

Translated excerpt

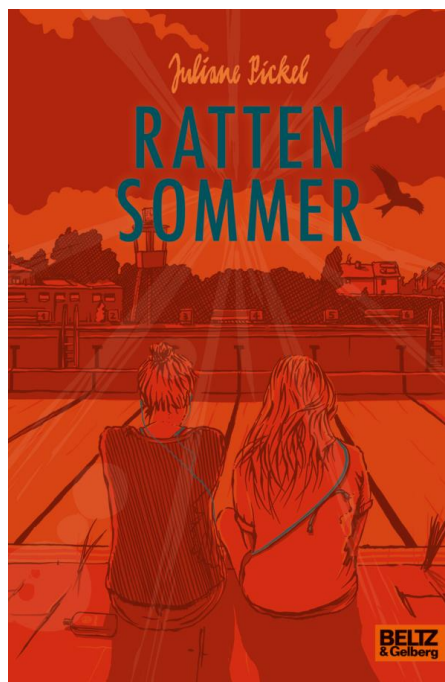
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Juliane Pickel
Rat Summer

Translated by Zaia Alexander



IN THE DEEP END

Now the summer's even starting to stink. As I walk across the school parking lot to my bike, the odor gets stuck in my nose. I stop and take a deep breath. It reeks as if something invisible were rotting. It reeks of death.

I get on my bike and drive away. Pedal faster and faster, despite the heat, as if I could shake off the stench that way.

This summer is totally crazy even without the stench. It's hotter than it has ever been before and it's getting hotter by the day. The air feels weird, totally unlike any other summer ever. It leaves a stubborn sticky film on our skin that's impossible to get rid of even in the shower. And then these swarms of insects, tons more than usual. They hang in the air like living black clouds and you have to watch out that they don't fly into your mouth.

People are acting weird too. Frau Urbanow, who lives next door, suddenly threw her husband out after they'd been married for sixty-three years. A few days ago, he was walking down the street with his suitcase and she was standing in her bathrobe watching him at the front door, and then she threw his clothes into a heap in the front garden and set them on fire. She was still staring into the flames when the firemen arrived.

That's the sort of thing people are doing this summer.

And now this weird stench. When I finally reach our swimming pool, my shirt is soaked and is sticking to my back. I drop my bike on the grass and squeeze through the hole in the fence, then I walk past the abandoned kiosk, and across the dried up lawn that used to be the sunbathing area.

Sonny is sitting inside the deep end of the pool smoking, the fumes billowing upward like smoke signals. I can see it from a distance.

She didn't go to school today. She's not really into grades or report cards.

I walk to the edge of the pool and look down at her. She's leaning cross-legged against the wall, wearing nothing but her underwear and smoking with her eyes shut. She looks like she's on vacation.

And I don't know why, but instead of going down to her, I just stand there in the middle of this searing sun, and gaze at her sitting inside the sea of turquoise blue tiles, in her neon yellow boxer shorts and her black tank top covered in holes. Her legs are tanned summer-brown, her sun-bleached hair. I look at her and think how chill she looks.

And how beautiful.

And I have absolutely no idea why it struck me just then.

As soon as she notices I'm standing there, she grins up at me and I get that feeling in my stomach as if I'm falling. It's got to be because of this summer.

"You wanna get yourself barbecued up there?" Sonny asks, and I wince and laugh a strange laugh that doesn't sound at all like me. It's pretty much the least cool laugh in the world.

"Get your butt down here, Lou Marinko. We're on vacation." Sonny pulls two bottles of Jägermeister out of her bag and swings them back and forth. I laugh again, but this time it sounds normal.

My cell phone rings - it's my dad. I press the off button, climb down the ladder into the pool and sit in the shade next to Sonny. Then I dig her report card out of my backpack and put it on her lap. "I think this belongs to you."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that." Sonny hugs the report card as though it were a precious gift. "Any surprises?"

"Religion," I say.

Sonny's report card is pretty dreadful, all D's, an F in physics. She even got a D in PE because she thought doing gymnastics on the balance beam was beneath her. She got only one B, and that was in religion. I show it to her. "What's that about?"

"God's always believed in me," says Sonny, and burns a hole through the grade with the tip of her cigarette.

She always pretends she doesn't care about grades, but she actually wishes she were better at school. Of course, she'd never admit that, not even to me, why should she? Everybody at school thinks she can't get her shit together anyway. Because of what happened to her mom back then, and because of the trauma it gave her.

Sonny's mom is dead. But not because she was sick or anything like that. Sonny's mom was killed. And it happened because of a lousy cheeseburger. A cheeseburger with no cheese on it.

That was almost five years ago.

The guy who did it is in prison. Sonny never mentions his name and nobody else is allowed to in front of her either. He's the Lord Voldemort in Sonny's story.

His name is Hagen Bender.

My cell phone rings. I press the off-button again. My dad probably just wants to find out about the last day of school.

Sonny holds the end of her cigarette on a corner of her report card until it catches fire and then drops it to the side. It sails through the air, ashes slowly floating to the ground, until they end up on the tiles. "Rest in peace," says Sonny and makes a sign of the cross.

She opens the two bottles and hands me one of them. I say no with a wave of my hand. I'm not into schnapps. She shrugs and toasts herself, then we lean in-sync against the wall of the pool.

"Do you smell that?" I ask. "That awful stench? What is it?"

Sonny inhales and shrugs. "If in doubt, my future. Or Ruben Wenger majorly farted."

Ruben Wenger sits in front of us in physics. He's a smart ass with lactose intolerance. I grimace and look at the report card. "You could be a pastor," I say.

"Nope." Sonny says no with a wave of her hand. "Then I'd have to get up early on Sundays and wear ugly cloaks. And I wouldn't be allowed to have sex either." She looks straight at me. "Right?"

“Yes, you can,” I say, and there it goes again, that moment of total weirdness. Sonny throws her cigarette butt onto the report card and her arm briefly brushes mine, a lingering touch, hardly worth mentioning, but I flinch as if I had grabbed an electric fence.

What the hell.

“Shit,” the word slipped right out of my mouth.

I secretly feel my skin. It tingles, kind of like having a slight burn, but not at all unpleasant. Just strange.

“What’s wrong?” Sonny asks, and then a grin flits across her face, but I don’t know what kind of grin it is, even though I actually always know. Because I know her face inside out. Because I know Sonny inside out.

Our parents used to live next door to each other, so we’ve known each other since we were babies. But I’m positive our souls had met way before they chose our bodies. Sometimes I feel as if Sonny’s blood is running through my veins. And she often says exactly what I’m thinking. We’re so different, it’s as if we grew up on two different galaxies.

Sonny and I, this is kind of how it goes:

Sonny: Puts on a big show - me: rabbit in front of a snake.

Sonny: Sky’s the limit - Me: Where is the limit? Sonny throws a stone - I pay for the broken pane. Seen from the outside, we couldn’t be more different - Sonny is blond as a Swede and tall, her body sinewy, her back straight, her gaze fixed straight ahead. And that’s me next to her, shorter, wider, darker, always slightly crouched, you never know.

We’re always together. Everybody always calls us *the twins* at school. But they don’t get it. Sonny and I, we’re not two of a kind. Sonny and I are two halves of a whole.

We sit there for a while without talking. The sun has just disappeared behind the huge old oak tree. From down below you can see the treetops.

There’s nothing ahead of us but a listless, muggy summer vacation.

Nothing ahead of us but “*Six weeks, Lou,*” says Sonny and takes my hand. I nod slowly.

“*Six weeks,*” I say.

We’ve been looking forward to just hanging out at the pool all day.

The abandoned old swimming pool with the waterless pools is where we hang out. We’re there all the time. Nobody ever strays over to here. Everybody else prefers Aquarama. A few years ago, after they shut down our pool, they built the new one on the other side of town. It’s this huge thing, where everything is supposedly *mega* - mega slides, mega waves, mega fun. Mega dull.

Our pool is nice and old-fashioned. A big pool, a baby pool, a diving platform, period. And everything’s still there: the sunbathing lawn, the old kiosk, the ticket booth, the showers, even the lifeguard’s chair. It’s exactly the way it used to be, except people aren’t jumping off the triple anymore, or lying on the lawn sunbathing and eating chips. It’s as if time has stood still, and there is such a nice, quiet melancholic feel to everything. If you listen carefully, you can still hear the kids shouting and the splash of their cannonballs under the diving platform. Everything here is the past - whatever could happen already has happened. I like it when I don’t have to think about what could happen. That’s why I like being there so much.

Sonny and I swore we’d never bring anybody else here. The pool is *our* place.

But best of all is that there’s no water in the pools. Especially, since I can’t swim.

Well, maybe I *could*. I know what my arms and legs are supposed to do. I was in the lake once when I was little. My dad showed me how. But as soon as I set foot in the water, I panic. I have these dreams where I sink all the way to the bottom. It's dark green, and there's no light shining. I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. I never reach the bottom, but I'm sure that something horrible is waiting for me down there.

Luckily, nobody knows about it except for Sonny. And when swimming is on the schedule for PE at school, I have a Norovirus or my period.

Swimming is like breathing for Sonny. She can't live without it. When we're not at the pool, she swims in the lake. I think she'd rather *live* in water.

She totally wants me to try. There she goes all over again.

"So when are we going swimming, Lou?" she asks me, and I say what I always say: "Never, Sonny."

Just talking about it is enough to make me sick.

Sonny stands up, pulls herself up at the non-swimmer side of the pool and takes three steps to the diving boards. She walks all the way to the edge and starts bouncing up and down. Each time she bounces, her feet lift off the board a little more.

"You know there's no water in there," I say. "Speaking of water."

"Forget it!"

"Maybe it would broaden your horizons, Lou." "My horizons are just fine."

I totally get how weird it is to be sitting down here in the heat instead of swimming in the lake, which is practically next door. But swimming is simply not an option.

Sonny stops bouncing. "You know, Lou, maybe this is the summer when something finally is going to happen. When something ... becomes *different*."

"I think things are fine the way they are," I say.

That's also the difference between me and Sonny.

I always expect a disaster around the next corner - and Sonny expects an adventure.

She starts bouncing again. "You know what, Lou? I don't think I'll go back to school after vacation."

"*What?*"

Her hair springs up and down against the deep blue sky. With every jump, she lifts off higher into the air. I have the feeling she'll disappear forever into the dark blue afternoon sky.

School without Sonny. I can't even *imagine* that. "And what do you want to do instead?" I ask.

"No idea," she says. "Maybe I'll buy a Bible and declare it's the end of the world in the pedestrian zone."

She sits at the edge of the pool, drops herself down, and lands lightly on her feet, as if it weren't nearly ten feet high. Sonny would also land on her feet at 150 feet. She's a cat with ninety-nine lives.

She takes my hand and pulls me up, then puts her hands on my shoulders and leans her face very close to mine. Her nose almost touches mine.

"You know, maybe *we* also should be different after these six weeks than we were before."

I gulp because my throat is suddenly way too tight.

"And maybe this is the summer you're going to swim, Lou Marinko."

My mouth is dry. I look at the small scar that starts at the corner of her mouth and runs in a gentle curve across her left cheek, the scar I've seen a thousand times before. Suddenly, I totally want to caress it with my finger. I have to make a real effort not to, and suddenly I can't breathe properly, as if something doesn't have enough space in my body.

I look into Sonny's eyes. I can always tell her mood by their color - the darker they get, the angrier, or she's looking for a fight. Now they're dark green. She wants something to happen. And she won't stop looking at me. Again a grin flits across her face.

And I think that maybe something already *is* different.

And then suddenly there's a shadow above us and we both lean our heads back and look up at the sky. A red kite is hovering over us, a fairly large one. It circles calmly over the pool, as if it were watching what we're doing down there, then it floats silently away until it's just a tiny dot in the infinite blue.

As soon as it flies out of sight, my cell phone rings again. This time I answer.

My dad's voice is so clear and close that it feels as if he were standing right next to me.

"Is Sonny with you?" he asks, and when I say "Yes", he goes silent for a moment and breathes heavily, as though he were laboring to put his words in the right order. And then he put it together, the sentence that I wish he would immediately take back.

"He's out again, Lou."

SALAMI TACTIC

"With extra cheese," says my mom, as she heaves a huge slice of pizza onto my plate, it's so large my plate nearly disappears under it.

So she knows about it already. The scent of pizza is supposed to distract us from the bad news. When sad things happen, or things that could hurt in some way, my mom cooks up everything her kitchen has to offer. As if she could make things turn harmless with vinegar. As if it were an antidote to bad luck and feeling terrible.

After what happened to Sonny's mom, all she did was cook. We were still neighbors back then. My mom made so much food for Sonny and her dad that it filled up the entire house. In the midst of all the grief, there were bowls and pots of food everywhere, but my mom always brought new pots, even though Sonny and her dad barely ever ate anything. As if she could have stopped the horror hanging in the rooms with lasagna and potato soup. Most of the food gradually turned moldy. It smelled really weird in the house. I thought it was death that stunk so badly. Which wasn't possible, because Sonny's mom hadn't died at home, but at McDonald's. Almost, anyway. She actually died in the ambulance.

I'm glad she didn't actually die at McDonald's. It's best not to die at all if you're Sony's mom and not even forty, but you definitely shouldn't die at McDonald's, where it reeks of deep-fried fat and where people in bad moods stuff their faces with food wrapped in plastic. And where everybody, who thinks about you always thinks about fries and chicken McNuggets, and not have a clue whether they're sad or hungry.

My mom cuts a big slice off her pizza. "Eat!" she says. If we eat, we can't talk about Sonny's dead mom. Or about the fact that we always think about my sister when we think of Sonny's mom.

“What did Sonny say?” my dad asks, looking at his slice of pizza, as if he forgot what it’s there for. I shove some crust into my mouth to delay an answer.

“What did Sonny say about what?” my mom asks.

My dad and I look at her.

“Well, about...” my dad says and falls silent.

“About Hagen Bender.” I spit the name out, along with a few crumbs of pizza across the table. I feel as if I have to say it out loud so that my mom can’t ignore it. It burns my mouth like chili. It makes me cough.

“I told you that already: He got out,” says my dad.

“Yes, I know,” says my mom. “But I’ve been thinking it over again: it’s just not possible that he is back out again. They should have kept him there much longer...”

“Four and a half years, actually,” nods my dad. “Because of the previous convictions.”

“But it has only been...”

“Three.”

“Exactly!” My mom smiles.

My dad opens his mouth and closes it again. “Maybe he was well-behaved in prison,” he says, and I find the idea funny that you first kill somebody and then do a great job in prison removing the dishes from the dishwasher.

“How do you know? I ask.

“Vadim told me.”

My dad is a social worker and Vadim is his colleague. He works with prisoners and has his contacts. He’s also a major gossip.

“Think about it,” says my dad. “Three years for taking a person’s life.”

“Well,” says my mom absently, “it’s horrible.”

She takes another slice of pizza. My dad glances at her plate. “You know what Doctor Heaven said.” His voice sounds angry, but nobody is supposed to notice.

Mrs. Heaven is my mom’s doctor. She had warned her that it wouldn’t be long before her heart conked out, if she didn’t lose weight soon. “It’ll be a really nice heart attack, my dear,” my dad quoted her as saying. “There you are at the checkout in the supermarket, not suspecting a thing, and bam, you fall over, intensive care unit.”

Mrs. Heaven likes drastic scenarios. They don’t faze my mom at all, but my dad sure gets upset. He’s been following her around like a manic personal trainer lately. “You have to move!” he always says. “Take a walk! Go for a bike ride! At least do a few squats!” My mom ignores him, that’s her form of sport.

In the photos of me as a baby, my mom still looks pretty slim. But then she started to put on weight. If you put the pictures from over the years together, you can see how she gains weight every year, like in a flip book. I think she’s gained at least two kilos for every year I got older.

“Maybe she just likes herself that way,” Sonny sometimes says, but I don’t think that’s true. She always moves as if she’s wearing an uncomfortable suit because she needs it. Like an airbag that protects her from emotional collisions. I don’t mind that she’s fat, even if I can’t really reach around her when I hug her. When she eats, it seems as if she disappears into her own world. And then I miss her.

My dad is skinny as a beanpole. He only eats to survive. When I hug him, it's exactly the other way around: it goes straight to the marrow.

Most of the time, my mom ignores anything that looks like an argument. If my dad criticizes her, she smiles it away. Or brushes it aside. But lately they've been arguing more often about my mom's weight. And that usually makes my dad cry. Which is nothing unusual - my dad is the biggest crybaby in the whole world. He actually always cries every chance he gets, and he has about twenty-five different ways of crying, depending on whether he is moved by something or is just sad. At first glance, this seems totally endearing, which he is. But he actually steals the show with his blubbering. If you're crying their eyes out, you gotta wonder if you even feel like crying anymore. But you can never be angry with him.

Sometimes I get the feeling that my dad cries so much because my mom doesn't. As if he could just take care of all the feeling for her. And sometimes I think he feels pretty alone. And anyway, it's not really about the food or being fat, but actually about my sister. And about the fact that she's dead and they never talk about it. Never *truly* talk about it. At least that's what my dad always says when they argue and they think I can't hear them.

My sister isn't really dead. She never was alive, at least not in this world. She was what they call stillborn - she was dead when she came into the world. It just happened and nobody knows why. Nobody had a syndrome to explain it, or a complicated name to describe the whole thing so it would be a little less awful.

I was born exactly a year later. My parents were in quite a hurry with me, as if they wanted to correct a mistake very quickly. And they somehow managed to get us to have the same exact birthday - the sixth of July.

Sometimes I envy my sister. Because if you've never really lived or only almost lived, everybody thinks that everything you'd have done, had you lived, would have been incredibly great and special.

At least that's what my mom thinks. And she also has a very specific idea of what my sister would have been so great and special at doing. And she'd like me to be exactly like that idea. Even if she would never admit it. But I know, for example now: "Have you thought some more about going to camp, sweetie?" she asks me.

"About what?" I ask, even though I know exactly what she means. But I can also pretend it's nothing.

"About the tennis camp. There are only a couple of spots left. I left the brochure for you to look at." For weeks she's been trying to persuade me to spend the last two weeks of my vacation taking tennis lessons in some dumpy seaside town with a bunch of other teenagers. It's not as if tennis interests me in any way. Or that I'm particularly athletic, or that I look good in white. But my mom has this image of me running sportily all over red clay and walloping balls across the court with my amazing forehand. It's one of those things she thinks I should be doing. Just like she thinks I should grow my hair longer.

There are all these 'I'm sure you'd enjoy it' things, which really mean: "Your sister would have enjoyed it."

"So?" my dad asks, "what did Sonny have to say about it?"

I get up and grab a bottle of water from the fridge - it's better to lie standing up. "Not much," I say. Actually, it's not even a lie. Sonny didn't actually say anything about Hagen Bender being out.

Because I didn't tell her. I tried to, I tried all the way back home from the swimming pool, right up to the intersection where Sonny and I always part, but somehow I couldn't spit out the sentence:

"By the way, your mom's murderer is on the loose again."

"She probably just doesn't know what to say," says my dad, although he knows Sonny is never at a loss for words.

I sit back down again.

"Well," says my mom, "it's vacation time now." She pats my hand. "Think it over about the camp again, will you?"

I look at the five big pieces of salami on my slice of pizza, arranged like meaty Olympic rings and glistening greasily from the yellow bed of cheese. I'm repelled by the little globules of fat in them. I don't really eat meat anymore, but my mom always forgets.

"Leave her alone about the camp, Ute," says my dad.

My mom sighs: "Tennis is just such a great sport."

"So, maybe you ought to give it a try," my dad says quietly, and my mom pretends not to hear him with a smile on her lips.

My dad spins his slice of pizza a hundred and eighty degrees, as if it would open a new perspective for him. "Vadim says Hagen Bender will probably move back to his old house."

"Who?" my mom asks. My dad glances over to her. He can roll his eyes without rolling his eyes.

"He's coming back here?" I hadn't even thought about that. In my mind, Hagen Bender is sitting in a plane to Havana with a hat, sunglasses and a fake beard. I wouldn't have imagined he'd just walk back into our town like that.

My dad nods. "At least that's what Vadim says." "That'll be very cold," says my mom.

"I wonder what Marek's got to say about that," says my dad. Marek is Sonny's dad. He used to be friends with him. Before it all happened. He's changed a lot since then. Well, changed. Actually, he just kinda went bonkers. "As if he had moved to Mars," says my dad sometimes. "It's just too far away to fly there."

Now he sighs. "Sonny will tell Marek, won't he, Lou?" His voice is vibrating suspiciously again.

I shrug and look deeply into the salami's fat eyes. "Probably."

And then we sit there quietly eating and thinking so loudly about Sonny's dead mom and my so-called dead sister that it makes my ears buzz.

My sister was actually supposed to be called Louise instead of me. But because she was a star-child, that is, still-born, they named her Stella - the star. And when I came along, exactly a year later to the day, my parents gave me her name.

Sonny thinks it's really weird to walk around with a name that was actually meant for your sister.

That's why she never calls me Louise. I'm Lou. That's half of Louise. One sister of two.

At some point back then, Marek asked my mom to stop cooking for him and Sonny. And from then on, she spoke less and less about Sonny's mom, which I found strange because she had known her for so long. She really was crazy about her. Everybody liked her. You couldn't help it.

When Sonny comes over today, my mom only asks her how Marek is, and Sonny always lies to her face: "Fine!", and my mom leaves it at that.

She always prefers a nice lie to the ugly truth.

That's probably why we never really talk about my sister. Because in a way, she's also an ugly truth.

Whenever I ask my mom about her, about what it was like back then, she always says: “There’s nothing to tell, sweetheart. That was *so* long ago. And then we got you.” And then she smiles, and even the smile is a beautiful lie, a huge one, and then she says every time, every single time: “And then I said to the nurse: This little one here, she’s our miracle.”

And when she says that, there’s always something in the way she looks at me that makes me feel as if it’s not a miracle at all. Actually, her look always makes me feel as if I’m yet another ugly truth. I wonder what good it would be for Sonny, if she knew Hagen Bender was out again. We haven’t talked about the whole thing for ages. I don’t want her to start thinking about it all over again during this vacation. I want this vacation to be ours alone. That this summer belongs to us. I don’t know what she’ll do when she finds out that Hagen Bender is out again. Skin him alive and eat him for breakfast, probably.

I’ll have to tell her anyway. The whole ugly truth.