

# The Easy Life

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Sunday Morning

It's just the wasted years so close behind

Watch out, the world's behind you

*The Velvet Underground*

## Part One

## COUNTDOWN

And the bird mounted the bird. Their beaks gleamed gaping in the light, their heads lurched hectic in the air. The rear one flaunted his outspread wings, flared his pennons, cawed and spewed and rubbed himself soberly against the other bird's feathers. Were they blackbirds or ravens? Too quick to say for sure. You'd have to hear the mating calls, but the window kept the echoes outside. No sooner did Kathrin realize what she'd glimpsed than it was over, and the birds whished away. She swallowed.

Kathrin liked animal sex scenes. She was fascinated by the *Discovery Channel* of the world, couldn't look away when the TV beasts in herds and hordes and packs and schools and swarms and colonies conjoined, tangled, pulled apart wildly and colorfully and apparently fatally and multiplied through mating. The birds and the bees. Individual instances were inevitably instructive.

"We could use a bit of filth," Catharina said. "Yes indeed."

Their eyes crossed.

"Huh?"

Catharina had clearly followed Kathrin's gaze. "Heat, but for real, not just going through the motions like the jackdaws there. *All that chirping for nothing.*"

Kathrin laughed, but found the final remark out of place, especially the way she'd just blurted it out in front of Lale, who was Catharina's godchild, after all. Then Kathrin thought of the sex last night with Jan. It might have been the first time they'd had sex in a year, but that didn't make it less wearisome, compulsory, a PhysEd class, wrangling, tussling, and nonetheless (when she gave in, *because* she gave in?) Kathrin did come. She was thinking about someone else when

she did. Jan needed longer, that too was a somber, almost depressing act of violence. Nor was she exactly thrilled to have his semen sprayed on her belly. She'd almost found him disgusting. No, she *had* been disgusted. Her sleep afterward was fitful.

"Basically they're just fulfilling an evolutionary imperative," Kathrin said pointedly.

"What evolutionary imperative is that?" Catharina asked rhetorically, in other words, not waiting for an answer, and turned back to the gigantic TV.

Jan's television debut was coming up. After the regular host had a skiing accident, they'd needed an emergency replacement for the next three or four weeks, and instead of hurriedly casting some third-rate anchor of the kind constantly gearing up in the starting blocks, they'd decided to just pluck Jan, the deputy editor-in-chief of the current affairs program, from the channel's upper echelons and wedge him into the role of presenter.

Now everyone was sitting around the TV as though around a campfire: Kathrin and Catharina, the latter's Scandinavian lover Lasse, Kathrin's sister Saskia, Kathrin's children Lale and Severin, and a friend of theirs whose name Kathrin hadn't really caught, *Torsven* or something like that. It was just before six pm.

Ads were running, the flatscreen beamed clips into the world and into their brains. In the tastefully decorated living room, aided by abundant indirect lighting, their faces, illuminated by the LCD monitor, were like those in a painting by Bellini. The other painting, the real one, that Kathrin and Jan had bought for their wedding, with its slender, strangely ethereal maiden posed before a deep, starry sky, hung over them and observed the scene from on high like a divinity.

In the studio, the countdown was underway, and Jan was touched up one last time (by a man who had wanted to be a filmmaker, as he just had to tell Jan at the start of their conversation).

The images of the day shot through Jan's head, images of his day, too, even his life, jumbled, eidetic snapshots from the retina, whirling madly together, temporally disordered. Wait for the red light. As a joke, the team called the area in its vicinity the "red light district." For Jan though, the red light meant panic.

For Kathrin: nerves. How would her husband present himself? Would his on-camera debut go smoothly? Could Jan stand the pressure, the effects of which the camera lens would pick up and disperse and radiate to the public?

Despite all this, Lale and Severin were bored: puberty had already waylaid them, bringing problems and the usual pimples, Lale's little scars were already mostly healed, but tubby Severin's acne was in full bloom just then. Like pale marionettes, the two of them sat there in the corner, peas in a pod.

Catharina and her sinister lover Lasse, who seemed to Kathrin to be flirting with her, sat there like conspiracy theorists of love. He had a long red beard, her hair stood up electrically in curling-iron curls, hip though, and they smiled at everyone the whole time in this esoterically nebulous way; the pose was so draining, Kathrin actually started to think she was in a smoke-filled room full of hippies. She'd never been to Catharina's polyamorous commune, but she took a skeptical view of each specimen, each resident. Particularly of bearded silently flirting men with the bright chubby cheeks of alcoholics.

"When's he gonna come on?" Lale asked.

"Right now," Kathrin said and waved her off.

An ad for cream cheese. Alpine summits, Viagra-blue sky, then a family, then crisp bread lathered with the aforementioned cream cheese, which shared a name with a city and a film. Then black. Jingle. It was time.

... *seven... six...* Jan cleared his throat... *five... four... four... four again... three...* Attention, focus, Jan!... *two...* calm, serious face, please, no, no, just go... *one.* Hold your breath, Jan. And go. The world collapses, only the camera remains. Jan twitched. *Zero.*

Camera rolling. Family plus the retinue of strangers held their breath. There he was. Oddly distinct and older than in reality, realer and at the same time more artificial: more wrinkles, but at the same time, smoother. A highly precise mask, more details visible than in reality. Far too much detail, everything, him, the backgrounds. Plus a lack of dimensions.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to *Skyline*, your *Up!* current affairs program: people, places, points of view.” His smile seemed to want to slide off his face.

When it was over, Jan went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. Looking in the mirror, he felt he’d made a misstep. But there was no going back. He was public now.

In the meanwhile, his family discussed his appearance.

“Whatever.”

“Whatever? It was actually quite splendid.”

“Yeah, but like—I don’t know.”

“Did he have a zit?”

“I felt like the debut was sort of fumbling, I guess.”

“I mean, it was his very first one.”

“For me, it wasn’t Dad.”

“Of course it was Dad,” Kathrin said.

Ad runs: *Mon Chéri.*

## AS ALWAYS

Two weeks after his first turn as presenter, immediately after receiving the life-sapping photo message, fate had it that Jan Drescher got zapped by a police radar. His glans was itching from the sex the night before, but pleasantly, as he found it both animal and tender. Since he'd been on TV, they were finally having sex again—and he had no complaints there. Weird how the act itself is hard to remember, he thought, and it was odd to him how success and screen presence could make a person sexy, and it occurred to him that just thinking you're attractive, if you aren't totally wide of the mark, actually does make you more attractive. That was the draw of self-confidence, a banality that never ceased to amaze. Pinned in the stares of women on the street who evidently recognized him, he strutted across the sidewalk with a curious poise: firm steps, but radiating modesty. And he went on letting their stares pin him.

In the car, as an experiment, he looked a woman straight in her face for a long time, a pedestrian cutie by the crossing light, but when, after a moment's irritation, their eyes met for a second time, he couldn't take her gaze any longer and turned hastily in the other direction, to hide his insistence. Soon afterward, the traffic turned thicker.

The photo that arrived later together with his ticket showed his face, blurry but clearly bewildered, looking down at the display of his smartphone, surrounded by the vague grey of the street, and lower down, harshly lit, the license plate of his SUV.

No photo captured the fact that one, two seconds later, he nearly ran off the road and caused what would surely would have been a devastating accident. This fact, or rather the probability of this fact or the fact of this probability, abides solely in his memory, perhaps along with the fading recollection of the teacher and her charges making jaunty racket crossing the sidewalk in rows of three just as Jan shot toward them.



He would definitely have taken out at least one of them had he not at the last moment jerked the wheel and with a not at all spectacular but treacherous change of course put the sport utility vehicle back on the right track.

He didn't even skid.

But instead of driving onward, callous and coolheaded, as would have been typical for him, Jan stomped on the brakes. Maybe the adrenaline rush was too great even for him, and had downshifted his system to survival mode and compelled it instinctively and momentarily to revoke his right to pilot a vehicle.

He squealed down the street for a considerable distance and came to a stop at a traffic light that just then had turned red. Jan revved the engine once more and maneuvered the SUV as elegantly as possible onto the side of the road. Then he wiped his forehead and eyes and tried to get a grip. What had just happened? Picture, flash, lurch. And then stillness. That was how it was. He was still holding his smartphone in his hand, the picture open.

Someone was hammering on the glass. Pale, clammy, still not quite there, Jan glimpsed a woman's seething face and rolled down the window.

"Could you try and pay attention, man!" the teacher's face chided him. "Eyes glued to your phone, what else! You almost ran those kids over!"

"Uh, I... Sorry," Jan stammered.

"Pay attention!" The woman had a kind of beehive hairdo: a throwback to her hipper days or a foretaste of her approaching spinsterhood?

"I'll watch out next time."

"You'd better!"

"Look now, nothing happened."

“Thank god! The children are terrified! Those goddamn phones, they ought to be against the law! It already is!”

“What is?”

“You’re not allowed to use them while driving! They can arrest you!”

“Take a breath, lady. I had the whole thing under control, I hit the brakes,” Jan said, trying to pacify her.

“You sure did, like a psycho, in this tank of yours!”

Silence. A tank—verdict of the lower-middle-class haters. Just don’t talk back, Jan thought, let the whole thing go.

“Don’t you have anything to say?”

Jan shook his head dully.

“Good.” She calmed down a bit. “We got lucky this time, so. Pay attention though, I’m telling you, keep your eyes on the road.”

“I will. Promise.”

The teacher or chaperone or kindergarten assistant was about to turn around. Her skeptical gaze roved the interior of the SUV, the leather upholstery, the touchscreen radio, the entire crusty ambience of affluence, then lingered on his smartphone. Jan was still holding it, but listlessly, like a long lost remote that no longer turned on any appliance.

“What’s that?” the woman asked.

“What?”

“That, right there.”

Jan didn’t understand at first, then he did. He wanted to say something, but she beat him to it.

“You pig! You pervert!”

“Listen, this is—”

“I know perfectly well what that is. I’m calling the police.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I certainly do! And I very much doubt that’s your son!” She was now wielding her own cellphone, but like a kitchen knife.

“No, it isn’t.”

“And you just come right out and say it. Disgusting.”

“You have no clue what you’re talking about, and whatever you’re assuming, you’re wrong. I’m going to drive off now.”

“You better stay here.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

She waved her ancient Nokia phone and made vague gestures suggesting she was about to call the cops. She clearly wished to give Jan the opportunity to explain himself.

“Fine. Should I tell you who that is?”

“Yes.” She glared at him.

“It’s me.”

“What do you mean, that’s you?”

“Yeah, me. That boy is me.”

These words surprised even him. He hadn’t thought them through to the end, otherwise he wouldn’t have uttered them so resolutely.

He could tell she believed him, even if she didn’t want to. She lowered her phone.

“But...”

“I never saw it before either, you know. And I’m not really sure what to think of it.”

Silence. Behind here, the children had already forgotten the incident and were breaking off into new play groups.

“I’m going to drive off now,” Jan said peremptorily.

The teacher or chaperone or kindergarten assistant nodded.

“You and your children keep well,” Jan said, and rolled up the window. “Have a good day.”

And drove off, louder and more resolutely than before.

## THE HINGE

The clown wouldn't come. He pumped and pumped, but it was pointless, and Kathrin too was left hanging till further notice. But orgasms didn't seem to be the point or the meaning of this exercise at all. More than *coming*, what was happening in this spacious bedroom was about *taking*, about the swift consumption of as many individuals as possible, about the opportunity to use all briefly and be briefly used by all. This awkward unrestraint led not at all to euphoria, to the boundless ecstasy Kathrin had promised herself—but still, she was into it. There were couples that gave off a sort of filthy-frisky intimacy, that seemed unified, almost romantic, for a few frantic seconds in their sinful pop-and-serve Gardens of Eden. But most of those present struck Kathrin as novices like herself—and like her, they were struggling to get past their nerves, or to conceal them by overacting.

Like now, right in front of her, for example. She stared at the new dick. Dark and prominent it rose before her and was slowly stroked. Had something caught the attention of its owner (whom she intentionally didn't look in the eye), did he want to relieve the clown, take his turn *giving it to her*? Would he be a shooter or a dribbler? Nice if he shoots, maybe, but not in my eyes, Kathrin smirked, *that burns like hell*. But she really did want it, his sperm, and she wanted it anonymous. Her gaze was blurry, penetrating the distance, her lips slack but full. Behind her, the clown persisted in his exertions, aggressive, raging, makeup likely running, make it clap, echo, faster, deeper, by now he'd found a good angle. Kathrin jerked like crazy (along with the jolly dick in front of her), horny, hot—Hatefuck, hatefuck, she thought, pk-pk-pk, ss-ss-ss—but only to a point, then she stopped, stiff but acquiescent, before the ring of faces, some void, others industrious. It

didn't click, it just felt different from the porno videos at home, blander, more orderly, more conventional. Kathrin had envisioned lust, had drunk champagne like crazy, had capped it all off with an Ativan (Ativan and alcohol were a breathtaking, anxiety-free buzz) and on the way over had even cracked nasty jokes, grabbed Catharina's crotch—and what she wanted was dissolution, resolution, now, and as crude as possible. Defiance and craving surged in her, she wanted to break herself, break her resistance, and now she was mimicking the gestures, faces, and postures of the porno actresses. She pushed her pelvis backward, held out against the barrage, stretched her stiff tongue, looked up at the stranger, and made a jerking-off motion in the air with her left fist.

The stranger needed just ten seconds to come, he came violently, but even standing at the front of the crowd, he didn't even manage to hit Kathrin's face. Right away, he turned around and left. The clown, too, had had enough of the hatefuck (a film still flashed before her eyes, a clown, but with fangs streaked with fake blood behind milky threads of spit), scrambled past her, red nose sliding off, a film of sweat and makeup on his face, and took the other man's place. Amid short, manic strokes, he sprayed her forehead and right cheek and tried to stick his cock in her mouth for her to suck it clean, but she refused.

She saw Catharina holding a forbidden cigarette in the doorframe and conversing with some Zorro. Their eyes met, empty and uncomprehending. Kathrin had to suppress the shame that flared up inside her. She wasn't here for shame. To the contrary.

She had to do something to stop the withdrawal, the bodily non-presence, had to scrape herself together, redesign herself, so later, if just for an evening, she could squander herself more vehemently. For a year now (or was it a year and a half?), she and Jan hadn't slept together, or if they had, her memory could no longer access it—in a drunken stupor, maybe, or else half-asleep, if at all; she didn't know, and if you didn't know something, it might as well not have happened.

What she did know, did feel, repeatedly and more strongly: at the mere thought of Jan, she turned cold and absent inside. Not even his TV appearance had done anything to change that.

Kathrin wiped off her face with a towel and pulled over the next stranger, who flopped formlessly on top of her, overweight and overfaced to boot, in a mask, as the rules for men here demanded. He was an Anonymous with the notorious Guy Fawkes mask on his fat face, and she was a skipper. It felt to her like an almost bureaucratic act, like pulling down a file box when you already knew the contents. Maybe the masks were keeping her from coming.

For Kathrin, masks, in their devious ambiguity, had always had something silly and repulsive about them. She'd always rejected everything carnivalesque and had kept away from the Venetian masked balls in vogue in friendly upper-class circles not long before. This cloying, sultry mood, its edgy anonymity and dialectic of showing and concealing suggesting that anything could happen—the mere thought of this fusty demimonde of identities repelled her, and back when others were rosily singing the praises of that Kubrick film *Eyes Wide Shut*, she'd felt nothing but abstract nausea. Wasn't sex always about the face, the person, grasped momentarily in dissolution and yet somehow more palpable than ever in spite of this loss of self?

Or was it the utter opposite, the other end of the scale? If she was honest, the chimera of pure darkness, of restless anonymity, aroused her much more: the thought of being an animal, a thing, of glory holes and darkrooms and partitions with an opening for her to shove her genitals against, being taken without consideration, by whom or by what didn't matter—by a filthy universe, basically, that would use her up and spray all over her. Nor did she want to be disguised, no, if anything she wanted to be invisible and blind. That was why she was here.

Her mascara bled into her eyes. It burned, her field of vision blurred, the bed area curtained in satin turned to a single mass with bodies flopping like fish on dry land. The tea lights spread out

over rose petals that the hosts Katja and Ferenc had sprinkled all around left a dim glow on the mirrored walls. While two more men (one the devil, the other black) busied themselves with her, or her with them—*stroking, gulping, milking*—she grew impatient and stubborn. The place was somewhat tasteless, it was dirty enough, it *nearly* corresponded to her fantasies, and yet she couldn't lose herself in it. That *almost* hurt. Where was the lust, the horniness, that had accompanied her and fueled her for so long, in the car, on the sidewalk, at the movies, in the classroom? Was she the one who was missing something? The idea of a sex party and the fulfillment of her wishes were worlds apart. Sex was still just a bad copy of the fantasies that lay upstream of it; this she learned from Jan, from most of the guys who'd come before him, the rest she'd already figured out on her own. She needed radicalization, pushing the limits to the absurd, here too, because the bodies around her, the twosomes, threesomes, and foursomes using and stroking and ramming one another, were still all too trapped in their bourgeois tastefulness, all too self-aware. In shame, they sidestepped obscenity. Ativan for all! she thought. Kathrin needed other phrases and dialects, dumb, filthy phrases to milk in the dark room of her consciousness, "give me that king-size chocolate bar" maybe, or some outrageous slang term for her anus, ideally slurred in a Saxon dialect with deep gutturals. Real breathless peasant slang was what she needed, coarseness, down to business, clichéd stallion stuff. Here all that was missing, Jan was missing it, really it always was missing. What she needed was to shape someone obscenely from the ground up, a boytoy, a makeshift slave, an S&M Kaspar Hauser tucked in a secret hiding place, she thought, and picked up speed, she must breathe words into him and summon the acts that she herself had never uttered or written or done, just seen and heard on the net.

Suddenly Kathrin too had a miserable little dog mask over her face. The devil had put it on her with a whisper. She saw herself blurred in the mirror: white cheeks, big eyes, sweet tongue.



She was a little dog now; she was a baby schema. And it worked. She panted, ironically at first, then intimately, pulled the devil closer to her, jerked his waist toward hers, harder, faster, and he responded, turned crasser and courser and bigger, paused, rammed against her and into her. She blew the devil and stroked him at the same time, functional and greedy and horny, then took him out of her mouth to whimper and pant and flash her tongue, *here's my tongue, you pigs, get to it*. Then she did everything at once, stroking, whimpering, blowing, panting, fucking, biting, *here, world, do it, take me*. And finally she came, with a sound between bark and moan, the devil deep in her mouth, the black man stiff in her belly: *here, world, here*.

The next morning, she couldn't help but giggle. Me, a dog! Looking at herself in the bathroom mirror, she even gave a quick yelp, hushed and reserved, her own best co-conspirator—and noting with repulsion that her tongue was uncommonly coated, she giggled again, but more artificially than before, forced even, as if an audience had suddenly appeared and she had to put on a show for them. A burst of guilty conscience needled her from behind. What was all that about, honestly?

She'd known the so-called masked ball was going to be a sex party, a sex party in a vile, attractive purchased home, a boring excess of decadent gentrification, and she'd known she would go there and get it on. She'd known since Catharina's first timid mention of it weeks ago, gripped by the rush of the forbidden, and while Catharina chuckled on the phone, *We don't have to do anything*, Kathrin was already thinking, *Oh we do, and how*.

## SNOOZE FUNCTION

Jan looked at the picture on his phone. What *is* that, he thought. Kathrin showed up suddenly to hug him from behind. He hid his smartphone, not exactly flustered, but tense.

“Something wrong?” Kathrin said.

“No. Where’s Severin?”

“At Reimo’s.”

“And Lale?”

“Same.”

“They’re staying the night there?”

“Slumber party, supposedly. Bad news?”

“No. Well. Depends on what bad means.”

“Not so good news maybe?”

“The web stats are plunging even faster than the audience share, and they’re not doing anything about it, just those ridiculous *Did You Know...?* articles. Thing is, anyone who doesn’t know what’s in them also doesn’t have an internet connection and isn’t young. I’ve been saying this from the beginning, go big with the web, but the head of programming has to stick to the instructions from the station head and she’s frankly in the early stages of senility. I assume she wears dentures, but getting her to change is like pulling teeth.”

Kathrin laughed briefly but convincingly, so the joke had been good.

“In the meantime,” Jan continued, “our viewers are dying off. We should have rolled all this out back when the internet was first getting rolling. Now we’re struggling to do things that should be a matter of course.”

“Got it. But what’s past is past. And now you’re there, so you can draw in the young things.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jan said, feigning irritation. “Anyway, it can’t go on like this for long. And we all know it. But we’re the ones on the front lines, and we’ve got to make it happen, a thousand percent. It’ll work out.”

“Everything else OK, then?” Kathrin asked, as always.

“Yeah, everything’s OK.”

“OK is good then.”

“Yeah, OK is good.”

They shared a kiss. To Jan, it felt a bit too moist.

“So what about us? Should we throw our own slumber party?” Jan purred, going for a tawdry erotic effect.

“First the theater.”

“What? Another family catastrophe?”

“Why not?” Kathrin asked with a giggle, brief and convincing. “As long as it’s not ours, we can wallow in others’ misery,” she added.

Jan wasn’t pleased. “It just feels so stilted to me,” he said. “They sit there all stiff and happy, then they hit the drinks, then comes the catastrophe, then ghosts from the past float up, then they’re sinking their teeth into each other like zombies. And the audience gawks, and most likely they see their own life mirrored in it, but wait, stop: they actually left their life at the coat check and temporarily outsourced it, and so now they ... what’s it called? You know, that thing from Plato you talk about?”

“Catharsis,” Kathrin said. “From Aristotle.”

“Right, *catharsis*. So they can manage to cathartically muddle through, but it doesn’t go anywhere. And then everyone stands up, appalled and sated, and they slip their lives back on and

they've got something to talk about, even before they've left the foyer they're busy getting right back into the filth, the filth of their lives and their words and bla bla bla."

"Jan."

"I know, sorry. But it's all just so remote, if you ask me."

"It's entertaining, and it livens up the conversation," Kathrin said. "And we need some new input now and again. And you used to like it, no?"

"Used to, yeah. I don't know. Maybe I was just pretending. Because none of that has anything to do with life. Life is way plainer and more complicated than that whole song and dance. Life is prating and negating, nothing more," Jan said, seeming surprised by this spontaneous rhyme.

"Come on, calm down now," Kathrin soothed him (and she had the feeling for a second she was wearing the dog mask from yesterday, the plastic baby schema, this cutesy cloying falseness and—*eh*, she turned red, her entire body radiated shame) and then quickly: "Are you changing or sticking with your suit?"

Jan sniffed his armpit under his Helmut Lang shirt. "Maybe I better change, right?"

"It's on the bed. See you soon."

"Thanks."

Jan contorted before the bedroom mirror, somewhere between athletic and absurd, then grimaced, somewhere between absurd and ugly, then grabbed his crotch, *still there*, then changed. When he took his cellphone out of the pants he was wearing, he looked at the picture.

He was starting to have a secret.

## AFTER CURTAIN

After the murmurs, the lights went out: Theater, got it. OK, Jan thought, OK OK.

*Death in Venice* was showing. The actors were actually having sex on stage, or so Jan thought. He found that deeply alienating, and his mind strayed; he thought of Stein, Stein and the boarding school he'd gone to.

The actors appeared to form a daisy chain fingering each other's butt. Jan had never seen something so absurd. He grew silently flustered and looked away. There was an emergency exit, the sign glowed green.

After the show, Jan had the vague sense he was being watched, first because of his new role on TV, second because of the images in his head, from before. Slightly paranoid, he stood there alone.

Then he saw Malte. What was *he* doing back here? He stood there, small, bald, a swindler. Jan knew things about him no one else knew. He waved, Malte grinned, nodded, and came over.

"No way! Who is *this* then?"

"No way! Who is *this*?"

"Unbelievable! Drescher."

"Unbelievable! Carlowitz."

"Unbelievable. Hey, Kathrin."

Kathrin observed the small, trapezoidal patch of light reflected on his bald head. "Hey, Malte."

Malte and Kathrin exchanged a right-cheek-left-cheek kiss. The men hugged like klutzes and pounded each other on the shoulder.

“Unbelievable. Since when do they let you into the theater?” Malte asked.

“Since it lost its dignity,” Jan said, and grinned.

“That’s your place, all right. Where dignity no longer counts.”

“Same goes for you, Malte.”

“Are we still in the play?” Kathrin interrupted.

“Were we ever not?” Malte said.

“Are we getting philosophical again?” Kathrin rolled her eyes.

“The stage is rubbing off on you.”

“I saw you guys inside, I was three rows behind you. You look lovelier than ever. Especially from behind.” Malte grinned.

“Three rows back. Good place for you.”

“Kathrin, you’re a dear, but you’re becoming more and more like your husband.”

“To the contrary, he’s becoming more like me.”

“Which is the same thing.”

“Actually, there’s a fundamental difference.”

“What did *you* think of it, then?” Jan said, ending the absurd duel.

“I mean, I thought what I thought. Patchy.”

“*Patchy* is just another nothing word.”

“What do you mean, *another*?”

“What did *you* think of it, then?”

“Patchy.”

“That’s what I said. Kathrin’s verdict will have more substance to it.”

“Sure. But it’s not ripe yet.” In Malte’s glasses, too, the same patch of reflected light, he seemed to consist entirely of surface, Kathrin thought.

“Should we have a drink to help it along?”

“So sorry, we can’t,” Kathrin said.

“We’ve got to go home,” Jan agreed.

“The kids.”

“Too bad.”

“It really is. I’ll go get our coats.” Kathrin walked toward the coatroom and breathed a sigh of relief.

“She never has liked me.” Malte put on his best wise-ass-swindler face.

“Don’t exaggerate, that’s BS. We really do have to go. You don’t have kids.”

“Aren’t yours grown already?”

“No.”

“OK, OK. But you and I are going out for a drink sometimes, right? It’s been ages.”

“For sure.”

“A lot’s happened recently, too.”

“Sure has.” *Yeah yeah, a lot always happens*, Jan thought. But the pause after the sentence grew longer, almost pregnant with meaning, the same as Malte’s gaze. So Jan asked, “Like what then?”

“What?” Malte seemed roused from some somber thought or other.

“What’s happened?”

“You know, Matuschke?!”

“Yeah, Matuschke, so?”

Jan paused. “What?”

“Well, have a look at Mr. Tabloid! Where do you get your info from? Bird flights? Coffee grounds? 4chan?”

Jan treaded water. “Wait, yeah, right, Matuschke, Matuschke, got it. Soon to marry, if I remember right, his Swedish supermodel girlfriend, slings real estate to celebrities in America, and I presume he still has one of the finest looking nuns from the upper echelons of the German business class. Same as always, then.”

“Haha. Same as always. My guy. Drescher. Unbelievable.”

“What then?”

“Matuschke’s in the slammer.”

“What?”

“Yep.”

“For what?”

“The thing with the kids. And the pictures.”

“What?”

“Yep. Nasty business. Eerie. Keeps getting worse and worse.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They’re treating him like a murderer there now.”

“What do you mean, kids, pictures?”

“Where are you living these days? Don’t you hear anything anymore? Too many editorial meetings?”

Jan glanced around the foyer, faces were angled toward him and nodding, in other places they blurred into mere smudges, fingerprints, blobs.



“So.” Kathrin was back, quicker than thought.

“We need to talk about this soon,” Jan said.

“Naturally.” Malte nodded.

“About what?” asked Kathrin.

“A classmate of ours is in trouble,” Malte said.

“Nothing big. Something to do with mortgages, Cum-Ex, that sort of thing,” Jan said, trying to downplay it.

“So it is something big,” Kathrin said, and her eyebrows narrowed, revealing the cleft of doubt, a little edge.

“Nothing that can’t be taken care of, though,” Jan said.

“Nah. It never is. There’s a solution for everything, a messaging one above all,” Malte said mischievously. “Particularly for people like us.”

“Careful, you’re saying the quiet part a bit blithely.” Jan smiled. “We really have to go.”

“Kathrin, Drescher. Unbelievable.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Keep your eyes peeled. And stick with it. But play it cool. Stick with it, but play it cool. Unbelievable. Drescher.”

“Take care, Malte.”

“And don’t forget to sink the shot, Drescher. At some point, you’ve got to sink the shot. Ciao, Drescher. Ciao, Kathrin. Unbelievable...”

But they no longer heard him.

## PLATEAU PHASE

A secret is an inner place of solitude that can burn like tinder if left alone. His was about to ignite and fester.

In the past, if the children were away, there had been a sexual ordinance in place. It had to be followed, and as loudly as possible, such were the unwritten dictates of this exemplary marriage. Now the rule seemed to have come back into force, at least partly. Under his pride and joy, the Martin Eder painting, a sign of his distinguished taste precisely because no one else liked it, Jan tried to take her, but Kathrin escaped and started rubbing his cock. She moaned loud while doing so, extra loud, fake loud. And his groans echoed through the halls with their baseboard heating, and almost as in a movie, a Jack Nicholson drama, he lost all inhibitions and came as obscenely and camera-ready as he could. But there was no camera running.

Afterwards, Jan couldn't sleep. The act of love with his wife, whom he still desired, had come across a bit like a performance, with him as both actor and spectator. That wasn't bad, but it was strange. He felt like a liar watching himself lie, sweaty, unsure, each jerky gesture a piece of a confession that hadn't yet come together as a whole. What did he have to confess?

He tried to move as little as possible.

"Can't sleep?"

"Nah, I can."

The blankets lay over him like something sliced, like carpaccio, thin and damp and alive not long before. He was sweating. He was carpaccio. He tried not to move. He didn't want to admit to her or to himself that he couldn't sleep. He burrowed in as if into a child's blanket fort, writhing

in the bedding, which was stiff at first, then damp, writhing gradually, in slow motion, for minutes on end through the whispering in his head. His eyelids too were slight, paper-thin slivers of flesh, and beneath them, his pupils lay paralyzed in the murk.

Kathrin hugged him. “Shh. Did you have a bad dream?”

“No. I’m sleeping though.”

He was dead flesh, cut from the Lord’s side across the grain, fileted and ready to eat.

How old had he been? Eleven, twelve? Thirteen?

He had immediately recognized the park, the soft slopes, the meadows running to Villa Dolorosa, where the sixth-graders lived, he was one of them, and in the picture, you could see a horse in the distance, one of the stallions that Carvalho... When was the last time he thought about Carvalho, what was he up to now? Carvalho, the pyro, Carvalho, the Kim Basinger freak, Carvalho, the blond Portuguese with the slumping stature, the inscrutable dimwit—and then one day, one regular afternoon when they were in middle school, to be precise, Carvalho had up and masturbated one of the stallions until it came, using an ordinary plastic bag, just straight up jerked it off, and then with the bag full of semen... He twitched.

“What is it?” asked Kathrin, now almost impatient.

“Nothing. Bad dream.”

“Mm-hmm.” She put her hand on his head.

And what about Matuschke? Had he gotten one of those pictures, too? Was that why Matuschke had—lost it? What had actually happened to him, what had he done? Might those pictures something to lose it over? And if so, why were they something to lose it over, and was “lose it” even the right term?

Why, why, why. *Why ever how ever*, Jan thought, then shooed the thoughts away, or tried to, as if they were pesky flies he could swat away. But the shit that drew the flies was inside him. Under the blankets, it was getting damp and narrow.

It's nothing, it's a photo, it's a picture of me, from the old days, it's me, why me, I'm naked in it, why. What kind of psychopath sends me a picture like that, anonymously, to boot, on my cellphone, it's got to be a psychopath, how did a psychopath get my number? And why don't I remember? Remember what?

"Of course you remember," Kathrin said. He was already dreaming.

"You do, too, then," he said to Malte, who edged over to him, too close, in the dream.

"We all remember." A gray-black crowd of people, blurred, like a procession of the dead. The focal point was a dark throbbing.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jan was sweating, in the dream and in real life.

Then Constantine emerged from behind a tree, a dealer, gaze shifty, almost crazed, clothes tattered, and showed Jan three pills in his weathered hand, one blue, one red, one brown, and they crumbled away and melted, and he whispered:

"The shit's inside you."

## REDUCTIO A.D.

The next day in the editor's room, Jan sat at his desk and thought for a moment about nothing. Then the intern (or volunteer?) came in with smiling eyes, which were blue (or gray?). Jan smiled back, with his mouth, mistake, he thought, I'm smiling all fake and innocent and looking twee and sexy when I'm trying for the opposite, to look innocently sexy, *oh man*. He asked himself whether he found the intern (or volunteer?) breathtaking, boring, beautiful, or indifferent. She placed a stack of papers in front of him. He smelled her perfume, it was one of those caustic men's colognes female students liked to wear these days, for some *structural* reason, probably, Jan thought (because of structural injustices and long-needed weakening of the outdated patriarchy and structural machismo), and he was the same, he too was a structural problem, Jan thought, while the intern (or volunteer) leaned toward him (or actually over him), perhaps she was *leaning in*, as they say now, trying to get somewhere, anyway, she was quite close to him.

Who if not Jan knew the secret language of alluring scents (which were often also repellent), Jan, connoisseur and fearer of women; Kathrin had schooled him on it (and last year, for an *Up!* Feature on "cool scents of the season," he (or rather, the intern ((or volunteer)) had researched the matter extensively), but this perfume, the intern's (or volunteer's), was a secret tip. He'd asked her about it, and since then, they'd been joined in a strange alliance, Johanna (or Jasmin?) and Jan, who hadn't mentioned this perfume in his feature, because it was to remain a secret tip (and hence their secret).

It was Bienheim Bouquet, Winston Churchill's cologne, real "insider stuff" (but an insider where, Jan wondered, in what field, what age group, what peer group? ), Johanna (or Jasmin) had told him, it was nothing like this citrus-fresh men's fragrance with notes of lime and lavender and

cedarwood that she was wearing (he had asked for an alternative, for a birthday present, maybe, for her, maybe, this person who had long meant more to him than “intern” or “volunteer,” than “Johanna” or “Jasmin,” but he was faithful, so faithful); “No, Jan,” she then said (or was it: “No, Mr. Drescher,” yes, he wasn’t yet on a first-name basis with her), nothing was even remotely similar to this fragrance, maybe the Aesop fragrances a little, but really there was nothing, “No, Mr. Drescher.” And according to Johanna (now he knew her name again, because yesterday an email had been sent around notifying everyone that she was no longer an intern, but a permanent employee at the station), this Bienheim Bouquet was only available at *Manufactum* or *Havarie de Luxe* or certain well-stocked perfumeries, then “You’re welcome, Mr. Drescher,” and then “Ciao.”

Johanna was gone, only Churchill’s scent hung still in the air.

Again, Jan thought of nothing.

Almost nothing. He thought of Kathrin, of Churchill, of the war, and of his British friend from Eton, whom he suddenly missed; thought involuntarily of Johanna’s skin over her collarbone, which he had glimpsed in the neckline of her shirt (she gave him no other choice!) and which lingered like an echo on his retina, inverted, as he knew (and Johanna probably didn’t): as a reflection from a light source turned upside down by the vitreous body of his eye.

But Jan’s brain turned it all aright and then the other way and then straightened it back out. Then the image vanished.

Then he thought of his next appearance two days later and got nervous; then of Annabelle and of back then, remote: at home.

## THE EASY LIFE

After Annabelle, it was Kathrin who came into his life, in a way that surpassed each and every fantasy of love and dream of youth (or so he thought, anyway). It came true: longing could be fulfilled, wishes come true, love was plain and simple—and possible, plain and simple. Reality offered up a new terrain, opened a new space that pointed the way to the future.

At first, they were a scenester couple in the early 2000s. Amid strobe lights and thundering bass and brutal beats, in the current of the ever-same but ever-new night, they'd approached each other tentatively, danced around each other sometimes, pumped friends of friends for info, gotten word and then forgotten it, on drugs or alcohol or in minor aberrant relations on the edge of the dance floor. Then they lost sight of each other for a longer time, only to meet again one long night in a club and grab hold of each other without hesitation. They had seen, observed, and recognized each other, there on the dance floor of dreams and screams, and crashed together from the highest of highs. After two all-night dances, they had breakfast at a hotel and landed at Kathrin's place. They'd been together ever since.

Kathrin was known on the scene and almost an addict, and Jan was a promise, strong enough to wait for the moment of her collapse, spontaneous enough to see what the two of them could be and seize the moment, and square enough to take a turn as her benevolent savior.

And so they met at exactly the right instant between slip and fall. And they wanted to get serious. They needed a *but* to renounce the endless party, their supposed unfitness for a relationship, and the eternal indecisiveness, and they needed a *then* and an *after that* and a *what's more*—they wanted to live the great bourgeois fairytale to a T, following all the artistic criteria governing the genre. And so the wedding was held at a lake, in the lush green countryside with

luxury hotels nearby, and all the guests, every last one, showed up dressed in white and, at the end, they jumped joyfully into the water like naked children, to swim and enjoy life and their new love.

It had been an unlikely beginning, and yet many had undertaken it, from dance floor to dream, to love and stability, and another marriage was sealed, another dream begun, and so on and so forth; and then the marriages, the dreams went bust, many, many failed over the years, eventually there was no looking away from it, and there was blame and ugliness and deceit and falsehood, and the fairy tales came slowly to an end.

But for a long time, Kathrin and Jan were the model of success, especially given Kathrin's brief and poisonous moment of fame. He accompanied her on her last book tour, let her go, read, flirt, saw the interested, begrudging, or lustful looks in the auditorium and waited, just waited. The reading tour was a disaster-free, unspectacular success. So she was finally able to make peace with her troubled career. That was no small thing.

They even went on a big European tour soaking up *World*, made savings plans, signed contracts, and she returned to school and started a second career as a German and history teacher at an inclusive school. Slowly, his career in television took off, first culture programs, then current affairs. Soon there would be a big house for them to move into.

Then came the children, cementing the relationship and multiplying their good fortune. As she stood there all pregnant with Lale, she was for Jan quite simply the most beautiful woman in the world. They would now be a family and fulfill every duty and overcome every stress. That's what he had wanted, and at the end of the day, she thought that was what she wanted, too.

They would live an easy life. That's what they swore to each other. And it seemed as if it could really and truly happen.



## AFTERWARD

They were still texting on WhatsApp around nine pm, Jan seemed already drunk, made typos and jokes, then dropped off, and she was happy about it. Then she had had sex with others, strangers, clowns, lions, devils. That's what had happened. She giggled and called Catharina.

“So you really didn't do anything?”

“Nothing. Just watching you was enough.”

“The guy in the Zorro mask wanted to, though, right?”

“But maybe I didn't want to?! He could hardly talk, he kept stuttering, and you know what he said?”

“What?”

“He wanted to... *r-r-r-run a t-t-t-train on me.*”

“What about you?”

“Not with me today, not today, kid.”

“Haha! That train's left the station, Zorro!”

“Exactly.”

“Catch the next one.”

“Do these idiots think they don't even have to make an effort?”

“Well, that's the whole point of this sort of thing. *Not* to talk.”

And in fact, Kathrin hadn't talked with anyone, she had simply downed more champagne, and then, after nodding at a very surprised Catharina, had walked, almost vanished, into the room full of sailors and rose petals and tea leaves. She really had wanted to do it.

And so? What had she learned? That she could turn into a dog and enjoy it? That fantasies were always better than their fulfillment? That she had no conscience? That she—and now, at breakfast, between baked rolls, cocoa, coffee and orange juice, came the second, more violent prick of conscience—could have unprotected, anonymous sex over and over without thinking once about infection?

What infection might we be talking about then?

“Flu epidemic,” said Severin, “lots of teachers have got it. And almost all the students too.”

“Why didn’t we get it?” asked Kathrin.

“Good genes,” said Severin, buttering his roll.

“Nah,” said Lale, “severe mutations.”

The kids laughed and chewed. Kathrin observed them furtively with a *loving look*, which she saw at the same time from without; she saw herself as a *loving mother*, staring at her children, gentle and caring, with a thin veil before her eyes. Inside her, however, a minor uneasiness stirred, what she also saw were little libidinous creatures, volcanoes of hormones just past the first peak of puberty, outbursts, acne scars and twisted loves on the verge of striking. From the outside, this unease was invisible, there was only a mother’s soft gaze, which now struck her as false, playacting, and which immediately ceased.

Chlamydia? The drip? Was all that possible? Viruses struck at her inner eye and penetrated her system, eating their way into her body from below. She looked on like an educational film from a sadistic biology class, but she was the screen, the teacher’s edition, and the student all in one. And AIDS? What about AIDS? The thought kept replaying, it now had its own synaptic path in her mind and had only to keep following, keep following. Her eyes went black for a moment. She leaned against the table and took a breath.

“Mom?”

The light came back.

“It’s okay, little fainting spell.”

A sound, barely perceptible, the rustling of clothes, the squeak of rubber-soled shoes. There was someone—

“Oh, right, Keanu slept over,” Severin said.

“Keanu? I don’t know any Keanu!” said Kathrin.

A brief flood of perceptions: Lale’s minimal reaction to Severin’s statement, maybe surprised, maybe somehow grateful; Severin’s calm, the kind of calm that wants to mask a tiny lie; Lale’s lack of reaction after the first impulse. Brief stare.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Drescher. Yes, my name’s Keanu. Can’t do anything about it.”

A boy stood in the doorway. Kathrin was startled by his beauty. He looked almost like a sculpture, finely chiseled, the dust still on his facial features, complexion dark. The gauzy shadows shifted with his least movement, like high-res animation, like a cartoon, but more detailed, more dazzling. Kathrin’s heart skipped. She had never felt this sort of bodily sensation before. She would have to get over the sight of him, that much she knew. Her heart skipped again, as though to confirm such beings really existed and weren’t just things you heard of, saw in movies, or read about in books. She gulped then and thought, paradoxically, as if to defend herself, of Kleist, of his boy with the thorn, evoked old literary images and thoughts, thoughts about a beauty that knows nothing of itself—probably in order somehow to cope with this excess of presence, this soft suffocation. The light clung to his cheeks, he seemed almost to absorb it, to transform it into something else, another light perhaps, or the glow of a spectrum all his own. You could see he had no notion of how to act, whether he should stand there or move.

Lale made the first move, stepping in for her perplexed mother: “Have a seat then, Keanu. Orange juice? Water? Cocoa?” While she did so, she watched her mother closely. What was going on?

Kathrin knew she had to break the spell right now.

“Yes, nice to meet you, welcome to our home, Keanu.” She pulled out the chair for him, and he hesitantly sat down. Kathrin remembered looking through the new admissions to the school and asked, “Your name sounds so familiar—are you starting at our school soon?”

“It’s an American actor’s name,” Severin said, and was amicably ignored.

“I’m already there, Mrs. Drescher,” Keanu said, shyly nodding and smiling, “at your school. In the orientation class.”

“He’ll be with us soon,” Lale said, casually licking a spoon.

Kathrin nodded and remembered just then that the reasons for his school transfer were rather opaque—internet bullying, they’d called it, but it wasn’t at all clear who was the victim and who the harasser or whether such a distinction could be made with any precision. Most likely Keanu had made some misstep that had unleashed virtual but also real persecution on the part of his classmates—typical when the antisocial dragnetworks were running hot and spilling over into the streets and schoolyards. Kathrin nodded. Everyone deserved a fresh start.

Especially a handsome kid like him. She tried to suppress her enchantment with a sober smile, and as she did so, she forgot herself for a moment. What must his background be? Asian, Turkish, Hawaiian, Persian? There was no way of telling, and no need to tell either. What for?

Lale banged her spoon extra loud against her glass, and when Kathrin flinched and looked at her, her daughter gave her a nasty, irritable look from across the table, with a slight shake of her head.

“Well, Keanu,” Lale said then, without taking her eyes off her mother, “would you rather have a roll or multigrain bread... or toast? We’ve got everything.”

“Yes,” Kathrin said hastily, “yes, that’s right,” but afterwards, she could only repeat her daughter’s phrase: “We’ve got everything.”

## SIX WEEKS

The next few weeks were hell. Immediately following the breakfast with the children and Keanu (taciturn, but *cute*, so *cute*), Kathrin was seized by a latent hysteria, which she recognized as such, but couldn't hold at bay. She was now certain she'd caught HIV, or if not, then syphilis or gonorrhea at the very least. There it was all at once, the grim realization, and it wouldn't go away. She started secretly examining her vulva in the bathroom several times a day, opening her labia like a wilted flower and peeking inside, presuming any skin chafing was a clear sign of infection. Was that discharge unusual? Was it itching again? Where did that redness come from, and that bump? She looked at herself like an abstraction in the mirror and breathed harder. She knew it was unreasonable and hysterical, but couldn't shake it off. Sweat pearly on her forehead, and that was suspicious, too: was this flushing the first sign of disease? This misgiving made her sweat even more.

Her pathetic overblown secrecy in front of Jan and the children would last a whole six weeks. Only then could the doctor she rushed to see in a free period reassure her that absolutely nothing was wrong; only then would the tests rule out any infection. If she was infected, sufficient antibodies would have to form. Antibodies! She shivered and cursed the vestiges of her childhood Catholicism, which seemed to still exert power over her from somewhere inside. Because why else would she be acting so crazy?

“Kathrin, are you smoking?”

“Yeah.”

“What's that about?” Jan joined her on the terrace.

“It's just one.”

“Is something up?”

“No, I’m just stressed.”

“About?”

“Just stressed in general. Everyone at school is crazy.”

“It took you so long to finally quit.”

“I just felt like having one... I’m not going to start again.”

“Weird.” Jan kissed her on the cheek and lit one up as well. He took a drag, pulled Kathrin close, kissed her again, and said, “It’s not bad.”

“I know,” Kathrin said. A small dull rush arrived in her head, and her heartbeat seemed to calm, even as it sped up.

Two hours later, Kathrin was on the web for two hours. Her research only stoked her hysteria. The deeper she fell into the forums, the more nauseated she felt, and the forums too suggested it wasn’t fear for herself that was driving her, but rather a miserable guilty conscience. Everything started to spin.

She needed to see Catharina, now. An hour later, they were sitting across from each other in a café around the corner with two dishes of ice cream in front of them. Kathrin poked around in hers, barely eating a spoonful.

“So what is it? Why all the questions?” Catharina asked.

“Because I’m getting kind of anxious,” Kathrin said. “It’s just a question. I’m just asking.”

“But you know who the hosts were: Katja and Ferenc, normal movie people, if you can call that normal, just friends of friends, and I can’t tell you anymore who all you fucked there.”

The people around turned momentarily attentive, you could tell by the tiny jolt that traversed them, the way they froze for a moment afterward.

“Don’t get all moralizing on me!” Kathrin tried laugh, to make comedy of it, and added softly, so only Catharina could hear, “There were only four.”

“Only ...” Catharina smiled.

“Yes, only! Don’t do me like that.” Kathrin looked around uncertainly. Catharina leaned toward her with her worried face on.

“Cut the drama, dear.”

“I’m at the end of my rope.”

“Anyway, when you find out who it was, what are you going to ask them then? Whether they have AIDS?”

“Maybe. Why not?”

“Kathrin. Come down to earth.”

“You were watching. Did you know anyone there?”

“I wasn’t watching you!”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I didn’t know any of them, or I didn’t recognize them. They all had on those ridiculous masks, remember, even you had one on at some point.”

“I know.”

“Chill out, for god’s sake, I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“I’m really at the end of my rope.”

“Just relax.”

“Can you give me Katja’s number?”



“So you can ask her about your sex partners?”

“Yeah.”

“Really now. You’d best not. That’s just embarrassing.” Catharina had taken an object out of her purse, wrapped in colorful paper, a gift probably, and was toying with it.

“Which one was Katja?”

“I introduced her to you, didn’t I?”

“I was drunk.”

“I don’t have her number.”

“You do, too.”

“You should have thought all this over earlier.”

“I do remember one thing. The mulatto.”

“The mulatto? That’s not a thing anymore, mulatto. Anyway, why are you asking about him?”

“I didn’t ask about him exactly, but I know about him, because of the skin color and all. You’re allowed to talk about that. And besides—ahhh!”

“Ah what?”

“I’m ashamed, but I can’t wait six more weeks!”

“You can, too.”

“Easy for you to say! You just stood there like a good little girl.”

“Because I don’t have to run away from my monotonous fucking family life!” Again the people peeked over. Kathrin broke out in a sweat and cursed Catharina to herself.

“There’s nothing monotonous about it,” she whispered.

“If you didn’t have a family and a husband, you wouldn’t be freaking out like this right now. Just get a grip on your guilty conscience, Kathrin.” Her too, then. Her too with the guilty conscience.

“I want to at least ask the black guy.”

“Why him, exactly? Have you lost it?”

“Cath! I’ve read the statistics, if you really must know.”

“What! What statistics?”

“I just want to know who he is. If he’s fresh out of Africa—it’s just concerning.”

“You really are a racist!” Now people turned toward them.

“I’m not, Cath. I’m just at the end of my rope.”

“It’s nothing. Can’t you just get that into your head?”

No, she couldn’t. And Catharina, who had stuck with her for so long and supported her in life, sometimes more, sometimes less, but always being there, even for the children, even for Lale, no longer had any real help to offer Kathrin. All she could say was, “Relax.”

“You really are one to talk, with your relaxed-ass polyamory, where everything is supposedly possible and in the end, nothing means anything.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, believe me. And I’m being serious when I tell you to relax. Happy late birthday, by the way.” Catharina handed Kathrin the small package.

“I didn’t have a birthday ...?” Kathrin objected.

“No, but this thing will give you the best birthday of your life. Believe me. You’ll feel like you’ve been born again. And you won’t have to go to any more orgies you’ll later regret.”

Kathrin silently mouthed the words “What is this?”

“Open it.” Catharina nodded wisely.

Kathrin did, and found herself holding a strangely shaped object, slightly curved, looking a bit like an electric razor with a hole in front. She immediately knew it was a sex toy.

“That’s the Satisfier,” Catharina said, especially loud now, “and it will help you put this whole unpleasant business behind you.”

“What?” cried Kathrin, and she wanted to throw the thing away, at the waiter or into the dish of ice cream the next table over. People turned around again, and a few women laughed.

“Maybe for now you don’t believe me,” Catharine said. “But just you wait.”

Kathrin stared at the abstract plastic object in her hand and felt for a moment like the most misunderstood person on earth.

## PRÉLUDE À LA SCÈNE

Kathrin, too, had hated the evening at the theater. The ugly hipsters standing around in chunky glasses with lenses big as windowpanes, bulky sneakers, white tennis socks, sweaters or T-shirts tucked into their pants, fashion slaves pretending to look like nerds. Throw in one or two old-timey accessories, a grandmother's gold chain with a slender gold cross or maybe mom's earrings handed down from the eighties, expensive, old, invaluable junk. Pleased as punch in their nylon track pants, puffy balloon fabrics, braces, septum piercings, jute bags stamped with slogans and vegan Doc Martens. Boycotting beauty, maybe, as a form of pseudo-emancipation, in cut-rate jeans with extra-trashy tattoos.

Jan had strode through the small cluster of people into the theater, holding Kathrin's hand, the bell had only sounded once but he had pulled her after him frantically, dragging her, almost.

She had refrained from exclaiming, "Excuse me?"

She was the star (a former star, but still), but he always hogged every social occasion, and recently this behavior had become almost unbearable, like a cliché she was trying to look away from because it was so cliché, so indescribably dumb.

But this was how it was: he was the TV guy with the sizable fanbase, and she was just a "teacher." She had shriveled from top dog (if just in the dog-and-pony show of the media) to a mere companion. She had come down in the world, he had come up! As there it was again: Jan's panic when they went to the theater, the stodgy aplomb he thought he had to radiate—the stodginess of which, she was sure, she alone saw.

She hated the theater evening as much as Jan, but she couldn't admit it, because these subtle disparities were almost the last thing she had left in this trench warfare without shots fired, without

battles. It had been ridiculous, really, this oversexualization as kindergarten, this anal hurrying through open doors; but that the cultural landscape really was as banal and dreary as Jan recognized over and over in his boorish ignorance was something she couldn't admit to herself or to him. It was one of her last bastions.

Then there was Malte, whom she frankly couldn't stand, one of those pseudo-clever boarding-school guys, not even a manager or lawyer, a mere *advertising jerk-off*, pumped full of brittle self-confidence that would collapse with one little prick, and Kathrin was a pricker, a very fine needle poised to jab, and like so many others, whenever he saw her, he started whistling no sooner than punctured. His bald head gleamed, as did his eyes, as did his glasses too, nothing about the guy was anything more than a *reflection*.

Oh God, thought Kathrin, are we back here again, do I really hate *everyone*? She watched the musky, ritualistically masculine greeting ceremony of the two men, raised her eyebrow, nodded, uttered two, three sentences, and went to fetch their jackets.

The people, did they remember her still? No, maybe? It didn't matter. She hardly knew any of them anymore, some by sight, maybe, or else she mixed her with her or him with him or him with her or her with him; life, she knew, was nothing but a comedy of errors. She waited by the coatroom with the number in her hand, discreet people next to her, with scarves, ties, brooches, pleasant, actually, this waiting, this patience on the part of all.

Later, sex was vaguely in the air again, but how, how should they do it? Penetration was out of the question, or was she supposed to up and tell Jan to put on a condom, or else he might get infected with HIV? Even during foreplay (which had little play to it), Jan seemed to be trying to prove something to her and himself, and she tried to hold him off and yet prove to him in turn

that there was love there, or attraction, or whatever, but her guilty conscience ran burning down her spine—and then she remembered Catharina’s gift, the Satisfier.

“Wait,” she said, “I got something.”

She scurried off down the hallway and pulled the thing out of her coat pocket. She scurried back and thrust it into his hand. “Here, here’s something different. We said we wanted to try new things, right?”

“Yeah, sure, but...”

“Just give it a go.”

Though she herself had little desire for this abstraction (but now she’d have to), the information she had Googled about it shot out of her mouth like advertising jingles: it was custom-made for the clitoris, a revolution after decades of dildo hegemony, it really worked, with undulating pressure and twelve settings, it was amazingly fast, at least that’s what everyone on the web was saying, they gushed and raved and wondered how they could have ever lived without the Satisfier, it was the real deal, and now that they were rediscovering each other, it was time for something new, wasn’t it?

Jan nodded, perplexed, and said “What do you need me for then?” but he tried to mask it as a joke and smiled, if a touch too sadly.

“We’ll share the experience, come on!”

“No, that’s too weird for me right now.” He turned away. “Another time, OK?”

“OK.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and thought, exactly like her children, but not ironically like them, instead with thoroughly bitter seriousness: *Hello, hello, anyone home? Hello, hello, hello? Anyone there?*

No one, just disappointment and loneliness.

She hopped up and went to the bathroom and wet her face with cold water and rummaged around in the toiletries bag (from Lacoste) and took three pills. Then she dragged herself back to bed, into the damp fabric. She felt so heavy, and everything seemed steeped in a deep red. Then she turned heavier still, then lighter. She forced herself to close her eyes, and her thoughts too.

Ten minutes passed, maybe an hour.

Finally Jan was snoring. She, too, tried to beckon dreams, tender, please, soft, please, fast, please, dead please.

## LOO TIME (TO THE JOHN)

Malte and Jan sat at the bar. Malte went on ribbing him.

That was par for the course with him, especially when things weren't going well: teasing, "being ungenerous," as Johannes liked to call it, criticizing, bellyaching, playing the part-time cynic, while remaining as invulnerable as possible.

Jan knew how much Malte envied him, but he didn't really want to admit it. He had pointed it out to Malte on more than one occasion, gently at first, then firmly, then even loudly, but Malte seemed reluctant to see it, was unable or unwilling to recognize his pettiness. His lack of benevolence or empathy for success turned him into a rigid icon of coolness. And he was so little and bald! But icons were old and pale and flaky, weren't they—bearing witness to ancient, mythical, long-yellowed times? Just like Malte, Jan thought, and he saw the reflection of light on Malte's bald head, a circle, and he imagined it as a glued-on halo. Yes, thought Jan, *back when believing still mattered...*

"I gotta pee."

"See you soon."

In the bathroom, a foul odor sickened him, but he was pleased at this brief respite from how overwhelming the whole bar experience was turning out to be, strange as it was. He sighed and peed. Then he heard someone lurching behind him in the stall, standing up, breathing deep and raspy, and then turning the faucet hard, crumpling the paper, and then, while Jan shook off and it was briefly quiet, blurting out:

"Now, now. What are you doing? You're only supposed to urinate here!"



Jan turned around, disconcerted. The guy, failed artist-slash-barfly type in his mid-fifties, leaned into the urinal. Jan couldn't exactly see what he looked like from the front. He just saw the giggle's shaking the man's back and asked, "*What?* You're supposed to urinate here, right, so what?"

Back at the bar, he told Malte about the bizarre incident, and Malte laughed without reacting, or perhaps with a knowing sort of reaction. Not that there was a punchline, it was just an instance of impertinence.

Malte changed the subject: "Do you ever fart at the urinal? Like this loud?" He made a farting sound with his mouth.

"What?"

"I mean, some people really cut loose there, I mean, really let it fly. For me, that's rude, I really think you shouldn't do it."

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean, but—"

"Petra, two more, please."

Then the talk continued. Jan and Malte were bragging a little about women. This one and that one they knew, who was a ten—there was something cagy about it. What their breasts were like, who had the hotter features, which ones liked to suck it—you could tell by their lips, supposedly—and which ones were mother types—and Malte, the lifelong bachelor, found that especially appealing. Jan was bored.

"So," he interjected, "what exactly's up with Matuschke?"

"Don't tell me you haven't Googled it yet."

"Yeah, of course."

"Have you seen the pictures on the net?"

“With Brangelina in Malibu?”

“Tell me—does all that fan mail keep everything else from getting through?”

“To a point.”

“Not Brangelina, man, no more pregnant Swedish model in Malibu. These pictures are speaking a different language, I’m talking jail, cops, the end of the line. Matuschke himself getting perp-walked by real-live cops, head down, in turmoil. Take a gander.”

Malte, slightly sweaty from the beer, showed him Google results on his cellphone.

“It’s crazy,” Jan marveled, “how a person can just spin out.” The pictures showed exactly what Malte had said: no doubt, it was Matuschke, their classmate from the old days, and the cameras’ perspectives, close-ups from just beneath chin-level, with his face pushed toward the ground, mercilessly captured Martin Matuschke’s distinctive, familiar features—but also, and above all, showed the ruthlessness of this public exhibition of the criminal—because that’s what he was, right?

“It’s repulsive, though, the way they judge you,” said Malte, “like you’re a murderer. It’s a messy situation, the whole thing—but *this* is overdoing it.”

“I don’t know,” said Jan. “I don’t know the details.”

“I’ll spare you those. Good old Matuschke had some unsavory chats. That’s all I’ll say. Hard stuff, real pervert stuff. But virtual, every single bit of it was virtual.”

“So you got a letter about it? An email?”

“Tonke told me. But honestly, everyone knows. Only you seem to be shielded.”

“Shielded? I’m not being shielded. What kind of...”

“Six years,” Malte interrupted him, “six years in prison. In the USA, to boot. That’s a bit more brutal, like in the movies. He’d better get his enema ready.”

“Serves him right.”

“Sorry, Drescher, but that’s taking it too far.”

“For you, maybe, you don’t have kids.”

“So? Maybe that means I can take a clearer, less emotional view of it.”

Jan took a sip, set his drink down, and went on, “Because you can’t apprehend the producers, they’re somewhere in Russia, in the Czech Republic, I don’t know, not here, anyway, not somewhere you can get a hold of them—and that’s why you have to punish the consumers, the onlookers, the guys jacking off to this stuff. And hard, I mean hard. It’s that simple.”

“But not like murderers.”

“That’s soul murder. It’s worse. It’s the lowest of the low, there’s no word for it.” Jan thought of Lale and Severin and had to shove them right out of his mind.

“If I look at a video on the net,” Malte argued, “that’s not the same as actually touching a child.”

Jan remained firm. “It’s the same thing, just secondhand. We’re talking about images of rape, and whoever looks at them is guilty. Anyway, think about that, *touching*, you’re talking in very florid euphemisms.”

Malte gave Jan an earnest look, his big blue eyes staring for an almost provocatively long time, empty and expectant, awaiting a real reproach, perhaps, or else a real attack. Jan turned uncertain, he remembered (though they’d been in the back of his head the whole time) the pictures, the pictures of him as a child. When it was clear Jan would speak no more, Malte butted in lapidarily:

“Still, the sentence is too harsh.”

“I don’t think so. Imagine if someone had done that to us when we were kids.”

With this sentence, Jan had strayed deep into the danger zone. He waited. No response. Unease.

“Sure. So what then?” said Malte.

“I don’t know,” said Jan.

“I’d tear the sons of bitch to pieces,” Malte said.

“Me too,” said Jan, irritated that he could only agree with this choice of words, and repeated, “*Sons of bitches*. Now here we are talking all aggro. It doesn’t take much”

Malte nodded and contemplatively swirled the whiskey he had since moved on to, bourbon on the rocks, same as always. Jan was feeling squeezed, by his collar, by Malte, he’d have gladly have dragged it out for a while.

“What are they all up to now?”

“Who? The aggro? The sons of bitches?” Malte gurgled into his glass.

“The guys the old days. Like Rohde, what’s he up to?”

“He’s at Bertelsmann.”

“Von Bredow?”

“With his dad.”

“Nettelbeck?”

“Got his own ratings agency.”

“Sure. Just like you’d have thought, each goes his own way. And I’m now the greeter guy from tabloid TV, and you’ve got your little PR outfit.”

“Easy there. The national railroad’s got me on their payroll,” Malte complained with feigned indignation, but Jan’s ribbing didn’t even make it to the level of a joke, they both knew

that it was mostly thanks to him that Malte had gotten the job. It would have been the perfect occasion for a lighthearted pretend dust-up. But Jan wasn't in the mood for jokes.

"And *all* the rest? What were their names, even?" Remembered images began to dance before his inner eye, slowly but tenaciously, as if he were on old, expired drugs.

"A lot of them up and vanished," Malte said.

"Those are the ones that interest me. The vanished ones."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I've just been thinking about all that lately. You don't remember anything?"

"Like what?"

"Maybe Matuschke was a victim himself."

"Victim of what?"

Jan made a vague gesture of ignorance, of impotence and being in the dark.

"That's a bit simple-minded," Malte said, "this cliché about how only victims can become victimizers. Or are you trying to say something else?"

"You really don't remember anything?" Jan fired back.

Malte paused. "Remember what?"

"Can Matuschke write letters or e-mails from jail?" Jan asked evasively.

"I think so. But it's all filtered and censored, probably. Do you want to write to him?"

"No."

"Maybe we should."

"Nonsense."

“No, let’s do it, let’s write him right now.” Malte picked up a napkin “Here, I’ll make a clean copy and send it later. Tonke must know the address. No, I’ll type it up instead. On my cellphone, no, I’ll record it. Easy as cake.”

“Don’t record it,” Jan begged.

“Dear Martin,” Malte spoke into his cell phone.

“Stop it.”

“Why? He’s rotting away in jail! Matuschke! Our Matuschke!”

Jan didn’t reply.

“Dear Martin,” Malte spoke into his cell phone, “Dear... Martin. Dear doesn’t sound right, does it?”

“No.”

“Now I can’t think of anything, how do you bring this up? It has come to our attention that—we’ve been unhappily informed—that you’ve gotten into a fix...”

“A pickle,” Jan quipped.

“Yes, perfect,” said Malte, “a little gayer sounding, you’ve always had a homophobic streak, no surprises there. You’d better give me a hand. Dear Martin, we’re writing to you because we were stunned to learn of the...”

“You don’t want to help him,” Jan interrupted, “you just want lift yourself up. Consolation as ego boost.”

Malte blushed. “You’re being cynical now. I never realized cynicism came so easily to you.”

“I have my reasons. More than a few.”

“What reasons? Life’s been good to you. Maybe it’s so good to you *because* you’re so cynical?”

“Actually, I sometimes think it’s been too good. That there must be something... some displacement mechanism at work, I think. No one can have it this good, there’s got to be some displacement happening.”

“Displacement. The power that keeps us afloat,” Malte said.

“Nice slogan, really great, Malte.”

“You’re telling me!”

“You really don’t remember anything?”

“Just perverted clergymen, the usual. They were hard on us, obviously.”

“Oh?”

“Not like *that*. But for life. For life... they steeled us for life.” Malte stretched out his elbows three times for emphasis. “A good school, in the end.”

Jan couldn’t take it anymore: “Do you not remember how they took pictures of us?”

“Yeah. Just Stein,” Malte shrugged.

“Right, just Stein.”

“That was his kick. But that wasn’t really...”

“No. But sometimes,” Jan said, then paused for a moment, “sometimes I think about it.”

“Yearbook pictures.”

“And for the private collection.”

“Meaningless pictures.”

“Same as what you do for work nowadays, basically.”

“Right.”

“Were you naked?”

“Completely naked? No. You?”

“No,” Jan lied.

“And even if. Right, so. *Dear Martin.*”

Malte looked for words, even stood up, swished his fingers almost poetically through the air, trying to coax, to drag the words from the smoke that filled the room.

“Dear Martin, it was some time ago that we—when we—we heard—it came to our attention that you—you—that you got... lost—wrapped up in unsavory materials on the net—dear Martin. We just want to let you know that...”

Jan grinned. Malte noticed and lowered his arms.

“Best to skip it then,” he said, and sat down again.



## PUBERTY

What it would feel like to be inside another person, Keanu had wondered for the first time on his seventh birthday. Back then, he wanted to be inside his cousin, inside her tall, pliant body, generous even before puberty had hit, inside her plump face with its bulging, slightly parted lips. He had already heard a thing or two about how this being-in-someone worked, had heard about “sticking it in” and things like that, and had sometimes talked about it himself. But he still couldn’t quite picture it; the act itself was mysterious, fabled, forbidden grounds, kind of like Hogwarts in Harry Potter. It had nothing to do with “love,” which he had already experienced in first grade (her name was Walda). It was a simple, sudden, burning desire: to be in there. He’d often felt this desire, this question, through the years, more naturally, more precisely the older he got. He had rarely even spoken to those he wanted to be inside: neighbors, sales clerks, teachers, and later on, girls on the way to school, a specific one every or almost every morning. Instead of hitting these “targets” (as they were now called), he had kissed a classmate he despised more than desired. At least there was that, he thought.

This desire to be inside a female person was not merely sexual or carnal. It was profoundly hostile and parasitic, or else had the character of a conquest. It had nothing to do with the “merging” biology books often described. Keanu wanted to nestle inside and expand. He didn’t want two people to merge, but one to penetrate the other and make her a part of himself. Hostile takeover. Incubus.

And salvation. The thought of being *chosen* in a complicated, very dark, and opaque way had been with Keanu since his early years. People’s eyes were just like that, they clung to him, sometimes with hostility, sometimes with love, searching for something in his eyes—but what?

That a moment of enlightenment, of clarity, lay dormant in the act of sex was something he vaguely hoped for (naturally, he could never have expressed it this way, but the feeling was always with him and he perceived it very clearly). With sex, he hoped, he would finally be able to see the task that had been assigned him from elsewhere, and the meaning of this game with all its levels would open up, reveal itself, become clear. It would be dazzling, lucid, and light, and the rain of triumph would descend upon him.

“This is—Keanu.”

They had laughed, of course. They always did, and Keanu always laughed along with them, but from a step up, more wounded, arrogant, routinized. Proud at the same time of this dazzling name. If he looked different, more normal, uglier, commoner, then the name really would have been preposterous. But he even looked like Keanu Reeves, that was the bizarrely magical part. His beauty ennobled his otherwise daft name. And then came the joke he’d been using for the last year or two: “Actually I’m his son.” And he generally chalked up the ensuing laughter as a win.

While Principal Rupp introduced Keanu, saying he had come from the Waldorf School and had now agreed with his parents (first lie) that a stricter grading system might do him good (second lie), Keanu looked at Mrs. Drescher, who was leaning against the radiator, facing him. They had met each other briefly, and this first eye contact here at school was all official and functional and friendly, she had smiled at him openly and with pedagogical tenderness. Then he had looked at Rupp, then at the thirty or so heads, picking out and assessing individual faces. The second eye contact with Kathrin Drescher had not been quite so innocent. He stared at her for two or three seconds too long, willfully, and counted (twenty-one, twenty-two ...), and irritation overtook her face. She blushed and looked away.

Twitches in the corner of mouths, oozing eyes, brightened by light-emitting diodes, broad spectrum. Signs and gestures crisscrossed the room. Splinters of faces lingered in memory. Keanu felt defiant and scared. How would he conciliate, assimilate, reintegrate? At fifteen, he already felt himself finished, fixed, a full person. The world should arrange itself around him, as should his new classmates. But it wouldn't work that way. He had sensed a crucial difference between himself and most of his new classmates: one of origin. He was the foreigner, and everything was foreign to him, and that would have to be sifted through and resolved. But it never would be, not entirely, that much he was vaguely certain of. The residue of foreignness would always be here, this special status, which he'd felt he possessed his entire life.

There she stood, next to Mr. Rupp, whose name he would need to remember. He wanted to be inside her, he could already tell. Rupp was talking, that scared him. The other young people scared him. The new room, the new school. The smell of rubber. The new existence.

Being inside her, but like an active ingredient: *I will destroy you and redeem you*. Of course, he didn't think of it literally like that, but rather the way the Internet and his background had given it to him, as a virtual game, as a dirty extra level, as a grimy corner, as a filthy site, as porno trash, and at the same time as fucking abstract, as abstract and faraway as he felt.

The next day at school he feels even less comfortable, more alien. Kathrin Drescher wasn't his homeroom teacher, but at least she'd be his German teacher, that much was certain, and her daughter, Lale, was in his class. She was hotter than all the others, but like all hot girls, obviously, she was unapproachable. And damn smart, too.

On the way home came the game thoughts, next level. Pixels and pics and surfaces, all dots and squares, the weather, the sky, the passersby geometric, the girls, the men, the universe. He shot through time and space and tried not to break apart. Down below somewhere was a treasure

room with a pot full of gold and vaginal secretions, there had to be, it had to exist, because why else would Keanu do all this to himself?

At the corner in front of the playground, the gypsy boy was back in his wheelchair, nodding and smiling. They didn't know each other, only from sight, but somehow the fucked-up gypsy boy seemed to regard Keanu as an ally. Or else he nodded to any and every one like that, sitting in his stinking wheelchair with the shredded upholstery. Loser, buddy, Keanu thought, and turned morose. Even if he didn't want to, he too saw the boy as an ally, too, though he didn't know why. Or maybe he did: lepers always recognize one another.

At home, Keanu checked out a few Youtubers, but that bored him. His grandmother wasn't home yet, and he felt lightheaded and free. He went to a porn site.

*Like poison... like poison, in, in, poison, load, poison, poison, poison.* The clips sped past quicker and quicker, mouths gaping, eyes pleading, breasts jiggling, *give it to me.*

Women and girls, more and more of them, the cuts faster and faster, begging Keanu to *give it to them.* And eventually he crossed the threshold and came and gave it to them. He wiped his head and shaft with a washcloth, then stuck it back behind the radiator again. The emptiness felt good, in his balls, his body, his head. He closed the page with the cumpilation and cleared his history.

Then Keanu googled Mrs. Drescher. There were individual entries on university courses from the past, the topics of which meant nothing to Keanu, a few old novels, everything dull. Then a picture from a photo series from some party, "At the End of the Day" it was old, from back when Keanu was four or five. Mrs. Drescher was standing there in a strapless white dress with another beauty on a freestanding spiral staircase made of iron, very pretty, very thin. Both of them looked

composed and cool and somehow debauched by the camera. *Dope*, thought Keanu, and at the same time, *pathetic*.

And then, oops, he almost overlooked it: a book entitled *Swastika Nest*, available in bulk, what was that, “antiquarian”, right, junk probably, secondhand. She had published something? Whatever, the photo was more interesting. That was it, though, no Facebook, no Instagram. Keanu grabbed his crotch again.

Ten minutes later (shooting blanks, hotter like that, the less semen, the radder it felt) he was watching the latest streams by the biggest Youtubers (he was addicted to their voices and catchwords, they were like friends for him), Marfillo was getting more and more ratchet and hardcore, the Porsche logo on his cheek—he’d tattooed it smack on his right cheekbone—was now almost totally faded, he was slumming, upbeat, in a reaction video to a stream by Herbz, the philanthropic vegan and longboarder who’d caused a big stir on social media with his brief manifesto “Milk is Black.” In the past, they’d all been letsplayers, but now the game videos were only secondary, it was more about the banter and babble and blathering than Fortnite and Fifa. The interpersonal was what counted, and everyone was now just “reacting” to each other and reacting to reactions and to reactions to reactions. Keanu posted a few nasty jokes in the current style (“first time I ever clicked so fast on a tit video” or “no one, literally no one: Marfi: go old shit give percent %D”), did some quick hating (“yo I hate hard but no hate no bad blood”) and then “had” to “bounce” or “take a big one”. Because he was wanted at the swimming pool.

**[END OF SAMPLE]**