

Translated excerpt

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Annette Pehnt
A chronicle of closeness

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Writing won't come. Hence my plan for autobiographical investigations. Not biography but investigation and invention of the smallest components possible. Using these, I then want to build myself, like someone whose house is unsafe, a safe one beside it, if possible using the materials from the old one. What is bad, though, is if the person's strength fails in mid-build and he's left with not one house that whilst unsafe is at least whole but a house half-destroyed and a second half-built – in other words, nothing at all.

Franz Kafka

My maxim would be for God's sake write about what you don't know! For how else will you bring your imagination into play? How else will you discover or explore anything?

Graham Swift

Tuesday

A day without speaking is not on. This morning you were as if sewn up tight, you said nothing, I mean *nothing*, nix. I felt like tearing your lips apart, propping your eyelids open, simply saying nothing in not acceptable in our family, lots of things are, but saying nothing: *no way*. Grandmother mother child: gabby, sharp-tongued, never at a loss for a word, chinwags, chatterboxes, motormouths, huge talkers. Abruptly staying silent is not on. If you'll say nothing, I'll do it for you.

Mother threatens Annie with death, she is good at that.

I'm dying, she says, quietly at first but it is enough to make the child's heart beat faster, to bring Annie to mother's side, she takes mother's hand and holds it to her shoulder.

'I'm dying, I can feel it coming, this time I'm sure, my time has come.'

Annie turns white, eyes fixed on mother's lips. Mother looks fine but her lips are dry because she is breathing in and out in jerks, her breath coming so quickly that somehow she cannot catch it and starts trembling. Annie knows then that this time mother really is right, someone who moans while inhaling and moans while exhaling is not long for this world, her mother is not long for this world.

'Mother,' Annie says fearfully. Mother sinks into an armchair and grasps Annie's arm, holding on very tight to stop her running off, but that she would never do, she is not going to abandon her dying mother, she will do anything for mother, maybe save her if she lets her.

'I'm all alone,' mother groans, and at length Annie remembers what she must do. It had simply slipped her mind, the last time was a while ago, that time it helped and it will help again, and already Annie feels less scared because she is going to make a big effort and save mother again, like before. She feels a spurt of joy at being able to do so much for her dying mother.

'Mother,' she cries, thrusting against her mother, who promptly hugs her even tighter, as if death were trying to wrench her from her child, 'I love you so much, I do, you mustn't die.'

‘No,’ her mother murmurs, ‘I don’t think so, nobody’s there for me, one’s quite alone at the end.’

‘But someone is there,’ Annie cries in triumph, recalling exactly the words she must say and will always repeat, ‘I’m here, mother, I love you.’ Mother flaps a dismissive hand and listlessly turns away from the child. Annie dances round, back into mother’s eyeline, seizes the flapping hand, holds it down, and starts stroking her mother. Mother is breathing noisily and quickly, her lips dry and still half-open, gargling in her throat, all this is part of it, how could Annie have forgotten. Swiftly she lets go of the hand, darts into the kitchen, moistens a tea towel under the tap, and comes straight back to mother’s side, where she dabs the lips with the damp towel and grasps the hand, which at last responds, the arm embracing the child in a firm grip. Mother’s groaning quietens, her eyes open, and she looks at Annie, who does not look away.

‘You’re my daughter,’ mother murmurs, ‘you won’t desert me.’ Annie nods, squeezes the hand, and slumps against mother’s shoulder. Knowing that this time, once again, her mother is not going to die, all of a sudden she feels very tired.

And now you’re threatening me with death.

Having learnt that we cover every topic except the bad ones, I was incapable of talking to you at the hospital this morning. You did not even open your eyes. Your hands: fatter than before and solid-looking, the skin stretched like foil over the swollen backs, they lay motionless on the covers. I almost reached out to touch them, but such caresses are not the norm between us. On a venture: ‘They’ve been fattening you up in here,’ I said, smiling into your expressionless face, someone had to say something in that silent room, the nurse took care to leave the door open at all times. I tried to prise up your eyelids with my gaze, they were fat too, little discs of fat shutting out the view. Go ahead, speak to your mother, the nurse suggested as she saw to the appliances, just talk, she’ll hear.

But she’s not listening, is she?

I screamed all the time as a child, apparently, as a baby: screamed and screamed, caught my breath, screamed some more, screamed until I was blue in the face.

‘It’s not a normal way to behave.’

I was, you were forever telling me this, such a demanding child, I was so, so demanding, just screaming all the time, stock stiff from all that screaming.

‘I know, was there no pacifying me, Mum.’

The forbidden question, what do I mean by it, how dare I ask anything of the sort. Do I mean, for instance, you failed, never wished, or simply neglected to pacify me, or what. Of course you tried, you tried everything. Do I suppose you just left me lying there. You picked me up, carried me around, sang me a snatch of song, carried me from room to room some more, you *never*, and I mean *never* abandoned me, you spoke to me, you went through the whole gamut of things one does with babies: you did everything but give up on me, and who was it went on screaming.

‘That was no innocent screaming, it was almost, and I know this is something one shouldn’t say about babies, it’s taboo, but it was almost an evil screaming, almost torture, actually.’ There. Now it’s out. Sleep deprivation is torture.

You went to the doctor, our family doctor, a gaunt, sound man who after listening to the otherwise healthy baby between bursts of crying gave you a reassuring nod.

‘But is it normal for such a baby to scream all the time. Is there anything one can do, what can I do, I’m at my wits’ end.’

‘This is a highly-strung child, you see, a sensitive, perceptive child, they just scream more than others.’

‘What can I do, though.’

‘You must keep calm, that will calm the child down too, she’ll grow out of it.’

You never slept because of my screaming, ergo torture it was. Not deliberate, nothing intentional, all right, so there is unintentional torture too, anyway you felt you were being tortured, or what else is it when a person cannot wash their hair.

‘Why hair.’

Well, I never stopped, did I, so you were unable to wash your hair, as simple as that. The result was, you ran around with greasy locks all day, week in, week out, like a spray of damp chives on your head: *utterly* pathetic, while I gaily screamed and screamed, I could have become a singer with those lungs.

Once a month to the hairdresser because Dad came home early. He had to go to work, of course, the way things were then, not like nowadays when fathers parade children around all day and every day, in between times earning on the computer with baby on one knee. That was when you bought the wig, I came across it in the sock drawer one day. Why did you keep it, in fact: a dark-brown pageboy bob

with a strict cut that hugged the skull like a helmet, then baby could cry to her heart's content: you looked as if your hair had just been done.

Running from the house to the shelter, Annie's legs suddenly stop working. It is not far, in this village everything is close together. The shelter is at the corner by the apartment blocks, they need only keep going past the Lüthens' big house whose steep roof looks in the dark like a cliff face, past two orchards and the witch's cottage where Frau Hellwiger lives. A moment earlier Annie was speeding through the evening, faster than children normally run, the bag of emergency supplies hitting the backs of her knees, mother pulling her forward, her armpit feeling stretched. Father is still at home, why is he not here, the warning has gone off, but that is his way. He waits and waits until the planes can be heard, then he follows, but sometimes even then not. 'Sleep in a chap's own bed for once,' he says, 'nothing will happen, will it, or did something happen.' Annie has to admit: 'No, dad, nothing happened, nothing's happened yet.' Then the wailing begins and Annie shuts her eyes, says no prayer, counts no seconds, avoids thinking about father, pacing to and fro up there in the living room, he may even have opened a window for the fine tangy evening air, and so long as she avoids thinking about him nothing will happen. Today too he has stayed up there, mother tugs Annie across the street, quietly complaining about father, 'sleep in a chap's own bed,' she mutters, 'piffle. Do I sleep in my own bed. Or you, do you sleep in your own bed,' and she yanks at Annie's arm, not waiting for an answer, because she must hurry, no one dawdles here, nor does she, it is important to keep up with the rest, otherwise when they arrive there may not be room for them. 'Quick now, otherwise we'll be standing outside when the bombs go off. Frau Hellwiger has her cat inside her jacket, its little face peering out like an imp. The Lüthens have their instruments, dragging them along through the night, 'these are valuable, you see, we don't want all these turned to firewood.' The cello, the nineteenth-century viola, a whole string quartet gets dragged around with them, they could play in the shelter, but the fiddles just lie silent in a corner, vibrating when the planes go over.

Everything is as usual, when suddenly Annie's legs give way under her, she stumbles, drops the bag, and stands there.

'Move,' mother shouts at her, 'stand there and you'll strike root.' 'My legs have stopped working,' Annie whispers, but her mother does not hear, there is too much

noise around her, the sirens, neighbours' hurrying footsteps, cries, heavy breathing. Mother lays an arm around her and yanks her forward, 'come on now, the Lüthens will have got down there ages ago.' Annie yields, but her legs will not do as they are told, they feel soft and bendy, twitching and collapsing under her, and she slumps back against mother. Mother halts in her tracks and wrenches the bag from her hand. 'What's the matter with you,' she screams at Annie, 'can't you even run any more.' Annie leans against mother, burying her face in mother's coat. Mother elbows her off, hoicks Annie's chin up, and says straight onto her face, so softly that Annie cannot possibly miss what she is saying: 'You're a pain, you are. You'll be the death of us both, is that what you want.' Annie shuts her eyes, shakes her head, and lets mother drag her, not using her legs, until they reach the shelter.

Fear, that's what it is, I'm always scared. Still, every day. Most recently this morning, at the hospital: scared of you not looking at me.

Where did it come from, you used to ask, as if I knew.

'Wherever did you get that from, not from me you didn't, I was never scared, wasn't allowed to be. In a war, being scared wasn't on. But you, you sissy. Even as a baby: scared of everything and everybody. Strangers, dogs, planes, the dark, that especially, cars, engine noise, dreams, fire, the moon, sometimes of me, even.'

It's true: ever since I could talk, I've talked about fear. To banish it, of course, or why else does one speak. Only it didn't work, words weren't enough, no matter how much I repeated them. So you had to banish it, time and time again, even now sometimes, my husband isn't up to it, he can't do it, only you can do it.

'Have you never grown up.'

'I'm an adult, aren't I.'

Fear you were no longer there. Often I got up and listened for your voices in the living room, someone was talking so someone was there, but I was not entirely sure, it might be a ruse, a dream, I could be imagining things. Only one thing was certain: if your shoes were in the hall, you had to be there, nobody goes out without shoes on, especially not in winter. You wore silk tights, that I knew, they would tear on gravel, on flagstones, on the road, only with shoes on then. I used to stare at the shoes in the hall, sometimes I touched them, just to make quite sure, always leather, always proper shoes, not boots, always meticulously clean, dad took care of that, he used to smear shoe polish on carefully and buff them up with a soft cloth that you would cut to size

for him from his old underwear. And there they stood together beneath the big mirror, ranged neatly side by side, your shoes and dad's shoes, and that harmony blended with your voices from upstairs to form a secure frame inside which I could lie down and at length go to sleep.

A picturebook child, rosy cheeks, blond ringlets, shy, how still she sleeps, nothing disturbs her repose, if only she weren't so scared the whole time.

'You won't go away, then.'

'We won't go away. We're not splitting up.'

And you really did not split up. Lots of people we knew left each other, sometimes the man first, sometimes the woman.

'Gone, she just cleared off, he has a youngster, it's the children I pity. Who'll take them on holiday now, who'll make them a sandwich now.'

And really, I thought, poor children, my fear glowing red subconsciously: what will they do when they're scared, who will look after them, who will look after me.

'My mother was also not there,' you told me, and it sounded almost like a boast, something you were proud of: 'She wasn't there, and you were, and your being scared didn't make you vanish.'

Why am I so scared, then, since there was nothing, no war, no leaving, no fire, nothing amiss, nothing at all, in my smooth, straightforward, sheltered existence.

'So what have you got to be afraid of,' you said scornfully, not meaning to mock but my fear was simply too pathetic: what had I ever gone through.

Or that something might snap off you. We were sitting on the sofa, a picture book in your lap, both hands holding the book. I was leaning against you, my nose pressed into your woolly, a faint smell of smoke, I thrust my chin onto your shoulder, scarcely listening to the story, which I knew off by heart, until at last you laid your arm lightly around me. Now it was lying where I wanted it, I wanted to be embraced. But it sometimes happened that it fell away, simply dropped off. Carefully I turned my head to see whether it still sat snugly in your shoulder. It looked all right, but an arm could come off in a trice, like a rotten branch it could come loose and crumble away from the joint and then you'd only have one arm to cook and do the cleaning with and lay around me.

'Mum, can arms just fall off.'

You gave me a mocking look, you may have been trying to expel something from me with mockery, but we both knew that would not work.

‘What do you think, then,’ you said very mockingly to show me how silly my question was, not really to ridicule me but to counter my fear, ‘what do you think: that an arm like this can just come away,’ and you swung your arm backwards and forwards before my eyes.

‘No,’ I said ashamed, ‘but at the shopping centre there’s a man with a leg missing, he leans on crutches and has purple hands.’

‘It didn’t just fall off him,’ you said, ‘he left it on the battlefield.’

So. In war, legs got left behind, like I once left my gym bag behind after sports. They lay around and turned purple, until someone gathered them up and threw them away.

‘Or,’ I told my friend Karin, we enjoyed discussing horrible things together, ‘there’s a home for legs that get left behind. One-legged people can go there and see if they can find one to fit them.’ Karin giggled and took me to the shopping centre, where we looked for the man with crutches. This time he was by the chemist’s, propped against a flower basket, purple hands grasping the handles. He never sat down, although the bench beside him was once again free. He could just go to the home and find a new leg, we giggled. A woman’s leg maybe, a long slender one with a high heel. We hung around the chemist’s shop, the woman who ran it slipped us glucose drops and kept an eye on us to make sure we didn’t try to pinch anything, but we were too small for that, all we wanted to do was study the one-legged man at close quarters, give ourselves shivers down the spine from the trouser leg tucked up with a safety pin and thinking about a war where body parts lay around. The man shoved a cigarette into his mouth and shot a sullen look over at us, he had noticed us staring at him, and now we started playing with him, turning away and wandering off, only to creep up on him again, half-hidden behind the carousels with cough sweets and sticking plasters, we had almost forgotten about the leg now, we wanted him to recognise our faces, we were not fooled, not one bit, we were fast and small, he would never catch us, never.

The shopping centre, like a maze and all sparkling new, sucked you into its embrace almost daily. It was brand new then: everything under one roof. With your smart black shopping trolley, off you set, sometimes with me, sometimes without me, and if I did not want to come you went anyway to make sure there was enough in the house: the freezer compartments full to bursting with red cabbage, apple pie, oven chips,

butter, in layers like a brick wall, peas, onion soup, pizzas (Margherita, Funghi, Four Seasons), pancakes for dad and ice cubes for guests; the drawers with non-perishable hankies, Dr. Oetker's cake mix, powdered soup, stock cubes, crispbreads, and in the cellar a lot more, loo paper, tomato soup, jams, not homemade though, not ever. That was something you could do without, thank you, no more preserving, no plum trees, the garden was far too small. Much better mark everything off in the catalogue, covered apple tarts, rösti, and call the man from the freezer company. And fill the black shopping trolley each day, not mindlessly, not indiscriminately, you shopped wisely, every day something new, to have everything in the house, and at times you laughed at yourself.

Because Annie's legs no longer work when the alarm goes off at night, mother has to think of something else. She finds a half-secure cellar with neighbours only five doors up, almost at the corner in other words, but even five houses are too far for children with no legs. Every night there is a warning now, and rather than her dragging the child through the streets it's better if Annie goes down into the half-secure cellar in the evening and stays there overnight. That way the girl can sleep without needing to plague anyone with her slowness, able to stretch her pudding legs out on the camp bed that mother has made up for her there. The neighbours' groundwater level is so high that the old furniture pushed into a corner and the storage boxes and tools stand on pallets. The camp bed stands on a pallet too, and when Annie leans over the edge of the bed and looks through the slats she can see the water. However, mother says, she shouldn't worry about that but lie nice and quietly on the camp bed, otherwise she'll get wet feet. Anyway, she's meant to be asleep. Mother bids her goodnight and locks the door. She needs to lock the door of course because anyone could come in, one never knows who's wandering about these nights. So mother locks the door and goes home, only five doors away but she can hardly leave father on his own all evening. If a warning sounds, she'll be back in a twinkling, there's no need for Annie to be scared.

Annie lies quietly on the camp bed, listening to the gurgling of the water underneath the pallets and waiting for a sound at the door. Because sleep won't come, she opens and shuts her eyes over and over again to make herself tired, but it's no help, the darkness is everywhere.

When a siren goes off somewhere, a factory siren or even just a fire engine, you stop talking and duck. Not that you're scared, I don't mean that. In my younger years there were often test warnings.

'They have to do a test warning to make sure the sirens are working.'

'But why do the sirens need to work. If no war comes, they don't need to work, surely, there'd be no point.'

'Well, you never know what's going to happen.'

'Will war come soon, then.'

'No, not here for sure.'

Test warnings might go off until lunchtime, while you were serving up the noodles or on the phone to grandma, one of those endless telephone conversations:

'No, mother, that's not what I meant, if you'd just listen to me for a moment, no, you really can't say that, mother, but if you won't listen. Mother, I've been trying for hours, I've even –'

Then the siren went off. And you dropped the receiver, struck dumb, feeling tiny, then grandma could scold your mother through the receiver as much as she liked, you were in another time: nights alone in the cellar, frozen on top of that pallet.

Grandma must have remembered those nights too, in the end she too had lost her home, that lovely family home with the green shutters and the orchard, all those plum trees, her dresses, the eggshell-coloured wedding dress, the antique blackened silver that Annie, my mother, had once been allowed to polish. But she just carried on, talking in such a loud voice that I could overhear, standing beside the dangling receiver:

'Listen to me, Anne, look, Anne, if you simply refuse to answer you owe me an apology, Anne.'

But you stood there, or sat down where you were, frozen for a long moment until I called out and tugged at you, already scared you might burst into tears: because that was the worst thing of all, to be avoided at all costs.

Often your eyes bulged slightly, as if pushed from behind by the tears, from inside, as if they found no way out. But you mustn't cry, actually you mustn't sit still either, you had to hold me because I was so scared of the warning and you weren't.

'War might come, the house might catch fire, mum, can't you hear the warning, why are you giving me that funny look.'

You stood there a moment longer, lost, then you laid an arm around me: the siren was already dying down.

Once there was a warning at primary school, the teacher ushered us outside, we'd had a practice, knew we were supposed to hold hands and number off, knew which bush we were meant to assemble around in the playground, the teacher looked back once more from the door of the classroom, bent down to look under the desks, she knew precisely what was to be done, even saw the tears in my eyes, held my hand, we took up the rear of our little procession. Out of each classroom came a line of girls and boys in perfect order, gently urged on by a calmly smiling teacher, whereas the siren had me by the throat until I choked and wept; there, there, teacher told me, it's only a drill, it'll be over in a moment, calm down now.

A parent interview: about my feeling scared. 'The child needs help,' teacher told them. 'She's not going to get over it on her own. I know her family background, the teacher said in a friendly fashion, but where does the child get these fears. 'We have to try therapy.'

What? That took some swallowing, you told me, that was a bit much that was, such a small child and already in therapy, wild horses would not drag you there, not for money, honestly though, even when she was a baby she did nothing but scream, it was not normal, granted, but where did being scared come in, nowhere. I was not ill, not that, but I was much too anxious, frightened all the time, there was some kind of disturbance involved, and that could be treated, it was nothing to be ashamed of, and anyway it was only a suggestion, which you agreed to on my behalf.

So I went for therapy and talked about being scared, and because I enjoyed talking I told the therapist long stories, gazing into his soft brown eyes, which never left my face, stories about sirens going off and the man who had left his leg behind in the war, about fire and my parents possibly going away, although they'd never do that, but saying that one never knew, did one, what might happen.

I had no right to be so scared, it got on everyone's nerves. The psychologist was even better than you, he was obliged to devote an hour solely to my fears. Like yours, his hands were always warm. He looked at me, while I was speaking, with a fixed, warm look, good against fear and so warm, in fact, that for days I would look forward to diving back into those eyes and loathed going when the hour was up. I should avoid bringing in fear immediately because it was too big. We began in a different

way, in a meadow where I imagined going for a stroll, and I ambled about, my thoughts were my dogs, leaping around me, there were springs, moss, lots of little rodents and birds, boulders I could lean against and stretch my feet into the stream, animals all around me, I had only to stretch out a hand and I felt fur and feathers. Not a cloud in the sky, not a fear in sight. To talk the fear away, to walk it away, he had me walk on, I enjoyed those verbal walks and the listener who kept his eyes on me, always kept his eyes on me, so I existed, that meant, and I felt good, another thing he did: he kept asking whether everything was all right, no one else did. Then he steered my thoughts and myself towards the edges of the meadow, where the undergrowth became thicker and bigger animals lived that stayed out of sight because they were shy and maybe dangerous too, and the spring, the stream roared louder. More water came down, ripping at the banks, the ground became rockier and steeper, and how are you feeling now. I feel a bit scared, I said, and that was what my listener wanted, he lured me into where it was scary, deeper and deeper into the undergrowth, he thought he could frighten me with bears and wolves, but it was not that. Animals were OK, they could be tamed, even the big ones. But I could already hear a crackling sound, the brushwood was so withered, all it took was a spark and a fire might start, an enormous fire could spread like the wind, it advances faster than the eye can see, a fire like that, devouring the timber, darkening the air, you can try running but no one is faster than flames, not animals, not people either. I was breathless with running, I had never run so fast and yet I knew I would never make it, quite, said my listener. So what can you do. He was applying the brakes, slowing my story down: think for a moment, what can you do, look around. I was in a sweat, of course: fire all around me, wind raging. I can, I said breathlessly, I can maybe step into the stream and go on up the stream. Yes, my hearer said, the water will protect you, climb down into the stream then. I did so, stepped into the stream just as I was, shoes and everything. It was deeper than I expected, up to the calves, knees, up to the hips, cool water: no fire. I waded forward, making stiff progress against the current, ducking right under at one point to prevent the flying sparks from setting me alight, that stopped them. I made more and more progress, the flames died down, I brushed the soot from my hair, which hung dripping around my face, wet from the protective water. You made it, my listener said, you're safe. Yes, I said, still amazed at being unharmed. All on your own, the listener said, you found your way out of the fire, no one else helped you. Yes, I said.

My listener grew on me, I became so fond of him I started to count the days until he would be listening to me again. You always asked what I got up to with the psychologist and whether he was nice to me and what it was he did to me and whether it helped. You can tell me, you would say, we talk about everything, right. I told her nothing and I have no idea whether it helped, all I know is that in the stories I told my listener I became bolder and bolder. Each time I began by going for a walk in the meadow. Then something awful happened, a storm, an accident, a rockfall, fire, very often fire, and my listener, who listened to me as no one did in later life, listened to my running away or even standing my ground: fetching water, taming an elephant who would then snort out huge quantities of water onto the flames with his trunk and cause them to shrink to the size of a pitiful heap of embers. I told the story with eyes closed. Sometimes, when I shot a quick glance across at the listener to make sure he was listening properly, he would be looking pensively out of the window, one leg always crossed over the other, slightly slumped in the chair. But I never doubted that his thoughts were with me and my flames.

At one point you decided to have a go at my fear yourself. Right, you said, grasping me with one hand and a box of matches in the other, let's just see about this business of fire. And you led me outside the house, took a match from the box, and waited until the flame was steady. 'What are you doing,' I asked, alarmed. 'Now I hold the flame to the wall and you'll see that a house doesn't simply catch fire like that.' 'No,' I cried in horror as fear exploded in my body and spread with a rush to my fingertips, 'no, don't do that.' 'Leave her alone,' said dad, who was in the front garden dead-heading evening primroses, 'can't you see what the matter with her is.' You paid no heed. 'See, it doesn't burn.' But the match had gone out, so you struck another. 'Now look.' 'No, no,' I screamed and fell into your arm, but there was no stopping you, you held the little trembly flame against the concrete wall and it died instantly. The ashen match head left a tiny black dot on the white wall. You gave me a look not of triumph, more like a teacher who has just finished explaining a difficult problem of mathematics so perfectly that even the stupidest child will grasp it. I burst out crying and ran off, my fear dismissed as something stupid. It was not going to fall for such a ruse and nor was I.

My listener gave me the courage to put up a serious fight. When we had walked through a great many meadows and put out innumerable fires, I gave him a long story entirely without fear. I narrated that story with my eyes open. I told a story about a

boat on the river, there was a party going on, lots of people were dancing to some lovely music, and when the dance reached its climax the boat cast off and began to move over the water in the gathering dusk, lit by Chinese lanterns. I looked at my listener and he gave me a nod. When my hour was up I had told lots of stories against fear and lost my listener, but you were still there. Nothing's changed, though, even today. No leaving. Don't split up. Evenings, shoes in the rack.

Mother was often gone. Annie didn't know where. She went out organising, it was vital to have ideas if one was to survive, get hold of food, butter for baking, and who else was going to do it, father was in the fields, milling poppy seed. So she left the house, and Annie waited in the orchard. She could have waited in the house, but the house was too empty, with only nanny working in the kitchen, scrubbing the pots and pans in which no one could do any cooking until mother returned. It was better for Annie to wait in the orchard, she climbed up into a plum tree and leaned back on a branch, or she watched the ants running to and fro along their roads by the compost heap, or she practised birdcalls with a blade of grass. The blade of grass had to be pressed between the thumbs, but it only worked if the grass blade was stiff and not torn at all. She could have joined the children in the next street, but she waited until dark and the damp crept up to her, then she ate the blade of grass and a second one as well. In the darkness the birdcalls had a shaky sound. Nanny called her, and for a little while longer she hid amongst the plum trees and listened to the calls, which became more and more urgent, she liked that but would have liked it even better if it had been mother calling.

Mother returned eventually, after midnight sometimes, father had been asleep for ages but Annie was still awake. No matter how late it was, there she stood in the doorway, beaming because mother was back, waiting to be greeted, but mother had no thought of offering a greeting, she was hot and her hair was dishevelled, she'd had an experience but refused to say what. Instead she talked about the stubborn farmers who were looking for silverware, nothing but silverware, and how she had nearly been forced to return empty-handed because she had no silverware to offer. She waited until a tense silence spread, and a bit longer. Then she slowly and with much pomp and ceremony drew a pat of butter wrapped in newspaper from her coat pocket, her bit of loot for Annie: the prize for those hours spent alone in the orchard, and Annie had to show pleasure at the butter and at mother's pluck.

‘How did you get the butter with no silverware.’

‘Well,’ said mother, pursing her lips coquettishly, ‘I always think of something.’

Next morning nanny baked currant tarts and fried potatoes in the iron pan, none of which would have been possible without the butter, and Annie stuffed herself sick.

Wednesday

We wanted, or I wanted, I want to go on a trip with you sometime, to Stuttgart or Munich, one of the cities you grew up in, such lovely photos of you as a child, your soft wavy hair. Surprise: train tickets all of a sudden, a nice little hotel, maybe Hamburg too, a new city together, recently I asked you again, hm yes, you said, that would be nice, but I wanted rather more than a meagre Hm. I wanted major enthusiasm.

‘Oh yes, darling, we’ll do that, here, let’s look at dates, nonsense, I always have time for you, of course I do, always.’

That is what I want, otherwise no deal, that, surely, is the least I can ask for:

‘How nice that you’ve been thinking about it, I’m delighted.’

And then, then we’d have a *very* good time, the two of us, that I am *very* good at, you know I am. I have it from you, in fact. Before, when we were three travelling, we never stinted ourselves, marvellous trips, dad would drive us in the Citroën, northwards, southwards. He would have made excellent preparations: with the rowing boat on the Swedish lake, that roundabout in Wales, cicadas, concerts, cheese and wine, the puppies in Holland, I nearly took one with me. Dad waited patiently, helped you into your parka when it began raining again in Wales, fetched the mosquito spray and sprayed your legs, my shoulders, he would find patches of blue in the leaden holiday sky until in the end you said:

‘We’re feeling good, aren’t we children, we’re feeling so good, how good we’re feeling.’

That was the accolade, the enthusiastic response, my sole valid currency until today, and I fell in with it enthusiastically: *yes*, we’re feeling *really* good.

Your delight in me, about me, in us, is something I need badly, but it is hard to get, very hard, I have to work at it, and I do, I do, I’m not lazy, I don’t stand idly by. I

work: it used to be presents, special looks, little gifts, a bunch of flowers, hand-picked, a painting, something glued, written on, always with a tag on which were the words: I love you very much. From the shopping centre a tiny perfume, bought with pocket money, that afterwards stood by the telephone for freshening up during calls.

And if your gaze rests elsewhere because you are listening to an inner voice or have a headache and close your eyes (watch those headaches), or if your eyes rest on nothing, simply wandering about, then I get nervous. Those headaches I see coming before they arrive. I know all the signs, even the faint ones, the slightly skewed mouth, the absent gaze, the half-closed eyes, popping open again quickly in case anyone notices that it is starting again.

‘Go and see the doctor.’

‘Oh, it’ll be all right.’

‘Mum, they can certainly do something.’

‘Oh, I don’t know, headaches are a national illness, leave me alone, won’t you, that’ll make it go away, just don’t say anything to dad.’

And now in the hospital: I need you to open your eyes, otherwise it will never happen, how am I to go on a trip with you if you keep your eyes closed, you will not see anything then and you might just as well stay at home.

Your closed eyes: even as a child I wanted to peel them open, I used to take hold of the eyelids by the lashes and pull them up gently so that I should be seen by you again.

Hey, come on, open them, open your eyes and look me in the face, that’s it, there I was again, everything back to normal almost.

And sometimes, if your gaze wasn’t resting on me, I had to stay near you until you noticed me, that might happen soon, it might take a while. I had to tell you a story that would cheer you up or that would touch you or tell you something about myself that you understood, like this morning, but I used to be better at it.

‘Mum, today at school Karin did something awful, shall I tell you what.’

You shook your head almost imperceptibly, but I wouldn’t be put off.

‘What Karin did, she found this worm by the bush outside the door and she –’ I paused for effect, you opened your eyes for an instant and I knew I was on the right track.

‘She stuffed it into Bernd’s pencil case, underneath a sort of tube thing, you know mum, where the rubbers usually go.’

Or I must have got on your nerves:

‘You’re looking tired. You don’t look good at all. What’s the matter with you. Go and have a rest. I’ll do all this, I can empty the dishwasher myself, you’re not needed here, you go and have a lie-down.’

If I said that, you did the opposite, guaranteed, like the Amen in church, even if you had perhaps wanted to lie down before, it was like you snapped to attention.

‘What do you mean tired, don’t talk nonsense. You, *you* look tired, have done for weeks, I keep telling you.’

‘Yes, you keep telling me.’

‘So, why must you spy on me.’

‘I’m not spying on you, I’m just worried, a girl can worry about her mother, can’t she.’

‘There you go again, that tops everything, I can’t stand it when you put on that whiny voice.’

‘Come on, it wasn’t like that – come on now.’