



Dauçhters

Lucy Fricke

translated by Sinéad Crowe

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Lucy Fricke was born in Hamburg in 1974. After working in the film industry for several years, she studied creative writing at the prestigious Leipzig Literary Institute. She has published four novels in the past twelve years, winning her a number of awards including the 2018 Bavarian Book Prize for *Daughters*. Lucy Fricke has been running HAM.LIT since 2010, the first Hamburg festival for upcoming literature and music. She was a resident at the German Academy in Rome and at Ledig House, New York. A member of German PEN and a founding member of the Kook artists' and writers' network, she has judged both the Friedrich Luft Prize for theatre productions and the Karl Heinz Zillmer Prize for publishers. She lives in Berlin.

Sinéad Crowe comes from Dublin. After completing a PhD in German theatre at Trinity College Dublin and working for several years as a lecturer in German Studies, she moved to Hamburg, where she began her career as a translator. Her translations include Ronen Steinke's *Fritz Bauer: The Jewish Prosecutor Who Brought Eichmann and Auschwitz to Trial* and Pierre Jarawan's *The Storyteller*, a co-translation with Rachel McNicholl. Sinéad Crowe also teaches at the University of Hamburg's Institute of English and American Studies.

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The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut in the framework of the 'Books First' programme.

V&Q Books, Berlin 2020

An imprint of Verlag Voland & Quist GmbH

Originally published under the title TÖCHTER

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Editing: Katy Derbyshire

Copy editing: Alyson Coombes

Cover design: Pingundpong*Gestaltungsbüro

Typesetting: Fred Uhde

Printing and binding: PBTisk, Příbram, Czech Republic

Quoting from 'L'italiano', lyrics by Cristiano Minellono

www.vq-books.eu

Daughters

The Eye of God

I'd been stuck there for three days. Rats scurried through the alleys at night, tourists amassed around the Trevi Fountain during the day. Security guards with machine guns outside the museums, dark underground stations where the filth couldn't be seen, just smelled, and if I wanted to visit the Vatican, I had to book online.

I was staying at the Babylon, a budget hotel staffed entirely by Koreans. Maybe it was because I hadn't planned on coming to Rome, but I fell in love instantly. I'd always had a quiet admiration for places and people that run to seed with their heads held high, so sure of their beauty that they don't give a damn what the rest of the world thinks. It was a desolate diva, this city, utterly foul; the only thing it kept clean was its churches, while outside, pigeons shat on every monument.

I'd only intended to pass through. To go from the airport to Anagnina, the last stop on the metro, and to take a bus from there to a town in the mountains where there was someone I'd been meaning to visit for ten years. He knew nothing about my plans, and he wouldn't have cared anyway, being long dead. But you have to say goodbye to everyone, even the dead, especially the dead, and I'm afraid I had an unhealthy attachment to this man, basically worshipped him. It was liable to become a problem at some point, the way everything becomes a problem at some point, especially love, especially men.

So I'd been making my way, after ten years it was time to start making my way, I'd decided, but now here I was, stuck. On the day I arrived, I stood at the bus station watching people boarding this contraption they call a pullman, a contraption

that always seemed to be running late, that had been trundling the streets for decades with the last few rows of seats missing, the windscreen wipers too. But I'd once spent days being carted through a jungle on the bed of a pickup, I'd boarded a rickety propeller plane in howling winds, and I'd ridden pillion on a motorbike while the rider was on the wildest acid trip of his life, as he informed me mid-journey, turning his head to give me a lingering look. Fear was not one of my more prominent traits. So why couldn't I leave this city? Was I lazy, stoic or just a coward when it came to accepting realities, truths I didn't like, truths such as the death of this man?

I was pondering this as I stared up into the Pantheon's dome, into the middle of the hole, into the grey sky over Rome, into the eye of God. A few metres away, a pink helium balloon had got stuck, one of those balloons that were being handed out outside every Victoria's Secret in the city at the time. An ad for fucking underwear was stuck in the dome of the Pantheon, and with every waft of air it danced a little towards the exit, towards freedom. Hundreds of degenerates were transfixed by this spectacle, all eyes on the pink balloon, phone videos recording, and when it finally floated out into the Roman sky, the crowd clapped and cheered as if the Messiah had just appeared.

My bag began to vibrate just as a stern 'Quiet please' came from the loudspeaker in four languages. I answered anyway, and Martha was on the other end.

'Where are you?' she asked.

I glanced up at the ceiling as if to double-check. 'I'm in the Pantheon.'

'You answered your phone in a church?'

'It's not a church, it's the most godawful tourist trap on the planet. We're packed in like sardines – I wouldn't be able to get out even if I tried.'

'Please do try,' Martha said in a low voice. 'I need to talk to you alone for a minute, somewhere quiet.'

'I'm in Rome. They don't do "alone" here,' I said as I tried to find a route through the masses.

'What on earth are you doing in Rome?'

'Nothing. I just thought, you know, everyone should visit Rome at least once.'

'You're getting odder.'

'Well, at least my crises are getting more refined as I get older,' I replied. 'We're having a rare old time right now, my crisis and me.'

I passed the biggest door I'd ever seen in my entire life. It was at least six metres high and made of bronze. If the doors of heaven are anything like that, I'll never get in.

'Still there, Martha?'

What followed was a dangerously weak 'Yes'. I'd never heard her sound so weak before. There was something so ominous about this 'yes' that I didn't hesitate for a second. I didn't ask any questions. We'd known each other for long enough now to recognise when one of us was about to crack. Martha would start to cry on the phone, and crying on the phone is even worse than crying alone in the back of a taxi. You can't clutch on to someone on the phone; a voice is less than a little finger. I would fly back right away.

Just as I was hanging up, a pigeon shat on my head. I'd learned by now that this wasn't a good omen.

All Sorted

I'd taken the first flight out, the night so short as to be practically non-existent, and now, at around half past nine on a Monday morning, I was dragging my suitcase across Warschauer Bridge, where the party had just broken up, the revelers either in bed, passed out in a pool of vomit or still dancing in some club. I trudged past empty bottles of cheap sparkling wine, shattered beer bottles and an abandoned amp. Shards crunched beneath the wheels of my case. Around the next corner, right beside a massive building site, was my flat. The stairwell smelled like an exploded beer cellar, and a numb silence had taken hold. The building had adapted to its bacchanalian surroundings. To survive the noise here, you needed a country retreat or a job abroad. To afford the rent, you had to sublet your rooms to people from duller countries, people who came here to behave in ways they would never dream of at home. We lived in a muddle, sleeping on sofas with the downstairs and upstairs neighbours, while in our own flats, party tourists pissed on the parquet floors.

I financed myself by fleeing the city. Whenever I was strapped for cash, I would head to parts of the world that were cheaper than this one, of which there were many. 'Kill the investor in you,' I'd read on the side of a building in Kreuzberg recently and cheerfully disregarded. I felt that I'd been living in this neighbourhood long enough now to deserve a piece of the pie, that in fact I myself was the pie. So, like nearly everyone else, I flogged my own home for 80 euros a night.

And then on Thursdays we'd clutch our cardboard coffee cups at demos to save the Turkish greengrocer's, if not the en-

tire neighbourhood, from being driven out, standing alongside artists from Charlottenburg and Prenzlauer Berg who'd shown up to express their solidarity and day-trippers carrying canvas bags emblazoned with protest slogans. A few speeches, a few songs about the rising rents and the selling-out, and demand on Airbnb would shoot up another twenty per cent. The tourists bought the bags and later toted them around New York, Barcelona and Lower Bavaria. No one ever bought vegetables.

The face in my mirror looked exactly as old as it was: just over forty. The lines stayed white in the sun now, as if I'd shattered on the inside. I could only call myself beautiful in the past tense. Age had arrived by night, and it kept on coming. I used to grow while I dreamt, but soon I would start shrinking in my sleep, waking up smaller each morning until I vanished entirely. Sometimes I wondered how I was going to get through all the time until then. And to top it all off, there was more hair sprouting on my face each day.

The Spanish kid had thrown up next to my toilet, the stereo had been set to the highest volume. A jar of peanut butter, a chunk of Emmentaler and a bottle of beer in the fridge, three cigarette butts stamped out on the floor. *José, 24, lives in Madrid.* The picture in my bedroom was now hanging upside down. Apparently José was a practical joker. I was glad I'd never met him.

It took me two hours to clean the flat, to purge it, to scrape Spanish youth out of the cracks. When I was done, I opened José's beer, sat down by the window and looked out at the Spree. It was mid-April and the river was still a river rather than a party strip. In less than six weeks, the techno cruisers would be blaring past, their lasers groping the walls of my study. I'd be looking out at frenzied stag and hen parties, at semi-clad men and even less-clad women, all of whom would be thinking they were hav-

ing the time of their lives and would probably be right, a state of affairs I found increasingly pitiful.

There was no sign of Martha when I arrived at the bar. There was no sign of anyone, apart from a barman I'd never seen before, who was polishing glasses. Martha had suggested the location, a former haunt of hers, though whether this was for sentimental reasons or for lack of a better idea, I didn't know. It felt like a lifetime since we'd spent our nights here with Henning, a boyfriend she would regularly resolve to leave, only to eventually marry him last year. And with Jon, Henning's oldest friend, whom we hadn't been able to save, who'd made this bar his favourite and only companion, leaving his money and his will to live at the counter until both were gone. I didn't think about Jon very much any more. We rarely talked about him, but then all three of us had got quieter in general since he died. Whether this reticence was down to our age or our pain, whether there was any difference between the two, I wasn't sure. We just kept going, and it wasn't as hard to keep going as we'd expected.

I glanced over at the door just as Martha slipped in, like a shadow. She gave my shoulder a listless stroke and sat down with a groan. She barely looked at me, just at the bottles on the shelves.

Martha only went out these days when it was absolutely necessary, and this necessity always came from within, never from the outside world. It had been a long time since she'd shown any interest in the outside world. She'd been pregnant again and again over the past year: four weeks, six, eight, and afterwards, after the miscarriages, we'd go drinking before it all started up again. I was a little unnerved by the way she emerged from these hormonal torture sessions virtually unchanged. Martha was the toughest old bird I knew. During her unfertilised weeks, she'd always order the most expensive booze, usually neat.

In for a penny, in for a pound, she'd say, and be pissed by her third glass. This was one change that did bother me. At first, I'd

