

you were obsessed with it. Or that curl behind your ear, the only one in that honey-coloured hair of yours.

I'm wary of taking out the few photos I've kept. Tears come more easily as you age, and I hate crying. I hate it because it's idiotic, and because it's no consolation. All it does is exhaust me, and then I don't want to eat anything or put on my nightshirt before getting into bed. But you have to look after yourself, clench your fists even when the skin on them is covered in spots. Try to let things go. That's what your father taught me.

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All these years, I've imagined myself a good mother. Reliable, lively, friendly... adjectives that don't really fit me. In the village, they still call me Teacher, but they greet me from a distance. They know I'm not that sociable.

Sometimes I remember a game I used to play with the children in year one: 'Draw the animal that looks most like you.' These days I'd draw a tortoise with its head in its shell.

I like to imagine that I wasn't one of those meddling mothers. I would never ask you, as my mother always did, who this or that person was, if you had time for him or wanted to go out with him. But maybe it's just another one of those stories I tell myself, and if I had you with me, I'd bombard you with questions, looking at you from the corner of my eye every time you were evasive. As the years go by, you feel less superior to your parents. If I make comparisons now, I come out worse overall. Your grandmother was harsh and difficult. She knew what she thought about everything, had no trouble telling black from white and no problem being blunt. I, on the other hand, got lost in all the shades of grey. According to her, my studies were to blame. She thought anyone

who was educated was unnecessarily difficult. An idler, a know-it-all, a hair-splitter. But I believed that the greatest knowledge lay in words, especially for a woman. Facts, stories, fantasies... what mattered was being hungry for them and keeping them close for times when life got complicated or bleak. I believed that words could save me.

## 2

I've never cared much for men. The idea that they were connected with love seemed ridiculous to me. As far as I was concerned, they were too clumsy, hairy or boorish, sometimes all three at once. Around here, everyone had a bit of land and a few animals, and that's the smell they carried around with them – of sweat and stables. If I had to imagine making love, I preferred to think about a woman. Better the sharp cheekbones of a girl than a man's prickly skin. But best of all was to stay single, accountable to no one. Actually, I wouldn't have minded becoming a nun. I was

more excited about the idea of removing myself from the world than having a family. But it's always been difficult to think about God. Whenever I thought about him I got confused.

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Erich was the only one I ever looked at. I'd see him go by at dawn, his hat pulled over his forehead, his cigarette already hanging from the side of his mouth at that hour. Each time, I wanted to go to the window to say hello, but if I'd opened it Ma would have been cold and she'd surely have shouted at me to close it immediately.

'Trina, are you crazy?' she'd have shrieked.

Ma was always yelling. And in any case, even if I'd opened the window, what would I have said to him? At seventeen, I was so awkward that at best I'd have stammered. So I just stayed there, watching him walk towards the woods,