were endless flights of rooms? — Sophie could not imagine any place where she'd rather spend these weeks.

The day of their departure brought to an end the huge mess in the apartment where one had stumbled over packed suitcases and baskets. No one had been able to find anything, especially not the most important things. When finally the luggage was stowed away they took their seats and the coachman urged the horses, half expecting to have to turn around again in a minute. They waved back to the "summer woman", who was standing at their window in the living room. She would see to the apartment, feed the parrot and water the plants.

"She is a very tidy and reliable person," Corinna said with satisfaction and Sophie could not help smiling, for it sounded funny to hear her sister talk this way. At the same moment Corinna called: "Please, coachman, stop again." And off she was to get her new fur cap that she certainly would not need during the next few months.

The ride to Jurmala took about three hours. From Hagensberg, the neighborhood behind Peter's park with the Royal Yacht Club, they had to go west, leaving the city on soft paths winding through pine forests. Hour by hour the reddish stems of the trees would pass by their window, spreading their dazing smell of resin.

At the sound they were met by the first breeze from the sea. The reed on the banks rustled, ducks quickly disappeared, and the red, blue and green wooden fishing boats swayed on the water.

Corinna chatted away with Maria, the nanny, who held Corinna's son in her arms. Her sister seemed no less excited than when a child. Just a few summers ago she had walked around in her girl's dress with little red boots, and a toy in her arm. Now she had become an enthusiastic young woman. She did not seem to miss her husband, who was on a business trip once again.

When they finally turned onto the path leading to Majorenhof, Sophie's heart also leapt higher. In a moment they ought to be able to see the gable of their house emerge from the pines; the tiny wooden tower with the weather vane that the morning and evening sun would tint gold.

"The trees must have grown, I am sure," Corinna exclaimed and took Sophie's hand. "They won't allow us to see the house any more."

The nanny laughed. She had put little David on her lap and tried to show him the spot from where they would see the house any moment now.

"There it is," called Corinna and pointed with her finger. "There it is."

Finally the cream-colored gable rose from the woods, its small stained glass windows reflecting the sun light.

"Coachman, please hurry up!" A moment later Corinna jumped down from the cart and ran all the way ahead.

"Your sister will never grow up," Maria said, who was the same age as Corinna.

The house appeared just as they had left it last year. And yet some things had changed. Sand had been blown in front of the door, lay on the iron girders that locked the windows. A pine tree had been blown down and had torn off some of the gingerbread decoration. While Corinna went to the beach, the coachman started unloading. Sophie walked to the house, key in her hand. She put it into the lock, slowly opened the heavy door and entered the dark room. A musty smell, the smell of long winter months, enveloped her. It contained her childhood: How as a girl she had run into this room and stopped short in its dark center. The furniture, covered with white sheets looked like frozen creatures waiting to be released. She had walked across the wooden floors to the group of seats in the middle of the room. There she waited for her father to take down the iron girders and open the window shutters. She kept standing, stiff

as a stick, while slowly one window after the other was opened and let the light fall into the room in broad sheets. It was the change from the world of darkness to the world of light, and many endless weeks were contained in it. The wonderful feeling of today and today and today, many times more, a sense of time that one experienced only as a child.

Then finally the nanny would come, carrying baskets, followed by the cook who bustled around the kitchen. Soon they would go about cleaning the house with buckets of water and damp cloths, scrubbing the wooden floors, beating the rugs. Then Sophie believed she alone had to preserve the darkness, and the smell of the lonely winter months, as it was still discernable in one or the other velvet chair.