

Translated excerpt

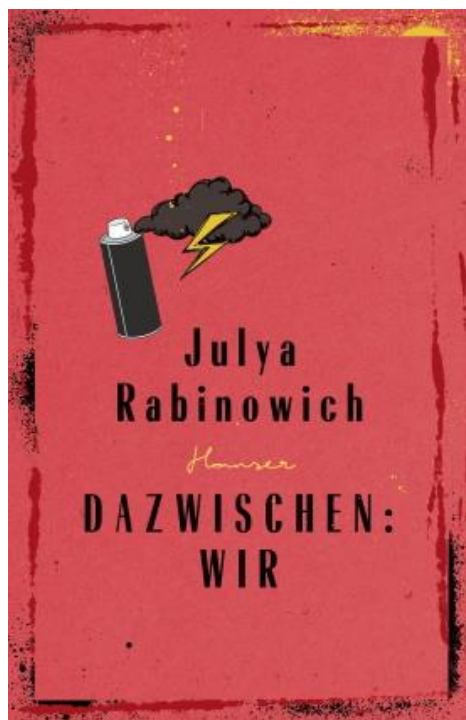
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**Julya Rabinowich**  
***Us, In Between***

Translated by Claire Storey



Today I sat in the garden and watched the clouds drift past. Watching them stretch, fray and then suddenly disappear. Like Dad. Or they change. Turn into something new. Like me.

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It's ridiculous to keep writing in here, day after day, as if nothing's changed. Everything has changed. Yet I force myself to do it. Why? Well, what else would I do? I do it because my dad did it: Keep looking forwards, never look back. He did it as we fled. But at some point, he turned around. And then he was stuck looking backwards, until it was too late. I'm not doing that. I've learnt that from him.

So then. Next diary entry. Even if it hurts.

It's sunny today. I'm going to the woods. Walking.

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It's almost halfway through the holidays, and then it's back to school. But it's still so hot. The berries are ripening in the garden and we go swimming nearly every day – Laura, Markus and me. And in the evening, I'm so tired, heavy like a sack of rice. And then I can't sleep because Mum needs something. My aunt never needs anything.

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Laura's seen a little puppy. Not in real life. On the website of one of those animal charities. It's such a tiny furbaby! Black with bat-like ears. And proper puppy-dog eyes. So now she's pestering her mum for a dog. Laura's mum has lots of nice carpets and isn't a big fan of the idea. I think the puppy's really cute too. But Mum's scared of dogs. And she thinks they're dirty. I'm not even allowed to dream of owning a fluffball like that. If push came to shove, I don't think I'd even be allowed a tortoise. Laura just laughed at my tortoise comparison. And then added, "At least you've still got Rami, Madina."

Yeah, thanks for that. If only my little brother listened to me half as much as a puppy would. But he never listens to me, or Mum. He's turned into such a pest. Six months ago he was just a minor pest. Now he's a major one! And Mum does nothing. I don't think that's good.

If it was me, I'd pull his ears so hard, they'd be massive.

"Well, you take him out for his walkies then," I suggested to Laura, and she cackled with laughter. I watched her laughing and thought, just a few months ago, I'd have joined in. But now it's all different. Somehow, I've got the feeling that I've overtaken her. Like in a race. She's simply behind me. Left behind on the inside lane. I push that thought away because I don't want to think it. I want us to be together for ever. But now it's like we're in the same room, in the same friendship, but not in the same situation.

Hang on though. It's always been like that. She's never been in my situation, and I've never been in hers. But back then we didn't spend every minute of every day together. And I simply didn't know so much and didn't check everything out, so I never even realised.

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Our new apartment is right underneath Laura's. On the wall next to our doorbell there are several holes. A plaque used to hang there. Laura's dad's plaque. From his business, his office. Laura hates him. I asked her why they didn't just fill in the holes. The holes that always make her remember. She said she wants it like this in her mind, just as it is. I don't understand. I only want the good memories of my dad.

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Laura wants to make a raised bed. It's almost autumn! It gets cold quickly here. Not like back home. Back in our old home. I am at home here. I just still find the seasons a bit strange.

"No probs," she says. "We'll still manage a few flowers."

She sits there, her vest top over tanned skin, fine light hairs on her forearms, belly and shoulders. I've always found these little hairs so beautiful on her. On Markus as well. Mine are thick and black like flies' legs. I shave my legs like anything. Once you've started, you can't then stop because otherwise they come through even thicker than before. And you get used to having smooth skin. Mum complained a bit when she realised.

Tina from school said I shouldn't shave because we women should just let our hair hang out. Mum told me I shouldn't because I wasn't allowed to shave. They should all just do what they want and leave me in peace. End of.

My aunt took me to one side and recommended some sugar mixture she's always used. I'm just not to mention it to Mum.

"So," says Laura standing up and stretching, "As soon as I can feel my legs again, we can fetch the soil and fill the bed."

Her legs are amazing, so narrow, a bit of meat on her thighs, just enough to give them a beautiful, rounded look. Mine are more muscley; I do a lot of sport. And Laura hates sport. We do go for a jog every now and then. I learnt how to from her.

"I wanted to watch a film with Markus," I say.

"He's not here yet." Laura always has this line at the ready, the reason why I should stay and talk to her and not her brother. I know she doesn't like it. Especially because she doesn't have a boyfriend at the moment.

I stand up and brush the leaves off my bum. I still didn't dare wear shorts quite as short as Laura's. Not even now Dad's not here. Mum would howl, I swear.

“It’s not what we get out of it that’s important,” says Laura with a wise expression, emptying the plastic compost bag into the bed. “The important thing is just to do it.”

Don’t know about that. I’d quite like to see the fruits of my labours. But I don’t say that out loud.

We burrow into the soil and I think about how I used to create that fairytale world in my head. To have some space. To get away. To be able to keep going. It’s not there anymore. Not since Dad left. Not since Markus became my boyfriend. Not since I had to grow up faster than I’ve ever had to before. That childish nonsense. I’m too old for all that now.

“What’s with the face like a wet weekend?” asks Laura, brushing strands of hair out of her face. Her hands are covered in mud and her face soon looks like a soldier in full camo.

“Nothing.”

I look away. I don’t want to talk about it. Not again. It doesn’t change anything.

It doesn’t bring Dad back.

She lovingly places her mucky paw on my shoulder. Mud, and a familiar warmth.

“You know you can always talk to me. I’m right here.”

I feel one of those loathsome tears in my eye, right in the corner, not yet visible. I screw up my eyes tightly, making out there’s something in it. And there is. My past.

I nod. Then stand up, wipe my hands down my skirt and go inside.

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“Come out,” pleads Laura from the other side of the bathroom door. I’m sitting in there, staring at the wall. It’s so cool actually having our own toilet! Where I can sit as long as I want. Well, almost. Mum’s taken Rami for a walk and Aunt Amina’s out at her course. It’s all mine. Our two rooms, our bathroom, and our little kitchenette, the whole lower floor.

“I’ve got tummy ache,” I lie.

“You don’t even believe that yourself,” Laura shoots back.

I open the door. She’s standing there, grinning.

“D’you want to talk about it?”

“It doesn’t change anything,” I say and sob so hard I can’t breathe, like I’m drowning in a sea of snot. She puts her arms around me. The smell of roses and sweat. Almost like my grandma.

“Come here,” says Laura, pressing my face into her chest, soft and firm, and so not like my grandma. I snuggle into her and squeeze my eyes tightly shut until I can see spirals in the darkness behind my eyelids.

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Markus has friends over. I hate it when he's not told me beforehand; he just does it and I have to introduce myself to a new round of changing faces. It used to be fun. But that was before I saw him every day. Feels natural to see Laura every day. But not him. And less still with his friends. One of them has come on a red moped. He's been sat at the garden gate for ages with the engine running, presumably hoping Laura might finally notice him. I get up, annoyed, and call to her because the stink makes me want to throw up.

"What's wrong?" asks Markus, as upset with me as I am with him.

"Sorry," I say. And then I leave.

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I go downstairs to my room that's also Rami's room. Rami should be asleep but he's not. His bed is empty.

"Where's Rami?" I ask Mum who's sitting at the table as she so often is. Her chin resting on her hands, her gaze fixed on her teacup, her back rounded. She always used to sit up straight. She doesn't reply immediately; I have to ask again.

"I don't know," she says, and seems astonished at her own helplessness.

"Shouldn't he be in bed?"

"Yes."

"Call him in then."

"I already have."

I sigh. I know she has no energy to stand up and look for him. Swearing, I slip on my cardigan and go outside into the garden, into the darkness of the universe, where the small planets of the solar-powered lanterns shine. Because of the security light.

"Rami!"

No reply.

"Come on you. It's not funny. Come here now. Or else!"

Somewhere a bush rustles. A cat. Or a badger. Or my flippin' annoying little brother. I take two more steps forward.

"You're such a pain!" I yell. "Mum's going to be mad."

"Yeah, and?"

The words come out softly. And not at all convincingly. It's really more of a question. I walk towards the voice. He's crouched there behind a lilac bush. His shoulders hunched up to his ears.

"Why are you sitting there?"

"Why not?"

“Come inside.” I try to grab him, but he shrinks backwards. I can’t reach him because of the branches he’s hiding under.

“Oh, come on!”

“Go away,” he says, sticking out his bottom lip. “I won’t listen to you. I’ll only listen to Dad.”

“But he’s not here,” I say, making my voice a couple of notches friendlier. And stretch my hand out to him. He shrinks back even further. I give up.

“He’ll come back! He will! I know it!”

I sit down on the ground a little distance from him.

“I’ve got chewing gum. You want some?”

He looks at me with his bulging eyes, tears pooling in them. I lay down a strip of gum, like he’s a feral cat I’m trying to tempt out. He crawls even further in.

“Look Rami,” I say. “I know it’s horrible for us. But we have to keep going.”

We sit still. I don’t look at him; I look up at the stars. The shooting stars will start soon, and I’ll make a wish. I know exactly what I’ll wish for. The same as always. At some point the gum on the ground disappears. And sometime later Rami comes out and leans against me. And cries. I don’t cry. I have something to do.

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Once Rami is finally snoring, I turn off his nightlight and head into the kitchen. Mum’s still sitting there. My aunt has already gone to bed. Perhaps to give Mum some space in the quiet. I reach for the teapot. The tea inside’s gone cold. And her cup’s still full. I sit down next to her and take her hand. Her head sinks a little, but not before I see the tears.

“Mum.”

“I wish I could... I just wish I could pull myself together,” Mum says quietly. “Every day I try to. I just can’t do any more.”

I pour myself out some cold tea and take a sip. It’s been left for too long and it’s bitter and black as hell. I plop in a sugar lump that clearly won’t dissolve. Whenever this happens, I feel so lost. Every single time. Ms Wischmann says Mum needs support. And that support shouldn’t come from me. When I think about Ms Wischmann, I look forward to the end of the summer holidays when I can start to see her again. Have a place to run to, once a week, where it’s all just about me. And it’s so good because without that island of peace, I’d have gone crazy by now. Because of everything. At our last meeting she made it even clearer: “Your mum has fallen into a deep hole. But you can’t help her out of it on your own.”

The deep hole Mum’s fallen into is called Depression. But she doesn’t want a Ms Wischmann all to herself like I do. She doesn’t want to talk to strangers. And clearly, I can’t force her to. She only talks to me. And my aunt. And sometimes Laura’s mum. Now we live with them, after we were given permission to live here. Can’t imagine

what it'd be like if we were still living in the refugee hostel. It'd be a nightmare. So I hug Mum as tightly as I can, and push away the resentment that grows inside me, next-door to the pity. Because it's too much for me. Because once again, it's all too fucking much for me. It's a while before Mum lifts her arms and hugs me back. But she does it. That pleases me, at least.

In the morning, Laura wakes me up: doors slam before she plants a kiss on my face. She smells of toothpaste and fresh soap. She's come straight from the bathroom. She's brought a basket containing boiled eggs and bread rolls with butter and sweet orange marmalade.

"Made by me!" declares Laura, grinning.

"Eh, I helped!" I say. I'm so tired, my eyes will barely stay open.

"Come on, come on. The day's half gone already."

Laura sets the coffee on the table and fires up the toaster. I sit up in bed. The sun's pouring in through the window; someone's opened the curtains. Rami's not there. And the sun, rushing in, is already high in the sky. I've massively overslept.

"Where is everyone?" I wonder. I hope I don't have to sort anything out again, something someone else has messed up.

"At the fair. With my mum. All three of them."

I'd completely forgotten about the fair. The stalls were being put up yesterday. Rami will have an absolute ball. Rides and candy floss. Hopefully that'll make him a bit more bearable... for a few days at least.

I crawl into the kitchen in my pyjamas. I feel like a mummy that'll disintegrate just by walking. Laura wafts the coffee beneath my nose. It smells amazing. The bread smells great too. So does the jam. I down the coffee in one, burning my lips.

"Another one?"

"Please. I think I might need a hundred today."

"Anyway, I reckon I've just about won mum over. About the puppy."

Laura stands with her back to me, stirring her coffee. I creep over to her and snuggle up. Sometimes I have no idea what I'd do without her.

"We're going to the fair this evening," says Laura. "And you're coming this time. No excuses."

I swill the coffee round my mouth like mouthwash, so I don't have to answer straight away.

"Come on, Madina."

I swallow the coffee.

"Fine," I say. This time nobody's going to tell me I can't. Dad's not here.

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Mum tried to stop me. But it was a bit half-hearted. So I'm going out this evening. With everyone else. This is the very first time that has ever happened.

"Is Markus going?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.



“Good. Then he’s in charge.” She made as if to go upstairs to personally tell Markus that at the start of the evening, ta-da, he would magically become responsible for me. Like I’m some sort of enchanted princess that turns into a monster when the sun goes down and has to be put in a cage to stop it from causing any damage. And she expected me to go with her obediently and interpret, as always. I started up the stairs.

Then I stopped, blocking her way.

“No, Mum. I’m responsible for me. No one else.”

She held onto the banister, not moving, fighting an internal battle. Then looked at me with such a miserable expression, a look rarely seen.

“But that’s awful,” she said. “I wish your father was here. I wish he would protect me. I just want you to have it better than me...”

I smile.

“I’m fine with it,” I said. “Whatever I do for myself, nobody can take that away. You know?”

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Later we’re standing in Laura’s room making ourselves up. My hair’s still chin-length, and when the weather’s humid, like this evening, the strands curl to make me look like Medusa with very short snakes. I like my curls. Still. Laura’s dyed her hair bright red. You can see the patches of red on her neck and hands. The bathroom looks like a slaughterhouse. We’ll have to clean it all up later. Otherwise there’ll definitely be no furbaby. So I reckon. Laura still needs convincing though. Sometimes she just doesn’t see the things she does that wind her mum up. A bloodbath, for example.

Laura puts on some tight black shorts with her bum cheeks hanging out the back. I think they look awful. Not because I don’t like her bum. I’d just find it so embarrassing if half my backside was on show to the world. She’s planning on combining that with a top that looks like her mum’s underwear!

“It IS my mum’s underwear!” she explains when I ask.

“Laura. Think about the puppy.”

I’ve put on my best summer dress: light green with a dainty pattern, floaty with pretty narrow straps that cross over on my back. Not too short. But not too long either. Would have been unthinkable before. It’s my small hard-won change. Mum’s learning, but it’s baby steps. I’ve got to be patient with her. Otherwise we clash. And then she cries, and then I cry too. Who wants to just keep crying?

Laura never has to have conversations like that. Laura borrows her mum’s heels, and her lipstick, without asking. Sometimes her mum gets annoyed but most of the time she’s just happy Laura’s got such a lust for life, so she says. But when she offered me a lipstick, a bright red one, I turned it down.

“Thank you, Susi,” I said. Since we moved in together, I’m to call her Susi. It was really weird at first, but I’ve got used to it since then. Just like I’m getting used to everything

here. It's easy as pie to get used to the good things. "It's really sweet of you, but I just won't wear it. It'd feel like I'm wearing fancy dress."

She rolled it backwards and forwards on the palm of her hand. A shiny black cylinder, beauty within. Just not my kind of beauty.

"It'd go so well with your skin tone."

"Thank you, but I really wouldn't wear it."

Too stubborn a reply maybe. Perhaps in a corner of my soul, I really did want to wear that bright red lipstick, even though it was completely at odds with my own self-image. She looked at me. Because of my refusal. I used to take everything she gave me. A lot of it was wonderful. But not all of it. I never had the guts to say no. Because I'd have looked rude. And ungrateful. But I don't want to lie anymore. Even out of politeness.

"What are you thinking?" asks Laura, putting the finishing touches to her eyeliner, as cool and precise as a goddam surgeon. I've no idea how she does it. I can't. I start shaking and I don't just wobble, I make a huge, big mess.

"Why?"

"You were chewing your bottom lip again."

"You see that even with one eye shut while you're working on the other?"

"I'm omnipresent, girlfriend!"

"Omnipotent more like!"

We laugh. It's cool when you have someone you can laugh with when you're down. They should be prescribed by a doctor to everyone who doesn't have one. Like just do it! I'd prescribe myself Laura if I didn't have her here.

Outside a car horn beeps. It's such an intense honking, a long, loud, honk of longing. For Laura. She rolls her eyes.

"Not him again...."

I know who. The guy from the café where we usually go for ice cream or cake. He's a waiter there. He comes from somewhere out of town and drives in making so much noise in his pimped-up red poser car everyone knows he's arrived. And then he does the same on the way out. And Laura and I really know about it because every time he's doing his "driving into town" thing, he stops off at our gate and honks. Ever since Laura was bored one day and made eyes at him. Even though I'd warned her – never in a million years would I ever make eyes at someone like that.

"It's just a laugh," she'd said, and now we had to suffer the Honker every single day. He annoys me even more than a mosquito bite on my arse. I shuffled in my sandals – turquoise with narrow straps and low green heels. I feel all grown-up in them. Laura's mum gave them to me for my birthday. And I swore to myself I'd get a job so I could buy her something nice for her birthday, not just stupid vouchers or meadow flowers like usual. Vouchers to do the vacuuming, vouchers to do the laundry, vouchers to go

food shopping. What sort of birthday present is that? Exactly. But then it all kicked off with Dad, and I had no time left over for a job.

Outside, the annoying noise sounds again. And again, and again, and again. Laura yanks open the window.

“I’ll drive you to the fair!” he yells out of the bragging machine window.

“Thanks, but no thanks!” yells Laura back.

“Come down!”

“We’ve got a lift already!”

He puts the window back up like some flippin’ visor. And drives off with squealing wheels.

“So annoying!” says Laura, swearing.

“Who’s picking us up then?” I ask in surprise. It’s the first I’ve heard of it.

“Mr Nobody and Sir No-one,” laughs Laura.

“You’re so silly,” I say. “Why are you lying to him?”

She shuffles over to me.

“Because it doesn’t matter!”

“Just tell him you don’t want a lift. He’s not going to give up otherwise.”

“Just forget it!” laughs Laura.

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The evening’s over. And I’m still sitting here writing. It was fun to go out at night with Laura for the first time, but I felt a bit scared walking through the woods to get there. All alone, the trees with their branches and the shadows in between.

I try not to look into the darkness. I think about my forest, the one I’d almost got lost in, my fairytale forest from before, with its tropical birds and dangerous animals. I dared to go through that forest. And this one here is truly harmless. Much less dangerous than the war I walked through. Much less dangerous than the pigs who forced my Dad to return to that war. Much less dangerous than everything I left behind in my homeland. I tip my head back to see the stars above me: a huge map of unknown worlds, shining, shimmering, endless. Laura tells me a joke I don’t get; I laugh anyway. The further we go into the darkness, the louder I laugh.

“This evening is going to be soooo sick!” says Laura.

It really is, I think to myself, and feel really happy.

Even from a distance, you can hear the noise growing: people screaming, a mixture of different songs blaring out from the loudspeakers, playing over each other. The lights flashing red, green and blue. In the lights, the people look like they’re from a horror film. Young people, old people, dressed up and ruffled from the rides. I reckon the whole town is here tonight, and then some. Right in the middle is a Scrambler with cars

at the end of its arms, each one spinning on its own axle as the Scrambler leisurely turns the other way. Behind the Scrambler are garishly lit stalls selling bratwurst, cocktails and candyfloss, the lights turning bystanders into zombies. And at the front, pizza stands.

“We have to go on the Scrambler!” shrieks Laura.

“Before or after we eat?” I ask.

“Afterwards, of course!” Laura leads us to the nearest food stand. “In for a penny...”

We stand there. A crate of beers flies past us. “Ooops!” says Laura, ducking.

We buy a bratwurst and chips each, crispy and smelling of oil. Big, thick-cut chips, with ketchup and mayo and everything on top. Laura sits on the grass. I sit next to her. We open our cans of lemonade in unison. We do that at school. Synchronised lemonade drinking!

“Where’s Markus?” I ask.

“He’s with his mates, picking up the ones who live further out. They’ll be here soon.”

I get an uneasy, tense feeling inside; the Honker could find us. But if he does, I’ve decided I’m going to chase him off, even if Laura won’t do it. Even if he is much older than us. I just don’t care.

A couple of girls we know from school walk past. We say hello, we wave, we chat. Then they move on. It’s so unbelievably lit that they talk to me just like they talk to Laura! Like it’s normal to talk to me. I’m not a foreign body anymore. I’m now just one of them. At least I think I am. It feels so different from last year. So different. Last year they swung between not talking to me at all and talking to me really awkwardly. I lived in a refugee hostel and didn’t know what I was doing. But at some point, I worked it all out, even better than my own parents did. And then my parents got pissed off with me. It was a properly crazy year. But Laura was always by my side, and that’s what made it bearable. And beautiful at times. Until Dad disappeared.

We climb in the car on the Scrambler.

“Say goodbye to your hotdog!” screams Laura. The car sways gently one way and then the other. The Scrambler’s arm creaks and groans as it spins higher and higher, gaining speed. Halfway up I realise my shoes are dangling in mid-air. Briefly feel queasy. We’re up, and everything’s spinning. Laura’s screaming. And laughing. I calm down. My hair whips round my face, I lift my head and the stars circle above.

“Scream with me!” yells Laura. “Come on, Madina!”

And she clings to my arm, giving me the energy I need, and I open my mouth as wide as possible and scream with her, our two voices becoming one, rising up over the Scrambler and the stalls, high up into the starry sky spinning furiously above us.

And then I throw up. But hey ho!