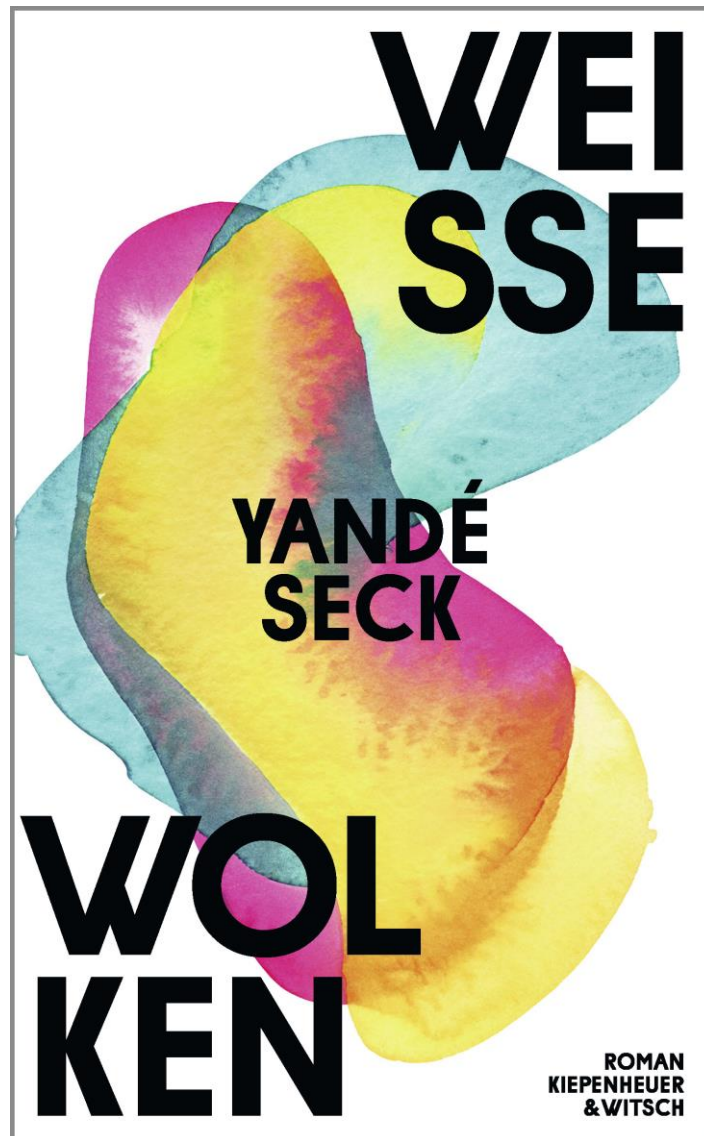


# WHITE CLOUDS

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When Max woke up, Zazie had already been sitting in the kitchen for two hours, had finished the coffee in the Bialetti and smoked three cigarettes. She had answered her professor's invitation to meet in the new year and was now reading last week's *Freitag* newspaper. She liked Max best right after he woke up. He hadn't put on the suit he usually wears during the day. He hadn't yet tried hard to guess how the world wanted him, rather he arrived in the world with light swelling around his eyes and nose. Later, his hair was supposed to look as if its position was a casual coincidence; in the morning it just looked like shit. Pressed flat to the back of his head, sticking up in all the wrong places – *honest* somehow.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm reading about the protests in Iran.”

Max smiled naively and asked if there was still coffee. There wasn't anymore. Was the fact that she drank an entire pot of espresso by herself a sign of her unconscious to Max that he should eat breakfast at home? She'd have to ask Dieo sometime.

“Um, I have to go to the youth center, do you want to shower here, or...?”

Max seemed to understand. He went to the bedroom to change. She heard him fix his hair in the bathroom and brush his teeth. In that order. The

fact that he wanted to do everything perfectly was both touching and a turn off simultaneously. It's always the same with these white boys. Everything has its place. There were no ambiguities or secrets. They felt guilty when they were supposed to. So all the time.

"I'll get going then." Max leaned against the doorframe and reminded her of Eddie Redmayne. His skin always appeared a little transparent when he was hurt. She stood up. "We'll see each other tomorrow, okay?"

"Hm," he looked at the clock and bit his lip. Last night he had stood here, with his forearm pressed against the wood and had told her about his pain. He had laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and showed her, where he was tense. She hugged him and felt how he dug his face into her neck.

"See you later," she heard him murmur into her braids.

After the door had closed behind him, she looked around. The disorder in the kitchen suddenly bothered her. She emptied the ashtrays, brushed the crumbs off the table and rinsed her coffee cup. She got a thick notebook out of a bookcase that she could only reach with a small footstool. She placed the album *Ash's The Best* on her turntable and sat down at her kitchen table. In an atypically orderly manner, she had stashed aquarelle pens in a small drawer. She had only recently written the text that she wanted to work on today, after she had watched her nephews.

*On the day that Zazie broke her brush,  
her mother cursed her: "You little brat!"  
"Leave me alone," Zazie answered, and then  
she didn't get any of the warm cookies.*

*And on that same afternoon her female ancestors  
appeared  
on the ceiling of her room.  
They danced  
and sang,  
until the whole room was filled with their  
colorful clothes  
and their warm songs.*

Little Zazie emerged with only a few strokes, she had a soft afro and a cheeky look. Her mother appeared only as a shadow on the wall. A doll with straight hair lay on a table next to a tiny tea set. On the next page, a little Zazie stood in her room and gaped at the ceiling, where her female ancestors danced as shadows.

Zazie forgetfully reached back into the drawer and took out a vaporizer. 173 degrees. Breathe out. Empty your lungs for a breath of relaxation. She couldn't feel the effect of the CBD as easily as the THC. It felt more like everything stayed the way it was, and yet she still felt as if she'd just worked

out and after that had spent two hours in the sauna. She turned up the music and wished she had an easel that she could stand in front of and dance. The telephone rang.

“Hey dear, are we still meeting at the *Bar with No Name* for lunch?” Winta asked, loud as usual. “And tomorrow we’re meeting with Lamine and the others at *The Heart of Africa* and having drinks afterward. And then we’ll see what happens, right?”

The last time they had said “we’ll see what happens” on a Thursday evening, they had ultimately ended up in Gibson and Winta had made out with a Croat who worked as a fitness coach and kept throwing her over his shoulder as they walked home.

“Yeah, no problem, we don’t have to make a big deal...”

“Are you crazy!?”, Winta interrupted her. “Don’t make a big deal out of a Master’s with distinction! Not with me, my dear. If you want to have friends who think it’s normal that you have such a bad-ass degree, you can go find some little German wimps.”

She had to smirk, because she knew that her friend was standing in front of the sink in the ladies’ room at her agency and was primarily directing this speech at her reflection. She once observed Winta talk to her mother on the phone and look at her reflection simultaneously as if she was trying to convey to herself that she really spent every day in the library and it was just a matter of time before she got her degree. For two years now, Winta secretly

worked for a small event company and she had long stopped believing that she needed a degree in marketing management for anything in her life.

“Okay, okay, so we’ll see each other later. And we’ll spontaneously decide whether we’re going out tomorrow!”

“Perfect! How’s *white boy* doing? Is he coming along tomorrow night?”

Zazie was silent for a minute and then mumbled: “Maybe next time.”

Winta seemed fine with that. “And you better wear something classy! Please, my dear, don’t wear one of those sacks that you call *simple* or whatever, okay?” She hung up.

Something classy. That was important to Winta. She even wore thigh-high boots and a long coat to work. Back in the day, Zazie used to wear worn out jeans and sneakers and a bomber jacket. And now? She was searching for a style that was unapologetically African, relaxed, and modern. A style that disclosed that she was unhappy with the entire state of the world, but still wanted to get into clubs. She decided to search for some inspiration for her outfit that night on Instagram. #antiracistbae or #anarchistknockout. She shut the notebook and stowed it on her bookcase. The magic of her inventive morning had faded away and she decided to take a bath and then make her way back to Frankfurt.

He loved this time of day. It was as if all the efforts of the past year were finally blossoming this month. For a few years now, at the start of December, he would sneak away during the lunch break to Fressgass, an upmarket shopping street. My God was he happy to get away from the stuffy life of being a civil servant and staring at his phone to watch how assets multiply. Last week, during a Token Sale he had bought a few crypto coins that had increased tenfold. Today he'd invest his winnings in Christmas gifts for Dieo and the boys. His phone vibrated and displayed a series of notifications. He ignored most of them and started to read an email from Ludger. His boss may have been relaxed and wouldn't reproach him if he came back to the office a half hour later, but he still expected Simon to keep an eye on developments in Zurich even during his lunch break.

Ludger would probably get curious right away about Simon's Christmas gifts and make jokes about Zazie again, whom he considered Simon's lover. In Ludger's universe, relationships between men and women were either marked by disinterest or sexual tension.

In the meantime, sexual tension had become a complicated thing for Simon. A) he had to be well-rested, something that only happened seldom, b) he wasn't allowed to watch any news and c) his wife couldn't be latently angry at him.

Whenever Zazie looked stunning, like she did at his wedding, he felt more like the pride of a big brother.

He had just eaten a Caesar salad at the deli on the corner and was contemplating whether he should order an espresso, because he just saw the perfect present for his wife: an oversized scarf in different pink tones. The mannequin even wore an afro and he imagined Dieo with the exact same scarf on the cover of *Vogue*.

A little later, he made his way back to the office, weighed down with shopping bags. He had also got a small gimmick from the Apple Store for Dieo and a treehouse from the Lego Store for Otis and Leander. When he passed the *Bar with No Name*, he caught sight of Zazie.

“What are you doing here?” Only when the words left his mouth did he notice that she was wearing headphones and her eyes were all glassy. After ten years practice, he could easily tell whether she was stoned or had been crying. When she smoked a joint, her eyes turned red and narrowed to little slits. When she cried, her nose turned red. She took off her headphones and greeted him restrained. Her nose downright glowed.

He wanted to say that he had to get going. But Zazie sat back down and lit a cigarette and he stayed. She seemed not to care whether or not he sat down with her.

“Zazie, is everything okay? You seem so, how should I say, timid.”

She glared at him angrily. “I was just listening to an audiobook.”

“Oh.”



“Baldwin.”

“Oh.” They really existed on two different planes. “And do you want to tell me why you’re crying?”

“I think it’s about belonging.”

“You’re speaking in riddles. And honestly, I have to get back to the office.”

She scrutinized him and his shopping bags and for a moment he was ashamed, but he wasn’t really sure why.

“Young James is walking through his neighborhood and again and again sex workers ask him where he belongs. When a church lady asks him that again, he wants to say, ‘Well, to you.’” She takes a drag on her cigarette. “It’s about belonging. For everyone. You and your crypto start-up just as well as the left-wingers, the right-wingers, Turks, this entire time, all of us are actually...”, she pauses because this realization apparently makes her cry again, “on the search.”

When he nodded, she allowed him to continue on his way to his “problematic wage work”, which is what she called *Finlyst*.

At night, he entered the apartment and greeted Luisa.

“The boys are already sleeping. Jonathan just got home and went straight to his room...”

Simon nodded. “I’ll just bring the shopping into the office.”

He hid the shopping bags up on the shelf and came back into the hallway. Luisa looked up from her phone and smiled at him with that safe smile that's always the same.

He gave her the money and thanked her.

When he looked at Luisa's socks pulled up and her broad, light-colored pants, he thought of Zazie. "Who do you actually feel you belong to?", he asked her, probably a little suddenly.

She put her wallet back in her jacket. "How do you mean, sir?"

"Please don't call me sir. It makes me feel old."

Luisa hesitated for a moment. "Sir - sorry - you mean, to which neighborhood?"

"I mean generally."

Luisa seemed to be thinking about it, while she zipped up her jacket. "I think I belong to the people who want more justice. For the planet, too."

That's what happens when you ask a 17-year-old this question. "Thanks Luisa." He smiled back and wished her a nice evening.

"You too, sir!", she said and he didn't correct her.

His phone vibrated and revealed a message from Ludger: *Zurich answered. PAN, get ready.*

Dieo smoothed down the hair on her head that was standing up, she filled up her water bottle and put it in her backpack. These things, that brand-new young mothers have been carrying around for a few years, were actually crap. But Simon believed that as a “young urban mother,” his wife needed a Fjällräven. Yellow looks so good on her. So last year, the little package was lying under the Christmas tree and it showed the entire Holzhaus neighborhood that she belonged to the group of incredibly relaxed, totally unpretentious mothers in Nordend.

“We have to gooo! Otiit, do you have your hat?” Since his first fall in this world, her youngest son refused to wear anything on his head.

This winter, he always “forgot” the rust-colored hat with the hip logo that Simon had bought in one of those feel-good stores along Oeder Weg. 24-year-old employees at concept stores could convince her husband to buy anything. She often asked herself, who he was trying to impress when he bought a “weekender” from one of these Taja’s for 700 Euros or a hat for Otis in one of these stores.

“Leave my backpack alone,” Leander screamed in his little brother’s ear and pushed him. The boys ran through the hallway. Some random shit lay everywhere and Dieo asked herself, when would the day come when she would all be organized.

Grandma Rose always described it like this: “In our first apartment living together, the dishes piled up every evening. One day it annoyed me and I became organized.” During Dieo’s childhood, Grandma Rose had sat on a little stool for hours and sorted crowded boxes of Barbies and Playmobil toys, combed plastic hair and curiously observed with what kind of fascinating sense for details her toys were created. Dieo often wished she had the patience for her sons that Grandma Rose had in those moments. She had always dreamed of one day sitting down with her daughters in beautifully decorated girls’ rooms and drinking imaginary Earl Grey out of miniature cups and eating Petits Fours. Now she had boys who were interested in Anime or Lego Star Wars, and a sister who insisted she needed to “decolonize her daydreams.”

“I need a red notebook for math!,” Leander yelled from the living room and pulled a wrinkled piece of paper from his back pack.

“And you’re only telling me this now?!” Dieo snapped at him when she read the letter addressed to parents.

“I forgot.”

“The store hasn’t opened yet. You’ll have to tell them you’ll bring it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, tomorrow, just not today, that’s what lazy people say,” Otis trilled and Dieo asked herself, from where a four-year-old had such a talent for rubbing salt into his mother’s wounds with such accuracy.

“Let’s go!”, she interrupted him, she hoisted Leander’s backpack onto her shoulder and went to the door. She had her first appointment at 9:30 AM. In the past, coming too late seldom had consequences. Nevertheless, Dieo had the feeling the parents could tell by looking at her that before she advised them to be more relaxed in their everyday, she had just hurled cornflakes bowls into the dish washer and had failed at the minimum requirements of being a mother.

Today, what prevented her husband from participating in this morning spectacle is what he and his colleagues called an “all-nighter.” What an idiotic term, charged with potency. Ludger, Christian and Simon had become accustomed to communicating with each other in acronyms. So when Ludger was of the opinion that a night shift was necessary, he sent these three letters to Simon: PAN. When he was lying on the sofa, first the computer on his lap and shortly thereafter his cellphone made a quick “bing” sound. Sometimes even his stereo in the living room made that sound, because one of his devices was connected to it. The other day they were listening to the Beatles, while she was cutting Leander’s hair. Dieo trilled to herself and enjoyed the fact that they were all together and yet still spending time on their own. It’s like how Donald Winnicot named the condition of a mother and child, when a child learns to be for itself and enjoy it in that moment. This being-together-but-alone was interrupted by a “bing” from the stereo. Ludger then texted several messages and the music sounded in irregular intervals, until she turned off the stereo.

Simon's monitor had several different windows open with text, graphics, and tables. In the right upper corner, small speech bubbles popped up.

Ludger: *Call me ASAP*

Christian: *BTC at <40k*

Ludger: *PAN, get ready.*

One of Ludger's short PANs meant she would have an all-nighter with two kids in her bed and different knees between her ribs to look forward to. In addition to that would be a morning full of chaos with the special challenge of not waking her husband who was sleeping in his office.

When she wanted to take one last look at the breakfast table, the door to Jonathan's room opened. He stood there in his boxer shorts and looked at her unwaveringly.

"What are you doing here?," she asked.

"I don't have any class until third period," he responded hoarsely and ran his fingers through his hair. She was sure he was lying.

"What class got cancelled?," she asked and looked over at the clock above the kitchen door. It was 7:35 AM. She would soon start a fight with another mom driving an SUV during morning rush hour and then arrive at the school completely worked up. Until this evening, Leander would be upset with her because he hated getting to class only a few minutes before it began.

Once she had delivered him, her and Otis would first get a croissant before she took him to kindergarten. He called it a “Quaso for the soul.”

“French?,” Jonathan said and made little effort to lie to her.

Why did he have to come out of his room at this exact moment? Did he want to provoke her?

“We’ll talk this evening!,” she said and slammed the door shut.

“Quaso-for-the-soul-day?,” Otis whispered to her and she nodded.

When they sat in Glauburg Cafe a half an hour later and Otis ripped his golden croissant apart, he suddenly asked her, “We do everything well together, mama, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” She smiled and bit into her brioche.

He leaned back in his chair. “I just wanted to ask, could we take a trip sometime without the others?”

“You mean just the two of us?” She took a sip of coffee. Otis shrugged his shoulders and smiled embarrassed.

“Maybe the two of us could spend the night at Oma Ulli’s...”

He nodded and cuddled up to her.

“So, let’s get going to Kindergarten.”

Otis looked behind his shoulder. “Look, there’s Joni!”

Dieo turned around and it was true - this time dressed in a down jacket and boots - Jonathan was standing in the doorway again and running his fingers through his hair. She stood up and waited until he noticed her.

“Hey mom...”

“What are you doing here?”

“I come here sometimes. To read.” He took a copy of *Minima Moralia* out of his jacket.

“Aha.”

Her telephone vibrated in her pocket. Otis touched it through the material.

“Mom, you have to answer.”

She took out her phone and saw an unknown number on the display.

“Good morning, I’m de Latour. Am I speaking with Mrs. Rosenbaum?”

Dieo gestured in Jonathan’s direction and whispered, “Can you look after Oti?” while she held her hand against the speaker. “Mrs. de Latour, wonderful that you’re calling!” She left the cafe.

“Am I disturbing you?”

In front of the cafe, she tried to pull her calendar out of her bag. “No, not at all.”

Through the window, she saw how Otis leafed through Jonathan’s book while he talked to a waitress. Mrs. de Latour told her that in about six months she’d have a room for rent in her practice.



“That would work well. I passed my midterm not long ago and I’ve looked at two rooms so far.” Mrs. de Latour suggested they should meet in Cafe Laumer after Christmas. They agreed on a date and arranged to meet.

When Dieo hung up the phone and turned back towards the cafe, Jonathan and Otis were standing in front of her. “You never say so many nice words at once,” Otis commented and Jonathan grinned.

“I can drop him off at Kindergarten if you want.”

Dieo took a deep breath. “You’d do that?”

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders. “Of course, it’s on the way to school...”

“Thanks!” She kissed Jonathan on the cheek and bent down to say goodbye to Otis.

“He’s prickly just like papa, right?” Otis turned his cheek towards her. “But mine isn’t prickly.”

“Bye not prickly!” She turned towards her cargo bike and climbed on - for a moment a feeling of exhaustion coursed through her. Was everything really taken care of, and could she go now? She toyed with the thought of calling in sick and just going home to watch a tv series, but then she remembered the mess in the kitchen and the large mountain of laundry that awaited her there and she headed in the direction of the advice center.

Her shift at the youth center had begun an hour ago. In the meantime, a few young people had arrived and she asked herself if smoking one cigarette each hour made her a chain smoker. Ayoub sat down next to her while she leafed through a cycling magazine.

“How are you doing Ayoub?”

“I’m OK Zazie.” He looked at her.

“Something up?,” she asked a little annoyed.

“No, no, I - I was just wondering...”

“You were wondering what?”

“Are you into Blacks or whites?”

Where did that come from? She cleared her throat to buy herself some time.

“So first of all, race is a construct, um...And the fact that you, a BIPOC, are asking me, whether I find men attractive on one or the other side of this fabricated difference, that’s...”

“Zazie, just stop with the academic nonsense. It’s a simple question. Which men do you prefer?” Now he was grinning.

She liked that he reacted to her so-called academic nonsense by suddenly expressing himself in a more direct way.

The irony, in the way he did it, had something subversive about it.

“Why can it only be just Blacks or whites? Are you only allowed to choose between a Moroccan and a white German? What happens if you fall in love with a Swede whose parents are from Vietnam?”

“I’ve never met a Swede, but if the Swedes hear about me, the men over there are going to be in trouble.” Ayoub spoke louder so that his buddies who were playing pool could hear.

They both barely noticed him.

“No, seriously now, why only Blacks or whites?”

“Almans are white, Zazie. Open your eyes. You go to college, that’s where all these white Almans are. I thought, maybe your family wants you to marry someone from your country?”

“It might happen that I meet a charismatic Lebanese man or that I have children with a Polish Jew. Then my kids would be Muslim-Jewish-Polish-Africans with a German passport.”

Ayoub laughed. “Are you Muslim, Zazie?” He turned to his friends. “Hey, did you guys know Zazie is Muslim?”

The guys laughed. “Say *wallah!*” one of the two demanded from her.

She asked herself, why, in conversation with Ayoub, did she make it sound as if she lived in a post racial world and only spent time with cosmopolitans.

It was true. Until now she had only dated white or Black men. Where did this binary in her love life come from? Her sister believed it was because of taboos and identifications.

“You put up with way too much from Black men and you punish white men for the racism in the world,” Dieo had once said to her, which resulted in them not speaking for a week.

Until today, she wasn't exactly sure why this statement had made her so upset.

She thought of Nadir, a tall, beautiful hip hop head with a nose ring. She adored him for an entire summer, but he barely gave her furtive glances. The immigrant boys at school didn't even perceive her as a girl and when they did, they had provoked her particularly violently as a sign of affection. It's as if there was an unwritten law that forbade romance with Black girls. Even the white boys didn't attempt to sit next to her during spin-the-bottle or seven minutes in heaven. It was as if they first wanted to try out a standard version (white, blond, very thin girls). At university, she was suddenly a man magnet. After a guy moved out of his parents' house, slept until the afternoon and had tried a few drugs, then it was cool to date Black girls. She mentally collapsed at the thought of what areas this oppressive thinking was affecting.

“Come on, let's play a round of FIFA!” She stood up and grabbed the controllers that were locked up in a closet.

As always, Ayoub chose Mané as his avatar and beat her five to two.

When she walked into the restaurant wearing her sequin jacket at 7 PM, Lamine, Gabe, Feven, Nuri and Winta were already sitting at the table. After

everyone hugged her and gave her wet kisses on her cheeks, Lamine asked how she wants to toast her graduation.

“I’ll take a martini with ice.” She sat down next to him.

Lamine ordered a round of aperitifs. Winta chose a few appetizers. “After that, Alícha and Bamyá for everyone. What do you all think?” Winta looked around.

“First let’s toast to the most ma-mean degree!” Lamine said and raised his glass.

The others joined in. “To Zazie!”

Zazie sipped her martini and looked her friends in the eyes. Feven told Gabe about something hectic from her day and Lamine continuously checked his phone.

“What’s up with you Lamine?”

“Unfortunately, I’m still really fucked up from last weekend.” He laid his phone on the table with the display down. “Sorry, I’m having a little stress with Nadja.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

He waved it off. “Well you know, it’s about the r-word again...”

Zazie nodded.

“...this small microcosm Frankfurt, it’s okay, but I swear to you, outside of here everyone is racist!”

“Where outside?”

“We wanted to do some wellness, somewhere upstate. That’s not exactly my thing, walking around naked with just a loin cloth on.” Nuri reached across the table and pinched Lamine’s cheeks. “It’s been too long since I’ve seen you in a loin cloth, brother!”

Lamine smiled and pushed his hand away.

How familiar his face was to her. She had met Lamine somewhere in the Frankfurt nightlife. She must have been 18 or 19. At the time he was studying law. “If you want to talk to her, you first have to get past me,” he had called, when little Chabos got too close to her in Travolta’s basement.

Earlier he had always spoken of wanting to become the first Black federal judge in Germany. But after his first state examination, he had founded an Afro German network for academics and started working at a start-up.

Lamine took a sip of beer. “Nadja really wanted to go to the spa.”

“At least you don’t have to go camping with her anymore, brother.” Gabe popped a portion of nuts into her mouth. “That was always the best. Lamine at some camping spot between Almans who were eating lunch at 11:30 AM!”

Lamine smiled and turned back to Zazie. “You wouldn’t believe how the people stared at me because I showed up at a sauna in the middle of the boonies. That was so back-to-the-nineties, specifically Brandenburg in the 90s.”

Winta listened to them. “At least you still have the advantage of Black-man-is-scary. If I run into those old farts when I’m wearing a bikini, first they stare at me and then they hit on me. And if things are really going shitty, some drunken Karl-Heinz comes up to me and talks my ear off.”

Zazie rolled her eyes.

“The other day some ninety-year-old approached me completely innocently asking ‘Where are you from originally?’, and I still thought to myself, maybe I’ll have to help him across the street. Suddenly he whispers to me: ‘You all have the best asses.’ That Bastard.”

Zazie held her hand in front of her mouth even though she knew the story. After Winta had finished explaining in detail what the difference between an innocent grandpa and a disgusting Karl-Heinz was, Dieo appeared in the door.

“Hi everyone!,” she said and once again sounded ten years older than she was.

They all hugged each other and Dieo got a chair from a nearby table and sat down next to Zazie. “I just looked at the evaluation. Your professor was thrilled to bits!”

Zazie grinned embarrassed. “I somehow can’t even believe it.” She snuggled up to her sister. “What do you want to drink?”

“I’ll take what you have...”

When the waitress came to their table, they ordered two martinis.

“Have you told Ulrike the good news yet? I was considering whether we should all go out to eat. Maybe you want to introduce her to you-know-who as well.” Dieo had let her voice sink. As the daughters of a single mother, they both knew what kinds of things had to be kept secret.

“Forget it!” Zazie took a sip from her glass and roughly put it back down.

Dieo gave her a questioning look.

“Ulli started up with her whole you-could-have-been-so-many-things number. If I can get a degree like this so easily, I could have also studied medicine or psychology - blah, blah, blah.”

Dieo laid her hand on her arm. “Don’t worry about that. She...”

“It’s OK!”, Zazie interrupted her sister and looked into the circle of people.

“Now tell me what you found out with your work, Mrs. Dr.,” Gabi called over in her direction at exactly the right moment.

“Basically, you can summarize it like this: Capitalism produces the Bernd Höcke type. They aren’t the exception, rather a basal part of the system. The problem is our image of humanity. This whole ‘higher, faster, further’ leads us straight to the betrayal of the most vulnerable in our society.”

“You sound like my professor from before!” Winta disguised her voice.

“Capitalism produces this type...”

Lamine and Dieo quickly exchanged a glance. Zazie took a sip of martini, stood up and grabbed for her sequin jacket. “I’m going outside for a minute.”



She lit a cigarette in front of the restaurant. After she had taken two drags, Dieo stood next to her. "What was that?"

"Uh, no idea. For once I nerded out on something in this thesis and Winta could barely handle it if I spoke about it. She always says I sound like Ann-Kathrin."

"What?"

"Back in the day we called the girls with pearl earrings and turned-up collars 'Ann-Kathrins'."

"Could it be that Winta wants to keep everything the way it is?"

"Could it be that you just have to let your psychoanalyst out right now?"

Dieo smiled and pulled her coat belt tighter. "A degree, a new boyfriend, you don't live around the corner from her anymore, that's a lot of change. Maybe she's afraid of losing you."

"You can't just leave it alone, can you?"

Dieo shook her head.

"Let's go back inside. And please don't mention Max again. I want to do things at my own pace."

When they came back inside the restaurant, Gabi quickly approached them with a tray of shots.

After they sat back down at the table, Gabi placed a shot glass before them and gave her a toast. "To your homecoming. You're not going to stay in Offenbach after graduation, are you?"

Neither her sister, her three Nordend mamas nor her friends could get over that: two years ago she had moved to Frankfurt's poor, little sister town.

"Zero - six - nine, ok," she said with the hope that this reference to the rap song would nip the discussion in the bud.

She only knew a few rap songs from the Offenbach scene, had never been in that hip night club Robert Johnson and wasn't interested in what Ulrike called the "vibrating art scene of Offenbach." She had just found herself a nice, little apartment that she could afford, and she liked the vibes of the city. As she made her way to the bar, she was reminded of why she didn't regret moving away from Frankfurt's neighborhood by the train station, despite all the cries of naysayers. Junkies, sex workers and undefined underground inhabitants crossed her path. A young father wearing beanie, boots and baggy trousers pushing a stroller avoided a homeless man crouching in a house entrance.

"Fucking hipsters," she heard Lamine mumble.

Dieo pushed her bike until they reached the bar and bid goodbye to her with a warm hug. "Don't let yourself get down, little sister," she said quietly.

When Zazie got home way past midnight, she let her sequin jacket fall to the floor and went to the kitchen. Her notebook lay open on the table, she could vaguely see little Zazie's afro in the book and thought of the saying that she once heard somewhere: "A grown-up is a child with layers on." Her phone vibrated.

*Max wants to share a song with you. Mac Miller. Self Care.*

She had to smile and answer immediately with a heart.

*<3 I'd like to experience oblivion with you sometime, too.*

Simon leafed through the online catalogue of a travel agency, his laptop lay across his lap in such a way that out of the corner of her eye, Dieo could see the pictures of a Riyadh, in the middle was one with an illuminated pool.

“I’m not saying I don’t want to go...” She scraped out her yogurt container with a spoon.

“And because neither of us says that we don’t want to go, I’ll have to book it at some point.”

She gasped. “You’re always in the process of booking something. If we’re sitting in Riyadh, you’re still going to constantly be answering Ludger’s emails. When we’re sitting around the Christmas tree, you’re still going to be overtired from some late-night shifts. This just goes on and on...”

He knew, soon she was going to say that they’re letting their lives pass them by, but before it could come to that, Jonathan walked into the living room. He had just spent an hour in the bathroom and now his wet hair was dripping on the towel that he had hanging around his shoulders. “What are you guys up to?”

Simon shut his laptop. “Your mother and I just can’t agree on how we should spend our Sunday mornings.”

Dieo put the yogurt on the arm rest of the sofa and scooted to the side so that Jonathan could sit down next to her. “Yes, Simon thinks you can

experience everything important on your smart phone, but I think you should be able to live in the moment.” She stroked Jonathan across his cheek and put on a mother’s scrutinizing gaze. “You’re looking really pale. Are you sick?”

“Naw, I’m fine.” Jonathan gently pushed his mother’s hand away. “You know what Adorno says, we don’t even notice how unhappy we all are, because we always escape into consumerism.”

Dieo bent herself forward, past Jonathan, to demonstratively shoot Simon an unbelievable look. “Where’s that suddenly coming from?” She stood up and went towards the kitchen.

Simon couldn’t help but grin. “Didn’t you once say that in his youthful days, Florian always drank red wine with his friends and read *Minima Moralia*?”, he called after her.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with my biological father!” Jonathan pushed strands of hair out of his face.

“There’s a guy on TikTok who talks a lot about Adorno...” He took his phone out of his pants pocket and showed Simon the video of a guy who was 20-years-old at the most, who held a copy of *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* in his hand. “I’m really into it at the moment. You know, Adorno said that psychology...,” now he looked towards the kitchen, “doesn’t come close to the horror.”

“Which horror?”

Jonathan locked his phone’s screen and shook his head. “All of this here! The destruction of our livelihood for example...”

“Uh huh.”

Dieo came back from the kitchen and gave him a smoothie. “And that’s why you’re not going to school anymore?”

“I am going to school! Besides, I want to go to London.”

“I was wondering why you’re suddenly interested in us.”

Jonathan smiled mischievously, stood up and grabbed Simon’s laptop.

“What’s your password?”

“Give it to me, I’ll do it!”

While Jonathan explained to Dieo that he wanted to go to London with his friends and attempt to overcome social isolation and autosocial coldness, Simon clicked through the offers for language tours to Great Britain.

“I found a few offers for language tours, look at these.”

“Bene and I actually want to go check out all of the thrift shops there and just chill a little. Preferably in East London.”

In the meantime, Dieo had sat down at the table and opened her laptop. Was she secretly googling Adorno quotes?

“I don’t understand anything anymore. What does the one thing have to do with the other?”

“Nothing? Jonathan wants to go to London to drink ale and tell everyone what’s wrong with the world. Just like all young people want to do.”

“You see mom, once again, the guy who’s not biologically related to me is the one who understands me the best.”

Dieo looked at the clock. “Can we first decide what we’re doing with the little ones today? I still have to write a therapy proposal.”

“I sent you the three best offers, Joni. But in exchange for that, you have to come to the museum with me and the little ones. We’ll deliver Otis to the craft workshop, and we’ll visit an exhibit about money.”

“About money?” Dieo raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, the history of money. I think it’s important...”

Joni clicked through the offers. “Looks good, I’ll send them to Bene.” He stood up and knocked on the bedroom door of the little ones. “We’re going to the museum!”

Shortly thereafter they heard a rumble. Dieo looked at her phone. “Papis just wrote me that he’s in Frankfurt. I told him he should call you guys. We can all get something to eat tonight.”

A little later, Simon registered Otis at the children’s workshop. For some reason, four-year-olds love it when students build robots with them out of electronic scrap. Leander was standing in the foyer of the museum and played Candy Crush on his new phone while Jonathan and he looked around at the museum shop.

Only a half an hour later did Papis enter the museum through the revolving glass door. He looked like he always does, as if he had just arrived from the 1980s and was about to give a speech about German philosophers: a

brown trench coat, a checkered scarf wrapped around his neck. His reading glasses, sat atop his short-cropped hair, had seen better days.

“Excuse me, I made the mistake of letting someone solicit me at the train station! A young African man gave me some very good restaurant tips...”

“No problem, I already brought Otis upstairs. We wanted to look at the exhibit about the history of money.”

Simon bought four tickets for the exhibit from the young woman at the reception. He could see in her face what Papis could trigger in his counterpart in just a few minutes. The woman looked at Papis with a fascinated, almost loving look.

After he took the tickets, Simon hugged Papis and put a ticket into his coat pocket.

“Merci, Simon! That’s exactly the right thing for us. On y va!”

While they walked upstairs to the exhibit, Papis laid his arm around Jonathan.

“What do you know about money, my dear?” While they walked away from him, Simon heard him say that it rules the world and he refrained from commenting while he put the children’s tickets into his wallet.

“Look, that’s how people used to pay back in the day. Before there were credit cards and internet and stuff,” Jonathan explained to his little brother while they were standing in front of a vitrine with coins and bills. Papis had moved a little away from them, crossed his arms behind his back and was striding through the exhibition in a decidedly casual manner.



“Why do you need internet to pay?” Leander asked and Jonathan explained to him what happened if Dieo ordered new clothes for the little ones online.

“There are giant warehouses full of t-shirts and shoes and pants in all different sizes. And when it goes out of style, a lot of stuff will be thrown away.”

Leander nodded concerned.

“Back in the day, she bought everything for me at the flea market. That was better for the environment. Mom did something for the environment, so to speak, because we were poorer. Cool, huh?”

Leander thought about it for a long while. “So the kids who wore your clothes before were kind of like your big brothers.”

“Right, the clothes keep getting handed down as long as they’re not too worn out.”

Suddenly Papis was standing next to them again. “Some people give everything that they have away and only live with what’s absolutely necessary. In the ancient times there was a man who by the end of his life only had one cup, and he even gave that away when he saw a child form a cup with his hands in order to drink from a well.”

“I didn’t know that you even know Greek mythology!”, Jonathan said enthusiastically. “When I was little, I always listened to the legends.”

“Strictly speaking, that’s not mythology. Diogenes was a real-historical person. I assume you’ll learn about him in school.”

Jonathan nodded and started to say something, but Papis had already continued to lecture: “Basically, we humans don’t need much. Diogenes understood something: It’s the simple things in life that matter, right?”

Simon’s cellphone rang.

“Listen, we have to get back to the Glaston pitch. Best would be within the next two hours. Can you make it?”, Ludger said without beating around the bush, when Simon answered the phone.

He looked at his watch and knew Dieo would quarter him.

“We’re at the museum, give me an hour. I’ll bring the kids home and then come to the office.”

“I’m really sorry that I have to interrupt your family idyll!” Ludger hung up. Simon turned to Papis and the kids. “Guys, I’m afraid I still have to go to work today!”

“Oh really?!” Leander grimaced. “Is Joni going to bring us home?”

Simon looked at Jonathan and considered how he could compensate his eldest son for leaving him alone with Papis and the little ones.

“You could make a detour to the ice cream shop and buy the boys waffle cones with vanilla ice cream and then make your way back home around 6.”

“And tell mom that you were with us for a long time,” Leander added.

“We’re on the same page,” Simon said with a mixture of disillusionment and pride.

**[END OF SAMPLE]**