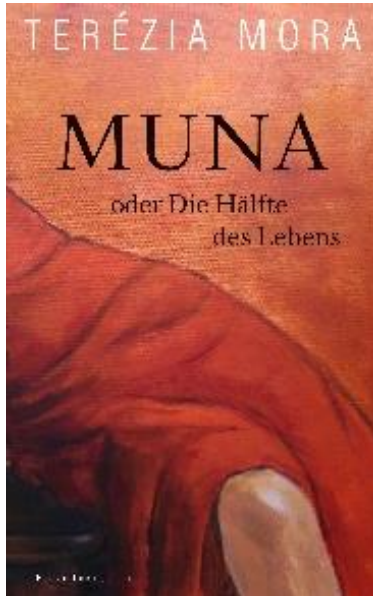


Terézia Mora

Muna, or Half of Life

[Muna oder Die Hälfte des Lebens]

Outline + Sample Translation



Novel

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Muna loves Magnus. Whether Magnus loves anyone – and if so, who – is hard to say. What happens when you spend your life depending on someone else?

"I know what you want," he says. "You won't get it." Muna is about to graduate from high school when she meets Magnus, a French teacher and photographer. She spends the night with him. When the Berlin Wall comes down, he disappears. Seven years later, they meet again – and become a couple. Muna thinks she has found the love of her life. But as soon as they take their first trip together, cracks start showing in their relationship. Over the years the coldness, unpredictability and violence get worse. But Muna isn't willing to give up.

Terézia Mora, born in 1971 in Sopron, Hungary, has lived in Berlin since 1990. For her stories and novels she was awarded numerous prizes, among others the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, the Kunstpreis Berlin, the Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse, the Deutsche Buchpreis and, in 2018, the Georg Büchner Prize. Her books have been translated into 20 languages. Moreover, Terézia Mora is one of the most distinguished translators from Hungarian.

Sample Translation

By Ruth Martin

1. Eighteen

After they took my mother away, blue lights flashing, I went out the back to where my bike was parked, and once again it had a puncture. You utter bastards! The inner courtyard resounded.

A young lady should not be yelling like that! And do watch your language!

Old Frau Mäder. Before, I'd been sweetheart. What's wrong, sweetheart? Your poor mother? Oh, sweetheart, how awful, what happened?!

After my eighteenth birthday, my mother held out for precisely one week before taking too many pills washed down with too much alcohol, that's what happened.

I can't make out what you're saying while you're sobbing like this, the dispatcher grumbled, but then she did actually manage to send the ambulance to the right address. Less than a minute later the police arrived as well. They didn't let me go in the ambulance; they questioned me in the flat with the door open the whole time. Frau Mäder didn't dare come in, she stood out in the hallway, but she will have got the gist of it even so. The type of alcohol isn't so important, red wine, the pills are important, what kind of pills were they. They took the pills with them and left me behind, though they were going to the hospital, too. The police are not a taxi service. My hair was full of sweat, I was wearing too-short tracksuit trousers and my hands were shaking too much to get changed – but apart from that I'd taken the dispatcher's words to heart, to pull myself together or I'd be no help. I was prepared to cycle to the hospital, but then my bike had yet another puncture, and that only happened when I locked it to the railings of the cellar steps – I'd even examined the ground there, in case there were nails or shards of glass you couldn't see, but nothing. Someone in my building who didn't want me to park my bike there kept stabbing my tire, always alternating between the front one and the back one, you utter bastards! And you, Frau Mäder, don't lecture me, I'll talk how I want!

My mother might be dying, I screamed up at the courtyard walls, and you puncture my bike? Fuck the lot of you!

Frau Mäder was still objecting to my behaviour, this really is no way to behave. The others ducked out of sight. A minute ago they'd all been lurking in windows and doorways, ambulance and police, zinc bath, right? But now the barricades had gone back up. I dragged the bike out of the yard and took it straight to the repair shop, where they knew me and where Ehrke, a former racing cyclist, had previously always said okay, because it's you. But it was a goddamn Sunday, and the shop was closed. I just left the bike there. Ehrke would recognise it, if it didn't get nicked first.

First my parents lived happily and contentedly together for eight years, and then my father got cancer and died in the space of a few months.

While my parents were both still young and healthy, they only discussed important matters between themselves, and their bedroom was a no-go zone for me even on Sunday mornings. Frau Helper (that really was her name, another of our neighbours) and I would cook wedding broth with chicken meatballs, and Wiener schnitzel, the same thing every Sunday, and when it was ready Frau Helper would tell me to get changed and comb my hair so I'd look nice for Sunday lunch, and only then would they emerge too, also nicely dressed and smelling exquisite, of perfume, aftershave and cigarettes.

My father was a chain smoker and got lung cancer, a textbook case. Diagnosed in January, and in April he was dead. In his final days, when he realised he wasn't going to survive, he asked me to get into bed with him, and as long as he could still speak he would whisper stories in my ear about soldiers, pistols and orders. My father was so old that he'd been fourteen during the final chaotic battles of the war. My mother hadn't even been born by then. His favourite fairy tale was the one about One Eye, Two Eyes and Three Eyes. It used to really upset me. "You with your two eyes, you look like common people, you are not one of us." Two-eyed as I was, that just gave me nightmares. But his tales of brothers in arms soon sent me to sleep. When I woke, I was always in my own bed. Mother must have carried me away from him, although when I was awake she claimed she couldn't lift me, I had got too heavy for her. One morning, when I'd woken up in my own bed, she told me he'd died in the night.

Do you want to see him?

No.

Absolutely not. Later I asked her when exactly he'd died. Before or after she took me away.

After, she said. She sat with him for a while, and then went to bed herself. And it was only after that. Neither of us cried, until night fell again and my mother got into bed with me. She said she couldn't sleep in the marital bed any more, though she'd been sleeping there alone for the past few weeks. And so in our home there was a deathbed, an empty marital bed, and a child's bed where my mother and I lay side by side, scarcely sleeping.

Unlike my parents' bedroom and the things that might get dirty or broken in a child's hands – his books and manuscripts, her jewellery and makeup – my mother's alcoholism was not a no-go zone. She talked to me about it like it was an entirely normal illness. Almost everyone in her family was an alcoholic, so it was hard to avoid becoming one herself. Grandfather, father, mother, brother. Only her older sister Angela isn't. Though she is a neat freak, and hates anything that resembles art, or life (my mother). My father married my mother knowing she was an alcoholic. He didn't try to make her change, he just looked after her. Every evening, he would drink two to three glasses of red wine from the daily bottle. When she got pregnant, there was no more wine, because – as even she realised – she mustn't harm this child. And she didn't harm me. All she drank was two cognacs to bring on the birth, to finally get things moving.

My mother's mother couldn't hold her urine in after she gave birth, and other women my mother knew had also shredded their pelvic floors, so my mother did pelvic floor exercises. For a woman, pelvic floor exercises are the foundation of preventative healthcare. A daily beauty routine is optional, unless you're an actress, and then it's obligatory. My mother massaged herself every morning and every evening. There was a long routine and a short one. The long one lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours, but that included everything, even hair (removing some hairs, caring for others). The short routine lasted 40 minutes and concentrated on face and body massage, in particular the décolletage, upper thighs and bum cheeks; the lower legs take care of themselves, but everything above the knee requires attention. You use a plucking technique on the abdominal wall, especially if you've given birth, and you can firm up your breasts with a body brush. You also have to pinch the skin of your underarms, which makes your breasts jiggle. That should be done a hundred times, but five hundred times doesn't do any harm, either.

Your mother became an actress so she could say: This is the instrument I work with, it has to be taken care of, I can't let myself go like those other women who do shift work and have families, said sober Auntie Angela. The women in our family are naturally voluptuous, in other words naturally chubby, and your mother has done everything in her power to defy her nature, but alcohol bloats you, even if you don't eat.

Red wine, cognac and dessert wine were my mother's favourite drinks, with mulled wine in winter. After my father's death she drank all of them alone. There was a short routine and a long one. She concentrated on staying more or less sober at work, but as soon as the curtain came down, she had her first glass of wine at the theatre, and the rest of the bottle at home – that was the short routine. To begin with, she would tip his share down the sink, but later she couldn't bring herself to waste it. The long routine was saved for the days when she wasn't performing. There was a cheerful, sociable version of the long routine, during which she could still be out and about. She had bought a hip flask from an antique shop; she giggled about it, but later she got angry because the top didn't seal properly. She should have taken it back and thrown it at their feet, but she didn't dare do that.

I'm scared of the women in shops. Of all women in all shops, the sales assistants. Why do there have to be female sales assistants everywhere? Why do you only find male ones in those shops that just sell screws? I get on much better with them.

The at-home version of the long routine usually lasted two days. She stayed in the bedroom, getting paralytic, listening to all her records and dancing until she wasn't capable of it any longer. She danced to chansons and symphonies alike. I liked this long routine better than the short one or the long one where she went out, because it brought her the most relief. A nicely condensed relief. Afterwards, things were much better for weeks. She danced beautifully, even at the point where she was just reeling.

My mother had no good friends. She had colleagues, people she knew, competitors and admirers. She didn't trust women, and valued men exclusively for their abilities. My mother took great care of her own appearance, but wasn't interested in how men looked. Positions, titles or wealth didn't impress her, either. Only genius.

The only thing that interests me in a man is his genius.

And so she looked up to some directors (while scorning others), some writers and artists in other lines of work, and her hairdresser. He is a brilliant hairdresser, in Berlin he could be a star. And in other places he could be world-famous.

I admire your art, my mother told her hairdresser, quite sincerely.

The hairdresser's wife was a beautician. She had sharp black eyebrows. No, I don't want my eyebrows dyed, my mother said. They do that in the theatre, as it suits them, you know. The beautician didn't like the flirtatious bottle-blonde my mother appeared to be, but the two of them found a good way of hiding that fact: theatre gossip. My mother bought the jealous beautician's goodwill with theatre gossip. After all, it's my face she's fiddling about with. I should really take my business elsewhere, but it's difficult. It's difficult to say, I'll go to the husband, the hairdresser, but not to his wife, the beautician next door.

When my father was alive, they often had guests; his people from university and hers from the theatre would come over for red wine and cigarettes. I slept in the next room or didn't sleep; the smoke crept in through the gaps in the door, and I liked it. After his death they kept coming for a while, to console her, and in fact everyone did gradually get more cheerful again, until the neighbours complained about the noise and the smells. They cited working people's right to sleep at night, and me, a child in her care. We even had to speak to someone in children's social services. I wore a knitted jumper with little flowers on it. Did your mummy knit that? Yes. (No.) I was doing very well at school and never caused trouble in the neighbourhood – that was mentioned approvingly several times. My mother was scared of the neighbours and of social services, and there were no more gatherings at our flat.

Come here, my mother said. Let me give you a hug. You're all I've got now.

Your skin. That soft baby skin.

Your shiny golden hair.

The scent your hair gives off when I smell your head.

The scent of your neck.

Your smell is changing. You're getting teenager-sweat. The smell of your sebaceous glands is changing. It reminds me of my mother. My mother always smelled of milk and flour. Of raw milk and raw flour, not of cake. Your hair smells of flour, your neck of milk. Your breasts are getting big. Your stomach, too. No, it isn't too big yet. You're just becoming a voluptuous woman, like all the women in our family. You're becoming a voluptuous blonde, a Marilyn Monroe, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Anyway, as a woman, at some point you have to decide: goat or cow. Goats think there are better roles for cows, and cows think there are better roles for goats, and everyone is envious of everyone else. My nose is getting red. Dammit. I'm getting a drinker's nose. I need to have something done about these bags under my eyes, otherwise I might as well just leave the teabags on them and go out like that, no one would notice the difference. I'm getting old, kiddo. My jawline is sagging. You need to massage your thighs, your bottom, your stomach, your breasts, yes, but don't forget your neck and jawline. I neglected my neck and jawline, how could I have been so stupid, and there's no making up for it now. I never liked massaging my neck, it's like being strangled. That's your thyroid. Taking thyroid hormones as a slimming aid can kill you, especially combined with alcohol. I can't get hold of them these days, anyway. My liver's done for. I look myself in the eye every morning, scared that the white is going to have turned yellow. The good thing is: when you're an alcoholic, they give you a new liver, but not if you're a cancer patient. That isn't fair, but medically it would be pointless to give a cancer patient a new liver. Let me give you a hug. If I didn't have you. He's not here to look after us now, we have to look after each other. I have to look after you, because you're still a kid. I can't die young and beautiful while you're still a kid. I'm not blaming you for that, mind you. The world is a shitty place, people are pigs, your father shielded us both from them, and now I have to do it.

When I was little, I would cry with her, comfort her and worry. Later, I started avoiding her. Along with pretty much everyone else. I was freer than most fifteen-year-old girls; outside school that was good, in school it was bad, how could it have been any other way. I could go out whenever I wanted, including evenings. Our class teacher, who lived on the same street as us, spoke to me about it once. What business does a schoolgirl have hanging around on the street alone after dark? Lucky I was alone. If I'd been with a boy, she would have semi-accused me of being a whore in front of the whole class, as she'd done with others. As it was, I could say I wasn't hanging around, I was on my way to or from one of my mother's performances/rehearsals, it was just the two of us, who was supposed to go with me? And that might even have been true – I did go to the theatre quite a lot, although recently the atmosphere there had been a bit strange since my mother starting getting paranoid. Or else she actually was being passed over for things. Possibly because she'd become erratic and unreliable. She groused and complained about the conditions, the inhuman, humiliating situation at the theatre, but of course she couldn't so much as imagine any other life. It's like a bad marriage, I'm telling you. And I'll tell you something else – she leaned in confidentially, I could smell the red wine on her – they'll fuck you, there's no avoiding it. You've just got to make sure you fuck them right back.

(Mother. That is the most disgusting thing you've ever said to me.)

I must confess, recently she'd started to annoy even me.

I had an inkling that I should celebrate the New Year before my eighteenth birthday elsewhere or not at all; though on the other hand, I'd spent New Year at the theatre my whole life, as far back as I could remember, and who knew, this might be the last time.

The show was a bit silly, as it always is on New Year's Eve, they did improv and cabaret with songs, everyone was in high spirits, there was always someone asking if they'd brought out any more sausages (no, they never cooked enough), but there was plenty to drink. My mother's older male colleagues complimented me on my budding beauty, as they did every year. Now I was no longer a child, the younger men stayed out of my way just to be on the safe side. Thank you, I said – graciously as my mother had taught me rather than, say, shyly or defensively – and kept circulating around the building, until the fact that I kept stumbling across couples everywhere doing things, and either recognised them or didn't, started to make me feel too uncomfortable. My mother was nowhere to be seen. I decided to stay put in the first-floor bar, so as not to risk finding her in a corner with someone I either knew or didn't as well. She was sure to turn up in the bar at some point.

The first-floor foyer was rammed. Couples dancing and others just standing together and laughing, and of course the ones in the obligatory queue at the bar, behaving like the queue was a cue to get closer and make provocative noises. I should leave. Where is it written that you have to stay until midnight? On the other hand, it was almost midnight. She'd always found me at midnight before, to cover me in kisses. And right on time:

Hey, what are you up to? Guarding this corner?

Because I was standing with my back to the panelled wall. She was of course far from sober.

You've got a face on you like a wet long weekend, what's that for?

I was looking for you.

If you're not having fun, go home. You don't need to bring other people down with that face.

She pushed past me and of course past the queue to the bar. I hated her so much just then. Can't you die? Here, stylishly, in the theatre? Fall from the gallery, or the rigging loft?

1988 ended with a resolution to leave this woman and this town as soon as possible and never see either of them again.

In the new year, however, my mother did manage to pull herself together for a while. January passed without incident, and in early February she began excited preparations for my birthday, though it wasn't until the start of March.

You were a whole three weeks late! 1 March when it should have been 8 February!

I know.

Pisces not Aquarius!

... (I know.)

And so enormous!

Ultimately, she did manage to surprise me. She had flowers sent to me, and cards from her older colleagues who'd known me since I was little, and she gave me things from her and my father in lovingly wrapped parcels:

A thick leather writing case that held a yellowing notebook with a few sheets missing. In one of the pen loops there was a fountain pen that had been my father's. She'd bought a new nib and a new ink cartridge for it.

The small brass goldsmith's anvil from the flea market that she had once given him as a paperweight. From her, there was a sky-blue slip trimmed with black lace, and new fishnet stockings (You can't wear them anywhere yet, but their time will come, you'll see).

A small, old handbag with a catch that no longer worked properly, but you could use it as a jewellery box for the locket that held photos of her and my father when they were young, and an amber ring with things trapped in it like a secret garden, which she had brought back from a tour to Moscow.

And the crowning glory: her kimono dressing gown made of real silk, which I'd been dreaming about ever since I could remember. She told me to take these things with me wherever I went. I was overjoyed. So many things, and so precious!

You only turn eighteen once.

For a whole week I was happy, grateful and confident. I gave her the limp flowers that had been pressed into my hand for International Women's Day, and she gave me hers, and we laughed. That was on the Wednesday. On the Sunday, I found her.

I left the bike outside Ehrke's workshop and marched to the hospital on foot; our town isn't that big. I got past the porter at the main entrance, but they didn't let me onto the ward. This is no place for you, there's nothing you can do anyway, call tomorrow, then we'll know more.

On the way home it was already getting dark, and cold, too. The river lowers the temperature even further, but I liked to walk along it all the same. Looking down into the water from a bridge helps even if you aren't thinking of throwing yourself in. How often had I come here when I was angry with her!

Oh, these looks! Not talking though, huh? Yes, I'm drunk again! You can see that! What you don't see is that I'm crying! Or you don't care. A person can go to the dogs right in front of you, and you don't care!

First she whined – You don't care, you don't care! – then she sobbed, and finally she started tugging at the window which, as always, was stuck. The frame had been daubed with too much paint during an inadequate renovation and shut before it dried, or the wood had swelled, what do I know, but this window onto the street hadn't opened for years. Besides which – second floor! That might do it, or it might not.

Fucking hell! Nothing works! Nothing works! I'll just have to go up to the fucking roof!

Go on then, I said, and left the flat myself. Hastily turned the nearest corner to avoid looking back and actually seeing her standing on the roof.

I went to the river and looked into it, away from the town, where no one can look back at you. A shallow little river, it would come up to your shins, your thighs at most, you can see the stones at the bottom, and it's very quiet, you can barely hear it. The bridge how many metres above? That might do it too, or it might not. But I wasn't going to jump, and nor was she. And if she did? No, she wouldn't. I stayed there until it got so cold I couldn't stand it any longer, and then I went home. She was waiting for me in the kitchen. Apologised for trying to open the window, and even more for talking about the roof. She was still responsible for me, after all, while I was underage.

And then she actually did do it. Or it was an accident. Who could know? Maybe not even my mother herself.

The early March wind still smelled like winter, I was wearing an ugly short down jacket and my head was freezing, my neck, my legs, my feet. The soles of my Chinese plimsols were now only a millimetre thick under the balls of my feet. The few people who were about were hurrying along the bank with their heads pulled into their collars. Most were already at home, as was right and proper on a Sunday evening. I will have to run. I hate running. Do it anyway.

I turned away from the parapet to get up some momentum, or rather, to lean haphazardly into the first stumbling steps that might turn into something resembling a run, taking a leaf from the book of people who are dead drunk but can still dance to symphonies – and then he whizzed past me, so fast and so close that I almost choked on my own breath as I came to a shocked halt to avoid colliding with him. But I was still standing up on the bridge, and he was down below now, on the bank, riding a bike with a back light that flickered in such a specific way that I would recognise him anywhere: the man I'd been in love with for six months now. I wanted to duck into the shadows, to stop him seeing me in this get-up, but the thought wasn't even fully formed by the time he disappeared into the darkness.