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Anne Rabe

DIE MÖGLICHKEIT VON GLÜCK

THE POSSIBILITY OF HAPPINESS

Novel, 384 pp, March 2023, ISBN: 978-3-608-98463-7
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Stine is born in the GDR and grows up in reunified Germany. She is just three years old when the Wall comes down. But her family are deeply wedded to a system they cannot move on from, and to the belief that they have lived the 'right' life. In this wonderfully intelligent and clear-eyed book, Anne Rabe tells the story of a generation whose origins are an empty space.

Stine is born in the mid-1980s in a small town on the East German Baltic coast, a child of reunification. She is too young to understand the change of system in the GDR, but her family's complex ideological views have an impact on the next generation. As her relatives hide the lost world behind an impenetrable silence, Stine finds herself asking questions she can no longer repress. Anne Rabe has written a clear-sighted and unsettling book with great literary power - a mixture of non-fiction and literature, knowledgeably researched and at the same time captivatingly beautiful. She traces the wounds of a generation that grew up between dictatorship and democracy, and explores the origins of racism and violence.

Anne Rabe, was born in 1986. She is a multiple award-winning playwright, scriptwriter and essayist. She served as a scriptwriter on the Grimme-award-winning series 'Warten auf'n Bus'. For several years she has also played her part in the collective effort to come to terms with the past in east Germany, through her work as an essayist and speaker. Anne Rabe lives in Berlin. THE POSSIBILITY OF HAPPINESS is her first novel.

PRAISE

»The Book of the Hour: Anne Rabe's bestseller, "The Possibility of Happiness," is one of the year's surprise successes. It fits perfectly into the East-West debate. "The Possibility of Happiness" is the debut novel by Anne Rabe, which, despite being released in the spring, is only now receiving the attention it rightfully deserves. It was considered a top contender for the recently awarded German Book Prize and has been climbing the bestseller lists for the past three weeks. What is the reason for this? It should be noted that Rabe, who has previously worked as a dramaturge, screenwriter, and essayist, has written a literary work that is highly convincing and worth reading for that reason alone. … (But) Rabe (also) masterfully handles a hybrid of various, yet internally consistent, writing styles. At times, it is poetic, as in the italicized inner monologues of the narrator, and at other times, it is sober and documentary. The novel relies on interviews and includes a bibliography listing archives and secondary literature. It references social science studies and, in many parts, resembles a non-fiction book. In this way, Anne Rabe intertwines the personal with the broader context, connecting her own family history with a sociogram of the post-reunification years in East Germany. She creates, as vividly as she depicts her most intimate private world, perhaps exactly what the great "ethnologist of herself," namely the Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux, once referred to as an "impersonal biography." … This novel delves into the profound infiltration of violence in a society during the tumultuous 20th century, revealing that even at the zenith of its historical potential, the shackles of violence could not be cast aside.«
Ronald Düker, DIE ZEIT, 19.10.2023

»Anne Rabe juxtaposes the perspective of a child's eyes with documentary research on literary quotations. … ("The Possibility of Happiness") is a document of coming to terms with the past, the past of one's own youth. … It's astonishing what this montage of research, literary quotes, dreams, and memories, as well as the interplay of inner and outer dialogue, brings into focus. … Anne Rabe's pursuit transcends mere erudition; the picture emerging from her research fractures into ever more minute pieces, and within this fragmentation lies its profound veracity. … All of this may not sound like a direct path to happiness. But perhaps, it's precisely that: the act of remembering as an opportunity to break the curse of intergenerational experiences of violence.« "The Dark Heart of the GDR" by Stefan Kister, Stuttgarter Zeitung, 24.10.2023

»"The Possibility of Happiness" intertwines memoir, family research, and essay. Anne Rabe skillfully connects the personal aspects of the family with societal analysis. It's a powerful and moving text that transforms the fragmentation of a traumatized self into a literary form.« WDR 5, 13.10.2023

»… Anne Rabe (…) has written a formally intriguing novel about experiences of violence in the GDR and how they are passed down through generations. In the book, a young woman attempts to uncover the secrets of her family, to break the eternal silence and mute violence. Formally, the novel combines elements of memoir, essay, and autofictional narrative. It explores both the overt and covert brutalities within families and the state, questioning why they persist and how a world can emerge from a cold silence where even abuse was possible.« Welt am Sonntag, Mara Delius

»Writing childhood off the chest - Rabe's debut is a powerful book. The author rushes through 384 pages from one act of violence to the next. Many of the experiences described are ones she herself had to endure as a teenager. And so, while it says "novel" on the cover, "The Possibility of Happiness" is primarily an analysis of familial structures, as they sometimes existed in the GDR, as well as a critique of the system. « taz, Simone Schmollack

»Anne Rabe lets us experience how painful it is to come to terms with the past: because it is about people who are close to each other. At the same time, the book also has an answer to the question of how the cycle of violence can be broken: Through the courage to ask questions.« RBB Kultur, German radio station

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE BY FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG, FAZ

"Ongoing Terror" by Andreas Platthaus, 17.06.2023, translation by Lizzy Kinch

Anne Rabe's novel, *The Possibility of Happiness,* offers an antidote to rampant nostalgia for the GDR.

Of the fifty chapters in Anne Rabe's novel *The Possibility of Happiness*, only five have titles. Four of these recount the life of the first person narrator, Stine's, grandfather — or rather his life before her birth in 1986. It's the story of Paul Bahrlow, who was born in 1923 to a poor Berliner family, grew up in the Nazi era, was wounded on the Eastern Front (to his delight), and is excited by the prospect of the newly established GDR: "We came from East, dear Stine, we only wanted one thing — no more fascism!" To his disappointment, the state does not meet his enthusiasm in kind. His career stagnates, and he is shunted off to work as a lecturer in the provinces on the Baltic coast. He finds belated familial happiness in his second marriage; after one daughter dies shortly after her birth, two more are born, one of whom, Monika, is Stine's mother. The state — to which Paul has devoted himself in more ways than one — collapses in 1989 and then the real drama begins, told solely from Stine s perspective. Seeking explanations, she sets out in search of traces of the contradictions of her grandfather Paul s life, long after his death. Her findings are relayed in these four chapters.

They are each titled "The story of Paul Bahrlow" (in four numbered parts), and indeed this could be the title of the novel. Its theme is what Ines Geipel has described as transgenerational trauma: the transmission of the damage wrought by a life under totalitarianism onto one's offspring, who were not old enough to experience it firsthand. From this vantage point, Paul Bahrlow is the point of origin for all Stine's experiences of violence, though not directly from her beloved grandpa, who was her tutor and conversation partner as a child (the parallels to the grandfather in Judith Schalansky's debut *Blue Doesn't Suit You,* also set on the Baltic coast, are striking). No, the nemesis is her own mother, a teacher and committed communist whose tactics for dictatorial domination over her two children (Stine and Tim, her slightly younger brother) range from psychological terror and corporal punishments to sadism. One scene, in which she forces both children into a boiling hot bath, is unforgettably brutal.

This stands in, pars pro toto, for life in East Germany, whose population is traumatised: "Everything was violence, you think", Stine relays to herself (all the internal monologues are italicised) "so much violence". She relies on sarcasm to save her when talking to her peers: "The stories you tell Pit and Vicky, Krissi and Ada are all about alcoholism, violence and brutality. And you laugh about it, as if there's something to laugh about. Because none of you know what else to do."

Why, then, is "The Possibility of Happiness" an appropriate title for this novel about an unhappy family and an unhappy country? After the birth of her own child (grandfather Paul is already dead), Stine rebels — initially suspending communication with her family (except her brother) and then breaking it off entirely when she realises her mother is trying to forge ties with her daughter behind her back. From her own

life, Stine is well aware of the allure grandparents can exert on children; although her other grandfather was a tyrant, she harboured a deep affection for the mother of her father, Sven. For his part, Sven cemented the break with his father by adopting his wife's surname. However, as Stine realises in hindsight, Sven Bahrlow was far from the figure of salvation that he seems to be in the bathroom scene. Having left his children at the mercy of their mother's reign of terror, he's just as guilty as she is.

To resist the ongoing horror, Stine instigates the break, while her brother maintains contact but moves to Bavaria and thus gains at least the geographical distance from their parents that Stine seeks at every level. She has moved to Berlin, yet the novel's climax sees her at the Baltic coast once more on holiday with her own family — this is the fifth chapter with a title, specifying the present time and place: July 2022, Gräsö in Sweden. It's the second point of departure from what we have read thus far, starting at the end rather than at the beginning with Paul Bahrlow; Stine has freed herself from her origins. Her children have been raised according to anti-authoritarian principles, unburdened by the heavy weight of the past. This, then, is the possibility of happiness.

To what extent the configurations and actual events of the novel relate to Rabe herself will be of some interest. Nowadays writers don't need to pass off memoirs as novels to reach an audience. Novelists are constrained by form, and Rabe has written a formally enchanting book that pairs its fragmentary aesthetic with the fractured mirror image that Stine has of herself. Although its author was born in the same year and in the same place as the first-person narrator (Wismar is clearly recognisable in the book's unnamed "small town"), her own career as

a political commentator — who gained prominence prior to this debut for her analyses of the legacies of the GDR — does not feature here. Outside of the structure of the family, nothing takes place except Stine's self-interrogation.

And yet *The Possibility of Happiness* is a book that reaches far beyond its particular subject matter. It explains why East Germany's history of violence since reunification has differed from West Germany's. Not quantitatively, but qualitatively. This does not mean that right-wing extremist attacks in Mölln, Solingen, Winnenden or Hanau should be given less weight than Hoyerswerda, Rostock-Lichtenhagen, Erfurt or Halle, but Rabe delineates different causes. She uses Stine's family history to illustrate them as impressively as a sociological study. In doing so, she pulls the rug from under the feet of the current glut of books seeking to normalise (and relativise) the experience of the GDR. Individual fates help to counter the generalising narrative. The fact that this is a novel about a single person detracts neither from its truthfulness, nor its power to shock.

INTERVIEWS WITH THE AUTHOR

Extract taken from an interview with Berliner Zeitung, 25.04.2023

Did the writing sometimes feel painful as well?

Certainly, the writing was not easy. The perspective of the character is radical. I don't write about shame without reason. It's not just about the older generation and their past beliefs; there are also stories from my generation. For example, how children and teenagers in my childhood used to torment others in the worst ways. And when you grow up in a time when adults were not approachable, you carry that shame and guilt alone.

The novel at times depicts the research process, the chapters vary greatly in length, and it's not told linearly. How did you decide on this form?

I wanted the book to be like when you lie awake at night, with various thoughts running through your mind, moving from one point to another. This includes the memories of the people I spoke to, which is why there isn't just one "I" but sometimes also a "you." The narrative voice should be unreliable and doubtful because it doesn't fully trust its memories or research findings. I always find it astonishing when statistics are treated as if they were documented by objective authors without their own motives.

"The Possibility of Happiness" is a hopeful title, but happiness is sparingly distributed in the book.

It's a metaphor for the turning point or revolution. "The Possibility of Happiness" also represents the opportunity for reflection, enlightenment, and encounters. Perhaps this can lead to a different way of being together.

Extract taken from an interview with the public broadcasting station RBB, 19.9.2023

How does the narrative reflect this theme?

At its core, the narrative explores how the political violence of the 20th century and the GDR infiltrate families, relationships, and friendships. It examines how this violence disrupts and dominates these aspects of life. It also delves into the question of how one can break the cycle of violence, this new form of violence, and how to deal with it. It's also a story of emancipation from this violence. What I want to convey is how long-lasting and powerful this violence is and how powerful the silence surrounding it can be if one doesn't start talking about it and opposing it.

What was different in East Germany compared to West Germany?

Violence exists in West Germany as well, but I believe it operates within a different system. Much of this has to do with the fact that East Germany was influenced by dictatorship and authoritarianism for a

much longer period. There was a long history of silence and traditions. The tremendous violence of the 20th century, which began in World War I and culminated in World War II as an absolute inferno, was suppressed for a much longer time. This is because there was no equivalent to the events of 1968, no questioning of the actions of parents during the National Socialist era or the war. All authoritarian systems tend to prevent coming to terms with and addressing the past.

What did you want to convey about your generation of East Germans?

It's a very specific story about a particular family, one that was loyal to the party. It was important for me to tell such a story because I feel like not much has been said about it yet. So, I wouldn't say it's a book about an entire generation, but the characters in it all share this experience of violence, even in their interactions with each other. That's what I wanted to convey—the everydayness of violence that persists. And also, the loneliness of this generation. What it's like to grow up with this gap in history, with adults who were not available. I also believe that it's a generation that was not loved simply because they were born into the agony of the GDR. Many of their parents were very young. Then, there was this rupture in '89, and it led to tensions. Because anyone who had small children back then had much bigger problems than someone who could venture into the world alone. I think there is a lot that has been left unspoken between this generation of children and their parents. It's very difficult for many in my generation to confront that conflict.

What did writing this book personally demand from you?

I grew up with a somewhat positive view of the GDR, and at some point, I had to realize that it's a topic I've been grappling with for a long time: how profoundly evil that state was, and the profoundly cruel things that happened there, for instance, in the youth workhouses. The reorientation that my main character, Stine, undergoes is, of course, very painful. It's that feeling that there was a huge lie, and I believed in something completely false. Or when you wonder how the teachers, educators, and parents operated within that system and even supported it.

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Extracts taken from Anne Rabe, The Possibility of Happiness (chapter 1, 6 and 13), translated by Lizzy Kinch

1

You are trying to remember.
There's the sea. The Baltic Sea with its grey, restless waves rhythmically driving ashore, never noiselessly. The harbour and the old warehouses. The shipyard cranes and the fishing boats. There are the renaissance waterworks in the market square — they say a drummer lives underneath, forced to beat his drum night after night in eternal damnation. The church tower without a nave, chiming every hour. The gloomy ruin behind the hoardings, once another church, and there the narrow cobblestoned streets.

This corner is where the fruit market used to stand. Your aunt weighed bananas on a scale, and oranges. Opposite the kiosk, where her new boyfriend used to work and served you and mum chips and ketchup.

The road to your grandparents leads up the Russenberg, past the old barracks.

Russian women used to wear their fur coats out and about in the city, people tell you. But that was in the time when this street was still known as Rosa-Luxemburg-Straße and led to Karl-Liebknecht-Straße, which is what your parents say whenever they send you to fetch something from friends.

There is the first flat, without a toilet or bathroom, there is the second — three rooms plus a kitchen, bathroom and separate toilet. Opposite the playground, where the Nazis sat. Right there on the corner, aunt Sabine and cousin Katja's apartment.

The living room full of ashtrays and the Barbie camper van and VHS tapes from the Polish market, which Katja's new dad brought her. How you loved the smell of smoked cigarettes when your aunt gave you an old jumper of Katja's.

Broom handles are sticking out of the sandpit in front of the kindergarten. Wrapped in ribbons tied in crepe paper. Hanging lilacs and balloons! It is June, Children's Day, and it's raining. From the low building you hear yourself and the others singing: Lovely, lovely sun…

There is the house that dad built. The tiny room without a key, that belonged to you.

The bed in whose darkness you sank.

There's your mum.

There's your dad.

There is Tim. Your brother.

(…)

6

Apart from all the fuss with the flags, I barely remember the last birthday of the Republic. Nor was I at the demonstration in the market square. Lots of children were there, though. To protect against arrests. It was the biggest demonstration against the Socialist Unity Party leaders in north Germany. They marched to the front of the Stasi headquarters and demanded an end to the horrors of surveillance. As a sign of peaceful protest, they lit candles in front of the SUP district leader's office.

Why did they never tell us what happened? Why didn't they talk about it at school?

The new era arrives with lunch. 1990. When everything's over. The classroom at the very end of the corridor in the low-ceilinged kindergarten, just five-minute's walk from the flat with the separate toilet.

Matthias Reim's voice creaks out of a radio. "Damn, I love you, I don't love you…" As the country collapses around you, you all croon along in squeaky singsong: "Here comes Kurt, no helmet nor his belt", and just like Frank Zander you shout: "Enough! We want to dance!"

There are no cooked lunches anymore, instead food arrives in polystyrene boxes, that you peer inside curiously.

There are real Corny bars, strawberry flavour!

But the bright packaging doesn't contain what it promised. The cereal bars taste awful and you can't help but retch. But Frau Preussler, the kindergarten teacher, says you have to eat it up.

While the other children lie down for their afternoon nap, you sit in front of the cereal bar. It cannot be done. No matter how hard you try, it's too sticky to swallow.

But. You. Must.

Everything changed, they say.

And it's true!

That summer I went with grandma Ursel and grandpa Arnd to McDonald's.

The new country tasted different, but the rules we had to submit to stayed the same.

You better eat up if you put something on your plate.

Anyone wanting to get into Frau Preussler's good books just had to give her bad back a rub. And anyone rude or noisy had to lie down next to Kim, the ginger girl who wet the bed, during afternoon nap time. When it rained, we lined up in two rows in the corridor and sang: "Lovely lovely sun, come a little lower, make the clouds go away, O lovely lovely sun, how we want you to stay…"

My parents were members of the state-party, the SUP. So were my grandparents. I know that for a fact, and I also know that after the Wende they were members of the Party of Democratic Socialism, a successor party led by Gregor Gysi. At some point, when I was old enough and the upheaval was long enough in the past, they decided to tell me about it. It mattered to them that they only left the Party when — all at once — jobs were being handed out, and getting ahead was at stake. They didn't want to just give in. Unlike some, they were no "turncoats". They never told anyone which box they ticked every four years in the voting booth, but I knew they voted for the PDS.

"Turncoats" — a word I thought about a lot as a child. But I didn't dare to ask.

I imagined a long duffel coat, rotating in a circle. Always rotating. But what was the point?

When I was ten years old, that was in 1996, dad told me about the difference between socialism and communism.

We were siting in our red Opel Kadett, in the carpark in front of the supermarket.

Summer heat. There was still no air conditioning inside the car. To let air in, you had to roll down the windows by hand. All the same, the Opel was really something. Shortly after the Wall fell, it had replaced our Trabi. It had seatbelts, a radio and a cassette player.

Mum was in the supermarket with Tim while dad and I awaited their return, stewing in the heat. I liked that people in the supermarket carried their shopping in paper bags without handles, just like in the American films I sometimes watched with Katja (she had video cassettes). The one good thing about going shopping. Boring. I preferred staying in the car and listening to the radio: "All the latest smash hits, and tunes from the 70s and 80s!"

"In communism", dad began, "everyone is equal and everyone gets paid the same. Actually, in communism there's no need for money at all. It'll probably be abolished."

Money wasn't necessary in communism because everything belonged to everyone. So it was pointless piling up possessions or getting rich. Instead, people went to shops and just took what they actually needed. I liked the idea, but I couldn't explain why. Maybe because it sounded fairer.

In communism, dad went on, dustbin collectors would earn as much as professors, bricklayers as much as architects. Because if you really thought about it, nobody is worth more than anybody else. How could an architect build a house if there was nobody to lay the bricks for the walls? What would happen if nobody took the rubbish away?

"Class divisions were invented by the ruling classes," dad declared.

On the radio someone requested the Macarena.

I nodded along, occasionally adding a *hmm*, but I didn't know what he meant by "class". I really wanted to believe him, and the part about money and people's value made immediate sense to me.

You remember that once in primary school — in answer to the question, what do you wish for? — you wrote about a world without money. A world without money, and world peace.

"And what about socialism?", I asked him.

"Socialism is the early stage of communism. It's what the GDR was."

I knew we lived in the former GDR, and that I had even been born there. My red vaccination pass was stamped with a hammer and sickle. I liked the little red booklet and sometimes I took it out of the drawer, in which mum kept her documents, and ran my finger over the emblem. The wreath around the symbol of the SUP dictatorship lent solemnity to this testimony of my immunity against measles, tetanus and chickenpox. But I also knew that this vaccination pass came from a different time — that everything had once been completely different here, that my parents divided our past into the time in the East and the time in the West, that there were Ossis and Wessis, that Wessis were bad and Ossis (including me) were somehow superior, even if the Wessis saw it very differently.

Jon Bon Jovi roared so loudly that dad had to turn the radio off.

I looked out of the window at people pushing trolleys full of shopping across the carpark. The cars threatened to swerve suddenly into one another and scratch their paintwork. I imagined all these people tearing down the Wall a few years ago. Had they all turned their backs against socialism? Why? I didn't understand at all. What dad had just explained was nevertheless clearly right. It would be crazy not to want to live in a world like that. Work and food for everyone — instead of the threat of unemployment, which in the 1990s was as common as salt in the Baltic sea.

But dad knew why. People in the GDR weren't ready, he said. They hadn't understood yet that capitalism would only hurt them. All they could think of was themselves and their own advantages, and they were far too greedy. One day, though, when the war for resources broke out, when everyone realised never-ending growth was impossible, then socialism would return. People would fight again for communism and a more equal world. They would understand that you don't need twenty different brands of yoghurt, one will do fine.

From time to time I had wondered what the GDR was, and now everything was clear. It was the better country, the better idea. Its time would come.

I remember how much I had wanted a Free German Youth shirt when I was young. I dreamed of being a Young Pioneer. My mum showed me how to tie pioneer knots. I would've marched up front, flag flying high, to celebrate the 50th, 60th and then the 70th anniversaries of the Republic.

So when I was older, I thought that obviously it had to be a dictatorship. When people are too stupid to do what's right and all they

care about is themselves, you've got no choice but to force them! In any case, was a dictatorship like the GDR really a dictatorship? I was much more afraid of the Nazis who roamed the streets in the 1990s and by the 2000s had managed to find a way into the state parliaments in the East. In 2004, the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany won 9.4 percent of the vote in Saxony, and in 2006 they were elected to the Schwerin state parliament. I saw the Nazis as a real threat. Socialism, on the other hand, was just a good idea that hadn't yet been properly implemented.

(…)

13

I cannot wake up from the dark dream of my childhood.

When I dream it, bizarre twists and turns unfold in strangely familiar surroundings. People look completely different, but I recognise them behind their masks. I lose myself in familiar alleyways and sense immediately that I've been lost here before. In hindsight I recognise the signs that I'd once overlooked or ignored.

An example — mum calls and says I need to peel potatoes for myself and Tim. I ask how many. "Well, until the pot is full", she snipes down the line.

I open the cupboard and see the different pots on the shelves.

Which pot? So many possible mistakes to be made.

I opt for medium and go to the larder where the potatoes are stored. I put two, three potatoes inside. Then another, but it seems so few and mum said I should fill the pot. So I add even more potatoes, filling the pot to the brim.

There are eight or nine potatoes, which seems a lot, but could also be not enough — another one goes in.

I don't know anymore, I'm clueless, my anxiety rises, what if it's too many? But mum said until the pot is full. So I peel the potatoes. When mum comes home and sees the full pot, I get slapped in the face.

"Are you a complete idiot, then?"

I'm furious for a moment, so I say, "I am not an idiot."

And then she slaps me again, all of her strength landing on my cheek.

I run down the stairs into my room, so she doesn't see me cry.

But when I've wept through some of my tears, I think — of course it was too many potatoes. I'm fourteen years old; I should know how to peel potatoes.

What's more, I had seen the second slap coming and I didn't defend myself, I just let mum's hand smash into my face. So really, I was guilty. It could have hurt half as badly.

Another example — we're on holiday, and Tim and I have hit the jackpot. Our parents aren't making us go hiking with them, which means we can spend the whole day at the pool instead. We've got everything we need, including suncream and ten Marks for chips at lunchtime, and maybe even an ice cream. I got my golden swimming badge just before the summer holidays, and mum sewed it onto my costume for the trip.

We like everything at the pool. The slides, the diving tower and the restaurant, where there's a pinball machine. A neighbour at the hotel even lets us have a few goes.

The neighbour's wife asks me if I've put cream on. My shoulders are looking a bit pinky.

I say, "I'll do it now."

But then off we run again. It's the best day of our whole lives. Timmi doesn't need any suncream — he's always brown, he tans as soon as the snow melts. And I don't want to have to wait the half hour for it to sink in.

"Let's do the three metre jump!"

I see the slide in front of me, the pinball machines and the diving tower. I have never been to such a perfect pool.

When we have dinner with our parents in the hotel, I can barely move. I'm sunburnt all over. In some places my skin has started to blister. The neighbour who saw us at the pool feels guilty. She should have insisted, but she does know a cream that works wonders… Mum rebuffs her harshly, "She won't need it!"

My fault.

And it was. It wasn't as if I hadn't packed any suncream. It wasn't as if I hadn't been reminded. It wasn't as if I didn't consider myself to be highly intelligent otherwise.

At night I try to think the pain away and lie on my tummy, so that only the skin protected by my swimming costume touches the mattress. It's impossible. At breakfast the next morning, I ask if I can skip the hike.

My skin is red like the apples in the breakfast buffet. You can already see pus amassing in the blisters.

But mum's look interrupts me before I can show her my shoulder.

I ask Tim if he remembers the spinner**.** The clothes spinner? Down the phone, Tim takes a slug of beer. I know it makes him look like dad.

He doesn't want to remember, I think not for the first time, as there's no way he could have forgotten the spinner.

In the new flat, the one with the bathroom and the separate toilet, Tim and I shared our own room. It had fold out cupboard beds and when we had to tidy up, we'd throw all our things in and quickly snap them together. My cousin Katja had taught me this trick; she was a year older than me and knew all the tactics. We also had a washing machine. A real one, but with no spin cycle. We therefore had to load the sopping wet laundry into the cylindrical spinner in portions. When it was plugged in, the vibrations began as soon as you pushed the locking lever down over the plastic lid. The engine gave the small barrel a hard shake. We both had to hold the spinner down with all our strength, otherwise it'd leap off the chair in circles and the water (which we collected in a bucket) would spill out across the bathroom floor. If you lay across the spinner, your whole body tickled. Timmi was laughing and so was I — spinning was our favourite chore.

Boom. The bathroom door flew open. "What's going on?" Timmi let go in shock and the spinner slipped from my hands. The water missed the bucket, but I quickly let go of the lever to stop the power. Mum angrily yanked the plug out of the wall.

"Now you're both going to have to get a smack," she said and left the bathroom.

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We each stood at a sink and waited.

I said to Tim, "You're not allowed to cry. Otherwise she'll be happy."

When mum returned, my brother was the first to be punished. Tall and soft, she started slapping his backside with her hand. Of course Timmi let out a howl immediately. He was only three and didn't know how to control himself properly yet. I wanted him to stop and stared at him sternly. He tilted his head back so tears and snot ran down his throat and he choked, which only briefly interrupted his crying. As soon as his breath returned, the tears set off again. Only when mum let up did he stop.

"Do you understand me now?"

Tim nodded and ran out of the bathroom.

"Blow your nose!"

I will not cry. I. Will. Not. Cry.

I held onto the sink with my hands and leaned my head on it. That way I could cover my mouth and be careful not to smash my teeth against the porcelain. That terrified me, because it's so painful.

Mum hit me. Harder. I wasn't crying. She hit harder and harder. At some point this child had to give way. Mum hit me until she couldn't anymore.

It was pretty stupid of me, really. If I had given in earlier, it wouldn't have hurt so much now.

She didn't ask me if I understood her.

"All I remember is the constant smacks on the head. The crack against the back of my skull. I can still hear it."

"Me too," I say, instinctively raising my shoulders and tensing my neck to counter the blow.

"Go on, smack her head…" I know Tim's hand is flying through the air on the other end of the line, and then his tongue clicks as his hand meets the imaginary child's head in front of his chest.

Mum says, "Go on, smack her head."

She's sitting opposite you and dad is next to you on the bench at the kitchen table. He's about to lash out with his right hand. Tim keeps eating. He is sat between mum and dad in the corner of the bench.

"Go on, smack her head."

Your hand slipped. Again. The spinach fell on your dress, and who's going to have to wash it off?

You said, "I didn't mean to."

"Would've been impressive if you had," he says.

You don't look up, you try to wipe the spinach off your dress.

"Leave it alone, it'll make it worse."

Crack, dad has lashed out. Thwack, it hits your head. Crack, thwack.

"Stop touching it. Take it off!"

"It wasn't on purpose…"

Something presses against your chest, taking away your ability to breathe and speak.

"You have to soak it."

Crack, thwack. One more time, because you don't want to listen.

Tim has finished eating, jumps on mum's lap and shouts:

"Back scratch!"

You still have to finish your food. With no dress; soon you'll wonder if it's worth undressing before dinner.

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And yet I can remember afternoons with apples in puff pastry. Skiing or, best of all, when all four of us went to the beach and dad flung us about in the water.

Birthday cakes, family parties, holiday camps.

It looks beautiful on the outside, but once I step inside, a dark labyrinth unfolds before me. It has no exit.