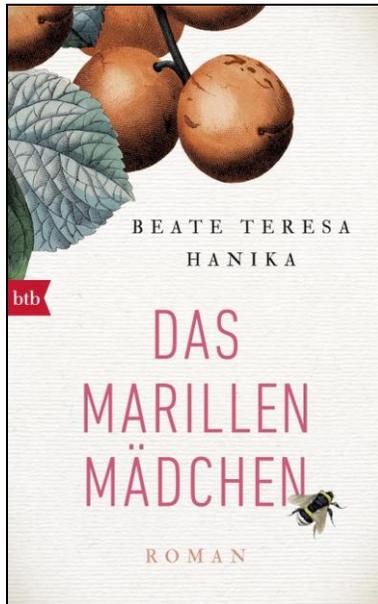


Beate Teresa Hanika

THE APRICOT GIRL

[Das Marillenmädchen]



Literary Fiction

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Elisabetta lives a secluded life in her Vienna childhood home. Ever since she was a young girl in the 1940s, she has been preserving apricot jam from the fruits of the tree in her garden. She keeps one glass from every year, just like she keeps her memories awake: Her glamorous older sisters who would sunbathe in the garden, admired by the neighbor's boys, her mother's beautiful singing, and her father's gifts -- little things he would extract for her from the pockets of his doctor's coat. And then the day when everything changed, when her parents and her sisters were taken away by the SS and the girl was left behind, her only companion being the turtle her father gave her shortly before he left, and whom they mockingly named Hitler. And her sister's voices also stayed with her, commenting everything she does.

When young Pola moves into the room Elisabetta rents out, the old woman's routines are being challenged. Pola, a passionate dancer, struggles with her own past -- her love for her soul mate Rachel and a terrible event that binds her to Elisabetta. And yet, a gentle companionship starts to form between the two women.



Beate Teresa Hanika was born in Regensburg in 1976 and has already written several highly acclaimed young-adult novels that have been awarded among others the Bavarian Art Promotion Prize and nominated for the German Youth Literature Prize. *The Apricot Girl* is her first novel for adults.

Sample Translation

by Imogen Taylor

I would like to tell you a story. I know – stories are out of fashion; I haven't heard any at least since the new millennium began. Apart from this one. It is about love and freedom, and what more does a good story need?

It began when the Russian woman moved out and the girl moved in. They thought I wouldn't notice – thought that my eyes were so bad I couldn't tell a Russian from a German, that the singsong of their voices was so similar – harsh and imperious – that I would hear only their disjointed accents through the floorboards and think they were one and the same woman. They thought they had it all figured out. One day it wasn't the Russian woman who come home; it was the other. She unlocked the door downstairs, climbed the creaking stairs to the first floor and when she saw me standing at the door of my flat, she called out a quick 'Good evening, Frau Shapiro'.

I know how I look. My eyes are watery and clouded over, my hair is white with age and my body rickety (even if I wish it weren't). As far as appearances go, I won't have made the best impression. But I still have all my wits about me.

I folded my arms across my bony breast and listened to her footsteps. Once upstairs she walked about the flat as if she had always lived there. She slipped off her shoes, walked barefoot into the bathroom, turned on the tap and let the water run into the cast iron bathtub while she went to put her shopping in the fridge.

I hadn't liked the Russian. She was a simple girl from near the Mongolian border, her face almost Asian, her body lithe and weightless. As lithe as a reed, bowed shivering over the black water of

Lake Baikal. As weightless as the dragonflies that settle on your hand with whirring wings. She was respectable and quiet and never brought men back to the house. Never. But although she was so respectable, I had never liked her.

A quick glance was enough to tell me that the other one was trouble, and looking back on it, I wonder why I didn't turn her out that very evening. It was my house, after all. My flat. But somehow the thought didn't occur to me.

She left a smell of rosin on the stairs – that and a terrible mixture of anger and fear and mystery. A smell of unspoken words and of deeds best forgotten. Perhaps that was what stopped me from going after her and confronting her. Or perhaps it was only an old lady's thoughtlessness, or boredom or an element of cowardice that held me back. Who knows?

My mother told me that it was my father who gave me my name. After my mother had named my two sisters Judith and Rahel, my father insisted on Elisabetta. Elisabetta. A completely ridiculous name for a little Jewish girl, but my father said he could see in my eyes that I had no use for an ordinary name, but needed one that set me apart me from the others. Elisabetta Shapiro. The name certainly set me apart; he was right there. It was a name that was neither fish nor fowl, neither Jewish nor Italian – and it had no connection to the town where I was born, Vienna.

It could have been worse. I don't want to moan. Especially as none of the children who were born that year were born under a lucky star. 1934 was not a year for lucky children. And I don't think it made any difference to the fate of a child born in 1934 whether it was called Elisabetta or Judith.

I don't know what the situation is today. I only know that this girl didn't look particularly lucky either. When she appeared and the Russian woman vanished, the apricot tree was just coming into blossom. The tree stood at the back of the house, at the terrace door, and blossomed with an abandon that only nature can muster, scattering white petals lavishly over the grass. Over the unmown, unkempt grass which felt rough underfoot. At night I couldn't sleep because the scent of spring crept

up to my bedroom window, making me – and the spirits – restless. Or else because that girl was walking about overhead, turning pirouettes.

I discovered that, like the Russian, she was a dancer at the Vienna State Ballet. That she danced in the corps de ballet and was German. I didn't need to know any more.

The next morning, so early that there was mist creeping over the ground even in the centre of Vienna, I went out into the garden and leaned against the apricot tree. I couldn't sleep. Not because of her; it was as if the twenty-four hours that made up the day were not prepared to let me go. Over the years I had got into the habit of standing here, smoking and talking to Rahel and Judith. Rahel, the elder and sterner, often scolded me about the house: I was letting it go to rack and ruin, she said. Mother would turn in her grave if she knew how I treated it. She meant that there were clumps of dust under the furniture; that there were dishes piled up in the sink because I didn't feel like washing up, pale marks under the pictures because the walls needed painting and buckets in the attic because it sometimes rained in. Only when there was a downpour, of course, or when the snow melted at the end of the winter.

Mother doesn't have a grave, I would answer, because it was true. Judith would try to placate us, stroking our skin like the wind and usually saying nothing. Even as a child she had been quiet. Reserved. While Rahel and I quarrelled, she would sit on the front steps reading, or roll marbles back and forth on the little path that led from the garden gate to the house.

'What's that girl doing in the flat upstairs?' Rahel asked and I tore open a new packet of 'Ernte 23' cigarettes. I only smoked them because I knew how much Rahel loathed the smell.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'The new girl. The German.'

'She's Russian.'

'Don't act stupid. I saw the Russian leave with her suitcases in the middle of the night. She took the tram to Central Station and is probably on the Trans-Siberian Railway as we speak.'

‘Nonsense.’

‘It’s not nonsense. You close your eyes to things.’

Judith shook the petals in the tree and I drew on my cigarette. The bitter smoke settled on my tongue.

‘No one takes the Trans-Sib nowadays.’

‘You know perfectly well what I mean. Mother would turn in her grave.’ Rahel’s words sounded like a series of slaps in the face, but I had grown bored with that sentence somehow. Too often spoken. Too often heard. I yawned, opening my mouth so wide that Rahel could see the last of my remaining teeth.

‘I know.’

‘She wouldn’t put up with it.’

‘A Russian woman.’

‘A German woman.’

I sighed.

‘Don’t be silly. What difference does it make? Mother wouldn’t have put up with a Russian in the house either.’

I must have been right about that because Rahel abandoned her cutting comments. I liked her really. Deep down I loved her the way only sisters can love one another. I leaned my back against the trunk of the apricot tree. It felt as gnarled as my own body.

‘Do you remember,’ I asked, ‘the time Father planted the tree? He dug it out of a fruit grower’s orchard in Mödling and brought it here on the back of his bike.’

Rahel said nothing.

‘He said it was a good time to plant it.’

I remembered his words as clearly as if he’d been standing next to me only a moment ago, leaning on his spade here on this very spot, earth on his forehead from wiping his face with his hand after

digging the hole. I imagined the time that followed just as clearly: orange and juicy, sweet and rich, like apricots picked warm from the tree in summer.

‘You weren’t born when he planted the tree,’ Rahel pointed out.

‘But he told me about it so often that it feels as if I was there.’

‘Ridiculous,’ Rahel said grumpily.

‘The fruit grower in Mödling had died in the war and his garden was abandoned.’ I flicked ash onto the dry grass. ‘Father didn’t even have a bucket. He clamped the ball of roots on the bicycle carrier and must have lost half the earth. No one believed the tree would survive without earth and with only a few roots. But it’s still here today.’

Like me.

‘Who are you talking to?’

I hadn’t noticed the girl coming up behind me, and I started. She was wearing a white leotard with a pair of short jeans over the top. Through the thin cloth I could see her ribs and the slight swell of her breast.

‘With the blackbirds.’

‘I see.’

I was struck by her eyes. Her pupils were like the tunnels hewn barehandedly into the rocks on Monte Negro: pitch black, with no end in sight. You have to force yourself to drive into them; you think three times before setting off, and halfway through at the latest you deeply regret your decision. She held out her empty hand and for an instant I thought she was going to introduce herself to me, formally, as would only have been proper, but she simply wanted a cigarette. I let her take one and then handed her my lighter too.

‘I thought you were talking to the tree.’

‘You can’t talk to trees.’

‘You can talk to anything,’ she said, plunging her black pupils into mine.

We smoked for a while in silence and I could feel Judith laying her hand soothingly on the back of my neck. At the front of the house, the Mariahilferstrasse was waking up. A tram approached its stop with much ringing and squeaking, the mist dispersed beneath our feet and I shivered and wrapped my arms around my middle. Since I have grown old, all warmth seems to have left me, as if I have a hole somewhere that it seeps into. I did not intend to speak to the German girl about her deceit; I only wanted to look at her and understand why she was here. Why she had found me now.

One thing I can say about the girl is that she walked between the worlds. She could assume different forms, knew the dark side, but also the light, and remained impervious to both. That is unusual. You normally see it in a person's eyes, but hers revealed nothing: those black tunnels ended in nothing – nothing that had ever touched her. I admired that. And at the same time I detested it. Perhaps I confused her external hardness with something deep down inside that could only be guessed at.

The Russian's daily routine had always been the same. Like clockwork. She got up late because practice at the opera house starts late. And she came back very late because the performances end very late. I would hear the gentle click of the door as she carefully pulled it shut. Carefully so as not to wake me. I once tried to explain to her that this wasn't necessary.

'I'm not asleep at that time.'

She looked at me uncomprehendingly.

'I never go to bed early,' I added, which seemed to confuse her even more.

'You don't have to be quiet for me.'

'You're welcome,' she said and it was only then that I realised she was not conscious of her actions; she was like a dancing string puppet, always in the right place at the right time. A puppet which slept and ate, but did not dream. At the same time I suddenly understood that many people were like this and I thought with horror of my own consciousness, of the many hours I spent in the garden, while my head emptied itself, on and on, emptier and emptier.

The German girl was completely different.

Regular hours seemed alien to her. Her days were without any discernible pattern. Sometimes she stayed out all day and half the night, and when she returned she would drag herself up the stairs to her little attic flat with her last ounce of strength. I suspected that she lay down immediately inside the door, curled up in a ball like an animal back from the hunt. A marten perhaps, or a weasel or an opossum.

Then there were days when I didn't hear a sound from the flat, although she was obviously there. Her shoes stood untouched on the doormat. The curtain billowed out of the window and I swear I could hear her breathe. Did she sleep all day long? Was she catching up after all that dancing?

She hadn't been in the house two days when she brought a horde of girls back home with her – something the Russian woman had never done. I only had to look at the Russian for her to buckle, swallowed up by her own shyness, like a rabbit before a snake. I hated her for it, although I knew it was wrong to hate somebody for being weak.

This girl, at any rate, was impervious to my looks. She simply ignored me when she got back from the opera house with the girls, a cluster of floaty creatures, soaked by the drizzle, almost dissolved. Their voices buzzed on the staircase and I stood by the garden gate and watched them climb the stairs. Frowning, angry, because they had acted as if I wasn't there. Hadn't asked permission, hadn't said hello, hadn't even nodded at me – nothing.

Funnily enough I didn't hate them as much as I had hated the Russian woman.

Old age has not surprised me. I had expected it to break over me like a flood that sweeps away everything in its path, drowning and destroying. But it crept up on me so slowly that there are days when I gape at my own reflection. Gape at the way my skin has fallen into wrinkles, as if my body had miraculously shrunk and the skin grown: too much skin, too little flesh. My back surprised me though; one day it started to hurt and made up its mind to go on hurting. The soles of my feet are

rough and my pubic hair has gone. It helps that I was never a beauty. Not like my mother or Rahel or Judith.

They were tall with long, well-proportioned limbs, narrow faces and dark wavy hair. I took after my father who was stocky even as a young man. He was also bald, so that I can't say whether I inherited my hair from him – hair like ponies often have: neither wavy nor straight; just hard to manage. My build was definitely his, and my deep-set eyes and square hands. It was unimaginable to me that a time would come when outward appearances would take second place.

Unimaginable, at least, when I watched Rahel and Judith spreading out a blanket in the garden to read on. Their dresses were high-necked and fell to the ground, but sometimes a bare foot would peep out from below a hem, rosy as a promise – or a narrow wrist would appear, or a lock of hair curled over a cheek.

From my room – the room the girl would later live in – I shot with a catapult at local boys who tried to peek. I aimed at their chests and usually hit their foreheads. Curses, howls. A just punishment. My sisters pretended not to notice.

'You're imagining things,' Rahel said to me only the other day. 'We didn't lie in the garden. You don't lie in the garden when there's a war on. You flee, you fight for survival. Bombs fall. When do you think we lay in the garden?'

'Next to each other like the Sirens,' I teased.

I could sense Rahel smiling.

'The boys charged money for letting people look through the hole in the fence.'

A tall paling fence that was supposed to protect us from our neighbours' prying gazes and, if necessary, from the entire world.

'You dreamt it.'

'I remember it.'

Judith giggled – or it might have been a squirrel rustling in the twigs.

‘We’d never have allowed them to stand at the fence and charge money.’

‘It was worth it to look at the two of you. No one would have paid to see me.’

‘You were sweet. Like an imp.’

‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure.’

When I spread out my blanket in the garden, years later when the apricot tree had begun to cast a little shade and Rahel and Judith were no longer there, no one stood at the fence. Who wants to see an imp lying under an apricot tree? An imp reading its sister’s books, turning the pages their hands had touched under the boys’ gazes, the gazes of young men who couldn’t sleep at night because they would dream of the backs of the girls’ knees, of their breath that smelt of meadow hay, of corn cockles and poppies. Couldn’t sleep because they weren’t sure, could never be sure, whether the fleeting glances the girls threw over their shoulders were meant for them or for the rose chafer crawling up the wood of the paling.

Perhaps old age only surprises beautiful people, because for them the difference is painful, sharp as an unexpected wasp sting. For me, on the other hand, old age was a blessing. I didn’t mind being an old Jewish imp. On the contrary. The girl was no beauty either, not classically lovely. But her movements – the way she sauntered along the garden path, stopping to pick a cosmos to smell, the way she spun round when she thought no one was looking, the way she put one foot before the other – that was beautiful. And at that point I hadn’t yet seen her dance.

I shall start Pola’s story on a day in Munich. It was about six or seven years ago, maybe longer. As they drove out of Munich towards the lake, Pola could feel the storm coming a long way off. She realised that she didn’t trust the clouds, and as she was pondering the absurdity of the words – I

don't trust the clouds – it occurred to her that there was something else that she couldn't put her finger on. She had the feeling that something more than a storm was brewing and that it was not by chance that she was sitting in this car – nor was it to do her brother a favour. Adèl sat at the wheel of their mother's Rover and Pola beside him. She lowered the side window and the hot summer wind blew her hair into her eyes, twisting it into firm blond tails that whipped her eyes until they hurt and began to sting.

They were silent. Adèl had turned the stereo up so loud that it was almost impossible to talk anyway. The tarred road became a dirt track and eventually petered out altogether at the lake, by the enormous bulldozed mound of earth and sand, and an area of firmer sand where you could park your car and spread out your blanket. It was only now that Pola opened her eyes again. Götz's Mercedes was parked there, a few motorbikes, a crate of beer. Adèl let the car roll to the shore and flung open the door. Pola got out, shading her eyes with her hand, and looked across at the island. She didn't trust the island either, she realised – or the wind or the water.

'Gets prettier and prettier, your sister,' Götz said, pulling Pola into his arms. 'You'll have to keep an eye on her. Do you hear, Adèl?'

Comments like that embarrassed Pola, so she kept her face tightly pressed to Götz's chest, breathing in his smell which settled deep down in her stomach. It reminded her of the days she had spent in that square house, going to sleep, and waking up again to find Götz still there – days when Götz had protected her and talked to her as if he were her father or brother, or maybe even God.

'You don't have to tell me.'

'I don't want anything to happen to my girl.'

'I can take care of myself.' Pola pressed her face as hard as she could into Götz's clean white shirt, which smelt of old furniture and violets and past years, and Götz returned her hug.

'I know,' he said. 'I know.'

They flung their clothes down on the sand and Adèl plunged into the water – green, it was, bottle green, and churned up by his young wild body. He made it froth, cleaved the water with his arms and dived as far as he could. Very far. So far that it frightened you to watch. Another car drew up, more boys belonging to her brother and Götz. All one big family. Pola's family.

She broke away from Götz and began to climb the mound that the bulldozer had heaped up in over the last days. The sun tickled her back and the gravel slipped away beneath her naked feet. From the very top she could look out over the entire lake, at the deep green of the far shore, the willows and birches ruffled by the wind, the little path they had cleared around the edge through the stinging nettles and touch-me-not. And the little island where only she can go because she knows the place where there's a gap in the brambles.

Can you later remember what you thought when you were young? Pola resolves to remember. Not to forget a single thought or chase away a single picture – especially not the happy pictures and this was almost a happy picture: the boys romping about in the water like young dogs, Götz jumping in after them in white shirt and trousers and roaring like a sea lion as he surfaced. The music coming from the car. The kingfisher darting over the surface of the water. You can't forget that. Not ever.

She ran down on the other side, the slope so steep that she almost stumbled, and dived headfirst into the water. Icy cold, it made her gasp for breath and sent adrenalin coursing through her body. She was better on land, but she wasn't bad in the water; that's how it is when you're young, more a child than a girl, at home in all the elements, a dancer between air, land and water.

She swam to the island, the shouts of the boys behind her, her brother's voice, which made her feel happy, and Götz's calls now and then, deep and rich. A little way before the island, before she felt the fine sand between her toes, she turned around and looked back. The dripping young men were climbing out of the lake. She dived the last metres, under the willow trunks lying in the shallow water, through creepers and algae and singing frogs, found the place where the roots are washed smooth and pulled herself ashore.

Two girls meeting for the first time usually know at once whether they are meant for one another or not. Girls need exchange no words to find out; they sniff each other like wild animals, prick up their ears and hold their noses into the wind. Sister or rival? Bosom friend or arch enemy?

Pola only stood and looked at her. She was standing on the far side of the island, up to her hips in water. At first Pola only saw her back: a wet black men's T-shirt clung to her shoulders, her hair hung down in thick dark strands.

Pola put her head on one side. A summer wind bringing a storm. Seconds. Split seconds.

Sister. Bosom friend.

'What are you doing there?'

'What's it to you?'

'Dunno. Just wondered.'

'I've lost the frog I was going to kiss.'

'I see.'

'Do you believe everything people tell you?'

'I try.'

'I really have lost something. Here in the dark water. Here, can you believe it? Not over there, where it's light and there aren't many trees hanging in the water. On a good day you can see every pebble over there. if you keep still.'

'I know.'

'You just mustn't stir up the sand. Then you don't see anything, of course. But here. Here it's as...'

'...dark as night.'

'Darker.'

'Pitch black.'

‘Like the throat of a...’

‘...prehistoric animal.’

‘Even darker. Somehow.’

They strayed off into thoughts of prehistoric animals and darkness: saurians and alligators, lurking at the bottom of lakes. Pola stared into the dark water. From the shore, behind the brambles, she could barely see the girl’s legs; they disappeared into the silt, in amongst the water lilies, flags and midge larvae.

‘Do you know the way onto the island?’

‘Of course.’

‘By the smooth-washed root?’

‘There’s a way here too.’

‘Rubbish.’

‘I never lie.’

‘Here, there are only brambles and thorns and burrs.’

‘I could prove it to you.’

‘Go on then.’

‘Then I won’t find the place where I lost it any more.’

‘Does that mean you have to stand there for ever?’

‘Till I get webbed feet.’

‘And scales.’

‘And a mermaid’s tail.’

‘You’d better find it before it’s winter or you’ll get frozen in up to your hips.’

At last the other girl turned around. Carefully, so as not to stir up the mud any more. She had an angular face with broad cheekbones and a conspicuous gap between her incisors. Pola’s heart beat in her throat.

‘There’s a hole right in front of you. Look down.’

Pola looked. There really was a hole, between the stinging nettles and the costmary. And if she made herself very small, she could fit through.

‘But I don’t want you trampling about in the water here.’

‘I know.’

She twisted her way through the hole and let herself slide out into the water on the other side like a snake.

‘What does it look like?’

‘Gold. With my name on.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Rahel.’

‘Good, then I’ll find it.’

Rahel laughed. Her voice was rough, husky, almost like a boy whose voice is breaking, and Pola had to laugh too. They began to dive, stirring up the mud with their hands, hesitant at first and then without constraint. What is lost is lost. They found black stones, mussel shells (closed ones and open ones), frogs, fishing hooks and an old tin that was so rusty you couldn’t open it any more. After a while they wriggled through the beaver’s tunnel back onto the island and let the sun dry them, as if their search was suddenly no longer important, as if they could forget what they had been looking for and where it was, lost and swallowed up by the mud.

The smell of touch-me-not hung heavy in the branches of the willows, the island crackled and rustled and the girls set the air between them buzzing as they passed stories back and forth, pressing them into one another’s hands like little tightly wrapped presents.

It is true that there was a time when I was not as tired as I am now. If I remember rightly, that time was in the late forties. But it might also have been in the fifties and sometimes, it seems to me, I can situate it in precisely 1953, the year my sisters came back and I stopped being lonely. I was making jam at the time. The branches of the apricot tree were bowed down under the weight of the fruit and whenever I had a moment's time I ran about the garden gathering the windfalls in Mother's old stone jug. I loved holding those soft, furry fruits in my hands, seeing the orange tinged with red, feeling the juice run through my fingers when I broke them open to get out the stone – that perfect stone which I discarded on the grass in spite of its perfection. It was impossible to gather them all in before they grew overripe, split open, attracted wasps and hornets and were lost for ever, but I tried at least; I did my best, and sometimes I stood over the stove until late into the night, if I hadn't found time before. I yawned as I weighed out sugar and squeezed lemons, and my eyes stung as the sweet mass slowly began to bubble, splashing my lower arms with hot, painful spurts.

I thought of the jars I kept in the cellar – of the long shelves which my father had bought, but never used. In the dingy light of the dim light bulb, they shimmered golden and I wondered that they did not discolour. In all those years.

Jam year 1949, for instance. Only one jar and on that jar a label on which, in my rounded handwriting (which strangely enough is now narrow and slanting) I even recorded the day: 3 July 1949. A Sunday. Unlike the following year, that was a cool summer in which the tree yielded only a few apricots; most of them rotted on the tree (because of the rain) or were eaten by the blackbirds and thrushes (who presumably couldn't find anything else). I had gathered the few apricots for that one jar with great difficulty from among the marguerites that leant against the trunk, heavy with rain, and after making the jam I put it in the larder and forgot all about it. When in the following year the tree was laden with fruit because the spring had been sunny and mild and the summer hot, I found the jar again and put it downstairs on the shelf with the others. I wept, not because of the jar or because of my forgetfulness, but because the boy next door had broken my heart. He had kissed

me again and then left me again, but I realised that although I couldn't make the pain disappear entirely, it eased off when I stoned the apricots and pounded them vigorously to a pulp – that the tears which ran down my cheeks began to taste sweet instead of salty, and that the longer I stirred and the hotter the apricot pulp boiled, bubbling and spurting onto my apron, the wider my heart grew. I made twenty-eight jars and the next day I treated the boy with contempt.

And God help you if an imp decides to hate.

When my sisters came back on a hot July night in 1953, I was bent over the jam pan looking to see if the liquid was forming a skin. I plunged in my spoon and couldn't stop myself from licking it.

'It'll go mouldy if you don't get out of the habit of sticking your tongue in it.'

Rahel.

'It'll go mouldy even before you've screwed on the lids.'

'I always do that.'

'Doesn't mean it's right. Mother always put a sprig of lavender in.'

'Hmmm.'

'Why don't you?'

'It's not in flower yet.'

'A stem. Not flowers. There's just as much scent in the leaves of the lavender. Silly.'

She sounded sulky, as if she was cross at me for being alone here to do as I liked.

'You don't have to eat the jam.'

'You've let the lavender go woody. Mother always cut it down to precisely four inches in the spring so it would grow back strong. Your lavender is as tousled as your ghastly hairdo.'

I couldn't stop my heart from leaping with joy; it was Rahel's voice, as stern as ever. I peered out of the kitchen window onto Mariahilferstrasse. It was deserted. The streetlamps buzzed and mayflies circled them, burning themselves and reeling and dying even before they hit the ground. Cyclists skidded on them; the following morning I would go out with a broom and sweep them all into the

gutter. The tinny noise of a television set and the lazy song of the robin spun themselves into a single thread that wrapped itself about my heart. Life was wonderful.

‘Besides, it’s not kosher.’

Kosher. A word I never used and didn’t live by – a word that meant nothing to me. Nothing.

‘It’s the Sabbath, and jam made on the Sabbath is never, never not kosher.’

A brief silence while her eyes wander over the jars.

‘Jars that once held liver sausage are not kosher.’

‘As I said, you don’t have to eat the jam,’ I reminded her, not taking my eyes off the street. No one ate the jam.

How long had I been waiting here? How long had I stood here? I could tell by the draught that Judith was behind me.

‘Little sister...little sister...’ she breathed into my ear and I turned around and fell into their arms.

Weeping and laughing at once.

The week after the German girl moved in, I went down to the cellar to fetch a jar from the shelf. At random. I’d never done that before; the archiving alone had been enough. I grabbed one without even looking at the label. I stayed in the cellar only as long as was absolutely necessary; it always smelt a little of the time after the war. Dark and dank. I tucked the jar under my arm. It was time to begin. Who knows how long it would take now that she was here.

I carried the jam out into the garden and put it on the bench which I had recently pushed under the tree as a concession to my bones. They spurned all contact with the ground nowadays, sulking and aching if I did anything as childish as spreading out blankets under apricot trees, even if I dug up dahlia roots or put in tulip bulbs. Carefully I sat down on the bench and opened the jar. 1954. Unmistakable.

It wasn't ten minutes before I heard footsteps. They were prowling about at the terrace door, twisting their supple limbs, standing on one leg and on tiptoes. I smiled and plunged the spoon into the jar. That was the year Rahel had said she couldn't bear Germany's being allowed to participate in the World Cup and I had said I didn't care, but it was a lie. Were so few years enough to cleanse a nation of murderers? Rahel talked on and on as I threw the apricots into a bowl of water, split them open and dropped them in the pan. Perhaps rather too energetically. Too resolutely. Some of them were worm-eaten and I made up my mind to ignore it, to symbolise the fact that badness was always ignored. I could feel Judith tugging at my apron and Rahel breathing hot air down my neck.

Or perhaps it was only the summer air of Vienna that had got trapped between the houses during the day.

'They're everywhere,' Rahel said. 'Sit around all over the place living off the fat of the land. No matter what they've done, where they were, who they were. That man in the post office, the old chap with the glass eye, he sorted Jews down in Operngasse. And now he sorts the post.'

'What do you want to do about it?'

'Old Schlegel.'

'Old Schlegel is dead.'

'If she weren't dead she be working for the Red Cross now. They've forgotten everything.'

'What. Do. You. Want. To. Do?'

'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

Equanimity, I thought, crossly. Everyone should do what needs doing with equanimity. No more and no less.

I for my part had to see to the fruit that had been lying in the rain all night and was beginning to rot – would start to ferment if I wasn't quick enough. The terrace door swung open and the draught made my sisters whirr apart like humming birds. I didn't have to turn around to know who it was.

'Halftime.' His hands held my waist, pushed up my skirt and apron. 'Two all.'

‘Don’t care.’

‘You must care.’

‘I don’t. Clear out.’

There is nothing more stupid than that game and the men who get carried away by it and don’t notice how pointless it is. Who get so wrapped up in it that they forget all about the past and the future. Just because someone shoots a ball and scores. A banality takes the place of an atrocity. A banality wipes out everything. All forgiven and forgotten. It made my blood boil like the jam.

‘My wife’s fallen asleep in front of the telly.’

Why did you marry that idiot? Why do you break my heart and then come back to me? I did turn around now so he could kiss me.

‘Fifteen minutes, then it starts up again and she’ll wake up.’

‘Then you’d better go back right now.’

‘No way.’ He smiled at me crookedly, the way you only ever smile at an imp, then seized me by my hips and swung me onto the kitchen table. Behind him the jam bubbled over the edge of the pan and caramelised on the hob. What a party. Half the street must have noticed. But not her.

‘Why don’t you do this to your wife?’

‘She’s boring.’

‘*Pretty* boring.’ He didn’t get it. He never did. Why I loved such a simple-minded person was a mystery to me. And yet.

‘She doesn’t smell like you, Shapiro.’

‘What does she smell of?’

‘Rosewater.’

‘And me?’

‘Sticky and sweet.’ He buried his face in my hair and inhaled deeply at my throat, pushing my thighs apart with his legs as he undid his flies.

‘Rabbi Hishda said to his daughters: If your husband holds your breast in one hand and “that other place” in his other, then give him your breast until he is dying of passion. Only then should you give him the “other place”,’ Rachel hissed furiously into my ear.

‘Hold your goddamn mouth,’ I hissed back, although I could understand her anger. I didn’t usually use such drastic words. But I had to resort to drastic means to get her to be quiet. Her voice distracted me, ordered me to think rather than feel.

‘It’s true. The only thing the Jewish faith condemns is adultery,’ she retorted breathlessly.

‘And if the lovers aren’t naked?’

I slipped his shirt off his shoulders and his gaze fixed mine. My nails clawed his skin. He had such wonderful firm tanned skin on his shoulders.

‘And if the man’s a goy?’

‘How could I take her and not you?’

I’d often asked myself that question too. He pulled me closer, but I resisted. I wasn’t sure – was it Rahel who had put me off or him? My sisters withdrew into the garden. Rahel smugly. Judith only because she loved to be under the apricot tree on hot summer evenings and shroud herself in the smell of the overripe fruit.

‘You’re missing the game,’ I said curtly and pushed him away with my bare feet, ignoring his pleading eyes, his docility, which in this instant was not an act.

The jam was burning. I could smell it and hurried to take the pan off the hob. He watched me pour the boiling hissing liquid into the jars. It burnt my arms, this goddamn jam. One glass yielded to the heat with a dull crack and the sluggish mass spilt out over my fingers. The base of the pan was burnt black because I hadn’t paid attention. I was so fed up with paying attention.