

LIES ABOUT MY MOTHER
by Daniela Dröscher

Sample Translation by Jo Heinrich

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Literary Fiction / Novel

448 pages

Publication date: August 2022

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Contact information: <https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights>

MY MOTHER WON'T FIT IN A COFFIN. She's too fat, she says. When she dies, her ashes won't be kept in an urn; she simply wants them scattered over open water.

My mother's been living by the lagoon for the last few years, at the most north-eastern point of Germany. You couldn't get any nearer to Poland, the country where she was born.

We talk about death a lot. Actually, only she talks about it. It's her weight that gets to her, even though she has none of the classic ailments that doctors attribute to fat people without a second thought. She has pains in her muscles and joints.

I can talk about many things with my mother: almost anything, in fact. The only thing we never touch upon is the money issue. It doesn't look like she'll ever reveal that secret. She'd probably deny ever having had a secret.

Of course you had secrets, I think. Like all human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret.

My eyes wander over her bookshelves. I contemplate

Tolstoy. My mother loves *Anna Karenina*. Maybe we could start a conversation about Tolstoy's heroine and her dramatic ruin?

'Happy families are all...' I begin by quoting, but my mother's already turned her lovely head away.

'Happy families, whatever. Unhappy.'

Sure, I think, unhappy. Throughout my entire childhood and youth, her unhappiness was like a lead weight on my shoulders. So this isn't just her story, it's mine too.

'If you don't start talking,' I threaten, 'I'll have to make something up. I'll have to lie.'

'Go on then. It's your job, after all.'

My mother smiles, flattered, not at all surprised. Almost as if she fancies being the heroine in my novel. I, on the other hand, sound like a timid child. Not like a writer.

The story I have in mind is a story with lots of make-up, blonde wigs, a trapeze and hidden compartments. A complete fiction, in many respects. In philosophy, fiction is described as a 'methodical aid in solving a problem'. My problem is that there are so many secrets in my family that

I don't know where to start. The money issue is just one of them.

It's all down to my father that she sometimes seems so enigmatic, even though she and I are so close. To him, she's the most mysterious person in the world. Yet at the same time, he claims to know every last detail about her.

'Your mother doesn't do moderation. Not with money nor with food,' I can hear him saying. 'There's nothing mysterious about that.'

Through simplistic assertions like this, he's stigmatised my mother for years. And somewhere along the line, or at least every now and then, I believed him.

As a child, I was always stuck between the two of them, like a little detective. Except that I was investigating for my own sake. For a child whose attention is constantly facing outward, wandering between adults, it's hard to distinguish between lies and secrets.

If I want to find out my subjective truth about the money and all the rest of it, I'll have to turn my parents into characters. Characters who can help me understand who's told

which lies about whom.

I'm hesitating, one last time. How can I write about my mother without echoing my father's perspective?

'Just start,' my mother suddenly says softly, 'Go on. You can do it.'

'Do what?' I ask.

'Well, tell your story in a way that keeps me protected.'

'Protected? How? What do you mean?'

'How?' she smiles. 'Protected by you, of course.'

*'Tell all the truth
but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –'*

Emily Dickinson

*'It was a load of crap!
It was old-fashioned, parochial even,
that's what it was!'*

Monaco Franze

One

1983: International Year of Communication

Bird of the Year: The Sand Martin

1

I was sitting in the back of our orange VW Beetle. The leather holdall was in the footwell on the passenger's side: the bag that usually only came out for summer holidays. The boot was packed full as well. I could feel that something wasn't quite right.

It was still early in the morning. My mother should have been at work, and I should have been at kindergarten. Instead, we were driving along the dual carriageway towards Himmelstädt, where my grandparents lived.

'Do Grandma and Grandpa know we're coming?' I asked. My mother just nodded, but said nothing.

I caught sight of her face in the mirror. She was staring at the road, making an effort to conceal her tears from me.

That was something I was familiar with. 'Not in front of the child,' my father would always say. He didn't want me to overhear their arguments.

They fought almost every day, or to put it more precisely, he'd fight, and my mother would merely defend herself. The rows usually started in the evenings, when my father would come home from the office and complain about his wife being 'too fat'. That day, he'd started over breakfast.

I could see my mother bravely balancing her tears along the fine line of her lower eyelids. I reached for my doll, Iwona, who was perching on the seat beside me. Together with Pepper, the black cat, she meant everything to me. All the children at kindergarten in the village had a brother or a sister. I had Iwona.

I decided to sing some of the songs I knew to cheer my mother up. I stood up and straddled the narrow compartment behind the handbrake. I loved standing in that spot; you could get a complete view of the road from there. Unlike in my father's car, I never had to do up my seatbelt when we went out in the Beetle.

The white stripes whizzed under the car as I was singing. Off to the side I saw vineyards, then meadows again; houses only occasionally appeared on the slopes.

The journey to Himmelstädt seemed strange to me. It had been a long time since we'd been to my grandparents' house, and they hadn't been to ours for ages. Before that, there had always been arguments between them and my father's parents, who lived with us. My mother hadn't managed to make them get along, and my father had only tried half-heartedly.

Without any warning, the moving landscape came to a halt. A jolt went through the car. It was as if a giant was tugging on the boot. I screamed and clung to the headrests. The car jerked and jumped, my mother yanked the steering wheel around and somehow managed to steer it onto the hard shoulder. My head hurt. I'd been slammed first against the roof, then against Iwona.

'Are you OK?' My mother leaned between the seats and felt my forehead.

I nodded, to reassure her.

'Are you sure?' She tried to comfort me, stroking my blonde fringe away from my face.

'What happened?' I asked in a daze.

My mother turned back to the dashboard.

'I forgot to buy petrol.'

A little later we were walking along the hard shoulder. My arm wasn't strong enough to hold the bulky petrol can far enough away from me; with every step the empty metal canister banged against my legs. It was annoying, but my mother was wearing her high-heeled sandals, with her toenails painted red, and blue eyeshadow gleaming on her eyelids. I couldn't help feeling that a rusty petrol can wouldn't go with her 'get-up', as Grandma Martha, my father's mother, always called it.

It was unusually warm for April, and my mother was in a hurry. Even now, in this heat, she was careful to make her steps look elegant and effortless, as if she were floating. I kept dropping back a little behind her. I liked the way the sun was tracing our shadows on the asphalt. My mother's shadow was tall and wide, mine was thin and short, and I tried to stay in her silhouette as we were walking.

For weeks, the words 'calories', 'diet' and 'summer holidays' had been floating around our apartment. My father wanted my mother to go on a weight loss programme at a health resort. But my mother refused because she didn't think she was too fat at all.

Grandma Martha agreed with him, 'without even being consulted', as my mother complained. My grandma didn't like my mother, and she didn't like my mother's parents either. Her family 'wasn't from around here,' my grandma maintained. They were originally from Poland but they were German at the same time, what they called 'Silesian Germans', which I found terribly complicated.

'Look, Mama, there!' I nearly stumbled over the can in my excitement.

An emergency call box had appeared a few feet in front of us

by the side of the road, just as shiny, bright and orange as our Beetle. My mother shook her head and dragged me past it.

‘But Dad says you can use them to ring the breakdown people.’

My father had explained how it worked. The breakdown people were called ‘The Yellow Angels’.

My mother laughed. It wasn’t a genuine laugh, and I didn’t like it when she seemed to be mocking me.

‘Not when you’ve forgotten to buy petrol.’ She looked at me beseechingly. ‘You mustn’t mention this to Dad, do you hear?’

I nodded, but I could feel my neck tingling with heat. Telling lies, crying and playing with your food were the three deadly sins. Lying was the deadliest of all. There was nothing my mother hated more.

‘You know how he is,’ she said, as if to excuse him.

It was true: my father would be terribly annoyed if he found out about her mishap. In his job, everything had to be just right. He built gearboxes that tested other gearboxes and an error could cost people their lives. Planes could crash, trains could derail, or Formula 1 racing cars could be thrown off the track and crash into the grandstand without braking. I could see it was better not to tell him about the empty tank.

‘Look! We’re almost there.’

In the distance we could make out a little building with sea-blue flags waving.

When we reached the petrol station, I held my breath as the petrol smell was so strong.

‘Breathe through your mouth,’ my mother told me.

‘Forgot to fill up?’

The petrol attendant’s gaze was drawn to my mother’s figure at

once. I didn't like the way the man was looking at her. His eyes wandered first over her calf-length denim skirt, and then over her thin jumper. He didn't seem to think she was 'too fat'.

He only glanced at me briefly. But I didn't take my eyes off him, just as he didn't take his eyes off my mother as he stuck the nozzle in the can and let the gurgling petrol splash into it.

My mother put her handbag in front of her, took out her purse and crossed her arms. Only then did it occur to me what was missing.

'Iwona!' In the rush I'd left her in the car.

'Iwona - is that your sister?' The petrol attendant's voice suddenly had a strange undertone. I must have called her name out really loud.

'It's only a doll. Called Yvonne,' my mother said quickly and glared menacingly at me. My doll was originally called 'Yvonne', but my Himmelstädt grandma, who 'wasn't from around here', had christened her Iwona purely from homesickness.

'There you go.' The man took the nozzle out of the can.

My mother opened her purse. Her gestures were measured at first but soon became more and more jittery. Eventually she looked up.

'I haven't got enough cash,' she admitted.

The petrol attendant was looking at my mother, all his ardour now gone.

'So what are you going to do now?'

I watched my mother as she gritted her teeth and narrowed her lips. It wasn't the first time she'd gone out without enough money. She'd even had to put things 'on the slate' at the butcher's or the flower shop. They knew her there, though.

The petrol attendant eyed her up and down once more.

‘Normally I’d have to ring the police.’

I looked at my mother in horror. She seemed composed, but then I knew how she looked when she was bottling up her rage.

For a moment she just stood there looking at the vineyards rising up on the other side of the road.

‘You know what?’ she sighed. ‘I’ll bring you the money tomorrow. And I’ll bake you a cake. OK?’

The man hesitated. ‘Do you have any identification?’ My mother hastily pulled her papers out of her bag. The petrol attendant inspected her photo, and then he nodded, and a few minutes later we were walking back to the car on the hard shoulder.

My mother was carrying the heavy can. The petrol was sloshing with every step.

When I offered to help her, she waved me aside.

‘How’s your head? Is it alright now?’ she asked, but it sounded more like an accusation than concern.

I nodded, even though a dull pain was throbbing in my temples. As caring as my mother was, her mood could change at the drop of a hat.

She didn’t say a word all the way back to the car. She kept stopping to catch her breath. She nearly stumbled several times. She may have looked really uncomfortable, and all her elegance was gone, but it never occurred to her to take off her high heels.

After she’d filled up the car, she screwed the can shut and glared first at me then at the Beetle.

‘We’ll go back home now,’ she said and opened the door, making more noise than usual.

I crept back in and found Iwona on the back seat. My mother had only just got in by the time I'd fastened my seatbelt. All the way home I tried to see beyond her head and spot the needle on the petrol gauge.

IN AN EARLIER VERSION of my manuscript, my mother unceremoniously sets fire to the petrol station. Even though she could never really have done that, the image of it corresponds to the fear I felt as a child.

Later in life, whenever I came across explosive characters who vacillated between rage and impotence, I couldn't help but think of my mother: people like Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas, or Ulrike Meinhof. Like these characters, her impotent rage has something to do with money, with a rebellion against the fact that a thing such as money exists, or needs to exist.

Hardly anything in my mother's life is as important as her financial independence. Penny-pinching is deeply alien to her. But she's never quite shaken off a sense of incredulity at having her own money. I have to keep reminding myself how unusual it must have been for women back then to have their own bank account. It was just as much a novelty for a woman to be able to choose her own career rather than the one her

parents picked, or to accept a job without her husband's permission. Only in 1977, the year I was born, did women gain this right to professional autonomy in Germany.

I have an image of my mother opening her purse, in a department store in the pedestrian area. There's something both coy and proud about her. She's the same whenever she comes out of her bedroom to show me some new clothes she's bought.

After the incident, I made an effort not to say a word about our strange trip. I'd never had to keep so quiet about something so exciting before. It took great concentration not to let slip to my father how pleased the petrol attendant had been with the cake. My mother had even given him a wallet. She had lots of nice 'samples' from working in the leather goods factory.

My mother did her best to keep the mishap a secret. The most important thing was concealing the bump on my forehead. Its purple and blue colour even showed through my thick fringe. Whenever I saw Grandma Martha, I'd walk with my head down for fear of her telling on us.

'What's up with that child?' she grumbled in her broad accent. 'Face like a wet weekend.'

But then a letter from the police arrived, and before my mother could take it, Grandma Martha had purposefully fished it out of the post to present to my father that evening.

My grandparents' apartment was directly below ours; anyone in the family could just go up or down the grey marble stairs to see each other. When they moved in, my father said there was no need for separate letterboxes. That was just fine by Grandma Martha: it would be easy for her to spy on my mother.

A motorist had informed the police about the broken-down car.

No one, my father read out in a trembling voice, was allowed to park their vehicle on the hard shoulder in Germany. My mother hadn't even put a warning triangle near the car.

‘It’s really not that hard.’ My father simply couldn’t grasp how a woman as clever as my mother could have been ‘so stupid’.

The letter also included a fine.

‘Almost your entire month’s wages,’ my father said with a deep sigh, running his hand through his thick white-blond hair, which fell halfway over his ears.

I was examined from head to toe and it didn’t take him long to discover the bump on my forehead. He started shouting straight away.

It wasn’t just my mother who bore the brunt but Chancellor Kohl too, as he still hadn’t enforced a nationwide seatbelt law, despite all the promises he’d made before the election.

Even I was drawn into it.

‘Silly girl,’ moaned my father, as he so often did when I hurt myself or got into mischief. ‘Why do you always have to stand up in the back?’

But of course, the chief culprit was my mother.

‘It’s negligent!’ he shouted.

He wasn’t interested in the fact that my bump hardly hurt at all by now. It wasn’t clear what he was most angry about: the fine, the offence, my mother keeping the misadventure secret or me being put in danger.

Meanwhile, my mother was annoyed with her mother-in-law who’d once again been interfering in private matters. The communal letterbox had often been the cause of nasty rows. My mother had no chance to get any mail addressed to her; the postwoman would come in the morning while she was at work, and yet again she criticised the lack of privacy, which oddly made me think of dirty underwear.

‘Post from the police, it’s a disgrace!’ my grandma prattled on unperturbed.

‘The letter was addressed to me. To me!’ My mother was glaring, her face glowing as she stormed out of the room without a word of explanation. She was what they called ‘hopping mad’.

In the early evening, in the middle of the news, Grandma Martha hot-footed it up to our apartment. She was a short woman with pale blonde hair in a bun, and as always when she was worked up about something, the pea-sized blue mole on her right nostril quivered.

‘What a cow! It’s a disgrace!’ she barked at my mother, who just carried on filing her nails without looking up.

‘Come, quick,’ she urged my father. ‘Come and look at this.’

My heart pounding, I followed the grown-ups. Everyone except my mother ran off towards the little vegetable garden by the single stream in the village, amidst the other allotments. I was only wearing my thin-soled plimsolls so every footstep hurt on the stony path, but I gritted my teeth. The allotment meant to Grandma Martha what Iwona meant to me: everything.

When we arrived at the gate, the rakes and shears, normally stored neatly in her shed, were all scattered across the little path. There was a broken beanstalk, and radishes and carrots were strewn between the beds, half dried out. The whole thing looked like a bomb had hit it: it reminded me of a frightening scene from a children’s book I knew. Terrified, I looked over at my father who was standing there ashen-faced.

‘Such a nasty piece of work,’ Grandma Martha went on, ‘She’s got a screw loose.’

I gulped. They were talking about my mother. They all thought she was the only possible culprit. I could feel my heart pounding.

‘Shh,’ Grandpa Ludwig chimed in, ‘not in front of the child.’ He didn’t usually like telling people what to do, but he and my mother got on well. He took me by the hand.

‘Come on, El. Let’s pick some berries.’

My father stood there, his face stricken. While he helped his mother sort out the worst of it, Grandpa Ludwig and I picked the ripe berries and gathered them in a little white bucket. The raspberries were the most precious. They were the type of fruit my mother loved most and with each one I pulled from its green stalk, I grew sadder and sadder.

On the way home, my father gave me a piggyback because my feet were hurting so much I couldn’t walk, but not without giving me a hard time for running to the allotment without the right shoes on. ‘Immature’, he called my behaviour, and blamed my mother for it. After all, I was six already.

I enjoyed the view from his shoulders. Birds were perching in rows on the power lines, chirping a little song in the dusk. Grandpa Ludwig had once explained to me that they could only stay alive on the lethal wires if they didn’t touch the poles.

The row that broke out once we were home was so vicious I could make out every word of it from where I was sitting outside my room on the liver-brown stairs.

My mother tried to defend herself, but after quite some time when she stormed out of the living room in tears, the decision was final. She’d be going to the health resort on her own; I wasn’t allowed to go to the legendary ‘Baden-Baden’ with her.

On the day she was due to leave, my mother's large beige holdall stood in front of the filigree wrought-iron black gate separating our garden from the street.

My father, my grandparents and I stood there in a row, like Russian dolls. It was early in the morning, and still cool. My mother had her fur jacket draped over her shoulders, much to Grandma Martha's annoyance, as she envied her that coat.

'Miss High and Mighty', she always sneered.

My father stood beside me, his arms folded over his scrawny chest. While he seemed relieved my mother was going to the health resort without me, I thought he looked uneasy. Almost as if he had a guilty conscience.

'Grandpa Ludwig will look after you,' he said.

'The poor child,' said Grandma Martha and squeezed me against her apron, which smelled faintly of fried food.

'Poor El.' This time she directed her concern towards my mother, who instantly frowned. She didn't like it when people shortened my name. It must have been awkward for her to leave me in the care of a woman she couldn't stand.

My mother bent down towards me. I hastily threw my arms round her neck. I desperately wanted to feel her warm skin. Memorise her scent. She smelled warm and sweet; I could often pick out a hint of caramel. My throat tightened, but I managed to fight back any tears. More than anything I would have liked to cling to her. It was the first time my mother would be away for a long time and I was missing her already, even though she was still there in the flesh in front of me.

'Look after yourself, OK?' she whispered, her face close to mine.

Her body remained at a distance even while we were having our final hug. I could feel some kind of armour. A barrier - I couldn't tell if it came from me or her, or from both of us.

My mother stroked my hair one last time. The next moment I was waving, both hands in the air, until the Beetle turned into the main road and disappeared around the corner. It was as if a gap had all of a sudden opened up inside me, an empty space that seemed to be both deep inside me and outside my body at the same time.

MY FATHER WAS ONE OF THE FIRST young men in the village to turn his back on farming and take up a 'proper job'.

There was hardly anything he loved more than working at his drawing board. Designing, calculating speeds, solving complicated mathematical equations, but also drawing in its own right. His sharp grey graphite pencil gliding along the ruler on a milk-white drawing pad, or on the orange grid of graph paper. The smooth movement of a compass. Even today, he won't draw on a computer but prefers drawing by hand.

By insisting on learning a white-collar profession as a boy, he managed to 'better himself'. This was also what gave him a kind of princely status in my grandma's eyes.

'I got a prince, and I carried on treating him like a prince,' my mother always says with a shrug. 'I didn't know any different; it had been the same at home.'

Her own mother was unreservedly submissive to her

husband.

'Grandpa would say "jump", and Grandma would ask how high. He was the thinker, she was the doer.'

There were three things, my mother says, that she underestimated when she got married: the village's power, her prince's requirements and her mother-in-law's jealousy.

But more than anything else she had underestimated herself. My mother didn't want to jump, or be the doer. She was a thinker herself, with a head all of her own. Along with her body.

My mother sent a parcel full of gifts just in time for my seventh birthday. My ears burning, I began to unpack it at the breakfast table. On top was a card with a laughing dolphin on it, saying how much she loved me. Beneath it were four whole presents, all wrapped in colourful stripy paper. The first contained clothes for Iwona - four different sets in total. In the second there were three cassettes with stories on them, in the third two jigsaws and in the last a sticker playset. My mother had filled the spaces between the presents with masses of Bazooka Joes; I gasped, as I loved that hard salmon-pink chewing gum and its sweet, nondescript flavour so much.

My father tried not to make a face, but I could tell he thought the gifts were overpriced and the amount excessive.

My mother had also sent two books for Grandpa Ludwig. Only my father and Grandma Martha were left out. For some reason I had the feeling that the parcel had been addressed to my father rather than me.

‘Good grief, what your mother spends her money on,’ he muttered. That was nothing new to me. He often complained about how ‘wasteful’ she was and how she spoiled me too much.

The chewing gum, in particular, seemed to annoy him.

‘Put those away,’ he said. ‘They’ll give you diarrhoea.’

My father gave me a pair of enormous stilts. He’d made them himself from spruce wood in his carpentry workshop, and he’d carefully smoothed off the edges. I made sure I thanked him

nicely, especially as I knew that when he was a child he'd only had stilts made out of old tin cans. And lead marbles, not shiny glass ones.

He also had 'a lot on his plate'.

Our apartment had turned into a building site. On the very day my mother had left, my father had begun to clear out the living room and tear out the 'unsightly' laminate so he could replace it with parquet flooring made of square wooden sections the size of plates. Every evening, he'd slip on an old pair of jeans and a T-shirt that 'didn't matter if it got dirty', he'd put the radio on, open a bottle of beer and happily work away. He liked 'Knowing Me, Knowing You' best of all; he'd always turn it up and I couldn't help being infected by his good mood.

Where the red, white and black patterned Persian carpet used to be, where I liked to listen to my cassette stories, soon there was only a bare, grey, uneven surface. Some of the floor was crooked and difficult to smooth out, so my father was constantly rushing around the apartment with his spirit level in search of an uneven angle.

After my grandma had gone downstairs to her apartment, we sat down at the breakfast table.

It was strange to sit there without my mother, just the two of us. Even my father seemed unsettled by the situation. He kept standing up and changing in and out of his jacket, but he became more and more troubled each time. It was as if he'd lost a kind of mirror when my mother had gone. And, of course, an adult who would listen to him.

Whenever my parents sat together at the breakfast table, my father would talk either about politics or about the company. The

company was a mass of contradictions, as far as I could tell. On the one hand, his job brought him great joy. Being employed also meant financial security, as he liked to emphasise.

But at the same time the company was a source of ongoing discontent. The man he called a 'junior' was a trained engineer - my father wasn't. He was also the owner's son, which made him the 'natural successor'.

Now my mother wasn't around, my father had to make do with me as the recipient of his tirades. But of course, I didn't understand anything about problems with bosses or about the 'Cold War', which he liked to talk about at every opportunity. I also wanted to read my Mickey Mouse book and eat my cake, which I was allowed to do, as it was my birthday.

After a few failed attempts to make conversation with me, my father immersed himself in the fat grey VDI engineering newspaper, but not without ranting about Chancellor Kohl and his nuclear power plants. He did that a lot. For some reason, I was almost certain my father didn't like the Chancellor because he was overweight. Not because of the high taxes he 'squeezed from the taxpayer'.

When I took another piece of the cake Grandma Martha had baked for me, he suddenly looked up from his paper. His bright eyes looked strict behind his glasses.

'Ela,' he said, 'you don't want to get fat.'

Astonished, I looked at the chocolate icing piled up on my children's fork. I'd never been on the receiving end of this kind of reprimand before. My mother only made sure I didn't eat too many sweets because they could give you stomach ache. But this was something different.

All afternoon I tiptoed fearfully around my stilts. They were tall, rigid, unwieldy and scary, and I didn't dare try them on my own. Neither Grandma Martha nor Grandpa Ludwig would be able to catch me if I lost my balance. My grandma was also having a bad day, and she wouldn't stop criticising my mother's parents, as they hadn't brought me 'a single present'.

She herself had given me a pram for Iwona. I walked it gratefully up and down the garden. I was pleased, but felt guilty that she'd spent so much money. I knew that my Himmelstädt grandparents 'had money' and the Obach ones didn't.

Pepper kept rubbing against my legs while I was pushing Iwona around. He missed my mother, whose stroking he preferred to my pathetic child-sized hands.

I'd rejected Grandma Martha's suggestion of inviting some playmates from kindergarten round for a birthday party. I was uncomfortable with those children. They spoke in dialect and made it clear I didn't: my mother spoke High German to me, without an accent. I was also sure they'd ask about the health resort. Other mothers in the village never went away for long periods. I'd already resigned myself to the fact I wouldn't make any real friends in kindergarten, but that wasn't so bad either: soon I'd be starting school. I was one of the few children eligible to start school early because of the month I was born - although I was due to go a year later, the kindergarten teacher thought I was mature enough to go now.

All afternoon I avoided going up to our apartment. My father was at the office and only the man helping him lay the parquet was upstairs. He was applying some varnish that was supposed to dry overnight, which was why I'd been told not to go in the living room

under any circumstances.

While my grandma was cooking, I was having fun with my sticker playset on the kitchen table. It consisted of a hilly green landscape and a big blue sky, about the same size as a drawing pad. The figures were based on fairy-tale characters: detailed, flat people that kept sticking to my fingertips and to each other. They were hard to handle, but I loved the fact that they weren't just fixed in one place, but could be moved about on the surface. I spent hours sticking the tactile characters down and moving them, while I ate one Bazooka Joe after another.

Early in the evening, when my father had arrived home, the phone rang. I was sitting watching the TV, which wasn't in the living room as usual but in the little mezzanine upstairs; I was watching a series. As I was sure it was my mother on the phone, I rushed to answer it. I swung the living room door open with all my might and ran in towards the green push-button phone.

'Ela! No!' I heard an urgent voice behind me.

It was only when I had the receiver in my hand that I realised it was sticky under my feet.

I looked down. I was standing in the middle of the varnished floor in my plimsolls. A thick, clear, pungent-smelling layer surrounded my soles.

'Come out of there this instant!' my father shouted from the doorway.

'Ela, what's wrong?' my mother asked on the phone. Her words sounded very distant. Even her voice seemed to have got thinner.

'Get out! You'll be stuck fast!' my father repeated, genuine panic in his voice.

I stared at him. Was that possible: would my feet become one

with the varnish? I could feel the fear rising within me. The next second, a rumble went through my belly, and something warm and foul-smelling ran down my legs.

My father stared in bewilderment at the mess. Then he called out for Grandma Martha, as he stormed into the room and snatched the receiver out of my hand.

‘You and your stupid chewing gum,’ bellowed my father. ‘All this sweet stuff. It stops now, once and for all.’

He hung up, with a dramatic slam. Meanwhile Grandma Martha manoeuvred me into the shower.

My father came up to me afterwards. ‘It’s not so bad,’ he said, but I could tell from his face that it really was bad. It would cost money to do the varnishing again. I could see he was shaken up, on the inside. It was my birthday, he wanted to be a kind and generous father, and, apart from anything else, it had been his job to keep the door shut. Yet I could sense how upset he was. He wasn’t mean, but ‘wastefulness’ outraged him.

The incident had made two things clear to me. One: my mother had to come back from the health resort. Urgently. And two: I was the one who had to make sure she came home.

Before bedtime, I went in search of something. I knew my mother kept her calorie chart in one of the drawers next to the cooker. It was an elongated green and white book with a woman's mouth made up with red lipstick on it. The woman was balancing a round bowl, in which food was stacked, between her lips. Underneath, it said, ‘Du darfst’: ‘You’re allowed’, a low-fat food brand. The book’s cardboard pages were arranged alphabetically. From A for *Ananas* - pineapple - to Z for *Zuckerwürfel* - sugar cubes - it

showed exactly how many calories were in everything. I was thrilled. Grandpa Ludwig, who read a lot, had taught me to read over the spring.

I made sure my father was watching TV upstairs, then I took the book away. I carried on reading it secretly in bed, and tried to learn the most important numbers by heart. I was drawn to the foods that my mother had marked with a little cross.

My father had shown me how to count to a hundred. I couldn't do addition yet, but I could see how fatty or low in fat each type of food was. An egg had 80 calories, a slice of cheese had 100, a banana had 100 too. A tablespoon of Nutella had 50.

THE WORD 'DIET' HASN'T ALWAYS been universally used to describe a low-calorie regime. The ancient Greek 'díaita', from which our word is derived, means 'lifestyle' or 'way of life'. In ancient times, a fat belly represented wealth and well-being.

My mother grew up with parents who were very down-to-earth and confident about their fat bodies. In her family, being fat was associated with health and prosperity, rather than a stigma. And for years she didn't consider herself 'too fat' at all.

I hesitated over writing about my mother for a long time. I still wonder if I can choose the right words, and not end up hurting her in a moment of carelessness.

Language is surprisingly clumsy when it comes to describing a fat body. Plump, chubby, stout, portly, burly, bulky, podgy, tubby, hefty, paunchy, buxom, stocky, chunky, full-figured, full-bodied, corpulent: all these words seem

strangely coy and euphemistic. The word 'fat' seems the most honest to me. Saying it out loud still takes me some effort. Even though my mother uses it herself.

I admire activists who refuse to hide their fat bodies, flaunting them and celebrating them, fighting the logic of classic women's journalism.

We never had glossy women's magazines in our house.

The ideals they propagated were 'too unrealistic', according to my mother. And 'too boring'.

Entire industries are founded on the desire for a slim figure. If women on earth woke up tomorrow feeling truly positive and powerful in their own bodies, the economies of the globe would collapse overnight.

My wish came true. After my father rang her, my mother came back from the health resort a week earlier than planned. I was overjoyed to have her back. Even my father eyed her approvingly. Her hips were noticeably narrower than before. ‘You’ve lost the most weight from your thighs,’ he said appreciatively.

My mother took the compliments in her stride. Something about her seemed different. She wore new sunglasses with big blue tinted lenses and she looked foreign and chic.

‘Like Grace Kelly,’ my father said.

But she stopped appreciating the shiny new parquet he was proudly presenting to her when she spotted me on the landing. After all, I was the reason she’d come back. She covered her face with her hands.

‘Ela! Child of God!’

She looked me up and down. I was wearing my favourite track-suit bottoms – shiny black polyester trousers with stirrups. Normally the fabric fitted me around the thighs, but I’d lost so much weight so quickly that the polyester was hanging around my legs. My body didn’t look much better. Two skinny arms peeked out from under my favourite T-shirt with its blue, white and black batik pattern, and my collarbones stood out conspicuously. I’d been examining the results of my diet in the mirror at length.

At first it looked as if my mother wanted to grab me, turn on her heels and walk out. But then she just bent down and hugged me tight.

Briefly, but for longer than usual, her armour had disappeared. I relaxed, close and warm, into her bosom and I could hear her heart beating. For a moment it was as if I was looking down on us: her and me, these two disparate silhouettes. It was strange. My mother had lost weight, and I'd followed suit. The difference between us was the same as always. Or nearly, anyway.

It was almost scary to see the strict rules my mother followed with her food from then on. In the mornings and evenings, she ate almost nothing but crispbreads, and I could see how much effort it took her to stick to this regime.

My father expressed his respect for her by praising her again and again for her discipline. But it didn't take long for another subject to cause tensions. For a long time now, my father never tired of pointing out that Mama was 'paid a pittance' for her job. She was a bilingual secretary at a leather goods factory by the name of Erich-Engel, but until now she'd only looked after the English clients. When the subject came up again at the table over dinner a few weeks after she'd come back from Baden-Baden, she said decisively, 'You're right. I don't earn enough. Things have to change.' My father looked at her curiously.

'If I want to get ahead,' she said, 'I really need to learn French properly. By correspondence course. From a distance learning college. A language school.'

My father choked on a hot potato.

'A course? Without any entry requirements?' he asked in disbelief.

'Yes,' my mother said cheerfully. 'A woman who was at the health resort with me studied there.'

I hadn't seen my mother looking so cheerful for a long time. 'Studying' seemed to be something wonderful, even if my father clearly saw it differently. He frowned questioningly.

'I'd be much better paid,' my mother persevered.

'And how exactly do you work that out?'

She took a deep breath and exhaled. Suddenly her voice didn't sound cheerful at all any more, just very tired.

'Why do you make it so hard for me?' she asked quietly.

'I just want to know what you've got in mind. And in terms of time.' He carried on eating, without raising his eyes to her.

Immediately there was a visible uncertainty on my mother's face. As if she had a guilty conscience.

'It's part-time,' she said quickly. 'And it's not that expensive.'

'Huh? It costs money too?'

'Of course it costs money.' My mother bit her lip.

'And what about Ela? Who'll look after her?'

My mother looked at him, perplexed.

'Well, Ela... Ela will be playing. Like she normally does.'

I nodded eagerly.

'I've got Iwona. And Pepper.'

Judging by the expression on my father's face, a doll was not a playmate to be taken seriously. He often complained that I should play with the children in the village and not be 'tied to my mother's apron strings' so much.

'She'll make friends, when she starts school,' my mother tentatively ventured, but straight away he said, 'But it's not definite that she's going to school.'

My mother stared at him.

'I thought we'd decided. She's ready.'

‘A child needs its mother.’

Now my mother clutched her forehead. She shook her head.

‘But you’re always saying a child needs other children. What’s going on now?’

‘You think you’re so clever,’ my father suddenly raised his voice.

He folded his arms, as he always did whenever he claimed he was in the right, even though everyone, including him, knew it wasn’t the case.

‘I don’t care what you think,’ my mother said. ‘I’m going to find out. And then we’ll see.’

The summer holidays were ‘just around the corner’. We would be going to Italy on holiday, to a place with the enticing name of ‘Adriatic’. Every evening my mother would learn Italian vocabulary ‘to be able to get by,’ she said. As she already spoke a little French, Italian couldn’t be that difficult.

My father showed me where on the globe that had long been on a shelf in the living room cupboard. The sphere had a light bulb inside and glowed in the dark; I loved tracing the outlines of the continents with my finger. And I particularly liked the Italian boot.

‘So far from home,’ Grandma Martha, who’d never been further than Munich, complained.

Since the trip to the health resort, the two women still only spoke to each other when they had to. Grandma Martha demanded an apology for the ravaged allotment; my mother remained silent and would rather have ‘bitten off her own tongue’; she treated her mother-in-law as if she didn’t exist.

It all went so far that Grandma Martha refused to keep an eye on me when I came home from kindergarten at lunchtime.

Grandpa Ludwig offered to help, but he couldn't cook, not even just to warm something up, and so my mother would rush home from the office every day to make lunch. It was important to her that I got 'a hot meal', even when my polyester trousers had stopped hanging round my legs; I looked just as I had before.

'Those were the terms,' I heard her say to my father once, 'your mother looks after Ela.'

'What do you mean, terms?'

'You know exactly what I mean. For me to move here with you. To the countryside.'

Before we set off on the long journey to the Mediterranean, my father wanted me to learn to swim. So we were taking a trip to the local open-air pool.

Our swimming bags and straw beach mats were in the hallway.

While my mother was putting some cold drinks in the cool bag, I pointedly pushed Iwona up and down in her pram, from the kitchen along the hall towards the pantry and back again. I knew it was up to my parents whether I'd have a little brother or sister or not. In our village stork's nests were hung over front doors for luck when a baby was born somewhere, but my mother didn't think much of silly folk tales like that. She'd explained to me that a man and a woman had to 'love each other' for a baby to be born.

When no one took any notice of me, even after some time, I came up with the idea of replacing Iwona with Pepper in the pram, which did not end well, of course. He scratched my arm and my mother gave me a cautionary look.

'Animals aren't toys.'

It was hot, far too hot, and the atmosphere in the house was

already oppressive, but then my father came into the kitchen, which seemed to instantly darken.

‘Can you explain this to me?’

He usually only sounded this annoyed when he was fed up about his junior. Something was wrong. Really wrong.

With a ‘face of thunder’, he showed my mother an invoice.

‘I can’t wait to hear what you’ve got to say,’ he snapped.

My mother looked at the floor.

‘I wanted to get home as quickly as possible,’ she said, ‘because of Ela.’

‘So you simply walked out? Without saying a word?’ He shook his head. ‘You’ll have to pay for the health resort yourself now. I don’t believe it! How could anyone be so irresponsible?’

‘Irresponsible?’ Now it was my mother’s turn to ‘blow her top’. ‘Who was it letting the girl starve?’ She threw the towel she was about to put in her swimming bag down on the floor. ‘You know what? You can go to the pool on your own. And to the Adriatic too.’

I was horrified. I could see she wasn't going to change her mind, at least not at the moment. My heart was ‘in my mouth’.

‘Oh, come on, now,’ my father tried to backtrack, ‘I didn’t mean it like that.’

But my mother had already slammed the kitchen door behind her.

It was freezing in the pool, the scratches Pepper had given me were hurting and I wasn’t very good at what my father was telling me to do. Teaching me to swim required a lot of patience from him, but he did his best. Even so, he didn’t manage to get me to

put my head under the water. I hated the way the chlorine burned my eyes.

At some point he gave up and decided to buy me chips instead.

‘But don’t tell Mama,’ he said.

‘That stale oil they keep reheating - ugh!’ she always said.

We lay on our straw mats for the rest of the afternoon. My father sat there with drooping shoulders. We didn’t speak to each other much, which was unusual. He only asked me to rub some sun cream into his back.

THE WORDS 'HEALTH RESORT' ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED with the town of Baden-Baden in my memory. But my mother actually went to Hessen to lose weight. Not to Baden-Baden in the south.

In all these years, I have never seen her do anything on her own. She never took a holiday or even went on a day trip. I find it hard to imagine her in a different place. But at the same time there's something cosmopolitan about her.

How did she pass the time, on that weight loss programme? Did she sit on a riverbank feeding pigeons? Did she make any acquaintances? Did any men look at her? Did she eat an ice cream in the sun? Or more than one?

Herr God, Herr Lucifer, Beware, Beware.

As I reread Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*, coincidentally set in Baden-Baden, the words 'health resort' take on other connotations. One is the theme of gambling, and another, my Silesian-German grandmother's fur coats.

In my mind's eye I can see my mother sitting in a fur coat at a Baden-Baden casino table, throwing money around. She's speaking Polish, although she hardly knows any Polish. In my imagination, she seems happy, not unhappy. Almost like me, when I'm sitting at my writing desk.

Writing, too, is a kind of roulette. Or a never-ending health resort programme. Have I mentioned how much I like wearing fake fur?

5

Fortunately, my mother's threat came good. She went to the Adriatic with us, on condition that my father didn't say another word about the unfinished weight loss programme and the costs involved. And he actually managed to keep his mouth shut.

We would be spending the holidays with the Elsners, a couple from Garmisch-Partenkirch, and their children. My parents knew them from Munich, where we'd lived for a while.

We were due to meet at a motorway service area just before the Italian border, and then 'cross the Brenner Pass' together, my father announced, not without a certain reverence in his voice.

I couldn't help but marvel, all the way there. The Alps, speckled with snow, rose up in the distance. I'd only ever seen the mountains in pictures in our photo album. I was amazed at how massive and imposing they were in real life.

When we arrived at the car park, I initially kept my distance. I couldn't remember the family. Isolde, the mother, was so small and thin she could have fitted in my little polyester tracksuit bottoms. She hugged both my parents affectionately, as did the man, whose name was Gerd. My father was visibly pleased; my mother's reaction seemed a little cautious to me. Both daughters were close to my age: the elder ten, the younger five. Their names were Thekla and Moni. Thekla, the elder sister, chewed gum incessantly and listened to music on her Walkman, which she casually tucked into the waistband of her jeans. As she walked towards me, I looked up at her in awe. She smelled faintly of perfume and

seemed incredibly grown up all round. The younger daughter, Moni, didn't seem to notice anything besides herself. She was a slightly fatter child who demanded food incessantly, much to my father's horror.

At lunch in the service station, she devoured a plate of spaghetti in no time at all. When her parents got up to pay, my father bent over the table and looked over the empty plate at Moni with excessive concern.

'You must eat more slowly. Make sure your fork's less full, and always chew well. Ten times every mouthful. At least.' He made an effort to speak especially clearly, without an accent. Then he turned and gave my mother one of his troubled looks, as if she was to blame for Moni's eating habits.

We'd only just got back in the car when he snapped at my mother.

'Does your swimming costume still fit you?' he asked tetchily.

His words came out of the blue.

'What do you mean? Of course it fits.'

I understood at once. She couldn't compare to the competition: her thighs were so much wider than skinny Isolde's, despite all the crispbread.

My father had just wanted to make a throwaway remark, and he would probably have left it at that one stupid comment, but now my mother was in a rage. I could feel quite clearly how much he hurt her.

'How thin am I supposed to get? In your opinion?' she snapped, so vehemently that I cowered deeper into my seat.

My father was silent.

'Just tell me,' she carried on.

When there was no reply, she too retreated behind a grim silence.

‘It’s never enough, is it?’

No one spoke another word for the rest of the long journey. I tried to focus on my music cassette. My eyes were glued to the landscape, but I also had the feeling that I had to concentrate on braking, steering and overtaking, myself: the atmosphere in the car was so tense. Only once did my mother offer in a deadpan voice to take over the driving from my father, but he turned her down and carried on resolutely without a break.

When we finally arrived at a place called Brindisi, we were all sweaty and tired. It was the middle of the day, and the light was unusually bright and blinding. Luckily, my mother had bought me a pair of children's sunglasses, which I proudly put on.

The hotel was right on the sea front and was called ‘Banjo’, just like the crispy chocolate bar I’d sometimes have from the petrol station. It was the very first time I’d be staying in a hotel. I was happy, and very excited. The carpet and curtains were a bright apricot colour and smelled faintly of smoke: not even the air freshener could mask it. My parents both wanted to have a lie down, but I jumped around on the big double bed and begged them to take me to see the sea. Eventually my father gave in. My mother ‘gritted her teeth’ and packed up the swimming things.

We joined the Elsners on the beach; Thekla and Moni had also wanted to go to the sea for a swim straight away. At first, I just stood there in amazement for ages. My feet were planted in warm sand. There was no wind at all, and the sun was still high in the sky. Never before had I seen so much blue at once – the sky and the sea. My father and Gerd hired parasols and loungers from a very

tanned man in lemon yellow shorts, who 'was asking a fortune' for them, but it was the holidays, after all.

My parents were still only speaking to each other when they had to; the mood between them was getting worse by the minute. My father constantly fixated on my mother's body. She tried to ignore his glaring, but it was obvious how much it unnerved and upset her. I knew she'd been really looking forward to Italy but now all her fun seemed to have been spoilt. Not even the shells I found for her could cheer her up.

While I was kneeling in the sand, taking care not to break any of the delicate white shells between my fingers as I was picking them up, I also kept tentatively looking over at my parents.

I simply didn't understand what was 'fat' about my mother. There were women here on the beach who certainly weighed much more, and there were plenty of men carrying their enormous bellies about in front of them as a matter of course.

Isolde's skin was so white she had to stay under the huge orange parasol all day long. There she sat, drinking beer that you could buy from 'hawkers' with cool boxes, and playing skat with the men squatting next to her on knee-high little chairs. She laughed a lot. I liked Isolde, but something told me it wasn't right to like her.

Now my father was sitting with Gerd and Isolde, he practically blossomed. He was exuberant around them, making joke after joke, laughing incessantly and slapping his thighs, even if something wasn't actually funny at all. But only until the men started discussing work. Gerd, it turned out, had just been promoted, and the more enthusiastically he talked about it, the more my father's face darkened. I felt sorry for him. I knew how much he suffered from not being 'given a chance' in his company.

My mother sat separately on a blanket the whole time, a small book with a white linen cover on her knees. She didn't need a parasol – her skin soaked up the sun and she looked beautiful in her dark blue bikini. But she didn't seem to be enjoying her time on the beach particularly. She didn't go into the water, but just sat there with her legs drawn up, reading page after page and hardly ever raising her head, her face half hidden behind her Grace Kelly sunglasses.

My father made no secret of how uncomfortable he felt with his wife barely joining in the conversation. She was monosyllabic with me too, and so dismissive that I soon didn't dare approach her any more than necessary. My father didn't know what to do. She ignored his 'critical looks' stoically. Isolde acted as if she hadn't noticed how icily my mother was behaving towards her. Gerd was the only one who asked what she was reading.

'*Homo Faber*,' she said, which sounded sinister to my ears. 'It's a story about an engineer.'

I saw how my father winced at these words. After all, he wanted nothing more than to be just that: a proper engineer.

Gerd tried to persuade my mother to go for a swim. She wouldn't go, but she smiled gratefully at him. She also listened attentively to Gerd's stories about South America. Before he was married, he'd spent a lot of time in Argentina. He also asked her about her work, and my mother talked about the dealings she had with buyers and salespeople.

'I'm doing a diploma at the moment. In French,' she said proudly.

With every sentence the two of them exchanged, the more sullen my father's face became. He didn't like it when my mother

talked about her work. He found it uncomfortable that she was employed in a leather goods factory. 'The poor animals,' he always said. But the conversation was soon over, and Gerd went back over to his wife.

At some point later in the afternoon, Thekla took me and Moni by the hand and all three of us walked over to the water. I could see how happy it made my father to see me playing with other children. 'Take care,' he shouted after us cheerfully. My mother wasn't paying us any attention. She was concentrating on her book, as if she had nothing to do with what was happening around her. She wasn't even interested in my sunburn. My neck and the top of my chest were red all over; my father had forgotten that area when he'd been rubbing in the sun cream, and I could gradually feel my skin getting warmer and warmer.

We cautiously went into the water. I'd only been swimming with my father before that, and always with water wings. But now I was going in, step by step, with only Thekla's hand to hold me. I could smell her perfume, even in the water. The waves lapped around our ankles, then around our calves, and then finally around our hips. I was jumping up and down ineptly.

My water wings were still in the beach bag. Thekla and Moni didn't need them, and I didn't want to need them either.

We were standing up to our hips in the water when a big wave swept up all at once and Thekla's hand slipped from mine.

'Ela! Take care!' I heard my father's shrill voice behind me, but by then I'd already lost my footing.

Suddenly there was only a rushing noise around me. The water flooded into my ears, my nose, my mouth. I kicked and tried to find a foothold, but I no longer knew which way was up or down.

It was only when my father pulled me out of the water that the panic set in. I screamed and screamed and screamed. It was burning inside my nose, I couldn't see anything and everything tasted of salt.

Back to safety on the beach, my mother showed no visible signs of alarm. She consoled me tersely, probably out of defiance, as my father kept glaring at her reproachfully, and Thekla was getting a proper telling-off from Gerd. My mother simply dried me, and the fabric felt rough and harsh on my reddened chest - it hurt.

'You've only swallowed a little water. No need to cry,' she said sternly, at which point my father exploded. 'That's enough now!' he shouted and I fell silent, because at first I didn't know whether he meant me or my mother. I looked from one to the other, trying to figure out who'd done what wrong and when: my mother, Thekla or me, or all three of us. But neither my father nor my mother said another word.

A few days later, Thekla, Moni and I were playing with the Italian girl from the next table. She had breakfast in the hotel restaurant with her parents every morning like us, and over the course of the week we'd become friends. She could speak both languages, German and Italian, and she was comfortable talking to the waiters who kept coming over to us and making jokes with her. When my father saw this, he seized the opportunity and sent my mother over to ask the waiters where he could buy a certain kind of tile. All the roofs in Brindisi's old town had these tiles. My mother, all of a sudden in her element, tried in English, French and her newly learned Italian.

I got bored with the conversation, so I wandered out to the hotel

forecourt, where a balloon seller on a bike was riding by, loudly hawking his wares.

Without a second thought, I trailed after the man.

Barely two minutes later, I was lost. All around me were the old town's unfamiliar narrow alleyways: no hawkers here, and no tourists either. It smelled of fish, damp gym shoes and spices. I could feel my whole body breaking out in a sweat. I wandered around for a while and found a busier street, but nothing here seemed familiar either. I'd never find my way back to the hotel. All I could see around me were people's legs. Adult legs and hips, and crowds. I stood, frozen to the spot, and fought back my tears.

All of a sudden, a young woman with curly black hair bent down to me. She was wearing a colourful dress and talking Italian to me non-stop. It was interspersed with her putting her hand to her chest and saying 'Mariella', 'Mariella.' After a while, I managed to pick out individual words from the wall of foreign sound. I thought I could hear 'hotel' and 'police'. In my confusion I told her the name of the hotel - 'Banjo' - but it didn't seem to mean anything to her.

She took me to the police station and waited there with me, in the hope that my parents would show up at some point. I was eternally grateful to her. Her hair was beautiful; I admired her high-heeled shoes and gazed at her smart handbag, and all the while she was smiling her warm, gentle smile. She reminded me a little of the woman from the 'Du darfst' advert.

After what felt like as long as it took to cross the Brenner Pass, my parents arrived. In a dramatic gesture, my father dropped to his knees in front of me, hugged me tight and rocked me back and

forth in his arms.

‘My girl,’ he kept sighing, and, ‘Ela, Ela, Ela. So glad.’

When he let go of me, I looked up. I could feel his silent reproach. To him there was no doubt: it was my mother’s fault that I’d walked out of the hotel. My mother, probably trying to brush off these accusations, looked at me with a very odd expression on her face.

‘Sorry,’ I whispered.

‘What for?’ she wanted to know.

‘For getting lost.’

She rested her gaze on me silently. Searching, somehow. Maybe she knew what I’d been thinking. Since Mariella had taken me by the hand and led me through the town to the police station, since it was clear that I was safe, I’d been imagining what it would be like to have her as a mother. A thin, cheerful, Italian mother. A mother my father could relax with on the beach and a mother who’d never, ever need to go on a diet.

For the rest of the holiday, my mother would go off to the old town, ‘having a coffee’ or ‘shopping’, while I sat next to skinny Isolde and her daughters under the parasol on the beach, and my father would play frisbee with an overly upbeat air about him, and he’d act as if he and I were a perfectly normal family.

IT'S STRANGE that I don't look like my mother in the slightest. Anyone who didn't know we were mother and daughter would never suspect we were related. Physically, I 'take after my father'. But when I was younger I was convinced I'd get fat too at some point. It seemed certain to me that one day my mother's figure would burst out of me and emerge as my true shape.

What a paradox: when I was younger, I'd have given anything to be able to protect my mother from the judgmental looks of others. At the same time, though, I could register an awakening sense of shame.

Very few girls want to look like their mothers, and that's an understandable departure. In my case, there's a more complicated distancing behind it. Early on, the way my father saw things inscribed itself in the way I as a child saw things. For a long time, I saw the way he saw, whether I wanted to or not. I had to learn to actively reject him.

Quotations in the text

‘Like all human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret.’ (p. 1): Gabriel García Márquez, tr. Edith Grossman: *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Penguin, 1988.

‘If women on earth woke up tomorrow feeling truly positive and powerful in their own bodies, the economies of the globe would collapse overnight.’ (p. 15): Laurie Penny: *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism*. Zero Books, 2011.

‘Herr God, Herr Lucifer, Beware, Beware.’ (p. 19): Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*. Faber & Faber, 1965.