

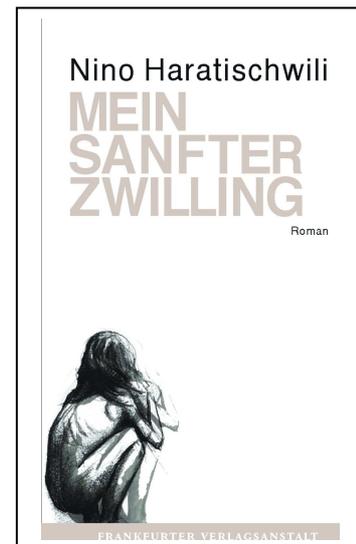
Mein sanfter Zwilling

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pp.105-111

We were alone. The little bay was our silent secret; tourists hardly ever strayed here. This stretch was thought unsuitable for bathing because fishing boats anchored here, the wooden jetty stretched out endlessly into the water, and the water was considered too cold. But we had made the place our own and acclimatised ourselves to the rough, chilly sea.

He had pulled his t-shirt back on and his teeth had stopped chattering. He was beautiful, flooded with sunlight like that, with his sombre gaze, his teeth, sharp and a little too angular, his full lips, and the fine dark hair on his face that he had been proudly shaving for the last year. It was the day I began to desire him, and my desire was agonizing, exciting and shameful all at once.

I kept my head down and pulled my knees up. I had a page-boy haircut that summer, and bitten fingernails; my toes were painted bright red with Tulja's nail varnish, and I was wearing a linen sundress with a red ribbon at the waist. My mother had bought it for me in a fit of sentimentality, at a ritzy store in New York. I called it my New York Fancy-Pants Dress, and was secretly proud that it had been given to me and not Leni.

He lifted my chin and forced me to look at him.

- What's up – are you in love or something? he said, in his usual, somewhat indifferent tone. I stayed silent. Then he let out a laugh. At that moment the last ray of sunlight hit his forehead and, entirely illuminated by the soft

summer light, he looked like a saint. The familiar veil fell over his eyes, and I wanted to cry. I felt a sorrow so deep that it aged me by years in the space of a second. Maybe I felt this way because it had suddenly dawned on me that the love we felt could never be labelled one way or another, and so would always remain a secret from other people. But I hated secrets: I have hated them since the day Ivo's father came home...

Maybe I realised all this as I sat in front of Ivo and was, for the first time, incapable of telling him what I was feeling. Maybe, intuitively, I was mourning all the simple, elemental things we gave up when we sat like this in front of each other and I started to look at his body. Maybe.

He registered my sorrow, and began to stroke my shoulders. He had stopped grinning, and was waiting for me to turn my face towards him again.

- Who with? Come on, you can tell me, he teased, biting into an apple.
- With you, I said quietly, and looked at him. He choked, or pretended to, to give himself a couple of seconds to think, and put the apple down on the towel.
- Stella.

He searched for words, and instinctively backed away a little. But even so, I felt a certain relief, and looked up at the sky, which had grown dark. I could hear the fishing boats by the jetty rocking back and forth to their own rhythm.

- Yes, I confirmed, and against all expectations, this word gave me strength and catapulted me to an autonomous, unreachable star. Then I rolled onto my side and stretched out. He looked out at the water and played with his fingers.
- It's not possible, he said, and fixed me with a sombre, brooding gaze. His iris had almost completely disappeared.
- Why? I asked, sitting up again. It was eerie when he looked down at me like that.
- Because it isn't. Come on, you're not stupid.

- Is it because you, I mean, because of the family, or because you don't feel the same way?
- Both.

I gave a start. My new-found strength was instantly transformed into a fear that took my breath away. I started chewing my fingers. But I didn't want to give up: I didn't believe him, and I couldn't just surrender my strength without putting this to the test.

I took off my clothes. I unfastened the ribbon on my dress, and although Ivo had watched me get dressed and undressed many times, although we had run into the water naked many times before, I knew that simply uttering my declaration of love had transformed the act into something completely different.

I pulled the dress over my head and put it to one side. Ivo looked at me in irritation, still undecided as to how he should behave, but he was watching, looking at me, looking at my body, which had transformed itself into a body from one moment to the next.

- What are you doing? he asked, uneasily, rising into a squatting position as if wanting to steel himself against anything that might happen next.

I unhooked my bra, with a movement that was still unpractised: not especially alluring or natural. But I took pains not to get tangled up, and was soon sitting in front of him bare-breasted. I started to take off my knickers, and at that moment he clasped my wrist and twisted my hand away. He looked at me. And then I leant forward and kissed him. He tasted how I'd imagined he would: of salt, of apples, and of life. Always when I wanted to kiss Ivo it was this taste that made the anticipation even more pleasurable.

He returned the kiss, and then unclasped his hand from my wrist and ran it over my elbow and up to my collarbone, his fingers lingering on my throat. I kissed him again – he pushed me into the sand and lunged at me. I don't know if Ivo had had many girls before me; he never told me. Back then he was extremely popular with the girls at school, though they found him too strange really to want to get close

to him. But he was mature, more mature than me: mature in his will, in his claim on my body. Then he was lying on top of me, and I spread my legs, and at that moment he leapt up and turned away and started running. He ran into the water and left me lying there, alone, with a burning between my legs and a vast emptiness in my belly. It felt as if I was burning up from inside; I doubled over and began to scream. I screamed so loud that the echo of my voice hurt my ears. I screamed and beat my stomach again and again, longing for the burning to stop.

When he came back I was sitting, fully dressed, hugging my knees and chewing an apple. The minutes while he had been out of sight in the sea had changed me. I had become an adult, at a stroke, quickly and with no prior warning.

- It's not possible, he said. He was naked and his penis, slack from the cold water, hung between his legs. He wrapped himself in the towel and sat down next to me.
- Fine, let's not then, I said, getting up.
- I'm going.
- Hey, wait – Stella, wait!

I had already stood up and was marching off. He called my name, but I didn't turn round again.

Two weeks later I went to Harry and pressed my hips against his backside as he leant over a motor boat, repairing something. My lust for revenge was stilled that night, when I climbed through his window and into his room.

Ivo only found out a few days later. I had told a girl from the village, who I hated because she was always flirting with Ivo, and who hated me because I robbed her of Ivo's attention. Of course I knew she would tell him, and of course he knew why I had done it.

Tulja always said that when we love, we never simply love a man, woman, child, a mother or father in isolation: we always want to love everyone and everything at

once, in the same person. She said that trying to categorise love is a decadent addiction of our time, this desire to give all emotions a structure. She said we always need everything from the one person we love. That we always long to unite all these people in one, and that this longing always puts love in the shade. Because we can simply never be everything at once. But the essence of love lies in this striving to unify the multiplicity that we all carry within us. Tulja thought that such a love would be possible if we hadn't built up systems and societies, if we had preserved what was elemental in us, but... Tulja said a lot of things.

Maybe love is really more like anarchy?

Maybe I've never lived the life that I should have lived?

Maybe Ivo had to borrow his life from all of us?

Maybe I really don't know who I am?

Maybe I will only find the answers now, light years away from what I called 'my life' for so long.

I look at the present, which is empty and promises nothing. But I know that only the present can provide me with answers for the past, and maybe for the future, too.

There are three days in my life that made me into what I am today. The first day was the rainy afternoon when Ivo's father returned home unexpectedly; the second was that day at the beach with Ivo, and the third was the day my son was born. And although the third day had nothing to do with Ivo, when I had awoken from my exhaustion and saw my blood-smearred son, the nurse who laid Theo on my breast asked me who Ivo was. In my pain I must have called his name. She assumed from this that he must be the child's father. I didn't correct her.

pp.149-153

For a long time after my declaration of love on the beach, Ivo ignored me. He finished school and went to the States, to stay with Gesi, whilst I carried on doing odd jobs in Tulja's boat shed. Leni had moved to Berlin three years previously, to start university. He didn't get in touch, didn't write, didn't call – Gesi said he'd started an internship with a small magazine.

I was grieving, and decided in defiance not to fly to Newark for the holidays. The summer was hot and wore me down. Flies buzzed in the garden. I was tired and lazy, moving sluggishly as I helped Tulja water the flowers, do the shopping, and hire out the boats. I sat barefoot on the landing stages, looking out to sea and hoping, in my romantic fervour, that Ivo would sense the pain he had caused me from thousands of kilometres away, and would feel remorse. Secretly though, I hoped he would come back and apologise, confess his love, and woo me.

Chewing gum, with salt in my hair, I lay for hours in the bay watching the ships in the distance or reading depressing books. Tulja intuited what this sickness was, and sent me to Hamburg to stay with my father. He was still living alone then, in our old house, and the two of us would sit silently together in the garden. I became churlish, hardly answering when he asked me something, and just shrugging my shoulders. My father bought me a moped, and my sole diversion that summer became riding it as fast as possible, breaking all the rules of the road. Until I hit an expensive car from our street and was packed off to stay with Leni in Berlin. She had just moved into university halls, and was going through a belated adolescence. When Gesi called and invited me to come to Newark, I let slip that I didn't want to see Ivo. Alarm bells rang. A telephone network was established, and secret conferences were held. Ivo was questioned; I was questioned – but we didn't tell them anything.

What was up with us, had we had an argument, was that why I was behaving so strangely? There was no end to the questions. They put my behaviour down to

childish envy. They knew the ties that bound me and Ivo together. And they accepted it.

He came back at the end of September. Taller, lanky, with a dark complexion and cowboy boots. He was carrying a black rucksack and looked so free, so contented, so enviable, whilst I seemed to be shrinking into my misery: in one of Leni's old shirts, Tulja's wellies and cut-off jeans, my hair cut into a childish bob. I felt horrible, and took myself off to the barn, pretending I had things to do there.

Father stayed to dinner that evening, and we ate out on the patio. Father drank and told anecdotes, and suddenly Ivo was being offered a glass of wine. He accepted, as if it went without saying. After dinner I excused myself and secretly left the house. I heard my father driving off in his old car, and Tulja telling him he shouldn't be driving in that state. I heard the cats crying, and I heard music playing in Ivo's room. The music was strange and impenetrable to me; he had brought it back with him from America. I made for the jetty, running like a madwoman, where I threw myself down in the cool sand and broke into convulsive sobs. I screamed and raged and railed against the world for its cruelty towards me.

Then I lay there and smoked a cigarette that I'd stolen from Father. I had started smoking out of pure boredom. I knew Tulja wouldn't come looking for me, and so I stayed there, stubbornly enduring the cold night air, hoping to catch pneumonia, as a punishment for Ivo.

– So there you are.

He was standing behind me. I hadn't heard him coming. He sat down next to me, and I moved away, pleased and at the same time unsettled by his sudden appearance.

– What do you want? I spat, ostentatiously blowing smoke in his face.

– Nothing. I came to see you.

– Why?

– Because we haven't seen each other for so long.

– Oh, *right*.

- Don't you believe me?
- No.
- Your loss.
- I'm sure it was lovely at Mum's.
- You could have come too – she's *your* mother, after all.
- I didn't want to spoil your summer.
- Spoil it how? What are you talking about? They spend the whole time asking me what's wrong, as it is.
- Nothing. What could possibly be wrong?
- That's what I'm asking you.
- Leave me alone.
- Why are you being like this with me, Stella?
- I'm not being *like this*.
- Yes you are.

We fell silent, and for a while everything seemed to be like it had been before, when we spent our evenings by the sea, and found endless space for our dreams.

- Stella, he began, looking at me properly for the first time since he'd arrived. What happened was wrong. I want you to stop keeping me at a distance – I want us to be friends again.

I wished I could go back to the uncertainty of that summer, to the silence – anything seemed better than what he was saying to me.

- I'm not your girlfriend, and I'm not your sister either.
- Whatever you say.

He got up, offended.

- Ivo.

I leapt to my feet and gathered all my courage. I placed myself in front of him – he was a head taller than me. I felt small and miserable.

- Don't go away again.

I chewed my thumb and looked at him beseechingly. His gaze gave nothing away.

He took me in his arms and kissed me on the temple, and his kiss seemed so cold, so humiliating, that I took a step back and pulled his arms from around my waist.

A seagull started to screech in the darkness.