

Mother. Diary of a Farewell

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Melitta Breznik, born in Kapfenberg, Austria, in 1961, studied medicine in Graz and Innsbruck and trained as a doctor before specialising in psychiatry and psychotherapy. She lives in the Swiss canton of Graubünden (Grisons). Melitta Breznik is the author of the following books, all published by Luchterhand: *Nachtdienst* (a short story, 1995, translated by Roslyn Theobald as *Night Duty* for Steerforth Press), *Figuren* (*Figures*, short stories, 1999), *Das Umstellformat* (*The Adjustment Format*, a short story, 2002), *Nordlicht* (*Northern Lights*, a novel, 2009), and *Der Sommer hat lange auf sich warten lassen* (*It's Been a Long Wait for Summer*, a novel, 2013). She was awarded the Swiss ProLitteris Prize in 2020.

Photo: Peter von Felbert

Mother. Diary of a Farewell is a finely tuned account of the final weeks of a mother's life, as chronicled by her daughter, who has become her carer. Breznik observes both her mother and herself, and reflects on their occasionally fraught mother-daughter relationship. In parallel, she recounts her family history, and in doing so links back to her 1995 debut, *Night Duty*, a memoir about her late father.

"In the morning, before my brother comes to prepare the funeral with me, I change the picture on the calendar to the first one for December. A still life with fruit and a lobster by Pieter de Ring. Mother's provisions for the journey. And a parting glass of sparkling, light-filled wine. I raise my right hand in an expansive gesture. Here's to you and your life, Mama."

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Excerpt translated by Rachel McNicholl

1

17 October. I've been here with Mother since yesterday. On the phone, her voice sounded different, the deeper tones missing, the melody of her speech strangely spare and flat. She'd been having terrible stomach pains, she said, and vomiting a lot. The doctor told her she should avoid fatty foods and anything that caused bloating, but she'd been doing that all along. We never had leeks or cabbage at home, as Mother had adapted family meals to her own needs. When I was a child, she'd occasionally make scarlet runner bean salad for my father, the way they make it in this region, with pumpkin-seed oil, finely chopped onion and garlic. Mother moved from Frankfurt am Main to this small town in Styria in the late 1940s and had learned to cook what the local men expected their wives to dish up.

After she'd reached her late eighties, Mother found it more difficult to get to the shops. One day, she showed me a brochure for a small apartment suited to people her age. Things moved quickly after that. I was surprised by her eagerness – Mother and I went from store to store picking out new furniture, paid out of her own savings and a contribution from me. There was very little she wanted to take with her. This was to be a fresh start in the final chapter of her life, and she marked it by inviting her former neighbours from Burggasse for drinks in her new home.

She's been living in this apartment close to town for two years now. Seven other women live in the two-storey development. The common room on the ground floor is spacious enough for residents to meet for coffee or a card game. In the mornings, a community social worker comes in to check if anyone needs to see the GP or a nurse. There are no male residents, as most of the men who fought in the war are either dead or in nursing homes. Mother settled in well. The walk-in shower, kitchenette and patio make everyday life easier than the old apartment where she lived for twenty-five years after separating from

Father. In warm weather, she loves to take her afternoon nap in the deckchair just outside her living room, feeling the breeze in her hair. In a little bed at the edge of the patio, she grows parsley, thyme and peppermint, and has roses climbing up the wind-break trellis. Frau Gabriel, who for the last few years has been helping Mother with heavy housework once a week, usually helps with the gardening too.

At first I was reluctant to come here because, for as long as I can remember, Mother has suffered from ailments that disappear as quickly as they appear, and I was hoping that would be the case this time too. I'd described the situation to my brother, who lives in the next town, over the phone. He'd already heard, so I asked him to call to Mother's that same day and let me know how she really was, as I couldn't tell whether it was really necessary for me to travel. I had plans for the next few weeks in Basle, meetings lined up with the medical directors of psychiatric clinics where my next job might be. And I had taken a year out to work on a book. The research had taken me first to Greece, to the region of the Meteora rock formations, where my father had been stationed for a few months as a Wehrmacht soldier. Another trip had taken me to the south of England, to Romsey, a town near Southampton, where he had spent two years in a prisoner-of-war camp. I'd spent a lot of time in archives in Vienna, London and Freiburg im Breisgau studying papers relating to military units my father was attached to during the war. I was trying to pinpoint the disaster in whose long shadow he had failed as a father. Given to bouts of heavy drinking, he had withdrawn from everyday life increasingly over the years. In the last stage of my research, I'd gone to Frankfurt, specifically to Bergen-Enkheim and Fechenheim, the suburbs where Mother had grown up and met Father during the war. Mother and I had stopped off there a few years earlier, on our way to four psychiatric clinics in Hesse, hoping to find documents about her mother, who had been held there and had died in unclear circumstances in the early 1940s.

I'd been phoning Mother several times a day from Frankfurt, hoping she'd get better. But as soon as she told me that she could barely get out of bed, I made my way here without further delay. When I arrived,

Mother was in surprisingly cheerful form. Still in the doorway, I bent to kiss her soft cheek, which smelled so familiar, and gave her a tentative hug, unsure how firm or gentle my embrace could be. A head shorter than me, she felt light as a feather, and I was almost tempted to pick her up like a child. Touching her triggered a comforting sense of security in me, though this closeness was usually very short-lived, marking the beginning and end of a visit to Mother. In between, all physical contact was subject to an old taboo. Don't get too close, don't hold that hand for too long, don't stroke that hair – just don't.

2

Mother is wearing a yellow house dress. It's a simple pattern, something she made herself years ago. The colour complements her hair, which frames her face in fine, soft waves. It's late morning and we're sitting on her sun-warmed patio. The whole town is wrapped in the unexpected warmth of this balmy October day. Mother seems frail, finding it hard to keep up any pretence that she feels better than the last few days. She waves away my suggestion that she consult the GP. Insisting on it would get me nowhere, so I tell her about my research trip instead and start preparing lunch. I place the contents of the shopping bag on the fold-out table while she settles back in her armchair, the sun glinting on her white hair. I've never seen Mother with any other hair-do, and it brings back images from my childhood – the salon assistant making small-talk over the tops of curled heads, the women's chatter ramping up as they swap news of this person or that. The talk mainly revolved around the steelworks, the snorting beast that dwelt among the tree-clad mountains. Over the years, it had devoured many a husband, father or fiancé who'd been working at the blast furnace or the steel hammer. I was nine, and I wished Mother would go for a tint, dark blond maybe, so that I'd be spared my schoolmates asking why I lived with my grandparents. Mother often recalled how her hair suddenly turned grey not long after I was born, practically overnight.

Mother and I chop the vegetables I bought at the market. We're going to have chicken soup – the fowl is

from a local farm – seasoned with bay leaf, marjoram and parsley, the way she always made it when I'd come home from school with a temperature, only fit for the bed. Sometimes we'd have chicken broth, or clear soup with *Griesnockerl* dumplings on Sunday, served before the schnitzel. The sun is warm on my back as we peel and chop companionably, transferring the vegetables to a glass bowl. I watch Mother slicing the carrots – she always cuts discs, whereas everyone else I know who makes this soup goes for sticks. This soup is going to look just like it did in my childhood, the peas and carrots – little green balls and orange circles – suspended in the clear liquid, golden globules of fat and freshly chopped parsley floating on top. Silently, I hope that my ministrations will make Mother better quickly. If I lived nearby, we could cook together more often – it would be easy to make Strudel pastry together, pastry that tasted the way it always did. In my younger years, I dreaded the thought of becoming a housewife like my mother, waiting for husband and children to come home for lunch, and this fear kept me from ever cooking with her. It wasn't until I was in my thirties, working as a doctor in Switzerland, that I wanted to how she made *Marillenknödel*, her apricot dumplings, or asked for the recipes for *Topfenstrudel* cake, *Kaiserschmarren* pancakes, or beef *Rindsrouladen*. Mother might have gobbled my life up if I hadn't left home. This is a thought I keep to myself.

The chicken is simmering away in a large saucepan, Mother is resting on the sofa in the living room, I'm on the patio, feeling the warm autumn breeze, and for a brief moment it's just like it was when I was a little girl. Father would walk through the door any minute, tired from his shift at the steelworks. After washing his hands and face, he'd take the newspaper to the kitchen table, where he'd sit until the vegetable soup or goulash soup or dumpling soup was ready. Then the rest of us would be called to table.

Mother fills me in on the neighbours in her building while we're sipping the hot soup, and I think this will probably be like other times, when having me around speeded her recovery. Maybe it's the exhaustion after these stomach upsets that has been putting her in gloomier moods these last few years, especially in the

autumn. After half a bowl of soup, she complains of stomach-ache, and almost immediately throws it all up. She drags herself from the bathroom to the bedroom and falls into an exhausted sleep. In the kitchenette, I wash the dishes quietly and resolve to take Mother to the hospital next morning. Her condition is more serious than either of us wishes to acknowledge. With a heavy heart, I sit down at the dining table, opposite the open door to Mother's bedroom. I can see her in bed, a rust-coloured wool blanket pulled up to her shoulders, and from this distance I can see the tension gradually easing from her face. I start writing my diary.

Beyond the big patio windows, the light fades slowly from the landscape. The world shrinks to what is visible in the soft light from the floor lamp in this living room with its yellow-gold sofa and cushions, dining table and four pale wood chairs, sideboard with Mother's everyday items on it. Neatly positioned side by side, the blood pressure monitor, the oval pill box, a packet of tissues, a little pile of unevenly cut slips for shopping lists, a biro bearing a bank logo resting on top. Behind all these is a page-a-week desk calendar, a gift to Mother from her niece. This week's picture is *Femmes de Tahiti* by Gauguin, a colourful, restful painting. One of the two dark-skinned young women is sitting on the sand, her thoughtful eyes directed beyond the artist. She's wearing a pale pink dress. Propped on one arm beside her, the other woman is deep in introspection. In the background, a dark green strip stands out against the blue-black sea and gentle white-tipped waves.