

# **LIKE PARADISE**

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## Part 1: Other Lives

“My God you’ve grown so big, let me pick you up, my little plum”

“What?”

I open my eyes and look right at the sun, which makes my field of vision disintegrate into mosaic tiles.

“Don’t your grandparents say that to you? They do to me every time I see them. And they still always try to lift me up. My grandma is four and a half feet tall and riddled with osteoporosis. And yet she wants to heave me up into the air. One day she’s going to snap straight in two.”

It’s summer. May. We’re sitting on the grass. Louise and me. It’s hot. Dry grass is sticking to my backside. Sitting on the grass is largely overrated. That’s what I think. There’s always something nipping at me. Sitting on grass is a really great metaphor for life. From a distance it looks appealing, but if you dwell on and consider it more closely it starts to prickle and itch.

“Do you reckon there are a lot of ticks around here? I have absolutely no desire to get Lyme disease right after exams, which I then spread because no one diagnoses it, only to end up furiously shrieking at the blind and mute world around U-Bahn stations, unaccepting of my fate.”

I hate ticks. Who thought up ticks and for what reason? Louise blinks away the unusual free time and looks at me.

“I have no idea whether there are ticks here. Probably. There are ticks everywhere in Bavaria.”

Louise is less influenced by my tick panic, building instead a beetle autobahn and thinking about her theoretically halved grandma. Everything before us is veiled in cloud and about to take a run-up. I always thought that school was a

terrible invention, and I was incapable of subordinating my contempt for my life plans, which had led to me passing my exams with a lowly 3.0, Louise an impressive 1.2. Whatever. Future. No school. Palm size freedom while we sit on the grass.

“Aren’t you hot? You look like we’re in the middle of winter. Is that a snowsuit?” Louise asks.

I like the summer even less than I like school. I would even go so far as to say that I hate it. Because I take it personally. Summer means fewer clothes. Summer means the smell of other people. Summer means the smell of oneself.

“No, it’s not a snowsuit. It’s a flannel shirt and work trousers. They’re breathable.”

“Whoever’s breathing under your trousers will succumb to heatstroke.”

“No tick is going to get me”

“True. But what would happen to your plan of screaming wildly in the U-Bahn?”

“Who knows.”

I stuff my trouser legs into my socks. Castle walls against the ticks.

“Are you excited about our holiday?” Louise asks.

Holiday. This peculiar furuncle of capitalism. Endless servitude for two weeks of being happy that you exist, while lying tipsy under a pine thinking about how this is real life. Grandezza! Maybe I also hate the idea of holidays because it takes summer too far.

“Hm, sure. I’m looking forward to the sea.”

Small, white lies, because I don’t want to trample over Louise’s joyful

anticipation. Sometimes I wonder if Louise is a reincarnated oak. She is solid and rustic, nothing about her wavers. She knows what she wants to study at university, how she and her existence will be formed. As if it was painted in the air in front of her and she just has to copy it down on paper. *Easy-peasy*. I, on the other hand, don't have a life plan, not even the faintest idea. What do I want? Something to do with art? Being a Lyme disease patient? Peace and quiet? Louise pokes me.

"Come on, be happy. I'm excited, even though we have to fly. It'll be great."

"Happiness on command, OK! HOLIDAY! In capital letters!"

6 years, 8 months and 21 days to go.

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The day of the flight arrives. We loll around at the airport, and I stock up on food. Louise's snacks comprise primarily of two packets of Tavor, which she's stashed in her jacket pocket on account of her fear of flying. The oak is being sawed into.

"When should I take the tablets? Should I take them? What if the plane crashes? If I take the tablets now, I might fall asleep during the security checks and they won't have an effect on the plane."

Even before any crash, Louise is a wreck. I barely recognise her.

"Then take another one. Anyway, they don't start working that quickly.

Everything's going to be OK. Really. The plane's not going to crash."

"And what if it does? Why wouldn't it crash. You can have my books."

“I’m going to be sitting with you on the plane. Why would we crash?”

“So you do think we’re going to crash.”

“No, no I don’t. And I didn’t say that. In just five hours we’ll be on the beach drinking a bottle of fizz. The worst thing that could happen is that there’ll be too many other tourists. But definitely no plane crash.”

The only thing Louise takes from my speech are the words plane and crash. After the security check she takes three Tavors in one go and sleeps the whole flight to Gran Canaria, as well as the seemingly endless bus ride to the hotel. On our arrival we quickly conclude that the hotel is more German than a bratwurst and the nationalist wing of the Alternative for Germany Party. A small piggy bank at the entrance tells us it’s good karma to tip. All the signs are in German. The evening’s entertainment is in German. There’s a resident German doctor, a German pharmacy and Franz Josef Strauss’s corpse is definitely stored here somewhere. The menus are in German. There are Spanish-themed weeks. In German. We’re told all of this with great enthusiasm by the man welcoming us. This hotel is Germany in concentrated form. It’s so German that the Atlantic would yodel if it was dissolved in it. We take the lift up to our room, the Bismarck Suite. Bismarck Suite?

“Mate... where the hell are we?”

Louise is back in her rustic oak form. We’re standing in our room, the suite, taking in the art print of an Alpine panorama hanging over the bed.

“Is that a naked angel riding a bear? In the Alps?”

“He looks a bit like Chuck Norris.”

“What’s Chuck Norris doing in the Alps? On a bear?”

“Subjugating the earth? Being extremely manly? Holiday?”

“As an angel?”

“No idea.”

She opens the bedside table and brings out a Bible. Colonisation after all.

“Praise the Lord.”

I walk around the room, the Bismarck Suite. A suite... for whom? A family of ants? Two grown people could hug while standing against the two opposite walls. Bismarck Suite ...

The balcony door sticks, I yank it open. The air is soft and smells of a mixture of chlorine and distant sea. And grease. Our balcony is right next to the extractor vent from the kitchen.

“Do you want to smell like chips? Then come out and sit next to me.”

“I love chips.”

Louise comes out onto the balcony. She’s put on her holiday outfit. A straw hat the size of a continent, shorts and a t-shirt that says, ‘I’d like to be a pineapple’.

“I’d like to be a pineapple? What’s that supposed to mean? And why?”

“I don’t know, but the yellow’s nice. And pineapple positivity is not bad either.

There are a lot worse things that someone might want to be. A management consultant for instance. Or an apple. Imagine that!”

She sits next to me, straightening her straw hat. The continent on her head.

“That’s a very big straw hat. I’m hungry. I want chips.”

“Then we must eat chips! Let’s go to the beach. There’ll be chips there. And sand. Both would be terrific.”

“And guys in too small trunks. Glorious.”

“Them too, right, come on.”

We go out, passing by the hotel complex. Complex best describes the architecture. It looks like a desperate cry for children's toys by an architect. In grey. And a bit of yellow. Stacked and out of place in the middle of nature, which wants nothing more ardently than peace from the blubbing of people. Their filth, their volume, their me-me-me.

Standing around outside the hotels are guys handing out flyers for evening events. Disco Night, Samba Forever, Latin Fever, the name generator spat out 80s clichés all over the place. The flyers are given to women without exception. There are ample men apparently. As we walk past the flyer distributors, we're ignored. A brief look, a turning away, and a continuing of the search. Even Louise notices it.

"Clearly we're not the demographic."

"I'm not sure if that's a reason to rejoice or not."

"In principle I'd like to be asked so I can say no. You know. Like wishing that your ex will send you a message so you can *not* answer. So you can tell people that you didn't answer."

"Of course. Shall we walk past them again?"

"Absolutely."

We turn around and stroll back past the flyer distributors. Nothing. We're holograms in an overly bright room. They don't see us.

"Pff. Idiots. Let's go to the beach, come on. And party at the hotel later.

There'll be punchbowls there. That's way better."

Louise is annoyed. But I'm glad. Why seek the affections of flyer-distributing proles?

We pass stalls and stands where anything useless can be bought. Truly anything. I'm surprised there aren't any ponies or flights to the moon being offered. People bustle. Children squeal. Families make themselves known to families. Some overweight birds munch chips lying on the ground. Then they strut and peck at their dull feathers. A little spruce up when you're going for dinner with friends.

The trees are a tapering watercolour brushstroke framing the beach in green. Scraps of everyday life and pleasure are carried on the wind. The sea stretches out and has no end. It's beginning is meek and tentative. The air is gentle and salty. We take off our shoes and tread on the sand. Feverish heat nestles against our feet. We move quickly so we won't get burnt.

I'm wearing trousers that go just below the knee, a t-shirt, a jacket and a cap. Underneath it is a swimsuit that I despise. A formless something that can't decide whether it's swimming fashion from this century or a kind of base camp tent. My legs stick out the trouser legs like white threads. As if anchoring myself to the ground, so I won't get blown away. Why does everyone want to take their clothes off as soon as the opportunity arises?

When we find a spot in the shade, we lay out our towels and sit down. Louise is wearing a wall of sunblock over her body. A stick of chalk and a ball of wool in a snowsuit on holiday.

"Do you want sun cream? Or mosquito spray? I've got both."

"No, I put some on at the hotel, all good."

I stay sitting, cross my arms, a closed railroad crossing for all the things I perceive that want to get through, and look out at the sea. How beautiful it is. To our left five young men cavort around. They're chasing after a ball as if it



were eternal life. They're loud, annoying, and: I'm jealous of them. Because they can have fun and be at ease. The opposite to me. I'm always heavy and grey and sit clumsily in a snowsuit by the sea. For as long as I can remember. They're happy without even being aware of it. They just are. Sleep, get up, moments of being marred by life, but not because of who they are. They sprint into the water, dragging one another, dive under. Force their way back through the water's mirrored surface. Call to one another. Bound to one another through presence. Who knows what will be. Who cares about that. Roughhousing is their tenderness. Hugs, sporty, manly. They are the sea. Never quiet, toing and froing.

I briefly have quarry pond flashbacks, I feel disgusting and fat. I remember first loves. Of others. Me detached in the snowsuit on the bank. No skin, that's the main thing. Why must I be such a fat colossus. On our right are a group of teenagers, flexing their muscles and collectively strengthening the effect of the hormones that have just started coursing. They're still kids climbing towards adulthood. Without all the burdensome nuisances like bureaucracy and seriousness. Their bodies have run on ahead, their thinking lollops after them. They're so light, so unburdened, that they're practically flying into life, while they chase and splash around with wild abandon.

Everything seemingly within reach, but no matter how much I stretch, I cannot break through to the frolicking of the others. Not the men, nor the youths. I would like to go into the sea, but don't dare walk past them. Can everyone else see how odd, fat and wrong I am? A walking typo disturbing every wonderful text.

"Don't you want to go in the sea? What's up? Are you brooding?" Louise

asks.

“Hm, no, don’t be silly. I’m just waiting a bit. Warming up a little.”

I draw abstract shapes in the sand with my toes. Then I bury my legs, so I feel less uncomfortable. In case the crabs and mussels laugh about my leg threads. That’s how we sit, right in front of the sea. The stick of chalk and a half-buried metre of misery that looks a jackalope.

Back at the hotel the porter welcomes us. In German, of course. He’s definitely hidden an alpine horn behind the counter.

“Hello ladies! Well? How was the *playa*? Refuelled on a little sun?”

Standing before him we are as far removed from ladylike elegance as a cheeseburger from Liza Minelli, which his wooden flirting can’t penetrate.

Admittedly, he directs himself more at Louise than me, but I’m annoyed anyway. Louise mumbles something about skin cancer, I say nothing and look intensely at the board announcing the evening programme.

“Travesty Evening with Cora Zon and Pauli Paulinchen. Experience the best drag queens in Gran Canaria here tonight!”

Only their heads are on view in the photos. As if they were hacked off with a cleaver right after a show and then stuck on the poster. Did someone try using Microsoft Paint for the first time with their eyes closed?

“Louise, did you see that? Cora Zon and Pauli Paulinchen. Shall we go?”

“Oh! Absolutely we’re going. Great. When does it start?”

“In half an hour.”

“We can make that. Come on.”

We take our beach bags upstairs, rush back downstairs and enter the inner

courtyard where the show is taking place. Show perhaps sounds a bit too much like lions and Las Vegas. Around plastic tables sit individual couples around sixty. Germans without exception. And no one is making too much effort to hide it. The stage has the greatness and charm of a depressing tipped over shoebox, at whose centre is a little table with a laptop on it. Everything is framed with bamboo and reeds. Aha, holiday, almost forgot! We order the cocktails with the funniest names and wait for the beginning of the show. Meanwhile, we notice that two faded roses have assembled. Cora Zon and Pauli Paulinchen. The Drag Queens. Queens sounds a little over the top. Cora Zon simulates fieriness. You can tell from her red hair and sparse clothing. Pauli Paulinchen is the boring of the two, discernible from the conservative, short faded blond hairstyle and 'lots' of clothes. This amount of clothing magics a nun still kneeling at the prayer book before my eyes. They're both smoking. And don't seem too happy that they have to start their performance. Our drinks arrive. Two little packets of sugar in strawberry-something-or-other with vodka. A lot of vodka. I take a sip and I'm drunk. Louise coughs and giggles. Music comes on. Cora Zon takes the stage. She teeters into the centre, stands in front of the mic and starts belting out a song. She doesn't sing. She screams. As if she wants to break through walls. She climbs up and fights scales, whose rungs are too far away for her to reach. The tones tumble. Cora Zon doesn't care. The courtyard is completely filled with her. I'm fascinated and horrified. It's awful and fantastic. The song comes to an end. No glasses have been broken. Single claps can be heard. Time for the first gimmicks. Not a single spark. The funniest thing about Cora Zon is her hair. Likewise the most frivolous thing about her. I sip on my drink.

Pauli Paulinchen is up. She doesn't sing herself, but mimes to a recording as if her life depends on it. More is more. Not a centimetre of the shoebox goes unused. Movement is vital! A large part of it within her face. Louise sways to and fro. The first hour passes by like a flight. Both of them show no signs of tiring and shoot their way through their performance. We're on our fourth round of cocktails. Without any warning or dramaturgical logic Cora Zon begins after the third hour to strip on stage. First her clothes, the makeup and then the wig. Oh my! She's barely undressed, and she leaves the stage, lights a cig and sits at a table. Pauli Paulinchen totters next to her. That was it. End. A mayfly would bid farewell with more fanfare. Louise and I look at each other. Drunk and disturbed.

"Is that it now?" she asks.

"No idea" I reply.

The two of them are perching at the table smoking. They look a bit like Marge from The Simpsons' beastly sisters. Only in drag. And even more dejected. Our rush has taken on too much speed for us to put the brakes on right away.

"I can't go to sleep, not right after that spectacle. We have to keep drinking so we can comprehend what we've just seen."

"Come on, let's go sit with them. They can't sing but they seem masters at drinking and smoking. I like that."

"Louise, stop, we don't know them..."

Louise is no longer listening to me and is on the way over to Cora Zon and Pauli Paulinchen's table. Why do people get this unruly compulsion to make contact with complete strangers? I actually just want to drink with Louise in

peace. She plants herself next to the pair of them and blathers. Then all three of them look in my direction. Cora Zon and Pauli Paulinchen nodding graciously, apparently permitting an audience. Louise waves me over to them. The uncoordinated waggle of her hand looks more like she's trying to polish the air until it's free of streaks. I plod over to them. When I'm standing right in front of the table, I can see how heavily made up the two of them are. Their makeup is so thick, you could build a wall from Cora's face. Does she sometimes hammer nails into her face, just because she can?

"Well, hello. Don't be shy. Your girlfriend already warned us that you're a little coy. Don't worry, we don't bite. Unless someone asks us to."

Cora Zon does a snapping motion with her mouth and laughs loudly at her own joke. On the table are two carafes of water and two glasses. I'm surprised at how ascetic there are. Perhaps we've wrongly estimated their alcohol tolerance and they're actually very well-behaved show greats who only simulated their lack of talent. Louise sits down and pulls me into the other free chair.

"Do you want a little sip?" Paula Paulinchen asks.

"Sure, water would be good, we've already drunk a bit too much this evening."

Pauli Paulinchen giggles. I don't completely understand why, which might be because four drinks are sloshing through me. She gives each of us a glass. Fills it right to the top. Because I'm obviously thirsty, I pick up the glass and down it in one, only to realise afterwards that I've necked a large glass of vodka. Cora Zon and Paulinchen aren't drinking water, they're drinking carafes of vodka. This sudden additional dose of intoxication rips the evening

in two halves. A before and an after. An under two permille and an over two permille. My memories are small blocks which, when stacked onto one another, amount to a wobbling tower.

Block: Louise and I dancing on a table.

Block: Cora Zon, Pauli Paulinchen and us drinking to lifelong friendship

Block: Cora Zon shows us a tattoo on her backside. A combination of a dolphin and a penis.

Block: Filling our glasses and emptying them. Water ...

Block: We practice aerial lifts to the song 'Schöner, fremder Mann' or some other song by Deichkind, I no longer have any clue.

Block: Cora Zon says that we're such a beautiful couple and that she loves lesbians. We reply that we're not a couple and we're not lesbians, as far as we can judge. Cora Zon stands by what she said.

Block: Filling our glasses and emptying them. Water ...

Block: Pauli Paulinchen looks lopsided. Like a shelf from Ikea that someone assembled without help.

Block: Pauli Paulinchen, looks at me and says:

"You're a very handsome man, you know! Very, very handsome. Isn't that right, Cora?"

Cora Zon dances, stumbles and falls on her wall face.

"I'm not a man," I reply.

"What? Yes, you are, yes you are. You're a very handsome man to me."

"OK, sure."

Block: Filling glasses and emptying them. Water ...

We're so unbelievably drunk. She could have just as well told me that I was a

handsome cupboard, and I would have believed her. Lesbian, man, carafe of vodka, all fine. At some point, as the sun is coming up and the waiters are starting to prepare the German breakfast buffet, we fall into bed and circumnavigate the threat of alcohol poisoning with a dose of sleep. I dream of carafes, wigs, and something about men.

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As I awake, much too early, I feel like a tree without leaves in high summer. Ailing and ruined. My head is a desolate continent. Cora Zon, Pauli Paulinchen, vodka from a carafe. I need something to bring me back into the present. I feel sick. And what was that at the end? The thing about the handsome man? What had Pauli Paulinchen meant by that? Louise snores loudly. I stand on the balcony. The air promises what the day won't hold. I'm too unwell for activity. The heat is piling up. The air trembles over the sea. Down below in the street, the last few people and the rubbish from the previous night are swept up together. The morning cracks its joints, a few hotel guests are hurrying to the pool to lay down the towels they will later steal from the hotel over the sunbeds.

I don't want to wake Louise and steal quietly out of the room to once again stack up last night or rather the blocks of it. Besides that, I hope that the fresh air will get rid of my headache, and the nausea along with it.

On the stage where Cora Zon and Pauli Paulinchen had performed last night, there's early morning exercise. The music is much too loud. My head is rattling. Among them are two teenagers of about sixteen. Puberty has

painted a thin stripe over their top lips. I slump into a chair not far from them. Sitting up straight is currently not a viable option. Out the corner of my eye I see that their heads dock together, as if they were magnetic, and they whisper secretively. Then they shout something in my direction. Through a lot of cotton padding and residual intoxication, scraps penetrate through to me. "Hello. Excuse me, get up please."

They are pure volume, their voices break in the middle and their faces cover beauty's eyes. They are shimmering sawdust filling the place. They don't seem to be aware of their brash annoyingness and have discovered a tired and hungover victim. I look over at them.

"What? Why?"

Nothing wittier comes to mind. It always comes to me afterwards. My sedated repartee is formidable. I definitely still have two permille in me.

"Come on, stand up. We just want to check something, honest."

They might leave me in peace again if I stand up. That's all I want. At the moment anyway. Perhaps getting up's the answer. I slowly sit forward and straighten up. I'm wearing jogging trousers and a wide red t-shirt.

"I told you! Look! It's got tits! It's a woman. A man-woman!"

They're beside themselves with delight. How easy it is. Big joke. Loud laughter. Applause worthy of the stage show which they have claimed completely for themselves. I sit back down. Why don't I say something? I feel unwell and don't have any desire or energy to argue with idiotic teenagers. I don't care what they say. They smirk and whoop. Weirdly, I feel tears rising up in me. This is strange because this situation isn't anything new. "What are you?" "Hermaphrodite!", "Boy or girl?", heard it a thousand times, really no



great surprise. I notice how a reservoir forms in my mind. Don't cry. It would be preferable to save the tears and water a dry patch of land in Thuringia or let them flow into the sea. I lean back my head a little and screw up my eyes. Only as much as to prevent any tears rolling out. The knot in my stomach throbs in time with the Coco Jambo that's rattling out of the loudspeakers. Comedy is tragedy in mirrored writing. The tragic is comical music at the wrong time, which everyone is dancing to. Why didn't I stay in bed. Time for the club dance. The great morning exercise finale. The trainer skips as if his life depends on it.

I quietly get up and slip away. I manoeuvre through the corridors of the club hotel and hope that the two boys won't ambush me in order to top off their fun. I'm a spidery line whereas all the others are a clear, straight stroke from one point to another and yield an incredible amount of sense. The growing unrest in me is so loud that the birds fly off when I walk past them. Louise is still very much sleeping. I won't tell her about the incident, because I'm ashamed, and sit loud and quiet by the sea which kindly lets me be who I am.

6 years, 8 months and 20 days to go.

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Louise sits up in bed, looking more rumpled than the sheets and the oversized soft toy she brought with her, and looks at me reproachfully. "Are you alright? You look a bit upset, and it's still too early for that. The sun's shining. A new day for eating chips."

“I’m staying here. My head hurts, I’m crazy ill and people annoy me”

“Which people is that? Has something happened?”

Louise knew me off by heart. We’ve known each other since we knocked our heads together in kindergarten and had to get stitches. Sometimes we wonder if small parts of our brains swapped in the process because we’re so close and understand one another without a word.

“No, what could have happened? Nothing’s happened at all. Everything’s always the same. Tendentially still the same old shit.”

“OK, wow. Sunshine. Forget it.”

Louise shuttles between resentment and something like perplexity. Or plain tiredness and a hangover. Why am I taking shots at Louise when really I want to batter those two hooligans, or myself. Louise twists her hair around her finger and looks at the Chuck Norris angel in the Alpine panorama over the bed. The air between us is doughy and soggy at the same time. I carefully sit down to cut through it and apologise.

“Um, Louise, sorry, that was stupid. Do you want some chips? I still have some in my bag.”

She looks at me like people look at weird adverts. Cluelessly and looking for a deeper meaning. Perhaps she just thinks it’s too early for chips. On the other hand, Louise can eat chips any time day or night. I bring the chips out of my bag and hold them under her nose. She takes them.

“OK, chips are always a good idea. And ... in case you’d like to talk ... even if your mouth is full of chips, I’m here. Now, come on, let’s have breakfast, chips always make me hungry.”

“Louise, if you could be anything, what would you be?”

“Anything at all?”

“Exactly, whatever you like.”

“OK, hm, maybe an autocrat in a country where everything always has to be in a good mood and love chips. You?”

Should I tell her what happened? Should I talk to her about what Pauli Paulinchen said yesterday that still haunts my mind? Maybe she won’t remember. No. Instead I say, wittily

“Cheese. I’d like to be cheese.”

“Why? Why do you want to be cheese?”

“Because then everyone would love me. Everyone loves cheese.”

“Interesting. But I think that people also love you even if you’re not cheese.”

“But not as much.”

On our last evening we sit heavy with wine and sluggish from carrying all the kitsch up to our chips-scented balcony and spread the folded future out in front of us. Louise is anticipatory and abuzz; she thinks that the unknown twinkles. That life is wonderful and fully charged and one simply has to pluck up opportunities. Or that they have been there for a long time and we just haven’t seen them. My anticipation squats and gnaws and has an arthritic knee. I would have preferred an exact plan. But there isn’t one. The future seems to be a mixture of chance, luck and rich parents. Of these three I have chance on my side the most. Would a career come from chance? When Louise talks about what might be, there’s a lightness about her and she glows. She heats up and is ignited by the smallest spark. When I talk about the future, it begins to rain somewhere.

“Aren’t you afraid of all the things that might happen?” I ask her.

“What for? That would be like if every time I crossed the street I expected to get run over.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Rubbish. You just have to take a leap and trust that someone is going to catch you. You think you’re going to fall flat on your face. But it’s not like that.”

The wine has accelerated her optimism to lightspeed.

“What do you want to do after you finish school, have you thought of something in the meantime? Lyme disease is off the cards, that’s for sure.”

Down on the street the masses practice joyfulness They chug their beer as if they’ve been lit on fire from the inside and need to put it out. Glee doesn’t seem to exist quietly. The whole world has to know that the whole world is feeling jolly. Tomorrow there will be no yesterday. That’s why people come here. To vanquish time and not have to carry around the abject everyday. To briefly, only very briefly, not be themselves.

“Well ... tell me.”

Louise pours herself more wine and inhales the chippy air. Her bronchi must have the patina of a sausage stand by now.

“Huh, no idea, art or something like that? Acting? You don’t have to be yourself all the time. Sounds good to me.”

“Acting? Since when have you been interested in theatre?”

“I didn’t say that. I said I don’t want to be myself all the time.”

“Then go into politics.”

“Ha-ha.”

“Well, if you fancy acting, then do it.”

“It sounds like you’re saying: if you really want to ride a dolphin through the Sahara, then off you go.”

“That’s good too! Maybe I’ll become an expert in citrus fruits and import-export one day, that’s OK too. The main thing is not to have a sad office life. If you want to go to acting school, then do it.”

What she’s saying is right. And because I’m slightly squiffy and touched by a little bravery, I don’t throw stones at my idea of the future, and instead feel something like a joyful confidence.

“OK, I think I’m going to do it. To art, cheers!”

“To art. To everything, to citrus fruit and all that drama!”

We briefly fuse with joy and pleasure on our balcony. Nothing disturbs, nothing dims, our prospects. Everything is good, because everything is clear and decided.

Not mumbled, but said clearly. The future is not tomorrow, but rather now in our naïve heads.

6 years, 8 months and 10 days to go.

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At 19 you have the notion that you’ve got a lot of time. You think you have it by the barrel and can drink from it endlessly.

This is why one makes dubious decisions, lives in a dog kennel for a year, learns everything about everyday life while micro-dosing or applies to private

acting school. Clearly, I also act like I have a crazy amount of time. And so I travel to Upper Bavaria to audition for a shady acting school that I was recommended from someone who knew someone who knew someone that did something with theatre and goulash. The route alone should have made me suspicious. After two hours on the train passing through places with names that surely even the inhabitants can't pronounce, I arrive. In a small town somewhere in the Bavarian provinces. It's split up into the New Town, ignored by tourists, and an Old Town, which everyone finds positively romantic. Right next to it is a fuming factory that is mentioned remarkably seldomly in the guidebooks about this small gem.

The train station is at the end of a line. On many levels. I arrive too early. This is why I roam slowly along the main street in the direction of where the auditions will be taking place, which is curiously supposed to be in a castle. When I arrive at the aforementioned castle half an hour later, I see excited little groups standing together in front of the entrance. More women than men. Everyone fluttering and nervous, which is extensively communicated to one another. I am in any case a fuzzy image of my selfhood and shaky, but don't want to talk to anybody. Which is why I hover like a fly on the edge of the conversation and remain standing on my own. After some time the door opens and everyone is invited in.

A small river of young, clueless people manoeuvres inside.

The women audition for acting. The men present look like they've fallen from a truck, and have the intention of studying directing. Women act, men tell them how to do it. Good to know. I'm not certain of what I'm actually doing here. One of the women says with gasping breathes that she had already

failed all the entrance exams for the state acting schools and that this is her last hope. As if this school is the transplanted heart that can save her starving body.

“Acting means everything to me. If this doesn’t work out then, I don’t know, I think I’ll kill myself.”

Why is she telling me this? I look at her.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit drastic?”

“Huh, in what way?”

“You just said that you’ll kill yourself if you don’t get accepted by a school.

Isn’t that a bit much?”

She looks me as if I’d asked her if she’s a product of an incestuous relationship between two golden eagles.

In a very expressive way, tears appear in her eyes. Has she practiced this?

Has she trained her tears? She takes a photo of herself as she cries.

Then the exams begin, and she stops her crying in its tracks. In order to establish a democratic atmosphere or so that no one secretly steals something from the castle, we’re all in the same room during the auditions.

What follows are many hours of intensive feelings. For some reason unbeknownst to me, it’s important to scream, cry, spit, crawl on the floor, tear at your clothes – a lot – and imply nakedness. I’m really thirsty. One of the guys next to me annihilates a ham and cheese roll with his mouth open and necks a bottle of orangeade.

Then I’m up. I’ve prepared a monologue by Sartre and a song. I’m not naked and I don’t scream or cry. My performance, if someone was feeling generous, could be described as purist. The women present are irritated, additionally

because I'm not wearing a dress. When I finish there is some hesitant clapping, and the next person enters the ring.

After a couple of hours we're allowed to leave the room and once more stand in front of the castle. A few birds caw above us. They're probably laughing at us. A few of the women are crying again. They cry through the entire weekend. I don't cry. After the exam I go to the youth hostel where I've booked my room, ruin my stomach with the local speciality and read comics till I fall asleep. I spend most of the night puking. I should have built that into my audition.

The next morning I stand wan and wobbly in front of the castle. Tender minute-long friendships have already been woven between the others. The tension is laughed off and hidden inside jokes. I'm still stagnant.

The head of the school, back then a chain-smoking great director, now an impresario of amateur actors, steps out of the building, that is, the castle. He looks like a tanned smurf. His skin shimmers grey-blue. His hair is snow white and clouds around his face. When he coughs it sounds like a gravel truck being tipped over in his chest.

"So, my dears. That went well, eh? The committee will now deliberate. In two weeks, you'll receive word of our decision. Bye-bye."

He turns around and staggers, leaning on his stick, back into the building. I'm clueless as to what I should make of all this, make my way back home and spend the next two weeks watching a lot of talk shows with Louise to keep my emotional level stable. After 14 days a letter arrives. The examination committee apparently found my naivety original and authentic, so I've been



accepted. You could say that being accepted to a private acting school is approximately as difficult as drinking mineral water. But because I don't have a Plan B, let alone a Plan A, I accept. Louise buys a bottle of cheap Sekt and we toast my triumph.

6 years, 4 months and 2 days to go.

\*

One month later I find myself once more at an acting school in the Bavarian provinces, whose leadership comprises a former theatre star from the Eastern bloc, a sports teacher who was accused of doping in the GDR, a performance lecturer who lives on light and cigarettes and scattered figures from the underworld. I live in a room at the edge of the New Town among boozers and crazies and incessantly ask myself what I'm doing in this awful place, without ever receiving an answer.

Louise helps me to move in my meagre belongings and freight this handful of life into my new existence. I have a mattress, a TV as big as a thumbnail, a guitar and clothes, mainly a lot of caps. As if I needed a head covering for every single thought in my head. We crouch on the carpet that smells like corpses and polystyrene, eat unbelievably bad pizza from the box. It's not easy to orientate with regards to taste where the box begins and the pizza ends. Between us, as is often the case, is Sekt, which we drink from the bottle, because I don't have any glasses. Above our heads, it's overcast. Louise is leaving tomorrow and is getting ready to move to Berlin. At least

she's taking the big, wide world and her youthful esprit seriously. It will be strange not to have her around me. The first time since we banged brains.

"Why do you have so many caps? Do you have heads I don't know about?"

"It's illogical to have so many caps."

"Louise, since when do clothes have anything to do with logic? Fashion is never logical."

"Ok, Lagerfeld. I had no idea that you'd become a fashion icon."

"Are you excited about tomorrow? That things are kicking off?"

"No idea. I hope the people are OK."

Getting to know new people. Delimit new places. Break new ground. I know that Louise loves things like that. She breathes in as deeply as she can because she wants to absorb everything. Not just surmise, but completely gasp it up and feel it spread through her. And me? I'm afraid. I'm afraid of every fast cloud, every shadow, every sound that could be hiding around the corner. Brood over what other people think of me.

"Of course they'll be OK. You don't always have to go into things thinking that everyone will be shit. There are nice people too. Look at me. I'm nice."

"Good to know! But maybe you're the great exception."

"Rubbish. It's going to be OK. Will you visit me in Berlin.? We can act like annoying tourists and be hated by everyone."

"Sounds tempting. Of course I will. Being hated is a good plan.

We toast ourselves with our low-priced Sekt.

6 years, 3 months, and 21 days to go.

\*

It always seems like it's evening in this strange place in the provinces. Everything always feels like it's just before closing time. Sluggish, drowsy and at close range. Like underwater. I spend most of my time in stuffy castle rooms looking out of the small windows over the Old Town. Imagining myself as the captain of the underwater world spreading into the valley. Sometimes it seems auspicious, but it's mostly lonely.

My year comprises five women, including the crying photographer, one man, three directors and me. The cutting edge of culture has come together. We look like a colourised Addams Family on bad speed dabbling in art. Our role-studies class comprises watching the ever-horny acting-coach doing his courtship display. He almost freaks out, there's such a large selection of female students. I am not considered for his wooing. Never mind, I have enough feeling out of place to be getting on with.

The problematic thing about having a year with only women is that practically all plays in this world are principally for male roles. The school is pushed to its limits because of this fact. Plays that only have roles for women? How's that supposed to work? Ought they build a kitchen on stage? Plays are pored over as if it's about the discovery of a new planet. Since no one cares to jiggle rickety gender roles, the directing year, which, surprise surprise, is only made of men, is condemned to act

When the decision is made there is an atmosphere as if it had been announced that the production would be appointed by ham and cheese rolls. One of the boys from the group gasps. He comes from Waldkraiburg, drives a

lowered Opel, looks like the villains from Disney films and likes reading Playboy during lessons.

Number two is half drunk and finds the idea of collaborating with loads of girls stimulating. He licks his lips often. The third in the bunch will not take his coat off for the entirety of the course and looks like a startled hedgehog. The teary photographer takes a photo of herself thinking, maybe she wants to prove to the world that she has a brain.

The other women are called Sarah, Birgit, Ophelia and Joana. Ophelia sees herself as a spiritual being and asks the cosmos for advice before every decision. Birgit originally had her sights set on a career in administration, but then, in an act of freedom from whatever, decided to study acting. Sarah is five years older than we are and never tires of saying that she feels much younger. Her appearance begs to differ – she is very partial to cigs and the sauce. The only one I took into my numb heart within the first few seconds is Joana. She is sharp, cool and the wisdom of the universe is stored in her eyes. However she does it. We get one another straight away. Probably also because she finds the others just as dopey as I do.

6 years, 1 month and 2 days to go.

\*

After gruelling days the school unearthed a play. It's about distraught princesses, takes place in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain and is slush, through and through. Officially it's a tragicomedy. It's the pre-prime time piece among the

performances. Men are knights who slobber over the frantic princesses bordering on hysteria and suicide and who, in case of any doubt, will save them. Sometimes they're a bit stupid and clumsy, but inherently very manly. The women are women. Full stop. Always shrill and flustered, they're probably on their period. I have no idea what or who the horny lecturer is riding, but he gives me the main role. Me. The main female role. As he announces his decision, the faces of my colleagues thunder down onto the tables in front of them at 100 miles an hour, shatter and crumble at the feet of the lecturer. That's going to be the princess? What? The main role. Princess. Does the horny lecturer want to unleash my inhibited femininity and make a sensually swirling Sophia Loren out of me? I had my heart set on playing a friendly donkey and being falling-over-drunk before the first curtain call. And now? I'm a princess, against my will.

In order to prolong the force of his announcement, the lecturer ends the lesson prematurely. Everyone goes outside, I slip out behind them and intensively tie my shoelaces because I'm not in the mood to discuss his decision and my princess role.

The sun is shining out front. I want to go home to my room in Boozehole. The castle wall towers up beside me. It's exactly a kilometre long, which is apparently very remarkable. The town is always boasting about it.

When there's nothing to brag about, just use walls. Shouldn't I be glad that I nabbed the main role? Somehow all I can think about is that I'll probably have to wear a dress. Up to now I've only worn a dress twice in my life and both times I looked like a scarecrow doing a drag show. How is that supposed to work? Someone's calling for me. I turn around and see Joana.

She's running up behind me.

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts."

"Because of the part? Are you glad?"

"I don't know. It's a bit of a ... surprise."

"Hm. Did you see the crying photographer's face? She's definitely taking another crying selfie right now. She wasn't expecting that."

Joana thinks the crying photographer is even more idiotic than I do.

She looks at me.

"Come on, let's get out of here and buy all the ham and cheese rolls before the directors get them."

"Finally, a good plan"

6 years and 4 days to go.

**END OF SAMPLE**