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DIE EISTAUCHER / THE ICE DIVERS

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9 The Campsite

I am outside sweeping up the first leaves when I see him in the distance. The sunlight is dazzling on one side and I pause. The camping season is over, really. The only peculiar thing is that he is arriving so late. Yet there is still a sense of unease about him. That is something I have learned over time: first to locate the feeling in your body, to name it and then to figure out where it has come from. Now it happens automatically. After all, twenty years have passed since that time. Although I remember most often in September.

Sometimes I think that I am just imagining it all. That none of it really happened and Franziska Fellbaum is living happily with Peter somewhere. And Jakob has grown up. Not like our Jakob, who is still a child.

If a day ends with this thought I sleep peacefully with no nightmares at all. In the nights that follow the other days I hardly sleep, pulling Iga's longboard out from under the bed instead and riding it into the past. That is how you have to imagine it.

He stands in front of me with a little dictionary and stammers: 'Nocleg? Nie mam namiot.' Only now does he take off his rucksack. As though it would have been too risky before. What if I had sent him away immediately. Martin, he says, and offers me his hand. I say: Saša, and shake it. But we already know each other, I think.

The way he stands there and smiles. Leafing through his little dictionary. He is no older than me. Why doesn't he have a smartphone? Who doesn't have a smartphone in 2016? The rucksack and the shoes, both brand new. As though he had bought the things just for the purpose of coming up the hill to my campsite and showing them to me.

I say: 'The cabins are all vacant. Further up the hill. The last, most beautiful one is right in front of the forest.' Then I point north towards the cold. He nods. Anyone else would have said straightaway: You speak German? With no accent? Where are you from?

But he knows, I think, although then the doubts come. It's just my imagination. I can't know that. How would I know? I am mixing things up again.

Today we live in a nature reserve. In paradise. Iga and Jess and Jakob and me. Almost a family. If you like. Ras comes once a year. Then we are complete.

Even if I don't understand who Martin is yet and what he wants. At the sight of him all doubts vanish and I can say with certainty that nothing of what happened twenty years ago is a product of my imagination. None of it can be changed anymore. Despite the longboard, despite our good will.

'Excuse me', he says, and I realise that I have been brooding again. That is not good. I must pull myself together, if only because of the danger that my suspicions might be right. So, I go into the house and fetch the key. A glance at my smartphone. Three messages from Iga.

We head for the last cabin. That is where the forest starts, a wilderness with bears and wolves that flee from the tourists during the summer. They will soon come closer again. Iga thinks it is predictable. A question of probability. Even though she wanted to stop constantly scrutinising everything. There are some things a person can't defend themselves from.

The leaves on the trees glint in the sunlight. Martin follows me without raising any objections.

'I'll take it,' he says straightaway. 'How much?'

'Ten Euros a night.' He nods and reaches for the wallet in his trouser pocket.

'And food?' He points to my house.

'Yes', I say. 'There's food in the evenings. If you let me know in advance. You are the only guest at the moment.' I pocket the money. Then I turn around and go.

I am terribly hot, T-shirt and flannel shirt wet through. His gaze at my back tears my skin open and exposes the nerves. I have learned to love this life and no longer want to give it up. Who would have thought it? Twenty years ago, I had a very different opinion. The campsite on the hill, surrounded by little mountains. Like a fortress. The deer that comes every morning, and the wolves in winter. The autumn, when the wolves teach their cubs how to hunt and Iga and I watch them from our hide. Iga especially loves the wolves. Since Jakob was ten, he has been allowed to come too. The female wolf now lets us come within five metres of the cubs before she raises her hackles and bares her teeth. She has got used to us. She has learned that we are not a threat to her.

In my room I notice that my hands are shaking as though I have been digging in the garden all day. I have to sit down and think. What if I am wrong?

Saša, I reproach myself. Don't be afraid.

I couldn't protect my parents. They were swept off the road by a force of one hundred kilometres an hour and forty tons.

Afterwards I only had Iga. With her I wanted to leave no stone unturned. Watchful and full of kindness, I still haven't taken my eyes off her. Watchful and full of kindness.

It is dark outside when I hear him knocking. It can't be anyone else, and I remember that I offered him food. I see that two hours have passed. Two hours that have disappeared into a black hole. The steady brightness of the lightbulb hurts my eyes and my head. I tap my knuckles against my forehead repeatedly.

'Sorry. I didn't want to disturb you. It's just...'

'You are hungry.' He smiles. He is terribly nice.

'Come in. No, come on.'

I run my hands over my face and rub my eyes. He does not look like a criminal. The rucksack, the shoes. Expensive material. Why not a hotel or a guesthouse? Why my campsite? There are rooms for rent in the village.

'Pierogi Ruskje', I say. 'Boiled or fried?'

'What do you recommend?'

'Fried.'

'Then fried.' He turns away from the bar and scans the room, without judging. He just takes it all in. This has a calming effect.

I fetch the dumplings from the freezer and put them directly into the pan overflowing with melted butter. You're not supposed to do that. They will end up tasting deep fried rather than sautéed, but I'm not bothered. I suddenly decide that he should not make himself too comfortable. I put two spoonfuls of sour cream on the plate. I leave the parsley.

He has sat down at a table in the middle of the room. Any one of us would have chosen a place where it was possible to press our backs to the wall.

I put the plate in front of him, lay a fork next to it and sit down with him. 'Would you rather be alone?' He doesn't want that, of course. I reach into my breast pocket for a cigarette and look at him enquiringly.

'Go ahead', he says, dipping half a dumpling in sour cream in the most natural way. He has been here before. Not at the campsite, but in the village. I remember having seen him at a bus stop.

'Do you come here often?'

He looks up, wipes his mouth with his serviette, swallows the chewed dumpling.

'Last year. I stayed in the guesthouse. That's where your campsite was recommended to me, because of the view and the animals. And it is true. It is very beautiful here where you are.'

'Yes', I say and notice a thick scar on his neck.

'Work accident', he replies quickly.

'What work do you do?'

'Police.' He says it just like that. I forget to blow the smoke past him. He coughs.

'Excuse me.' He shakes his head.

'Is your job very dangerous?'

He laughs.

'Sometimes.'

I laugh too.

'And you? Is the season nearly over?'

'Yes, yes. I don't really expect anyone else to come now.'

'And the rest of the year?'

'The income covers the rest of the year.'

That is a lie. In winter I do tours. But I want to see whether he blinks at my lie, whether he notices it. I would like to be able to assess how good he is. And in fact, he does falter briefly, cuts the dumpling with his fork and just says: 'It is a beautiful life that you have here. No one can tell you what to do here. And there's still nature, the sun.' We both laugh, as though he had made a joke. Afterwards he devotes himself entirely to his food. As though he was on his own now after all. I stub the cigarette out and go back into the kitchen, reach for my smartphone, and message Iga: We have to meet up. Today.

1 *Everything*

Iga lets her longboard slide onto the floor so that it rolls a few metres ahead and she can jump on as if by chance. It was her first day at her new school, the first day of the new school year. She moved off the pavement onto the road, alongside a line of cars. Someone honked their horn. The late summer air tingled against her bare forearms. The asphalt was rougher than the pavement but the road sloped slightly, so that she only had to stand on the board and let herself be pulled by the slope. The sunlight tickled her face. She rubbed her eyes. Children with huge school bags staggered along next to one another. Some were holding a parent's hand and were being dragged along like little dogs on their leads, others held hands with each other. The older ones leant against road signs or smoked in small groups hidden behind advertisement boards. Others carried schoolbooks open in front of them. At every stop there were one or two who the others stayed away from. The others avoided them without it being something they had to talk about. Adults with briefcases crowded in between the students, heading frantically yet resolutely towards their car parking spaces, holding their keys in their hands like pistols. There was a faint musty smell in the air that announced autumn. The traffic was drowned out by calls, greetings and insults.

The clock Iga passed already said half past seven. She jumped off, deciding to take the tram the rest of the way, and stashed the board between the straps of her rucksack and the back of the bag. Her third school in two years. Another new class, with around twenty new classmates. The teachers too. Three more years, 1,095 days, 26,280 hours. Her gaze moved to the ground and alighted on a yellow flower that had pushed itself up to the sunlight through a crack in the concrete. Iga bent down. She stroked the silky petals carefully. The temptation to pick the flower was huge. Everything was possible and everything passed. She stood up and ran to the tram. This time she would do it better – stand out less, be there more, keep her mouth shut more. Then everyone would be happy with her. Then her father would have one less thing to worry about. She looked up to the sky. Clouds were flying south like migratory birds. The doors shut behind her and the tram moved away. How would it be, her new class? And the teachers? Would they like Iga? Would she get her own bench, or share one with a boy?

She skated the last bit to the school, past the latecomers and the chronically late. Gusts of wind chased the first leaves across the road. The concrete was smooth under the board. As though she was gliding on ice. As if the world had no resistance.

The principal stood at the entrance to the school building and tapped on his watch with his index finger when he saw her. 'Quick, quick', he called, and smiled. She jumped off, grabbed the longboard by its axle and sped up.

'This year we are welcoming two new students. So, let's go round quickly with our names.' A murmur went through the rows of the square classroom which, due to its meagre north-facing windows, already needed the neon ceiling lights on in September. Iga had arrived last and now sat alone on what was probably the least popular bench, on the right, directly next to the door.

The form teacher, Professor Hochleithner, cleared his throat and adjusted his jacket. He nodded to the boy in the front row. 'Sebastian', he answered, and Hochleithner nodded again. The names rushed past Iga, until a 'Ras' emitted between stomach and larynx made her sit up and take notice. He seemed to be new as well.

'What sort of a name is that?', came from the row behind her, mixed with a kissing sound. 'Jessica! Please!', warned Hochleithner, before being corrected by an abrupt 'Jess!'. Iga turned around, astonished, and saw bright red full lips, chewing on a lollipop stick. 'Jess', Hochleithner repeated, almost submissively and added: 'Make that lollipop disappear, please.' But Jess didn't even seem to consider parting with the lolly. A thick brown fringe, two pigtails, a white T-shirt with a wide neckline from which an angular, tanned shoulder protruded on the right, several thin leather cords around her neck. Hochleithner ignored her, even though he was visibly irritated. He wasn't used to being contradicted. Still, he let it go and turned back to Ras. 'Ras-pu-tin', he read- slowly. 'That's your name?'

'Yes. But everyone calls me Ras', said a fat boy with freckles and ginger curls, staring at the table.

'Is that a Russian name?', Hochleithner persisted. Such a stupid question, Iga thought. 'What else could it be?', she said, noticing that she had spoken her thought aloud. Everyone laughed. The fat boy's gaze met hers. He had a pained expression, as Ras had now taken on a prominent place in the mind of the maths teacher. Iga plucked at her eyebrows. At least she was good at maths.

'And you are who?', Hochleithner asked, in the tone of voice that adults use when their question contains a threat and a promise.

'Iga Sulkowska', she answered quietly.