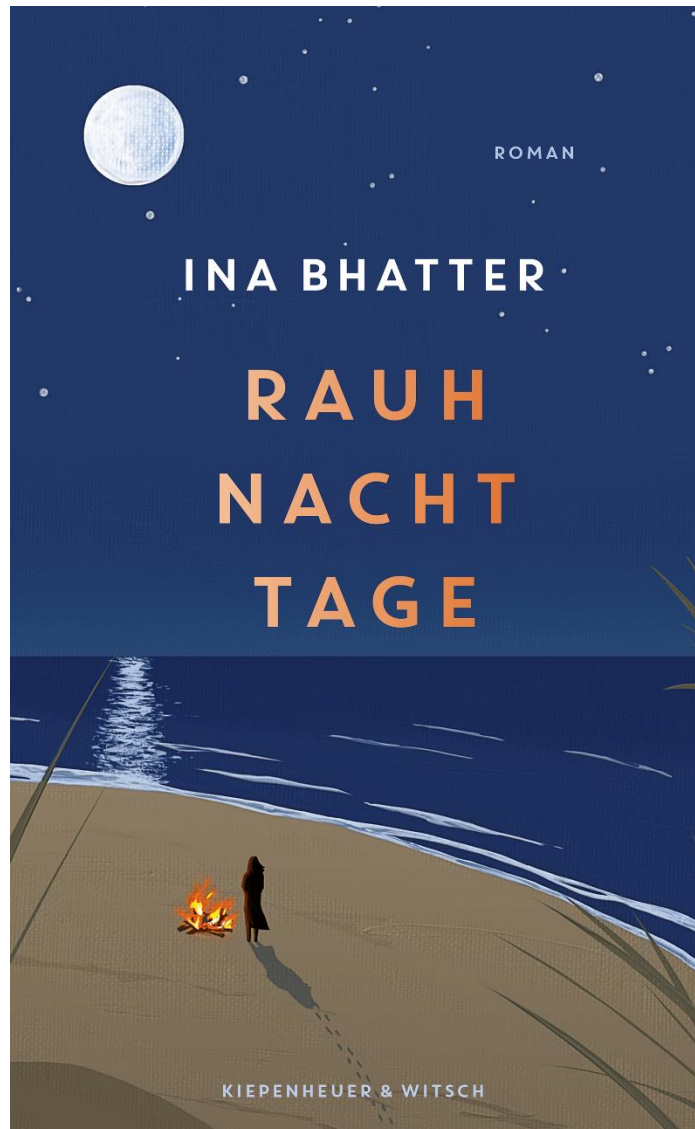


THE TWELVE NIGHTS

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24 DECEMBER

The homemade reindeer stuck to the balcony door smiles back at me, forgiving. Its body's too small for its head, and the antlers so enormous you'd think it were dragging half a tree around with it. By rights it ought to topple forward, but it holds its ground gamely on its hooves. Above it glow coloured stars cut from tissue paper, snipped out by two children who aren't mine.

It makes me think of a picture, black card and that same translucent paper. A house with coloured windows, the moon, a shooting star in the night sky. Every year my mother used to fish it out with the Christmas things and pin it to our kitchen window, and I'd feel so proud of myself. The flat would smell of cinnamon then, of cloves and vanilla, as if the spices had come straight out of the box along with the little smoking man and the tree baubles and the feeling of having a place in this world.

I get up, as if that might shake off the memory that follows uninvited, that hurts so much, clinging to the heels of the magic of my childhood Christmases like some petty thief. I open the big glass door and step onto the balcony, feel the icy December wind on my face and look out into the darkness of this Christmas Eve. In the distance I can just make out a strip of black, glittering sea. I take in the perfect stillness wrapped around me, think of all the families sitting together over roast goose and red cabbage and dumplings by the tree, and know this is going to be a very lonely Christmas.

But that's all right. Christmas hasn't been a place where I feel at home for a long time now. And this year less than ever.

Back in the warmth of the flat I see the crumpled wrapping paper piled in the middle of the big dining table like some gaudy mountain range, next to all the things I've unwrapped. They lie there now, expectant, as though they want something from me: the dark blue notebook with the stars on it, the scented candle that already smells far too strong through its cellophane, the bath salts, the essential oils, pine, frankincense and cedar, the winter tea blend, an empty preserving jar, a bundle of dried herbs, the misshapen gold-coloured bowl. And then, of all things, a book about the *Rauhnächte*. I can't believe my best friend doesn't know me better. Though there's no one here to see me, I shake my head and press my lips tightly together.

I never came across the word *Rauhnächte*, any more than Halloween, until a few years ago. But it's been turning up more and more recently, in conversations, in magazines, in the short videos social media shows me of people burning something or other with meaningful looks and elaborate techniques. I always clicked past them quickly, hoping the algorithm would sooner or later understand it was barking up the wrong tree. And now here it is, this guidebook and the full kit, the whole works! What on earth was Linh thinking?

Slowly I pick up the book, turn it over and read on the back that the twelve days and nights between Christmas and Epiphany are known as the *Rauhnächte*. They're held to be a threshold between the familiar and the unknown. A time for pausing, for looking back and for reading the future, in which the old is bid farewell and room is made for the new. A breath of magic hangs over these days and nights, it says. In certain cultures and regions, the turn of the year has for centuries been bound up with customs and rituals ranging from cleaning the house to telling fortunes.

I just don't get it, I think, and put the book back down like a hot potato. What is it with this sudden enthusiasm for everything old? Only last year Linh was telling me proudly about her paleo diet and trying to eat like a caveman for a month. I told her she'd have been dead by now if she really lived in the Stone Age. And who these days would have a tooth pulled without anaesthetic just because that's how they did it in the Middle Ages? Perhaps our ancestors simply had a great deal of time on their hands and no idea how else to get through the long winter afternoons and evenings. They couldn't go outside, not unless they wanted to freeze to death in the dark and cold or be eaten by wild animals, and watching Netflix or playing Minecraft wasn't an option either. These days we have heating, the internet and electric light. About the only way we notice it's winter is that it stays dark outside most of the time and we need thick coats, scarves and hats for the short walks we do. But we don't have to worry about standing in front of empty supermarket shelves, or about being attacked by some hungry animal. Our ancestors would probably

laugh themselves silly if they could see us sitting in our comfortable homes, trying to pretend we have their problems.

Linh has tucked a letter in among all the presents. For Luise, it says on the snow-white envelope, in fountain pen and in Linh's beautiful handwriting, which I've admired since our schooldays.

Dear Luise,

I'm so glad you're here! Make yourself at home with us and take whatever you need. I really hope you can get your mind on other things here, and above all, find some peace. What happened in the autumn wasn't your fault! I hope you know that.

Look, I've prepared something for you! It's my Christmas present to you. What's in these little parcels could change your life. I tried it myself last year, and what it set off in me was truly magical! I've written you a list, a plan for the coming twelve days. I've put it together from everything I've learned about the Rauhnächte. Trust me, dear Luise, this is exactly what you need most right now!

Happy Christmas, big hug,

Your Linh

What I need most right now, I couldn't say. Probably I need quite a lot, or perhaps, really, very little. A book about rituals and fortune-telling probably isn't it, though. I take the second sheet out of the envelope and unfold it:

Luise's Ultimate *Rauhnächte* Schedule

Preparation: write down thirteen wishes for the new year.

25 December: Grounding. Walk barefoot for two minutes. Journaling: what are my roots?

26 December: Intuition and connecting with myself. Silence retreat, meditation, no screens.

27 December: Open the heart and wonder. Write a letter to myself listing ten things I love about myself.

28 December: Nature and the natural world. Experience moments in nature, look at the stars.

29 December: Spirituality and the mystical self. Reflect on faith and trust.

30 December: Fulfilling relationships. Think of people who have helped me. Send a message to someone I haven't been in touch with for a long time.

31 December: Cleansing. Write down the things weighing on me and burn the paper. Traditional smoke cleansing. New Year's Eve fortune-telling.

1 January: Gratitude. Write twelve things I'm grateful for in my *Rauhnächte* journal. Make a joy list. Reflect on happiness.

2 January: Purpose and inner light. Light meditation. Who do I want to be?

3 January: Vision. What are my goals for the new year? Make a vision board.

4 January: Farewell and transformation. Water ritual. Take a bath with sea

salt to wash away the last remnants of negative energy.

5 January: Transition. Open my final wish. *Rauhnächte* reflection.

At a loss, but touched too by the trouble Linh's gone to for me, I lay the letter and the list down on the table. Anyone who knows me even slightly ought to know that I'm the last person to believe my life will improve just because I light a scented candle, scribble a few sentences in a notebook, or fill a flat that isn't even my own with smoke, come to that. As a doctor, helping people is my job, granted. But self-help rituals have never been my thing.

For a while I leaf through the *Rauhnächte* guide and lose myself among the symbols of smoke and fire, the animals and the ghostly figures that catch my eye as I skim the pages, all haunting the cold winter nights. Just as I'm about to put the book down again, I come across a chapter that actually catches my interest: it's about prohibitions, things you must on no account do during the rough nights, spinning and sweeping among them. I picture myself sweeping out Linh and Tobi's ultra-modern flat with a besom broom, and wonder what era these rules date from. Am I not allowed to weave, either, or forge, or scythe? I take a photo of the page, send it to Linh and write:

Thanks for the book and all the presents! But what exactly am I supposed to do with myself the whole time if I'm not allowed to spin?

Then there's a laundry ban, which, depending on how you read it, applies either just to washing whites, or to hanging washing on the line, or to doing laundry at all. In a broader sense the ban is about letting go of everyday chores, and the guide recommends, to be on the safe side, simply washing all your laundry before Christmas and giving the house a thorough clean while you're at it. Because mess, firstly, attracts confused energies, and secondly, the household is meant to rest more or less entirely between Christmas Eve and Epiphany. As if the run-up to Christmas weren't stressful enough as it is!

On top of that, all outstanding bills are to be paid, borrowed items returned, and no rubbish taken outside after dark. I think of the non-fiction books, on clear communication, on bacteria, on clever finances and Mediterranean eating, that I borrowed from friends because I wanted to read them. Which, to this day, I haven't done. Until now the pile just gave me a guilty conscience for not having opened them. Now I feel bad on top of that for not managing to return them before the year's out.

Reading on, I learn that no wheels are allowed to turn. That's reserved solely for the wheel of fate, with which the goddesses of Norse mythology spin the threads of life. That one I could manage, I think. As I don't live in the Middle Ages, I've no cartwheels or spinning wheels within reach, and I don't own a car either. The only wheel that turns for me, and for most people I know, is

the hamster wheel, and against that, I suspect, not even a bundle of dried herbs stands a chance.

I decide that my life is quite full enough already, and the last thing I need is a book handing me yet more rules and prohibitions. Which puts it, on my ranking of the most covertly unpleasant Christmas presents, right after the electric toothbrush my boss gave me last year, the one that shows me a disappointed face with a turned-down mouth on its little black display every time I've brushed my teeth, because apparently I never do it for long enough. I plug the toothbrush into its charging dock and the dock into the socket. For a bathroom where four people usually shower and keep their toiletries, it looks remarkably tidy, as everything does at Linh and Tobi's. I go through all the rooms and look around. I've been here once before, in the summer, when the two of them, proud of their new flat, four rooms with a balcony and a sea view, had just moved in with the children.

Make yourself at home, Linh wrote, but that's not so easy when the home in question is built for a life so entirely different from your own. I go into the bedroom, see the wide double bed and, above it, the pictures of dunes and sea grass against the cream-coloured wall, like something from a wellness hotel. The living room, with its great wall of windows, the long balcony and the anthracite sofa, opens onto the kitchen, all handle-less cupboards and a hefty dark grey island. It looks like the set for a film about people who throw dinner parties and chat away good-humouredly while cooking, holding those

enormous red wine glasses that wouldn't even fit on my kitchen shelf at home. The fridge is far too full for a family currently away on a fortnight's holiday. As full as the fridge of someone anxious to make sure the person who finds it in their absence wants for nothing. Next I go into the study, with the big desk and the sofa bed I'll be sleeping on. Linh has already made it up for me.

The only room that looks even slightly like mine is the one where the chaos hasn't been cleared away: Emma and Anton's room. From the bottom bunk an olive-green plush Brachiosaurus eyes me with curiosity; up top a unicorn's head with a rainbow mane hangs over the edge; and a teddy bear in a denim dress sits by the window. The goods train, whose track winds an adventurous course across the green carpet, looks as though caught in the middle of hauling a small packet of gummy bears from the door towards the desk. On the wall hangs a picture of a princess with yellow hair, who looks surprisingly cheerful given that her feet point outward at an anatomically improbable angle. Beside it, another cardboard reindeer with a sceptical look on its face, the elder sibling perhaps, the prototype for the specimen stuck to the balcony door in the living room.

To the left of the door stands a shelf full of games and books. I imagine playing Memory with Emma and Anton if they were here now, or Ludo, or Uno, and in my head I can hear their gurgling laughter.

My phone pings.

Then I suppose you'll just have to come into the new year without spinning.

Linh sends a winking emoji and a photo of herself against turquoise sea on a palm-lined beach. She looks so happy!

Have you written down your thirteen wishes for the universe yet? I'm doing it too, it's such a powerful exercise! And remember to word them as if they're already real.

Not yet.

I sit back down at the dining table.

Doing it now though, great idea!

I fetch a sheet of paper and cut it into wide strips. My thirteen wish papers.

As I think about what I might wish for in the new year, I realise the idea isn't so great after all. First, because I feel ridiculous sitting here at the table shuffling these little scraps of paper about as though they were pieces of some unsolvable puzzle. And second, because I can't actually think of thirteen wishes. The thing I want most of all, nothing in the whole of the Milky Way could grant. And every other wish looks small and stupid by comparison.

Far too trivial to send off to the universe, which would either laugh at me or decide it had more important things to do. So what am I supposed to write on these bits of paper? That my hairdryer's broken and I need a new one?

Later, lying in bed with the little lamp switched off, it occurs to me that there's something else still turning, though I'm not sure it has wheels: the carousel of thoughts in my head. I wonder whether that's forbidden during the *Rauhnächte* too. It's round, at least, and I think it should be banned immediately. The extent to which it stops me sleeping the way one is supposed to at night is, frankly, nowhere near *Rauhnächte*-compliant. If only somebody could please come and remove it, then, so the images will finally leave me be?

They come and go, every single night. Every night since that sunny October afternoon: Felix, cycling ahead of me. Felix, flying through the air, his front wheel catching on a root. Felix, lying motionless on the forest path, a large, sharp stone beside him. Me, dropping my bike, running to him, kneeling beside him. Touching his shoulder, saying his name, seeing the blood at his temple, realising he's stopped breathing. Dialling the emergency number. "Young man, cycling accident, unresponsive, not breathing, head wound, suspected traumatic brain injury."

And every time I see myself starting chest compressions, steady, even, see the forest floor beneath Felix's head turning red, feel the sweat running down

my face. If only someone had been there, someone who could have pressed the dressing from my first aid kit against the wound and flagged down the ambulance, whenever it finally came. I see the line of blood running from Felix's ear, and hear myself saying it will be all right, though I don't know that at all. What use are all those years of studying, I think, the exam I'd only just passed to qualify as a specialist, if I can't do any better for him than this? Felix, my good friend. As though in a trance I press the heels of my hands again and again, arms locked straight, into the centre of his breastbone, thirty compressions, then two breaths, over and over. Stay with me, Felix! Please stay with me.

I fetch a glass of water, switch on the light in the living room and sit back down at the table in my pyjamas, where a few hours earlier I'd failed to write down the thirteen things I wish for in the new year. I wipe a tear from my cheek with my sleeve and pick up the *Rauhnächte* book again. It says the ritual of the thirteen wishes is a modern custom that draws on the old traditions of the *Rauhnächte*. Each day I'm meant to draw a slip and burn it without looking, symbolically handing one wish after another over to the universe. The thirteenth wish, the one left over at the end, is the one I'm meant to take care of myself in the new year.

Remember to word the wishes as if they're already real, Linh wrote, and I wonder why. If my subconscious believes the wishes have already come true, wouldn't it try even less hard to make them happen? But the book also

says the wishes should be written in the present tense, and phrased positively and as specifically as possible. There are a few example sentences, along with a suggestion to run through the different areas of life in your mind to find ideas: work, family, health, relationships, leisure, that sort of thing. I pick up one of the little strips of paper, think about my work, and begin to write:

I meet my patients with calmness, clarity and compassion. I take another: *I work with a team that supports and inspires me.* Finding the words comes more easily now: *I feel secure in my abilities and trust my intuition. I have energy for both work and free time. I enjoy learning and growing.*

And then, a good half hour and thirteen wishes later, I'm back in bed. My thoughts feel light and buoyant now, and my body pleasantly heavy, the way it does after a long walk. The images in my head have withdrawn and settled down to sleep. The carousel has stopped turning.

25 DECEMBER

I open my eyes and don't know where I am. I feel around for my phone to get my bearings, and see a message from Linh:

Good morning and welcome to the first day of Rauhnacht! Today's theme: grounding, and strengthening your roots.

I rub my eyes with the backs of my hands and hunt for the light switch on the lamp beside the bed. *Rauhnacht*, what a strange word.

And remember to write down what you dreamed before you forget it. You know each Rauhnacht stands for a month of the new year. What you dreamed last night is an omen for January!

No, I didn't know that, I think, turning over under the warm duvet. Nobody sent me that memo, and evidently neither did the control centre in my head, because however hard I think about it, I didn't have any dreams. Or at least I can't remember anything. What I do know again now is that I'm not lying in my own bed at home, but in Linh's flat, and that Linh isn't here. I sit up and type my reply:

Off to a great start! I didn't dream. Is my January going to be boring now?

Of all months, this absurdly long January, with days that go dark again before they've even properly got light, and more weeks in it than any decent month ought to hold. Linh's reply comes at once:

Don't worry! Sometimes it has an indirect meaning too.

I wonder how something can be indirectly boring. Then I react to Linh's message with a laughing-crying emoji and put my phone down. Boredom, indirect or not, isn't something I'm seriously worried about, in any case. I've quite enough problems as it is. What to do next, for instance, because after six years of medical school and five years of specialist training, I'm wondering whether I can even be a good doctor. Or whether I ought to look for a different job. One where it isn't a matter of life and death. Where a bad day just means a deadline gets pushed back, and nothing more.

When I come into the living room, I see the neatly folded slips of paper lying in a row on the dining table. I remember that late in the evening I did manage to think of thirteen wishes after all. Writing them down had given me the feeling of getting something important done. Afterwards I went back to bed and pictured the universe taking care of them. It wasn't just a comforting thought – the idea felt so lovely that I fell asleep contented.

Now, in daylight, I feel ridiculous. I'm almost ashamed that in a fit of night-time naivety I believed, for a moment, that it might actually work. And even if

it did: what use are these slips of paper, when everything I'd ever planned for my life – being a doctor, helping people, opening my own practice one day – lies shattered on the floor in front of me?

Felix was the most life-loving person I knew. He saw the good in everything and always managed to make other people laugh, even when there was nothing to laugh about. Without a second's hesitation I'd give my wishes to Felix, and give the universe a good hard kick up the backside too, to make sure it did everything in its power to grant them.

I press the button on the coffee machine, fetch milk from the fridge and slide the tube of the milk frother into the carton. I love coffee, even the filter coffee from hospital break rooms, with cold milk and sugar cubes. This is luxury by comparison. I carefully pull open the larder cupboard and discover various kinds of muesli and cornflakes, round ones, flat ones, ring-shaped ones, pink, yellow, wholegrain, maize, nuts or dried fruit. I go for the maize one, with almond flakes and honey. It reminds me of the television advert I used to see so often, the family sitting at a laid table in the middle of a wheat field, spooning up exactly these cornflakes in high spirits. I always wished I could sit there with them too, so free and untroubled.

I nudge the thirteen little slips carefully towards the edge of the table and let them slide, one after another, into the empty preserving jar, like ducklings taking their first swim in a pond, then pick up Linh's *Rauhnächte* schedule

again. For today, the first of the *Rauhnächte*, it says: Grounding. Walk barefoot for two minutes. Journaling: what are my roots?

The cornflakes are far sweeter than I expected. I look out through the big pane of glass at the sea. If I were a tree, my roots would run deep. Dry, but sturdy. And cut off on one side, though nobody looking at the surface would ever see it, because the tree grows on regardless, just as it should.

I grew up alone with my mother, and my childhood with her gave me enough love to last a whole lifetime, probably. Mama loved me enough for two, for herself and for my father. For the rest of the family I never had.

I have no memory of my father. He left when I was still a baby, around a year old. My mother never spoke about him. As a teenager I thought about him a great deal. Whether he'd gone because I was such hard work or cried too much. Whether they'd have stayed together if I hadn't existed. In the end I concluded that he hadn't left because I was irritating, but because I wasn't important. Because my mother wasn't important. I never went looking for him. I didn't want to meet him, even when, many years later, he wrote us a letter. Because could there be a bigger idiot than a man who left a woman like that? Who didn't bother with his own child and instead built himself a new life in a new country with a new woman, as though you could shrug off your family the way you'd pull off a woolly hat that was itchy?

I write “grounding and roots” on the first page of my *Rauhnächte* diary and draw a tall tree with branches and leaves, and a tangle of roots winding underground, but only on the left-hand side.

Then I pack my small rucksack and set off for the beach. I don't meet a soul. The streets are quiet and empty. Just a few gulls pecking half-heartedly at the harbour wall. Although I've caught what's probably the window of maximum daylight for my first walk, everything is grey, the sand, the sea, the sky. Three bands, as if ruled with a straight edge, different shades of the same tone, like the paint sample cards you pick up free in DIY shops. Ice grey, sand grey, slate grey. I breathe in deeply and out again, close my eyes and try to make out that unmistakable smell of the coast that no bath additive in the world can imitate.

Every year in the summer holidays we went to the seaside for two weeks, Mama and I. My mother would lie on our big yellow beach towel with the red spots and read, while I tore about barefoot on the beach all day, digging my feet into the sand, building sandcastles, playing in the waves. At midday we'd get fish rolls from the seafront promenade, ice cream later on, and in the evenings we'd fall into bed content and worn out. For one brief moment the thought warms me. The idea that we could be here together, in the summer. I could tell her about my life, and she'd listen to every word.

I take off my shoes and socks, roll up my trouser legs and set off. The soles of my feet send a signal to my brain telling me, in no uncertain terms, to put my thick socks straight back on, and the memories of childhood summers retreat, offended. *Nice try, but a complete deception, nowhere near warm and safe.*

I set my timer for two minutes. Like a fakir walking over broken glass, I put one foot in front of the other on the cold layer of sand, try to sink in as little as possible, try walking faster, but none of it helps against the stinging feeling creeping up from the soles of my feet to my calves. This has very little to do with grounding or feeling one's roots, as far as I can tell, unless the roots in question are genuinely this painful. I take a photo of my bare feet in the sand for Linh, then walk towards the water, which plays at the shoreline like the hem of a magnificent gown, with that incomparable sound only the sea makes. I close my eyes and would love to enjoy it properly, the rushing, the salty air, this clarity, if only it weren't so appallingly cold! Tentatively I stretch one foot towards the waves, which come and go with real force, until a single millilitre of water touches my toes, and I snatch it back, startled.

I'm just about to check my phone to see whether the two minutes are up yet, so I can put my shoes back on, when I notice something moving between the waves off to my right. I blink a few times, not sure whether I'm seeing things. Now I can see it clearly: someone is swimming towards me with fast, powerful front-crawl strokes. A man. I stare at him, disbelieving. He reaches

the shore, comes out of the water and takes a deep breath. For a moment I forget that only seconds ago I was worried my big toe might freeze off. Instead I feel as though I'm on some fashionable surfing beach in a country where the sea is warm and the sun is strong and the *Rauhnächte* are a world away.

"Hello," the man says, glancing at me, briefly but warmly. He looks young, and like someone who swims often. He nods at me, walks quickly over to a small pile of clothes a few metres away, unfolds his towel and dries himself off.

"Hello," I say, and can't stop staring at him. There's a lot about him that fascinates me. That he's simply standing here in his swimming trunks, for one thing, and that his skin, despite the cold, isn't blue but rather pink. The way he moves, so effortlessly. But most of all his eyes. I try to work out why.

Then my timer goes off. The man smiles briefly as he wraps himself in a thick white bathrobe and rubs his tousled dark brown hair dry. I fumble in my jacket pocket, say "Oh, the two minutes are already up," and switch off the alarm. The man's smile widens, and he quickly looks away, a little embarrassed. I turn back to my shoes, because my feet have heard the alarm too and are now insisting more forcefully than ever that I put my socks straight back on, and my head tells me I don't need to stand around looking foolish any longer,

while something else in me, which might be my heart, tells me to stay. Keep talking. Say something more sensible. Smile back.

My feet and my head win, backed up by my own self-consciousness, and I say "Bye" and hurry off towards my shoes. "Bye," says the man, slips into a pair of big blue flip-flops and heads off in the other direction.

On the way back I wonder how anyone can swim so casually here, as if we were at the equator, and whether there's a worse opening line in existence than: *Oh, the two minutes are already up*. Then again, it makes no difference at all whether that man now thinks I'm completely mad, since I'll probably never see him again.

Back at the flat I make myself a tea, a bag from the packet of winter varieties Linh gave me. It's called Fruit Magic. I send Linh a photo of myself with the cup, along with the feet-in-the-sand picture, and settle down on the sofa under a woollen blanket. The tea barely tastes of fruit and even less of magic, more like hot water with a hint of flavouring. I stir in some sugar, light the scented candle and pick up the *Rauhnächte* book again. I leaf through it and read that there's an explanation for the tradition of the twelve nights: an old rift in the calendar, a tear in the fabric of time, arising from the fact that the solar year is longer than the lunar year. For many hundreds of years, it says,

the *Rauhnächte* have been considered a kind of in-between time, especially permeable. The old hasn't quite gone yet, the new hasn't quite arrived.

Permeable to what, I wonder, and open my laptop to look into it properly: our solar year follows the arc of the earth around the sun, an orbit of 365 days. The lunar year, by contrast, counts twelve lunar cycles, which together add up to only around 354 days. Between the two there remains a gap of twelve nights. Earlier cultures already placed the *Rauhnächte* within this span, days during which the veil between the two worlds grows especially thin. I stand up and look out of the window, at the houses and the sea.

I know the two worlds, I've seen them myself: there's the one reality, in which we work hard and chase recognition, growth, the feeling that we matter. And then there's the other one, which stays hidden from us until, without warning, we're pushed into it, or rather, fall into it. After that there's no holding on. We lose the ground beneath our feet. That other reality becomes so all-consuming that we wonder how we ever managed to exist so long without seeing it.

Once we've discovered that it exists, we can no longer ignore that knowledge, however much we might want to. We're pulled into this parallel world when we're confronted with our own mortality. When someone we love falls seriously ill or dies, when we ourselves receive a terrible diagnosis. When that happens, the door opens onto this other world, one we'd only ever

vaguely known existed, somewhere, but not for us. And suddenly we're right in the middle of it, and everything that mattered to us before means nothing any more. Only then do we realise how many of us there are, how many people like us, how many have fallen out of ordinary time.

As someone who has herself been the bearer of news that forces that door open, news of only a few weeks left to live, of hearts that have stopped beating, of brains starved of blood for too long, I know this: the moment we step into that world is merciless, cruel, immeasurably forceful. Nothing can take away the pain we feel, nothing can undo the loss we suffer, and nothing can reconcile us to the feeling that a great wrong has been done to us.

I understood that long before I became a messenger of the kind of news that divides people's lives into a before and an after. I understood it back when my adolescence was coming to an end. It happened many years ago, between my final school exams and Christmas, when Mama was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and, within a few weeks deteriorated so badly that I barely recognised her. Pancreatic cancer, a monstrous word, a monster. A pile-up of syllables that shouldn't fit together at all. I read everything there was to read on pancreatic carcinoma back then, picked apart study data and wrote to organisations, so as not to sit by and do nothing while the most important person in my life became less and less of herself. I knew nothing about medicine at the time. But I knew I never wanted to feel that helpless again.

I read on a website about the *Rauhnächte* that during the rough nights we're closer to the dead. The boundaries are more open between the old world and the new, between the outer and the inner, between the everyday world and the otherworld, the world where the ancestors, spirits and myths are said to live, along with dreams and intuition.

In the afternoon I think about getting some fresh air again. It's dark, and I can't go shopping, not today, on the first day of Christmas. I still want to have a look round the place, though.

It's raw and damp. Fine drizzle settles on my face as I step out of the house. The seaside town looks like an abandoned village. Strings of fairy lights hang in the narrow lanes of the old town, and the windows of the houses hold candle arches, candles and angel figures. The smell of roasted almonds drifts towards me from an open window. I hear voices, and pans clattering. So there is life in this place after all! I just can't see any people. They're all indoors, having a lovely time, together with others who mean something to them. I tip my head back and look up at the fronts of the buildings, imagining the decorated flats inside, Christmas carols, the smell of baked apples, children playing board games or reading stories with their grandparents, and couples curled up together on the sofa.

As a teenager I believed Christmas had to look like it did in the films my mother and I watched together on television every year. I believed something was missing from my life. A father, a little brother, an older sister perhaps? A

golden retriever, certainly, a house with a front garden and electric fairy lights outside, and a big family who came to visit us at Christmas, laughing warmly, bags full of presents with big golden bows. And usually the snow was missing too.

These days I know that Christmas is a feeling, and that the magic we attach to it does not come from perfection, but from belonging. I also know that I was never as close to it again as I was back then. I just never told my mother that.

[End of sample]