Cappelen Damm Agency *Fall 2019*

F°401	Tiril Broch Aakre	Mødre og døtre

Mothers and Daughters

This is a story about loss.
And about troubled love.
And about mental health.
And about the darkest darkness and brightest light.
And about one of the 593 suicides in Norway in 2017.
And bout being mothers and daughters.
But it is also a story about laughter.

In 2017 Tiril Broch Aakre looses her mother, who has chosen to end her life after struggling with mental illness for a long time.

The daughter is going through her mother's things, and through writing try to paint a portrait of a mother that will not be caught up by neither diagnosis nor what a traditional mother should be like. Through looking at her mother's things, reading her books and letters, looking at pictures and digging through memory, the daughter tries to find the truth about who her mother was. The mothers voice is also heard through letters and text she has written and sentences underlined in books. In this way the mother draws up the way she sees the world, and the way she sees her daughter. And through this work the daughter has to ask herself: What is actually love?

Mothers and Daughters is a novel about love and compassion, about mourning and mental illness. But most of all it is a story about being a mother and being a daughter.

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Tiril Broch Aakre (b. 1976) is a writer, editor and translator. She made her debut in 2013 with the poetry collection Lace. In 2015, her first novel Save the Children received excellent reviews. She has since written the novels Fjällräven Yellow and Mothers and Daughters.

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Sample translation by Matt Bagguley

When I was a child, I would go on expeditions in my house, opening cupboards and peering into all the corners. Looking through shelves and loft spaces. I would discover unknown places – such as an alcove under the stairs where my father stored cushions for the garden furniture. I burrowed my way under the cushions, to the innermost nooks and crannies, where no one else could go unless they were as nimble and curious as I was.

I remember thinking: No-one but me has ever been here, only *my* fingers have stroked this floor. It's somewhere no one else has bothered to look for. How I relished that thought, my self-chosen mission! I was always sure that I'd discover something of archaeological value; something that could solve a mystery others had long since given up on. It could just as easily have been a small detail, a button for example, that led to new explorations and assignments – where did it come from? Shape, colour and patterns would put me on the trail. It could have fallen off a garment that belonged to my father or sister, or was it a remnant from the sewing box? I wanted to find out for myself, to ask someone else was a last resort. And if I found myself unable to solve the mystery, my imagination would help me out. Maybe the button was left by someone who lived here before we did?

My curiosity ate the dark corners, peered under and behind the furniture. The two planks supporting the top of the coffee table formed a small room just big enough for me to crawl into. That too was a discovery, to be able to sit there in total peace.

I climbed up to the little attic above my father´s walk-in closet, up the narrow shelves that formed a ladder, and found a transparent plastic bag of baby clothes. Inside I could see layer upon layers of folded bodysuits, tiny cardigans and cotton wrap-around-sweaters tied on one side with laces, the whole bundle

flattened by vacuum. I pulled the contents out, and found a baby-duvet with small, porcelain-blue ducks on the soft cotton cover. I brought it with me for my dolls, even though I knew my father would be annoyed that I'd found something that had been packed away. I didn't like the fact that I was doing something I shouldn't, but I just needed to hold these things in my hands, stroke them and smell them, rub them against my cheek, make use of them, make them mine. For my father it may have looked like I was making a mess, but for me it was about finding something that belonged to different order, something I was quite certain lay behind everything.

I never missed my mother in this house. I longed for her and was so excited when I saw her car come down the steep hill and drive past the row of garages. She would step out of the car with slightly buckled knees, slam the door and then walk down the path with that bounce in her step, wearing tight jeans and tennis shoes, or short skirts, flat sandals and a white cotton blouse – Mom – so soft, kind and funny. I adored her.

But she didn't belong in that house. She belonged in the various apartments she moved in and out of, and where I was every Thursday and every other weekend. She belonged in the car and the trips to the Costa Brava we went on. She belonged in the daily phone calls – where I told her everything that had happened to me, and we laughed and I cried and would be comforted. Her phone voice was my day-to-day mom. I didn't know anything else, and I didn't want it any other way. I didn't have the kind of mom who greeted the children with a "hello" in the hallway when they got home; who cooked dishes I had never heard of in the oven, who came into the room carrying elaborate birthday cakes and filled the shelves in the bathroom with all kinds of little sparkly things. My mother never attended birthday parties, or the constitution day parade or Christmas Day. But that's just the way it was in my family, I never thought there was anything strange about it.

My dad's shaving things lay on the bathroom shelf; a red tube of thick, pearly-white cream, a brush, and a razor. It was his shaving brush that I used when pretending to apply make-up in front of the mirror, it was his shaving cream I used as miracle-cream on the dolls.

All the things I'd received from my mother were out on display. To clear them away, would be like clearing her away. I'd been given so many cuddly toys, a new one every time Mom came home from traveling. She was constantly traveling since many of the clients at the ad-agency, where she worked as a copywriter, were tour operators. Among other things, I was given a whole range of seals, in all sizes – Mom called me "the seal cub" I lined them all up in bed, alternating who was first in line, closest to the light – that's how I saw it, each one had to be remembered, put in the light. My room was swarming with things, because I wanted it all to be visible. I remember the feeling of people actually *being* the things they gave me, and how I wanted to take care of them.

I was forty-one when my mother died. Two years ago now. In mid-July that year, she went on leave from the psychiatric hospital where she was a patient. She ended her life at home.

In the immediately aftermath, I couldn't picture her as she was when I was a child. All that had happened since – and the horror and shock – was like a sandstorm blurring my memories.

The only way I could reach my childhood-mom was by focussing on a memory I have of her in the car; sat in the purple velvet seat of her black Saab for example – she would stretch her back to do her makeup in the rear-view mirror, tighten her lips as thin as they could go, then paint them with dark eyeliner, apply lip gloss, rub soft rouge quickly into her cheeks, raise her eyebrows, and ruffle her fringe. I was able to pluck these images from the sandstorm for a few seconds – the brisk, energetic movements and postures, the crooked smile, the deep, slightly husky voice, and the dark brown eyes that never had any make-up around them.

She touched the lower part of the steering wheel nonchalantly with her fingers an hands – she referred to them as "work fists," but this was an affectation, her hands were a little coarse maybe, but they were feminine, and her nails were always manicured. Her little feet – "hooves" as she called them – rested at acute angles on the pedals.

She nicknamed the car (a black, model 900 Turbo) "The Black Devil" because it was constantly breaking down. When we drove up the bumpy dirt

track to our cabin in the mountains, it was always my job to lean forward between the front seats and check the road ahead for large rocks, many of which had already smashed the car's undercarriage several times. "Saabs are too low for the hills," my mother said.

She was someone who moved around, living with different boyfriends for a time, or with friends. She wasn't one to settle in one place. Her medical records show that she lived a turbulent life, "not that there was anything particularly negative about it." She called herself "a gypsy", "a punk", "impossible" (a bit ironic since these were other peoples' words in her mouth). She was someone who always managed, like a cat amazingly landing on its feet again and again. Her second husband said that if you were on the other side of the world and had lost everything you owned, and you could make one phone call, she would be the person you'd call – and for years my mom was called, regularly, by people in a pinch or a crisis. But she also had a fragile side – she described it herself as being "like a parsley leaf quivering in the gooseberry jam." She'd lose all her energy, and just get sick and lie in bed in a quiet, dark room.

When I called an old friend of hers to tell her about my mom's death – just before the funeral, in late July, I was making all these phone calls while walking the same little circuit, barefoot outside the garage at home, so that my children didn't have to be constantly reminded of what had happened – and she said: "I think your mother had ADHD and was wrongly medicated the whole time."

There were plenty of theories about my mother. Friends and family placed varying levels of importance on what she could blame herself for, her intractable life choices, those due to the traumatic childhood she had with her volatile father.

What was – if not the core – the most important thing?

Was it the biological factor; a signal failure in the brain that was genetically conditioned? She was treated for bipolar II disorder and in the spring before she died "signs of histrionic personality disorder" had been mentioned. But what about her prolonged and heavy use of addictive

medicines and psychiatric drugs? What had it done to her brain and her emotions? It could be difficult to separate the diagnoses from the effects of long-term heavy use, and misuse, of these drugs. And after reading through a range of articles, talking to psychiatrists and psychologists, I understood it would be virtually impossible to know what was what.

During one of her first admissions to the psychiatric hospital, a doctor noted in her medical records that there was something about her that they'd been "unable to put their finger on."

Did I recognise her behaviour in the descriptions of the diagnoses? Some elements, yes, quite clearly, but there were also sides to her that couldn't be categorised. If I were to focus on one personality trait, and remember an incident where this trait had become evident, a memory of a conflicting personality trait would appear just as quickly. I remembered many episodes of black-and-white thinking, for example, yet it was also typical of her to make subtle distinctions and look at an issue from different angles.

Doctors speculated over the diagnoses for fifteen years, and various diagnoses showed up in the papers we looked at following her death – in some places it said "You have PTSD and ME," but we never saw that repeated in the numerous journals that came to us from hospitals and GPs. Even after she died, specialists commented on what they believe she had suffered from, in the commentaries and expert reports that were sent from the regulators – despite the fact that these were doctors who had never met her themselves.

I have one memory from when I was five or six years old, where I'm rummaging though the shoes at the bottom of a wardrobe containing the family's outdoor and formal wear. In the front row are the dress shoes – and I remember, among other things, some shiny, green ones I had inherited from my sister, which I'd been hoping to be big enough to use one day, although I knew I would probably wear them with extra socks on before then. Behind them are shoes for other seasons – some narrow sky-blue and white ski boots that require all sorts of manoeuvring to get into. But it's a deep closet, so I crawl halfway in to see what's lying at the bottom, in the dim light; pushed all the way up against the back wall. And I find something new: A pair of flattened leather slippers. They are just like my dad's slippers, with white,

fleecy wool inside, only a bit smaller and in a lighter, tan colour. They are ladies slippers, but a completely different shape to my sister's feet. At first I wonder if they perhaps belong to my dad's girlfriend, but I don't think so, I've never seen her wearing them. When I finally ask my dad, he says: "They were your mom's."

This was the first time it had ever occurred to me that my mother had lived in this house. When she was a woman who owned slippers, and my mom and dad walked about in a shared home wearing the *same* slippers, for so many days and taking it all so for granted that the slippers had become misshapen and worn out and smooth underneath. Neighbours had seen my mother going back and forth to the laundry-room carrying the white washtub, and standing by the washing line hanging up bed sheets – things I had only ever seen my father do. The fact that my dad's slippers where no more worn than these, even though he used them every day, gave me a dizzying feeling that it was not all that long ago either. But all this is located beyond the scope of my memory. Not even the short, disjointed flashes of memory, I believe that I have from when I was very little, involve my mother being in my home. For example, I think I remember her holding me in her arm, in a leather pouch, in my grandparents' hallway, and that we were walking out the door with my father in front of us. I remember seeing his dark brown leather hat, but at the bottom of the steps the memory ends, it doesn't come all the way home with us.

They were Mom's. In a sense, it was then as though the woman who owned the slippers had already disappeared; and that the woman who was my mother was a completely different person, the person who one day started driving down the hill and into the grounds. Many years later she would undergo yet another transformation, becoming a new woman that I didn't recognise or know how to relate to, one who took desperate amounts of medication and whos heavy-footsteps walked up my steps when she visited.

Now I ask myself how my mother got to and from the house when she lived there. Did she take the tram or the bus – I've never seen her take either the tram or the bus – or maybe she jogged or biked it to university, or to work, and back? She didn't have a driving license back then. But all that is impossible for me to imagine.

I regret not asking her about these trivial things. It strikes me that we could have talked about all these minor details on the phone, on those occasions when she "just wanted to hear my voice," as she said, and when I dismissively told her "I have to work" because talking to her on the phone felt too difficult. It would have allowed me to ask away about whatever I wanted. What did she eat for breakfast? How did she get ready in the morning? If only I'd just chatted with her lightly and firmly, kept these conversations going, it would have been nice and comforting for her. I still have these thoughts – *if only I had been... more comforting for her...* But I know that I had tried every possibility, and that I'd tried this one too. And I knew that she wasn't one to stick to light small-talk; that there was always an undercurrent to our phone conversations which I couldn't handle, quite physically couldn't handle, and so in the last few years I'd been telling her that I had telephobia and that we had to communicate via text message. The year that I was living in Paris, which coincided with her first admissions to the psychiatric hospital, I demanded she stopped calling and that we only wrote letters to each other. After she died, I knew that I had a box full of these letters, but it took several months before I could even look at them – there was a dark energy coming from the box. I was afraid of what I the letters contained.

Did she use the shortcut up the slope while she was living in the terrace house I grew up in? Or did she walk down the hill and across the yard? I was pretty sure she used the shortcut, and I can picture her scrambling down that embankment, from tree to tree. But in the next instant I picture myself and my own movements. There was no point asking anyone if she took the bus or used the shortcut – people didn't go about remembering things like that.

During my mother's final years, when her life and our relationship was marred by her health problems and use of medication, I would dream of being able to afford to buy a house for her near where I was living. It was a beautiful, albeit foolish and short-lived dream. I knew deep down that it was impossible.

I also dreamed that maybe she would become an old, quiet lady, sitting in a nursing home, where I would fix her hair, and paint her nails. We could drink coffee and eat pastries; I could rub moisturiser into her feet, and read to her.

But she wasn't that sort of a mother, and I wasn't that sort of a daughter, and I don't think she wanted it any other way.

It is August 2017.

S and I have stacked the things we brought from my mother's house outside the front door. Boxes of novels, art books, and biographies. Paintings, silverware, a tall antique table made of dark wood with a shelf underneath, some glasses and cups, a few things I had made when I was a child, and some plastic bags full of clothes. It all just fits under the roof of the front porch, sheltered from the summer rainclouds.

I bring a stool out and sit just outside the open door.

It's typically fickle August weather in Eastern Norway. Thunder rumbles beyond the ridge on the other side of the green valley. The sky is a blue and greyish-white colour, my son skips and dances on the lawn wearing a red bathing suit, my daughter picks blueberries at the back of the house. S drives back and forth, to the store or the recycling centre with all of my mom's things that we can't bear to keep.

For three days I sit on that stool and wash her stuff, nothing gets past me into the house. When someone talks to me, it takes a long time for me to understand what they're saying, and it takes a while for me to respond. Inertia sets in. It's still there.

I've tuned in to a radio play. It's for the children, but they are running around, so really it's for my own self comfort. The sound of the story – the children's voices, passing trains, doors being opened and slammed, creaking noises and old phones ringing – subdue the feeling of terror inside me. The grief and fear can suddenly flare up and leave me gasping for breath. My sister, K, tells me that she's been listening to audiobooks of Jane Austen novels, that she's read many times before to help her get to sleep.

I sit on the stool with a bucket of soapy water beside me. With a cloth, a sponge and a toothbrush. Silver polish. I take out each item, one at a time, and wash it carefully.

The silver has become tarnished. I rub the polish into it with the sponge. There's a tray, two tablespoons, an old sugar spoon, and a kind of funnel with a crooked spout; I have no idea what that was used for. It's what's left of the silverware from my grandmother's childhood home, most of which was stolen from a barn where my mother had once stored her some of her belongings.

Her art books are smeared with paint, some repaired with tape. I give them a wash.

A ceiling light shaped like a kerosene lamp that once hung in her bedroom. I wipe the dust from the light bulb. A marble lamp base that has turned brownish-yellow and covered in tacky linseed oil. I scrub it clean with the toothbrush.

Were those lights switched on that day, quietly illuminating the house?

In a book about the painter Turner, the last fifty pages are yellow and wrinkled from cat piss. The cat piss has crystallised into a fine glitter.

I try to scrape up some crumbled pills from the shelf under the table. Bits of them have fallen into the fine cracks in the varnish, so I'm unable to brush it all away and it leaves thin, white veins in the dark wood.

I flick through some of the books, reading what she has underlined. I recognise her perceptions of life and reality.

In Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye*, she has highlighted: "I swung wildly but with force. I knew I was strong, and maybe like they said, 'crazy.' But I had this feeling inside of me that something real was there. Just hardened shit, maybe, but that was more than they had."

Her jackets and coats are hung upon clothes hangers to be aired along the eaves of the porch roof. My grandmother's mink coat, the Valentino coat in dark brown sheepskin that my mother´s wealthy boyfriend once gave her; it had originally been floor-length, but she trimmed it to knee-length a few years ago. The short leather jackets in fine, soft leather; one in sea green, one in grey, and a light pink leather coat. The jackets dangle and sway in the breeze.

They smell of cigarette smoke, but if I bury my nose deep into the mink fur I can still smell my mother. And at the heart of that smell, my grandmother.

A few days go by before I buy a new white lampshade and decide to plug in the old marble lamp in the living room.

I'm worried that all my mothers' things might explode in my house.

[…]

That day.

My father-in-law, the kids and I go to Øygarden, where my parents-in-law have a holiday home.

The kids and I stroll down the lane to the little grocery store. I take some photos on the way; since I want the children's book I'm writing to be set here. I've decided to write children's books, cheerful books, the ones my children enjoy reading. No more novels about grief and misery.

I take photos of the canal flowing in from the sea and past the shop. There's a high tide and the water is sparkling. It's this sparkling that I want to remember, so I can describe it in detail.

At 13.03 I write: "Hello, how are you doing?"

I take photos of cow parsley swaying by the roadside, while the children balance on a wall beside it. I want to remember what flowers grow there, because I think the children in the book should pick them and draw them in a summer diary, as K and I always did during the summer holidays when we were little.

I take photos of the little shelf full of paperbacks in the shop, for the scenes where the kids go to the store. One of the books is called *Life in a Day*.

I remember thinking: *She can't die while I stand here looking at a book called Life in a Day*.

My daughter sorts through the packets of chewing-gum on the counter while I figure out what we should buy, although I no longer remember what that was, but suppose it could be ketchup or bread or a disposable barbecue for our walk to the cave later. And we need to hurry since there's a storm due to blow in at six o'clock. Now it's calm and sunny, but the weather can change suddenly here.

I take photos of the walk. First in the little troll's forest, with its crooked trees. The wind is now blowing, the trees creak and groan, and we pretend that there really *are* trolls there. The time is 14.08.

My mother still hasn't responded to the message I sent her at 09.58 – "Hi, how have you been?" I had written. I'm upset that she hasn't answered because she's been replying quickly just lately. But I console myself with the though that this has happened before; that she is perhaps busy with something, or that her cell-phone battery has run out and she has forgotten the charger.

We find some dried out crab claws on the rocks, which crumble as we pick them up. My father-in-law tells us that the seagulls drop the crabs onto the rocks to break their shells.

I remember walking over the rocks with my phone in the breast pocket of my raincoat, so I'd feel it vibrate if it rang. I'm ashamed at how I'm too cowardly to call her; that I keep putting it off.

The wind has really whipped up, but I'm reluctant to pull my hood up because I want to be able to hear the phone if it rings.

My mother's intense suffering was now unbearable for me, how else could I cope with it other than by trying to shield myself from it; force myself to forget it?

I'd been living in two worlds for so long, and it was so hard to be in both at the same time. I had to somehow choose which world I was going to be in and focus on that. That was how I thought about it afterwards – that it wasn't possible to be in two places at the same time, to constantly take in what was really going on in my mother's world and try to sort it out. My brain just couldn't do it. It would cope for periods, but then I'd collapse afterwards. I was ashamed that I couldn't cope with it, but I'd tried as best I could to make it work. Had I tried as best I could? Yes I had! In the weeks and months that

followed, I would cry to S telling him that, "I didn't do everything I could, and she was is in such an awful state. My pain was nothing compared to hers." And he said, over and over, "You and K did everything you could, more than you should have done!"

I follow my children and father-in-law over the rocks on that Saturday – film a video clip of the children squatting in a small cove as the waves lash the shore, and as the water recedes the undertow makes a loud, gurgling sound.

I take a picture of my father-in-law and the children with their backs to me in front of the cave entrance, which is actually a ravine that cuts through the mountain.

I remember walking behind them into the ravine, and that we had to squeeze through the narrowest sections. I remember thinking: *She can't die while I'm squeezing my way through a ravine, it's too absurd, it's too symbolic, like being born again, but from a mountain instead of a mother.*

On our way back, I take pictures of a family grave in the local graveyard, which I send to S, who is spending time with a childhood friend. We walk round looking for the graveyard for some time before we find it. Do I see it as a good sign that we found the grave? The children run around pointing at the graves they think are nicest, and I take note of what they like, but something else within me says: Don't look for signs, don't think symbolically, be rational.

I'm thinking: *She can't die while we go looking for a grave in a graveyard!*

But she does.

She dies that day. In the middle of a quite ordinary day.