

## Christa · Sigrid Nunez

I AM TOLD THAT MY FIRST WORD was Coca-Cola, and there exists a snapshot of me at eighteen months, running in a park, hugging a full bottle. It seems I snatched this Coke from some neighboring picnickers. I used to believe that I could remember this moment—the cold bottle against my stomach, my teetering, stomping trot, feelings of slyness and joy and excitement fizzing in me—but now I think I imagined all this at a later age, after having looked long and often at the picture.

Here is something I do remember. Coming home from grade school for the lunch hour: It may have happened only once or it may have happened every day. Part of the way home took me through empty streets. I was alone and afraid. The noon whistle sounded, and as at a signal I began to run. The drumming of my feet and my own huffing breath became someone or something behind me. And I remember thinking that if I could just get home to my mother and her blue, blue eyes, everything would be all right.

Here are some lines from Virginia Woolf: “there is nothing to take the place of childhood. A leaf of mint brings it back: or a cup with a blue ring.”

Sometimes—now—I might find myself in a strange town. I might be walking down a quiet street at midday. A factory whistle blows, and I feel a current in my blood, as if a damp sponge had been stroked down my back.

Woolf was thinking of a happy childhood, but does it matter? Another writer, members of whose family were killed in concentration camps, recalls how years later, looking through a book, he was touched by photographs of Hitler, because they reminded him of his childhood.

My mother’s eyes were enhanced by shapely brows that made me think of angels’ wings. Their arch gave her face an expression of skeptical wonder. When she was displeased her brows went awry; the arch fell; the world came tumbling down on me.

I remember a pear-shaped bottle of shampoo that sat on the edge of our bathtub. “With lemon juice. For blonds only.” As the years passed and her hair grew darker, she started to use bleach. On the smooth white drawing paper of kindergarten I too made her blonder, choosing the

bright-yellow crayon, the yellow of spring flowers: daffodils, forsythia.

Other features: A wide mouth. Good, clear skin. A strong nose. Too big, her daughters said. ("What do you mean? A fine nose. Aristocratic. Same nose as Queen Elizabeth. I don't want a little button on my face.")

And her walk, which was graceful and not graceful. A slight hitch in her gait, like a dancer with an injury.

And her hands: long-fingered, with soft palms and squarish nails. Deft, competent hands, good at making things.

This is the way I see her at first, not as a whole but as parts: a pair of hands, a pair of eyes. Two colors: yellow and blue.

The housing project where we lived. The wooden benches that stood in front of each building, where the women gathered when the weather was fair. The women: not yet thirty but already somewhat worn away. The broad spread of their bottoms. The stony hardness of their feet, thrust into flip-flops. (The slatternly sound of those flip-flops as they walked.) The hard lives of housewives without money. Exhaustion pooled under their eyes and in their veiny ankles. One or two appearing regularly in sunglasses to hide a black eye.

Talking, smoking, filing their nails.

Time passes. The shadow of the building lengthens. The first stars come out; the mosquitoes. The children edge closer, keeping mum so as not to be chased away, not to miss a riddle. *He married his mother. I'm late this month. She lost the baby. She found a lump. She had a boy in the bed with her.*

Finally a husband throws open a window. "You girls gonna yak out there the whole damn night?"

Part of my way of seeing my mother is in contrast to these women. It was part of the way she saw herself. "I'm not like these American women." Her boast that she spoke a better English than they was true. "Dese and dose, youse, ain't. How can you treat your own language like that!" Her own grammar was good, her spelling perfect, her handwriting precise, beautiful. But she made mistakes, too. She said *spedacular* and *expecially* and *holier-than-thoo*. She spoke of a *bone of contentment* between two people. Accused someone of being a *ne'er-too-well*. And: "They stood in a motel for a week." No matter how many times you corrected her she could not get that participle right. She flapped her hands. "You know what I mean!"

And her accent never changed. There were times when she had to repeat herself to a puzzled waitress or salesman.

But she would never say *youse*. She would never say *ain't*.

Parent-Teachers' Day. My mother comes home with a face set in disgust. "Your teacher said, 'She does *good* in history.'"

My mother liked English. "A good language—same family as German." She was capable of savoring a fine Anglo-Saxon word: *murky*, *smite*. She read *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*. She knew words like *thane* and *rood* and *sith*.

Southern drawls, heartland twangs, black English, all sounded horrid to her.

One or two *Briticisms* had found their way (how?) into her speech. "It was a proper mess, I tell you." And somewhere she had learned to swear. She had her own rules. Only the lowest sort of person would say *fuck*. But *bastard* was permissible. And *shit*—she said *shit* a lot. But she always sounded ridiculous, swearing. I was never so aware that English was not her native tongue as when she was swearing at me.

She did not have many opportunities to speak German. We had a few relations in upstate New York and in Pennsylvania, and there was a woman named *Agä*, from Munich, who had been my mother's first friend here in the States and who now lived in Yonkers. But visits with these people were rare, and perhaps that is why I first thought of German as a festive language, a language for special occasions. The harshness that grates on so many non-German ears—I never heard that. When several people were speaking together, it sounded to me like a kind of music—music that was not melodious, but full of jangles and toots and rasps, like a wind-up toy band.

From time to time we took the bus across town to a delicatessen owned by a man originally from Bremen. My mother ordered in German, and while the man was weighing and wrapping the *Leberkäse* and *Blutwurst* and ham, he and she would talk. But I was usually outside playing with the *dachshund*.

Sometimes, reading German poetry, she would start to say the lines under her breath. Then it no longer sounded like music but like a dream-language: seething, urgent, a little scary.

She did not want to teach her children German. "It's not your language, you don't need it, learn your own language first."

Now and then, on television, in a war movie, say, an American actor would deliver some German lines, and my mother would hoot. If subtitles were used, she said the translations were wrong. When my elder sister took German in high school, my mother skimmed her textbook and threw it down. “Ach, so many things wrong!”

A very hard thing it seemed, getting German right.

In one of my own schoolbooks was a discussion of different peoples and the contributions each had made to American society. The Germans, who gave us Wernher von Braun, were described as being, among other things, obedient to authority, with a tendency to follow orders without questioning them. That gave me pause: I could not imagine my mother taking orders from anyone.

I remember being teased in school for the way I said certain words. *Stoombach*. And: “I stood outside all day.” (“Musta got awful tired!”) I called the sideways colon the Germans put on top of certain vowels an *omelette*. Later, after I’d left home, I had only to hear a snatch of German, or to see some Gothic script, to have my childhood come surging back to me.

My mother said, “English is a fine language, it gets you to most places that you want to go. But German is—deeper, I think. A better language for poetry. A more romantic language, better for describing—yearning.”

Her favorite poet was Heine.

She said, “There are a lot of German words for which you have no English. And it’s funny—so often it’s an important word, one that means such a lot. *Weltschmerz*. How can you translate that? And even if you study German, you can’t ever really learn a word like that, you never grasp what it means.”

But I did learn it, and I think I know what *Weltschmerz* means.

My first book was a translation from the German: fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. My mother read these stories aloud to me, before I had learned to read myself. What appealed to me was not so much the adventures, not the morals, but the details: a golden key, an emerald box, boots of buffalo leather. The strangeness and beauty of names like Gretel and Rapunzel, especially the way my mother said them. The notion of enchantment was a tangled one. You couldn’t always believe what you saw. The twelve pigeons pecking on the lawn might be twelve princes under a

spell. Perhaps all that was lacking in one's own household was the right magic. At the right word, one of those birds might fly to the window bearing in his beak a golden key, and that key might open a door leading to who knew what treasure. My mother shared this with all her neighbors: the conviction that we did not belong in the housing project. Out on the benches, much of the talk was about getting out. It was all a mistake. We were all under a spell—the spell of poverty. What is a home? We project children drew pictures of houses with peaked roofs and chimneys, and yards with trees. My mother said, “Every decent family is getting out,” as one by one our neighbors moved away. “We’ll never get out, we’ll be the last ones left.” Meaning: the last white family.

Metamorphosis. First the fairy tales, then the Greek myths—for years my imagination fed on that most magical possibility: a person could be changed into a creature; a tree. In time this led to trouble.

I can still see her, Mrs. Scott, a twig of a woman with a long chin and hollow eyes: my teacher. The way my mother mimicked her, Mrs. Scott became a witch from one of the stories. “‘Your daughter says, In my first life I was a rabbit. In my second life I was a tree. I think she’s too old to be telling stories like that.’” And then my mother, mimicking herself, all wide-blue-eyed innocence: “How do you know she wasn’t a rabbit?”

Oh, how I loved her.

Because my mother gave it to me I read a book of German sagas, but I didn’t like them. Heroism on the fierce Nordic scale was not for me. To Siegfried I preferred the heroes of the *Hausmärchen*: simple Hanses, farmers and tailors and their faithful horses and dogs. (In just a few more years I’d prefer to read only about horses and dogs.) I did not share her taste for the legends of chivalry or the romances of the Middle Ages. The epic was her form. She liked stories—legendary or historic—about heroic striving, conquest and empire, royal houses and courts. Lives of Alexander and Napoleon were some of her favorite reading. (This was a mother who for Halloween dressed up her youngest not as a gypsy or a drum majorette but as Great Caesar’s Ghost—pillowcase toga, philodendron wreath—stumping all of the kids and not a few of the teachers.) She read piles of paperback romances, too—what she called her “everyday” reading.

One day I came home to find her with a copy of *Lolita*. The woman downstairs had heard it was a good dirty book and had gone out and bought it. Disappointed, she passed it on to my mother. (“So, is it dirty?”

“No, just a very silly book by a very clever man.”)

The “good” books, the ones to be kept, were placed in no particular order in a small pine bookcase whose top shelf was reserved for plants. To get at certain ones you had to part vines. Dear to my mother’s heart was the legend of Faust. Goethe’s version was years beyond me, but what I gathered of the story was not promising. I liked stories about the Devil all right, but Faust’s ambition struck no chord in me. I was a child of limited curiosity. I wanted to hear the cat speak, but I didn’t care how it was done. Knowledge equals power was an empty formula to me. I was never good at science.

Shakespeare in one volume. Plutarch’s *Lives*, abridged. In the introduction to the plays, I read that Shakespeare had used Plutarch as a source. At first I thought I had misunderstood. Then I felt a pang: the world was smaller than I had thought it was. For some reason this gave me pain.

I remember a book given to me by my fourth-grade teacher. A thick, dark-green, grainy cover, pleasant to touch. A story about immigrants. One man speaking to another of a young woman just arrived from the Old Country. The phrase stayed with me, along with the memory of the feelings it inspired. I was both moved and repelled. “She has still her mother’s milk upon her lips.”

My mother never called it the Old Country. She said my country, or Germany, or home. Usually home. When she spoke of home, I gave her my full attention. I could hear over and over (I did hear over and over) stories about her life *before*—before she was a wife, before she was Mother, when she was just Christa.

She was a good storyteller. To begin with, she spoke English with the same energy and precision with which German is spoken. And she used everything—eyes, hands, all the muscles of her face. She was a good mimic; it was spooky how she became the person mimicked, and if that person was you, you got a taste of hell. She talked all the time. She was always ready to reminisce—though that is a mild word for the purposive thing she did. The evocation of the past seemed more like a calling with her. The present was the project, illiterate neighbors, a family more *incurred* than chosen, for there had been no choice. The past was where she lived and had her being. It was youth, and home. It was also full of horror. I cannot remember a time when she thought I was too young to hear those

stories of war and death. But we both had been brought up on fairy tales – and what were her stories but more of the same, full of beauty and horror.

She had been a girl, like me—but how different her girlhood from mine. And I never doubted that what she was, what she had been and where she came from, were superior to me and my world. (“What you Americans call an education!” “What you Americans call an ice coffee!”)

In memory I see myself always trying to get her to talk. Silence was a bad sign with her. When she was really angry she would not speak to you, not even to answer if you spoke to her.

Towards the close of a long dull day. I have lost the thread of the book I am reading. As so often on a Saturday at this hour, I don’t know what to do with myself. Outside, it is getting dark. Nothing but sports on TV. My mother sits across the room, knitting. She sits on the sofa with one foot tucked under her. She is wearing her navy-blue sweater with the silver buttons, which she made herself, and which I will one day take with me, to have something of hers when I go away. (I have it still.) The soft, rhythmic click of the needles. At her feet the ball of yarn dances, wanders this way and that, looking for a kitten to play with. I let the book close in my lap and say, “Tell me again about the time they came to take Grandpa to Dachau.”

*Motorheads* is a word you would use today for the men of my mother’s family. In half the photographs I have seen of them there is some sort of motor vehicle. My grandfather and my uncles and many of their friends were racers. In the photos they are wearing leather jackets and helmets. Sometimes someone is holding a trophy. In one astounding photo my grandfather and five other men round a curve, a tilting pyramid, all on one motorcycle. The stories took my breath away. Motorcycle races across frozen lakes. Spectacular, multivictim accidents. Spines snapped in two, teeth knocked out to the last one, instant death. What sort of men were these? Speed-loving. Death-defying. Germans. They slalomed, too.

The year I was born my grandfather opened an auto-repair shop in the Swabian town where he had lived all his life, a business later passed on to the elder of his two sons. I do not remember him from the only time I met him, when I was taken as a child to Germany. The memory of my grandmother on the other hand is among the most vivid I possess. “You took

one look at her and called her a witch.” So I already knew about witches, at two. Pictures show that she really did have the sickle profile of a witch. And I was right to fear her. She locked me in a dark closet, where I screamed so loud the neighbors came.

My grandparents had grown up together. An illegitimate child, my grandmother was adopted by the childless couple who lived next door to my grandfather’s family. In summer, the narrow yard between the two houses was filled with butterflies. My grandparents were said never to have had any interest in anyone but each other, and to have shared a strong physical resemblance all their lives. My grandmother was known for her temper. During the war, when shoes were all but impossible to get and her son Karl lost one of his only pair, she pummeled his head with the other; he still has the scar. Whenever my mother, the eldest child and only daughter, spoke of her mother, she tended to purse her lips. (“We were always at odds.” “She didn’t like girls.”) When I met her for the second and last time, I was in my twenties and she had not long to live. Dying, she was still mean. A habit of reaching out and pinching you as you passed: teasing, hurtful. The pinching malice peculiar to some little old ladies. Revealing things my mother had kept from us: for example, that both of my sisters were illegitimate, and that my mother was too. (“You didn’t know?”) She suffered all her life from bad circulation and died of a stroke.

My grandparents were Catholics, and at that time in that town, most of the power was in the hands of the Catholic Church. Like other Catholic towns, somewhat slower to embrace National Socialism. I am not sure how much danger my grandfather thought he was courting when, just before the national plebiscite in November 1933, he stood outside the town hall distributing anti-Hitler leaflets. Before this, he had shown little interest in politics. His opposition to the Nazis grew largely under the influence of a friend named Ulli, who planned to leave for America if Hitler got more than seventy-five percent of the vote. My grandfather’s two siblings were already in America, having emigrated in the twenties, but neither of my grandparents wished to leave Germany. My grandmother also may have influenced her husband against the Nazis. Her father had been an official of the Social Democratic Party. She had had many leftists among the friends of her youth and had been an admirer of Rosa Luxemburg. She was arrested with her husband immediately after Hitler’s victory.



“They woke us up in the middle of the night.” “The Gestapo?” “No, no— just the regular town police.” My mother was six. “One of the policemen was someone I knew, an old man. I used to see him in the street all the time, he was very nice. But after that night I was so scared of him. Any time I saw him after that I ran the other way.”

They searched the house. Earlier that night, while my mother slept, Ulli had come to the door. “Hide these for me.” A gun, a typewriter.

A policeman— “not the old one”— opened the hall closet, and the typewriter slid off the top shelf. He covered his head just in time. “I remember, his face turned bright red.”

“Gerhard and I stood together on the stairs, crying. Karl slept through it all—he was just a baby.”

My grandparents were led out to the waiting police van. “It was already filled with people.”

“Out of nowhere” a woman appeared. “A complete stranger. She was very stern. She told us to go back to our room and not dare to come out.”

The next morning my grandmother returned, alone. Later, after dark, she took the gun hidden in the wall behind the toilet and buried it in the back yard.

Eight months before, Heinrich Himmler had set up the concentration camp at Dachau. It now held about two thousand inmates. My mother said my grandfather never talked much about his time there. (“He was ashamed of having done something so stupid.”) In one beating he suffered a broken rib which healed grotesquely— “like a doorknob on his chest.” “You are going home,” he was told, and put on a truck with a group of fellow prisoners who were then driven to the train station. The train came and went. The prisoners watched it come and go. Then they were driven back to the camp. This happened many times. Meanwhile, there was work to be done. The camp was expanding. My grandfather was put to work installing electrical wiring. And then one day, thirteen months after his arrest, he really was let go. He was sent home in his prison uniform. My mother was playing in the street when another little girl ran up, scandalized. “Christa! Your papa is coming across the field— and he’s in his pajamas!”

“He was lucky.” Ulli did not get out of Dachau until ’45. (And then he left for America.)

My grandparents’ house had been confiscated, their bank accounts closed.

My grandmother had moved with the children into the house of her in-laws. She had taken a job in a drapery shop.

My grandfather was afraid that no one would hire him. He appealed to an old friend from polytechnic days, now at Daimler-Benz. A relatively quiet time began. Every day my grandfather took the half-hour train ride into Stuttgart. He was not troubled again by the Nazis. And when, after Hitler's speeches on the radio, my grandmother carried on—Hitler-like herself, according to my mother—my grandfather said, "Let Germany follow her own course."

Time passed. The town synagogue was closed. The town idiot, a homeless man who begged on the church steps, disappeared. The main department store went out of business. The gardens of the houses where the Jews lived became overgrown. Consternation among the Mendels: They want to go to America, but Oma is stubborn. The very mention of crossing the ocean makes her weep. Finally, a compromise is reached: the Mendels will go with their son to America, Oma will go to Switzerland. Before leaving, she entrusts two trunks to my grandparents' care. "I'll want them back some day."

Nineteen-thirty-nine. My grandfather was called on the first day of the war. He was with the troops that invaded Poland, and would remain in the Army until Germany's defeat.

Meanwhile, my mother was growing up. Away, mostly, at a Catholic boarding school in the Bavarian Alps. The nuns are hard. My mother comes home with a horror tale: a cat smuggled into the dorm, discovered by Sister and thrown into the furnace! Still, her parents send her back.

For many of the girls, returning year after year, from age six to eighteen, the school *is* home. Away, my mother is homesick all the time; but at home, especially over the long summer, she pines for school.

At the end of one summer, the girls arrive to find the nuns replaced by men and women in uniform. The nuns, they are told, have returned to their convent, where they belong. From now on, my mother's education is in the hands of the Nazis.

Over the next few years, many of the new teachers will be soldiers wounded in the war: amputees; a math professor whose face was so scarred, "we thought at first he was wearing a mask."

As she recalls, no one ever made any reference to her father's disgrace;

she was not treated any differently from the other girls.

She keeps up her grades but she does not excel. Unlike her brothers, she is not superior in math. She does not seem to have been ambitious, to have dreamed of becoming something.

(Up to this point, I have had some trouble seeing my mother. Even with the help of photographs, it is hard for me to imagine her as a little girl. Unlike a lot of people, she did not much resemble her adult self. The child of six crying with her brother on the stairs, running away from the old policeman—I see that girl, but she could be anyone. But now, she is beginning to be familiar. I can imagine her, her feelings and her moods. I can see her more and more clearly: Christa.)

School trips to the opera. (“He who would understand National Socialism must understand Wagner”—Hitler.) Hot and stuffy in the balcony. The agony of itching woolen socks. She would always hate opera. Today: “All I have to do is hear a bit of it and my feet start to itch like I haven’t washed them for weeks!”

Another thing she hated: her turn to tend the rabbits, raised by the school for food. The filth of the cages. The fierceness of one particular buck, known to the girls as Ivan the Terrible.

The Hitler Youth. Uniforms, camping, sports. “Just like your Girl Scouts.”

The rallies and the victory parades. “Tell me what kid doesn’t love a parade.” A little flag on a stick. Flowers for the soldiers. Always something to celebrate. April 20: the Führer’s birthday. My mother has just passed her tenth. He marches through the Munich streets, veering right and left with outstretched hand. His palm is warm. Photo opportunity. Later, back at school, a copy of the photo is presented to her. She bears it home, proud, *somebody*. Her mother tears it up. My mother threatens to tell.

School pictures. My mother in her winter uniform, looking, like most of the other girls, comically stout. (“We probably had three sweaters on underneath.”)

Trude, Edda, Johanna, Klara—my mother’s little band.

Girls becoming women. One’s own tiny destiny absorbed into that of the Volk. To be a Frau und Mutter in the heroic mold, champions of the ordered cupboard and snowy diaper. The body: nothing to blush about but always to be treated with respect. My mother earns high marks in

gymnastics. She is good at embroidery and crocheting.

Dance lessons. Ballroom steps, the taller girls leading.

The heartswelling beauty of the landscape, especially at sundown. Alpenglow. Someone called it: Beethoven for the eyes.

Lights out at nine. Talking verboten. Whispers in the dark. Confessions, yearnings. Boys back home. Teachers: “I don’t care that he has only one arm.” Gary Cooper. The Luftwaffe aces. And: “Leni Riefenstahl was so beautiful.”

In the summers, you had to work, at least part time. You might be a mother’s helper, or work on a farm. You had to bring written proof that you had not idled your whole vacation away. As the war deepened and you got older, you were assigned labor service: delivering mail, collecting tickets on the street cars, working in factories or in offices.

The last year of the war, eight girls assigned to track enemy planes in the same operations room in Stuttgart are killed by a bomb. Among them my mother’s best friend, Klara.

The last battles. Only the German victories are announced. But who cannot read the increasingly somber miens of the teachers. Letters from home tell of brothers, still in school themselves, called to fight. “Erich sends his love and asks you to pray for him.”

Still, when it comes, the announcement is shocking. “You must make your way home as best you can. Don’t try to carry too much with you. And be careful. There are enemy soldiers everywhere—and some of them are black.”

My mother had already had a letter from her father at the front. “When the war ends, don’t be foolish and try to outrun the enemy. Try if you can to hide until they have passed. Do not let them keep driving you ahead of them. It won’t do you any good, they’ll just catch up with you anyway. And whatever you do, do not go east.”

My mother boarded a train, but long before her hometown station a roadblock appeared and the passengers were put off. Against advice she had packed all her belongings. Now she left two suitcases on the train, keeping only her knapsack; she would soon abandon that, too.

(It is at this point that my mother finally comes in clearly, on this four-day walk home.)

For the first stretch she has company—other people from the train headed in the same direction. But for most of the journey she is alone. She is not

afraid. Just days ago she turned eighteen. The sense of having an adventure buoys her up, at least for a time. Also, in the very extremity of the situation, a certain protection: "This can't be happening." Blessings: weather ("That was a beautiful April"), and she is in good shape from Alpine hiking.

Dashing for cover at the sound of a motor. *The enemy is everywhere.*

Hunger. She cannot remember her last good meal. At school, day after day, cabbage and potatoes. The tender early spring shoots begin to resemble succulent morsels. At dusk she knocks at a farmhouse and is given an egg-nog and a place to sleep in the barn. The steamy flanks of the cows. Infinity of peace in that pungent smell, in the scrape of hoof against board. Morning. Rain. "Dear God, just let me lie here a little bit longer."

Sometimes she sings out, as people do, from loneliness, and for courage. "Don't ask me, for I'll never tell, the man I'm going to marry."

What passes through her mind cannot properly be called thought, though her mind is constantly busy, and she loses herself in herself for hours at a time. Daydreams bring amusement and solace. Her senses are lulled and she is carefree. Funny thoughts do occur to her now and then, and she laughs out loud. Sometimes she watches her feet, and the fact that they can move like that, right, left, right, covering the ground and bearing her along, strikes her as nothing less than miraculous.

Often she is lightheaded. She imagines her head floating like a balloon above her. Attached by a string to her finger. She jerks the string, and her head tilts this way and that, like the head of an Indian dancer.

People met along the way move furtively, every one in a hurry. "No one would look you in the eye."

Straw in her hair, itching between collar and neck. Seams loosening with wear. The smell of the cows mingled with her own. A burning sensation in the folds of her flesh. Will she ever get to change her underwear?

She mistakes a turn, walks for miles down the wrong road before turning back. In the fields, the first wildflowers. A tumult of sparrows. She is seized by the unbearably poignant sensation of *déjà vu*.

A plane. Nowhere to hide. She squats where she is, arms over her head. The plane swoops down, low, so low she can make out the grinning face of the (British) pilot, who salutes before taking to the sky again. Laughing, she embraces her knees and bursts into tears. In that moment of terror her heart had flown straight to her mother. From now on she will often be

struck with fear, foreseeing her house in ruins, and her mother dead.

(A young woman fixed upon reaching home and mother, making her way through a conquered land overrun with enemy soldiers: I read that part of *Gone with the Wind* with a swell of recognition.)

At last: the church tower, the wooden bridge. A woman in the *Marktplatz*, weeping, weeping.

My mother beat the Americans by one day.

The Occupation. A time to count your blessings — “at least for us it really was over” — as the refugees streamed in from East Prussia. The Americans: “You know, typical American boys — loud, friendly, vulgar. Every other word was f-u-c-k.”

One day an American lieutenant came to the door. “He stood there grinning from ear to ear. ‘You don’t remember me? I’ve come for the trunks my grandmother left.’ We couldn’t believe it. Walter Mendel, all grown up. He brought us our first Hershey bars.”

Incredulity, the sense of this-isn’t-really-happening, endures. A topsyturvy time. Dating the enemy. Fräuleins in the arms of American soldiers. Eating themselves sick in the mess hall hung with Stop-VD posters: *Don’t Take a Chance, Keep It in Your Pants*.

For my mother, the start of a new life.

(And here I begin to lose her again; I mean, I no longer see her clearly. About this period — so important to me because directly connected to my own coming into being — about this period she hardly spoke at all.)

She has a job, teaching kindergarten, which does not suit her. She doesn’t particularly like children, and since these are the children of farmers, she has to keep farmer’s hours, going to and coming back from work in the dark.

Whatever energy is left over goes into dating. First in her heart is a boy named Rudolf. He is her own age, a boy from the neighborhood, grown in the years she was away into stripling-handsomeness. Had her life been happy she probably would have remembered her experience of him as a lark; instead he became the love of her life, her one and only.

She said often, “I should have married him”; but just as often, “I couldn’t have married him, we would never have got along, we were too much alike.” In other ways, too, she hinted at an intense and dramatic entanglement. But I don’t think it really was like that. I think she convinced her-

self that it was, because this helped her: there is consolation in seeing oneself as a victim of love. (Ideally, of course, he should have died—killed, say, as so many other German boys his age were killed, in the last months of the war.)

“After him, I really didn’t care what happened to me.”

Rudolf. One precious photograph included in the family album. Curly hair and a curl to his upper lip, from a scar, giving him a somewhat cruel expression; and indeed it was by cruelty that he got that scar: he taunted a rooster, who flew in his face. He was fickle, he liked to make my mother jealous. Well, two could play at that game.

Two can play, but for men and women the stakes are not equal.

My mother becomes pregnant.

Lacan says: Only women’s lives can be tragic; about men there is always something comic.

Newsreels from this era show that the attempt to turn women who had consorted with Nazis into laughingstocks, by shaving their heads, failed.

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The next part of her life is the one I have most trouble imagining. I think it also must have been the hardest. “I thought I had died and gone to hell.” But it was only Brooklyn. The housing project looked like a prison. “Your father had said something about a house with a little garden. What a fool I was.” (She often called herself a fool. Another thing she said a lot: You made your own bed now you have to lie in it. She had little sympathy for people who’d botched their lives, and towards real sinners she was unforgiving. She often complained that criminals in this country got off scot-free. Also: she was suspicious of repentance. You could not escape punishment by confession or apology. She herself rarely apologized. I’m not sure to what degree she applied her own harsh rules to herself. I know only that she suffered a lot.)

She was not the only German war bride in the project. Now and then a group of them would go into Manhattan, to 86th Street, to shop in the German stores. When there was a bit of extra money, a German movie; coffee and cake at the Café Wagner, or at the Café Hindenburg, said to be where the New York branch of the Nazi Party had held their meetings.

I am daunted when I try to imagine her pregnant. In those days she was a slender woman, almost frail. In photographs her mouth is dark, the cor-

ners lifted, not in a true smile but more of a my-thoughts-are-very-far-away expression. I try to picture her in one of the humiliating maternity dresses of the day (“a large bright bow at the neck or a frilly bib will draw attention away from the stomach”). She wears her long hair pinned back. Not one of her three children was planned.

When I try to imagine her, she becomes stilled: a figure in a painting. She sits in an armchair which she has turned toward the window. From this angle you cannot tell that she is pregnant. Her one-year-old and her three-year-old lie in the next room; she has just got them down. She is exhausted, so heavy in her chair she thinks she will never rise again. Blue smudge like a thumbprint under each eye. What is she looking at? Through the window: water tower against leaden sky. What is she thinking of? Schooldays. A million years ago! Trude, Edda, Johanna, Klara. Klara dead. And the rest? Surely none so unhappy as she? Rudolf! At last she bestirs herself: with a furious gesture she wipes a tear from her eye.

She used to say, “If we had had money everything would have been different.” I didn’t understand why we didn’t get help, like many of our neighbors. “Welfare! Are you mad? Those people should be ashamed.” But she was already ashamed. I saw it in her face when she had to tell people my father was a waiter. I thought taking money from the government would be better than always complaining. “You want us to be like the Feet?” (The family next door was named Foot.) “Ten kids to support and the father sits around drinking.” But wasn’t Mr. Foot better off than my father, who worked seven days a week and never took a vacation? Didn’t happiness count for anything in our house?

There were periods when she cried every day. If you asked her why she was crying she would say, “I want to go home.” Other times, when she’d “had it” with us, when she made it clear that we were more than any person could bear, with our noise and our mess and our laziness, she would threaten to leave us and go home. (I was one of those exasperating kids who can’t bear to be separated from their mothers. More than one teacher lost patience with me. I think I sensed something in those threats to go home that I’m now sure was there: the threat of suicide.)

About the Germans Nietzsche has said: They are either of the day before yesterday or of the day after tomorrow; they have no today. Coming of age, my mother shared in the dream of a grandiose destiny. Now she became one throbbing nerve of longing.



We believed her when she said that every night she dreamed she was back in Germany. She made us promise that when she died we would bury her in Germany. *In German soil*, is what she said. She understood those Russian soldiers who had gone to war with a pouch of soil around their necks so that if they fell, a bit of Russia would be buried with them. She had the Teutonic obsession with blood and soil. She made us promise also that if she was ever in an accident we would not authorize a transfusion. She would rather die than have someone else's blood in her.

Now and then we would receive packages from Germany which might include sweets. Once, a box of small, bottle-shaped chocolates wrapped in colored foil and filled with liqueur. My mother's eyes lit up. "I haven't had these for years!" But before tasting one she wavered, "I shouldn't, it will just remind me of home." A good thing she warned us; from the way she slumped in her chair we might have thought she'd been poisoned. I will never forget the sound she made. Many years later, to thank me for taking care of his plants while he spent Christmas in Denmark, a neighbor of mine brought me back a box of those same chocolate bottles, and at the mere sight of them I felt as if a poison had entered my veins.

*Heimweh*. "Another word you have no English for." Homesickness? "Yes, but more than that." Nostalgia? "Stronger than that."

In third grade I had a friend named Lore Kaplan. Her mother, too, was from Germany. Mrs. Kaplan's accent was only slightly different from my mother's. "Doesn't she want to go back?" "Oh, no, she would never go back, she hates Germany." Strange!

I was ten when Eichmann went on trial in Jerusalem. My first view of the famous photographs. It was said that all Germans were on trial with Eichmann. Neighbors fascinated by the testimony prodded my mother for details of life in the Reich. She never brought up her father. ("It would be as if I were making excuses.")

"I am still proud to be German." "I do not apologize for being German." But during this time she was depressed. By then we had moved away from Brooklyn, to another housing project, where there were no Germans. My mother might hang out with the women on the benches, but she was not really friends with any of them. She would never feel at home among Americans. She had the European contempt for Americans as "big kids." She found herself constantly having to bite her tongue; for example, when one of the women complained about the war: "I don't

know what it was like for you over there, but here you couldn't even get your own brand of cigarettes."

I don't think a day went by that she did not remember that she was German. Watching the Olympics, she rooted for the Germans and pointed out that, if you counted East and West together, Germany came out ahead of both the Americans and the Russians.

It was not to be hoped that any American—let alone an American child—could grasp what this unique quality of being German was all about. I don't recall how old I was, but at some point I had to wonder: If you took that quality away from her, what would have replaced it? What sort of person might she have been? But her Germanness and her longing for Germany—her *Heimweh*—were so much a part of her she cannot be thought of without them. To try to imagine her born of other blood, on other soil, is to lose her completely: there is no Christa there.

She saw herself as someone who had been cheated in life—but cheated of what, exactly? Not a career. She never missed having a job. She was not one of those women who can say, If I hadn't had a family I'd have gone to med school. (Back then, people would say of certain women: She never married, she was a career girl.) My mother always saw herself as a housewife. During one especially lean spell, when it looked as if she might have to earn some money, the only job she could think of was cleaning houses. But just because she saw her place as in the home doesn't mean she was happy there. The everlasting struggle against the soiled collar and the scuffmarked floor brought on true despair. In that struggle, as every housewife knows, children are the worst enemy. Her big cleaning days were the darkest days of my childhood. She booted us out of one room after the other, her mood growing steadily meaner. We cowered in the hallway, listening to her curses and the banging of her broom, awaiting the inevitable threats to go home.

We offered to help her clean, but she refused. "All you do is smear the dirt around." Besides, she was not going to be one of those parents who use their kids as servants. (Mrs. Foot, for example, who had her six-year-old girl doing the vacuuming.)

Everyone had his proper sphere. "You kids just worry about your schoolwork."

"If we had had money, everything would have been different." In the

ads for lotto, people tell their dreams, which often turn out to be of travel, preferably to exotic places. But seeing the world was no more one of my mother's dreams than being a doctor. What would she want? A big house. A big yard. "And a big fence!" No more living on top of other people!

She would live in one housing project or another for most of her adult life.

She never played lotto. She didn't believe in good luck.

I don't know that her life would have been very different if she'd had more money. In later years, when my sister wanted to hire someone to clean for my mother, she refused. Maids: "They just smear the dirt around." (Dirt. Contamination. The horror they inspired in her went deep. When she spoke of dirt encountered somewhere—someone else's house, say—she would shake herself like a drenched dog. We were not allowed to use public toilets, which made going anywhere with her an agony.)

Money. Visiting me in my first apartment, she happened to hear me tell my landlord that the rent would be a little late that month. She didn't understand why I wasn't ashamed of that. She had been uncomfortable, too, about my applying for a college scholarship; she would rather have paid. She would never understand how I could accept loans and gifts of money from other people. *Down to my last penny*: why didn't I blush when I said that? "I don't know how I could have raised a daughter like that."

A simple life. Up in the morning, the first one. Fix the coffee, wake the others, bundle them out the door. Dishes, beds, dust. The youngest child home for lunch. Dishes, laundry. Sometime in the afternoon, between lunch and the children's return, a pause. Lose yourself in a book. Page 50. Page 100. An errant duke. A petty dowager. A handsome and truehearted stepbrother. The heroine swathed in shawls against castle drafts. *Romance*. A thing ludicrous to imagine with her husband, with whom she had never been in love. At best she treated him like one of the children. "Wipe your feet off before you step in this house!"

Her early heartbreak (Rudolf) had made her defiant. She didn't owe anyone anything. She didn't have to be nice. "I can't stand the sight of you!" She wasn't going to play the hypocrite. "I wish that we had never met!" A riddle: If it was true what she said, that she expected nothing

from her husband, why was she forever seething with disappointment? The threat to divorce him became part of her litany of threats. But she was never interested in anyone else, not even after he died, though she was then just forty-six.

Wife and mother: dissatisfying as that role may have been, it is hard to imagine her in any other. Outside the house she lost her bearings. Any negotiation beyond that required for simple domestic errands flustered her. She hated going out. She hated having to deal with strangers. Even worse: running into people she knew. But she was always cordial. She would stop and chat—often at length—putting on a chumminess that I feared others would see through, and I guess some did.

She was intimidated by authority. My decision to change my major my junior year in college bothered her. “Are you sure you don’t get into trouble for that?” “You sure they let us park here?” she would ask, peering anxiously about. Some part of her always remained that child on the stairs watching the arrest of her parents. The ringing of the telephone could stop her heart. An unexpected knock at the door, and she would widen her eyes in warning at us, a finger to her lips. We all held our breath. When the person had gone, she would peek out from behind the window shade to see who it was. Whenever she had to go somewhere she hadn’t been before, she was terrified of getting lost. Her fear revealed itself in flushed cheeks and repeated swallowings; I held onto her icy hand. Oh, the trouble you could meet going into the city! Much better stay home. At home *she* was the authority, the only one permitted to do as she pleased, to be herself.

It was as a teenager, I suppose, that I decided that what she needed was the right man. In our neighborhood there were many examples of the rugged type: men with square faces and corded arms, who earned their living by brawn. I thought my mother might have been better off with one of these. (But this was my fantasy; she never expressed any attraction to such men.) Her upbringing had resulted in a paradox: though she feared authority, she approved of it, she would have liked to see more of it. (The trouble with most Americans? They are too free. The trouble with most kids? They are not disciplined enough.) I think her ideal man would have been a cop. At any rate, she needed someone strong, the sort of man with whom a woman feels safe. A scoff-at-your-fears sort of man. She implied that her father had been something like this, before Dachau. My father—

fumbling, shy, so fearful of authority himself—would not do. She was the one who had to drive, who carried the kids' bicycles up and down the stairs. She wore the pants. Like so much else, this whetted her scorn. "My lord and master—hah!" No sympathy for him when he was down with a cold—"He sneezes twice and it's the end of the world"—or when for a time he had nightmares and often woke her with his cries. Nor did she expect sympathy from him. Only once did I ever see her turn to him: when her father died.

Outbursts triggered by his forgetfulness, his butterfingers, his superstition against making out a will. Once started, she could not stop herself. Her rage tore like a cyclone through the house. Afterwards we would all sit in a kind of stupor in which the cat and even inanimate objects seemed to share.

My mother sobbed. "I'm not asking for that much." But she was: she was asking him to be someone else.

At times it seemed as if she had but one emotion: loathing. I think she often experienced what Rilke described: "The existence of the horrible in every atom of air."

She had that love for animals that is unmistakably against humans. "Now I know men, I prefer dogs." This remark of Frederick the Great's—quoted by Hitler—expresses a famous German sentiment. My mother: "I feel worse if I see a dog suffering than if it was a man." Said without apology; with a tinge of pride, even. As if it were superior, to prefer dogs. In one of the houses of the Frankfurt Zoo you come to a plaque announcing the animal to be seen in the next cage: the most savage creature of all, the only one to kill its own kind, to kill for pleasure, and so on. A mirror behind bars. When I was there someone had written in English on the wall under the plaque: *You krauts oughtta know!* And under that was written in French: *Of all our maladies, the most virulent is to despise our own being—Montaigne.*

But she was not without pity for humans. Once, she went into the city to do Christmas shopping and gave all her money to an old woman begging outside A & S.

She never forgot the hunger of the war years. “Aren’t you going to finish your ice cream? You’ll regret it. When the war comes there won’t be any ice cream.” (I worried a lot about the coming war and had my doubts whether hiding my head in the crook of my arm as we did in school shelter drills was going to save me. At any rate, when the bombs fell I wanted to be home. I knew in case of attack we were supposed to go down to the cellar, but my mother said she would never do that. She remembered raids in which people had drowned in cellars where the pipes had burst. “I’d rather die any way but that—drowning with the rats!” I agreed, and for a time my bad dreams composed themselves out of these elements: sirens, rats, and the water reaching to my chest, to my chin. . . .) At the time of the Cuban missile crisis she went back and forth to the supermarket until the cupboards were jammed. For Easter our school held a contest that involved pairs of children playing catch with raw eggs. “Only in this country do they teach children to throw food around.” They say a European housewife could feed her family on what an American housewife throws away. Suppers from my childhood: boiled eggs and spinach, knockwurst, scrambled pancakes with applesauce. My mother’s love of sweets would eventually cost her every tooth in her head. Sometimes we made a whole meal out of a pie or a cake. We ate Hershey bars between slices of white bread for lunch. At our house you did not get up from the table until you had cleaned your plate. A common punishment: to be sent to bed without any supper.

I don’t think I ever saw her truly relaxed. Some part of her was always going—head, hand, foot. Even when she was sitting still, her breath came a little fast. I suspected that she had high blood pressure. No way to know for sure, since she never had it checked. She wanted nothing to do with doctors. Though she suffered from headaches aspirin couldn’t touch, she would not go to a doctor for a stronger prescription. When small growths like blisters appeared on the whites of her eyes, she removed them herself with a sewing needle. “But you’ll get an infection!” “Ach, don’t be silly, I sterilized the needle.” Who needs doctors?

She had good hands and she was always making things. At Christmas she baked and decorated dozens of cookies, storing them in tins with slices of apple to keep them fresh. She copied scenes from children’s books onto our

t-shirts using magic marker, and covered her bedroom walls with abstract flowers made with crumpled paper dipped in paint. She learned to sew first of all for economy, but then an obsession took hold of her. Day after day we would come home from school to find the beds unmade, dishes in the sink, and my mother hunched at her Singer. After a long day of sewing she would spend her evenings knitting. She made everything from bathing suits to winter coats. She was like a maiden in a fairy tale, spinning, spinning. Soon the closets bulged. All that work ruined those beautiful hands. The scissors raised a great welt on the knuckle of the third finger of her right hand, and crushed her thumbnail. Instead of being proud of her work, she would rather have had others believe the clothes were store-bought. I *was* proud, and bragged to my friends that she had made my new red velveteen coat. Liar, they sneered, when they saw the label she had sewn in the lining.

She had a green thumb. Neighbors brought her plants that seemed in danger of dying. And she saved from dying, too, a score of sick or injured animals—squirrels, birds, a cat that had been trapped in a burning house. I remember as blessed those times when she was engrossed in nursing some creature back to health. It was good to see all her gentleness brought out. For those hands that could make plants bloom and heal a broken wing could also destroy and cause pain. They tore things and smashed things. They pinched, slapped, and shoved.

I sit on her bed watching her get ready to go out. The process of putting on her face takes a long time and is always the same, but I never tire of it. Those tempting little pots and tubes with names like desserts: Frosted Cherry; Plum Delight. The magic mascara wand. Abracadabra: blond lashes are black. She says it helps if you keep your mouth open when putting on eye makeup. She is in her slip and stockings, the bumps of her garters standing out on her thighs. When she crosses her legs, there is the hiss of nylon against nylon. She says that European women are better at using cosmetics than American women. “American women look so cheap.” She always puts her lipstick on last, but first she rubs a dry toothbrush lightly across her lips to smooth them. I pick up the tissue she uses to blot her mouth and fit my mouth to the imprint. The next part of her toilette I don’t like. Before pulling on her dress, to protect it from stains,

she ties a scarf over her face. Standing there in her nylons and slip with the scarf over her face she is a disconcerting sight.

People said, "Your mother is so pretty." But she didn't see herself like that. I could tell by the way she spoke of other women that she did not count herself among the pretty ones. She was not flirtatious. She was never charming in a strictly feminine way. She had no use for feminine wiles, and she hated being ogled by men. She would not wear sexy clothing. Her daughters were another story: "When you are young you can get away with anything." Not all agreed. The Dean of Boys stopped me in the hall. "Does your mother know you're walking around like that?" "She made this for me." "Well, tell her this is a high school, not a skating rink." I was chagrined, but my mother laughed. "It's his own guilty conscience that's bothering him."

She didn't like to go to parties where she might be asked to dance. "I don't want a strange man putting his arms around me."

She never complained about getting older. She looked much younger than she was anyway. Once, on her way to the store, she crossed in front of a police car and the patrolman called out through his bullhorn, "Young lady, shouldn't you be in school?" "I gave him a dirty look and kept walking." I knew that look. I'd seen her shoot it at a lot of men. In time her coldness towards men would seem to me a miscalculation: Hadn't she ever considered the possibility that being nice to men could get a woman things she might not otherwise have?

Though she would always color her hair she gave up trying to stay slim. As she put on weight, her jaunty walk became more of a waddle. You would not have thought she had once been good at gymnastics. But she could still bend from the waist with straight knees and touch her palms to the floor.

She might not enjoy going to parties, but she threw herself wholeheartedly into helping me get ready for one. She made my dress. She did my hair. She got into a competitive spirit: "You'll be the prettiest one there." By the time I was in high school her moods in general tended to be brighter. I think it had to do with her children growing up. I was the only one still at home. Young enough to be still under her thumb but old enough not to be a burden. I did well in school, I made her proud. (But if



someone complimented me in my presence she would shake her head. “Please. She thinks highly enough of herself as it is.”) She was curious about all aspects of my life and took pleasure in those adolescent triumphs: making cheerleaders, being asked to the prom. The carefree, promising youth she herself had not known.

(I spent the summer of my twentieth year in California. One day my friends and I took LSD and went to the beach. At sundown, driving home in our jeep, we were still high. On acid, every passing thought can strike like an epiphany, and this one seemed to fill my head with light: My mother had never known this. To be driving with your friends in an open car, laughing; to be twenty and happy and free with the wind in your hair and your life ahead of you—she had missed all that.)

There may have been another reason why her moods improved with the years. When I first started having periods, I sat down one day and did some math. Once a month times 12 months times 23 years. So she had been through this already 276 times.

I found her everywhere in my reading. Children are said to see images of their own mothers in the stepmothers and witches of fairy tales, but I always saw mine in the innocent blond girl, often the prisoner of the witch, forced to labor at her sweeping or spinning. Later, I would identify her with any damsel in distress, with romantic heroines like Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, and Scarlett O’Hara. I placed her under the sign of beauty, suffering, and loss.

Sitting on her lap as she pages through a magazine. One ad after another showing beautiful women in beautiful dresses. “You should wear this, Mommy.” “You would look nice in that.” Her response is gruff. “And where would I wear such a thing—to the laundry room?”

The hours and hours she spent beading the gown I would wear to the country club dance.

She swiftly disabused us of certain notions acquired at school. America is the land of equal opportunity. All men are brothers. The best things in life are free.

Home for lunch, I eat my sandwich while she sits at the kitchen table pasting S & H green stamps into a book.

The hum of her sewing machine. The funny munching sound of her pink-ing shears. Singing while she works.

Sometimes, I would catch her looking at me with a gently stricken expression. In a sad voice she would say, "You are a good kid, you really are."

She taught me the original German words to "Silent Night," which I sang in a Christmas pageant.

Her favorite English poet was Tennyson.

Back in Germany for the first time in almost twenty years, she realized that she was forgetting her German. "I go into a store, I want to ask for something, and for a second I have to struggle for the German word." With the years she lost more and more German, and at some point—she doesn't remember when—she began thinking in English. After living in America twice as long as she lived in Germany, she finds that German has become her second tongue. She stops reading German. Dining in a German restaurant, she orders in English. But her accent remains as thick as it ever was, and she still makes the same mistakes. "They stood in a motel for a week."

I never saw her at a loss for words. She was always able to say what she wanted to say. She could always say what she was feeling. Her memory was excellent, as were her powers of observation. Nothing escaped her, you could not put anything over on her. I think she had a good mind.

She had no best friend, no one (besides her daughters, as we grew older) to whom she could really talk, no confidante. She didn't trust people. If anyone tried to get close to her she backed off. "People are too much trouble."

Although she insisted that you obey all the rules without question, she was disdainful when you asked to do something because everyone else was doing it. "What are you, a sheep?"

She had strong opinions about everything. Opinions *should* be strong, otherwise they are not worth having (Goethe).

Her people, the Swabians: known for their bluntness and for their love of order.

She was different. She did not *belong*.

She said, "Give women power and they'll turn out to be worse than men." (She always expected the worst of people. She thought humankind was irredeemable. Her punishments were always given more in anger than in sorrow.)

For a while, when I was in grade school, she used to write poems based on themes from mythology. She made the costumes for some of our school plays. Always a supply of pink and blue yarn on hand (in our neighborhood someone was always having a baby). No one I ever knew had such smart hands.

There are times when I seem to remember her as though she were a landscape rather than a person: Those blue eyes filled the entire sky of my childhood.

Once, when we were driving on the highway, another car came hurtling towards us, missing us by a hair. At the moment when it looked as if we would die, she said "Mama."

At her lowest she would say, "I feel like a bug crushed under someone's heel."

I believe that, in spite of all her bitter railing against her lot, she never really expected anything different.

You made your own bed now you have to lie in it.

I don't believe my mother made her own bed.