

Pp. 13–19

The Tattoo

My mother was a woman of the world. You could tell by the scent of her hair and the pack of admirers sniffing at her heels. The von Ärmels were one of the most distinguished families in Bern. When I was a child, some people would still nod sycophantically at us in the street, or even salute. I can still remember my first day at school, when the teacher wrote our names on the board. He used coloured chalk for mine.

Mother had spent most of her childhood and adolescence in private schools around the world. She always said she could speak seven languages fluently.

‘But what good will that do me? In Bern?’

All those years abroad eventually made her feel like a stranger even to herself, and she kept everything and everyone at arm’s length. Her admirers saw this as a very special kind of refinement. She was regarded as the most beautiful woman in the whole city. And she knew it. Even if she rarely concerned herself with such details. She didn’t waste time on trivialities, and did very little thinking too. That was far too mundane a pastime for her taste.

Instead of thinking, she preferred to act.

One Christmas, when she was sixteen, she ran away from home. No one noticed for the first few days. Grandmother was far too busy to register subtleties like an escaped daughter. She had recently started breeding huskies and would tell everyone who listened that the huskies were her reason for living. Grandmother was always searching for such reasons. She collected them like other people collected snow globes.

Her husband, the man who would become my grandfather, had long ago forgotten that he had a daughter. He had been a fierce army officer who had distinguished himself during the war defending the border. His love of forced marches had led his soldiers to give him the nickname ‘the Merciless’. This name would later be used by my grandmother too. After the war, he quickly lost his mind, while some malicious gossipers said he had never had one in the first place. ‘I don’t know this man. No idea who he is,’ Mother used to say. She rarely talked about him in any case, which is not particularly surprising; it must have been strange to have a father who could recite every military rank by heart, yet did not even know his own daughter.

Every year, on Grandfather's birthday, we went to their house for lunch. It was always ice-cold inside. Grandmother only put the heating on for special visitors. I never liked these visits because we had to take off our shoes and put on a pair of slippers, which gave off a sour smell that I also noticed around my grandmother. In the early years she still employed an elderly manservant, who was very pale and looked generally unwell. He coughed a lot and was always sniffing. Probably a result of the icy cold in which he constantly had to serve. The manservant gave off the same sour smell. No one knew his name, not even my grandmother. Of course we could have asked him, but for some reason none of us ever thought to do so.

We always ate the same meal of fish, which Grandmother would announce with the words: 'It doesn't taste particularly good, but it's food.'

Grandfather always sat at the head of the table in his old army uniform, which was covered in soup stains and other ominous splotches. Why did no one ever wash his uniform? He never looked particularly merciless to me anyway – instead, the years seemed to have been merciless with him. Was this the proverbial poetic justice?

I had to go over and wish him a happy birthday. As he always did whenever he saw me, he took my hand and asked: 'How many kilometres?'

And I had to answer: 'Fifty, Herr Kommandant.'

'Not enough,' he would retort. 'Sit down.'

My brother Thomas, two years older and already braver and more cunning than me, always came up with an original answer that delighted my Grandfather.

'I took the plane.'

'Very good. I like that,' laughed Grandfather, clapping Thomas approvingly on the back. Then he gave him a twenty.

But next time, when I said, 'I took the plane,' Grandfather grabbed me angrily by the ear: 'You lazy brat! How dare you?'

I really didn't like those visits at all.

During lunch, it was my father who attempted to keep the conversation going. He studiously ignored the fact that not only was Grandfather clearly unable to follow his deliberations on current affairs, he also didn't have the faintest idea who my father was.

Mother sat silently beside him and stirred her soup. She stirred faster and faster, as if her stirring would make time pass more quickly.

After she ran away from home, she disappeared without trace for a whole month. No one knows to this day where she was for all that time. But when she returned, she had an enormous tattoo on her back, which was the reason why later Father never wanted to take us swimming. The tattoo was an immense mutilation that seemed to incorporate the entire colour spectrum.

And other colours too, which only existed on Mother's back. Nevertheless, I was firmly convinced that the tattoo must portray something more. An image. An object. A story.

I didn't like abstract art back then.

'What is it, what is it?' I asked Mother over and over. I begged her to let me see the tattoo again. Finally, I stood there staring at the mutilation with a care and devotion that no other painting could have drawn from me.

'Is it a peacock?'

'No.'

'But those eyes. It's got to be a peacock.'

'Stop it! Respectable children don't study their mothers' backs.'

She didn't like anyone asking about this month in her past. It remained her secret. But from time to time there were little signs, snippets, which gave a hint – albeit unsatisfying – as to where she might have got to. Sometimes she would sing songs that sounded like they were from a show, as though she were singing on a stage and not in our living room.

Once, shortly before my birthday, I asked for a magic set.

'What on earth are you thinking?!' screamed Mother.

A magic set, a brilliant present for nice children, you might think. But evidently Mother had a different view.

'Never!'

'But why not?'

'Children like you shouldn't do magic.'

What else was there to do in life, according to this sobering logic? I could have argued that. I was so frightened that I never mentioned magic sets again.

Once I asked her directly: 'What did you do during that month?'

She smiled and said: 'I ate incredibly well.'

I wasn't able to enjoy my food for a while after that.

Another time I asked her: 'What happened when you went back home? Were they mad? Did they beat you?'

I didn't ask that without reason. Once, when I gave Grandmother a couple of crocheted oven cloths I had made her for Christmas, she launched into a passionate speech in favour of corporal punishment for children. Of course, this speech might have had nothing to do with my oven cloths at all. Sometimes people simply feel like making a passionate speech.

'Beat?'

Mother laughed her strange laugh.

So, back then, when she returned home after her month away, there was a gleaming rust-red cattle truck in the driveway. One of the huskies had bitten Grandmother on the thigh.

Following this heinous offence, the dogs were of course no longer her reason for living. They were sent away to St. Moritz, where they spent the rest of their days pulling bored Russians through the snow on sleighs. Grandmother bought herself an aquarium filled with valuable fish. The fish did not bite her thigh, but they too were, as Grandmother soon found out, not her reason for living.

In her room, Mother found the goodbye note she had written a month earlier. It lay unopened on her pillow. Where she herself had left it.

Later, Mother developed a weakness for American street artists. She flew to New York, to Chicago and San Francisco, where these street artists could be 'picked like mushrooms'.

I was still very young when she organised a preview for a few of them in the art gallery. She had invited the entire Bernese glitterati to the event. All of them men, all of them admirers. I remember this evening well, as it was the first and last time that Grandmother was asked to look after us. At that time I was obsessed with Mary Poppins, but Grandmother had taken it upon herself to be her complete opposite. She arrived with a grotesque hat and the words, 'Get into bed, and whoever doesn't behave will answer for it.' By half past six, we were lying under the covers, shaking. Thomas had boasted before Grandmother's arrival that he would watch the Young Boys' match on television that evening, and both halves at that. There was none of that daredevilry left now. He lay in the bed above, shaking just as much as me.

'Thomas,' I said, 'didn't you want to watch the Young Boys?'

'Shut your mouth.'

At that moment, we heard footsteps in the hall.