Marion Brasch

From Now On: Quiet

A novel about my fabulous family

400 pages

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"From now on: Quiet" - this saying, which the restless children recited with their mother and which was supposed to guide them to sleep, hovers over Marion Brasch's family novel like a mantra.

Marion Brasch's irresistible novel tells the story of her extraordinary family. Her Jewish parents, who met in exile in London, established the existence of their young family in East Berlin, where the father wanted to realise his ideals as a politician after the war. While he became the GDR's deputy minister of culture, the three sons - who became famous writers, playwrights and actors - revolted against the authority of their father's generation and failed in the face of reality. The little sister sought reconciliation and balance and often enough came up against limits, including her own.

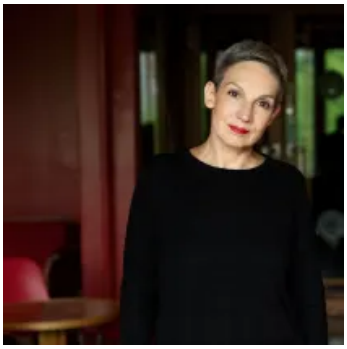
With surprising ease, Marion Brasch recounts the dramatic events of her family - success, revolt, loss of the three brothers - and follows their path through adventure and turmoil to their own freedom. She succeeds in creating a moving, often witty retrospective of her family's history, while at the same time recounting her own life in a country that no longer exists. It is the "grand narrative of a vanished world" called the GDR, which has led to numerous discussions, films and theatre productions about the Brasch family.

"Marion Brasch has written a book about a very special, but also exemplary family in the GDR." Katja Essbach, NDR Info

"Laconic and light, Marion Brasch tells of her path to her own freedom." Kristina Gründken, WDR 5

"A captivating book (...) If her brothers could still read it, they would be proud of their sister." Jochen Schmidt, Der Freitag

"In search of her own history, Marion Brasch has found her own voice: clear, transparent and very moving." Roger Willemsen



Marion Brasch was born in 1961 in Berlin. After finishing high school, she became a typesetter and worked in a printers' shop, then with a number of publishing houses and with the Composers' Association of the GDR, and later for radio broadcasters. Her novels "Ab jetzt ist Ruhe", "Wunderlich fährt nach Norden" and "Lieber Woanders" have been published by S. Fischer.

PROLOGUE

I was four years old the first time I ran away from home. I can't remember it, but the story was repeated to me by various people in rather contradictory versions. My father told me they'd only noticed I'd disappeared that Sunday afternoon when they got a call from the stationmaster. I'd been picked up in the sweetshop at Alexanderplatz station, where I'd insisted on being given a free bag of chocolate buttons.

My mother said she'd found my bed empty when she went to put the ironing away. Luckily, there'd been a ring at the door at that very moment. It was the lady from downstairs, who had found me in tears, wandering lost around the station. My mother tended to embellish her story with all manner of interesting, albeit varying details: in one version I was wearing my pyjamas, in another I was fully dressed. Sometimes I had an ice cream in my hand, sometimes a lollipop. But it was always the lady from the fourth floor outside the front door.

And then there was my brother's version, who had been nine at the time. He claimed in an aggrieved tone that it wasn't me who'd run away, but him. And it hadn't been a sweetshop either; it was a tobacconist.

This is one of the stories that get told over and over in my family. And it's true – just as true as all the following stories...

ONE

I was four years old, then, the first time I ran away from home. I remember it because my mother sent me to bed earlier than usual for my nap. I was normally allowed to play with the grown-ups for half an hour after Sunday lunch. For normal Sundays like this one I had a varying arsenal of toys, which I used to drag into the dining room on my blanket and spread out under the dining table. On normal Sundays like this one, my parents and my two big brothers sat around the table. On this occasion, even my third and oldest brother was there, gradually becoming a rare sight at home.

He was nineteen, fantastic looking and wore a leather jacket that smelled incredibly good and creaked like an ancient tree at his every move. The more excited the conversation at the table grew, the faster and louder the jacket seemed to speak as well. It was a fascinating but still rather unsettling procedure, which I listened to

spellbound until my mother's head popped under the table and informed me in no uncertain terms that I was to abandon my position quick-sharp for my bedroom.
I took my time. As much as I hated it when they argued, I hated it even more when I had to listen to them from exile. But it was no use – at some point I was alone in my stupid bed in my stupid room. Not for very long though, as my youngest brother was soon given the boot as well. My brother, who was ten years old and hadn't actually had to take a nap for years now. My brother, who always acted like he understood the grown-ups. My brother, who was allowed to sleep in the top bunk every night.
He slammed the bedroom door with a curse, informed me of how square the oldies were and vented his rage with childish cruelty on my favourite doll, pressing her rubber face in with the words: 'She looks much better like this!' Then he climbed up into his bed and sulked in silence. On normal Sundays I'd have thrown something at him for maltreating my doll and gone to tell on him. But this Sunday was different. Perhaps I'd grown up, perhaps there'd been just one slammed door too many – whatever it was, it made no difference. I just wanted to get out of there. To do a bunk.

Doing a bunk. That was what my mother said when she talked about England. 'We did a bunk,' she said, and at some point she told me about the toothbrush she and her sister had to use to clean the street in Vienna, under Nazi supervision. She told the story in passing, like an episode she'd normally have forgotten. Like an anecdote you only remember because of some minor detail: a toothbrush that was no use afterwards.
At the time I thought it had been a game: the loser has to clean the street with a toothbrush, so what? And Nazis – in my mother's soft Viennese drawl, the word sounded like a cute breed of dog. But doing a bunk – that sounded wonderful.
I imagined my mother clambering boldly from one bunk bed to another, carrying her belongings in a handkerchief all the way to London. Perhaps the bunks were all piled up like a long ladder. I wanted to try it out too. But the time didn't seem ripe quite yet, and I'd never come across such a great collection of bunk beds. So I only got as far as Alexanderplatz station.
I could have found my way there with my eyes closed. I'd practiced it often enough, holding my father's hand when he took me along to fetch cigarettes every weekend. We had a secret code. One squeeze of my hand meant: step down off the curb, two squeezes of my hand meant: step up onto the curb. To begin with I used to peek occasionally, but not after a while. I didn't open my eyes until I smelled the shop where my father bought cigarettes for himself and sweets for me. It had a special fragrance of tobacco and coffee. I liked the smell – but I couldn't enjoy it because the saleswoman was such a fat nitwit. She treated me as though I was part of the family, pinching my chin with her sausage-like fingers as though she wanted to steal it at the next

opportunity, seeing as she didn't have one of her own any more. I could have put up with all that if only she hadn't had the hots for my father: 'Ah, Mr Deputy Minister!' she'd fawn. 'The good tobacco as usual?' My father nodded. 'And for the littl'un… chocolate buttons!' she'd bark, as if I was dim-witted or deaf. I hated the fat lady. And she was always there. Perhaps she was too huge to leave the shop. Perhaps she was as huge as fat Mr Bell, who my oldest brother had once told me about.

Fat Mr Bell got so fat that he couldn't fit through his front door. He spent all day sitting on the carpet, waiting for the lady next door to bring him something to eat. Fat Mr Bell got sadder and sadder because he had no idea what was going on in the world. But then he had an idea. He asked the lady next door to bring him a long wire, some thin sheets of tin, a hammer and a pair of pliers. He's lost his mind, thought the lady next door. But she brought him what he wanted. So fat Mr Bell invented the telephone and he was soon jolly again, because he could call people up and they'd tell him what was going on in the world.

The fat lady in the tobacco shop was not jolly. She was just huge and loud. And particularly so when she spotted me in the queue that Sunday afternoon and thwarted my plans. She planted her ham-sized fists on her hips and shrieked: 'Now what's my little princess doing here?! And where's your daddy?' The word 'daddy' reached me only as an echo across the station's shopping arcade, where I ran straight into the arms of the lady from the fourth floor.

'What are you doing here all on your own?'

'I've done a bunk,' I explained.

'I see,' she said, and she promptly bought me an ice cream and took me home. My mother was as white as a sheet when she opened the door. She sheepishly thanked the lady from the fourth floor and pulled me inside the flat.

'What on earth were you thinking?'

'I did a bunk. Just like you!'

'Our little sister did a bunk,' my middle brother crowed, suddenly appearing behind us. 'Everybody wants to do it and she just goes ahead.'

He was fourteen and I only saw him at the weekends when he came home from boarding school.

My mother spun round on her heel. 'Go to your room! I'll have words with you later!' she shouted at him.

'I'll have words with you later,' my brother mimicked her as he vanished into his room. My mother gave me a good telling off and made me promise never to do anything so silly again.

'Don't let it go to your head,' said my youngest brother once we were in our beds that evening. 'I ran away before you were even a twinkle in daddy's eye!'

'Did not.'

'How would you know?'

'Better than you, stupid.'

'Shut your mouth.'

'You shut yours.'

Our mother came in.

'That's enough,' she reprimanded us, drawing the curtains. She came to our beds, gave us each a kiss, and we said our goodnight words, one for each of us.

From – now – on – quiet.

Then she switched off the light and left.

If I was to believe my oldest brother, there had been a predecessor to that spectacular escape attempt. I was ten months old at the time and he was sixteen. We lived in a house on the edge of Berlin and had a dog called Fred, and also an elderly housekeeper with an overbite by the name of Agnes.

It was a perfectly normal summer morning. My parents were at work and my two youngest brothers were at kindergarten and school. I was at home with my oldest brother, Fred the dog and Agnes. Agnes was smoking in the kitchen, my brother was in his room, Fred was lounging around in the garden and I was playing on the living room carpet.

Be it out of boredom or curiosity, I crawled out of the house, unobserved and wearing nothing but a terry nappy slung casually around my hips, proceeding through the garden and onto the road. The dog spotted me, ran after me, carried me back with my nappy between his teeth and deposited me mutely in the hallway, whereupon I broke out in a fit of piercing screams. My big brother came dashing out of his room, plonked me down in the playpen, shouted for Agnes smoking uselessly in the kitchen and slapped her round the face. Agnes was fired that same day and the dog must have died not long afterwards, as I can't for the life of me remember any dog. We left the house on the edge of town and moved into a tower block on Alexanderplatz.

From then on I was sent to the weekly crèche, a marvellous institution: you were handed in with a clean nappy on Monday morning and collected in the same condition on Friday evening. There, I presumably concentrated all my energies on taking in and discharging nourishment. This is another dark chapter I no longer remember, although I do have a vague sense of what it's like to be kept behind bars with a full nappy, having to put up with the ear-splitting noise of all the other smelly kids. Instead of letting it traumatize me, though, I made sure I was soon out of nappies, and learned to use and love my potty.

The weekly crèche was followed by kindergarten. I had a driver who took me to kindergarten once he'd dropped my father off at work. The car was a shiny black Tatra and the driver's name was Mr Wolf. Mr Wolf was a tall, broad-shouldered man who always had wet hair, which he combed neatly back at every red traffic light with a brown comb, forming a kind of parting down the back of his head.

Mr Wolf took me to the petite, poodle-haired Auntie Ritter and the strict, unflatteringly bespectacled Auntie Liebig. The two of them were the perfect double-act. Anything that the soft-hearted one let you get away with, the other one put right again with a warning voice and a firm hand.

On one occasion we had sülze for lunch: scraps of fatty meat encapsulated in aspic. Auntie Ritter walked round the table, trying to make the disgusting food seem vaguely attractive. 'Look, it's got a face – it's smiling at you. It wants to be eaten, yummy yum.' Most of us put on a brave face and managed to ingest the stuff in homeopathic doses. But when Auntie Liebig did her round it was time for big forkfuls. Including for me. She leaned her heavy bosom against my shoulder and pointed an even heavier finger at my virginal plate: 'What's this then? Your plate's still full! Eat it up, quick, quick!' She grabbed my untouched fork, pierced a piece of flesh-coloured goo on it and held it in front of my nose. Not for long, because it made me vomit. Not for long, but long enough to cover up the disgusting stuff on my plate with the disgusting stuff from my mouth, killing it for good.

Another unpleasant memory is our fancy-dress parties at kindergarten. While the other children came in different costumes every year, I was a flower-girl every single time, kitted out with a sundress, a headscarf and a little basket of plastic flowers.

Once my mother gave me a red headscarf and put an empty wine bottle and two slices of cake in the basket: Little Red Riding Hood. It was nothing short of humiliating.

I wanted to turn the tide for the last fancy-dress party. And Granny Potsdam was to help me. She was my father's mother and we called her Granny Potsdam to differentiate her from Granny London.

Granny Potsdam took me to a shop that I've never seen the likes of, before or since. On the outside it was a shop selling 'Textiles and Haberdashery', on the inside it was a rainbow-coloured grotto stuffed full of delights. It was so tightly packed that no more than two or three customers fitted in at one time. The tables warped under the weight of huge shiny multi-coloured bales of cloth, the shelves were piled with cotton reels and balls of wool, the ceiling was hung with long bright ribbons in all materials with all kinds of patterns. There were large wooden chests containing thousands of odds and ends and boxes full of buttons, sequins and diamantes.

The shopkeeper's name was Eva, and my granny was on first name terms with her. Eva was about forty years old and incredibly beautiful. She had fiery red curls and grey eyes, their lids half-closed and making her look

rather tired. My granny called them 'come-to-bed eyes'. I only learned later on that the term meant something other than what I thought. She also told me later that Eva's red hair wasn't natural and she actually had the same mouse-blonde, straight hair as her father – an asthmatic baker I went to for our morning rolls.

We squeezed into Eva's shop and chose everything we needed for an Oriental princess outfit. Eva took my measurements and less invited than commanded us to her flat the next day. There, the walls were lined with cloth and decorated with pictures of a single model: Eva.

Eva made me a sequinned dream out of dark blue artificial silk with a veil and a long train. The dream's half-life consisted of precisely two hours and ended in my granny's passageway, as a sooty mess with a torn train, a strained ankle and floods of tears. Absolutely unnoticed, the princess had sneaked out of the flat to surprise her grandmother with a scuttle of coal from the cellar. Scheherazade was never to leave the Potsdam backyard.

I loved going to stay with Granny Potsdam. I was allowed to stay up as long as I liked, watch Sesame Street on West German television and roll cigarettes for my granny.

She had a silver tobacco tin and an ivory cigarette holder, which she smoked as elegantly as a movie star while she told me stories about the old days. Stories from a world that had not the slightest thing in common with the life she lived now. It was the world of a wealthy Jewish factory-owner's family, who had moved to Berlin from a miserable village near Breslau. Her father was one of eight children, had a twin brother and died at the age of only fifty-one. 'Of a broken heart,' as my grandmother always stressed with a sigh, and a certain dash of drama. She rarely mentioned her strict mother.

She showed me photos of her brother, who went out to the African colonies during World War One and died of yellow fever. She showed me her beautiful sister – a singer and dancer, a protégé of the wives of high-ranking Nazis until she fell out of favour and was deported to Theresienstadt.

She told me about her three husbands, each one worse than the last. 'They all cheated on me,' sighed my grandmother. 'But they were so handsome!'

She showed me a photo of a young man who looked the spitting image of my father. He was wearing the uniform of a World War One officer, flashing a charming smile at the camera. 'A handsome ne'er-do-well, a real ladies' man. He went insane though.' Before that happened she divorced him, only to marry a film critic shortly later, who laid all of 1920s Berlin at her feet. Albeit only until he began to find other women's feet more enticing.

Next came husband number three: a biologist, art-lover and translator. He was twenty years my grandmother's senior and took her back to the small Bavarian village where he lived.

'They never stopped gossiping about me, whenever we walked around the village,' she told me with a drag on her ivory cigarette holder. 'The Jewish divorcée, they called me. But I was better than those common fishwives!' She blew out the smoke with such contempt as if the entire village were with us in her living room.

She was something better, and she proved it by becoming an ever better Catholic than they were. She made religion her new hobby. But what began out of a mixture of defiance, boredom and curiosity, soon became her whole reason for being. At some point she no longer just pretended to believe – she really did believe.

She sent her son, who was later to become my father, to a Catholic boarding school in the mountains. He became a keen altar boy, and had he not been circumcised he would no doubt soon have forgotten he was ever Jewish. He learned what a good Catholic had to learn. Father Richard taught him Latin, Father Rupert took his confessions and Father Martin explained the world to him. Albeit in a way that was not to the Gestapo's taste. Now he was an antifascist and a Jew – and that was beyond the pale and he had to leave. Both the boarding school and the country. A Jewish kindertransport took him to England.

His mother was allowed to stay. She was protected by her marriage to an Aryan. After the war, however, she divorced him on the grounds of repeated philandering. My grandmother spent two years in the spare room alongside her ex-husband and his young bride, until my father returned from exile and found her the small flat in Potsdam where she still lived.

My grandmother was a woman who loved appearances, delighted in glamour and glitz and the world of beautiful objects. She enjoyed getting lost in the past, which she hoarded like treasure in her old bureau. Sometimes she gave me the key and let me look in all the little drawers, in which she kept the insignia of another life.

She lived in the past but she never forgot that I was part of her present. And she did the job of grandmother very well. She'd let me sleep in her bed beneath the wooden crucifix, spending her night on the uncomfortable settee in the living room. When I woke up in the morning I'd creep under her covers and she'd read Red Indian stories out loud in her creaky, warm voice. She'd make me green beans, bake me chocolate cake and buy me little rings with bright glass stones.

Only Sunday mornings were dull. That was when she'd take me to church. An hour of miserable boredom with earnest-faced old people and a jaundiced-looking priest with terrible breath. When he stood in the church porch to welcome his parishioners, I'd take a deep breath and hold it in until I got inside. It wasn't until later that I realized all I had to do to save my life was breathe through my mouth.

I hassled Granny Potsdam to sit as far back as possible, but the priest's reeking breath seemed to reach me even in the very last pew. I survived... narrowly.

My father had strictly prohibited his mother from taking me along to church. Not because he wanted to spare me the endless sermons, prayers and hymns. No, my father was concerned that my tenderly blossoming class consciousness might be undermined.

Granny Potsdam, however, had no missionary intentions – she didn't care whether I believed in God or not. She only did it to score points against her son. She knew how much my father hated her Catholicism. And she also held him responsible for 'this disaster', as she called it. I didn't know at the time, of course, what that meant, but I could tell by the contemptuous look on her face that accompanied this word around her dark and poky Potsdam flat, that it must have something to do with her present life.

Dragging me along to church and letting me watch Sesame Street on West German TV – strictly forbidden! – was her small act of revenge on her son. Going behind his back gave her a wicked sense of pleasure.

'May lightning strike me down if I let your father forbid me from doing anything,' she'd say, taking a nonchalant drag at her cigarette holder that made the cigarette I'd rolled for her glow red.

One day she really was struck down. She fell down dead at the age of seventy. My father was sitting in the kitchen, smoking. 'Granny's dead,' he told me with an expressionless face. 'The funeral's tomorrow. Do you want to come? You don't have to.' I cried. He smoked. I was ten years old. Of course I wanted to go to the funeral.

The halitosis-stricken priest spoke solemn words at the ceremony and red-headed Eva exchanged her come-to-bed eyes for grief-ridden ones. And my father smoked.

My father was always smoking. Even when Granny London came to visit, and she couldn't stand it when he smoked. She didn't like my father and she'd never forgiven her daughter for letting a Jew converted to Catholicism and then to Communism drag her off after the war to the dreaded Germany, of all places. And then to the East! Deep inside, she despised her daughter for putting up with it, and she let it on to my mother even decades later, in a very subtle way.

Granny London was called Granny London because she and her husband William hadn't returned to Vienna after the war but had stayed in England. The two of them lived in a wealthy London suburb and spent the summer at their holiday home in the mild climate of the Scilly Isles off the coast of Cornwall. Willy was an artist and Granny London lived on his money and the rich inheritance from her first husband.

Granny London was a beauty even in old age – elegantly dressed, with her hair immaculately coiffed and long, red-painted fingernails. She spoke the finest Viennese, scattered liberally with English vocabulary – a perfect lady.

William, whom we called Willy, was her second husband and was no less classy than she was. His face was inhabited by a neatly trimmed Adolphe Menjou-style moustache and his wavy white hair was combed back impeccably – he was the epitome of the perfect gentleman with the charm and nonchalance of a Viennese man-about-town.

Willy was an illustrator and a sculptor with a particular passion for animals. He made large bronze statues that were popular in various zoos, and drew comics and cartoons of amusing dog stories. Willy used to give us all sorts of Bengo-related gifts. Bengo was a puppy, who led a rebellious existence as a comic, cartoon or cuddly toy. My bedroom was populated by numerous Bengos. The Bengo centre of my life, however, was a small rug spread by the side of my bed, until it got threadbare and was disposed of in a cruel undercover operation by some pitiless member of my family.

My grandparents' rare visits from London were spectacular events, as Granny London knew just how to give us the feeling it wasn't her visiting us but the other way around.

She and Willy usually resided in an expensive hotel at the centre of Berlin. There she granted us audiences that had to follow a strict protocol of her own invention.

Usually, my parents and we children waited in the hotel lobby until my grandmother and Willy appeared, to be escorted from there to the restaurant. Granny London greeted every member of the family with sophisticated composure and breathed cultivated kisses onto our cheeks.

'Ja schau, Sweetie!' she'd purr at me when it came to my turn, mixing German and English as usual. 'Look at you, haven't you grown!' She spoke, took my face in her cool hands and kissed my forehead while I drew in her precious scent. She smelled wonderful, of exquisite perfume and far away.

Willy's operating temperature was somewhat higher than my grandmother's. 'Hullo, Kid!' he'd say with a broad grin and a big hug. And it was he who'd rescue me from dying of boredom several times over during the endless hours in the hotel restaurant.

Willy always had a sketchpad and pencils with him and he drew everything I wanted. Dogs and cats, waiters with pointy faces and ladies with funny hats, the food on the table, my brothers' bored faces and various kinds of monkeys.

Time dragged by in the restaurant until Granny London finally made a gracious gesture to the waiter to signal that he might bring the bill. My brothers' cramped faces relaxed, a light returned to my father's dull eyes and my mother stared gratefully into space. At last it was over, with the long hours in the restaurant followed by the handover of presents in the hotel suite. These were heavenly moments for my brothers and me. I was given chocolate and Bengo items, there were the obligatory Levi's for my brothers, my father got

jars of marmalade, cigarettes and crystallised ginger and my mother traditionally took consignment of the mothball-scented velvet dressing gowns and nightshirts cast off by my grandmother. My mother was a proud woman and refused to show any sign of emotion. With an almost casual gesture and a cool, 'Thank you, Mama,' she'd take her mother's cast-offs and put them aside immediately, continuing her animated conversation with Willy all the while. The humiliation seemed not only to miss its target, but to be dispatched straight back to the sender by return of post. She was very much her mother's daughter.
'I do love her,' my mother said once. 'But I freeze when she's around me.'