

Schöffling & Co.

foreign rights

author Ulrike Almut Sandig

title Monsters like us

original title Monster wie wir

© 2020 by Schöffling & Co.

English sample translation

translated by Karen Leeder

copyright for
the translation Karen Leeder

contact Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

www.schoeffling.de

1.

Once I was floating in my mother's womb. It was cramped and had walls that gave way as I bumped against them, then nudged me back into the twilight of her body. It was reddish in colour, although I didn't see the relevant documents until decades later. From the other side of the abdominal wall, I heard noises, doors opening and closing, an iron hatch, a shovel and the scraping of iron on iron, muted creaking and crackling, a rhythmic thunder like the clatter of coal, and the scratching of oven tongs, interrupted by her voice, that seemed to be telling someone something. I didn't really care what my mother was doing out there. She meant nothing to me in the way that mothers always end up meaning nothing to their own children. Perhaps you can only have an attitude about something when it is separate from you. But I was a tiny, featherlight foetus in dark brown corduroy trousers hunched in my mother's uterus. And at the same time, I was her womb and was wrapped around myself, threaded with fine veins.

I have no inkling how old I was when I had that dream. In any case, I was not surprised that my brother was there too. We were having fun, laughing and jostling each other as we flew through the darkness like two cosmonauts in a space capsule after a power failure. His head with its protruding ears stood out black against the reddish walls. It didn't surprise me in the slightest that suddenly a crack of daylight burst in and he said, catch you later, Dummy-doll, I'm going out into the world now. Of course, I wanted to go too and rowed up behind him with my see-through arms, but Fly turned round again; that's not how it works, he said, your turn comes much later. So, I sat cross legged on the smooth uterine tissue and watched him crawl out through the gap that closed behind him again, and said to myself, that's a shame, but never mind. I'm younger, after all.

I must have been quite small. Because when Fly and I were having a snack in the kitchen and I told him I could remember his birth, he laughed and said that was rubbish, I was four years younger than him. Exactly, I said, and scraped my frozen vanilla ice cream out of the beaker. That's why I stayed inside. You said it wasn't my turn yet, don't you remember anymore? My brother got up from the kitchen table, snatched a thick black fly for one of his experiments, and keeping it in the hollow cavity between his hands, carried on laughing and explained: hey, Dummy-doll, we were both in Mummy's tummy, but not both at the same time.

Or does it begin in the midst of it all, in our families where we get up and go to sleep alongside the others, as if it were self-evident to live just like this and no differently?

In our house no one was beaten. In this, Fly and I were different from most of the children we knew. When the children were together at family gatherings, in the stairwell in search of daddy longlegs (his idea), in the attic in search of the Santa Claus mask from the Advent celebration belonging to Christian education classes (my idea), or by the gooseberry bushes in the garden (our cousin from Bitterfeld's idea), while our parents were still sitting in the dining room eating cake, my brother would ask everyone who of us was beaten at home. Which of you get a thrashing? When the daughters of our father's old friend from his student days reported getting clipped round the ear at the dinner table, or, hesitantly, our cousin from Bitterfeld described the belt that hung behind her mother's mirror, a look of quiet satisfaction passed across my brother's face. Probably I was the only one to see it. Sometimes I pushed past him and said, no, no one ever gets beaten here. Smacked, at most. Where? the student friend's daughters wanted to know. On the bum, of course, I said unmoved and ignored my brother's fist poking me in the ribs. When the Bitterfeld cousin asked: with or without clothes?, and before Fly could interrupt, I quickly said: without, of course, otherwise you don't get the proper sound, I saw the same satisfaction I had recognised on my brother's face,

flick across my cousin's. She's only saying that that so she's the centre of attention, he said, then slapped the back of my head with his hand and ran up the stairs to the attic. Do you want to see a real urn? A full one? The daughters of the student friend declined, they also had urns in the attic at home, but the Bitterfeld cousin rushed after him asking: what is an urn? There are dead people's ashes inside, my brother whispered in her ear. When you shake it the tooth crowns rattle, and some of them are made of gold!

That wasn't a real beating. A beating is when you can see something afterwards, my brother said.

I'm dying, I'm dying. We lay in our beds, as the headlights of passing cars moved across the bedroom walls. That's not true, I said. You don't die of a beating.

No, I'm dying of something else, came the sound from his bed. My brother lay on his back wheezing loudly. Can't you see I'm dying? he said, grabbing his neck with both hands, before grunting unintelligibly and throwing himself back and forth on his mattress in spasms. I jumped out of bed and whispered, I'll get mother. No, no, my brother wheezed, half-suffocating, don't get her. Get me a sweet. A sweet! He grunted pitifully and jerked his face round towards me, which looked ghostly in the darkness.

Are you sure that'll help? I asked, and Fly replied: If you don't run right away, I'll really die, oh, oh... I couldn't let that happen. I ran into the kitchen, dragged a chair in front of the kitchen cupboard, climbed on top and from there on to the shelf, where I fished out a sweet for Fly from the top section and one for me, for reassurance.

What are you up to? I heard a voice behind me. It was Pap. I'm just get something for Fly so he doesn't die, I answered in my defence. The next moment I was lying in bed on my stomach, face pressed into the pillow, and Pap was standing next to me. He pulled the cover back, pulled down my pyjamas and smacked my bottom. Not with any force, but with precision. As if he were banging the side of a broken vending machine, or as if he were

himself a machine performing the one and only function for which it has been designed. But in that case without any in-built language program, as Pap always administered the blows to our backsides in silence. After performing his educational duty, he pulled up our pyjama bottoms, just like that, and tucked the blanket up to our chins. The next morning, the imprint of his hand on our backsides would be long gone. When Pap had closed the bedroom door behind him, and I lay bed, still on my stomach, I started to cry. It wasn't until I heard my brother's breathing come deep and regular that I stretched out my legs into the cool bottom half of my bed. The headlights of a passing car moved over the ceiling of the room, and I closed my eyes.

Fly and I shared the children's bedroom with patterned wallpaper and high windows. The headlights of the few cars that turned at the crossing in front of the house drew across the walls, in a window-shape, while I lay in bed with a torch leafing through my mother's songbooks. Many of them were ones we sang in the children's services, I recognized them by the pictures. With my index finger I traced the sounds as they went up and down on the telegraph wires of the stave and pictured them to myself as swallows, landing, singing and rising again. It was quiet in the room, from next door came the monotonous sound of the TV, muffled conversations. But in my head there was a humming, clapping, and singing, which, when I looked up from the notes, followed the shining square of light across the walls. When Fly was sent to bed, I quickly turned the torch off and pretended to be asleep.

Don't bother, he said, I've already seen.

I yawned demonstratively and blinked. You woke me up, I murmured believably. Hmm, whatever, hissed Fly and pushed a chair over in front of the cupboard. In his pyjamas, he climbed from the chair to the dresser, balanced on the top of the toy cupboard, shouted: my name is Spiderman! and leaped into the bed next to mine with a thud.

Fly loved to be in the air. During the day, he would take to jumping from the garage roof. Or from the tops of the tall apple trees. Or he climbed up onto the neighbours' pigsty and charged up and down until the piglets began to squeak and my mother ordered him down and sent him to the nursery for cello practise. But Fly found pretty much everything more exciting than cello.

Did you know that glue burns? he asked me and pulled a silver tube out of his back pocket. I was standing on my bed under the window. With my hands pressed flat on the cool inner-pane, I was bouncing back and forth, absentmindedly, watching the Soviet soldier in front of the house, who had been dropped off by a car just as I was coming back from kindergarten. You didn't know that, did you, said Fly. My mattress springs squeaked like the piglets in our neighbour's sty; the poplar next to the crossroads turned its leaves in the dry May wind; the crossroads in front of the house rose and fell with my jumping. I'll prove it to you, said Fly. The only one standing still was the soldier. He stood in the middle of the crossing, his dusty black boots side by side on the tarmac, his pale hands pressed to the seams of his uniform trousers, his wide head under a helmet that allowed no facial expression to be seen; he stood there and squinted down the main street. Are you even looking? asked Fly. The Soviet convoys were always preceded by a solitary car that drove along the route hours in advance and dropped off a soldier at each junction, instructing him not to move from the spot until the tanks or trucks came down the road in columns, at which point it was his job to point them in the right direction. This one had already been standing there all afternoon. Whenever a car rattled by, a tractor swung past giving him a narrow berth, or boys on their bikes circled him begging him for a military badge, he pressed his lips together and kept looking straight ahead. Dummy-doll, said Fly. It was only when old Pazia leaned over the garden fence to offer him a beer in broken Russian that he lowered his chin and shook his head almost imperceptibly. Wait for it, said Fly. He has been stationed here for a long time, old Pazia called across to our mother, who had appeared in our driveway, her shopping net on the

handlebars, ready to go and fetch sausages before the shop closed. 'E knows exactly what will happen if 'e don't obey orders. The May sun carved his shadow into the tarmac at the crossing and Fly shouted: And we're off!

There was a click, and I turned around. Fly was standing right next to my bed, Pap's lighter in one hand, in the other the silver-coloured tube. The glue squeezed from the top in a transparent bubble. Fly clicked the lighter again, sparks. If Pap find out that you..., I muttered. A spark, Fly tried it again, a spark, and there it was, a pretty little flame dancing above the lighter. That's not allowed, I said. Fly: shut up, Dummy-doll, I'm concentrating. The glue caught immediately. In shock Fly pressed the tube and another stripe of glue spurted out, igniting as it fell to the floor. The lino, spread out in shallow waves under a mess of matchbox cars and colouring pens, immediately caught fire. The next moment, waist-high flames were blazing before my bed. I pressed myself back against the cool windowpane and didn't move a muscle. Fly was hopping from one leg to the other to trample down the fire, the flames already licking at the wooden bedpost. As he reached out to grab his school bag and beat down the flames like in his Karl May books, the fire was just playing round the tube of glue that had fallen on the floor; then it shot up even higher.

Do something, Ruth, he cried. Go on, do something! To reach the window handle, I had to climb out onto the windowsill. Interior window, exterior window. When I finally had it open, the May air gusted in and I felt the fire flare up behind me. The soldier at the crossing pushed his helmet back. Had I called out or not? Did Fly? He was quick. The next moment he had climbed up the veranda and swung a black boot over the windowsill. Quick as a flash he grabbed me and Fly and lifted us onto the roof of the porch. Then he disappeared into the room and closed the window. We saw his shape moving around in the smoke behind the window; he tugged my blanket off the bed and slapped down the flames with directed movements. You rascals, called old Pazia from across the street. We stood stiffly side by side and held hands.

Pap was still wearing his moped helmet when he appeared in front of the porch. As he entered the house and tore the door to our room open, the smoke billowed out of the now open window through which the soldier was just lifting us back in. His face dusty and wet under the helmet he was still wearing. He had a broad nose and the darkest eyes we could ever imagine, and those dark eyes were laughing at us. His huge, pale hand wiped across his face and he coughed. Pap stared at him. *Spasibo*, he muttered. *Spasibo bolschoje*. The next moment we heard the tanks.

They were crawling slowly down the main road like prehistoric animals, and the soldier ran off, shouting back another *Tschort wosmi*, the meaning of which we didn't have to guess, as he legged it. He charged down the stairs, chased across our yard and the front garden; the tanks on their chains ploughed along the main road, neighbours appeared in the windows; old Pazia stepped back from the fence as the first tank pushed along in front of us. By the time the soldier arrived at the crossing the first two tanks had already missed the turn.

It took an hour, Pap told mother in the kitchen that evening, to steer them back and guide them into the street that led to the barracks. He sat at the dinner table with his legs crossed and lit his pipe. The lighter was different from the one Fly had nicked from him. Logical. Mother stacked the dirty plates in the sink. And the Russian? she asked. Well, there was no end of trouble, Pap said, puffing so the tobacco crackled and glowed. There was one hell of a beating. He will certainly be disciplined and transferred.

Mother turned around. But he saved the children!

Of course he did, but he had instructions not to move from the spot. Pap sounded as if once again he had to explain an obvious fact that mother did not know. She screwed up the dishcloth and turned around. He won't, she said. Tomorrow you're going there with something for his superior. Chocolates, brandy, I don't care what.

Pap remained silent and puffed on his pipe. The smoke spread over the half-cleared dinner table and formed a transparent blanket over Pap's head as he leaned back. That won't do any good, he said. They have their own rules.

As Mother marched across the kitchen with long strides and stood towering over him, the blanket of pipe-smoke drifted up and formed fine curls in the stuffy kitchen air. You're a coward, mother said. What kind of pastor does that make you?

We heard the slap all the way from the dining room, where we were tucked up on a makeshift mattress bed, staring in concentration at songbooks (me) and Karl May (Fly) so as not to miss anything. The door was ajar. Fly and I had been quartered here until the nursery floor could be re-laid. The whole apartment still smelled of burnt plastic.

This is the first slap in this story, Voitto. No idea whether it was mother or Pap who delivered it and whether it was Pap or mother on receiving end. But after a few times round this planet circling the haematoma of the sun, I can at least tell you this: it all starts with believing a slap can be the natural conclusion to a conversation. Fly and I turned over onto our sides and rolled in under our duvets. Then Fly turned off the light.

(...)

7.

You don't know the shoe-fac?, Marcel asked. The butterfly knife swirled in front of him in the smoky air and cut it into shreds.

Viktor and the others were standing at the bus stop by the football pitch sharing a packet of Lucky Strike. The lawn in front of them was surrounded by red metal pipes, where the wind made strange whistling sounds, like the boat masts of an abandoned harbour. The windows of the sports club were dark; today's game had been cancelled. Not on the ninth of November, the coach had said, and now some of them stood at the bus stop, where Marcel and his gang otherwise stood and cheered.

What, the shoe factory, said Marcel and flicked his glowing stub across the goal. My old man used to work there. Lighters clicked, murmuring, a girl with shaved neck and plucked eyebrows laughed at something. Proper German workmanship, Marcel said undeterred, not the Vietnamese-made rubbish you get today. Bored, the girl turned to Marcel. But now there's a club for lefty scum in there, he said. The Kirchendiebe and other indie low-lives play there, that punk band the Beatsteaks were there once and other sorts of degenerate music. Murmurs of agreement. People who snort coke and everything. Someone whistled through their fingers. Someone else laughed and placed a small light-blue pill on his tongue. Crack!, Marcel blurted. All that corrosive poison from Poland, set to ruin our country, is stashed there.

Hey, be quiet, called the girl, Marcel wants to tell you something.

Tonight there's a party there, called Marcel and stretched out his arms. Everyone's going. All the scum, the punks, the dopeheads, the high school students. He put his arm round Viktor, who had long been towering over him. Of course, not the decent high school students

like our good Ukrainian here, Marcel said and laughed. He was the only one who was not completely wrong about Viktor's lineage. Meanwhile the girl with the plucked eyebrows moved round and stood in front of them. She drew on her cigarette and blew smoke into Marcel and Viktor's faces. Her feathered hair almost covered her darkly made-up eyes. And? she asked.

Marcel lifted his arms. His watch shimmered in dim light of the overcast afternoon. Well, we're going too, he shouted at the group. We're going to have a bit of fun too.

It was almost one o'clock in the morning, as the cars pulled up in front of the iron gate, which led down to the factory hall on the industrial tracks. *It's time to act, time to act*, the Rock against Communism band Stuka growled from the loudspeakers of the Golf, where Viktor sat in the back seat, sandwiched between two mates of similar stature. *Germany must and will change!* In the boot, the petrol bombs clattered in the beer crates: hours had been spent on handicrafts. Time to warm things up a bit, Marcel had said at some point and distributed the baseball bats from his private store. Viktor had weighed his in his hand, impressed by the weight and the grain like on an old musical instrument. The girl with the shaved neck was at the wheel. Let's party, she had said when Viktor got out of the car with the others, but don't hang about. When the cops come, us up here will be off!

Viktor felt the exhaust fumes from the running engines warm on the back of his neck as he went down the narrow staircase behind the gate into the club grounds behind Marcel and the others. Downstairs it looked a mess. Fairy lights were strung through the bushes and scrub, there was scum perched everywhere on the crumbling walls and old beams with their tangled hairstyles, dense smoke rising from their open mouths. In the corner was a large bonfire, where they crowded round laughing and shoving who knows what down their throats, as Viktor saw in the dim light. Not far away two girls with long hair stood in the bushes snogging. They kept their eyes closed as Viktor and the others pushed past them to the

entrance. That's when the baseball bats came out of the jackets. The doorman, an old acquaintance of Marcel's, just had time to shout *fucking Nazis* before blood spurted from his face. As he lay on his side, cowering under Marcel's attack, Viktor clambered over him. Inside the ceiling was hung with military netting containing countless shoes. They reminded him of a school visit to Buchenwald, where he had benefited from his ability developed years earlier to flip an inner switch and feel nothing at all. Viktor had already flipped this useful switch in the girl's car, so that he could now shout with a laugh: it looks like a concentration camp in here.

They smashed up the club. They swept the bottles from the bar sending splinters of glass flying into the air. They jumped over the bar and trampled the decadent cocktail mixers, crushed the test tubes for the Bloody Marys and poured the contents of the cash register into the outdoor toilet at the back exit. It wasn't about the money. It wasn't about the principle either. But in the backs curled before him, the arms angled up in defence and the centrifugal power of the baseball bat in Viktor's hand lay something that came pretty close to his idea of joy.

Until he saw the dance floor. Despite the almost complete darkness, he recognized Ruth immediately. She stood on the edge swaying slightly, lost in the rhythmic beat that was still emanated from the loudspeakers, even though the DJ had long since scarpered. It was some kind of cover version of this old Malaria! song, *cold clear water* coming towards him from the speakers, while Ruth's slender figure leaned forward and moved slightly to the monotonous beat, as if nothing else existed in the world. She had shorter hair now that shifted aside as she danced to reveal her eyes. Viktor paused and walked closer. Strobe lights lit up the dance floor in jerky flashes, so that Ruth looked different with each beat, a flip book with pages missing. *Over my hands*, a woman's voice sang, Ruth's fingernails still looked just as bitten as they had been when baking salt dough together in a previous life, *over my arms*, *over my shoulders*, her ears are fine and yet she doesn't even get that the rooms in front are

being taken apart? *Over my legs, over my thighs*, he looked at Ruth like he had never looked at her before, not during their rare meetings in the school playground and not years before, when he didn't have a friend like Marcel and she had the most beautiful mother in the world. For the first time, he looked at her like a stranger looking at a stranger. As if each of her movements were directed towards him. Beneath her plaid shirt were amazing breasts that swayed softly to the beat, *over my breast, I close my eyes!* When he finally stood behind the abandoned DJ's booth and ripped the plug out, Ruth abruptly stopped and looked around. Except for them, there was no one left in the room. With the speakers silent, the crashing and groaning from the other rooms was suddenly deafening. In the chill-out zone there was a noise like New Year's Eve fireworks; from the VIP room came bright ceiling light and curses, because Marcel was in there, slitting open the mattresses, in search of the good stuff; somewhere glass shattered. Arms hanging by her sides, Ruth stood on the edge of the empty dance floor and stared at Viktor in surprise. What he wanted to do was hide her in his bomber jacket. *Piss off, man, make yourself scarce*, he shouted at her. But she didn't piss off.

Slowly she crossed the dance floor. The strobe light was still on. Jerkily she went up behind the DJ's desk and stood in front of Viktor. She reached up to his shoulder. Her breasts were only a hair's breadth away from him. So now, she said calmly, *you are one of them too.*