Maman by Sylvie Schenk

Excerpt translated from the German by Lucy Jones

‘Our mother only talked to laundry and babies.’ That’s what I just said to my sister Pauline on the phone. What voice did I say it in? My everyday voice or a young girl’s? My stage voice? Or one that’s no longer mine? A voice that twirls like an acrobat in the air and takes on a life of its own, and which is now the voice of this text?

I’m calling this a text because I’m not yet sure whether I’m writing a novel, and because ‘text’ and ‘textile’ are related. My mother, after all, was the daughter and granddaughter of silk workers from Lyon.

Maman’s name at birth was Renée Gagnieux, a name that has long been stuck inside me, wriggling behind my ribs, much more quickly since my sister Lisa began combing through Lyon’s archives. It’s hard and bent and jagged, like a question mark. My mother’s unknown mother, Cécile Gagnieux, was forever rumbling about in her insides, pushed down, swallowed but never digested. She never even knew her mother’s name. I want to weave Cecile’s life into this text to answer the questions my mother probably asked herself so that she can rest in peace and I can find my peace at last too. This text will be peppered with my least favourite adverbs, ‘probably’ and ‘possibly’. It is going to be an approximation, a text that tries to get close to the truth. I understood early on in life that the mystery surrounding my mother’s origins had eaten her away from the inside, drip by drip, like medieval water torture. This unease also unsettled the minds and the hearts of her children. And now, seeing as questions do not answer themselves, I have to go and look for some.

Caught in the crossfire

I've often wondered whether I would have preferred a different mother, a mother who had interesting talks with me, like the mother of my schoolfriend, Suzanne, a rock-solid woman who taught geography, studied Esperanto, read *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and appreciated Picasso; a mother who applied herself to her children's upbringing, who gave her daughters piano lessons, who checked their homework and showed them the way things were done. But no, I don't think I would have liked a different mother. I've never liked being shown the way, even though I don't have a very strong sense of direction. I don't question my mother. I loved her the way you might love a strange creature that's yours all the same or a secret you have to guard. She was a rare mother who needed protecting although I sometimes could not bear her. If any of my father's bourgeois relatives criticised her in the slightest, I'd be spoiling for a fight. His dreadful family labelled my mother an idiot and I hated all those arrogant asses from Lyon. I wished my father's mother would perish, but she lived a long life.

Maman had brought us into this world and let us grow wild like weeds. This had its advantages. Thanks to her quirks, we spent a lot of time outdoors. She was never physically affectionate and didn't teach us much – just commonplace things when it suited her or because that was the proper way of doing things, and even then, only as an afterthought, because that just wasn't her way of doing things. But to do nothing is better than being artificial, stiff or pretentious. She liked flowers from the weekly market, fresh flowers from the meadow. I brought her sprays of wild daffodils, cornflowers and anemones from my getaways to the mountains. She always thanked me politely but uninterestedly. She had no command of any art, preferred light reading and knitting jumpers from easy patterns. She could sew but badly – dreadful light blue, pleated pinafore dresses for my sister Pauline and me with hearts for bibs and a shirt with a much-too-large collar for my brother that made him

look like Little Lord Fauntleroy. She was often silent. I never knew whether she was mulling things over or dreaming, reminiscing or hatching plans. She was a quiet person with blue eyes and a mind that was busy hiding its shortcomings.

My sister Pauline recently sent a box of *papillotes* – French Christmas pralines – to my home in Germany. Each contains a little slip of paper with a saying or a proverb. On the first one I opened, I found a quotation by Confucius: 'The greatest traveller takes a trip around himself.' For now, though, I have to map out and travel around the no man's land of Maman to give it contours and texture. To prevent it from vanishing.

Perhaps my mother was the source of my envy and fascination, mingled with fear, of intellectuals who juggle abstract terminology; of arrogant know-it-alls from educated families; of strong and Me-Too women who know the score, who can talk smartly and are always in the right; of positive people in general who hide their dark sides; and of those who say things like, 'We all forge our own destinies', or 'Death is a part of life', or 'Don't give money to that beggar or you'll become part of her problem.' I have a foot in each camp, one in the camp of the learned – doctors, professors with their large libraries, slippery lawyers and politically correct teachers. And one in the other camp – the uneducated, the simple, the mutes, the losers, idiots, fearful, addicts and the lost. Here I am, stuck in the middle, an artist caught in the crossfire, a writer. Words are liquid existence: they seep into the crevices of everyday life.

The Unfortunate

Maman was an unfortunate woman who couldn't reflect on her misfortune. She was mysterious, perhaps even limited, and had the habit of talking quietly while kneeling in front

of open wardrobes, so quietly that we couldn't hear. When we passed, all we heard was a soft murmur, all we saw were her lips moving. We would act discreetly and walk on by as if she were kneeling in a confessional box. She was genuine and dishonest at the same time if withholding the truth is a form of lying rather than just reticence. Everyone – she, her adoptive parents, my father and his family – kept her background secret from us, her children. She was the kind of woman who kept quiet and was ashamed to exist because her parents and parents-in-law were ashamed of her origins and kept them secret. But as a dentist's wife, she wanted to live according to her status, with servants and fur coats. She had no morals, just two principles. The first was never to be late for dinner. 'Children, your father does not like to be kept waiting.' The second was that we should, please, please, not get pregnant before marriage, but if so, have an abortion if we found someone who would do it. Among her children, her favourite was the youngest boy or girl. She loved babies because they are innocent and uncritical and completely reliant on their mothers. She could cling tightly to them. For these tiny creatures, she was the source of life. Although she sang out of tune, she tried to hum them lullabies. She didn't have a voice or milk and had to bottle-feed Pauline and me during the war, but when she was holding a warm little body in her arms those were the best moments of her life. Babies lived, ate and digested; they cried and squeaked with pleasure. Nursing a child filled her with calm, I think. No one was judging her, no one was laughing at her and her toothless child would smile up at her. Those moments were real and ideal. She was completely immersed in them. The baby and she were both together in that moment, palpable and visible. The magic disappeared when the baby turned into a child and ran away, developed its own will, slammed the door and answered back. There is a photo from the 1950s of her and us older children. We look serious and dishevelled, walking down a narrow street in Gap in the middle of the road, her right hand holding my sister Pauline's, Pauline holding mine, and my brother Philippe holding my mother's left hand. (Her last child

is not yet born and the oldest is at home). We take up the entire width of the street and look like a paper chain after a party. I am just two years old and already an older sister – Pauline's.

As a teenager, I challenged and intimidated Maman. I like getting a rise out of her and testing her limits, which is when she would lash out at me because she was lashing out in all directions. At the time I certainly loved Mother Nature, as the old folk sentimentally but aptly call it, more than my own mother.

'Our mother,' I said to Pauline, 'only talked to laundry and babies.' It was true. But the baby, which was just a word I said over the phone, then writhed inside me, took on a primal shape, a baby's body – and cried. It was Maman. She was born Renée Gagnieux on 29 December 1916 at 5pm in Lyon. Her mother Cécile died one hour later.

Cécile dies (1)

Soon the bells of the Hôtel Dieu hospital will ring six times. The priestess, who has been summoned urgently, has administered the last rites and a sister from the hospice is sitting by her bed, patiently awaiting the approaching death of the ageing woman who has just given birth. Perhaps the sister is letting rosary beads slide through her fingers or glancing at *Le Progrès*, the daily paper from 29 December 1916, which is lying on a side table. Full of awe, she stares at the two heroes from Verdun, one with a bandaged head, the other on crutches, two exemplary men from the front who have forced the Germans into a temporary retreat. The nun is happy about the Germans' defeat. She doesn't know that the war will still last another two years and cost the lives of millions. The nun sighs or coughs, rustling the newspaper, but Cécile's eyelids are heavy and she is no longer aware of what is going on around her. She does not hear the woman folding the newspaper, shocked by the word 'inferno' – the inferno in Verdun. Cécile doesn't hear her washing her hands, trying to wash away the hell they have

touched before she crosses the room to the window. Night has fallen and soon the streetlamps will be lit. She scurries over to the bed of the ageing woman to check her weak pulse – yes, the poor sinner is still alive but she will never find out that she has delivered a girl, christened Renée as she wished. It's sad for her, sad for the bastard baby, sad for us all, and let us pray to the merciful Lord to take the orphan unto Himself like her mother. Because what will become of this tiny, lonely thing? If it survives, that is, considering its meagre weight.

I lie down next to Cécile and whisper in her ear that Renée will grow up to be a mother of five, a grandmother of ten and a great-grandmother of nineteen.