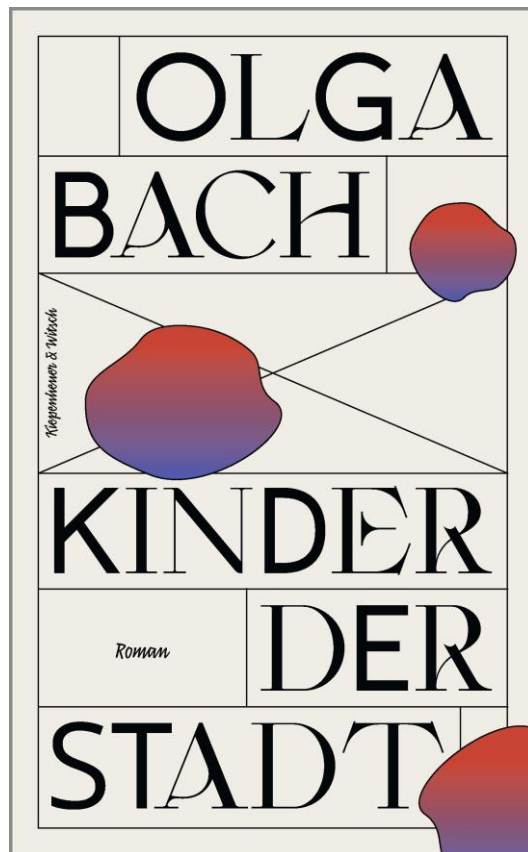


# CHILDREN OF THE CITY

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Sample translation by Jo Heinrich

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## NOVEMBER 2019

Orhan takes his multicoloured scarf from around his neck and wraps it round his head. Who will he be: Grace Kelly, or his grandmother? He makes his way towards Pankstrasse. He sashays along the pavement, waving to the cars and blowing kisses as if he knows the passers-by. Or as if they were his fans. An elderly woman stops and looks up aghast at this bizarre lady.

When Orhan steps into the café, he takes off his headscarf, kisses me and proudly announces, 'I came on the S-Bahn. I haven't taken a taxi for three whole days. God, it's slow.'

At the counter, the assistant tells him what's in all the rolls. 'Want anything else, Irina?' he asks me, without turning around.

'I'll have a coffee. Why do we have to meet them so early?'

As is so often the case, he doesn't answer my question; he just holds out his enormous sandwich to me. 'Here. It'll help you put on a little weight.'

Günther the lighting designer arrives; he looks like death warmed up. I usually only see him in bars after dark, and rarely during the day. Orhan and Günther kiss each other on the mouth when they see each other. Lukas the actor comes in next, his eyes peeking over his scarf. 'Why do we have to meet them so early?' he snarls – the third night owl among us.

‘Irina,’ Orhan turns back to me, ‘can you give us a quick run-down on what this museum is and what we’ve got to do there today?’

‘Why me? They contacted you about this.’

‘But I sent all the information on to you.’

‘The PDF you sent the night before last? That was 120 pages.’

Orhan shrugs. ‘OK. I actually only know the Head of Communications. From when I was in Munich. He’s just started there, and he recommended us to the Director. There’ll be some important people from the world of politics at the museum’s launch. They want it to be a big event.’

‘And when will that be?’

‘In May.’

‘Isn’t that a bit short notice?’

‘It’s not a lot of work. The programme only needs to last about an hour, maybe with a press conference beforehand. And they have a decent budget.’ Orhan turns to Lukas, ‘We’ll introduce you as our producer at the meeting.’

Lukas stiffens. ‘I don’t know anything about production.’

Orhan takes the sandwich plate back towards him. ‘At the end of the day, it’s only about budget plans anyway.’

‘We have to produce it ourselves?’ I ask.

‘If we didn’t, they’d have had to put out a call for tenders. Because they’re using public money too. But most of the money

comes from a benefactor, I think he's American.' He looks at his Apple Watch. 'We'd better go. Irina, have you paid yet?'

Surprised, I rummage for my purse. Orhan normally foots the bill for everyone.

Outside, the actor wraps his scarf around his face again, Orhan tightens the hood of his jacket so only his eyes and the tip of his nose are peeking out, and I put on my fur hat. My mother, Maya, gave it to me. Only the lighting designer has his head and face bare, keeping up a virile strong and silent front, and he's smoking one of his filterless roll-ups as he walks.

'Irina, why are you always the only woman?' asks Orhan. 'Don't you like working with women?'

'Where did you get that stupid idea from?'

'Do you actually have any girlfriends?'

'Yes, you know I do. Susanne, for example. And Bianca. And Maria...'

'But Maria isn't in Berlin.'

'Why do my girlfriends have to be in Berlin?'

We pass the Wedding district court on our left, with its stepped gables, oriel windows and castellations; 'Neo-Gothic,' I hear my inner Zoba say.

Orhan and I argue all the way to Böttgerstrasse over whether or not I can't stand being with other women.

Lukas points eagerly at the building on the left with its eccentric stairs and decks: 'Is that it?'

Orhan shakes his head. 'No, but the museum was designed by a top architect too.'

Humboldtthain rises up before us; the trees have recently lost their leaves, and the flak tower looms over them. Gesundbrunnen train station is on our left. Below the overpass there's a tangle of railway tracks. An ICE train glides away southward. Demolition companies, scrap merchants. We stop in front of an inconspicuous house. A sandstone-coloured facade, narrow windows. Orhan rings the doorbell, and a door opens automatically. Stylish bare concrete in the entrance. The floor is covered with a plastic tarpaulin. The uniformed doorman sits behind glass, talking over his intercom with a Berlin accent. He's telling someone we're here.

'What's the name of this museum again?' the actor whispers.

'Museum of Identity... and something else,' I whisper back.

Then we wait. The doorman is silent, and we all wait in silence, until at last one of the glass doors opens and a man comes towards us, his arms outstretched. He must be the Head of Communications. 'Orhan! How wonderful!'

Orhan introduces us. 'And this is Irina Funke, our writer.'

'Great. We're really excited about this. My manager's expect-

ing you in the conference room.’ And to the doorman: ‘Our visitors still need to sign in, thank you very much.’ One by one, we lean over the book while the Head of Communications carries on talking. ‘Sorry about the mess, we’re still settling in here.’ Then he winks. ‘My manager’s waiting, but I’m sure we can still have a quick tour.’

We struggle to keep up with him.

‘That’s the administration area, where the research centre will have its offices.’

Unfinished offices: here, too, tarpaulins are on the floor, boxes are piled up and there’s a smell of plaster. Then the Head of Communications holds his chip up to the reader by a metre-wide steel door. ‘The star of the show here is architecture. Just imagine what you could do here!’

The steel door opens in slow motion – beyond, an endless space appears.

How can this house, its exterior seemingly so small, have so much space inside?

The Head of Communications raises his arms: ‘This is the foyer. Upstairs there are three more floors. 3000 square metres of exhibition space.’

Galleries, inclines, free-floating stairs and ramps made of glass. Lukas is taking photos with the grave air of a producer and Günther seems completely unimpressed, taking off his leather

jacket and hanging it over his arm. Endlessly far away from us, a team of technicians are busy laying cables.

How did the donor get this rich?

The others are already climbing one of the flights of stairs, and I rush after them. ‘Have you heard of the architect, Orhan? He mostly does projects in China.’

On the top floor, daylight mixes with diffused artificial light; I can’t work out its source.

‘We’re creating a complex urban gardening structure on the roof. With rabbits. It will also be a meeting place for young people from the surrounding area. This is especially important to the donor,’ explains the Head of Communications.

Through a glass facade spanning several metres, there’s a view towards Humboldthain.

Orhan steps up to the window and looks out over the city. He might have been Grace Kelly earlier, but now he’s standing with his legs wide, his hands in his pockets. He’s dressed from head to toe in black, probably Yamamoto.

‘Günther, could you light up the trees in the park from here?’

‘Sure.’

The actor approaches the Head of Communications, clears his throat and starts talking in a deep voice: ‘Because of the budget plans...’

But the Head of Communications looks at the time. ‘I’m sorry,

we really should be getting to the conference room now.'

We're back on the first floor, in front of a steel door.

The Head of Communications pushes it open. The museum's Director is a qualified sociologist, I read on the website. White hair, a white scarf over a grey tweed suit, with very serious eyes behind her glasses. She's the same height as me. That's rarely the case with women.

'Sorry about the mess!'

I look around. There are little bottles of mineral water on the table, and next to them a vacuum jug and a plate of carefully arranged biscuits. Notepads are laid out.

The Director smooths her blouse and looks at us expectantly.

The Head of Communications briskly sits down and motions for us to take a seat as well. 'I think it makes sense to start with a brief description of the museum.' His face is blotchy.

Far apart from one another, we sit in silence. We are weirdly dwarfed by this table.

'The Museum of Identity and Reunification is dedicated to the post-reunification period, with a special focus on the capital,' he begins his lecture.

Günther reaches for one of the water bottles, opens it noisily and takes a long swig.

'We will be filling a gap in the politics of remembrance in Berlin. We will deal with themes that have *only just* become



memory and that still continue to have an effect now, as our immediate past.'

Lukas nods thoughtfully at each sentence and takes one of the notepads.

'As I'm sure you've heard, in the 90s there was talk of the "end of history". Of course, we now know it didn't happen. But what has history been since 1990? What we do know is that it is the story of a disintegration. Stable things became fragile. Terror, financial crisis, climate change, Europe in crisis, refugees, populism, war. But it is also, from a positive point of view, the story of an opening up. Identities wind fluidly around historical milestones, interweave with each other and call for recognition for the first time. As a foundation, we revolve around questions such as: what does it mean to locate our identities, collectively and individually, together yet diversely, in a city like Berlin now? What is the common denominator in our new multiperspectivity? And how can we come to a consensus on this, in terms of the politics of remembrance? Does pluralisation necessarily mean fragmentation? Are we still listening to each other? As you can see, each question leads on to the next. We are not only a museum, but also an open laboratory, a research centre and a discussion forum. In conversation with all this city's stakeholders.'

We all remain silent and smile; only Günther remains stone-

faced.

‘Have you got anything to add?’ the Head of Communications asks his manager.

She straightens up. She seems unprepared somehow to be a director, as if she still needs to grow into the role.

‘It certainly is about filling a gap here in Berlin,’ she says slowly, ‘But that’s not all. You’ve probably heard that this place was donated to us by a philanthropist. His grandparents emigrated from Berlin to the States to join their relatives who’d made it there. He wants to contribute something to this neighbourhood, where his grandparents grew up. We operate locally, but at the same time we are part of a global network and want to become known beyond Berlin.’

Orhan looks out of the window, lost in his thoughts. At some point, one of us has to say something. I clear my throat: ‘Do you have any concrete ideas about the performance? The museum’s purpose is quite... wide-ranging.’

The Head of Communications enthusiastically crosses his legs. I wonder what his face looks like when he’s not smiling. ‘Thank you for bringing this up, Irina. We asked you, Orhan, first and foremost, because of your spectacular visual language, of course. Only a director like you can fill this immense space. But you’re also a Berliner, born around the time the Wall came down, and with your identity, you stand for the diversity I was

just talking about. You, all of you,’ the Head of Communications gestures to Orhan, Günther, Lukas and me, ‘are in yourselves an interaction with our exhibition, simply because of who you are.’

‘Günther, weren’t you born in Bavaria in the 60s?’ asks Orhan.

The lighting designer nods.

Orhan leans forward. ‘As you mentioned multiperspectivity, it’s given me a vision of a performance with no central perspective, a sequence of scenes that the audience will be free to walk around, but without being able to interact with the performers. We can start down in the foyer with the first scene. One idea will morph into the next, all the way up to the top floor. I’m going to use a string orchestra, with the musicians spread throughout the building. Günther will create a complex light installation incorporating the surrounding environment. We should definitely include the building’s history. Irina, you can stay in touch with the museum about the script.’

‘Great, great!’ shouts the Head of Communications, his eyes on the Director.

She nods slowly. ‘Mr. Stern, this is an experiment, both for you and for us. We certainly follow a different logic here in a museum context than you do in theatre. We have to take into account the sensitive concerns of all the various parties involved. There are lots of details to discuss, of course. But we’re really looking forward to it.’

Hood pulled up, scarf wrapped tight, roll-up cigarette, fur hat. The Head of Communications stands with us briefly on the pavement by the entrance, shivering in his rather ill-fitting suit. And he's stopped smiling at last. His voice is suddenly much calmer here, outside the museum space. The actor gives him a filter cigarette. He takes one or two thoughtful puffs and finally says, 'I probably don't need to mention it, but East German identities mustn't fall by the wayside, under any circumstances. We have stakeholders from the new eastern states on the board of trustees. Between you and me, the foundation's board is very sensitive about this.'

'Sure, we understand, thanks for pointing that out.'

A friendly goodbye. Overpass, tracks, trains. Orhan turns off towards Gesundbrunnen. 'I'm going to take the S-Bahn home and make chicken soup for Barne. He's sick in bed. See you tonight at the Ankerklause?'

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Diner booths, springy bench seats upholstered in dark leather, and in between, black tables with chrome legs. Outside, groups of people are crossing the Kottbusser Bridge. A couple of mojitos, a jukebox, one cigarette after another; friends come and go, squeezing onto the seats. Basti steals a saltshaker, as always. At around midnight, Orhan and I meet in a toilet cubicle. He's put

his mobile on the cistern and he's laying out two lines for us. From above, I can see the bald spots left by his alopecia.

'It's absurd,' he says as he's chopping the cocaine with two bank cards. 'That museum's labelling me as queer and diverse. But at the theatre I'm already part of the establishment, slowly making room for the new ones. Me of all people. All we need now is an Ossi, someone from the East.'

'Maria's an Ossi,' I say. 'Maria, she's got GDR parents, she now works for the Die Linke, you know, the left-wing party. She's a perfect fit.'

'Do you think she'd work with us again?'

'Don't know – she might not. I'll ask her.'

'I'm sure we'll create another masterpiece,' he says before snorting his line. He almost sounds sad.

'Orhan?'

'Yes?'

'Are you worried about money?'

He straightens up and hands me the rolled-up banknote. 'I just have too many overheads. And then there's all the money I give to my family...'

Two o'clock in the morning. We take an Uber up Sonnenallee. We turn left behind the S-Bahn station. At the Hotel Estrel, it's *Stars in Concert*. All of Berlin is familiar with the posters. Beyond, the industrial area is dark. We get out and start walking

over the cobblestones. In the courtyard there's a car repair shop, a pole dance studio and a scrapyard. We take a quick look around. Our friends haven't arrived yet. Orhan looks tense. The bouncer nods and we go into the factory building.

'Irina, I've always wanted you to write my story. Maybe now's the time,' Orhan says to me, before I lose him in the crowd.

Sergio. There's always an Antonio, a Sergio or a Matteo at these parties. He hasn't slept for two days. He's going on to the Rummelsburger Bucht later, to the waterside. Programmer, DJ, waiter. Bought an apartment eight years ago with his parents' money. Its value's quadrupled since then. The photojournalist at the bar works for the newspaper *Die Welt* and he's just come back from northern Syria. We sit on office chairs in the seedy stairwell and take some ketamine. People are traipsing up and down the stairs all the time.

'Are you on a guided tour?' I call after them.

He shows me photos on his iPhone: 'This woman's hiding from the bombs.'

At some point he takes pictures of me; I can't keep my eyes open.

'That was some trip, six weeks in northern Syria! But this is some trip too.'

Hours later, Orhan and I are waiting outside the club in silence. Overhead, the sky is grey. I take off his glasses so I can get

a better view of his eyes. He lets me. His skin is dry and red. I can't interpret his gaze; he looks away. My heart's tightening.

'Don't worry! I'm fine,' he says, getting into an Uber.

We don't kiss each other on the mouth when we say goodbye.

Back in Tempelhof, the stairwell already has that smell of German lunches. Welcoming wreaths hang on the apartment doors. I never see any visitors here though.

I'm horrified when I look in the mirror. Blood everywhere? No, it's lipstick. Why are there never any mirrors in clubs? I'm missing an earring. Sparkly fly earrings. I get into the bathtub, squat down and the hot water flows over my head. What will Maya say? She only just gave me those earrings for my 29th birthday. I could just buy them again, then she won't know about it. I'll just have to ask her where she got them from, drop it into the conversation. I wash my hair several times.

In the bedroom, the bed is empty: Gabriel's not there. I already know that in three hours' time I'll be awake again and I won't be able to get back to sleep.

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Gabriel's been working at the clinic in Schleswig-Holstein for almost a year now, as part of his training as a psychotherapist. I imagine him walking around our bed. He has a portrait of his big brother on his forearm; he had the tattoo done eight years

ago, not long after his brother died. We'd only just met.

[Irina]

How's it going G? Miss you.

I've been lying in bed for almost 24 hours. Looking at photos. A selfie of us. Blue sky behind us, we're smiling. I'd wrapped his T-shirt around my head; I can't remember why.

[Gabriel]

Hi little owl, looking forward to coming back to our nest. How'd it go at the museum?

Nothing's happened. Still, I feel like I have to keep something secret. Gabriel sleeps in a room next to the clinic. He has a half-hour walk to the nearest supermarket. The other trainees have parents from Algeria, Kosovo and Turkey. Not everyone can afford to work unpaid for a year in the big cities.

*Zoba*: my display lights up with my father's name. I pick it up.

'Irina, my fawn, how are you doing?'

'Let's just say I've looked better,' I croak.

'When will you be getting here?'

'My train leaves in two hours.'

'Prepare yourself! I've aged terribly. I'm hardly recognisable.'

'Oh, nonsense. I'll let you know when I'm between Hanover and Bielefeld.'



‘Bye.’

I put Gabriel’s jeans on, and Orhan’s coat, and then Maya’s fur hat on my head. 992 pages of *The Kindly Ones* are in my case. After the last book I read, *Effingers*, the Holocaust victims’ story, it’s time to read about the perpetrators next.

I walk along Ordensmeisterstrasse, towards Tempelhofer Damm. The chestnut trees stand bare in front of the rough brown concrete prefabricated block. An old man murdered his young lover in there recently. Then there’s Berlin’s largest tanning centre.

I pass the Ullsteinhaus, on the other side of the Teltow Canal, under a grey Berlin sky. The huge golden hands on the clock-tower have stopped. Why is it that so many clocks in this city don’t work?

Two men from Egypt run the little bakery down on the platform in Ullsteinstrasse U-Bahn station; they’re always in a good mood. The extreme heat from the summer of 2019 was trapped down here well into the autumn. How many years of my life have I spent on the U-Bahn? At least an hour a day ever since my twelfth birthday. It must be years. I text Gabriel.

The carriages are full of workers, middle-aged people playing colourful games on their smartphones, schoolgirls who aren’t in school, drunks talking to themselves or yelling at each other, re-

tired couples in pale C&A clothing, silently but amicably annoyed with all the others.

[Gabriel]

17 years times 365 is 6205 days plus 4 days because of leap years, so 6209 hours divided by 24 is 258.71 days, or if you divide that by 30.5, it's 8.48 months. That's how much time you've spent on the U-Bahn.

On the ICE train, the man next to me is writing about the jukebox motif in Aki Kaurismäki's films on his laptop. I fall asleep and wake up in Wolfsburg and see the big VW Group logo. When I look out, I have to squint. I've spent a year looking at nothing but books. Legal textbooks. Thousands of case outcomes. Thousands of index cards.

*Outline how the infringement procedure under Article 258 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the EU is examined. In a general partnership, in accordance with Section 128 of the German Commercial Code, all general partners are liable with their private assets for the company's liabilities. What is the situation within a private partnership? If there is liability, are partners liable for fulfilment? Explain the 'perpetrator behind the perpetrator' concept. What are the case groups?*

I can't help but let out some burps, but luckily the attack passes after a few minutes. It started a year ago, when I began

studying for the state exam, and when Gabriel and I moved in together. Several times a day, I burp as if I'm possessed. According to the internet, my problem's called 'aerophagia'. I went to a speech therapist, but after two sessions she thought I'd be better off with a psychotherapist. I never got round to making an appointment – I never had the time.

I open my case. *The Kindly Ones*. It's a doorstep with a red cover, just like one of those old law textbooks.

Bielefeld station. Everyone's in a hurry, and the platform quickly empties. A guard is standing on the platform in the distance, looking past me intently. Down the stairs, along a long underpass. I hope it's not true: I hope he hasn't aged. Up the escalator and there he is, right next to the station café, raising his arms enthusiastically. He's not aged, he's just the same as ever.

'Irina!'

'Zoba!'

We gently trot towards each other; we hold each other's forearms; he studies my face before I pull him to me and hug him. Sometimes I can't help but cry in these situations, when we see each other for the first time in a while, crying with joy and emotion, over him, over the two of us.

‘Well done, well done on your exam! A lawyer and a playwright! My daughter writes plays and she’s a legal whizz too!’

‘You don’t look any older!’

‘Don’t I?’

He runs his hand through his hair. ‘Oh, your father has aged terribly. I’m 80, you know! Come on, let’s get a cappuccino and do some people-watching!’

He’s wearing the leather slippers he often has on when he picks me up. As if he’s at home wherever he goes. Tattered corduroy trousers, a light blue fisherman’s sweater, his ancient thick double-breasted jacket with the high collar. He still manages to look so good. Maya once told me, ‘He held out his side profile towards me. He didn’t look at me.’

His bushy eyebrows are wild; he even has to have them trimmed from time to time at the barber’s in Melle. Under them, his eyes are clouded with age. They used to be brown. He’s now eagerly using them to follow people’s comings and goings. A disabled man asks us to open his Coke. It hisses and sprays everywhere, and the woman behind the counter shouts sternly, ‘Reinhard, did you shake your bottle again?’

Together we all wipe the Coke off the tables.

Zoba’s Renault Espace is parked in front of the station in a no-parking zone. He can’t lock any of the doors. The key is in the ignition, as it so often is.

It's his fourth Espace. He's been buying the same car ever since Jakob was born.

'Jakob's coming later. He couldn't come on the train I was on.'

'Oh, Jakob the aesthete, splendid.'

Inside, it smells bitter, of cabbage, or wood perhaps, not an urban smell, at any rate. Everything takes time. First, we have to just sit in the car, in front of the station.

'I went to the Hardigen, I got some wood for the fire from Leo.'

More than anything else, the Espace is good for transporting things.

'Didn't he shout at you to get out the other day!?'

'Yes.'

'Did you sort it out?'

'No.'

'Then why did you go back there?'

'He wasn't there.'

'So you just took the wood?'

'Well, you know, Leo is my twin, after all!'

If I didn't have my boots on, I'd put my feet up on the dashboard. 'On my way I started a book about a man in the Second World War who was born in 1914, just like Dankmar. And he was in Ukraine in 1941 too, and he went to the Caucasus after that. The only difference is that the protagonist, Dr Aue, is in the SS and not in the Wehrmacht. It's very unsettling so far.'

‘We went to Ukraine, in Dankmar’s footsteps, you and I.’

‘I know.’

Zoba pats the steering wheel. ‘That’s how far we’ve come.’

Then my father starts the car. We leave Bielefeld and head towards Werther, with the Teutoburg Forest on our left.

At some point, the roads become single-track and pass fields.

We’re going at a snail's pace, 20 km/h. Zoba’s telling me about something. No, actually he's talking at me. His two bridges in Berlin-Mitte, at the Bode-Museum and Berlin Cathedral, are a ‘Venetianisation’ of the River Spree. In Oldenburg, the silver linden trees are ‘my bridge’s sculptural lines. We now know that trees are truly sacred!’ He talks about himself in the third person. ‘The Fouqué Bridge in Brandenburg, by the architect Z. S.’

I look into the distance, at trees, at puddles, at a lone heron.

‘Berlin needs another bridge by the Jannowitz Bridge. On the Märkisches Ufer. You know where I mean?’

‘Towards Fischerinsel?’

‘Towards Fischerinsel! You’d have to convince the council that there’s a need for a bridge there. A footbridge with a bar in the middle. Where people can go to drink. Just as it should be.’

He’ll still be making plans when he’s on his deathbed.

‘Hanno Rauterberg is always complaining about contemporary building. So I sent him everything I have about bridges. That's what they're meant to be printing in their next issue.’

‘Who’s Hanno Rauterberg?’

‘He’s from *Die Zeit* - the features section.’

‘But that’s weekly, isn’t it? I’m sure they won’t be able to fit it in. You’d be better off giving it to another paper, maybe the FAZ! We could send it to Maria.’

‘Maria works at the FAZ?’

‘Maria was working at the FAZ.’

‘Maria was working at the FAZ...’

‘Now she’s working for Die Linke.’

‘And how about Orhan – how’s he doing?’

‘He’s overworked and he seems to be having money problems. He’ll be making his opera debut in a few months. At the Deutsche Oper.’

‘Orhanito. The magician. He’s drowning in his own mannerisms.’

‘With so many premieres each year, they can’t all be good...’

Just behind a small patch of woodland, we stop and wind the windows down so we can hear the rain.

‘The rain’s good for the countryside,’ says Zoba, closing his eyes.

‘Is there not enough rain here too? I thought that problem was only where I am, in the East.’

‘Everywhere.’

We creep on, analysing the landscape as we go. And actually,

there are whole groups of dead spruces in the woods, amongst beeches, alders and oaks that are still bright and leafy. From time to time, drivers overtake us, hooting. We spot a deer in a field. The sun's breaking through.

'That brown in that field, what a brown! And beyond that, the green of that other field! And that house looks like it has close-set eyes.'

'You mean its windows? Amazing how long the shadows are!'

'Shadow is the messenger of light. I've spent a long time focussing on shadows...'

Zoba lives on the outskirts of a village, in a museum, the Dankmar Schreiner Museum. It's an old farmer's house; he's completely redesigned its interior. As he goes inside, he shouts out his obligatory 'Hello, pictures! Irina's here!'

His father's paintings are on all the walls everywhere. Landscapes with thick layers of texture, finely painted flowers, austere still lifes. No portraits. There are some of Zoba's brothers, his sister, his mother and Zoba's first wife in a box room. Zoba has five children by four women; it was only Maya he didn't marry, and it was only with her that he had two children, Jakob and me.

'Didn't Dankmar ever paint you?' I once asked him.

'He never painted me.'



At some point, though, I did find a portrait of him, in the box room, among the pictures that didn't make it onto the walls.

'Why did he kill himself?'

'Because of the pigments. At that time, paints had ingredients that attacked the nervous system. He had terrible headaches.'

'Do you think he witnessed the mass shootings in Crimea?'

'He was a peace-loving soldier. He painted the people there. Ustayev, the Tartars. We went there.'

I put down my case by the front door and Zoba gives me some slippers.

'Zoba, I wrote to the Federal Archives. About Dankmar's work as a soldier in the Wehrmacht. But they only came back with a hospital stay in Ukraine. And proof that he was stationed in the Caucasus.'

'He drew maps, in the offices. He didn't shoot anyone,' says Zoba.

'Didn't your mother destroy all his diaries after he died?'

'Yes, I think she did.'

Oak floors, whitewashed walls; the ceiling in the large hall is the colour of oxblood and has hefty beams. There are no doors. Our old Bechstein grand piano's in the hallway. It's airy, quiet and spacious. A grotesquely large space for one person. Zoba is completely impoverished in his old age. He's one of thousands and thousands of self-employed people who never saved for a

pension. Threadbare clothes from the twentieth century, pasta with ketchup, no money for petrol to get to Berlin. For my birthday he either gives me valuable things of his own from the old days, nothing, or a bowl of quark. In return for this lifestyle, he lives in a palace. If I ask him how much of his mortgage he still has to pay off, he's been quoting the same amount for years.

I pay my respects to some pictures: delphiniums, mallows, jugs, and I walk up the first steep stairs. The oil painting by my great-grandfather, who was also a painter, is here in the 'studio'. A white dress and a white hat with frizzy brown underneath, sfumato and hazy: Erna, my great-grandmother. Erna's father was Jewish, which is why her daughter, Dankmar's wife, my grandmother, was expelled from the Magdeburg School of Applied Arts under the Nuremberg Race Laws.

I go up the second steep staircase to the attic. I look at the balustrade. Orhan built it ten years ago, when he, Maria and I spent a summer working on Zoba's building site.

To this day, I'll never understand how Orhan did it. He had no idea how, and no one helped him. He just retreated into himself, listened to the radio blasting out classical music, and set to work.

I go back downstairs and sink into one of the huge chaises longues in the 'studio'. My temples are throbbing, and there's a pain behind my eyes. Never partying again. No more drugs.

Zoba throws a blanket over me.

‘The title of this chapter is “Arrival”.’ He stretches out on the second giant chaise longue, at the other end of the room.

‘Zoba, we have to go back to Bielefeld in an hour to pick up Jakob.’

‘Ah, Jakob, the sun child. He always stands so straight. Could he be ordinary? No! It’s the most important thing, not to be ordinary.’

Zoba talks to me from the other side of the room; I turn around, my face to the wall, close my eyes, switch off.

‘... I knew it was better not to interfere. Children thrive best when they’re left alone. He’ll come when he needs me.’

‘So, a quick half-hour nap.’

Here, we always sleep at least nine hours a night, and after breakfast we go and have another lie down. We have a siesta at some point later. Sometimes we nod off for six or seven minutes in between as well. I have a vivid dream about Hitler and a swarm of flies.

Half an hour later, Zoba starts talking again straight away.

‘I did the legendary IBA in 1987, the International Building Exhibition.’

I briefly regret having come. ‘I know.’

‘It was about preservation, not this modern type of building that divides everything off. No, overlapping uses, flexibility! The

old Kreuzberg 36 was going to be demolished. Then the squatters arrived, on Admiralstrasse, and I said, "Great! Go ahead!" And I sorted them out something basic...' Out of the corner of my eye, I can see him raising his index finger while he's lying there. '...so they had a dustbin. Rubbish is a whole topic in itself... I had my office at Moritzplatz. And in the building which is now... which is now... What's the name of the restaurant down there, in Kochstrasse?'

'Sale e Tabacchi.'

'Sale e Tabacchi! It was there, in that building, that we planned the IBA. And Haus Huth was a top address. I used to bike between those three points by the Wall.' He goes silent for a while. 'Germany had screwed up the Third Reich, put on such airs and graces, been so dominant and overbearing, so it would have been good to show some humility to the world and admit there are ultimately two Germanys, East and West.'

'Zoba, you're the West's Heiner Müller,' I murmur and turn over.

Zoba's sitting at the Eiermann table reading his emails. I put my hair up with a clip. My father looks up from his Mac and claps.

'Bella! I love your hair up like that!' He pays a lot of attention to my appearance. Would he be as enthusiastic about me if he

didn't think I was beautiful? I'm almost as old now as Maya was when she met him.

'Life is full of setbacks. Hanno Rauterberg's replied. He can't fit my bridges in. All my works are listed buildings, damn it! Hanno Rauterberg, what an idiot!'

'You should have sent him a finished article, not just everything you had.'

'He could give it to the keen interns to do.'

'Send it to Maria!'

'Why Maria?'

'Well, because it's a better fit for the FAZ.'

'Is Maria at the FAZ?'

'She was at the FAZ! We need to go now.'

My brother emerges slowly from the crowd and comes towards us. He sees me; we smile. No other person I love is more likely to stay by my side for life. My brother who's been smoking pot for 15 years – his eyes are glazed over. He towers over everyone here in the station hall. He's much taller than me, and taller than Zoba too.

'Hello, Zoba!'

'Ah, son!' Zoba takes him in his arms and pats him on the back. It's obvious they're related.

Jakob's dark brown leather jacket is open, its pale lining

showing, and underneath, a blue fisherman's sweater. His back has a slight curve, which let him get out of National Service when he left school.

I hug him next, my head disappearing inside his jacket briefly; Jakob has his own aromatic smell.

In the Espace, I examine the back of his head. He takes off his hat and rubs his flattened hair.

If he let his hair grow longer, it would be curly. But he always goes to the same Turkish barber and gets it cut short. His hands with his long, narrow, pale fingers, like a pianist's. Beside him, Zoba's claws are on the steering wheel.

'Check this out, Zoba stole some wood from Leo.'

'No way, he stole it?'

20 km/h again.

Zoba is singing in a made-up language. He gently puts his hand on Jakob's thigh.

My brother is still beaming. 'Finally, back in the countryside!' But his voice sounds a little uncertain. It sounds childish, or artificial, when he's talking to Zoba. I know I'm guilty of this too, so it bothers me.

'Don't you have any work on?'

'Yes I do. I've taken some time off.'

At the end of the first job interview of his life, Jakob said he'd get back to them about whether he'd accept the job. He just

wanted to look at other architectural firms first.

‘How am I supposed to explain to them why it took me so long to get my degree?’ he asked me the day before. We were sitting in a dimly lit Vietnamese at Schöneberg S-Bahn station.

‘I’m sure they won’t even ask about it.’

‘But what if they do?’

‘Hmm. Just say you were having a period of self-discovery. It’s true, isn’t it?’

Now he takes one week a month off as sick leave, on average. With his poor pay – minimum wage, nine euros an hour – I don’t really blame him.

‘At the moment I’m supervising a building site in Friedensstrasse, at the Platz der Vereinten Nationen. Zoba, do you know the Society for Urban Development? It’s a trust that works on social projects. Mainly converting existing buildings. Sort of like Simona’s office. It means there’s subsidised studio space in Friedensstrasse, only 3.50 per square metre. It’s all in a listed building,’ Jakob says proudly.

‘Simona, that was a wild time back then in Hamburg,’ Zoba replies.

‘What was it before, Jakob?’ I ask from the back seat.

‘It used to be a school. But it was bombed – only the teacher’s house was still standing in the street. Then it was a police sta-

tion. It's typical Berlin-style, built around a communal courtyard. And it's been empty ever since reunification.'

'Little Uncle, Little Uncle, bravo!' Zoba sings. He stops the car; the Violenbach river's babbling.

'Irina, do you remember when we saw the deer?'

'You mean two hours ago?'

'You saw a deer?'

'Yes, it was really cute.'

We wait.

'There, a hare!'

It's enormous, leaping across the field, batting its forelegs, before disappearing into the wood.

In the Dankmar Museum's kitchen, we're drinking Herforder Pilsner. I'm sitting in my usual place, with my feet up on the wall by the window from where you can see the house next-door. My body's being warmed by the radiator directly to my left. Zoba looks almost frail next to Jakob. It's twilight.

'Farmer Wehmer enters right,' he says.

The neighbour comes into the picture from the right, pushing a wheelbarrow, then disappears behind his house. His daughter, who has a learning disability, is standing at their front door; she waves cheerfully to us, and we wave back.

'She's not all there,' says Zoba.



He's hung some fat balls in the hedge that divides us from Farmer Wehmer, and sparrows, blackbirds and robins come, and now and then a tiny wren. There's nothing he loves as much as birds.

## SEPTEMBER 2006

As so often happened, Irina had overslept. She'd been lying there battling the temptation to bunk off. But she'd pulled herself together, dragged herself to the U7, passed the kebab shop where she often got a cheap snack of bread and sauce during breaks, and now she was walking across the empty schoolyard. The first lesson was already half over. She could see students through the windows. She reluctantly walked up to the low-rise building where her classroom was.

The new school year had just begun: Year 9. Just the same old thing, over and over, Irina was thinking. She was reaching for the front door when it opened outwards and a girl rushed out past Irina, who turned around in surprise.

She watched her throw her backpack on the ground. It was Maria.

They had hardly exchanged a word, although they had been in the same class for a year.

Maria was one of the unpopular ones. A giant of a girl, a little taller than Irina, with a strangely deep voice, hair that was far too unruly and clothes in sludgy colours. Best in the class: a nerd, basically. The cool girls were the ones with the crop tops, low-rise jeans, glittery belts, thongs pulled over their hips and eyebrows plucked super-fine. And most importantly, the ones

with the big brand clothes.

Irina turned back to the door. But then she turned around again. Maria was still standing there, with her back to her.

‘Hey, everything OK?’ she asked.

Maria took a deep breath and picked up her backpack. ‘I don’t need any of you. I’m doing my own thing,’ she said, and walked back to the door without looking at Irina.

Irina followed her. Maria’s got a real temper, she thought. What did she mean by her ‘own thing’? Irina never lost her temper.

They went into the classroom together.

‘Oh, what an honour!’ the nasty maths teacher said smugly. ‘One’s decided to grace us with her presence again and the other one’s here at last.’

A few days later, Irina was standing in the smokers’ corner between Maria and some girls from the years above. She was amazed: maybe Maria was unpopular in her class, but she had friends who were older. Torn tights, miniskirts that only just covered their bums, studded belts, black and white checked skater shoes, patches, messy pinned-up hair and chipped nail polish. Maria was wearing a black T-shirt. ‘Eat the Rich’ was emblazoned under a white skull, and instead of the usual two bones, there was a crossed knife and fork.

‘Want one, Irina?’

Maria calmly rolled a cigarette and handed her the crooked result. The few teachers who smoked were walking up and down the path that led to the other school, the one for less academic students.

That school was another planet. They had no contact, even though it was directly connected to theirs. There had only once been a snowball fight one winter. People said the other school’s students had put stones in their snowballs.

Irina didn’t know Maria's friends. She nervously puffed on the crooked cigarette.

She took a deep breath in. A punk girl was standing next to her. Irina saw cheeky green eyes, a snub nose and lip piercings, but then her vision filled with yellow spots that grew bigger and bigger. Her arms and legs tingled and went hot.

‘I... I have to...’ she murmured and slumped to the ground.

‘What’s she doing?’ she heard the girl ask.

Then screams seemed to be coming from afar. At the same time, there was whispering, very close to her ear. Meat was piled up on a table. Garish vortexes, and voices coming from every angle. Someone was telling a story.

‘Irina!’

She opened her eyes and saw the sky, and blurry faces. Worried eyes directed at her.

‘She’s waking up!’

Irina was helped up. She touched the fabric of her pants between her legs. Thank God, she hadn’t wet herself.

The green-eyed girl laughed. ‘Maria, are you bringing your weirdo to the Köpi on Friday?’

‘I was really worried. You were twitching and stuff,’ said Maria, as the two of them walked back towards the low-rise building.

‘I’m sorry. It happens to me sometimes.’

They were getting slower and slower.

‘What’s the Köpi?’ Irina’s curiosity had got the better of her shame.

‘A squat in Mitte.’

‘Squat’ seemed to be a natural part of Maria’s vocabulary. Irina quickly nodded. ‘And what’s going on there on Friday?’

‘There’s a hardcore band playing. From Atlanta, I think.’

‘Awesome. And you’re going?’

‘I’ll have to see... I may have to babysit my brother.’

‘Oh,’ said Irina, disappointed.

They had stopped. The last students were going to their classes.

An Italian lesson on geography next. Irina would invariably fall asleep. At the end of the lesson, the teacher would gently

wake her up and tell her it was time to go. Irina was a good student, although she didn't put the work in. Most of the teachers liked her. Most of the teachers liked Maria, the A-grade student, too, even though she could be so quick-tempered. 'Somehow I don't feel like geography today.' Irina was never in the mood for geography. 'We could do something... something else.'

And so they sneaked out of the school, got bread and sauce for 50 cents at the kebab shop and trudged off to the U-Bahn. Herbs, garlic, hot spices.

'How old is your brother?'

'Three.'

'Cute. And what's his name?'

'Josef. Yes, I know, we're like Mary and Joseph, ha ha.'

Irina laughed out loud. 'Your parents are funny.'

'We don't have the same father.'

'I have half-brothers and sisters too. Thousands of them. Because of my father. My little half-brother is younger than his nephew, or something like that.'

They took the U7 train. Parchimer Allee, Blaschkoallee, Grenzallee, Neukölln.

'Here's where I live,' said Maria, but she stayed in her seat.

They kept on the train, and invented a game. They took a word from one of the adverts in the carriage, for example 'haemorrhoids', and took turns to make new words from its letters.

'Hoodie.'

'Moor.'

'Doom.'

'Heh.'

'Heh isn't a word,' Irina protested.

'Heh? Yes it is!'

Next stop Möckernbrücke.

'Do you like movies?' Irina asked.

'Sure.'

'In the McDonald's on Ku'damm, there's always a movie on upstairs. You can watch it for free. Want to go there?'

'Yeah!'

They jumped off the train.

'What's wrong with the kebab shop here? Why does it always smell like that?' wondered Irina as they walked up the stairs.

'Our train's coming!' Maria shouted.

They went up the escalators, their backpacks bouncing.

Maria held open the U1 carriage door that was about to shut for Irina.

They reached Gleisdreieck. They looked out at wastelands, weeds growing tall, tracks, gravel, the strange rusty metal rocket, the water tank for the steam trains.

Then the U-Bahn raced into an old building before it reached

Kurfürstenstrasse station. It was where the railway went underground. Maria and Irina turned away from the dark windows as they travelled on to Wittenbergplatz.

‘Here’s where I live,’ said Irina.

They strolled up Tauentzienstrasse. On the right, tucked away at the top of the Mini-City, was the Broadway, usually full of school trips. Further along, on the left, was the Marmorhaus, the old movie palace with its hand-painted posters, red carpet, shell-shaped ceiling and draped curtain.

McDonald's. Past the tills and upstairs to pastel-hued children’s seats in the shape of elephants; *Finding Nemo* was playing at eleven in the morning.

‘Maria?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you know *Les enfants terribles*?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Fancy going off and stealing something useless from KaDeWe?’

They both still had their heads full of animated fish.

‘What, now?’ asked Maria.

‘I used to play this game with my brother. The bigger and more useless, the better.’



KaDeWe. Built around the turn of the century, like the Marmorpalast, and like Haus Huth. Irina could see its white lettering and the spinning Mercedes sign at the Europacenter from her apartment.

When she walked through the perfume department on the store's ground floor with Maya, several members of staff would approach her mother and alert her to fragrances she'd never buy. When Irina was in KaDeWe on her own, she could feel critical eyes on her. And with good reason. She'd stolen something from almost every department. On the third floor, they walked past the thousand-euro shoes until they stopped in front of an inconspicuous door. Hidden behind it was the canteen. Only staff were meant to use it: plenty of people in black and white clothes, apart from a few pensioners who knew it was a cheap lunch here. There were no ID checks.

'Come on, Maria! We just need to play it cool, as if we come here all the time.'

Soon they were sitting in front of a selection of fruit tarts and eclairs with a pistachio glaze and gold leaf from the sixth-floor food hall, all for €1.50.

Behind them in the smokers' room, staff were eating meatballs in front of overflowing ashtrays, their eyes burning.

'There's a Vera who's famous here,' Irina told Maria. 'Whenever Vera arrives, someone on every floor shouts out "Vera's

coming!” And then they take cover.’

‘But what’s so bad about Vera?’ Maria shoved the third éclair into her mouth. ‘And who is she anyway?’

‘No idea, apparently she’s the worst customer ever.’

Half an hour later, Irina went down the escalator, a deadpan expression on her face, and in her hand a plastic axe longer than her torso. She’d found it in the costume department.

Maria stood beside her, with red ears and a huge chocolate heart from the sixth floor hanging round her neck.

×

Words were painted on one of the Köpi’s walls: ‘The border does not run between peoples, but between above and below’. Maria and Irina passed under a metal archway.

‘Attention, you are now leaving the capitalist sector.’

It was night. They walked across the floodlit courtyard. On the right, in the shade, was a barricade of cars. Dogs were barking. Did people really live there: how could they sleep with that noise? The front building’s grey façade was crumbling and covered in tags. The side wings were eroded, partly uninhabitable.

People were coming and going, and the sound of a gig was emanating from every door of the building.

Maria stopped and smiled. A much older boy, tall, with crooked eyes, came up to her and kissed her on the mouth.

‘This is Valea.’ Maria proudly grabbed Valea’s arm and put it around her waist. She’s even slept with him, Irina realised.

They pushed their way past bodies: naked, slippery men’s backs. Maria was already starting to pogo. Further ahead, the room opened up onto the concert.

The hardcore band from Atlanta was playing the scariest noise ever. The singer let out a high and continuous scream, as if possessed. It couldn’t be healthy, Irina thought. The drumming was a hotbed of insanity. And in front of the stage, there was collective aggression. Maria and Valea threw themselves in without hesitation and disappeared. Irina stood lost in front of the crowd of punks for a moment, but then took a deep breath and rampaged after them, jumped as high as she could, pushed away sweaty people, laughed.

‘It’s her! What’s her name?’ cried Irina, when she found Maria again, pointing to the girl from the smoking area at school.

‘Who?’

‘Her.’

‘What?’

‘WHO’S SHE?’

‘SUSANNE.’

Susanne had jumped on a tall boy and was clinging to him. Irina stared at the slender legs that were around his hips.

Soon after, they were back in the courtyard. With a glazed

look, Susanne was pressing her student ID card against the boy's back and altering it with a ballpoint pen. Irina constantly lied about her age too. A few months before, she'd met Basti on the S-Bahn and claimed she was 18 on their first date. Since then, he'd confessed to her that he was only into men. They'd become friends. And he still thought she was 18.

'Just give up!' said the punk boy, annoyed.

'Shut up!'

'What are you trying to do?' asked Irina.

'Oh look, it's Weirdo! So this is Marc, and here's Stefan, and Sarah. But they're not worth mentioning. Come with me!'

'Susie, stay here! You can't get in anyway,' Irina heard Marc shout as Susanne pulled her away from the group and handed her a bottle of Sternburg.

She looked across the courtyard, but she couldn't see Maria. Had she already gone, taking Valea with her?

She drank as much beer as she could, as quickly as possible.

Outside on Köpenicker Strasse, Susanne found an empty shopping trolley.

'Where are we going?'

'To the Tresor.' She was pushing the shopping trolley along as if the nightclub were a supermarket. Suddenly she started running and leaped onto the trolley, her bare legs stretched out in mid-air. Irina ran after her, grabbed her by the ankles and began

to turn on her own axis. Both of them were screaming with laughter, spinning in circles, faster and faster. Until the wheels jammed. Susanne tilted off to one side. Irina fell in the road, Susanne fell smoothly onto Irina, and the trolley fell smoothly onto Susanne. They lay there on top of each other.

Silently, they looked up at the sky.

The asphalt under Irina felt warm, and Susanne felt like a compact little monkey on top of her. Her buttocks on her lower abdomen, her strong shoulders on her breasts, the back of her head on her collarbone. The smell of the Köpi was in her hair.

‘Are you feeling faint again?’ Irina heard her say.

‘No.’

Again they went silent.

‘I think that once something happens somewhere in the world for the first time, there’s a much greater chance of it happening again somewhere else. Even if no one noticed it happening,’ the little monkey said to the sparse stars above, eventually pushing the trolley aside. It made a clanking sound. ‘Hey, your beer’s spilling on me,’ she shouted.

‘Oh crap, where?’ Irina simply threw the bottle aside and put her hand on Susanne and felt something damp. Her stomach was flat and hard.

‘Are you an acrobat or something?’

‘A dancer.’

Susanne slid further down.

Irina could feel pulsing and throbbing between her legs. She took Susanne, moving like a snake and pressing her buttocks against her, by the hips. Irina reached for her naked thighs. Under her skirt she found a moist warmth. More snake dancing. Slowly, they tilted to one side. They turned to each other, looked into each other's eyes. Susanne laughed and kissed her. On the mouth, then on the neck. On the stomach. For a moment Irina was ashamed that she wasn't more toned. She hated her body.

'You used to look more substantial,' Zoba had said when he saw her for the first time in a while that summer.

She looked down at Susanne's messy pinned-up hair, her heart pounding faster and faster.

Suddenly, everything lit up.

'Fuck,' Susanne looked toward the headlights, 'the cops.'

They helped each other up and walked onto the pavement.

'You're an obstacle to traffic, girls,' one of the policemen said from the car.

'Sorry, officer,' Susanne said, and Irina let out a snort.

'And more than anything else, it could put you in danger.'

'Sorry.'

'Don't do it again!'

Susanne and Irina nodded politely, and the policemen drove off.

'Can you get the shopping trolley out of the road?' they heard  
one of them shout.

[END OF SAMPLE]