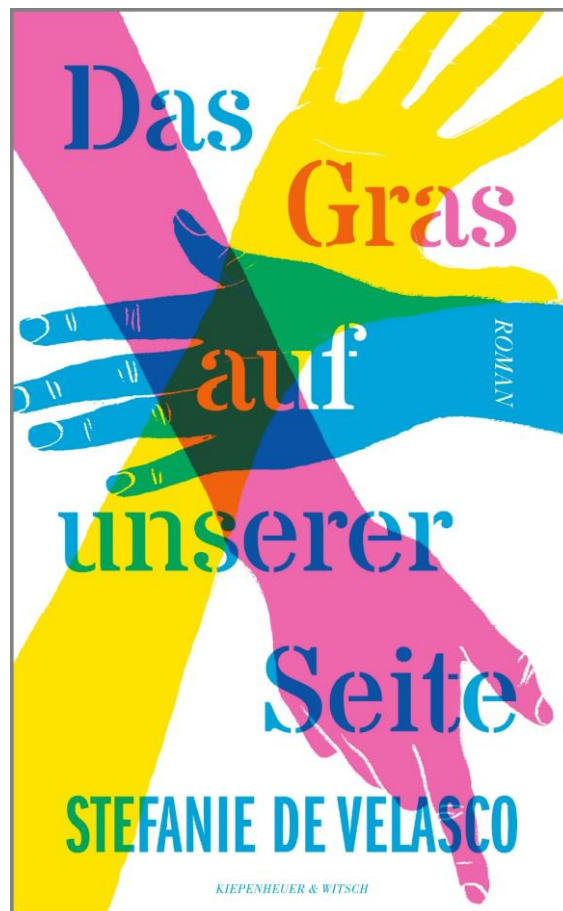


# The Grass on Our Side

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**1**

## **Menstruation**

I.

We devour –

Grass,

Foam-born noodles,

Hamburgers, rotisserie chicken.

We devour –

Anything that falls out of strollers:

pieces of pretzels,

Bits of sweet pastries,

Corn chips in saliva.

We devour –

Carrion

Bones, vomit and feces,

Not by choice, by our nature.

From *Schmutzig Bleiben: Verse für Hündinnen*, by Grit Feigenhauer

The heat comes at night. She can't sleep, her t-shirt sticks to her even though she's lying outside, beneath the pear tree. Grit has put a mosquito net around the mattress – another one of those tropical nights, even the garden barely provides any relief, though this heat is no summer heat. Like a bad migraine it announces itself with an aura, climbing up from your gut, pushing in behind your face, and creeping into every pore where it finally oozes out with sweat, producing a kind of cap lamp that makes it impossible even to think about sleeping. *Perimenopause*. It's the onset of menopause, the gynecologist said when Grit wanted to know what the hell the term meant. She wanted to prescribe her hormones, but Grit has come to like staying awake all night, and she catches up on sleep during the day. Nobody tries to make her get up in the morning. For a while she just lies there and listens to the nightingale in the elderflower bush, that electronic sound that doesn't even seem like something from the natural world, more like minimal techno or the MRI machine that time last year when she had to be put in the tube because of the lipoma in her breast.

The frame of the cot creaks as she pulls on her pants, sets her feet on the grass and slips into her Crocs. Grit had to hang it from the pear tree with straps because Arno doesn't want the metal legs to bore into the ground, making the grass yellow in those spots, though it doesn't fit in the cabin anymore anyway. There are moving boxes stacked to the ceiling, furniture wedged together, with the laundry basket on top, still full of dirty clothes. She'll wear her underpants inside out one more time, then she'll have to finally to do the laundry – as soon as the relatives are gone. Her sister and her future brother-in-law. The twins. Otto and Wilhelm. Those terrors who are her nephews, and who, with their screeching, their stomping, and their incessant whining for ice cream and screen-time, have been disturbing the peace in Anno's apartment – a week during which only beige food has been

served. Noodles, apple sauce, fries, vanilla ice cream. She knows you can't get annoyed at children, especially not as a childless woman in your late forties with pronounced facial rosacea from too much liqueur and sweet stuff, but she can't understand why Alice didn't leave the children with their grandparents.

Luckily she'd thought of the garden allotment on the second night while lying with a stomach ache next to Anno on the folding cot in the living room as her sister snored in the next room as loudly as an old bag with sleep apnea.

Pale moonlight hits the window of the cabin, Grit looks at her own face reflected in the glass – a werewolf with unwashed hair in an old *Dirty Dancing* t-shirt – she pulls the elastic off her wrist and arranges her hair, pulling the ponytail tight to give herself a natural facelift. She bends over, something is sticking between her toes inside her shoe. A seed? There are nuts and seeds all over the place, some as big as rubber balls, but it's just a chocolate raisin.

Past sprawling raspberry bushes and weed-infested flowerbeds she blazes a trail to the little lawn behind the cabin, where she's left her bicycle.

There's a light on in the next allotment over, it shines weakly red through the brush. Someone else who can't sleep, maybe; in any event Grit isn't the only one who overnights here in the no-man's-land between Yorckbrücke and Potsdamer Platz, even if it is against the rules of the garden colony.

Last season Anno's parents kept everything in hand here, pruned the bushes, mowed the lawn. But the garden has gone feral since then. Grit pushes her bike onto the gravel path, puts three Ikea bags in the attached trailer, and weighs them down with her bike lock. In Gleisdreieck Park, dull beats from Bluetooth speakers drown out the nightingales' singing. Up on the bridge the U1 train rumbles westward, someone has painted BERLIN IS GAIA'S CLITORIS on one of the bridge pilings, girls in crop-tops and

cargo pants dance beneath it, the clothes Grit had worn when she was their age.

Strange how everything repeats itself. What was it the gynecologist said yesterday?

*Puberty, only backwards – that’s what you can expect in the coming years.* Grit turns right past the volleyball courts and rolls down the ramp by Baumarkt and crosses Yorckstraße. In front of Hisar, party people are sitting with their goodnight döners, junkies have locked themselves in the newly-built public restroom, huddled together, Grit can hear them giggling and coughing as she rides past them. There he is again. Herr Trott – she sees the shadow of her dog running along next to her, his ears flapping, she even seems to hear the click of his claws, as if he’s had his paws studded with beads. It’s been a while since she sensed his presence, imagined seeing him out of the corner of her eye – how long will it stick around, this shadow of Herr Trott alongside her? She rides down the street, standing up from the saddle and looking over the tops of cars at the entryways to the buildings. Next to the bakery there’s a cardboard moving box. Grit parks her bike and turns on the flashlight on her phone. There’s a message on the lockscreen.

## **DOGVILLE**

*Kessie: Somebody jumped on the tracks outside Cologne. I’m stuck in the Bergisch Land.*

*Grit: O no...*

*Kessie: There are flashlights all over the place in the dark. Conductor said we shouldn’t look out the window. I think they’re picking up body parts.*

*Grit: LOL of course you looked out the window*

*Kessie: No, the guy next to me told me. Same thing happened to him one time between Hamburg and Hannover. It’s because of mother’s day, he says. Such a chatty egg-eater.*

*Grit: Egg-eater?*

*Kessie: Somebody who eats eggs while traveling.*

*Grit: Aha...I do that.*

*Kessie: Haha*

*Grit: I was just at your place. You meant the stack of notebooks on the desk, right? Didn't see any others. Send them to you Monday...they're already boxed up at the garden*

*Kessie: Thanks. They'd never have fit in my suitcase. Wanted to mark them over the wknd. But they got left there.*

*Grit: It was really sudden...your departure. Just say the word if you need anything or there's anything I can do..*

*Kessie: Yeah, thanks. Hey, what garden?*

*Grit: Belongs to Anno's parents...they don't use it anymore and I've been crashing there since Alice & Sons got here...it just wasn't working with so many people in Anno's tiny apt...I was going crazy.*

*Kessie: A garden allotment?*

*Grit: Yeah but they're going to sell it soon. Until then I'm staying there!*

*Ha!*

Grit bends over the cardboard box and shines her light on the contents. Mostly clothing. A pair of Asos moccasins, underneath them a spiral vegetable slicer in its original packaging, and a couple DVDs. Grit scans the barcodes on the videos with her Momox app. The ones worth more than 50 cents she places in the bicycle trailer. The clothing is wet and smells like wine, Grit feels around and turns out the pockets of a pair of jeans, finding a five euro note. Sometimes in the midst of a Marie Kondo frenzy, the people throwing things out don't bother to take the time to empty the pockets. Beneath the clothing are books, all dry. *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*. Self-help books aren't worth anything, unless it's esoteric stuff. Angels and aliens always sell – and, of course, Buddhism. *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* is worth eight

euros, the app says. She adds the book to the trailer. Maybe something for her brother-in-law. As a reconciliation gift. He reads that sort of bullshit.

## **DOGVILLE**

*Kessie: Fire department's on the scene now. No way I'll get a connection to Ihrscheid today. The FD's hosing down the train.*

*Grit: Why??*

*Kessie: Egg-eater says it's to clean off the blood. You can't pull into a station splattered with blood.*

*Grit: OK, crazy!*

*Kessie: I'll have to take a taxi from Cologne. Annoying.*

*Grit: Do you know how long you'll be in Ihrscheid?*

*Kessie: Absolutely no idea.*

An organic grocery store set up shop on the main street not long ago, and they don't lock up their garbage bins. Grit rides into the courtyard, hops off her bike, and pulls on the latch of the gate to the fenced-off area. Locked; they've learned fast. Grit holds the Ikea bags in her teeth and climbs over the chain-link fence. She is swarmed by flies when she opens the first bin, it smells of rotten dairy products, and she quickly closes it again. In the second bin there are bananas and, underneath, potatoes and carrots. The bananas aren't even brown. Kohlrabi and oranges, apples and more carrots sit in the third bin, all a bit worse for wear, but nowhere near ready for the garbage. Grit packs them up, heaves a bag over the fence, and a rogue carrot rolls along the ground.

Herr Trott would have grabbed it immediately and chewed it up and then stood in front of her begging. His black fur, the white splotch on his chest, the most lovable eyes in the world – for a second it feels like somebody is gnawing on Grit's heart like on a carrot. For 16 years he had



been her companion, had always accompanied her on vacations, on reading tours, visits to her parents, and on nightly tours like this one. She always knew the dog would die one day, of course – and at the end, when he needed around-the-clock care, she was almost happy when the veterinarian said this was it. She doesn't want a new dog. New dog, that sounds weird. Another dog, no better. Anyone who loves animals doesn't keep one – that's what Grit believes now, even if it does sound self-righteous. She grabs the stray carrot. The bags are nearly full, but there's still so much left. What she pulls out of the city's garbage bins every month could feed thousands. She climbs over the fence one last time and opens the fourth bin. Croissants and cinnamon rolls, slightly dry, but otherwise in good shape. Maybe her nephews would like them for breakfast. Reconciliation feast.

She pedals the bike and now-heavy trailer along Potsdamer Straße, past Kleistpark, continuing straight to Kurfürstenstraße. The hookers are huddled together, they crane their necks as Grit comes past with the food.

“Want a cinnamon roll?” she asks, but the hookers shake their heads and turn away, arrogant and elegant – they're probably thinking, Finally somebody out at night doing stranger things than we are. Grit places a banana and croissant next to a sleeping homeless person. Hopefully he'll be pleased that someone has left breakfast at his bedside. She looks around, needs to go. There's no bathroom in the garden, sometimes she pees on the flowers, supposed to be good for them, she'd read somewhere, microorganisms and whatnot – but only in moderation. She hops off her bike, squats between two cars and lets it flow. Everyone does it. Men. Her brother-in-law yesterday at the Kulturforum. He had proudly sidled up to a tree in broad daylight. The twins looked on with big eyes, standing there like little monkeys, you could hear the gears of the learning process rattling in their heads.

Grit pulls up her pants. A guy with a 4You backpack and jacket with a reflective strip is walking along the sidewalk, he steps around the bike and only then notices Grit between the cars.

“Shame on you,” he mumbles, shaking his head as he walks on.

Grit gets back on the bike. “Shame on *you*,” she says, riding past him.

## **DOGVILLE**

*Kessie: We're finally moving again. I'm getting worried about Pan. He can't hold it for longer than 6 hours.*

*Grit: You should have left him with me...*

*Kessie: No. You've got enough on your plate with your relatives in Anno's tiny place. And anyway, Pan makes a nice buffer between me and my mother.*

*Grit: If you end up having to stay longer I can pick him up...*

*Kessie: Thanks, you're the best. Almost there. I can see the Rhine glittering.*

*Grit: Safe travels!*

*Kessie: Thanks. I'll touch base tomorrow!*

Kessie puts her phone away and looks out the window. On its way into the station in Cologne, the ICE train inches across Hohenzollern Bridge, the sides of it covered with thousands of padlocks. As a young adult she'd loved looking at those steel tokens of love, fastened to the bridge by couples over the years. Every time she crossed the bridge they'd given Kessie a vague sense of hope for a future in which she would no longer be alone. These days, though, they disgust her. Clumps of them rusting out, merging with the bridge – brown and irrelevant, like the Hohenzollerns themselves.

Pan comes out from under the seat. He's made it through the entire trip without making a sound. Kessie had opted against an expensive ticket

for him, instead she'd bought a newspaper and spread it across her lap to hide the dog. She doesn't agree with the policy – dogs cost as much as a child, even though Pan isn't even allowed to sit in a seat. He discretely shakes himself and Kessie runs her hand over his short fur. Eight years ago, when she found him on the beach at Torre Pacheco, he'd been a mangy sack of bones. At first he wasn't approachable. She'd tried with chorizo, then with fatty salami from Pamplona, but it was only when she offered him a piece of bread that he came near, took it out of her hand, and allowed himself to be petted. She'd named him after the Spanish word for bread, not the Greek god, even if he looks like a cute little god with the black rings around his eyes and his floppy silken ears.

The person next to Kessie – the egg eater – stands up, baffled. “There was a dog under there the whole time?” he asks.

Kessie smiles.

The egg eater nods approvingly and lifts his bag down from the luggage rack.

“Right, hope the rest of your trip goes well, and best wishes for your mother.”

“Thanks.”

Pan yawns and stretches – downward facing dog. *Adho Mukha Svanasana*. She's forgotten her yoga mat in Berlin. She does yoga regularly, but only to balance out her screen time. She isn't hoping for serenity or self-love or any kind of enlightenment. Even though she could surely use those things in Ihrscheid. Kessie has only seen her mother occasionally over the last decade. A weekend here or there, or on Christmas. This time she has to stay longer. *She fell. The neighbor found her in the staircase. She was conscious but disoriented. She kept saying she needed to pick you up from kindergarten. She's in the hospital with a severe concussion.* How absurd to get these messages from Alvaro, of all people. Kessie's brother left for an internship in Spain at 18 and never came back to Germany. No time, he said

on the phone, he was terribly sorry, but he couldn't possibly leave his wife alone to tend to the kids and the hotel during the high season. He'd come at the end of the month; Kessie would just have to handle it on her own for now.

As the train comes to a stop, she lets Pan get out ahead of her and then rolls her suitcase to the elevator. Outside at the taxi stand it takes a while before someone will take her with the dog.

## **DOGVILLE**

*Charly: my deer, you make it yet?*

*Kessie: Almost. Missed the last regional train. I'm in a taxi to Ihrscheid.*

*Luckily almost to the station.*

*Charly: Um why isn't he dropping you at home???*

*Kessie: Pan needs to be walked.*

*Charly: ok tall me when you get home, don't want you getting sent back to berlin in a body bag*

*Charly: \*tell*

Kessie's mother isn't waiting for her at the station in Ihrscheid, waving, like she usually is. It's just after midnight, the square in front of the station is dark and empty. The taxi driver puts the suitcase on the sidewalk, Kessie pockets the receipt, says goodbye, and leans down toward Pan. He wants to find the nearest tree, but his muzzle has to go on first. It's nothing like it used to be. Over the years he's not only developed dozens of allergies, but also become a sort of vacuum cleaner, gobbling up everything on the street that looks halfway edible. If Pan eats even a tiny crumb of bread, the next day he'll have heartburn and bloody diarrhea.

"God damn it," Kessie mutters as she digs through her bag. She can't find the muzzle. She must have forgotten it as she rushed to exit the

train. In front of her is the empty pedestrian zone of Ihrscheid. A few years back the county seat was made part of the ICE route to Frankfurt, and the whole area around the station had been modernized, with only the courthouse still looking as shabby as it did back when Kessie had to appear before a judge. She was alone with the man in a large room. *Who do you wish to live with*, he asked, *your father or your mother?* The judge repeated Kessie's answer, speaking quietly into a cordless device he was holding in front of his mouth. *With my mother.*

"Drop it," she hisses, pulling on the leash. Pan listens and drops the piece of pretzel. She gives him a treat as reward. He can only tolerate the exotic stuff – camel meat, ostrich, kangaroo. She'll give him a precautionary acid blocker later. A sick dog is the last thing she needs right now. Tomorrow she has to go to the hospital, visit Dolores, and talk to the neurologist; she has to call Alvaro and google the opening hours of the library at the college in Sankt Augustin.

At the bank Kessie withdraws money and then buys a pack of Lucky Strikes from a cigarette machine. She doesn't smoke very often anymore, but without cigarettes she can't bear Ihrscheid. In the old days the area around the station was full of strip clubs and sex shops. When Kessie staggered home on Sundays, a mess from parties the night before, she would encounter stray men walking around like zombies in a video game. One time a guy in a dark suit with milky stains on the pants spoke to her. Do you know where Furzelstrasse is? Kessie kept going but he grabbed her by the arm and said something, she didn't remember what it was anymore, but he held a porn magazine in her face, that she still remembered. And the image – two legs sticking up and between them a thick, creased, bumpy tongue. Another time, early in the morning, she was waiting for a tram to take her to the flea market in Rheinaue. She was smoking. A young man sat down next to her, blond and bombed. He opened the fly of his jeans and started to jerk himself off. He smiled at her. To this day she can still see his eyes, watery

blue, and the sudden pain in them as she put out her lit cigarette on his cock. How could she have been so insane? She shudders at that sense of recklessness, which abandoned her by age twenty at the latest.

In the distance the gray apartment blocks of municipal housing come into view, and Kessie digs out her mother's housekeys. The family name on the doorbell has faded. Her brother was given a Spanish first name, but with the second child Dolores insisted on a German name: *Kerstin – so you fit in here completely*. Pan rubs himself against the walls, leaving gray smears in the staircase. In the past Kessie would have kept the dog from doing that, as Dolores's neighbors are amateur spies and racists, but her mother will probably never come back here.

As Kessie opens the door on the second floor, an unpleasant smell hits her. Pan puts his nose to the floor and sniffs his way toward her mother's bedroom; Kessie can just barely keep him from licking up something from the floor. Vomit is on the bedside carpet. Kessie rolls it up and throws it into the washing machine in the bathroom. There are blood-smeared towels inside the machine. She pours detergent into the compartment, slams the door shut, and holds her breath until the sound of the water starts. She's thirsty, drinks water greedily, directly from the faucet, brushes her teeth, makes Dolores's bed with fresh sheets, and takes off her clothes.

## **DOGVILLE**

*Kessie: Made it.*

*Charly: Great now I can sleep*

*Kessie: Why are you up so late?*

*Charly: I wasn't, I was sound asleep, but then Vincent woke me up, at the door, crying, they're breaking up.*

*Kessie: again?*

*Charly: yeah the poor bastard I'm sleeping with him for now*

*Kessie: Haha. You just can't help yourself. I'll reach out tomorrow. Night!*

The next morning Kessie is awakened by Pan's wet nose. She'd tossed and turned in her mother's bed for half the night until the dog crawled into bed around four. Tired, she rummages through the kitchen cabinets, looking for decent coffee. Dolores has always drunk Linde's Kornkaffee, a grain and chicory non-coffee. Over the course of forty years in Germany, her mother had stuck steadfastly to a Mediterranean diet, with only a few odd exceptions: on the top shelf of the refrigerator are tins of cervelat wurst and sülze. *Guilty pleasure* – last Christmas Dolores had explained it to Kessie, using the English term. *Gilti plätscha*, as Dolores put it. Even as kids, Alvaro and Kessie had laughed so hard they cried when their parents said English words or very long German words. *Say Michael Jackson!* (*Meekuh-el Dschak-sonn*), *say Streichholzschächtelchen!* (*Es-try-kolz-schettel-shen*), and their parents, too, laughed at their own pronunciation disasters. These days Kessie is pleased when Dolores so much as smiles; that's how rigid her facial expressions have become.

She steps out onto the balcony with a cup of coffee substitute. The sun is breaking through the fog, beyond the roofs looms Michaelsberg with its Benedictine abbey; at the end of the street is the supermarket where Dolores worked as a cashier. She'd had exactly four years to enjoy a bit of her retirement, then the tumbles began. At first Kessie assumed it had to do with her mother's Achilles tendons. She showed her some stretches, they went together to buy sneakers with gel insoles, but Dolores continued to walk around in high heels, and Kessie stopped wondering about the falls. Phone calls from Ihrscheid increased – *I'm falling, I'm falling*. Then came the diagnosis, which Kessie accepted without understanding the scope of the condition. In the meantime, though, it's undeniable: Dolores has deteriorated in recent years. Her speech has changed, her facial expressions are more rigid and more slack at the same time, they give her otherwise so resolute mother a look of being lost in thought, which Kessie would like if she didn't know it was a result of the illness.



She takes a photo of the abbey on the hill, the shopping center, the pink sky, adds a pastel filter, and posts it to the dog chat.

## **DOGVILLE**

*Kessie: Nothing does your head in like your hometown.*

*Charly: GM...*

*Grit: hey you-hoo have you been to the hospital?*

*Kessie: No. Heading there now. Wish you were here.*

*Charly: if it's all too much for you I'll come to ihrscheid.*

*Grit: with me too*

*Charly: even if I'm like totally broke for you I'd go all the way to Morrowland.*

*Grit: You shot something in May didn't you?*

*Charly: yeah but I have to pay off that ridiculous vet bill the woman in tiergarten wasn't fucking around, bubba had a tussle with a sheepdog he hates those puffballs,*

*Grit: by tussle you mean ripped to shreds, I assume?*

*Charly: I got bubba under control at some stage but the sheepdog woman went nuts she said she was going to call the cops, and she took a PHOTO of my ID*

*Kessie: sorry. I must have missed that in all the hubbub around Dolores.*

*Charly: now strap yourselves in here comes the bill*

*Grit: WTF????? 1500 euros*

*Kessie: that's real*

*Charly: I know, sucks*

*Grit: "dressing wounds and sutures"? what the hell did bubba do to the poor sheepdog??*

*Charly: where am I going to get that kind of money*

*Kessie: you want to borrow some?*

*Charly: you would do that???*

*Kessie: one condition, Bubba has to be neutered. I'll throw in the money for the operation. Gotta go. I'll text later.*

*Charly: What? No*

Charly tosses her phone onto the foot of the bed. She likes treating the thing roughly, to risk breaking it. Fritz gave her a case but Charly won't put something like that on her phone. If it wants to be hers, it'll just have to deal with the world outside, like Charly herself, embrace hardship and heat, dance around the sharp corners and jagged edges that life throws at you, even if it hurts sometimes. Although, thinks Charly, can you really expect that of a device when you don't even feel up to it yourself these days?

It's Saturday, and the *Schmuckwinkel* – corner jeweler, as the sign outside says – smells of B12 lasagna. Charly loves the dishes her roommate cooks, but today the scent coming down the hall and making their way through the crack in her doorway is making her feel sick.

Vincent lies next to her in bed and cuddles up to her.

“What time is it?” he asks.

Warm breath flows over her shoulder. Vincent's face looks rumpled, like a ball Bubba has chomped on. He dropped by in the middle of the night, Charly wanted to ask him for money after sex – for the veterinarian bill, but it's not the best moment to do that. It's been like this forever. Fight, breakup, counseling, reconciliation – those are Vincent's four seasons. She barely knows his wife, who doesn't like him being chatty with his exes. Exes. That's what she calls them. What a word. *His wife*, sounds like *my dog*. Charly can't think of her name. Lina, Ida, Mina, Stine. Those are the names young wives have these days, and the kids are named things like Ferdinand or Oskar, Hedwig or Wilhelmine. Like they'd grown up in Bullerby, or escaped the Hitler Youth.

Charly peeks through the railing of the loft bed. Bubba's dozing on his couch beneath the shop window. His ears twitch, he's dreaming. Nobody would look at him now and believe this gentle giant could turn into such a Hell's Angel. How his chops had glistened as his teeth bored into the sheepdog – like a leather zipper in an expensive bag. BK. Bubba Kaiser, King of Chomp, Grand Duke of Gonads. Charly lets herself slump back into the pillows. Money has to come – regularly, she needs a goal, methods and routines, instead of debt and ruins. But how and which ones? She can barely open her eyes. She's always loved to sleep a lot, and to sleep in, but this is foreign to her. These comatose naps, mornings, afternoons, evenings, it's got to stop.

Vincent pulls her toward him.

“Don't you need to go to counseling?” asks Charly.

“Yeah, soon,” whispers Vincent. He kisses her, Charly slides closer to him, rubs her cheek on his stubble, shoves her nose against his neck and breathes in the piney scent. Vincent's eyes are Sherwood Forest green. Robin Hood must have smiled like him when Maid Marian caught him bathing, when he said to her: *Beg your pardon, I'm only taking a lady's advice*. That's what Charly thought when she met Vincent for the first time. Years ago now. They were both standing alone like idiots in front of Berghain because the bouncer didn't let them in. Vincent offered her a swig of his warm beer. They strolled along the riverbank, crossed the Spree to where the floating swimming pool was moored, and climbed over the fence. The pool was covered with a tarp. They took off their clothes, slid into the water, the tarp above them, and they slept with each other – it was so cool and warm at the same time, Vincent's wet, cool body, covered with freckles, he looked like a Dalmatian. Afterwards they laid on the sand, the beats and cheering of revelers echoing across the river from party boats, and Vincent told her he was descended from one of the Three Musketeers. Charly took it for a ludicrous lie, too much testosterone in his blood after sex, but she

loved it – the story, the peacock-like ostentation of it, for somebody to come up with something so original, for the sake of a bit of admiration, and was almost disappointed when later that week Vincent showed her an image of a young soldier who did indeed look strikingly like him, as well as a photo of a sword in a glass case at his parents' place in Paris that was supposed to have belonged to one of the musketeers.

She pushes Vincent's soft, white t-shirt up and runs her fingers over his ribs, traces the tattoo on his left hip – a heart with the words *You and me and Bela Lugosi* inside it. Vincent moans softly. He rolls onto Charly, his long arms on either side of her shoulders, enclosing her in a protective embrace of soft, warm skin. Slowly and carefully he enters her, Charly lifts her hips and presses her vag against him like a glowing rhomb. That's what you do to horses and cows and expensive handbags, and that's what Charly does to her trio of men, brands them again and again with her mark: MCK, Maria Charlotte Kaiser – Queen of Coitus, Countess of Cunts, Femme Fontaine, she feels full and hungry at the same time, then hungrier and hungrier. The first climax comes slowly, like low-voltage electricity slowly creeping up a hot wire, the second is the opposite, an orgasm as quick as a fox following a rabbit into a its den, grabbing it and – dead.

Vincent takes off the condom and spoons Charly. She presses her backside to his crotch, reaches down and places her hand on her vag. This position comforts her, the same way a stuffed animal in her arms comforted her to sleep as a child. She snuggles both for the same purpose, but why? Why is she so downtrodden? Everything is well and good, except for the money problems, and that's always been ineradicable – like lice in kindergarten.

“Two toothpicks are walking through the woods when a hedgehog comes by. One toothpick says to the other, I had no idea there were buses here,” Vincent whispers in Charly's ear, but she barely hears the obligatory post-sex joke, as she's nearly dozed off again. Her lower body hurts. Maybe

she's just getting her period, she forgets about it every month anew – that ruddy tide and all the crap that washes up with it: headaches, feeding frenzies, fatigue, cramps. It's been that way for thirty years, enough time, you might think, to come to terms with it, to accept it as part of life, and yet this monthly attack, this flood of blood, remains alien to Charly. She sits up, startled.

“What is it?” asks Vincent. Maybe she's about to start bleeding right now, she has no desire to have to change the sheets – the only disadvantage of a loft bed – she doesn't have any tampons, either, meant to buy some last week, even that she has put off, and now the vibrator is buzzing at her feet, too. She digs under the sheets, but it's just her phone.

### **DOGVILLE**

*Grit: @Charly you guys want groceries? I was dumpster diving again yesterday...could stop by in an hour..*

*Charly: yeah, definitely can you bring me a tampon too??*

*Grit: I gave you that menial cup.*

*Grit: menstrual cup*

*Charly: my deer I threw that away I used it once and it smelled like Harzer cheese I even had to throw out the pot I boiled it in because it stunk so bad as well*

*Grit: I just wash it with soap...like my hands...mine doesn't stink but it is stained. Brownish. Unattractive...but good.*

Charly grabs the condom and climbs down the ladder. How much longer will she be okay climbing up and down it? She'd never asked herself that question – until last week when her agent showed up here and asked her about it. *Aren't you ever afraid you're going to fall?* She stops by unannounced every few months. Charly sets out a saucer for her to ash her slim cigarettes on and waits for her to recite her spiel. *Why do you never*

*answer the phone? Why are you throwing away your talent? Was that your boyfriend? There's no shame in needing a day-job. But if you play dead I'll have to drop you.*

Charly puts the condom on the windowsill and looks for her t-shirt. Daylight seeps through the curtain, the shadows thrown by the succulents seem to dance in the sun. Never, Charly thinks, pulling on her t-shirt, I'll never go looking for a job. Job, the word alone – sounds like the bubbles caused by a body sinking in a swamp. Job, job, job. Up to now she's been able to appease the bureaucrat at the swamp-center with the few days of shooting she gets each year, but now he's getting serious and trying to place her somewhere. So she, too, has gotten serious, a little. Together with her agent she halfheartedly made a highlight reel. She used to get lots of work. She'd had a role in the series *Black Butterfly*. Three young women heading to earth from another planet to research the place from space. Like *Star Trek* – only the other way around. And funnier. For two seasons she played the first mate, then it was over. At this point it had been years since she made money from acting. There had been a major offer one other time; Charly put in the effort and got the part. In the summer of 2017 she was sitting in make-up for the *Heute-Show* and a makeup artist was trimming her long, dark-dyed hair into an impish pixie cut. She was to feature in four sketches a month – as Frauke Petry, but then just one day after Charly's transformation the politician left parliament. Afterwards Charly had mourned Frauke Petry, that petite figure with the razor-edged smile who called for refugees to be shot at the border if necessary, and Charly prayed that something would come of the oddball party she promised to found, at least for three years. That's how long her contract would have been, she'd have been flush with money and living well, but nothing came of it, and now Charly is tired. And broken. She's stopped practicing her craft, has slowly but surely let this one true love in her life shrivel up, and now it's too late, she thinks. *Do you think others would have gotten where they have if they let every setback*

*demoralize them? Do you think you're the only one who ever failed to land a role? The only one ever dressed down by an egomaniacal director? That's the profession, my dear! It's hard and it hurts, and it takes you to the edge of the abyss. As it should. Otherwise anyone could do it,* her agent said as she looked through the clips for the highlight reel.

Daylight sneaks through the curtains, the shadows thrown by her cactuses seem to dance in the sun. The rent at the *Schmuckwinkel* is low, the unemployment office can't throw her out of here. Before Charly moved in, the *Schmuckwinkel* had been a jeweler, the sign is still on the building façade. Charly lives in the old showroom, shares a kitchen and bathroom with Fritz, who lives in the back and has set up his goldsmith workshop there, too. His mother left him the ground-floor apartment when she closed up the shop and retired. Fritz has run the business online ever since. He designs his own collections and repairs broken necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. The bulk of his money he earns through workshops where he teaches couples to make their own wedding rings.

Charly scurries down the hall with the condom in her hand. Vincent's toiletry bag is on the shelf in the bathroom – blue, simple, an honest bag without any frills. Dental floss is hanging from the trash bin. Even after ten years living together, Fritz would never allow himself to leave behind even the faintest trace in the bathroom, and Charly doesn't floss. She opens the bin with her bare foot, disposes of the condom, and uses the tip of her finger to shove the unruly floss into the trash.

Charly looks in the mirror. She looks as if she's made of cheese, and her breasts, those flat things, like shoulder pads that have slipped down, now feel like she's traded them out for medicine balls. She grimaces at herself – Jack Nicholson's face in *The Shining* – and then mouths a scream to relax her jaw muscles. She's been grinding her teeth in her sleep, no doubt because of Vincent and the breakup. She must have been in post-coital la la

land when she said he could stay here. From one nest to the next, that's what they count on after a breakup – she knows how it is. Charly loves babies and she loves fathers. Who knows, maybe she would have distanced herself from her trio long ago if they hadn't all slowly shifted into reproductive mode – except for Tristan, but he's her youngster and will probably get started soon enough. The dark rings under their eyes that they wear proudly as proof they've spent the night at their child's side, the yellow stains on their t-shirts from mashed carrots – these badges of a calamitous lifestyle excite her, maybe the same way some girls felt attracted to motorcycle-riding rockers fifty years ago. But it not's only that. Charly loves Vincent, she loves Leander and Tristan. Without any sort of constraints. The English word for a spouse sounds almost like a leash, or *halsband*: husband. She closes the bathroom cabinet, the mirror on it divides Charly's face symmetrically into two halves. She's playing a straightforward game: sleeping with the same handful of men. Sleeping with them for years, decades, loyal to them no matter what they make of themselves, even if they get married and become parents. And once in a while you treat yourself to an occasional cheeseburger – chance acquaintances, a little snack between meals, and to give the whole thing extra umami you pick out a cheeseburger that's either particularly beautiful or particularly ugly. Always sleep with the same men, and once in a while a quick cheeseburger, wolf it down, the way you're supposed to eat a cheeseburger, before the beautiful ones become ugly and the ugly ones become beautiful.

Back in the workshop, Fritz is sitting at his desk, heating up a piece of metal. Like he's smoking a shisha, that's how he looks with the blowpipe in his mouth. He gives off a nonchalance that Charly would like him to have in real life as well, outside his workshop.

“Should I take the lasagna out of the oven?” Charly asks.

Fritz takes the blowpipe out of his mouth and rolls in his chair to his brand-new Prometheus 2000. “I'll do it in a second.”



Rows of bracelets are lying next to the kiln. *Embraces* – a new collection for the shop, and above them is a metal plaque with a Coco Chanel quotation. *The best things in life are free. The second-best things are very, very expensive.* Fritz isn't capable of negotiating, so Charly had suggested years ago that he replace the Goethe quote his mother had hanging in the same spot (*The connoisseur appreciates the simply beautiful, ornamentation speaks to the masses*) with Coco's. That way the customers know what the story is straight away. He pushes his dark hair out of his face and peers through the tiny window of the kiln.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

“No,” says Charly. “Well. I don't know. I just feel funny.”

Maybe her nausea is a result of the smell of the coconut-based cheese, thinks Charly, it has a penetrating scent when it starts to melt. Fritz's B12-lasagne is richer than any Bolognese bomb.

“Maybe you're hungry,” says Fritz. He stands up, hangs his jeweler's apron on a hook next to the patio doors, and grabs the dustpan from a shelf. His t-shirt rides up as he squats down and sweeps up a few metal shavings, exposing his muscular back, but to Charly, Fritz is like a Ken doll: he smiles and has muscles, but when you take down his pants there's definitely nothing except flesh-colored plastic underpants.

[END OF SAMPLE]