

FRANZISKA GÄNSLER

ETERNALLY SUMMER

Translated by Alexandra Roesch

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The woman and the child arrived on a Tuesday. I hadn't had any new guests arrive for weeks. Because of the ongoing volatile situation, the trade fairs had been cancelled or postponed, and there didn't seem to be any other reasons to come to our area.

Although it was October now, the heat of the past days had stoked the fires once more. In the garden you could hear the helicopters as they circled above the forest, as well as the police announcements every two hours as they travelled between the surrounding villages: *Stay in your houses, wear a protective mask, keep your windows and doors closed. Stay in your houses, wear a protective mask, keep your windows and doors closed.* They grew louder and quieter, came and went.

I had been sunbathing, and was standing in the cool entrance hall in my dressing gown. 'Do you have a room available?'

It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and for me to make the two of them out. In front of me stood a woman and a little girl; I guessed she must be three or four. The woman was around my age, mid-, maybe late thirties. She was wearing a light-coloured dress, had a small wheelie case next to her, was holding the child with her right hand, a handbag over her shoulder. I noticed that neither she nor the child were wearing a mask, but perhaps they had been waiting for me for a while already and had put them away. Their legs and shoes were dusty and grey; they brought the smell of the forest with them, the smell of burnt leaves and smoke.

I walked ahead through the small dining room, through the terrace doors to the garden. A low wooden bridge, in the style of a Japanese veranda, led from the terrace to the rooms. In the middle was a pond, next to it a small sycamore tree, whose leaves shone red. A young grey cat slunk through the coarse reed grass, stopped, stared at us.

I knew that the garden was a surprise to most guests. It didn't fit with the rest of the hotel, to the dark entrance hall, the dining room with the wooden furniture and the dark green curtains, nor with the name, which unimaginatively was the name of the village: Hotel Bad Heim. My grandfather had planted the garden in this style, during a summer that my mother and I had spent here. Me, in between grades one and two, and my mother, who loved everything to do with Japan. Fortunately, it suited the current time because, apart from the pond, it hardly needed any water.

The sky pressed down from the forest. When we crossed the bridge, I noticed that the woman had stopped behind me. I followed her gaze to the brown towers of smoke above the fire, behind the river, where the forest consisted almost exclusively of pine trees. I wondered whether she had not known about the fires, whether the two of them had landed here by chance. For someone who was not used to it, who had not expected it, the sight must appear quite

threatening. So I said: 'Don't worry, it's just a line of shrubs. And there is the river in between. The fire will stay on the other side.'

I unlocked the last door in the row, room five. The afternoon sun fanned through the closed shutters across the bed and the carpet.

The child had stayed in the garden and was watching the cat. The woman looked around, put her suitcase down near the door. I asked if I should open the shutters. The room was the only one that had a second window; it looked out on the field behind the house, toward the forest. The woman smiled at me.

I placed the key on a small table. 'You can eat here, the restaurants in the village are closed.' I realised I had forgotten to take her details. 'I need your name,' I said, 'and your passports, please.'

She nodded, smiled once more. 'Can I bring them later? I am not sure where they are just now. Our name is Ansel, Dorota and Ilya.'

She spelled the names, I told her mine and added that she should let me know if she needed anything. Then I took my leave. When I turned back towards her once more in the doorway, she had sat down on the bed and pulled off her shoes. The friendly smile had left her face. Instead there was a tension around her eyes, as if her thoughts had wandered off, not expecting me to look around again.

I didn't see the two of them for the rest of the day. I smoked, sunbathed, listened to music. Towards the evening, I made myself a plate of tinned sardines and tomatoes. I thought about making something for the woman and the child, but decided to wait. If they needed something, I had enough for a simple meal, frozen fish, potatoes, bread, cheese, eggs, as well as several cans.

I listened to the news in the dining room. The unusual heat was set to continue, no rain in sight. I had opened the main door and the sliding door that led to the garden, and a warm wind drifted through the house. The never-ending summer brought a strange restlessness with it, a helplessness, that I tried to ignore most of the time. It had to grow cooler at some point, clouds would form, it would rain. Autumn would come. A belief in an old normality that was postponed anew by the meteorologists every day. Restlessly, we watched the temperature curve, the red line and the blue line, that showed day and night and remained constantly high, steadily parallel. Each day the hope of a drop, of cooler nights, of air masses of different temperatures that could collide above the forest. Each day the hope of clouds, of rain. Each day the *still not*. Each day the *it has to break at some point, it will break*. Waiting.

The perpetual summer intensified not only my fear of fires, but also my mental uncertainty. I had got used to the fires in July and August, but now we had been waiting since mid-September for the earth to grow damp and the air to clear.

I took my usual path through the garden, fed the fish, chased the cats away, picked up the first leaves that had fallen onto the surface of the water. I could barely smell the fire on this evening, the wind came from the village. It would stop burning soon. Only a few more days.

From one of the sunbeds I looked up at the pink-tinged sky, waited for it to grow dark, until only the glow of the forest remained, far beyond the river. I lit a cigarette and walked slowly across the gravel to the fence behind which the brown lawn stretched towards the edge of the forest. I looked towards the room that the woman and the child had taken. They hadn't left it since they arrived, and now it was dark there, behind the shutters, dark and quiet. The

television was not on, and no-one was talking. I realised I hadn't asked the woman how long they were planning on staying. Probably one night, I thought.

The mother must have a reason for staying here with the child, what with everything being so restricted by the current measures, the air quality being particularly bad. They were probably passing through, had had to change trains here, had got stranded. I imagined a track that had not been able to withstand the heat. Air conditioning out of order and unacceptable temperatures in the carriages.

I returned to my sunbed, picked up the bunch of keys and left the hotel through the main entrance. There was a pram, a folded buggy in the lobby that I hadn't noticed before.

The streets were empty. I walked slowly through the village. Past the windows covered in silver foil, the playground that was closed in summer to reduce the amount of time children spent outdoors. A group of youths were perched on a climbing frame. They were smoking and had their heads together, their faces reflected in the light of their mobile phones, bright islands in the darkness. I heard them laugh. One of them moved, gripped the top bar and slowly pulled himself up. His grey back, his grey shoulders, it looked easy, this up and down, as if it required barely any strength.

I stopped for a moment at the crossroads and listened to the voices, the laughter, the bass, the fabric created by sounds that were more real than those that came from the phones. The traffic lights were still redundant, a train passed through the empty station. Signs on the lampposts warned of the fire, of the air, illustrated the correct way to behave. Line drawings of heads wearing smoke masks, children and old people alongside a thermometer, emergency numbers, a map on which the assembly point for possible evacuations was marked.

The regulations for leaving the house had been in place since mid-April. The situation changed on a daily basis according to the direction of the wind, the success of the firefighting operations, the weather. The wind often carried the smoke into the village. Old people and children stayed indoors, behind windows, looking at screens that showed the surrounding area. Everyone observed the fluctuations of red, orange and yellow areas that showed how high the levels of sulphur compound in the air were.

Bad Heim. Low houses, paved front gardens and empty street. Signposts that pointed to places that no longer existed, the health spa, the casino, the vineyards. Hoardings. Behind them municipal buildings that marked a white horizon like mountains, balconies over balconies, privacy separated by walls of frosted glass. Cat trees, bird houses, plastic furniture with fixed plastic tablecloths, drying racks, stationary bikes. The empty bunker of the Grand Hotel, the incomplete lettering that rose into the sky on the façade, the old curtains. Many houses still bore the old signs that showed they had once been boarding houses, green signs that promised ever-vacant rooms, relaxation and good air.

I walked past the station, across the tracks, along the tarmacked path. After the last lamppost came the meadow on the right. From here you could see my hotel on the edge of the village, the only one that still existed in Bad Heim. The window of room five was black against the outside wall. I saw that the woman had opened the shutters after all.

My little world lay in the bright circle of the outdoor lamp. Three sunbeds, a small table. On it, my loudspeaker, my ashtray.

I walked across the meadow towards the gap in the fence and entered the garden. When I was already quite close to the building, I noticed a small, pale shape behind the window. It was only when it moved that I realised what I was looking at. The sole of a foot was being pressed

against the window by someone sitting in the dark. A shock ran through me. I had thought that the woman and the child were sleeping, but it seemed as if the mother was sitting at the window, in the dark, her gaze going out towards the forest. She would see me coming. I quickly went past and made sure I didn't turn in her direction, as if I were elsewhere with my thoughts. And yet the image of the foot stayed in my mind as a disconcerting memory, the pale toes, the ball of the foot, pressing against the glass, as if trying to extend the room.

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Ash covered the fields the next morning; soft grey flakes twirled in the corners of the garden, lay on the water. The sky was brown, low clouds of smoke piled up from the forest, the wind had turned again during the night. It was still warm, too warm, and it brought a bitter smell with it. I thought of the relief firefighters, of their shouts among the tree trunks, the quick commands, boots that burst across the forest floor.

The girl, Ilya, was sitting alone in the garden when I came out of my room.

'You are up early.' I smiled at her, but she just looked at me and then returned to her game. She was digging around in the gravel with a little stick, mixing ash with stone and burnt leaves. I thought of the recommendation not to let children play outside for long, of the closed playground, swimming pools and parks, but I didn't feel comfortable getting involved in their situation. For years now, I had only had individual guests staying with me who appreciated being left alone. Families did not travel to fire areas, and I barely had any experience of children any way. The few acquaintances who had had children had moved away. Paula, Helene. I briefly considered phoning Babs, my neighbour, to ask if there was anything I should be doing, but the girl seemed content, engrossed in her game. There didn't seem any to disturb her, to explain anything.

As I did every morning, I examined the sycamore tree, checked the red leaves for holes, for small grey blisters, for heat damage, dryness, smoke, but there was nothing to be seen. Again, I thought about the fact that the girl was in the garden and checked the app, examined the data for the day. The concentration was not concerning, Bad Heim and everything south of the river was marked in light yellow. I decided that the current precautionary measures applied to long-term stays, for children whose daily lives took place in wider fire areas. This one morning surely wouldn't do any harm.

In passing I told her that I would make breakfast, but she didn't react. I put on some coffee in the kitchen, heated up some milk, placed toast, jam and butter packets on two plates, placed everything on a table by the window, fetched the high chair from the boxroom. I didn't have any fresh fruit, so I filled a large glass bowl with some tinned fruit. Yellow, white and orange chunks, bright red cherries, in viscous juice. Through the opaque glass I could see that the girl was still alone in the garden. The mother's door was slightly ajar, something I hadn't noticed before. She was probably packing everything up, showering, making the bed. I thought of the ash that was entering the room through the gap in the door. Of the grey fluff in the carpet fibres, in the sheets and towels. I thought of how I would run the Hoover across the floor later, how it would leave a pale trail.

I drank my coffee at the back door of the kitchen, smoked a cigarette, ate the rest of a packaged yeast bun. Here, near the rubbish bins, the cats slunk around, pushed their thin bodies through the gaps in the fence. Came and went, came and went.

When I stepped back into the garden, it was almost nine. The girl was sitting by the edge of the pond, the red mouths of fish popped up through the water, snatched at the ash as if it were food, disappeared again. The water level was too low, but since the water usage had been limited, I could only refill the pond once a week.

I sat down on a sunbed near the child. I wondered if she were hungry or thirsty, whether I should ask her again, offer her some breakfast outside, but she seemed lost in thought. After a while, I got up, fetched a broom, brushed my way stroke by stroke across the veranda, towards the door with the number five. The room behind it seemed completely still. When I reached the end of the veranda, I carefully swept along the edge of the house. I could only see a few centimetres of the room through the gap in the door. A strip of carpet, the edge of the bed, and on it, immobile, the back of the mother's knees, light, folded above one another, bent legs. Her back must be turned towards the door, her body uncovered on the bed, curled up like a small child.

Ash was lighter than normal dust. It immediately clung to everything, and if you brushed it off, it returned immediately. I swept back the same way. A glimmering leaf sank down slowly in front of me, onto the wooden balustrade. Its original curved form was still intact, but all that remained between the black veins were white, smouldering structures. I leant the broom against the side of the house, carefully placed the leaf on my hand, protected it from the wind and carried it over to the child.

'Have you ever seen anything like this?' I carefully opened my hands as I crouched down. The child looked curiously into the hollow that my fingers formed, cautiously came closer. For a moment the leaf sat there like a butterfly, then the wind carried it away. It disintegrated just above our faces, dispersed.

'Ilya!' The mother was standing in the doorway. She was wearing a white dress, her hair gathered at the nape of her neck. 'I am sorry,' she said to me, then, to her daughter: 'Ilya, come here, leave Mrs Lehmann to do her work in peace.'

I stood up, smiled. 'It's no bother.' I noticed that she was wearing the same shoes as when she arrived; the straps were still grey and dusty. The woman looked tired, exhausted, as if she had barely slept.

The girl between us continued to look up into the sky, still searching for the dissolved leaf.

'Would you like some breakfast, Mrs Ansel?' I asked. 'A coffee?'

Her reaction was slightly delayed, it took a moment for the question to penetrate her thoughts. Then she smiled at me, nodded and pulled the door closed behind her. Her heels clicked quickly in time with her steps on the wood.

When the two had sat down, I closed the terrace door behind us. The mother smoked and looked outside, towards the forest. There was a nervous energy about her. Her toes and the corners of her mouth seemed to be under constant tension, needed to be moved. She scraped her index finger over her thumbnail, reached into space, rotated her wrists. She barely spoke to the little girl, but smiled at me every time I approached her table to bring or take something away. There was a certain reserve on the edge of this smile that made it clear that this was a gesture of politeness, of good manners, not a desire to make contact. I recognised a similarity with my mother in this tension, even if the woman didn't have much else in common with her. Her eyes were an unusual colour, between grey and green, she was tall and slim, her face had clear contours. Her parting, her eyebrows, her cheekbones, the jaw, the line of her lips. She was unusually beautiful, but there was a defensiveness in her beauty, in her avoiding gaze, in the

way she moved, as if she didn't want others to look at her. My mother had been soft, a shape that seemed to blur into her surroundings, always hungry for attention, affection, approval.

'Can I make up your room?' I asked the woman when everything was in place.

'Thank you, that won't be necessary.'

I wiped the nearby tables, the backs of the chairs. Ash everywhere. 'Do you know how long you'll be staying?'

She took a drag of her cigarette. 'Not exactly,' she said. 'Is that all right?'

I told her that the hotel was empty because of the fires anyway, then followed her gaze across the garden, the meadow, to the edge of the forest.

'You really don't need to worry,' I assured her once more and smiled at the child. 'The fires stay low on the ground. It's just the air that's a problem here, you know, when the wind comes from the forest.' I showed her the cloth that was grey with ash. 'It's been too hot for too long, the forest is too dry.' I shrugged my shoulders. It was something that was often said; that I had often said, often heard. I remembered that I was obliged to tell travellers about the current situation, about the correct behaviour, about the safety measures. 'Do you have a mask? You need that if you go outside for any length of time.' I fetched a flyer and two new sealed masks from reception. One for adults, one for children. 'Here are all the details. The summer was bad, but things will quieten down when autumn comes now. When it rains.'

She nodded, thanked me, took the items that I held out to her. She seemed to skim over the information, then placed the flyer and the masks on the table in front of her and pushed aside her plate, which she hadn't touched. Her phone lay next to her coffee cup, she picked it up, put it back down again, picked it up once more. When it lit up, I saw that someone was trying to call her. The woman turned the display down towards the table.

When the child had had enough and drunk her cup of milk, she was allowed to get down and return to the garden. The mother stayed at the table. Smoke immediately came through the open door.

We watched her daughter return to the pond, bend down, run her fingertips through the skin of ash that lay on the water.

'Ilya thinks the ash is snow,' the woman said with a short laugh. I saw her face reflected in the window. She was not smiling. Her cigarette lit up, she inhaled, then she exhaled the smoke between herself and the glass. I noticed once more how restless she was, she couldn't keep her hands still. A small gold bracelet on her left arm cast reflections of light on the wall when she moved.

I tried to remember when we had last had snow. It must be five, six years ago, a whole childhood without snow. The woman stubbed out her cigarette, picked up the flyer, the masks and the mobile phone and got up. While I cleared the table, I watched her sit down on one of the sunbeds outside. Ilya was blowing at the ash, I saw her laugh, saw how the small flakes dispersed in front of her mouth.

In the days that followed, a routine set in, in which I didn't see much of the two of them. I slept badly, coughed at night and sweated; I was often tired during the day. I woke up early, always in the hope that the meteorologists had been wrong, that the night had brought a break in the weather, but the heat remained.

Sometimes Babs came to the fence. She was sweating and was thrilled that someone new had come to the village, especially someone with a child. Who were they? Where did they come from and why did I not have any details? She laughed and slapped me on the shoulder.

We stood in the morning sun, between the garden and the forest. The fires, the weather, unchanged. Then Babs went back, along the path through the coarse grass.

I checked the state of my tree, made breakfast. When the wind came from the village, I opened the doors and windows and let it into the house. Then I sat in the garden with my coffee, smoked and read, until Ilya came outside at some point. She played alone, watched the fish, pushed pebbles around. Sometimes she carried a plastic toy or a doll around with her. I had placed some old toys outside, buckets and spades, a small rake. Things that I myself had played with as a child. I was happy to see the items being used, and to see Ilya use them. She dug holes and shovelled gravel, and in her conversations with herself, I heard her play out various scenarios.

I noticed that she watched me when I began doing the jobs that needed to be done in the hotel each day. Although we barely spoke to one another, I liked the feeling of not being alone anymore. With Ilya behind me, I swept the veranda, wiped the ash off the chairs, tables and sunbeds. The past pushed its way over the present in these moments. I remembered myself standing in the garden, of my own gaze at the bent shape of my aunt, her concentrated face above loops of water and foam. The stones beneath my feet and my mother alongside me, her white, soft arms in the sun.