When you've lost your home, where do you belong?

Me, In Between

Julya Rabinowich

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Winner of the Friedrich Gerstäcker Prize and the Austrian Children's and Young People's Book Prize

'Spare and powerful, Julya Rabinowich writes a refugee story about arriving – with an anti-war message. Not only is the simple yet powerful language remarkable, Rabinowich also writes convincingly complex and ambivalent characters'
Die Zeit

'An impressive novel that vividly illuminates the conflict among children and young people who are torn between two cultures and who have to find a new home'
Radio Deutschlandfunk

'Rabinowich gives her young heroine a strong and poetic voice. Her experiences could not have been described in a more exciting and haunting way'
Radio Bremen

'Madina becomes a voice for everyone who has to build a new life abroad'
Neue Zürcher Zeitung

'Julya Rabinowich is particularly convincing with her fictionalisation; no trace of a well-intentioned refugee story, just skilfully sparse impressions from the first sentence. The style is concise yet warm . . . Rabinowich portrays the self-discovery of an adolescent respectfully and sensitively'
Neue Zürcher Zeitung

'Julya Rabinowich tells her character Madina's story through a diary and so gives countless girls from different countries a very personal voice. I was glad to accompany her in this difficult year between grief, total anger and boundless hope'
Masuko13

'In her clever novel Julya Rabinowich tells of the difficult beginning in a new country, after the difficult ending in another country . . . Rabinowich's great merit is that she questions simplistic stereotypes – or rather shows how they slowly dissolve'
Süddeutsche Zeitung

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For all the children and young people I've met
who were seeking a place to call home.

And for Naïma.

1

Where do I come from? That doesn't matter. It could be anywhere. There are many people in many countries who live through what I have lived through. I come from everywhere. I come from nowhere. Beyond the seven mountains. And much further still. A place where Ali Baba's thieves wouldn't want to live. Not any more. Too dangerous.

I have long hair. Down to my hips. I used to laugh a lot. I have a little brother and I'm not afraid of wild dogs. And I've already seen people die. So there. If you know that about me, you know more about me than most people here.

I'm just going to start with things I like. I can always come back to the things I don't like later on.

So, things I like: I like it when I hug Laura and breathe in her familiar smell. I like it when I accomplish something I've set out to do. And I like it when I can out-talk some idiot who comes my way. Because I've finally

mastered the language. If you stay silent, you've already lost. It's as simple as that.

I like it when the sun shines. The sky gleams a brilliant blue and if you block out the noise of the motorway, you can hear the birds singing.

Next to our house there's a tree. A large tree with dense branches where the birds sleep. I imagine they've built their nests in the knotholes of the branches. Nests like that don't fall out as easily when there's a storm. I like that even more: the idea that they're safe even when it's really windy. And the rain doesn't get in there either. Well, not much anyway.

It's a good thing really that the tree isn't right outside my window, otherwise I'd spend too much time watching the birds. Or feeding them. I often wrap up the bread rolls from breakfast and sneak them out with me so I can sprinkle the pale crumbs on our windowsill later on. You're not allowed to take food with you into the bedrooms.

Mum follows this rule to the letter. I think it's stupid.

The cook doesn't follow the rules either; she starts clearing up while we're still eating. Because of her, we all gobble our food down. Sometimes, I can barely eat anything. Sometimes, I'm just not hungry in the evening. Who's hungry at the same time every day? Not me! You can't go back for seconds, either. The best you can do is pile as much on your plate as possible. Sometimes she

grumbles and then I have to hand back my bread or cheese or salami. Even if I've already touched it.

'You'll never eat all that,' she says. 'And you definitely don't eat salami. I know that much.'

I say nothing to that. Of course I can't eat that much. But I want to decide for myself when I eat and who I eat with. The birds, for instance, should always eat with me. And I give the salami to the cat in the yard before I go to school or in the evening before bed.

I've often watched the cook wrapping up our bread, salami and cheese with her precise, skilful hands. She puts it into little plastic bags from the supermarket and then into the large carrier bag she always brings with her. She comes here on a bike and sometimes the bag's so heavy that as she leaves with the bag hooked over the handlebars, she wobbles along the country lanes. My little brother Rami's so thick, he even offered her his small, colourful rucksack. Dad laughed. Rami can be such a goody two-shoes, given the chance. And since then, of course, the cook's taken a real shine to him, even slipping him some chewing gum because he comes across so well-behaved, with his big, wide eyes that Mum falls for so easily. Just like everyone else. Little brothers are pests in human form. Pests with curls.

'She's cheating us,' I said to him. 'And you really want to help her?'

'But she's so lovely,' he replied.

So of course, then I called him an idiot.

And he laughed. He thinks everybody's lovely, everybody.

Even the weirdo from the second floor, who's headbutted him a couple of times and often sticks his leg out to trip me up when I'm running down the stairs in the morning to get to the school bus.

Thing is, I'm always up on time. In summer, the birds make such a racket I'm already awake by five. But it can take up to an hour for the bathroom to become free. And waiting for my aunt to come out takes even longer. She stays in there for hours. *Hours*. Until Dad starts yelling.

There have been a couple of times when I've gone to school without a shower and spent the whole day feeling embarrassed, especially when Mona shouted out 'She stinks!' as I walked past. But perhaps she'd have said that anyway; she says it nearly every day. Luckily, not everyone laughed, and Laura didn't laugh at all.

We've made a hidey-hole for some soap in the toilets so it never happens again. In the third stall in the girls' toilets there's a loose tile on the wall. Behind it, Laura's hidden a little bar of soap, wrapped in pink paper, and I sneak out to the toilet during first period and have a wash with this little bar of soap that smells so sweetly of roses and makes me feel like I've had a bath in a whole tub of flowers.

We used to have lots of roses in our garden. And I

had a cat back then too. And on the way home, I'd pass a herd of goats. I like goats. Some of the farmers here keep goats. Just like my grandma.

I've not told anyone at home about it. I don't mean the goats, I mean stupid Mona's stupid name-calling. Nor have I told them about the not-washing or the rose-scented soap in the hidey-hole in the girls' toilets either, otherwise Dad might get upset again about the shower being busy, and then Mum will have to calm him down and defend her sister, Amina. And then she'll get into an argument with Amina, because my aunt really loves to argue. With everyone. But especially with Mum because she never gets angry. Either that or Mum immediately bursts into tears and then my aunt has won. I keep out of her way if I can.

If I didn't have Laura, it'd be really awful. But fortunately, she's here. I reckon I've been really lucky.

Perhaps I'll tell you about those who have been less lucky sometime.

But I don't want to do that yet.

Some people here get angry with Mum; she's often at loggerheads with them because my aunt hogs the bathroom for hours on end.

'Mrs Lema,' they begin reproachfully, 'it's not on.'

Mum placates them, talks to them, asks for compassion,

which really gets on their nerves, and given most people round here don't have many nerves left, it properly gets on their last few remaining ones. When Amina finally emerges from the bathroom, there's often an argument in the hallway. Involving several people. Amina walks straight past them without saying hello, the skin on her hands, underarms and neck glowing dark red because she's scrubbed it so hard. Sometimes I think she'll scrub her skin to shreds. She never thanks Mum. And Mum looks at her so sadly, I just want to give her a hug. Nobody says anything else. They all carry on as if it were completely normal that someone should want to tear their own skin off their body. I don't say anything either because I don't know what else to do.

2

I secretly let the cat into the room today. She curled up on my bed and purred. I lay my head next to her so I could feel her body gently vibrating. It's like the softest massage. Only without hands.

Amina says if she catches that 'fleabag' in her room again like yesterday, she'll snitch on me to the landlord, who everyone calls 'the Boss'. 'In *her* room.' Yeah, whatever.

Asked Dad whether we could stick Amina in her own room.

No, we can't. The Boss says we already have a big room. The little ones are needed for couples with babies. There aren't any single rooms here. It's not worth it.

Dad almost seems to regret it even more than me.

I don't want to be in a rubbish mood.

In a philosophical moment, Mr Bast, our biology

teacher, placed a glass of water on the desk. 'Half full or half empty?' he asked. It all depends how you look at it. Just before breaktime, he accidentally knocked it over. Whenever he's in full flow, he waves his arms about like a windmill.

I look at it like this: the glass is always half full, even if it's actually nearly empty. That's how I try to see it, anyway. But it's not really the case for us. We're not really here yet, but I'm working on it. Not that it's our decision to make, of course. But I can still try! Like when I realise I'm keeping up in just about every subject at school. That means I don't have to keep worrying about failing the year and having to repeat it while Laura passes and leaves me all on my own again. Granted, if Laura wasn't helping me, I'd already have failed a couple of assignments. Particularly in German. Maths is easier. I think the German teacher – her name's Mrs King – knows that. I think she just looks the other way. It's very kind of her. I just hope nobody else notices.

Mum's had another argument with Aunt Amina. Amina really winds people up the wrong way. Dad got involved, as always: sent Mum out and then me. Rami hid behind the wardrobe. Dad hadn't spotted him. Or didn't want to.

Mum went out into the yard and sat on the bench in the sun, holding a tissue to her eyes as if she had a

cold. What else could she do – stand in the hallway with everyone walking past? The kitchen's closed in the afternoons. Women often wander around the place crying quietly. And the men argue in loud voices. Sometimes it's the women who argue loudly while the men cry, but usually only when they really are at the end of their tethers, and then other more serious things happen as well and the doctor has to be called, or the police, or sometimes both. The weirdo from the second floor was once beaten so badly by his parents he had to go to hospital. The warden wasn't bothered; it wasn't him that called the police. Don't know who did. And no sooner was the weirdo back again, he tried to have a go at Rami. Until I intervened. He may be a pest, but he's still my little brother.

I sat down next to Mum on the bench. The stripy ginger cat jumped up onto my lap, purring. I laid one hand on the soft, warm cat and the other on Mum's arm and told her funny things about school. In reality, they weren't that funny. I padded them out a bit. But I reckon that's fine in moments like that. She laughed and dabbed her eyes. I like it when she's not crying all the time.

Every morning, Dad runs down to the letterbox, as does everyone else who hasn't yet given up hope. Then he comes back silently and I know it's empty again. No decision from the authorities, no black and white decision telling

us we can stay. Asylum granted. Finally. Being granted asylum is a bit like having a baby. You wait with such anticipation. The decision develops and grows, although sadly the authorities need much longer than nine months. And all the while, there's an underlying anxiety. It will change everything. Everything.

Everyone who has moved out of here received the letter first. I've seen it happen. It's either move out, get your own home or stay here. Or be picked up by the police and removed from the country. Some left straight away, others later on. Some started kicking and screaming inside the house or outside by the police car. Some police officers were kind, nearly crying themselves. Some were just brutal, enjoying it even. Almost like being back home. I couldn't look away. I stood glued to the bannisters, staring as though I was watching a horror film – you think if you look away something even worse will happen. They grabbed people by their hair. Their heads were pulled right back. I shook.

Suddenly Dad was there. I hadn't heard him. He placed his hand gently on my shoulder. 'Come, Madina,' he said. 'Come, let's go to our room. Now, come on.'

I shrank back into his arms, sinking into them, feeling his chest pressed against the back of my head. Broad and solid. I was suddenly swathed in a thick fog. Could only move with his arm across my back. Let him guide me slowly away from the bannister. Downstairs, the screams

died away. He steered me carefully into our room and turned the radio up, strange music, whatever channel was on. I concentrated on the music and the female presenter's voice. So as not to hear anything else. Was so grateful to him.

'That won't happen to us,' he said. He said it so very calmly. 'Do you hear? We're staying here.'

The front door slammed and outside a car drove away.

I didn't answer. Images were running through my mind.

No, I don't want to write about that yet. Out. Stop. Now. I'm just nipping to the loo and to get a glass of water.

Right, I'm back.

Here we go again. Everyone's waiting for the letter, the one and only letter that can save you. The letter that says they're granting you asylum. In black and white. Safe. Better than just dreaming. This black and white document that means staying here. Having rights. Being a real person with a real life. And then you move out.

Three friends have already come and gone like that.

One told me she was here for nearly five years. I got to know her when we moved in. She spoke my language. That was amazing. Showed me the house, the cats, the birds. Warned me who to stay away from. Played board

games with me out in the yard and told me all about the TV programmes in the common room. I couldn't speak any German then.

Two months later she'd gone. She was so happy. About the new flat. With its own kitchen and its own toilet and its own bath. Just getting into the bathroom without having to fight my aunt would be progress. We said we'd still see each other. But the new flat was in a different area, quite far away. She dropped by a few times. And then she stopped coming. I was alone again.

I don't want the same to happen with Laura. That would be awful. Laura's my oldest friend here. Since I first started school, nearly a year and a half ago. And aside from that, she's the only one who's ever come over to me just like that. Sat with me every so often. Didn't laugh at the mistakes I made in German, which everyone else, except for me, found so funny. At the beginning, I was so scared, I stuttered. That made the class laugh even more.

Sometimes I forget I had an even better friend back home. That's not right. You should never forget something like that. But then sometimes I'm really happy when I can forget Mori. In any case, I can't do anything else for her.

Or her sisters.

Mona's an even bigger pain than my little brother. I've not done anything to her.

I'd prefer to write about something nice. Something that I like. My long hair, for example. Quite a few people are envious of it, back home too. I've not cut it for about seven years at least. When I plait it, it comes right down to my waist. A beautiful, thick, shiny plait. Dad gets mad if I suggest wearing my hair down like most of the other girls at school. Laura has short, choppy hair. And Sabina – who I'm a bit jealous of because she was friends with Laura before me and who's a bit jealous of me because I get on with Laura better than she does – would never have such a boring plait. Sabina's sister is a hairdresser. Sabina's hair is quite thin and every other week she comes in with something new because her sister practises on her. Sometimes it looks good. Sometimes it's a bit OTT. And sometimes her hair's left in such a state, she has to get it cut again.

'You've got such beautiful curls,' says Sabina, who'd really like to have curls. And then she says, 'It's such a shame you tie it back all the time.'

I don't want to explain anything to her, so I tell her it's because I don't want to wear my hair down. But really, I had to fight hard to stop Dad from forcing me to wear hijab. In summer! I never wore a headscarf back home. But here, everything's different.

She picks up my plait and plays with a few loose strands at the end, making them spring up and twirling them around her fingers like a black, shiny silk ribbon. Her hair is smooth and pale like cooked spaghetti.

Sometimes the three of us go to Laura's and lock ourselves in the bathroom for almost as long as my aunt, and we try everything out: Sabina's sister's styling mousse, Laura's brother's hair gel, her mum's curlers. We're going to have a go at dyeing our hair sometime. We're dead set on it. Laura gets lots of pocket money and has already bought us some bright colours: tomato red and sea blue. Not much use for me, unfortunately; it won't show up on blue-black hair. But anyway. We put on make-up, mix face masks, and pop slices of cucumber over our eyes. We take photos of ourselves.

'Beauty immortalised,' says Laura.

Us as gorgeous women. Us as bronzed statues. Us with hot pink curlers, crimson lipstick and cats' ears. A whole album of them. I draw pretty patterns around the photos. Laura's mum loves it.

There are photos all over the walls of their home, of her, of Laura and Markus. Some of the photos have a bit cut off at the edge. One side missing. That's where Laura's dad was.

Dinner is always at seven o'clock. No earlier, no later. Quarter of an hour before the meal, everyone has to be downstairs. On the ground floor. A queue forms next to the dining room door. And then we wait. Some people get impatient, like animals in a zoo that know when it's feeding time and know that someone always comes to bring them food: meat, fish, hay and fruit. But they still get jumpy every time, as if they're not one hundred per cent certain they'll come.

At the beginning – right back at the beginning, the first few days after we arrived – we were locked up. Properly locked up. With guards in uniforms, bars on the windows and grilles across the doors and serving hatch. As if we were criminals who'd already been convicted. They looked like soldiers. Almost like the ones back home. They barked orders at us, but nobody understood. The rooms were so overcrowded. And yet they kept cramming in more and more people. Some of us had no space to sleep, so we lay on the floors in the corridors. Old people, young children, men, women.

We were all so excited because we'd made it, but overwrought at the same time. Fear made us sweat. At some point, an interpreter arrived. Looked at us disparagingly, disgusted. I've seen that look many times since. Feels like having dishwater thrown in your face.

Now when I see it, I hold my head up. And square my shoulders. Animals do that too when they want to make themselves look dangerous or important. I copy them. And I don't look away. Animals don't do that either. But it's taken a while. Firstly, to know what to do. Secondly, to be able do it.

They threw bread rolls into the room, not dished out but properly thrown, like we were in a zoo but on the wrong side of the fence. Dad always protested his case, right from the start. But still. It took them a while to believe us. And then they brought us here. It's better here. We have a dining room. The front door is always open and if we want to go outside at night and stare at the moon, we can.

3

Laura's mum gave me this diary, by the way. Just because.

'Every day you can write down what's been happening,' she said, 'I had one just like it. It's really funny when you look back on it in five or ten years' time.' She laughed. Stood there at ease in her jeans and brightly coloured trainers, leaning against the kitchen counter made from a pale wood. She looks really young, even if she is a bit chubby like Mum. Short and chubby. Behind her, blue patterned curtains, flowers and herbs in colourful ceramic pots on the windowsill. The whole place, light and airy. I love it there.

But I frowned, just fleetingly, and she didn't understand why. Perhaps she thought I didn't like her present. I really do. I just don't like the idea of writing down everything that's happened to me. The book's too nice for that.

It's covered in blue velvet, a silver lock in the middle with a dainty little key. Like in fairy tales. Only princesses have keys like that. I felt like an instant princess, an on-demand princess. But not one who's hanging about in a tower waiting for a prince. More like the sort that'll fight

for her kingdom. I've hung the key on my necklace together with my polished lapis lazuli pendant. The stone looks like a teardrop, a tear encased in silver. I used to wear an outstretched hand with a blue eye in the middle. Grandma gave me the lapis lazuli teardrop before we left. So I don't cry. 'So all the tears stay locked in the stone,' she'd said, while fighting back her own tears. I'll give it back when we meet again. I removed the silver palm with the blue eye from my chain and pressed it into her brown, wrinkled hand. A souvenir of me. We agreed to swap back again. Later.

I put the book under my pillow every night.

If Dad snores or Rami or my mother call out in their sleep, I bolt straight upright. And when I lurch upwards, I'm usually met with the same view: my aunt, sitting motionless by the window, staring out. Whether it's one in the morning, or three, or four. She knows I'm awake but never turns around. She says nothing. If it wasn't for the slight rise and fall of her chest, I might question if she were alive. In the moonlight, it's easier to see the movement of her throat, her chest. That's why I like it when the moon comes out from behind the clouds. I like the moon.

It happens all the time. All the time. I force myself to pretend I've not seen her and lie back down again. Reach for the velvety book cover, almost how I used to feel for my cat, back home, and then it's all OK again.

Everything in here belongs to me. And I only share it if I want to. I leave the photo album at Laura's for safety's sake. Who knows what my parents would make of it? The wild make-up and Laura's nightie. I'd prefer to be safe than sorry.

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and don't know where I am. And I'm so scared I could scream. But I don't dare scream. So nobody hears me who shouldn't hear me. So nobody finds us. I feel for the light switch. I always have to sleep near the light switch. I've moved my mattress directly underneath it. Even when I touch the plastic and know I can have light at any time, it still takes a while for my heart to stop racing. And longer still until I have the courage to sit up and look around the room. Check we're all still there, where we belong. I count everyone before lying down again. Make sure nobody's missing.

I'd love to invite Laura to ours sometimes, so it's not always me going to hers after school. It makes me uncomfortable. Very. And it's pretty rude not to return the invitation. If I were at home, we'd have invited Laura over straight away. We always had guests over back then.

Mum would always cook as if there were a wedding

to celebrate, or a birthday, at least. Rice with sultanas and lamb, or chicken with plums, and salads garnished with dates and pomegranate. And that's before you start on the cakes. I really miss Mum's cakes. Not just eating them. When I was little, I was always allowed to help. It was really special, mixing the batter, the spices, rosewater and fruit. And afterwards, licking the bowls clean with Rami. Sometimes I got terrible diarrhoea from the raw batter, so did he. But we didn't care. In spring, we'd put the table outside in the garden. Cicadas chirping in the evening. And a huge full moon behind the silhouettes of the trees, the stars twinkling in the darkening night sky. Candles. There was always someone playing music. Or we'd put on a CD.

I'd love to do this just once with Laura. Even just the cake part. Licking the vanilla and cinnamon cream from the spoon with her. But I'd be even more ashamed if Laura saw how we live here. There are some really strange people in here. I'm particularly scared of one of them. He never washes, never brushes his hair, talks to himself and often calls out random things. And he follows the women around the house. There's no point in telling him not to. He just carries on. He never actually does anything. Just lurks there. But if I see him, I lock myself in the toilet until someone else needs to go.

Laura would be appalled at our toilet. Our room, too. Five mattresses on the floor and a table and four chairs,

nothing else fits in the narrow room. There are never enough places for us all to sit down. Either Rami sits on Dad's lap, which if that were me, I'd find embarrassing. Or my aunt gets pushed out. Or I go, because it's all too much for me, the mood around the table, the squabbling and the squeeze.

Dad sometimes goes out for hours and nobody knows where he is. 'Walking in the woods,' he says when someone asks him. But that's not true. I've never seen him go into the woods or come out. At least not while I've been on watch in front of the house. And at the beginning, I spent a lot of time doing that. Rami says he's often seen him go down to the cellar, but never come back up again. Sometimes I'm frightened there's a secret, enchanted room into which he withdraws. It's mostly only kings and evil witches who have rooms like that. And Dad isn't either of those. He's just my dad who's sometimes too strict. But he loves me, I know that.

At the beginning, as soon as one of us was missing, we got scared. Well, perhaps not scared. But on edge. Would they come back? There are so many who haven't. The only person who always holds it together is Mum. Whatever happens, whoever's arguing and complaining. If Dad's out and it's been more than two hours, she gets nervous. She still smiles but a hard line appears on her jaw between

her cheek and the corner of her mouth, reminding me of a taut bowstring from which the words she wants to say will never be shot. When I see her like this, I give her a hug. But sometimes I just want to be elsewhere.

And if I'm round at Laura's too often, Mum feels hurt and Dad gets angry.

Then my only option is to open the door to my fairy tale world and step in. I used to disappear into it back home, whenever we sat in the cellar, the plaster dust spraying down onto our heads as we counted the blasts: how close were they? How many? If there were a lot of bangs, the bombers would usually turn back because they had no more bombs on board. Mum sang songs for Rami and whenever the droning grew louder, her voice did too, as if to drown out the noise of the planes, the explosions. He buried his face firmly into her, as you would a cushion, hands over his ears. And Dad put his arms around us. Tried to hold all of us at the same time. That only ever worked if we were huddled so closely together we could no longer breathe.

I'm still not used to straying too far. I only ever wander a short distance away. And I even struggle with that.

Sometimes there's no way out but to hide inside. Then I channel all my energy to imagine. When you climb inside yourself, you can even hear the sound of birds calling in the fairy tale wood. I want colourful birds in my wood, with splendid tropical tail feathers. They aren't

scared, even when the sun goes down and the shadows grow between the ancient trees.

Sometimes Dad fears I'll become as much of a stranger to him as the country that now surrounds him. But I'm sure he's just imagining that. Definitely. He's so proud of me because I can speak German well. Something he's not managed. But then he doesn't have a teacher like I do. And no Laura. He still hasn't made any friends here, unlike Mum who gets on well with four of the other women who live here. Two of them will be moving out soon, though, because they've got their papers. We don't. Perhaps Dad's scared to approach others because he hasn't got the hang of it yet. He gets much more embarrassed than I do when he makes mistakes. I think. And without me, he'd be kind of lost. That's why I often have to go with him and interpret.

Then I interpret things I don't understand. I mean, I understand the words but not the meaning. What papers he needs. Why he's here. Always the same. Really, he could just send me. On my own. Perhaps he'd enjoy that even less. But the men and women behind all the little shabby tables in all the little shabby rooms are friendlier to me than to him. I know exactly what he's going to say. I've repeated it countless times, like an organ grinder who always plays the same melody. And he gets nervous and

starts sweating, and I see how annoyed he gets and has to force himself to stay calm. He succeeds most of the time. And dutifully gives the same answers time after time: why is he here? Why haven't the papers arrived yet from back home? Because our house has been bombed and is no longer standing, that's why we've brought nothing with us, and because the authorities in a country where war is raging simply don't work as efficiently and quickly as in a country where there is no war. Because Dad's on the wanted list. Not because he's committed any crime. That was the worst part, trying to convince the authorities of that. My dad is not a criminal. My dad is a medic. He would never harm anyone. Dad never wanted to harm anyone, but that alone was enough. Because in a war, it's not possible to stay out of it completely. Even when you've tried so hard. Dad quickly became a wanted man and an enemy of the state, so quickly he didn't see it coming.

'Aha!' say the officials sat at all the shabby little tables in all the shabby little rooms. 'So he was just doing his job. Then why is his life in danger?'

And I start right back at the beginning: how badly injured people would be laid at our door. How Dad clearly couldn't just let them die on our doorstep. Even if they were rebels.

'Aha!' they say. 'So you were actively supporting the perpetrators?'

Dad's patients. The resistance fighters and the regime supporters. Or in other words: the rebels and the soldiers. It was always the same. Only the names changed. The names change but the violence remains. You just can't run fast enough. Whatever you're running away from is already there, lying in wait. Like an eagle and a hare. A mean trick. But nobody here knows it. I have to explain that first. And then Dad gets cross and says we'd have all been killed anyway had he refused to help. By one side if he helped or the other side if he didn't. And not helping at all would have been even worse.

They ask him – well, me, because I'm interpreting – why he can't prove I'm his daughter. Perhaps I'm actually someone else.

I simply don't understand why they don't believe us. You can tell I'm his daughter. I look just like him. I've often shown them: our hands are exactly the same, the thumbs, the fingers, even the shape of our nails. Why would I pretend to be his daughter? That's crazy.

WHY WE TOOK THE CAR

WOLFGANG HERRNDORF

WINNER OF THE GERMAN TEEN LITERATURE PRIZE

Mike doesn't get why people think he's boring. Sure, he doesn't have many friends. (OK, zero friends.) And everyone laughs at him in class. And he's never invited to parties.

But one day Tschick, the odd new boy at school, shows up at Mike's house. He dares him to go on a road trip with him. No parents, no map, no destination. Will they get hopelessly lost in the middle of nowhere? Probably. Will they get into serious trouble? Definitely. But will they ever be called boring again? Not a chance.

'You will see the world with different eyes after reading this novel'
Rolling Stone