

ORCA

by Franziska Gäsler

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I am prepared now

to force

clarity upon you.

Louise Glück

I'm at work when Olympia is arrested. Eight hours in the supermarket, no windows, phone in my locker. I measure time by how often the store radio plays "Walking on Sunshine"—a dependable method, because the program repeats every forty minutes. It was designed for the time span of an average grocery run, not for shift work. The only news permeating this steady and unchanging flow of hits are the latest promos. *Fifty grams free, this week only, new in the cooler.* If you want to know more, you have to study people's buying behavior and the remarks they come out with at a similarly dependable rate. Tax rises, extreme weather, avian flu. It's all channeled through humor. Whenever there's a rise in infection, customers who never usually buy chicken and turkey make special requests for it. They ask whether we'll be personally liable if they get sick. Whether we'll come nurse them. Their questions ensure we know who we're dealing with: These people have heard of the risks, but they're not your average citizens. Images of state-imposed livestock culls don't trigger concern in them; they whet their appetite. I laugh with them—it's all the same to me. I always laugh when a customer makes a joke, no matter what it's about.

No one mentions Olympia's arrest that day; they only ask about the security firm that's been doing bag checks at the entrance for a few months—so-called "safechecks." Some complain, others think it's good, but everyone sees the bag checks as a sign of the world's decline. They're a reminder of before, of a time when such measures were unnecessary. People's reasoning tells them that the mere fact of the checks is proof that danger been averted. They don't realize there's no

connection. The safechecks mean neither more safety, nor more danger, only more control. But I don't argue with the customers who come to the meat counter. I keep the statistics about power in the public sphere and the efficacy of surveillance measures to myself. Nor do I tell my customers that in the DIY department alone, the supermarket stocks more than twenty products that could be used to threaten people: pen knives, folding saws, an all-purpose ax. That the bag checks are powerless against such products. That anyone serious enough, anyone determined enough, will always find a way. All these things I keep to myself. I react appropriately. I act nice so my customers are left feeling satisfied. I smile. I talk in a high voice with an upward lilt at the end of each sentence. I throw in a smattering of dialect here and there; that always goes down well. It's right for the meat counter. *I'm* right for the meat counter—and a little more so with every shift.

I stand here in a white coat in the white light, glad that people don't look me in the face—that even those who ought to don't recognize me, that the focus is on my hands stacking salami slices and the gram count on the scales. I'm grateful if I cut too much of something and a customer says it's fine if it's a bit over. I'm happy when I get the weight right first time. One cut—a hundred grams of liverwurst. One scoop—250 grams of ground pork. A small triumph every time. I'm also happy when I get a row of identical numbers. I've taught Bennet to call these sequences "angel numbers" and explained the philosophy behind them: Each one is a message from the universe that can be deciphered with Google. With our vinyl-gloved fingers, we

draw each other's attention to a lump of forcemeat weighing in at 333 grams or a stack of ham that tips the scales at 222 grams. We know what these numbers mean.

333—a message of luck or change in your career, success, ambition, or focus.

222—a powerful message that your life is being created with divine assistance.

That's the great thing about the meat counter. Me and Bennet don't talk about sausage; we talk about our lives. For hours at a time, we stand here in the artificial light between the tiled wall, the meat cutters, and the display, getting excited about angel numbers.

It's already dusk when I leave the store by the back exit and see that it's rained during my shift. I toss the meat waste into the dumpster, glad the air's cooled and that everything stinks less. The puddles are rimmed with yellow pollen, the shiny roads streaked with grime.

When I pull my phone from my pocket, the display says twenty–twenty. A time like that feels good, too—like a positive omen. There's a message from my mom, left at six, asking me to bring a loaf of bread, and three unanswered calls. She always forgets I can't check my phone at work, but it's too late now; the tills are closed. I head for home, opening my newsfeed as I walk. The breaking news is right at the top, highlighted in yellow: *Olympia Mitterwald—Suspected CEO Murderer Arrested in Berlin.*

I zoom into the fuzzy photo, the screen suddenly wet beneath my fingers. I see clothes I'm not familiar with; I see Olympia's long hair. Her face is a blur. *Terror Teen Finally Hunted Down.*

Most media use the image that has so far been her main wanted photo: Olympia at eighteen with a high braid and long, thick lashes. The picture was taken when she started at Alpha Secure; it shows her unsmiling and tough-looking—much tougher than she ever was.

The information is constantly updated, or that's the claim. I've come to a standstill in the middle of the sidewalk. People push past me. I cradle my phone in my hand like something alive, something with a pulse.

I need facts—as many as I can get—but all I can find are the meager details of Olympia's arrest and rehashed versions of things I already know. Like a cut that takes time to fill with blood, I take a while to process the information.

Olympia is back. It dawns on me that although I haven't heard from her since that night, I've been waiting for her to reappear ever since.

I've been waiting, although with every day that's passed it has seemed more and more likely that she'll remain gone forever. That none of that will ever surface in my life again. That it will stay submerged, buried inside me, until eventually I forget all about it, all about her—until there's nothing left but me and this life that is now mine.

The meat counter by day, silence by night.

OLYMPIA

The day I met Olympia, there was a dying rabbit between the supermarket parking lot and the empty office building, in the channel of coarse grass along the glass façade.

For weeks, things had been at a standstill, trapped under a bell jar of heat and pandemic. I'd spent most of lockdown following a regime of self-renewal, aiming to look like my parents suddenly had more money. I worked on pore-free skin, white teeth, and sculpted arms; I chased the glow that comes with significant wealth. Svea Bleibinger was on my mind a lot, and I had fantasies of shaking up the hierarchy with my metamorphosis when school started up again.

My weeks were filled with routines: skincare, haircare, sport, teeth-whitening strips, manicure, pedicure. I'd built up a pretty good knowledge of bodyweight training, proteins, vitamins, niacinamides, azelaic acids, UVA and UVB radiation, and on Reddit I'd come across something that took up all my evenings—the hunt for flawlessly faked luxury articles, aka mirror replicas. I chatted to people who were listed as trusted sellers on the rep forum and had direct contacts with pirate factories in Qingdao and Tianjin. I asked about prices, shipping costs and PSPs, pre-shipment photos. I knew which factories were known for which brands, could tell from a photo whether the seam of an Hermès Kelly was machine or hand-stitched, and knew which Chanel models were supposed to be marked “Made in Italy” and which “Made in France” (it was a seasonal thing). This was important groundwork. I realized I couldn't show up in class with a fake Birkin, but other brands—Tiffany, Burberry, Cartier, Louis Vuitton—were standard at school, and I spent hours each day tracking down the best replicas of items the others had originals of. In my Notes app I kept a list of options I could afford with my savings. I studied pictures of bags alongside their fakes and read the praise and criticism from the community. I learned to pay attention to detail: the alignment of the logo at

the seam; the depth of the engraving on the rivets; the position, curve, and color of the leather straps. This knowledge gave me a sense of empowerment. Through my own efforts I could acquire what others received as birthday or name-day gifts from parents or grandparents, or as a reward for a good report card. No matter what I ended up buying when my research was complete, it felt like the fakes would be superior to the originals from the outset, just by virtue of the secret they held. They were the fruits of a successful hunt.

Behind the rabbit I could see the deserted office. Endless rows of empty desks arranged so that you'd always be staring into someone's eyes if you glanced up from your screen. The parking lot was reflected blue in the office windows, along with the low wall I was sitting on, the rabbit's back, and the line of sun-hatted heads behind me waiting to go in the store. All socially distanced, all with masks and their own shopping baskets. Some greeted each other with an elbow bump. Small bottles of disinfectant dangled from belt loops and bag straps. A lot of people were scared, but no one was as scared as my parents, who did all their panic-buying online and had familiarized themselves with the price range for CBRN protective suits—liquid-proof hazmat wear for chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear hazards.

The rabbit was lying on the ground like tossed garbage, curled up and alone. The fur on its ears and back was fine as cottonwool, quivering with the tiny, rapid tremor of its breath, its heartbeat. Pulse pulse pulse. On its underside, the fur was dark and sticky; blood seeped blackly into the earth, soaking the roots of the grass. Apart from the gentle throb, the little body lay perfectly still—then all of a sudden something seemed to move inside it, like a hand entering a glove. It was stretched to the length of my forearm. I had pushed the grass aside with the tips of my sneakers and could see the rabbit's open mouth as it made the noise that had attracted my attention in the first place. A pair of big, yellow teeth jutted out of each jaw, like an opening claw. It was such a revolting sight that I wanted to push the grass back over it and run away. I didn't want to be there anymore, didn't want to see that stiff body and open

maw or hear that hideous scream—but I couldn't just leave the creature to die in the dirt, on that bleak strip of dry grass along the wall, next to the supermarket parking lot.

Is it yours? Someone bent down to me. Long, pale-pink hair, a denim cap saying PALERMO in rhinestones.

I shook my head—what kind of a question was that? *No?* I hoped I sounded calm and mature, not like the child the situation had made of me. A child who wanted to hold the rabbit like a doll, who thought she could help it by rocking it in her arms and comforting it.

Fuck. I examined the girl in the shiny office windows, her oversize metal T-shirt, her short military-look skirt.

The outfit could have seemed random, cobbled together in a thrift store, but she'd fixed the hem of the T-shirt with a rubber band on the inside to give it a vaguely cropped look. Thick silver earrings glinted in her ears and she'd gelled the baby hair at her temples into little waves, like Maddy in *Euphoria*. She wasn't from round here, that's for sure. She must have been new to the area, or visiting.

Side by side, we leaned into the shadow of the empty offices, and for a moment I imagined us going into the supermarket together to fetch a cardboard box, water, and straw. I saw us picking the rabbit up, dribbling water into its mouth, taking it to a vet. But the girl clambered past me, over the wall, onto the hard strip of grass. When she turned to face me, her eyes caught mine and widened. *Hey, don't I know you? Cora?* She laughed and there, in that open mouth, beneath the lipliner and the eyeliner, I recognized a face I hadn't seen since childhood. Olympia Mittelwald. She'd lived with her mom and sister and grandma in the same apartment building where I'd lived with my parents, way back before Mom inherited the house and we moved out. *Crazy. So cool.*

Olympia hugged me and I could smell something sweet in her hair, a mix of vanilla and pepper. YSL Black Opium, but more pungent than the original, more alcoholic, a dupe. I wondered what she could smell on me and how my back and shoulders felt under her hands.

Could she tell I'd been working out? Was I squeezing her too tight, or maybe not tight enough?

The rabbit screamed again and she let go of me. The noise was throatier and more gurgling than before. It sounded like a lot more blood.

Shit. The poor thing's just suffering.

The low wall I was sitting on was one of those wire cage things you see everywhere, filled with various-sized rocks. Olympia leaned over and began to root around in it. I climbed into the gap beside her, afternoon protein shake in hand, and my lovely long nails flashed in the glass. Almond Poppy Red. Another skill I'd taught myself from video tutorials in lockdown—manicure with acrylic tips.

Olympia's back was broad and her thighs toned, the vastus laterales clearly visible beneath her skin. You could see she worked out. She was wearing heavy black cowboy boots. I peeked at her hands, still busy with the rocks. She'd always had bigger hands than me; I remembered her fingers clasped firmly around mine or around her baby sister's arm, but now she had hands to match her boots—cowboy hands. Strong, with short natural nails, so that, unlike me, she could claw rocks out of that wall with impunity. I looked down at my perfect red tips, hoping she wouldn't think I was superficial, too vain to help her.

In the glass pane, Olympia's pink hair was cotton-candy, and PALERMO glinted in mirror writing over the rabbit's back. *OK, here goes.* She was holding a big rock in each hand. The next time the rabbit spasmed, she slid one of the rocks under its little head, alongside the tips of her boots and my Air Maxes. Then she smashed it like an egg.

[...]

We spent that afternoon like the first. We started off inside, feeding the cat, dusting the furniture, sweeping dead flies from the windowsills, airing the house. Then we cleaned out the henhouse and topped up the water and grain feed, a feathery sea of chickens lapping at our legs. We exchanged notes on Elson. His late husband's great-grandmother had laid out the garden before this was a residential area, back when the house was the only one on the hill at the edge of the forest, with nothing but fields around it. Elson and his husband, Maxim, who was heir to the house, had reconstructed the garden as faithfully as they could, using old photos. They'd put years of work into growing the original plants and recreating the original colors and scents. The house had been modernized, but in the garden the past was to live on.

His husband was an artist, I said. The ceramics and stuff are all his.

We wondered how they'd met.

Elson's from the country, Olympia said. From a farm. She bent down and picked up one of the chickens, then gently began to stroke its puffed-up feathers. It looked light and heavy at the same time and seemed to yield to her touch. I think that's why I got the job, actually. Because I was interested in all that—his stories of the past, about the plants and animals and stuff.

I thought of the rabbit, of Olympia's hand clutching the rock, and of how unflinchingly she had brought it down on the rabbit's head.

The garden felt like an extension of the house, as though rooms had been added on. There were areas designed for relaxation: shaded stone benches, a summerhouse, a pond. Other parts were wild and free, full of grasses, flowers, and insects—pear and plum and apple trees. Separated from the rest of the garden by a wooden fence was a vegetable patch. Narrow paths led between banks of tomato plants, cucumbers, beans, zucchini. Olympia told me the cellar was full of preserves, the walls lined with shelves of canning jars. Pickles and bottled fruit, jams and compotes.

Do you know what his husband died of? He wasn't old, was he?

He never said. Apparently Maxim's family didn't want him to have the house. But it's his and he's determined to keep it. He told me where Maxim liked to sit, what his favorite flowers were, and all that. What apple recipes he used to make.

Sad.

She shrugged. Maybe that's why he's never here. Maybe he can't take it anymore.

We were standing in the sun between the redcurrant bushes, picking the little clusters of fruit, and collecting them in plastic buckets. The glowing red mounds caught the light like glass. This story was so different from anything I'd previously heard about Elson.

It was still warm when we finished. Like me, Olympia usually did her work-outs at home with YouTube videos. Here on the porch, with the pond and garden as a backdrop, it felt like someone should have been filming us. Side by side, we pushed ourselves up, tensed our muscles, lowered ourselves to the ground. We did this again and again. I could smell the pond, Olympia, my own body. Push-ups, mountain climbers, planks. Left knee to left elbow, right knee to right elbow. Again and again, slowly and with control. Each time Olympia lowered herself to the ground and pushed herself up again, I did the same. I'd expected her to be stronger than me, but in the end, she was the one who stayed down and rolled onto her back. I saw her staring up at the pink sky and realized that, unlike me, she hadn't been counting. I finished my set—thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—then I, too, stretched out on the ground. We lay close, the garden coming to life around us in the cool of the evening. Birds called softly from the trees; midges were gathering over the water.

Will you do mine for me sometime? Again, Olympia gripped my hand when I took the vape from her, and ran her fingers over my nails.

Sure. How would you like them? Olympia looked for a Rosalía video, paused it, and zoomed into Rosalía's hands resting in her lap. Her fingers were nervously interlaced, but her nails were long and silver—ten knife blades.

I breathed out. I liked it when the mist hung over us for a moment before thinning out into sky and air.

From Rosalía we somehow got onto Joe Exotic, and that got Olympia talking about orcas. Had I heard they'd started attacking yachts? *Orcas are kick-ass*, she said. *Super smart. And they live in matriarchies.* She googled *orca attack* and we saw water—an expanse of deep-blue ocean around the shiny-lacquered hull of a boat. The bodies surfaced slowly. Huge. Black-and-white. First two, then three, four, five. They blew out air and dove down again, leaving small eddies alongside the boat. *Orcas, look!* A woman's voice. *Can you see them? Wow, they're so beautiful.* The whales turned away, two black backs, two fins. The woman scanned the surface of the water with her camera. *Where did they go? Can you see them?* And then, suddenly, a crash and a scream. The picture wobbled. Another crash and lots of voices all shouting at once. *What's going on? What are they doing?* The same words yelled again and again. *What are they doing? What are they doing?* Over the sea, the pond, the porch, the grass. Then the video broke off.

That one didn't sink, but there was another that did.

I asked Olympia what she knew. What theories were there about the orcas' behavior?

Revenge? Sick of all the yachts in their ocean? She laughed. *No, animals aren't like that. They're just playing. They're bored.*

The next time, I took my equipment along and did her nails. Three hours on the living-room carpet, three hours with her hands in mine, the buzz of the electric file, the glow of the UV lamp. I had to prize off one or two of the tips several times and start again, because they were crooked, but in the end Olympia had ten perfect silvery Russian almonds, just like Rosalía's. I

loved the way she kept stretching her hands out in front of her and spreading her fingers, angling the nails to catch the light and send it flitting across the ceiling. She kept laughing and saying how well they'd turned out, how cool that I'd taught myself. There was something puppy-like about her clumsy efforts to pick up the garden hose or type on her phone, and that evening, when I showed her how to clean the nails with a little brush to get the garden out from under them, she was shocked at the black earth that ran into the washbasin in the guest bathroom.

We laughed even more than usual that day.

We talked about the past, piecing together our memories of the apartment building and then filling each other in on what had happened since, zooming out of our childhood and building images of ourselves for each other, pixel by pixel—sixteen years of coordinates that made us who we were. Olympia told me about all the times she and her mother and sister had moved house. A string of packed-up rooms, new schoolmates, constant efforts to start over. She didn't realize how special this life had made her. Bad Gastein, Bregenz, Vienna, Düsseldorf, months in Mexico and Bali. Each place a shimmering fragment, part of a trail that lay behind her like so much glitter.

I wish I had your life.

She laughed. *What good is it to me?*

We went up the fig tree armed with small knives and cut the ripe fruit from the branches, small and soft and warm from the sun. I asked Olympia if she remembered the scene in *The Bell Jar*, where Esther imagines her life like a fig tree and is afraid she won't be able to make up her mind. She's scared the figs will rot, one by one, while she's sitting under the tree dithering. *I lowkey get that*, I said. *I want every single one of those figs. I want to go to the Sorbonne and I want to study in Cambridge. I want everything.*

Olympia was standing on a branch, facing me. *You can want that.* She laughed. *The question is, what will you do when the trunk starts to rot away?* She dug the tip of a silvery nail into the

wood and I imagined the bark breaking open to reveal the soft pulp beneath, black and gross, the trunk yielding to her touch like a sponge. *How will you pick figs if the tree dies before they're ripe?*

Wham—the blade of my knife licked the back of her hand. *Stop it. I put a lot of effort into those nails. They'll break off if you carry on like that.* Only very quickly and very lightly, because Elson's knives were sharp.

She laughed and pulled back her hand. *You freak.* We watched the cut slowly fill with blood. Olympia ran her tongue over the thin red line and I thought of the sand back when we were kids, brown and lumpy on her foot.

Gross. Now I laughed. *Freak yourself.* And I thought of Svea, amazed at how different the same word could sound, how different it could feel.

In late August, the garden tipped into drought. The soil between the plants was cracked and hard; the flowers lost their color. Everything was ripe and heavy, almost too heavy for the branches, which had grown brittle in the sun. Leaves curled at the edges; the grass stood high. The water was low in the pond, its surface tarnished by a dull, gray film.

Elson should have been back long ago, but he kept putting off his return and we sometimes didn't hear from him for days. Olympia told him the fruit and vegetable picking was getting to be too much for one person and he gave her a raise, no questions asked, so we were both paid.

We followed his instructions minutely—the detailed, handwritten lists that he photographed and sent to Olympia. We could see his fingers on the photos, the rough old skin, the brown-rimmed nails. We wondered where he was, what he was up to. We picked fruit and vegetables, made preserves, replenished the stores. We sowed the autumn crops.

Elson's house had a cellar like a bunker. Three storerooms were packed to the ceiling with canisters of water and disinfectant, bottles of gas, batteries, stocks of food. Next to the

storerooms was a living area with bunkbeds, a kitchenette, a shower, and a toilet. Beyond that was the fitness room. We didn't know when the cellar had been built, but the furniture and equipment were old-fashioned, the floor covered in a thin, faded-blue carpet. There were CDs and a multi-disc player, and we worked out to Italo-pop under a poster of a sunset.

In between working out, we lay on the carpet. There was one CD, by a singer named Alice, that we listened to over and over. Our favorite track was called *Per Elisa*, but we sang *Paradiso* until I googled the lyrics.

Vivere, vivere, vivere non è più vivere

Live, live, live, can't live anymore

I loved it when we were down there together, all muscle. I loved it when we were side by side on the treadmills, running and running without getting tired. Tough bodies in a tough world.

When I saw myself there in the mirrored wall next to Olympia, I got the impression that you could tell I'd been doing real work, turning over the soil, bringing in the crops. You could tell that my toned biceps were no longer just the result of staring at my tablet in the solitude of my room, mindlessly repeating exercise routines demonstrated by an influencer in Australia. My skin looked different too, my hair, my eyes. And when Olympia stretched out her hands to me in the mirror as she ran and yelled *Cora*, pretending she was trying to reach me, though she couldn't move from the spot, I saw my mouth wide open, my body jerked forward with laughter, and this laughter, too, seemed new and real to me, more real than anything that had come before. It was like something was shining out of me—the sun, the light, the whole golden summer with Olympia.