

CONFESSION WITH BLUE HORSES



**CONFESSION
WITH BLUE
HORSES**

**SOPHIE
HARDACH**



An Apollo Book

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This book is dedicated to my son, Aaron





I

The Model Migrants

The barbed wire fence across Potsdamer Platz – that barbed wire fence has disappeared and given way to a worse, more permanent obstacle. What we're seeing here on the corner of Potsdamer Straße and Potsdamer Platz right on the edge of the pavement is a concrete wall of a height of about 70 or 80 centimetres, topped by two layers of hollow bricks. Eyewitnesses report that the work began last night at 1.30 a.m., when six lorries turned up with building material, and five vans with bricklayers. They have built a new stone border right through Berlin.

RIAS Berlin, Broadcasting in the American Sector,
18 August 1961, Reporter: Rainer Höynck





Prologue

Summer 1987

MY BROTHERS FELL ASLEEP after drinking Mama's tea. Heiko lay slumped against her shoulder, his mouth half open. Papa carried Tobi in his arms. The afternoon was fading, and our lengthening shadows merged with the shadows of leaves and swaying corn stalks. A meadow stretched out in front of us. Two storks were picking their way through it, twisting their white necks and clicking their beaks.

Beyond the meadow loomed a forest, dense with brambles and conifers. We would cross the meadow, enter the forest on the other side, slip through the barbed wire and keep walking until we saw houses. There, we would be safe.

I gripped the hem of Mama's jumper and whispered: 'What if they shoot at us?'

'They don't do that here.' She looked away.

'It's not dangerous' – my father, now – 'lots of people have done it.' He paused. 'Or at least some.'



‘Look.’ Mama squatted down next to me, awkwardly because she was holding Heiko. His arms flopped about, limp and heavy with sleep. ‘It’s not like Berlin, you can see it for yourself. There isn’t a wall here.’

‘I don’t want to go,’ I said. Just then, the storks took off. They drew a wide circle over the corn field and vanished into the distance, away from the forest.

Mama stood up. My brother Heiko slipped from her grip. Just a little: she caught him, snuggled him against her chest, cupped his bottom with her hand. It was the last time I saw her do that, holding him with the jagged nervousness that was typical of both my parents, who were never quite sure how to handle us. It was my grandmother who raised us mostly, and I wished she was with us to tell us all what to do.

Mama and Papa turned towards the meadow. My two little brothers were all they carried. We did not need suitcases, tickets, passports, keys. The door to our old flat in Berlin would be opened by other people, long after we were gone. Our Trabant, which was parked on the other side of the corn field, would be found by the local villagers in the morning, with the key left in the ignition.

Mama shifted Heiko’s weight to her hip, held out her hand and said:

‘Come, Ella.’

The light was fading quickly. This was the right time, my father said. Dark enough to be hidden, light enough to see where we were going. Very safe, nothing to fear, but we had to go now. I took my mother’s hand and followed her into the meadow.



Ella

My Mother Was Afraid of the Dark

London 2010

A YEAR OR SO after my mother died, I received an unexpected inheritance. At the time I was living on a boat in South London, underneath an elevated railway line; not a proper houseboat, just an old fishing boat that had been dumped into Deptford Creek. Empty crisp bags littered the towpath and blew into the water when the trains rumbled past.

I had been stuck on the boat for almost a year. Initially it had seemed like a good solution: independent, cheap and self-contained. Not quite on land, not quite in the water. An in-between life that had suited me well, at least at first, during the warm summer months. Autumn had still felt romantic, in a creaking and storm-tossed way, but now it was spring and I had lost my last shreds of enthusiasm somewhere between February and March. When it rained, water trickled down the inside walls of the cabin. Slugs left trails across the windows.



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The bathroom was in a cupboard, with the shower head suspended right above the ridged footprints of the squatting loo. My most precious possession was a photo of all of us on Oma's allotment back in Berlin. She was standing among some sunflowers and waving a little flag, probably for a Socialist holiday; my grandmother loved official holidays and never missed a march. Next to her was Mama with baby Heiko in her arms, and Tobi clinging on to her skirt. And there was Papa, dangling me by my feet so that my hair swept the grass. It was our favourite game: 'How do the bats sleep?' he'd ask – 'Upside downnn!' I'd scream and run into his arms, and he'd pick me up and turn me upside down. *This is how the bats sleep!*



Every evening, I cycled over to Canary Wharf, where I worked as a cleaner at an investment bank. My shift started just before midnight. The banks were beautiful at that time, tall lightboxes in the dark. Often a few traders were still tapping away on their keyboards, striking frantic deals with New York. They lifted their feet, I mopped the floor under their desks, they put their feet back down and thanked me, all with their eyes fixed on the screen. My shift ended just as the earliest traders came in to catch up with their colleagues in Singapore and Hong Kong.

My mother had also worked as a cleaner for a while, after she'd been released from prison. Later, in London, she left most of the chores to us, especially the things she couldn't bring herself to do, like fetching bottles of fizzy water from the cellar.





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Mama did not like the cellar. There was no proper light in it and she was afraid of the dark.



One morning I came home from my night shift, shouldered my bike and carried it across the narrow wooden plank to my boat, when I heard someone cry out behind me: 'Ella Valentin? Hey! Ella Valentin?'

A postman in a hi-vis jacket jogged up to me, his crown of coiled black dreadlocks wobbling dangerously with every step. 'Parcel for you.' He stopped and passed me the box across the water.

I smiled at him. 'Well done for finding me.'

'Yeah, well, tell them to put a postcode on it next time. This almost went back to the sender.' He paused to fix his hair, then nodded at the boat with amused curiosity. 'Not too damp in there?'

'It's all right.' I wanted to say something else, to stretch out the conversation, because I rarely spoke to anyone in those days, and he was being friendly. But I could not think of anything, and so I just wished him a nice day and he walked back to his wheelie bag.

I went into the cabin, kicked off my shoes and lit the stove. It was a heavy parcel, solid and well packed, like the ones we used to get from West Germany when I was a child. Inside were brightly coloured art books, and a note from the new owner of my mother's flat in Finsbury Park. He was converting the



attic and had found a bunch of her art books there. Tobi and I must have overlooked them when we cleared out the place. One by one I spread them out on my mattress, letting them light up my cabin with their saturated cheerfulness. German Expressionism, the Bauhaus, Dada, but also more obscure East German movements. A slim, worn paperback celebrated the programme of the Bitterfelder Weg, which encouraged artists to go and work in the factories, feel the weight of a spanner and learn about 'real life'. I was surprised Mama had kept that one. An envelope fell out, and crumpled bills and bits of paper. How typical of my mother, who had always used makeshift bookmarks, to leave these little traces of herself behind. I found a hair band between the pages of the Bauhaus book, and a notebook wedged into the back of the Dada catalogue.

The notebook was filled with long lists in her familiar, rushed handwriting:

Barking dogs: that never used to be a problem, it is now.

'Privileg' (the smell)

That accent from Dresden, I heard it on the tube this morning, had to get off and walk.

Ach, Mama! I put the notebook aside and went through the other scraps, the bills and the envelope. They were nothing special, just utility bills and an admin-type letter from some office in Germany, but it touched me to read her name on them. The envelope contained a photograph, of a painting of three blue horses. They were standing in a meadow, massing

against a storm, necks curved, hind legs tucked under. There was a dark shape at the edge of the meadow, a curled-up body in the grass. No, it was only a shadow, the shadow of a cloud.

So it really had existed, the painting of the blue horses, even though Oma had tried to convince me otherwise.

I picked up the German letter. The phrasing was complex, bureaucratic, and I had to read it several times before I understood the gist of it. Apparently my mother had corresponded with an archive in Berlin; I could guess what this was about.

The door to the deck swung open and let in a gust of wind and water, a fishy tang, a smell of chip shop and wet metal. I stepped outside and looked up at the brightening London sky, at the grey weeds that clung to the cracks in the concrete. On the other side of the canal loomed the old Deptford sewage pump, its windows smashed, its loading dock abandoned.

I climbed onto the roof of my cabin to get a better signal, and then I called my brother Tobi.

OUT OF ALL OF us, Tobi truly was the model migrant. We had all hoped for a fresh start when we moved to London in the early nineties, sponsored by Mama's supporters, but Tobi was the only one who really seized the opportunity. He assimilated to the point of sprouting freckles. Whenever I spoke in German to him, he replied in English. He even spoke English to Mama. And we let him, because we were proud, I think, that at least one of us had really made it.

I had to call twice before Tobi answered the phone, sounding cross and sleepy. 'It's six in the morning.'

'Time to get up and lay some turf!'

'I don't actually lay turf, Ellz, I have people who do that for me.' He yawned. 'Mind calling me again a bit later?'

'I'm about to go to sleep.'

'Speak at the weekend, then?'

'It's kind of urgent. Well, not urgent, but...'

I told him about the notebook, the photo, the letter. The more I talked, the more excited I became, and the more certain that these documents were meaningful and important.

'Or they could just be bookmarks,' Tobi pointed out.

'Even so, they're worth looking into. Why don't you come

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over for dinner? And then you can take the books home with you. I don't want to keep them here, everything's damp.'

'You can always stay with me, you know.'

'I know.'

'OK, I'll come over.' He paused. 'What did you say the notebook was? A diary?'

'Something like that.'

We hung up. I went back into the cabin and put on the woolly hat I wore to bed. The photo of the blue horses I placed on an upturned crate, with a circle of salt around it to keep the slugs at bay.

IN THE AFTERNOON I got up and tidied the boat for Tobi. I washed the plastic windows, emptied a bucket of soapy water over the deck, banged against the clogged stove pipe with a frying pan until it puffed more freely. Last, I aired the old green gaberdine coat that I inherited from my grandmother, Oma Trude. It was shiny with age and hung on me like a wet sail, but I liked to wear it anyway. At art school I had used it for a performance in which I dressed in a blue boiler suit and the old gaberdine coat, then piled broken bricks on top of each other. The tutor asked if it was a comment on 9/11, and I said no, it was a piece about my grandmother.

Oma always proudly referred to the coat as her 'OdF coat'. OdF stood for *Opfer des Faschismus*, or Victim of Fascism. Many of Oma's friends were fellow OdFs, elderly people who liked to start sentences with 'When I was in Buchenwald...'

They formed a little aristocracy, so it seemed to me at the time, these men and women who had proved their worth in the fight against Hitler. But there was also something lonely about them, or perhaps I see this only now, how mistrustful they must have been of the people around us, the same people who in the old days had hounded them. They gathered around the samovar in Oma's living room, warmed their hands on

delicate painted tea glasses and talked about Gorky and Lenin, about pickled mushrooms and the melting snow in Moscow. East Germans, all of them, though their German was embroidered with Russian words from their years in exile. The women stroked the fringes of their Russian shawls, the men held out their shot glasses for more of Oma's sloe vodka.

When it was time to leave, they put on their furry schapkas and plastic headscarves with the greatest reluctance, and there was always that moment when one of the men put his hand on the door and left it there for a few seconds before turning the handle, as if to plead – *Do we have to go out there? Can we not stay here, in this warm and friendly place, and talk a little more about the Soviet Friendship Day of 1963?* Officially, their side was all-powerful then. The red star ruled. But as they hurried through the streets, past the empty shops and long, grey queues, they must have sensed how little love there really was for them. The Germans had not truly embraced Real Socialism; they were simply going along with this regime as they had gone along with the one before. Still, I for one was very proud of Oma's courage, for which our government had rewarded her with a flat, a job and a green gaberdine coat.

A balled-up spider fell out of one pocket when I aired the coat, but otherwise it was still perfectly wearable.

I remembered how Oma and I had queued outside the shops back in Berlin. It started to rain, and she opened her green gaberdine coat so I could slip under it. Then I remembered how in the mornings she let us stay under our duvets while she lit the coal in the tiled stove, and by the time we got up, the kitchen



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would be almost warm. I sniffed the coat. It still smelled a little of her, or perhaps I was imagining that.



The tide was low now, and the boat sat stuck in the cat-litter silt. The concrete canal walls were painted with a graded wash of green algae. A thin ribbon of water ran through the slick and two ducks were waddling towards it, the emerald-headed male and his discreet, brown-feathered partner. When the water receded, all sorts of rubbish emerged. Seven squashed and mangled shopping trolleys had risen from the mud and formed a wonky semicircle around my boat. This – I thought – is the beginning of the apocalypse, when shopping trolleys emerge from the riverbed and round you up. I climbed down the side of my boat and walked over to the first trolley. It lay half submerged in a pool of water, upside down, forming a little cage, and when I peered into this cage I saw that there in the water, tiny fish flitted about. The trolley had become a nursery. How clever of the fish, how adaptable, but how depressing too, that this was their first experience of the world. I went over to the next trolley and prised open the little grey tray. It still had a quid in it. Victory! Clutching the coin in my fist, I looked up at the white sky and considered my situation.

Had I not always been quite good at spotting details? How many people would have waded past that trolley and never noticed the fish? Tobi had sounded sceptical on the phone, but surely he would eventually accept that there *was* something





significant about the notebook, the photo, the letter; that these had to be clues of some sort.

Popping balloons

Loud voices

Cushion covers embroidered with little flowers

When I was a child, my mother sometimes broke into a sweat for no apparent reason. We were at a birthday party, and suddenly, we had to leave. Or we were on the tube, and Mama's hand gripped mine; she rushed me out and back up to the street. There we waited for the bus in the rain, my hand crushed by her fingers, until we got on, found a seat and she collapsed into it, damp with fear. They were so vivid, those moments, as if every single one of my fingers had stored the memory of her hands.

Gunshots (also, slamming doors; the bang! of an exhaust pipe)

I looked at the trolley again. The little fish were gone. There was one thing I had not told Tobi, and perhaps I should have: when my mother was already very ill, she made me promise I would not go looking for my brother Heiko. We had been looking for him for years, it was our only real activity together, and I had expected her last request to be the exact opposite: that I would spend the rest of my days searching for him.

I asked her what she meant, but she refused to explain, and as so often, we left it at that. By then she was in constant pain.





Sometimes it was even harder than usual to tell when she was lucid, and when she was off into one of her fantasies. She said, for example, that it no longer mattered who betrayed us, that she had wasted so much energy on trying to find out who it was, and now realised it was of no importance, and had never been of any importance.

‘What do you mean, betrayed us?’ I asked, and held her hand. She was in bed, her bony head propped up on the white pillow.

‘Someone told them about us.’ She closed her eyes. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘How do you know?’

She shook her head. ‘I looked into things. I shouldn’t have. Let’s talk about something else, Ellachen, let’s talk about your paintings. Are you still working on those mushroom paintings?’ She opened her eyes and smiled. ‘I wish I could go and see them. What are they like?’

I described them to her: the large canvases inoculated with a special fungus that changed colour as it aged, from brown to deep greens and even blues, creating a cycle of growing, living paintings, unpredictable and rather beautiful. It was only partly a lie. I really had experimented with canvases and colour-changing fungi, but the result had looked like a collection of damp rags. I was no longer making anything, really, but I did not want to tell her that. It was easier to invent imaginary paintings that were exactly as I wanted them to be. She listened with great interest, and said they sounded wonderful.

That was the sort of thing we talked about in those final



months: paintings, sculptures, artists we both admired, exhibitions I had seen. She only mentioned the past one more time.

‘Remember when we saw that balcony fall off?’ She laughed quietly to herself. ‘We were lucky it didn’t hit us.’

‘I didn’t see it fall off, you were on your own that day.’

‘No, no, I can see it right before my eyes, it whooshed right past us, it missed us by *this* much.’ She showed me with her index finger and thumb, marvelling at our narrow escape. ‘*This* much. And you held on to my hand for dear life.’

‘Maybe.’ I pressed an ice cube from its tray. My mother liked sucking on them. A falling balcony, a flat with a magical bathtub, two little girls sticking out their tongues at a concrete wall. Some of the stories from my childhood sounded like fairy tales, but they were no less true than this ice cube I was holding right now, this cool soaked flannel, this thin hand poking out from a pyjama sleeve.

‘Mama, do you remember my friend Sandy?’ I asked. But she had already fallen asleep.

I MADE BOILED EGGS in mustard sauce for Tobi, a recipe from Oma. We sat down on two wooden crates, but Tobi's was too low for his long legs. He stretched them out and pulled them back towards him, all the while trying to balance the plate on his knees. He leaned against the damp wall, winced, discreetly sat up again. Maybe he'd hit a slug trail.

'Is it OK?' I gestured at the eggs.

'Delicious.' I'd never heard my brother describe a meal as anything but delicious, or a person's house as anything but lovely.

'Do you ever wonder what he's like?' I asked.

Tobi had picked up our mother's journal, about to open it, but now he paused.

'Is that why you asked me over?'

'I'm just thinking, I hope he's charming. It's such an asset in life. I hope he knows how to make people like him.'

'It's hard work, is what it is.' Tobi massaged his legs. 'I thought this was about Mama.'

'You used to be so close, you two. Don't you remember? You'd stand there, hugging each other, and all the grown-ups would be like, aww, and then one of you'd scream – *He bit me! He bit me!*'

'I'm not a biter.'

'Maybe it was him then.' I could see them very clearly, squeezing each other so tightly.

'The things you remember.' Tobi shook his head. 'I don't remember anything. I suppose I'm lucky that way.'

'You must wonder, though? Is he happy, is he safe? Even the small things: does he like dogs, what's his favourite food, has he got a girlfriend...'

'Or a boyfriend.'

'Or a boyfriend.' And I tried not to smile because I thought, of course Tobi thinks about him, of course he tries to imagine what he's like, and he probably pictures him as a charming garden designer with a nice boyfriend, just like I picture him as a somewhat lost artist obsessed with the past. Where else could we start but with ourselves?

'He might even be really sporty,' I said, and Tobi said: 'Highly unlikely', and we laughed, having finally hit that point of connection. Team sports: never a Valentin strength.

Tobi opened the journal. His lips moved as he tried to read Mama's handwriting.

'*Privileg?* What's *Privileg?*'

I leaned over the page with him. We were both left-handed, which was not something I thought about except when we sat close together, and didn't have to worry about things like clashing elbows. 'It's a kind of aftershave. Really, you don't even remember that? Papa used to wear it.'

'*Privileg.*' He shook his head, pointed at the next line. 'No, nothing. And this? *Cushion covers embroidered with little flowers. Not as bad as the rest; slightly unpleasant.*'



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'I don't know. Maybe they put a cushion over her head?'

'Ella! Please.' He closed the notebook.

'What do you expect? It's a trigger diary,' I said.

'What's a trigger diary?'

'A diary of things that frightened her. Come on Tobi, you know what a trigger diary is.'

'You say that as if it's common knowledge.'

'It is.'

'In your world, maybe.'

'What do you mean, in my world?'

He ignored me and picked up the photograph of the blue horses.

'Tobi, what do you mean?' I repeated.

'I mean that you've always been obsessed with that sort of thing, lists and codes and stuff.'

'That's so not true.'

'I don't blame you, it's not like Mama ever gave you a choice.'

'I'm not obsessed. I just notice things.' I could hear the frustration in my voice, the impatience. 'This painting, don't you remember this painting?'

'No.'

'Well, I do.' I snatched the photo away from him.

'What is this, an interrogation?'

'I wasn't an only child, Tobi, that's all I'm saying. You were there, too.'

'And Heiko.'

'And Heiko.'

'I'm not saying I wasn't there, I'm just saying – I can't really



see why you're bringing him into this, or why we're sitting here talking about Papa's aftershave, or why it matters how Mama felt about embroidered cushions.'

The visit wasn't going at all as I had hoped. It shouldn't have surprised me. We'd had this conversation before, and he'd blocked and derailed it before. I'd just thought that having something tangible to show him would make it different.

'Look at this letter.' I unfolded the typed letter I had found among her books. 'It's from an archive.'

He frowned. 'It's a bit dense.'

'You're a bit dense.' Line by line I translated the letter for Tobi, which I had to admit was rather satisfying. He was better at life, but I was better at German.

OFFICE OF THE FEDERAL COMMISSIONER FOR THE
RECORDS OF THE STATE SECURITY SERVICE OF
THE FORMER GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

SUBJECT: Request to view personal file

Dear Frau Dr Valentin,

Further to your application to view your personal State Security file, we can confirm that such a file exists here at the Office of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service. Unfortunately, much of the file appears to be missing. Even the pages we have succeeded in recovering are mostly incomplete.

I would of course be more than happy to show them to you, should you be interested in viewing them anyway.



SOPHIE HARDACH

I am sorry, Frau Valentin, that there is so little we can do to assist your search.

Yours faithfully,
Dr Reinhardt Licht
Archivist

My mother had regularly travelled back to Berlin, each trip one of her many futile efforts to reunite our scattered family. I tried to recall if she had ever mentioned an archive, but all I could remember from her last trip was some sort of school reunion. I hadn't asked her about it; it hadn't seemed important at the time. But I hadn't asked her about plenty of really important things, either, and now desperately wished I had. Talking is a habit like any other, it needs to be sustained through practice. If you never talk about the small things, it feels weird to suddenly launch into a heart-to-heart. 'Of course I never asked him about that,' my father once said about his own father, who had been a member of the Nazi party. 'We didn't even talk about the weather. How could I suddenly ask him why he'd joined the Nazi party?'

We had often trawled websites together, my mother and I; had posted search ads and dates of birth in the usual desperate threads and depressing forums; had fielded dubious replies from strangers who were quick to mention finder's fees. *I am looking for my son, Heiko, who was taken from us*, she had typed again and again.

We had put in official requests to various German ministries, only to be told that in cases like ours, there was nothing to



be done. The separation had been legal under the old law, the GDR's law. The details of the case fell under the Data Protection Act, including Heiko's new address, if he had one, and his new name, if he had one, or even the basic question of whether he was still alive. It turned out that the question of whether my brother was alive was a very private matter, one that could not be shared with his family; because legally speaking, we were of course no longer his family.

'You mean our politicians were able to hammer out a deal about nuclear bombs, and borders, and the privatisation of an entire economy, but not about what should happen to little boys who were stolen from their families,' my mother said to a senior official during one of those visits back to Berlin. 'You mean they were able to agree on how quickly Moscow would pull out its troops, and which weapons our country should be allowed to have, and how to value a collective pig farm – but not whether mothers like me would ever see our children again, no, that didn't enter their heads, did it? To figure out how I might one day see my son again.'

Upon which the official patiently explained again that while he understood our frustration...

'I know,' my mother said. 'I know, I know. I know.'

And yet she'd never mentioned this archive.

'I've looked it up,' I said to Tobi. 'Check this out.'

I opened my laptop, but the connection had frozen.

'We'll try the roof,' I said.

'I don't believe this.' He groaned. 'Every time, Ella, every time I come to visit you...'



‘... we have such a lovely time, right?’ I nudged him. ‘I know. It’s wonderful.’

I climbed onto the roof of my cabin and opened my laptop. Tobi followed, making a great show of wiping down a corner before he sat down. Which was ridiculous: surely he worked in places much dirtier than my roof.

‘Should have brought my gloves and overalls,’ Tobi said, as if he’d read my mind.



The archive’s website had seemed a little overwhelming at first, filled with pictures of looted Stasi offices and archivists painstakingly reconstructing old files. But there was a friendly sidebar for people like me: *Are you a victim, or the descendant of a victim, of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic? Here is how the archive can help.*

‘That’s us!’ I swivelled the laptop so Tobi could see. ‘Victims and their descendants. That’s us, right there.’

‘You say that as if it’s something to be proud of.’

‘It’s certainly nothing to be ashamed of. We *are* victims.’

‘I’m not a victim, I’m a garden designer.’

‘They’re not mutually exclusive.’

I clicked on the link in the sidebar. A new page opened up with a contact form.

Please tick one of the following four options:



I want to research...

- the activities of the State Security Service
- the rulership mechanisms of the GDR
- the rulership mechanisms of the Soviet-Occupied Zone
- the National Socialist past.

‘That’s so German,’ Tobi said. ‘Like a menu, or multiple choice. *Which of our twentieth-century atrocities are you most interested in? For genocide, dial one...*’ I noticed a link at the bottom of the page: *Viewing files for near relatives of missing or deceased persons.*

This was very different from the dire online forums we had wasted so much time in. Much more legitimate, more official, more promising. If there was a surveillance file on my parents, then surely it would include details on our family, and our separation. And we had the right, it seemed, to view that file. Even if it was incomplete, it was at least *something*.

Who knew what else my mother had discovered in Berlin? Were we not perhaps doing exactly what she had wanted us to do, walking in her tracks, following the little trail she had laid for us? If she had truly wanted me to stop looking for Heiko, she would have destroyed the letter from the archive. Instead, she had left it there for us to find.

I took the laptop back from Tobi and started filling in the contact form. We could get a cheap flight, go for just a few days, visit the archive, see what we could find. Already I could picture us going through the records, noting down addresses and leads, finally getting somewhere.

‘What are you doing?’ Tobi craned his neck to see.



‘Could you take time off next week, do you think? A couple of days should be enough.’

‘To do what?’

‘To meet this guy, this archivist who wrote to Mama. He sounds helpful.’

‘Ellz...’

I sighed. ‘I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that this is just one of my crazy ideas, and you’ll have to bail me out in the end.’

‘Who says I’ll bail you out?’

‘She went to Berlin to visit that archive.’ I could hear myself getting louder. ‘She must have thought they could help her find Heiko.’

‘So what? She also thought the lady in the corner shop was spying on her.’

‘You can’t discount everything she did because of a few isolated incidents.’ For a moment I wasn’t sure if I was talking about our mother or myself. ‘Come on, give her some credit. She wasn’t stupid, she knew more about the world than you and I ever will. And you can say what you like, but that corner shop woman *was* a bit weird. Remember the time she asked Mama where we were from?’

‘That wasn’t weird,’ Tobi said wearily. ‘What’s weird is that Mama replied, “From Canada.”’

‘It’s no one’s business where we’re from.’

He shook his head. ‘Don’t you think it might be better to leave him in peace?’

‘You can’t mean that.’





CONFESSION WITH BLUE HORSES

'All those years she spent looking for him, and not a single trace, not a single sign. If he wanted to be found, he'd have let us know.'

'Why would he not want us to find him?' I said, suddenly feeling a bit deflated.

'Because he doesn't even know we exist, maybe? Because he's fine with the way things are?'

'I have a friendly disposition and tolerate all known foods. My hearing is above average and I have a fine creative mind. Why would anyone not want me for a sister?'

'Ach, Ella.' He put his arm around me. 'Don't run off to Berlin. Stay here and...'

'... get a proper job.'

'Exactly.'

'I'm the worst cleaner in London. My clients' desks actually look dirtier after I've been there. I think I'm about to get fired.'

'How about teaching art?'

'I'm terrible with children.'

'That's not true.'

'They make me sad. I look at them and I think, that's how small he was.'

'Take a year off and focus on your art then. You can stay with me. I loved your show, I thought it was brilliant.'

'No one came to that show.'

'I did.'

'OK, one person came to that show.'

'You'll have thousands of shows. Look at Picasso, it took him decades to make his mark.'





SOPHIE HARDACH

'No it didn't. Picasso was a child prodigy.'

'You could pass for a child prodigy.'

'Thanks.'

'With a bit of Botox.'

'Oh Tobi.' I laughed.

'That's better.'

We went down onto the deck to watch the rain-swollen creek. The dark water rushed past carrying with it all sorts of urban swag. Broken barbecues, bicycle pumps, plastic bottles. Another shopping trolley.

'Look.' Tobi pointed at the trolley. 'That one's from Waitrose.'

I smiled. 'We're gentrifying.'

He caught a passing branch from a tree, let go of it, caught another branch.

'I think I need to at least give it a go,' I said. 'I'll visit this archive, I'll check what she saw, and I'll come right back. And I'll pay you back, of course, as soon as I can.'

'I like how you elegantly slipped in the issue of funding there.'

'It's just the flight and a room somewhere.'

'This isn't about the money. I just think you're in for more pain, and more disappointment, and more time wasted chasing someone we'll never find.'

'I have no choice, Tobi. I have no choice.'

Often when I stood on the deck I had to fight the urge to jump into the water, not out of a death wish but because it would be so refreshing, so mentally cleansing. I would dive in and come out as new, with all the old Ella washed off.



'I miss him,' I said. 'Don't you?'

A few moments passed, and then he said: 'Can you show me that photograph again, the one with the horses?' I gave it to him and he looked at it for some time. Eventually, he nodded. 'There was a story you used to tell me...'

I shook my head. 'That was Mama. She told us a story about the three blue horses.'

'No, it was you.'

'Really?'

'Once upon a time, there were three children who lived in a bathtub. Then one day, the sorcerer came and...'. His voice was half drowned by the noise of the creek, but it did not matter, I knew the story so well.

'... and took the children away,' I continued. 'And he carried them off to his castle, and there he turned them into three horses, into three blue horses.'

'But their grandmother went after them. She killed the sorcerer, she lifted the spell, and she brought the children home.'

'Except she didn't bring all three of them home, did she?' I reached down and dipped my hand into the water. 'She only brought two.'