FIVE KOPECKS (Fünf Kopeken) by **Sarah Stricker**

Novel. Published by EICHBORN © Bastei Lübbe AG, 2013
Translated from the German by Lucy Renner Jones

Chapter 1

My mother was very ugly. My grandfather wouldn't allow her to be anything else. She was scrawny and pasty-faced, her skin didn't have any hue of its own, just her nose turned red when she got upset or too happy, when she was cold or sweaty, or simply for the sake of it, in an act of pure spite. She had a pointed chin and an even more pointed mouth from which her uneven front teeth stuck out, although this was probably the least serious of all my mother's defects because there was not a great deal in life for her to laugh about. At least she was as blind as a bat so that in the early days, she was spared the sight of her own appearance. It wasn't until third grade when her teacher noticed she couldn't read a single word on the blackboard that my mother was given a pair of Nana Mouskouri glasses from behind which her eyes swam like two smudges of watercolour.
'Can't she just sit in the first row,' wailed her mother, my grandmother, while desperately trying to braid the fuzz on my mother's head into plaits. She would kiss my mother's cheeks and secretly smear the traces of her lipstick into them, trying to rub at least a little life into her face. But my grandfather would shout, 'It's not a fashion show, damn it! She goes there to learn something.' And so the glasses stayed on, although my grandmother was overcome by such a terrible headache that night that my grandfather was forced to lock himself in the toilet the following morning for twenty minutes.
But even later on, when my mother wore contact lenses and her stomach had softened and her face had hardened, she was still ugly. Not until just before the end, when she couldn't sit up any more and I had to feed her with a spoon, did she suddenly become beautiful. The hair colour that had never really been one flaked away like old plaster, exposing a silvery grey. Her eyes began to shine and the two deep furrows at the top of her nose smoothed. The more death ate into her body, the more lively she became. She even flirted with the doctor who came to check on her every day. They knew each other from the Charité where my mother had worked after I was born, but at the time she had been a doctor, not a woman. Her new, coquettish smile, the way she fluttered her eyelashes when he bent over her and pressed the cold stethoscope to her breast, made him noticeably flustered. But from a certain age and girth, opportunities to flirt have to be taken as and when they come. So he cooed back to her, called her 'young lady' or 'my little missy', which my mother would have thrown him out of the house for, had he dared just half a year before. They chatted about the old days, which were suddenly the good old days, about professors, mutual acquaintances, and the incompetence of colleagues. My mother giggled like a little girl, something she had never been. She fingered her neck, cocking her head a little to one side and he beamed back at her like a butcher's assistant who has emptied a pig's intestines for the first time with his bare hands. Only now and again, on those rare occasions when he actually took a reading or glanced at the plastic sac hanging by her bed, did he rub his forehead and look very worried, which only raised my mother's spirits even more.
She was incredibly proud to have developed a respectable illness at the end that no one could dismiss.
'As long as it hurts, you know you're still alive,' she would say, and her lips curled into an unfamiliar grin.
But the most peculiar part was that she wouldn't stop talking. She lay in my bed, which had been and was now hers again, hands folded across her navel as if she was expecting another

child, and talked and talked and talked. I sat next to her, some copies on my lap for an article I had to write so that she could make believe I was just taking a break from work and all this was simply a little chat and it didn't have to look as if she was pouring her heart out while I said things like 'Are you OK?' or 'Don't you want a rest?' But my mother just gabbled on as if she hadn't heard me, skipped back to the beginning to fill in some detail and got bogged down in banalities that in retelling had to be made bigger, better, punier, uglier, more atrocious or embroidered in some other way until they could be presented as the highlight of her life. Other, more important things were not mentioned at all or I just pieced them together for myself, filling in the sketchy outlines with my own images, adding the sound of her voice from my memory even though it grated a little in the past tense. For as long as I could remember, my mother had only spoken about the future. Not until her life deflated, like a paddling pool after you take out the bung at the end of the summer, did she suddenly develop a taste for the past. Only the present was left untouched until the very end.

My mother was too ugly to pine after beauty for very long. Only pretty girls spend hours in front of the mirror, learning their imperfections off by heart like vocabulary, and rattling them off at every compliment. But she, on the contrary, was not prepared to quarrel with her looks. It would only have attracted more attention to them and her 'old mug' really wasn't worth it.

'Leave it,' she'd say when I offered her my lipstick, 'it's a lost cause.'

'It can't harm,' I'd say but she couldn't be persuaded. She claimed that her lips were too rough, and that there was nothing more disgusting than flakes of skin with colour stuck in the layers. Claimed that her skin couldn't breathe under that 'greasepaint'. Said her eyes watered from mascara.

But the worst part was how she dressed. For work she managed to pull herself together: a dress suit, white blouse and court shoes. But when she came in through the door at the end of the day, she dropped all her inhibitions along with her clothes. Halfway through the door, she would already be tearing off her outfit with a groan before running around for half an hour in her underwear so that I had to quickly hide any girlfriends who had dared come over in my bedroom. Only when she was half-frozen was she prepared to pull on an old pair of my father's shorts, her dimpled thighs peeking out from the trouser legs like freshly leavened dough. On top, she wore vests that she bought in packs of five and wore until they fell apart at the seams. And no bra, of course. Apparently, the lace trimming chafed her. When she sweated, – and when *didn't* she? – her nipples stuck to the damp material like children to their parents in a heaving crowd. She positively paraded her ugliness. Pride, she called it. Defiance is what I heard. She cut her own hair, leaving it long enough at the back to clump together in a rubber band, ridiculously short at the front, so that her hastily put-together face was exposed to the mercy of onlookers. But it was my mother's face and I loved it. At least until I rediscovered it in my own.

With my grandfather, it was exactly the opposite. The only thing that interested him about my mother's appearance were the traces of his features in it. He had no time for beauty – it smacked too much of superficiality. And if there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was superficial people, 'in the name of God,' even though he could stand Him even less. He was unshakeably convinced that nothing better could happen to a young person than 'having a

spanner thrown in the works'. It was character-building, 'provided, of course, qualities are there in the first place,' as he explained to the nurse who picked my tiny mother out of her cot, his eyebrows raised self-assuredly. He pushed his glasses back onto his nose and looked at the scrap of a body that was held towards him – the puny legs, the torso that was so long, scrawny and fragile that the onlooker was afraid the head might fall off at any moment, especially one like my mother's. 'A head like a horse's arse. Th-a-a-a-a-t big,' he'd say and stretch his arms out in front of him like a Greek doing the sirtaki.

Apparently, at least according to the legend cultivated by my grandfather, my mother was missing the dent that 'normal children' have in their heads at birth, the gap in the bone that keeps the skull pliable until the brain is fully grown. And that's why her head seemed disproportionately large when she was young.

Medically speaking, this is highly questionable. But my grandfather had the same kind of relationship to science as he did to chocolate. Sometimes it was the be-all and end-all, an energy source, a blood pressure reducer, an anti-depressant and food of soldiers. Then he would stuff himself silly and couldn't even look at it for months. Any objection from doctors, and even my mother herself in the end, only made him defend his story more vehemently. 'Delivered ready to use,' he would cry and pat my mother on the back of the head. No explanation could be expected from grandmother. She'd given up on the truth shortly after her wedding day, along with chess. My grandfather was invincible in both.

So he took the bundle from the nurse, turned it back and forth as if looking for the label, and then actually found it. He thrust his stretched finger into the dimple in her chin, – his dimple – a dark hollow carved deep into the flesh. In his case at least. With my mother, it was nothing more than a faint dot, as if someone had poked her skin with a pencil, but it was his signature beyond a doubt. He placed a kiss on my grandmother's forehead, the child back into her arms, saying, 'Well done, Hilde, you can be proud of yourself,' and headed out and down the corridor to look for someone to have a drink with.

The only one who could not get used to my mother's appearance, no matter how hard she tried, was my grandmother. She loved my mother, of course. She couldn't allow herself *not* to, of course. But every time she looked at her, she felt a tugging, about three fingers below her breast. When she thought she wasn't being watched, she occasionally rubbed the spot as you sometimes do in ticklish places to make them less sensitive. But no matter how hard she rubbed, the tugging never went away.

'Oh, don't! Just look at her beautiful little mouth! And she's so alert!' cried the nurse when she saw my grandmother's red, tear-stained eyes. 'You're imagining things. I tell you, she'll turn many a boy's head!' She rested her hands on her hips and shook her head, laughing, but my grandmother could see that she was lying.

'I was just hoping she'd look like me,' she stammered through her tears.

'But she does!' protested the nurse, 'She's the spit of you!' And my grandmother, of course, believed her and started to cry in earnest.

Perhaps it would have been easier for her if she'd had another try, a second chance to cast her genes into a more acceptable mould. But when 'as if by a miracle!' she managed to get pregnant, she was already 36. She knew by then that my mother was all that she could expect in the way of family. Besides my grandfather's, that is. But none at all would have been almost preferable.

My grandmother only had contempt for the 'rabble' that were her husband's relatives but her genteel upbringing forced her to hide this opinion behind the occasional allusion, punctuated by a sigh, to the Capital where culture did not mean the annual Christmas party at the sports club. As she said this, she crooked her little finger up from her coffee cup, rolling her eyes under fluttering eyelashes until my grandfather, in sheer delight, grabbed her hand under the table. He hated his family even more than she did, and with far less grace: he called them the 'bag-a-a-a-ge', which, as my grandmother pointed out, was not Pfalz but French. This only made him love her even more. To him this young lady, who had walked into my great-grandfather's haberdashery one day, and had rejected the flesh-coloured panties offered to her with studied politeness yet unmistakable revulsion, was not only the epitome of ladylikeness; he also sensed that she saw the spark of sophistication in him that no one else in his hometown recognised, no matter how many silk scarves he threw around his neck.

My grandfather came from a tiny place whose name could only be said with a voice full of nasal disdain. The only one in the village who had a third book gathering dust on the shelf, aside from the Bible and *Mein Kampf,* was his brother Helmut (Helm), who had been fortunate to train as a bank clerk and had stood ever since behind the counter in the district savings bank, which was just behind the vicar and the mayor in the village pecking order. My great-grandfather had saved a bit of money and even if he had no education, he'd had enough sense to send both his sons to grammar school, which was neither cheap nor usual in those days. 'A fine man,' as even my grandmother had to admit, who, nevertheless, a few weeks after their brief encounter, died of the knock-on effects of a war injury. The majority of the remaining relatives were employed by the automobile, plumbing and electrical industries, which lightened the burden of renovating the house my grandparents inherited a great deal. However, these repairs came with a price tag of countless blocked toilets, the contents of which various uncles discussed with such effusiveness at the coffee table that my grandmother would believe she had discovered an unhealthy pallor in my mother's complexion after half an hour at the latest, and would rush out for fresh air. This did not stop her from sending every guest a little card patterned with violets the very next day in which she thanked them for the lovely evening and insisted on seeing them again soon, very soon.

She herself had grown up in Berlin at a respectable address, which nonetheless did not save it, along with most of its residents, from falling victim to the war. My grandmother was the only survivor of the 1943 air bombardment that destroyed their building. And that was only because she had lashed out so wildly despite her mother's attempts to calm her until the grip on her wrist had finally loosened and she had run out of the shelter in the cellar where she apparently saw the plane that dropped the bomb through the gable window. She knew that she owed her life to fear. And she never forgot that.

Half out of her senses, she ran through the streets looking for a familiar face, or something to eat at the very least, but only found even more suffering and even more horror. She hid alone with just her fear for company among the ruins of the walls that had buried her parents and her little brother, and when the war was finally over she had become so endeared to it that she could never do without it. She was afraid of everything – the Russians, the Americans, even the Germans, screeching cats, squeaking doors, footsteps, no matter what nationality they were, a pair of which, shod with robust steel toecaps, finally

chased my grandmother out of the ruin because she assumed that their owner was interested in stealing 'something apart from the silverware. If you get my meaning.' That was in fact taken by a young man whom she met on the run, but who was subsequently killed on a trek across a minefield. However, that was after the defeat, which was now called the liberation, so it didn't really count. Except when it rained. Then, he was the love of her life, and the gout, which she displayed by the rhythmic shaking of her pillbox, was just a symbol of her yearning.

In the end it was all nonsense, of course: my grandmother's one and only love was fear. Everything that came after that was simply a variation on this theme. She loved my grandfather out of fear of life, a fear of no longer running away but of arriving. She loved my mother out of fear of death. Me, out of fear of losing fear. In her old age, while steadily munching her way towards a heart attack – fat, at last rich again and secure behind her burglar alarm – it only took a rattling window for her to ask me to see to my grandfather while she went to the pharmacy for a new packet of prescription-only placebos. When I made the 'annoying' (according to her) 'pathetic' (according to my mother), 'well-meant' (according to me) but certainly 'fruitless' (according to all of us) attempt to allay her fears with common sense, she told me with glistening eyes, which only the untrained observer could mistake for tears, of the nights she had spent in the courtyards during which fear had been her only companion. Without another soul in the world, she had crossed half the country, even though it had shrunk slightly in the meantime, until she had managed as if by some further miracle to make it to a cousin who had 'happily! That says it all! Happily!' married in South Germany.

By then, my grandmother was 18 years old, six of which she'd spent in wartime and two mostly living on the streets. And she felt like she hadn't slept for at least ten times as long. When her cousin opened the door to her, she was so tired that not even the pair of antlers on the wall elicited a snide comment from her. She was weak and hungry but still very pretty despite the bones jutting through her flesh like fishing hooks, but my grandfather had those too. And after a few weeks, during which by turns she had to admire the crocheted toilet-roll covers and the tricks performed by the Rottweiler, Hasso, her arrogance returned.

'I dunno,' muttered Helm at my grandmother's inaugural coffee.

'A bit big for her boots, isn't she?' said his wife Gundula (Gundl.) But my grandfather's mother, my great-grandmother, was quite overjoyed with the good parlour manners that my grandmother brought into hers. With round eyes, she took in my grandmother's straight shoulders, her upright back, followed the cup that she raised so easily to her lips so that it didn't appear to touch them at all, and in sheer admiration, her own little finger jerked up from her coffee cup. 'If you don't take her then I don't know who,' she whispered to my grandfather, and quite honestly, he didn't know either.

Thankfully, the cousin died soon afterwards, due to some illness: everyone was ill and half-dead at the time, so you could say she just did the job properly. My grandfather had not quite wiped his knee clean from making the proposal when my grandmother turned up on the doorstep, suitcase in hand, ready to move in straightaway, bringing with her a touch of sophistication. She taught my great-grandmother the genitive case and taste, 'not that you'd call it good.' Apron dresses were replaced by little blouses and skirts requiring so much fabric that the wastefulness broke Schäfer Marie's heart, the only one in the village to have a sewing machine. And to thank her, my great-grandmother set herself the goal of making

sure 'the girl gets some flesh on her bones.' At lunchtime, the smell of cake wafted through the house, which my grandmother wolfed down off the new dainty plates in less ladylike fashion until her bones had entirely disappeared beneath her flesh again. And then a bit more. And then further still. No matter how she warned herself never to forget her parentage, she could never quite remember what it felt like to have her hunger satisfied. When my great-grandmother fetched her mothballed wedding dress out of the wardrobe and tried to pull it over her head, it got stuck halfway.

Not even the sweetness of married life could replace my grandmother's fear. She was nervous, exhausting her body with needless panic attacks, hardly allowing it sleep let alone take pleasure in anything, and it took its revenge as best it could. She had two miscarriages and a third child died after a few days in the incubator. She was so afraid that she might have to forfeit the fourth that she never left my mother's side. 'I can't help it,' she wailed, when Gundl read in *Marie Claire* that this attitude was not healthy, 'she's all I've got!'

And it was not much. It was bad enough to have to share my mother with my grandfather; she was not giving anyone else a look-in. My mother spent a total of exactly two hours in a kindergarten, one hour and forty-five minutes of which was spent on the lap of my grandmother who simply could not bring herself to let go of her little white hand. The nursery teacher had to literally prise the little body, which had started trembling from all the fear, out of my grandmother's arms. She set my mother down in the dollies' corner, pulled up one of the little chairs and had a word with my grandmother. She knew how painful it was to cut the cord but a child had to build a sense of its own identity, discover its separateness, blah, blah, blah. She had an asymmetrical haircut, exposing one – 'One!' – parrot earring, and had that quiet, compassionate way of talking 'like in those left-wing communes where everyone sits on the floor and lets the others finish what they're saying.' My grandmother nodded politely, tasted the invisible cake that a little girl offered her, pretending to listen to the nursery teacher but doubting whether anything could truly grow here except prejudices against the childcare profession. Then one child coughed. A second child sneezed into the colouring pencil box. And that was it. The next morning, she put an ad in the newspaper for a secretary for my father so that she could stay at home and keep my mother sterile.

After his father's death, my grandfather had taken over the haberdashery, now called a 'bootique', and had bought the neighbour's house that had been standing empty since '38 'for a song', as he proclaimed, driven by an ambition that could not afford to look back. The living room was converted into a storeroom. Sewing threads and knitting needles disappeared. Instead, long bulky dresses were manoeuvred into the shop window. Before he sold them, my grandfather had each item photographed for a catalogue that allowed the latest Schneider Fashion collection to be mail ordered. For every new customer, my grandmother had to stick a little flag into the map of Germany that hung behind my grandfather's desk. She chose the goods, kept the books, answered the telephone and even modelled for him a couple of times. Until my grandfather decided at the beginning of the 1990s in a fit of pioneering spirit that moving to the capital would not be enough – in the new Germany, a new logo was needed, and it was to be her legs, balancing in a slit skirt on the lower curve of the S that hung resplendent on the catalogue front page and the shop door. She was his 'right hand' as he told suppliers who came to visit. When the gentlemen went to shake hands, my grandfather would pull his hand up into his shirt cuff

and proffer my grandmother's instead; she found it funny the first few times, then embarrassing and finally, when she realised with a shock that she was in danger of sullying their love with an opinion of her own, she found it funny again.
Although she had the upper hand at the beginning of their relationship, she did her best to disappear into my grandfather's shadow within a matter of months. Ask my husband. Ask Daddy. And later, ask Grandpa, 'I haven't a clue.' Even her speech drifted more and more into Pfalz dialect. She avoided having her own interests or convictions. The only thing that was undoubtedly hers was showing affront when her husband did not appreciate her self-sacrifice enough.
My grandfather was so in love with her that he didn't notice the change at first. And when he did, he just thought that it was how things had to be. That was marriage. Only sometimes, when at the end of a 48-hour day my grandmother would ask him to check her housekeeping book 'in case I made a mistake', he would cry, 'Hilde, your head's not on your shoulders just to hold your perm! Do it yourself, woman!' until she, shocked by the abrasiveness of his tone, broke down in such a fit of tears that the inky sheets of numbers in her hands began to run.
The feminist in the family was my grandfather. Firstly, because of the laugh he got when he said it. And secondly, because the masculinity of his childhood, with its stench of sweat, liver sausage and flat beer, was repugnant to him. He liked having a woman by his side. It wasn't until after my grandmother left the business that she noticed it played a small role whether the business was in fact 'the' business or 'his' business. Then she chose to ignore this to be on the safe side.
A week later, he'd found a replacement and when he saw how quickly he could train the new girl, he took on a second straightaway. In the end he was in command of an entire army of young *Fräuleins*, as you were still allowed to call them back then. Young girls with too many teeth and chiselled cheekbones, their skin drawn across their cheeks like pillowcases stretched too tightly, who laughed into the receiver, took orders or tottered off to take a dictation. They sat in two rows to the left and right of my grandfather's office, their heads bent over their typewriters, while he marched up and down the corridor giving orders. If he needed a little cheering up, he'd get them to step into 'Roll call!', which he bellowed from his office, a feigned-playful-but-deadly-earnest Napoleon hand stuck into his suit jacket, which not even my grandmother found funny in the end.
My grandfather had been an officer and 'was still one!' as he explained to me, outraged, when I had the cheek to suggest that he should consign the war to the past. He hadn't even turned 19 when he was given the rank of lieutenant, and 50 years later, he was not prepared to give this honour away – even if he disagreed with the Nazis, 'on the whole' of course, as he hastened to add. Like all Germans, he had an aunt who had hidden a few Jews in her cellar and was a passionate, albeit ('for mother's sake') secret, anti-fascist. Apart from ideological dilemmas such as these, the years from '39 to '45 had been 'the best of his life' as he liked to announce – see above.
The times were made for men like him, men who were still just boys and who wanted to change that as quickly as possible. Who were enthused by just about anything that would earn them a couple of medals to pin on their uniforms. And my grandfather was the worst kind of all. He said 'responsibility' and meant 'challenge.' The radio spoke of 'the nation and the Fatherland' and he heard 'out into the big, wide world.' He had all the qualities that

were high in demand in those days: the desire to win, a hunger for power, passion. And a complete blindness to his own faults. Others might have been bigger and stronger and maybe, 'ma-a-a-y-be' even cleverer. But my grandfather was so sure of himself that his opposite number wasn't given any room for doubt. He did not *think* he was better than the others; he *was* – and which such conviction that most people believed him. At a tender age, he led a troop whose members were twice as old as him on average. Once drafted, and rather impressed nevertheless at 'the Führer's' consistency in following his vision, he wanted to get somewhere. And he got as far as Kaliningrad in the end, which was still called Königsberg in those days, where he ended up in a Soviet prisoner of war camp in '44. From there, the Red Army took him to Kazan, the 'Land of the Tartars', which my grandfather pronounced with such foreign, rolled 'r's that as a child, I placed it somewhere between Transylvania and Taka-Tuka Land.
And there he faced his biggest challenge. Winter was the worst time, when the air sweeping down from the Urals was so cold that it bit into your lungs. So cold that it peeled the skin off your cheeks. So cold that people were afraid to cuddle in case they got frozen together. And it was winter all the time, except when it was summer. But then it was even worse because it stank to high hell of excrement and people and putrefying flesh that the Russians left to rot away until the gnats came to nest in your open wounds. Only thanks to a certain Micha Sergevitch, a warden, who now and again smuggled a couple of potatoes out of the storeroom for my grandfather, did he manage not to starve. 'A textbook anti-Semite but a true friend to the Germans,' he'd say and nod appreciatively. 'We always said that if they let me go, he'd come home with me and then we'd find him a real German girl, a clean one whose breath didn't stink so much that when you kiss her that you'd think there was a dead rat under the bed.' Shortly before it came to this, Micha was shot by his own people – and not even on purpose. 'After a bottle of vodka, your aim isn't that hot,' my grandfather laughed and poked a stretched-out finger into his neck to show where the bullet had entered Micha, half shattering his head to smithereens.
My grandfather loved lathering his listeners in a good deal of blood and pus until their eyes watered from all the horror. 'You only see things like that on the telly these days,' he'd say and then his eyes would bore into you from head to toe so that you'd literally feel your own gutlessness in the backs of your knees. No hardship in your life could vie with the hardship in his life. Being born too late was reason enough to be a failure. But still, I liked his 'war' much better than my grandmother's, who would watch me with reproachful eyes across my plate of unfinished cauliflower. Sometimes when I was bored, which was a capital crime in the family, I would deliberately start moaning about my homework after lunch just to get him going on the subject of Kazan. Then, he would get worked up into a rage, call me a wet rag and try to wring the last drop of self pity out of me. My grandfather was a terrific storyteller. Over the years, he'd honed his stories in response to his audience's reactions so that his sentences resembled cogs in a wheel that interlocked perfectly. He knew where he could coax a scream of horror, or where he had to hold something back until the moment the listener returned to his cheesecake with a false sense of security, when he'd blurt it out in an aside. As he talked, his voice swelled to a crescendo while he thumped his hand rhythmically on the table top or by turns raised his fist in the air, which was still permitted in those days, while enjoying how his listener shuddered. Occasionally, when I was allowed to sleep upstairs at my grandparent's because my mother had to return to the shop, I woke up

startled and bathed in sweat because his shouts, pierced with chunks of Russian, penetrated my dreams.

None of this was talked about, of course. In the beginning, because there was no time: it was all taken up with admiring everything – my house, my car, my empire. And not later either as this would've required admitting there *was* some – time, that is – and so much of it that my grandfather even decided, half a year before his Alzheimer's became so bad that he couldn't even remember his name, to add men's fashion to the company range just to fill the empty hours. There was nothing worse than time in my family. Apart from the type you were short of and/or ran out of: everyone liked that, as it proved what busy bees they were. The other, despicable version, with the L-word in front, was only mentioned when referring to the outside world, to those creatures at large who deserved nothing but derision, frittering away their '*leisure* time' in cafés or lying on picnic blankets instead of learning foreign languages or splitting the atom. At the most, there were breaks, not time, the chink when lack of time from both sides met in the middle. And even these were to be avoided at all costs. If you were too fresh and jaunty in the evenings you had to endure the accusing looks of the others whose eyes were circled by deep, black, rings of hard work. Exhaustion in my family was hard currency. Whoever could keep his eyes open after ten o'clock in the evening had not run himself into the ground. And not even ugliness was an advantage in this matter.

There were three things – and things always came in *threes* because he was, as I said, a good storyteller – that my grandfather had learned in the war: firstly, standstill can end in death. His friend, next to whom he stood in the photo in the dining room, their right arms outstretched with such vigour that they were almost yanked from the frame, (who, despite several cards emblazoned with violets from my grandmother never – 'not once!' – came to dinner because his memories of Kazan weren't as hilarious as my grandfather's) lost a toe to frostbite when he sat down on a stone for a moment at work. That was a great lesson to my grandfather. I can't remember seeing him stand still for more then ten minutes during my childhood. Idleness was a virus for him. It lurked in front of the television, in newspapers, in unmade beds that you could all too easily slip back into, in bathtubs and most of all at swimming pools. And when you'd caught such a virus, it was difficult to get rid of again. You only had to blink once too often and you'd end up like Max, Helm and Gundl's son, in truth a nice young man until one year, he was let off his summer job in the shop and sent to 'holiday camp! Even the name of it! Those young ones have nothing but holidays all year round!' during which he succumbed to drugs and, shortly afterwards, art, which culminated in his decision to move to Berlin to become a painter, from which he only recovered when subsidised idleness and the GDR were abolished in one go.

The only means to prevent such misfortunes was to remain in constant motion. Even at mealtimes, my grandfather constantly jumped up, whether it was to fetch a book to help him disprove someone's else's foolish ideas, or whether he had the urgent need to rearrange a piece of furniture that was no longer at right angles. And if he had nothing better to do, he'd be forced to go to the toilet by his equally nervous bladder, returning with his flies open so that he could bring his half-finished sentence to a nasty end, all at a frantic pace that matured to absolute perfection in my mother.

He didn't walk, he ran. He didn't think, he knew. And he knew, of course, better than anyone else. In his vocabulary there was no 'I find/think/would say', no 'In my opinion',

simply: 'It is.' At times, he waded so deeply into generalisations that he completely lost a grip on the first person singular. 'Of course one killed. Is one proud of this? No. Would one do it again? You bet!' Reality had to measure up to him, not the other way round. There was hardly a subject that he was not familiar with, although his expertise was largely unclouded by experience. He didn't have time for it. 'I don't have to eat shit to know what shit tastes like,' he would say, and gave people answers to the most pressing questions in politics and history, biology and psychology – which was all the same thing – or in art and music, no matter whether they'd asked or not.

But above all, he knew about business. That was the second thing he'd learned as a prisoner of war. On endless marches along the Volga, besides all the rubbish that was talked about mothers' food no longer to be had and other mother's daughters who had not quite been had although the chance would've been a fine thing, his co-prisoners had talked about a whole lot of useful stuff. My grandfather got to know the German philosophers, he picked up a little French from a pharmacist from the Alsace, but most of his time was spent talking to a factory owner who taught him systematically. When the Russians put him on the train home three years later, he was so knowledgeable about bookkeeping, accounting and management that the first thing he did when he got back was to tell my great-grandfather that he was doing everything wrong.

The third and possibly most important thing that he learned in the war was that a dream can never be too small to provide shelter on a bitterly cold night. Before the war, he had never been particularly interested in his father's business. Now he saw the opportunity to build something on it. Anything. What, exactly, was secondary. The main thing was that he would be at the stern and of course it had to be big – big, bigger, the biggest, in any case bigger than anything that had gone before. My grandfather couldn't get his fill of the dream that women in Paris, Rome and London would walk around with his name on the napes of their necks. But first, he had to be content with importing his wares from *their* countries to restore a bit of style to German women, 'and that was the biggest challenge of all!' He had no proper training or savings but an iron will and the fortune of being born in an era when that was enough. He was among the first to recognise that people who have nothing want more than anything things that they don't need. Within three years, he'd doubled his profits. In the fifth year, the catalogue was published, the odd copy of which I still find today at flea markets lying among old sewing journals and erotic magazines full of hairy armpits. At the end of the eighth year, the flags on the map were so close together that from north to south, hardly a white patch could be seen. He took the country by storm, just as he took everything and everyone, and en route he even forgot that he abhorred fashion.

He could talk for hours on end about colour, cut and quality, and especially how the competition was lacking in all three. His own suits were all tailor-made – allegedly because now that my grandmother wasn't there to attract admiring gazes, he had to be his own business card. In reality, however, off-the-peg clothing just didn't fit him. My grandfather was quite small. When he sat on his leather chair in his office, his legs dangled in the air. In their wedding photograph, he is positioned on a step so that he doesn't get lost next to my grandmother with her high heels but in the end, he is the one who dominates the picture. He is wearing a tailcoat, white bow tie and patent shoes that are half hidden by my grandmother's skirt, as well as a wide, false grin that makes the blood go to his nose. In the background is a marble staircase with imposing pillars on each side. It takes a while until you

realise that it's all painted, a canvas, hanging in a photographer's studio. My grandmother appears to be drowning in all the additional frills that Schäfer Marie sewed on to cover all the inserted panels of fabric. Around her neck hangs a cross that my grandfather only agreed to under great protest. She has linked her arm in his and is looking slightly up at him. His dimple can barely be seen but from photo to photo, it grows, as does the bald patch on his head. At my mother's christening, he's only left with a thinning coronet of hair stretching from one ear to the other until, mid-album, his head is covered once more in lustrous, slightly wavy hair, even thicker than my grandmother's, who is walking beside him. 'Toulouse 1969' says the writing on the back in minute pencilled letters. Added, their three names, as if they might forget who they are.
My grandfather poses brownly on brown grass wearing only shorts and sandals. On his chest twist a few stray locks. His artificial hair has something incongruous about it, like a fur hat in summer. Although he is standing there quite calmly, it looks as if my grandmother is trying to keep up with him, one hand in the air to catch my mother if necessary, who is enthroned above them like the tip of a pyramid. She is sitting on my grandfather's shoulders, hands over his eyes so that only his mouth reveals whether he's laughing or shouting. Her legs are wrapped around his upper arms so that you can barely tell where she begins and he ends. It almost looks as if she is growing out of his back. She's wearing a coral-coloured bathing suit with such a low neckline that her light brown nipples can clearly be seen. Under her greaseproof paper-like skin, her veins shimmer greenly.
Only my grandmother does not partake in this display of flesh. She's wearing a silk blouse and is carrying a stiff bag on her arm as if she is on her way to the theatre. Although it must have been quite hot, her legs shimmer through pearly nylons. Even then, she is already a few pounds too heavy but her elegance lets her get away with it. Her blonde hair is stuck with needles into a pinned-up hairdo, from which not one strand dares to fall, her skin beneath is powdery white as if her face might crumble into dust at the slightest wind. By contrast, my grandfather looks like his silhouette has been cut out with blunt scissors. His eyebrows under my mother's childlike fingers are long and bushy. The days spent away from German plug sockets have cast a net of black stubble onto his cheeks. His jaw is square and at last, there is the deep indenture in his chin. The fragility of my grandmother makes him seem bigger than he is. She's soft, he's hard, he's dark, she's light; each is more where the other is less. A beautiful couple. Only plus and minus can cancel each other out.

Chapter Two

My mother was too ugly to be stupid. When she was five, she could already read. Or perhaps it was when she was four or three – it depended on how urgently my grandfather needed to be proud of her. No one knew where she'd learned it. One morning at the breakfast table, she allegedly picked up the newspaper and started reading the headlines aloud.
'My genes!' cried my grandfather, while his cheeks glowed as ruddily as the girl on the Rotbäckchen label but my grandmother suspected that he had taught her secretly when she was at confession, the only pleasure she allowed herself in the meantime. My mother simply claimed that she had learned the labels off by heart and had pieced the rest together – but growing up in my grandfather's house inevitably fostered a knack in her for creating legends.
My grandfather drove into town and carted back heaps of books. *The History of Ancient Rome*, *An Introduction to the Animal World in Three Volumes,* an atlas, *Harenberg's Key Astronomical Data.* He chose indiscriminately but extravagantly. Here and there, he also brought along some fiction as long as the lady in the bookshop was able to assure him that it belonged to the canon of world literature, and not the kind one skims over in a hammock, only to sigh blissfully when one reaches the end. Every month he chose three volumes for my mother and assigned her 30 minutes' reading a day, which had to be ticked off on a list.
'She can't even read the time on the clock,' wailed my grandmother but my grandfather didn't listen to a word. And my mother certainly didn't either. Whenever it was that she learned to read, she had learned to ignore my grandmother much earlier.
In the evenings, her progress would be tested. Bent over his steaming plate, my grandfather fired one question after another at her. What's the capital of Burundi? What is water made of? What's 12 times 4?
'Let her eat first,' whined my grandmother, 'it's getting cold.'
'In fourteen ninety-two…' cried my grandfather
'…Columbus sailed the ocean blue!' my mother crowed back. At intervals, he'd slap his thigh, or hers and exclaim, 'Hilde, the child's a genius!' or 'a true Schneider,' or simply 'I told you so,' which always seemed to fit.
My grandmother scraped rings into her potatoes with a fork and murmured 'She can always be a genius later on.'
In the end, they would leave her sitting alone at the table to head over to the globe in search of some country that the newsreader had read from her yellow sheet, and my grandmother would eat the food off the plates around her so that nothing went to waste, in the beginning because: 'when I was your age …' and later because: 'the children in Africa…'
On Sundays, they would sprint through museums before going to the opera or theatre or ballet, whatever happened to be on offer. Sitting still made my grandfather's joints ache as if he had run a marathon but he regarded it as his duty to stimulate my mother both intellectually and culturally even though he knew, of course, that this was practically impossible in Germany.
Whenever his brimming, stuffed-to-bursting, completely unmanageable schedule allowed, travelling was on the agenda 'so that the child gets out of this hole once in a while' as my grandfather put it. Thanks to his fashion boutique, he had a broad network of acquaintances everywhere in non-communist Europe (and the rest was no loss, 'a bunch of corrupt states

through and through, thieves, the lot of them, from the lowest *natchalnik* to the highest minister!' at least until the Iron Curtain fell and all of a sudden there was nothing better than the East – but more on that later) whom he regularly visited to inspect goods, negotiate new contracts or just drink 'a decent *cap-a-cheeno* at last, the stuff they flog you here as coffee is atrocious.' And nearly every time, he managed to have the whole family invited.
Before she could even walk properly, my mother spoke four foreign languages.
'Fluently!' cried my grandmother.
'Five,' cried my grandfather.
Again, he returned to the bookshop, this time in search of 'something foreign' to add depth to what she'd learned. The only thing that the lady in the bookshop had in stock was a volume on Renaissance painting with French picture captions.
'I'll take it,' he cried and, just so as to avoid linguistics or aesthetics getting the upper hand, added *The Book of 100 Puzzles* to his shopping basket that my little mother pushed across the table to him the very next day, all filled in.
'Oh-oh… that's not normal,' cried Gundl, 'children should be children,' and 'I'm telling you, I'm thankful to the bottom of my heart that my Max is taking his time to grow up. Now, what was that funny thing he said yesterday? *Mama, the only bit of the tat I tan say is 'paw'.* Isn't that funny, Oskar, come on, admit it, it's funny, isn't it?'
But my grandfather was not prepared to join in the enthusiasm for the inadequate or the deficient, for tender little legs teetering on tippy toes across the floor, the loo that wasn't quite reached in time, the burps that smelled of sour milk and all the other pathetic attempts that were passed off as growing up.
'You don't hang a work of art on the museum wall before it's finished,' he said, and fetched my mother's Bunsen burner out of the cupboard so that she could explode the jelly babies Gundl had bought with potassium chlorate, as described in *The ABC of Chemistry*.
From the very beginning, he treated my mother like an adult in an undersized body and those who didn't do the same had to endure such a tirade on how they were endangering her development that in the end, they would slink away sheepishly with 'Bow-wow – I'll give you bow-wow!' ringing in their ears. In my grandfather's house, no one went 'beddy-byes' or did 'poo-poo', there were no children's activities, no children's books, no 'you're too young for that'. The innocence and carefreeness that others extol in their old age remained alien to my mother, thanks to my grandfather's steadfast defence. But at the same time, he also extracted her from the dark shadows that reside at the edges of childhood, and helped her to break down the hazy chaos of smells, noises and images into their separate parts before they had time to clump into a feeling. My mother knew that the pills my grandmother took were *not* sweets, that the neighbours *hadn't* just moved away and that in truth the afore-mentioned friend's toe had *not* frozen off. And my grandfather was always standing by to spur on her thirst for knowledge that little bit more.
When she was very young, they were almost joined at the hip. In the mornings, they would read the *Rheinpfalz* newspaper together and he would explain to her all the nonsense that Prime Minister Schmidt and his crew had been up to again, even though it couldn't be 'explained' at all, all that champagne socialism; Kohl, the old Oggersheimer, now *he* was the type that they should send to Bonn. After school, she went to his office for lunch and was allowed to stay afterwards to sort goods or type up the *Fräuleins'* order forms till the

evening when she plodded home with my grandfather and recounted, down to the last shred of detail, everything she had done during the few hours they'd been apart – every thought, every slice of bread and butter she'd dropped, every hiccup, simply everything, everything, everything. Because anything he didn't know was a lie in itself.
He listened to her, asked a few questions here and there, and then overwrote her stories with his own, which were of course much bigger and scarier. He traded hiccups for earth-shattering events, bread and butter for hand grenades: 'You might think I didn't pick it up but I tell you, you've never seen anyone run so fast in your life.' He took the scaffolding she gave him and arranged his life onto it. And when my grandmother was around, and wasn't caught up in one of her panic attacks for once, she would throw on a handful of her own mortar until the structure was well and truly sealed.
Other influences, such as postwar children with problems below the level of starvation, did not exist. Contact to children of her own age had to be avoided at all cost lest they confused my mother with all the drivel they spoke. On her birthday, my grandfather invited his own friends – men who went well with his cigars, economic miracle-workers like himself, former comrades, lawyers, and professors who brought their own publications instead of presents. They would all sit around the butter-icing cake my grandmother had made – and which she alone ate – and get worked up as they connected theories, which my mother parroted so eagerly in the schoolyard that getting on with her peers was ruled out all by itself.
At least that way she was able to dedicate herself to her talents without distraction. And she had so many of them that in her early years, my poor grandfather couldn't decide which of her gifts he should put the entire weight of his inflated expectations behind.
To begin with, there was drawing. My mother was precociously young of course, no one could say how old exactly, but unless the chronology that my grandfather established over the years was completely rearranged, it must have been some time before she was born. In any case, one day my grandmother found a pencil drawing on the floor, which was even more astonishing for the fact that no one could even remember giving my mother a sheet of paper, and of course she was too small at minus two years old to have fetched it from the drawer all by herself. My grandmother, anyhow, found the drawing of a small figure that was her spitting image (my grandmother's, that is, not my mother's who, even at that tender age was clever enough to know that a self-portrait was not going to cause any tidal waves of enthusiasm). Quite the spitting image: the pearl earrings, the lace collar, the nervous blotches on her neck that my grandmother was less keen on seeing. And even less so when my grandfather immediately framed it and hung it next to the coat pegs where everyone would spot it straight away.
'An artist! There's never been one in the Schneider family yet," he crowed.
But then, out of the blue, my mother started turning cartwheels – first one-, then two-then no-handed so that my grandfather had to run off and hunt down an old GDR gymnast who hadn't returned home after the World Championships, and who maltreated my mother with her testosterone-soaked voice until she was as pliable as a rubber band. Legs in front, behind, around her neck, the splits, up, down, and through. But turn her into a beauty it did not. In fact, she even became a bit scrawnier. When she ran up to the stand once the award ceremony was barely over to have her triumph authenticated by my grandfather's 'Well done!', the medals clanked against her ribs. Then she was asked by a concerned trainer at gymnastics camp if she got enough to eat at home. Whereupon all attention was directed

towards her next talent, her voice, which was really very beautiful. And, of course, much 'm-u-u-ch' too developed for her age.
Once again, a private tutor was sought, and then a second when the first's system of sticking stars under every song she had learned by heart, cost him his job. His successor was a former opera singer, who breathed a great deal but sang very little with my mother, which, after firstly referring to it as 'nonsense', 'a waste of time' and even 'fraud!', and secondly, discovering a photo in the teacher's hallway depicting him in a monstrosity of green and yellow feathers posed next to Göring, my grandfather acknowledged as 'the only and only true method'. Even if he didn't agree 'on the whole…' but that's already been said.
'I don't know, I don't know,' said Gundl, who subscribed to *Marie Claire* in the meantime. 'That girl is constantly under pressure. You have to give her a bit of peace and quiet.'
'Otium est pulvinar diaboli' said my grandfather, looking proud because he was the only man in the whole world who spoke Latin.
He fattened his ego on the marvels my mother performed and the more it swelled, the hungrier he became. So much so that he (the very same person who had told anyone who had wanted to listen for the last 20 years – and those who didn't too, of course – that he'd 'rather eat flies with the Devil' than set foot in a place of worship) marched to church with my mother one Sunday morning and explained to the Father that an offertory without my mother's Hallelujah was like a wafer without a topping, which the priest at first didn't want to take his word for but having listened briefly to my mother singing, agreed to let her perform a few songs after all.
'*Now*, of all times,' wailed my grandmother, having overheard my grandfather saying to Helm on the telephone that they (my grandfather) were of course planning a three-course meal on the occasion of my mother's singing debut – no, the exact details were not fixed yet but they (my grandmother) would rustle something up. He invited the whole family, even my mother's other aunt and his sister Ilse whose all-pervading optimism seemed to sprout from her pores like acne, which usually resulted in him mislaying her phone number.
Ilse was rather atypical for her breed. Had she not had the same dimple carved into her chin, it would have been hard to believe that she was a Schneider. Always cheerful, and always full of understanding for everyone and anyone, she genuinely believed that no one wanted to do her harm, was therefore single, and full of the unshakeable, dormant hope that dear God – for, of course, she believed in Him too – would make sure she found her place in life.
When my father rattled off the news to her in between two incredibly pressing appointments – straight out, boom – that my mother would be performing a 'new interpretation' of *Praise the Lord* the following Sunday, Ilse's joy was so cloying that he had to go and yell at a couple of *Fräuleins* just to calm down again.
On the morning of the mass, they turned up an hour early to reserve seats. His arms stretched slightly away from his body to stop his suit material wrinkling at the tiniest movement, – 'Everything else is rubbish!' – my grandfather sat in the pew at the very front; next to him sat my grandmother, whose pill box, in sheer panic that my mother might start to panic, lay rattling in her hand. Next to them sat Helm, Gundl, Max and right at the end, Ilse, who was a little out of breath because she kept repeating every few minutes that it was all bound to go well.
Only my mother appeared to be completely unruffled.
'A real pro,' said my grandfather, 'not a sign of stage fright,'

'Shhh,' hissed my grandmother.
'Rubbish!' said my mother. 'Of course I was afraid.' She took the glasses off that she had taken to wearing again since she'd become ill because contact lenses stung her eyes, and wiped them on the sleeve of her nightdress. Her lip curled and that new grin flashed again. 'Don't kid yourself! There's as much Grandma in us as Grandpa,' she laughed and slapped my arm. 'When I got past the holy water, I thought I was going to faint, I was so excited.' What she was *really* afraid of, more than the audience, was the '*Fear? In Kazan, anyone who was too slow was thrown into a dungeon full of rats and had to sit it out until the stench rose up. That's what I call fear'* from my grandfather.
She shoved her glasses back into place. The windscreen-thick lenses shimmered in all directions. 'Believe me, I preferred to get a grip on myself.' Without looking round once, she climbed into the pulpit, took a deep breath and started singing, loud and clear and with such force that her voice almost cracked with all the strength that she did not know how to control yet, as if a shot-putter had just been handed a tennis ball. Below, necks craned but my mother saw nothing, just sang away to the last note, then made a beeline for her seat while my grandfather leapt to his feet and started applauding.
'Oskar,' hissed my grandmother, 'not in the House of the Lord.'
'Don't you worry,' replied my grandfather, 'God will forgive me. That's His job.' Only with a great deal of effort could he be persuaded to sit down again and stick it out to the end 'even though the rest of the performance was absolute rubbish in comparison.'
When it was over at last, he stood at the church door and gathered compliments for my mother that he liked so much he forgot to pass them on.
'Oskar, we have to go,' whined my grandmother, 'the guests will be at the door any minute now.' But not until the priest came out of the vestry and said: 'Sometimes the Lord showers his gifts so generously on one of his sheep that one can only watch in awe,' was my grandfather prepared to say goodbye, but not before he'd invited the priest to lunch, causing my grandmother – the missing place card! Possible food allergies! – to take her first sedative and then, when he declined with thanks, ('Aren't we good enough for him?') the second.
By the time she arrived home she was about to collapse. 'The chicken will never be done by the time they arrive,' she shrieked from the kitchen, and – 'Oh no, the candles! Quick!' – 'Not *that* quickly, you'll go all red in the face!' – 'Oskar, would *you* fetch the candles please?' and – 'If they don't come soon, I can just throw the chicken away.' Because, as always, Gundl was late. Apparently, she'd even taken half an hour to get from the kitchen to the dining room because on the way, she kept remembering something she'd forgotten so that she had turned helplessly back and forth like the bunny in the Duracell ad whose batteries are running out. My grandfather liked imitating her. My mother got the part of clapping her hands to her cheeks and saying in a shrill voice, 'I'm s-o-o-o-o sorry!' just as Gundl did all the time and at an interval of ten metres, on that day just like all the rest, until she finally came hurrying up the drive with Helm and Max in tow and, as my grandmother was quick to observe, wrinkled her nose in the direction of the kitchen.
'Oh, but not at all! We've only just arrived ourselves. I had a few last-minute things to do anyway,' exclaimed my grandmother.
'My God, the spitting image!' said Gundl as they hung up their coats and: 'We just popped home to fetch the cake slice in case you didn't have one,' while she thrust an enormous,

quivering Black Forest gateau wrapped in Clingfilm towards my grandmother, who took it, mortally offended that she had dared bring a foreign cake into her house, trilling, 'Thank you my dear!' only to shove it into the deep freeze that evening where it languished, forgotten.
'Well, how's it going at the bank? Have you become rooted to the spot behind the counter yet?' shouted my grandfather and slapped his brother on the back.
'Counter, my arse. I'm in investments now. You don't even have to get out of your chair to work and they give you a pay rise for it,' said Helm and then he was off, following my grandfather around the house to guess how much the new juicer and the new TV and the new SLR camera had cost.
'New! Don't make me laugh!' cried Helm and did anyway. 'Not even a zoom! Mine does all that automatically.'
The women competed too but in the opposite direction.
'How's your father?' asked my grandmother.
'How's he supposed to be?' cried Gundl. 'Terrible. Wet the bed again. I didn't get a wink all night.'
'You poor thing,' replied my grandmother, who, in Gundl's presence, ostentatiously spoke standard German. 'Believe me, when he's no longer with us, you'll wish you had someone to keep you awake.' Hand on heart, quiet sigh. 'I know what I'm talking about.'
The food was eaten, the drink was drunk; everyone wished my mother, at my grandfather's insistence, a golden future. She was passed around the table and had her head rubbed as if they expected, sooner or later, a gold coin to fall from her mouth, while my grandparents scrambled about with the camera.
'Smile please,' cried my grandfather.
'Not too much!' cried my grandmother. But my mother's teeth were already captured on film. My mother looks even smaller here than she did in Toulouse although she is several years older. Perhaps it's the way she is standing, legs crossed, arms behind her back so that she appears to be literally sinking into the floor. But if you look carefully, you can already see two tiny bumps starting to show like little suction caps below her cherry-red velour pullover, the first, tentative pangs of puberty.
'There's one left,' cried my grandfather.
'Wait!' cried my grandmother and gave him a terribly conspicuous inconspicuous sign, at which he ran off to the study and came back with an enormous bunch of flowers. 'Thank you for this wonderful meal,' he said and handed her the flowers that she herself had bought the day before.
'What a surprise! You shouldn't have!' she cried.
In the picture that Helm – 'What? It doesn't even have a self-timer?' – shot, they look truly in love. Real pros.
My grandfather still hadn't had his fill and dragged out the pottery 'sculpture' that my mother had quickly thrown between two award ceremonies.
'Is there anything that the child *can't* do?' cried Ilse and clapped her hands.
'Of course. Fail,' said my grandfather and did not look for a moment as if he was joking.
My grandmother splashed some more sparkling wine into the glasses and onto herself, changed, then put back on her original clothes so as not to appear vain, but rubbed away at the stain for so long that she needed a fresh skirt after all.

For the hundredth time, my grandfather told the story of how Micha Sergevitch had thrown back vodka with the guards while they had dragged potato sacks out of the back store. 'The storeroom overseer was a one-eyed Jew. Micha used to laugh his head off when the books didn't tally,' he said and did the laugh one more time for everyone's benefit. Then he slammed his fist down on the table and held my mother up high. 'Who'd like to listen to our singer again?' The kitchen stool was fetched and my mother praised the Lord once more, and God Almighty, his strength, his works, before all time, in eternity, until Ilse wept with compassion.
'That girl should be on TV,' said one of the plumber cousins with his mouth full. He let his gaze wander over my mother. 'Perhaps on the radio,' he added.
'You have to enter her for one of those singing competitions. With any luck she'll become as famous as Heintje and get to travel all over the world,' another threw in.
'Don't! She's all I have!' cried my grandmother and wrapped her arms around my mother's tiny frame while making the worrying discovery that her 'all' had become even smaller.
'Luck?' cried my grandfather more loudly. 'You can tell that to the fairies! Luck was invented by layabouts so that they could blame their misery on fate, not themselves. People need to work hard, that's all.'
'Lord, how beautiful!' sighed Ilse, who had finally got her breath back, 'a person's voice is truly their second face.'
'That's what a "child under pressure" sounds like,' said my grandfather pointedly and found a thirty-seventh picture on his film after all to flash his Schadenfreude in Gundl's face. At which she decided that Max should sing something too. Which he was absolutely incapable of doing after Gundl crushed his fingers in her fist so tightly that he nearly screamed out loud but still wanted to climb up on the stool and send his *Hänschenklein* out into the big wide world for a few verses until he forgot the words and his voice faltered, and he burst into tears, far from being 'in good spirits', which earned him such a good hiding when he got home that the neighbours had to turn up *Inspector Derrick*.
Max never quite forgave my mother for this incident. For the rest of his schooldays, he never spoke another word to her. It wasn't until they met again in Berlin – he on the run from the state and his parents, she in front of the empty home in which she'd pretended for a month that she could do without *hers* – that he took her home a few times as she seemed so out of place in this city that didn't suit her at all. Everything that would normally be hidden, out of decency, anywhere else in the world, – drugs, dirt, noise, vices – was deemed good here; anything went, or didn't, was shit, or wasn't, everything was somehow OK, was free of values, free of pain, free of anything at all, which meant that my mother had to try really hard to ruin her life.
At least, though, she had plenty of practice at that. In trying very hard, that is, in struggling, toiling uphill, slaving away – so much, in fact, that she didn't know how to stop or what 'taking it easy' actually meant. And my grandfather did his best to keep her from learning it. As soon as she had mastered one of her talents to her best ability, when doing it did not mean complete over-exertion, he would immediately choose a new challenge for her. Being the best was not enough, it also had to be *her* best and the journey there had to be painful. No pain, no gain. But: gain without pain was even worse. And that was the reason why the singing teacher received a call just a few weeks after her performance to say that the show was over. Singing was too easy for her.

Novel. Published by EICHBORN © Bastei Lübbe AG, 2013
Translated from the German by Lucy Renner Jones

'We can't waste time on just a hobby,' said my grandfather. The next potential vocation was already knocking at the door, and unfortunately, it was much more promising. 'I'm sure you understand.'
And of course, my mother understood too, and took up the oboe without the slightest resistance. Or the gym ball. Or whatever idea my grandfather had next to fill the shelf with trophies. Not until twenty years later, with waiters clapping at her feet and her friend Sweetiepie, who also clambered up on the table to dance with her, did she sing again, surprised at her own deep, sensuous voice that had matured unobserved, and which she enjoyed hearing. But she didn't really understand what *enjoying something* really meant at the time and still thought that her days only served one purpose: to find out which one of her outstanding talents was the most outstanding of all, the one that would make her fly high and, above all, which would carry her out of this 'dump', a word she spat out with almost the same revulsion in her voice as my grandfather.
But first, she had to get through her youth. And it was something she was far too clever for by a long chalk, at least for *her* youth, back then when being young was still up to youth itself, and the burden of having fun and letting your hair down and misbehaving was still entirely on youths' shoulders so that the adults could work themselves to death in peace and quiet. She hated everything about it: the whispering behind her back because she was the only one who never made any mistakes and had to demonstrate the test to the whole class on the board. Or because she didn't manage to fall in love with an actor or a singer, or anyone else for that matter. She hated the way they giggled at her knee-length skirts and the way the girl next to her dragged her rubber across the desktop with ink-stained fingers; hated the jokes with innuendoes that she was supposed to laugh at but couldn't, secretly proud that she couldn't and even more secretly wondering what was the matter with her; hated the silly impudence that was disguised as idealism, and the even greater ignorance to brag about it out loud, even years later when ripped jeans had been swapped for suit trousers with creases.
The generosity that others feel for their younger selves was something she found repellent. Whatever was true about the dent, or hole, or gap in her head, whether it kept her skull pliable or not, it had long since grown over. At 10, 20, 30 or 40 (or even 49 for that matter although she didn't quite make it to 50), she claimed she had always been the same person, the impatient, erratic one that I was familiar with. One who easily made things too hard for herself. One who said that she didn't care what others thought of her, and then repeated it even more loudly so that the back row could hear. One who tried so hard to be herself that she forgot who she was.
But most of all, she hated youth for what it did to her. For as long as I can remember, my mother was at war with her body, which in those days was not yet the norm. It seemed alien to her, strange, abhorrent, but most of all, she felt cheated by it. The wires and pipes in her insides that heated up uncontrollably, pumping the blood into her cheeks, revealing her embarrassment to the whole world, her clammy hands, rumbling stomach, trembling – all of this seemed to serve only one purpose, to show her up. Her body left her with no emotion, no thought that she could keep to herself; every little trivial secret trickled to the outside world like a leaky rubbish bag leaving a trail behind on the street. And as if that wasn't bad enough, hair suddenly began to grow everywhere, under her arms, on her legs. And between them too, of course.

My grandfather was no more enthusiastic about it all than she was. No matter that he was in a great hurry to lead my mother out of the darkness of childhood and into the kingdom of adulthood; the fact that he had to make a detour through puberty was something that thoroughly annoyed him. He found it difficult to get used to the fact that below the alert eyes that hung on his every word, a pair of breasts was now sitting at the table, pushing themselves out from her ribcage at such an agonisingly slow pace that he could hardly take his eyes off them, as if he were witnessing a terrible accident.
My grandmother did not lag behind him one little bit in this respect. But in her case, she didn't so much want to get adolescence over and done with as quickly as possible; she didn't want to let it in in the first place. With all her strength, she braced herself against time, tried everything possible to preserve the last remainders of my mother's childhood, hid whatever could be hidden, denied things if necessary, and, if not. Even when my mother was 14, she prohibited her from locking the bathroom, saying, 'Am I supposed to call the fire brigade if you can't get the door open?' and, with absolute regularity, she needed to get to the medicine cabinet just when my mother had come out of the shower and was drying herself. My grandmother dogged her every step even more than before, following her everywhere and bursting unannounced into her room as if hoping to scare the woman growing inside her daughter so much that she wouldn't dare come out again. When my mother, despite all these efforts, managed to get her period all the same, she was simply advised to wash more often and to stick a few sheets of toilet paper between her legs, as it would surely suffice for that smidgeon of 'gnat's muck'.
The first months were hell. My mother showered twice a day. She spent the school breaks on the toilet, squirting herself between her legs with a bottle of fizzy water. When a boy kneeled down in front of her to tie up his shoelaces, she was so terrified he might have smelled something that she bunked off school for the first time in her life and went home to change. Nevertheless, my mother had to bleed right through her underwear before my grandmother would let her have a packet of sanitary towels.
But her washing habit stayed, getting worse the older she got. Every morning, long before my alarm went off, my mother would get up and try to eradicate her body. She would turn the shower on full, as hot as she could stand it, and scrub the previous night away. She sprayed and frothed and foamed, held the shower head between her buttocks, under her armpits, in her ears, in her mouth, gurgled and spat, and scoured between her fingers and toes with the scrubbing brush until her skin was red and fuzzy like washing when a tissue accidentally ends up in the drum. And when she had finally managed to rub away everything that was uncontrollable, every part of her that was wayward or dead, her sweat and old skin cells, every remnant of decay so that her body was reduced to a glassy surface which she could project her intellect onto, she turned to the flat we lived in, which was 'covered in filth'. Always.
It was bad enough when I still lived at home but when she finally had two more rooms to herself, it turned into a completely sterile place, so clean, cold and practical that no one wanted to stay there longer than necessary.
I hadn't been there for years. When she finally phoned me and I picked her up to take her to my place in the middle of the night, I was too distracted by all the tablets, infusion stands, the oxygen apparatus – all the props of her illness that I hadn't had a clue about up until then – to look around.

Novel. Published by EICHBORN © Bastei Lübbe AG, 2013
Translated from the German by Lucy Renner Jones

Only when it was all over did I go back to her flat. I walked through the bare, white rooms that I had grown up in on tiptoe, as if I might scare someone, and yet I was the one who was holding her breath, so terrifying was the emptiness that crowded in on me from both sides. The only objects that stood in the glass cabinet in the kitchen were her cleaning products, neatly lined up like souvenirs from foreign countries. The fluids were colourful and garish – pink, neon green, squeaky yellow – and most of the bottles bore the sign of the skull and crossbones.

I went into her bedroom and opened the cupboards, took her trousers off the hangers and pulled them on over my jeans. The waistband reached up to my chest. Over the last few months, she'd become quite fat, not able to stop stuffing herself at the last minute, she of all people, who had to be forced to eat, only to lose it all again in the last few weeks.

I let the trousers drop to the floor and sat down on her bed, a very narrow bed, a mere 90 by 200 centimetres. A bed for a single person. Someone who had stopped hoping that that would ever change. Or rather, had stopped worrying. I pressed my nose to the sheets. They smelled of nothing, in other words, probably of her. A smell that was too similar to my own for me to notice. I gazed at the white walls, the white cupboards, the white laminate that she'd laid over the beautiful wooden floorboards in case crumbs got stuck in the gaps, back to the pair of trousers on the floor in front of me and suddenly discovered a dark edge of dirt all around the waistband. I picked them up off the floor and looked more closely. Pulled another pair out of the wardrobe, then a third to be sure. Always the same: dark rims of dirt, stains, in some cases even sticky. I got up and lifted the pile of T-shirts off the shelves, then the few pullovers, and found more and more signs of how far gone she had clearly been, finally even discovering two pairs of dirty knickers, stuffed into the corner as if she had hidden them there. She must have waited so long to tell me the truth about what was going on that she hadn't been able to look after herself any more.

I took a pair of scissors and began to cut everything into squares, creating enough cleaning rags to last a lifetime. Then I went into the living room and carried on looking even though I wasn't sure what for. Probably just for something I could take home with me before the charity – the one that my grandmother had found in her growing need to chalk up a few points with the Lord before my mother's death – came to pick up the rest. I took a file off the shelf and rummaged around in her documents, pulled out entire drawers in the hope of finding a personal object – a paper weight, a favourite cup, some knick-knack that most people would have lying on their window sill. But of course, I found nothing of the kind. Of course my mother had nothing like that lying around. Of course there was nothing here whose sole right to exist was sentimental value. My mother was not attached to anything except perhaps the thrilling feeling of getting rid of some 'ballast', which started with the little yellow notes stuck next to the telephone. The more tirelessly my grandmother hoarded every little thing – food, money, fat, you never knew when the next war might break out – the more enthusiastically my mother threw away. In our flat there were no pictures, no fridge magnets, no wonky pottery. Even the presents that I brought home from school for Mother's Day only survived a few days. As soon as even a few things had formed a group, she took a dustbin bag and stuffed everything in that wasn't nailed down, driven by an unbridled desire to make a clean sweep. She went on a rampage through the house until her gaze was able to glide across uncluttered surfaces, where nothing lay except a new beginning.

The same fear that my grandmother had – to lose what had been hard won – manifested itself in my mother as a fear of finding what had been lost: a fear of being assaulted by memories, a fear of the slightest negligence, the slightest slip that would cause mayhem in her well-ordered, neatly folded life.

In the end I went home with empty hands. I'd resigned myself to the thought that, apart from a few photographs that my grandmother had been able to rescue in time, I would have no other keepsake, at least not a tangible one, which in fact suited my mother very well. Until I suddenly remembered the necklace that I'd found in the attic as a child at the bottom of a jar that was filled to the brim with drawing pins. At the time I had been looking for material for a collage that we had to do in art class and I'd been playing around with the jar when the shimmering necklace flashed inside it. While trying to fish it out, I'd cut the backs of my hands. And then, once I had managed to get it out, I had not wanted to just leave it up there in the attic.

I ran to my bedside table, and delved into my old jewellery box – and there, among all the clip earrings that I had worn as a teenager because my mother hadn't allowed me to pierce my ears, it still lay, even if it was a bit tarnished. I had to step towards the light to see that it was in fact a coin, set in silver, although it did not look particularly special, more like play money. On one side was a plain number five. The other side was so worn that I could barely make out the embossment. Two ears of corn could be seen with great difficulty and under them, the letters CCCP. The chain itself was completely rusty. Even when I'd first found it, it had reeked so potently of metal that I'd felt a bit nauseous when I'd put it on. But still, I'd hidden it among my few pieces of jewellery because I'd convinced myself that it had meant something to my mother. It was only now that I was sure it really had.