



Lilli Tollkien

Two Hands Lifting the Sky

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English sample translation available

About the unyielding will to survive from a girl who becomes the heroine of her own story

Lale's childhood in West Berlin in the 1980s is unlike most others – she grows up in a left-wing male flatshare. Her drug-addicted mother loses custody of her, while her father is in prison for attempting to rob a bank in order to redistribute capital. A friend of her father's takes Lale out of the children's home and into his shared apartment in Neukölln. Her guardians vacillate between drug binges and political ambitions, between parties and aid projects in Nicaragua. Women are changed like clothes, and those who complain are dismissed as crazy and bourgeois.

While the adults politicize, plan the revolution, and sell hashish in the living room, Lale is allowed to stay up as long as she wants, drink Fanta, eat candy, and watch TV. Lale is left to her own devices – and becomes a victim of the abusive men in her environment. As an adult, she pulls herself out of the mire by her own bootstraps, fighting her own way as a woman, artist, and mother, driven by her insatiable thirst for a better life.

A childhood and youth in left-wing Berlin in the 1980s, in the shadow of the excesses of those who tried their hand at parenting and failed. A haunting but never sentimental novel.

Lilli Tollkien, born in Berlin in 1980, began various training courses and studied Directing and Music Therapy in Berlin and Heidelberg, among other things. She worked in a wide variety of professions, including as an addiction counselor in a prison, a job coach, and a set designer. In addition to her current profession, she is a photographer and has published in anthologies. She lives with her children in Leipzig. *Two Hands Lifting the Sky* is her first novel.



Lilli Tollkien

Two Hands Lifting the Sky

Sample Translation by Jamie Lee Searle

This novel is inspired by real events.

It makes no claim to authentically render events, persons or their actions.

This is a fictional story.

It's warm inside my mother's body, her footsteps rock me in her pelvis. I swim and make out my surroundings with my lips. The tongue and taste buds take form. The amniotic fluid – of which I drink half a litre each day – tastes sweet, because my mother lives on Haribo Mix. She's hooked on the sugar, she needs it as a substitute for the heroin that she's trying to quit now she's pregnant with me.

I'm inside her belly when she and my father drive the old Mercedes to Spain for her detox treatment, and through the placenta I feel her high when the detox fails.

My ears develop, I hear my mother's heartbeat and the fierce roar of her blood. Her pelvis is a resonance chamber; it begins to pulsate as soon as she speaks, and I react to her voice by blinking. I hear her tell my father she loves him, because she did love him, like all the other women did, she'll say that over and over. I hear the admonishing voice of my Grandma Lore, reminding my mother that she's already messed up motherhood once, and that she won't be raising yet another grandchild, but her voice contains hope too. I hear my mother scream at my father, I hear doors slam, and I hear the crystal ash tray which she throws at him out of the window of her second-floor

apartment shatter on the tarmac of Skalitzer Straße, just ten centimetres from his feet. My father is on his way to rob a bank, for the fun of it and for the political cause, for an underground newspaper and for the release of three friends who were arrested after a previous robbery. This time, things will go okay.

The contractions begin in the thirty-second week of my mother's pregnancy, and my father drives her to the hospital. "I won't survive this," she says, and he gets her some heroin. I am not placed on my mother's chest. Under controlled external conditions, in the incubator's microclimate, I do the detox that my mother couldn't. It's the winter of 1980, long before people realised that even premature babies should have skin-to-skin contact directly after birth. Back then, they still believed that newborns who are struggling to regulate their body temperature should be immediately stabilised in an incubator with ventilatory support.

Later, I read: *Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome is caused by a mother's drug consumption during pregnancy. Due to prenatal drug consumption via the umbilical cord, the unborn child develops a dependency. The newborns shake, experience restless sleep, vomit or have diarrhoea. Their muscle tone is weak, and they are prone to shrill screaming.*

In the car on the way home, I lie next to my mother on the back seat in a washing basket lined with pillows. *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan* is playing on the radio. My mother strokes my forehead and hums along softly.

1.

One and a half years later – there are different versions of this story – I'm sitting on the floor of the room in Skalitzer Straße, on the patchwork blanket brought over by Grandma Lore, putting cube-shaped and star-shaped building bricks into the corresponding cube-shaped and star-shaped holes in a wooden

block. It's summer. The windows are wide open. Traffic sounds and children's cries drift in from outside. Every five minutes, an U-Bahn train rattles past, making the coffee cup on the table in the middle of the room vibrate and the light bulb on the ceiling sway. There's a farmhouse-style wardrobe next to the door, and opposite it, beneath the window, a mattress on the ox-blood-coloured plank flooring. My mother is on the mattress, leaning against the wall and shooting up. She knows exactly how much she can take so she can still prepare my formula, feed me and change my nappy. But on this occasion, the stuff must be particularly pure or mixed with barbiturates, and she dozes off, longer than for just the usual moment when the opiates flood her system. I crawl or toddle a few hesitant steps towards my mother and find some sweeties in the bag next to her, tucked in the crack between the wall and the mattress. They are *Rohypnol* tablets, "roofies", as my mother calls them. "As different as night and day" goes the *Hoffman-la Roche* advertising slogan – like Valium, but ten times more potent. Some minutes later, when the U1 clatters past the window, my mother awakens from her slumber. She sees me, convulsing with the empty bag in my hand, and suddenly sober from the adrenaline, calls an emergency doctor.

Around the same time, my father goes into the trendy bar *Der Kosmos*, takes his friend Karlheinz's motorbike key from the hook next to the kitchen door, swaps the number plate behind the building and drives to the agreed location: in front of the Sparkasse bank, next to the supermarket. He's meeting his flatmate Katharina, from the commune on Waldemar Straße in Kreuzberg. He's in awe of this mother of five, twenty years his senior, who after Benno Ohnesorg was killed by a policeman on 2. June 1967 left her bourgeois family life behind in order to devote herself entirely to political activism. She writes radio plays and participates in multiple robberies, in part so she can found Berlin's first anti-authoritarian children's nursery with some girlfriends. As a member of the left-wing urban guerrilla, her goal is to obtain money subversively and redistribute it for the cause directly from the banks and corporations; in other words, from the top down. *Mothers make perfect bank robbers*, she's alleged to have said, *they already have all the necessary skills*.

While my father and Katharina hold up two security guards with toy guns, Katharina's daughters wait in the car with a lollipop. "I'll be back by the time you've finished it." A woman with two children and shopping bags in tow wouldn't draw attention during subsequent police checks, that was the plan, and it had already functioned well on several occasions. But not this time. The police had removed the spark plugs from the getaway motorbike, the robbery was foiled, and Katharina and my father were arrested.

In Urban Hospital, my stomach gets pumped and my mother's custody of me gets revoked. I'm passed into the care of child protection services.

My father is on his way to Tegel prison. His name isn't on my birth certificate anyway, because at the time of my birth my mother was married to another man; a marriage of convenience which provided her with money and an interesting surname.

The children's home is a blank space in my memory. The images that arise in my mind bear no relation to reality; they're borrowed from films I saw later, sparse rooms with long rows of beds. I'm sure it wasn't actually like that. Following my enquiry at the *Jugendamt*, the file is looked for but never found. If I try to recall the room at the institution, there's nothing there but the vacuum behind my sternum.

One year after I'm taken into the care of the state – I'm two and a half years old by this point – a guy with long black hair and a beard enters the children's home hand in hand with his girlfriend. They are Karlheinz, my father's friend, and Marianne, his then-girlfriend. Karlheinz flirts with the director, drops the name of a friend who's a social worker, signs a few documents and then leaves the building again with me holding his other hand. He takes me in as a foster child in his flat-sharing community. He's actually a house painter, but at this point in time he's working in the children's home and with the youth welfare magazine *Heim und Hilfe*. They're acting in the wake of the extra-parliamentary student protest movement and Ulrike Meinhof, who in the 1960s tried to challenge the authoritarian conditions of corrective education in the Federal Republic.

My father had borrowed Karlheinz's motorbike for the bank robberies with Katharina, but during his arrest, he kept schtum and made no mention of his friend. Karlheinz sees it as a political act to do a favour for his imprisoned comrade by rescuing his child from the home. Karlheinz's current significant other, Marianne, serves as an alibi for taking a foster child into a male flat share. The *Jugendamt* office provides seven hundred Marks per month for the fostering.

2.

Karlheinz's flat share is on the third floor of a four-storey pre-WWII building with a faded, salmon-pink façade. The house is on a cobblestone street lined with old linden trees, in the heart of Berlin close to Tempelhof airport. So close that we children – Lina from the first floor, Mona from the second, and I – try to touch the aeroplanes with our outstretched arms as they take off, and so close that when they land, we dramatically hurl ourselves to the floor amid the din of the engines. Long before anyone could imagine that this neighbourhood would one day become a desirable place to live, Karlheinz, his friend Frank and a few others bought the rundown house for a good price and refurbished it with their own hands, a scheme that was subsidised by the Berlin Senate. As a project for self-governed living, they made a *Gesellschaft bürgerlichen Rechts*, a social contract in which no one was to get rich, and everything was to belong to everyone.

In the third-floor flat share, there are six rooms. Four men and one child live in them: my foster father Karlheinz, Wolfgang, Ansgar, Frank, and I – a fat little Milupa-formula girl with blonde corkscrew curls. Marianne later tells me that when Karlheinz got me from the home, I was clumsy, with only basic motor skills, always hungry and incredibly shy. I was apparently afraid of every blade of grass and constantly clinging to someone's leg. But it seems I also gained confidence at an astonishing speed, and ran through the rooms,

stumbling about between the tins of paint, ladders and brushes, and I always found something to look at or play with.

Nothing was forbidden; I could stay up as late as I wanted, jump on the mattresses, eat Nutella sandwiches and consume as much TV and Fanta as my heart desired. “You know you could forbid me from doing something occasionally, right?,” I allegedly said at some stage, something that became a running gag among the adults.

The living room, the heart of the apartment, is a typical Berlin room linking the front of the building and the side wings: L-shaped and dark. Beneath the only window, opposite the Gründerzeit-era chest of drawers with the television on top, is a platform with a foam mattress.

From the living room, a door leads into Karlheinz’s room. If I try to remember his furniture, I can’t picture a thing, but I do see women in his room, beautiful women in beautiful poses who are there only for him and who allow themselves to be shunted around like chairs or tables. My foster father ticks. When I nestle close to his chest, I can hear it in my head, behind my eyes, but I also hear it even if I’m just in the same room. The metallic sound of his artificial heartbeat sounds just like the ticking of a watch. A photo shows Karlheinz with a blonde mullet, streaked with grey, wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses. A T-shirt emblazoned with the words *No Night Without Drugs* stretches across his beer belly. He’s wearing a black leather jacket over it, and his handlebar moustache looks like it belongs to a detective on an American crime show. His room has its own bathroom and a private entrance at the rear of the house.

The narrow hallway immediately after the front door leads off into three bedrooms. The first belongs to Frank. He’s the one who invested the most money in the apartment. In the middle of his room is a large bed, framed by dark wooden shelves, giving it a grotto-like appearance. A cave within a cave. On the bed are black satin sheets: shimmering, cool and smooth. Above the bed, suspended on cables, is a mirror in a golden frame. There are spindly shelves on the walls, long and thin like Frank himself, holding countless tankards, glasses, bowls, and cups which are filled to the brims with coins. In

between are crookedly draped posters: *Rise Up for the Revolutionary 1st of May!* and: *Down with Deutschland!* A lino print hangs at the head of the bed. It shows a sleeping woman, and the inscription beneath reads: *I didn't go to work today, I don't think I'll go tomorrow.* And yet Frank is one of the few in that crowd who has a regular job – “with the state”, even, as the others say. At the Federal Tax Office.

Then there's Wolfgang's room. Here the air is milky white from the smoke of his filterless cigarettes, interspersed with the fine dust that collects on the type cases. It smells of fruit schnapps and *Roth-Händle* tobacco. An electric organ made of dark brown plastic stands against the wall. If you push up the slats of the lid and press the black buttons that say *Rumba* or *Cha-Cha-Cha*, it crackles. A red spark flashes behind the buttons, and the grains of dust dance to the rhythms in the sunlight.

Ansgar's room seems empty.

Later, in a recurring dream, I'm walking along the hallway, the sisal flooring scratches my feet. The lightbulb flickers, then goes out. I want to run past Ansgar's room, go forwards, get to the apartment door, but I can't move, and the sisal knots itself around my feet. I want to cry out, but I can't open my mouth.

The rooms are inside me, the entire apartment. Some of the images have become lodged in my chest, and I don't remember them. And yet my whole life long I dream in the rooms of this apartment, again and again I'm walking along the long hallway. I'd like to step outside, dream in other spaces, but the rooms have written themselves into my body like a fundamental architecture.

3.

My father gets released from prison after his accomplice Katharina tells the court, one year after her arrest, that she'd dragged the young man into it. He moves into the flat share with us. I don't recognise him, and run away from his

outstretched hands, or at least that's what he tells me. Apparently I studied my father sceptically from Karlheinz's lap and ignored him for days on end. I can't remember this, and can't imagine ever not having sought out his presence. What I do remember is my father putting me to bed. I remember wanting to lay my face in his hands. I don't want him to go, I want to press my cheeks into his Pritt-stick-claggy palms, which also contain tobacco crumbs and scraps of leather. I don't want him to leave until I've fallen asleep. I don't want to fall asleep, because I don't want him to leave. I remember him saying "Goodnight, my little bunny," and moving to stand up. I hold his hand in both of mine and press it against my chest like a cuddly toy. He pulls his hand away and places it on my head, a warm roof. I remember him saying "Sleep tight", and "I'm heading across the road, to the bar." And I remember how I wanted to live under them, under my father's hands.

"Where's my mother?", I ask, and the answer I receive is: "Your mother's looking for an apartment." I picture her walking the streets of Berlin at night, her gaze trained upwards to see whether there's an unlit window somewhere and therefore a vacant apartment. When we talk on the phone, she calls me her "little marble". She only occasionally visits me in the flat share; junkies aren't particularly welcome in the building project. Then she puts me to bed and sings me nursery rhymes. Brahm's *Lullaby* and *How many stars twinkle in the sky?* She avoids the word God. Instead of *Tomorrow morning, if God wills, you'll wake again*, she sings *Tomorrow morning, if you wish, you'll wake again* and makes *O, from the twinkling stars that shone, the Lord God counted every one*, into *O, from the twinkling stars that shone, it's you who counted every one*.

I remember her freckled skin the time we went swimming at Baggersee together, and her red pubic hair in the sunlight. Her white skin, like a particular kind of marble sprinkled with bright red, the puncture scars on the undersides of her arms like beige craters. At this point, she's on the methadone programme. The pink raspberry ice cream melts in the sun and drips onto our skin, running down my forearms in little rivulets. The sand sticks to it in distinct patterns, appearing different in the pools of ice cream to the sunscreen.

My mother rubs me down with a hand towel and I enjoy the embrace without direct skin contact.

That's the day before I fly to Nicaragua with the men from the flat share, shortly before my fifth birthday. As a goodbye, she gives me a brown doll in a shiny plastic box. The doll's frizzy hair is tied into pigtails with red ribbons; her body is soft, made of a brown material and stuffed with padding. Her arms and legs are plastic, and she's wearing a blue-and-white checked dress and red-lacquered shoes. My mother says the kids in Nicaragua all have dark skin, like this doll. "I stole it for you at Karstadt," she adds with a beaming smile, and I immediately love the doll.

Back at home that night, my father has to push the duvet back into the bedding and fold the blanket around my feet and my body. Everything has to be tucked in tightly. If I can feel the duvet seam against my legs as I'm falling asleep, I begin to cry. It's as though the receptors of my skin contain amplifiers that translate every irritant into a really intense sensation. I'm afraid of evaporating out of my skin into the expanse around me if the blanket isn't tucked in on all sides. "The princess and the pea," says Ulla, the first of my father's girlfriends I can remember after my mother. Ulla's daughter Juna is the opposite of me. She climbs trees, she's as brave as Ronia the Robber's Daughter, and she's the leader at nursery. Everyone wants to be friends with her. Once, Juna and I apparently drank the adults' punch instead of the kids' punch and danced on tables together. I don't remember it.

It's Juna who at some point says: "Your mother injects drugs into her arm, Ulla told me."

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