

While We Were at the Party

by Ulrike Ulrich

Excerpt translated by Don Henderson

She has to get rid of those flowers. The sickly sweet smell they give off has somehow made it to the bedroom. That might even be why she woke up. How could she ever have thought (even for a moment) that Adrian had sent them? Adrian, who never sends flowers to anyone, doesn't even like them; lilies, least of all. Adrian, who left a long time ago for the hospital (the covers are pulled off on his side of the bed); he's busy saving lives while she's lying around in bed. And today — suddenly she sits bolt upright, always wide awake as soon as she opens her eyes — today is Saturday. The First of August. Swiss National Day. Today is the day of her party. What time is it anyway? Alexa reaches for her phone on the nightstand. Twenty after nine. Adrian texted her with kisses, hoping that the party prep was going smoothly. Not her favorite activity, as everyone knows. Planning, sure (evites, guest lists, even to-do lists); getting things done, of course (that's what it's all about); but all those details on the day itself: God, no. She could do without all that. The last few years, Adrian has usually helped her get ready but was always on call during the day and had night duty the night of the party (he'd signed up for it). This time it was different. He was going to come. He'd said as much four days ago. And she'd been fine with that. But she still didn't know why he'd switched his days. It's not like his party-phobia wasn't still an issue. Everything she loves about parties, how ephemeral, how shimmering, how extraordinary they could be, the mixture of intensity and superficiality; all that is difficult for him, especially making small talk with strangers and semi-strangers. That he'd stayed for over two hours after her CD launch party had been a big deal.

Because she knows that he won't enjoy her rooftop party, she starts to worry a little about him being there. It worries her a little that it might rain; and she worries that her favorite author

might pop in; and she's supposed to perform, there'd been so much build-up about it. She's going to sing for the very first time at her party, and a new song at that. And the party starts earlier this year. Because of the kids. Which was the reason that it ended early last year. That was because the parents were too uptight. For a good party (she learned this from *her* parents, who were never so much in agreement as they were when it came to throwing parties); for a good party you need music and alcohol; you need people who can switch gears (be festive but easy going at the same time), people who like to talk, drink, dance, mingle, and yes, people who like to flirt a little too.

Was that why Adrian was coming, because on Tuesday she'd invited that young lawyer? One day after her forty-fifth birthday, which she spent in bed because of another UTI (not menopause yet, damn it). She'd invited the young lawyer because there weren't enough men (still weren't). Of course, that's so retro; Adrian's right about that; just as retro as her excel spreadsheet for guests with separate columns for women, men, and (now) children. But that's the way it is, her circle of friends consists of couples and straight single women. And last year Jessica complained about the shortage of men. Which is why, after her last concert, she'd invited this Jonas guy; who was, she had to admit, good-looking, and who thought her songwriting was so great; and who, well, she simply wanted to get rid of somehow. No, she couldn't go out with him for drinks right now. But did he have plans for the First of August? No, he didn't.

Of course she knows how she seems when she's onstage, when she's singing, that she's like a different person; she earns points for style she'd never had in the past (especially in those all-important teenage years). But Adrian (this still makes her happy), Adrian fell in love with her when she was standing on a cloud, not standing on a stage. When they were together in Yverdon for the Swiss Expo, wearing those blue rain capes, wandering through an artificial cloud of mist. He fell in love for the first time, he says, when she convinced him to lie down with her on the ground and to look up through the dripping wet fog at the sun. No, Adrian definitely didn't switch his work duties because he was jealous of Jonas. This wasn't the first time she had

invited someone spontaneously to her party. He knows that it means as little to her as these stinky flowers. Which, she'd thought for a moment just might be from Jonas; after all, he has her address now. But she'd hoped against hope that Adrian might have placed them at her door (they're actually very pretty). She takes a picture of his now empty side of the bed and sends it to him. She writes: *What a shame you're not here*. It's been twelve days since they'd made love. It was on the kitchen table that creaked louder than usual, so loudly it made them both laugh. Twelve days. And that wasn't because of Adrian's headaches, not because of his work schedule, and not because of Adrian's son either (even though Robert has been spending almost every weekend with them lately). It was because of her — and her body. The inflammation. The irritation that comes with it. She can't even satisfy herself without being afraid of causing herself pain. She doesn't want to be like this. So stricken. This isn't like her at all, she thinks to herself, and notices that Adrian is texting back. *That would be nice*, he writes. And: *Tomorrow I'll be there when you wake up. Kisses*. When she starts to click on "reply," he's already offline.

She picks up the phone, stands up, raises the blinds. It's raining. Ever so lightly. The sky is gray and heavy with the kind of misty rain that sometimes makes it impossible to see with her glasses on. According to the weather forecast published online by the Swiss newspaper, the *NZZ* (the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*), it will stop in ten minutes. The chance of rain in the evening is forty percent. It looks like she'll definitely have to tidy up the apartment. So far they've always been lucky with the weather. Only once did a storm whip up so suddenly the paper plates went flying off the rooftop. But she had never used paper cups and never would. It was a point of pride for the Albrecht family.

She fishes out yesterday's bra and slacks from a pile of clothes, takes a blouse and panties out of the closet and goes into the bathroom. Soap and deodorant, that should be enough; she took a shower the night before. Now she has to go to the gas station for the charcoal she had forgotten (everyone always insists on grilling). And then she has to take a look at the song

again. She'd decided, of all things, to do a cover of the folk song that was like a sacred cow to the Swiss, the beloved "Guggisberglid." And also she'd promised Robert she would give him feedback on his essay by the end of the week. For his graduation thesis. She would read it tomorrow when she could concentrate better. Where is her jacket? Where did she put it yesterday when she took it off? The kitchen chair. Where else? And she has to look for her keys. She closes the door behind her, and just when she gets to the eleventh step she remembers the flowers. She runs upstairs again, then quickly back down as if she has to make up for that minute she'd just wasted.

Sarah hears Alexa's steps on the stairs and waits at her door, in front of which she's placed her city-issued recycling bag so she won't forget it. Alexa doesn't do anything quietly, she thinks to herself. Otherwise she doesn't fit the stereotype at all. Almost always friendly. Doesn't talk too much or too fast. But my goodness, she's so loud! When she's singing, playing the piano, or just walking up the stairs. Maybe it has more to do with her profession than the fact that she's German, that she is so impossible to ignore. "Wait," she says, so that Alexa doesn't hurry past her with just a wave. "Wait a second." She's found something on the stairs, she tells Alexa. "I think it's for you."

Alexa considers whether she should follow Sarah, who has retreated into her entrance hallway. Although they sometimes talk for a while when they meet on the stairs, she has never been in Sarah's apartment, not even to water her plants, which she's done for almost everyone else in the building. And here she is again. Holding a card in her hand. "Look at this," she says. Alexa looks at the card. *I don't believe in ageing. I believe in forever altering one's aspect to the sun.* And on the back: *Better late than never. Wishing you all the very best. Until tomorrow. Kisses, J.* Of course: Jessica. The one friend who hadn't sent a birthday card or a text. They must have been delivered to the building yesterday, and the card got separated. "They're

beautiful,” Sarah says, pointing to the lilies. “Absolutely perfect.” She can’t keep them though, she tells Sarah. And she can explain it all to Jessica if she has to. “They stink to high heaven,” she says.

Everyone is sensitive in some way, Sarah thinks. For her, it’s loud sounds. For Alexa, it’s obviously her sense of smell. Sarah says she likes their fragrance. “May I give them to you?” Alexa asks, “I just hope they won’t make you ill.” Five giant royal lilies. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep them?” Sarah asks, and Alexa holds her nose and laughs. “Totally!” — “Well, thank you so much.”— “No, really, thank you. For solving the puzzle. I had no idea who they were from.” Sarah could well imagine that Alexa would have trouble knowing which of her fans had sent her flowers. And that she wanted to just toss them out. “I have to go,” Alexa says, standing first on one foot and then on the other. “I have so many things I have to do. We’ll see each other later this evening. On the rooftop terrace, I hope.” Sarah nods. Although she is going to her cousin’s cookout. Sarah nods and says, “Ciao.”

As she walks down the stairs, Alexa decides she has to text Adrian right away about the flowers. What a relief she didn’t have to throw them away. That Sarah likes them. Sarah, who will probably only show up tonight for a quick glass of prosecco like last year. And then disappear again without saying goodbye. In any event, she was happy she’d accepted the invitation. She was glad anytime someone said yes, they would come. And disappointed anytime someone said sorry, no, we can’t. Of course, the biggest disappointment of all was that Stefan and Chrigu declined. That those two, of all her friends, would be missing. Without them it wouldn’t be half as festive. They were the very ones who, once when she’d wanted to take a year off, told her she couldn’t possibly do that, not her; her party had become an institution. She pushes the door open. No, Stefan and Chrigu just had to pick July to go to Liguria, she thinks to herself and notices that the *NZZ* was right; it had stopped raining. When she arrived in

Switzerland thirteen years before, she had entrusted the *NZZ* with a certain authority well beyond the weather; she hadn't even known that it was a "party newspaper" as Adrian had always called it; although he had put off cancelling his subscription until the beginning of the year when they wanted to make the vice-president of the right-wing newspaper, *Die Weltwoche*, the editor-in-chief. Should she take the most direct route to the gas station? She really must go over the text again, which she can do — as she often does — when she has breakfast on the square.

She crosses the street on red; only one car crawling along at a safe distance. Looks like a student driver. Jessica has her exam soon. And Zoltan has started taking driving instructions now too. Whenever they get together, he talks about his most recent lesson; and once she had seen him as he drove past her building, sitting straight up and not wearing his usual Zoltan-cap. The driving instructor noticed her waving to him and reacted as if distracting a driving school student were a federal offense. She hasn't seen Zoltan for three weeks (what's going on with him?), but he'd called her on her birthday and promised her they would come, no kids this time, and that they wouldn't go home before midnight. And Evelyne promised to have her in-laws babysit Rosie so that she could finally stay until the party was over. That Evelyne was now a mother has been the biggest change to get used to. Last year she wasn't able to be there at all, because Rosie was sick. Has it really been four years since the two of them belted out the popular singalong song, "The Venus of Bümpliz," from the rooftop? Sang so loudly the police showed up. Everyone who was there and anyone who heard about it afterward agreed that the presence of the police marked it as a great success. At one of her parents' parties (which were legendary), two young policemen had joined in; Alexa was still young, and she could remember how scared she was to see two men in uniform standing at the door. Four years ago she'd had quite a fright again; someone must have left the door open, and suddenly two police appeared on the rooftop wanting to speak to the hosts. Evelyne sang especially loudly and laughed when she saw Alexa's face. You won't be deported, she said, because she knew that was Alexa's

constant worry, absurd as it was, that just before she was naturalized she would break some law and be deported. Just like the young Albanian man in her version of the “Guggisberglied.” The man, the one who is always smoking, is sitting in front of the newspaper kiosk again. Drinking his coffee. Sometimes she runs into him on the street, sometimes, but not very often, at the coop too, which is the only place she has seen him without a cigarette in his mouth. Usually he keeps his head down, his eyes to the ground.

Sometimes the woman in the plaid pants greets him. Sometimes she doesn't. Often she does it in such a way he's not really sure if she's greeting him or not. Rainhard would prefer it if she didn't greet him at all. It just makes him uncomfortable. He thinks that there must be some reason for it. Some cause. He's always thinking about causes and reasons. His mother tells him that all this studying is making him sick. And she's not talking about his ditching physics or the three semesters of economics. At this very moment, his mother is sitting at the *Buure-Zmorge*, a breakfast gathering hosted by the conservative Swiss People's Party, talking to her brother about refugees, Protestants, and absent relatives. The woman is gesturing to the waitress; it's a perfectly clear greeting, like she means it; he can tell all the way from over here. That's the way you should greet someone. If she would just greet him like that, it would be okay.

Her favorite spot is free; Alexa orders a cappuccino and *gipfeli* and takes off her glasses, the new ones with the larger frames and thicker lenses. She refused to try them on at first; her eyes were too close together for glasses like that; they made her look like a cross-eyed comic book character, she told Zoltan. But now she only wears contact lenses when she's onstage. Or at parties. She opens her to-do list and considers what she should do when. Lyrics. Gas station. Straighten up the apartment. For the kitchen alone she'll need an hour. Then the beer garden tables and benches. She and Adrian should have done that together yesterday. Maybe she could manage the benches without any help, but not the tables, never. Strings of twinkling lights,

lanterns, shade sails, she can do all those things when the *NZZ* says it will stop raining. She can stock the fridge in the mansard room. Get the punch ready. And the music. Music is the most important thing. And this year, if there is no dancing again, she really should hang up her hat as host. Institution or not.

With the cappuccino in front of her, she pulls the music from her bag. The “Guggisberglid” is sacred to the Swiss, it’s true. (Well maybe not *all* the Swiss. Maybe not all *that* sacred). Adrian loves it. Evelyne loves it. Zoltan thinks that Sophie Hunger’s version is the best. And she has always wanted to sing it. Not in the Bern dialect, of course. Okay, let’s see. A touch of wit, a touch of politics, that’s what Adrian said when she showed him her standard German version. And when she asked him questions about it (why is she always the one who has to ask questions), he told her there’s no official version. He did criticize the meter of her refrain and her first stanza though. But she would ignore those comments for now. After all, she is the songwriter in the family. He’s the man with the perfect pitch, the brilliant bass player of the brilliant trio, which a lot of people thought would be The Next Big Thing. Until he decided to go into medicine. But he didn’t drop music altogether. The only thing left was Thursdays in a hotel bar; performing together had been reduced to only two or three times a year after his son, Robert, appeared on the scene. She sings the refrain softly to herself. In her version, she’ll pair the lovers’ new names, *Anna-Verena* and *Hashim-Elmedin*, and their hometowns, *Rüschlikon* and *Wiedikon*. The meter works just fine, actually. . . She can’t quiet her mind; the music is distracting her; she finishes her cappuccino.

Monica sent an email to say that she is bringing her grown daughter, Shirin. And finally news from Jan and Delia too. Jan is sick; Delia is coming anyway. Thankfully, not the other way around (her male to female ratio). Delia is not really a close friend; the two of them never get together, but whenever she does see Delia, Alexa has this feeling that it’s a blessing to be a woman, a special kind of happiness. It’s the same feeling she gets when she listens to Marlene, Etta, Susan, or Regina. When she reads books by her favorite women authors. And Zoltan

might come with Liane Steffen tonight. Because she has a reading in Wetzikon tomorrow, and he (as her long-time editor), has to take care of all the details. And she herself said, “Of course bring her along,” when he talked about it. Was that because he might have not come otherwise? Because the very presence of Liane Steffen would be regarded as a triumph, like the party when the police were up on her rooftop. Because she would love the chance to talk to her? But not at her own party. How is she supposed to sing songs from the Patent Ochsner Band with Evelyne at one o’ clock in the morning when Liane Steffen is sipping champagne at the other end of the roof terrace? How is she supposed to sing her own song? Her kitschy song? She admits it herself. A little bit political — but unfortunately kitschy (which often goes together). “Check, please!” she calls out. The waitress nods and continues to hum as she makes her way from the coffee machine to the tables to the cash register; she plays the best music; that’s why she’s Alexa’s favorite waitress; although there are others who are more attentive, who have already started preparing her cappuccino when they see Alexa heading for the café.

Klaus notices Alexa rummaging around in her wallet, sees that she leaves her glasses on the table, then turns right around and puts them on her head. Now she’s smiling; she’s seen him. “Klaus! Hi!,” she says. “Why didn’t you wave to me to get my attention? I didn’t recognize you without my glasses.” — “You looked so busy. You were talking to yourself.” — “Not talking,” she says, “Singing.” A few weeks ago he’d bought one of her CDs, even though he prefers listening to classical music or pure jazz. Great voice, but he found the lyrics a little cryptic, except for Friedrich Hollaender’s, of course. “I’m still putting the finishing touches on my song for tonight.” Surely she wouldn’t be singing at some official government affair. “Wouldn’t you like to come to my party? I’ll send you an invitation if you give me your email address. I don’t already have it, do I?” He’d given Alexa his card a year ago and had no doubt that she would lose it immediately. “Won’t you come? I would be so pleased. I know Adrian would be too.” He had no plans for the

First of August; he doesn't like a lot of noise or speeches, or national symbols. He hadn't seen Adrian since school. Nevertheless, he says he'll come. And he dictates his email address to her, which she enters on her cell phone.

Alexa doubts that Adrian will be all that pleased. When she told him a few months ago she'd met one of his old classmates, he'd had to think for a moment. The last two years of middle school? Yes, that's right, Klaus. He was always a little square. He seemed very German to us, he said with a smirk. Alexa reminded him that his son's classmates might be saying the same thing about Robert. But Adrian was firmly convinced that Robert, even if he had only been a part of his life for the last three years, couldn't possibly be considered a square; and she was happy that he didn't ask what had become of Klaus. He could make up his own mind about that. One more guest, (a male), but otherwise she hadn't made much progress. At least she'd had breakfast. Those firecrackers. "Lady farts," they call them here. She can understand the attraction for children, but the boys by the circular tree bench are Robert's age. The man who is always smoking is still sitting near the newspaper kiosk, and she nods to him. He grimaces; once he actually smiled back when she greeted him. The telephone buzzes in her jacket pocket. *Jessica*. No, no, no, Jessica can not be cancelling! "Already out and about?" Wherever she is, she says, it sounds like there's a war on. Alexa turns, moves away from the adolescents. "I'm at Idaplatz. And by the way, I just invited another single guy." Klaus and Jessica; impossible. She can't even imagine them having anything in common to talk about. That's why she's calling, Jessica says. She has a man of her own to bring along.

Jessica had wanted to bring Brad as a surprise; that would've been more fun, she thought. But Brad thought that was a terrible idea and had almost begged her to talk to Alexa about it. "So, guess who it is!" she says. Then she immediately tells Alexa that it's Brad; he's back in Zurich. She doesn't have any time for guessing games. She can't quite decipher the noise Alexa makes (almost like she's choking), but it certainly doesn't sound as enthusiastic as she had

expected. “Super,” Alexa says. “Super, bring him with you.” If Brad weren’t right there standing next to her (looking so relaxed) she would tell Alexa what a good catch he was and how much fun it was to go out partying with him (it was a relief that he was also showing signs of a hangover). “We’re going to Rütli Meadow first,” she says to Alexa instead. ““But we’ll be there by eight at the latest.”

Today of all days he has to come to Zurich, today of all days, Alexa thinks. Otherwise she could have stayed in blissful ignorance about his being here. “You’re going to Rütli Meadow? Aren’t you afraid of running into some Nazis?” she asks, trying to get control of herself. “Thing of the past,” Jessica laughs. “And today Simonetta Sommaruga is giving a speech.” They were keeping the rabble from the Swiss People’s Party to a minimum so that the place where the Swiss oath was first made would be safe from extreme far-right demonstrations. Brad has always wanted to experience the First of August there, she adds. Jessica of all people, who has teased her all these years about her parties on Swiss National Day, about all of her red and white decorations and the hard-boiled eggs she made with Swiss crosses on them; Jessica is going with Brad to Rütli Meadow. “Do you have everything under control?” Jessica asks, and Alexa is happy to be able to fall back into her playful whiny mode so that she can tell her that of course, as usual, she has made exactly zero progress and about all the things she still has left to do, and about her weather worries. “Is Brad at your place?” she asks in spite of herself. “Tell him I said Hi.” Yes, Jessica tells her, he’s out on the balcony smoking at this very moment. She has to race to the theater, but then she would pick up a car from *Mobility-Auto*. “It’s just around the corner from my place,” Jessica says. And then she reassures Alexa the party this year will be better than the last one, no question. And the weather, she adds, has never been a problem before. But just in case she would take her rain boots with her to the Meadow. “Who knows what condition the ground will be in after all that rain last night.” Of course, she said, Brad only has one pair of shoes to wear, his expensive Italian ones. Alexa tells her to have fun. Last year she might have gone with them, but not with her naturalization interview coming up, and then

suddenly she remembers the flowers. "*Forever changing one's aspect to the sun?* Thank you!" And Jessica laughs. "Exactly," she says, "Forgive me. I always forget that your birthday and the holiday aren't on the same day. Brad reminded me." And then she says that she really must go, and simply hangs up.

Alexa had crossed Kalkbreitestrasse before she noticed that she'd already made it to Seebahnstrasse. They hadn't seen each other for three years. And had never talked about what happened. Brad is like a dull pain in her side, she thinks, one that only throbs when you turn a certain way. But it's not Brad really; it's that thing she'd had with Brad. Whenever she manages to forget about it for awhile; whenever her conscience isn't bothering her; whenever she isn't feeling guilty about Adrian, and not afraid that he might find out; whenever she's considering telling him about it (and Evelyne, who only knows half the story, always says: no, absolutely not); whenever she thinks about how happy she is with Adrian; whenever she's distracted by her music, the concerts, or lately, going on the road; whenever she's sitting down to write; whenever she's had some success, some positive notices; whenever some time passes (like the last few weeks and months) when she isn't thinking about Brad at all: that is when, absolutely without fail, she will wake up having spent all night dreaming about him. Sometimes it's about something irritating. Usually it's about something mundane. After dreaming about Brad she wakes up and there's Adrian, lying next to her, his mouth open slightly, creases from the pillow on his face, otherwise no trace of wrinkles, maybe some three-day stubble; Adrian, who she always thinks is so beautiful, even if the most beautiful thing about him isn't immediately apparent: it's the way he looks at her, his trusting, watchful gaze, his forest green eyes (*Green are your eyes in the morning when you rise*, she likes to sing to him sometimes). Adrian, who has no idea, at most only a hint, of how beautiful he is. Hey look, he had said just a few weeks after it had happened, look there at the bus stop, that's Brad; and there was Brad hanging in full view, big as life, once again on a poster advertising a bank. She doesn't want Adrian and Brad to meet. If only to spare Adrian's feelings. She should have said no. (But what could she have

said to him? The party was at capacity? The low railing was too dangerous for men over six feet tall?).

She's at the gas station. Charcoal and lighter fluid. What else? Should she buy one of those cone-shaped fireworks that shoots a fountain of sparks into the air like a volcano? Maybe if she saw Brad beforehand, she would feel better. She texts him. Is that still his number; does he still have his Swiss cell phone? Wasn't he somewhere else, Italy? If he has nothing else to do, she writes, while Jessica is away at the theater, would he like to visit her. The *Mobility-Auto* isn't even three blocks from her apartment. And seconds later, his "yes" appears. Jessica is almost on her way out; he could drop by soon. He can help with the beer garden tables, Alex thinks. Seriously? Why in the world did she do that? Help with the tables! How is that supposed to keep him from coming to her party?

The young man in front of her in line turns around; he's rocking nervously back and forth. His full sensual lips, full lips like hers used to be; he has an altogether attractive face; maybe she notices it more because there are three deep scars on his left cheek. How hard she tries to keep her own scars hidden. And hers are only from a difficult puberty, not from some injury — at least not the physical kind. Something must have happened to him. She guesses he's in his mid-twenties. Probably from North Africa. She's never seen the kind of cigarettes he's buying before. Did she really just invite Brad over? Was she crazy? But really he wouldn't be staying long. What's he doing at Jessica's? She had always thought that the two of them would make a good couple, a good-looking couple anyway, even if Jessica only comes up to his chest; both of them are naturally attractive, effortlessly so. And back then, when they were doing "The Threepenny Opera," Jessica told her she wanted to go to bed with him, and riffing on Pirate Jenny, she'd said he could stay in "her ratty old hotel anytime" and sang along with the song, "And I'm scrubbin' the floors while you're gawking." She was pretty drunk. "I'd scrub Brad's floors any day, no one else's," she shouted. But he was the one in a steady relationship back then, and she was the one who sang "Pirate Jenny" onstage while Jessica was working

backstage as the assistant dramaturge. Jessica is a published writer now. A playwright. Good for her. Fierce. Unfortunately she hasn't had much success, certainly not as much as Brad has. The young man with the scars is standing next to the freezer full of bags of ice and is staring at his outdated cell phone. Ice? Does she need ice? Her freezer is so tiny. There's a bang. A violent popping sound. And his eyes; his dark eyes that look like they are lined with kohl, are opened wide with fear; she points to the children with the fireworks on the opposite side of the street, different children, younger this time. Kids who are playing with fire far too close to the gas station. But he has noticed them himself and smiles. Smiles quickly at Alexa and stuffs his cell phone into his pants pocket.

It would be better if he didn't call Zoltan yet, Kamal thinks. Rotachstrasse is very close. It would be better if he was standing at the door when he called. He waits for the light to turn green; if he jaywalks a police car is sure to be heading straight for him. He doesn't think they have started searching for him yet. But often enough before he has been stopped for no reason. The worst time was a year ago; it was in July; in Bäckli Park. Hands against the wall. Spread your legs. What's so damn humorous. And he'd pointed to the Amnesty International sign. They searched him between the night club and the Amnesty offices. Someone reported they'd seen him dealing drugs.

Mylord Sauna. In rainbow colors. Nothing ambiguous there. He used to go to the Hamman Guerín in Tunis with Rashid. It was a well-known hook-up spot. But nobody cares, Rashid said. Not since the revolution. This place wasn't anything like life in the desert where his relatives lived covered up from head to foot. Rashid called him *Amir al Sahara*. The Prince of the Desert. A name for racehorses, Kamal thinks. But Rashid ran away, just disappeared suddenly. Couldn't be reached. His Facebook profile was deleted. If Kamal knew where Rashid had gone, he wouldn't be here right now. Sometimes he thinks that Rashid is dead. Otherwise he would have surely contacted him somehow.

He's never walked past all these glass buildings before. Around the time they first met, Zoltan had invited him to his place. He'd felt welcome there. And he can't go to the Autonomous School of Zurich, the program run by immigrants to offer "education for all." It's the summer break. And the police are probably still hanging around. There are always police everywhere. These patrol cars. He can feel it on the back of his neck whenever one of their vehicles creeps past. He should get rid of his cell phone. It doesn't even have GPS. But they can always find your location somehow. He's watched enough TV at the shelter; television helps when you're learning German. Without Zoltan he wouldn't be nearly so good with the language.

Now he has to cross another one of those wide streets again. All those flags hanging everywhere; from flagpoles and windows. Red and white like the flags of my country, he thinks; the meaning of the colors is always changing back home. He doesn't know what the Swiss cross stands for, but he would be happy to celebrate the First of August with the Swiss people. If they hadn't rejected his claim. Now there was nothing left to be done, the lawyer said. Now it was official; he was here illegally. All he can do is go underground, that's it. "Don't come back to the shelter," Anissa wrote. They might have started looking for him in the containers there already. He can't go to the train station either; he might as well check himself into the deportation holding cell if he did that. They refuse to believe him, that they would throw him in prison in Tunisia. They say he can't prove it. That it has nothing to do with his "sexual orientation" (no one says the word sodomy here). But it did have something to do with it. In Tunis, they didn't treat him like someone who robs tourists. That was the worst part of it, how they looked at him when he went home. No, not the worst. The worst is something he can't even talk about; he can't find the words. He can't tell anyone about it. Not even Zoltan, who wanted to help him put together a new case for his claim. He'd had it so good with the people at the school, at the school's newspaper, the "Paperless Paper." He doesn't know why he doesn't go there anymore. Or study. Or join the demonstrations. He doesn't have the strength anymore. Without Zoltan he would've given up a long time ago anyway. That man, that man who is

standing over there. He shouldn't have come here. They don't always show up in a uniform after all. But no one knows anything about his private lessons. Not even at the school. We don't have secret police, Zoltan said once. And the last scandal of mass surveillance of the public wasn't that long ago. Kamal crosses the Rotachstrasse and calls Zoltan's number.

Zoltan hasn't been awake long. Today he was able to sleep in; tomorrow, if they're lucky, both of them will be able to sleep in if the kids have breakfast at the neighbors' house. Which isn't very likely. It's Kamal. "Wait a minute," Zoltan says and leaves the room; he always does that when he takes a call; the noise level is usually too high; it's often work. Kamal sounds like he's been running. He's close by. Can he come up? As long as the man isn't standing on the corner anymore. "What man?" Zoltan asks, looking out the window; there is only an old woman pushing her walker. "You can't come up unfortunately," he says; of course he does want to see Kamal, he does. He sounds worse than usual, almost as bad as the time a drunk teenager punched him in the face. "I'll come down," Zoltan says. "Three minutes. Do you know Café Plüsch?" Kamal tells him he'll wait in front of the hi-fi shop, and hangs up. Zoltan pulls on his jeans, puts on the sweater that Kamal said was a beautiful color. He hasn't even taken a shower yet, hasn't washed his hair. So what. He puts on his cap. "What are you doing?" Martina asks. "It's an emergency. At school," Zoltan answers. "I'll be right back." — "Kamal?" she asks, and he nods yes.

Martina thinks it's a good thing that Zoltan is involved with the Autonomous School of Zurich; that's the kind of man he is; he would give his right arm to help anyone, whether it was one of his authors or one of the refugees to whom he teaches German. Sometimes she thinks that because he does that, teaches courses at the ASZ, all that volunteer work, and because he spends so much time there, time that she doesn't have (who does?), that in her own way, she's somehow doing her part. She doesn't have any time for that kind of thing, the job, the children.

She always does a little more around the house, although they had planned to share the work evenly, although she vowed that they would be a family of equal partners, that she would not fall into that old trap. And Zoltan was perfect for a partnership like that. No one is better suited for it, except Adrian perhaps. But she and Zoltan don't have any children, only a teenager on weekends lately. The party. She promised to bring a salad. Why is she making the salad for Zoltan's best friend's party anyway? Zoltan waves to the kids. Leonie comes into the hall. "Are you going to the playground?" she asks.

Zoltan laughs. "Not without you, I'm not. I have to go do something." Leonie nods solemnly, as if she knows what he's talking about. Martina has disappeared into the bathroom; clearly she doesn't consider this farewell worthy of a goodbye kiss. There it is, the terrible thought; it comes to him again when he's on the stairs, that everything will be normal again when Kamal isn't around anymore. Expulsion. They call it *expulsion*. If only Kamal could make it to France. But what good would that do, with this shit in Dublin going on. Where could he go?

There he is, so delicate and small, in front of the shop window full of stereo equipment. He doesn't look twenty-three years old from this distance. Now he's seen him; he's turning around and probably smiling. It was Martina who said it, after Kamal had been at their place for coffee last spring, *angelic*, a word he wouldn't let any of his authors get away with, especially not in this context. *A beautiful human being*, she'd said. Her enthusiasm seemed exaggerated to him.

"Merci," says Kamal. "Merci for coming." And Zoltan thinks he has no other choice, he can't help it somehow (even if the reason why confuses him). Sometimes he's afraid that Kamal knows why too, that he knows exactly what's going on with him. And sometimes, he even hopes that Kamal knows it (perhaps understands it better than he does himself). That Kamal was aware of it as much as he was when they touched each other, accidentally or on purpose, earlier when they were in class, or the last time they were together, sitting in a café looking at an

exercise book. Kamal gives him a quick hug. He smells different, not an unpleasant smell, not at all. "Let's go to Plüsch; it's not far," Zoltan says, and Kamal nods his head absent-mindedly. "Somewhere where there is not the police," Kamal says. And Zoltan assures him that in all the years he's been going to the Plüsch café, he has never seen a policeman there. And then he remembers the two soldiers who were sitting outside the café a few weeks ago, their assault rifles leaning against the glass window, drinking coffee before getting on the bus.

Zoltan doesn't ask what's going on. And Kamal doesn't know how to start. "How are you doing?" he asks. Why isn't Zoltan asking him anything. And why are they going to this café? Zoltan looks at him in surprise. "Fine," he replies, "everything's fine, lots of work, as always, but otherwise fine." Zoltan always has too much work. And he doesn't, Kamal thinks; he's not allowed to do anything, gets a daily allowance, emergency aid now, but he isn't allowed to do anything. And that by itself is enough to drive him crazy. Too much time. Too few options. Zoltan sometimes gives him manuscripts to read and asks for his opinion. He's trying to be nice. But it's not serious. Not real. He never knows what he should say, not even when he understands most of it.

Zoltan wonders if what is happening right now, should be happening. But Kamal seems to want to wait until they are sitting in the café to talk more. As long as the path is clear, he goes so fast that Zoltan can hardly keep up, but if there is a choice to be made, which direction to take, left or right, he looks at Zoltan. "Do you even have to work on Swiss National Day?" he asks now, and Zoltan laughs. "It seems like I have to work all the time, somehow. Holidays. Sundays. Tomorrow I have to accompany one of my authors to a reading." Actually, Martina is adamant that he not work on Saturdays and Sundays. Not proper work. Reading is okay, but editing is out. No emails under any circumstances. Those authors of his. She says that if he wouldn't

always respond to their emails, they would stop calling on weekends. That's the only thing he has managed so far: not answering the phone on weekends.

"Why the First of August anyway?" Kamal asks. "I have heard talk of the oath in the year twelve hundred and something, but why this date exactly?" In Tunisia, each liberation has its own separate holiday: 1956, 1987, and 2011. "Shit, I have no idea. It's completely arbitrary, I guess," Zoltan answers and points in the direction of the café on the other side of the street. Arbitrary. That's a word he has heard before, maybe even read. But he doesn't know what it means. "Arbitrary. Whim. The opposite of . . ." Zoltan picks up his cap and puts it on. "In French, it's *arbitraire*," he says. "*Le fait du Prince*," Kamal is familiar with that. He's very familiar with that. "Arbitrary," he repeats. Zoltan holds the café door open for him.

The waitress (Zoltan can never remember her name although he sees her almost every day) smiles and takes the lactose-free milk out of the refrigerator. He asks Kamal if he would like some tea, but he wants coffee too. When they finally sit down in the furthest corner, Kamal keeps his back to the door. Kamal says: "I can't go to the shelter anymore. Not to the school either." Zoltan is taken aback. In that moment, he knows what is expected of him, what he expects of himself; he thinks of what Martina would say. "But the lawyer wrote another letter, didn't he? He managed a deferment at least?" he asks, and he notices that the dark half moons under Kamal's fingernails are dried blood; he's been chewing his cuticles. Kamal's hands are always in motion, he wants to take them and hold them tight, calm them, stop him from hurting himself; he wants to take his hands in his. Kamal shakes his head. "Yes, he writes another letter," but the second extension has expired. The same thing happened to Daoud. "They put him in jail, two weeks only after the second exit order." Zoltan knows how this plays out. He knows it all too well. But still. Daoud was a different case. With him everyone knew the outcome would be negative. That he would be expelled. But Kamal is different. They can't seriously send

him back. "I don't know where to go," Kamal says. "Could I just spend two, maybe three nights at your place?" He puts his right hand down in the center of the table, and Zoltan leans back, his leg touching Kamal's. Or was it the table leg? He can't have Kamal sleeping in his home. Kamal sleeping in the bedroom next to his bedroom. Taking a shower while he's having breakfast with Martina in the kitchen. He can't still be there after Martina and the children have left. "I'm so sorry," he says, and sees instantly that he has taken Kamal by surprise, that he hadn't imagined Zoltan would say no; he had never said no. But Zoltan thinks, in Tunisia no one would ever think of rejecting someone who asked for help like that. Or would they? What if the request came from a young relative who was openly gay. "Martina's parents are coming today," he says. "Today of all days; I'm so sorry." But surely there is some other possibility, one he can keep from Martina. "What about Patricia? Patricia has plenty of room," he says quietly, relieved. Patricia, that's a good idea. "She's in Paris," Kamal answers. "She's not here."

Zoltan is lying. Kamal can tell. Was he afraid of the police too? Or afraid of his wife? He tells her everything. Maybe she doesn't want him there. The gay Tunisian. He just can't imagine that's true. When he met her, she asked him all sorts of questions about the revolution, what was left of it. Open minded. Interested. And she'd invited him into her home without knowing him at all, which wasn't something to be taken for granted in Switzerland. He knows that now. "Maybe Patricia left a key somewhere," Zoltan says, taking out his cell phone. "Should I call her?" Kamal thinks about how conspicuous he is here. He can't stay here. Everyone in this room is white. But maybe there is no safer place to be than in Zoltan's company, who, despite his beard, couldn't look more innocent. He nods. But he doesn't let himself feel any hope. Zoltan was his hope. Zoltan, who at this very moment is telling his co-worker the same lie. He can't understand it. Zoltan was always there for him. And now? When it really matters. "He can't go there," he's saying, and then he can hear Patricia talking excitedly. Zoltan looks old all of a sudden. "He's still living at home." And then he says that he'll find a solution; no, she doesn't

need to mail the key, not yet; and he says goodbye. “She left her spare key with the neighbors, but they’re in Ticino,” Zoltan tells him. “But she’s going to think about it, and she’ll call back.”

She’ll call back. But how can she help him, Kamal thinks. She’s in Paris. He stands up. He can’t understand it. “Wait! Where are you going?” Zoltan asks. He picks up his backpack. “I don’t know,” he says. “But I know some other people.” Of course he knows other people, but most of them are in a shelter too. In bunkers with guards. Or he doesn’t trust them. Since Daoud left, Zoltan is his only real friend. Zoltan is pulling bills out of his pants pocket, two hundreds. “Go to a hotel. Somewhere inconspicuous, don’t go near Langstrasse. Maybe go to that pension, Zum Guten Glück. It’s just around the corner. Or go to the Fürdich pension, no, not Fürdich; go to the Kafi Schnaps Hotel; that’s up by Schaffhauser Square.”

But he doesn’t want to take the money. He has no problem with Zoltan giving him books. He doesn’t have a problem with Zoltan paying when they go to some chic café (because that’s where Zoltan wants to go); every third time they meet for a lesson together, they go to Hassan’s, and Kamal pays for the tea. The best tea in the city. “I have to go,” Zoltan says, as disheartened as if *he* were the one on the run. “Martina’s parents. Please go to a hotel. And I’ll call you.” Kamal takes the money, and Zoltan hugs him, holds him so tightly it’s uncomfortable; Zoltan doesn’t always know where his body starts and where it ends.

“Thank you,” Kamal says and leaves. Zoltan watches him; he’s looking in both directions, then goes left; he should wait at the bus stop with him, but he has to pay the bill first. Where should he put him up? Should he talk to Martina? Then say her parents had canceled. Kamal wouldn’t mind. He could even explain it all to him; he could explain almost anything to him. Kamal is bright. And sometimes he seems more mature than Zoltan, even though Zoltan’s older, thirty-seven. When he walks out, Kamal isn’t standing at the stop; he would’ve seen the bus go past if one had come in the meantime. That tall blond man on the other side of the street — he knows him somehow. But where? That face. They’ve spoken at some point. No doubt about it.

That has to be Brad, Alexa's and Jessica's actor friend. The posterboy for UBS. Well, he's no help.