

Simone Lappert *Der Sprung*

Sample translation from

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Finn

From the bathroom, all he could see of her was her tanned feet. She was still asleep, her breathing slow and even. He wished he could lie back down with her, bury his nose in the pale hair at the nape of her neck, and fall back into dreams. But Tuesday was pigs' eyes day, one of the best-paid days of the week. He had to pick up the eyes from the abattoir behind the gravel plant by nine thirty and take them to the ophthalmic clinic on the northern edge of town, then courier material around all day, urine samples and documents, blood tests and bouquets. Tuesdays weren't a day for weak calf muscles. The whole town switched up a gear on Tuesdays. Finn held the blade of the razor upwards under the water and turned the tap on full. He hoped the sound would wake Manu up. He didn't want to go over and rouse her, didn't want to seem that selfish. He drained the hairy water and wiped the dark stubble from the edge of the sink with the back of his fingers, listening; Manu hadn't woken up. Finn fiddled the green plastic toothbrush mug out of its limescale-stained metal holder and dropped it on the floor. The sound it made wasn't very loud, a puny plastic clang. He heard Manu turning over in his bed and then it went quiet again.

When she slept, she slept. Shaking his head, Finn watched the toothbrush mug rolling across the cracked tiles, bumping into his courier backpack and coming to a halt. He couldn't quite believe he'd just done that; thank goodness no one could see him. If there was one thing he hadn't expected, it was that this town he actually meant to leave would surprise him with a woman who made him throw plastic toothbrush mugs around at eight in the morning just to get a few more minutes awake with her. And he didn't know whether to be pleased or angry or amazed. He left the toothbrush mug on the floor and went over to the open bedroom door. Behind Manu's shoulder glinted the slim steel silhouette of his Pinarello racing-bike frame, polished to a shine, still bearing the peeling Banesto logo for the Spanish corporation that sponsored Miguel Indurain back when he sped along the asphalt like an alien in the nineties. Big Mig – like Finn, too tall for the sport and his back crooked – had won the Tour de France five times in a row with unsurpassed elegance. Until a few months ago, that magnificent piece of metal had been the only thing that made Finn's heart skip a beat. All he had done was count the pigs' eyes that lay between him and Campagnolo chain rings, gears and derailleurs, a racing bike that would have brought tears to the eyes of Big Mig himself. He had imagined a trip to Istanbul or Naples: behind him nothing but past boredom and a four-and-a-half kilo saddle bag holding the bare necessities, ahead of him a beautifully uncertain future of rutted coastal roads, overheated asphalt and lonely mountain passes. Later in the year, by ship to New York for the infamous Alleycat

courier race: the hot, fast city and him, Big Finn, in the midst of the hustle for first place. All that seemed far away now when he looked at Manu, lying in his bed and disrupting his pulse and his plans. Her large ears were red from sleep or the heat, her short hair such a pale shade of blonde, almost white, it was barely visible on the pillow. Her hair colour reminded him of the fluorescent pigments used to mark the road lanes in the town centre. It's luminous, he thought. She drew her eyebrows together as though dazzled by headlights from inside, she clenched her fists, and it almost looked like she was clenching her feet too, clinging on, braking, perhaps falling. Her small breasts were outlined under the sheet, but he didn't dare to touch Manu and wake her up, even though he could tell by her tense body that she wasn't enjoying her dream. Manu had this rare magnetic seriousness about her, something attractively precarious that he knew only from people who had been through a severe illness or great pain; people who had faced up to the absurd like a rabid dog, people with whom anyone who'd gone unscathed wanted to align themselves – not just because they knew more about life than others, but also more about death; that was what made them so special. Leo had been one of those people too. Finn remembered his piercing gaze and how he almost never blinked. His bald head and later the blond stubble. He remembered the huge garden in front of the house by the lake out at Griebnitzsee, where they'd spent endless afternoons, the raft they'd paddled out on, often not returning until darkness, the old Peugot racing bikes and their tours around the countryside. The weeks when Leo lost his hair, for the second time. Leo's presence was like a magnifying glass – everything was closer, bigger, sharper when he was around. Back then every day without him seemed like a loss to Finn. And he remembered the funeral, four days before Leo's fifteenth birthday, the feeling his whole life would be one long loss from then on.

Manu barely spoke about what was past. All he knew was that she magnified the world for him in a similar way. He knew, no matter how close he got to her, her earnest would never be his own; he could only borrow it like a piece of equipment that didn't belong to him; he'd have to give it back at some point. He knew too that he had to tell her what he was planning, Naples, Istanbul, New York, he had to tell her, ask her if she wanted to come along. Ask himself what a No from her would mean.

'Have you left the tap on?' Manu stared at him wide-eyed, as if she hadn't just been fast asleep.

Caught out, Finn reached for the cycling jersey under the bed and put it on. 'What makes you think that?'

'I can hear it,' Manu said. She struggled out of bed and into the bathroom.

Finn followed her, picking up the toothbrush mug surreptitiously. ‘You were just dreaming again,’ he said as he stroked her hair.

Manu wrapped both hands around the tap and turned it with clenched teeth, until it creaked.

Finn wiggled the toothbrush mug back into its holder. He couldn’t help laughing.

‘What?’ Manu murmured.

‘You’re exaggerating.’

Manu rubbed her red palms together. ‘It’s not good when it drips,’ she said. Her voice was still hoarse and sleepy. ‘All those drips for hours on end are enough to water a patch of green the size of your bedroom. It just shouldn’t drip, that’s all.’ Her eyes alighted on the plate of bread and honey balanced on the edge of the bath by the soap dispenser. ‘It’s pigs’ eyes day today,’ she said. ‘You need to have breakfast, it’ll be a long day.’

‘I thought I’d done pretty well,’ said Finn. ‘I managed two bites. But then I couldn’t help thinking of the slimy eyeballs with the red veins. The size of ping-pong balls. And they have these long stretchy tendons on them, grey like umbilical tubes but thinner, and you have to get them out of the cavities...’

Manu took off first the Tour de France T-shirt from 1992 that she wore in bed, then her boxer shorts. She leaned against the sink, pulled Finn towards her and kissed him. Her hair smelled of his freshly laundered sheets and the straw hat she wore at work. He could feel the warmth of her belly through his polyester top. She put her hand under his top, then down his shorts.

‘What have you got in mind?’ he asked.

‘Distracting you,’ whispered Manu. ‘And now eat.’ She let go of him and went over to the bedroom, and Finn reached for the bread and honey and ate hastily, not tasting anything.

‘I have to hurry as well,’ she said. ‘First the strange guy with the Chinese herbs, and then I have to rescue the old saguaro cactus on the traffic island outside the shopping centre. They want something more attractive there, they said, flowering cherries or something. But that cactus has been there longer than I’ve been alive!’ Manu snorted in disapproval. Finn chewed and watched her slipping into her white knickers with the hole under the elastic, then her short green gardener’s dungarees. The pale skin on Manu’s breasts and between her legs marked the zones only his hands could access, or at least he hoped so. She found it hard to stand on one leg, still sleepy, and she stumbled as she tried to get her second boot on, tipping over the old mayonnaise

bucket holding her gardening tools. He was glad she was getting dressed; he had to leave soon and there was no room for an erection in his padded cycling shorts.

‘What are you thinking?’ Manu asked, picking up her tools.

‘How tanned you are,’ was all Finn said.

‘That’s from going swimming in every weather. If you’d get off the saddle for once and come with me, you wouldn’t be as stripy as a spider plant. But in summer,’ she said, ‘in summer you’ll come swimming with me, won’t you?’

Finn nodded.

‘Sommer’s coming up,’ said Manu.

Finn nodded again. ‘I know.’

Manu rubbed dry earth from the edge of her hand rake. ‘What’s up? You’ve still got that look on your face.’

‘Have you ever had a serious illness?’ Finn was surprised at himself for asking; he’d only meant to think it.

Manu put the hand rake carefully back in the bucket. ‘Do I look like it?’ she asked, not meeting his eyes. Instead, she arranged her tools like a bouquet of flowers.

It seemed impossible to say yes; she’d take it the wrong way and Finn would have too much to explain. ‘Forget it,’ he said. ‘Just a thought.’

‘I don’t like it when you look at me like that,’ she said. ‘Look inside me. Why do people have to keep looking at me like that, all strange. Like my biography was an attic for rummaging around and finding interesting things.’

‘But biographies are a bit like attics. I just want to know what you went through before we met,’ Finn said, ‘what your story is, what’s up there in your attic.’

Manu walked past him and grabbed her sun hat from the coat stand. ‘Right. My attic. Mine. If you want stories, go to the library,’ she said, angry, ‘or to the cinema. Why’s everyone so obsessed with stories and back then and in those days? That’s why you fall in love, because it changes you, that’s what’s so great about it, the transformation.’

Finn wanted to agree with her and tell her he’d been transformed as well, that he’d thought deeply and often about that transformation, that he felt better now when he hung out with the other cycle couriers at the base, that he didn’t feel so puny any more next to guys like Silas or Tom, who looked like they’d got lost on the way to a shooting for a Davidoff Cool Water ad and showed off about having held more breasts in their hands than Allen keys. He wanted to tell

her how good she was for him. But Manu had already gone out the front door and down one flight of stairs and he hadn't got a word out, his mouth gaping and silent.

Manu stopped by the landing window, abruptly, like she'd forgotten something. 'All swept away,' she said. 'Where have all the clouds gone?' She opened the window and leaned over the sill. 'The grass is all brown outside, even in May; something's not right. Wasn't it just raining?' She turned back to him, her question meant seriously.

'You and your rain,' Finn said. 'There weren't any clouds, you're imagining it. It'll come along soon enough, your rain.' His voice sounded angry and Manu couldn't know he was basically angry at himself for the awkward, helpless way his affection for her made him feel.

'I'm leaving,' he said, 'on my bike, for Naples or Istanbul, depending on the weather, and then for New York. At the end of May. At the latest.'

Manu closed the window, carefully, as though scared of waking someone up. She turned around and looked at him. 'That's less than three weeks away.'

'Come with me,' Finn said. 'Just think of all the plants along the way.'

'You shouldn't repot something in blossom,' Manu said. 'It's pretty likely to die in the process.'

She jammed the bucket under her arm and continued down the stairs. Furious, Finn kicked the bannisters. There was no need to repot anything now; he'd knocked the whole plant off the windowsill without meaning to. He'd managed alone for a bloody long time, without all the hearts and flowers stuff, all the lying awake, the butterflies, thinking about haircuts and googling recipes. His whole life had fitted into a saddle bag. Now and then, Silas had fixed him up with one of the girls he'd got bored with. But all of them wanted to make something out of him. For them, he was like a frame without a saddle, a mediocre frame that needed repainting and new parts before you could be seen with it on the street. Because couriering was apparently not a career and plaid shirts were totally out, his curls would be so cute if he just let them grow, his walls would be perfect in mint green with a mid-level border, because dancing was dreaming with your feet, and a man of twenty-nine was at the age when he had to buy furniture. The only time he'd gone weak at the knees was at a steep descent. Sure, there'd been the odd week or two in his schooldays spent smoking joints and masturbating in bed, Chris Isaak's 'Wicked Game' on repeat, because yet another girl thought he was more like a cute big brother to her. And no one slept with cute big brothers; the only guys who had sex were the broad-shouldered selfish arseholes who stood around the back door of the gym making Brad Pitt eyes and only took the cigarettes out of their mouths to spit the initials of their latest conquest on the pavement, drop by drop. But that was long ago, long before he'd got used to giving his heart away only to racing

frames and the promise of twisted mountain roads. It was a very long time since he'd wanted to be more than he was. And Manu liked him even without a career and curls and mint-green borders. She liked white walls because you could hang up the pictures in your head on them, as she said. She let him like ketchup and instant mash, and she let his feet get nightmares from dancing; at most, she'd laugh her quiet laugh. He had to sort things out with Manu somehow, he just had to come up with something.

Edna

Edna felt for the remote on her bedside table. The tip of her forefinger found the On button and screen light flickered across her closed eyelids, a friendly woman's voice informing her about the mating rituals of dwarf crocodiles, mixed with the song from her radio alarm, 'Oh baby, baby, it's a wild world, it's hard to get by, just upon a-' Her fist hit Standby dead on target and she eased her itchy eyes open to see morning sun cast against the wall through the strips of the blind. A good day for the tortoise, Edna thought, and coughed. A hot day for old women like me. And Tuesday, it was Tuesday at that. She reached for the full pack of cigarettes on the windowsill, the cellophane removed in anticipation before she went to sleep; she loved the resistance you had to overcome to separate the first cigarette from the others, the jerk that went through the filter. She opened the matchbox, took out a match and pulled off the red tip with her teeth – wonderful, that crunch of sulphur between her teeth – and then a second match, rasped across the strip of sandpaper, the first inhale straight to her lungs, the burning in her night-dry mouth, now, now she was awake. A crow outside in the elder tree messed up the shadows on the wall. Edna folded her cover back and tapped off the ash. She didn't like the light in the morning; it made her varicose veins look thicker and bluer than they really were. She positioned the burning cigarette in the indentation on the edge of the ash tray and turned the TV volume up so it was audible from the hall. In the bathroom, she lit a new cigarette and turned up the little radio as she ran her bathwater. 'Oh baby, baby it's a wild world...' She lit another cigarette in the kitchen and in the living room, put the radios on there too, the same station in every room; that way she could walk around, get the toast and the butter knife ready here, water the pot plants there, the laurel, the agave, the banana plants, reward herself for every knee bend in front of the TV with a mouthful of nicotine, and all without dirtying the hall carpet with ash as she walked back and forth.

Her hair still wet, she went out in the garden, a plate of toast, butter and quince jam in her left hand, in the right a bunch of ribwort, sorrel and clover picked by the edge of the woods and put in water overnight. Edna rustled the bunch and took a few steps into the garden, not too far so as not to trample down the knee-high grass; that was Cosima's territory. Edna knew Cosima could smell the fresh herbs. It wasn't long before she stuck her head out of the blades of grass and came juddering towards her. Edna put the herbs down on the gravel by the garden table, sat down and buttered her toast. 'I went to visit Magali yesterday,' she told Cosima, who launched herself on the clover first. 'She was sitting there all tame, that old warthog, in her flowery bed with a nurse plumping up the pillow. And all along she'd got her shotgun under the sofa, the good old double-barrels. I wasn't bad at shooting tin cans, not bad at all. Just shooting animals,

though, that was never my thing. Never understood what she thought was so great about it.' Cosima was now munching up the sorrel. 'Slow down,' Edna said, 'you'll get the hiccups again.' She folded the slice of toast in half and bit into it. 'She hardly remembers anything,' Edna said with her mouth full. 'Only the adventures pop up now and then, the first stag she shot, two or three lovers, that kind of thing.' Edna put the toast back on the plate. 'I can tell you this. Sometimes I envy her. I mean, if I could find some way. For all my memories to melt away in my head over time. Like an Alka Seltzer, shhhhhhhh, and all that's left is a dull taste. That'd be quite something.' She got up and filled Cosima's bowl with fresh water from the hose, watched the bubbles slowly dissolving on the surface, one after another. 'You know,' she said, 'if you lead a healthy life, you can easily get to a hundred and twenty. That's a lot of years. Rather you than me.'

There were 87 euros left in the coffee tin on top of the fridge. That would have to do until the end of the month; she didn't want to go back to the office. The new doors there that didn't have a handle, just a buzzer. And then you had to take a number, get called into one of the cubicles, had to render accounts like some kind of criminal. She'd rather have toast and jam, or potato pancakes, as long as she had enough for cigarettes. She put a tenner in her skirt pocket and checked she'd taken her lighter; she wanted to get going while it was still cool. A coffee at the city park, then maybe pay Magali a quick visit, nab some of her lunch, she hardly ate a bite of the good food they gave her, maybe a walk in the woods if it got hotter, dinner at home in the garden with Cosima, then pop over to Yellow, where it was so lovely and loud and crowded, where she could stand at the bar surrounded by booming bass and didn't have to talk to anyone, because nowhere was a woman of her age more invisible than in a club. And that's where she'd stay, until just before midnight, until this miserable Tuesday was over and done with, that's exactly what she'd do. That's what she did every Tuesday.

Edna saw the woman even before she'd closed the door behind herself. She stopped short, her hand wrapped around the door knob. Up there, on the roof at the other end of the square, on top of the house with the pale green façade, a woman was standing straddling the gable, perfectly still. Determined. Edna didn't move. She felt her heart thudding in her throat, her gums, her temples. Now the woman started moving, putting one foot slowly in front of the other, downwards towards the roof's edge. 'Good God,' Edna murmured, her hand beginning to hurt around the door knob. The square was almost empty, just a few school children with sports bags crossing it noisily, none of them looking up. Edna let go of the door knob and walked towards the house. The woman seemed to notice her and moved faster towards the edge, slipped on a

roof tile, caught herself, stopped at the rim, circled her arms to regain her balance. Edna pressed a hand to her mouth. ‘I have to get down,’ the woman called out, leaning over the drop. ‘I have to get down, right now.’ The woman’s silhouette, the square, the façades, everything went blurry before Edna’s eyes, she was hot, terribly hot, it all came rushing back, the gravel between the tracks, the blood, the crushed body, the flashing digital sign on the roof of the soap factory beside the railway. She wasn’t going to watch. Not again. Never again. Edna’s whole body reacted, set off a trembling alarm, a whole-body trembling she hadn’t felt for years. She turned around, something clanked, smashed on the pavement, Edna didn’t look over her shoulder, held her ears shut, didn’t want to hear the woman calling, didn’t want to hear anything, let alone see it, she pushed the door open, dashed into the kitchen, grabbed the telephone from the wall next to the fridge, put one finger in the hole in the dial, faster, why wouldn’t it go faster, 1 – 1 – 0, her hand trembled, her voice too when someone finally picked up at the other end and she could finally say there was someone standing up there who wanted to jump, who meant it, that they had to be quick, very quick.

Three and a half minutes. Three and a half minutes until Edna heard the sirens and saw the flashing blue light brush against her kitchen curtains. She’d counted the seconds on the kitchen clock, her back to the window, her temple on the telephone’s cool casing. At last. She reached into her skirt pocket and lit a cigarette. Her left hand smelled of the metal of the door knob. As fast as she could, Edna drew the curtains in the living room, closed the blinds, the bathroom window. In the bedroom, she switched on the TV, turned it to the children’s channel where there would definitely be no news. The darkness soothed the trembling in her limbs, limited it to her hands, which were holding her up by the metal bars on the bed. What shocked her was that the woman had shocked her so. It was all years ago now. They had given her this flat to live in, where she felt fine. They left her alone and didn’t ask after her. Hardly anyone knew anything about her past; there was even a rumour she was rich because she lived here, the heiress to a Swiss banker or even an aristocrat. Edna enjoyed the biographies people came up with for her, stories she could retreat to when reality got out of hand.

She pulled the cover up to her chin and turned up the volume. Most of them did it on Mondays or Tuesdays. That’s what the statistics said. Bugs Bunny tricked a hunter, had a duel with a cowboy, outwitted a vulture. Edna smoked cigarette after cigarette, the ash tray on her stomach so she barely had to move.

Theres

She'd just folded up all the empty cardboard boxes and taken them out back to the storeroom when Werner came into the shop through the side door, rather earlier than she'd expected him, with sleepy, watery eyes, hair neatly combed back, the green shop apron over his shoulder.

'Have you stacked the shelves?' he asked. 'Did all the stock come in?'

Theres nodded. 'How did you sleep?'

Werner shrugged. 'This awful heat,' he said. 'I was tossing and turning like a pregnant cow.'

'I got the pirate hippo in my egg today,' Theres said. 'I've never got a whole series so quickly, it's a real streak of luck.'

But Werner wasn't listening. He took a red pen out of the till drawer and began writing reduced prices on the hygiene articles by the door. Theres stroked his hair. 'Are you hungry?' she asked. 'It's nearly past its sell-by date, all this,' Werner said. 'Got to go down at least fifty per cent.' He paused in the middle of writing and stared into space with a frown, as if trying to remember a name. His thoughts were crowded close together, thought Theres, like the beams of the old farmhouse where he grew up. There wasn't much space in his head between the heavy thoughts, it was a crush; that's why he was always frowning when he thought hard, when he wanted to look behind individual thoughts, had to shift them around to make space for a smile, couldn't do it any other way. He had had that look even as a young man, but only now and then, not several times a day like now. She used to like it, the way he wasn't always making jokes like the others, the way he withdrew into himself occasionally. He'd always just had his own serious mind. It would never have occurred to her to give him a pet name; that would have seemed like a desperate attempt to tame him. She called her husband Werner, not Werni or honey or anything else shabby like that. And he, he called her Theres, not like his friends from the old days who patronized their wives, my pet, my little Lisa, my little angel, as though they might otherwise realize they were sharing their lives with a real person, a whole different individual. It was just that Werner's modern attitude hadn't moved with the times. Like the furniture from back then, the old toys out of the chocolate eggs or the battered sign above the shop door, it had become an antique gradually gathering dust; vintage, as Roswitha would say. These days, no one wanted to pick their food out of a layer of coloured gelatine, hardly anyone was interested in potted meat any more, or marshmallows or boil-in-the-bag meals. Werner, though, had stopped looking around outside, where people bought organic and coffee to go. He stuck firm to his 1970s concept and suffocated any discussion of it in steely silence.

They worked side by side for a good hour without talking. Theres cleaned the glass of the fridges, the counter and the till drawer, dusted the scratch-card holders and the strip lights, while Werner checked the sell-by dates on the dairy products and then the drinks. ‘These sirens today,’ Werner said at some point into the silence, bent over the freezer, ‘you’d think it was the end of the world.’

True, now Theres realized it – first the police ten minutes ago, now an ambulance and a fire engine. ‘Probably an accident,’ she said, and she pushed the coins around in the compartments as if counting them.

They soon stopped listening, with the shop door opening more and more often and an unusual number of people coming in. Towards midday, the sirens were still going strong. ‘Seems to be some kind of major incident,’ Werner said. ‘No wonder, with all those giant cars squeezing through the roads these days. They’re always knocking everything down. I wouldn’t be surprised if a child has got run over or a cyclist.’ That was one of Werner’s favourite subjects. Presumably, he would have talked himself into a rage if five boys and a girl hadn’t come into the shop at that moment. The boys’ bodies were swathed in oversized T-shirts and baggy pants, two of their voices were still in the middle of breaking, and only one, the one with the big mouth, had something akin to a moustache on his top lip, which he fashioned into a sneer when the girl held a video up on her phone.

‘Holy shit,’ he said, pointing at the screen. ‘What a spazz. That salty old lady’s gonna go viral, guys, betcha any money, it’s wicked!'

Theres couldn’t see what kind of video it was, probably a porno or some other obscene clip. She had no idea what a spazz was, only that it sounded offensive. The boys strolled along the aisles and gathered up all sorts of things, five cans of Redbull, three ice teas, two packs of popcorn, one of peanuts and two bananas. The very pretty girl merely gave instructions – she wanted an apple and a Diet Coke, and the one with the peach fuzz took care of it for her. At the counter, he asked Werner for a pack of Lucky Strikes and a lighter. A glance over his shoulder to make sure the girl was watching. Werner hesitated; there was no way the boy was eighteen, Theres could tell straight away. But then again, he’d only get the cigarettes somewhere else, and five euros was five euros. Werner was already ringing up the total when Theres intervened: ‘Could I see some ID, young man?’

The boy gave another sneer. ‘Keep your wig on,’ he said. ‘Never mind then, just the drinks and the other stuff.’

He slammed a twenty-euro note down on the counter with a long sniff. Theres said nothing, her hands twisting the red pen that Werner had accidentally left among the hygiene articles.

‘You mustn’t let louts like that intimidate you,’ she said after they’d left the shop. ‘It won’t get

you anywhere.'

Werner returned the cigarettes to the shelf in silence. The bell on the door rang again and a blond woman entered the shop, sweating strongly, seemingly agitated and in a hurry. She headed for the hygiene articles shelf and brought deodorant, a toothbrush, toothpaste, shower gel, disposable razors and a packet of condoms to the till, along with two bananas and a large bottle of water. The hygiene articles she stuffed in her handbag, and the rest went in the plastic bag Werner gave her. He hadn't yet told her the total when the door opened again; a mother and toddler, behind them an older man with a dog, and through the window, Theres saw two young women beating a path to the shop. She was gradually beginning to find it unusual. Ten minutes later, she was certain it was unusual.

'You see, Theres,' Werner said with satisfaction, tightening his apron strings. 'I've always said they'll be beating our door down again one day.' By that point, a queue had formed all the way out to the street; all kinds of people wanting ice cream, water, biscuits, cigarettes, fruit and sweets. Theres was helping him serve and pack now and there were hardly any transparent plastic bags left; they'd soon run out of change as well.

'Just like the old days,' Werner murmured to her as she opened up a roll of fifty-cent coins and let them rattle into the till. It seemed as if he'd smiled at her as he said it. His forehead was shiny with perspiration. Theres couldn't remember the last time she saw Werner sweat. She took a couple of fifties and hundred-euro notes out of the till and put them in an envelope. It was time she found out where all these people were coming from.

'I'll just pop to the bank and get some change,' she said.

'Make sure you're quick,' said Werner. And this time he really did smile.

Once Theres had left the shop and taken a few steps around the corner across the square, she saw a crowd over by the pale green building. There must have been more than a hundred people and someone joined them every few seconds, tipped their head back like the others and took their telephone out of their pocket for a photo or a video. Mothers were sitting on the wall in front of the neighbouring buildings with their children, feeding them drinks, breaking up bread rolls and cleaning ice cream off chins with wet wipes. Pensioners were standing there shaking their heads, and a young girl had spread out a towel and was trying to sunbathe while her boyfriend threw something at her, popcorn or peanuts. Popcorn or peanuts from *their* shop! Theres looked up to what the crowd was gawping at. Up on the roof was a slim figure, her arms crossed in front of her chest. Theres took a few steps closer and saw that it was a young woman wearing short green dungarees. She went a little closer and narrowed her eyes. 'Goodness me.' She put a hand to her mouth. Screwed her eyes up again to make sure. But yes. It was her. The big ears, the pointed

nose, the upright stance. It was Leslie Kuhne's daughter. Now blond and grown tall, but it had to be her. She couldn't remember the girl's name; she hadn't seen either Leslie or her daughter for years. All she had heard was occasional gossip. That Leslie apparently lived in Karlsruhe, sold home-made jewellery on eBay under the name Esmeralda_23 and had married for the fourth time. And then of course her older daughter, Astrid, who had gone into politics and was standing as mayor over in Freiburg. There were posters everywhere when you drove into the town. Theres kneaded the envelope of bank notes between her fingers, searching her memory for the name of the woman on the roof. Nunu. All she came up with was her nickname; the girl's sister used to call her Nunu. She hadn't had it easy, poor thing. A good twenty years ago when they'd still lived on the estate by the edge of the woods, Theres would sometimes look after her when her big sister couldn't manage it. Leslie was already too fond of her drink in those days, and the father would have done more damage if he'd been there than he did by staying away. Once, he had chased Leslie along the road in her pyjamas with his air rifle, right into the woods. The girl couldn't have been much older than twelve, then. Three years later, rumour had it that Astrid, barely turned twenty, was living in the flat alone with her little sister, and their mother had cut and run to look for her husband. Theres remembered an igloo that little Nunu had spent hours building outside the house, her cheeks red and her hands encased in yellow mittens. 'When I'm grown up I can go and visit the penguins at the North Pole and live with them,' she had told her, and she explained that Astrid had said penguins never left each other, they stayed together their whole lives.

Theres held her breath. Nunu stepped forward, approaching the edge of the roof in small increments, then stopped at the guttering and looked down. 'For heaven's sake,' Theres murmured, and she darted towards the building; someone had to do something! It was only then that she saw the police and the fire brigade at the front, positioning a rescue mattress. And up in one of the attic windows, she could make out a police officer apparently talking to Nunu. The police siren wailed, blue light flashed across the façade, and Nunu held her arm across her face. 'Jump, you coward!' Theres heard a teenage boy yelling from the crowd. 'Go on, get it over with!' Nunu took her arm away from her face, clambered back towards the gable to the chimney where there was a white bucket, and rummaged around in it. She grabbed something, ran to the edge of the roof and threw the object down to the road; a hand rake or a small spade, Theres couldn't quite tell. The siren wailed again, Nunu squatted and pulled a roof tile out of its place, and then threw that down to the road as well, towards the spot where the boy had shouted. The crowd inched back. A young policewoman set about cordoning off a section of the pavement with tape. 'Leave me alone,' Nunu called from the roof. 'Piss off and leave me alone!' A van

stopped outside the barrier tape; seven police officers with helmets and shields shoved their way through the sliding door and took up position next to the firemen, who began to set up their own barrier with newly arrived metal fencing. Nunu pulled back when she saw the police and hid behind the chimney; only her blond hair and one green trouser leg were now visible. Theres turned around to the shop and saw that the queue had reached the next turn-off. She remembered the bank notes in her apron pocket. She had to get back and help Werner, whether she liked it or not – there was nothing she could do here.

Finn

Outside, the heat was already flickering above the tarmac. A smell of freshly mown grass, of summer, came from the sports ground on the left. Finn swung unto his bike and his mood improved slightly. An old woman was walking very slowly towards him with her little dog, from the OAPs' home on the other side of the road, a permanent building site. Let's hope she's still around by the time the dug-up earth outside her window turns into a park, thought Finn, and her room turns into the residence the poster on the construction fence has been promising for over a year. He stepped on the pedals. As the woman walked past him he thought he saw a rifle slung over her right shoulder. Must have been a trick of the light. He made a mental note not to stream so many crime shows and let the air flowing past him blow all thoughts out of his mind. After a matter of metres, he began to sweat under his helmet, but it was that wonderful kind of sweating that he enjoyed. He was fast today, tense and taut as a strung bow, perhaps because of the argument. Past the retirement home, the sports ground and the methadone clinic, he headed for the motorway access road. Cycling on the motorway was illegal but he didn't care on pigs' eyes day; it was the fastest route to the abattoir and they'd only ever caught him once, last autumn. On days like this, the police patrolled in the shade.

Ever since he'd left Berlin a year and a half ago and washed up here on a cycling trip, he had had every centimetre of road beneath his wheels. He knew every street here, every short cut, all the viewing points, dead ends and drug-dealing corners, he knew the people and their boredom, which had quickly become his own. Like him, most of them weren't here for the atmosphere, they'd just ended up here, were waiting or trapped. The town was an interchange station, a place for passing through. It did have everything you needed, admittedly; a handful of bars with good coffee and cheap beer, a few sunny spots, places to swim in the summer, an ice rink for the winter, a picturesque town centre, two or three small parks with gnarled trees and seasonal plants, a football pitch, a bit of art and culture, the one local baker who still took his job seriously. Basically, there was nothing much the town didn't have, except anything people missed when they left again. Finn pulled the seam of his jersey over his nose and cycled onto the slip road.

The moment the security man opened the iron gate to the dusty abattoir yard, Finn could see Moosbach stepping out into the sun through the side exit, in one hand the cooler of pigs' eyes and an empty jam jar, in the other the two cigarillos they were about to smoke together. Moosbach was his favourite out of all of them here. A short, pale-skinned man with an unusually deep voice, Moosbach had trained as a milliner and was actually a vegetarian. But his

hat shop had gone bust and at his age he'd had no option but to take the job. The Tuesday cigarillo with Finn was one of his few distractions from work, which he didn't like to talk about. He gave Finn a lethargic wave; unlike most customers, he didn't seem to want things to go quickly.

'First work, then pleasure,' Moosbach said through tight lips once Finn had got to him. He used the empty jam jar to scoop the pigs' eyes out of the base of the cooler. Finn laid his old Peugeot down gently on the gravel and ran a spit-soaked finger over a non-existent scratch on the steering wheel. All he heard was the squelching noise and then the metallic squeak of the lid being screwed on.

'All over,' Moosbach said. 'The peepers are packed. Your bike won't get any cleaner. Just be thankful you're here so early; the stench is unbearable by midday when it's hot.'

He took a plastic bag out of his pocket and handed it to Finn to wrap up the jar. Just last week, the eyes had leaked out all over a birth certificate.

Moosbach slapped a hand to his forehead. 'I almost forgot. Be right back, hold this,' he said, passing him the jar and disappearing into the abattoir. Through the door, Finn could see pigs' cadavers gliding past, hung from a rail on the ceiling. He did his best to breathe through his mouth.

'Best not to leave these things in the sun too long,' Moosbach said on his return. Finn wrapped up the jar and deposited it in the darkness of his backpack, then wiped his hand on his cycling shorts.

'Here you go,' said Moosbach, holding out a hat to him, thin grey felt with his old company stamp: Moosbach Hats.

'Made it myself, tip-top quality, out of a single piece of fabric,' Moosbach said with a smile.

'Thought you might have some use for it – they're just gathering dust at my place.'

'Don't you want to give it another try with a hat shop?' Finn asked. 'I can't be the only one who needs a hat now and then. Maybe sell them on the Internet, have you tried that?'

Moosbach tipped his head back and looked at the sky, as if checking the weather for his answer. 'Times have changed,' he said. 'People want to buy things they don't need these days.' He handed Finn a cigarillo and a light. Moosbach had a weakness for these perfumed smoke sticks with their sweet filters; he inhaled properly and licked his lips in pleasure. 'They sell cases for mobile phones in my old shop now,' she said. 'Little plastic ears and pigs' snouts. Seems to be doing well.'

'But come on, honestly,' said Finn, 'you can't keep rooting around in raw meat here day after day and just put up with everything you built up being gone for good.'

Moosbach laughed. 'Believe me, my boy,' he said, 'I've seen plenty go for good in my life: I saw

my father walk out the garden gate for good back in 1964, my mother's on her way out now, I've seen banks go for good and neighbours, seen towers, walls, parks, currencies, queens, cafés, style and good manners disappear without a trace. I've seen the light in their eyes disappear, with almost everyone I know.' He trod the smoked cigarillo under his heel. 'Life is a matter of staying and coming to terms with everything disappearing one day. Take my word for it. From the day you're born, you start losing things: your teeth, your puppy fat, your heart, your hair, your time, your jobs, your loves and one day even your mind. Life is a matter of staying behind, after things, expectations, people. It's better you start getting good at it sooner than later. If you want to lead a good life you've got to be a damn good loser.'

Finn was almost smoking the sweet filter by now. Moosbach had never said so much in one go. He flicked the stub into the gravel far away and was glad to hear his phone ring. It was Holger from base, the absolute opposite to Moosbach. He spoke almost faster than his tongue permitted, in a high nasal voice: Pickup for the Plaza, someone there needs a lilac blouse, size 10, and khaki socks, size 6, sounds a bit like a fruit salad to him but what the hell, he trusts Finn to get it right, Conference Room 223, Ms Guhl, he has to buy the stuff at Grundlers by the town hall, says the customer, and then there's a fanny swab from the gynaecologist on Schillerstrasse to the lab. Make like a banana, Finn heard Holger say with a laugh before he hung up. 'Gotta go,' Finn told Moosbach, who looked in the empty cooler and nodded. 'Thanks for the cool hat. Hope I get to enjoy it for a bit before I lose it.'

It was getting hotter by the minute. Once Finn arrived at the Plaza, he wished he didn't have to leave the air-conditioned foyer for the rest of the day. Four beads of sweat dripped from his chin onto the marble reception desk, next to the small Plexiglas plaque with the dish-of-the-day recommendation. The receptionist didn't even flinch. She was paid to ignore things like that with a fixed smile and make everyone feel everything was exactly as it was supposed to be. With an exaggeratedly generous gesture, she picked up the telephone and announced Finn's arrival to the conference room. Her words were of the same sterile politeness as delayed-train announcements. Before he could knock at conference room number 223, the door opened outwards. A tall blonde in a lilac shirt and grey suit trousers stood before him, clutching a smartphone in one hand and pushing a flipchart on wheels into the corner with the other. There was a prominent coffee stain above her right breast.

'Hannes, I don't care how you do it,' the woman said quietly into her phone. 'Play a round of crazy golf with him, find out how to make him happy, just please get him to put me on the shortlist somehow, you know how much depends on it. Hold on a second,' she interrupted herself, and took the parcel from Finn, the phone jammed between her ear and shoulder. She

ripped open the tissue paper with one hand. ‘Hello,’ she said to Finn, not looking at him. Not until she saw what was inside the parcel did she raise her eyes and glare at him. ‘Are you colour blind? No, not you, Hannes.’ She turned her attention back to Finn. ‘I spelled it out especially: L-I-L-A-C.’

‘Lilac is totally last season,’ Finn responded calmly. ‘The sales assistant at Grunders says nobody’s wearing lilac blouses any more so they don’t have any in stock. You’re bang on trend with pistachio right now, apparently. Sorry.’

The woman sighed. ‘Oh boy, I’m going to look like an ice cream.’ She took a money clip out of her pocket and got hold of two hundreds. ‘Pistachio, that’s green, and green’s no good, green confuses people’s thoughts, there are several studies on it. Lilac is soothing and I’m going to have to soothe a lot of people today, you see. Colour psychology doesn’t care about trends, you tell that woman.’ She handed the money to Finn. ‘Have a nice day,’ she added as she slammed the door in his face. Finn looked at the two hundreds. A thirty-euro tip, fine by him. The phone in the Velcro pouch around his arm vibrated. ‘Sealions feeding time,’ it said on the screen. The prospect of eating fish sandwiches by the fountain on the market square with Silas made him whistle as he descended the stairs.

The route from the gynaecologist’s to the lab went smoothly. All the lights were green as the heat brought calm over the town, aligned people with each other, making them all a little slower, slacker and less vain; they grew more polite, perhaps because they suddenly became aware what helpless creatures they were, in the face of nature’s whims.

He spotted Silas at the fountain from a distance; he had ordered fresh fish rolls and melon and was winking at the freckled assistant in the food truck as Finn got off his bike. The young woman blushed and lowered her eyes to the deep-fat fryer. Guys who looked like Silas didn’t need furniture, wallpaper borders or dancing courses. A mattress, toothpaste and clean underpants were more than enough; women dreamed up the rest until they couldn’t block out reality any more. Finn could hardly blame them – Silas was a great guy, despite his tendency to exaggerate in all kinds of ways, his constant affairs with several women at the same time and his never-ending cashflow problems. Finn couldn’t remember ever seeing him in a bad mood. He’d even managed to make the town look good to him; it had been Silas who’d got him the courier job, and Finn had stuck it out here for an amazing length of time.

‘You’re beaming like a Cheshire cat,’ said Silas. ‘Anyone would think you’d spent the night with a woman.’

Finn took off his helmet and grabbed one of the rolls. He’d felt the lack of a proper breakfast on the way here. ‘Just because you probably did... You’re always jumping to conclusions,’ he said.

He'd tell Silas about Manu at some point, maybe tomorrow or the day after, but right now he liked having her all to himself. If that even still applied. The thought of their argument stung him like a bee.

'Well, now,' said Silas, 'I was at the Einhorn yesterday, on my way to powder my nose, and I met this redhead in the queue for the toilets, body of a goddess. She didn't waste time, took me straight in the cubicle with her. Halleluiah, let me tell you, she knew her stuff. Wasn't even wearing panties. They were banging on the door and shouting at us.'

Finn grabbed another roll. 'Uhuh,' he said with his mouth full, 'and then?'

Silas grinned and took the last piece of melon. 'Yeah, I don't know, I lost sight of her after that. And my wallet was missing as well. Never mind.'

'Alright,' said Finn. 'No need to overdo it, I'll pay for lunch.'

Silas winked at him like he'd done with the food truck woman. 'I owe you one,' he said.

Finn's phone rang just as he was about to take another bite. It was Holger; he sounded more serious than usual. 'Where are you right now?' he asked.

'Marketplace,' Finn said, putting his helmet on and handing the money for lunch to Silas, ready to go.

'Are you on your fixie?' Holger asked.

'Yeah,' Finn answered, although he knew Holger didn't like him riding around with no brakes because the police could stop him at any time, or confiscate his bike right away. But it was faster than any other bike – and also he'd attached fake brakes to the steering wheel.

'Listen,' said Holger, 'some little kid's having an operation on his head out at the children's hospital, they need a tissue sample taken to the lab really urgently, pretty serious it sounds like, they didn't sound very happy. The boy's four and every second counts, so it's best if you do it, you're the fastest.'

'On my way,' said Finn, his feet already on the pedals. 'You can count on me.'

As he dashed up the steps he saw the sliding door to the operating room open up and the registrar come running towards him with the sample. The door didn't close fast enough and Finn saw the little boy on the operating table inside, his little feet and his little left hand; thankfully, the doctors were leaning over his head. Finn took the sample and put it in his backpack as he ran back down. He was unbearably thirsty but he couldn't afford to lose any time now.

The fastest route to the lab took him back across the marketplace, past the new shopping centre and then through the old town centre.

Even turning into the old cobbled streets after the mall, he could tell by the looks on the faces coming towards him that something unusual must have happened. They were whispering,

looking back and had their hands in front of their mouths. An accident, maybe, thought Finn, probably one of those damn SUVs again that go racing down the narrow roads and knock over anything and everything. But he could manoeuvre well on the bike, he'd get past the accident site. At the other end of the old town centre, he saw the barrier a couple of hundred metres away, about a hundred gawkers standing by the fence, fire engines, ambulances, police, cars honking, blue and orange flashing lights bouncing off the walls. Finn pushed on, he had to get through, if he turned around and took the other road he'd lose more than ten minutes.

'What's going on?' he asked a passer-by, an elderly man trying to light a cigarette as he walked. 'Ach,' the man said, shaking his reluctant lighter. 'Suicide attempt, some crazy's lost the plot and is standing up on the roof.' He pointed at an apartment building with a pale green façade over by the edge of the park, on the other side of the road. The man shook his lighter again and walked on, cursing. Finn swore now too. 'What an asshole,' he murmured as he powered on at full speed; why did he have to kill himself right here, for God's sake, why right now? Finn kept moving, undeterred, until just before the barrier, where he realized the police might confiscate his fixie. He thought of the boy's tiny feet and decided it was worth the risk; he hoped the police had better things to worry about. The road was blocked from both sides but he had to get past the building somehow; no choice but to get off his bike and walk. The pavement was crowded with people, smelling of sweat, kebabs and cigarette smoke. Maybe it was the courier shirt that made people give way to him as best they could before they raised their phones above their heads again and carried on shooting photos or videos. Finn made better progress than he'd expected. He didn't raise his head until a hundred metres on, soaked in sweat, where he saw the last barrier and a gap between two trees that would take him into the park and then back to the road. That was when he looked up and in the direction everyone else was staring. He tipped his head back and shaded his eyes with his hand. When his gaze focused on the figure up there, his joints went hot and pliable, his heart sank to his stomach and thudded wildly, he gripped the steering wheel but found no support as all the adrenaline flooding his body seconds before while he rode seemed to turn solid and form painful lumps in his belly. Up there was Manu, barefoot on the tiles at the end of the eastern gable, bobbing her knees, tearing at her hair, swaying back and forth. Manu. He wanted to call her name but his lips stayed closed, dry and weak, his tongue heavy in his mouth, his jaw trembled, the shirt stuck with sweat to his armpits, his arms stuck to his body, and when he took a few steps forward it felt like his feet were stuck to the tarmac. Beautiful, proud Manu. That was all he could think at that moment; aside from that, his head was hot and empty. He couldn't summon up a picture of Manu, just disjointed close-ups: the gap in her teeth, her calloused fingertips, the tiny scar beneath her right eyebrow. If only the

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façade wasn't so dazzlingly bright. He wanted to switch off the light in his head and here on the square, stop everything, turn it off, go swimming with Manu.

Maren

Her eyes ran along the woman's slim back, stroked every fine hair on her smooth skin, stopped at the mole below her waist, that incredibly slim waist, slid down to her small round bum, the flash of black lace between her flawless cheeks, those fine blond hairs there again too, what utter insolence – enough to make her punch her, kick her, scratch her. The woman turned around and held her breasts in her face, imprinted with the negative of a bikini top, small pink nipples on pale skin. She stood there like a poked-out tongue, the woman, nyah nyah, mocking her with her hand on her hip and her flat stomach, which didn't even bulge when she breathed in. And she smelled good, so fresh and subtle. Was it mint? Lemon balm?

Maren wrote down her measurements mechanically, pressing the pencil firmly to the paper, too firmly – the lead broke. She reached for the biro on the ironing board and noted down the insolent figures, fast, small and jagged.

'What do you say?' the woman asked. Maren had forgotten her name but it didn't matter, she'd look it up later in the customer files.

'Friday,' Maren said. 'I can get the suit done by Friday. If you want the short coat as well it'll be five days longer. Are you sure you don't want a blouse to go with it?'

The woman put her sleeveless grey silk top on; she wasn't wearing a bra. 'I haven't got that much time,' she said. 'But I like the idea of it, just a blazer and nothing underneath. My breasts are so small I can get away with it. There has to be some advantage.'

'Sure,' said Maren, plucking the sheet with the measurements off the block. 'Friday then.'

She watched the woman step out into the sun and light a cigarette, blowing the smoke out with relish and then disappearing around the corner. Maren sighed. The pedometer on her skirt waistband showed 1024 steps; not exactly a whole lot considering it was noon already. She crossed the shop, adjusted a few coat hangers on the rack, and switched on the steaming station: 1097. Maren sighed, several loud sighs, and then went into the changing cubicle and pulled the curtain shut. She undid the zip of her skirt and pulled it up under her armpits. She gazed at the pale skin she had once liked so much. Now, it shimmered grey through her black tights and a bulge formed above their elastic, two if she didn't suck in her stomach, and her heavy breasts pressed down from above on the slack tissue. She pulled her belly in as hard as she could and pushed her chest out; her waist got slimmer, a tiny bit at least. This inspecting of herself was new. For years, she had rarely thought about it, not even looked at herself from behind when buying trousers. She'd been proud of her freckles and her big breasts. Maren tugged her skirt down and adjusted the pedometer. 2003 steps when she left the cubicle. She wouldn't manage the

10,000 that Hannes had recommended per day, not today. She went into the kitchen, opened a pack of Haribos, stuffed a handful in her mouth and felt the sweetness flooding her tongue. Before she swallowed, she stopped chewing, bent over the sink, spat out the slimy mess, took a piece of kitchen paper, gathered up the lump with it and threw it in the bin underneath the sink, followed by the packet of gummy bears.

‘Everything alright?’

Maren whirled around, hitting her elbow on the microwave in shock. Jaris was standing in the doorway, taller and more bearded than she remembered him.

‘Surprise,’ he said with a grin.

Maren felt her face flush. ‘What are you doing here?’ she said, wiping her sticky fingers on her skirt. ‘I thought you weren’t coming until next week.’

‘I’m here now, and I want to take you out to lunch,’ Jaris said. He put his instrument case down on the floor. ‘Give us a hug.’

Jaris smelled good, as always, of sandalwood and the leather jacket he wore, with a slight hint of tobacco, the good kind from France that Maren could never remember the name of.

‘You look great,’ he said, taking her face between his hands. ‘One day I want to count all your freckles. Every one. But you’re always running away from me.’

Maren twisted out of his embrace, inconspicuously removing the pedometer from her waistband and hiding it behind the microwave. ‘I can cook us something,’ she said. ‘How about risotto – I’ve got all the ingredients at home.’

Jaris was a baroque musician; he played the cornett, a strange curved woodwind instrument that sounded a bit like an oboe, only deeper and warmer. It took him all around the world, to Rome, New York, Paris, Odessa, and now and then it brought him here, where he gave concerts or held lectures at the Conservatory for Old Music. It was five years ago that he’d first turned up at the shop, clutching a tailcoat with its lining ripped. He couldn’t pay but he bought her a cloud of candyfloss at the marketplace later. Maren never took his flirting seriously, firstly because of Hannes, and also because she’d always seen Jaris as out of her league, too good-looking, too well-travelled, too inconstant. She enjoyed his compliments but it was more like watching a film, knowing that she was submitting to an illusion.

Jaris picked up his instrument case. ‘How could I resist your risotto?’

Maren gathered up her things – handbag and keys – and switched off the steaming station and then the lights. Jaris leaned against the shop door rolling a quick cigarette. Then another one, which he stuck behind his ear. She liked him just for that; she didn’t know anyone else who in their late thirties still stuck a cigarette for later behind their ear.

Outside, the heat came leaping at them; they both took their jackets off a few steps from the door. Jaris wanted to walk, having spent all day in a darkened auditorium. Disgruntled, Maren thought of the pedometer behind the microwave in the shop and tried to count her steps in her head for a while, but she gave up after the next side street.

‘What’s up over there?’ Jaris asked as they turned onto Maren’s road. ‘Is there an open-air concert outside your house that I don’t know about?’

‘Goodness,’ said Maren. There were indeed about a hundred people standing outside her building, with two police officers blocking off the access to the park with tape. Behind them, sirens wailed and two police cars sped along the narrow road and stopped outside the garage. Maren picked up speed. ‘Do you think something’s happened to Hannes?’

‘No, I doubt it,’ Jaris said, not walking any faster. ‘There’s probably just a cat stuck up a tree. You know what people are like, they call the police for the slightest thing.’

‘Rubbish,’ said Maren. ‘There, look, there’s someone up on the roof, I can’t believe it, on my roof. That can’t be!’

Even the TV was there, the police lights flashing blue across the façade, phone cameras depicting the scene umpteen times over, and every one of the videos would later show Maren’s blue-and-white striped bedroom curtains and the little cactus on the windowsill, blossoming for the first time this year. ‘What a nightmare,’ she said to Jaris. ‘Everything’s blocked off. What am I supposed to do now?’

‘Come with me to Paris, for instance,’ Jaris said with another grin. ‘You can’t go in there, anyway. I’ve got a double room with a view of the canal for two days, and then it’s off to Florence. Think it over. Perhaps it’s a sign.’

Maren was now close enough to the building to see the woman dashing across the tiles up there like a scared, wiry animal. She was pacing to and fro, pulling at her hair, then she squatted down and covered her ears, bobbed back and forth, leaped up again, circled her arms, grabbed a tile and threw it down at the street. If I was that slim, Maren thought, I’d never kill myself.

‘She has to get down,’ she said. ‘She has to get down right now. I can’t live under a roof someone’s thrown herself off, it’s a great big joke, they must be able to grab her down from there.’ She struggled through the crowd to the police officers by the cordon.

Jaris kept close behind her, his telephone now also at the ready. ‘Crazy,’ was all he said. ‘Absolutely crazy.’

‘Excuse me,’ Maren said as she grabbed a policewoman by the sleeve. ‘Excuse me, I live here, I’d like to get into my flat.’

The policewoman turned around; her face was very red, her fringe stringy with sweat beneath her cap. ‘Name,’ was all she said.

'Fritsche,' said Maren. 'Maren Fritsche, fourth floor, look, you see those blue-and-white striped curtains up there, that's my bedroom.'

The policewoman shrugged. 'We can't let anyone in the building at the moment. You can see what's going on up there. Contact the police station in town if there's anything you need urgently, medications or that kind of thing. They'll be able to help you.'

The policewoman turned her back again, the conversation clearly over for her. Maren clenched her fists. What a cheek. And what made this insolent woman think she'd need medication? It was only now that she noticed a man's head up in the dormer window; probably a policeman. He seemed to be talking to the woman but she took no notice, rummaging in a bucket of tools and grabbing something with a red handle, a pair of garden shears as it turned out when the object crashed to the ground.

Maren shook her head. 'This can't be true,' she said to Jaris. 'That's our bathroom window. That policeman must be standing on the toilet lid, he's standing up there on my bloody toilet lid! I can't believe it! Rubber bullets, a safety net and be done with it, they must be able to deal with such a skinny little runt!' She said it loudly on purpose but the policewoman showed no reaction.

Jaris sniggered. Maren whirled around, wishing she could slap him. Instead, she searched her handbag for her phone and tried to call Hannes. 'Looks like this will take a while,' Jaris said. 'I'll go over to the café and get a bite to eat. I'm starving. I might see you later, I'm leaving in about an hour and a half, OK?' It wasn't a question, it was an offloading. Jaris pressed a kiss to her cheek and split.

Hannes didn't pick up. She pressed redial, tried it again, a third and fourth time, and then she gave up. She plucked at the policewoman's sleeve again, said 'Excuse me, hello.' Still no reaction. She'd had enough now. First that skinny rake in her shop, now this stick-thin crazy woman up on her roof, across the square gorgeous Jaris making fun of everything because it wasn't his problem and this time tomorrow he'd be sitting in a brasserie on the Canal Saint-Martin and smoking roll-ups. And Hannes? The bloody traitor? He was presumably installed in the staff canteen at his bank, eating sashimi with seaweed salad, or even worse, he was nibbling at some low-fat assistant on the vegan artificial leather couch in the customer reception area. And even if he did call back he'd make sure she knew she'd disrupted his optimized routine and none of it was his problem either. Because she, Maren, was no longer his problem. Suddenly she felt trapped between all the chattering, sweating, filming people, she felt an urge to hit out at them, kick them in the shins and the ankles. It was too crowded in this boring, musty town that had nothing to offer but mediocrity. She'd had enough of it, Hannes's new ascetic lifestyle, his

bloody coldness. She'd had enough of being good and sensible and decent, so much so that her fists clenched all on their own, her lips toughened to a thin line. Enough of keeping her head down, nodding and smiling, enough of it all, right now. First things first: her tights. Let them all see them, her dented, chubby, pale legs, oh yes. Maren bent down, tugged at the nylon, felt her fingernails tearing a ladder, rrrrip, what a wonderful cool feeling around her knees, she took off her shoes, stuffed the damp tights in her handbag and put her shoes back on, barefoot inside them. She was sweating, several beads of sweat running down her face from her hairline. Who gives a shit. Not her problem. She found Jaris's number in her phone and called him. He didn't answer until the fifth ring.

'You know what?' she said to Jaris, savouring every word like salted caramel. 'I've thought it over. I'm coming with you. Show me Paris. Count my freckles, if you like. Where's your car parked?'

'Oh, OK, wow, that's what I call spontaneous, er...' Jaris hemmed and hawed. He was over in the car park next door to Roswitha's Coffeehouse, she could see him running his hand through his hair in bewilderment.

'Let's go,' said Maren.

'Right now?' he asked.

'When else?' Maren said. 'I want to get out of here. We can eat on the way. I can see you. Give me five minutes, I'll just buy a few things.'

She hung up before Jaris could answer. Elbowing her way through, she headed straight for the little shop on the other corner of the square, pushing broad-shouldered into the queue. No one said anything; they could tell she was in the mood for trouble and they let her through, made way for her.

And Maren wasted no time. She reached purposefully into the shelves, just the bare necessities for now: deodorant, razors, toothbrush, bananas, water, condoms.

Finn

'Come on, jump, you pussy!' someone yelled close behind Finn, one of the ones pressing their bellies against the police cordon and waiting for all the standing around in the sun to be worth it at last, a teenager with a peach-fuzz moustache. A roof tile shattered on the ground right in front of the helmeted firemen. And another, and a third. He watched the men lift their protective shields above their helmets as Manu's rubber boot sailed through the midday heat and landed on one of the raised shields with a dull thud. Those men must be sweating so hard, thought Finn, and: Manu will get sunburnt up there.

'Beginners!' Manu shouted. 'You pathetic beginners, piss off, pack up your fucking air mattress and go home, I'm not coming down until you're gone.'

She loosened tile after tile from the roof and piled them next to the chimney, carefully straightening the pile with the palms of her hands. Finn knew she was making an earnest face up there, even though he could only see the back of her head now. That proud seriousness in every one of her motions. He raised his hand and called her name, waved, called out again, but Manu didn't hear him; she turned her back and went on de-tiling the roof. Now and then, she whirled around and threw something down at the street, a tile or one of her gardening tools.

'Excuse me.' Someone tapped him on the left shoulder. 'Do you know her?'

Finn tore his eyes away from Manu and looked into the face of the policeman who had planted himself in front of him, walkie-talkie in hand. Next to him was a young policewoman with a red face. She repeated the question. 'You called the woman by name. Do you know her?'

Finn's mouth was dry; it was an effort to speak. 'What's going on here?' he said. 'What's up with Manu, why's she up there?'

The policeman took off his cap and used it to fan himself. 'That's what we're trying to find out,' he said. 'So it's important that you tell us everything you know about her. Carola, you take over.' He pressed the walkie-talkie into the young woman's hand. 'And put Felix up there in the picture as soon as you know more.'

'Right,' said the policewoman, 'what can you tell us about her?'

Finn stared at the policewoman's sweaty face and then at the notepad in her hand, the pencil she was twirling between her fingers. He knew how Manu smelled in the dip between her throat and her collarbone, that she liked being close to water and always got worried about the state of the country's flora if it didn't rain for more than three days, that she'd studied biology and worked on the side in the Botanical Gardens, that she'd meant to write a thesis about *Noctiluca*, the tiny single-celled organism that makes the sea shine blue, that the creatures were what's called dinoflagellates and that word made Manu's eyes sparkle, but that something had gone wrong at

uni, something Manu didn't talk about, and even when she refused to talk about it the light in her eyes went out. That's why she was a journeywoman gardener now, that was what she called it, like a journeyman, an old word for craftsmen who visited their customers at home when they were called in. She took care of traffic islands and graves, urban backyards and suburban front gardens, and there was hardly a plant in the town she didn't know by name. He knew all that. But what she was doing up there – that he didn't know. Was it something to do with their fight that morning?

'Her name's Manu,' said Finn, 'she's a... my girlfriend. It must be some kind of misunderstanding, I can't imagine she wants to jump.'

'Manuela, then?' the officer noted it down. 'Surname?' The pencil in her hand twitched impatiently.

Finn swallowed. 'I don't know,' he said. 'She's never told me.'

'Seems to be a very close relationship you've got going there,' the policewoman said, noting down a long sentence on her pad.

'Hey,' said Finn, 'that's none of your business, you can...' He didn't get any further; the phone rang in its Velcro strap around his arm. BASE, flashed up on the display.

'Shit,' Finn swore as he remembered the tissue sample in his backpack, the little boy on the operating table.

'Where the hell are you?' Holger yelled down the telephone. 'What the hell's going on? Are you having a picnic or what? Why is the bloody sample not at the lab yet?'

Finn moved the phone away from his ear; his head was spinning. He took a couple of deep breaths and began to elbow his way towards the park. 'I was just going to call you,' he said to Holger in the end. 'The cops nabbed my fixie, I ran into a road block at the park, nothing I can do, sorry.'

'You loser,' said Holger. 'Stand in front of a front door and give me your address, Silas is almost at the park, I'll send him over. We'll have words later.'

Finn rubbed his eyes and found that he was crying, not making a sound but his diaphragm twitching. 'Shit,' he murmured. 'Shit, shit, shit.' He looked over at the park and spotted a glass recycling bin. He ran over and hid his fixie behind it. Silas's silver helmet was already visible between the trees; no time to lock the bike. Finn ran across the road, stood outside house number 15 and told Holger the address, even though Silas had already spotted him.

'Jeez,' he said, panting as he braked. 'What are you up to? I've never seen Holger so angry, he was yelling at everyone at base, he even smashed his piggy bank against the wall.'

'I can't help it if the whole police force is gathered here,' was Finn's annoyed response.

Silas looked around. 'Pretty crazy,' he said. 'Total social apocalypse here.' He gave Finn a

calming pat on the shoulder. ‘Holger will sort himself out, don’t worry,’ he said, ‘I’ll talk to him. Shame about the bike, though, that’s the last you’ll see if it. Got the sample?’

Finn rummaged in his backpack, his hands trembling; his whole body was trembling, in fact, and he hoped Silas wouldn’t notice. ‘Here,’ he said, handing him the vacuum-packed sample.

Silas put it away and gestured in Manu’s direction. ‘Looks familiar, that girl. Isn’t she the one who was gardening on the traffic island outside base the other week? Gave me the brush-off. One tough lady. Looks like I was lucky after all. Imagine having a thing with a mental case like that. They’re only trouble and in the end—’

‘Oh, shut up, you stupid show-off,’ Finn exclaimed, shoving Silas so hard that it shocked even him. Silas swayed on his bike and fell sideways into the road, his ribs banging against the crossbar. He stared at Finn, more unbelieving than angry. He swiftly picked himself up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘OK,’ he said and straightened his helmet. ‘You’re lucky that sample’s so urgent. I’m really looking forward to your explanation though.’

Before Finn could even open his mouth to apologize, Silas had pedalled off. He didn’t know if he’d pushed him out of anger at Manu or affection for her. Now he heard the sounds around him again, people talking over each other, the fire brigade’s sirens, the boy shouting at Manu to jump, the smash of a roof tile hitting the street. He noticed he was breathing hard, like he’s been running. And when he raised his head he saw two guys filming him on their phones. The sight of them set off a strange sense of not caring, which weighed down his limbs from inside. He simply turned away and picked up his backpack. Up on the roof, Manu was still ranting. Her mayonnaise bucket flew pale and slow through the air, landing in front of the young policewoman. She pushed it aside with the tip of her shoe, like something that was none of her business. Finn shouldered his backpack and headed back into the crowd. He was going to go up there now, to Manu. Come on, he’d say, forget those idiots down there, let’s rescue your cactus.