

Translated excerpt

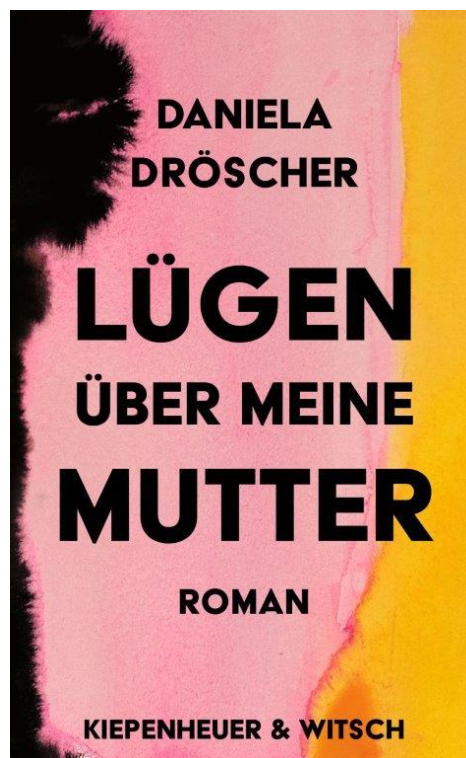
**Daniela Dröscher**  
***Lügen über meine Mutter***

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**Daniela Dröscher**  
***Lies About My Mother***

Translated by Jo Heinrich



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MY MOTHER WON'T FIT IN A COFFIN. She's too fat, she says. When she dies, her ashes won't be kept in an urn; she simply wants them scattered over open water.

My mother's been living by the lagoon for the last few years, at the most north-eastern point of Germany. You couldn't get any nearer to Poland, the country where she was born.

We talk about death a lot. Actually, only she talks about it. It's her weight that gets to her, even though she has none of the classic ailments that doctors attribute to fat people without a second thought. She has pains in her muscles and joints.

I can talk about many things with my mother: almost anything, in fact. The only thing we never touch upon is the money issue. It doesn't look like she'll ever reveal that secret. She'd probably deny ever having had a secret.

Of course you had secrets, I think. Like all human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret.

My eyes wander over her bookshelves. I contemplate

Tolstoy. My mother loves *Anna Karenina*. Maybe we could start a conversation about Tolstoy's heroine and her dramatic ruin?

'Happy families are all...' I begin by quoting, but my mother's already turned her lovely head away.

'Happy families, whatever. Unhappy.'

Sure, I think, unhappy. Throughout my entire childhood and youth, her unhappiness was like a lead weight on my shoulders. So this isn't just her story, it's mine too.

'If you don't start talking,' I threaten, 'I'll have to make something up. I'll have to lie.'

'Go on then. It's your job, after all.'

My mother smiles, flattered, not at all surprised. Almost as if she fancies being the heroine in my novel. I, on the other hand, sound like a timid child. Not like a writer.

The story I have in mind is a story with lots of make-up, blonde wigs, a trapeze and hidden compartments. A complete fiction, in many respects. In philosophy, fiction is described as a 'methodical aid in solving a problem'. My problem is that there are so many secrets in my family that

I don't know where to start. The money issue is just one of them.

It's all down to my father that she sometimes seems so enigmatic, even though she and I are so close. To him, she's the most mysterious person in the world. Yet at the same time, he claims to know every last detail about her.

'Your mother doesn't do moderation. Not with money nor with food,' I can hear him saying. 'There's nothing mysterious about that.'

Through simplistic assertions like this, he's stigmatised my mother for years. And somewhere along the line, or at least every now and then, I believed him.

As a child, I was always stuck between the two of them, like a little detective. Except that I was investigating for my own sake. For a child whose attention is constantly facing outward, wandering between adults, it's hard to distinguish between lies and secrets.

If I want to find out my subjective truth about the money and all the rest of it, I'll have to turn my parents into characters. Characters who can help me understand who's told

which lies about whom.

I'm hesitating, one last time. How can I write about my mother without echoing my father's perspective?

'Just start,' my mother suddenly says softly, 'Go on. You can do it.'

'Do what?' I ask.

'Well, tell your story in a way that keeps me protected.'

'Protected? How? What do you mean?'

'How?' she smiles. 'Protected by you, of course.'

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*'Tell all the truth  
but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind –'*

Emily Dickinson

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*'It was a load of crap!  
It was old-fashioned, parochial even,  
that's what it was!'*

Monaco Franze

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# One

**1983: International Year of Communication**

**Bird of the Year: The Sand Martin**

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# 1

I was sitting in the back of our orange VW Beetle. The leather holdall was in the footwell on the passenger's side: the bag that usually only came out for summer holidays. The boot was packed full as well. I could feel that something wasn't quite right.

It was still early in the morning. My mother should have been at work, and I should have been at kindergarten. Instead, we were driving along the dual carriageway towards Himmelstätt, where my grandparents lived.

'Do Grandma and Grandpa know we're coming?' I asked. My mother just nodded, but said nothing.

I caught sight of her face in the mirror. She was staring at the road, making an effort to conceal her tears from me.

That was something I was familiar with. 'Not in front of the child,' my father would always say. He didn't want me to overhear their arguments.

They fought almost every day, or to put it more precisely, he'd fight, and my mother would merely defend herself. The rows usually started in the evenings, when my father would come home from the office and complain about his wife being 'too fat'. That day, he'd started over breakfast.

I could see my mother bravely balancing her tears along the fine line of her lower eyelids. I reached for my doll, Iwona, who was perching on the seat beside me. Together with Pepper, the black cat, she meant everything to me. All the children at kindergarten in the village had a brother or a sister. I had Iwona.



I decided to sing some of the songs I knew to cheer my mother up. I stood up and straddled the narrow compartment behind the handbrake. I loved standing in that spot; you could get a complete view of the road from there. Unlike in my father's car, I never had to do up my seatbelt when we went out in the Beetle.

The white stripes whizzed under the car as I was singing. Off to the side I saw vineyards, then meadows again; houses only occasionally appeared on the slopes.

The journey to Himmelstädt seemed strange to me. It had been a long time since we'd been to my grandparents' house, and they hadn't been to ours for ages. Before that, there had always been arguments between them and my father's parents, who lived with us. My mother hadn't managed to make them get along, and my father had only tried half-heartedly.

Without any warning, the moving landscape came to a halt. A jolt went through the car. It was as if a giant was tugging on the boot. I screamed and clung to the headrests. The car jerked and jumped, my mother yanked the steering wheel around and somehow managed to steer it onto the hard shoulder. My head hurt. I'd been slammed first against the roof, then against Iwona.

'Are you OK?' My mother leaned between the seats and felt my forehead.

I nodded, to reassure her.

'Are you sure?' She tried to comfort me, stroking my blonde fringe away from my face.

'What happened?' I asked in a daze.

My mother turned back to the dashboard.

'I forgot to buy petrol.'

A little later we were walking along the hard shoulder. My arm wasn't strong enough to hold the bulky petrol can far enough away from me; with every step the empty metal canister banged against my legs. It was annoying, but my mother was wearing her high-heeled sandals, with her toenails painted red, and blue eyeshadow gleaming on her eyelids. I couldn't help feeling that a rusty petrol can wouldn't go with her 'get-up', as Grandma Martha, my father's mother, always called it.

It was unusually warm for April, and my mother was in a hurry. Even now, in this heat, she was careful to make her steps look elegant and effortless, as if she were floating. I kept dropping back a little behind her. I liked the way the sun was tracing our shadows on the asphalt. My mother's shadow was tall and wide, mine was thin and short, and I tried to stay in her silhouette as we were walking.

For weeks, the words 'calories', 'diet' and 'summer holidays' had been floating around our apartment. My father wanted my mother to go on a weight loss programme at a health resort. But my mother refused because she didn't think she was too fat at all.

Grandma Martha agreed with him, 'without even being consulted', as my mother complained. My grandma didn't like my mother, and she didn't like my mother's parents either. Her family 'wasn't from around here,' my grandma maintained. They were originally from Poland but they were German at the same time, what they called 'Silesian Germans', which I found terribly complicated.

'Look, Mama, there!' I nearly stumbled over the can in my excitement.

An emergency call box had appeared a few feet in front of us

by the side of the road, just as shiny, bright and orange as our Beetle. My mother shook her head and dragged me past it.

‘But Dad says you can use them to ring the breakdown people.’

My father had explained how it worked. The breakdown people were called ‘The Yellow Angels’.

My mother laughed. It wasn’t a genuine laugh, and I didn’t like it when she seemed to be mocking me.

‘Not when you’ve forgotten to buy petrol.’ She looked at me beseechingly. ‘You mustn’t mention this to Dad, do you hear?’

I nodded, but I could feel my neck tingling with heat. Telling lies, crying and playing with your food were the three deadly sins. Lying was the deadliest of all. There was nothing my mother hated more.

‘You know how he is,’ she said, as if to excuse him.

It was true: my father would be terribly annoyed if he found out about her mishap. In his job, everything had to be just right. He built gearboxes that tested other gearboxes and an error could cost people their lives. Planes could crash, trains could derail, or Formula 1 racing cars could be thrown off the track and crash into the grandstand without braking. I could see it was better not to tell him about the empty tank.

‘Look! We’re almost there.’

In the distance we could make out a little building with sea-blue flags waving.

When we reached the petrol station, I held my breath as the petrol smell was so strong.

‘Breathe through your mouth,’ my mother told me.

‘Forgot to fill up?’

The petrol attendant’s gaze was drawn to my mother’s figure at

once. I didn't like the way the man was looking at her. His eyes wandered first over her calf-length denim skirt, and then over her thin jumper. He didn't seem to think she was 'too fat'.

He only glanced at me briefly. But I didn't take my eyes off him, just as he didn't take his eyes off my mother as he stuck the nozzle in the can and let the gurgling petrol splash into it.

My mother put her handbag in front of her, took out her purse and crossed her arms. Only then did it occur to me what was missing.

'Iwona!' In the rush I'd left her in the car.

'Iwona - is that your sister?' The petrol attendant's voice suddenly had a strange undertone. I must have called her name out really loud.

'It's only a doll. Called Yvonne,' my mother said quickly and glared menacingly at me. My doll was originally called 'Yvonne', but my Himmelstädt grandma, who 'wasn't from around here', had christened her Iwona purely from homesickness.

'There you go.' The man took the nozzle out of the can.

My mother opened her purse. Her gestures were measured at first but soon became more and more jittery. Eventually she looked up.

'I haven't got enough cash,' she admitted.

The petrol attendant was looking at my mother, all his ardour now gone.

'So what are you going to do now?'

I watched my mother as she gritted her teeth and narrowed her lips. It wasn't the first time she'd gone out without enough money. She'd even had to put things 'on the slate' at the butcher's or the flower shop. They knew her there, though.

The petrol attendant eyed her up and down once more.

‘Normally I’d have to ring the police.’

I looked at my mother in horror. She seemed composed, but then I knew how she looked when she was bottling up her rage.

For a moment she just stood there looking at the vineyards rising up on the other side of the road.

‘You know what?’ she sighed. ‘I’ll bring you the money tomorrow. And I’ll bake you a cake. OK?’

The man hesitated. ‘Do you have any identification?’ My mother hastily pulled her papers out of her bag. The petrol attendant inspected her photo, and then he nodded, and a few minutes later we were walking back to the car on the hard shoulder.

My mother was carrying the heavy can. The petrol was sloshing with every step.

When I offered to help her, she waved me aside.

‘How’s your head? Is it alright now?’ she asked, but it sounded more like an accusation than concern.

I nodded, even though a dull pain was throbbing in my temples. As caring as my mother was, her mood could change at the drop of a hat.

She didn’t say a word all the way back to the car. She kept stopping to catch her breath. She nearly stumbled several times. She may have looked really uncomfortable, and all her elegance was gone, but it never occurred to her to take off her high heels.

After she’d filled up the car, she screwed the can shut and glared first at me then at the Beetle.

‘We’ll go back home now,’ she said and opened the door, making more noise than usual.

I crept back in and found Iwona on the back seat. My mother had only just got in by the time I'd fastened my seatbelt. All the way home I tried to see beyond her head and spot the needle on the petrol gauge.

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IN AN EARLIER VERSION of my manuscript, my mother unceremoniously sets fire to the petrol station. Even though she could never really have done that, the image of it corresponds to the fear I felt as a child.

Later in life, whenever I came across explosive characters who vacillated between rage and impotence, I couldn't help but think of my mother: people like Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas, or Ulrike Meinhof. Like these characters, her impotent rage has something to do with money, with a rebellion against the fact that a thing such as money exists, or needs to exist.

Hardly anything in my mother's life is as important as her financial independence. Penny-pinching is deeply alien to her. But she's never quite shaken off a sense of incredulity at having her own money. I have to keep reminding myself how unusual it must have been for women back then to have their own bank account. It was just as much a novelty for a woman to be able to choose her own career rather than the one her

parents picked, or to accept a job without her husband's permission. Only in 1977, the year I was born, did women gain this right to professional autonomy in Germany.

I have an image of my mother opening her purse, in a department store in the pedestrian area. There's something both coy and proud about her. She's the same whenever she comes out of her bedroom to show me some new clothes she's bought.



After the incident, I made an effort not to say a word about our strange trip. I'd never had to keep so quiet about something so exciting before. It took great concentration not to let slip to my father how pleased the petrol attendant had been with the cake. My mother had even given him a wallet. She had lots of nice 'samples' from working in the leather goods factory.

My mother did her best to keep the mishap a secret. The most important thing was concealing the bump on my forehead. Its purple and blue colour even showed through my thick fringe. Whenever I saw Grandma Martha, I'd walk with my head down for fear of her telling on us.

'What's up with that child?' she grumbled in her broad accent. 'Face like a wet weekend.'

But then a letter from the police arrived, and before my mother could take it, Grandma Martha had purposefully fished it out of the post to present to my father that evening.

My grandparents' apartment was directly below ours; anyone in the family could just go up or down the grey marble stairs to see each other. When they moved in, my father said there was no need for separate letterboxes. That was just fine by Grandma Martha: it would be easy for her to spy on my mother.

A motorist had informed the police about the broken-down car.

No one, my father read out in a trembling voice, was allowed to park their vehicle on the hard shoulder in Germany. My mother hadn't even put a warning triangle near the car.

‘It’s really not that hard.’ My father simply couldn’t grasp how a woman as clever as my mother could have been ‘so stupid’.

The letter also included a fine.

‘Almost your entire month’s wages,’ my father said with a deep sigh, running his hand through his thick white-blond hair, which fell halfway over his ears.

I was examined from head to toe and it didn’t take him long to discover the bump on my forehead. He started shouting straight away.

It wasn’t just my mother who bore the brunt but Chancellor Kohl too, as he still hadn’t enforced a nationwide seatbelt law, despite all the promises he’d made before the election.

Even I was drawn into it.

‘Silly girl,’ moaned my father, as he so often did when I hurt myself or got into mischief. ‘Why do you always have to stand up in the back?’

But of course, the chief culprit was my mother.

‘It’s negligent!’ he shouted.

He wasn’t interested in the fact that my bump hardly hurt at all by now. It wasn’t clear what he was most angry about: the fine, the offence, my mother keeping the misadventure secret or me being put in danger.

Meanwhile, my mother was annoyed with her mother-in-law who’d once again been interfering in private matters. The communal letterbox had often been the cause of nasty rows. My mother had no chance to get any mail addressed to her; the postwoman would come in the morning while she was at work, and yet again she criticised the lack of privacy, which oddly made me think of dirty underwear.

‘Post from the police, it’s a disgrace!’ my grandma prattled on unperturbed.

‘The letter was addressed to me. To me!’ My mother was glaring, her face glowing as she stormed out of the room without a word of explanation. She was what they called ‘hopping mad’.

In the early evening, in the middle of the news, Grandma Martha hot-footed it up to our apartment. She was a short woman with pale blonde hair in a bun, and as always when she was worked up about something, the pea-sized blue mole on her right nostril quivered.

‘What a cow! It’s a disgrace!’ she barked at my mother, who just carried on filing her nails without looking up.

‘Come, quick,’ she urged my father. ‘Come and look at this.’

My heart pounding, I followed the grown-ups. Everyone except my mother ran off towards the little vegetable garden by the single stream in the village, amidst the other allotments. I was only wearing my thin-soled plimsolls so every footstep hurt on the stony path, but I gritted my teeth. The allotment meant to Grandma Martha what Iwona meant to me: everything.

When we arrived at the gate, the rakes and shears, normally stored neatly in her shed, were all scattered across the little path. There was a broken beanstalk, and radishes and carrots were strewn between the beds, half dried out. The whole thing looked like a bomb had hit it: it reminded me of a frightening scene from a children’s book I knew. Terrified, I looked over at my father who was standing there ashen-faced.

‘Such a nasty piece of work,’ Grandma Martha went on, ‘She’s got a screw loose.’

I gulped. They were talking about my mother. They all thought she was the only possible culprit. I could feel my heart pounding.

‘Shh,’ Grandpa Ludwig chimed in, ‘not in front of the child.’ He didn’t usually like telling people what to do, but he and my mother got on well. He took me by the hand.

‘Come on, El. Let’s pick some berries.’

My father stood there, his face stricken. While he helped his mother sort out the worst of it, Grandpa Ludwig and I picked the ripe berries and gathered them in a little white bucket. The raspberries were the most precious. They were the type of fruit my mother loved most and with each one I pulled from its green stalk, I grew sadder and sadder.

On the way home, my father gave me a piggyback because my feet were hurting so much I couldn’t walk, but not without giving me a hard time for running to the allotment without the right shoes on. ‘Immature’, he called my behaviour, and blamed my mother for it. After all, I was six already.

I enjoyed the view from his shoulders. Birds were perching in rows on the power lines, chirping a little song in the dusk. Grandpa Ludwig had once explained to me that they could only stay alive on the lethal wires if they didn’t touch the poles.

The row that broke out once we were home was so vicious I could make out every word of it from where I was sitting outside my room on the liver-brown stairs.

My mother tried to defend herself, but after quite some time when she stormed out of the living room in tears, the decision was final. She’d be going to the health resort on her own; I wasn’t allowed to go to the legendary ‘Baden-Baden’ with her.

On the day she was due to leave, my mother's large beige holdall stood in front of the filigree wrought-iron black gate separating our garden from the street.

My father, my grandparents and I stood there in a row, like Russian dolls. It was early in the morning, and still cool. My mother had her fur jacket draped over her shoulders, much to Grandma Martha's annoyance, as she envied her that coat.

'Miss High and Mighty', she always sneered.

My father stood beside me, his arms folded over his scrawny chest. While he seemed relieved my mother was going to the health resort without me, I thought he looked uneasy. Almost as if he had a guilty conscience.

'Grandpa Ludwig will look after you,' he said.

'The poor child,' said Grandma Martha and squeezed me against her apron, which smelled faintly of fried food.

'Poor El.' This time she directed her concern towards my mother, who instantly frowned. She didn't like it when people shortened my name. It must have been awkward for her to leave me in the care of a woman she couldn't stand.

My mother bent down towards me. I hastily threw my arms round her neck. I desperately wanted to feel her warm skin. Memorise her scent. She smelled warm and sweet; I could often pick out a hint of caramel. My throat tightened, but I managed to fight back any tears. More than anything I would have liked to cling to her. It was the first time my mother would be away for a long time and I was missing her already, even though she was still there in the flesh in front of me.

'Look after yourself, OK?' she whispered, her face close to mine.

Her body remained at a distance even while we were having our final hug. I could feel some kind of armour. A barrier - I couldn't tell if it came from me or her, or from both of us.

My mother stroked my hair one last time. The next moment I was waving, both hands in the air, until the Beetle turned into the main road and disappeared around the corner. It was as if a gap had all of a sudden opened up inside me, an empty space that seemed to be both deep inside me and outside my body at the same time.

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MY FATHER WAS ONE OF THE FIRST young men in the village to turn his back on farming and take up a 'proper job'.

There was hardly anything he loved more than working at his drawing board. Designing, calculating speeds, solving complicated mathematical equations, but also drawing in its own right. His sharp grey graphite pencil gliding along the ruler on a milk-white drawing pad, or on the orange grid of graph paper. The smooth movement of a compass. Even today, he won't draw on a computer but prefers drawing by hand.

By insisting on learning a white-collar profession as a boy, he managed to 'better himself'. This was also what gave him a kind of princely status in my grandma's eyes.

'I got a prince, and I carried on treating him like a prince,' my mother always says with a shrug. 'I didn't know any different; it had been the same at home.'

Her own mother was unreservedly submissive to her