**The Little Girls**

**By Monica Isakstuen**

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Represented by Gyldendal Agency:

[Nina.pedersen@gyldendal.no](mailto:Nina.pedersen@gyldendal.no)

[Anne.cathrine.eng@gyldendal.no](mailto:Anne.cathrine.eng@gyldendal.no)

**Extract**

**pp. 5-52**

*How long are you going to be here?*

*Don’t know. Until my mother gets bored.*

“Petite maman” (2021), Céline Sciamma

Yes, of course, for outsiders it looks idyllic

a small white cabin, partially hidden

behind some clusters of

weather-beaten pine trees, at the head of the bay

on a small hill between the bare, golden rocks that are pounded

by the winter sea, and caressed by the summer sea, like now

look!

at the soft morning swell

that makes you want to tear off your clothes and

lie on your back and just

float

around in the blue-green, listen!

had it not been for the seagulls, the puff-puff-puffing

of the eternally fishing neighbour’s boat out there

would dominate the soundscape, but

no matter: we’re talking about the kind of place that

only the most fortunate (or privileged, if you prefer)

inherit access to, and in that sense only borrow

as long as the place’s rightful

owner is happy to welcome future hopes as holiday guests

and each and every holiday guest

should therefore show great gratitude to them, that is,

unless you take a place like that for granted?

well, such careless thoughts will in the long term

bring their own punishment

you don’t need to be an estate agent to know

that if such a paradise were put up for sale

a multitude of interested parties would turn up

because how often do you find a jewel like this

on the open market?

oh yes, there are plenty of people who would give anything for a so-called

seaview, there are plenty of people who turn a blind eye

to layouts that make more sense

on paper than in reality

but honestly: roofing felt on the roof?

have you ever seen anything so tasteless?

ugly cheap black tar paper

talk about flushing an otherwise gloriously beautiful

pearl down the pan (ugh, yes, the roof is a sore point

and a tiresome topic of conversation

that should ultimately be avoided), but

yes, there are plenty of people who don’t care about roofing felt

and small rooms and narrow beds, there are

plenty of people who can’t be bothered to get annoyed

about all the special techniques and

tricks needed to open a particular window or

or close

an outer door, or that is smells

slightly of

damp

in the kitchen

there are plenty of people who are willing to overlook

such minor details, people with money and power

and friends in prestigious architect firms in town

and for people like that the road to planning permission and demolition is

short

so you have to take care!

yes, you have to tread carefully, know your place

in the big picture, keep a lid on vague wishes to upgrade

and change –

I beg your pardon?

change?

to what purpose?

unless the holiday guests want to be called in

to give a hand one weekend with

everyone in all kinds of relationships

across all generations?

no, I thought as much

so bear this in mind: anyone who holidays in

such a place, is treading on pine needles

and lava and

grace

look!

the seagulls are landing on the roof

two, five, eleven of them stressing about

on the black roofing felt, burning hot in the sun already

no, forget the roofing felt, for goodness sake,

not even the flying rats of the skerries

want anything to do with it

just look, they’re flying off again

one after the other, hoarse cries, fretting and fussing

it’s the seagulls that wake the people

under the sky

at the head of the bay, between the trees, behind the wood panelling

inside the windows in the rooms in the beds

watch now, there’s someone stirring

in there

The initial confusion, where

when

what day

the uncertain circumstances before the eyes are fully open

what time is it and

where am I supposed to be and

what meeting have I forgotten and

who’s standing waiting for me somewhere else, annoyed,

yes, who have I let down by sleeping so long?

but then I stretch

and hit my toes and feet and

right elbow into the wall

ow

and as a pure reflex and sit up

and bang my head

ow, ow!

on the base of the bed above me, and then the real circumstances fall

into place: this narrow bed

and the duvet cover with tiny flowers over me

and the walls with staring knotted faces, there

and there

and there

and the warm light through the sun-bleached curtains

the seagulls’ intense

negotiations about fish entrails from the eternally fishing neighbour’s catch

out there, they flap and fret and fuss

and I understand

where I am, and I remember how to behave

here

But all the same, surely it’s only human

To feel a bit befuddled when you wake up?

surely it’s no mortal sin to take a few seconds

to remember your surroundings and tasks?

I mean: to drop out of consciousness every now and then

doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten the little girls

or the fact that the little girls with the greatest

of ease and right

at any moment might storm in

and demand my attention and help

and care

of course I don’t forget

that the little girls, when they see my face

that the little girls, when they hear my voice

that the little girls, when they sense my presence

hear the resounding cry inside

*my mother*

yes

the little girls’ awareness of me

is just as strong as the one I have

when I see her face

when I hear her voice

when I feel her presence in the room

*my mother*

I have a one-hundred-per-cent clear picture of her

Follow closely now, that is the sound of my mother making her way through

the morning, out into the day, and I draw breath, and I count

one

there’s my mother coming out of the bedroom

two

there’s the creak of the door

three

there she is stepping over the threshold and stretching up her arms

first over to one side, and then over to the other side

and back, until her spine gives a faint crack

four

there she is in the kitchen

five

now she opens the cupboard about half a metre to the left of me

if I knocked a hole in the wall

and time

I could reach out my hand and touch her, or help her

to put on the coffee, or wash up something that I

forgot to wash up last night, or

put something back in its place that I put in the wrong place

six

or just wipe over a couple of surfaces, it never hurts to keep things a little tidy

or, I could stroke her back

and comfort her and show understanding

seven

but somehow it’s not really me to stroke my mother?

and somehow it’s not really my mother to be stroked by me?

eight

now she turns on the tap

nine

now she’s holding her fingers under the water and waiting

ten

until it runs cold

eleven

now she carefully lifts the carafe from the coffee machine

and flips up the lid and holds it under the water jet that’s just the right strength

twelve

and lets the carafe fill up until it’s just full enough

thirteen

and lets the lid fall back into place

fourteen

and pushes the carafe back into its space on the coffee machine and swings out

the filter cone

fifteen

puts in a filter

sixteen

and measures out just enough coffee

seventeen

peers at all the lines, is there the right amount of water, is everything as it should be

yes, eighteen

now my mother presses

the switch, now she walks into the living room

nineteen

out into the hall

twenty

into the bathroom

twenty-one

my mother closes the door behind her

twenty-two

and I breathe

out

When we arrived here yesterday evening I understood that my mother wanted

the little girls to sleep

here, in this room that was once only

mine

com and see how nice I’ve made it for you

my mother said and opened the door and showed the little girls

how nice she’d made it

for them

with teddy bears on both bunks and wild flowers on the windowsill

isn’t it a bit small?

the little girls said, because

they’re not familiar with my mother’s systems

that’s my fault!

I’m the weak link

my mother didn’t look at me

she pursed her lips and said

small?

no, there’s plenty of space both up

and down

and the little girls smiled

isn’t it summery, my mother said

isn’t it lovely, doesn’t it smell good?

and the little girls stepped carefully over the threshold

and craned their necks to look up at the top bunk

and bent down to look at the bottom bunk and

hugged the teddy bears

and leaned towards the window and poked their noses

into the bunch of wild flowers

mmm

yes, the little girls expressed

their delight and showed their appreciation for

the trouble my mother had gone to

for them, but the ways of little girls are

inscrutable, they turned with

a cheerful smile to my mother and said

what about the other room?

I myself was of little help, I just stood there

silent, I didn’t say

the little girls were right, I didn’t say to my mother

for goodness sake, can you not see that they’re growing?

I didn’t tell her that the little girls don’t like

to sleep up high, or that they certainly never manage to agree

on who will sleep above

and below, or the other way round

I didn’t tell her that head to toe would be pointless

as the little girls would then just spend the evenings bickering about elbows

and knees and shoulders, about distance and closeness and breathing and coughing

and farting, and then there’d be no end

to it, I didn’t confess to my mother that the little girls

so easily lose patience with each other

and that I unfortunately so easily lose patience with them

and that I would rather not begin the holiday

in that way, with discussions and arguments

I didn’t explain to here that the little girls need

plenty of room and soft mattresses and big duvets

and that on the way in the car the little girls had already decided

that they would sleep in the other room, with the double bed

and the sofa bed and the bureau

I didn’t nudge my mouther and wink at her and say

you know what it’s like

when the little girls have decided on something

when the little girls have made up their mind

yes, then it’s not always so easy to –

no, because you remember, don’t you, how it –

and one could perhaps try to imagine –

I mean, just how principled should one be?

no

I didn’t ask my mother

Why do you always have to plan down to the smallest detail?

I didn’t shout

ask them what they want!

no, I didn’t say anything, I didn’t give

the slightest cough or sigh

I didn’t give a hint

of anything

that might be deemed in defence of the little girls

to the contrary, I sent them a look that begged

them to understand

the gravity

of the situation and to understand that it would be easiest for everyone

if they put their own wishes to one side and humoured

my mother, I mean

how hard can that be?

I heard my mother say

that it was a shame for the poor bears, oh

how lonely they would be

and for the pretty flowers that had grown so beautifully

for you, stood there in the forest, night and day and night again

and been nourished by the sun and the dew, while they waited

to be picked, look at them

they want nothing other than to stand here in all their glory

just think how they’ve longed

to be smelt and admired

by you

But the little girls had a solution

the little girls said

we can take the teddy bears with us, and the wild flowers as well

and then they did just that

the little girls picked up and carried

the duvets and pillows, and holdalls and bags and bears and blossoms

into the guest room with the double bed and bedside tables and big cushions and

tall wardrobe and a generous chest with lots of drawers

I could hear them in there

how they actually managed to agree about

who would sleep on which side of the wide

bed with the fluffy duvets and which drawers they would use

and while the little girls settled in

my mother popped her head in

to me, in the little room, where I had bent over to stuff

the rucksack and beach bag and holdall and cotton net in

under

the

narrow

bunk

bed

and I heard her say, to my back

well, well

you get your own way again

this room that you always wanted

Oh, my mother was about to give up on me

that summer!

who gets their own room

in a place where all earlier generations have put up with

their mothers and sisters and other relatives, where for decades one

has obediently slept next to whoever it might be

where does the expectation of special treatment come from

something as grand

a room of one’s own

in summer when you’re outdoors all day

my mother said

stand still

she said as well, as she took my measurements

height, width, depth

what’s the point of

tailoring a whole room to a person who’s still growing

we have no idea how tall you will be

gracious, it’s simply guesswork

my mother sighed

and rounded up the figures that she felt might be right

given my heritage and environment and food consumption

she then passed the measurements on to my spotty cousins

who were going to convert the toolshed into

a bedroom for me

so I had something to adhere to

a growth curve into the future

a set of limitations for an otherwise limitless life

*How* much you’re growing

my mother says

*how* much you talk

*how* loud you shout

*how* much you eat

*how* much noise you make

*how* restless you are

*how* are you sitting

*how* are you standing

*how* are you walking

*how* scatterbrained you are

*how* much mess you make

*how* do you think you’re behaving

if only my mother knew how hard I’m trying!

how quietly I tiptoe down the hall and how careful

I am to put glasses and cups down

so they don’t leave a stain on the counter and other surfaces

how diligently I wipe away the crumbs and pick up

the hairs and rub and polish stains, not to

leave a sign

that I’ve been anywhere, or even

exist, if only my mother knew how lightly

I touch the doorhandles and window latches, how controlled

I am when I lower my body onto

a chair and how soundlessly I move closer

to the table, how still I sit, and how much less I put

on my bread than I’d really like to and how

slowly I chew each mouthful, and how little

milk I pour into the glass so it won’t

spill over and how graciously I say thank you for the food and how

well I clear up after myself, because everything can be softened

and everything can be curbed, except growth

yes

that

is not something I can control

growth is not something my mother can prevent

no, growth doesn’t shrink

growth is not ashamed, growth owns no shame

growth creaks and cracks and spurts and hurts

growth bubbles and boils and gasps and groans

growth denies itself nothing, growth pushes on and

allows the body to spill over waistbands and burst trouser legs

and sleeves, growth makes your pants small

and your skirt hem short and your bed narrow

but it’s not bad-willed

growth has no will

growth just grows, growth grows me tall and intense

and big and ugly and beautiful and hungry and thirsty and messy

and wild and independent and defiant

and uncontrollable, growth doesn’t stop

until my elbows and my shoulders and my upper arms

and my lower arms and my hands

and my fingers have grown enormous and bash into

everything, and my bum spreads and my thighs expand and

my tits wobble and sway, all of me blushes and pulses and

swells

shh, body

stop!

Listen, my mother’s humming now

As she usually does when she’s peeing

My mother also usually tears off three pieces (no more)

of toilet paper, and my mother usually wipes herself

while she looks

the other

way

and my mother usually waits to pull the chain until someone has

done a number two, yes

my mother usually makes up her own expressions

for phenomena that my mother finds

unpleaseant, my mother turns on the taps

and washes her hands and turns off the taps and takes

one

pump

of soap and turns on the tap again, with her lower arm

in order to avoid any

stickiness

getting on the tap, my mother washes her hands for at least twenty seconds

my mother leans forward and turns off the tap, with her lower arm again

and wipes some stickiness from the tap, how on earth did that

stickiness

get on the tap, someone must have gone to the toilet during the night

who’s not familiar with the system

or has not been instructed well enough in the system

because there is a system, after all,

why can’t they just follow it?

The clouds sail slowly across the sky

and the morning swell tries to snuggle up

to the bare rocks, but the rocks don’t want it

yet, the rocks doze on and let

the moves

run off, and the sea kindly

withdraws, only to try again later

and the sun burns

on seagull feathers

and dry trees and

black roofing felt, before it’s even half past seven

this summer day brings word of

sunburnt shoulders and a temperature that will exceed the already

overwhelming heat record

from yesterday, and there’s almost no wind

look, the pennant on the flagpole, it’s hanging

lifeless

straight

down

and the aphids are searching around on the hydrangea for dew without joy

but there’s not even a trace of wetness, every last drop has

evaporated, yes, the morning dew has already disappeared like –

and

in there she

stretches

several people stretch, the younger

bodies are awake now and

make their demands on the day

Oh no, is it not obvious

that I should lie here for another half hour, at least

free of meetings and emails, just the pillow and

the duvet and me and the view and maybe a book

and get a cup of coffee and wander back

quietly, so as not to wake anyone

oh no

no, I hear noises in there

in their room, giggling and snickering, curtain rings

racing

along the rail, they don’t need to pull down the whole room

what are they doing in there?

can’t they sleep a bit longer instead?

I had almost counted on

them sleeping a bit longer, in fact, I had actually asked them

fervently

to sleep a little longer

when I pulled the duvets up over them

and turned off the light and said

we’re on holiday now

tomorrow we can sleep as long as we like

good night!

but no, the little girls obviously don’t associate holiday with sleep

the little girls have obviously not discovered the joy of lounging

in bed, the little girls jump up

and let loose

Where does the time go, the little girls are four months old

and grin showing their gums at the sight of the other, the little girls are

nine months and can sit up alone, thirteen months

and throw off duvets and bedlinen that have in inexplicable ways

come loose in the night, the little girls are one and a half

and put their feet on the floors and toddle off, the little girls are

three, four, six and

open the bedroom door

and sneak past the bathroom

and run into the living room with bare feet

in only their pants, the little girls come hurtling towards

this room

Soon they will run into my mother, who’s standing there already

outside, impatiently irritated, because my mother doesn’t like

it when one lies in bed like this and

lounges

until late in the day, in the good weather

hello, it’s morning

says my mother and raps her knuckles on the door

it’s morning, you have to get up

says my mother

she knocks harder

canyouhearmeitsmorningyouhavetogetup

hellowhatareayoudoinginthere

quick, quicker, my mother is about to lose her patience

my mother will feel obliged to raise her voice

hello

do you hear me?

Hello, is there anyone in there?

Aiai, here come the little girls

how old are they, actually

fifteen or five?

they’re here now, they’re coming now

they’re putting their hands on the doorhandle, pushing it down

now they burst in

six years old

now they throw themselves at me

eleven?

twelve?

the little girls

don’t care about narrow or short

or too small, the little girls fight for space in my belly

and on my breast and in my awareness and my arms and

on my back and in my thoughts, but not in my heart because in my heart there’s always room, nine years old

the golden age of childhood

I read somewhere

or –

yes

the little girls are nine

Oh, so there’s life in you

says my mother’s face in the doorway

who’s that coming here, big and tall

I say and open my arms to

the little girls, and my hands reach for

their hands and my fingers reach for their

hair and their shoulders and their warm backs

my lips are drawn to their

cheeks, I want to kiss and kiss and kiss their soft faces, draw in

the sweet smell on their necks and lie here and be

a human pile all day, but

I want to swim, the little girls say

now, the little girls say

wait a little

I say

we’ve only just woken

no, the little girls say

I’ve been awake for ages

the little girls say

I’ve been awake for hours, I’ve been awake all night

I’ve been looking forward to it since yesterday, I’ve been looking forward to it since last

week, since Christmas, since last summer

I want to swim, swim, swim

now, now, now, the little girls say

come on, the little girls say and

pull at me, no

I say, you will just have to wait

a little longer

but I’ve waited a hundred years

the little girls say

oh?

I say

anyone who’s waited since last summer, my mother says

can wait a few minutes more

no!

the little girls shout

yes, you have to wait

I say

You’ll just have to be patient

my mother says

patience is a virtue

I say

absolutely, patience is something everyone has to learn, my mother says

and anyway I haven’t even had a pee yet or washed my

face or brushed my hair or brushed my teeth

or put on suncream and as far

as I can see

neither have you?

I say

The mood quickly changes

it takes so little

you spoil everything!

the little girls shout and run out of the room

and I leap out of bed and

grab my dressing gown in passing and wrap it around me

and run after the little girls

into the living room, what is it now

I say

you’re always like that

the little girls cry

it’s the only thing I’ve been looking forward to

and if you don’t know how much I’ve been looking forward to it, you’re

actually a terrible person, the little girls sob

and if you’re a terrible person I would

rather die than be your daughter

the little girls sniffle, they really hold nothing back, no

the little girls obviously don’t know the system and

all the rules about what one can do

and not do, what one can say and

not say

why do you have to be so STUPID, the little girls howl

why do you have to be so boring and strict

why do you have to say no to everything that’s fun, why are you so grumpy?

I just want to swim, the little girls sob

can’t you just let me swim, it’s the only thing I want to do!

the little girls wail

it’s the only thing I’ve been looking forward to

you don’t understand anything

you don’t remember what it’s like to be a child!

the little girls howl

For my part, the little girls can roar and

shout and howl and scream and rail and row

as much as they like, yes, the little girls can

condemn me and curse me

in this way and that

yes, yes

that’s fine

the little girls are children, after all, whimsical and greedy, eating through

minutes and hours and days with the pleasure principle

as their compass, and I am the grown up

thoughtful and patient, the one who can take everything and put up with everything

but let them be right about everything

I can’t do that, the little girls cannot

stand there and shout at me

that I don’t remember

Hah!

just look, it’s actually me

standing there wrapped up in a far too big dressing gown

and shouting

at my mother

you spoil everything, I shout, and

you don’t care about me, I sob, and

you don’t know what I want, what I want to do, I wail, or

what I wish for

or long for

or hope for

or believe in

or don’t believe in, I sniffle

you don’t care what I like and don’t like, I whine

you can’t even be bothered to try to understand

what it’s like being me

I cry

I don’t want to be your daughter any longer!

I howl.

And look

there’s my mother standing in a far too big dressing gown and screaming and crying

her too, at my mother’s mother

you don’t listen to what I say

she roars

you don’t understand who I am

she sobs

or how I think

or what I want

I wail

you don’t care why I’m crying

my mother says

you’ve completely forgotten

the little girls say

what it’s like to be a child

I say

You’ve suppressed

my mother’s mother says

what it’s like to be

nine