

# EVERYDAY LIFE, SUSPENDED

by Paula Fürstenberg

Sample translation by Lucy Jones



© 2024, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

pp. 5–33

Literary Fiction | Novel

320 pages

Publication date: February 2024

Foreign rights with: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

Contact information: <https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights#contact>

## A list of possible ways to start this story

z)

*You can't punch with a raised fist.*

This should have been the first sentence of your first novel. It came to you a few weeks ago while you were vacuuming. It was one of those sentences that you say came out of nowhere. But that's not true because all sentences come from somewhere, and what you mean is that you have no idea why you thought of it. In any case, it came easily to you and you carried it around proudly for a few days and looked forward to the sentences that would follow. Then you sat down at your desk and added it to the manuscript of your novel. But no other sentences followed, and your happiness gave way to familiar doubts that have always come easily to you. Because if you're too stupid to tell the difference between the beginning of a novel and a saying on a teabag string, perhaps you should have kept your part-time job as a PA at a newspaper.

You got up from your desk and walked across the hall to tell Max. He said, 'It's just a sentence. You're being over-dramatic, as usual.'

It was one of those blunt things only best friends can say because of countless other discussions that have gone before. You forgave Max straight away and pulled a fake-insulted face. He smiled and you were relieved because, for a while, you'd both been going around with unfake-insulted faces. It may have been the only smile you'd managed to tease out of Max for months. So at least the sentence that didn't go anywhere was useful in that way. Then you went back to your desk, where you

left the sentence in your novel, stubbornly hoping that it would deliver a result, like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

y)

This is Max's story and originally you wanted to keep your story out of it. But because you're telling the story and Max has been your best friend for twenty years, keeping out of it isn't possible. So it's also your story and you realized this the day you were the worst friend in the world. You were sitting in the kitchen with Max, which was unusual because Max had started keeping to himself. You'd just been talking about getting a cat, which you'd only suggested because you thought a pet would do him good and you'd remembered that Max had always wanted a cat. You didn't particularly like cats but you liked Max and it was one of your more desperate attempts to help him get through this 'difficult phase' of his. But Max only harped on about vet bills, about not having a proper place for the litter tray, and the smell of cat food in your vegetarian fridge. The more you argued, saying how fluffy and fun a cat would be, the more morose Max became, slumping further in his chair, his gaze more downcast, until he suddenly muttered, 'You're right. It's as if there's this sack of darkness inside me. Mrs. Double-barreled Name says I need to go to hospital.'

You looked at him for a moment, trying to control the feelings he was bringing up in you. But you couldn't. Instead, your voice got loud and your tone sharp.

'You just have to sit up straight! Look how you're sitting. Look at me when I'm talking to you. Pull yourself together, Max.'

These sentences felt strange, like a foreign language in your mouth. But they shot right out of the middle of your body, perhaps from your own sack of darkness, which had just been ripped open.

‘Look,’ you said, ‘look at me, right now – this is how you’re sitting.’

And you copied him, perching your backside on the edge of the chair, knees splayed to each side, one arm over the back, shoulders slumped. You felt stupid when you were doing it, like a dancer teaching a choreographer his own dance. And although Max looked at you, he didn’t even try to sit up straight like he usually did. He said nothing, didn’t shout back or snort in contempt. He just looked at you the way you look at a person who’s not even worthy of a reaction. Then, without a word, he stood up and disappeared into his room.

Looking back, you can only guess what made you lose your temper with your best friend, who was clearly in such bad shape there and then that he needed to go to hospital. Perhaps you were offended that your generosity in suggesting to get a cat had gone unnoticed. Perhaps the cost of his illness to you both was just starting to dawn on you. Perhaps you had a premonition of the silence that would take over the flat when Max went into hospital. Perhaps you regretted sending him to Mrs. Double-barreled Name. Perhaps you didn’t want Max to take the ending of the story you were writing with him to hospital. Perhaps you were annoyed because your writing hadn’t been going well for a while, ever since you’d been offered a contract for your book, or rather, since you’d quit your job at the newspaper, or rather, since Max had been hired full-time, or rather, since you and Max only slept in your bed. All of this had happened at roughly the same time, and you couldn’t tell what was related to what. You’d backed yourself into a corner and couldn’t tell anything apart

– Max’s problems from yours, work from personal life, or manuscript from reality. Most of all, you sensed that there was something wrong with you too, something connected to what was wrong with Max and that your bodies had fallen into an unhealthy co-dependence.

x)

This is Max’s story and because it’s a story about illness it starts with his symptoms. Max had the full range: sleeplessness, cheerlessness, hungerlessness, sluggishness, hopelessness, listlessness, restlessness, and later also speechlessness. When people talk about being sick, one of the many euphemisms and cover-ups is to talk about *having* an illness and its symptoms as if it were a surprise gift. It’s a way of parceling a crisis into a manageable package that seems less threatening. But the opposite is true in Max’s case: he’d gained nothing and almost everything was wrong with him. There’s confusion in general about whether sick people *have* something or something is *wrong* with them. *What do you have?* and *What’s wrong with you?* mean the same thing. You don’t like either one, but in Max’s case, you lean toward *What’s wrong with you?* His textbook symptoms were pointing clearly to what was wrong and yet it took a whole year for anyone to work out.

You saw the changes in his body. After all, you’d had twenty years’ practice of looking at Max’s body. You saw the way he was shrinking into himself, the way his limbs had started folding in on themselves, knees squeezed together, elbows pressed into his body as if he were trying to take up less space, trying to disappear, trying to maximize what was wrong with him all the way to Maxlessness. You saw the sack of darkness he was carrying inside and how it got bigger the thinner he

grew. You saw all this, but you couldn't figure out a diagnosis. This is easy to explain. You've had things wrong with you too, but like Max, you know very little about the fine line separating a regular bad mood from a sick bad mood. You'd both grown up in a world where people often talked about work, but rarely about bodies. The only contact you'd had with medicine was the mostly painful thud of a medicine ball in sports. Long ago, your body had taken a laid-back attitude to gravity, and ever since, you'd suffered regular bouts of vertigo. So you'd probably experienced more illness than most people in their early thirties. But what you knew was only an island. No sooner had your attacks started than you learned not to talk about them. So there was a reason you weren't on the ball when it came to what was wrong with Max and his diagnosis, but it wasn't an excuse. After all, you both wanted to be better than the world you'd been born into.

w)

Strictly speaking, a story only starts when someone starts telling it. And this is how this one starts. After leaving university, you worked part-time as a PA at a local newspaper where it was your job to give the journalists support. You researched topics, made appointments, made coffee, prepared interview questions, and edited texts. You had to follow instructions and were told what to do and your organizational skills were highly appreciated. The PAs were only asked to suggest topics when the journalists ran out of ideas, and this was always presented to you as a great opportunity. This great opportunity mostly involved racking your brains for a good hook that the journalists could claim was theirs before writing the article. One of these great opportunities was Annual Architecture Day in June. Too many articles had already been written on gentrification and housing shortages and a fresh approach was needed, said a journalist called Martin. An approach that

fundamentally called public space into question. You told Martin that Max was an architect and that he'd written his thesis on grieving in public spaces. It included his design of a utopian construction called the *SobBarium*, a public space where people could go to sob, scream, and cry their eyes out. Martin was very taken by the idea. He wanted to publish a profile feature of Max, complete with an illustration of his plans for the *SobBarium*. And it was you who should write it because you knew Max, and Martin would act as an advisor because it would be your first article. Max agreed and it was easy for you to get your ideas down on paper because you'd written half of Max's thesis.

Martin thought your first draft was too technical and abstract. He said the personal angle was missing. So you added that Max himself had been dealing with grief at the time because his uncle had killed himself and Max knew from personal experience that there was a lack of public spaces where people cry. Martin thought the second draft was too depressing as the article was going to be published under 'local interest', which was not the section for articles that needed the phone number of the Samaritans underneath. He suggested leaving out the uncle's cause of death and suggested concentrating on your friendship during Max's year of grieving. Martin found your third draft too far-fetched, and he asked if you were sure that you and Max weren't a couple. You were very sure. Martin raised his eyebrows and thought for a moment. Then he said Max should come across as a sensitive East German, an example to show why East Germans were always moaning, which wasn't, he said, a judgment of any kind, merely an observation. Long story short, another article on housing shortages was published on Annual Architecture Day. But by then, you'd started writing about Max and your friendship, his uncle, and the *SobBarium*. Your notes had gotten completely out of hand; you had fifty pages of

material but weren't even close to the end. You had learned to love working at home or in the quiet of the library away from the hectic newspaper office. But most of all, for the first time in your life, you felt that you were on the right track. Up until then, your life had been a series of grabbed opportunities that were more or less compatible with your physical condition. Suddenly, a text was erupting on your computer because you had something to say that only you could say, and no Martin in the world would stop you. You had no choice but to carry on.

v)

It didn't occur to you that Max might have something seriously wrong with him until the day he phoned to say he'd hit his head. You were in the library and still thought you were writing your first newspaper article. If someone had predicted it would become a novel, you would have laughed long and hard. Anyway, it was the morning and you had just decided to fend off any interruptions from the outside world in the mornings so you could write. As Max knew this, he never phoned you in the mornings. Yet here he was, phoning you anyway, and so you went into the foyer and called him back. He said that he'd hit his head. He'd put his hand on the kitchen door handle. But his hand hadn't pressed down the handle while his feet had carried on walking, which was why he'd hit his forehead hard on the door. If Max were a child still testing out his hand and foot coordination, it wouldn't have been a big deal. But Max was over thirty, and Max had been opening doors for decades without hitting his head. That morning, however, something had gone wrong. Max's forehead was throbbing in pain and he had no idea why he'd been opening doors without a hitch for decades, but not this time. There was nothing special about the



door – it wasn't the door to an architect's office where overtime was waiting for him or the door to a room he'd never entered. It was simply your kitchen door, and he knew it well, better than most doors. He was having a day off, wasn't in a hurry, and there was no one waiting for him, not behind that door or any other. There was no conceivable reason why his motor skills had momentarily lapsed and perhaps it was less this than the lack of a discernible reason for his head colliding with the door that made Max place one foot in front of the other very cautiously now, as if he'd forgotten how to walk, or had lost all faith in his body.

He told you all this in a croaky voice, stopping as he tried to hold back the sobs and you couldn't figure out why his voice was all croaky over such a trivial thing. You thought: why this gap between form and content? You thought: this is an adult man, crying because he's banged his head. You thought: seriously, this is why he's phoning you? Back then, you still thought Max was just going through a difficult phase. You didn't heed the signs – that this adult crying on the phone because he'd hit his head was a sign. Perhaps it was the sort of sign that's only clear in retrospect, in conjunction with all the other signs. Possibly though, you're only telling yourself this to justify why you did nothing but make a wisecrack which you'd rather not repeat here.

That's not funny, Max said. Charles VIII banged his head on the lintel of the door on his way to watch a game of tennis and died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of 27. Can you please take something seriously for a change? Why don't you ever take anything seriously?

You were silent for a moment while you tried to tally the Max you knew with the Max on the phone. Because you and Max had never taken anything seriously,

especially not serious things. When his mother had phoned to say that his uncle had hanged himself, you'd been sitting next to Max. He'd hung up, told you what had happened, and said: When I was a kid, they always told me not to hang my head.

Gallows humor really runs in your family, you answered.

Then, in the short time before the news sank in, you'd both laughed loudly. You'd laughed hard as if you were stocking up on laughter because you knew there wouldn't be anything to laugh about for a long time.

In any case, this kind of thing is just your kind of humor. Otherwise, you're not all that funny. You're the kind of people who live in your heads, who prefer talking problems over, not cracking jokes. But in emergencies, sarcasm is your coping mechanism, a kind of self-reassurance: as long as we can laugh about it, we'll be all right. And the same Max who'd made jokes about his uncle's death now wanted you to take a blow to the head seriously. Max had lost his sense of humor and because Max never lost his sense of humor, it became as clear to you as a blow to your own head that something was very wrong. The gap between the Max you knew and the Max who was throwing accusations had grown too big for you to ignore.

The moment you stopped being heedless of the signs was not, unfortunately, the moment when you started displaying what psychotherapy calls effective behavior. You were still a terrible best friend, and you stayed that way for the whole of the following year. You said: Take a holiday. You said: Let's have a beer tonight. Beer and holidays are the stupidest things to suggest to a person with psychological problems, as a friendly doctor will explain to you after Max hasn't called you in a while.

u)

You've both learned to tell the difference between symptoms and cause, and that's why the story begins long before it's obvious that something is wrong. First, something happens that's hard to explain. Max calls it a curse and you call it delusion. In any case, it has to do with Max being convinced that he's going to die young because all the men in his family have died young. The word *convinced* isn't quite right because Max knows that history doesn't repeat itself. At most, there may be similarities, and even those similarities, when examined closely, are quite different stories. But this *knowing* is all theory, the kind your head can understand but not your body – and that's not right either because the head, of course, belongs to the body, even though the history of ideas has been pretty successful in claiming otherwise.

Max knows that the men in his family aren't actually cursed to die young by an oracle or something, but this non-existent curse is causing Max's symptoms, which means that it does kind of exist. As already mentioned, it's hard to explain.

You don't like it when Max calls it a curse because that makes it sound as if there's no escape. Max, on the other hand, doesn't like it when you call it delusion, because that sounds as if he can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality. You're both able to agree on the fact that men dying young in Max's family is something of a tradition. But that doesn't solve the problem of what to call it, because tradition isn't the same as delusion. Then Max reminds you that *you* named *your* illness without consulting him on it. You gave in and now you both call it a curse because, in the end, it affects Max and not you. When the tradition turned into

a curse is equally hard to say exactly, but it must be about five years ago – the year, in other words, after Max's uncle's death which was the death that made Max the last man alive in his family.

t)

According to the death certificate, his uncle died by suicide in 2014, and according to family memory, of capitalism. Max's grandmother says the following about it: The men in our family all died of the German system.

As everyone knows, a prerequisite for a tradition is that it's repeated, and Max's uncle's death was already the third untimely death in the family. The first was tragic, the second, an audacity on fate's part, but the third made it the rule rather than the exception. Since then, Max has wondered when he will die, and which system will cause it.

s)

Because this is also the story of a family tradition, it starts with earlier deaths in Max's family. According to the death certificate, his father died of an asthma attack in 1988, and according to family memory, of real non-existing socialism. His grandfather died in 1976 of the long-term consequences of a war injury, which is why, strictly speaking, the story starts with that war injury in 1944.

r-d)

A prerequisite for a curse is also that it is repeated and that's why the story starts every time Max thinks: I'm going to die young too.

c)

This is also a story about your friendship, which began in 1999 in seventh grade. Back then, you hadn't yet started talking about yourself in the second person; you still said 'I' when you meant 'I'. Max and you still had no idea of the difficulties that would arise simply from being alive for an increasing length of time.

b)

You don't want to hide behind blind spots in the system, and that's why you have to add that the quality of your friendship, or rather, the roles you play for each other, have led to you not heeding signs when it comes to illness. For twenty years, your roles were clearly defined: Max was the healthy one, you were the sick one. You were the one who knew the school sickroom better than the gym. You were the one who rarely took part in sports. You were the one who often had to lie in bed throwing up or with stomach cramps or who ended up in the emergency room where appendicitis was regularly ruled out. You were the one who was on first-name terms with the ear-nose-throat specialists and physiotherapists.

Max, on the other hand, kept your place in class, explained to teachers why you were absent, and took exercise sheets for you. Max was the one who brought you homework, picked you up from the doctor's, and cycled over to your place in the long breaks to make you lunch in bed if your mum was at work.

None of this changed in the years after you left school. You were still the sick one, Max the healthy one. You got used to your frail body spoiling your plans. You spoke about it in the third person, in sentences like *My body isn't going to let me do that today*. As if it were a person preventing you from doing things you wanted, or a boss, piling too much work on you, and stopping you from going out. When Max says 'I', he includes his body. If he were ill, he'd say *I'm ill*. But up until now, Max has never been seriously ill. In all your plans, your body was the variable, and his, the constant. You simply can't imagine him being ill. You thought your image of him was complete, a problem that occurs in many long-standing relationships. You think you know each other and don't see the changes that have crept in over the years. When a change can no longer be denied, you're suddenly surprised, which makes it seem as if the change has happened suddenly, which is wrong. That's why the story doesn't begin with Max's symptoms, but with yours, before you even knew Max, when you were 11 years old.

a)

The story of you not heeding symptoms is part of the story of not talking about bodies, which is also a story of swearing about bodies. When you talk to or write about Max, you do it in a language that has no words for the female genitalia, at least none that roll off the tongue easily. It's a language that turns orifices, their functions and secretions, into taboos on account of scatology. It's a language that turns illnesses into insults, and diagnoses like idiocy, spasticity, disability, Down's syndrome, and psychopathy, into swear words. It's a language whose metaphors are contaminated with society's ulcers and ruptured appendices, with a toxic climate

and bile-spewing speeches, myopic politics, convictions like viruses, and groups of people turned into parasites. You sit at your desk faced with a crippled language whose vocabulary has been amputated and on sleepless nights, you think this story might never get going if you can't get past this and find a language to tell it in.

## List of the founding myths of your friendship

- The first school day after the summer holidays

It was 1999 and summertime, but you'd not sat back to unwind. You'd spent the summer holidays between primary and secondary school at home and you'd had a lot of time to picture the red brick building where you'd be shaped into *something better*, in your grandmother's words. You didn't know who you'd be better than, or what or when you'd become better, but you knew that asking questions wouldn't make it any easier to understand. For that reason, you'd bitten down quite a few of your nails the night before your first day at school – all of them in fact.

Your mother always arrived late for morning appointments, sometimes due to her night shifts at the laundry and sometimes due to nights out boozing which, for convenience's sake, were also called 'night shifts'. The first thing you'd learned to do in kindergarten was tell the time so you could tell her to get a move on, as latecomers were made to wait outside until the end of the morning circle.

On your first day at secondary school, she dropped you off at the school gate at 7.50 on the dot – but two days late. As it turned out, it wasn't Monday but Wednesday. Stupidly, it was your fault. When your mother had asked you a week earlier which day it was, you'd looked at your new Casio watch and mixed up Tuesday with Thursday. The fact that your mother relied on her twelve-year-old daughter with a shaky grasp of English for such things explains everything about why you were a well-organized child who loved clocks, calendars, and lists.

In third grade, you had your first boyfriend. His name was Rico and every afternoon, you climbed on the wall behind the school dining room building to kiss



each other on the lips without being seen. You kept a list which you called *The Kiss List* and wrote a tick or a cross next to the days of the week, depending on whether you'd kissed or not. Shame made you rip it into tiny little pieces later on, but whether you were ashamed of the kisses or the list, you can't remember – you only remember the feeling. Today, you can't fathom what that list was for. All that remains of it is the anecdotal symbolism of a kid who loved all kinds of order, the kid that you used to be.

So you arrived two days late and were allocated a seat at the front, right in front of the teacher's desk where you sat for the first three days next to no one. But Max beat you at being late. His mother had driven him to the wrong school for a week, and this only came to light when another Max, who'd been ill, suddenly turned up and there were two Maxes on the register. The wrong Max arrived in your class where he belonged and was given the last free seat, next to you. The headteacher handed out letters for your mothers with a friendly reminder that education was compulsory but that he would not make a report to the Youth Welfare Office, as long as this kind of thing didn't happen again. You read the letters in break, glanced at each other, and then, as if on a secret signal, threw them into the bin. You'd already managed to convert your mothers' guilty consciences into dozens of scoops of ice cream and hours of TV – and you didn't see why the headteacher's forgiveness should end that just yet. When you were allowed to change seats at the beginning of the next school year, you both switched to the back row where you sat next to each other for the next seven years until A levels.

- Things in common

The similarities between your single mothers produced some similarities in you, their children, and from that grew a solidarity that formed the basis of your friendship. Being brought up by single mothers meant you lived in a different time zone, one called *earlier than the rest*. Max and you knew how to break an egg on the side of a saucepan, turn off the mains when a pipe burst, mend a puncture, file your nails, and stay up all night *earlier than the rest*. You knew *earlier than the rest* not to wash white t-shirts with red socks, that absent fathers have a special gleam, and that there was no direct connection between wages and wealth. You had to forge signatures *earlier than the rest* but for different reasons: not to hide something but because your mothers weren't around to do it. You were allowed *earlier than the rest* to go alone to the bakery, school, or a lake. Once, at the edge of a playground, you heard someone mutter, *Well, she's on her own*. You applied it to yourself and thought for a long time that it referred to children who raised themselves on their own.

When you were children, your absent mothers meant you were alone at home, jumping out of your skin at every sound. But as soon as you were teenagers, it meant that you could get up to whatever you wanted. At a time when becoming an adult couldn't happen fast enough, *earlier than the rest* was a head start on which you built your need to feel superior. You made fun of kid's juice cartons, homemade covers for exercise books, homesick tears on school trips, haircuts done by hairdressers, and house-dust allergies. You make fun of ironed and weather-appropriate clothing, which had obviously been put out the night before. All those who grew up more cosseted than you with permanently dry feet earned the nickname *Rubber Boot Kids*. Your friendship is based on the fact that you were never *Rubber Boot Kids* and that you elevated the holes in your trainers to symbols

of your life experience. In retrospect, you can't tell whether shopping wasn't your hobby because you didn't like it or because it wasn't within your means. In retrospect, you can no longer say whether your contempt for *Rubber Boot Kids* was an attack or self-defense.

In retrospect, you have to say that the differences back then were risible compared to those you'd experience later in West Germany. In the 1990s and Noughties, your parents' generation in the East went into almost collective social decline, which is why all parents were busy getting by rather than raising children. You children of the post-revolutionary East were the generation of no guidance. Studies have shown that you all display long periods of adolescent lag, metaphysical homelessness, and an attachment to your environment of origin. You have no objections to these findings. You use the insult *Rubber Boot Kids* to this day. But ever since you studied in West Germany, what you mean by it is an empty child's bedroom in a home that is a house rather than a rented flat and which will one day be inherited.

Your friendship nearly turned out differently. Max's mother was pregnant once again after he was born but she decided against having the child. It was 1990, and the history of the two Germanies was raging outside, while three-year-old Max raged inside, and his mother had no idea how to get by. Having a child at that time didn't seem like a clever idea to many women and in the East, the birth rate fell by half in the 1990s. This phenomenon was called the *birth dip* and somewhere along that dip, Max's sibling vanished, the sibling all only children long for when they are bored or arguing with their mothers – their wish for an ally. You think your unfulfilled wish for a sibling is the reason your friendship goes beyond what people usually understand by friendship, which neither you nor the world have the right

word for. You think that you are both stand-ins for your missing siblings, and you wouldn't be such close friends, or no longer friends at all, had Max's mother kept her second child. Max, on the other hand, thinks that since you've been going to a therapist, you have started over-psychologizing everything and that you simply got on well.

#### - Differences

The lives of almost every educational climber feature one person without whom things would have turned out differently. In your case, it's your primary school class teacher. Frau Bauers' socialist beliefs were not shaken in the least by the fall of the Wall and reunification, which is why she continued to teach your class Pioneer songs, regardless of curriculum changes. You still know the 'Song Against the Neutron Bomb' off by heart. Apart from this, Frau Bauer saw it as her socialist duty to help children from the working classes get into higher education. She was the one who recommended you continue onto A levels and convinced your mother to approve of her recommendation.

At primary school, you were a cheeky kid, and your school reports always say the same thing, with contrasting adjectives: a good/alert/clever pupil but unfortunately also cheeky/impertinent/loud-mouthed.

What primary school failed to bring about in you, grammar school achieved as if by magic. Your loud mouth fell as silent as a stone the moment you set foot inside the red-brick building. You were a good pupil, which only means that you were well organized. Lessons were not at all easy for you but for exactly that reason you were a diligent learner. The teachers called you hard-working, but in retrospect,

you'd call it dogged. You wondered for a long time whether grammar school was the right place for you, or whether it would've been better for someone else to be sitting on your chair. You were always aware that someone else wasn't sitting on your chair because you were. For that reason, your chair was uncomfortable, and you slid around on it during lessons, as skittish as a weasel, and as frozen with fear as a rabbit whenever you were asked to speak.

Max, by contrast, was blissfully ignorant and lazy but gave the impression that he had things sussed. From the outset, he possessed what you later called *great physical confidence*. He sat on his chair as if there was no doubt that he belonged there. He walked down the corridors and across the playground with the same self-confidence, and actively participated in lessons, even when he hadn't read the text that was being discussed. You always read everything but never said a word.

After the first parents' evening, you heard your mother telling your grandmother that the people at the grammar school couldn't be that clever because your class teacher thought it a pity that you were so shy. To you, your mother said that you could change schools any time if they used words that were too hard for you to understand. It was meant to cure you of your fear of failure, but all it did was make absolutely clear that it was possible to fail in the first place. Even so, your mother recognized right away that your silence was caused by your change in environment, as you were the first family member to sit on such a chair. In retrospect, you give her a lot of credit for recognizing this because she was the only one who did. All this only became clear to you later when the chair thing started all over again at university. At school, no one understood it all through to A levels. You were considered hard-working, but shy. That's how things were back then: there were only individual characteristics, not structures, at least for those who weren't

negatively affected by the structures, in other words, everyone except you. Except that's not quite true because there were Russian-German children at your school, and circus children, who squirmed just as uncomfortably as you on their chairs. You kept your distance from them, which is a way of saying that you looked down on them. Because they kept to themselves, and nobody could or wanted to remember their names, they arrived unnoticed and disappeared just as unnoticed halfway through the school year. They were the only ones who gave you a sense of who you were supposed to become *better than*, in your grandmother's words. In your mind, they only had walk-on parts, if any at all.

You suddenly feel so sorry about this that you stop writing to dig out school photos which have their names on the back: Sergei, Jekaterina, Michail, Réka. This has been happening to you more and more often recently. You keep realizing who you've kept your distance from and what stories you can't tell. Of these four, you can't even remember their first names. You didn't make fun of them, but you didn't stick with them either. You stuck with Max who owned his chair rather than just sat on it. Your single mothers may have had lots in common when it came to how little money, how little time, and how few men they had in their lives, as well as their frustration with reunification, but they differed in how much education they had. Your mother was a skilled worker, a *Facharbeiterin*, as it was called, although she'd say *Facharbeiter* without *-in* because that's just how it was in the GDR. After her factory was closed in the 1990s, she retrained in the field of textile repair. From then on, she worked in an industrial laundry, being hired and fired on temporary contracts for years, depending on demand. Max's mother was a skilled worker who studied electronic engineering, *Ingenieurin für Elektrotechnik*, although she'd insist on saying *Ingenieur* without *-in* because that's just how it was in the GDR. She

worked for the VEB Energiekombinat, the state-owned energy plant. After reunification, she'd done one training program after the next to master whatever was supposedly helpful in the new system – English, business studies, IT courses. But like so many others, she got stuck in retraining programs, the so-called lock-in effect in economics. Yet her qualifications were considered exemplary in the West and practical experience was valued. Max's mother says that she would have only needed one course, and it wasn't on offer: how to think in terms of competition and how to market yourself. Still, Max didn't need someone like Frau Bauer to support his grammar school application. He couldn't ever remember it being up for debate. Max sat on his chair as if it belonged to him and you, as if it were on loan.

- Exchange

You were good at school and Max was good at copying from you. Even today, he sometimes introduces you as the woman without whom he would never have passed his A levels. What Max doesn't know is that you copied him too, just differently. So now you've come to the point where you have to start talking about your secret, one that was hidden for so long that even you didn't know it. Perhaps secret isn't the right word; perhaps it's more of a trick that you only realize you've been performing since you stopped being able to do so. It takes quite a lot for you to admit this, and you have to slide and squirm quite a bit until you manage. So here we go. Your oldest memory of this trick is:

In eighth grade, you had to give a talk in Biology about semi-permeable membranes. Preparation is everything, said your mother, and you prepared for it as if for a PhD viva. You knew everything the city library had to offer on cells and

osmosis. You'd practiced how to say 'semi-permeable'. But when you were standing in front of the class, you couldn't get out a squeak. Your knowledge was all stuck together into a rubbery mass from which you couldn't extract a single sentence. The class and your teacher stared at you, first in expectation, then with embarrassment, while you turned into a semi-permeable membrane that let all their gazes in but nothing out. You now knew for certain that preparation wasn't everything and nothing about semi-permeable membranes.

Then you looked at Max. He was leaning back on his chair, legs slightly apart, one hand on his knee, the other on the table. The remarkable bit was what he *wasn't* doing: he wasn't sliding around nervously on his chair, he wasn't clearing his throat, he wasn't embarrassed for you or giving you an encouraging smile. He was just sitting there and looking at you as if there was nothing strange about you not saying anything. He was the only one in the room not reacting nervously to your nervousness. You didn't know back then how few people have this ability but you could feel its effect. The sight of him immediately calmed you down. And then, you borrowed his body. You imagined it wasn't you but Max standing in front of the class. You imagined that his arms and legs were yours. And then you spoke for a quarter-hour with such clarity and confidence, it was as if your body had been turned inside out and become a semi-permeable membrane through which nothing could get in and only sentences could get out of your mouth.

From then on, you watched Max closely. He seemed to have a kind of invisible wall between himself and the rest of the world, leaving him sure at all times where the boundary between his and other bodies lay: Max was always sure of the difference between *you* and *I*. You watched closely how he sat, how he stood, how he walked, and how he spoke. You copied his body language and cadence. Whenever



necessary, especially in exams, later in presentations at university, and during editorial meetings, you imagined that his body was yours. Imitating Max's physical confidence was a magic trick without which you couldn't have passed your A levels. Seen this way, your friendship was an exchange of goods that got you both through school – your lexical knowledge for his physical confidence. While he copied your content, you copied his form. The only difference was that Max needed permission to copy from you whereas your copying went unnoticed, not only by Max but even by you. This trick was like riding a bicycle: you could do it without thinking and without remembering how you'd learned it. You only began thinking about it a few months ago when it stopped working.

[END OF SAMPLE]