

EXCERPTS FROM *I AM ZOË* HANDKE

From Part I, “Alma, Illinois”

Born into the midst of her own youth, I am frightened often when I think of my closeness in age to my mother. The numbers are capable of astonishing me. When I was five years old and about to start school, my mother was a girl of only twenty-four. When I was a decade old, she was not yet thirty. I was a senior in college before my mother at last celebrated her fortieth birthday.

Sometimes I think: *We could have been sisters*. On my mother’s rather populous side of the family, I knew sisters whose ages in fact were separated by more than nineteen years—my grandmother’s sisters, my mother’s aunts. This closeness in age in the case of myself and my mother—even now, when I have lived to the age of forty and have children of my own—is able to confuse and alarm me. Especially recently, it holds for me at certain moments an uprushing of fear and panic that I have spoken of to no one and that draws me unwillingly toward the stopped time that I think of as the past.

My mother, in keeping with the style of the 1940s, covered her mouth generously with vivid red lipstick. Her dark hair, pinned back from her ears, fell to her shoulders and ended there in a loose upturn of curls that seemed to me a perfection of carefully planned disorder. On her cheeks she wore a rouge of light rose, a color taken, it seems to me now, from summertime in the country, where beaded dew lay early in the morning on clustered flowers in sunlit gardens. Sitting on the edge of the bed near my mother’s dressing table, I watched her apply this rouge, touching it first to her cheek with the pads of two fingers, then moving them in slowly expanding circles over her skin until it seemed that the blood had rushed there permanently in a rose blush of healthfulness, or of confusion, or desire.

Perhaps I was four years old at this time, perhaps slightly older. Quietly, careful to be no disturbance, I watched my mother at her mirror. With taps of a soft puff, she touched powder to her white forehead. She pressed her fingers tightly against her temples and with painful attentiveness scrutinized for long moments her image in the glass. She stood up from her chair, placed her hands at her waist, and, her eyes still seeking out the mirror, twirled around until her skirt flared out, rose up, and billowed on the air.

From Part II, “Three Islands, Illinois”

My mother’s unremitting and fastidious housekeeping, the unflagging energy she devoted to it, and the great strength of her desire for cleanliness and order: washed windows and curtains, laundered rugs, vacuumed carpet, folded linens, clean ashtrays,

polished furniture. My father using a tall ladder on weekends one spring to scrape and paint the outside of our house. The particular and oddly secretive pleasantness especially of the kitchen late at night, with everything in its place or hidden and out of sight: the room lighted only by the one small lamp under the cupboards above the sink, or by nothing but the faint beam from the street light through the side window. The memory of my mother on the back porch, squatting on her heels with a stiff brush, scrubbing at the caked earth that clung to my father's work boots.

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That there was another side to everything about her: like a mirror that reflects things normally but that also, like a window, lets you see through into a shadowy world behind its surface: lets you see into a place, beyond time, that can't really exist.

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My mother's way of looking at me, during periods of difficulty or anger, as though she did not see me, or as though I weren't even there and she was looking through me. Her saying to Carlotta, once when we were in high school: I'm sure *your* mother is a good mother.

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My understanding none of this until later. Its being by then much too late.

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The incident of my schoolbooks, near the end of eleventh grade. My mother leaning in the doorway of the bathroom with her arms crossed over her chest while, barefoot and wearing only my nightgown, I brushed my teeth at the sink. My imagining later that my mother did not see me at all, but instead saw my reflection in the bathroom window at my side: a ghost-image of me, outside of time, suspended somewhere in the night air above our yard, bent forward over the sink, brushing my teeth. That she saw not me, but herself at my age, then despised me, because she was gone.

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That I was ungrateful. My mother's great, unleashed anger, her accusing me afterward of ingratitude, when from the desk in my room she took my notebooks and papers and books, carried them downstairs and plunged them into the wastebasket under the sink before collapsing at the table in sobs. My father going into the room. My mother telling him, her passion unspent, that she never wanted to see me again.

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I was a mirror. My mother wanted me broken.

From Part IV, "New York"

The building we lived in dated from 1926. The rooms of our apartment itself were large, cunningly arranged, although not enormous. They were blessed by plentiful windows that allowed in air and scent and light, although sunshine itself came in only briefly, for short periods of time each day, and to some degree in accordance with the seasons.

Through the front windows, facing north, sunlight came in only during the airy summer months, after the sun had passed the solstice, and then only obliquely, filling the rooms with astonishing light for an hour or two not long after sunrise, when I, and the ghosts of all those who had lived there before me, gathered near the windows in the brightness.

At the back of the house, where adjacent buildings rose higher than ours, sunlight angled down to warm our windowsills and inch across our floors in a short visit each afternoon, fleetingly in the thinner and more narrow light of the cold winter months, but for a robust and lazy hour in the languid afternoons of summer.

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Of the comfortably worn and half-decrepit old apartment, I believed this: that in the large bathroom, where I bathed my new daughters in the smooth white basin of the sink, were mingled together with the greatest intimacy and eloquence the building's continuing life and its far-reaching antiquity. The room was large enough for the uncrowded luxuries of a chair, a painted wicker table, and a stool. I remember, in it, whiteness and a soft clarity, a comfortably proportioned spaciousness: and a Mediterranean air, cool and shadowy even in the hottest of summer days, having something to do, it must have been, with the open window, and with the light and air that came in (a plant hung at the window) like flowing, leaf-shaded water, spreading out over creamy thicknesses of aged white paint, over the huge claw-footed tub, the stone-tiled floor and half-tiled walls, and over the smooth, softly glowing and deep ceramic whiteness of the ponderous old bathroom sink, in which my daughters, each in her turn, sat in regal, perfectly foolish and happy splendor, slippery-skinned and wet-headed, splashing in cool water that had been gathered a great distance away, drawn from the flanks of wooded mountains; that had been brought through a remarkable intricacy of ancient conduits to the calm, poised, generous, and old-fashioned cool whiteness of this room; and that then, having bathed the small bodies and smooth limbs of my young daughters, would be returned once again to the patiently waiting chambers of the deep and green and light-filled sea.

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