

Sample Translation from

Elena Fischer

Paradise Garden

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My mum died that summer.

A song on the radio was nothing but noise, no longer an invitation to sing along even though neither of us knew the lyrics. A downpour was nothing but weather, no longer an opportunity to run outside and dance barefoot in a puddle. That might sound poetic, but it only looks like that on paper. Fourteen is a shitty age to lose your mum. The grief comes and goes like the tide, but it's always there.

My mum was buried on the hottest day of the year. The birds tripped up in the white sky and the lizards scuttled into the shade of the gravestones. Rosebushes were in blossom by the side of the path, and the wind wafted their sweet scent all the way to the grave. The heat stretched out time and slowed down all motion.

I wiped my sweat-soaked hands on my dress and stared into the hole at my feet. Down there was the coffin, on top of it sunflowers, and inside it my mum. Her dark curls framing her face, her red lips smiling mockingly, her feet in her white cowboy boots, that's how I imagined her. And apart from that, I imagined my mum suddenly popping up next to me and rescuing me. She smoothed her skirt and ran her hand through her hair. Then she said something like 'Stop making those sad faces, you guys, I can't

stand it!’ My mum kissed me on the top of my head, took my hand and ran off with me, as so often before.

I didn’t get my mum back, of course.

What I got instead was my first period.

The priest threw earth onto the coffin. ‘Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life,’ he said in a strange sing-song voice, and the blood seeped warm and alive out of my body. For a second, I thought I was dying too now, and I felt like lying down alongside my mum. It seemed like my body was betraying me by getting its first period right then, of all times. I didn’t move a muscle. I closed my eyes and hoped that would make me invisible. I hoped no one would notice I’d just become a woman.

I wanted to make my blood flow back into my body, but I couldn’t halt gravity. My blood trickled languidly down my leg. Everything strove downwards, towards the earth. I clenched my thighs together and stained my yellow summer dress.

If my grandmother had been there, she’d have pursed her lips, two thin lines pointing downwards at each end. She would have cried without ceasing. My grandmother seemed to have a secret water tank inside her, from which she sourced her rivers of tears. Perhaps her face was so wrinkled because all the water flowed out unchecked, leaving nothing but dryness.

On the day my mum died, I fell apart. All that remained was a sequence of letters that had once been my name.

My mum called me Billie. B-i-l-l-i-e.

When she said my name her lips touched, short and sweet. The first time I heard my real name was when I was seven. On the first day of school, the teacher called all the children to the front by name, one by one. I was left behind, along with a name I'd never heard before.

'Billie is a short form of Erzsébet,' my mum said. Her pronunciation was perfect. I did understand Hungarian, but what I heard was German: *Ärschebett* – a bed for asses.

'Why wasn't I just christened Billie?'

'Your grandmother didn't want it,' my mum sighed.

I didn't know my grandmother, but I'd already found out she didn't approve of anything my mum liked.

'Why didn't she want it?' I asked.

'The name Billie's not in the bible,' my mum said.

'Is Marika in the bible?'

My mum shook her head. Then she said: 'Not directly. But Marika means a gift from God. Or that's one meaning, anyway.'

'And the other one?'

My mum grinned so wide I could see her gold back tooth.

'Rebellious. But your grandmother didn't think of that.'

But now: back to the beginning.

The beginning was the last day before the summer holidays.

The beginning was a song on the radio.

The beginning was big plans.

Perhaps the beginning was all of it together.

In any case, I got home from school just in time to help guess the song. My mum and I were crazy about this one competition.

‘Turn it down,’ I said as I came into the lounge. I’d heard the presenter from outside on the walkway, and all our neighbours had probably heard him too.

‘Shhh,’ my mum said, putting a finger to her lips. She was holding the phone in her other hand. I knew she’d already keyed in the number. We’d tried it a thousand times before.

My mum was sitting on the sofa. Her left leg was dancing, and beads of sweat glinted on her brow. It was a boiling hot afternoon. My mum had opened all the windows in the flat but the air in the lounge was still stuffy.

The minute I sat down next to her, it started.

‘Three, two, one,’ the presenter said, and then came the first notes.

“‘Wicked Game,’” my mum called out.

‘No way,’ I said. I’d recognised the song straight away.
‘It’s “All My Tears”!’

‘Are you sure?’ my mum asked.

‘Yes, just call!’ I said.

Getting the song right was one thing; getting through was different. The most annoying thing was when you got through but guessed wrong. My mum pressed the green button and held the phone to her ear.

Winning money was a massive deal for us. Where we lived, most people had long since erased the word ‘winning’ out of their vocabulary. No one lived here by choice, on the edge of town. Our building was the tallest of five tower blocks, forming a little patchwork town of their own in a semi-circle. Each block was painted a different colour; ours was a weak shade of yellow. If you gave your address, in a job application for example, people knew all about you right off the bat. Thanks very much for your interest – next, please. My mum could tell you a thing or two about that.

I held my breath and counted four rings. The phone rang four times at the other end, and suddenly we were on the radio. My mum and I were so thrilled we kept interrupting each other. She kept switching from German to Hungarian and then back again, like she always did when she was excited. But the man on the radio still managed to understand us. In the end, he told us to stay on the line. We couldn’t believe our luck.

‘Let’s hope being on hold doesn’t eat up our winnings,’ my mum said. She put the phone on loudspeaker and rubbed her right ear. It was bright red.

We were only on hold for five minutes. Then a woman congratulated us and asked my mum for her account number. My mum read the numbers off her bank card. It was like she was saying a prayer, which she knew in advance would be granted.

My mum hung up. ‘We’re going on holiday this summer!’

‘A proper holiday?’ I asked. I saw palm trees swaying in the wind, I saw a sandy beach, and of course I saw the sea.

‘A proper holiday,’ my mum said. Then she got up to get ready for work.

I stretched out on the sofa. The heat was making me drowsy. I closed my eyes and listened to the water running in the shower. At some point, my mum came back in, wearing her I-can-do-anything outfit. Her sequinned top shimmered in the sunlight, her jeans were skin-tight. She was wearing her white cowboy boots with the cherry pattern. She kissed me goodbye and took the bus into town, to her evening job.

My mum had two jobs. In the mornings she worked in a big glass box made out of lots of little glass boxes. She cleaned for the staff, who wore expensive suits and ties. And she also brought them their paperclips, envelopes and highlighter pens – sometimes even an ice pack. Every now and then, one of them

would walk into a door or a wall. In the evenings, my mum waited tables in a bar. ‘The bar job keeps our spirits up,’ she’d say when she counted her tips after a shift, ‘but the cleaning job keeps our bills paid.’

My mum saw the craziest things at the office. It was because no one saw her. When she walked the corridors in her jeans and tabard, topping up the printers with paper or cleaning the toilets, she was invisible. They’d grown accustomed to her over the years, like to a filing cabinet or a lamp. It was only when she came home, changed her clothes, let her hair down and put on red lipstick that she became the person she actually wanted to be.

Once per shift, my mum did a round of all the offices to empty the waste paper bins. ‘You can tell a person’s true character by how they treat things they don’t want any more,’ my mum said. The man at the end of the corridor stuffed everything in his waste paper bin: leftover food, half-full cardboard coffee cups, CDs, shoes. Once, my mum found a bloody tissue. She couldn’t just empty the bin, she had to reach in and pull it all out, every time. She took half a life out of that man’s waste paper bin.

I was still awake when my mum got back from the bar that night. ‘Shove up a bit,’ she said, and then she slipped into bed next to me. My mum turned around to face me.

‘Can we use the money to go to the sea?’ I asked.

‘Sure, which sea?’ my mum said, grinning.

‘The Atlantic. Or the Caribbean.’

When I thought of the sea, it was never boring. It was either wild or it was turquoise, like on the posters in the travel agents’ window. Either way, I longed to see it for myself. Sometimes that longing was like a mosquito bite in a place you can’t reach to scratch it.

‘I want to go to Florida,’ my mum said. ‘I’ll have pancakes on the beach every morning.’

‘Of course you will,’ I said, and my stomach started rumbling.

My mum had been crazy about Florida ever since she’d seen this one movie. It was about a little girl and her mum, living in a mobile home. Nothing happened in the movie. ‘Why would anyone make a movie where nothing happens?’ I asked her. When I wrote stories, a whole lot of things happened.

‘As long as nothing happens, everything is possible,’ my mum had said. And she was right, in a way.

My mum got up from my bed. ‘I’ll make us some,’ she said. And then she vanished into the kitchen. My mum’s pancakes were the best I’d ever eaten. She made them every time we had something to celebrate. And believe me: we found plenty of reasons. Birthdays, for example. Not just our birthdays – the birthdays of all the children living in our block. And there were a whole lot of children living there.

My mum brought a stacked plate to my bed and asked:
'Haven't you got pancakes hanging out of your eyes?'

She asked that every time.

'Coming out of my ears, you're supposed to say,' I corrected her, dipping my finger in the maple syrup and licking it. My mum still had problems with figures of speech, in German. The world was her clam, the pen was mightier than the knife, and she'd say: 'I'll give that idiot a piece of my brain!'

My mum sat down on the edge of my bed. 'Everything wears off as time goes by.'

'Like a song, for example,' I said. Sometimes I listened to the same song so many times in a row that I couldn't remember what it was I'd originally liked about it.

'Right, exactly. Or a person,' she said. 'But not you. You'll never wear off.' She wrapped her arms around me, almost knocking my plate to the floor.

Later, long after my mum had fallen asleep in the lounge, I got up again. I opened my window wide and leaned out into the warm summer air. We lived almost at the very top. It was the seventeenth floor. From up here we could have seen the sea, if there'd been a sea. But there was only an autobahn. The autobahn snaked through the nature reserve and sliced the green into two parts. The roaring of the cars was always there; we hardly heard it any more. When I was little, the sound of the cars had often sent

me drifting off to sleep. ‘Hey, can you hear the sea?’ my mum would whisper.

In the school holidays there was more traffic. Sometimes my mum would fill big glasses with fruit juice and ice cubes, add pink straws and paper umbrellas. She’d get me to hold the cocktails while she took two deck chairs and set them up on the walkway, the communal balcony between our front door and the balustrade with the peeling paint.

Then we’d play at holidays.

We’d sit side by side, my mum in a white bikini, me in a swimsuit, and savour the sun on our skin. We were glad we’d already got there while everyone else was still stuck in their cars.

I stood by the window and listened. The truth was only occurring to me now. The truth was, of course, that we’d have changed places at the drop of a hat. We’d have loved to be stuck in a car, on our way to Italy, France or Spain.

I was sitting on the outside walkway, flicking through travel brochures. The brochures were thick with glossy covers. The man at the travel agents had asked where I wanted to go, but I didn't know yet. All I knew was that I wanted to surprise my mum with a good idea.

'To the coast!' I told him.

'Europe?' the man asked, and I nodded.

'Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Greece?'

'Exactly,' I said. 'And can I have a brochure about Hungary as well, please?'

'Hungary's not on the coast,' he said, piling brochures into a bag for me.

I knew Hungary wasn't on the coast, of course, and I knew my mum would never go to Hungary. But I liked looking at pictures of it.

I was in the doorway when something else crossed my mind.

'Have you got a brochure for Florida?'

Now I was shifting my eyes between the pale blue sky above me and a road crossing straits of turquoise water. I saw palm trees on powdery beaches and baby pink hotels with gigantic pools and verandas with wicker rockers and gardens planted with flowers the size of footballs.

And then I saw the prices.

They were so high, we couldn't even afford the flights over. We couldn't afford a single flight, even if they'd let us share a seat.

I slammed the Florida brochure shut and closed my eyes. The sun was high in the sky, dyeing the darkness behind my eyelids red. I had the whole walkway to myself, but I knew it wouldn't stay that way for long. My mum and I weren't the only ones who relocated outside our front doors as soon as it got hot. We shared the walkway with our neighbours, since none of us had a private balcony.

Luna, for example. Luna was older than me but younger than my mum. We didn't know exactly how old she was. Sometimes she'd say 23, sometimes 32. The truth played hide-and-seek between the two. Luna's age depended on how she was feeling. She worked right nearby, in the Sunset Tanning Salon. If she liked you she'd let you go on the sunbed for free. She always had one or two tokens in her pocket, that you could put in the slot instead of coins. We liked Luna, and Luna liked us. That was no use to us, though. I was too young for the tanning salon; you had to be sixteen. I kept trying to talk Luna into it, but she shook her head so hard her pink hair went crazy. My mum didn't need a tanning salon. While most people around us watched their skin fade back to the colour of raw sausages in the winter, she was still brown. 'It's my Romany blood,' she'd say with a sigh. She

couldn't believe she was missing a chance to get something without paying.

I moved onto the next brochure. Sure, Italy wasn't Florida, but they had nice beaches there too, and good pizza. And that's pretty good. I compared hotels and campsites. I flicked ahead and back and ahead again. It wasn't long before I realised our winnings just weren't enough. They might be enough for a new mattress or for one or two day-trips to a big amusement park. It would be enough for a season ticket for the swimming pool. It would probably be enough to get us to Italy in our Nissan. But then what?

'Are you going away this summer?' a voice asked suddenly from beside me. It was Ahmed. He had a sports bag over his shoulder, boxing gloves spilling out of it. Ahmed's skin was shiny with sweat, but in this weather it was hard to tell whether someone was on their way to training or had just finished. Ahmed was even darker than my mum. He was officially an Israeli but really a Palestinian. I didn't get how that worked, but it didn't really matter to me.

I thought for a moment whether to tell him about our winnings, but then I didn't. I didn't want to make him sad. Ahmed had come to Germany to study chemistry, but for some reason he wasn't getting anywhere. Whenever my mum asked him how he was doing, he'd laugh and say: 'Fine, it's going great!'

But recently he'd stopped answering. I knew he'd lost his job handing out leaflets.

'We wanted to go to the sea,' I said instead. 'But we'll probably end up staying here.' I put the Italian brochure down next to me. 'It's all way too expensive.'

'Why don't you go to the North Sea? It's not that far away, and I've heard it's really nice there.'

Ahmed unlocked his front door. He was our next-door neighbour; we went over whenever we needed help with anything. He was very strong with big hands, which could open any jam jar. I liked Ahmed. He smelled of soap and shisha and he had the longest eyelashes I'd ever seen. Plus, he had good ideas.

I got up. I felt like going right back to the travel agents and picking up a Germany brochure. But the place was closed in the afternoon. Instead, I went to get my school atlas, a pen and paper and a calculator. Back out on the shared balcony, I opened the atlas and looked for a map of Germany. There was more than one autobahn heading north from where we were. They didn't go all the way to the sea, of course. No one wanted to lie on a beach with cars zooming past behind them. But there were plenty of country roads. I looked for the shortest route, and then I noted down the name of the place.

I started calculating. We had enough money to pay for the petrol. Maybe we could even stay a night in a hotel. At the

bottom of the page, I drew the sun, a beach and the sea and wrote 'North Sea' above them.

'What are you doing?' my mum asked, behind me. She'd got back from work ten minutes before. I didn't have to turn around to know her jeans and T-shirt were on the hall floor. She just dropped her clothes where they fell as soon as she got home from the office. Then she put lunch in the microwave. My mum leaned over the back of my deck chair with a steaming plate of lasagne.

'I thought it was the school holidays,' she said, checking out the atlas.

'I'm planning our trip.'

I took the plate and put it on the floor beside me. My mum pulled the second deck chair closer to mine.

'Let's see,' she said.

After three seconds, she passed me back my notes. 'No. No way. How did you get that idea?' She folded her arms.

'Why not?' I asked her.

'What would we do at the North Sea?' she said. 'Freeze our bums off on the beach? We don't like wind, have you forgotten?'

'It's a thousand degrees out here. We won't freeze.'

'Let's go to France,' my mum said, leaning back.

'France is too expensive,' I said. 'We could only just afford the travel costs. Where would we sleep?'

‘We’ll think of something,’ she said, and helped herself to a sip of my cola.

‘Oh yeah, like what?’

‘It’s nice and warm. We could sleep outside.’

‘What if it rains?’

‘Then we’ll sleep in the car.’

When my mum saw my face, she said: ‘Did you know there are people who spend their whole lives in cars? I bet they give their car a new lick of paint every year.’

I liked our Nissan, that wasn’t the problem. The Nissan was the only luxury we allowed ourselves. Most of the time, we took the bus. Sometimes we even bought bus tickets. Only sometimes, at the start of the month, did we drive the Nissan into town. The problem was that our car had no MOT, for a year now. Aside from that, the passenger door didn’t close properly. But my mum was very inventive: she’d tied the door to the frame with a thick piece of string. When we went around corners, though, I still had to hold onto it like if someone you love was dangling over a cliff.

‘Think of the over-zealous policemen who tell you off for something like that, instead of tracking down proper criminals,’ she’d once said.

But I wouldn’t give up that easily. ‘It’s nice on the North Sea coast,’ I said.

‘How do you know?’ my mum asked.

‘Ahmed told me. How do you know it’s not nice?’

‘There are some things I just know.’

I had no idea what my mum had against the North Sea. I got up, took the pile of travel brochures and dropped them on the floor.

‘Hey, what’s the matter, what’s all this?’ my mum said.

‘There was no point in getting them if you already know everything.’

My mum stared at the brochures. The top one had a flamingo on the cover.

‘Is that Florida?’

I nodded.

My mum pushed up her sunglasses into her hair. ‘Did you get it specially for me?’

‘Yes,’ I said, and then my mum hugged me. Of course I hugged her back. When there’s only two of you, it’s better to make up quickly.

‘Hey, what’s up with you two?’

Luna had come out. Her footsteps made a slapping sound on the tiles, from her flip-flops. She wore them all summer long. She’d found them on the internet, where one pair cost no more than a scoop of ice cream. But since the packaging and postage was four times the price, Luna had gone ahead and ordered a whole pile of them. Now she had flip-flops in every colour in the universe. They came from China and were made of plastic. My

mum thought they'd give Luna skin cancer on her feet. It was only a matter of time, she said.

We came out of our hug.

'We're going on holiday,' my mum said.

Luna grabbed the brochures and sat down on the floor between us. And then my mum told her we'd won the call-in. In the end, she said: 'Billie wants to go to the North Sea, but I want to go to France.'

'France!' Luna said, looking at me. 'Think of all those croissants. And isn't the weather better there?'

Why was everyone so hung up on the weather, for God's sake? I was about to say something but Luna carried right on.

'Plus, the French have a really cool lifestyle. What is it they say?'

'Savoir vivre?' I asked.

'No, something else.'

'Laisser-faire?'

'That's the one,' she said.

My mum looked at me and grinned. I knew I didn't stand a chance any more. I'd just been outvoted by someone who didn't even have a say. I sighed. Once my mum had set her mind on something, there was no talking her out of it. And Luna was right about the croissants.

Luna dug a bottle of nail varnish out of her shorts pocket. She dropped it on my mother's lap and laughed, like someone had

made a joke. Luna often laughed for no real reason. Maybe it was because Luna was simultaneously the happiest and the saddest person I knew.

Luna had more daydreams than I dreamt at night. Her biggest dream was to marry a man who'd get her out of debt.

'She's got a long wait coming,' my mum once said.

My mum unscrewed the nail varnish bottle and took Luna's hand. The two of them often did each other's nails. Luna would do my mum's right hand, because my mum was right-handed, and my mum would do Luna's left hand, because Luna was left-handed. The varnish looked like melted vanilla ice cream.

'When am I going to get my postcard from Hollywood?' my mum asked.

While Luna was waiting for Mr Right, she was trying to become an actress. That was her second dream. She was constantly learning lines: downstairs by the washing machines, in the queue at the discount supermarket and while she disinfected the sunbeds. She was waiting to be discovered.

'Soon,' Luna said. 'And then I'll buy a big house for us all to live in.'

Luna was always coming up with ideas like that. I thought we already lived in a big house, right next door to each other, but I didn't say anything.

'And you? What's your big dream?' Luna asked my mum.

My mum was quiet for a while. Then she said: ‘Air conditioning.’

Luna laughed. ‘OK. And now really?’

‘France. From now on, my big dream is France.’ My mum leaned back and closed her eyes.

‘And what’s your dream?’ Luna turned to me.

I didn’t have to think for long. ‘I want to be a writer,’ I said.

‘Mind what you say,’ my mum said to Luna. ‘She’s always writing things down in her notebook.’

Later, I put popcorn in a plastic bowl and put it on the lounge table, with the cola bottle and glasses. Luna brought crisps over. ‘Sweet and salty,’ she said, putting crisps and popcorn in her mouth at the same time. ‘If you had to pick one... Which would you take?’

‘Sweet,’ said my mum.

‘Salty,’ I said.

We turned on the TV and waited for Luna’s moment. As we sat side by side, I had the scent of her freshly washed hair in my nose. It smelled of coconut.

‘There! There at the back!’ my mum suddenly yelled.

Luna was at the back of a train compartment, holding her ticket out to the inspector. We rewound about eighty times. We loved getting a taste of what Luna called her ‘glamorous life’.

Not much later, my mum had a day off. That was one good thing. The other was that it was the start of a new month. A new month was like a new life. At the start of every month, my mum tried to make up for the end of the last one. At the start of every month, my mum said: ‘Let’s do something fun.’

I listened to the low squeaking sounds coming from the lounge. My mum would be waking up any minute now. She was tossing and turning on the big air bed. She’d pump it up at night, then deflate it again in the morning and fold up her bed like a parcel, which she stowed behind the sofa.

Then I heard her walking around the kitchen barefoot. She filled the kettle, opened the oven and took out a baking tray, put it back in and closed the oven.

I lay in bed, dreaming of our holiday. I’d spent the past few days comparing photos of the North Sea with photos of France. I’d gone back for a North Sea brochure, obviously. When I got back home with the brochure under my arm, my mum had raised her eyebrows but kept her opinion to herself.

Then something strange had happened. The longer I looked at the pictures of France, the paler the ones of the North Sea got. The longer I stared at endless palm-tree-lined beach promenades, colourful old town centres, huge yachts in harbours and crêpes with melted chocolate, the more I wanted to go to

France. In the end I wasn't even sure it was a proper holiday if you stayed in Germany. When my mum came into my room that morning with warm croissants and a café au lait, I was thoroughly convinced.

'It all tastes a thousand times better in France,' she said.

'OK, let's go to France!' I said with my mouth full.

My mum did a little dance and bowed at me. 'Merci, Madame!'

I guessed those were the only two French words she knew. Apart from *croissant* and *crêpe*, of course.

And then my mum said: 'Let's do something fun. Let's go into town and get you a new dress.'

We parked the Nissan in an underground car park by the river. It was still ten minutes' walk into town, but it was worth it. The underground car park was the cheapest of all – and you got a nice walk along the river.

The river divided our town into two. There was a section on one side where you could have a barbecue. Big families set up camp there whenever the weather was warm. There were so many relatives, you couldn't tell who was whose father or uncle or sister or cousin. But that didn't matter, because they all belonged together. The women would sit on brightly coloured blankets, the men played boule or frisbee. Later, they'd put huge kebabs on the barbecue. The children would run wild and

sometimes they'd argue. But then they'd just look for someone else to play with.

Sometimes Lea and I would go and lie in the grass by the river after school. Lea was my best friend. We'd go to the river together and do our homework there. Or I'd do my homework, anyway. Lea was too busy commenting on people's clothes as they walked past us. Lea had a real thing about clothes. For her, clothes were like: having enough money to fly to the coast – first class; ordering a three-course meal when you weren't even hungry; or going shopping when your old stuff wasn't even worn out.

Once my mum and I got to the town centre, I was about to head for our favourite second-hand shop, but my mum held me back. 'No, we're getting you something brand new today.'

'But...' I said, but my mum put her finger on my lips.

And that was how I came to spend a whole hour in a changing room in the biggest department store in town. My mum brought in one dress after another. I tried them all on, and I didn't feel like myself in any of them. I didn't feel like purple flowers or multi-coloured stripes.

'We'll just keep looking,' my mum said.

But we didn't have to. My dress wasn't on the rack with the others. It was hidden in the jeans section. I knew instantly that I'd found the perfect dress. It was as if it had my name printed on it. It was lemon yellow and it fitted like it had been

made just for me. The straps were two fingers wide, with two layers. You could adjust the length at either end, with a button. And the best thing was: the buttons looked like sunflowers.

‘So, what do you think?’ I asked, stepping out of the changing room.

‘I love the buttons!’ my mum said. ‘They’re gorgeous! Are they porcelain?’

My mum loved sunflowers. Thousands and thousands of them grew right near our block. Sometimes, when she needed cheering up, she’d say: ‘Hey, Billie, let’s go to the sunflowers!’ We’d stay until the yellow petals glowed in the setting sun. ‘They’re clever,’ my mum said. ‘They always turn to the light.’ She’d never have cut off a sunflower and put it in a vase. ‘Violence has many faces,’ my mum said. ‘Cutting flowers is one of them.’

The shop assistant wrapped the dress in bright pink tissue paper and then put it in a white gift box. She put the box in a white bag. At that moment I knew I would never throw the packaging away.

My mum and I left the store hand in hand. We strolled through the sunshine and my mum asked: ‘Do you fancy an ice cream?’

We went to Venezia and I got to order a Paradise Garden, the biggest ice-cream sundae the café had to offer.

‘You’re not eating, you’re painting,’ my mum laughed as I mixed strawberry, passion fruit and coconut and called my new creation flamingo flavour. Once I’d sucked up the thick liquid through my straw, she got the bill. She gave a generous tip. Then she said: ‘We’re going to dive off the ten-metre platform today. Today’s a good day for it.’

I knew that face. That was the way she looked when she’d surprised herself. For my mum, spontaneity was what routine was for other people: it gave her something to hold onto.

I had often dreamed of diving, at night. But every time, I’d flown away just before I hit the water. When I woke up my heart would be thudding inside my chest.

Just before we got to the outdoor pool, it started to rain and thunder rumbled in the distance. The woman behind the desk didn’t want to let us in. ‘The ticket office shuts an hour before the pool closes,’ she said through the barred window, putting her fat fingers with red nail varnish and cheap rings down on the desk. Next to them was a pack of cigarettes. It was open, with a cigarette peeping out. She must have been about to take a break.

‘We could sneak in,’ I whispered in my mum’s ear, but she shook her head and made that sound with her tongue, like she always did when she thought I was talking nonsense. Then she turned back to the woman. ‘This young lady’ – my mum pointed at me – ‘has something she needs to get done. And it’s’ – she took a pointed look at her watch – ‘62 minutes until closing time.’ She

folded her arms. Even though she was so fragile-looking, the gesture was impressive.

There was almost nobody there, just a handful of swimmers. We put our bags down on the grass and stripped off to our underwear. Luckily, my mum was wearing normal knickers and not one of her ‘I’ve got a date so I’ve gotta look hot’ pairs.

She dived first. She walked to the end of the platform, her eyes focused straight ahead, and stood perfectly calm for a moment. Then she stretched her arms upwards as if to touch the sky with her fingertips and put her hands together. Her body tensed like a bow and then entered the water almost soundlessly. Her header was perfect.

‘Your turn,’ she smiled as she pulled herself out of the pool and squeezed water out of her hair. ‘It’s not about looking good. It’s about having the courage to dive.’

My mum always found exactly the right words.

I climbed the metal ladder. My mum grew smaller, the blue surface more menacing. I imagined the platform was a cliff and the swimming pool was the sea. I imagined I was a mermaid and the sea was my home.

And then I jumped. As I clambered out of the water with trembling legs, my mum took a package out of her bag. ‘For the bravest girl I know,’ she said. I ran my hands over the wrapping paper. It crackled. Inside was a red swimsuit. There was a shark’s

fin on the front, and underneath it said *Beware of the shark!* It was the coolest swimsuit I'd ever seen.

'Where did you get it?' I asked.

My mum laughed. 'At the department store. You took so long I could have bought ten other things.'

I wrapped my arms around her.

'And how did you know I would dive?'

She shrugged. 'I'm your mum.'

All that was the best non-birthday present I'd ever got.

At home, we waited for the storm to reach us, but nothing happened. We'd opened the front door and all the windows, hoping a fresh breeze would blow through, but it stayed oppressively hot. And then the skies opened up and the water steamed off the ground and the leaves of the trees.

My mum and I sat on the sofa, eating watermelon. The sofa was our favourite place. My mum had got it from the recycling, years ago. Ahmed had helped her, and the carpet shampoo had been his idea too. He used it to clean his prayer mats, which he dried in the sunshine outside our flat, and my mum used it to clean the blue velvet upholstery, which was pretty stained in places.

Something about our sofa was magic, I was convinced. It made my mum talk. I knew next to nothing about her past. I didn't even know who my dad was. But sometimes I did find things out.

I found out, for example, that my mum had grown up in the countryside near Budapest. Her dad had built their house with his bare hands. There were four bedrooms but only two of them were used. The other two had been planned for my mum's brothers and sisters.

'They were never born. They all died too soon.'

'Why?' I asked.

'I don't know.'

The house had a garden and stables. As a child, my mum played with cats, chickens and goats. We had a photo of her on the wall in the lounge, sitting on a huge pig and laughing into the camera. There was lots of work to do back then, but no dad. Cancer had taken him away from her, a little more with every month. When she was ten years old, she sat down on the edge of his bed and took his hand.

'His skin was almost translucent,' my mum said.

She had to promise him she'd always cope on her own.

He died that same day.

'What was the worst thing about not having a dad any more?' I asked her.

'Being left alone with my mother,' she said, keeping it brief. 'Her hand was always faster than her mouth.'

That was probably the reason, I thought, why we'd never visited her in Hungary.

I bit off a chunk of watermelon. The juice ran down my chin and dripped onto the piece of paper resting on my thighs.

‘Sun cream, sun hats, sunglasses,’ my mum dictated, enjoying the fact that everything she said started with *sun*. She was in an extremely good mood. I don’t know if that was the sparkling wine she’d added to her breakfast juice, or because of France.

We wanted to get on the road as soon as we could. My mum just had to sort something out at work first.

Half an hour, and our packing list was done. And then suddenly something occurred to me. ‘We haven’t got any suitcases, have we?’

My mum looked at me for a moment like she was processing what I’d just said. Then she burst out laughing. The laughter came flowing out of her like lava from a volcano, and I was sure everyone on our floor could hear her. Once she’d calmed down, she shrugged and said: ‘We’ll just chuck everything in the car.’

That night, I crawled in with my mum on the air bed. I’d woken up from a bad dream. First I’d been riding sea horses through colourful underwater worlds, resting in gigantic seashells and climbing seaweed up to the surface where the sun glinted on the water. Then all of a sudden it grew darker all around me. The darker it got, the less air I had to breathe. When I woke up my heart was thudding.

'I dreamed of the sea again,' I said.

'What?' my mum asked, half-asleep.

'Have we ever lived by the sea?' I asked.

'Maybe in another life,' my mum said, and then she fell right back to sleep.