

Laura Freudenthaler

*The Queen is silent*

Novel

*Sample translation by Mandy Wight*

SOMETIMES SHE WOULD PUT THE COFFEE ON and while the water was running through the filter she'd go to the front door to fetch the newspaper, just as she'd done every morning in the old days. The letter box was stuffed full with several days' newspapers and as Fanny pulled them out a little animal fell onto the stone step. An earwig. When the child was small, she'd had to tell her the story of the woodcutter over and over again, how once upon a time, in the village, he'd come to see Fanny because he had such a pain in his ear. While Fanny was telling the story the child had raised her hands towards her ears and shut her eyes, not wanting to see what she was imagining. Still, she hadn't closed her ears off altogether, but listened right to the end and let out a noise somewhere between horror and delight when Fanny told how she'd pulled a big fat earwig out of the woodcutter's ear with a pair of tweezers. Fanny swept the animal over the edge of the step with her foot. When her granddaughter was a bit older, she'd said reproachfully that it wasn't true at all that earwigs creep into ears and that Fanny had been telling her horror stories. Fanny had a look around the front of her garden. The shrubs with the little roses were long since gone. The fir tree stood unchanged in the left hand

corner of the garden, attracting crows, who sat perfectly still for hours on end in its broad branches. Sometimes Fanny went as far as the garden gate and looked out onto the street. If she saw a neighbour catch sight of her and raise a hand in greeting, someone who might then come over, Fanny went back into the house. She poured coffee into a cup. If the milk was off she added a bit of water. She sat down at the kitchen table and stirred a few sugar cubes round in the coffee. She looked for the crossword puzzle in one of the newspapers and got her biro ready. Her glasses were probably on the windowsill in the sitting room. She tried to recognise the clues, which were repeated anyway over the years, and inserted a few letters into the squares. Her granddaughter said her letters looked like spiders' legs. Fanny looked over to the kitchen window. In the old days she'd see the postman go past the window, then she'd go to the front door, take the post from him and exchange a few words. Now it was a different postman and he didn't always come at the same time. Fanny couldn't be certain what time it was or what time of day. She looked at the crossword again. A word came into her mind but it wasn't the one she'd been looking for. One syllable and Fanny didn't know where it belonged. But when she sat at the kitchen table like this, with a coffee and the newspaper, it could feel for a moment as if she were back in the old days.

SHE'D ALWAYS LIKED BEING THE FIRST TO BE UP and about in the morning, while everyone else was still asleep. There was something clandestine about being the only one awake. Nobody knew she was there. For half an hour or even a whole hour Fanny would be alone, she'd have her coffee and think about what needed doing that day and would then slowly begin her various tasks. On good days some moments felt like the old days, single past moments that reached across into the present, because they'd been lived so many times. But often Fanny couldn't get up for days on end and couldn't tell one moment from another. She lay in her marital bed that she'd never again, not for decades, shared with anyone, while the days went past her window. The birds sat in the damson tree, fled when it rained, returned when the sun shone. Sometimes Fanny thought she heard someone creeping round the house. The telephone rang. Fanny tried to find the impetus in her body that would sit her upright and pull her out of bed. In vain. She listened to the telephone ring. She imagined Hanna listening to the ringing, her ear pressed to the receiver, waiting for Fanny to pick up. From the length of time Hanna let the phone ring before putting the receiver down, Fanny could work out how worried she was and how likely it was she'd get in the car and walk through the front door three hours later. It had only happened once, but since then Fanny hoped each time it would happen again. The ringing stopped. Fanny hadn't managed to get up. Maybe it had been her granddaughter. She hadn't been in touch for a long time. Now and then a postcard came from abroad. Fanny turned her head on the pillow to one side. On her bedside table lay a book with empty pages and a gold cover. It reminded Fanny of her granddaughter. Only the first page of the book wasn't empty. On it her granddaughter

had written, 'Dear Gran.' And underneath, it said that she was giving Fanny this book so she could write down her memories. Her granddaughter had wanted to talk to Fanny about her memories. Not your fairy tales from the village, she'd said. The real past. Fanny had smiled. She hadn't understood what the child wanted of her. She still didn't know. Perhaps in the meantime the child had realised it's better to leave the dead in peace and for that reason had disappeared. It may be that for her granddaughter she too counted as one of the dead. Hadn't she kept any pictures from her childhood her granddaughter had asked. Pictures, Fanny had asked. Photos, her granddaughter had said. She'd been impatient. Certain things just aren't talked about, her father used to say. Everything that once had been, was now here in this house. Fanny heard noises from the cellar as if someone was hammering at the workbench. She could still picture the morning when she'd stood the full coffee mug on the ground under the redcurrant bushes. The yellow sleeve of her blouse in the redcurrant bush, amongst the green of the leaves and the bright red of the berries. She'd been the schoolmaster's wife and no one but her in the village would wear a blouse. The priest admired Fanny's beauty. She turned her head the other way.

HER HAIR WAS WHITE and would stay white. The trembling would no longer go away. The phone was ringing and then stopped. Fanny looked over to the window, opened her eyes and closed them. She longed to have a proper deep sleep again. She dozed and drifted through time. A small girl, she was sitting on the ground in the farmyard in the hollow. The sun was warm and there was no breeze. The yard was enclosed on three sides. A huge gateway took up the fourth side with the gate standing open. It was summer, the ground was hard and dry, with a layer of sand on top. Fanny was drawing waves with her fingers in the sand. On the bench against the house wall sat old Mrs. Hager and wheezed softly as she breathed out. The wheezing accompanied the movements of the waves drawn by Fanny's fingers. When the child looked up she saw Mrs. Hager's calves twitch when a fly landed on her skin. Blueish waves ran over her calves too. Fanny heard another noise behind the wheezing. She raised a sandy finger to her chin and looked around. A bird screeched, then fell silent. The noise had come from the barn. Fanny listened. All the other noises suddenly died down as if settling together over that noise from the barn. Fanny heard blows, a hammering in the distance. The bellowing of an animal could just be heard penetrating into the yard. A tall figure stepped out of the barn. Her father came across the yard in Fanny's direction. The closer he came, the taller he became. When he reached her he stopped. The child leaned her head back and looked up at him. Her father nodded and called her by her name: That's my Fanny. Her father stretched out his hand as if to stroke her head. She felt his fingers pass above her head and a loose hair got caught in his rough hand. There was a pulling and a little pain as it came away from Fanny's scalp. Her father nodded again and

walked on towards the gate. Fanny wanted to go after him. She had just stood up and gone a few steps when she saw him disappear through the gate and she was grabbed from behind by the armpits and lifted up. Old Mrs. Hager carried Fanny back to her place. The child turned and tried to bite the hand that was holding her. Fanny didn't like the maid whose job it was to watch her.

IT WAS ONLY LATER THAT SHE REALISED there was no other child in the village who had someone minding them. The other children went round in a pack, in the woods and in the farmyards, and only looked for an adult if one of them had hurt themselves. Later Fanny heard it said that there were only two childminders in the whole area, one for the masters' children and one for little Fanny. The masters owned all the land and also the saw mill where many men worked. Fanny knew the country house where the masters were said to live, but she had never seen any of them, not even the children. Her mother told her later that the old servant, whom she called Mrs. Hager, could no longer be used for work, and so she looked after Fanny while the others were in the fields. Sometimes the hours really dragged until her parents and brother came home at last. But however long she'd waited until they appeared in the gateway, she kept her lips shut tight, to stop her pleasure escaping. Even if her throat hurt, Fanny kept sitting still as her parents and brother came nearer. Her parents went inside while her brother sat down on the ground next to Fanny. Toni was a few years older than her and could already help in the fields. Together they drew figures in the sand. Fanny leaned her lowered head further forwards and Toni bowed his head until the crowns of their heads were touching, one against the other. When they were called for dinner, they stood up as if their bodies had gained weight while they were sitting. Fanny's place at the table was next to her father. Once she'd climbed onto his lap and put her arms around his neck. She'd wanted to tell him something. Her father had leaned back and looked at the child. Fanny had seen the distance open up in his eyes when her father held his head away from her. She sensed that it was improper to have her hands on her father's neck. Her

hands were dirty and sticky. Fanny took her hands away and put them on her father's chest to support her. Her father's chest was hard. The child felt ashamed. She climbed down from her fathers' lap and sat down next to him on the bench.

WHEN HER FATHER HAD LEFT THE KITCHEN, Fanny disappeared under the table and under the bench. She crept into the corner at the back, where it was dark and smelled strange. In her imagination the smells were sinking down. The smells of the food and the people at the table, their breath, the smells from their clothes, from her mother's skirts and her father's shirts. The smells from the bowls, from the hands and the necks, were sinking down and gathering under the table and under the bench. Just like dust getting thicker in the corners, the smells gathered together, lingering stubbornly in the darkness beneath, right there where the child was crouching. Fanny moved further into the corner, squeezing herself in. Beneath her she felt the wooden floor, against her back and on both sides, the wall. Fanny was calmed by the hard wood above her pressing against her head. From here she could see her mother's legs, how busy they were, walking about. Her mother's legs were mostly moving and whenever they paused, Fanny could read from them what her mother was doing with her upper body and her hands. But it sometimes happened that her mother was sitting on the bench and had forgotten what she'd just been doing. She sat quietly as if in a dream. Fanny, under the bench in the corner, was able to read this state of being from her mother's legs which she knew so well, perhaps better than the rest of her mother. Her mother's legs looked in those moments as if they were asleep, as if they were recovering from all the running about, as if they were smiling and occasionally murmuring in their sleep. Her mother's legs seemed delicate in those moments. Fanny crept over to them and placed a hand on one calf, letting her mother know she was there before appearing out of her hiding place in front of her. As if asleep the mother gazed at her daughter. She put her arm round

Fanny's body and leaned her head against the child's head. Fanny felt her mother breathing. She kept still. Her hands lay on her mother's thighs. That's what it must be like to sleep in Mother's bed. You didn't know where your own body warmth finished and your mother's began. When Fanny lay in bed, she was always acutely aware of the outline of her body, tucked up tightly in the bedcovers. Sliding her fingers out from under the covers she felt for the edge of the bed where it was dark and cold. Fanny imagined sleeping in her mother's bed to be like sleeping in a warm pouch with no borders. Her mother was still leaning her head against Fanny's head as if she were asleep. Her legs woke up before the rest of Mother. With her mother's breath still on her neck, Fanny's hands felt her thighs become restless. Beneath her hands, beneath the fabric and beneath the skin, Fanny felt the urgency in the legs, before her mother released Fanny from her arms. As she stood up, she smoothed down her apron. She had to see to the stewed fruit, her mother said. Fanny stood where she was for a moment before going back under the bench in the corner. Her mother went into the pantry and came back into the kitchen. When she bent down to get a pan out of the dresser, her face came into Fanny's line of vision for a moment. There was a voice her mother used when talking to herself. Sometimes you could hear it and sometimes not.

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