KILLJOY
by Marie Menke

Sample translation by Eleanor Updegraff

Literary/Upmarket Fiction/Novel, 224 pages
Publication date: February 2026

FIRST CHAPTER

When Romy Left

Lotte was waiting outside her parents' house. I saw her as soon as I turned out of the farmyard on to the village street. I brought the car to a halt again and took a deep breath. The rear-view mirror was covered in a thin layer of dust underneath which I could see my cheeks burning. Still, at least I didn't need to get out and ring the bell.

Everything about Lotte was brightly coloured: her flower-patterned slacks with elasticated cuffs, her batik T-shirt, her jute bag, the hair tie on her wrist. We'd last run into each other at Christmas, had only nodded at one another across the church pews. Lotte opened the passenger door and I felt how the back of my T-shirt stuck to the fake leather seat with the amount I was suddenly sweating.

'Thanks for picking me up,' she said and buckled herself in. She placed her bag in her lap, clasped it there with both hands.

'Of course,' I said, my throat suddenly dry.

I didn't succeed in looking Lotte in the eyes.

I wanted to turn around, but my grandfather's old Fiat didn't have power steering. By the time we were finally facing the right direction on the road, I could feel droplets of sweat on my brow.

A single road ran through the farming community we'd grown up in. Individual tracks branched off it here and there, too narrow for two cars but wide enough for a tractor. There was a clubhouse for the shooting association, a playground and an army of ducks which right then were running along the edge of the road, as though they were on patrol.

The silence in the car was so thick it seemed sinister. I'd have liked to turn on the radio, but the Fiat didn't have one. I tried

to remind myself of the questions I'd prepared specially for Lotte at breakfast.

And then she burst into laughter so abrupt it sounded like barking.

'I didn't even wash my hands,' she said.

I sneaked a glance at her. Lotte was holding her fingers up to her face and studying the smudges of paint on the backs of her hands. I was driving so slowly now that the ducks on the verge were keeping pace.

'How much of your voluntary social year do you have left?' I asked.

'Two weeks.'

'Are you enjoying it?'

'It might be nice to have a day that doesn't feature shrieking kids again.'

I nodded, though I never heard shrieking kids.

The fact that Lotte was working in a kindergarten was something I'd heard from Mama, who'd heard it from Lotte's mother. Bianca had told her last summer over coffee in the bakery on the market square, and Mama had immediately messaged to tell me. In Süthland, the village grapevine was very much still intact, even four years after I'd moved away.

We drove past the sign at the entrance to our hamlet, and, not quite a hundred metres later, past the one denoting a dead end. We saw only the backs of both of them. A few years ago, someone had started collecting signatures for a petition – in vain. Our farming community might be a dead end but, all the same, the dead-end sign ought, please, to be placed after the village sign. Newly arriving visitors were confused otherwise.

I slowed down. A wide country road led away from us into the town centre of Aulbach. The distance seemed so great to me, it was as though light-years separated the houses in which our parents still lived from the market square in the little town where

we'd gone to school. Out in the hamlets, all year round, the shooting clubhouses were fuller, the number of residents fewer but the birthday parties more frequent. Out here was where we bus kids lived, the ones who hadn't even been able to go to primary school on foot; we farm kids, whose families had given up their farms decades ago.

In the rear-view mirror, the rows of houses grew smaller, then they vanished under the foot of the mountain in whose valley Aulbach lay. On either side of the road, the rapeseed bloomed luminous yellow.

'Where are you living now?' asked Lotte as we peeled off the B-road on to the roundabout at the entrance to the town. She had cupped both hands round her elbows, as though she was trying to hang on to her own arms for dear life.

'Still in Cologne,' I said.

Again, Lotte laughed as though she was trying to spit something out.

To me, she seemed like a bomb in the passenger seat, and I couldn't be sure how long her fuse was. At any moment, it might burn all the way down.

'I know,' said Lotte. Of course she knew; the village grapevine doubtless reached her even better than it did me. 'But where in Cologne? In your own place?'

'In a shared flat,' I said, then added, 'Two of us.'

'Do you get on well?'

'My flatmate's moving out next month.'

'What was the problem?'

'The cleaning rota,' I said simply.

Lotte nodded, as though she'd already known that, too.

We drove past the market square, then the driving school. Its logo had always been projected on to the wall at our end-of-year school parties; in return, the driving school had sponsored our school

leavers' ball. A new clothes shop had opened next to it now, *Gentlemen's Outfitters and Ladies' Fashion* – no need for fashionable men in Süthland. A signboard stood on the kerb outside the snack bar at the station – *half chicken, today just 5.99€*. Inside the snack bar, the chickens were still whole, rotating on two spits above the grill.

My grandparents lived next door to the church; we turned off just beyond their half-timbered house. They'd built it themselves at a time when the centre of Aulbach had still been affordable, long before my parents had taken over the old farm. The fact that my father came from one of the former farms had horrified my grandmother when my parents got engaged. Even now, she still found it laughable.

There were meadows now on either side of the road. Black-and-white cows grazed them, lone walkers dotted in between, their dogs on long leads.

'I didn't think Romy would say yes,' said Lotte. She drew her shoulders up to her ears and knotted her hands together.

We passed the town sign and straight away I put my foot down. Behind me, a Mercedes had already pulled out to overtake. It got back in line again.

'Did you think she would?' Lotte asked now.

I shook my head. I was gripping the steering wheel so hard my knuckles were turning white.

'I haven't seen her since you two did your A-levels,' said Lotte. She'd taken her phone out of her jute bag and seemed to be scrolling through a message thread. 'When was the last time you saw her?'

Suddenly, I thought I smelled smoke. I frantically rolled down the window and screwed up my nose. The Fiat's exhaust could easily have been defective. I expected to see greyish plumes billowing over the asphalt.

But the stench had already gone.

‘That summer, too,’ I said and rolled up the window again. ‘Before Romy went to Lapland.’

My cheeks flamed anew. The lie was one I hadn’t told for a long time; I was out of practice.

The fields of cows came to an end and we turned into the forest. Then the trees to our left cleared to reveal a view of the old quarry lake. It was early evening, the day warm but cloudy, the water a greenish hue.

Romy had suggested the lake. Two weeks ago she’d created a group chat on WhatsApp: her, Lotte and me. When the chat had first plopped up, I’d thought I was imagining things. Then I’d started going hot and cold by turns, for the whole rest of the day. How were we, Romy had asked, and Lotte had answered did we want to meet up sometime when we were back in Süthland. Lotte was there anyway; I was visiting my parents this weekend. I’d been sure, though, that Romy wouldn’t say yes. But then she’d messaged that she’d get a bus from Cologne and meet us at the quarry lake.

I parked at the edge of the forest and Lotte got out first. I was just locking the Fiat when our eyes finally met. Lotte’s eyes were brown and almond-shaped, her face slender, her cheekbones high. She furrowed her brow. There, under her skin, were the outlines of two round bulges, as though she’d grown horns and tried to lop them off. Ever since her accident, Lotte had had two screws holding her frontal bone in place. They seemed to be sticking out further now, as though they needed to give her more space to think.

How I’d have loved to know what she was thinking at that moment, what she saw when she looked me in the eye.

Then Lotte turned away.

‘Romy says she’s down by the water already,’ she said a moment later. ‘She’s shared her location with us.’

Lotte led me past the bay where families had spread out their towels on the gravel. The clouds overhead had lifted, the sun now shining stubbornly down on us. I followed Lotte along a trodden-down path in the woods bordering the shore. Her steps were so brisk she was almost marching. Behind her, I slowed. My T-shirt was still sticking damply to my back. I should have brought a change of clothes, like the children Lotte looked after. In the bag hanging from my shoulder, the car key clinked against the wine bottle.

I could just turn around, I thought.

Then I saw Romy. She was sitting cross-legged on a wooden jetty that stuck out into the water, her back very straight. The trees behind us threw her body into shade; only her head was sticking out. She'd tipped it right back, as though to bring her nose closer to the clouds. The brown curls she'd once had had been shaved off, and the few millimetres of hair left on her scalp looked bristly, like a hedgehog's spines. A black hiking rucksack lay next to her on the jetty, a picnic blanket strapped to it.

I stopped walking, my feet suddenly cemented to the path. When Romy noticed us, she turned round. Her shaved head made the contours of her face look sharper – her angular chin, her round eyes. Romy smiled. From the path, I couldn't tell whether the smile reached her eyes, whether they sparkled the way they used to do when I looked up at her: Romy sitting cross-legged on the bed in her old room, my head in her lap.

In my memory, the afternoons we'd spent that way seemed countless.

Romy stood up. A piercing sparkled in her belly button, a slender gold chain around her neck. The last time I'd seen her, there'd been soot on her cheeks. The thought of it made me cough. Only then did I notice I'd balled my hands into fists. Now, they loosened – like butter softening under Romy's gaze.

'Did you find it OK?' she asked.

'You did share your location,' said Lotte.

We'd have found Romy even without a phone. Lotte had once had a birthday party at the quarry lake; we'd camped here in Year Five. We'd swum among the algae and rotting leaves in the water; we knew the bay with the swimming spot, the trodden-down paths between the trees, the wideness of the lake above which the ceiling of clouds was now closing again.

Romy had only joined in later. Her family had moved to Süthland in the summer before Year Ten. Coming from Munich, Romy had brought with her an otherness which clung on even after the move. In summer, she'd worn flowery dresses and bamboo flip-flops, in winter, jeans and fleece jackets; no down, no fur collars, but walking boots. In Year Ten, I'd saved screenshots of models in outfits I liked to a Pinterest board. Even back then, I'd had no idea what Romy had in mind when she shopped for clothes.

Lotte helped Romy to spread out her picnic blanket. Then we unpacked. Romy had brought hummus in a jar and three metal tumblers; Lotte fruit gums and a bar of chocolate; me a baguette, white wine and two little pots of my mother's home-made blackcurrant jam.

We sat down: Romy, Lotte and me next to them. It felt as though something was bubbling between me and Romy. I kept stealing furtive glances at her. Romy opened the jar of hummus; the clear polish on her fingernails gleamed. Her fingers were long and thin. She lined up the three metal tumblers next to one another. When she peered at me out of the corner of her eye, I hurriedly looked at the lake. Between me and Romy, Lotte seemed like a lightning conductor.

Finally, I opened the wine and poured us all a drink. We didn't toast. Romy sipped hers at once, and the little butterfly that hung on the gold chain in the hollow between her collarbones leaped up and down with every swallow. Romy was tanned brown;

the lines of bikini straps were visible on the skin at her throat and round her neck. Under my fingers, Romy's skin used to feel burning hot.

Sitting cross-legged on the wooden jetty, I waited for an explanation as to why Romy had messaged us again so suddenly, why exactly now. The silence had become so thick again I couldn't bear it.

'Were you still at uni this morning?' I asked Romy.

And then she started to talk. Romy's sentences followed one another rapidly: the style of subsumption in their assessments, the state exams for which she met up with friends every day to revise, her shared flat, group hikes to the Eifel mountains at weekends, the interrail trip she was planning to take when her exams were over. Romy unpacked her big-city life in front of us like something she'd brought carefully with her, wrapped up in newspaper, in order to present it to us. Her enthusiasm looped itself around my neck like a too-tight drawstring. When I found myself gasping for air, I pretended the wine had gone down wrong.

Then I was thinking of Lapland again. I'd never found out what Romy's trip that summer after A-levels had really been like. I'd only seen photos of it on Instagram. Now Romy was telling us about the flat she'd looked round with her new boyfriend, not far from Chlodwigplatz, a coffee roastery downstairs.

Later, Lotte talked, too. With her, I had to ask more questions, help out more. Since leaving school, Lotte had started and then dropped out of two traineeships: first as an industrial management assistant, then as a dental nurse. The voluntary social year she was doing at the kindergarten was the first thing she was actually going to complete – only two weeks left.

'Couldn't you resit your A-levels instead?' asked Romy.

Lotte shook her head. ‘I think I want to do something practical.’

‘Law’s actually pretty practical, too,’ said Romy.

Then it went quiet again.

We ripped off chunks of the baguette and dunked them in the hummus and blackcurrant jam. Then the fruit gums stuck to our fingers – blue Smurfs and sour worms. The chocolate had melted; Romy spread it on a piece of baguette with her fingers. In her tumblers, the white wine tasted of metal.

At some point, the sun began to close in on the lake and engine sounds drifted over to us from the swimming bay; the families were heading off.

‘And you, Sophie?’ Romy asked then.

It was as though I’d been electrified. When I looked up from my metal tumbler, Romy’s eyes were forceful. I felt myself growing smaller under her gaze, looked back down at my fingers and started to push at the skin of my cuticles.

I could have talked about the books I’d read in the holidays and which we were discussing in seminars now, about going to the Maison d’Izieu that spring, about getting to know Milan through playing university sport in the winter semester, about the two-person shared flat for which I’d been all too glad to leave the student halls I’d been in before – despite the lack of a cleaning rota. But I didn’t want to show off in front of Lotte about the little bit of a life I’d managed to build for myself, didn’t want to admit in front of Romy how hard the last four years had been. The lower the sun sank, the less I wanted to think at all about the time that had passed since we’d seen one another last.

‘I’m going to be doing a practical semester in the autumn,’ I said. ‘I was allowed to pick five schools I’d be happy to be sent to. One of them’s near Chlodwigplatz, too.’

Romy sighed. ‘Do you really want to go back to school?’ she asked. Her gaze seemed like a net she was throwing out to trap me.

‘That is why I’m training to be a teacher,’ I said.

‘But with your subjects you could do something else instead.’

I downed the rest of my wine, then stuffed a handful of sour worms into my mouth. Of course I knew that some people studied German and History without training to be teachers; we attended the same lectures, after all. Nonetheless, I’d made a different choice.

‘Journalism, for example,’ added Romy. She’d found a stone on the jetty, small and flat. She weighed it in her hand and said, ‘I imagine that’s pretty cool, getting up close with world history.’

Romy reached back a bit before she threw the stone into the lake. It skipped the surface twice, then sank.

‘Don’t you two ever run into one another?’ asked Lotte. There were remnants of blackcurrant jam at the corners of her mouth.

Romy and I gave a synchronised shake of the head.

‘Although Cologne is actually a village,’ said Romy.

I didn’t have the strength to contradict her.

My gaze remained caught on Lotte; her face was expressionless. Had she imagined it would be like this – the reunion she’d contrived?

As it set, the sun drew a reddish line between the lake and the sky. Silence had fallen between us again, like an awning fixed at three corners which we’d managed to stretch too tight.

At some point, Romy reached for the last scrap of baguette and dunked it in the melted chocolate.

‘We should go swimming,’ she suggested.

‘It’ll be dark soon,’ I said at once.

Lotte pulled a face, too. ‘I’ve drunk too much.’

'And where are we supposed to get changed?' I asked.

But Romy had already stood up and pulled her T-shirt over her head. She stood there naked from the waist up, let her T-shirt fall carelessly to the jetty. Next, she climbed out of her jeans.

'The water's too cold for me,' Lotte added.

Romy shrugged her shoulders. She was wearing black-and-white-striped knickers – the cotton kind that even at school I'd only worn to sleep in and on days when we didn't have sport.

Then she walked round to where the water met the gravel, and further out still. From the jetty, I watched her take her first stroke, the way she stretched out her arms in the water and then opened them. The muscles showed in her upper arms. I looked down at myself – my shorts, my trainers. I could have taken them off and followed Romy. I imagined what it would be like, our bodies weightless in the water, the warmth of Romy's back against my stomach, my arms wrapped around her hips from behind, like before.

But as Romy moved away from us, her outline in the lake became nebulous. I'd have liked nothing more than to reach out to her and pull her back to shore. Romy was fearless; I'd always known that. But in the twilight I didn't dare go into the water – and in any case, I didn't want to leave Lotte on her own.

I glanced sideways at her. The sugar from the sour worms still clung to her lips. Suddenly, I remembered all the many questions I'd lined up for her that morning. But without Romy there, I didn't dare ask them.

And then I lost sight of Romy.

'Can you still see her?' I asked.

Lotte pointed mutely at a dot in the lake.

I screwed up my eyes. 'That's a buoy,' I said nervously. 'It's not moving.'

I imagined running back to the road in a panic, a bus driver placing an emergency call, vehicles with sirens coming down the

forest track to the swimming bay. I would explain what had happened to the two policewomen who'd have arrived with their blue lights flashing. They'd call for a diver to search the lake, then for a helicopter to look among the trees on the shore. Sniffer dogs would fight their way through the forest. They'd all come, just to search for Romy.

'How long do we wait before we get help?' I asked.

Lotte took off her trainers and socks. Carefully, she stuck her toes into the water. She shrank back from the cold.

'Romy doesn't need help,' said Lotte.

I'd have liked then to shove her into the lake. I could see it already: Lotte, arms flailing, before she sank beneath the surface.

'If anything happens to Romy,' I said, 'it's our fault.'

'She's the one who went swimming,' said Lotte. 'Not us.'

'But I'm worried!'

Lotte stood up. Only her trainers remained beside me on the jetty. Black sneakers, they looked as though they'd been made for a child's feet. They were the only thing about Lotte that wasn't brightly coloured, I realised.

'And that's exactly what Romy wants,' she said.

I turned to look at Lotte. She scooped the rest of the melted chocolate off the silver foil with a forefinger. Then she balled up the packaging and put it into her bag.

'Are you just going to leave?' I asked, appalled.

'I'm not going to wait around here,' said Lotte.

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and I remembered the tight rust-red bun she'd always worn, the many hairgrips clustered round the temples of a seventeen-year-old Lotte. Back then, I'd never have been able to imagine her with either flower-patterned slacks or screws behind her forehead.

'But you don't have a car,' I said.

'There might not be any trams here, but there are still buses,' replied Lotte.

Then she slung her jute bag over her shoulder and clambered up to the road.

Had she also looked at me and imagined facing my earlier self – seventeen-year-old Sophie with brown horn-rimmed glasses on her nose and pimple marks at her temples?

I stayed sitting on the wooden jetty, no sign of Romy in the lake before me. The buoy didn't move, either. It was as motionless as the cliffs which rose up out of the water a few metres away from it – artificially created so the kids could dive from them.

But what if something really had happened to Romy? My last memory of her couldn't be this afternoon at the quarry lake, her stories about revising with friends for their state exams, about the empty flat above the coffee roastery and the boyfriend whose name I didn't even know, her thin fingers from which she'd licked the melted chocolate, her shaved head and the butterfly between her collarbones.

I scrambled to my feet. I left the wine and the food behind on the jetty, but I took my bag with me. I crawled up the embankment to the road on all fours, stinging nettles burning the skin at my ankles. When I made it to the top, I couldn't see Lotte anywhere.

Then a silver VW bus came round the bend. I leaped into the road. The vehicle came to an abrupt halt. There was a young woman at the wheel. She looked too small in the driver's seat, like a teenager who'd run away. There were two kids in car seats in the back.

The woman rolled down the window; her face was pale. 'What on earth do you think—'

'I need help; my friend's in the la—'

'And when did you last see your friend?' The woman was gripping the steering wheel tightly.

'Half an hour ago, perhaps.'

'And where did she swim out to?'

I pointed to the water, and then Romy emerged.

When she pulled herself back on to land, she'd made it across to the opposite shore. Romy crawled into the reeds. She placed her hands on the stones, then pushed her torso up out of the water in one motion, followed by her legs. Romy was as elegant as a mermaid and I was too far away to be able to see whether she was shivering with cold and exhaustion, too far to be able to see whether the muscles were again visible in her upper arms. From a distance, they looked as thin as matchsticks.

'And how's she meant to get back now?' I cried.

The younger of the two children in the VW started to cry loudly.

'There's a footpath, you know,' said the woman at the wheel.

'But she isn't wearing anything!'

Romy was already walking. Barefoot, she was hurrying along the path on the shore.

'I-I think the problem's solved,' I stuttered.

The woman in the van turned to the back seat and stroked the legs of the crying child. Then she wound the window back up again.

Romy vanished into the woods any time they were closer to the lake than the path. She'd disappear from view and I'd hold my breath. But then she'd re-emerge from the forest, sticking close to the water, and when the woods ended she walked along the road, past the cars and campervans driving towards her. Romy was wearing nothing but her knickers; she'd folded her arms across her chest. Romy's bare feet on the asphalt, Romy's bare feet on the grass, Romy's bare feet kept on walking.

By the time she came out of the undergrowth, I was sitting on the jetty again, frozen like a *Sims* character who's only allowed to move when someone's there to play with it. It was dark by now, mosquitoes whining overhead. The lonesome buoy seemed to be

rocking, ghost-like, on the surface of the water, and the treetops kept blurring together into a parapet encircling the lake.

Romy laughed, shrilly and freely, a laugh that climbed the octaves and brought its own echo with it. She still had her arms crossed over her chest, lake water dripping from her hair.

'Didn't think I could make it,' she said when she saw me. Then she pulled a towel out of her rucksack. 'Where's Lotte?'

I pulled my knees up to my chest. 'She had to go,' I lied.

Romy paused. 'She's still angry with me,' she said, then wrapped herself in the towel. 'I wasn't in touch with her for years.'

You weren't in touch with me either, I thought silently.

Romy sat down next to me on the jetty. 'I can't bear to see Lotte like that,' she said.

She plunged her legs back into the water. Her shins were unshaved, the polish on her toenails red. Romy gazed out at the lake, which hadn't looked any different when she'd been in the water: the lonesome buoy, the trees on the shore. The tingling in my belly seemed to be growing by the second.

'So, it's just the two of us again,' said Romy eventually.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Romy tilted her head to one side; it slipped down to my shoulder. Lake water dripped from the stubble on her head to my T-shirt. She placed a hand on my thigh; her palm felt slippery against my skin.

'I was on my way to get help,' I said, my throat tight.

'Help for who?' asked Romy.

'For you. I thought I'd never see you again.'

Romy jerked away from me as though from someone with an infectious disease – scabies or impetigo. I immediately regretted my words.

'I was just swimming,' she said.

'You left us on our own,' I countered.

For a moment, it was silent except for the thrum of mosquitoes above the lake. Then Romy reached for her rucksack and pulled it towards her.

'I have something for you,' she said and undid the buckle.

Close your eyes, I heard a just-turned-eighteen Romy saying in my head. I wanted to obey, but she was already putting a blue Tupperware box in my lap.

'Wrong colour,' was the only thing I said.

The box was full to bursting with the cashews that we'd always eaten first out of packets of mixed nuts. I reached in. Romy stuck out her tongue, placed a nut on it and squinted down at it. I blinked and saw Romy before me, only just turned eighteen, on the stained carpet in her old bedroom; Romy, four years later, on the wooden jetty at the quarry lake; Romy who tipped her head back till the cashew nut rolled down her tongue. I blinked and saw Romy. The corners of her mouth twitched suspiciously, then she chuckled.

Her laughter was infectious. I reached into the box again.

'Can you catch?' I asked.

'Can you throw?' Romy countered.

She was kneeling on the jetty now. I threw a cashew; it was a particularly long one. Romy craned her neck, missed it only narrowly. In the water, the nut sank at once. We clutched our sides laughing. Even though Romy threw herself on to the jetty, she didn't manage to catch the next nut either.

Then I lost my balance.

I grabbed Romy's shins; I'd nearly ended up in the lake. My laughter died away. Still swaying, I sat up until I was bolt upright with my legs crossed, the way Lotte and I had found Romy on the jetty earlier.

The tears in my eyes made her face look soft at the edges.

'Why did you really message us?' I asked.

A shadow fell across Romy's face, dull, like the soot particles on her cheeks back then.

'I wanted to know if Lotte was all right,' she said.

My mouth was dry now. 'Her accident was a long time ago,' I managed.

'Did you see the screws in her head?'

I flinched; of course I'd seen them.

My hand went limp; a cashew nut rolled on to the jetty and from there into the water. I felt suddenly heavy, as though the lake might pull me into its depths at any moment.

'Why am *I* here, then?' I asked.

Romy pressed her lips into a narrow line. 'You ought to ask yourself how Lotte is, too,' she said and looked out at the lake again.

She ran her hands along her arms and then her shins, as though the lake water had left something on her skin that she needed to wipe off. I wished it could be that simple.

Romy stood up. She let her towel fall to the ground. One corner of it landed in the lake where the water saturated it. Romy was naked; instinctively, I looked away. Then I heard her scrabbling through her rucksack. She pulled her denim shorts back on, then her grey top, put the lid back on the Tupperware box and packed it away. She tipped out the contents of the metal tumblers, white wine dripping into the water. Then Romy grabbed the towel and stuffed it into her rucksack along with the tumblers, algae and leaves from the lake still clinging to its hem. She swung the rucksack on to her back, then looked down at me.

'There are people living in the house again,' she said.

My head shot up; Romy's face looked bleached in the twilight.

'I went over,' she said, 'and a removals van was there. They found something, in the cellar.'

'No idea, but they called the police.'

In a panic, I looked around me: the buoy on the water, the forest. I almost believed the trees on the shoreline were shadowing us. Their trunks must have been bugged, and the jetty, too, ready to record a confession. I was trembling all over.

'Did they find something of ours?' I whispered.

'I don't know,' Romy said simply.

Then she left me on my own.

Still trembling, I stayed sitting where Romy's towel had been earlier, rotting leaves and mouldering algae sticking to its hem, all the unspoken things that swirled between me and Romy.

That night I dreamed of Romy swimming lap after lap of the quarry lake in the twilight. I woke up bathed in sweat. I tried using Maps on my phone to find the house where, apparently, people were living again. Again and again I zoomed in, comparing rows of houses and pavements in the centre of Cologne. They all looked the same; I lost my way among them.

Then I scrolled through my photos, hunting for Romy now. But my pictures didn't go back as far as school. I opened Instagram. There, Romy appeared still to be in Lapland. She hadn't posted anything since her trip the summer after A-levels. I clicked on the first photo – Romy with a husky in the woods – and the next – Romy's hands speckled with whitish blisters – and the next – Romy taking a sapling out of a terracotta pot. The caption said the delicate little plant would grow into a pine tree.

In the morning, my phone was still lying next to me on my pillow. I had a new message from Lotte, asking if she could come and see the free room in my flat.

There was no way I could bear her being in my flat, not even for a day. In the Fiat, among fields of cows, I hadn't even been able to look her in the eye.

But in my head I heard Romy's steely voice: *You ought to ask yourself how Lotte is, too.*

Against her, I was powerless.

SECOND CHAPTER

Four years earlier

I climbed through my open bedroom window into the lavender in the garden. The yard smelled of slurry and of damp grass. Only when I'd reached the barn door did I switch on the torch on my phone. I undid the padlock, then squeezed my way inside.

All that remained of my great-grandfather's farm were two goats, which my parents kept as lawnmowers. Where once cows had stood, there were now piles of hay bales. Between them stood my grandfather's old Fiat, my bike leaned up against its passenger door. The paint was cracked, the tyres deep-treaded.

When I pushed down on the pedals, the dynamo started to hum. I could only sense Lotte's parents' house further down the street; the darkness had swallowed it. I veered off. The sign at the entrance to the hamlet was missing. It had probably been taken away by drunks, propped up in someone's bedroom as a trophy. I passed the dead-end sign, then an old apple tree whose branches had grown a little lopsided, as though they'd been bracing themselves against the wind. On the bike path running alongside the B-road, I passed no one but a woman riding a Haflinger horse. She had a torch on her helmet; its light blinded me. She trotted slower when she saw me.

Romy's family lived in the centre of Aulbach; Romy was able to walk to school. I'd never been to her house before. I rode past the church in which Lotte and I had been christened nearly eighteen years ago, then across the cobbles of the market square.

When I rang the bell at Romy's house, it was her brother who opened the door. Johannes looked at me in astonishment. I looked down at myself. The red-checked fabric of my pyjamas was

sticking out under my down jacket. I'd already been in bed when I'd got Lotte's message.

'I wanted to see Romy,' I said quickly.

I knew from other people at school that Johannes was the reason Romy's parents hadn't come to Süthland earlier. They'd been wanting to move to the country for years – whatever it was that drew them here. They'd stayed a long time in Munich, however, for Johannes's football career. On his first day at our school he'd been on crutches: cruciate ligament rupture. But this evening he was wearing a football strip again: FC Bayern Munich.

'Romy's in the attic,' said Johannes and pointed to the stairs that led from the hallway to the upper floors.

The walls of the staircase were hung with pictures from Romy's childhood: Romy bakes a cake, Romy goes to a wedding, Romy goes canoeing. In one picture, a grinning Johannes was hugging a kindergarten-aged Romy; his incisors were missing. I'd have liked to stop and photograph the pictures, so as to look at them later in peace.

There were no photos on the walls in my parents' house, just one on the fridge. Lotte and I hung there as four-year-old versions of ourselves, facepaint on our cheeks – two leopards at the Carnival parade in our hamlet. The plaits on Lotte's head had been coiled up like doughnuts.

The door to one of the attic rooms stood open, piano music drifting into the hall. I followed it. Beyond the open door, Romy was sitting on a dark-red carpet, her back against the wall, legs crossed. Next to her was a plate holding roughly chopped pieces of pineapple and toothpicks; a book was open in her lap. Between her fingers, Romy held a cigarette; the skylight was ajar.

Her room was a gloomy place. The furniture was made of dark-varnished wood: a chest of drawers piled with books, a desk, a bed made up with black sheets, a bedside table on which stood

a speaker from which the piano music was coming. A photo had been stuck up on the woodchip wallpaper beside the skylight – no frame, as on the staircase, just a strip of Sellotape.

In it, Romy had her head on Lotte's shoulder; both of them were smiling at the camera. Lotte's cheeks shone with grease, the acne at her temples looked like miniature volcanoes and the bun into which she'd forced her rust-red curls was tight. The grips that held it in place were the same colour as Romy's hair: chocolate brown. She and Romy were so close that Romy's hair fell over Lotte's shoulder, too. In the sea of light behind them I recognised the wooden beams in the ceiling of the clubhouse.

Romy looked up from the book in her lap. She followed my gaze with her own.

'I don't actually like those end-of-year class parties. I don't really fit in at them,' she said. She took a drag on the cigarette between her fingers. 'Do you want one, too?'

I shook my head.

Romy twizzled the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger. I looked from its glowing end back to the photo on the wall. Romy didn't look at all as though she didn't enjoy class parties. Fitting in wasn't a state of being for her, I suspected, but a skill. Romy had a lot of those. And so she'd fit in, if need be, even at the clubhouse.

'You can sit down.' Romy pointed at the carpet, as though she'd deliberately served enough pineapple for two, then at the skylight. 'I saw you coming.'

Still in the doorway, I opened my mouth – after all, I had something important to say. But the words in my head collapsed in on themselves. Suddenly, I didn't want to tell Romy about Lotte's message at all. It would have felt as though Lotte was there, too.

And so I sat down, also cross-legged. The carpet was a bit stained. On the floor, I imagined I could feel Romy's warmth, as though her body was touching mine.

Romy shut her book. 'Heinrich Böll,' she said, then added: 'Pineapple?'

She picked up the plate from the carpet and held it out to me, as though I was a real guest and hadn't just turned up on my bike at her front door on any old evening. I reached for a toothpick, speared a piece of pineapple and shoved it into my mouth.

Lotte hated pineapple, it occurred to me, so much so that her mother had thought for a long time it might be an allergy. But if Romy and I spent more time together, we'd always be able to eat pineapple, now that Lotte was gone.

I'd last seen Lotte at school, two days ago. *Freedom*, our philosophy teacher had chalked up on the board, white on green, a question mark beside it. Romy had been sitting in the front row next to Lotte; she put her hand up at once. I didn't listen to her. Instead, I watched how Lotte was playing with the hair tie on her wrist. She snapped it against her forearm again and again, like a whip.

'No one is ever truly free,' said Romy.

At that, Lotte stood up and left the room.

I was sitting right by the door. I looked from the board to Romy, then followed Lotte out. I ran down the corridor, called her name in the stairwell – nothing.

Just as I was turning to go back, Romy came out of our philosophy classroom. She turned in the opposite direction; I followed her at a slight distance. When Romy went into the toilets and vanished, I hung back beside the sinks. I heard her hastily press down on a handle and open one of the cubicle doors. Carefully, I peered round the corner.

Lotte was sitting on a closed toilet lid, her arms wrapped round her knees, her head hanging down to her chest. She was swaying like a statue threatening to fall off its plinth in an earthquake. Lotte gasped for breath. And then tears were rolling down her cheeks, coal-black with mascara and eyeliner.

Romy swung one leg across the toilet seat, sat down on the lid behind Lotte. When she wrapped her arms around Lotte, her movements seemed so practised that I wondered whether Lotte had experienced this often: this difficulty breathing. She sat between Romy's legs as though penned in.

'Only two months to go,' said Romy, just loud enough that I could hear.

I knew immediately what she meant. In two months we'd be sitting our A-levels.

'Why are you here?' Romy asked now.

I forced myself to swallow, the acid sweetness of the pineapple burning my throat.

'Because Lotte sent a message saying she's going to a clinic and I should let you know,' I said.

I was a bit worried that Romy had already seen it coming. Romy usually got things very quickly; at least, she did at school. And besides, she and Lotte had spent a lot of time together in recent years.

But Romy asked, 'What kind of clinic?'

She was quite still now, no longer rolling the cigarette between her fingers.

'She just said clinic.'

'Said?'

'Wrote. On WhatsApp.'

'Fuck, my phone is off.'

Romy groaned with frustration. Would Lotte even have sent me a message if she'd been able to get in touch with Romy?

'I think,' said Romy, 'if I turn it on, it'll know where I am.'

'Mine does that, too,' I said.

It was more important that I knew where Lotte was.

'And she didn't say anything else?' asked Romy.

I pulled my phone out of my trouser pocket. There was only one other message in my chat with Lotte, almost a year old. Lotte had asked if she could bring my mother the key to the clubhouse later on. I'd said yes, but Lotte hadn't rung the bell; she'd just dropped the key into the letterbox instead.

Once, Lotte and I used to celebrate Carnival, the annual shooting club festival and everything else together. But since starting sixth form, we hadn't met up just the two of us. At school, too, we no longer sat next to each other. Instead, Romy and Lotte sat together in the front row of all the classes we shared, while I sat further back.

'Do you think she'll still get her A-levels?' asked Romy when she'd read Lotte's message.

'Maybe she doesn't care.'

Romy looked up as though I'd said something stupid. 'But Lotte wants to study psychology,' she said. 'You need straight As for that.'

I swallowed. I hadn't known that. I'd have believed Romy capable of moving away after school. I'd have believed her capable of anything. But Lotte had grown up in Süthland, like me. I'd assumed she would stay in the area.

'If she doesn't manage it,' said Romy darkly, 'then she's stuck here.'

Would that be so bad, I wanted to ask. Just in time, I bit my tongue.

Romy's cigarette had gone out. She fished around for a lighter that was lying on the chest of drawers, lit it again and pushed the skylight further open.

‘What would you do if you couldn’t go straight to uni?’ I asked.

It was a rhetorical question; I was aware of that. Romy’s marks would be good enough for any degree out there; I had no doubt about that, and nor, in all likelihood, did our teachers.

But Romy said, ‘I’d go travelling,’ as though she’d long since made plans. ‘Canada or Peru or something.’

She was fearless, I thought then.

After our last school holidays, Romy had told us how she and her parents had travelled round the USA in a campervan. I’d been to the North Sea for a week; we’d hired a holiday cottage and a canopied beach chair.

Romy pulled the plate closer, tapped ash off her cigarette next to the pineapple. ‘Get out of here, at any rate. Nothing ever happens in Süthland.’

‘And that’s a good thing,’ I said. ‘At least nothing can happen to you here.’

‘But I want to experience things,’ said Romy. ‘Change things.’

She stood, and I looked up at her. Still holding her cigarette, Romy went over to her bedside table. She opened the top drawer and took out an old phone – a brick with buttons, like my mother used to have. Romy threw the phone on to her pillow.

Then she swivelled the desk chair on which her school rucksack was lying and took out a little red Tupperware box. She sat down again, opened the box and offered it to me. There were nuts inside.

‘Pudding,’ said Romy. ‘Mama thinks she has to get them for me since I went vegetarian, because of the nutrients.’

I took a hazelnut. It let out a crack when I bit it in half with my molars.

Romy reached into the box, too. She stuck out her tongue and tried to balance a cashew nut on its tip. It looked comical, the

way she was squinting, a stunt. I'd already raised my hands in front of my torso, on the point of clapping. If we were Romy's audience, the whole of Süthland was her circus ring. Then she let the cashew roll down into her mouth.

'From the very beginning,' she said, chewing, 'I had the feeling Lotte and I were on the same wavelength.'

The hazelnut in my mouth tasted strangely bitter. I imagined how Romy had arrived in Aulbach three years ago and studied us in the schoolyard with a scrutinising gaze, one after the other, assessing our wavelengths. A few months later we'd started sixth form; Romy and Lotte had already been close friends by then.

'I don't even know what that's supposed to mean – wavelength,' I said, frowning.

'Imagine everyone's surfing a wave, and if two people are on the same one, then they're on the same wavelength and get on well together.'

'I thought it had something to do with radiowaves,' I said, taking an almond from the Tupperware. 'Your wave must be a lot longer than mine.'

'Rubbish. I'm always so jittery – mine's got to be short and tatty.'

'I thought your wave would be longer; you've got more perseverance.'

Romy ran a hand distractedly through her hair; the smoke from her cigarette caught in it.

'It doesn't matter, anyway,' she said.

But to me, it did matter. I'd have liked to be on the same wavelength as her.

'How do you think Lotte got it?' asked Romy.

Something tightened in the pit of my stomach.

'Got what?'

I pulled up my knees, wrapped my arms round my legs. I didn't want to think the wrong thing, certainly didn't want to say the wrong thing.

'I don't know, do I?' said Romy.

'Then don't ask questions like that.'

I reached for Romy's wrist. It was slender; my thumb touched my middle finger. Romy looked at me in surprise, motionless again. I pulled her hand towards me, her skin burning hot between my fingers. When I took a drag on Romy's cigarette, it tasted earthy, as though I was breathing in the humus we spread on the garden and the fields.

I watched as the smoke left my mouth and rose through the window into the night sky, as though I were sending out a sign of life to the whole of Süthland, like Morse code. Perhaps Lotte herself would see the smoke, wherever she might be sleeping tonight.

What would she think of it – that I was at Romy's? At the thought that Lotte might find out about it, I felt the need to cough.

*

On Monday, I saw Romy leaving the concrete block that was our school via the front doors just after sixth period. I followed her out. A few people from our year were standing outside smoking. It was forbidden on school property; they were standing in the street beyond the teachers' car park. Romy wasn't among them.

I found her on the wall bordering the school garden, a little way from the smokers. From a distance, I couldn't tell who had ousted whom. Romy was holding an open book in her lap again. I stopped on a level with the teachers' car park and watched her. Romy licked her forefinger before she turned the page. She looked as though she didn't even go to our school, as though she'd just happened to stop there by the garden.

I went to her.

'Can I sit down?' I asked.

I thought I saw Romy hesitate. Then she nodded and put her book aside in the cress the Year Eights had planted. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, read the cover. Romy pulled the red Tupperware out of her rucksack again, took an almond and offered me the box. I reached in, cracked a cashew nut in two using my front teeth, let both halves drop into my mouth.

I pointed at the book in Romy's lap. Her bookmark was a scrap of checked paper on which she'd scribbled lines of numbers.

'Are you reading that for German?' I asked.

'I'm reading it for uni,' said Romy.

'You aren't even at uni yet.'

'Meaning I can do some reading already.'

'And what have you been working out there?'

Romy pushed the paper deeper into the pages. 'My A-level results,' she said. 'Predicted ones.'

'You don't even know your results yet.'

'I can estimate them.'

To estimate my A-level results, I didn't need any rows of numbers. I knew my average mark from the last school report I'd received: two point three. Confused, I reached into the Tupperware of nuts and put an almond in my mouth.

'We're reading *Andorra* in German,' I said then.

Romy closed the book and put it away in her rucksack. 'Don't know it.'

There was no god and no justice, our German teacher had said that morning. It had made me laugh. When I told Romy about it, she didn't even smirk.

'What does he mean by that?' she asked.

I hadn't thought about that yet. But when I did, I too started to doubt the existence of anything like justice. After all, I was at school and Lotte was at a clinic, so I simply shrugged my shoulders.

The first school bus turned in from the crossroads. The younger kids stormed out of the concrete block behind us, too many for so few buses. Aulbach had 17,000 inhabitants. That was just enough for a grammar school – at least for a concrete block on the edge of the woods, where the Aulbach river trickled down from the mountain into the valley and then wrapped itself round the town. And it was only 17,000 inhabitants if you counted the eleven hamlets around the town itself, too. Elsewhere, they might have been called villages – and the people who were ashamed of being descended from farmers did that in Süthland as well.

The teachers' Volkswagens were parked next to the fire escape, two tractors alongside them. You could get a licence to drive one at a very young age; at least, you could if your parents were farmers. The school buses didn't serve all the hamlets. Out there, in some of them, cars yielded to tractors instead of left yielding to right. Pedestrians were at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

'Do you miss her?' I asked as the bus came to a halt.

'Who?'

'Lotte, of course.'

Romy pulled a jam jar and a set square out of her rucksack. She tipped a handful of nuts into the yoghurt in the jar and started spooning it up with the set square.

'Yes,' she said then, gruffly.

'Do you feel lonely?' I asked.

Romy paused, then looked at me. Her gaze was so piercing I almost thought it could give me an electric shock.

'I don't want to get distracted,' said Romy, 'so close to exams.'

And yet Lotte deserved to be missed, I thought silently.

To Romy, I simply said: 'I still don't know what I'm supposed to say when people ask about Lotte.'

'Well, it's good if they haven't noticed,' said Romy. 'No idea what I'm supposed to say, either.'

'But it's strange to know you can just disappear and no one will notice.'

'The teachers would ring your parents.'

'But what if the teachers already knew?'

'Then no one would notice.' Romy paused again, yoghurt dripping from her set square into the jar. 'And here, you go round thinking you have friends and stuff.'

'We ought to get ourselves some more friends.'

'You can't like everyone.'

'I don't like strangers anyway.'

Romy licked the set square carefully clean and put it back in her rucksack among her exercise books. I took a cashew out of the Tupperware.

'Do you need straight As for psychology everywhere?' I asked.

Romy shrugged. 'You'll have to ask Lotte.'

I chewed thoughtfully. 'Maybe she felt under pressure.'

Romy said nothing.

'I doubt myself sometimes, too,' I added.

'Because of your marks?'

I nodded.

'Then say something in class sometimes,' suggested Romy. She nudged my side. 'You're clever, you know.'

I felt myself turning red.

'You think about Lotte an awful lot, don't you?' Romy asked then.

I nodded again. Of course I thought about Lotte a lot; she was gone, wasn't she.

'Why?' asked Romy.

Her voice was suddenly cold. When I turned to look at her, she was staring back with a penetrating gaze.

‘You hardly had anything to do with one another.’

I withstood Romy’s gaze. After a while, I had to blink, but I didn’t look away. It seemed to me like a game. If nobody looked away, it would end in a draw.

‘Lotte and I used to be really close,’ I said. ‘We come from the same place, don’t we.’

Romy closed the Tupperware of nuts. I’d already reached out my hand towards it again; now, I ran my fingers through my hair.

In silence, we watched the chemistry teacher through the window; he was still arranging test tubes.

Then Romy said, ‘Maybe it would be better if I fell flat on my face here, too.’

‘Better for what?’

‘So I could learn from it.’

‘Rubbish. It’s great that you’re so good. I’d rather I actually liked going to school, too.’

I sensed Romy’s gaze on my cheek, warm; it felt like going on to the balcony for the first time in spring and tilting my face towards the sun.

‘Do you not like it?’

‘No,’ I said brusquely.

Romy laid her head on my shoulder. I froze as my body registered her closeness, little by little, limb by limb. Then I inclined my head, too, my nose among her curls.

‘I thought, so’ said Romy. ‘You probably just conform less than I do.’

Her hair smelled of vanilla shampoo. I was warm with a sense of safety, a feeling I’d have liked to capture in Romy’s empty jam jar. I wanted to preserve it, something to snack on on the bad days.

And so we sat there until we heard the gong in the concrete block behind us, and even then we stayed sitting for a while. Eventually, Romy said: 'I need to go home now.'

The vanilla disappeared from my nose.

'But we still have History,' I said.

'I'm skiving.' Romy zipped up her fleece jacket. 'I revise better at home.'

She'd stood up; I remained sitting.

'Why are they so important to you – A-levels?' I asked.

'Because I don't want to do any old degree at any old university, and certainly not in any old city,' said Romy, her hands on her hips.

Again, I didn't fully understand what she meant. It didn't matter which school you did your A-levels at, after all, as long as you got a school-leaving certificate at the end of it.

'And what is it you want to study?'

Romy was silent. Then she shouldered her rucksack.

'Have you already got plans this weekend?' she asked.

I shook my head.

'Mama and I are going to Münster on Saturday, to a gallery,' said Romy. 'Do you want to come?'

Hastily, I nodded.

*

Papa sat beside me as I drove his car to Romy's house on Saturday. On the B-road, he held tight to the handle beneath the window in the passenger door.

That morning, my aunt had phoned. The second trainee at the nut factory where my cousin was doing her apprenticeship had just quit – would I not like to start there in the autumn.

'What kind of apprenticeship is it?' I asked.

'Something to do with the office,' answered my aunt.

‘I haven’t even finished my A-levels yet,’ I said, more to Mama, who had put the phone on speaker and placed it on the kitchen table.

‘You can manage a couple of tests,’ she said.

‘They’re not just tests.’

Mama sent me a warning glance. I sipped my breakfast coffee and scalded my tongue.

‘Sophie might want to go to Bocholt to un—’ began Mama.

‘I’m thinking about it,’ I interrupted.

Bocholt was the closest university to Aulbach, just over an hour away by train. On the website there was a list of degree courses, a whole load of names that had nothing to do with my school subjects. If I wanted to commute from my parents’ house to Bocholt, I’d need a car. But I’d be able to walk to the nut factory. It stood right next to the new-build estate where my cousin and her boyfriend had bought a plot just last winter.

Would I ever build a house, too? Everyone I knew lived in either a detached or a semi-detached house. If I just did an apprenticeship or a bachelor’s degree, I’d be finished by the age of twenty-one, I calculated now in the car among the fields of rapeseed, Papa still gripping the handle in the passenger door. But then I’d have to work for a while first, pay off my debts – I’d have to live off something while I was a student, after all – and then start saving again. My cousin had only got a loan because she and her boyfriend both earned good money, but I didn’t have a boyfriend. Unlike my cousin, however, I’d soon have my A-levels, at least provided everything went smoothly.

Romy’s parents drove a strangely angular car. It was painted the same red as my bike, with an elongated radiator grille, a roof box for skis and a door to the boot that opened horizontally.

‘Isn’t Lotte coming?’ Romy’s mother asked when Papa had driven off and we’d climbed into the car.

Romy negated briefly.

'Do you go to the city often?' I asked.

'There's not a lot of culture in Süthland,' was all Romy's mother said.

Romy steered the car on to the B-road, passing the little farming communities in the direction of the motorway.

'My cousin's bought a plot there,' I said as we passed a sign to the new-build estate.

'That's doable, still; land is dirt-cheap out in the sticks,' said Romy's mother.

'Is your cousin a lot older?' asked Romy.

'Two years,' I said.

Romy accelerated. Her mother turned on the radio: piano music.

In Münster, we parked near the gallery. We got out and Romy's mother walked ahead.

'Are your parents car enthusiasts?' I asked Romy.

She laughed. 'Why do you say that?'

'Because you've got one of those classic ones.'

'Papa bought the Lada out of nostalgia,' said Romy. 'He says he used to believe in socialism.'

'Like in North Korea?'

Romy shook her head. 'More the kind of socialism that doesn't exist anywhere in the world.'

I found this disconcerting. How could her father yearn for something that didn't even exist? Then again, he worked at a university; I knew this from other people at school. To my mind, the Lada seemed well suited to that.

At the entrance to the gallery, Romy's mother paid. Then she threw herself into the arms of another woman, ignoring the member of staff who was holding out her three tickets. I took them and mentally christened the new arrival the Felted Female. Little

balls of purple felt dangled from her earlobes; a felt brooch was pinned to one lapel.

'How old are you two?' she asked us.

'Eighteen,' said Romy.

'Seventeen,' I said.

'You still have dreams at that age.' The Felted Female's voice was so shrill I flinched. 'I wanted to emigrate to the US and marry a cowboy – anything but go to university and certainly not get a job, certainly never have kids.'

She laughed as though the entire gallery was meant to hear. For a moment, I felt sorry for her. Anyone that loud certainly wasn't happy in themselves.

'And what are you going to do after school?' asked the woman.

Just that morning, I'd been doing degree aptitude tests on my phone. They'd suggested I study either teacher training or tourism management. I didn't like travelling, but I did like my advanced courses in German and History.

Now, though, I waited for Romy to answer. To my surprise, she said nothing. Silently, Romy studied the little felt balls, the way they dangled from the woman's earlobes. Romy's mother shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

'We're doing our A-levels this summer,' I said then.

Romy looked at me, and her eyes seemed suddenly angry. But it was too late; the next sentence was already on my lips: 'We're having to do a lot of revision at the moment, because we don't just want to do any old degree at any old uni, and certainly not—'

'I'm going to Lapland in the summer,' Romy broke in.

I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. She hadn't said anything to me about Lapland. Romy's mother placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder; she was smiling.

‘I’m going to work on a reforestation project,’ said Romy. ‘For every felled tree, we’ll plant three new ones. I’m going to stay on a husky farm and go to Stockholm at the weekends.’

The Felted Female laughed anew, no less shrilly. She threw back her head and her rose-gold glasses jumped up and down on her knobbly nose.

Then she sighed.

‘Aren’t I glad you young things still have dreams.’

As we walked through the exhibition, it seemed as though the ceiling had sunk towards the floor, as though its concrete tiles and neon lights had settled on my head. They threatened to flatten me under their weight.

I followed Romy from one painting to the next, still life on canvas, thinking about the house my cousin was going to build, and about Lapland. To move out and study in a city, no matter which one – the idea had gone so hazy in my head I couldn’t catch hold of it. Somewhere in between it all I needed to build myself a future, too, find new friends, start a family at some point, build a house, have some kind of career as something or other.

How had Romy even come up with the idea of Lapland?

When we were back in the car, the radio went on again – still piano music.

‘Shall I take you home?’ asked Romy.

‘You can let me out at the entrance to the hamlet,’ I said.

I didn’t want the Lada driving into the farmyard.

[END OF SAMPLE]