

MY GIRLS: TO ALL THE ONES I HURT ALONG THE WAY

馬子們

This book is a confession, a letter written by the twenty-nine-year-old Chang Chia-He to all the women he has loved or who loved him in the past.

Miss Hermès was a warm and gentle embrace. Ugly Betty had a beautiful inner soul, but still, he turned her down, cruelly. Tsukushi was the one who got away, the one who would sear herself on his heart forever, but she had so many responsibilities at home and he felt neglected. Sam-Soon, now she taught him how to be a man. A good man...

To all these girls, Chia-He wants to say: Thank you. Thank you for making me the man I am today.

Mag Hsu 徐譽庭

Mag Hsu has previously directed plays and managed a theatre company, but now she prefers to write screenplays and novels instead. She won the 2012 Golden Bell Award for best screenplay, and set up the Dear Studio production company the same year. *My Girls: To All the Ones I Hurt Along the Way* was adapted into a comic and serialised by a Japanese magazine. Her most famous screenplays include the TV dramas *Story in Time*, *Apple in Your Eye* and *In Time with You*.



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By Mag Hsu. Translated by Riccardo Moratto.

My First Crush: Miss Hermès

My first girl appeared on the stage of my life when I was in my fourth grade. Her name was Hermès.

Her hair was long to her waist, undulating like the sea. No matter how hot it was, she always left her hair loose, falling like surging waves down her back. She wore a blouse and a knee-length skirt. They were coloured blouses, with pointed collars, round necks, or decorated with frills... She never wore the same thing twice. She also wore pleated skirts which matched her shirts. Sometimes the pleats were thin, at other times they were wide, or neither one nor the other; all the same, I never saw a single crease out of place. Around her slender neck she would wear a glittering necklace with a shiny diamond or a flying butterfly or a flower; or she would wear a knotted silk scarf, which at times she also wore as a headscarf. But what really made people want to be on intimate terms with her was her superbly elegant scent, a feminine and sweet perfume. My classmate Zheng Da-Ching, who sat right behind me, called her 'The Scented Princess.' The girls in the class mocked him for being so whimsical, but soon they started to wear silk headscarves as well.

Hermès was the daughter of our dean, and one day she happened to become our substitute teacher because our own teacher, 'Stinky Witch,' was on maternity leave since she had just given birth to 'Stinky Duck's Egg.'

In the beginning I didn't like Hermès at all, because she would always call me 'Little Cutie.'

Was it because I was short? Or because my skin was so white, never tanning in the slightest? Or because in class I was always so nervous that I could never utter a single word? I don't know, because I never got to ask her. For a boy to be called 'Little Cutie' was like a slap in the face, but still Hermès would say to me, 'Little Cutie, come to my office after class okey-dokey?', 'What's wrong, Little Cutie?', 'Hey, Little Cutie, you got a problem?' Those little nicknames uttered in an alluring tone of voice were utterly confusing to me, and so charming. They overrode my intelligence and self-respect, and most of all, earned my love.

I tried to resist it with all my strength, and with the not-so strong intellect of a fourth-grader. It seemed as if Miss Hermès was completely aware of it. So one day when I deliberately spilled the milk that Miss Hermès had given me, I was summoned again to her:

'Do you like me, Little Cutie?'

Resolute, I stayed silent.

'Well, maybe you hate me, Little Cutie?'

Still I kept quiet.

'So, that's it, you really don't like me at all, Little Cutie...'

I didn't utter a syllable, and Miss Hermès didn't say anything else. Standing next to her I looked into her sad face. Something as glittering as the diamond hung on her neck started to sparkle in her eyes. All of a sudden I blurted out two words.

'Yeah, right...'

Yeah right: It's quite a philosophical way of contradicting what someone has just said. It starts off from the front, then suddenly hits a backhand, catching people by surprise, but still it does not

give full expression to one's views. It is the standard method of reverse psychology. I still remember what our professor said in our first class of the course 'Introduction to Law': 'an outstanding man of law must understand and be able to properly utilize so-called 'reverse psychology'.'

I don't like Hermès. Yeah right. I don't love my mother. Yeah right. I respect my father, Yeah right... Apparently I could handle masterfully the art of reverse psychology in my fourth grade—presumably I should have been an outstanding man of the law by now.

Yeah, right. I had tried to make it in the world of jurisprudence for so many years, but up to now I've been so outstanding that I haven't even managed to attain my lawyer's license. I'm just a little assistant in a lawyer's office. Lawyer Kong was my senior at school, he is an outstanding person, always trying to persuade his clients to step back and think twice, always telling them 'this case does not pay off.' I have never understood understand why he didn't choose a career in social welfare, rather than the legal profession, which demands a more combative nature. As one could well imagine, the work in our office is somewhat dull.

I've wanted to resign on several occasions, but Kong always urges me to stay: 'Why think so much! If you stay here you'll have time to study properly and take your exams!'

In return for his kindness, I've had to actively seek new business for the office. I've gone online, or called on store managers, and looked for help from other people working in the same field. The court of justice has always been a place where most of our potential clients are concentrated. Most people still live with that old way of thinking: rationality prevails; but they don't understand that the law only protects people who know the law, and cannot protect the truth.

And so, I often wonder in and out of the court, where I am witness to all kinds of incredible things and all kinds of absurdities: clandestine love affairs between daughters-in-law and fathers-in-law; employers forcing their Philippine maids into ménage à trois; husbands filing lawsuits against their wives for concealing their transsexuality... Once I assisted on the case of a fellow student, working as an elementary school teacher, accused of serial murder.

I don't know why, but that beautiful elementary school teacher, distressed and panic-stricken, made me think of Hermès.

What did Hermès' face actually look like? I only have a vague memory left. Maybe it's because I had always had to look up at her from a shorter height, but most likely it is because I have totally confused her with another woman.

My mother was very beautiful, in a way that did not conform to conventional taste.

She had excellent skin, to the point that it was enough for her to put on some lipstick and she'd be ready to go. She was not very tall, but her legs were long. This is the reason why she liked to wear close-fitting pants, whether it was a pair of tight-fitting tapered pants, or bell-bottoms, or flares. No matter what she wore she was always dazzlingly beautiful. She didn't like to wear any kind of jewelry—often even absent-mindedly leaving her wedding ring by the sink. She wore her black hair long and straight.

I most loved to watch her as she was absorbed in a task. I loved to see her pin up her hair with a spare pair of chopsticks. I loved to hear her sing.

She would hum to herself as she did the housework, and she could make our home spick-and-span in the blink of an eye, and prepare a table full of delicious food. Every time she made a mistake in her cooking, it became a new invention. She said that these were a way of 'letting go,' but from the bottom of my heart I felt that was the manifestation of a woman's vitality! It was too bad that she never extended this vitality to her love life.

She loved to clean other people's ears and I loved to have mine cleaned. Every night after taking

my shower, after carefully drying my hair, she would have me rest my head on her thigh. With her white long fingers, she would Q-tip my ears. In those moments, happy and at ease, I would quickly fall sound asleep.

She also liked Chinese sorghum. When I woke up at night to go to the toilet, I would often see my mom drinking it with my father, who had just come home from work. They would talk at the dining table, wrapped in a cloud of affection and love. My mother would bring her legs to her chest, folding her arms around her knees; she would look at pa and listen to his words, a reverent expression in her eyes.

Back in those happy days, the most precious decoration in our house was most probably our 'music wall,' where vinyl records and cassettes were neatly arranged alphabetically. My mother's passion for music, especially rock, had led her to collect as many records as you'd find in any music store. I'd come home from school to find music by Europe, Aerosmith, Nirvana playing in the living room. To me, it was only terribly loud, and the subtlety of those records was lost on me. But as I saw Mother hum along, and then singing her lungs out, I felt that rock music was the coolest.

She had met my father in a folk-song competition. My father had been a judge, and had wanted to give my mother the first prize, for a song she had written in 'inelegant words that spoke a true love.' 'Her voice is what the eighties need,' he had said, even though the rest of the judges disagreed. Afterwards, with my father's encouragement, she became a well-known lyricist. In a time when pop music and folk songs had common boundaries, her straight-forward lyrics were innovative, her emotions directly expressed:

Who do you think I am?

I can't stand it anymore!

Look at yourself in the mirror!

You've had your chance!

Don't stand in my way!

I wanna fly!

I wanna fly!

Fuck you!

'Your father saw something different in me.' My mom would often tell me.

Once father had become her talent scout, he rapidly also became my mother's protector. After a two year love affair, mother became pregnant with me, and they hastily walked down the aisle.

My father really did see something 'different' in her. He would always say she was unconventional and elegant. But in his eyes, all women were unique in some way. Once he described an obese professor of mine as 'ample and fertile' and praised an anorexic colleague of his as 'slender and delicate'. According to his standards, older women working at the market still retained their charm, and he would call the bimbos yelling on the street 'the expression of magnificent youth.'

It made me curious. If everybody was so unconventionally chic, didn't this only mean in the end that everyone was conventionally elegant?

Anyway, I never got a chance to debate this matter with my father, who was so often absent that I never really knew him well at all. When, on my tenth birthday, he presented me with a Parker Pen and the *Complete Works of Western Philosophers*, I realized that he did not know me very well either.

All of these things happened before I turned ten. In 1990, as I entered fourth grade, my father finally got a chance to return to the main office in Taipei. We followed him and moved into a small apartment in a southern district of Taipei City.

Mother was really happy, not only for my father but also for the new life ahead of her. She worked very hard to sweep the neglected apartment until it shone, and then she found a spot for all of her beloved records and audio-cassettes. She also started to get back in touch with her good

university friends, and they formed a rock band together. In all those years, she had kept on writing lyrics but after moving to Taipei she seemed to be even more elated. Every afternoon, a few hours before I finished class, she would sit by the tea table in the living room to write, cross out and then write again...

*After a long time, I can finally embrace the sunlight
Like a whale back in the ocean, my heart seems crazy
Sweet and fragrant coffee is not worth careful savoring
I want a splendid life, even if the price should be death*

Here is the question: why did my ma, so cool, and Miss Hermès, so refined, merge into one in my memory? Hermès was tall, Mother was short. Hermès wore a sweet-scented perfume, while Mother had the smell of fresh talcum powder on her. Hermès wore a pleated skirt, Mother close-fitting pants. When I think carefully, even their long hair—the only thing they had in common—was in fact entirely different. Hermès' hair would surge like ocean waves, while Mother's fell down her back like a waterfall.

But, still, in my mind I could not separate their two overlapping figures, Every time I try to think back to Mother in high spirits, the 'yeah, right' between Hermès and I would always cross time and space and resonate in my ears.

If I had to dissect my own heart frankly, I think there would be only one answer: in the past I had hoped that my mom would die and be substituted by Miss Hermès. What reason could there possibly be for a son, who deeply loves his mother, to wish her dead? A good question, indeed. In the night, when I find I cannot fall asleep, I ponder this question, and it makes me go back to when I had just turned ten.

That year, in December, my mother's favourite band came to Taiwan. My father got us three VIP tickets in the front row, thanks to someone he knew. The three of us were ready to go on a pilgrimage. My mother was on cloud nine for a full month. Without any regard for my vocal chords, she wanted me to sing along with her. We screamed our lungs out.

Many other things happened that year: the fall of the Berlin wall, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait which triggered the Gulf War, Li Denghui became the last president elected by the National Assembly, the Chinese Professional Baseball League open play.

Father was busy every day; we would only spend time together once or twice a week. Every time we met he would always say things like 'we are witnessing history', 'the era where people are the masters has finally come' and so on. I was too little to be the least interested in these big events that the adults were so fussed about. On the contrary, I could quite not endure these foreign devils, these old men encroaching on my precious bedtime. Mother, instead, seemed to listen to all these events with genuine interest, her face permeated with the most beautiful and most touching expression.

They say that earnest men are the most charming. Indeed, in those years my father's charm reached its peak., His female colleagues, interviewees, or university professors began to call him up or come looking for him, constantly. Most pestering was Chang Chia-Hui, my father's editor. First she'd call to chase drafts, then to discuss an interview's direction. She was a pain in the ass! I especially hated that mawkish tone of hers with which she called my name. If my father was at home, he would answer the phone in a weird way, covering up his mouth, hastily saying a few words and then hanging up. And they wanted me to believe they were just talking about interviews? Yeah, right.

Mother didn't seem to mind at all. She firmly believed that my father, who knew how to appreciate women, would always love only her.

The night before the concert, when my father came back home from work, he brought some sad

news. He had found himself having to give the tickets over to his editor-in-chief who had been terribly scolded by his wife for not getting any himself. My mother did not utter a single word. That whole night, she kept herself busy by cleaning the house from top to bottom. It was clear it was just a way to give vent to her anger. For a whole week, she didn't speak much, did not put on any music in the living room and only cleaned my ears once.

Eventually my father proposed a way to make up for what he had done: to go see the baseball game. Back then, everybody was crazy about the sport. He wanted my mother to take me to Taipei Stadium at one thirty where we would have met with him by the ticket booth.

My mother finally awoke out of her own depression, and for this rare occasion, she got up early to start preparing food, until there were three layers of stuff in our boxed lunches. Then, she went into her room to change, putting on some lipstick that was perhaps a little too red. By the time everything was in order, we decided to leave half an hour early, in case my father couldn't find us right away. I should have reminded her then that our teacher had always taught us to show up on time but never mentioned anything about arriving ahead of time. What indescribable wisdom there is concealed in this!

As expected, we arrived at the ticket window half an hour early. My father was obviously not there yet. Just as we were looking about us, a familiar voice resonated in my ears: 'Well, well, Mrs. Chang? You've come early!' It was the annoyingly affected voice of Chang Chia-Hui.

'Ching-Li went to park the car, he'll be here any minute.' When she saw that my mother only responded with a smile, she seemed to need to fill in the silence—or perhaps she wanted to say something vindictive. 'He gave me a ride on the way here.' At this instant, my mother's eyes fell onto the overcoat hanging on Chang Chia-Hui's wrist, who hurriedly lifted it to explain: 'Oh, he asked me to help him take his coat.' With this, she promptly put the coat into my mother's hands. Two pieces of paper slipped out of my father's pocket. At once, both my mother and Chang Chia-Hui bent down to pick them up and then both paused: it was clear the two pieces of paper lying on the ground were two tickets torn off at the corners. They were admission tickets to the concert we had been unable to go to.

At first Mother seemed to freeze, while Zhang Jiahui swiftly picked up the tickets and stuffed them in her purse, attempting an incoherent explanation: 'It's too bad you couldn't go see the concert that day! I've never seen such a good audience!'

I couldn't understand why my mother's face had suddenly turned pale, and why she held my hand, trembling as if she was under some kind of malicious spell. Still more incomprehensible to me was why we didn't see the game that day after all, even after I had heard how great it was going to be.

That evening, all through the night, I heard Mother and Father fighting in their room. The morning after, no one woke me up, and there was no breakfast on the table. I knocked on my mother's door but no one replied. Peering through the gap between door and the frame, I saw she was still asleep on the bed, her body curled up in an awkward position. I couldn't rouse her.

From that day on, a strange atmosphere hovered over our house. I had the vague feeling that my mother had fallen ill. Her once smooth skin suddenly became creased, her long shiny hair became dry and lank, and several white hairs appeared. As for my father, the time he spent at home became even more sporadic, and even if he was at home, he would speak to me only because he had to: 'How's it going at school?' 'Anything interesting happen at school?' or some similar nonsense, after which he would hide himself in his room and talk with my mother in a strange squeaking tone that I could never hear clearly. More than once I tried to eavesdrop on their conversation, but all I heard were some unfamiliar names and my father's tirades, which made me even dizzier. The only thing I

was certain of was my mom's uninterrupted sobbing.

Everything became disordered in our house: albums got mixed up as Chao Chuan appeared in Hsue Yue's section. The soy sauce on our breakfast fried eggs became vinegar, stacks of old newspapers would appear on our tea table, mountains of dirty clothes piled high in the laundry room.

At school everything got more complicated: my uniform was no longer neat and spotlessly white, at times even turning a pink or powdery blue. Sometimes I would have take it out of the laundry room and wear it still dirty. I would forget to bring my writing brush and my PE uniform. Mother would forget to give me my milk money, and my nose would always be running because my allergies were now unchecked. Every day as I trudged to school, my classmates would call me 'dirty' and spread rumors about my parents' divorce. My self-esteem was so low that, at ten years old, I felt like I had hit my first wall. Hitting a wall: a concept derived from kinematics, usually it refers to that moment in long distance running, when your body mistakenly believes that such a state of motion is beyond your bearable limit. It will start to issue some warnings to you, creating breathing difficulties, stomach pain, muscle stiffness. But if you get through this period, your body will return to normal again. Everyday our existence is plunged in a sea of risks: we are born, we work, we pay taxes, we do business, we sign contracts, we consume, we love, we get married, we inherit, we drive in traffic... Peril is concealed in thousands of unfathomable things.

The only thing that can reduce risks is the law. At least by the law you can struggle to prove your worth!

I never understood why my mother never pressed charges against my father. She just needed to get the proof of his adultery, report it to the police and then go to court. According to article 239 of the penal code, my father most likely would have been sentenced to a few months.

Why was I only ten years back then? This fact has been haunting me ever since. At ten years, I was so powerless.

After Stinky Witch had given birth to Stinky Duck's Egg, she came down with some kind of disease, so it was announced to us that Miss Hermès would have to remain our teacher. The whole class was overjoyed, except for me.

Miss Hermès must have felt that something was not quite right. In that period her concern towards me was further intensified. She would give me all sorts of 'special tasks' to keep me busy so that I did not become too depressed. My latest assignment was to be the lead singer in the choral competition.

Despite my classmates' protests, Miss Hermès firmly believed in her own judgment. She started to rehearse with me after class. I didn't want to become the target of the other students' jealousy, but being able to go back home a little later was precisely what my heart desired.

Mother had grown irritable. If father was not at home, she would call him like crazy at the office, ringing his old classmates colleagues, friends, his boss, until she'd finally reach him. After hanging up, she'd start settling old scores, searching through her memory for evidence of his unusual behaviour. Of course, after this happened a couple of times, my father simply did not return home or even answer her phone calls anymore. He left me at home alone, with a hysterical mother.

Miss Hermès pressed the button of the tape-recorder, and a soft, sweet melody came out of it. It was the song she had chosen for the competition.

Edelweiss, edelweiss

Every morning you greet me

Miss Hermès listened to the song as if she was being carried away by it. She sang along and then with a smile resembling a 'blossom of snow,' she asked me:

'It's a nice song, isn't it?'

'Nice. Yeah right...'

Actually Edelweiss wasn't bad. I didn't know what kind of flower it was but I wanted to plant one in the courtyard. Then, every morning there would at least be an Edelweiss to greet me.

I really didn't want to go back home; my mother did not resemble at an Edelweiss at all. Instead, I would roam about after school, bored. Sometimes, I'd peer into the neighbours' gardens or squat in the thick grass of the park. All I wanted was to find that flower, small and white, clean and bright.

Every day, on the endless road back home, I prayed in silence: 'Please God, let mommy not be angry today,' but no one up there ever heard my prayers. Maybe this is also one of the reasons why in the years I grew apart from Him. Anyway, since God was always too busy to help, I began to do my best to return home as late as possible.

One day I was sitting in the park playground. While I day-dreamed about flying up in the Iron Earth machine up onto the moon, Miss Hermès suddenly appeared, scaring the hell out of me.

Surprisingly, she did not blame me for not going back home immediately after school. With that usual sweet smile of hers, she said:

'Did you eat?'

'...'

'Are you hungry?'

'...'

'Ah. I've just remembered your favourite word, McDonald's!'

'Yeah, right.'

She gave me a magnificent smile and I smiled back. I let my hand fall into Miss Hermès' and together we walked into McDonald's. I let my mouth feast on the Happy Meal she had ordered for me, sinking deep into an imaginary maternal love.

That evening I talked on and on, endlessly blurting out all the things I had wanted to say to my mother in the last few months. I even started to sing Edelweiss. It was the best meal I had ever had.

That night, when I went back home I was surprised to see the lights on in the living room and on the table I was dumbstruck to find a big portion of egg fried rice, my mom's specialty. I stared at it for a long time and rubbed my eyes a few times to make sure I was not dreaming. 'Mom is finally back to normal,' I thought to myself, and I rushed into her bedroom. In the pitch darkness, she sat motionless on the edge of the bed, her upper body hunched, her hands covering her face. She was waiting for me.

'What time is it now? Why did your teacher come all the way here to tell me you are not happy at school? Why don't you ever come back home after school? Maybe you don't want mommy anymore either.'

'That's not true...' Flustered, I tried to explain.

'You don't love me anymore either, right?'

'No, no...'

'Why don't you love me anymore? Why?'

'Mommy, I love you, I love you so much, really so so much!'

I embraced her with all my strength and cried my heart out.

'All men are false! Their love is false!'

'It's real, Ma! Mine is real!'

I cried for a long time, until I fell asleep. The morning after, I woke up in her bed and found a mess of papers. On each page, only a few lines...

You have imprisoned me I hate can't find a way out your love before has turned into a living hell now

Can't do anything Jealousy is killing me Colourless sky Good-bye This is the only way out of this hell.

After that night, Mother's mood seemed to improve. However, the weekends still scared me, because I not only had to be alone with her, but also I was forbidden from meeting with Miss Hermès, which made me even more lonely. This feeling tormented my conscience. Was Mother right? Was I nothing more than an unfaithful man?

Of course, back then, I couldn't understand what it felt like to be betrayed. I was simply afraid I could become the traitor, because my mother was a victim and her heart was bleeding. How could I possibly hurt her and make her feel betrayed once again?

What I was even more scared of was the possibility that I could become like her, another victim. One Friday, just before I went home, I couldn't help but ask Miss Hermès:

'Teacher, do you love me?'

Miss Hermès was amused by my question, which seemed to come out of the blue. 'Of course I do!'

'Will you love me forever?'

'If Little Cutie loves me forever, then I will love Little Cutie forever and a day!'

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah, right...'

'Yeah, right, you can say it out loud!'

Relieved, I squeezed Miss Hermès' hand even tighter. I tried to slow down my gait as if to stop the inexorable approach of the weekend.

Fortunately, that Sunday Granny and Auntie came to visit us. They tidied up the apartment and Granny even cooked for us. After dinner, Auntie helped me with my homework and Granny stayed in Mother's room, talking with her for what seemed like an eternity. Then, when they were about to leave Granny asked me:

'Honey, you want to come live with Granny?'

'Why?' I couldn't understand what she meant.

'You and your mother, so that I'll be able to take care of you both.'

'What about school?'

We will just transfer you to another one!'

'No!'

How could I ever commit a betrayal like that? The love I shared with Miss Hermès was genuine! We had a pact: if I loved her forever, she would love me forever and a day. I don't remember how many times I screamed 'No', before I pushed Granny outside with all my strength. I shut our big wooden door in her face.

That night I had a dream. I dreamed that mother had made a miraculous recovery. Her hair was long and shiny black again, she had put on some lipstick and had come out to see me in the singing competition. I didn't know in my dream if I had made first place or not, but I could see my mother's joy.

Then, I introduced her to Miss Hermès: 'This is my mother.' And then my mom, hearing how good I had been, became even happier. At the end of the dream, Mother and Miss Hermès both took my hand and the three of us, we all went to McDonald's.

A few days before the competition I began to feel sick, my throat suddenly inflaming and making me hoarse. I barely joined in practice, and rumours started spreading among my fellow students about giving the lead singing part to someone else. After class, I was summoned to Miss Hermès' office. I was certain she wanted to replace me. With tearful eyes, I approached her office desk, but instead, she gently stroking my head.

'Relax. I'm sure you'll make it. I promise you that if you make it into to the top three, I'll grant you one wish!'

'Take me to the zoo!'

'Deal!' Then Miss Hermès wrote out an invitation for me to give to my whole family, so they could come and watch.

'Mom... are you free next Wednesday?' I cautiously asked.

'Yes. What's going on?'

I handed her the invitation: 'I'll be the soloist. Can you come?'

'Of course, honey!'

'But if I don't win...'

Mother made me sit down by her side, her arms wound tightly around me. That maternal love that I hadn't seen for so long all came back in that moment: 'No matter if you win or not, we will go to McDonald's all the same to celebrate!'

'Celebrate what?'

'Celebrate how awesome you are!' Jesus, God, Allah, Avalokitesvara, I sincerely request, please do not let this mother be just a flash in the pan. Don't make her disappear again!

The day of the competition, I woke an hour earlier than usual.

Following Miss Hermès' instructions, I drank a cup of water with honey, and carefully warmed up my voice. I put on the uniform that Mother had ironed for me the night before. On the table a mighty breakfast, worthy of a prince, was waiting for me. I felt like the luckiest ten year-old boy in the whole world.

When I went out, I couldn't help but remind Mother once again the time of the competition:

'It's two thirty, don't forget!'

'Don't worry, I'll be there on time!'

That morning, none of us could concentrate on our lessons. As soon as lunch break was over, we followed Miss Hermès into the auditorium. Just as I felt my legs start to weaken, Miss Hermès, who stood by my side, encouraged me with a whispered 'Don't forget the zoo!'

At two o'clock the parents began to arrive, one after the other. I couldn't see my mother, not even when we got on stage. At that moment, I was too nervous to be disappointed; I could only stare into Miss Hermès' sweet eyes to find some strength. Into the deafening silence, I heard my voice begin:

Edelweiss, edelweiss, you greet me every morning...

All the other voices began to join in. Hearing the audience applause, I finally regained myself. I looked for Miss Hermès. She was smiling and mouthing to me: the zoo, the zoo!

We were awarded second place.

That night, I didn't ask Mother why she hadn't shown up. When she started ranting about how she had gone out, but couldn't find her way to the school... well, I didn't get the slightest bit angry. I just looked at her. A profound helplessness was expanding inside of me.

Because I suddenly became very mature, mature enough to know: Mother was really sick.