Caroline Peters

ANOTHER LIFE

Ein anderes Leben

- 70,000 copies sold!
- A very personal, impactful, and touching debut.
- On a daughter's questions to her mother – and to herself.
- English sample available soon.

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Who was Hanna? This woman often defied expectations. She married her three college friends one after the other and had three daughters. She was always lost in poetry, which made her forget the daily grind. She navigated between her family's expectations and her own desires, rarely finding time for herself.
Many years after Hanna's death, her youngest daughter looks back on her mother's life and her own 1970s and 1980s childhood in the Rhineland. Hanna ensured each day was different from the norm – a life balancing bourgeois and bohemian. From champagne and Pushkin in bed on Sunday mornings to visiting the library where her mother worked and flirted with shy students, Hanna's life was unique. They played poker under the Christmas tree and took adventurous rides in a Citroën 2CV. Eventually, Hanna decided to leave her family and start a new life on her own.
Caroline Peters tells the story with sensitivity and ease, capturing a daughter's questions to her late mother and herself about forging her own path.

Caroline Peters, born in 1971, is one of the most important German actresses. After studying acting at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Saarbrücken, she became a member of the ensemble at some of the most prestigious theaters, including the Berliner Schaubühne and the Wiener Burgtheater. Caroline Peters has been in many movies and TV shows, earning numerous awards along the way. In 2016 and 2018, she was voted Actress of the Year by the magazine *Theater heute*. *Ein anderes Leben* is her first novel.

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Caroline Peters

EIN ANDERES LEBEN

English sample translation by Jamie Lee Searle

ONE

Today is my father's funeral, and for me, it's my mother's resurrection. There's no other way I can put it. She died so many years before him. There were so many years in which they no longer knew each other. And now one thing's supposed to be connected to the other? Bow is dead, that's sad enough. He died alone in his house on Zikadenweg, surrounded by his books, his papers, his collections. Caring for himself towards the end, and sometimes looked after by his slightly nervous and ill-at-ease daughter – me.

We stand there by the grave, disordered, scattered, the entire family. My sisters Laura and Lotta with their husbands and children. And their fathers.

My sister Laura stands next to her father Klaus.

My sister Lotta next to her father Roberto.

Intermingled behind, the husbands with the children.

I stand alone between them.

Klaus, Papa, Roberto and Hanna went to university together in Heidelberg, and Hanna made it her mission to marry one of them after the other and have a child with each. My father was the last in turn. We used to all live with him. First, he became an architect, then he built himself a house, and a family.

Today he's being buried. I've often wondered how awful this moment would be. But it's not as bad as I imagined. As sad as it is, we're getting through it. None of us is falling apart, as I'd sometimes feared when I pictured it, on days when everything seemed bad anyway. The days when you visualise something even worse so the reality can't come as a shock.

We're standing here, and it's cold.

The wind is blowing hard here at the cemetery in Hessen. This is where he wanted to be buried, within his birth family circle. Those weren't really his words. Bow had said "family", within his family circle. I added the "birth" bit myself, so as not to be excluded from what Bow called his family. This is my view of things, out here by the grave he's about to be lowered into. Wasn't that how he felt at the end of his life?

Before us, beneath the ground, lie Ramspecks. All those who have died since 1860, the year when one of Papa's ancestors laid out this grave. The Ramspecks, the family my father left and with whom he'll now share eternity. Without us, because we're all still alive. And without his wife. Without Hanna.

Hanna is hundreds of kilometres away, in the depths of the Baltic Sea. In a corked bottle, filled with her ashes and weighed down with a little lead, to keep it on the seabed and stop it from bobbing around up on the waves.

And yet that's the sole purpose of a message in a bottle, for it to swim on the waves, to be discovered and fished out, otherwise no one will find it, Laura had said back when we read Hanna's will together. "But Hanna asked for lead, so her message can roam the ocean floor and be invisible to everyone above the surface," I replied. Lotta nodded, in a rare moment of agreement.

It's not very sustainable, Laura's children protested, and I got into a half-hearted argument with them. They were already grown up when Hanna died. Laura had become a mother for the first time in her early twenties, like Hanna had with me. I had also fallen pregnant at twenty, but at that age I didn't want a child. These twenty-year-old mothers in the family, I thought to myself back then, look what's come of it, and without any significant emotional doubts or male accompaniment, off I went to the doctor.

"What does that matter? Shanghai and Bangkok aren't exactly sustainable either, and they still exist," I said to Laura's children. My argument, which wasn't one, failed to convince them. Our mother's wish – their grandmother's – to be buried on the ocean floor, stood empty in the room. I was of the opinion that a person's last wish is a law that the family are obliged to obey. Ashes mixed with lead, that's how she wanted to be immortalised. The younger generation thought sustainability was more important than the individual. My sisters considered the wish impractical and extravagant. Laura, who was usually amenable to grand symbolic gestures, thought Hanna had gone too far this time. Who did she think she was, the Queen of Sheba? No, I said, and nor was she the princess with the pea, but maybe she was a woman who, in the last years of her life, had seen herself as a message in a bottle with lead, and who now wanted to make an invisible memorial from the ashes of her body, a bottle and a cork.

Silence. I had contradicted Laura. In front of her children. My sister's crew watched to see how their captain would react. Laura's expression was unreadable. There was no way she could agree with me, out of principle, and certainly not in front of the children. I was younger, and therefore – in the Ramspeck family logic – inferior. Nor could she simply say "that's a fair point", thereby at least partially acknowledging that I wasn't talking complete nonsense. Not in front of her people.

There was a time when I could easily read Laura's expression. She's the eldest of all of us. I was still little when she moved out and began her own life. During my childhood, it was important

to know what she was thinking, even when she wasn't saying a word. She seemed to know something about our parents which had escaped Lotta and I, so I tried to fill in the gaps by watching her. To this day, she acts all-knowing. And back then, to me, she was. But ever since her children had grown up and begun to read facial expressions with their own eyes, instead of blindly obeying their parents, Laura's had changed. She had become unreadable.

The crew looked at her and waited for a reaction. Laura's face remained unchanged, or so it seemed to me. Mimama has taken things too far, they said, no one should approach their own death in such an unsustainable way. Burning the wooden coffin was bad enough for the air and environment, and now to top it all off, they were supposed to mix her remains with lead and throw them into the sea? A glass bottle like that can shatter so quickly, and the lead would be carried across the Baltic Sea bed and be eaten by fish, which would then be eaten by humans.

No one needed to transform themselves into a poetic memorial at the bottom of the sea, said Laura, staring into the distance. Had she simply taken on her children's "no", or had the children read a decisive "no" in her face, and only I hadn't seen it?

We left it like that. The younger generation in the family today are far more environmentally aware than Laura's children were back then. Nowadays, when we iron wrapping paper and bows on Christmas and birthdays like our grandmothers did after the war, we feel pretty good about ourselves. So these arguments are often considered the most convincing. Back when Hanna died, that wasn't the case. And yet back then we managed to do something we're no longer capable of – find solutions. We were convinced we would think of something for Hanna's remains. And we did, but not collectively.

Laura is standing next to her father Klaus. Klaus had been in love with Hanna since the eighth grade. Even before that, really, but it was in the eighth grade that he finally understood his feelings. "That was when he suddenly realised what a girl is, and what a boy is." said Hanna when she told us daughters about it. She smiled and winked. For Klaus, marrying Hanna had been a logical step in his life, as logical as putting one foot in front of the other while walking. The fact that Hanna had so quickly fallen pregnant with his child had been a mistake. Not the child, but the timing. He couldn't have imagined anyone else becoming his wife. Hanna still remembered his father, and he hers. That made them family, forever. He was very happy in his second marriage, later on, but Laura remained his only child. To him, marriage was marriage, and family was family.

Hanna and Klaus's mothers, Grandma Tita and Grandma Dörgge, were friends, or perhaps they were better described as "co-wives". The men had left Thuringia together to join the Wehrmacht in Berlin, then later moved to Silesia with their young families, and onwards to the east during the war, from which they never returned. The division the young husbands served in had organised the invasion of Poland. I found that out later, as an adult. The plan had been to advance further and further eastwards, and every couple of years the two young mothers would follow on with their steadily growing horde of children. The first settlers.

Most of Grandma Tita's stories began with "When we lost Papi in the war…" As a child, I could never picture how that might have happened. Hadn't he managed to follow on, after the hasty departure from Neiße, as Russian cannons thundered in the background? This Papi was so alive in the family legend that I assumed he had simply not been found again, and was now living somewhere in secret as a very old man. He's the only father in the family called Papi; all the others were called Papa or Father. There was only one Papi.

Grandma Tita, Hanna's mother, was the children's favourite. She knew that, and liked to make jibes at the other grandmothers in our family. Particularly at Grandma Dörgge, her friend, nicknamed "the Dirge". Klaus too, the pale, fatherless son, was the Dirge. Laura was always very offended when Grandma Tita said that.

One night, Grandma Tita was awoken by her very first telephone. A voice from far away told her that her husband had fallen in the war. Tita shook ten-year-old Hanna awake and sent her three houses down to the Dörgges. Her husband had impressed upon her that, should he fall in Russia, she could be sure the war was lost, and if so, she had to leave at once and take the four children westwards. A place of refuge had already been agreed at the start of the war, a farm belonging to some distant relatives in Upper Hesse. Hanna rang the doorbell to drag Grandma Dirge out of bed, and told her Grandma Tita had said they had to leave immediately. Shocked, Grandma Dörgge woke up Klaus and his younger brother, while the baby in her arms slept through everything. Klaus and Hanna walked hand-in-hand back to Grandma Tita, who had already stuffed the car with her own children. Hanna only just had time to pull on warm clothes. She quickly said goodbye to her dolls and teddies, which she wasn't allowed to take with her. She put them in the window so they could watch her go. And she placed a book on each of their laps, so they had something to read until Hanna returned. The dachshund also remained behind with the dolls and books. Hanna stared at the dog through the back window until he was swallowed by the darkness.

This tableau, this backward view of Puz the dachshund alongside the reading dolls, is something I've inherited.

I watched Lotta standing there next to her father Roberto. She really doesn't look anything like him (Hanna said as much too), but she does look like Roberto's mother, so that clarifies things. More so than with us, the other daughters, because we don't bear any resemblance to our fathers either. Lotta stands there by Papa Bow's grave, looking beautiful in that uniquely Sicilian way, bathing in the moment. Painful farewell is one of her favourite poses. Roberto studies his daughter, looking gentle and lenient. Even now he's older, he's a really handsome man. After his marriage to Hanna, Roberto went on to have a large family. Lotta has an unimaginable – to me, at least – number of half siblings scattered between Sicily and Vienna, the birthplace of Roberto's second wife. The headquarters of his family's publishing house are still in Syracuse. Allegedly, there are also illegitimate Robertos and Robertinas, and in weak moments Lotta googles herself into a stalking frenzy in her attempt to track down potential siblings. "Before they appear next to me by his grave one day," she says. Next to ME, not next to US. Roberto belongs only to Lotta. Bow and Hanna belong to all of us.

Hanna was twice divorced when she saw Bow again; divorced from his closest university friends, Klaus and Roberto. Hanna and Bow ran into each other by chance that day, on Berlin's Kantstrasse. They hadn't seen one another for many years. Hanna was living with Laura and Lotta in the city and working for a translation firm. She had done a doctorate in Slavic and Germanic studies and learnt various Slavic languages, including Old Church Slavonic. This was all a little too much for the translation firm. And this "too much" was tangible and painful for Hanna.

Bow had travelled to Berlin for an international architecture congress. It's the biggest city there is, Hanna always said, and yet you always run into people you know on the street. They went to the "Paris Bar" together. Hanna had heard about it from her neighbour, an actor. In his stories, the Paris Bar sounded like life lived to the fullest. A place where you could read and write, argue and drink. A place where, night after night, young people gathered, young people who made art among the city's ruins, and who, more than anything, wanted to be art. That's how Hanna imagined it, at least. Bow didn't need to be asked twice. He would have gone anywhere with Hanna.

Don't you have to go to your congress, asked Hanna, once the first bottle of wine was suddenly empty. What's it about, she asked.

"It's just a trade fair," said Bow, who at this point in time wasn't yet Papa Bow, but instead adorned with his bourgeois name, Peter Ramspeck. He still had to earn "Papa" and "Bow". The fair was about architecture and construction. Didn't she need to go home to her daughters, he asked.

"Klaus's mother is looking after the girls," said Hanna. "She comes for a week every month. She's very fond of Laura, and now of Lotta too." Apparently Lotta had been a little too dark for her in the beginning, but she had grown accustomed to her.

Peter asked after Klaus, and Hanna told him a bit about his second marriage, the nice woman he had found, and about how the two of them had built a life together. Perhaps she was surprised that Peter knew so little about his old friend, but she didn't comment.

He had recently visited Roberto in Syracuse, said Peter. The amphitheatre there was wonderful, and Roberto's parents' house an absolute dream.

"I know," said Hanna, "I got married there."

"That's true," said Peter. "I remember."

Shortly before he went to the Paris Bar with Hanna, Peter had set up an architectural firm in Cologne. In the years beforehand, he had worked hard and saved relentlessly. And now he'd bought a piece of land that he wanted to build on. It was situated at the edge of the inner city, in a spot where, thirty years previously, a Jewish businessman had had a home built for himself and his wife. They ran a delicatessen in the city centre. After their second daughter was born, they had to give up their house and business and flee to Palestine. A few years later, all of it was bombed away, and that was how Peter came to own the land.

Bow had always had the least money when they were students, because even back then he was saving for his house. While Roberto frittered away his Sicilian mother's money with Hanna and Klaus, Peter spent those shared nights in Heidelberg quietly nursing one single milkshake. His father had disinherited him. Peter was supposed to have become a doctor, like all the other male Ramspecks before him. But he'd wanted to get away. Away from Alsfeld, away from centuries of family tradition – Dr Ramspeck from Alsfeld in Oberhessen. The Ramspecks had lived there, as pharmacists and doctors, since the mid-seventeenth century. Their house had been the same one for two hundred years: the Ramspeck house on the market square, half-timbered with tiny windows and creaking floorboards. Very pretty, very idyllic; and to Peter, a prison.

From the living room window of the Ramspeck house, there was a view onto the half-timbered town hall, the square, and the pillory. During the Middle Ages, an iron ring had been fastened to one of the square's walled corners, to be placed around delinquents' necks. Anyone made to stand in it could be spat on, cursed or bullied by the Alsfeld residents. On family visits, we all lined up by the wall to take turns putting the iron ring around our necks, pulled funny faces and took photos of each other.

Sometimes Peter would watch Klaus and Hanna on the square from the living room window. He knew them from school, but never spoke to them. He was a year below them, and they were refugees. When he ran into them again in Heidelberg, Peter had just transferred from medicine to architecture. They got to talking in the milk bar. No longer the Alsfeld boy and the refugees, but all three of them newcomers to the city, students, young people, emancipated from their parents, the war and the pillory. All of them finally away from home, away from their parents' pasts, from the concerns of not finding enough to eat nor fuel to heat the house. It was the first time they were allowed to be young, to read all day long and talk and sometimes even smoke. They shared beer and milkshakes. They spent a lot of time together and described the glittering careers that lay before them. Academic careers, artistic, traditional. The previous generation had left a surplus of teaching positions, jobs and opportunities. Everything that had come before them was wrong, stained and guilt-ridden. But once they had distanced themselves from all that, even just through their presence in a new place, through leaving their mothers, and in Bow's case, his father, everything improved. Hanna was the first in her family to go to university. But that was only the beginning. Everything lay ahead of her.

One day, a young man in the canteen dropped his soup from his tray and onto Hanna's coat. From then on, there were four of them. Roberto's Italian heritage gave the group that additional aura of new horizons. They were no longer just German – and who wanted to be that? They could look forwards and everywhere, and imagine and wish that from now on everything would be different. They were young and saw luck on their side. They were from Hessen and Italy, and they built for themselves whatever they could build.

"What are you going to build?" Hanna asked her old friend Peter in the Paris Bar, smiling flirtatiously. "A house?"

"Yes," said Peter earnestly. "A house."

What would it look like, Hanna wanted to know.

"A bungalow with three children's bedrooms, a study and a large American-style kitchen," said Bow. A kitchen counter, dining table, and that's it. No living room. He hated German living rooms. They weren't contemporary.

Who would he share it with, asked Hanna, who wanted to know everything about Peter's love life.

"With you," said Peter. "With you and Laura and Lotta." And perhaps they would have another child, he added.

"Then I went quiet," Hanna would always say at this point in the story, which made us laugh, because Hanna was never quiet. Only at that moment, in the Paris Bar. "We ordered another bottle of wine," she said, "and the rest is history." Our history. How everything began. Hanna and Bow often told us daughters who we were and where we all came from.

"Then Papa pulled a pencil out of his jacket pocket and began scribbling on a piece of paper." This was how the story continued. "It's going to look like this," he said, drawing the house we all grew up in. He wanted it to be flat and L-shaped, and it was. He drew the most beautiful house he could imagine, for the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. But he forgot to build a room for her. And this absent room got stuck in between the foundation stones, like a tiny seed, and grew and grew. With every year we lived there as a family, it grew to become a mighty, concrete-engulfing tree with hundreds of boughs. Bow's dream came true, but with the foundation stone of the house he had planted the root of failure. This part of the story isn't in the one we were told.

My two sisters have Klaus and Roberto in their lives, but Bow was their father. In our family, fathers are treasured and taken seriously. I often say that we could have made more of our maternal line. My sisters disagree, if only because I'm the youngest, and the youngest is never right. They learnt family hierarchy from the Ramspecks. They, who aren't related to the Ramspecks with any fibre of their being, are significantly more attached to their centuries-old traditions and ways than the former Peter and I. Laura and Lotta love the Ramspeck family history and the social graces that came of it. They love roots. They like to ignore everything that was produced by Hanna and Tita's line, and are Ramspecks through and through. But perhaps that will change now. Perhaps Bow's death will unleash locked-away memories of our mother in my sisters too.

A Buddhist friend told me at Hanna's cremation that our relationship to the dead remains dynamic. Ever since, I've been waiting for this dynamism to arise. Hanna has a place in our family history as the crazy one, the one who leaned too far out of the window in every sense. But even the dead we live with have to die eventually. And so perhaps the dead crazy woman, with whom Laura and Lotta's children grew up through our stories, will be buried today with Bow. Perhaps a new dead Hanna will rise up for all of us, with new stories. And perhaps Hanna's soldier father can finally die today too. After all, he's been dead for eighty years now, and yet he still accompanies us like he always has.

Hanna hated funerals. Particularly the sound it makes when the earth shovelled by each party guest clatters onto the coffin lid. That's what she called funeral goers – party guests – and she was always amazed that everyone dresses so alike. "And what's the soil thing about, anyway?" she used to grumble before every burial. "Is it a way of knocking on the lid to make sure you're actually dead? Is everyone afraid you might be lying there awake in the coffin and that no one's noticed? Do they think that might happen to them? The dead have a right to rest in peace. Does no one respect that?"

The day before Grandma Tita's funeral, the five of us were sitting down to dinner. Hanna was worked up, launching into her rant, and Papa Bow tried to stop her.

"The falling earth is symbolic."

"Earth is a fact. Not a symbol. It's an acoustic fist punch. A clip round the ear. Dirt that you literally throw into the ground after someone, and the action is underlined with a loud clatter. Seriously, who puts their hands in dirt while they're alive? You might when you're a baby in the park, or when you're gardening, but other than that?"

"The mourners can't fill in the grave themselves, so they're symbolically helping the gravediggers," Bow tried to explain.

"Why should I help? I don't help the waiters in restaurants by symbolically carrying the plates, do I? And besides, how does it help? Either you help them bury the damn coffin or you don't. Flinging a clod of soil on top of it doesn't really qualify as help, if you ask me."

Bow wasn't able to placate her. That was essentially his approach, and we daughters had all adopted it: placating Hanna when she was vehemently saying or thinking something. All the way down to her grandchildren, who had tried to placate her even in her final wish, we had all internalised this. And then we would pass Hanna's ideas and plans off as our own. It's a shame

I'm only realising this now, so many years after her death. Otherwise, I might have been able to take her seriously for once. But that would have contradicted the family consensus too strongly.

For the burial of Hanna's urn, we ordered rose petals instead of earth. Something for each party guest to flutter after her, a final wave, like with a handkerchief. Delicate and soft in the air. But the undertakers forgot the rose petals. No, actually Lotta forgot them. She had seized all the practical tasks of the planning for herself, but was then so absorbed by her newborn, just weeks old at the time, that a great deal got forgotten. Rose petals are plucked flowers; prepared by florists, not gravediggers. The urn burial was set for Ash Wednesday, which presented additional problems for the preparations. Florist, funeral home – everything was shut. There were people in carnival masks everywhere, singing and swaying, unwilling to tend to anything. And we daughters, irritable, argumentative, and, in Lotta's case, breastfeeding, battling our way through the city's unfettered streets.

Then came Ash Wednesday. We stood by the grave, and there was nothing there. No flowers, no rose petals, no pail of earth. A brief pause as the mistake became apparent. Lotta, the one responsible, was the first to react. She leaned over, scraped some dirt from the cemetery path and tossed it in. It didn't make a sound; there was too little of it. But the sight was ridiculous. Lotta, her daughter strapped against her belly, scrabbling around on a cold wintry path and scattering a few grains of sand onto the urn. I tried to stop the other guests from copying her by handing out tissues and petals from the flowers in my small bouquet.

"Why do you even have a bouquet with you?" asked Lotta in annoyance. "We said I'd get the flowers!"

"And, did you?"

"Lotta has maternal amnesia, leave her be. You have no idea what it's like," Laura whispered in my ear.

Both sisters were suddenly furious with me. My thoughts had evidently been written on my face in capital letters again; my gaze at Lotta by the open grave, as she threw dirt in after our mother, must have loudly and clearly expressed disapproval. Lotta's face was cursing me in every colour. If her baby hadn't been in the sling between us, I would have felt her palm on my face. Lotta had no inhibitions when it came to lashing out in front of others.

I went over to the hole and threw air in after Hanna. Laura did the same, and in her uncertainty put on Hanna's poker face, which she had tried to copy even when she was a child. She couldn't find one of her own.

Hanna's had been perfect. Transparent and dismissive all at once. Hanna was also an excellent poker player and liked gambling with us daughters on Christmas Eve. Among our presents, we had often received money from all manner of relatives. We had numerous family members on the different sides who weren't necessarily linked to all of us, and who took different approaches to the situation. Hanna considered it unjust if, at midnight, one of her daughters counted up the little coins that had fallen out of ugly Christmas cards, and had more than the others. That gave her the idea of playing for money, right there and then. She had been playing since she was a child. Perhaps, on the school yard and post-war black-market, lots of things used to be decided with cards. Hanna had had three younger siblings and felt certain parental responsibilities. And hunger. She used to speak so vividly of how they'd "scraped through" in the post-war years. She was horrified by our modern approach to shopping, and when we came home laden with bags, she would laugh at us contemptuously. She'd had to wangle, graft and swindle for everything, and she was proud of it. I wondered how much butter and how many eggs or cigarettes she had acquired as bartering goods by playing poker.

Hanna had this very particular facial expression when she was playing: deeply concentrated, fully relaxed, in the zone. Like a tightrope walker. Not one false move, her inner desire for victory told her. At the same time, her expression held a kind of smiling superiority. She knew we couldn't see through her. She was our mother, and that meant she was always bluffing. With everything. Laura tried to emulate Hanna's expression, but never succeeded, and she didn't know what to do with the cards anyway. I didn't either, and I wasn't hungry enough. Back then, I could only imagine money in the context of how many lollies, sour tongues and salmiak pastilles it could buy me. The sisters' bundles of money exceeded my arithmetic abilities, and that made them abstract.

Once, Lotta had snapped at me, deeply offended by how much Hanna had won: "It's impossible to play with you, you just don't get what bluffing is. It's always obvious when you've got a good hand. And when you take a risk, everyone around the table knows you're going to win. We'll never beat Mama like this." I ran off to my room in tears. Hanna ended the game and shared the hoard evenly among her three daughters, after which Lotta also ran crying to her room. Before that, she'd had the most money, and now she had exactly the same as the others. Mama was Mama enough to then go from bed to bed, distributing chocolate drops and humming, calming words.

My mother's hand on my head, jittery and nervous. Sometimes the clasp of her bracelet gets caught in my hair and tugs it. But she continues to hum and murmur, aware of the maternal power of physical soothing.

Today I wonder how she saw herself – as Hanna and not as Mama – when she sat there, soft and kind, on the edge of our beds. All-knowing? All-protecting? Or instead, as irritated and drained? Did I drain her when I clutched at my teddy, crying and whimpering, wanting to be reassured? Or was I her muse, and she actually the one who was draining me? Was the made-up lullaby she hummed to me something she would later clothe with words and put down on paper? A poetic triumph that had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with the fact that her youngest child was ashamed by her inability to bluff at Christmas poker?

I'm just as clumsy with my hands as Hanna. But unlike my mother, I don't have a daughter who hates me for it. When you're little, you get dressed and undressed by your mother day after day. This means dealing with zips, knots and buttons. My mother fumbled with all these hurdles; with impatience, rage and energy. This constant, frantic energy.

Once, when she picked me up from kindergarten, she struggled with the zip on my anorak. Our heads banged together, her sweating face directly in front of mine, breathing heavily. I stood in my brown jacket with the yellow-and-orange stripes in the corridor of the kindergarten in front of the lily of the valley box. I felt hot. I was already wearing my hood, which meant my vision was restricted. I could barely see the other children, who were also in the process of being stuffed into waterproof clothing. Hanna had a cheerful, entertaining voice, and the other mothers were captivated by her charm. She dominated the small group with her presence and radiance, and continued to fumble with my zip. The more difficult it was, the more irritated she became. Sometimes she paused for a moment to help other children put on a shoe or pull out a toy from beneath the bench. I watched in silence. Then I quietly began to cry. I was so hot in the kindergarten's over-heated hallway. Hanna tried to comfort me by stroking a finger across my cheek, but scratched me with a torn fingernail. "It's nothing!" she said, when I flinched. Suddenly the zip glided at the right place, but so unexpectedly that Hanna wrenched the little zipper upwards far too forcefully, smacking the back of her hand against the underside of my chin. A proper hook to the chin, you might say. At half past midday, at the end of a German kindergarten day in the 1970s.

For Hanna, a chin hook was an insignificant "it's nothing!" event. I felt relieved once I was finally sitting on the back seat of her Citroën 2CV, and she was so preoccupied by the jammed gear-lever that I entirely slipped from her already-patchy attention. I pushed down my hood and slowly, carefully and insistently pulled at the zip. Millimetre by millimetre, I opened my jacket, but left it done up at the bottom. No matter how hot I would get in the car, there had been enough fumbling for one day. I would only completely undo the zip again once I knew for sure I wouldn't need the anorak for the remainder of the day. Probably once I was changing into my pyjamas. Putting it on had cost me so much that wearing it had to be worth it. One day I would be grown up enough to do up the zip myself. And then everything would get better.

My father is going to the grave in the same way he lived, I think to myself at the funeral. Humble and boastful all at once. The speech being read out is one he composed himself. It's many years old and doesn't seem to have been updated. It's about his book on architecture and construction, and how intensively he worked on it. He must have written these words shortly after Hanna moved out. Or shortly before she moved in with him?

A child by a new man every couple of years, that's how Hanna spent her twenties. First Laura, then Lotta. I kept everybody waiting – that was how Bow liked to explain the large gap between me and my sisters. At forty years of age, Hanna had given up the concept of "one child per man" and wanted a second with Bow. When that didn't happen, reproduction was ceased.

The young Peter was delighted by baby Laura, the first of the clique, back in the Heidelberg days. When Hanna then had a child with Roberto, a lightbulb must have gone on for Peter-Bow.

The second wedding took place in Syracuse, near the amphitheatre. Hanna was seven months pregnant. "No one noticed, I was so slim back then," she said. I'm not sure whether that's true, or whether that was healthy. According to Hanna's telling, this second marriage was sealed from the moment her hand, guided by the beautiful Sicilian man's hand, was supposed to cut the wedding cake. The two hands lay on top of one another, Roberto's on Hanna's, as she held the long, sharp knife firmly in her grip. The sparkling new wedding rings touched. The bride's veil blew into the groom's face. He fumbled with it awkwardly while relatives took photos, and the beaming couple prolonged the moment when the knife would slice through the delicate marzipan icing. The moment came, the knife stopped, Hanna pressed harder, Roberto pulled Hanna's hand in the other direction. There was a skirmish, audible sounds of astonishment, and I believe that

time even stopped for a few seconds. And then the cake flew in a high arc through the air – it was made of cardboard. Roberto had known the whole time. He'd ordered it for budgetary reasons, but wanted to conceal it from his glowing, pregnant signora. He was so intent on concealing it that he tried to guide her hand with the knife himself as she cut into the sugar-coated cardboard. He believed that, with the gentle pressure of his expressive and incredibly beautiful hand, he could genuinely convince her that the cardboard was cake. He couldn't. The cake flew and flew.

Ute, Hanna's best friend, later painted an oil picture of that moment and gave it to Hanna for her fiftieth birthday. I can still remember how hurt I felt when I saw it, because it was the wedding day of other parents, of a marriage that didn't last long. A marriage in which deceit resided from the very first moment, a husband's belief that he could cheat his wife into believing anything. Ute brought the painting over shortly before Mama moved out of our place, Bow's place. Did this cake of betrayal exist?

We sisters often feel our way through this question from one story to the next, with anecdotes from the family chronicle, but to this day we've never found a satisfying answer. Retelling the anecdotes together is complicated. Memories form the foundation of our biographies. If our memories start to diverge, things get tense. The air thins. Or it becomes as thick as pudding. I wasn't the only one to inherit the young Hanna's gaze, staring out of the back window of the car at the dachshund, dolls and books. In tense situations, when we're searching for ways to vent, we can fall back on that and have a cracking argument. Was the dachshund wearing a collar? And if so, what did it look like? Only the motif was passed down to us, and each of us painted our own picture.

"The foot out of the bed" is one of the more peaceful anecdotes. In our childhood it was one of our favourite stories, an important component of the family lore, often told lovingly and happily, both a kind of warning against alcohol and an encouragement for totally losing control.

"We hadn't long been married, and were on our way home from a post-exam party," Bow would usually begin.

"Roberto's finals," Hanna would laugh loudly, with a sharp lift in the middle of the laugh. You couldn't tell whether she was laughing through some inner affirmation to Roberto, or somehow mocking and exposing Bow.

"We'd all written off the possibility of him ever sitting the exam, let alone passing it," said Bow.

The harmless swipes at Roberto were part of the anecdote. Roberto the Italian, the heir, and, light-heartedly, the rogue. Bow, by contrast, was the disinherited runaway who'd had to work hard for everything he later owned. His book about architecture and construction hadn't written itself. He was content with himself and his success and wanted everyone to know it. We daughters beamed at him and hung on his every word.

"But one day Roberto actually pulled it off, and he invited us to the Heidelberg milk bar to celebrate, right where we'd begun our studies."

"We didn't begin our studies in the milk bar," said Hanna.

"No, but that's where we met," said Bow.

"We met Roberto in the canteen. The milk bar was where we watched television together, on the only TV in all of Heidelberg. We blew the paper covers from our straws onto the ceiling, and they stuck to it. The entire ceiling was one big mass of stuck straw covers, swaying back and forth in the breeze from the fan."

The only television in all of Heidelberg – that, at least, I'm willing to go along with. But the straw covers stuck to the ceiling? I never believed this part of the story. I tried with numerous friends to reconstruct the ceiling scenario, in ice cream parlours with names like Jesolo or Venezia. Not once did we get one of the bits of paper to stick to the ceiling. What kind of straws would they be, what kind of superlight paper would allow the little cover to fly up to the ceiling? Or was the ceiling so low you could touch it with your hand, and Papa Bow could only stand in the milk bar if he stooped down? What was the sticky ceiling supposedly made of? We never contradicted our parents on the story. And why would we, because it's beautiful. I don't know what a milk bar is either, so what do straw covers on the ceiling matter?

"Your mother had one glass of wine after the other, and then she was singing loudly out on the street. She danced with Roberto, and stepped on my feet."

"Only 'cause you're so tall. I had to stand on your feet to dance with you."

Lotta loves this story more than Laura and I, because Hanna and Roberto dance together in it.

"And then what happened?" one of us daughters had to ask at this point. This was part of the highly-polished anecdote. We had to actively participate; only then did it really get good.

"What happened next? Your mother stepped on my feet, recited a limerick to Roberto and then fell over."

"She fell over? Just like that, on the street?"

"Thankfully Klaus was standing behind her."

Entrance Laura's father. Finally. Sometimes Bow managed to introduce him sooner. Laura was always eagerly awaiting it, and when it took too long, she introduced him herself with introductory questions like: "And Klaus wasn't drunk, right?" Feeble, Laura, so feeble, I thought later, once we were a bit older.

"Klaus was trying to stop Roberto from climbing a lamppost when your mother stumbled into his back. He was trying to dissuade Roberto by talking to him, instead of just grabbing him by the arm. He was slightly afraid of Roberto's strength."

Lotta would usually grin at this point. Laura's father Klaus was afraid of her papa, Roberto.

"I don't believe that," said Laura. "How could Roberto have been that strong? All he ever did was sit in the library and study."

"Evidently not, otherwise it wouldn't have taken him so long to graduate."

"Nonsense, you can study and do sport, it's only you Hessian cry-babies that can't!" Lotta would protest. This was part of the ritual too, even the expression "Hessian cry-baby", which was never used otherwise. It existed only in the collaborative telling of this anecdote.

"Your mother fell into Klaus's back and slowly slumped down to the ground. Klaus and I tried to help her up, but Roberto was quicker. Instead of jumping up the lamppost, he laid down next to your mother on the street. As though they were in bed together. He plucked a cigarette out of his pocket, lit it and put it between your mother's lips."

"'You don't even smoke'", you cried out", said Hanna to Bow with a smile.

"'I do today'", you replied. And then you felt sick," answered Bow.

"I was so dizzy. Everything was spinning, and then your papa said –"

"Which papa?" The chorus of daughters would interrupt, well-practiced, at this point.

"Then your Papa Bow said: "Put one foot out of the bed, that stops the spinning. And that's what I did."

"But you were lying on the street, not in bed," cried the chorus.

"No," said Papa Bow at this stage of the story. "By then she was in bed. Klaus and I carried her home."

"And where was my papa?" Lotta always wanted to know right at the end.

"Roberto? I forget. Probably he stayed there on the street and finished smoking the cigarette, until the street cleaners came and swept him up."

Later, in the architect's house, there was rarely any drinking. There were frequent guests, but Hanna restrained herself as best she could. In truth, Bow restrained her, by topping up her glass with water instead of wine.

In the years before she moved out, Hanna had developed the habit of dressing in cream-coloured clothes when guests came. She'd copied this from the dentists' wives and other VW-Golf driving wives in the neighbourhood. The other bomb-flattened pieces of land around Bow's bungalow had gradually been developed, and more and more "proper people", as Bow put it, had moved here. "Proper people" were important to Hanna too, but from her mouth the words sounded like an insult veiled as praise. For her, "proper people" were probably those to whom the perfect translation of a Tsvetaeva poem mattered more than membership of the Rotary club.

Bow didn't just want to belong to all this; he wanted to shine. By now his house was one of the oldest in the street, but by far the most modern. No one else had an American-style kitchen. He liked to show it off and urged Hanna to invite neighbours or colleagues to so-called "counter lunches". For these occasions, along with her cream-coloured trousers and blouse, Hanna would wear tastefully distributed gold jewellery. Looking back, you could say she took great pains to do everything correctly. And yet a bit of cake or some salmon canapé would almost always fall on her cream-white clothing. Later, once all the guests had left, the shouting would start. Lotta and I would creep off to our beds. Sometimes together, into one bed, sometimes each into our own. And at times Laura would be summoned from her flatshare to come and mediate. The cream-coloured wife and Bow's Rotary gatherings had only begun after she moved out. Then Hanna and Laura would sit talking late into the night, sometimes loudly, sometimes quietly, and every once in a while, despairingly.

Once, when I came down to the kitchen to make my breakfast after one of those nights, Hanna was standing there making a cup of tea. I had never seen her in the kitchen so early before. In our family, each daughter was given an alarm clock once we started school, and from then on, we organised ourselves. Hanna saw early wake-ups as an unreasonable demand of bourgeois life, and one she wasn't to be bothered with. On this morning, she was wearing a rust-coloured pair of trousers and a turtleneck. The teapot stood steaming in front of her, and next to it was the tea timer.

"You never make tea," I said.

"I'm making it for Papa," said Hanna, tapping her fingertips on a filter paper for the coffee machine. She passed the filter paper back and forth between her hands. When the tea timer rang, she didn't move. Bow came in and turned off the timer. Hanna hadn't even reached for it.

"My tea's ready," he said.

"Yes," said Hanna, "so everything's fine."

She kept turning the filter over and over in her hands. Laura was called again and came to the house to take the filter from Hanna's hands. And then Laura took Lotta and I by the hand and led us to her old bedroom.

"We have to go to school," I said, but no one responded. For the purposes of this discussion, it seemed that even school had to be skipped. We were sitting on Laura's bed, now the guest bed. Hanna had briefly attempted to make this into a work room for herself, but Bow, Lotta and I hadn't considered that necessary. Where would Laura sleep whenever she came home? "She has her own apartment in the same city, and there's a big sofa in the living area," was Hanna's reply. But it hadn't changed anything.

It's difficult to keep the memories in chronological order. Stories recount events one after the other. One occurrence follows onto the next, and therefore seems to be a result, or a consequence. But Hanna's story isn't a linear one. Hanna's story is a world of events which pass by one another again and again like moons on different orbits. Hanna in the middle, and around her the whirring planets: the swimming pool in Neiße, the four-leaved clover in Heidelberg, the house in Cologne, the escape, the time before the marriage, the wedding in Syracuse, the bike trip with Klaus, Alsfeld, the pillory, the Golf, the 2CV. The events move away and return again; in winter it's hard to imagine the summer, and vice versa.

"Sit down and listen to me," said Laura, and then she explained the situation to us. The situation which was now drastically changing. "Do you remember that time Mama stayed in bed for a long time?"

"Yes, she broke a rib, because the awning on the garage fell on her during a storm," I said. Back then, on the bed in Laura's room, this was still accepted family knowledge. Seen from today's perspective, I ask the imaginary sisters in my mind: "Who, I ask you, has an awning on their garage, and why?" – "For the car, you idiot," comes the answer (bad use of language by the sisters, but what can I do, that's how they talk in my imagination, as I sit here by our father's windswept grave,

immersed in my memories). "The awning was for the car?" I ask. "Yes of course, for her 2CV, dumbass. Papa built a garage for his car, and next to it an uncovered space for Mama's 2CV. And so it didn't get too hot in summer, he added an awning." I doubted this story. There's not one single photo as proof. But I think there are photos of an awning on the rear side of the house, by the garden patio. An awning at the front wouldn't have made sense. I really need to drive to Cologne to take another look at the house, to see whether there's any trace of an awning.

"Mama was trying to wind up the awning, because of the storm. But the awning was pushed down by a gust of wind and broke her collarbone," said Laura.

"That's not true," I answered. "She broke a rib. I broke my collarbone once, when you pushed me off the sofa."

"You were six, and you had a cut on your head after we argued because you fell down behind me, behind me," hissed Laura.

"No," said Lotta to Laura. "First you pushed her, and then you stumbled. And then you had a cut. You cried so much that Papa Bow immediately took you to the hospital and you got stitches."

"While I had a broken collarbone," I said, close to tears.

"That's complete nonsense, but it doesn't even matter.

Mama was hit by the awning and –"

" – and broke a rib," I finished Laura's sentence.

"She's right," said Lotta, pretending she was about to spit on the floor. Then she formed an "O" with her thumb and index finger and said: "Lick up or jump through the hole." We got that from the school yard. Since the first grade, we'd been using this gesture to enforce the truth and irrefutability of our statements. If we'd have stuck with it, we could have saved ourselves a lot of arguments once we were adults.

"Fine, so she got hit by the awning and broke a rib or her collarbone in the process. After that she was in bed for weeks, and in immense pain." At this point in the story, we all have the same memory or narrative in our minds. Hanna stayed in bed, and we stayed at our neighbour's, with her and her chain-smoking, war-ravaged husband. We got three meals per day, went to school, and waited for Hanna to recover. Papa Bow was helpless, and Papa Roberto came to visit a few times and took us out for ice cream.

"The rib must have healed at some point," said Laura then. "But Mama was still in bed and we were still with the neighbours."

"Really?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because of the black dog," said Laura, before leaving a whispering, slightly threatening pause. I was confused. Was I supposed to be afraid? Or impressed? And if so, what for?

"What kind of black dog?" I asked.

"I read it in a biography of Churchill," Laura continued, letting the name Churchill hang casually and all-knowingly in the air. "That's how he described his depression. A visit from the black dog."

Another pause.

"Wasn't Puz the dachshund brown?" I asked slowly,

"It's an image, silly, a figure of speech," said Lotta eventually. "Even a brainless fool like you must have squeezed enough into your dumb architect daughter's skull to recognise a figure of speech."

The man who had helped end World War II, I think to myself today, must have repeatedly spent weeks on end in bed, in the garden or on the chaise longue in the salon, hoping that one day enough energy would return for him to put one foot in front of the other, or to merely go to the bathroom.

While Laura explained all of this to us, Papa Bow was sitting in his study. He had no access to the rust-coloured woman with the filter paper in her hand. He had called Laura; there was nothing more he could do. And if the little ones were late to school today, it wouldn't be the end of the world. He was sitting at his first computer-aided typewriter, and that usually made him happy. For Bow, the latest technology was calming and exciting all at once. In his enthusiasm, he encouraged us all to welcome the typewriter like a new member of the family. He had installed it on a table bought especially for it, and called us into his office. We sat down one after the other and stared in fascination at the orange-coloured letters which made all the newly-created words appear on a display behind the keyboard, from left to right. Laura, Lotto and I took turns pressing the cumbersome keys. Hanna was the last to do so, and gazed arrogantly at the flickering band of words.

"It's blinding me. It blinks hysterically. On my typewriter, things go from top to bottom. I write the same way I read."

Pause.

"How a poem's supposed to find its form like that, I have no idea."

We looked at Bow. His face was lifeless. He took time to wordlessly fill the space with dense air. We daughters edged a few tiny steps back. Hanna simply stood there. The dense air didn't enter her biotope: in this moment, the membrane that separated her personality from the outside world was completely impenetrable. Laura and Lotto broke out into shrill laughter; always the best way to thin the air. The question regarding the formation of poems was being held against the advance of technology? Bow was speechless.

What made him so angry in this moment, and why am I only now realising for the first time that it was rage floating between us through the study? What bothered him about this observation, which from Hanna's point of view was quite factual? What sore spot had it hit? Had Hanna insulted his love for the computer? Or did her interjection contain the accusation that he'd betrayed something they used to both believe in, back in Heidelberg? Did he see in Hanna a jealous killjoy, who was only dishing out criticism because she was secretly annoyed that her low-paid poetry translations still had to be hacked into the faltering old Olympia, bringing her dangerously close to tendinitis, while he was presented with this magical machine by his office without having to pay a penny? Or was it merely that Hanna had contradicted him in front of us daughters?

Laura and Lotta made up a joke about poems coming to life and trying to beat up the machine from the architecture firm, but being helpless because they were made of paper. They would hop out of the typewriter's paper insertion slot, as light as paper aeroplanes, and dance through the air, but in front of the display they would collapse and crumble to dust. I laughed along with them and invented letters that, armed with scythes, tried to attack the electric machine. That made Hanna laugh loudly, and the sisters turned against me: "You Mama's girl. Letters that hack with scythes, what kind of sick comedy is that?"

"Sometimes letters have scythes and sharp blades and are dangerous, while walls and machines just stand there and eventually crumble. That never happens to words," said Hanna.

She turned and made a sensational departure. I followed her, trying to look as elegant and cocky as I could. Bow smiled. A small, wry, implacable smile.

Lotta began to defend the new typewriter again, but her song of praise sunk in Bow's inner storm, of which all we felt was a shockwave, camouflaged by that smile. What kind of language was it that diffused out of his body into the house and didn't carry with it a single letter? And why was it far louder and clearer than every word my mother spoke? And did Hanna listen to this syllable-less language, or was she somewhere else, forming poems in her mind at an imaginary desk in a made-up room?

Hanna began to cook. I hovered so closely behind her that she kept stepping on my toes.

"Sit at the counter," she said. "I can't do anything with you glued to me like that."

It was a sentence I heard from her many times.