

## Sabine Ludwig: The Worst Mothers in the World

Sample Translation by Ingrun Wenge

On this lovely June day, Bruno wasn't particularly keen on getting home. Today was Thursday and the mere thought of this afternoon's piano lesson with Professor Griebel made him feel queasy. He had not been admitted to the auditions, of course: "Fluency in his left hand is clearly not his forte," Professor Griebel had explained to his mother. "He should practise more often and take more classes, then he might actually have a chance to perform at our grand summer concert."

Upon hearing the word "concert", Bruno's mother's eyes beamed with joy.

Since then, Bruno has had to practise every single day, whether he liked it or not. It was only in the evenings, when his Dad came home, that Bruno was allowed to close the lid on the piano. "I have a headache already," his father would sigh, grimacing with pain. In any event, there wasn't much point in practising. Even if he practised for ten hours a day, Bruno's playing wouldn't improve, and Bruno was sure that this fact was well known to Professor Griebel. He even suspected that the professor deliberately kept his mother believing that one day her son would turn into a distinguished pianist. With all the money he was earning from Bruno's lessons, he was probably taking his ginger-haired student for dinner in posh restaurants.

Bruno grumpily kicked a can towards a lamppost. What if he got injured? He could get his hand jammed in a door, for example. This is what had happened to his friend Jim, but of course he hadn't planned it. Now Jim's right hand was heavily bandaged. "You know what, you can have my punch bag," Jim had told him. "I won't be able to practise for at least four weeks."

This was definitely a tempting offer for Bruno, but the punch bag was far too big to keep in a secret hiding place at home. Up until now, he had always gone over to Jim's place to box. He would "study maths" at his friend's house, and he reckoned he would continue to do so.

Bruno opened the garden gate. Head down, he trudged along the neatly weeded stone path, when all of a sudden he heard a high-pitched voice: "So there you are, Bruno dear!"

Startled, he looked up. In the middle of the opened front door stood an unknown woman with a weird pinny around her waist. She smiled at him broadly.

“What ... what are you doing here?” Bruno stammered.

The woman made her way towards him and before Bruno could utter a word she took his satchel off him: “That’s terribly heavy. Come on in, love. I’ve made your favourite. You like extra crispy oven-baked chips with ketchup and mayonnaise, don’t you!” While continuing to chat, the woman stepped into the house. Still confused, Bruno followed her in.

The kitchen was filled with the delicious scent of freshly baked potato chips. Bruno’s mouth watered. Was he dreaming? “But who are you?” he repeated.

The woman, who was now opening the oven door, turned around. “I’m your Aunt Anna! Didn’t you recognise me?”

Bruno frowned. He didn’t know of any Aunt Anna.

“The first cousin once removed of Great-aunt Adelheid.”

Great-aunt Adelheid Bruno knew. She was the one with the viola.

“Why yes, I saw her on my grandma’s birthday,” he said. “There was really yummy cheesecake. Great-aunt Adelheid played something or other and we were only allowed to start eating once she was done with her performance”.

“Exactly! That’s what happened on every birthday party,” the woman exclaimed. “She fiddled about endlessly and it sounded awful, didn’t it?” She gave him a conspiratorial smile. Bruno smiled back. Not too bad, this aunt of his. “But I don’t remember you,” he said.

Aunt Anna was now shovelling crunchy chips onto a plate. “Well of course, how could you! The last time I saw you, you were nothing but a baby. But I would have thought your mother might have shown you some pictures in the meantime.”

The only photographs Bruno’s Mum had shown him over and over again were the ones of him in front of a piano. At the age of two he had already been given a white children’s piano and had started tinkling the keys. And according to the stories, his musical talent had been obvious even then.

Bruno sighed. Aunt Anna was now squeezing ketchup on top of the chips and pushed the plate towards Bruno. “Enjoy your meal, love.”

Bruno was just about to shove a potato chip into his mouth when he dropped the fork again and asked: "And where's Mum?"

Aunt Anna sat down with him at the table.

"Your mother has gone to the North Sea. She's taking a cure at a spa resort."

"But she didn't tell me about it!" Bruno exclaimed.

"She has been thinking of taking a cure for quite a while. Then she was offered a place and had to decide quickly, so she called me and asked me to look after you until she's back."

Bruno chewed thoughtfully. Come to think of it, his mother had already mentioned that she felt the need to take a cure. This had often been a controversial subject among his parents, in fact. His Dad had always insisted that she didn't need it since she was at home all day and wasn't really exposed to any stress, or so he said. Whereupon his Mum would say: "But what about all the housekeeping, the garden and the ironing? And then there's Bruno to take care of."

Well, the "taking care" bit was now obsolete.

"So how long does such a cure last?" Bruno asked, shoving one of the crispy potato chips into his mouth.

"Four weeks. Exactly four weeks," Aunt Anna replied.

Bruno tried to look not too happy, but he didn't succeed. He grinned from ear to ear.

Sofia was yet another person who was not too keen on getting home. Today was the day the letter must have arrived. The letter from school saying that she had not passed. Her mother must have read it by now and Sofia's legs turned to jelly as she thought of the sermon that awaited her. She opened the gate and immediately noticed that the letterbox had not been emptied. This was strange. She opened the letterbox and advertising material, a mailorder catalogue and countless letters poured out. None of the envelopes were blue. But then those letters from school were no longer blue. They used this grey-coloured, environmentally friendly paper instead, just like this one. Sofia took the letter and briefly considered making it disappear. But then this wouldn't change the fact that she would have to repeat the year. And wasn't an end to terror preferable to terror without end? Steeling herself, she walked up the stairs and opened the front door.

“Mum? Mum, there’s something I have to tell you. And please, don’t be mad with me like...”. There, she stopped. A woman with a ridiculous skirt and an even more ridiculous cardigan was standing in the corridor. “Hello, dear. My, haven’t you grown! And such beautiful hair!” the woman chirped.

This was in fact something Sofia hadn’t heard before. Indeed her hair was thick and curly, but no matter what she did with it, it always looked as if there had been some sort of explosion on top of her head. Sofia shook her head slightly and asked: “Excuse me, madam, but I don’t think we have met before.”

“I’m your Aunt Anna. Don’t you remember me?”

Sofia couldn’t think of an aunt called Anna, but somehow started to dislike the skirt a little bit less.

“I’m one of your father’s cousins,” she explained. “Your Mum and I used to be close friends, but ever since they split up,” and with a sigh Aunt Anna interrupted herself. “I’m sure you know that it wasn’t easy. As she had to leave in a hurry, she thought of me again. Look what she wrote down for you.” Aunt Anna pulled a slip of paper from the pocket of her skirt.

*Had to go on a trip, I’ll explain later, Love – Mum,* Sofia read. She felt relieved. Just about got away with it. But for how long? Four weeks? Didn’t Aunt Anna just say something about four weeks?

“A cure like that takes four weeks.”

“A cure?” Sofia asked with surprise.

“But she never talked about taking a cure,” Anna said.

“Maybe not in front of you,” Aunt Anna replied, “but I’m sure she must have talked it over with Georg, don’t you think? ”

Sofia nodded.

It was true. Her Mum used to talk with Georg about all kinds of things, and often Sofia would only find out about it by chance. They were planning to go on a bicycle trip along the Elbe River, for instance. How Sofia hated bicycle trips. Niklas would of course enjoy sitting on his comfy trailer bike. Georg would have to keep pedalling while Niklas could once again do nothing.

“What time do we have to pick Niklas up from the kindergarten?” Aunt Anna wanted to know.

“Half past three,” Sofia replied.

“That’s brilliant!” Aunt Anna exclaimed. “That gives us some calm before the

storm.”

Actually, the ugly blue cardigan was quite alright, Sofia thought. It really matched with Aunt Anna’s fair hair.

Loulou came out of the kitchen and weaved around Aunt Anna’s legs. Aunt Anna didn’t react at all but went on with her chitchat: “You know, I really love small children, but I also think they can be utterly annoying, don’t you agree?”

“Stop it, Loulou!” Sofia shouted, as the cat lifted its paws and prepared to scratch along one of Aunt Anna’s flawless legs.

“Stop what?” asked Aunt Anna.

“Not you. I was talking to the cat!”

Sofia pointed at Loulou, who was now on her hind legs, curiously sniffing at Aunt Anna’s skirt.

Slightly confused, or so it seemed to Sofia, Aunt Anna looked down at the pet. Maybe she didn’t like cats?

“This is Loulou,” Sofia explained.

And then Aunt Anna gave the cat a broad smile. “Very pleased to meet you, Loulou!”

Somewhat indecisively, Emily was standing in front of the photo shop. She tried to peek through the windows past the pictures of those wedding couples with silly smiles and confirmees with spotty skin. She was in fact supposed to pick up the photos for her new identity card as the old one had been lost or misplaced or unintentionally swallowed by her Mum, or at least they couldn’t find it. And since Emily was supposed to join her father on a trip to Mallorca, she had to get a new one. Just a few days ago, she and her Mum had been to this photo shop and once again her Mum’s behaviour had been so obnoxious that Emily didn’t have the guts to go back into the shop. A nice young man had served them, trying to explain what a photograph for an identity card should look like. Since her Mum couldn’t work out what he meant, the young man had pulled out his own identity card and placed it on the counter. Whereupon Emily’s Mum had burst into frantic laughter, shouting, “My goodness, on this photo you look like a mix between the Beagle Boys and Black Pete!” Emily had been embarrassed to the core and had regretted ever allowing her mother to read *Mickey Mouse* and *Donald Duck* magazines to her.

As she peeked through the windows, she noticed that the young man in question had disappeared with a customer towards the photo studio in the back of the shop. There was a saleslady behind the counter now, so Emily took the chance and quickly stepped into the shop.

"I would like to pick up the photos for my identity card. This is my receipt," she said hastily, putting a slip of paper on the counter. The saleslady took a bored look at the receipt and yelled to the back of the shop: "Philip, one of your customers!"

"I'll be right there," said a voice behind the curtain.

"Oh no, please don't bother. Well you know, I was just going to pick up the photos and..."

The curtain opened and the young man appeared with an envelope in his hand. "That's alright. The thing is, you should take a look at the pictures first, in case your mother comes along and tells me you look like Grandma Duck or Magica de Spell." He spoke with a friendly smile.

Emily quickly glimpsed at the pictures, paid for them and, with glowing cheeks, rushed out of the shop. How embarrassing!

This time she would speak up. This time she would say something, even if her Mum felt depressed today. But maybe she was all right. This morning, she had seemed almost excited and had dressed up more than usual, though she had been somewhat cagey when Emily wanted to know the reason for her excitement. Emily unlocked the door of the flat. The flat was empty, which didn't surprise her. There was a slip of paper on the kitchen table.

*It's a miracle! I'll get back to you later. Kisses, Mum*

Emily sat down. Those who didn't know her mother would probably think that these lines were written in a haste, the letters sweeping over the page, strongly bending to the right as if they needed to seek shelter from a sudden rainfall. But in fact this was Emily's mother's normal handwriting. While writing, she would always think of something completely different she had to get done.

The doorbell rang. Hopefully this wasn't another person trying to sell a magazine subscription. Emily peeked through the spyhole. On the other side of the door stood a woman who looked quite pleasant, at least not like someone who wanted to sell anything.

Emily opened the door: "Yes please?"

"It's me," said the woman. "Aunt Anna."

Emily frowned. She didn't know any Aunt Anna. But maybe the woman was a friend of her mother's.

"My mum's not in," Emily replied.

Taking a step forward, the woman said: "Yes love, I know. That's why I'm here."