

Mareike Fallwickl
THE RAGE THAT REMAINS
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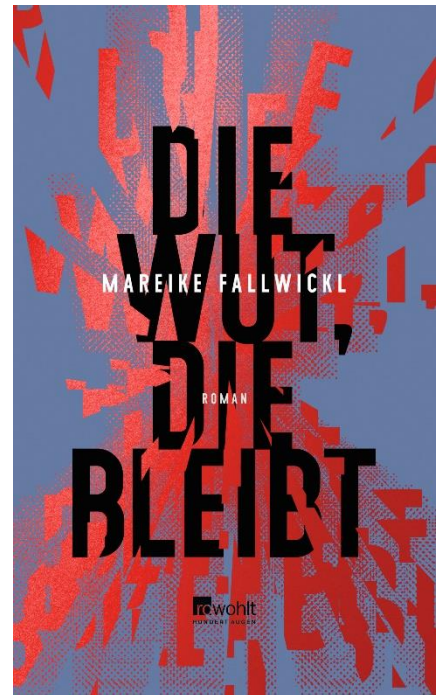
What happens when a mother no longer wants to, or is unable to, go on?

Helene, mother of three children, gets up during dinner, goes out onto the balcony and throws herself to her death. The family is in shock. Suddenly everything that previously held them together has gone: love, care, security. Helene's best friend Sarah, who had both envied and pitied Helene for her family, is dragged into a vortex of grief and chaos. Lola, Helene's eldest daughter, searches for a way of coping with her emotions, and concentrates on the feeling that is strongest: anger.

Three women: one cannot do what life asks of a mother. The other two have to find a way to fill the void. Their fates intertwine in Mareike Fallwickl's stirring and clear-sighted novel about what it means to be a woman in today's society.

Mareike Fallwickl was born in Hallein near Salzburg in 1983. She is a freelance author and lives with her family near Salzburg. Her literary debut *Dunkelgrün fast schwarz* was published in 2018 and nominated for the Austrian Book Prize as well the "Favourite book of the independents". This was followed by *Das Licht ist hier viel heller* in 2019; the film rights to this book have been sold. She advocates literature with a focus on female narrators on various social media platforms. *The Rage That Remains* is her third novel.

- A powerful, poetic work that recognises and identifies some painful aspects of our society.
- An author who fights with commitment for her themes and material. And one who is heard.
- Recommended by *New Books in German* (Goethe Institute).
- Sample translation available.



MAREIKE FALLWICKL

THE RAGE THAT REMAINS

Don't we have any salt, Johannes says at dinner, exactly like that: Don't we have any salt, and not even in Helene's direction. She hears the 'you' in his sentence, hears: You forgot it, hears: You did the cooking, hears: You get up and get it, and all those 'yous' suck the strength out of her body. She sits there, weak and tired, in her ears a thick buzzing. She hears it growing louder, filling up her body so there's no room left, not even for the next breath. She sees Lola stabbing at her salad, all sullen with that new teenage face of hers, sees Maxi shoving a lump of potato into his mouth with his fingers instead of his fork, sees Lucius almost knock his glass of water over, both of them blond like Johannes, present, demanding, so needy. And loud. They're all loud, the whole meal is noise, no, the whole day, full of their calling, their wanting, their arguing and asking and yelling, and it builds up inside Helene in these long hours she's secretly counting down. Till the moment when the children are in bed and the tears well up in her from fatigue in the kitchen. But then: the pattering feet in the night, the little tummies pushing their way in under the covers, the snoring and panting and grunting right next to her, the sticky warmth. She's never alone, not even for a few seconds. It's never quiet, not even to catch a breath. Helene looks at her plate, the butter has melted on the potatoes, she can't imagine opening her mouth, shoving something in it, how can any more fit inside, more and more and more, and to cap it all: the salt. She stands up and no one takes any notice because they're thinking: She forgot it, she did the cooking, because they're thinking: She's the mother. She takes three steps from the dining table to the balcony door, opens it, doesn't look back, takes two more steps. And then just the one.

ALIVENESS

Lola pushes out her bottom lip, squeezes it between her thumb and index finger like a roll of belly fat and turns it over. The blue veins are hiding in the gleaming mucous membrane like tiny worms. If the frenulum of the lower lip tears, it bleeds like hell. The gum is light pink and firm, the teeth well embedded. Lola could still break them off, though. With a punch, a pair of pliers, a crowbar. It wouldn't be that hard.

She stands in front of the mirror, so close that her face is nearly touching itself. She taps her lower row of teeth with the nail of her index finger and enjoys the horrible noise. She can feel the tapping like an echo in her jawbone, although teeth are virtually dead things. Enamel is also the hardest material in the body. But there are things even enamel can't withstand. Too much acid. Bacteria. The impact of a twenty-five-foot fall.

Lola lets go of her lip and takes a step back as if for a run-up. She headbutts the glass hard. The pain shoots across her skull into the back of her neck and creeps down her spine. She has a coppery taste in her mouth. One of her incisors has split the lip down the middle, and blood is spilling out. She doesn't lick it away.

Invisible pain is pointless pain.

Her mobile vibrates. It's been doing this incessantly since THE END. Lola never unlocks it, never opens any apps, has been collecting messages and questions and emojis on her display for five days now, a kind of stockpile, like insulating foam. Loops of a safety net. At night she puts her fingertip on the fanned-out message icons—WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok—to read them and count them. Flicks them open and shut again. The hearts they send her are broken. A zigzag line down the middle—all it takes to symbolise grief. At each of these hearts Lola smiles, and it's not a pretty smile.

She doesn't answer anyone.

Obviously, everyone is pretending to be sympathetic whereas in fact they're curious. They want a piece of the tragic affair. At night she imagines them talking about her.

She written back to you? they ask.

Me neither, they say.

Lola bends down to pick up the shirt from the floor and the movement shunts the pain into her forehead. Maybe she'll get a bump, hopefully she'll get a bump. A nice blue one. The shirt is grey and she's wearing baggy pants, add a hoodie, and done. Hood up. She looks in the mirror again. She never wears makeup, doesn't paint over the red spotty areas, doesn't own any mascara. She's combed her dark, shoulder-length hair, and that'll have to do. There are very few situations where society lets you be ugly, and today is one of them. Lola's determined to make the most of it.

The rage is the size of a thumbnail and is located under her left ribs. It is thumping and pressing, radiating heat, insatiable. She pushes down on it with two fingers, hard at first and then even harder. It feels as if one of her organs is burning. Maybe the spleen. Or what's on that side behind the ribs? The pancreas. Not the heart in any case: her heart carries on beating regardless. Beating, with no zigzag line down the middle. What does her body care that her mum's body is broken. She lets go of her side; it's even more painful than before. What happens to your teeth when you fall on your face from a height of twenty-five feet? Do they burst out of your gums, and where do they end up afterwards—in your mouth or on the street? What happens to your forehead if you fall on your head from a height of twenty-five feet? Is it dented or completely split?

'O-a!' Lucius calls from outside Lola's bedroom door, pronouncing the vowels separately, first O, then A because he can't say her name properly yet. He hammers on the wood with his small hands which are always sticky and always warm. Lola turns away from the mirror and immediately misses the sight of herself. She slips on the bomber jacket, the baggy, threadbare thing she wears every day. She stuffs her mobile into her jacket pocket and opens the door to her brother. He comes stumbling in, slobbering merrily as usual. He lets out some whoops of joy, hugs her left leg and rests his cheek against her knee. She runs her fingers over his blond head that contains not an ounce of rage. That is still to grow, secret and hard like lichen on a wall, and then Lucius will have to see how he comes to terms with the trauma draped around his neck like a shitty little medal.

'Up!' he says, standing on his tiptoes, this beseeching look in his eye. She lifts him up and rests him on her hip, the left one. His body is now directly against her ribcage. He doesn't have any black clothes, so Johannes has put him in the dark-blue ski suit with sleeves too short for him. It's a cold day in early March so it doesn't matter. Lola puts her nose to Lucius's temple and breathes in; he smells of warmth and caramel and home. What scares her the most is that his skin is so new and so unscathed. He wriggles his head into her hood and burbles expectantly because she sometimes plays peekaboo with him while wearing this top, pulling the material over her eyes until they disappear and then tossing it back to make Lucius laugh. Not today though. Not today.

She pushes his head away and carries him out of the room. Johannes and Maxi are waiting silently out in the hallway.

'Ready?' Johannes asks. He's wearing a white shirt and a suit and even a tie; he looks like a wannabe bank manager. A laugh threatens to erupt from Lola, but she quickly stifles it when she spots his serious expression. He arches his eyebrows, about to comment on her outfit, but then he doesn't. She knew he wouldn't have the strength to say anything. He doesn't notice she's bleeding; his attention is turned inward, focused on himself. That question . . . what an asshole. As if anyone could ever be ready for something like this. Maxi grabs Lola's hand and with both her brothers clinging to her body, they go outside.

No one talks in the car. Maxi doesn't ask, as he usually does, to listen to an audio book, and the silence bores into Lola like a green-headed pin. Her breath is streaming around the hot knot below her ribs and never completely reaches her lungs.

The trouble is that she didn't notice the last times. She didn't mark them with memorials. This is the last time Mum will make my packed lunch. This is the last time Mum will tell me I should put a hat on because it's snowing outside. This is the last time Mum will stick a plaster on my knee

even though I could do it myself, sing ‘Pat it, kiss it, stroke it, hug it’ and pretend I wasn’t far too old for this kind of comforting. Without any of that marking it has all floated away from Lola.

No.

Leaped away.

She checks in the mirror on the back of the sun visor whether the patch of blood on her lip is still visible.

The municipal cemetery is nearby and the drive too short to get a sense of what is about to happen. It’s going to be like that from now on: Mum will never be far away.

Lola feels her mobile buzzing in her pocket. Twice, three times through the material on her stomach. The shock will fade and new gossip will flourish. But today she is the centre of attention. In the lava’s maw. Today she’s the girl with the crazy mother who threw herself off the balcony for no reason.

Sunny is standing outside the gates like someone who isn’t really waiting. She’s good at this. She looks totally chilled and at the same time as if she’d be on for anything. She’s been to see Lola every day, bringing her school stuff and space cookies and golden hugs.

‘Mum believed me when I told her I was putting oregano in them to an Italian recipe,’ she said, and they laughed. Lola felt a pang because none of her sentences beginning ‘Mum’ are funny any more. Sunny didn’t ask any questions. Sunny didn’t want her piece of the tragic story but to be with Lola, wipe away her tears and snot, offer her a shoulder to lean on, bony and narrow, solid and warm. Sunny’s someone who doesn’t back down. Sunny’s someone who won’t be knocked down.

‘Bash yourself?’ she says when Lola comes up to her, and touches Lola’s forehead. They embrace like two weary old people.

Everyone’s eyes are drawn to Sunny, as usual, but especially so today. She has long red hair, green eyes and freckles—a fox cub, a fire creature, a blaze of colour. She’s wearing yellow Chucks and red tights, a black skirt and a green coat. The cemetery is a murky and misty brown, every grave stony grey and decorated with scrub that died over the winter. Behind her Lola hears her little brother wailing and senses Johanne’s gaze on her and its request. She’s better at calming Lucius, but only because Johannes never tries. Because he never learns to understand him, although it really isn’t hard. She talks to Lucius to get him to sit in the buggy he won’t get climb into, and there’s a singsong tone in her voice like Mum’s.

‘I’ll push you, OK,’ she says. ‘And look, Poffel’s here too.’

Lucius buries his nose in the hedgehog soft toy, puts his dummy in his mouth and lets her strap him in. Maxi is standing close by. He hasn’t said a word since he saw Mum vanish through the balcony door. He went silent and stiff. Lola turns from the pram to him without straightening up. He tolerates her hug like a towel being hung around his shoulders, and she feels a stabbing sensation in her tummy. The spot under her ribs responds with a burst of heat.

It truly was a vanishing act. Mum didn’t even look back.

They walk alongside each other to the funeral hall. Johannes doesn’t shake anyone’s hand. Very few people were allowed to come and no touching is allowed, so people mutter empty words instead—allmycondolences, suchatragedy, werehereforyou, calluswheneveryoulike—followed by lingering glances as they walk past. There are heart emojis in their eyes and curiosity behind them.

‘Think they gossip afterwards?’ Lola says to Sunny.

‘What do you mean, afterwards?’

Already small groups are forming on the side lines, heads bowed, eyes alert, everyone with his or her own theory. A whispered explanation, a supposition expressed behind a mask. They stop talking when they notice Lola and Sunny staring at them.

Lola doesn’t think the coffin is so bad. The picture is though. In It Mum’s face is framed by her dark hair and she’s laughing like someone about to say something funny. Everything about her is familiar to Lola, and everything is unfamiliar to Lola. It’s impossible to avoid her gaze. And then the crying starts. It comes in waves, from in front and behind and the side, rising sobs, suppressed

wails. Great-grandad Helmut buries his face in a white handkerchief, his shoulders wobbling. His only surviving descendant is Lola. She doesn't look at him.

Lucius has fallen asleep in the buggy, and Maxi is standing very straight next to Lola. When Johannes goes up to the front to make a short farewell speech to his wife, Maxi pushes his head under Lola's jumper, pressing his ear to her stomach. Up at the lectern, Johannes stammers his way through a mountain of words, and Lola ducks his searching gaze. She can feel Maxi's hot breath on her skin.

'Can he breathe in there?' Sunny asks.

Lola shrugs her shoulders and strokes Maxi's slender back. Then she sinks her teeth deep into her burst lip and sucks out the blood like water from wet moss.

Mum damaged them all by jumping, every single one of them in this cool, bare hall. Her crash landing sent out rippling tremors, shockwaves, flying shrapnel, injuring everyone who knew her. And the closer someone was to her, the greater the wounds.

That's what's so shit. Lola was extremely closer. You can't get any closer.

Mum's best friend, Sarah, has chosen a song that reminds her of when the two of them were young, and then she cries so much she can't speak. There's something unreal about watching her. Between the wreaths and the light-coloured wooden coffin her body shakes as if she's being electrocuted. Lola rubs Maxi's back in a circular motion, the same one over and over again, to the beat of a nineties hit. It's impossible to tell what it might have been that Mum and Sarah associated with this song—maybe the first joint, a balmy garden party they were allowed to go to without their parents, an old oath. Floating free in space, the song dances in the air like a stinking cloud.

Then they all form a procession and follow the deceased as she is carried along in front. Lola is glad to get away from Mum's picture, but she still cannot breathe more easily. The rage is no longer the size of a thumbnail but the size of a walnut. She pulls the jumper off Maxi's head and he blinks. He's starting school in the autumn, and Lola thinks of the new kids with their school bags and the proud mothers clustering at the gates.

She touches her smartphone in her pocket and keeps her hand on it until it vibrates again. Sarah is pushing the buggy with Lucius asleep in it, teetering on her high heels with her sunglasses on. She's clutching the handles of the buggy so tightly that her knuckles have turned white, and Lola envies her. It would be good to be able to hold onto something. Anything.

'I'd fall flat on my face,' Sunny mutters, looking at Sarah's black high heels, and Lola has to laugh despite herself, is startled by it, chokes on it and stops abruptly with a quiet cough. She sucks fresh blood out of the tear in her lip and imagines that if she laughed now, her teeth would be red. As if she'd bitten a rat in the neck.

They reach the freshly dug hole for Mum. Group 7, right behind the war dead. It's there on a sign: Group 7. With the other graves all around it.

Last autumn's acorns lie scattered on the muddy ground. A squirrel darts across a grave. That's how it is: a person is alive and then she's lying in Group 7. With busted teeth and a split head and a death date: 1 March 2021. Tells no more jokes, sticks on no more plasters, makes no more sandwiches and no longer sings in that scratchy but somehow still beautiful voice. The funeral procession stops, and the air around Lola thickens unexpectedly.

'A cemetery is a kind of timeless place,' Sunny says, but that isn't true. It marks the beginning of a new time—a time without Mum.

Lola raises her arm but not in a final farewell. She pushes up her jacket and top, lifts her lower arm to her mouth, presses her teeth against her skin and bites into it, very hard at first and then even harder.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Every good story starts with someone doing something unexpected that completely changes his or her life. What Sarah is doing, however, seems normal. She's baking a cake. She can't stay away any longer; she has to go and she can't go empty-handed. There are rules, social conventions about visits and gifts. You can break them, sure, but not in a situation like this. Seek out the grieving and you have to hand over a tangible token of your condolences. She thought about stopping at a supermarket on her way to Helene's flat to buy pretzels or a readymade cake, a few apples, bananas or oranges and transport them in her handlebar basket with the necessary care, but what would be the value of that? The few euros the items cost would cling to the offerings like a price label. No, it had to be homemade to represent a minimum of effort, time and goodwill.

She's done a lot of thinking in general, twisting her thoughts into fat ropes and more than once she got tangled up in the thicket of helplessness, nostalgia and unanswered questions.

She has already picked up her smartphone seven times today to call Helene or write to her. Seven times. Habit is like an old dog, a reflex deep inside her, triggering her fingers faster than her brain. The reflex to flick through her messages after getting up and showering and to send Helene something, answer a question, nearly yeah, we're on the last episode, a suggestion, let's chat this afternoon, a simple how are you today—that was her ritual. They did this every day. Sarah even had her finger poised on the display to ask Helene for a cake recipe and burst out laughing when she became conscious of the automatism, the faulty logic. Her laughter turned to weeping, tearless though, soundless sobbing that robbed her of breath for ages. Helene would have known a recipe. She baked so many Sachertorte and tray bakes, apple strudel and cinnamon rolls. For children's birthdays, dessert or because it was Sunday. This was despite baking never having been Helene's thing. Sarah never saw Helene mixing dough when she was younger. If she had enough money she'd treat them to something from the cakeshop, and on Lola's birthday she would simply stick a candle in a doughnut. But then she taught herself to bake with her typical, silent indignation and learned to make Nutella whirls and hazelnut croissants. Mothers bake cakes, so she had to know how to bake.

Every time Sarah takes out her phone to tell Helene something, the pain is there again, clean and fresh.

Their friendship goes back as far as a friendship can go. They met at kindergarten, went all the way through school and university together and even stayed in touch while they were living in different cities. Almost forty years, each year an extra drop of glue binding them together, which is what made Sarah think that this friendship was indissoluble.

Leon comes into the kitchen, and Sarah relaxes her wrist and stirs deliberately casually. He won't notice that it's a salad bowl and that she's never mixed dough in it before, but he's meant to note her domestic skills. Were this one of her novels, he would kiss her on the neck and gaze into her eyes, dip his finger into the bowl and lick it. He'd make an affectionate remark, gives her a mischievous smile . . . and it would ultimately turn out that he'd been pursuing some double-crossing plan all along.

Leon goes over to the fridge and takes out a can of his energy drink. Sarah stands there waiting because she can't carry on without a peek at the recipe on her tablet and she doesn't want Leon to see.

'What are you making?' he asks in that typical low drawl of his. He often speaks quietly and she found that interesting at first.

'I'm going to see Helene's children,' she replies.

'Is it gluten-free?' He smiles.

'No, but you can come along anyway.'

'Oh, I wouldn't want to get in the way,' he says with that I'd-love-to-but-I-have-to-work look. Basically, no one is as inscrutable and mysterious as they think. Now that they've lived together for a year, Sarah can read Leon's face like a book.

How useful that humans have created a system in which work comes before anything else. Men can't go to a funeral, for example, because they have to work. And a man can't help his wife who's cooped up with three children during lockdown because he has to work.

Sarah goes on stirring her dough and bows her head. Who knows what Leon would read in her face otherwise. He cracks open the can, takes a swig and gives her a peck on the cheek. There's hesitancy in the kitchen, and it's incredibly loud. She expects him to go out again, but instead he touches her gently on the shoulder.

'Is everything all right with them?' he asks, perhaps meaning more than just the children.

He's standing very close to her and he smells so good and normal, as always, and Sarah can't begrudge his ability to remain an extra who produces some performative concern while continuing to shower every day and do sport and not have this hole inside that spews out glugging sadness and guilt. His touch turns into half a hug that doesn't really work because she doesn't let go of the mixing bowl.

'No,' she says without adding anything.

What's the purpose of his question? What does he want to hear? Does he think she has the right words for these battered souls? Should she wrap it up in comprehensible phrases for him, package it in bearable bite-size pieces? She breathes into his chest and waits for him to turn away, but she's disappointed when he does. Leon strokes her upper arm again and maybe he smiles, but she doesn't look. Then he leaves the kitchen. The sweet smell of the glucose-rich drink clings to her cheek, and she isn't baking for Helene's children but for Helene. As a tribute to the unspoken reluctance with which you take to the kitchen to produce something for others to eat.

Once the cake is in the oven she sets the timer and puts the utensils in the dishwasher. In the bathroom she dabs some concealer under her eyes and applies more mascara.

The oven beeps and Sarah takes the cake out of the oven. She puts it out on the terrace to cool down. Molly takes advantage by slipping out into the garden. Sarah watches her go and then glances over at the study door, which Leon has shut. They went into the first lockdown together in spring 2020. They'd only known each other for about two weeks after a Tinder date, and it was his suggestion to hunker down together.

'We could have fun,' he said, touching a spot under her ear with his fingertips, causing a titillating tickling sensation. She pretended she had to think about it, then agreed with feigned hesitation, like someone who needed to be charmed. It was a no-brainer though. Why would she say no to a guy who was ten years younger than her, amazingly attractive and ready to go again immediately after sex?

No one, Sarah least of all, believed it would last—the pandemic or their relationship. But by the time the restrictions were lifted that summer, they had got used to each other and found their rhythm, or they'd perhaps simply missed the moment to end their extended hook-up.

'If you can endure being locked up together for weeks on end, you can endure anything,' Sarah has often said since. It's one of those phrases that has taken on a life of its own, even though it may not actually be true.

At the start of the first lockdown Helene told her to have fun with that hoarse laugh of hers that was amusingly sexy and conveyed everything they had experienced together, all the first times that come and go in life. She didn't know Leon—they couldn't meet at first, of course—and during the summer Helene was occupied even without the lockdown, her time divided between duties with two school-age kids, nine weeks of holidays and a ten-month-old baby. Sarah didn't want to invite Leon along to the outdoor pool to meet Helene and the children, didn't want to look at him through Helene's eyes—the self-absorbed libertine with the ripped body and gelled-back hair—nor Helene through his—the tired mother with carrot and cucumber sticks in Tupperware containers and hips broader than they used to be. He would have made the obvious comparison, of course he would. He'd have thought: So this is what happens to a woman when she becomes a mother. And Sarah wouldn't have wanted to come off better nor worse either, wouldn't have wanted to be compared to Helene at all like a choice of models in a shop window—take your pick,

young man, do you go for the uncomplicated childless woman whose biological clock is ticking so loudly, or the overworked mother whose every sentence is interrupted by her children and who would be grateful for your attention? Whatever Leon might have said about Helene afterwards would have been wrong, and whatever Helene might have said about Leon afterwards would have been right.

Helene didn't make any further suggestive jokes during the second lockdown in winter 2020. Neither did she ask where it was going to go from here, what Sarah's plans were; she kept her mouth shut. In a close friendship like theirs it is impossible to say one thing and mean something else because you're familiar with every intonation and can decipher every facial expression like a letter written in secret ink.

Now Helene's silence sounds different. It sounds as if she wasn't the one who stopped asking questions but Sarah.

It's early afternoon. Sarah places the cake in her bike basket and slips into her coat. She leaves a message for Leon on the kitchen work surface. When everyone was ordered to stay at home again, he gave up his room in a flat share. Why pay rent if he was always at Sarah's? And though at the start she'd imagined a casual affair with an attractive youngster people would envy her for, suddenly she had a steady boyfriend who wasn't even born when the Berlin Wall came down.

She turns her face to the sun as she cycles towards southern Salzburg. The air has changed, relegating winter to a memory, but it is still cool. There's already a feeling that it didn't last for so long, that it wasn't really all that bad. The first snowdrops are raising their heads, nature is coming alive, and now there's only grit on the road, no longer any ice. Every single crocus growing next to the dirty piles of remaining snow is a symbol of hope. Which is why it's especially tough to bury someone in the spring.

You could have waited, Sarah feels like telling Helene. Just a little longer. We'll be allowed out again soon. There'll be a vaccine. The sun's returning. One day the kids will have grown up. You only had to wait – how hard could that have been?

At a red light she wipes away her tears, which soak into her gloves. She turns off by the organic supermarket that used to be a shoe shop and here, hidden behind the buildings on the main road, are the blocks of flats. They are all alike apart from the colours of the paint, each uglier than the other. Helene used to live nearer the centre with Sarah and two other girls from university. In her memory, that flat was a wild mix of homemade mugs, lace panties, joints and social science textbooks. They listened to Joni Mitchell on repeat and had that famous picture of Susan Sonntag in a black leather jacket pinned up over the dining table. They took turns to look after Lola. Then Helene met Johannes, the boys were born and there aren't many affordable family flats in this city. Sarah parks her bike and carefully takes out the cake wrapped in aluminium foil. The estate is quiet. She'll have to walk past the balcony. She takes another route, a detour—there's no way she can walk across the asphalt in front of the building. She doesn't want to look either, but her head snaps round of its own accord. That's where she must have lain. Helene with the yellow dot in her left iris, Helene with those rough fingers and knobby toes. Helene who always chewed gum while driving, who at the age of thirteen said 'you old pig' to the physics teacher and was the only one who complained about him; Helene who desperately wanted to be a film director. The sensation in Sarah's chest is so cold that she hugs the cake as protection, and the foil crackles.

Her heart is pounding as she stands outside the front door with the key in her pocket. She has a copy for safety's sake, just in case Helene locked herself out, and started using it when Maxi was a baby. It was hard for Helene to jump up just then and come to the door with a squalling baby robbed of the nipple. Later on, when Maxi had started walking, every time Helene opened the door there'd be a crash in the background, followed by crying. So Sarah had got used to letting herself into the flat—Helene knew when she was coming, of course—and now Sarah puts her finger on the doorbell button. The lift smells of detergent and sour vegetables, and she buries her nose in her shoulder. Helene had fantastic breasts, even after three pregnancies. Sarah envied her because

her own bust is too big, too feminine, too attention-grabbing, always in the way. And because she thinks that a D cup automatically makes you look fat, no matter how you dress.

The lift doors open, and all three children are there, staring at her. Sarah is holding the cake in front of her like the comforter it is. Johannes is leaning against the door jamb, a flicker of relief in his eyes.

'I baked a cake,' Sarah says, taking in every detail in a flash. The blue bruise on Lola's forehead and her split lip, the fact that Maxi's jumper is on the wrong way round, Lucius rubbing his eyes—he can't have had his midday nap. The way the four of them are standing there illustrates even more clearly to Sarah that someone is missing, that there's an absence.

'I just wanted to pop this round for you,' she explains, thrusting the aluminium parcel at Johannes with a sudden urge to get rid of it.

'Chocolate,' she adds. The sound sticks in her throat.

'olate!' Lucius cries excitedly.

'Thank you,' Lola says without smiling.

'Want to come in,' Johannes asks, stepping aside, 'and have a piece with us?'

He's unshaven and has a sauce stain on his shirt. Parents of young children always have sauce stains on their shirts, like an identification tag. All four of them look at Sarah expectantly as if they're hoping for something from her. Sarah's throat is dry as she retreats, and the lift opens straight away when she pushes the button.

'I've got to go,' she says.

The hallway is grey and beige, the banister worn and it's pitch black when the light goes out. There are no sensors, and Sarah has often tripped over the shoes of some neighbours whose voices are way too loud through the flimsy walls.

The lift doors close with a jolt. On the way down Sarah presses her hands against her eyes so hard that white dots appear in the painful darkness. She still has her gloves on and thinks of the children's faces—Lola's at eye level, Maxi's and Lucius's lower down, all of them pale and waxy.

It's never about what's there; it's always about what's missing. And the terrible thing is that this new missing feeling won't go away now. She allows her mind to wander home, to Leon and his closed study door, to the roaming cat. She's about to push the front door open with her right elbow, but then she stops.

She talked to Helene on the phone just before dinner.

'I have to go,' Helene said. 'The potatoes are done.'

A thirty-seven-year friendship, and those are the last words Sarah remembers. The potatoes are done.

She turns around and gets back in the lift. She doesn't notice the smell any more. She removes her gloves and stuffs them in her coat pocket. She had never thought about the block being high enough for someone to jump off and die. Or that the balcony didn't have a real guard rail, just a thin, waist-high panel.

'Auntie Sa-a!' Lucius cries, unsurprised that she went away and has come back again. His mouth is full of crumbs already and so are his fingers.

'Always time for a piece of cake,' Sarah says to Johannes. 'I need to see if it tastes any good.'

Every good story starts with someone doing something unexpected that completely changes his or her life. In her hand hidden in her coat pocket Sarah is clasping the key she hasn't used.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

Lucius wriggles his hand into Sarah's as if it's the most natural thing in the world. Her hand is there so he takes it, goes with her and surrenders to her guidance and protection. Sarah has felt the warmth of his little fingers many times now and isn't sure what to make of it all. His trust makes her proud. His trust makes her afraid.

They go down the stairs, but it takes a while because the steps are too high for a child's feet and Lucius gets distracted every few yards by a stain on the wall, a stone on the tiled floor, a fly on the light switch.

'There!' he cries. 'There!'

They have time. Sarah has got better at planning and leaving early enough so she doesn't have to drag Lucius along to get him to kindergarten on time.

'Yes, that's a beetle,' she can therefore say. 'It's dead. Don't touch it.'

Lucius makes a buzzing sound. He looks golden with his blond curls under his hood. When he's in a good mood everything about him is cute—a sugar child—and people think Sarah is his mother. What else would they think? Same colour eyes, same colour hair, the small hand in the big one.

'Come on,' Sarah says softly, and they carry on.

They have a new routine. They're fully meshed and attuned. The daily timetable is intelligently structured, and Sarah knows what to expect. She even factors in surprises and if something doesn't go to plan, it no longer knocks her off her stride as much as it did at the beginning. And yet she is still so often off the pace. Because her steps beside Lucius feel so wrong—someone else ought to be taking them. Because she almost feels she's dissociating when Maxi comes charging towards her at the gate of his kindergarten—someone else ought to fold him in her arms. They have missed Helene all the more since they grew out of the most immediate state of shock and most brutal grief, since it has been possible to talk of normalisation. She is missed in the mornings when they wake up. Everything is wrong: the bed she slept in, the room she arranged, Sarah's clothes in Helene's wardrobe and what kind of bread did she used to buy for her children's breakfast? The less tangible Helene's presence becomes in the flat, in conversation, in Sarah's thoughts, the louder the pain of her absence becomes. Like the Nighthob in *The Neverending Story*, it perches on the back of Sarah's head and sinks its claws into the skin under her hairline, covering it with a perceptible chill.

She's filled with nagging worries too. She puts a fried egg on Lola's plate and fancies asking: Is that how Mum made them? She washes Maxi's hair carefully in the bathtub and wonders if he mentally compares her hands with Helene's with his eyes shut. She cleans Lucius's little bottom with wet wipes and would like to know if he notices any difference. She shies away from all the gestures Helene made and yet she has to do them. Every one of her movements is superimposed on all Helene's past movements, and they will never be identical.

But the children don't complain, so perhaps Sarah's fears are groundless. Maybe ultimately what children need is a fried egg, a loving hair wash or a fresh nappy. Someone to take them by the hand. At the baker's next to the kindergarten they buy two raisin croissants, and Lucius starts nibbling at his as soon as they're back outside. He clutches it with great seriousness. He never tires of eating this croissant from Monday to Friday, always enjoying it afresh, chatting away to the sales attendant who occasionally gives him a pretzel stick that he shares with his brother later. This is something else that fascinates Sarah – children's love of repetition. When does their desire to do the same thing over and over again disappear? When does it evolve into boredom and feeling stuck in a rut, making them want to break out of their unchanging everyday routine?

The kindergarten teachers make Sarah a little uneasy. Not because they eye Sarah up sceptically when they think she isn't looking and keep a close watch on how she puts Maxi's jacket on and ties his shoelaces, but because Sarah can't comprehend their choice of career. Why would anyone want to be surrounded by screaming children and red-cheeked rage? Why would anyone want to make chickens out of eggboxes and get their trousers slathered with snot? Especially as there's no money

in any kind of caring for other people, whether young or old. It might be a specific kind of altruism that convinced these women to learn to play guitar and recorder and use pinkening shears. It smells suspicious to Sarah.

She shakes off her discomfort by saying an extra-friendly hello. She smears a smile across her face to show that she has everything under control. It struck her a while ago that the kindergarten teachers call all the other mothers by their first names and only Sarah by her surname.

Maxi flings his arms around her neck in blissful relief and gives her a long, tight hug. It's as if he secretly fears that she won't turn up. And even though it hurts her not to be able to demonstrate her reliability to him, she knows it probably just isn't possible. After all, he has already had the experience of someone being there one day and gone the next.

She lets him hug her for as long as he likes. That's another thing she read in the advice booklet on relationships: if you hug a child, never let go first. Then she puts his hat on his head, takes his rucksack and says an overloud goodbye to the teachers, shouting out an additional, general 'Thank you!' As they leave Lucius gives Maxi the fresh croissant, and Maxi puts his arm around his brother's shoulder. Moments of fraternal harmony like this are rare, and Sarah feels a twinge of emotion in her throat.

On their way home she lets Maxi explain what they had for lunch, why his fingers are covered in sticky bits of cotton wool, who got told off for bringing an unhealthy snack to kindergarten—conversations with small kids are amazingly unsatisfying. They're more of a question-and-answer session than a conversation. Unequal. Lopsided. But Sarah still enjoys it when Maxi talks to her and tells her about his half-day without her because all he wants from her is to listen. Chatting to him is wonderfully unproblematic, there's nothing lurking between the lines, she doesn't have to interpret any signals or pay attention to body language as she does with adults who say one thing and mean something else. Maxi means everything he says. And it's the same the other way around: he listens to her. He asks a million questions each day, and Sarah does her best to give him answers that he can understand and she never says: You're a bit too young for that.

'Why don't coconuts grow here?' he asks. 'How can scientists tell what colour a dinosaur was if there are only fossils left?' he wonders. 'Why are there humans?' he whispers in the evening as he falls asleep.

Leading Lucius by one hand and Maxi by the other, they go home.

In late afternoon, just when they've finished building a cave out of blankets and cushions in the living room, Lola gets back from school. Sarah expects the usual eye roll or derogatory comment, but instead Lola crawls into their makeshift hiding place with them.

'I've got some jelly babies,' she says. 'Is there room for me as well?'

'Ye-e-s-s!' Lucius cries, quickly stuffing a handful of sweets into his mouth.

'Your mum and I,' Sarah begins, 'slept in a tent in her garden once.'

It's totally quiet in the den, the children's faces are tense, and Sarah hopes it's all right to talk about Helene. She doesn't know if this will tear open their wounds or if it's good for the children to remember their mother. Since Lola voices no objections, Sarah continues.

'And we watched something on telly just beforehand, even though we weren't allowed to. We crept into the lower part of the house where there was an old TV belonging to some uncle or other. MacGyver was on, a famous series. And it was pretty scary.'

She lowers her voice. It isn't completely dark under the blankets. Maxi stops chewing for a minute and reaches for Sarah's hand.

'In this episode MacGyver had to deal with a bomb builder. MacGyver was a hero who could get out of any tight spot and beat anyone. Anyway, the bomb planter came at night and he had a horrid face because he'd had an accident involving a bomb. You saw his hand every time he ran it across a window, a glass door or a tent, and then he killed someone. Your mum and I were so scared.'

An unexpected surge of sadness constricts Sarah's chest and she tries to breathe around it. She can see her there before her—Helene with striped socks, eating a red pepper like an apple, ringing

Sarah every evening to say goodnight even though they were going to see each other at school the next day.

‘When the episode had finished, we went out to the tent. We’d been begging our parents for weeks to let us sleep in the garden. But instead of enjoying the adventure, we lay there as stiff as boards, thinking of the terrible film. We couldn’t go back inside because we couldn’t admit that we’d been watching TV. And then, all of a sudden . . .’

She pauses and has to stifle a grin because even Lola’s eyes are wide and you could hear a pin drop in the clammy blanket den.

‘A hand ran along the side of the tent. Exactly like the bomb planter’s hand! We screamed, jumped up and bashed into each other in panic. There was someone outside!’

‘Who was it?’ Maxi asks in a creaky voice, squeezing Sarah’s hand with his sweaty fingers.

‘It was Helene’s mum,’ Sara replies with a laugh. ‘She wanted to see if everything was OK before she went to bed. And because we screamed so much, she started screaming too, so all three of us were screeching and Helene’s dad came running out of the house with a kitchen knife in his hand. We got into so much trouble!’

Lola grins, Maxi gasps in surprise and Lucius cries excitedly, ‘Ha!’

‘Helene’s parents scolded us the whole time. They said, “If you won’t listen, you’re going to learn the hard way”, and “Serves you right.”’

‘Maybe that’s why Mum didn’t like films with lots of suspense,’ Lola says, lifting the edge of the blanket by the den entrance to let some air in.

‘Maybe,’ Sarah answers without mentioning that Helene loved horror films—the gorier the better. That only changed when she had kids. When Lola was born, some of that harder side to Helene wore off. She could no longer bear the sight of shredded corpses, nasty scenes, bloodbaths.

‘Another story?’ Maxi asks. Sarah hesitates. Lola nods and even Lucius sits still, rattling the packet of jelly babies, so she tells them about some of the pranks she and Helene used to get up to. Dumping a bag of rubbish outside the mysterious uncle’s front door. Telling the girl next door to lick the ice on the iron fence pole. Getting caught shoplifting glitter pens.

The hiding place where they are huddling close together is a refuge from reality. From the knowledge that out there, outside the den, Helene no longer exists.

Later, Sarah puts some fishfingers in the over and mashes some potatoes, almost without lumps this time. The boys are in their grouchy pre-bedtime mood, arguing with each other; Lola is scrolling about on her phone. Johannes should’ve been home long ago but he hasn’t been in touch and didn’t pick up when Sarah tried to ring him. The meal is a mess as usual. A spoonful of hot mash lands on Maxi’s cheek and he wails. Sarah cools the spot with the sachet of blue gel they always keep handy in the fridge. Lucius drops two fishfingers on the floor and because she can’t take her eyes off her screen, Lola treads on them. Even good days tend to wobble towards the end and veer off into exhaustion, arguing and shouting. It amazes Sarah that don’t just let themselves be put to bed when they’re tired but get hysterically worked up, their eyes feverish and overcomes by a kind of mania that eventually gives way to tears.

When Lucius and Maxi are finally asleep, Lola joins Sarah in the kitchen and helps her clear up.

‘Thanks for those stories about Mum today.’

Sarah puts the plates in the dishwasher and studies this almost grown-up woman who comes across as so outspoken and self-confident. It’s easy to forget that she’s just as vulnerable as everyone else. Sarah moves towards Lola, puts her arms around her and hugs her close, the way Maxi does, unashamed of his desire for contact. Lola returns her embrace, resting her head on Sarah’s shoulder. They’re the same height now and it won’t take much for Lola to outgrow her. They stand there wordlessly, each sunk in her own thoughts but perhaps thinking the same thing. Lola lets go and smiles at Sarah, her eyes pools of silent sadness.