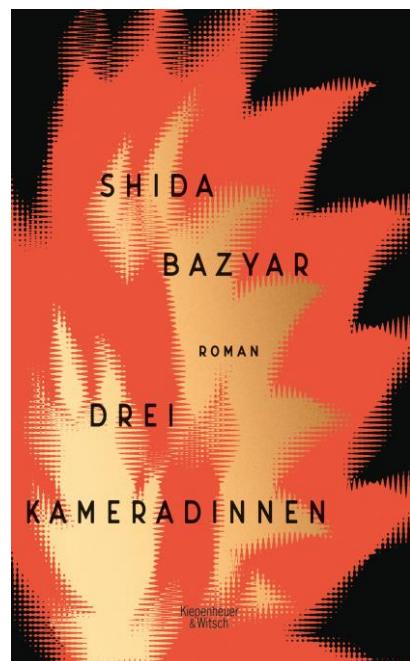


SISTERS IN ARMS

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[pp. 5 – 40]

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Inferno on Bornemannstraße

Aggressive and blinded: Saya M. from R. became radicalised as the world looked on.

“At school, she was always looking for an argument, constantly provoking people,” a former acquaintance says of M. “Saya just had this anger inside her, it’s, like, part of her DNA.”

Was it this anger that cost so many people their lives last night? While the authorities are still saying they don’t want to comment on an ongoing investigation, the witness statements paint a clear picture.

Former neighbours report that in the early nineties, Saya M.’s family was already taking in suspected Islamists who came to Germany on tourist visas. It is, admittedly, unclear which groups these people belonged to. But it may be assumed that Saya M. grew up in an atmosphere of radicalism.

M. was apparently attempting to recruit others until the very end: under the guise of careers advice, the young woman had been running workshops in schools for several years. Even on the morning before the crime, she preached to the students of the Wilhelm Gymnasium: “Learn Arabic, it’s the only language that has a future!”

Shortly afterwards, she attacked a man outside a café on Bornemannstraße while shouting “Allahu Akbar”.

Volker M. is currently receiving medical treatment. He has released a statement via his lawyer: “We have been tolerant for long enough. It’s people like Saya M. who are threatening the security of our country with their ideologies. How many more attacks do there have to be?”

The attack on Volker M. took place just hours before the deadly fire on Bornemannstraße, which Saya M. is suspected of starting, and which is already one of the most devastating since the Second World War. The authorities are still not calling it an Islamist terror attack. It seems the left-wing leanings this perpetrator liked to flaunt are shielding her.

Reports that the building destroyed in the fire was home to a member of a patriotically-minded group are so far unconfirmed, though they do point to a possible motive for Saya M.

I would like to remain fair, to clear up all misunderstandings and make no secret of what this text is and what it is not, right from the start.

No, that's not what I would like.

I would like to remain fair, to clear up all misunderstandings and explain who I am and who I am not, right from the start. I am not: the spawn of our integrated society. I am not: the girl you can gawk at, so that you can declare sympathetically that you've paid attention to the migrants and, well, it's all so dramatic, but also so admirable. I am not: the girl from the ghetto.

I am: the girl from the ghetto. But that's a question of perspective. There are real girls from real ghettos who'll laugh at me for using that word, when they find out which grubby corner of which backwater I grew up in – and there are girls who wouldn't have lasted a day there.

I am not: a girl. I'm too old to be called a girl; if certain things in my life had been different, if things had gone worse, I could already be a mother to girls

who would call themselves teenagers now, rather than girls. But I’m not. I do, however, wear a ponytail and a skirt, and both, combined with the absence of children, make me a girl in this world. Until I start spitting and shouting and causing a fuss. Then I’m a hysterical woman.

This text is the attempt to pull myself together for just one night. Not to throw anyone out of the window for just one night, not to become an internet troll; to wait. The attempt to wait for my friend Saya, who is coming out of the slammer.

I say slammer because I’m trying to sound more casual. Because even as a child, I liked the words that sounded more casual. I’m not saying slammer because it’s a relic of where I come from. You can grow up in a ghetto that isn’t a ghetto, where crime and punch-ups are part of day-to-day life, and still have just as little to do with the slammer as the horsey girls a few streets over have to do with real horses. But when I say slammer and look the way I do and speak the way I do, the horsey girls nod knowingly to me. Sure, they think, the slammer. The place where you went to visit your father as a child; the place your first boyfriend spent several months, before he came out and was suddenly completely changed; the place you think of nostalgically, sometimes. But I’ve never been in the slammer and I don’t know anyone who has, either, at least not in Germany. Until now. But the last thing I want is to end up there as well, and so I sit myself down here, at this desk, the island of my degree dissertation, the island of my – no kidding – 83 job applications, the island of my unemployment benefit decisions, and write.

So, back to what I actually wanted to say, to this attempt to spend the night waiting for my friend who is coming out of the slammer. She’ll come to my place as soon as she can, because she’s going to stay with me for a few days before flying back to her city and her own life. She was supposed to be having a holiday here with me, and going to Shaghayegh’s wedding while she was here.

It's Friday night, 2:28am, and I'm trying to start from the beginning. That won't work, because the beginning would be a time before we were born. So I will go back a little way, but start kind of more in the middle. With last Monday. Because every week begins with a Monday, and so pretends to be a new thing. So that we don't notice everything is just carrying on, miserably, miserably carrying on, and that nothing is happening. But Monday was before Saya arrived. Saya got on a plane in her city on Tuesday afternoon and landed in Hani's and my city on Tuesday evening. So let's start with Tuesday.

“I smiled at him, and it was just a nice smile, clearly not flirtatious, and he smiled back, and it was clearly flirtatious, and he spoke to me,” Saya said, passing the beer bottles to us, “in English.” “In English,” I laughed, taking the two bottles and passing one to Hani, “how considerate!” Hani laughed as well, albeit a little uncertainly, gave the bottle back to me and held out her lighter. The only smoker out of the three of us, she had the necessary equipment, but no idea how to open a bottle with it. I gave her the opened bottle back, clinked mine against it and said: “I bet he had a thick German accent, as well.” I imitated a thick German accent by saying something in English, I did it twice in a row, so that we could clink bottles and giggle twice, an initial, awkward giggle, the kind you let out when you've laughed together plenty before, but haven't seen each other for a long time. “His English not only had a thick German accent, it was also full of mistakes, of course,” Saya went on, resting her chin on her bent knees and looking out over the city. “That's the most embarrassing thing about these people who think they have to speak English to us: they can't even do it.” “It's okay to speak bad English, though, isn't it,” said Hani, whose English wasn't so good either, of course – and to be honest, nor was mine. Hani's wasn't good because she'd been to a bad school, and in my case it was because I'd never needed it before I moved to this city, where it was good manners to start speaking English straight away

when a foreigner came to hang out with you. Saya’s English was world-class. She’d only found a use for it after school, too, but then she’d travelled round the world with it, lived in this metropolis and that, had relationships, done a degree. “No one *has* to be able to speak English, I know that,” she said now, “but that’s the really weird thing about these people. If you’re not that good at something, then you wait and see if you actually need to do it or not, don’t you? You don’t just start babbling away at poor, defenceless people. Guys like him think our German must be so non-existent that their abysmal English is a better way to communicate with us.” “And what did he say?” I asked. “Did you answer in German?” “No way,” said Saya, “the flight was an hour and a half and he was sitting right next to me. If I’d answered in German, I would have had to talk to him for longer. I said in English that my English wasn’t very good. And then he looked really sympathetic and just smiled.” “And what if he was simply a nice person and was just trying to accommodate you?” Hani asked, looking out at the city, too, or rather over it, as if somewhere beyond its roofs and church towers lay the proof that people only ever mean well. “You were on a plane, after all, you never know who comes from where. He might have spoken to you in German if he’d met you on the street. I’m sure he just wanted to chat.” “Yeah, whatever, but this story isn’t over yet,” said Saya.

She had been with us for half an hour, had put her hiking rucksack in my room, checked whether she still knew my current flatmates in the kitchen, waited patiently for Hani to come back from the corner shop with the beer, and was then adamant that we had to go up to the roof, because she felt too constricted in flats right now. It was only when she got up here that she wanted to tell us how her flight was. “A catastrophe,” she announced; she’d sat next to an annoying man. On every flight she took, she always ended up sitting next to annoying men. So then she told us the story, not looking at all catastrophic. She looked like someone who would ride out any catastrophe in any case, and also knew how to make herself properly comfortable afterwards. Saya sounded completely normal. The way you sound when you’re happy to tell an everyday kind of story, to warm us up to one another

again. She told it in such an offhand, incidental manner. So we really had no inkling of all that was to come.

“Then a woman got on the plane wearing a headscarf,” Saya went on. “Uh-oh,” I said. “Uh-oh, indeed,” said Saya. “The people around me started to shuffle about nervously in their seats and look around. After all, the woman might have a bearded man in tow, it was a risk, and he would probably start harassing all the other women and then set off a bomb.” “No, he’d oppress his wife first,” I said. “Right, said Saya, “First, he’d quickly oppress his wife, and *then* he’d set off a bomb.” I wanted to say more, I wanted to go one better. But we hadn’t warmed up yet. “Are you two making fun of terrorists now? Or those people?” Hani asked, glancing at us. We were still looking at the roofs around us, the way other people stare into a campfire. We could hear car horns, the low sound of people talking on the street below. I didn’t want to reply – I thought Hani could have let us go on a bit longer. But since Saya had started telling us about her flight, Hani had been wondering if this was a story to get worked up about. That was what she feared, when Saya started telling stories: that the whole point was that you got worked up at the end. But so far in this story, everything was still fine. In fact, when Saya got on the plane, the whole world was still fine. Saya could almost have forgotten that the world was a place that got her worked up. She had a window seat and was one of the first to be allowed to board, without having to pay for the privilege. That evening she was going to see us and drink her inhibitions away. The most beautiful city in the world was waiting for her, without Saya having to think about its rental prices. When the guy with the bad English sat down beside her, she found it more amusing than annoying. Then the woman got on. And Saya would have taken no further notice of her, if she hadn’t looked at her ticket, the seat numbers, her ticket and back at the seat numbers, with a lost expression on her face. Something seemed to be wrong, her seat appeared to be occupied. She said so several times, said it to the people sitting in front of Saya, often enough for them to listen, eventually, and tell her no, her seat was the aisle, not the window, and that seat was still free. There was

a brief moment in which the woman said something like, “But it’s seat A, seat B, seat C!” as she pointed to each seat in turn, and the woman sitting in front of Saya replied, “No, it’s seat A, seat B, seat C,” starting at the opposite side. “Could you sit down, please, there are other passengers waiting behind you!” the flight attendant said at her back. She was unfriendly but also right: a queue of scowling people had formed, squashed together as they waited on the small plane. Saya knew that the woman in the headscarf was correct in this endless seat-A-seat-B-seat-C game, but she also knew that in a minute, the woman would probably just sit in the wrong seat rather than get into a discussion with the flight attendant as well. After all, a window seat wasn’t that important. And in any case, the flight attendant was annoyed, sounded like a governess and looked as if she was starving herself to keep her figure. It’s no good discussing things with hungry people. But the woman – let’s call her Yağmur for the sake of simplicity, because she looked like Yağmur from the TV series *Turkish for Beginners* – made a move that was completely new and interesting to Saya. “I’ll make a suggestion,” she said to the woman who was sitting in her seat, “Let’s just swap, and then you don’t have to get up, and I’ll sit in your aisle seat.” It sounded like the most agreeable offer ever, and Saya would so have liked to see the face of the woman in front of her. Next, Yağmur turned to the flight attendant and said, “I’m glad you’re here. Could you help me with my case? I’m not allowed to lift anything heavy.” She stroked her belly with both hands to emphasise how pregnant she was. There wasn’t actually an obvious pregnancy bump, but that isn’t something you can really say. The flight attendant had no desire to help, of course, and Saya had no idea if that was actually part of a flight attendant’s job or not. With a roll of her eyes, she eventually lifted the case into the overhead compartment, just to get things moving. “It’s only 12 kilos for hand luggage,” she hissed at Yağmur, groaning under the case. No one helped her. Probably because they were all afraid of her. Or because they all wanted to watch her being useful to make up for her unkindness: a pregnant woman, a suitcase, a good deed. “12 kilos,” the flight attendant repeated, raising a forefinger, as soon as the case was stowed. She sounded as if she was going to get her whip out at any

minute and spur the people standing around into performing strictly timed production-line work. Yağmur’s voice shook as she said: “Your colleagues told me that already, they weighed the case before I got on. Thank you for your help, it’s very kind of you.” The “very kind” was uttered so shakily that Saya realised the shaking was due to anger rather than anything else. Saya, a row behind the three women, was overcome with the two emotions she knew best. Anger and solidarity. Solidarity isn’t an emotion, Hani would have put in, if Saya had told us all this in the way I’ve described it here. But she wouldn’t object if I then ended the conversation with a simple, “Yes, it is.” Because when you know a person like we know Saya, you know that solidarity is an emotion and unkindness is a reason for raging anger. And that’s why it’s also silly to call Yağmur Yağmur, because the Yağmur in the TV series never displayed such dignified anger as the woman on Saya’s plane, and if you can think of another woman on German TV who wears a headscarf, just give me a call and I’ll change the name.

So, when Yağmur’s case was finally stowed, she sat down in her wrong seat and took her headscarf off. “Ugh, this weather,” she said, running her hands through her curls. It had been raining while they were boarding, but thanks to the scarf it hadn’t ruined her hair. The people finally starting moving, albeit haltingly, down the plane, and when the woman approached who had the aisle seat in Saya’s row, the man sitting next to her immediately leapt up to take her case. Saya leaned forward to see if this woman was pregnant as well, but couldn’t say for sure. The only thing she could say for sure was that he would drone on at this woman in German for the next hour and a half.

“And did she like that?” Hani asked, because now, at last, the moment had arrived when she judged the story to be interesting. I stopped listening for a second; a warm wind surrounded us and down below, someone was yelling something I couldn’t quite hear. The haze of flowering trees hung in the air, the spunky aroma that floats over the city at this time of year, along with the smell of exhaust fumes and Hani’s cigarette. It smelled so good. Everything was so good. The voices below grew louder as passers-by

responded to the person yelling, and it was so lovely to sit up here and simply have nothing to do with it. Not to have to fear for your life, to be a good citizen, pay attention, have to step in. All the alert mechanisms you get so used to in a big city are no use on the roof. We can't see or hear nearly enough up here to be relevant in any way. It's great. To have Saya's voice, Saya's body beside me, is great, and to know that Hani will put the dampers on anything that might sour the mood is great, too. The fact that everyone is doing what they are best at, and that my beer is lukewarm but still the best drink in the world. Saya told us about the man next to her and his failed attempt to flirt with the new woman beside him, and then finally came to the point, which I had been looking forward to all this time, because I already knew what was going to happen, I had been thinking it all along, I knew that Saya had done exactly what I would have done myself in her situation. “Then the flight attendant came round with drinks. Everyone said things like ‘tomato juice’ or ‘Diet Coke’ all expectantly, and then looked disappointed, because they'd been given a half-full, flimsy paper cup that makes you more sad than happy. The guy next to me, quite the gentleman, alerted me to the fact that drinks were being offered, but that he could wait patiently, and said ‘Ladies first’ in English.” Hani and I booed him, but only briefly, because we wanted to find out what happened next. “Then I craned my neck forward and said to the flight attendant, in German: ‘A coffee with milk and sugar, please,’ loud and clear and without any accent.” Hani and I roared and applauded and asked, “Well? How did he look? Did he say anything?” “Of course not. He acted as though nothing had happened. Later, when we were disembarking, I used German again, and said, ‘Bye, have a nice evening,’ as I was passing.” “And did he reply?” “No, he was too busy chatting up the woman without the headscarf.”

Saya wrapped herself in her shawl, which was like a huge blanket, and I thought that I should have realised that these shawls are a good look, too. It's just that, as always, I had been too lazy to try them on. When I see clothes in shop windows, the risk is always too great that I'll try them on and realise I'm wasting my time, so I stick to what I know. Saya doesn't shy away from

any risk. Saya tries on, lays aside, tries on, buys, throws away, exchanges, and in the end she looks good. Even the dilapidated bench in the middle of the roof looked better for Saya’s visit. Because she’d recognised the potential and the problems at a glance, and then brought all the cushions in the flat up here. And now we were sitting here like pensioners on the North Sea coast who own their own wicker strandkorb, on this roof, in the city that belongs to us. There never used to be any doubt about that, for Saya and me. When we thought about eventually leaving the estate, the only place we considered making our new home was this city, with all the things it promised. The promise of adventures and freedom, but above all the promise that here, at last, we wouldn’t stick out.

“Here’s to more kilos for pregnant women’s hand luggage,” said Saya, raising her bottle and taking several gulps from it. Hani reached for her bottle, confused, not knowing if we were really supposed to drink to that, if Saya was serious and we were going to be the lobby for pregnant women from now on, until there was someone else to be saved from oppression.

When Saya’s mother was pregnant with her, she was in prison. I’m saying prison this time because, when someone is locked up for political reasons, wanting to sound casual doesn’t seem right, somehow. And anyone who ended up there in times when the photos were not only analogue but black and white has even more right to have it called “prison” rather than “the slammer”. We were about 14, and sitting on the rug in Saya’s living room when we looked at the photos. It was pretty rare for everyone in our families and their endless guests to all be out at the same time, so we had an agreement that when this happened, we would meet at the flat of whoever had the place to themselves. In a matter of minutes, we became very grown-up, venturing to the fridge, getting some food together and clearing our own plates into the dishwasher afterwards. It was exciting to sit on the finally-vacant sofas to watch an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* in peace, without fathers and

mothers frowning at us. We drank juice from the champagne glasses that our parents never used. And Hani always had the peculiar need to get up in the ad breaks and stand out on the little balcony, which looked exactly the same in all our flats, because the flats our families lived in were all exactly the same. But Hani was the only one of us who lived in a flat that smelled of cold cigarette smoke, accidentally let in from outside, and the difference between her balcony and ours was what it was used for, and what it wasn’t.

Sometimes, when people say things like “weekend” or “a nice evening,” this is the precise image that comes to me. Me, sprawled on a sofa that is usually always occupied, a champagne glass in my hand, spellbound by the ecstasy of the RTL adverts, while Hani stands pointlessly on the balcony, looking out over the roofs of the town. The perpetual smell of those flats, the smell of feet, old wallpaper and dried herbs, different according to whose flat we were in. Just as our mothers’ languages and the taste of their cooking were different.

So, when we were at Saya’s house one day and her parents were out, she showed us the photo album, and the reason Hani and I were so reverent was not because we were such good friends, but because we knew that this was a private object, in a space where the adults had no private life. Where the children had no private life, either. Where no one had a private life, because there simply wasn’t sufficient room for it in the flat, or sufficient understanding of it where life and habits were communal. Most objects in these flats were either useful or decorative. Saya had only seen the photo album for the first time herself a few days previously, when an acquaintance of her uncle’s had come to visit and brought it with him. The album must have been passed from one trusted person to the next in convoluted ways over the years. Saya’s parents had left their apartment and their country without saying goodbye, and ever since, it had been waiting to be saved along with everything else that had belonged to the three of them. Saya was fourteen when she saw pictures of her parents as young people for the first time. Hani and I couldn’t know that this was a formative experience for her; we just

found it fascinating to see what these boring old people had looked like in their younger days. Saya showed us a photo of her mother with a bob, wearing a military shirt, with one foot on a rock and one hand on her hip. In my eyes and Hani’s, she might have looked young, but she also looked pretty uncool – and then Saya pointed proudly at it and said, “That was just before she went to prison.” Then she added with even greater pride, “So, just before she got pregnant. She might even have been pregnant with me in this photo, and just didn’t know it yet.” From then on, I was quite envious of Saya. Because of her mother, who had been to prison, and because that meant Saya herself had been to prison, in a way. Who would have thought that one day I would be sitting here like this, wishing Saya had simply never been in prison, not then and certainly not tonight. Why does she have to take after her mother in this, of all things?

In any case: when we were sitting on the roof and Saya had got to the part of her story where she was feeling solidarity with the pregnant woman on the plane, she sounded as though pregnancy was a blessed time filled with happiness, which mustn’t be clouded under any circumstances. And that’s absurd, if only because her own mother was pregnant just once, and during that time she was sitting cooped up with ten other women, and being taken off for interrogation every day, not knowing if her husband was still alive. My mother was pregnant five times and in every pregnancy she had to hope the child in her belly would survive her working nights in the laundry. As a rule, we heard these horror stories only from our own families, and so, from when we were little, we preferred to orient ourselves by other people’s reality, as if our own didn’t exist. Which was also important if we wanted the other kids to understand what we were telling them. So in summer we talked about “going on holiday”, although in our case that never meant the beach and a holiday apartment. We only ever went to visit our parents’ friends for a few days, in whose small flats we spent all day watching TV.

We still do it sometimes, even now; we take the things that have been sold to us as reality and paste them over our own biographies. And in this

reality, pregnant women are happy women, spending a brilliant, intense time with their bodies, in which you should support them and help to eliminate all nuisance factors. If someone doesn't show them any respect, then, according to Saya, you have to step in and fight for their rights. “Is Shaghayegh pregnant?” Saya asked, and for the first time it occurred to me that such a thing might be possible. “Why do you ask? Because she's getting married?” “Yes. Why's she getting married?” “I don't know.”

I didn't know why we were sitting on the roof and talking about that instead of nice things, and why Saya suddenly threw her bottle cap down into the street, as if she didn't know it might hit someone down there and injure them. All at once, I no longer had a good feeling about sitting up here. “Weren't you guys surprised she was getting married?” Saya said. She made it sound as if marriage was preposterous, as if you needed a good reason for it. “No,” I said, “I was surprised she actually invited us. But I think there are worse things than people wanting to get married.” “It isn't a crime,” said Hani, “I'm happy for Shaghayegh.” “I just don't know what there is to be happy about,” Saya said. And then she let rip, and I hoped the lecture she was embarking on wouldn't be a long one, because the subject bored me. But it did go on a bit; I'll just give you her main theses here. “People get married because films have taught them that's part of a happy ending, but in reality, marriage only exists so that men can bind women to them, control them and make them dependent on them. The fact that the concept has survived this long is only down to the two million tax benefits that married couples get, which amounts to financial, conservative blackmail, which is disgusting, and by the way, in the past few centuries it's also been a means of excluding everyone who doesn't belong in a heterosexual world. All this time, those people who don't go mad with joy at the idea of being a classic husband and a classic wife, have had to literally pay for it and be properly shamed by it day after day. That's the only aim of marriage. I mean, I'm glad Shaghayegh invited us as well, but I just want to know in advance what's gone wrong with her.” “Gone wrong? That's overstating it a bit, isn't it?” Hani asked. Saya shook her head. “Not in times like these. Bothering about something as banal

as getting married in times like these is a luxury you have to be able to afford in the first place. Something *must* have gone wrong with Shaghayegh for that to be her priority.”

So that was going to be Saya’s mission in the days before the wedding: to find out why exactly Shaghayegh was getting married, so that she could then celebrate. Because it was the celebration that had made her take the long trip here from the city where she’d chosen to live.

Two hours later we were as tanked up as I wish I was right now, and our dirty laughter echoed in the streets below us. The city was pretending to be peaceful. From the roof, it looked like a sheltered, silent place. It was six years since we’d last got drunk together on a roof in this city. On another roof, on New Year’s Eve, and even then, everything had been strangely reverent and peaceful. So peaceful that we had no objection to the barrage of fireworks in the distance, and nor did we think with sympathy about the refugees from war, the aging veterans and disturbed dogs sitting in their flats, scared to death while everyone around them was imitating a wartime level of noise because they were never usually allowed to let themselves go. Maybe our lack of sympathy was also something to do with the fact that there weren’t any war refugees or aging veterans left in the part of town where we were celebrating, and our sympathy for the hipsters’ dogs had its limits. It’s six years now since we were last together for New Year – not with new groups of friends, new partners or new partners’ friends, but quite naturally together, on the roof of the flat-share I was living in then. And we were sitting together quite naturally again now, as if not a single day had passed since then. Hani’s laugh still sounded as though she was a giant, as if it came from some vast sound box, as if it could make the earth quake. She threw her head back and slapped her thighs as we talked about something that had happened at some point, about which Hani had made some comment at the time. Saya’s laugh sounded throaty, as if she was enjoying every note of it, and I laughed, too – but I couldn’t stop watching the other two laughing at the same time. When they were laughing, they didn’t notice me staring at them, to imprint every detail

of them on my memory. There aren’t many people you know so well that you have to keep bringing yourself up to date on how they currently look. So that later, when you think back on this moment, you see them exactly as they were then. How do you do that, I wonder, when you’re properly old and thinking about an indistinct past? Do you see the fashions in your mind’s eye, the haircuts, as they were? Or do you just make an effort to see all that because you want to make the picture as true to life as possible? I do it when I write, when I think: I don’t want some weird, spectral silhouette of the people I’m thinking about; I want to see them the way they looked at that point in time, and it’s lucky that I can, or I wouldn’t be in a position to describe everything that’s happened to us.

Hani, on the other hand, is not usually very good at describing what’s happened to her, but we listen all the same. At some point she began telling us about some flight she had been on where the flight attendant did absolutely everything wrong. It took quite a while. And we didn’t completely understand, which meant it took even longer, because Hani was making an effort to ensure that in the end, we did in fact understand the point she was trying to make. It was about a man who was sitting in the wrong seat, and some people who complained, and a flight attendant who tried to help, but who didn’t listen properly and then made the wrong man get up, and Hani drew a little picture in the air of who was sitting where and who was in the wrong seat and where she was sitting herself. It went on forever, this story, Hani didn’t notice how much space she was taking up, and eventually Saya said she needed to go to bed soon, and Hani said, “Hang on, just one more cigarette,” and in the end she smoked another three cigarettes, so that we would understand *something*, and we only went to bed after reassuring Hani that she had definitely been in the right on that plane. Hani stayed over, and I enjoyed the fact that Saya *had* to stay at mine, because she was a guest in this city, but Hani *wanted* to stay at mine, just to be close to us. And so I was what I was brought up to be: a good hostess.

I’m going to stop writing now. There’s no point: I am continually trying to imagine who you all are, while you’re trying to imagine who we are. We’re not so different from you. You just think that because you don’t know us. Because you didn’t have a childhood that smelled like ours, and because you don’t have friends with whom you can share this stinking childhood. In any case, you are currently thinking various different things. You are already thinking Hani is an unsympathetic character, and you’re now imagining Saya is pretty. You’re waiting for the moment when I explain which of us comes from which country. And that’s something you need to know before you can put yourselves in our shoes. For you, that information is about as important as knowing which small German town we grew up on the outskirts of, and how old we are, and which of us is hottest. I’m not telling you that. You’ll have to manage without it. I mean, I don’t know anything about you, either. You will read this, perhaps, depending on how the press deals with the case. If the press tries to contact me, and they will, then I won’t give any interviews, because I know how interviews work, I’ve read the paper often enough and seen the public-service broadcasters’ political chat-shows. I’m going to print out this manuscript. I’m going to cut my finger and drip my blood onto it. I’ll give it to *BILD* and then you can let rip, writing about us. I’m describing Saya the way she is, and you can make of her what you will. If I finish telling this story before the night is over, I’m just going to write it again. Then maybe from your point of view. How the story would go if one of you had written it. Oh, wait, if I want to know that, then all I have to do is spend a few hours reading the newspaper or looking online. So, I’m not going to stop writing after all. I’ll go on writing, although all I have to drink is tap water and tea, and the neighbours’ cold cigarette smoke is coming in through the half-open window, and I would prefer to be drinking beer, and today I would even prefer to be smoking. But both of those would require me to leave the building. And that’s something I never really want to do, and certainly not today. The people outside are completely unpredictable, I don’t want to have to run away from them just so I can buy something to drink. In any case, the guy in the corner

shop over the road always tells me – and he phrases it like a question – that I’m getting prettier: “You’re getting prettier and prettier, aren’t you?” Then I do a fake giggle, because I don’t know what you’re supposed to say to that. Probably because there’s nothing you *can* say, because the point is not for you to say anything. The point is for him to say something. I’m afraid he’ll feel useless because he’s saying something so superfluous, and so I laugh and pretend it doesn’t make me uncomfortable. And then sometimes I feel a phantom hand touching my backside, although the guy is standing behind the counter and keeping his hands to himself. I get that sometimes, my body recalling unwanted touches from buses and trains and dancefloors, when someone is annoying me in a way that isn’t physical. Perhaps it’s my body trying to motivate me to react belatedly and punch someone. I don’t do that, of course, because the corner-shop guy doesn’t deserve it. So I usually just do nothing. Which reminds me of a story I should tell about Saya, because Saya always does something, she doesn’t let things be. She puts her foot down even if that means trampling on something, and that doesn’t automatically make her more violent than other people.

I was just writing about New Year. The one six years ago, our last together. It was a special New Year’s Eve: everything was still lovely and exciting. Though I would say that about everything that happened more than three years ago, because three years is the cut-off point, after which things in the past become lovely and exciting, as long as they weren’t bad or boring. There were people I knew at this party, and people my flatmates knew, who I didn’t know so well. And there were two people I knew inside out: Saya and Hani. The three of us didn’t spend the hours leading up to midnight with one another; we were with various other people, laughing and drinking and flirting, oh yes, I was definitely flirting with the cute flatmate I had back then, and because he’d only just moved in, we hadn’t yet reached the point where you either have to sleep together or stop flirting. I didn’t yet know that at some point he would start always making his coffee when he heard I was in the kitchen, and that I would therefore stop laughing at his jokes and cocking

my head to one side when he was telling me something. But at New Year we were still excited by one another. In the way it always is with crushes and flatmates. They’re important as long as they’re current, and as soon as you move out, they disappear from your eyeline and your life. I even had to think for a while just now before I remembered his name, he was called Felix, the kind of name that people have when they were born in the eighties and everything is going brilliantly for them. Felix had a mate who was completely irrelevant, who was irrelevant even back then, but who knew nobody at the party except Felix, and somehow also me, because I’d made him a coffee once when he came to see Felix. And because he didn’t know anyone, he came and stood with us and disrupted our flirting, because the minute someone is watching you flirt, you start being ashamed of what you’re doing. It’s only exciting when you can kid yourself you aren’t flirting. The friend, then, let’s call him Gabriel because of his angelic curls, was standing beside us, making our flirting visible and not involving himself in the conversation. In short: he was being a nuisance.

At some point, when Hani just happened to be standing beside us, I gave him short shrift and introduced the two of them to one another. From then on, I observed their conversation from the corner of my eye. He asked where Hani was from, and Hani answered truthfully. He asked was she did, and Hani told him she worked in office management. He asked if that was what you might just as well call being a secretary, and embarked on a dubious historical survey of job titles, to which Hani eventually said something like “I do bookkeeping and administration, so there’s maths involved as well”. Hani stood there, carrying on the conversation because I had introduced her to Gabriel and of course she couldn’t know he was an insignificant person. She didn’t exactly look amused, but she stayed and chatted. Gabriel acted as if he couldn’t quite hear what she was saying, which might actually have been true – in any case, he leaned further and further in, inclining his beautiful head towards Hani’s mouth. This position is impossible to accomplish while keeping all the other parts of your body to yourself, so he placed one hand gently on Hani’s upper back as he asked her what kind of company it was she

worked for. Hani likes hands on her back and she likes curly-haired men, so now she had one more reason to stay and talk to Gabriel a while longer, besides the politeness she thought she owed to me. She explained the company where she had just begun working, using words that the company itself used for this purpose: it was about animal protection, but a kind of animal protection that orients itself by the rules of capitalism, uniting both, because that was the only way for animals to really thrive in the world we live in, everything else was meaningless. Gabriel had plenty to say on the subject, as if he'd spent days and weeks thinking about whether that was a meaningful concept. Hani actually had spent days and weeks thinking about it and had already come to the conclusion that it wasn't (though it did now provide her with a living and dominate her day-to-day life), and she didn't find his arguments interesting, relevant, or good. And at that point she stopped caring about the hand and the curls, and quickly asked: “So, what do you do?” I could see from her face that the future of the conversation depended on that question. When he replied, the positions they were standing in didn't change at first, though his reply did go on a bit, and because of the conversation I was having myself, I didn't understand what he did for a job. But the expression on Hani's face revealed that she neither had a clue about his work nor thought it sounded nice, and her posture gradually began to change. Her ear moved away from his inclined head and constantly talking mouth – which didn't do much good, because he followed it. When Hani took small steps away from him, his body followed hers, which worked pretty well, because his hand had a good purchase on Hani's back and it told him where she was going. “I'm popping out for a cigarette,” Hani said, an escape route I had often envied her. Smokers can always withdraw when a situation becomes uncomfortable, always make other people wait for them, always find new people to talk to with an instant topic of conversation: smoking, if need be. But then Gabriel said, “I was about to go for one as well,” inconveniently and much to Hani's surprise: he didn't look like a smoker, and she hadn't yet seen him out on the balcony. Later, on the roof, everyone would eventually start smoking, but this early in the evening the only people drawn outside were those who needed to

go. So they headed for the balcony, and as she turned around, his hand tried to move down and graze her lower back for a moment – but Hani seemed to have sensed this, and managed to prevent it by moving swiftly away towards the balcony.

I stayed behind with Felix (who at that point in time, as I said, I found thoroughly witty and interesting), feeling a bit guilty that I’d used Hani to get rid of Gabriel. But I also told myself that Hani was a grown-up and could walk away if he was annoying her, and that he wasn’t actually that annoying. He’d asked the usual, not very original questions, well so what, there were worse people to talk to, and he did also seem genuinely interested in Hani’s life. And so I chose to carry on talking to Felix about growing up in the countryside and village parties, instead of worrying about two adults who could communicate to one another at any time that they no longer wanted to communicate with one another. When I saw that Saya was heading for the balcony to fetch a cold beer, I thought no more about it.

It was three, maybe four minutes before Hani and Saya came back to us, laughing and a little perturbed, and I heard Saya saying, “I couldn’t stand that for another minute.” We didn’t see Gabriel again for the rest of the evening; after his departure, we opened the schnapps. It was a home-distilled one, from the countryside, where Felix grew up, made from his parents’ quinces, and my conversation with him went on until midnight, until everyone, as I said, was standing on the roof, looking out at the supposedly peaceful city. That evening, that New Year’s Eve, Saya had said or done something I didn’t dare ask about, but if for example she’d given Gabriel a smack in the face, I would definitely have heard about it sooner or later. On the other hand, I hadn’t seen Gabriel come back in from the balcony. I simply never saw him again, not that evening or any time afterwards, and when I mentioned his name several days later, everyone just looked embarrassed and changed the subject. I have imagined what happened so often that I’m now sure my version is true. My version goes like this: Saya stepped onto the balcony, bent down to the beer crate and, as she was doing so, overheard enough of Hani and Gabriel’s conversation to assess what was going on. She

opened her bottle on the railing and stayed in order to keep listening. She listened and the other two smoked and talked, which is to say, Hani was mostly smoking and Gabriel mostly talking, until he looked at Saya and asked if he could help her. At that, Saya put her beer down, gave him a friendly smile, grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him over the balcony railing. Gabriel spread his wings like an angel, activated his halo and flew off, not turning back to look at the uninterested, smoking Hani and the strong, not-smoking Saya. That’s what will have happened, because Saya always finds a way to protect her friends. Hani might be less solution-oriented than Saya, but she’s always fine. If Saya hadn’t stepped in, Hani would simply have spent the evening with Gabriel, and drunk until he was smart, prudent, discreet and ego-free. Then she would have solved the problem by not having a problem. This strategy has always somehow helped her party better than Saya and me. In the last few years, for instance, when we’ve been patted down outside clubs or festivals, Saya and I have regularly gone berserk with rage, while Hani just giggled. She honestly giggled because she liked the friendly female bouncers patting her down, it tickled, and so she was always on good terms with those people, who never heard a word of greeting, let alone thanks, from Saya and me. Hani walked into parties in a good mood, while we first had to vent our anger.

When Hani moved to the estate, we were just starting puberty. We read the copies of *BRAVO* that the other kids on the estate borrowed from their older brothers and sisters, and we read them outside so our parents wouldn’t catch us. Saya, two years older than me, always read the Dr Sommer pages, which I noticed, but without any real interest. At that time, it meant that Saya had an open, brightly-coloured magazine on her knees with pictures of naked teenagers, alright, let’s say young adults, in it. An editorial decision that eventually made *BRAVO* scandalous, and which they later reversed.

When we were starting puberty, the column was already much less scandalous, but it still hadn’t been cut from the magazine, and it made a valuable contribution to our sex education, which no one else thought to give

us. Sometimes we showed the pages to each other and laughed ourselves silly. There was one picture, for instance, that showed a young man who had sprayed dabs of whipped cream onto his girlfriend’s naked body, so that he could then kiss them off. We fell about. I can still hear Saya laughing to this day, “Look at this, he’s put cream everywhere!”, I can see our immature bodies doubled over with laughter. Hani stood beside us and giggled along, though always in a slightly more reserved way. At some point that changed, probably when she understood the language and no longer had to pretend she was one of us, but actually was one of us. Various languages wafted around in the back of Hani’s mind, languages that she would never use in Germany, and would never be recognised as a skill or a mark of quality here. Her curiosity and interest in learning from us what you had to learn in order not to stand out was written on her face. Not because she was all that hungry for knowledge, but because anything else would have caused problems. And problems were what she had left behind. Hani’s parents, her brother and she had escaped the war, a bloody, unrelenting, merciless war, and no one here praised or pitied them for it. People were just vaguely aware of them and hoped, because Hani’s family hadn’t come too far, that they would go back as soon as the war was over. I don’t know if Hani and her parents, a white-haired, moustachioed man and a young, cheerful woman with curly blonde hair, hoped that, too. They always looked as though the most important thing to them was to be here and safe. To smoke on the balcony in peace, to be able to enjoy the sun and be welcoming hosts to their children’s friends.

Hani watching us read *BRAVO* was somehow important. We felt more grown-up when she was there. Perhaps partly because her initial silence made us think she knew a lot more than we did and had no need of *BRAVO*.

By the time Hani arrived, we’d grown out of that phase when Saya’s imagination would run away with her and we’d believe everything she said. By “we” I mean a few other girls from the estate and me. It was always clear who was the ringleader, because Saya simply had the most talent for it, and life would have become deadly boring if anyone had challenged her for this

position. Saya told us stuff about the world and we believed her, because it made the world better.

The wrecked cars without any number plates that rusted away in the parking spaces outside our building were a good example of this. We didn’t care about them; we had no interest in cars and didn’t question how run down our neighbourhood was. Until Saya told us a heart-breaking story. An old man, Herr Zimmermann, had parked those cars there, she said, and then got very sick and had been in hospital for years. The poor old grandpa was going to be out soon, and he’d be very sad to come back and see the state his cars were in now. We needed to help the old man, Saya said; we had to clean the cars up for him. Only Saya could achieve such a thing: eventually getting five people together to start washing some wrecked old bangers. If someone had seen us and asked, we might have realised that Saya had made it all up. But because no one did and because Saya’s story sounded absolutely plausible, we did everything we could to spare Herr Zimmermann this sight. When Hani came and we were just old enough not to believe every bit of nonsense we heard, Saya could no longer permit herself such stories. Hani, the observer, would have exposed her without even saying a word. But I believe by that age, Saya had also completely lost interest in telling these stories. Otherwise we wouldn’t have been sitting outside the building with the magazines.

But now I’ve got the order of things mixed up. And just now I was on Tuesday, the Tuesday Saya got here, when everything was still fine.

Though that night, already, things weren’t fine. That’s something you can say later, in court. Or to Saya’s psychotherapist – that might be important, if you want to find out whether she’s cuckoo. We went to bed, Saya and me in my bed and Hani on a mattress on the floor. We’d all used the same toothbrush, which we thought was less disgusting than none of us brushing our teeth. There has actually never been a point in our lives when we thought one toothbrush between three people was acceptable, but what are you supposed to do when two out of three of you have forgotten your toothbrushes and

you've already got that stale aftertaste of beer. We got into bed, murmured our goodnights, and soon I could hear Hani's soft snoring which, in contrast to her loud laughter, sounded as if she were a little girl. You never hear Saya at night. You can't hear if she's awake, you can't hear if she's asleep. With other people, you can hear when their breathing gets deeper or more regular, but you can't hear Saya breathing at all, and then at some point she simply wakes up. I closed my eyes and opened them again at once, because my head was spinning. At the same time, I was so tired that my eyes kept wanting to close again. There was a whole drunken dilemma going on in my weak body, which had recently been given too much coffee and not enough love. I closed my eyes again very slowly and opened them again, closed and opened them. Again and again, so that my body would start to understand that it was just imagining the spinning and I was lying quite safely, quite undeniably in my bed. I tried to calm myself down, and quite honestly the easiest way to do that was to think about Lukas. That's uncomfortable for me – after all, I was the one who left him, even if I'm not quite sure whether the rest of the world sees it like that. But it's also uncomfortable because you are either single or you're not, there is no in-between state in which your mind is allowed to be dependent on someone else. It's annoying to still be a little bit dependent all the same, at least dependent to the extent that you find it easier to fall asleep at night when you think about the other person. But what the hell, I decided. The important thing is that I fall asleep as soon as possible, and anyway I hadn't mentioned his name once that evening. That was not just a success; that was proof. Even if I didn't know exactly what it proved. Though I had now kept my eyes shut for longer than my body could cope with, and to compensate I not only had to open them again, but get myself a bit more vertical to avoid everything coming back up. Propped on my forearms, I was now lying there and feeling ashamed that my two friends, who had drunk exactly the same amount as I had, seemed to be handling it better, and then suddenly there was a crack, which clearly came from Saya, a horrible impact noise that went right through me and could only be made by someone with a lot of strength – and I didn't know Saya was that strong – hurling their whole

body against the wall, as if trying to break it down with their own weight. I cried out, looked at her and couldn't believe her eyes were still closed and she was lying there on her back again as if nothing had happened. But the next moment, she reared up again. My heart was racing, and hers seemed to be filled with panic or anger, as she leaned back to hurl her body full force against the wall once more. I was frightened for her, and the next second I heard myself saying, “Saya, Saya,” at a normal conversation volume. It was Hani, not Saya, who replied, “Yes?” “Go back to sleep,” I said. That was meant for both her and Saya, and they both obeyed. But my heart wouldn't stop racing, and I spent a good half an hour looking at Saya in the half-light. It was only then that my eyes closed. At least the shock had sobered me up.

[END OF SAMPLE]