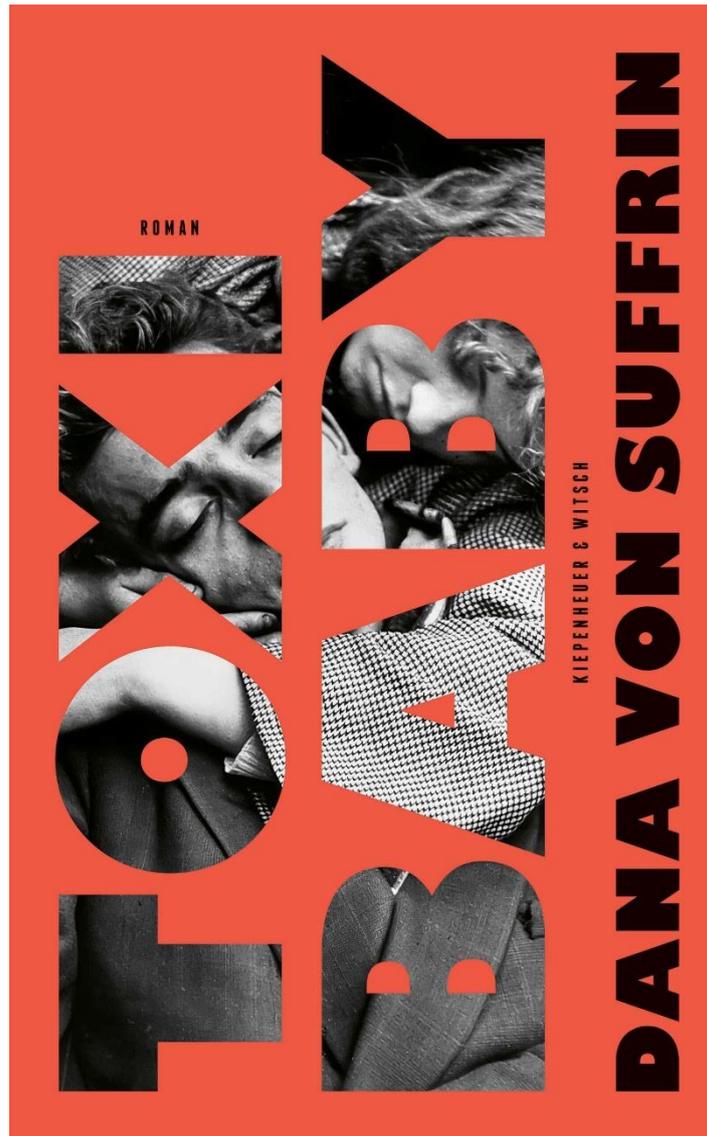


TOXIBABY

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THE TARO is a small, clear river that careens over boulders and only slows on upward slopes, dragging itself resignedly up like a weary old man (which reminds me a little of myself), and then in just a few places plunging much too wildly, almost suicidally, down steep inclines – which makes me think of my mother.

No one knows the Taro, of course – it's quite an insignificant river – certainly no one from Germany. It's really just Toxi and I who know it, because one late summer we got into my old BMW and then the only room we could find was in Sasso di Taro.

I am by nature slightly melancholic, plus I always have to keep making up stories, and so I spent a long time sitting with my knees pulled up, a little distance from the lido, staring at the river. I watched the water burrowing through the landscape of parched grass and scrubby, gnarled shrubs, slowly smoothing the corners off shell limestone and quartz pebbles, and conscientiously, contentedly, wetting everything that was thirsty. It doesn't actually matter, the landscape whispered to me, you will disappear just like one of these little bushes overnight in the sandy soil, you're still fighting it, still thrashing around in the net, but this too shall pass. All of nature, I thought, is unsentimental, indifferent to everything, it just goes on doing what it has always done, idiotic and stoic, and if I was to lie down to die now, it would decompose me at once.

Nothing can shock me; I already know everything about death, having had many years to get used to it thanks to all the pigeon chicks and kittens we brought home as children and put in small, padded cardboard boxes, force-feeding them oats, milk and sliced bread until their little heads hung down, until one morning they would be lying cold in their nests. I wasn't even sad, sitting by the Taro; I think I was actually happy. My melancholy was more the disbelieving, fleeting kind with which you glance up at the night sky or into the eyes of another person. A melancholy that is just waiting to evaporate in a matter of seconds and perhaps make your happiness a bit more interesting, a bit less ordinary.

At that time, we were of the opinion that a love like ours needed a backdrop less profane than my two-room flat in the furthest reaches of Giesing (which Toxi had moved into immediately, without us ever having discussed it), and so after two or three weeks we drove to Le Marche and walked around the old towns there holding hands in our second-hand-shop designer gear, letting the locals marvel at us. We strolled the narrow streets like two smug wildcats, turned perfume bottles over on our palms in the shops, and ran silk scarves through our fingers like water. We got the best table in every restaurant and only let go of each other's hands to eat pizza with a knife and fork. They served us Coke in wine glasses, and once I'd tapped my card on the card-reader, the fat proprietors would bid us farewell with a smile and a wave.

Our love was fresh and greedy; we decided, without discussing it, that we could manage without an audience, and so we quickly tired of the medieval towns, Chiavano and Villa San Silvestro. We wanted to see the sea. I drove, and Toxi passed me lukewarm San Pellegrino and wound the window up and down when I asked him to. At forks in the road, we always went left, and, when we realised how far it still was to the sea, ended up at the Taro entirely by chance, where Toxi immediately used my phone to book us the cheapest room (Toxibaby of course didn't have a penny left; he used to spend all his unemployment benefit on cigarettes and occasionally clothes or a book by Byung-Chul Han).

I can't remember what we talked about then, in the car, over breakfast, or at the lido, but we talked most of the time, because a word from the other person seemed like the most important thing in the world, and we both felt momentarily offended each time one of us disappeared into the green-tiled bathroom or had to take a phone call. In my memory we never talked about trivial, everyday things; we didn't comment on the food with more than a word or two, had no pain, no small complaints, agreed on everything, didn't read the news, spoke only rarely about fashion or travel (Toxi actually hated travel, he said, and was afraid of flying). And although Toxi was much more clued-up than I was, he didn't have that much knowledge of literature, and so we started right at the beginning by reading *The Divine Comedy* before bed. I don't remember why now, but at the time reading a book together seemed

like a kind of foundation, almost like a house the two of us were building, something we wanted to plan, build and live in together.

We lay in our attic room under a fragrant, flowery sheet; I read a few lines in my stupid show-off Italian, and Toxi turned to me, his head resting on his left hand and the little paperback Reclam edition in his right, and repeated the lines in the German translation, and often spent several minutes thinking about a single word that he remembered from Latin lessons, and it didn't annoy me at all; in fact I was charmed (and somehow the symbolism of this reading completely passed us by, because we too would soon be moving from one circle of hell to the next).

We'd only been by the Taro two or three days when I told Toxi that he was the only person I would need for the rest of my life, and at the time I thought, now at last my life is beginning, but just a short while later I was thinking the opposite: this is how you die.

Following the local boys and one or two other confused tourists, Toxibaby had climbed up the rocks at the side. For quite a while I'd stood there like a worried wife or mother, arms folded in the pale blue, waist-deep river water, looking up at Toxi as each time he took two or three paces back, then ran and leapt off the overhanging rock, and as he fell performed a move that I believe is called a triple twist – and then suddenly he surfaced beside me, grabbed me

by the waist and lifted me out of the water. You really liked that, didn't you, said Toxi, a little out of breath. I said yes, Daddy, it was very impressive, and then he picked me up with his arms around my backside, and we kissed like we were in an indie film, but stopped quite quickly as we were laughing so hard, because we both believed in Freud, and even then I was already starting to think that our relationship had something to do with my father (here I was mistaken, it was about my mother). Then Toxi was off back to the cliff again.

Toxibaby had already dived at least ten times. Each time he got up there he scanned the bank for me, and thanks to my new bikini always spotted me quickly, then he waved, and I waved back, but only for a second because I found the waving slightly embarrassing; we weren't kids any more. It was the fifth day of our holiday and our second day at the lido, and it had struck me at once that Toxi was like a different man; he was adorable, he was funny, he was full of energy, he spoke Italian even though he couldn't speak any Italian and flirted with the old ladies and their Pekingese dogs on the beach, and I watched him with a smile. He refused to use sun cream and acquired an unhealthy, ochre tan that he admired every morning. Back in our room that evening, with our wet things hanging on the washing line outside the kitchen window, I asked him how come he was an entirely different Toxi, how come we were almost carefree, and Toxi just looked me sharply in the eye and said: Sweetheart, you know, maybe I'm right about the things I say.

And then I remembered that, in Toxibaby's opinion, it was the circumstances of his life, meaning our society, meaning our system, meaning late-stage capitalism, that were to blame for everything that went wrong for him. Our little escape had made him forget that for a moment: it was as if nothing bad had ever happened to him, and he suddenly didn't care that life had turned out very different from how he'd imagined; he forgot all the sociological and philosophical classics, and his sadness gave way to drive, optimism and exuberance.

And because the cicadas were rubbing their little wings at night and whispering the legends of Sweetheart and Toxi to one another, and because the old gentlemen on the piazza craned their necks enviously to watch us, ogling my cleavage and pointing discreetly with their walking sticks, and because Toxi carried me home on his shoulders after my high heels got stuck in the cracks between the cobblestones, we were finally happy, and all of a sudden, the world was a magical place. Our love was perfect; a whole country tapped its feet to the stupid little songs I made up first thing in the morning and sang standing barefoot on the stone tiles while tipping espresso grounds into the mocha pot, and not getting even slightly annoyed if I spilled some – in fact, I only sang all the more – and Toxi laughed from the bedroom and, like all simpletons, I was convinced that things would be good from now on,

and they would stay good. I even convinced myself, with some justification, that I had earned this happiness after how terrible life had been for so long.

I wanted to try one last time. I took off my sunglasses, waded through the shallow river, clung to the undergrowth as I climbed up. I wanted to jump, too. Below me the Taro flowed, below me the general public were having fun. But I was part of another world, cut off from down there. I pulled up one knee and then the other, to give myself courage. Up here, I thought, you felt like a child who has been sent to bed during a party, but can't sleep and is listening longingly to the laughter and the chatter.

I heard someone calling my name.

TOXI IS A pain in the arse and an energy vampire; he is defeated to the point of clinical depression and at the same time proud as a peacock, strutting around my living room like the lord of the manor, and ‘doing some thinking’ instead of working. He wants to be loved, just like everyone else, but he doesn’t obviously seek recognition, he never dispenses flattery or praise, he doesn’t give us what we want from him – and therefore makes us long for what he’s withholding all the more.

Toxi is the most beautiful man you can imagine, with the face of a puppy despite being over 40. Like all dark-haired men, from a distance he looks like a ram; you might almost think he was Jewish (he isn’t, though, he’s from Siberia) and when I walk down the street with him, everyone is horribly jealous of us (I look a bit like a beagle puppy too, but in dark blonde). We almost got married, although he’s unfaithful and lies, and one of his ex-girlfriends, a semi-famous theatre actress, still hates him for that, though it’s important to point out that what put us off was less the fact that the ritual is so decisive and yet so meaningless than the bureaucracy involved. Toxibaby detests all of life’s impositions, and regards bureaucracy as one of these. In this respect (as in every other respect) he is absolutely incorrigible, and every single phone call and email stresses him out so much you want to lock him in a little cage. Toxi takes the small irritations of everyday life as hostile actions directed personally at him and, like all paranoiacs, he sees an exchange of correspondence with an authority as a direct attack on his existence. He can

put off calling the health insurance company for weeks, and rage for hours about the hotline employees, and if you try to take the phone away from him it just makes him angrier, and then he jumps up and down like a mutt and yells that you're siding with these people who are turning the world mad and bossing him around and destroying him just like they've been doing to people like him for hundreds of years. He forgets to do the washing up for days on end, and only realises he's broke when the ATM swallows his bank card. Sometimes this whole thing with him strikes me as ridiculous, the way a fist sometimes seems ridiculous: obviously not while you're making it and maybe punching something – during that part of the process it seems useful and normal – but you only have to look at it for a minute or two up close, when it's at rest, and it becomes completely grotesque. Where the hell is the thumb hiding? Why are fingers two to five clinging so anxiously to each other? What are all these creases and furrows, and how come in reality, the fist is a trembling little mouse?

I didn't know how used you could get to terror, or how fond of it you can actually become.

This time I think I was the one who'd ended it, but it's impossible to be totally sure, because of course over time each of us had started to pre-empt the other: breaking up with someone is always better than being dumped. It had been

one of those beautiful early autumn days, warm and cold at once; the morning was golden and the afternoon in the café already leaden. By my reckoning, it was our thirteenth break-up in barely three years, and as usual I was expecting a reconciliation within a few days or weeks, but Toxi stood firm, behaving – and this made me sick – almost like an adult man. I did what I usually did, because this was how it had always been: after a few days I would start messaging Toxi again and, once he'd unblocked me, we typically began again from the beginning, with me sending Toxi pink hearts and him sending me pictures of his biceps, and then I would call him my little mouse again and he'd call me his little donkey, and some mornings he'd even ask how I was, and I'd be really happy that Toxi was suddenly so attentive and caring – though at the same time it felt like having to get back in the ring even though my nose was broken and bleeding.

But this time, as I said, things were different: Toxibaby acted like I didn't exist. He didn't unblock me, he didn't ring my doorbell, he didn't even send a message telling me for the three hundredth time why he didn't think we could be together, and that was not a good sign: if Toxibaby was behaving like a sensible adult and not deigning to reply to me then, I thought, then maybe I had actually done something wrong.

How stupid normal life was, how boring, how undemanding and uninspiring! I caught myself reading spam emails from top to bottom. I spent half the morning watching videos by make-up artists and hairdressers. I listened to hours-long poetry readings on the radio. I ate overnight oats and drank cold coffee. I was indifferent to everything. The world seemed bleak and mean, and everyone was my enemy. I didn't answer the phone when my sister called, and all I sent her for her birthday was a text message. I lay on the sofa, distractedly ruffling Babka's fur. I started refreshing my email inbox every two minutes, to see if Toxibaby had finally got in touch. I didn't answer any letters, ignored all phone calls, lost Babka on a walk.

Did Toxi know how much I missed him? I wanted to contact him, to tell him something about Babka or discuss our former professors' latest spiteful, postcolonial newspaper articles, which Daria sometimes sent me and which I skim-read (we had all studied under the same professors, but Toxi was six years older than us). I couldn't think about anything but Toxibaby. Whenever I saw my first name printed on envelopes or in emails, it seemed to be secretly connected to Toxi; he had typed it so many times. And when I read the word 'Sweetheart' anywhere, one of the many messages he'd written me would immediately pop into my head.

All the world's wars seemed ridiculous in comparison to what Toxi and I had to go through. I wanted to invent new words for this suffering, but none came to me. After the business with Toxi I felt like I'd been in the Thirty Years' War; I was a young soldier abducted from home, I was a village in the Landgraviate of Hesse burned to the ground, a family burned to death in a barn, a buttoned-up reformer, a rabbi crucified in the Russian civil war, a Jewish mother beaten to death, her body thrown into a ditch. When I could no longer think of any other reason why we couldn't stand being together, I became a fatalist and saw the whole world as a succession of tragedies and unhappiness – in short, I was suffering from the same sickness that women have been suffering for centuries: I too had tried to save a man.

MOSTLY I SAT on a bench or looked out of the window, and when the emptiness got too much, I sent Toxi another round of psychotic WhatsApp messages, or rather, I sent messages into the ether, because I'd been blocked for four weeks now: Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday. I liked the idea that the messages intended for Toxi were stuck on a server somewhere, perhaps slowly burning themselves out like shooting stars or, who knows, maybe a social media manager in the Philippines was translating them into his mother tongue. Maybe somewhere a Vietnamese content moderator wearing flip-flops and shorts was reading them aloud to her colleagues and laughing, while she stirred her iced coffee with a straw, while the hot, angry sun clattered into the sea, while the tropical night fell, a few fishing boats capsized, and while on the other side of the city a group of long-legged German tourists came across a food market, where they casually swatted greedy yellow mosquitos, though a moment before, the mosquitos had already infected them with tropical diseases that in a few weeks' time would cause huge concern in Europe, though of course that couldn't worry the Germans yet, because they were still here; it was still half an hour before, on their way to the local pharmacy, they would be attacked by a gang of youths and have to spend the

whole of the following day in the linoleum-floored hallway of the German embassy, waiting to apply for replacement travel documents.

In any case, the whole thing had a desperate, romantic, senseless feeling about it, which moved me afresh every time.

07:21

Toxibaby

This is no good

I love yuo

I love you

07:22

It's your fault, anyway

I would have stayed but

you're crazy

Everything in the upper left quarter of the screen was hard to read, because my phone had been half-broken for months. Toxi's phone was the same, though the cracks in his were now two years old, and the fact that our phones were damaged in the same way was another thing that bound us together, and I couldn't bring myself to get mine repaired after the mishap, because it would

have caused an unbearable disparity – what couple, if you please, has one good phone and one bad?

Plus, Toxi's defect always reminded me of the first time we hooked up; he had dropped his phone at my party and of course the screen had hit the tarmac, which Toxi immediately took as an opportunity to spend about half an hour bemoaning just how fundamentally unlucky he was in life, while I tried to undo his trousers with one hand, and close his mouth with the other, because he was talking much too loudly.

Toxi didn't get his phone repaired because he had no money, and I didn't because I felt slightly reckless; my phone was broken due to my lack of impulse control, for which I suspected people envied me a little; I readily told anyone and everyone what I'd done with my phone, and knew that people would be a bit more careful around me as a result. Also, it made every message Toxi wrote me seem slightly more dramatic and therefore more important, the way that mysterious and barely legible gravestones in an old cemetery seem more important than the brand-new ones.

A few times, I had considered secretly taking our phones to SecondHandy on Pilgersheimer Straße for repair, but Toxi was one of those guys who never leaves his phone lying around; he'd even set up a PIN you had to enter to unlock it (which wasn't my birthday), and that always made me a bit jealous, because what was lurking in this little plastic and copper and iron box that

was not meant for my eyes. My interim position on this was that I wasn't yet ready to give a final answer to such a ridiculous question, and so while I thought constantly about our screens, I couldn't see a solution, and of course I hated myself a little for this indecision. When I sat on the park bench watching passers-by with Babka, I would be distracted and bored until I saw someone who was like Toxibaby in some way, the same hair colour, the same wiry forearms, the same affected way of holding a cigarette while propping the bent elbow on the other arm, the same wheezing Marlboro-man cough that always sounds like it has crawled straight out of an old-fashioned TV set showing one of those eighties programmes where men in plastic glasses discussed the newspaper headlines. All the same, my mood lightened at once; these coincidences seemed like a good omen, because everything that was similar to Toxi made it more likely I would soon encounter Toxi himself. Since the split I had been collecting things I wanted to tell him, because anything I couldn't share with him seemed meaningless, as if I hadn't really experienced it. Someone had robbed me of my audience and my mirror image and my best friend and my worst enemy, or at least cut off one of my limbs; I could still walk, but I was limping. Who was I supposed to show off to about being nominated for the regional literary prize? And to whom was I supposed to hint that there were still people who wanted to have sex with me?

I wanted to tell Toxi that I was considering sleeping with a PE teacher who ran a book blog called High Bar Books (although on principle I never slept

with anyone who had a website – this was how low I had sunk), whom I'd met at the ministry of culture's awful summer drinks reception, and I had to admit that the only thing stopping me was that I was fairly certain Toxibaby's reaction would be mockery rather than jealousy or rage, because High Bar Books was pretty much exactly the sort of person that Toxi couldn't even be bothered to despise any more, and simply ignored. High Bar Books had a secure state employment contract and unfortunately also had a very decent apartment on Bonner Platz (which I only knew from his posts), and unfortunately was interested in contemporary literature and unfortunately went on holiday to Marseilles and strode into any old museum of junk with great enthusiasm, and in all of this was as humourless and essentially decent as only young German men can be (he was just 31). I could easily imagine that news of an affair between me and Highbooks wouldn't even reach Toxi anyway, and thus I evoked my old philosophical problem, because how are you supposed to take revenge on someone if they don't realise that's what you're doing, and then of course I immediately stopped replying to Highbooks's messages, which were all very polite and obliging, and even blocked him, for no other reason than that I was a woman in love who wanted to protect her heart, which was under constant attack, and keep it as pure as possible, even though Toxi didn't want to know.

In retrospect, everything seemed symbolic: just a few weeks after we returned from the Taro, we'd given up on *The Divine Comedy*, because that was when our horrible arguments began and Toxi got into the habit of storming out of my flat on a regular basis and then ignoring my messages and calls for days, and I think that at least the Italian edition we'd found on the bookshelf in the holiday let is still under my bed.

In a very short space of time, we had forgotten all our romantic rituals. We hardly ever went out for walks any more, we didn't comb each other's hair or read aloud to each other, and though we never would have believed it, we were starting to live like entirely normal people: we worked (I worked), we ate, we complained, and we went to bed. In the morning, Toxi drank at least ten cups Turkish coffee, tipping the grounds straight into one of my cups and adding hot water from the tap. He spent the morning reading, sitting for hours over the books he'd brought with him, sometimes swearing, sometimes laughing, and sometimes getting up to smoke two Marlboros one after the other, and stubbing them out in my empty planters. Incidentally, I thought this was another thing that reminded me of my mother, who like Toxi couldn't resist introducing a moment of rebellion into each small everyday action. When others were drinking filter coffee, she opened a mini bottle of prosecco; when others smoked a cigarette, she smoked two; and when others crept into their daughters' bedrooms to check they were sleeping peacefully, she tipped

several litres of water over her husband's PC tower and called him a weakling and a loser.

In the last few years, I had often resolved to finish with Toxi for good, and put his stuff (a Margiela jumper, two pairs of linen trousers, some pomade, chargers, a book about Holocaust literature and a Martin Amis novel) outside the front door, but then the next moment I would find myself thinking again how lovely it would be to stay with Toxi forever, to watch him smoking first thing in the morning, a blanket wrapped around his hunched shoulders, to listen to his monologues without laughing, to fall asleep beside him night after night and maybe create a pretty daughter with him.

That much was certain, at least; our daughter would just have to inherit Toxi's mind, Toxi's looks, my patience and sense of pragmatism, and everyone would be satisfied. I sometimes imagined Toxi carrying our little daughter on his shoulders through Munich's problem areas and explaining the basic principles of Marxism to her based on the homeless people who pitched their tents outside the Raffeisenbank. I also imagined Toxi's mother knitting our daughter tiny pink trousers, and myself putting two fingers through their legs.

Like an orphan, I dreamed of a family. I imagined Toxi having a permanent job, picking our daughter up from school at lunchtime and carrying her knock-off Hello Kitty rucksack on his shoulder, while I would already be in the kitchen, making vegetarian lasagne. Chattering merrily away, our

daughter would spit spinach leaves across the kitchen, and Toxi's eyes would sometimes fill with tears because everything was so perfect. In the evening, Toxi would flop down beside me, and sometimes he wouldn't be able to keep his hands to himself, and then he'd whisper sweet things in my ear, just before I fell asleep, and then I wouldn't actually fall asleep, and afterwards our Egyptian cotton bed linen would cool our bodies, and only the few red cedars and the laurel hedges outside our windows would be watching us, because I would be his wife, but also his lover, and his sister, his best female friend, his best buddy, his advisor, his business partner, his father, I would be everything to him.

The wind got up and a whole heap of yellow leaves fell into my lap. I looked at Babka sadly. In a week's time I would go to Switzerland: no pets allowed. I took my phone out again.

Next week I have to
go to bloody Switzerland
All on my own
You've all abandoned me again

Toxi replied at once.

Stop dumping your shit on me, he wrote.

Are you alright, I asked.

You don't have to care, he said.

Want to come with me, I asked.

You are so deranged, he replied.

Ok, he wrote a few seconds later. We'll give it one more try. But this is the last time, guaranteed.

IT TOOK QUITE a while for Toxi to start getting on my nerves. The first three weeks after the Taro we were loved up like two little doves, falling asleep at the same moment and waking in the morning hand in hand. We kissed after getting up and gazed into each other's eyes for a long time, then made each other coffee and admired our good looks. We were like two little bunnies, each marvelling as we ran our fingers through the other's sleek hair, and then comparing our moles and finding celestial constellations in their patterns, in which we mockingly read a glorious future. We sent his mother selfies of us snuggled together like seahorses; we ate and drank the same things. If I wasn't full, Toxi would always let me eat from his plate. We only left the house to show off our happiness, and I put my arm around Toxi's shoulder and he put his around my hips, and Toxi laughed and said I was an Italian macho man disguised as a female author, and as we were walking to Jessa's Magic Ice-Cream, because at this time pretty much all we ate was sweet things, we realised that our stride was exactly the same length. When Toxi was writing a shopping list, we also noticed that our handwriting was almost identical. We summoned my sister to act as adjudicator. She dictated a Paul Celan poem to us, and Toxi and I had to sit on opposite sides of the table, our right hands covering what the left hand was writing (we're both left-handed), and my sister took a long, serious look at our pieces of paper, and then said: completely identical. Only the capital M was different, because Toxi just wrote an M, while I was in the habit of doing a kind of nostalgic

contortion, and my Ms now looked a bit like the seagulls we used to draw on the horizon as children, without ever having seen one in real life. I immediately resolved to go back to a normal M. Toxi and I fell into each other's arms, and I said we're like those platonic twin people, and he corrected me and said, spherical people, and I knew he was right, and then he added that the male spherical people came from the earth and the female from the sun, and I was a pretty good example of that, because after the Italy trip that summer I had a deep tan and bleached strands of light blonde in my hair and, if you were looking for similarities, I was most like that heavenly body – and I said you could tell Toxi was from the earth, too, but then I couldn't think of a good reason why, because Toxi wasn't actually very down to earth, and I was amazed whenever he managed to perform some utterly mundane task; when he came home with bread or bought himself shampoo, I was almost taken aback, and the three of us burst out laughing, but then Toxi said it wasn't such a funny story, really, because of course the spherical people who had once been so happy had then been torn apart by the gods. At the start of the story they were perfectly normal, with four hands and feet and one face at the front and one at the back, like watchtowers, and they were very strong and very cheerful, and in their exuberance they suddenly came up with the stupid idea of wanting to get closer to heaven, and so the spherical people did their weird manoeuvres, and ran off on their four feet in order to bounce and somersault into heaven and annoy Zeus a bit, and the Greek gods gathered on

Olympus and raised their eyebrows and groaned, and Zeus himself got into a terrible rage at the spheres rolling around and having so much fun, and ordered Apollo to saw the spherical people in half down the middle, and Apollo himself thought this was disproportionately cruel, but who was going to argue with Zeus? He grasped the spherical people by their four shoulders with his powerful arms and split them, and the spherical people wept with agony and shame, and then he tinkered around a bit with the half-spheres and took their heads in his hands and turned them 180 degrees, so they all faced forwards, and then he closed the giant wounds that humans had now, and twisted the skin into a belly button so they didn't bleed out, and Plato tells us that people have suffered immensely ever since they were separated from their other halves, hugging each other and never letting go because they hope to grow back together – and in the beginning they even starved to death because they could think of nothing but their lost halves, and for that reason Zeus changed his mind, and eventually asked Apollo to move the spherical people's sexual organs round to the front, and let's not imagine exactly how Apollo carried out that order – anyway, since then we have been able to unite at least occasionally and for a short time, and then we forget how lonely we really are, how abandoned and despairing, and immediately afterwards we remember that we're looking for something that probably doesn't exist, or at the very least is almost impossible to find, and maybe that explains the story of Toxibaby and me a little bit, because we were both convinced that we had

finally found what had been withheld from us for so long, and secretly we put that down to our own strength and abilities, and so we also became slightly arrogant and cocky, because at the time we thought we knew something that no one else knew, namely how to find your lost other half, and of course this kind of knowledge makes you arrogant, because in this regard lovers are not that far removed from conspiracy theorists, recumbent cyclists, or preppers, who go around thinking they're superior to everyone while other people laugh at them. The only thing that remains unclear to me even now is whether we were completely deluded then or not, and whether everything that followed was a result of this error, or if, like everyone else, we were simply suffering from still being only half spheres.

OF COURSE, this is not to say that Toxibaby's suffering in the years of our relationship or in his life more generally have made him pliant or even submissive; in fact, the worse his situation, the more haughty and presumptuous he is, and the more inflexibly he treats me. He takes any hesitation, any doubt, any attempt to weigh things up or be ambiguous, as a sign of weak character. Because of the phone calls, the health insurance company, me, and life in general, Toxibaby believes that every other person or at least every other man is his enemy. Listen, Sweetheart, he said once, while I was rummaging through a file from the state archive for my book – listen, Sweetheart, every single man I've ever met wants to harm me. I closed my laptop and looked at Toxi, who was standing in front of me like a child who has to recite a poem and for two or three seconds isn't quite sure whether to expect praise or a telling-off (while the adults delay their reaction to the dutifully recited poem, to accustom the child to the sadism that will soon shape almost every social interaction in his life). Toxi is more reliant on me than he likes to admit, and when he says, listen, Sweetheart, he needs an audience.

I'm standing at a red light, said Toxi, waiting to cross Pilgersheimer Straße, and there's some guy on the other side, let's say one of these young guys from the art academy, let's say he's studying video art with Hito Steyerl, let's say mid-twenties, in vintage clothes, with uncombed hair and rich parents. So,

Sweetheart, said Toxi, this guy looks over at me, and I look at him, and in a quarter of a second we both know all there is to know: I see the guy is physically inferior to me, he's taller, but kind of limp, I don't know how he's going to hold those heavy cameras all day long; on the other hand of course he has more money and more security in life, so in summary I don't find him really threatening, and I'm relieved, this guy doesn't exactly seem to pose a deadly danger. The video artist is definitely having the same thoughts, Toxi goes on: he looks at me, he sees I'm smoking, and real cigarettes too, not rollies made with long papers kept in crocheted jute bags like the soy boys from the art academy; he also sees I'm powerfully built and potentially aggressive, I don't know if that's my face or some kind of hormone (Toxi lifts weights every morning, why not, wasn't Rodin's Thinker also a prize boxer in reality?). Anyway, we wait there, looking at each other furtively; he's wondering whether to cross Pilgersheimer Straße while the light's still red to show off, to appear slightly stronger and more defiant, but he doesn't dare, because his mother's voice is telling him not to just walk across the street or hold a knife wrong or leave the light on when he goes out – this voice has been in his ear for 25 years, and I know that, and so he doesn't dare, and I stand there quite calmly, staring him out. The light turns green, he starts walking at once, because he's scared, I mean, he knows what a loser he is. I step out at a leisurely pace, like a cat who's just eaten. Shortly before we pass, I move to the side and almost barge into him, and of course the guy jumps,

and I can't help grinning. I've won, and the guy has been put in his place, like he has ten or twenty times already today, and here, my dear Sweetheart, said Toxi with a note of triumph, his beautiful listless eyes glinting rakishly and a hint of madness flitting across his face, you can see how thin the veil of civilisation is over barbarism. I didn't know exactly what Toxi was trying to tell me: did he want to emphasise his own masculinity, the crisis of which was as obvious as the crisis of masculinity more generally; did he just want to interrupt me because he was jealous of my work; or did he want to give me an introduction to the laws of our society? I sat up and looked at him.

Over the years, I have developed a look that makes people fall silent, but not Toxibaby. And so I said, I don't believe that, you're exaggerating, people aren't how you think they are, and we went back and forth like this for a while, and Toxi said I could believe what I liked, he didn't care (he did care), he was right as always, and then we argued for a bit longer, but not too fiercely, because I did actually need to work.

Because Toxi is a hothead and a choleric, he thinks nothing of getting into a fracas with seven different people in the Edeka queue because someone was rude to the cashier (we went shopping together every two or three days – 'together' meaning that I wrote shopping lists, examined the tomatoes, paid, and Toxi packed everything into bags and carried it home). Like many of us

who are in constant need of love and understanding, but are too shy to demand one or both of these, Toxibaby has chosen the antidote: he despises everyone as a precaution, and you can get into his bad books with one wrong word. And although it's impossible to see any principle or method behind this, he can also be quick to forgive and make up, with kindness and lavish tears – if his pride doesn't stop him. When he lapses into his eternal grumbling at the kitchen table, I hug him from behind and smooth his beautiful dark auburn, almost entirely brown hair with my palms, because Toxibaby can rely on me finding him irresistible when he is like he is: paranoid, impulsive, depressed, anxious.

I've never seen anyone as haughty as Toxi who refuses so stubbornly to fulfil the social role foreseen for him – of employee, fiancé, failed intellectual. He says his aim is to avoid being an upstanding or even productive citizen at any price. Toxi refuses to see society as anything but a cage full of white lab rats, whom you torture and who submit to torture. He never knows when he is watching and when he is being watched, and he doesn't understand that you can't be rat and scientist at one and the same time.

I once asked him: if you had the choice, Toxibaby, would you rather be the most intelligent person in the world, someone who could solve any puzzle and understand the most incredible things, but who was also ugly and misshapen? Or would you rather be really stupid but totally sexy? Toxi brushed crumbs from the table with his hand in slow motion, which suggested

he wasn't listening, and then he just said he would have to think about that, and I laughed at him and said come on Toxi, what is there to think about, and he said, you'd take stupid and sexy, right? And I said but of course I'd take stupid and sexy, and waggle my pert ass all day. I said, I'd read tarot cards, become a life coach and drive everyone who sees me insane – and Toxi said, but then you wouldn't be interested in anything at all, you'd have no idea about politics and history, and I replied that when you're stupid and sexy, you have much better things to do than study critical theory and sit around in lecture theatres, and Toxi said, look at me, I'm sexy and I still read Horkheimer, and I said, but you don't have the popular combination, you have the most harmful one, sexy and smart is kind of a death sentence, you can see that yourself, and Toxi was a little hurt, and then he said that good looks didn't last forever, and I rolled my eyes and said what I always said to Toxi, that he was completely unfit for life.

Toxi knows he can't change anything about his unhappiness, because although he has grasped everything, he hasn't understood any of it. He doesn't want to just drop out of society and be a hippy in the Balearics, either, because in spite of it all he is insatiable, he demands no less than everything from life, and the less he's given, the greedier he becomes. He's like a tired man who asks for a chair and then dreams of a sofa, he's the beggar in whose paper cup you place a coin, moved by your own generosity – and who then instantly throws it at your head and demands a 100-Euro note. Toxibaby thinks he's

owed everything because he believes he has really tried, and just because it didn't work out doesn't mean he didn't give it his all. The idea that things are constantly denied to him because he doesn't make enough effort or have enough money, because his thoughts are too complex or his family too poor, doesn't even cross his mind.

Because Toxibaby is a Marxist and proud of never having voted in his life, and because *democrat* is almost a dirty word to him, he secretly dreams of being the leader of a revolution or at least an intellectual, and he hates most of my friends – the stupid ones, obviously, but most of all the ones who have either money or a job he's envious of (research associate, professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, daughter of an author) – and claims any one of them would sell me to the Gestapo in return for a sandwich. He thinks I should be less trusting, but in reality he's just afraid of the advice my friend Daria gives (who happens to be a successful artist with a twelve-square-metre office on Klenzestraße that she calls a studio). In his way, he loves people; he just doesn't show it very often. In the days when he had a job, when his colleagues asked him for help in the afternoon, he'd delete the message at once and say truculently that he'd be twice as conscientious if they paid him twice as much, but for 1900 Euros take-home a month he wasn't going to lift a finger in his free time.

I only ever had two options with Toxi: I could agree with him like a well-behaved child and then let his monologues wash over me for hours, or – the option I much preferred – put on my famous look and disagree with him, which would then lead to hours of arguing. I knew very well which behaviour would provoke which reaction, but I sometimes deliberately did the opposite of what I should: I enjoyed conflict and it was fun to provoke Toxi, I wanted to show him that I could snatch up each of his thoughts and squash it if I had a mind to, wanted to prove to him that I existed, that I was free and independent.

But Toxi's mood, like Comrade Stalin's, could also switch for no reason. Sometimes, when Toxi flew into a sudden rage and I instantly threw the cloth I was washing up our dishes with into the sink and ran over to hug him, I could change his mood, and he'd begin to stroke my back awkwardly under my sweatshirt. But much more often we would start to argue properly, things usually got quite existential between us and, being honest, I would have to say that I wasn't entirely blameless in this, and that I too only realised over time that the tiniest things were connected to the very largest and that each little argument was actually about the whole thing. At every opportunity Toxi tried to find out how I really felt about him, and I realised that we – meaning we in general and not just Toxi and me – consisted entirely of opposites that were revealed in any and every situation, and that even just how we buy and drink a bottle of Coke while we're out, or how we look at a sunset, says

everything about us: do we buy a warm Coke from Edeka or a cold Coke from the kiosk? Do we drink thirstily or mindfully; are we afraid of the next day or do we look contentedly at the red evening light as its poisonous velvet slowly envelops our outstretched arms? And I refused to understand all this; at the time I was too busy being offended, because I had quite high romantic ideals, and so I couldn't figure out why Toxi's life wasn't getting better now that I was taking care of him, buying food and handing him bread with every meal.

Sometimes Toxi just sat there staring into space, and I stroked him and talked to him, but he was completely absent, and when eventually he did squeeze my hand, I was almost abject with gratitude, because I saw a sign, a sign; when Toxi took my hand, I knew that I existed and that Toxi knew I existed too, and then I thought once more that perhaps our misery was actually my fault, perhaps I needed to be more pliant and more patient, less aggressive and cynical – he was so sensitive, nature had given him too much of everything, too much pain and too much worry, too much insight and reason. Once, we even wept together because a robin had flown into my window, and Toxi held the little bundle of hollow bones and bright feathers in his hand like a secret or a treasure, and that sent me into a spin yet again, because it reminded me how convinced I was that Toxi was hiding something from me, something he didn't want to share, and then I was much sadder and started crying about the secret rather than the dead bird, until we calmed down and then spent a long time considering where to put it in case it revived and, given all this, it was a

miracle when Toxi got up every morning, smoked two cigarettes on my balcony, lifted his weights and took a shower, and for a brief moment I was happy again to be his servant.

Toxi once told me that Lacan says we can't express ourselves at all, not even when we speak the same language; there's always a gap between the need and the articulation of the need, and no matter how we try to remedy our deficiencies, we never will, we are ultimately condemned to loneliness. And you know what else? he asked. A relationship between two people, said Toxi, was a dialectical process, while complementarity or complete harmony were always interchangeable. If there was no friction, there was no meaning, either. I thought about these words for a long time, and sometimes felt I was on the verge of understanding them, and then I didn't understand anything, and all I realised was that while I should actually have been writing the new book, I had begun to long for something like harmony and unity, and I thought that Toxi had suddenly awakened in me strange and previously unknown desires and fears, fears that stopped me sleeping, that tormented and unsettled me.

Wake up, Toxi, I whispered one night, please wake up, you have to help me, Toxi, Toxi, Toxi. I had been lying in bed with my eyes open for hours, watching the red LED on Toxi's phone charger throwing its poisonous light over half the wall like a little devil, again and again, and just as I began to

make my peace with it, it grew pale, only to then turn red again. I had spent half the night trying to breathe in time with the pulse of the red light, and failing. Everything in the room seemed hostile: the piles of books threatened to topple over; the clothes we had carelessly thrown over a chair wanted to get up and chastise me. Toxi didn't wake up at first, as if he was fine with the evil red light and the objects in the room, and they were only my concern. But I tugged at his arm until he finally sat up. First, Toxi smoked a cigarette in bed, then he stroked my cheek and looked at me, then he said there were a few things I needed to understand, and he began to list these things as if they were common knowledge and he was already exhausted from having to explain them over and over, he rattled them off like a prayer or an official directive, but at the same time added random emphases, like someone whose first language isn't German, and after every second thing on the list he glowered sideways at me. He said there was no safety in this world, my parents were never coming back, each of us is abandoned and has to get along without the *big Other*, and I said but you haven't been abandoned, Toxi, all your people are still here, and Toxi grew slightly impatient and said I would just have to start getting used to strolling through the world without a father or a mother telling me what to do and what not to do. I said, Toxi, forgive me, but I don't think that's the problem here. Toxi continued his lecture undeterred, he said there was no comfort in this world, and I considered his words and watched the red light, and at once everything seemed sad, and I

suddenly felt I had to comfort him, I took his hand and whispered sadly, But Toxi, you wanted to comfort *me*, I'm so scared, and Toxi withdrew his hand and said I wasn't a child any more, and he had no desire to lie to a grown woman at three in the morning.

He never asked what I was so scared of, but that night I told him anyway. I don't know why, but I kept dreaming about Toxi dying, though maybe those are just the kind of dreams you have about people who are unpredictable, and Toxi said I was starting to creep him out with my endless talk of death, and then I lied and said, but it's my own death I'm thinking about, not yours, and it isn't any specific event or illness, I'm just convinced that I am going to depart this life very soon in a really uninteresting way, or at least in a way that can't be avoided by reducing risks or eating more healthily – I'll just trip on my way to the tram and fall stupidly on my head, or get run over by an electric Fiat Cappuccino and fracture the base of my skull. Now I had aroused Toxi's interest; he sat upright and smoked another cigarette, and said he hated death, he wanted nothing to do with it, and I said, that's typical of you Christians, you've got out of practice at being killed, and he replied that in this respect, he was actually more influenced by Spinoza, and then I turned serious again and said it was hard to escape the clutches of death, as I'd had several opportunities to observe, and then I reminded him again of the story that I liked to annoy him with, which was that our love had begun with a death, because on the afternoon before the party where we fell in love, I'd seen a

dead Bengal cat on my way to the tram. It was lying on the road in a pool of blood, and its pretty 3000-Euro face looked dissatisfied and spoiled, its sharp little teeth still glistening with saliva, though there was no doubt it was dead. I turned it over with the toe of my shoe and felt its soft, still warm flesh through the leather. It's hard not to see any kind of omen in a Bengal cat run over in the morning, as I tried to tell Toxi, but as usual he remained stubborn, he could explain everything, but he never wanted to understand anything, and so I told him about the other dreams as well.

I'd been having the same dreams ever since I was little, always about fish: fire fish that died in the aquarium and turned into brown balls; fantasy fish with sharp teeth, chasing me; octopuses I had to save from drowning, who slid their cold tentacles between my fingers and lost all colour in my hands, turning grey. Toxibaby said that really wasn't difficult to interpret, I was constantly having to save someone from death, it made total sense, though maybe the ones who were dying didn't actually want to be saved and simply turned grey in protest, you really are a little donkey – but when Toxi said that, he wasn't angry any longer or concerned, he took me in his arms again, and I felt quite dizzy and almost fell asleep again.

Toxi, I said, when I didn't fall asleep after all, so you think it's an idiotic, romantic idea that you can heal someone with love, and he said come on,

Sweetheart, let me sleep, I'm just saying there's no way out, and then he added that he was right about everything, and it would be better if I just agreed, because after all we weren't children any longer, in fact I was a kind of public intellectual, and suddenly I was wide awake again and disagreeing, saying I just wrote stupid books and was scared of chargers, and then I whispered, the really intelligent people are the ones who live happy lives, and Toxi laughed softly and then said that intelligent and intellectual weren't the same thing, and I repeated the sentence, but Toxi said, that's ideology, Sweetheart, what you're saying is highly dangerous, no one is happy, and anyway I need to sleep. That's true, I thought, no one is happy, and I fell asleep again too. But sometimes, as I've said, our arguments were much worse, and while I was still drying up the cups from breakfast, Toxibaby was already throwing on his coat, pulling a face like he was in terrible pain, stuttering with rage and running out of the flat.

However much I racked my brains, I could never manage to solve even one of our problems, but according to Toxi our great conflict couldn't be resolved; in his view, as an upwardly mobile new member of the petit-bourgeoisie, I was using my social and cultural and sexual capital against him, because of course all Toxi had was a fixed-term contract as a social education worker at a struggling school in Untersendling. Once, when we were yet again brooding over some book or other, he suddenly said that if someone would just give him 20,000 Euros he could finally live the life he wanted, and straight away

I took that as proof that Toxi had no clue at all about money, because 20,000 Euros wouldn't have financed more than a few years of cigarettes, and anyway he would spend it all on designer clothes in the first few weeks. After that, we argued all evening, because Toxi couldn't admit his mistake, even when I broke it all down on the back of a bill from the health insurance company: 20,000 would last 11.2 months at most, and who knew that better than I. And he said I didn't know anything, because for years I'd been splashing about in the German cultural sector, completely divorced from reality, saying yes to everything like a deranged dolphin, and then smiling nicely and submerging again while waving my left flipper, until the next bastard wanted to abuse me for his own ends.

[END OF SAMPLE]