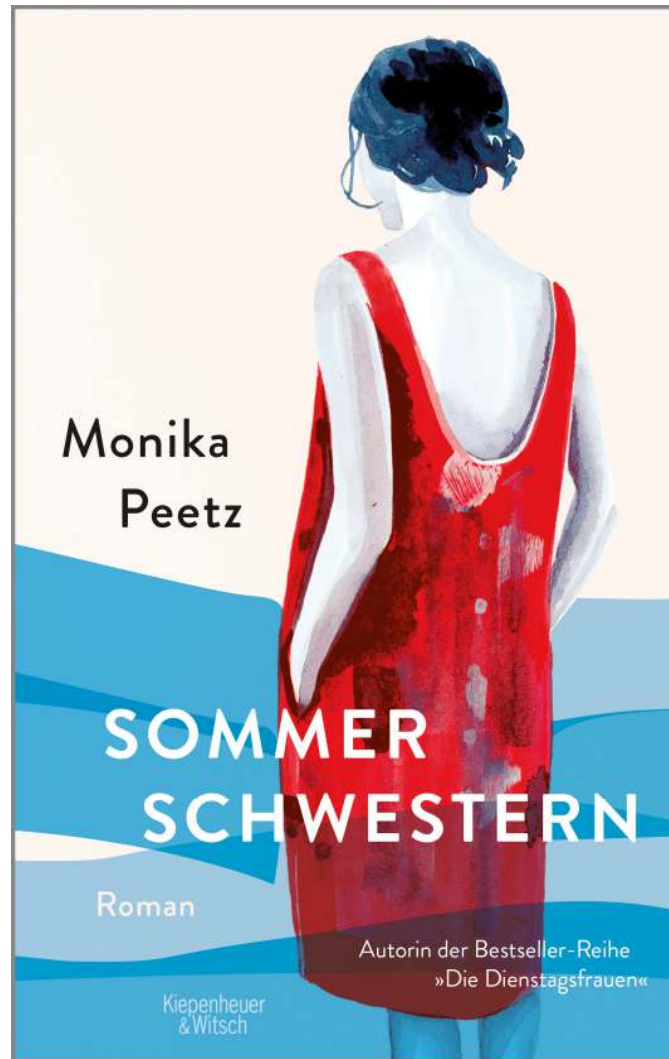


# Summer Sisters

by Monika Peetz

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



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## 1. Into the Unknown

Five minutes to go. Yella sprinted from the tram stop across the Europaplatz towards the main station. Panic-stricken, her eyes glided over the departures board until they saw Amsterdam Centraal. Platform 14, top level. That was all she needed. She had wasted valuable time at home by making a splendid breakfast for her family at the last minute. She had left a fruit platter, freshly squeezed orange juice, homemade granola, eggs cooked to perfection and three chocolate hearts for David and her two boys, to make up for her unaccustomed absence.

Four minutes to go. Why wasn't she the kind of woman who, thanks to early morning jogs in the park, could effortlessly complete a city marathon, or at least the kind who was chilled out about being late thanks to yoga, meditation and deep relaxation? She had to make that train. With half-hearted apologies, Yella squeezed her way through a group of business travellers who had already begun their ultra-important negotiations regarding the distribution of spring bonuses on the escalator and wouldn't dream of letting her pass. At half past six in the morning, everyone was in a hurry.

Three minutes to go. They say that anticipation is the best part of travelling. The short notice of the invitation hadn't given Yella much time to prepare, let alone to look forward to it. At the last minute, she had packed relatively random clothes that covered the spectrum of weather

contingencies between tropical heat and freezing cold. The rest of the oversized suitcase was filled to the brim with gifts for her family, which she had pulled out of her well-stocked gift drawer in a jiffy. She could, however, have saved herself the shower or at least the thick down jacket. Sweat was running down her back as she heaved the heavy piece of luggage up the stairs. Her t-shirt was stuck to her body, her lungs were burning, and her cheeks were probably glowing like a tomato. But who cared about the colour of her face? All that counted was the result. ICE 240 was already rolling towards Holland when Yella dropped into her seat, overjoyed. She had six and a half hours to catch her breath.

Yella had barely peeled herself out of her jacket, stowed the suitcase and opened the self-improvement guide, which had been gathering dust on her bedside table for ages, when a child's voice sounded out across the carriage: "Mum, wake up. Mum. I'm awake. Mum, can I get up? Mum, what's for breakfast? Mum. Mum, wake up." Her son's voice resounded at an embarrassing volume through the open-plan carriage. Reproachful glances poured down on her, while her fingers fumbled among mascara, Playmobil figures, half a bag of Haribo Smurfs, wet wipes, house keys, notepad and charging cable for her mobile phone. "Mum, wake up. Mum, I'm awake," the recording began again, a little louder this time.

In the morning rush, Yella had forgotten to turn off the alarm on her mobile phone, the sound of which Leo had recorded for her with his father's help. Three years ago, Leo's hoarse voice and his lisp, as he giggled and spoke the words for her under the Christmas tree had moved her to tears.

Since then, she had heard the recording so many times that she cursed David's idea. Nevertheless, she could not bring herself to delete it. After all, her first-grader no longer lisped and even his little brother Nick could pronounce difficult words without any problem.

"Mum, can I get up? Mum, I'm awake. Mum, what's for breakfast?"

A well-coiffed businesswoman with a mouth turned down at the corners like Angela Merkel's fired scathing glances at her and jabbed her index finger like a rapier towards the sign 'Quiet Area', which marked the zone for people seeking relaxation. This was an unattainable state for Yella at the moment. How often had she wished for a few days alone as she dozed off in front of her sons while reading them a bedtime story, days without chores, appointments, mountains of laundry and alarm clocks? Now at last the time had come, but it wasn't looking good. Even with her phone switched to silent, Yella managed the feat of being in two places at once. One half, head resting on her rolled-up coat, tried to catch up on the sleep she had missed in the last few weeks, while the other raced constantly around her flat in Berlin organising the day. Sandwiches, PE kit, the note for the school photographer, the permission slip for the kindergarten excursion: in her mind, she ticked off the items on her imaginary to-do-list before she remembered: *Nick's waterproof trousers are still hanging on the washing line*, she wrote on WhatsApp. She got neither a blue tick nor a reply. Either David was stressed out or still pissed off.

By the time the train arrived in Stendal, she had lost herself in imagining him trying to get the boys to school and kindergarten on time.

No news was good news, she told herself and suppressed the agonising need to check to see whether everything was all right at home. Yella didn't do this on Tuesdays and Thursdays when it was David's turn to take the children to school and she took the early shift. As an office worker for a start-up that operated round the clock, she was tasked with organising appointments for others. She was not an experienced traveller. Yella marvelled at how strange it felt to be travelling without her small family. In her mind she heard the school bell ringing and the door to the kindergarten slamming noisily. She pictured David returning to the empty flat, clearing the breakfast table and loading the dishwasher, taking out the rubbish and the waste paper, repairing the dripping tap in the bathroom, sighing as he discovered the waterproof trousers and drinking another cup of coffee until he couldn't find any more reasons to avoid his work. His heavy footsteps down the hallway and the characteristic creaking of his office door as it closed behind him reverberated through Yella's head. Once the children were no longer babies, her writer husband had reclaimed the corner room with the arched windows for himself and his work. The pattern on the wallpaper had disappeared beneath a mass of handwritten notes, photographs, newspaper clippings, art postcards, fictitious floor plans, research results and the homemade wall chart on which, every day, David rearranged the coloured index cards with brief information on the one hundred and seventeen chapters of his second novel. Yella avoided the room, which was drenched in David's sighs. The suppressed enquiries, as to whether he was making any progress had formed a kind of lump in her

stomach over the years in which the once-celebrated author had been chewing on his material. Yella pushed the gnawing doubt aside for a moment and soothed herself with the thought that the uncomfortable feeling in her stomach must be hunger. As she dug a cheese sandwich out of her bag, the mysterious envelope fell out.

Wolfsburg and the endless VW factory whizzed by while conflicting emotions raged inside her as she picked up the enigmatic letter from the floor of the carriage. Although she had received the message only a fortnight ago, the envelope had clearly been handled a lot. Yella had twisted and turned the letter in her hands, had thrown it aside, retrieved it, and stared at each word so intently that the letters danced before her eyes. She had groaned deeply when she tore open the envelope and she was still groaning two weeks later.

On the back of the envelope, *H.T.* was emblazoned in large, bold letters as the sender. Her blood boiled at the sight of the calligraphed ink script. The expansive letters, set off by thick dots, sat enthroned on the paper like two exclamation marks and revealed her mother's temperament. The pale grey tissue paper crackled softly as Yella opened the envelope, the contents of which she knew by heart. *My dears*, was the strangely unspecific salutation, which Henriette Thalberg had written energetically on the old-fashioned letter card. *I would like to discuss something with you all. 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> May. You don't need to make any arrangements, accommodation will be provided.*

Enclosed was a photocopied street map, marked with a red X.

'Is it a treasure map?' Leo had asked excitedly reaching for the paper with his jammy fingers.

'Grandma is inviting us,' she had explained, confused.

'Grandma Violet?' Nick had shouted, snatching the map from his brother's hand. 'Has she hidden a treasure for us?'

Her sons loved David's mother, who owed her nickname to the bright violet colour of her hair, which she had touched up every twenty-two days at a posh salon. The boys visited their grandparents regularly in their allotment garden in Potsdam, where Grandma would make Witch Soup over an open fire from her home-grown vegetables, while Grandpa Peter lovingly introduced his grandsons to the secrets of beekeeping and compost heaps.

'The other one,' Yella had said. 'Grandma from Cologne.'

Her sons instantly lost interest in the invitation. Her mother, used to four daughters, had neither patience nor understanding for the lively boys.

'They are so energetic,' she liked to complain. The snide way she spoke the word made it sound as if their temperament was a crime.

Yella's disaster radar had sounded the alarm as soon as she read the letter. A family reunion at short notice? In just two weeks? What a strangely cryptic invitation! What in the world did her mother want to discuss? The most puzzling thing was the destination that Henriette Thalberg had chosen for her revelation. The tone was urgent, the occasion mysterious, the location downright alarming. Why on earth did the meeting have to take place at the very spot that the entire Thalberg family had collectively

been avoiding for twenty years? She had almost collapsed when she realised that the map showed a section of the Dutch North Sea coast. Why Holland? Why Bergen of all places? Why the village where her father had died in a road traffic accident over twenty years ago? Yella still couldn't believe that her mother had chosen this emotionally charged place for the family reunion. Had Henriette Thalberg chosen this symbolic place to deliver good or bad news?

'What does she want from you?' David had asked after studying the letter in detail. Her mother had made little effort to welcome her son-in-law into the Thalberg family. He naturally assumed that with *My dears* she was addressing the four sisters. Even now Yella could not come up with a convincing answer to the question of what was behind the invitation. A fit of nostalgia? Homesickness for the past and the intact family they had once been? Longing for her daughters? Did she want to celebrate her sixty-fifth birthday that had been cancelled two years ago because of Covid? Or her retirement? But that was also two years ago. Was there an anniversary of one of the many honorary posts that she held? Had she been elected to the church council or received an honour for her work at the food bank in Cologne? What in the world did her mother want to tell them in this roundabout way? And why did they have to travel to the Dutch North Sea coast so urgently? Was there an old family secret that could only be revealed there?

Yella did not know what to feel. Her greatest fear was that the invitation might have something to do with her father's accident. But after



twenty years, what was there to discover about a traffic accident in which a storm had been the only cause and the only witness? It had cost her and her family no end of time and strength to reorganise their lives after his death, and Yella did not care to reminisce about the fatal day that cut her life story into two halves. Her daily family life was demanding enough without additional issues from the past.

Henriette Thalberg's letter had come as a bombshell to the sisters. Yella's quick enquiry had been shot down with a stark text message in response: *I don't want to explain everything four times over.*

As she hungrily devoured her cheese sandwich, Yella once more scrolled through the discussion that had taken place in the sisters' WhatsApp group chat after the invitation had arrived. She studied every single comment, looking for information that might have escaped her notice. Yella wished she had the detachment of her younger sister Helen, who, as a reserved scientist, referred to the facts: *'I refuse to worry in advance she wrote. There is still time for that once we know what it is all about.*

*I couldn't stand it,* intervened Amelie, Helen's twin. *I stalked Mum until she answered the phone. She wouldn't tell me anything. She just wants to get everyone together.*

*Why doesn't she just tell us what is going on?* Helen said indignantly. *This isn't the movies where you have to artificially create suspense.*

Her reaction revealed that she was not quite as relaxed about the matter as she claimed. Helen was only in loose contact with her sisters. 'I'm just not a phone person,' she always said. In truth, the ambitious scientist was reluctant to share her life and her problems with others. She placed little value on family. Neither on starting a family with her long-term boyfriend Paul, nor nurturing the one she already had. Yella often had problems with Helen's severity and lack of flexibility. Now, for once, she agreed with her younger sister.

*It doesn't have to be anything bad,* Amelie responded, without reacting to Helen's angry remark. *Maybe Mum wants to bring us back together. It is ages since we did anything together. And it doesn't get any nicer than Holland.*

It was all very well for Amelie, who was unattached, to talk like that. In transition between various jobs and constantly fleeing from chronically unstable relationships and apartments, she had no obligations to keep her from a spontaneous trip to the past.

The only one who did not take part in the speculation was her older sister Doro. The busy costume designer had navigated her way through an enviably glamorous life. With her award-winning and extravagant stage outfits, Doro Thalberg had achieved international fame. Yella guarded like a treasure the edition of *Vogue* in which an impressive eight glossy pages had been devoted to her sister's designs. Doro constantly jetted to and fro between her studio in Cologne, various stages and film sets and, on the side, mangled her adolescent daughter. In her second marriage, she had been

very lucky to have found Ludwig, a reliable Bavarian, whose hobby it was to take care of Lucy and support his successful wife's professional and family life. No-one could get past the almost two-metre-tall, heavy man who, it appeared, had missed out on a career as a bouncer. Doro apparently had better things to do than to join in the raging discussion about their mother. She was probably stressed out, in a meeting, at a fitting, or all of the above.

'4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> May, five days!' David had moaned. He had eyed the invitation critically, while their first grader had proudly stepped up to the family calendar to make a note of the trip to the seaside. Ever since he started school, Yella had tried to encourage him to organise his own appointments.

'4<sup>th</sup> May,' Yella had read out loud.

Leo had found the right number and had immediately burst into tears when he realised that the holiday collided with Penelope's birthday. He had talked of nothing else for the last fortnight but his school friend's knight-themed party and the Elsa costume that he wanted to wear for the occasion.

A glance at the overflowing family calendar on the fridge had been enough to send Yella into a panic. It was frightening how many social obligations a family with a four-year-old and a six-year-old could have. Nick was celebrating 'country day' at kindergarten, where he was assigned to the 'Italy' group, baking pizzas. Leo had a visit to the dentist, choir practice, swimming lessons and Penelope's party. To make matters worse, David had a long-awaited appointment with the chiropractor ('too much damn sitting down') on the Friday in question and a two-day seminar with his writing

students at the weekend. Where would they squeeze in a surprise long weekend on the Dutch coast?

After she had spent half a day thinking about it, Yella's concern had given way to serious annoyance. What could be so important that it could not be postponed? Why couldn't her mother plan more long term? Why couldn't she coordinate the date with them? What was she thinking?

*I'm going to give it a miss, Yella had typed into her phone. Going to Holland for just five days with the boys is a nightmare. And David is swamped with work.*

In the middle of the night she had got all her objections off her chest and ten minutes later she had deleted the barrage of arguments setting out why under no circumstances could she come to Holland. After Amelie's reassurances in the family group, her own name appeared eight times in a row, along with the words *message deleted*.

*What did it say?* Amelie had asked quite openly the next morning. *That I'm stressed,* Yella had replied honestly. Amelie had immediately fired off a load of emojis with lots of hearts. *Big hug.*

*I feel the same way,* Helen wrote. *I had to reorganise everything.* Yella was almost ready to cancel her mother for good when at last she got a message from Doro. Their older sister didn't mention the discussion about the reasons for the invitation at all. *I am so looking forward to us all being together,* she wrote. *I can't wait.* And underneath was the crucial clue that changed everything for Yella. In setting up the chat group, Helen had

chosen the prosaic and ultrashort name 4T, as if they were one of the chemical compounds she experimented with in the laboratory of a pharmaceutical giant. Later Amelie added four lucky clovers to the all-too-factual name. Now Doro had changed the group name again. Yella's heart beat faster when she read the name her older sister had chosen. It was as if she had found the magic word that opened the door to a secret world. *Doro has changed the group name to 'Summer Sisters'!* Summer Sisters! The words resonated with thousands of memories of happier times. How long had Doro, Yella, Amelie and Helen not seen each other as unit and as summer sisters? The girls had never been as close as they were in the endless holidays that they traditionally spent on the Dutch North Sea coast in Bergen. Every summer they ran wild in the triangle between the campsite, the beach and the village. When the four girls were not playing and bathing at the seaside, they roamed around between the tents, performed on the improvised stage (their band was called 'Doro and the rest') and sold lemonade, home-made soup, muffins or painted stones. When the sun dipped into the water at the end of a long day, they romped through the enchanted dune forests around the campsite until darkness swallowed them up. The memories of the childhood paradise brought a smile to Yella's face. The summer sisters permanently had sand between their toes and the wind in their hair, and ate whatever food was easy to prepare on the two flames of the gas cooker. Weeks on the beach, camping and pasta with a choice of red, green or white sauce - that was all it took for the girls to be happy! At the end of every summer, Yella wept bitterly when

the barrier to the campsite closed behind the back window of the VW van and school and quarrels started again shortly afterwards. 'We are not suited for everyday life,' Doro had always said. 'We are summer sisters.'

Doro was sixteen, Yella thirteen, the twins Helen and Amelie just nine when their father was killed in a car crash on the road between Bergen Binnen and Bergen aan Zee and their holidays on the Dutch coast ended forever. That was twenty years ago. Twenty years in which their lives had drifted apart. The summer sisters existed only as detached satellites, each of them trapped in her own orbit. After dropping out of architecture school, Yella had remained in Berlin; Amelie had ended up in Wuppertal after her last relationship ended, where she helped a friend set up a supermarket that used no packaging. Helen lived in the Frankfurt suburbs, and Doro listed Rimowa, her preferred brand of suitcase, as her place of residence, despite the fact that she was the only one never to have left Cologne. Yet she saw very little of their mother because of her demanding job.

Getting the extended family together was more than difficult. This was not down to Covid or the kilometres that lay between them. Henriette Thalberg never missed any of Doro's glamorous premieres, but beyond that she was notably absent from her daughter's lives. 'I don't want to impose,' their mother often said, not without a touch of reproach in her voice. In truth, she was reluctant to enter an environment where she had to adapt to the habits and pace of others. Compromise was not her thing.

The summer sisters? Did their mother want to take up the old holiday ritual? Did she want to conjure up the happy, carefree family they

had once been? The magic words associated with so many emotions finally made Yella relent. Perhaps the long weekend offered the last chance to continue the old family tradition and breathe new life into the summer sisters?

The vibration of her mobile phone jolted Yella out of her thoughts. A pop-up notification informed her that Amelie had posted an Instagram story.

The short piece of film showed planes taking off at the airport Cologne/Bonn. 'Flying into the weekend,' was the glittering caption.

Then the camera turned and showed Amelie, wearing a backpack, dancing in front of a Flixbus headed for Amsterdam. 'Destitute. No money for a flight,' she admitted with astonishing honesty to the 14,500 followers of her account *Discovery trip with Amelie*. Unlike Yella, who often struggled with hoarseness and Doro, who drowned everyone out, Amelie's voice sounded like soft caramel. With her long blonde curls, an ultra-short black and white checked dress and chunky Doc Marten boots with a floral pattern, she still looked like a high-school student. A swarm of male followers and admirers showered her with compliments in the comments. Many of them made no secret of the fact that they would love to have a real-life date with Amelie. The short film was from yesterday. It was followed by pictures from the bus at night, where little more could be seen or heard than the penetrating snoring of someone in the next seat, followed by shots of the endless queue in front of the toilets at the motorway service station, the desolate bus stop in Amsterdam Sloterdijk in the rain and the dark rings

under her eyes, which, of course, no-one apart from Amelie noticed. At the end there was a post with a rental bike. Yella envied her sister, who had long since arrived in Holland.



## 2. Luck and Headwind

Amelie thought she was particularly daring. After the uncomfortable night on the Flixbus and the short train ride from Amsterdam Sloterdijk to Alkmaar, she had rented one of those blue and yellow bikes from the Dutch railways that could be rented via an app for a couple of euros. With the help of the straps that were attached to the bike, she secured her backpack to the luggage rack. She looked sceptically at the dark clouds brewing over Alkmaar. At home, she would never in a million years have thought of venturing out on her bicycle on a country road in such gloomy weather. Next to her, an elderly couple were unperturbed as they got on their bicycles. Amelie decided to take her cue from the locals, who did not seem worried about the possibility of rain. They ought to know best. She got on her bike and started pedalling energetically.

'I am almost Dutch,' she said, giggling into the lens of her phone and posted the short film on her Instagram account. Google Maps showed her the way. On wonderfully smooth asphalt, untroubled by the strenuous inclines that made life difficult for her in Wuppertal, and with plenty of car-free crumple zone around her, cycling even with low rain clouds felt so much more natural than in city traffic at home. With a bit of luck, she would manage the ten kilometres to the holiday house before the next shower.

Her mood rose with every metre she covered without getting wet. The relationships in her family were a complicated web, but at that moment she nevertheless had the feeling she was cycling towards a new family beginning.

Amelie shared the perfectly constructed cycle path with clusters of teenagers cycling several kilometres from the Alkmaar schools to their homes in the surrounding villages. While school buses were used to cover such distances in Germany, it was apparently the most normal thing in the world for the Dutch to cycle a few kilometres to school in all weathers. No wonder, with a route that neatly separated bicycles and cars from each other. The teenagers passed by, chattering happily, looking insanely casual as they did so, as if they had been born on bicycles. They transported their school backpacks on the front bicycle rack in large apple crates that made the bikes so wide that they almost drove Amelie into the ditch when they overtook her in groups of three. Amelie felt incredibly at home until she was hit by the full force of the headwind on the outskirts of Alkmaar. An invisible wall slowed her down. Her hair flew around her head, the wind tugged at her thin little dress. The route had seemed manageable on Google Maps. Unfortunately the app hadn't taken into account that once you left the city and its protective buildings behind you, the force of nature had free rein in the flat landscapes of Holland. The wind swept a cold drizzle into her face, penetrating through the fabric of her clothes and did its utmost to pull her off her bike. Her thighs felt like jelly as she struggled desperately against the stiff breeze that brought tears to her eyes.

The holiday house was further away than she had hoped. The dead straight road ahead of her seemed endless. Between shades of green, brown and ochre, occasional red, yellow and purple stripes shone as if they had been drawn into the landscape with a pen. Fields of tulips, she noted enthusiastically. Amelie passed a kind of combine harvester which thundered across the field, cutting off the last tulips just below the blossom. Stems and leaves remained standing. Doro was currently working on a musical version of Alice in Wonderland in Berlin. Wasn't it the Queen of Hearts who threatened all the flowers with decapitation in that story? Here the bloodthirsty lady in the shape of a machine had already successfully roared across the fields, for at the edge of most of the arable land, the tulip heads were withering in great heaps. Just as all her strength went into her legs as she cycled, the plant was not meant to be troubled with exuberant flowering but was intended to produce new tubers, which were shipped from Holland all over the world.

The Thalberg family's holiday album contained numerous pictures of the sisters. Every year the four of them had been placed in front of an eternally shrinking stone gorilla on the obligatory trip to Amsterdam Zoo and photographed by the zoo photographer. There was also a shot of the quartet in a brightly coloured tulip field. Although the pictures impressively proved her presence at all the family activities, Amelie could hardly remember the trips to Holland. Neither the tulips, nor the zoo nor any activities with her father. As if someone had deleted her father and Holland from her hard drive.

Completely out of breath, Amelie braked in front of a farm, whose low building was almost smothered by a pyramid-shaped roof. For a few euros, the farmers sold the surviving tulips in a small wooden shed. Normally she could not afford cut flowers, but she had enough for an entire armful straight from the grower. She had barely attached her haul to the luggage rack when the weather gods suddenly took mercy on her. The sky above her opened up. Cheeky rays of sunlight pushed through the grey and painted magical spots on the flat landscape. An unexpected feeling of happiness swept through Amelie as she finally took a closer look at the countryside. Which ignoramus claimed that you didn't go to the North Sea for the weather? Holland was perhaps not one of the holiday destinations with a sunshine guarantee, but the rapid spectacle of the changes in the sky more than made up for any bad weather. The constant wind made for a never-ending fleeting spectacle. In Wuppertal, houses, tall buildings and the steep hills of the *Bergische Land* restricted the view. Here, the sky virtually embraced you. The clouds were reflected in the puddles, in the tarmac of the rain-soaked road and in the canals that criss-crossed the landscape. Everywhere water reflected every last ray of sunlight and lent the lush green meadows their peculiar glow. Dunes and the North Sea could only be glimpsed on the horizon even if she imagined that she could already smell the characteristic salty scent of the sea. Amelie had forgotten how overwhelming the Dutch landscape could be. 'As a cloud catcher, you can't put anything off,' said a soft male voice. 'If you're not careful, the wind will take the moment with it.'

Amelie almost fell off her bike in surprise at the unexpected flashback. It was her father's voice, coming to her from the depths of her memory for the first time in years. She could literally see him in front of her, pausing on the open road, pulling his paintbrush and his tiny Winsor colour palette out of his suit jacket to capture a special constellation of light on paper. His sketchbooks, which had survived in the attic, impressively demonstrated his boundless fascination with the beauty of North Holland: he immortalised the deserted landscape, the ocean that was devoid of bathers in the mornings, the sunset in the dunes, moss, a special mushroom, knotty trees bending in the west wind, but most of all he liked to paint clouds, just clouds, over and over again. As a child, Amelie had often been annoyed when, instead of taking her to the swimming pool or the beach as promised, he would stop to complete a drawing. Not to mention his deadly boring lectures on the very particular Dutch light that had captivated the old masters. As a grown woman, she now immediately understood what had fascinated him about this landscape. She wished she had understood then how far ahead of his time her father had been. He preached mindfulness long before it became fashionable. How she would have liked to look up at the sky with him just one more time. She imagined them pointing out to each other particular cloud constellations and the windmill on the left.

Amelie had a stack of old family photos in her luggage that her mother had found in a shoebox a few months ago. Besides one of her father's old woollen jumpers, the rediscovered photographs were among

the few mementoes she had of Johannes Thalberg. Whenever the conversation turned to the Summer Sisters, she was overcome by the unsettling feeling of having missed the Holland holidays. The prints in the shoebox proved otherwise. She had made up her mind to identify the places where the family photos had been taken. Perhaps the re-encounter with the places of her childhood would bring back buried images. Her hope was to bring her father's voice back to new life in Bergen.

### 3. The Croaking of the Frogs

The kilometres rattled away beneath Yella. There was no chance of sleep. With every hour that separated her from her everyday life in Berlin, her tension grew. The strange feeling in her stomach gave her no peace. Around eleven o'clock, the train reached the border at Bad Bentheim. Snatches of Dutch wafted in her ears. It felt like a random string of incomprehensible sounds from deep in the throat that sounded wonderfully foreign and familiar at the same time. While fourth period began for her son Leo in Berlin, the train thundered towards her past.

Touched, she was looking at the tulip photos that Amelie had posted on Instagram when Doro contacted her on FaceTime. 'Typing is a waste of time,' she always said. Breathing too, apparently, because as usual, Doro was hyped up and immediately started talking.

'Did Henriette reach you?' she said, without taking the time for a greeting.

'No, why?' Yella asked worriedly.

'Mother sent word that she couldn't make it ...' Doro started in one of her famous half-sentences, as a figure in the background flitted dimly across the screen. Her sister immediately broke off.

'Maria, are those the feathers from Italy?' she asked in delight and disappeared from the screen.

It seemed that she had placed her mobile on the table. Yella recognised the floor-to-ceiling industrial steel shelves, where Doro stored fabrics, latex, skins and foam rubber. She could literally smell the costume studio, the unique mixture of glue, paint, dust, textiles, hot coffee; she could sense the excitement and electrical tension even at a distance. A young man was sweating over a bale of tulle at a sewing machine, and in the background a girl ironed a long rail of frog-green costumes with a garment steamer that dangled from a bulky wire rack. Doro's face slid back into view.

'Are you still in the studio?' Yella asked unnecessarily. Doro's look, a perfectly fitted ice-blue jumpsuit that was splashed all over with decorative paint, and a hipster beanie beneath which her white-blond hair peeked out seemingly unintentionally, said enough. Yella had to acknowledge without envy that her costume designer sister looked incredible even in her work clothes.

'Mother might have asked us before she fixed a date,' Doro sighed. 'The invitation didn't come at a great time.'

Yella agreed with her. But did it really make any difference to Doro? Her big sister had been using that rushed tone of voice for years. However, her stress levels had soared to new heights since she had started working with Britain's newest directing prodigy on an extravagant musical version of Alice in Wonderland. Was the premiere scheduled for Berlin? Or was it Hamburg? Stuttgart? Munich? Yella had lost track, given the multiple projects, and missed the moment when she might have asked without feeling like the most inattentive sister in the world. Being on the cusp of



something ultra-important was a chronic condition for Doro. Her sister didn't seem to be particularly excited or optimistic. Doro picked up her mobile again and hurried through her storage rooms.

'A fitting came up,' she said. 'I've had a difficult couple of years with the pandemic. I have to take all the jobs I can to work off the debt.'

She didn't sound particularly unhappy. Doro was the kind of person who survived on extra strong coffee and adrenalin. There was an excitement in her voice at having a task that turned her into an indispensable, absolutely irreplaceable member of society. Doro had even managed to get her own Wikipedia entry, kept meticulously up to date by her interns. Yella enjoyed being part of a team at work. She could hardly imagine how exhausting it must be to always be alone on the front line. When Yella sank into her sofa in the evenings, exhausted after a day full of appointments and meetings, dinner and the children's evening routines, too tired to pick up even a single toy car from the floor, her sister was probably attending a show in Berlin, Munich or London. How on earth did she do it? Where did she get the energy from? Doro still managed to look better in her stressed state than Yella would have done in a red carpet outfit.

'What about Mother?' Yella asked impatiently.

'Just a minute, I'll be right with you.'

Yella shook her head at her busy sister, whose life consisted of throwing as many balls in the air as possible and hoping that they didn't all rain down on her at the same time. Master juggler Doro tended to call when she was standing in line at the bakery, sitting in the chair at the hairdressers, rushing

back and forth between appointments in a taxi, standing at the stove or waiting for the person she was meeting for a business dinner. Doro could not bear to let a single minute go by unused. Car rides with Doro were torture. At every red light she swerved into a side street in order to get to her destination faster. She was always on the go, on hold, on the other line and on the move from A to B. Whenever she was on the phone with Yella, she constantly interrupted herself to give super-urgent instructions to Ludwig, to point out a mistake to the seamstress, to tell Lucy to do her homework or to reprimand the neighbour's dog. Even in the delivery room she had been issuing instructions for alterations to her new kitchen between contractions so that everything would be perfect for the new baby's arrival. It was no wonder that Ludwig had put on so much weight over the years. He needed the extra kilos to be Doro's rock and keep up with her unbridled thirst for action. Unfortunately, Yella was not as tough as her brother-in-law.

'I just wanted to pass on that I've arranged with Mother to ...' her sister began.

'What did you say?' Yella shouted.

The stapling, rattling and hissing in the background swallowed up Doro's words. Doro always gave Yella the impression that her time was too precious to waste it on family phone calls.

She used to love getting insights into the life of the costume designer. When she still lived in Cologne, she had often visited Doro and regularly looked after her niece Lucy when needed. Since moving to Berlin

and having children of her own, she saw less of Doro. Even when her older sister was working nearby, she rarely managed to drop in on Yella. Doro was the undisputed queen, residing in her hive and receiving her worker bees only there.

'What's the matter?' Yella repeated loudly enough to get the attention of her fellow passengers.

She furrowed her brow. Of course her sister could have hung up and called at a more convenient time. Yella suspected Doro of enjoying an audience. Was her sister the workaholic trying to demonstrate once again how indispensable she was? How brilliant? How ultra-important? It seemed as if Doro only came alive when she was seen.

'What did you arrange with Mother?' she asked, exhausted.

'Doro, sweetie ...' a strangely familiar voice sounded.

A shadow slid into view and the camera wobbled and captured a young man. Yella recognised the actor immediately. She had drooled over Simon Carlson in a hospital television drama and secretly imagined him nursing her back to health when she collapsed on the sofa in the evenings. Since when did he have anything to do with theatre?

'Just a minute,' Doro put him off. 'I'm on the phone with my sister right now. Simon, say hello to my sister.'

Doro turned the camera even further towards him so that it captured his face.

'Hello, sister,' purred the smart registrar from Ward 17.

Yella was annoyed. The two of them were putting on an act and making her a spectator.

'I am sorry, sister, but I need my dear Doro all to myself for a moment. I have to congratulate her on the fabulous costume she has made for me. No one understands me as well as Doro,' said the soft, buttery voice that had so often lulled Yella to sleep. 'She'll be in touch in a minute. Bye, sister.'

And then he just hung up. The phone call raised more questions than answers and left Yella confused. Why had Doro actually called? What about her mother? Yella called back angrily, but only reached the voicemail.

Yella sighed heavily. She loved her own job. Nevertheless, she always felt dwarfed, insignificant and a failure after a call like this. While the costume designer surrounded herself with colourful and famous people and had a glittering career, the colourful spots in Yella's life were more likely to be Lego bricks that she stepped on when she stumbled barefoot towards the coffee machine. Conversations with her older sister sucked the last of her energy out of her. Whenever their paths crossed, the encounter left a stale aftertaste. Shouldn't her life be bigger, more dramatic and colourful? Her boss at the office had only nodded briefly when she handed in her request for holiday leave. Her work would not run away. And no one would ever show up at her desk to thank her effusively for a perfect expense report.

Yella's head was spinning. What would it be like to spend five days with Doro? She looked out of the train window into the dull sky as if she

were looking for confirmation of her suspicions that she was headed straight for a hurricane. Yella developed a startling clairvoyance at times. The vague premonition of entering a new life had taken her by surprise one freezing winter's night when she had opened the door to the seminar room to take part in the writing class of a certain David Ziegler, who had just won all kinds of literary prizes for his debut novel. Three months later, during a weekend with friends in the Uckermark region, Leo was conceived in the greenish light of a duvet with planet motifs on it. A similar inspiration came to her when she had gone to view an apartment in Wedding when she was heavily pregnant. There were dozens of applicants for the apartment in Wedding and in her mind's eye she had pictured two little boys running down the long hallway. When she stepped onto the blue and yellow intercity train to Den Helder on platform 8a in Amsterdam Centraal station, she was overcome by a feeling that her life was about to take another turn. In less than an hour she would be in Bergen. She didn't have the slightest idea where the journey was really going.

#### 4. Searching for traces

Amelie photographed the blue and white town sign of Bergen, which also displayed forthcoming events, to put on Instagram. The Krananburgh Museum would be hosting a new art exhibition, which would include a *Braderie*. *If anyone knows what that is, please post it in the comments*, she typed and was promptly answered by her all-knowing crowd of followers. *A Braderie is a kind of flea market*, wrote a certain zoe\_24.

Amelie absorbed every tiny detail, just as her father would probably have advised her to do. The narrow street that led into the village glowed in strong earth tones. Someone had put a huge amount of effort into contrasting the different types of brick in shades of grey, red, rust and ochre on the roads, car parks, pavements and kerbs. Even the zebra crossings were not just painted on, but artistically designed with two different types of stone. Amelie stopped to capture the special patterns for her followers. What slave labour it must have been to pave and carefully grout all those streets. Or did the wind and the sand carry out such jobs in Holland? On the ground she read the inscription *Houd 1,5 meter afstand, ook onderweg*, which reminded her of the Covid times. The bricks on the ground merged into the bricks of the houses, which, just like the farms she had cycled past, were often single storey. The second floor was inside the sloping roof.

For the past few years, Amelie had been moving from one temporary home to the next. She had tried out all types of living arrangements. Sharing large flats, sharing small flats, living together with her sister Doro, with a boyfriend, with a lover, with a girlfriend, in different towns, in a village, in a terraced house, an old building, in a tiny room and in a loft with a roof terrace. She had not yet found the right place. A little house all to herself would be her ultimate dream. She could picture herself closing medieval-looking wooden shutters with red diamonds on a white background every evening and retreating into her cocoon, which she didn't have to share with anyone.

The holiday home that her mother had rented for the family was located on the outskirts of the village, halfway between Bergen Binnen and Bergen aan Zee. There was enough time before her sisters arrived, to take an initial walk through the village. She parked her bicycle, shouldered her backpack and, after just a few metres, stopped outside a strangely untidy shop window. It took her a moment to realise that she was not studying the eccentric range of goods on offer in a shop but was unashamedly gazing into a private living room. Floor-to-ceiling windows dominated the front of houses in the town centre. For privacy some were covered with opaque foil, which apparently came in hundreds of different forms, but many of the huge windows were not even covered by curtains, so that in the narrow streets, Amelie felt as if she were walking through strangers' homes. She could not tear her eyes away from the fascinating glimpses of Dutch family life. Amelie watched children building Lego,

people in home offices in front of their computers and a young man who had dozed off on the sofa, and was conversely observed herself by at least four cats, a dog and a chubby baby whose playpen was placed in front of the windowsill. How did Dutch people do it? Did they look away? What must it be like to live here, when the neighbours could check in passing whether you had tidied up, where your sofa was, how many books you had and what TV show you were watching? Between the shade-giving parasols, she spotted an old man in a reclining chair, armed with a paring knife and potato, a cooking pot between his knees. A little girl stood beside him, pointing to a cobblestone with a purple hand and the enigmatic inscription *Zwaai je mee?*

*'Je moet swwien,'* Amelie said and waved her hand to greet the villagers. Then the girl gestured invitingly back and forth between Amelie and the man. Did that mean that she should wave too? Amelie didn't even know the man. The girl pointed to the paving stone and waved again. Hesitantly, Amelie did the same. The old man waved his potato happily and gave her a conspiratorial wink. The girl nodded contentedly.

Amused, Amelie continued on her way and almost ran into a window cleaner who was probably making a fortune here.

The private houses were replaced by more and more shops. Village life was now crammed into the small spaces between them. Amelie continued, weaving in and out of racks of summer clothes and rain jackets, trolleys full of beach toys, balls and kites; in between was a kiosk selling Dutch and German newspapers, magnets and key rings in the shape of



tulips, canal houses, clogs, windmills and cheese. Pedestrians shared the pavement with the displays of the greengrocer, the vases of a florist, signs advertising *Koffie en Thee*, or the latest offerings from a *Makelaar*. Amelie was amused by the notices in the window marked *Te huur*. It sounded funny and was probably referring to rental properties, because the ads next to it said *Te koop*, which undoubtedly meant the properties were for sale. And, she was horrified to realise, for incredible amounts. The little house with the red-and-white shutters was unaffordable for Amelie. The ads in the estate agent's window and the fact that the boutique shops were selling surprisingly high-priced designer fashion revealed that Bergen was an expensive place.

Amelie felt overwhelmed by these impressions. What astonished her the most, however, was the fact that she recognised absolutely nothing. This was the main street. She had spent every summer here as a child. Why didn't her gaze land on something that looked even remotely familiar? Her eyes flitted through the narrow streets, gliding over houses and street signs, shops and restaurants, always hoping to identify some familiar corner. There were inviting restaurants everywhere. A few rays of sunshine were enough to entice several undaunted customers to breakfast on the terraces of the cafés. North Sea dwellers were hardy. Amelie meandered between the tables and caught the aroma of hot fried snacks and fresh coffee. Snippets of German, Dutch and English conversation wafted in with the screeching of the seagulls. The intrepid birds circled above the outside areas of the pubs and loudly fought over every morsel

they could get their hands on. French cuisine was popular and featured several times, but you could also eat Japanese, Indonesian, Thai, Cantonese, Brazilian or Italian. Which restaurant had her parents taken her and her sisters to in the past? Or had they cooked at the campsite every evening? Why were all the details hidden behind a wall of fog?

'You have repressed almost everything that reminds you of the accident,' Helen had stated soberly when Amelie had complained that she could barely remember any experiences with her father.

The no-nonsense scientist was no help at all when it came to tackling into the painful areas of the family story. 'I have no interest whatsoever in digging up the history,' was how Helen deflected any enquiries about their shared past. 'For me, the subject is closed.'

Once they had shared their mother's womb; now Amelie often couldn't believe how different they were. While Amelie had a feminine style and was proud of her long blonde locks, Helen had always worn her black hair short. Amelie preferred colourful flowered dresses, Helen chose timeless classic clothes in black and white. When Amelie wanted to play the flute as a child, Helen insisted on learning the drums. Even at boarding school, their paths rarely crossed. While Amelie had a busy social life with lots of friends, Helen had managed to get into the boys' football team. Amelie cracked jokes that Helen never laughed at. Conversely, Amelie understood nothing about the science books that Helen loved so much. Everywhere she read about the intimate relationship fraternal twins could develop. Her special bond with her twin sister was limited to occupying

different poles in the universe and being held together this way. At a maximum distance.

Presumably Helen was right in her theory. The accident had clearly traumatised her to such an extent that she had placed all memories of the village right at the back of her mind. Unlike her sisters, Amelie was convinced that the invitation had something to do with the past and her father. Why else would the family gather in this fateful place? What secret did her mother want to share with them? Amelie could hardly wait to fill in the blind spots. She was relieved that her mother had apparently finally managed to bring herself to talk to them about the past after many years of silence. She hoped so much to discover her lost childhood in Holland. The memories would make her a more complete person and magically untangle the knots in her life.

Amelie settled down on the terrace of a typical Dutch pub to soak up a bit of the atmosphere before cycling to the cottage. She opened her purse, did a quick calculation and despite being quite broke, decided to order an Aperol Spritz. This was not particularly typical of the country she was in, but the bright orange colouring could pass for a nod to Holland. Some people drink to make the world beautiful, she drank herself poor. What did it matter? In contrast to her sisters, who had found their place in life with families and jobs, she had no fixed address, no mortgage or even any furniture. She was as free as a bird. Unfortunately.

Amelie scrolled through the new messages. Yella had sent her a picture from the train. She was the most unpretentious of the Thalberg

sisters and still wore her straight brown hair shoulder-length as it had been in school. Sometimes Amelie suspected that Yella was not even aware of the special charisma that she had. While Doro blurted out everything that came to her head without a filter, and Helen formulated her opinions clearly and unambiguously, Yella was surrounded by an aura of inscrutability. As if she carried a secret with her. Or was it the grief she felt for her father that was forever reflected in her eyes? Yella had always been their father's favourite. And Father had been dead for twenty years now. Amelie counted on Yella above all others when it came to completing the rudimentary picture she had left of her father. She just had to dare to break through the decades of silence and broach the painful subject that the family preferred to avoid.

*In orange mode*, she wrote on Instagram and posted a few live pictures of the glowing drink with the clinking ice cubes and the terrace of the pub. She panned the camera for a panoramic view, until she got stuck for a second on an older couple showing off their infatuation in public like a couple of teenagers. The wind carried their laughter across the tables. Although the man had his back to her, Amelie could tell from his exuberant gestures just how much enthusiasm he was putting into his story. An orange raincoat hung over the back of his chair with the peeling slogan *You'll never walk alone. Nijmegen 2012*. The woman burst out laughing and wiped tears from the corner of her eyes. The waiter brought a bottle of white wine to the table. The two clinked glasses, exchanged a kiss, laughed and gesticulated wildly. They clearly had something to

celebrate. Something that had happened in Nijmegen in 2012? Or the birth of a grandchild? Their retirement? A lottery win? Thirty-five years of marriage? Some good news in the family? That it was Wednesday? Maybe they were just celebrating that they were alive, together. Why weren't her parents allowed to enjoy the spring sunshine and the moment on the terrace? The matter-of-factness with which the woman plucked lint from her husband's jumper and let her hand rest on his upper arm touched her. Suddenly the man turned around, as if he could feel the yearning glances behind him. Amelie stopped filming, startled. A suggestive wink was enough to dispel the idealised image she had formed of her parents' future in an instant. Who could guarantee that they would still have been married? Who could say her that the marriage would not long since have become a sham? Who knew what they had been spared? Perhaps their mother's first marriage would have ended up like her second? The hasty union had not been a success. In the end her mother had been irritated by everything her second husband did: the way he coughed to clear his throat, the way he set his tea cup down too loudly on the saucer, the way he opened or closed a door or simply just the fact that he existed. Since the divorce ten years ago, Henriette had been living alone. Would she still have been happy with Johannes Thalberg today? Amelie had no idea what her parents' relationship had really been like. Another void that needed to be filled. Because she had nothing better to do, she added a series of hashtags to the video: #Holland, #Nijmegen2012, #couplegoals,

#youllneverwalkalone, #goalsinlife. When was her family finally going to arrive?

## 5. A look to infinity

Yella's suitcase jolted over the uneven pavement. Her heart was pounding as she turned into the green gorge of Rondelaan. The street was just wide enough for a single car to fit through. Henriette Thalberg had obviously spent a lot of money on renting a holiday house in this expensive neighbourhood. To the left and right, monumental villas from the last century peeked through the trees, surrounded by park-like grounds that presumably needed armies of gardeners to maintain them. A breathtaking snow-white bungalow with gigantic front windows gleamed among them. The luxury property unquestionably could have made the front cover of any international architecture magazine. The air smelled of spring and money.

Yella checked the street plan on the invitation again. House number 4 was at the top of a tiny alley. If she hadn't spotted Helen's silver convertible, she probably wouldn't have recognised the overgrown gate as an entrance. Yella breathed a sigh of relief when she realised that her mother had not gone so far in her nostalgia as to choose the same house in which they had spent their very last holiday in Holland. For years the family had rented a so-called *stacaravan* on the campsite. Unlike caravans, these spacious mobile homes were not approved for road traffic and were placed on the campsite by a transport company, where they remained in the same spot for the entire season. Only in their very last summer had the

family had enough money to rent a proper holiday home in Bergen. It had been a bad omen. Fortunately, their current accommodation was nothing like their former holiday home.

The blue-and-white painted wooden house with the large front window nestled in a waving sea of green. The wind swept ceaselessly through the seemingly random wilderness of grasses and shrubs, which were probably the result of careful planning and many years of care. The idyll seemed haphazardly thrown together, untidy, impetuously wild and at the same time orderly. Yella, whose botanical knowledge was limited to potted plants and visits to her parents-in-law's allotment, had only a rudimentary idea of how much effort it took to make a garden look as if the wind had brought seeds indiscriminately and scattered them liberally over the flowerbeds. The dark trees lent the house something melancholy. There was no sign of her sisters.

Suddenly Yella was in a terrible hurry. A strange fever gripped her. She quickly deposited the heavy suitcase on the terrace and rushed off without a second glance at the house and garden. She would have plenty of opportunity to explore the holiday home later.

With long strides, she crossed the garden and realised that she had calculated correctly. Like so many properties on the north side of the village, the property had a rear exit. She opened the squeaky garden gate expectantly as if it were the enchanted door to her childhood.

Her shoes sank into the soft ground with a squelching sound when she stepped into the darkness of the forest that rose up just beyond the



garden. An indefinable rushing sound came from afar. She was not sure whether it was the busy and fateful road that connected Bergen to the beach? The transition between the village and the nature reserve for which Bergen was famous was fluid.

Almost automatically, her feet found the winding path that meandered gently up and down through a patch of forest toward the dunes and the North Sea. These narrow paths had been the start of every one of her holidays in Holland. She wouldn't give up the beloved ritual that heralded the start of the holidays for anything in the world. While her mother unpacked and organised their things on the campsite uninterrupted, her father would start running with the four girls. Not until they were standing on the top of the highest dune, and the North Sea with its endless expanse lay before them, did they feel they had actually arrived in Holland. Every summer Yella and her sisters raced each other. Doro, with her long legs, was usually the first to catch that incomparable first glimpse of the sea.

Today Yella ran without any rivals. She took her time to take in the landscape. Above her, the young green of the oaks, birches and alders formed a protective roof. In the eternal struggle to survive under adverse conditions, the trees clawed the sandy soil and stretched their knotted arms curiously towards her. Branches twined into her path like the tentacles of an octopus. Yella greeted the eccentric trees like long-lost friends. She stroked her hand over rough bark, traced the wondrous shapes and inhaled the spicy exhalations of the moss. The cool, earthy

smell of the past drifted into her nose. She sensed and inhaled the air of the forest, noticed the chirping of the birds and listened to the gentle rustling of the fresh, lush green leaves, which whispered secrets to her.

'Each of these trees tells you its story, Yella. You just have to listen,' her father had told her.

Their unusual growth gave a vivid account of their tireless battle with the ocean wind, which forced them into bizarre contortions. Every branch showed the will to survive with which they withstood the constant onslaught of wind, rain, storm and lack of water. Unlike their fellow trees in the centre of Bergen, which stretched their branches to the sky, no two trees were alike here. They would never reach their typical size, but they were tough survivors who could be brought to their knees by the storm and still not be defeated. The force of the wind pressed the oaks to the ground again and again, and yet they tried each day anew to reach for the clouds.

An indistinct whisper sounded through the leaves. Suddenly she had the strange feeling that she was no longer alone. The mixture of overtiredness and overexcitement sharpened Yella's senses. The laughter of a child resounded eerily through the trees. From afar, she heard girls' voices. Was someone calling her name? She thought she detected movement and spun around. Was there a shadow flitting between the tree trunks? Had a branch snapped behind her? Was something rustling in the undergrowth? She remembered the much-loved fear factor when they had played hide and seek among the ghostly trees in the last light of day. As

they had done then, her eyes scanned her surroundings feverishly. She felt as if her father might leap out laughing from behind one of the bizarre trees at any moment. Without her two little boys at her side demanding that she race around all the time, she transformed back into the girl she had once been. It was a shock to find little Yella inside her again.

Involuntarily, she quickened her pace. The wooded area merged gently into the dunes. The path to the beach was long enough to give her soul the time it needed to settle into the holiday resort.

The path bent through a particularly enchanted group of trees, one more tiny incline: Yella caught her breath when the view finally opened up. Radiant hills of yellow and green ran in gentle waves to the horizon. Patches of light flitted across the sandy mountains as if they were in a hurry. The sun teased and tempted them. It crept out from behind the clouds and lingered as if to draw Yella's attention to a particularly beautiful tree, painted shadows and lines, tickled her nose, only to disappear and then reappear a few metres away. With a thick paintbrush, it dabbed a thousand shades of yellow, green and ochre on the sand and coloured the landscape with a confident stroke. The wind blew cold around her ears and left a hint of salt on her lips. Yella put up her hood and snuggled deeper into her jacket, which suddenly felt perfect. Her subconscious, which had suggested winter clothes, had been right. How she had missed that feeling of being warm and cold at the same time. How she had missed this landscape and the Summer Sisters. As a child, she couldn't get there fast enough; now Yella enjoyed every single metre that separated her from the

sea. The stiff breeze blew away all remnants of the central heating that had permeated her body during the Berlin winter.

Her bottle of water glugged gently with every movement. Every step brought a change in the view, in the ground, in the temperature. A few trees, a sheltering bank of sand that kept out the cold air, and already she felt compelled to undo the zip of her jacket - only to feel the full force of the wind a few minutes later. The landscape ahead of her was undergoing a constant transformation. There were white and grey dunes, whose troughs had been quickly colonised by ground-covering plants and grasses. Alongside heather and gorse, only the most resistant plants survived under these hostile conditions.

Yella paused, let her clammy fingers glide over the dune grass and photographed the tiny flowers on the ground. She listened, smelled and felt her way into the deserted landscape and, with every breath she took, her mind quietened and she found her way back into her body. Walking is supposed to be good for quiet reflection. Here in the dunes, Yella easily succeeded in putting aside the gnawing thoughts about the reasons for the invitation. The wind was blowing all around her, but she felt an inner peace for the first time that day. Step by step she walked across the sea of dunes and allowed her gaze to roam freely over the landscape. It was easier to breathe far from the desk that kept her imprisoned during the day, far from her daily family life with its big and small worries, far from the big city where everyone was always in a hurry.

The last time she had walked along this path, she had been a child. Ever since she had received the letter, she had wondered what it would feel like to return to this emotionally charged place.

Her mother's house in Cologne meant nothing to her any more; Berlin was forever the new city in which she could still get lost, but here, to her own surprise, she found a feeling that she had long thought gone forever. The salty sea air tasted like home. She had been so afraid to return here. Even in her wildest dreams, she had never expected this landscape to give her a feeling of home. She had no idea how much she had been hungering deep inside for this haven. Yella pulled out her mobile phone and sent a few photographs to David. *I have arrived*, she wrote. The words were true, in every sense.

## 6. First!

Yella could already hear the sound of the waves from afar. Only a few hundred metres separated her from her goal. The path merged with the tarmacked cycle path, only to suddenly break off into golden sand after a few steps on an uphill slope. This last dune was the cut off point for cyclists. Yella was taken aback when she spotted the blue and yellow bike from Amelie's Instagram stories. Her heart leapt with happiness until she remembered that there must have been dozens of such striking bikes around. Apparently, the Dutch railway's rental bikes were extremely popular.

Disappointed, she turned away, when suddenly, out of nowhere, a dark shadow appeared next to her.

'See you at the top,' a voice murmured to her.

She wheeled around and was surprised to recognise her little sister, who grinned at her.

'Where did you spring from?' she called delightedly.

'I'll tell you at the top,' Helen called, passing her at a rapid pace without giving her another glance.

She, too, had remembered the old family ritual of taking a look at the sea immediately on arrival. And as the first of the four Summer Sisters, of course.

'Catch me if you can,' Helen called out good-humouredly.

Yella was always amazed at how grown-up her sister seemed. The wind ruffled her short, tousled hair, which gave her an aloof coolness and androgynous look. Helen hated colour, skirts, make-up and fashionable frills. She wore her clothes like a uniform. Now, too, the usual bright white blouse with a man's collar and a pair of slim black ankle-length trousers, revealing immaculate ankles and elegant lace-up shoes, showed beneath her open straight-cut blazer coat.

Yella gathered up the last of her energy and tried with all her might to catch up with Helen.

'That's unfair,' she cried.

Energetically she braced herself against the wind, but in the soft sand, every step was laborious and sweaty. It was almost impossible to push off on the shifting and uneven ground. The soft sand sucked up all Yella's energy and swallowed up her feet, while Helen seemed to climb the slope effortlessly.

'I wasn't ready,' Yella called after her. 'And besides, I have a double handicap. I've had two children.'

Helen just laughed. 'That's an advantage. You're used to running after someone.'

Yella was suddenly gripped by sisterly rivalry. Maybe her muscles were remembering past races. A couple of oncoming children jumped aside in horror and watched her in astonishment.

Yella dared to dive. She caught Helen's foot. Her sister lost her balance and brought Yella down with her. Together they rolled a little

and landed at the level of the little girls. The children stared at them with their mouths agape. Clearly, they had never seen such childish adults before. Yella stuck her tongue out at them. The seagulls above their heads laughed at them.

'Spoilsport,' Helen snorted.

'That's unfair,' Yella panted with laughter. 'That's a red card.'

'You're playing mean,' Helen said.

Helen was the first to get to her feet. But the sand showed no mercy. Helen toppled forwards, gripped into the soft ground, scrambled back to her feet. Her foot slipped and sent a shower of sand right into Yella's face. She coughed, spluttered, gasped and rummaged for her water bottle. Helen sat down next to her to wait until she had rinsed the sand out of her mouth.

'I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean to do it.'

But by then Yella was starting up again. She had the advantage now. Helen started up immediately, wanted to go after her, but got her foot stuck in the sand. Yella laughed. A second later an elegant shoe flew past her head, then a second one. Helen had given up.

With one last effort, Yella reached the crest of the dune. Breathing heavily, she let her gaze wander. The view was so overwhelming that it almost took her breath away. The North Sea stretching into infinity, the roaring waves that broke onto the golden sandy beach stirred her anew each time. Only a fine line separated the deep blue of the sea from the



blue of the sky, which was delicately daubed with white balls of cotton wool. Somewhere out there, water and air blended into one.

The world lay at her feet, and yet she felt like a small sand grain in the universe. A cosy feeling of homeliness rose up inside her, as if someone had put a hot water bottle on her tummy. Was it the special colour of the sky, which seemed vaster in Holland than in any other place on earth, or the peculiar smell of the ocean, or the sound of the waves or the whisper of the wind that blew ceaselessly through the sea grass? Light as a feather and bristling at the same time, the wind made sure that the hillock on which she was standing did not blow away.

Helen sank into the sand beside her.

'You won,' she said. 'Well done.'

Her voice was as cool and pared down as her clothes. They remained there in silence for what felt like an eternity, silently taking in the surroundings that were associated with so many memories. The westerly wind relentlessly washed waves that had travelled far from England onto the beach.

For twenty years, Yella had avoided this place from her childhood like the plague. During the entire trip so far, she had felt like a rabbit that willingly surrendered itself to a snake, but now a melancholy sense of wellbeing washed over her. Why couldn't she capture this fleeting moment like a ship in a bottle? Once in a while, when everything went wrong, she would uncork the bottle and smell it. Yella couldn't get enough of the waves that, spurred on by the wind, were piling up, growing, joined

by bigger and even bigger ones, then eventually thundering onto the beach. Even in her childhood, the sea had exerted a magical attraction on Yella. No wind or weather had ever been able to keep her away from taking the path through the woods and dunes after a hurried breakfast to find shells, bird's eggs, shark's teeth, starfish, colourful shards of glass and mysterious treasure that the waves had left for her the night before. The things she found adorned the castles and canals that she built in the sand with her sisters, decorated the improvised museum that they set up every summer in front of their *stacaravan*, and were taken back home to Cologne in an empty ice cream carton before settling to gather dust under her bed and to be disposed of one day by her mother. The magic of the place could not be exported. Images surfaced in her mind of learning to swim in water with a temperature of 15 degrees, or flying kites, or wrapping herself up in the thick Dutch towels that they used each year and snuggling into a sandpit to devour thick books.

'Why did we wait so long to come back here?' Yella asked, her voice laden with emotion.

Nowhere else did the air taste so much of salt and childhood. Or was it the tears that were pouring down Yella's cheeks? She had spent holidays on the Adriatic, backpacked in the Gulf of Thailand, swum in the Black Sea and explored Baltic beaches. Nothing could compare to the austere beauty of the North Sea. The sight of it hurt because she immediately thought of David and the children. How she would have loved to share her happiness with the three people who were closest to her

heart. Yella was simply no longer used to thinking as an autonomous person. How was she going to shake off this tunnel vision that she had as a mother, these permanent phantom pains? That was the strange thing about children: from the very second that they had placed the wet bundle called Leo on her stomach in the delivery room, her heart had been beating outside her own body. Without her two sons, she felt like an amputee. In her student days, she had driven to Italy on her own, had travelled through Europe on an Interrail ticket. One plus one with David made four, and now she felt like less than one when she was alone. Everywhere her eyes alighted on things that she would have loved to share with her two boys, as if beautiful moments only mattered when Leo and Nick were by her side. The image before her eyes blurred.

'I didn't think you would actually come on your own,' Helen said.

'David would have liked to come,' said Yella, as if she were obliged to apologise. 'But he couldn't because of the children.'

That was complete sugar coating. The discussion about the invitation and her mother had turned into an argument that had lasted days. Like boxers, they had both prepared for the next round in their relationship dispute from their respective corners. The air had not been cleared yet, but Yella had decided not to mention her relationship problems to the family. She stared at the waves as if they required her full attention.

'I didn't even ask Paul,' Helen said. 'It's bad enough if one person has to change all their plans.'

Yella was constantly impressed by Helen's clear attitude. While Yella always bent over backwards to please everyone, Helen made her opinions clear, however unpopular they might be. Although seventeen minutes younger than harmony-seeking Amelie and therefore the youngest of the four of them, she had been considered the most independent of the Thalberg sisters since childhood. Helen's professional life gave her more freedom, but she hated surprises and last-minute changes to her schedule. She loved order, plans and reliability. It annoyed her no end if someone else took up her time without asking. Even, and especially, if it was her mother.

Helen stared at her overtly, as if trying to read what she was really thinking. Yella feared her youngest sister's dissecting gaze and sharp questions. Yet Helen herself, introverted and chronically quiet evaded all enquiries about her life.

'She is a vampire,' Doro liked to accuse her. 'She sucks everyone dry and gives nothing away.'

She wasn't entirely wrong about that. Helen had introduced Paul to the family only after they had been together for two years. Yella nearly fell off her chair when she saw her former classmate standing by her mother's Christmas tree, even though she had witnessed how Paul, with whom she had studied architecture, had first met Helen at a party in her student flat in Berlin. He had stood around on the dance floor like an impressive but misplaced piece of furniture. While a boisterous polonaise meandered through all the rooms, he had fled to the tiny kitchen balcony, where he

bumped into Helen, a declared non-dancer, who was visiting her sister at the time. 'My knees are not suited to rhythmic movement,' he claimed to this day. 'I can't put anyone through that sight.'

'Our mother will be disappointed that he didn't come,' Yella said. 'Sometimes I think she likes Paul more than us.'

It was true that Henriette Thalberg was an avowed fan of Helen's boyfriend. How many times had Yella, a college dropout, had to listen to her saying: 'My son-in-law is so talented, so successful, he stuck it out, he never gives up.'?

Helen was no more married than Yella, but David had clearly not earned the title of son-in-law in her mother's eyes. Yella took the praise of Paul personally and out of habit interpreted it as a criticism of herself. Paul had achieved everything her mother had wanted from her daughter. And acted as Helen's foreign minister. While Helen kept her cards close to her chest, Paul was the declared darling of the family. The architect who was committed to sustainable building was, in contrast to Helen, extremely communicative and genuinely interested in all the details of the Thalberg family and the sisters' lives. He may not have been a gifted dancer, but he was extremely nice. It was a pity that he wasn't there.

'What do you think it is? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?' Yella picked up the thread of the WhatsApp discussion.

'No idea,' Helen said.

'What do you think?' Yella insisted on an answer. 'What does your intuition say?'

'You know our mother,' Helen said cryptically.

Conversations with her little sister could be decidedly awkward, for Helen was not one to engage in small talk, gossip or wild speculation.

'I hate it when she bosses us around,' she suddenly blurted out. 'We are not allowed to have a say. Not in the place nor in the time. And if we're unlucky, we'll have to be eternally grateful.'

Yella was amazed at the rage that burst so suddenly from her sister. Dumbfounded, she eyed Helen.

'Our mother leads her life, I lead mine. We don't speak very often,' she added.

'Amelie thinks that's exactly why she wants to bring us all back together,' Yella insisted.

Helen said nothing.

'She will have a good reason for getting us all together here,' Yella added.

'Our mother rarely has good reasons for anything,' Helen said.

She dared to say what Yella had often tried to suppress. Helen made no secret of how difficult her relationship with her mother was.

'Why did you even come?' Yella blurted out, irritated.

'She's our mother,' said Helen.

The things she didn't say were more powerful than any words she might have said. Yella was often annoyed with her mother, but Helen was seething. Her sister jumped up abruptly and vigorously brushed the sand from her clothes.

'I know why I'm not interested in digging around in the past,' she said. 'I don't want to waste my life being angry.'

'Let's make the best of it,' said Yella.

'The accident was the most awful thing that ever happened to me. It took me years to recover. I don't feel like reminiscing about that day. What is the point of being stuck in the past?'

Yella sighed. The conversation had provided a foretaste of what awaited her in the days ahead. How complicated would it get once they were all there? Maybe she would have been better off staying in Berlin with her three boys.

'Let's go to the house,' she said, wearily.

[END OF SAMPLE]