

TIMING

The school still smells of winter. Damp wool, old trainers, and the weariness that's congealed here over the years. Lola shoves her skateboard into the locker and turns the key. The muttering follows her through the changing room.

There she is. You know who.

A collective murmur sloshes in her wake, eyes crawl over her back. But when she turns round the whispering stops, everyone is looking elsewhere.

Her backpack is heavy; it tugged at her while she was on her skateboard, pulling her off balance. She's caught up on the material she missed and brought all her homework with her. She needed something to keep her busy, a reason to lock the door to her room, and she's hungry for knowledge.

Even though her feet are now back on solid ground, her body feels off-kilter – as if the tiled floor of the school has sunk slightly during her absence, but only on one side. There's a minute sensory irritant, a dizzying feeling that her next step might not keep her upright. Maybe it isn't the after-effect of wearing a heavy backpack while on wheels. Maybe the imbalance is inside her.

Lola looks round. She's early, as Lucius pawed her face at five thirty this morning in his usual rambunctiously affectionate way. She took Maxi to nursery, then headed off for her first day back at school. Sunny isn't here yet.

Lola pulls at the heavy library door. The librarian whirls round, her lips parted, ready to point out that the library doesn't open for another ten minutes, but then she sees that it's Lola and says nothing. Instead she walks round the table and sits down behind her desk, adjusts her glasses. Lola wordlessly puts down her backpack and takes out the books she's borrowed. Her choice of reading matter is guided by hashtags. Whenever there's a new trending term, an important buzzword splashed all over the

web, she reads up on it. Draws up a list. Takes it to the school library and asks Frau Berg to order the books for her. Which Frau Berg does, so she can claim that the library is modern, up to date, and able to keep pace with the internet.

‘Thanks,’ says Lola. The librarian takes the books in silence. Then she leans over to the pile on her right and picks out two titles. She doesn’t let go when Lola reaches for them, so the books linger in the air between them both, held by four hands.

‘I’m sorry about your mother,’ says Frau Berg, in the manner of a person saying words they’ve prepared in advance, but stumbling over them for that very reason.

Lola says nothing, tugs at the books. The librarian lets go.

‘You’re always so with it,’ she pronounces in a briskly cheerful tone as Lola inspects the covers. She’s been looking forward to Dr. Bitch Ray; she follows the rapper on Twitter and often doesn’t get what the problem is. And she hopes Melodie Michelberger will open her eyes even more to the beauty industry and the filters society places on women’s bodies.

‘Woke,’ Lola replies.

‘Sorry?’

‘I’m not “with it”. I’m woke.’

‘... as in wake?’ asks Frau Berg, struggling to make sense of the unfamiliar Anglicism.

‘Yes,’ says Lola as she tucks the books into her bag, ‘but it’s more than that. It means not being asleep, not putting up with injustice. It means we’re awake and on the alert.’

‘I remember a time when boys and girls only wanted me to order the latest Knickerbocker Gang books,’ says the librarian, placing her hands on the desk. ‘By

Thomas Brezina. They were such page-turners, apparently. I'm not sure the headmaster approved.'

'Headteacher,' Lola replies.

Frau Berg blinks at her.

'It's better to avoid gendered language,' says Lola as she shoulders her backpack. 'Women can be headteachers too. Besides, we shouldn't assume how people identify.'

Frau Berg looks so confused that Lola would be embarrassed for her, if she was still capable of feeling anything resembling embarrassment.

Sunny is waiting at their shared desk on the back row of the classroom. Lola slumps down into the chair beside her and Sunny briefly rests her head on Lola's shoulder. She smells of coconut and is wearing a purple sweater with silver stars.

'Hoods down,' barks Herr Specht, the English teacher, sweeping a watchful eye over the class. Oliver and Simon do as they're told, but Lola doesn't react. Herr Specht is about to repeat his command, to sharpen his tone, to threaten her with consequences, but then recognition scuttles over his face, just like with Frau Berg. It's fascinating. The way he purses his lips, looks down at the textbook. He's realised who Lola is. And what kind of story she has now.

'Wow,' Sunny whispers. Herr Specht is known for his dictatorial teaching style, but the last thing he needs is for the grieving schoolgirl to descend into hysterics first thing on a Monday morning. He turns away, and Lola leaves her hood up.

'Your first victory of the day,' Sunny murmurs, grinning.

'Huh?' says Lola.

'International Women's Day, anyone? The day of feminist struggle?' Sunny raises her eyebrows.

Only then does Lola twig. Today is the eighth of March.

Sunny takes Lola's right hand in both her own. Her hands are nice and warm.
Fox-den fingers. Safe and snug, like a burrow.

When Herr Specht instructs them to read an article from their English textbook about 'The Ten Most Annoying Types of Facebooker', Lola studies the backs of her classmates' heads. What did they get up to over the last few days, over the weekend? She examines Hanna's blonde curls immediately in front of her, Matteo's smooth brown hair off to one side. What were they doing during those moments when Lola watched her mother get up and cross the room, thought to herself, 'Good, she's letting in some fresh air,' then thought, 'Why is she going outside?', then stopped thinking altogether? Oliver scratches his ear, his head bent over his book; the girl beside him whispers something to him. What were they doing after the funeral while Lola was comforting her crying 18-month-old baby brother, who had found it all too much even though he didn't understand any of it? Lola can see necks and collars, necklaces and hair ties; there they all are, sitting and reading. Maybe some of them have got together, maybe some of them had sex. They'll all be talking about some Netflix series or other, some song, some meme that Lola doesn't know.

They've stopped sending her broken hearts.

After school they gather on the enclosed patch of paving just off
Akademiestrasse. Most of the students have set off home or to the bus stop, but a few of
them form a group around Lola. Moritz lights a cigarette, lets Emily take a drag.

'No demo today,' says Sunny.

'Lousy pandemic,' Emily replies.

'Is *anything* happening in town?' asks Lola.

'Don't think so. Nothing's allowed,' Maja answers.

Moritz flicks the cigarette away. There's something profound about him, as if he has a secret or ten. But he's dating Emily, so Lola keeps her eyes to herself.

'What have you all been up to?' she asks. 'Any good parties?'

The others say nothing, and then the silence suddenly feels uncomfortable.

'How are you doing anyway?' asks Maja, and they all look so unconcerned that only then does she realise how agog they all are.

Lola looks down at her skateboard, pushes it back and forth with her foot without standing on it. On the underside there's a skull gripping a rose between its teeth. The off-kilter feeling from inside the school has followed her outside. As if one of Lola's legs was suddenly shorter than the other.

'Meh,' she answers.

Her classmates wait, but she has nothing to add, so they don't ask any more questions. Lola knows that her fifth-storey flat is forty feet up because Mum often mentioned it. 'Don't leave the boys alone on the balcony,' she'd say. 'Make sure you always close the door,' she used to warn her, 'if Lucius falls over the side then it's game over, forty feet is just too high.' And yet they never even went on the balcony. It's tiny and pointless – a little square tacked on to the side of the building, about the size of a bath towel. What would they even do out there? But could she tell the others all that? Unthinkable.

'Shall we get some chips?' Sunny asks once the others have left. 'I've got cash.'

Lola nods, they get on their skateboards. Sunny rides up ahead, her long red hair flapping under the brim of her yellow hat, a few strands flying in the wind. It isn't far: past the football pitch and the sports centre, the ARGE cultural centre with its empty terrace and its empty concert hall, until they reach the back of the university. The modern light-grey and black building with its smooth edges, columns and lines is a

popular meeting point even after hours. The wide steps around it are a good place to sit and chill, and there's a small outdoor gym with pull-up bars and a climbing wall.

Skateboarders, bikers and rollerbladers can ride here and do tricks on the ramps, steps and angular walls. Some people have a go at parkour too. Lola doesn't exactly think it's beautiful, but for a city like Salzburg, with its candy-coloured Baroque architecture, its straight lines are a minor revolution.

There's no one around. Because of the crappy weather and because it's not really allowed. Lola doesn't know how many people can meet outdoors at the moment, she's lost track of the Covid rules. Only one thing is clear: it's striking how often the police do the rounds of places where kids meet to go skateboarding.

They dismount, carry their boards across the street and join the queue at the fast-food stand.

'It wasn't too bad at school today,' says Lola. Sunny nods.

'But how does it feel when you think about home?' she asks, and Lola thinks about it. The walnut of rage growls under the left side of her ribcage. She'd barely noticed it this morning – a vague ache that you stop paying attention to at a certain point. When she imagines going home to that cramped flat, being mobbed by her brothers, when she imagines that Mum won't be there in the kitchen or in the bathroom either, that she won't have cooked dinner and won't ask how her day was, the rage surges so hard through her bloodstream that she almost throws up.

'Actually, I'm not hungry,' she says.

Sunny casts a glance at the cone of chips being handed to the girl in front of her, then smiles at Lola.

'Me neither,' she replies with a shrug, and Lola feels such love for her right now, for her smile and the solidarity behind it, that the nausea eases slightly.

‘Let’s just ride around,’ she suggests, though they both know it’s too cold.

They toss their backpacks onto a bench under the portico and practise there for a while, where the ground is flat. It took them two months to learn how to ollie and they fell over so often in the process that it felt like part of the move: lift the board, fall down. But then Lola’s feet figured it out, and so did Sunny’s. Now they know how hard to stamp on the tail to get good pop, how to guide the board into the air without losing it, how to land on it without coming off balance. And with that knowledge came a new body awareness, a surer footing on the moving board. There’s a looseness in Lola’s knees that she didn’t have at the start, and she holds her shoulders back with pride.

Time and again she looks at the glass walls of the building, watches herself. The way she bends her knees and her bomber jacket puffs up in the wind. In the reflection she sees how her face almost disappears under her hood, how small and thin her hands look, as if they couldn’t hold on to anything. In the reflection she sees that that she’s still here.

Learning new tricks should be easy when you already know a few, but it isn’t. Sunny keeps trying and failing to manual, Lola keeps stumbling over simple kickturns. And so the afternoon goes by; the sky is grey, there’s a faint threat of snow in the air. Lola’s cheeks are cold, her fingers icy. Her phone shows three missed calls from Johannes and a few texts.

When are you coming home?

The ball of rage by her left lung throbs, radiating waves of pain. Maybe it’ll eat her up with elegant, pitiless slowness. The big, wide stone steps are empty. The access ramp down the middle isn’t too steep, but if you don’t brake you can build up quite a bit of speed. Lola stands on her skateboard and lets it roll, her stance loose. She imagines pitching forwards. Is it possible to land on your face without bracing yourself with your

forearms? She imagines falling over backwards. Is it possible to crack your head without throwing your hands back to catch yourself? The body is too quick, too smart, having learned to protect itself from thousands of falls. But would it still do that if it fell from a lethal height? Would it throw its forearms in front of its face, fully automatically? Would it use them to make a shield in front of its head? And if it did, why? For what?

Lola, you're done with school, aren't you? When will you be home?

The board gets faster, Lola hears Sunny calling to her, closes her eyes. Maybe this is how it feels. To be in motion. Submit to the speed. Feel the wind. Straighten up. Lose your imbalance. Have no intention of stopping in time.

Can you come home and look after the boys please? I've got some urgent work to finish.

The end is not what she expects. Lola doesn't fall off her board, doesn't slam into a tree. Two arms enfold her, lift her up, hold her firm.

'I've got you,' a voice murmurs in her ear, 'I've got you.'

A strange smell, a strange body. Lola opens her eyes.

'You OK?' a young woman asks. She lets go, but stays close. She must be two or three years older, maybe 17 or 18, still a girl and yet already a woman. She has rainbow-coloured hair and a nose ring.

Lola nods.

The girl looks like she wants to ask: Are you out of your mind? Like she's thinking: Don't you have eyes in your head? Lola hears Sunny sprinting up behind her.

'Look after yourself,' the girl says and walks off.

And as Lola watches her go, all she can think of is something that surprised her even more than her rescuer's embrace: that the muscles behind it were rock hard. That the rainbow girl is strong, properly strong.