

Dark Green Almost Black

(Dunkelgrün fast schwarz)

by
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MARIE

1986

The small house is nestled against the wall that circles the churchyard. The church stands alone in its own quarry, close to the rocks that provided the marble from which it was built, but apparently not quite close enough – it's been slumping ever since it was first put there. Instead of putting it on the rocky plateau, the people built it right next to it. Half of the building sits on sandy soil and like everything built without a solid foundation, they say it's falling apart. Yet when I look for signs of decay, I don't find any. The famous place of pilgrimage looks old and tired but solid. The vicarage across from the church is painted in a rosy shade of pink. The building right next to it is pale green and houses not only the postal office but also the kindergarten and the elementary school in the back of the building.

“Let's go there,” I say as I'm reaching for Moritz's hand. Sophie moves, then scrunches up her face, yawns and continues to sleep. I feel sweaty underneath the baby sling. Her warmth covers my skin, my shirt is soaked and it sticks to my chest. The unfamiliar silence roars inside my head. I turn around again and again, looking for a car that doesn't come. We haven't met a soul so far. Moritz wants to head over to the playground and drags me towards the stairs. I open the little gate and hesitate. There, in front of the yellow slide are a woman and a child. Moritz presses his back to my legs. The woman who must have heard us, turns around. She is very beautiful. She too carries a baby in a sling, the boy next to her is the same age as Moritz and for a second I feel like I'm standing in front of a mirror. I am spellbound, I can't look away. The waves that her blonde hair makes, as it falls down her shoulders, are so soft that her silhouette almost seems blurry, like she belongs more to this world than I ever could. Her eyes are blue or green, her face is strikingly symmetrical and in all the parts where I am scrawny, her body has produced curves.

“Excuse me,” I say for no reason, while she takes a drag from her cigarette and smiles soberly as she looks at us. The boy runs towards Moritz, yells “howdy,” grabs his arm und drags him away. He is just as blond as she is, his eyes are as light as the sky gets right before the weather shifts and rain is about to come. He wears nothing but cropped jeans, his small torso is tan and quite muscular for a child's. Moritz turns his head towards me, his facial expression oscillates between cheerful and frightened. He and the boy vanish across the top of a small hill. The woman approaches me and even though I feel the urge to simply run away, I offer her my outstretched hand. She flicks the cigarette on the ground and steps on it without even looking. Her hand is warm.

“My name is Sabrina,” she says.

“Marie,” I say.

She blows smoke from her raspberry-red mouth and holds my hand a tad too long.

“This is Sophia,” I say, pulling away my fingers and stroking the little baby bundle on my stomach.

She bends forward to take a look at Sophia’s face. She smells like lavender and fags.

“Samuel,” she says pointing to her baby sling, “and Raffael,” she says pointing behind her back where the boys are.

She is wearing a flowery dress, it’s mustard yellow with hundreds of little flowers on it, light sandals on her feet. She looks like one of the women from a fashion catalogue, with dancing freckles on her nose and shoulders.

“I’ve never seen you here,” she says, tilting her head and giving me another smile.

“We just moved here a week ago,” I mumble, “into Schartauer’s house right by the Celtic Café.”

I walk up the five wooden steps and she follows me.

“Oh, that’s you!” She laughs. “Everybody’s been talking about you.”

She puts her hand to my hip and I cringe - as much from her words as from her touch.

“Oh well,” I reply rather unimaginatively.

“Now, don’t worry about it,” she says reassuringly and strokes my upper arm, “The people here just like to talk.”

I have the sensation of a spider sitting on my skin where her fingers graze.

“You’re from Vienna, right? And your husband goes to university there?”

I nod and gaze at the children. Moritz sits on a swing and Raffael pushes him, a lot harder than I’ve done so far. Moritz sits there with his eyes closed and his face turned towards the sun. His curls fly. When Raffael notices us looking, he says gravely: “Motz and I are friends now.”

Sabrina puts her hand on my shoulder.

“They really seem to click, the two of them,” she says.

I nod again and the sweat that has collected on my skin underneath Sophia’s body continues flowing slowly downwards. “Moritz will be starting kindergarten here tomorrow,” I say pointing to the green house below us. Sabrina beams at me and yells: “Raf, you’ll see your new friend in kindergarten tomorrow!”

Then she laughs again while I ask myself, why I have such a hard time being easygoing. My son finds a new friend without even trying, while I’ve had twenty-five years to do the same and still haven’t succeeded. For a moment, I feel abandoned by him. How much easier everything would be if grown-ups could just do it the children’s way. If I could just look at Sabrina and say: “Let’s

be friends,” without all these layers of politeness separating us. I look at her sideways. I would like to belong. I would like to take the first step.

Samuel wakes up and starts to bawl, his cries are loud and piercing.

“Oh,” says Sabrina, “someone’s real hungry.”

And since there is no bench, she just squats on the grass, pulls the baby sling around her upper arm so she can cradle Samuel sideways, pulls out her breast and presses the nipple into his mouth. She’s not wearing a bra. The hair in her armpit is dark-blonde, her breast is rounder and fuller than mine. All of this happens very quickly, a single fluid motion, I’ve barely blinked twice when the child is already sucking greedily while Sabrina smiles at me unselfconsciously.

“How old is Sophia?”, she asks.

“Two months,” I reply.

“Four months,” she says and strokes the mess of sweaty hair on the child’s head. She slips out of her sandals and stretches out her legs. Her toenails are painted purple.

“Seems like quite a match?” she says and looks at me inquiringly.

Her gaze seems to penetrate all the way into my spinal cord, but I don’t dodge it. The sun is right in my face, I’m sweating and I am thirsty. I can hear Moritz laugh. Then I sit down on the grass right next to her.

MORITZ

2017

Raffael walks into the apartment as he lived here. He looks around curiously, he doesn't ask questions, he doesn't say anything. Instead he slips out of his shoes and his jacket and puts down his suitcase. Moritz just stands there, motionless. With a gentle smile, Raffael takes his hand that is still clutching the door handle and closes the door softly behind them, as if he knew about the old neighbor next door who is such a light sleeper. Then he hugs him. He smells of rain and his three-day-stubble scratches Moritz's cheek.

Raffael pats him on the shoulder.

"It's so good to see you."

Before Moritz has a chance to answer, there's Kristin standing in the doorway to the living room. She yawns with her mouth wide open, only to throw her hand across it when she becomes aware of the stranger in the room. Raffael smiles at her.

"I knew she was beautiful, Motz," he says "But this beautiful?"

Moritz looks at Kristin and is overcome by surprise. It's been a long time since she glowed like that. Maybe when he first met her, maybe never. Normally her presence has a tinge of red, a faint shimmer. Now she exudes an intense pink, a balloon-kind-of-pink that tells him that she is insecure, thrown off balance.

He hasn't mentioned her to Raffael. Except for the occasional Facebook like and the usual "Happy Birthday" via messenger—which they didn't even exchange every year—they've not been in contact since at least a couple of years. No letters, no conversation, much less even a meeting. He had vanished from his life like a key that fell into a drain, a key that you gaze at from above, a little perplexed, knowing full well that you'll never be able to retrieve it. How did Raffael get this address? Who told him where he lives these days?

"Motz?" Kristin asks a little surprised. She's never heard anyone call him by his nickname, she couldn't have. She clears her throat when she realizes how raspy her voice is, then she undoes her ponytail, pulls back the long blonde hair and ties it anew. She's wearing a pair of black sweatpants and a washed-out Joy-Division shirt that used to be his and the way it settles on her stomach looks very unflattering. Moritz knows that this is not the kind of outfit she'd want to be seen in. Especially not by someone who looks as refined as Raffael, particularly so after being soaked in the rain.

He takes Kristin's hand in his own and holds them while he kisses the air to the left and right of her face. Moritz sees the pink darken and expand in circles around her.

Raffael puts his hands on Kristin's stomach.

“May I?” he asks and his smile extends to Moritz as well as Kristin. This breaks Moritz’s paralysis, he grabs Raffael by the shoulder and pulls him away from her stomach. Raffael immediately manages to soften this gesture by complying with it, thus turning it into some sort of hug that includes all three of them, as if they were standing in a circle, friends reconnecting after a goodbye long-ago. Yet, Moritz and Raffael never had this good-bye.

“Forgive me,” Raffael utters these words straight into this intimate situation, “Forgive me, I just showed up like that, unannounced and in the middle of the night. I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean to. I was going to come visit tomorrow or the day after and I would have called first, too, that’s for sure.”

He smiles at both of them, first Kristin, then Moritz.

“But?” Moritz asks surly. Raffael’s smile becomes only wider.

“But the hotel messed up my reservation and the two others I called were fully booked, so I figured you guys wouldn’t leave me standing in the rain.”

He runs his hand through his hair, shows them his moist fingers and shrugs his shoulders apologetically.

“I’d be forever thankful if you guys could set me up with a place to sleep for the night.”

He looks at Moritz. Still watery blue, his eyes are a deep lake on a stormy day and Moritz still feels they’re piercing into him. There is a slight desperation in the moment but not too much, just the right amount. He delivers his question in a tone that does not allow for rejection. Moritz withstands the look. Raffael’s eyes cut straight through him, they glide over spots that have not been seen in a long time. It’s the kind of feeling Moritz never wanted to have again. It’s also something he’s been missing.

“Of course, you can stay,” says Kristin, “you can sleep on the couch. Moritz’s friends are always welcome here.”

“Thanks,” says Raffael simply.

“Even when he’s never mentioned them,” Kristin adds, a little swipe to Moritz, who knows without even looking at her that she’s raised her eyebrows disapprovingly. He’ll have to answer some questions tonight, questions he’d rather not be asked.

“Of course,” he echoes, “We have a pull-out couch.”

“Oh please, no inconvenience,” Raffael dismisses the suggestion, “I’m happy to sleep on the floor, I’m completely exhausted. You won’t even notice me, I swear.”

Kristin walks over into the future children’s bedroom to get fresh sheets for the bed.

“Nice job, she’s stunning, Motz,” Raffael whispers and the old name feels cold on Moritz’s skin, like a cold hand that takes a little while before it starts to feel warm and familiar. Raffael follows him into the living room and clicks his tongue approvingly.

“Never mind,” Moritz says dismissively “I’m sure it is not the kind of luxury that you are used to.”

“Bullshit,” says Raffael, “your apartment is great. Very cozy. So ... unique.”

He points at a wall full of pictures, next to the television, where they have assembled a sort of collage of snapshots and personal memorabilia. Moritz and Kristin on a sailboat, in a burger restaurant in Amsterdam, Sophia at thirteen, the wedding picture of Kristin’s parents, the Post-it where Kristin jotted down her number for Moritz on that last day of the Business English class they’d both attended. Moritz feels uncomfortable, he does not want Raffael to see all these things that mean so much to him. It feels like they’re being exposed, laid bare in front of him. He takes two steps towards the wall to block the view.

The apartment is spacious, a hundred square meters, divided into four rooms in an old building in Hallein with those thick 17th century walls, walls from a time where people built walls to last an eternity. As soon as one enters the building, one is struck by the characteristic smell of catacombs and the kind of cold that’s been around for so long, locked in the building behind thick doors, that no amount of sunshine could ever make it go away.

By contrast, the apartment is modern, it was renovated, shortly before Moritz and Kristin moved in three years ago. The dainty stucco, the crooked window sills made of marble and the low wooden door were left unchanged throughout the renovation. They’re supposed to add to the charm of the place. The building has been around much longer than Moritz and will continue standing long after he’s gone. The building doesn’t give a crap about him. He – a man who builds new buildings – feels drawn to ancient ones. The kinds of buildings with whispering bricks and secrets hanging in the air. That’s the reason he walks in churches even though he doesn’t sway towards any religion or morality. He likes to sit on the hard benches and breathe in the sighs of sinners past.

Kristin throws a blanket and a pillow on the couch, then covers both in fresh straw yellow sheets. Her curiosity manifests itself in the look she does *not* direct at Raffael. She doesn’t ask him any questions, not even about the strangely vague story about the booked hotels. She’s trying to come across as cool, calm, and collected as if she’s someone who is used to receiving strangers in her house often as every week and maybe even offers their couch to rent on the internet. The tip of her tongue peeks through her lips while she is focusing on this routine activity. In moments like this, she looks like a little girl and Moritz gets an inkling of what their daughter is going to be like: bold, unrestrained and full of freckles. “Thanks a million,” says Raffael, “I don’t want to keep you up, I’m sure you’d like to go to bed now.”

Moritz hesitates.

“I’m sure I can skip work tomorrow,” he then says, “Fridays are usually slow in construction anyway.”

“That would be great,” says Raffael, “then we can go out and do something together. Cruise around a little. Like back in the day.”

“Yes, that’s a great idea,” Kristin agrees and suppresses a yawn, “you should do that.”

Embarrassment creeps into the silence.

“The bathroom is over there, second door to your left,” says Kristin, “take whatever you need. I’ll have to excuse myself now, sorry. Good night.”

“Good night,” Raffael replies and smiles. Moritz gazes at him sideways. He’s got wrinkles now around his eyes, also on his forehead, but the little boy Moritz used to know is still there. His face looks more angular and clear cut than it used to, not narrower but more distinct. Every one of his movements, his steps, his whole posture mirrors his self-assurance, even the arrogance that constantly shows in his slightly amused gaze, is attractive. He looks like someone who takes life easy because life in turn treats him well. One might even get the feeling that this lightness of heart could rub off, if only one managed to get close enough to him.

Moritz and Raffael are alone now and this could be the moment to ask him quietly what all this is about and also what the hell he thinks he’s doing, just bursting in here like they’d never stopped being friends. As if this were a place he could just come to at any random time.

“Let’s sleep now and talk tomorrow,” says Raffael.

He doesn’t look tired. As he briefly puts his hand on Moritz’s hand, he also touches the little scar on his thumb and not by accident, that’s for sure. “Remember,” is what that silent gesture says, “we’ve made an oath.” Moritz hesitates for a long time, then he nods and goes into the bathroom.

He closes the door, turns on the water and drinks from the tap. He looks into the mirror as drops of water fall from his chin. What does Raffael see in his face? Does he see all that has changed? Moritz stares, till all contours go blurry He looks for the boy that he too once was. Is Raffael able to recognize him underneath all these layers, can he still find something familiar after fourteen years? Also, who *has* he become in the meantime? He zooms back from blurriness; his gaze hits the cold surface of the mirror. His dark-brown curls are too long, his eyes are brown, sinister brown and earthy with thick long eyelashes. He looks scared and perplexed.

He brushes his teeth, pees and listens. It is quiet. He tiptoes into the bedroom on his bare feet, and slips into bed. He feels relieved that Kristin is asleep already. He lies awake for a long time and thinks of Raffael in the room next door. Sleep refuses to come to him like a stubborn child, anything more than dozing seems impossible and every time he nearly crosses that bridge into dreamless sleep, his body yanks him back by twitching uncontrollably. And then, suddenly, he is

wide awake. The alarm clock tells him that it is 3:14. Has he simply imagined Raffael standing there on his doorstep in his wet jacket, was it only a dream? His heart is racing, he is thirsty and gets up. Quietly he crosses the narrow hallway, it's dark and quiet. The door to the living room is not quite closed. He carefully pushes it open and sticks his head inside. And now, without the light, he can see clearly what he's been suspecting since earlier. The green has become darker, a lot darker, deep and massive, almost black. It fills the room; its glow reaches all the way to the ceiling. There was a time when Raffael was green like budding leaves, caterpillar green like snow peas in their freshly opened pod, light as lemons on other days. The green he sees now, has a number of black stains, like mold. Moritz just stands there and looks. Still he can't really make sense of what he sees. Something has happened. He knows that Raffael is not asleep; he can tell by the splashes that flare up and shoot through the green.

Neither of them says a word.

1991

Going into the woods was a test of courage every time. But Motz refused to let his fear show in front of Raf and that made going in there a lot easier. It took no more than two steps and they were surrounded by trees. It wasn't dark, only brown, a warm, friendly, mushy brown, like the lighter layers of the Ildefonso nougat that grandma Giti sometimes slipped him. They had to ensure his Mom did not find out about it, he was not supposed to eat chocolate, so Motz always made sure to put the cube of nougat straight into his mouth and let it melt, even though he would have preferred to get a good look at it first. On some days, there was a slight color gradient from brown to green, on others there was some gray at the far end of the brown but Moritz had not yet found out how the forest was feeling in those particular moments. The scary bit about the brown was not the color itself but the fact that it was alive. It was sticky and it pulsed, it sucked him in and it stroked him. The forest never had bad intentions but it was unpredictable and large. It seemed to know everything, even the things that you didn't want anyone to know about. In order to make sure, he'd find his way back out of the embrace of this giant mass that had neither beginning nor end, Motz stuck closely to Raf and that was why it was so difficult to go there by himself. It was just as difficult to enter a new room by himself but luckily, he did not have to do it that often anymore, since, by this time, he knew most rooms – those in his house and in Raf's, the school, the Celtic Café, Maria's little shop and grandma Giti's apartment. Every time he was about to enter a new room, all the objects in it began to yell at him so loudly that he had to press his hands to his ears and close his eyes because they would also flash with light. Everything seemed aflame and sparkled: silver, blue, yellow and pink, it sprayed

and twinkled. Then it tasted like berries or bugs, like burnt sugar or moss. Usually the sensations subsided when he stood very, very still for a long time. Then all the objects would calm down, until everything was alright and he was finally able to enter. His Mom did not know about any of this, nobody knew. There had been a time when she just dragged him into new environments. She'd been angry and impatient and then he had to scream, huddled on the floor with his arms around his head. Too much, it was just too much. At some point, he'd understood that other people did not experience the world the same way he did. He did not understand why that was. But it was easier to forgive them now.

The brown of the forest closed behind him, fern grazed his legs. Motz was breathing loudly, his heart was skipping. And then Raf took his hand. Raf always knew when the fear came. With Raf's fingers touching his, everything got well, his confidence was being transferred straight into Motz's body. The confidence was light yellow like a light bulb and it never flickered.

"Let's see whether any spiders have dropped into the secret glop," said Raf and pulled him towards the tree house.

The tree house had been around forever. Nobody really knew who built it. It changed ownership constantly, it belonged to one gang of kids then to the next and really it belonged to everyone. Everyone brought whatever they could find, new boards for the walls, Mickey mouse cartoons, discarded pillows and rusty knives. A small chest inside the house contained food most of the time. Whoever took it, replaced it the next time around with something they found at home in their mom's pantry or something they bought at Maria's store if they had enough pocket money to afford it. Motz always left the bananas that his Mom had given him to eat during breaks at school. Motz did not like them. He did like to swallow such soft and mushy texture. Sometimes he carried them around for so long that they turned brown and then he and Raf turned them into mush. A few days ago, they had made a blend of water and banana mush, added some soil, little stones and shredded leaves. Spiders loved that, Raf had said. Later they were going to cut up the spiders that the mixture attracted and add them to it. This was going to be their most terrible weapon against fat Manuel's gang.

"We just pour the spider potion over their heads from up here as soon as they try to climb up," Raf explained, "that's how the knights would do it when they were defending their castles."

"And then?" Motz asked wide eyed.

The idea gave him such creeps that he felt his skin erupt into goosebumps, even though it was August and quite warm.

"Then they'll be forever marked," Raf said firmly and even though Motz did not know what that was supposed to mean, he nodded contentedly.

"Damn," Raf mumbled as they arrived at the treehouse.

The bucket with the spider bait was empty. When Raf got angry, his green became fuzzy, it looked like individual stems, like the shredded cress that Motz's Mom kept on the windowsill in the kitchen. This made Motz anxious. Angry Raf was a dangerous Raf. You better ducked. All children knew that.

"Who did that?" Motz asked.

"I don't know," Raf grunted, "Do you have another banana?"

"Not today, Mom gave me a sliced apple and I ate it," Motz said apologetically.

"We should have done a better job at hiding the bucket, it's our own fault."

They sat down on the ladder that led up to the treehouse and let their legs dangle. The boredom of these summer days was like cling film that just wrapped itself around everything and made it hard to move. At least it wasn't quite as warm in the forest as it was on the grass outside, since the treetops protected them from the sun like a sunblind.

"What would you like for your birthday?", Raf asked.

"Some chalk and Knickerbocker-Gang books, and yourself?"

"Hm," said Raf, "I already got a remote-controlled race car. And three cassettes. And 500 shilling."

"But it's another three days until your birthday," Motz wondered. At the mention of such large sums of money, he felt a pinch of envy.

"So? Dad won't be there anyways and I won't invite anyone over," said Raf, then he added: "Our birthdays are almost at the same time."

"You say that every year."

"That's because it is the same every year, idiot!"

Motz shrugged. Soon they would both be eight years old. Only three days between their birthdays, three days he was secretly proud of, the only thing he had over Raf.

"You have a few shillings?" Raf asked. "We could buy some green candy snakes. No one here today anyhow."

Motz shook his head and didn't say anything. Normally Raf was the one who carried money with him. And he'd just received 500 shilling, too.

"Then let's go look for the others, maybe they are the Schnaufel's house. I'm sure we can mug someone there," Raf suggested.

"We could also go to the curling lane," Motz said quickly and nodded towards the asphalt track for curling that was a bit further into the woods. He didn't like it when Raf took the other children's pocket money.

"Why don't you look whether there is any food in the chest, instead."

Motz climbed up the remaining three rungs of the ladder and shuffled into the treehouse on his knees. He was fumbling with the chest's hook lock. It was a small wooden chest, no key was needed to open it, just a narrow hook made of metal that was inserted into a hole. While Motz was fumbling with it, he slipped and cut his thumb, directly underneath the fingernail. "Shit," he cursed right into the sharp pain.

Inside the chest was nothing but a shiny, yet empty, ice-cream wrapper. He climbed back outside. "Nothing," he said, "look."

He held out his bleeding thumb for Raf to look at. Raf pulled out his pocket knife. He flipped it open and cut himself in the palm of his hand without even flinching. Then he took Motz's thumb and pressed the wounds together. Motz gasped but did not fight it.

He watched their blood mix, his blood and Raf's. It burned and it hurt. Raf looked into his eyes.

"Blood brothers," he said without smiling.

"What does that mean?" asked Motz.

"That we're more than friends now. Like related," said Raf and continued to look at him.

"It means that you belong to me."

Motz corrected him: "That we belong together."

"Yes," said Raf but Motz knew that that was not what he'd meant.