Miku Sophie Kühmel
Triskele
272 pages
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Three sisters from three different generations. A cat. And a year of mourning.

Three sisters meet up in their mother's flat. Focused Mercedes is 48, capricious Mira is 32, and Matea, who still lives at home, is 16. Their mother Mone has taken her own life and left little behind: old jewellery, Muriel the cat, and a letter. As children from three different generations, they grew up with the same woman, but not together. Who was Mone to each of them? And what do the three of them share in the absence of memories? Matea, closed and introverted, has to get used to living with her eldest sister in Berlin and spends her days online. Mercedes sometimes forgets that she suddenly has a teenager living with her, and Mira, as always, feels superfluous. Triskele is a dreamy and rough-and-ready novel about sisterhood and the solidarity of women in challenging times.

'Miku Sophie Kühmel is currently one of the most exciting young talents in German-language literature.' VOGUE, Laura Sodano

Miku Sophie Kühmel was born in 1992 in Gotha. She studied at the Humboldt University in Berlin and at New York University, including with Roger Willemsen and Daniel Kehlmann. Since 2013, her short fiction has been published regularly in magazines and anthologies. She has recently also been writing for radio and podcasts, which she produces. She was awarded the Jürgen Ponto-Stiftung Prize in 2019 and the 'aspekte' Literary Prize in 2019 for "Kintsugi", her first novel.

Sample translation by Katy Derbyshire

JUNE

The kitchen is filthy. That's what you get on the first night of the long-awaited summer holidays.

The ceilings in the flat are so low, it's as if they've been constantly sinking a couple of centimetres since I moved out, twenty years ago. En route from the spare bed along the hall to the fridge, I kept tripping over kicked-off trousers or books pulled off the shelves. We've been putting off the clearing until now. The only space I made was in a corner of the study, when I moved in here weeks ago with my aluminium hand-luggage packed with a few clothes. Most of it was documents, true-colour material samples, tech for my video calls.

In the little illuminated window, my workmates see only me, and only the top third of me, usually wrapped in a blouse, which I slip off immediately at the end of the meeting, to spend the rest of the day in soft jersey. But for that half hour I get myself together, put my hair in a bun, and the only other thing they see is the wall behind me, painted navy-blue. Soft-focus thanks to the low bandwidth out here, the bare nails on the wall aren't visible and it looks like I'm perched in the middle of a monochrome Yves Klein painting, a void of creativity, calm and at one with the universe. As an overall concept, it came across as so well attuned that the whole agency soon forgot their condolences and went back to business as usual. And because I carried on meeting my deadlines, stayed available and answered emails with my usual non-violent-communication homilies, people probably soon forgot I'd moved in with my sixteen-year-old sister until the start of the summer holidays, into our dead mother's flat, and was leading a life far removed from all my habits, face-to-face with my repressed childhood. I, on the other hand, can still recall exactly how this very same monochrome study has passed through the decades and how I'd hit puberty surrounded by paisley and oak veneer; in a different time and a now-defunct country.

I take the pot out of the coffee machine and pour myself the cold leftovers from yesterday afternoon; it's pale brown and weirdly sweet. I'd forgotten how soft the water is in our home town. I pile the pasta bowls in the saucepan. Mone finally banished the onion-pattern crockery a few years ago, and kitted herself out with shiny white porcelain from Arcor.

I push all the dirty dishes against the wall between the old toaster and the new blender – I'm surprised to find such a thing in this household, it must be pretty new – making just about enough space for my backside on the worktop. And still I take a quick glance

back before I sit down, balanced on my hands, to check I'm not sitting on anything. In my mind, I'm still the slightly overweight teenager I once was.

A rubbish tip has accumulated in the corner with the table, empty bottles and plastic packaging, to say nothing of the crumbs. It surprises me how much soft-drink fits into Matea's petite body. But she drinks the stuff like water, and the little bit of extra caffeine won't wake her up any earlier than usual. I'm glad of the summer holidays and grateful not to have to get the poor girl out of bed at half past five for the next few weeks.

The clock above the door to her bedroom, ticking in time with the red hand, shows 9:30. Mira announced her arrival for lunchtime, so I assume she won't be here before three. I let out a deep breath, count the hours remaining to me before she pitches up, and vow to sit with this sweet cold coffee until at least 9:45, watching the clouds scud by, feeling the tug in my upper back. And nothing else.

As usual when I half-close my eyes in this flat, memories flit past me. I see the routes I took back and forth as a child, like paths worn down by ghostly shoes. From the moment we entered the flat after Mone's death, it has all been back here. We had to wear face masks in the building once before, in the early eighties, whenever we went up the communal stairs to the attic; apparently there was a major asbestos problem up there. It was like a curse, a dim cloud of uncertainty, and even at primary school I wondered whether it was really true that the asbestos stopped right outside our front door and waited politely outside, and that was why we only had to wear a mask on the stairs. Now, our fabric masks for shopping dangle side by side from the key rack, possibly hygienically questionable, and whenever I leave the flat I pat down my pockets, checking: phone, keys, purse, mask.

Back then, too, only half the people in the building stuck to the rule, and many of those I was afraid of as a child are still living here. Some have been halved in the meantime, thinned down by age or widowed. Gran had managed to get Mone the flat through her contacts, and it made sense to me that Gran's contacts were obviously as old as she was, so that was why we were the only people in the building whose hair wasn't at least salt-and-pepper.

9:46. I add the empty coffee cup to the heap of crockery and head to the bathroom. The lights are different now – bright LEDs – and my hair is too; I fit right in with the neighbours. An obstinate net-curtain of white, drawn over my dark-brown hair. I just stand there for a very brief moment, and then I start going through the list: brush my hair three times, from the roots down to my clavicles, two minutes of teeth-brushing, cleanser, eyebrow correction, lip correction. When I open one side of the mirrored cabinet I realise we haven't yet sorted through Mone's perfumes. I spray iris into mid-air, once. The scent settles around my shoulders, semi-sweet and heavy – the way everything here used to

smell, the washing and the pancakes and the back of the couch where she fell asleep every night. As in the past few weeks, I stand there and briefly wish it wasn't Saturday and I at least had one or two meetings. The moment lasts until the drawing-pin scratch of the doorbell fetches me back.

Mira looks beautiful as always, in her mussed-up Mira way. Her clear, alert eyes shining even though the mascara around them is smudged.

'What are you doing here so early?'

'Amaaazing, eh?' Mira really likes doing a really bad imitation of a Berlin accent. 'It's alright,' she adds before I can react, and drops her fashionably scruffy holdall on the floor, missing Muriel by a fraction of an inch as she pads past.

'Oh, my darling sister!' And instead of hugging me, she bends down and strokes the ancient Russian Blue. Muriel scrutinises Mira with milky eyes. I often forget the cat exists, even now. She moved in here long after I was gone. Mone took her in because she only had three legs. A faulty model. If it had to be a fancy pedigree cat, then one with a disability. To show mercy and charity; not that we've ever been religious. Muriel navigates the flat without a sound, without complaint. She's the size of an iron, and when Mira picks her up and coos over her it looks a bit like the cat's disgusted. The tiny shoulder blades underneath her fur twist back, her tail rolls up. But since she hasn't got her breakfast from me, she puts up with the embrace. Sycophant. As if she could hear my thoughts, she eyes me while Mira drapes her over her shoulder, humming, and carries her into the kitchen.

'Good grief, what's been going on here? Have I missed a party?'

Mira roots out a packet of biscuits from a cupboard, with more practice than I'd expect of someone who hasn't lived here for a decade, and sits down on the floor next to Muriel, who is slobbering cat food out of the little foil tin and making unappetising sounds of enjoyment – a tugging hum, sleepily satisfied.

'Old Mercedes is more of a dog person,' Mone had laughed back then when I'd simply dropped the kitten in shock as she extended one of her tiny razor-blade claws and plunged it into my new cashmere sweater. But my mother was wrong about that. The whole concept of pets has always been dubious to me; if anything, I'm a people person. Fish are OK.

I put on a fresh pot of coffee, acknowledged by Mira with a blissful sigh from her spot between the radiator and the cat as she continues to sprinkle herself with biscuit crumbs. Mira is the prettiest of us by a long way, but she has really big front teeth and she's always nibbled at her food with them, like a chipmunk. I vaguely remember showing her it when we were young. Look, this is what Chip 'n' Dale do on TV, and then the little blonde

girl with whom I shared only an eye colour started nibbling like crazy. Even now, she's holding her biscuits in eight fingers like a very large hamster.

'Did you wemember ve bokfes?'

'Of courfe!' I answer. I was brought up not to rabbit on with my mouth full. But the last few times I had breakfast with Mone, she was never short of a loud answer, despite cheeks full of overnight oats. Rules like that, I realised then at the latest, could always change.

The coffee machine gurgles. Our silence is still unfurling, with long spans between short sentences. But still, the flat feels a bit less orphaned with Mira here, although there's actually one more orphan, mathematically speaking. I'm just about to talk about the day's plans when, out of the corner of my eye, I spot Muriel on three legs and Mira on four, crawling over to Matea's bedroom; both, Muriel with one paw, Mira with her knuckles, scratch at the door and meow.

Matea's hair is straight during the day, but before eleven it stands on end, tousled and tangled. You can see the blonde and copper highlights she's put in. In fact, she spends an exceptionally large portion of her time dyeing, moisturising and grooming herself, and calls it *self-care.*

'Mattimattimatti!'

Mira wraps herself cheerfully around her younger sister's bare legs; Matea only ever sleeps in long T-shirts that don't match the rest of her wardrobe: a lot of them have floral patterns or animal print, and most of them feature fast-fashion poetry: *sporty spirit endless summer florida easy come miami beach easy go royal palmes avenue united states ...*

Without looking, Matea ruffles Mira's hair, not surprised; they presumably spent the whole of Mira's journey texting. Then they make some kind of joke I don't understand, and laugh so loud that Muriel jumps and squeezes through the gap in the door behind Matea, into the dark.

Cleaning is easier than clearing out. Even though it seems counterintuitive to clean what might be thrown away at the next stage, there's no need for us to discuss the order to do it in; we all agree. I dust the surfaces, Mira vacuums, cleans and polishes the floors, and Matea gathers up everything that's obviously rubbish and lugs it outside, taking two left turns to the cage full of bins on the corner. The way there is still the same, though the containers parked in the cage keep changing with the political circumstances; I end up arguing with my youngest sister, unable to get my head around the idea that there's no glass-recycling bin there these days. Which is why, around noon, we jangle a considerable number of liqueur bottles and pickle jars into the boot of my car, which still smells of new

vehicle. I bite my lip and send up a quiet personal prayer that it won't be left with a permanent note of pickled onions, olives, grappa, vermouth and beetroot.

'Nothing ever changes here, am I right?'

Mira's big eyes scan the small town divided by the bonnet ahead of us. Now and then, I also let my eyes wander over eggshell-white semi-detached houses, coniferous hedges, hopscotch squares on the pavements, carports.

I want to contradict Mira and say that things do change, because I like contradicting her and she can't stand it when I argue. But the more notice I take of the details, the more clearly she seems to be right; the same circus posters on every lamppost as the past decades – of course, there's now a neon-green *Cancelled* sticker on every poster, but the picture behind it, the creepy clown on his pony, is the same as ever. It's hard to find an objection. When I point out in the end that the Aral petrol station used to be Esso, my tongue is pretty heavy. But Mira gives a dreamy sigh. She has delightful memories connected to the petrol station, and she says, almost euphoric: 'I was allowed all the way to the petrol station, that far and no further!'

It's true; shortly before the start of the new millennium, Mone banned her from going into town on her own. She was only allowed to play shuttlecock, ride her scooter and walk the neighbour's dog Schröder as far as the petrol station. It was a new rule; it hadn't applied to me in the eighties. Then again, the petrol station hadn't been such an exciting place in those days, and the town centre was less of an attraction, with far fewer bright shop windows and multi-storey paradises full of cosmetics, CDs and toys. And they hadn't been any *kiddy-fiddlers*, Gran said, in East Germany. Everything was cramped but clear, it was easy to find work and housing, and no one went hungry.

'CAN WE GO TO THE CIRCUS?'

'Can't you read, Mira? It said *cancelled*.'

pp. 82-93

On the day my mother died, it hailed. That was the first thing I noticed when I got off the same bus as usual at the same stop as usual, having got up from the same seat as usual: second-last row, on the left – not touching any bars or handles, only balancing myself with my elbows here and there. The air was cold and wet, so harsh your eyes started watering when you turned into the wind, and what I first thought was light snow then turned out to be hailstones, drumming against my waxed jacket. I didn't get a strange feeling, I was just annoyed; I swore quietly because I wasn't wearing my glasses, which would at least have

protected my eyes, and turned the corner to the entrance to our building, which faces the side. And outside the communal garden, in a long men's coat with an umbrella with stones of ice bouncing off it like popcorn out of a pan of hot oil, stood Mercedes.

I knew everything at that moment. It had been clear how it would end. The ending is always so important to people, a good ending or a bad ending, but in reality there are no endings, basically all there is is this constant cycle, carbon chains and energy waves, and there's the moment when you take your hands off the keyboard, put down your pen. The illusion of an ending because you have to stop somewhere, while nothing stops, because your eyes get tired and your brain does too, because you fall asleep at some point and you're still there then, still enduring; in the worst case you're dreaming. And when the dream finally ends, or you stop taking part in it because you wake up, then you go on being awake. Does being dead make a difference? When the light goes off and you don't hear or see or think anything, anymore. Is that really the end? Even worse, for me, is the idea that there is no end. What a terrible image, *your mum's sitting on a cloud and looking down on you* – it makes me want to say: Are you crazy, she's scared shitless of heights! Just leave her alone. And me too, if you don't mind. Thank you.

'How's it going, getting ready for school?' Mira gives me knee a careful nudge. That's a nice thing about sitting in a tiny room together, naked and sweating; you make sure you're cautious about touching. I look at her for a long moment and then I say, as silly as possible: 'Oh, you know, could be better, I still don't know where to get decent grass where – Cedi – lives. All they have round there is marble floors and champagne, it looks like.'

'Aaaw!'

Mira likes a good drugs joke.

'Yay, she's a stoner. Or she makes jokes about dope, that's even better ...'

'How far have you got with Buddenbrooks?' Mercedes interrupts us.

'How do you know I'm supposed to be reading it?'

'You live with me. Remember?'

'If you can call it that.'

'Is it that bad?'

'No, it's really nice, thank you … I …'

I never break out in mumbles these days, but when I'm with my sisters, actually whenever I'm the youngest in the room, I lose grip of the situation and my communication skills fail.

'M-hm.'

'So.'

'Hm?'

‘Buddenbrooks.’

‘Oh.’

‘Just watch the movie,’ says Mira, winking like the uncle I never had. And she’s the one who’s read the most books of all of us. People who’ve read the most books are the least embarrassed about not knowing stuff – or wanting to know it. Wholeheartedly finding something boring: Mira’s good at that.

Mercedes intervenes, though: ‘Watching the movie’s not enough! It’s never enough. It’s not the same.’

‘Yeah, but you’ve got to start somewhere. Did you know that Viva presenter is in it …’

‘Viva?’ I ask cautiously.

‘Oh God. Don’t tell me I’m old.’

‘Just kidding! I know what Viva is.’

‘Ahaha! What a comedian. But seriously: I bet you don’t really have to read it. I can’t imagine they still do that kind of thing these days. Do they?’

‘Hmm, I want to get brownie points at the start and then coast for the rest of the year.’

‘That’s not how school works, though!’ Mercedes wants to cut in, and Mira cuts into her cutting in:

‘I’m nearer to school age than you!’

‘And I’m the nearest,’ I correct them both. Stating the obvious is the worst. That’s what annoys me the most when you actually speak and don’t just imagine conversations in your head. Repetition, the obvious, and my inner audience yawning, wishing I had a Skip button to fast-forward a bit with all these horrifically slow people. That, and when you say things wrong or mumble or someone doesn’t hear you and you have to repeat yourself until you end up shouting. Mone couldn’t hear that well by the end – or at least, she often didn’t understand what I said.

‘You’re absolutely right, Mati. You’re our Hanno!’

The youngest child is always the Hanno, that’s what I found out after a quick JSTOR-search. The hopeful youngest child: the last chance for a new beginning, for all to end well after all, perhaps – there it is again, the ending. There’s not much you can do about being born later than others.

In my introductory essay for English, I write: *Hi, I am an in vitro child*. Born in a petri dish, which isn’t quite true but it sounds really good and gets in a few more words from the vocab list. And it makes no difference how exactly I was conceived, if you ask me. The core of it is: my father is a blank. I’m the loose end of our group – family’s a big word, to me. I

grew up in a forest of female legs and always had the feeling something in me was straining upwards and I'd never be as big as the others. In the meantime, I'm half a head taller than Mira and I outgrew Mone at the age of fourteen. I'm not the little one, but still they rarely ask me anything – my opinion or the time or the weather.

'What shall we eat tonight? Vietnamese or Thai? Kantstrasse's known far and wide for Asian cuisine.'

Mercedes has obviously swallowed a *Lonely Planet*, but she presents her suggestions without the necessary euphoria, sounding slightly less human than Alexa or Siri would. Vietnamese or Thai.

Going out to eat in our home town means: to the town exit east, to the bus stop, to the bistro between the kiosk and Gran's old house. You're allowed to leave the school grounds for lunch from the age of 15, so I spent every break for the past year in a queue outside this one place, with Rese and Ramin, who aren't vegan – maybe that's another thing that bound them together against me. Just like Mira and Mercedes, who suddenly gang up when it comes to bossing me around.

'... Mati? Earth to Mati? Hello!'

'Thai or Viet, what's she going to say?'

'The crowd's on the edge of their seats.'

'Which of the two answers will it be: *No idea* or *I don't know*?!'

'Oh, the suspense!'

No idea. I don't know. No idea; I don't know. No idea, I don't know. NOIDEAIDON'TKNOW.

I opt for silence. I smirk, act embarrassed and think about what Inge wrote. I don't know Inge, but I found a quote from her on a church page for relatives of suicides, which some bright spark from my old class forwarded to me, not exactly sensitive, with the crying-rivers emoji. *Thank God my mother chose that step,* Inge wrote*. Life in our family was nothing but torture for the last few years. The minute she was discharged from the psychiatric ward she'd be right back in, trapped in the vicious cycle of her illness. It destroyed my sense of life too, and my younger siblings'. I know it sounds shocking, but it was actually liberating.*

No idea. I don't know. There are three phases to every suicide: 1. Contemplation, 2. Consideration, 3. Conclusion. I could, I can, I will. Decisions are also dissolutions. You say yes to one thing and no to another. Separate the yoke from the white. Beat one path. The poor path! No idea. I don't know. We can ask her over and over what the reason was, but she'll never answer. Because she went through a door and no window opened; everything

slammed shut behind her, the door snapped shut, the door with no house left. She's not here anymore. Her existence is no more, and I guess that really is an ending.

All that only sounds out in my head and I've stayed silent, stubbornly, without accepting any of the tasks probably thrown at me over the past few minutes, so Mercedes and Mira are now talking to each other, about a show they both watched and then instantly forgot. What was the actress's name again, how does that test work again, two women in a movie and they talk about something other than a man? Like I'd ever talk about guys, ha ha. My body's slippery with sweat. All I want is to get out of here and snuggle up in flannel and sleep. I think of a narcoleptic, put on a sweet face and say I'm tired, and they're both relieved to hear it because these primary needs are easy to satisfy, because it's something they can remedy: hunger, full bladder, cold and best of all tiredness. Because when you're dreaming, you're not grieving.

We get up and sway our way outside, my skin burning even though it's covered in sweat. Mira's goodbye kiss burns its way into my cheek like a brand mark. Mercedes is stingier than Mira so we have to take the underground back, and the stairs take me twice as long as usual. I mess around with my phone so Mercedes doesn't think she has to keep me occupied. She never does that kind of thing herself; she seems to like just staring into space. Except she couldn't get through family get-togethers in the past few years without checking her emails every five minutes. I follow her eyes, unobtrusively; she's looking at a girl sitting opposite us, whispering to her boyfriend, dripping with gold, her legs dangling over the boy's lap; the girl has Shakira hair and a loud laugh. When it's time to get off, Mercedes digs her elbow in my ribs like an ice-hockey player. I've never felt she liked me that much. And because I didn't grow up with her, it never really bothered me. She was a strangely distant relative who came by occasionally but was never really there. Even in the weeks when she suddenly lived with me, that didn't change. I shuttered up, doors and windows and mouth and nose and eyes. I knew no one would hold it against me; Mercedes even seemed glad of it. I'm here in my suit of armour because I don't want it any other way and I can't permit any other option. Because if I let out what's inside me, I'd scare everyone, and fear is what we can use the least, so I leave the monster inside and withdraw to my shell whenever I can, to my computer and into Threadworld.

We mostly crossed paths in the hall and the kitchen. I ate her healthy meals obediently and listened to her through the wall, talking in a smoky voice, alright actually, pretty nice to listen to, and sometimes I fell asleep to the sound of her voice, nodded off with my thumb still on my sudoku app. Now, when she's wearing a mask, you can at least imagine she's smiling, even if she might only be blinking or yawning.

There are these moments in loneliness, often around the same time, usually exactly the same hour of the day. For me, it's the first dark hour – the one after the blue hour. When it's inky black outside and I don't just hear the silence, I can see it too. As long as light hits my eyes, it's not quiet, there's something up, there's a window into another world, and that's why my screen is always on, and I feel less alone. Because there's still something flickering and glinting to distract me.

If I bury my face deep in Muriel's fur, it still smells of home. She won't let anyone else do it. She lets me up close, and it makes me feel smug. Even under the covers, she shows no inclination to claim her space; she's old and humpbacked, but she only pats at my face with a soft paw, her claws undrawn. On the screen under the covers, we watch a video, a thoughtful young woman with ultrashort hair and artificial resin glasses: *I'm a daughter, and I had a really problematic relationship with my mother ...*

I comment underneath it: *This is dirt. If I read the word poetry slam one more time I'll flip out.* Then, fed up of the internet of high culture, I open an editor and do my homework,

<doctype!HTML> <language: german> <head>

<title> mann mann mann </title>

</head>

<body>

 Was ist das. – Was – ist das ...

 <language: unknown> Je, den Düwel ook, <language: french> c'est la question, ma très chère demoiselle!

</body>

I stare for a moment at the listless HTML framework, then I creep out of my blanket cave and sit down at the window.

The summer smells old, of rotten fruit and wilting flowers, the putrefaction even clearer at night in the cooler air. Maybe some things do end. Muriel stretches her nose out of the window, curious. I lift her up by her armpits and hold the fluffy bundle over the abyss, the dusty chasm, below her nothing but depths, construction rubble and an old wheelbarrow. The cat doesn't resist, hanging there resigned to her fate and circling her tail. The older she gets, the rounder her owlish British Shorthair face, but under her thick fur she's astoundingly skinny. She looks at me with lamps for eyes, over her fluffy shoulder. I think for an instant she's going to jump, and I quickly press her to my chest and mutter at her that she can forget that – you're not getting away from me that easily, Madame. Triumphant, she curls up on my lap and we watch another couple of videos on my phone.

Then I read my last post in Threadworld one more time and think about adding something, but I hold off, I want to wait and see what the others write, tomorrow, before they go to work, maybe, or in their lunch breaks when they have a quick read so they won't miss anything that happens on our ship.

Light is still falling on the courtyard from the kitchen, which means Mercedes is working, even though she said good night the minute we got inside the flat.

Before I saw hers, I didn't know there were people still using Arcor mail addresses. Statistically, one in ten passwords chosen by users over the age of 45 is *password.* Not bad: Mercedes at least uses a capital P, swapped the a for a 4 and the o for a 0. But she hasn't changed it for years.