

My mother's lovers by Ulrike Edschmid

Sample translation by Mandy Wight

Chapter 1

At the time he had been Claire's lover. I don't know if she'd turned up on that winter evening with the intention of passing him on to my mother. I forgot to ask my mother and now it's too late. Claire and her lover must have walked into the valley from the lonely railway station as dusk was falling. The outline of the black cliff, which gave our castle its name, would have been ahead of them. There was probably snow on the ground illuminating the path through the spruce trees which led up to the castle. The short cut over the Geisberg, where the houses of the poorer farmers huddled under their grey shingle roofs against the cliff, was steep and hard to find in the dark if you didn't know your way round the mountain. And Claire didn't know her way.

Claire had always been, and remained, an outsider. She had arrived in the village in the last year of the war from a town which had been destroyed. Together with her husband she had found shelter in an attic room of the old manor house at the foot of the castle. Her husband was a set designer who could hardly see and who, as I remember, always went up very close to pictures in order to touch them. Shortly after the end of the war Claire left him. My mother said she's gone because in one single throwaway remark he'd poured scorn on what she was doing day in day out to help them both survive in that tiny attic room. One morning she disappeared through the small gate in the wall which sheltered the castle grounds on the village side. From then on she worked as a doctor in a hospital. She only came back one more time- on that winter evening.

I don't remember Claire's arrival. I was probably already asleep when she and her lover reached the castle. If she hadn't written to us to tell us she was coming, and with the door to the tower bolted on the inside at nightfall and the old bell gone rusty, she will have made her presence known by throwing stones at the window. In the course of the evening snatches of conversation and laughter will have penetrated through the crack in the door, lit up by a narrow strip of light, into the room where my brother and I lay in bed. At some stage, my mother related, after they'd rolled back the carpet, she'd put on her bodice, embroidered with sequins and pearls and her long, wide swinging skirt with the broad yellow band at the hem that flashed like a wheel of fire as she danced. Then Claire's lover, wearing the same jacket he wore when he drove Rommel's tanks, led first the one, then the other woman over the dark- red, polished floor. And there, said my mother, it happened, that he imperceptibly slipped out of Claire's arms and into her own.

The first train in the morning left between 6 and 7. Claire spent the few remaining hours of the night still at the side of the man she had come with. But she must have been unshakeable in her resolve, for she knew that she had an hour's walk in icy cold weather in front of her. Without waking him, she got up from the couch in the sitting room, turned the heavy key softly in the lock and went down the spruce lined path in a wide arc around the village. In the valley she crossed the narrow river on a makeshift bridge, put up to replace the old, slightly arched stone bridge which had been blown up at the last minute by retreating German troops.

Claire left quietly while everyone was asleep. For my mother she left a short message that said she was going back to her husband. Their friendship, she added in a postscript, was not affected by her decision. My mother told me later, it seemed to her that Claire had been waiting for a moment of clarity like this, to act on an idea which she had been mulling over for some time. Still, her decision was sudden and unexpected, even if it did perhaps come at

the right time for all concerned- for my mother, for Claire and for her lover. She's gone, he had said the next morning, and he stayed on. Claire's lover was twenty-four years old when he transferred his affections to my mother. And he had at his finger tips an inexhaustible wealth of oriental fairy tales from *The Thousand and One nights* to the tales of *Wilhelm Hauff*.

Up till then I knew only the tales of the Grimm Brothers, who had spent their childhood not far from us in a village near the local town. Before she began working as a weaver, my mother had made rag dolls based on characters from their fairy tales and sold them in Switzerland for coffee. The stories seemed to me to hold a mirror up to the life I saw each day as I walked through the village. It was cold. The people were poor, just as they were on the Geisberg, where they could only keep one goat and sat together on hard chairs in kitchens blackened by soot. In the distance lay impenetrable woods full of danger and misfortune. The charcoal burner's column of smoke, visible on some days from the castle, lured Hansel and Gretel to their ruin. Little Red Riding Hood walked through the wood on the Eschenberg and the wolf gobbled up the grandmother at Fischer's Hütte, where the stone marking the boundary with Bavaria stood. All the stories carried the threat of disaster. Even when rescue came at the last minute, this did not detract from the harsh reality which the tales depicted.

Claire's lover lay now at my mother's side and whenever I curled up at the foot of her bed with my brother on Sunday mornings, a magical world opened up, full of transformations and wishes granted. We sat in tents on soft cushions and flew on carpets. Claire's lover had been there, to the Orient. He had seen the white cities with their mysterious alleyways and markets. When the evening star rose in the sky we climbed through the ruin and out on to the terrace, which jutted out between two broken towers over the countryside. We gazed at the heavens under which he had crossed the desert. My mother showed us Cassiopeia, Orion, the

Great and the Small Bear. Claire's lover told us the story of Sinbad the Sailor and when a shooting star flew over us, I made a wish that he would never stop.

Chapter V1

My mother, my brother and I lived in one small part of the castle. The larger part of the enormous building was occupied by the forester's family. Towards the end of the war people turned up in the rooms which we were not using only to disappear soon after, burdened by sorrow and a past which they didn't talk about. The fat woman who lived in the next room never mentioned the day when her husband was found in the woods, stabbed to death, so they said in the village, by Polish forced labourers, and no one talked about the revenge which was taken against the Poles. No one said anything either about the infectious tuberculosis brought by an old woman from Danzig fleeing from the Russians. On long winter evenings we would play rummy with her in the two tiny rooms she used leading off the spiral staircase. We would come across her husband, smoking and humming sea shanties, in a window recess along the dark corridor. He told us about the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, which was torpedoed and went down just off the coast of Danzig in January 1945 with thousands of refugees on board. Their grown up daughter was said to be a real brain box, looked like a man, and learned to type on my mother's 'Erica' typewriter. After that she taught herself first Latin, then Greek, out of old school textbooks. When we went back across the landing after the game we dipped our hands into a bowl of disinfectant which my mother had put outside our door, just to be on the safe side. Eventually our G.P. had all the people who lived in the castle X-rayed. The woman from Danzig was taken to hospital and never came back. The old sailor and his daughter left. For a while afterwards we received the occasional letter from

her, written on a typewriter with the lines closely together, which reported that she had now learned Hebrew and Arabic as well. Then we heard no more from them.

For quite some time after that it was just us and the forester's family living together in the castle, and, looking back, this time seemed like a preview of my years in communes and shared houses. Sometimes we would look out of the kitchen window and see the forester driving carefully down the mountain with his smallest child in the capacious side panniers of his motor bike. His wife carried their only daughter behind him on her lap, one of the older sons sat on the petrol tank in front and we saw them getting smaller and smaller until the motorbike disappeared at the edge of the forest. During the day all the doors of the huge house stood open. A bunch of children were always running around on the floor of the entrance hall, 50 meters long and laid with sand stone slabs. We would transport sugar, salt, flour and anything else needed in the other kitchen on tricycles and scooters from one end to the other. If I didn't like my mother's milk soup, I'd have fried potatoes in the forester's kitchen. If we were having *Buchteln* or *Kartäuserklöße*, sweet dumplings, his children would come over to us. Our two families slaughtered a small pig in the cellar, in secret, at a time after the war when unauthorised slaughtering was prohibited. My mother and the forester's wife spent the whole of one night boiling up sausage and pig's belly, which they put into glass jars for preservation and divided up between them. At a dizzying height up in the loft we children clambered over a beam to the dovecot and saw our mothers sitting down below in the garden, drinking coffee while threading mushrooms and apple slices for drying. Sometimes my mother stayed the night in the local town, when there were no more trains running after a concert, or she'd missed the last one, and my brother and I would sleep with the forester's children, top to toe. Sometimes one or two of my playmates would wander off too far from the castle. If they didn't come back when called, the forester would get on his

motor bike, search the area and bring them back from the Sieben Buchen or the Eschenberg in his side panniers. Then he closed the large courtyard gate.

He was the first and only forester whom my mother had any time for. He would blow his hunting horn, not sounding the '*Halali*', but Bach's chorales, which could be heard on Sundays far and wide across the land. He did take part in the hunt and sometimes took us with him up onto the hunting stand, before dawn when the animals would come into the clearing, but we never saw him drive a jeep load of dead deer into the courtyard, in cowardly triumph, like his successor. He only wore a uniform when he was working in the forestry office opposite, not at weekends, and on the washing line in the garden you could see not only green shirts, trousers, short and long socks and handkerchiefs, but other clothes besides, unlike all the other foresters who came after him. On the many nights when the eerie rustling of dormice up in the attic could be heard and I couldn't go to sleep, I found my mother and the forester deep in conversation at the table in the window recess, while the village lay in complete darkness beneath them.

Nevertheless, there was a deep divide between him and my mother. The forester was, as they said in the village, a heathen, even if he did play Christian chorales across the countryside. The gulf between him and my mother lay in his backward looking, early Germanic Utopias and her Catholicism, which, though it was rather half hearted, still lay deeply rooted in her childhood. After Twelfth Night, we would pluck the Lametta from the boughs of the Christmas tree, smooth it down for next year, then throw the naked tree out of the window, saw it up and stack the logs in the wood shed for winter firewood, to be taken upstairs later bit by bit to heat the stove. The forester meanwhile would lay his pristine fir tree down upon a white linen cloth, manoeuvre it carefully down the spiral staircase and then offer it up for ritual burning in the courtyard. My mother used the forester's activities as story material for long winter evenings during power cuts; she conjured up his heathen

festivities at Christmas and Shrove Tuesday in the ice-cold seven hundred year old vault of St. Margaret's Chapel and, later in the year, his search at dawn for the Whitsuntide goddess. The forester, however, took their differences seriously: he would pace up and down the stone flagged hall at night, eventually knocking on the door of the room where my mother slept. And she, who would never forgive anyone disturbing her afternoon nap, let herself be roused from sleep and drawn into conversations over a cigarette about religion, morality and *Weltanschauung*. She was to miss those conversations sooner than she thought.

My mother's simple connection with nature was diametrically opposed to the forester's ascetic nature religion. She loved the view into the valley, with the river winding along, the beech woods and the apple orchards and the hawthorn tree under our window. But even if God had created it all, she didn't believe that he lived in the trees or the water or the wind, like the forester's gods. The world where the forester felt he belonged lay on the other side of our civilisation in the pre Christian past, whereas for my mother it was the future which counted. She still had things to do and whatever they were, she wouldn't achieve them if she didn't believe in the forward march of progress.

When the furniture removal van drove off from the courtyard in 1948, it took a large chunk of vitality with it. The many rooms, large and small, remained locked away from now on behind the newly built door with which the new forester had divided the house into two unequal parts. From then on I sat alone in the ruin beneath the oak tree, looked out over the castle walls as far as the horizon and imagined a life to myself, which lay like a promise far away beyond the wooded hills and mountains.

Chapter V11

One after another they all left. Claire had been gone for a long time. Her husband had been summoned to work at a great opera house and he had followed the call. My mother's sister and her husband built a house on the moors and it was some time since the forester's red furniture van had disappeared down the winding road, getting smaller and smaller in the growing distance. Claire's lover studied law and told us no more stories. Instead, he talked about cases. He had suddenly slipped into a different world, just like some time before when he had slipped out of Claire's arms and into the arms of my mother. He took her out one more time in the local town and while he checked the bill and found a mistake, she said goodbye to him, without making a sound and without him even noticing.

My mother lived like a bird on the wing. She didn't settle down or lean on anyone for support. What she saw around her held no attraction for her: women standing beside their men, who had returned, emotionally fragile, from the war. She sat at her loom until my brother and I returned from school, calculating how she could raise the money in the next year for the cost of the journey to the grammar school in the local town. When the rugs were finished, she would parcel them up, and carry them to the post office in the back room of the mayor's office, where they would be weighed, stamped and sent off. Then she would wait for the money, which arrived by postal order, and for the next commission.

In the meantime she had begun to weave rugs using animal skins. An article in the local paper described the remoteness of the long hall, cool as a tomb, like a monastery with its old oil paintings and wooden chests, where the only sign of life was the regular click-click of a loom at one end. My mother, the weaver, is described as a young woman, sitting in the next room with an extraordinarily beautiful view over the Hohe Rhön mountains, weaving a carpet out of skins to complement a pale colour scheme. Little did the journalist know what

my mother was feeling: that the steady up and down of the foot pedal, with which she separated the warp thread to insert the pieces of skin, was marking out the irreversible process of her life slowing down.

On that day in early summer, when the open topped cream Coupé came up the Schlossgasse for the first time, it looked like rain. The swallows were flying so low that they were just skimming the two doors of the gate which were standing open. My mother was on her way into the orchard to fetch in the washing, when the car drove into the courtyard and an elegant couple got out to pull the soft top over the car. The surgeon and his wife had been in the valley to remove a patient's tonsils and had stayed on, waiting until he was out of danger. They then became curious about the castle: since they had driven over the hill it was always within view. Their two-seater, which had been confiscated during the war, was returned to them directly after, and the medical couple were now using it to drive around the neighbouring villages on the instructions of our G.P. to carry out minor operations in people's homes in return for ham and bacon. It soon became a habit for both of them, once their work was finished, to come up the mountain. The women would drink coffee on the terrace, gazing over the valley as it narrowed down in the distance until the silver ribbon of the river became a dash, eventually disappearing amongst the meadows and alders. The surgeon, meanwhile, would borrow a cushion and take a nap in his open two-seater.

When autumn came and there was a fair in the village, he appeared on the Sunday afternoon and twirled round with my mother on the rudimentary dance floor until evening. Whenever one of his five daughters had a birthday, he would pick us up. My mother sat in front, my brother and I squeezed in behind on a spare brown leather seat. We drove down into the valley, up over the nearest mountain, then over the next one and turned into a park with an alley of chestnut trees and stopped in front of a villa. Close by stood a castle, built at the end

of the 19th century in a range of architectural styles, by the great uncle of the surgeon's wife: the project had driven him crazy.

The surgeon — small, round and a passionate dancer—had the idea of throwing a big party for Carnival. The celebration was to take place in the austere, solitary castle rather than in the roomy, comfortable house with servants, cook and nanny, where they lived: this idea developed out of the feeling of friendship which both the surgeon and his wife felt for my mother after only a relatively short time. They had realised, since meeting her, what it meant to be on your own. A woman like my mother was independent and 'dangerous'. She wasn't invited to parties without a man at her side. The only thing she could do was to take the bull by the horns: the surgeon and his wife suggested that my mother should host a party herself and with their help our home was transformed for the first time in February 1949.

The first thing my mother did was to take the pictures down from the walls- a sketch by the practically blind stage designer, a copy of Brueghel's *The Peasant Wedding* and a Chinese wall hanging beginning to fade above the couch in the sitting room, which we turned round from time to time to preserve the precious cloth. The hares which had been jumping before from the left side of the moon down to earth into the open kimonos of two Chinese figures, could now be seen plunging from the right down through a washed out emptiness. A canvas with a self portrait of my father disappeared, then the photo of him at his draughtsman's table was whisked off too, and last of all went the little blurred picture in the oval frame of my brother who died. In their place we hung up wooden cages with chickens made of *pâpier maché* and rigged up a deep blue sky out of crêpe paper, where we hung our silver Christmas baubles lined up in the shape of the Southern Cross. Next to the stove we set up divans using cushions and rugs. The large recess with the dining table became an oasis, where people could drink what alcohol there was out of rubber tubes. My mother braided sandals for herself from straw, dyed some old curtains pink in beetroot juice and made herself

an outfit from them: it revealed her midriff, for she was dressed up as one of the heavenly virgins. In the workshop where I slept with my brother a red tent was put up, made from two sheets of old ticking material donated by a farmer's wife. My mother cut half moon shapes out of old tin cans and sewed them on to the tent walls. Our mattresses were laid on the floor and my brother and I went to stay in the valley for two nights with a woman who came from the Sudetenland, who told us about the home she no longer had.

Once our rooms had been transformed into a desert fort, the farmers climbed up the road to have a look at it and drank schnapps with my mother till she felt sick. Most guests, who had marked a cross on the invitations against what they could bring by way of contribution- a hundred grams of coffee or tea, seventy five grams of sugar, two eggs, a quarter litre of alcohol or whatever- arrived by train at the little railway station and hiked up to the black cliff with their costume in their rucksack. The guests who had a car battled their way over the hill through the gusts of snow, then came down the mountain into the valley, and after that up the icy twists and turns of the road at a walking pace. Some didn't arrive until dawn the next morning. The farmers, who had already done the milking and mucking out, pushed the curtains to one side and it was a long time before they stopped talking about the stream of strange figures in disguise heading out of the two guest houses up the narrow village streets towards the bright lights of the castle. Two days later, my brother and I returned from the valley, slept for a few more nights under the red tent, and listened to the soft tinkling of the half moons.

Translation © Mandy Wight 2014