

1. The Knitting Club

”Oh, poor you! Not again!” Olivia’s low-cut neckline hovers dangerously close to Mildred’s nose while she flings several lumps of sugar into her teacup. She makes good use of this opportunity to take a closer look at the swollen eye.

“You really must do something about it! You’ll have to leave him. Women’s refuge!” Martha’s knitting needles clink indignantly in close competition with her busy tongue.

“But he was so sorry this time. He promised...” chirps Mildred. She all but loses the thread of the complicated pattern she has devised. Another nice and warm winter sweater for Arnold.

“He promised ... well, they always do, don’t they, Mildred? But when have you heard about a man who kept his promise?” Olivia is the hostess of their club today and expertly she regains their full attention.

Mildred sips at the sickly-sweet tea. How kind they all are. And when she remembers how close she was to giving up the knitting club a few months ago. Olivia had had a divorce with such a to-do, and Pauline’s lover had invited her to Malaga for an illicit weekend. Martha got her breast cancer, and Amy suspected that her husband pranced around in her clothes when she was away from home.

And in the meantime Mildred had just knitted her intricate sweaters while she tried to insert a few words about Arnold’s mushroom excursions.

But then she had tripped over a basket of mushrooms in the kitchen and broken her arm. Somehow the words had just rolled off her tongue when she told the others that Arnold had hit her. Now Mildred was looking forward to the knitting club every Thursday again.

2. Grammy

During most of fourth form Martha Gramstrup was our German teacher. Grammy was the thin and nervy type, a walking skeleton with rattling necklaces and bracelets. And her four weekly German lessons in fourth form hardly made things better.

Grammy's hair had been coloured red once in a distant past. She was the cardigan type, mousy grey and crap brown in any odd combination.

"Grammy is the incarnation of German grammar," Tommy claimed. Tommy had red freckles and jutting ears so he had learned early that attack is the best form of defence.

I am sure Grammy was well prepared, but more often than not she lost the thread. The boys would draw talentless caricatures of her on the blackboard, they sent letters to each other and peeled apples with their pocket knives right in the middle of her efforts at stuffing an irregular verb or two into our hormone-ridden brains. We girls were mostly knitting or doodling; we were far too old to participate in the boys' pranks, but we couldn't be bothered to learn German.

"Where were we?" she would ask from her desk while the bracelets whisked around the thin arms in a panic.

"Wir sollen schrauben wollen," Joe suggested helpfully. Stifled titter from pupils who were still awake.

Her cheeks turned pink, but usually she didn't seem to realize that the whole class was mocking her.

"Martha's husband is dead!" Lisa whispered her message as loudly as she dared while she rushed into the classroom three seconds ahead of Grammy.

"Martha who?" Bewildered, we stared at her until the penny dropped.

A subdued Grammy, dressed in black, came in with the worn satchel under her arm. She sat down on the chair, and in an atmosphere of embarrassing silence we crammed verbs and vocabulary for once.

"I heard it was heart failure," Betty informed us during the break.

"Small wonder, he must've been in his late forties." Lisa's parents used to play bridge with Grammy and her husband so she made short thrift with Betty's know-all attitude.

For a couple of days we remembered to be kind to Grammy. Jane left red apples for her on the desk, and our compassion lasted until the winter holiday began a week later.

”Grammy has had a haircut. Look!”

Yes, indeed. The wisps had turned into a smart, reddish-brown hairdo.

The transformation did not take place overnight, but during the spring a new Grammy appeared. She put on a few kilos and changed her style. One day she appeared in jeans, and she gave Tommy a regular bollocking for sending a paper plane through the classroom.

We watched in amazement, not quite certain how to react to our new German teacher. Unfortunately the change lasted for three months only; then the police came into our class and picked her up just when we were conjugating the verb “sterben”.