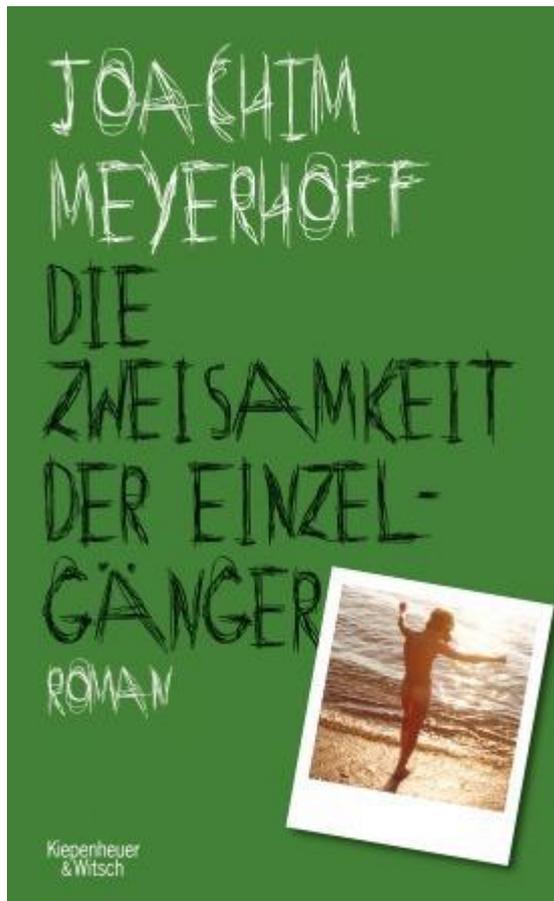


Sample Translation (pp. 7-40)

# **The Togetherness of Loners** **by Joachim Meyerhoff**

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*When I was twenty-three, I moved to Bielefeld to work as an actor at the municipal theatre. In order to find somewhere to live, I stuck up photocopied notices on junction boxes, lampposts and traffic lights around the city centre, each with its bottom edge carefully cut into little strips that had my mother's telephone number on: fifty-four eagerly fluttering pianos. That evening I made my first inspection, curious to see if one or more of the paper strips had already been torn off. I'd decided on the most straightforward wording imaginable:*

**Young actor seeks a small, bright, quiet apartment!**

*I'd deliberated over the order of the adjectives for ages, swapping and flipping them, as if the success of my search wholly depended on it.*

*I wandered through the unfamiliar city. All of the notices were intact. In fact, one of them had been added to. Underneath my statement on one of the posters, someone had written in thick felt tip pen:*

*to die in*

*Young actor seeks a small, bright, quiet apartment to die in!*

*It didn't seem like a good sign.*

*Having said that, before I left Bielefeld for Dortmund after only ten bitter months, I did meet someone.*

*The first great love of my life.*

“Do you want to kill yourself?” This was the first thing she ever said to me, and I’ve often wondered whether I should have taken it as a warning. I’d been watching her for the entirety of the dull opening night party, captivated by the way she looked. Big teeth, big eyes, a flat nose, extremely short hair. I liked her immediately. We kept snatching looks at each other, and in fact – she was even smiling a little. Her head moved strangely mechanically, as did her arms and hands, each one moved like it was separate, independent of the others, as if each body part didn’t match up with the rest. But this made me see her all the more clearly. Elegant, but also somewhat stiff – there was definitely something robotic about the way she lifted the beer bottle to her mouth. Depending on the way her head was tilted, one of her eyes was either partially or completely covered by falling strands of hair, while the hair on the back of her neck had been completely shaved off. She was wearing an outlandishly frilly white blouse, a dark blue pleated skirt with ridges and creases that swung to and fro in well-organised waves, dark tights, and old-fashioned shoes with rounded toecaps. It took some effort to take my eyes off of her for even a moment, to not endlessly stare at her. There was something all-out odd about her. But I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. Was it her nose, which had a sprinkling of freckles and looked like it had been squashed by a strong punch, or her pouting mouth with its bright red lipstick? Was it the slightly too thick eyeliner? This face was strangely thrown together: mouth, eyes, nose, all oversized, and the sum of these parts could so easily have resulted in a rough and ready whole. But it didn’t. I couldn’t be certain: did she look stunning or grotesque?

No matter where I was loitering at the party, I always knew where she was. An inner magnetic needle stubbornly pointed in her direction. When I turned away from her, I had to do so against some resistance, as if I was trying to work my way out of a force field. When I turned back towards her, it practically spun me around. Her gravitational pull on me grew over the course of the evening. My feet wanted to go over to her, march right up to her and place themselves in front of her. But without a plan, without having mulled over something to say, it seemed too daring an approach, and it was only once I’d hooked my arm through a bannister and firmly gripped one of its railings did I feel like I wouldn’t succumb to her force of attraction against my will. I talked with one of the other actors about the performance, whether it had been a success or not, whether the audience’s subdued response indicated they’d been deeply moved or just bored. During the conversation, without interrupting what I

was saying, I looked directly into her eyes from across the room. It was a beguilingly casual and intense moment. We caught one another's eye over and over.

I followed her to the dancefloor. I'd never seen anyone dance like that. So clumsily. Hands balled into fists, as if she was shuffling about on invisible ski poles, which she used to stamp about on the spot out of time. That's how campers flatten uneven ground before putting up a tent, I thought to myself. Was she being serious? Was she making fun of herself? Or was that really how she danced? She looked over at me with an ironically seductive look, throwing her white blonde hair from her brow with a quick flick of her head, bending and stretching her arms like she was testing out new joints, and opening her eyes wide. I had to laugh. She momentarily made a serious face and then turned her back on me. I was mortified, had I offended her?

I'd been very agitated before the premiere so I'd forgotten to eat. My neglected stomach grumbled at me, and I went into the adjacent room where the buffet was still laid out, though it had already been raided by a horde of hungry Huns. Only the ragged salad leaves used as decoration were left on the emptied trays, torn and mashed, like the badly wounded waiting to be transported away after a brutally fought buffet battle. A few chicken schnitzels were still suffering in one of the zinc coffins, the last reserve – who'd barely evaded the mob – were still a bit warm, but not far from their soggy demise. While I stacked the third schnitzel onto my paper plate I was suddenly aware that she was right behind me. But I didn't turn around, I was bewitched by a force on my back, a pleasurable sense of danger. It was as if I were approaching a gorge walking backwards, or more accurately, as if the abyss had rushed up to meet me. A crater seemed to gape right at my heels.

“Do you want to kill yourself?” Her words made me whip right around. Her gaze was so assured and aggressive, as if after a huge row, and it hit me full on. I tasted something I couldn't get my head around: smoke. It scratched at my throat. Biting smoke, like from a campfire made from young, damp wood. I cleared my throat several times. Where did this ashen taste come from? “Hey, I asked you a question. Do you want to kill yourself?” “No, I don't actually, should I?” “Maybe.” “Why?” She gave a shrug with her already slightly hunched shoulders and replied “To gain a new experience?” I was taller than her, and looked down on her from above. The part of her forehead directly above her nose was hard and flat, a circular zone, a stubborn, even obstinate little plate. That, I thought to myself, would be the

perfect place for a horn, that's exactly what it looked like – as if someone had cut a horn off of her forehead and then smoothed down the place where it had been cut with sandpaper.

“Are you really going to eat three of these disgusting schnitzels? That's suicide. There are far more refined alternatives. Or do you have a headache?” “A what, sorry?” “I asked if you have a headache?” I hesitated. She continued: “In factory farms the chickens are packed together so tightly that they rub up against each other and get open wounds on their wings. The pain makes them aggressive, so they peck each other's eyes out, or kill each other. That's why they get given painkillers in their food. At least that way they won't feel their injuries and they'll keep still. The growth hormones make them so fat that their joints swell up. Then there's the antibiotics. They hobble unsuspectingly through dark passages on their way to their mass execution clucking quietly to each other. If anyone could speak their language, they'd make out things like ‘They told me that they're taking us to a wonderful, green meadow’ or ‘Don't worry you lot, we're all getting our own nests’. The trusting dears that they are, they scuttle ever onwards towards their new life. But then they fall through holes onto conveyor belts, are fixed into position, mechanically beheaded, blanced, plucked, slit open and gutted. Impaled on hooks in their thousands. Stark-naked, hanging upside down, and headless, they're jerked along the death carousel out the death factory to the packing block. The very same night, their dismembered bodies – the amputated thighs and wings – are laid out on little Styrofoam beds, shrink wrapped and distributed over the whole country in freezer trucks along deserted autobahns in the early hours of the morning. Fresh from the shelf to your table. Pumped full of drugs!

She tapped the breadcrumb crust of my schnitzel with her painted fingernail. “All that stuff stays in the meat. Ingesting even a tiny lump of this tortured shoe sole not only helps with headaches, but coughs and fevers too. They should give these out on prescription. The hormones might give you man boobs, make your hair fall out and vital body parts shrivel up. If I were you, I'd seriously think it over. Bon appétit!”

It felt like I'd been entered into a highly professional game, but I didn't know the rules. No one can catch that many balls at once, let alone throw one back. “No, it's...” I tried to find the words, desperately flicking through the dictionary in my mind, but all the pages were stuck together, “actually I was just...” But before I could even finish my sentence, she shouted “Please don't say: hungry. Please, please don't. That would be so boring. You weren't going to say you were hungry, were you?” So it didn't go anywhere. I had to

gradually wake up, fire up some kind of engine that I didn't even know I had. But I wasn't wholly convinced by the one answer I could muster. "To be honest" I hesitated, trying to create a bit of tension, "I was getting the schnitzels for *you*, because I thought *you* might be hungry after dancing!" She screwed up her eyes in a flash, sized me up with a green rattlesnake gaze, momentarily giving her a masklike expression like a Madame Tussaud-waxwork dummy. She raised her chin, the smooth forehead tautened, and the spot where the horn had been cut off was aimed right between my eyes. It really looked like she was going to head-butt me, run me through with something invisible. "Are you telling me the truth?" I nodded. "You wanted to bring me these three schnitzels on the dance floor?" "Sure, would you like one?" "You're lying! I can see it all over your face." "Why would I lie? Here, help yourself." I held out the plate. I'd never been looked at like that before. Even winking seemed to be a sign of weakness that could bring me on the defensive. I would have liked to have just got to know her and elegantly nudged one or two juicy witticisms her way, like prodding a balloon through the air with my finger. But after the first five minutes together it was nothing more than standing up to her, of withstanding her, of not making a fool out of myself. She was quick-witted and I was witless, listing. She was taking quick breaths, and I wondered if her blouse was unbuttoned one crucial button too far on purpose or by chance. Our gazes were locked and inseparably welded together. Who was going to break them apart?

"I'm going to ask you for the very last time" her voice was stern, the words flew out tonelessly. "Did you *really*, and I mean *really*, get these three schnitzels for me?" She said 'really' in such an exaggerated way that her hare-sized incisors looked like match heads where they'd got a little red lipstick on them. What was going on here suddenly seemed to be about much more than the three gone-cold schnitzel corpses I was still proffering like a fossilised Stone Age waiter chiselled out of the rock. Her eyes had changed. She eyed me up sceptically. I tried to concentrate. What was the right answer?

"Fine," I said, "If you really, and I mean really, want to know the truth..." I imitated her, chewing on the word *really*. "They are" I held my breath theatrically "for me. All three of them! I'm absolutely starving." I picked up the top schnitzel and bit into it like a rugged poultry farmer.

She beamed at me. Beamed, then flinched. "Ouch, whenever I smile too wide the corners of my mouth rip. It sucks. I'm put together all wrong. I can't laugh properly when I'm happy. But you managed to do it with your outstanding chicken schnitzel number.

Thanks for the pain.” A little blood was collecting in the corners of her mouth. She beamed at me with a wide vampire grin. I gave her a serviette from the buffet table. She dabbed the swelling pearls of blood from the corners of her mouth. A circular mark spread in fast forward across the white of the heavily absorbent paper. She waved the bloody little flag at me triumphantly. It’s that easy to make a Japanese flag, I thought to myself. “Did you know that in the Russian language, the word for blood can also mean beauty? So when you say ‘I love your beauty’ you’re also saying ‘I love your blood’. Or if someone slits their wrists, for instance. The Russian mother enters the bathroom, discovers her daughter and screams “Oh, my child! My child, who I love above all things! Blood everywhere!’ she also means: ‘Oh, my child! My child, who I love above all things! Beauty everywhere!’” She was round-eyed again. This seemed to be her favourite expression, these bizarre, bulging eyes, this frosted marble gaze with an expanse of impeccable white around the iris. She wiped the corners of her mouth again. “Oh my God, I can’t bear the sight of blood, I think I’m going to faint!” Catastrophically badly – but all the more captivating because of it – she performed the oncoming fainting fit. She made her head flop backwards and swayed her body from side to side like a drunk. Her hair, which I thought might have been bleached it was so unnaturally light, fell across her eyes. “Help, help me. I’m bleeding!”

She suddenly clawed at my forearm, closed her eyes, stood there limply and turned chalky white. “Damn. Wait, wait a moment.” After a few moments of her breathing in and out gingerly, she whispered “Ay me, ay me. I don’t feel good. Is it ok if we stand just like this for a moment? I’ll be alright in a minute. Mon dieu. I haven’t eaten a thing all day.” She released her firm grip, her hand lay slackly on my arm, as if she were waiting to be lead to a formal dance. She had strong, stubby fingers, nails chewed right up past the exposed pale-pink nail bed.

“Can I do anything? Should I get you a glass of water?” I asked with concern. “Just a moment. I feel dizzy.” I wanted to say something but she heard me inhale and immediately went “Psssst” And breathed: “Aller a nouveau. Que je ne tombe plus cher” I didn’t understand a word. So we stood there, a pair of marble statues among the tangle of guests. She pressed her thumbs into my forearm a couple of times, very matter-of-factly, the way someone would check the ripeness of an avocado. I didn’t have the faintest clue what it meant. Was it affection, or a test? The minutes went by, and if I as much as shifted my weight, she hissed: “Pss-pss-pss...” She pawed around in the air like a disorientated blind woman, knocked against the paper plate, picked up a schnitzel and waved it in front of her

face, flapping it like a fleshy fan. “Air, air. I need air” She opened her eyes, but it was more than just opening her eyes, it was as if something had leapt out of her. She couldn’t just see again, her gaze shot out of her eyes like tyres burning rubber. She burst out laughing. “Haaaaa, haaaaa, haaaaa!” she sounded mad, like a loopy dictator in a trashy B-movie. “Did you fall for it?” I was perplexed and had become tired from standing around for ages. “You thought it was real!” Her bright, clear, delicate skin flushed a triumphant pink. “A brilliant performance, right?” I nodded. “Absolutely, I completely fell for it”. “Come on, don’t look so glum. It was a lovely rest”. She opened her mouth wide, stuck her healthy incisors into my schnitzel, tore into it ravenously until she’d bitten off a good half. Chewing, barely comprehensible, she asked me: “May I have a bite of your schnitzel?” I answered with an over the top “NO!” and then “Don’t tell me you’re hungry?” Without having to think it over for even a moment, she answered, smacking her lips like in a well-oiled comedy. “Oh nonsense, I’ve got a terrible headache.” We both laughed and something very strange happened. I saw her laughing, but I didn’t hear it. My own laugh, however, seemed very loud and powerful. The only explanation for this whinnying miracle of sound waves could be that she had laughed at exactly the same frequency as me. That we had hit the same note like two perfectly matched instruments and had merged into one single laughing tone. As she wanted to spare her ripped mouth corners she tried to laugh through only one side of her lips. This gave her a wild expression, and made her look like a very cheery witch.

“If this carries on I’ll have to go to a mouth corner surgeon to get my gob sewn up.”

“Do you maybe want to go for a walk?”

I was just as stunned by this question as she was. My question had got passed all the check points and safety inspections without the correct papers and had brazenly jumped from my tongue into the outside world. No thought had preceded these words.

Perhaps, I thought later on, every person carries around a few words they’re unaware of, that lie dormant and unnoticed within them, and that could alter their entire lives. A little double-action word revolver, whose bullets unexpectedly fire and undeniably, uncontrollably blast into existence. Of course, after months of anguish and hundreds of secretly attended therapy sessions one might be able to say “I can’t be with you anymore”. But it can also come to pass that such words are released like a shot, an unknown deep-seated force turns the tap and releases the words into the sluice. “I’m leaving you” or “I hate you all”. “What did you say?” “That’s right, I quit. I’m packing my things and I’m never coming back.” This

concept is as terrifying as it is liberating because sentence like these can slyly undo an entire life, but also trigger something, something disillusioning that once seemed to be beyond the realm of possibility. Now, the question ‘Do you maybe want to go for a walk?’ doesn’t quite sound like a life-changing moment. But it was for me, because I was anything but brave when it came to these kinds of things. Planned out and sharpened in my mind, a line like this would never have left my mouth, this I’m absolutely sure of. It’s far more likely that it would have made its descent, bypassed my heart, deeper and deeper into the darkness, until it had reached the well-populated graveyard of missed opportunities.

“Do you maybe want to go for a walk?”

She threw open her eyes. She looked like a dazed goblin after the boulder blocking its cave had been rolled away after countless centuries. She took a step away from me and began to speak, carrying out a conversation with herself at high speed with a put-on voice.

“Hey, I’ve just been asked if I’d like to go for a walk” “What, just like that?” “Yeah, can you imagine. Oh my God!” “Hey, be careful, you don’t know the guy! It’s the middle of the night.” “Do you think he’s dangerous?” “You never know.” “Well, he seems pretty harmless to me.” “Harmless, or dull?” “I’m not quite sure.” “Is he good-looking at least?” She gave me a scrutinising look up and down “Well, he’s alright.” “Well that’s clearly a ‘no’.” “Mind you, he did make me laugh” “Well then, if you really want to, do it!” She nodded at me and said in a deliberately sober way: “I may.”

“Great.” “Are there any schnitzels left in the tub? They’re delicious.” She ham-handedly removed the lid with a clatter, picked up two more pieces of meat, one with each hand. “Supplies!” she roared “Hey look, this one looks like Corsica, and this one’s like Sri Lanka. Although...” She gnawed on a piece “this spit of land has to go. Damn. Too much. Now it looks like Hungary. We’ll also need something to drink. Go get some beer and I’ll procure us some cigarettes. *Les cigarettes transforment les pensées en rêves.* I’ll get my coat.”

I went to the bar and was unsure of how many bottles I should buy. Suddenly the number of bottles of beer became the yardstick to measure my expectations for the rest of the evening with. Two bottles looked a lot like half-an-hour-then-I’ll- be-off. Two each is reasonable, I thought, but what if she really wants a third, and I didn’t want her to have to drink alone. “Six bottles of beer please”. I’ve always been someone who has been able to irrationally intensify situations in a matter of seconds through overthinking things. Two

thoughts, four thoughts, eight thoughts, sixteen, thirty two. Now, for instance, I'd ended up worrying about what I should do if the opportunity to hold her hand or hug her while swinging six damn beers through the night should arise. While I waited, I spiralled deeper and deeper into frictional thoughts operating on alternating currents. Con: Her morsels of French annoy me. Pro: I'm captivated by her quick mind. Con: Her constant side-stepping puts me on edge. "Pro: Her wide eyes almost burst with boisterous energy. Con: Does she really think I'm ugly? Pro: I made her laugh. Con: She's going to see the six bottles and think I'm only after one thing.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder: "Good evening. I believe we have an appointment." She saw the beer bottles. "I'd actually booked a night time stroll and not a piss-up. Come on then." We left without saying goodbye to anyone. She seemed to have been at the party on her own. It occurred to me as we made our way down the stairs, that she seemed like the kind of person who had overcome their feelings of loneliness at home, had got up in a feat of strength and had got dressed up to take their mind off of things for a while. To shut off a part of herself for a few hours from the moment the front door was closed. She climbed down the steps with noticeable effort. She took each step one at a time and gripped the rail tightly. When she saw my inquiring look, she said "Stairs and I, it's a sad tale. We're not on good terms" "Can I do anything?" "If you have any good ideas, then please do". I fiddled around with the bottles and supported her weight. I helped her down, step by step.

It was still incredibly warm outside, and we walked seemingly aimlessly through the city. Through Bielefeld. I had the bottle necks clamped between my fingers, three in each hand. She smiled and only said a couple of words: *beer paws*. It was nice walking beside her. The length of our strides fitted well together. We sat on a bench with *criminal damage forbidden* spray painted across it, I lined up the bottles in front of us, and we ate the filched schnitzels. I deftly popped the tops off two of the bottles on the sharp metal bar of the backrest, and got an approving, but also amused raised eyebrow. She said “Oh wowie!” took the beer and drank with her eyes closed, putting her top and bottom lips around the bottle neck like a small child. She suckled down half the bottle like this. “Ahhhhh” As time went on, the things she did or the way she looked at me gave the impression of being a reference to something else. She didn’t just go ‘Ahhhh!’ like someone who had thirstily drunk a few mouthfuls of beer. She went “Ahhhh!” like someone imitating someone going “Ahhhh!”.

She spat on her serviette. “I’m sorry, but I can’t stand it any longer. You’ve still got make up on you.” And before I could turn away or say anything, she had moved closer to me and was wiping my eyelid with the wet corner of the serviette. “Don’t worry, I do this every day. Stay still, will you.” She wiped my eyes meticulously. She smelled good, very faintly of herself and of something else. But once again there was this smoky itch in my throat, this tenseness deep down inside it, a tickle in my larynx, an ashen taste I couldn’t get rid of by swallowing. “You look a bit like a tranny. I’m not sure if Bielefeld is the right place for that kind of look, though I’d wager to say it’s not. Or is it deliberate?”

She’d actually hit a hole in one. I liked not taking all my make up off after performances and going around with eyeshadow and dark eyelashes. “Na, it’s just so tedious taking it off”, I explained. “Are you finished?” “Nearly” I kept seeing how the tip of her tongue poked out between her lips with reptilian velocity and lubricated the already badly smudged serviette. I could smell her spit on my face. “Right, look at me. Yep, that’s better. How about a cigarette?” “I’d love one.”

In spite of massive resistance from my body, well-trained after many years of exercise and high-endurance sport, I’d escalated from being an opportunistic smoker to a steady, habitual one. To begin with my completely healthy physique was incensed if I smoked. I’d

feel sick, my lungs would cramp in disgust, every alveoli screamed and every bronchial roared: “What the hell are you doing? Are you crazy? Stop it!” and my taste buds, stuck in childhood mode, would signal a ‘Code Red’. My father had smoked Roth-Händles for decades, and his illness, and premature death, must have had something to do with this particularly strong brand of cigarettes. To ignore this fact, to smoke against this better judgement, gave me a thrill, a defiance of reason that in the course of the weeks and months that followed would spill over into other areas of my life. The reclassification of wrong to right would become an absolute obsession.

“I’m sorry, I missed the chance to ask what your name was. Now it’s almost embarrassing.” She gave me a cigarette and said “Oh, how lovely, now I can say the greatest line of the twentieth century: Got a light?” I patted my trouser pockets. “Damn, no.” “I do.” She felt around in the pockets of her coat, a black, second hand, well-worn trench coat, which she wore with the collar up. She held the flaming lighter in front of me, made an inquisitive expression, raised her eyebrows, a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, and coolly blew smoke over the edge of her collar. That’s what I really liked about her right from the start; that she was always ready to play, that she could make all the clichés that surround us and threaten to bog us down completely harmless through tireless sleights of hand and her ironic mirroring. “Well, tell me your name” “Guess.” “What?” “I think you mean: pardon!” “Pardon?” “Guess.” “That’s impossible. How am I supposed to do that?” “Oh, come on! You can do it. What name suits me?” “My God!” I exclaimed into the lantern-bright night sky, a blackbird tweeted in a state of light-induced confusion “there are a million names. How am I supposed to guess yours? “We’ve known each other for ages. Have a go.” “How am I supposed to do that? That’s absurd!” She moved away. “You see, I told you the guy’s a complete bore!” “Fine. I’ll try.” I drank a mouthful of beer, nibbled around the label and said “Rumpelstilzkin!” She suppressed a little laugh, I definitely saw it. “Very funny. Come on, tell me what my name is.” She was being completely serious. “Alright, but you have to give me some time.” “Of course. Nous sommes jeunes et avons temps éternelles. Main thing is that you get it.” “Before I try I just want to let you know that I don’t speak a word of French” “So what. I don’t understand everything you say. Come on, tell me what I’m called.”

What did I know about her? As good as nothing. She couldn’t dance, she had a problem with stairs. But to infer a name based on locomotive anomalies was futile. Is a Hannelore more likely to fall down the stairs than a Rita is? Purely down to her French expressions, which sounded like perfect mother tongue French to me, I reached the

conclusion that she had a connection with France. What a meagre trail, but it was the only trace in sight. What French names did I know? I had to find something special, something not too weird. Do we look like the names we have? It may well be. But I was always astounded by how a one hundred percent dreadful name can be neutralised by its owner, how it can even become ennobled, and someone can say: ‘Hello Herbert’ or ‘Hello Detlef’ without even the slightest displeasure. It was obvious to me that I wouldn’t be able to guess the name, but I made an attempt to at least say a name that she’d find flattering, that would be a compliment. It was at this point that a jumping neuronal spark of my memory lit up. My parents had owned a record with a women singing in French. Her thick, black hair framed her face in the style of Cleopatra, her eyes were made-up dramatically. I tried to remember her name, formed the alphabet letter by letter with my tongue in my closed mouth. I often rediscovered missing persons using this method. As if the tongue was a feeler inside the brain that exposes the whole name through scanning the first letter. I’d already reached H without sensing even a hint of a connection between tongue and the space where the name should be, before I felt an intense response from J. I appended second letters onto it purely phonetically. Je – Ja – Jo – Ju? – Ju? Ding! Direct hit: Juliette Greco.

“Okay, I have a name.” She discarded her cigarette, sat up straight, ready for her summer night’s baptism. I hesitated for a moment, surprised that I really believed it possible to have found her real name. I tried to pronounce it with as much of a French accent as I could: “Juliette”. She didn’t look at me or say anything. She sat there as if she’d just received a devastating diagnosis, her back hunched pitifully. After a while she weakly shook her head. Should I actually feel ashamed that I hadn’t successful guessed her name? I’d known her for about a hundred minutes, and I should feel responsible for this bitter disappointment to this extent? “Yeah, I’m sorry.” I lit up my next cigarette while she quietly spoke to the pathway. “There are no miracles.” “Yeah. I mean, I’m sorry” We sat in silence. Then she straightened up. “Try again. Come on, you still have one more chance.” I put on a beseeching tone of voice, whimpered “Please. Enough. It’s impossible” “Nonsense. Look, now you can cross off one name. That’ll make it easier. You weren’t that far off!” “Oh, really? How about: Jutta?”

“Come on, don’t be mean” She punched my upper arm, and I was immediately convinced that she must have at least one older brother, so accurately had she found the place where the muscle was, which really hurt. We were both a little hysterical, and I liked it. “Come on, use your last chance. My God, don’t look so mystified. It can’t be that difficult. Spit it out!” I held my hands in front of my face and shouted into my palms: “Ahhhhhh –

Judith!” “Correct.” I turned towards her with a jump, and felt the alcohol in my system. “You’re joking, right? That can’t seriously be your name? Your name’s Judith?” She looked at me dismayed, the nostrils of her flat nose moved in a way I’d never seen before. It looked more like a trick people do at social gatherings to score points, like wiggling your ears or touching the tip of your nose with your tongue. Her nostrils fluttered and her eyes shimmered. I carefully asked “You’re really called Judith? Really?” She nodded, and my heart started racing, something in my brain started to sparkle and I couldn’t help but grin. One of my goofy smiles, which I instantly started fretting over, and which I was unable to suppress. If someone had in this moment drilled holes in my skull, a focused beam of light would have shot out of every single opening. “What’s up with you? Why are you doing such a gross smile?” “What just happened is absolutely unbelievable.” I grinned, “I guessed your name! That’s crazy!” “Well, it wasn’t that difficult. If it wasn’t Jutta or Juliette then there’s not that many options left. *La vérité appartient à ceux qui la cherchent*. I served my name up to you like a severed head on a platter”. In a fit of hubris I shouted: “Right, and while we’re at it: Now I’m going to guess your surname. Look at me. Wait.” I gnawed on my top lip, pretended to be weighing up my options and hoped I resembled a scientist examining a rare insect. I came very close to her face – where was that forest fire smell coming from – then put a reappraising distance between us and said: “Konradi. Judith Konradi? I’m right, aren’t I?” She couldn’t help laughing. “Absolutely correct. You’re a psychic. Wow, what a shit name. Sounds like someone the police are after. Judith Konradi was last seen yesterday around noon. She was wearing a red woollen hat. Violence can no longer be ruled out. But we are not requesting your cooperation in this matter as no one will miss her. If you see Judith Konradi on the street, keep it to yourself. In other news, Frau Konradi’s arse is slowly going numb. Shall we keep walking?” She knew the town substantially better than I did, and walked purposefully down narrowing side-streets.

When I moved to Bielefeld, I’d boldly resolved to shed my years of cluelessness with regards to fashion in order to finally create something close to my own style. I’d cut myself off from the unruly curls that grew out from the double crown at the back of my head once and for all, and had bought myself a set of hair clippers, which I used to shear myself while kneeling on the floor. All one length: 0.3 millimeters. The stubble that I gathered up and carried to the bin in the palms of my hands looked more like someone had shaved a mole, and not an up-and-coming actor. This small heap of hair looked miserable every time, and every time I saw this hair I was a small heap of misery. Clothes wise, I’d disassociated from

anything colourful and swathed myself only in black. Very tight black t-shirt to show off my biceps, with the tightest possible black V-neck jumper over it, but the t-shirt collar was absolutely not allowed to be visible underneath. Tight black jeans with a belt and a big silver belt buckle. I had two designs to choose from. An entwined snake motif à la Medusa and a buckle I'd brought back from my exchange programme in Laramie, Wyoming: a Rodeo cowboy, mid-jump. Something had gone terribly wrong with my choice of shoes, which was becoming more and more apparent while walking through these quiet streets. I'd bought so-called biker boots, ankle-high black leather boots with a wide strap across the heel and instep. The salesman advised me to have them iron-shod to make the soles last longer, which I then over-keenly got a cobbler to do. When I went to pick up the shoes, the cobbler had both his arms in casts and his left eye was completely swallowed by the blue, green and purple swelling on the side of his face. A charming, old-fashioned little bell rang as I entered the shop – and then this. He placed the boots on the counter one by one with his teeth, told me the price, and I had to put the amount in the cash register and take my change myself while he stood watching me from behind like a demented cyclops. Even a full minute after leaving the shop I could hardly believe what had just happened. The boots, however, only made me happy when I was standing completely still. When I walked they clacked on the ground penetratingly loudly and if I walked quickly I sounded like a two-legged horse in a rush. By exerting extreme pressure on the toe from above I tried to deaden the clacking, gently placing the sole on the asphalt. I was walking so peculiarly next to her because of this that she ended up stopping and asking me: "Can you tell me what you're making such a song and dance for?" Caught in the act, I stayed standing there. "Why are you creeping along next to me like a weirdo? What's up with your shoes?" "We've still got four bottles of beer" I said, just to say something "Great counting, Fred Astaire!" To get myself out of the dead-end I'd gone down in my ridiculous boots, I brought up a subject that had either intentionally or unintentionally been avoided up to that point.

"What did you think of the premiere this evening?" I'd played Tybalt and had spent the last few weeks doing hours of fencing training. She took a sip of her beer, gave me a sympathetic look and said: "Terrible. I haven't seen something as wretched as this production in a long time." I wasn't completely sure whether I'd understood correctly, or whether what I'd understood had been meant with all seriousness.

The rehearsals had been arduous. The young director came from Berlin, he wore clunky skull rings on every finger and had made all the actors despair through his cool

incompetence. He kept reading unspeakable entries out to us from his diary. I remember this one line: “The landscape behind Magdeburg is so great for fucking in.” He’d even shouted at me: “Dude, I don’t see your pain!” A week before the premiere he suddenly burst into tears and out-and-out begged for our help, for us to not let him down. Lying between the seats in the auditorium sobbing, he whimpered “I can’t do it. I can’t do it without you.” We reached an agreement and worked non-stop for the remaining days. I thought the evening had definitely been a success. She had a different opinion. “I didn’t know where to look, it was so embarrassing. That Julia!” she shouted “It’s unacceptable for a thirty-year-old who looks like a forty-year-old to play a fourteen-year-old. And she’s doing it in the buff. Skipping around with her saggy boobs shouting: Romeo! Oh, Romeo! I thought she’d lost it and was looking for her child. And Romeo, he’s gay right? The way he fenced! Prick, prick, prick. Like an absolute pansy. No, really, I mean really, there wasn’t a single good moment. Nowt. No love, no magic, no hate, no plague, no politics, no form. Unspeakable rubbish. Shakespeare’s language, Shakespeare’s lines, they’re like billiard balls. They have to collide off of each other. Forces need to be released and transferred. There needs to be friction. Heat coming off of the language. The heat is located within the language and not within this Julia, disfigured by vice and childbirth” – these were her words, disfigured by vice and childbirth – “running after a gay Romeo. And you could see that they were disgusted by one another from the back row. I can’t stand stuff like that. That can...”

In order to not be completely buried by her avalanche of words, and to not fall silent underneath the heavy snow load of her disgust, I shouted: “You do know that I was in it too?”

She looked at me almost tenderly. I’d never thought it possible, and every time I thought about it afterwards it would still puzzle me, how someone could say such cruel things with such a disarming expression: “Do you want to know the truth? The real truth?” I nodded: “Of course I do!” “Fine” she said softly “You were worst of all. In your too-tight leather trousers. Shirtless. Are you out of your mind? It’s a theatre production not a fencing tournament. And can you tell me why Tybalt speaks with a north-German accent? Tell me, does Tybalt come from Hamburg or Husum? And the way you died.” She started laughing. This laugh! It sounded like my own laugh. Even though laughing was out of the question for me, it felt as if it wasn’t her laughing, but me. I was laughing at myself. ‘The way you rolled around on the floor minute after minute. You were shrieking so loudly you didn’t hear the audience sniggering.’”

While she berated me she grew more and more beautiful, she blossomed. Her toadstool words slowly spread within me, unfurling their poisonous influence, and I felt how my anger and offense grew more and more, caustically eating away at my dumbly nodding expression. I was hurt, speechless, I wanted to shove her and run away, and was truly paralysed by her toxic words. The worst thing about it: the bitter recognition that she could be right. “They laughed while I was dying?” “They sure did! Couldn’t you hear during your death throes?” Wounded silence. “Oh come on!” her big teeth were chattering. “I’m getting cold. Shall we move a bit faster?”

She once again pretended to converse with herself, her head moving this way and that: “You’ve hurt his feelings!” “What am I supposed to do about it? He wanted to know the truth. I even asked to make doubly sure.” “Was the performance really that bad?” “Well, just between us, it was the biggest pile of shit I’ve ever seen” “That doesn’t matter, you have to do something, otherwise he’s going to run away!” “Yeah, but what?” She stood in front of me, took a step towards me and hugged me. Her hair was directly under my nose, but I could barely smell anything. In my mouth there was this taste of burning again. I probed around my mouth with my tongue. Campfire romanticism for dinner. Where was it coming from? Was she a pyromaniac? Was she wearing carbonised underwear? She whispered “You’re so fragile.”

No one had ever said that to me before! “You’re so fragile.” This was a sentence I immediately knew I would never forget. A sentence that had been outside the range of possibility for me, I’d never dreamed of such a thing ever being said about me. And yet I had longed for this sentence. At first I thought, what kind of sentimental nonsense is this? But then it slipped inside me, found its place, a free spot as if made especially for it. Everything that directors and fellow actors had ever said to me, without exception, whether full of praise or critical, I’d found in an uncomfortable way to be rather awkward. It would get jammed inside me, and I’d compulsively get the urge to take up a position, to even have to defend myself. But this sentence fit, it fit perfectly. Just as every person carries a few words around with them that want to be expressed, there is also, I thought to myself, a few sentences that we’re all waiting for, words that we have no idea could be pertinent to us, and which will make it possible for us to rethink who we are. “You’re so fragile.”

She let her hands slide over my back, pressed her fingers to the left and right of my vertebrae. It felt medicinal, like the procedure for a spinal operation. I put my arms around

her too. Long, floppy monkey arms. She looked up, opened her eyes so wide that her forehead didn't know what to do with all the skin that crimped into umpteen folds, and lay her head against my chest. We stood there motionlessly, like at the party. Were her thoughts racing just like mine were? I was a hugged monument on the outside and an anthill in a state of emergency on the inside. I closed my eyes and was suddenly sleepy, as if the dark was stroking my forehead with the back of its hand to soothe me. The minutes went by. Then I began to suspect that the minutes no longer quite knew how long they should last, when exactly a minute was up and they should make room for the next minute already waiting impatiently in the queue for its turn to huddle against us and spend its short minute-life with us. I imagined them, this long queue of minutes that had sought us out especially, a couple on a warm night not budging from the spot for inexplicable reasons. And because it's so wonderful with us, one of these minutes begins to misbehave and clings on, trying to stay a little longer, and the other minutes shout out: "That's it, time's up, you've elapsed. Stop it! We're up next." "No, I want to stay. A minute's longer than you think." "That's not up for discussion, you better get out of here, our great moment is about to start" Hundreds of seconds are lured in and whirr all around the minutes. If we were to stay standing there even longer, perhaps an hour would majestically arrive, I digressed further, shooing away the troublesome minutes with a powerful paw, whispering to us: "Take your time. It's me: a whole hour" Oh boy, avalanches of thoughts are coming down in impenetrable regions of my brain. I carefully lift my eyelids and look around without moving my head. It couldn't have been a more unremarkable place. Pathway, street, facades, doorways, parked cars. Her and I, I thought, are surely the most exciting thing to have happened to this run-of-the-mill corner of the world in a long time. For umpteen years this dreary view of the street still had a couple of pieces missing. But now, the final decisive pieces had been put down – a she-piece and an I-piece – and they fit exactly. The place where her ear lay against my chest had become so warm through the fabric that it was as if someone had pinned a newly cast medal onto me, and her hands on my back had accumulated finger-shaped warmth. I would have liked to have pressed her against me, but that couldn't happen. She had designated distance and duration. I was torn. One minute I thought: it's wonderful standing here. I could happily stand here the whole night till the sun comes up. Shortly followed by: right, that's about enough, I need to move. An unpleasant, unromantic nervousness was building up inside me, which I tried to hold back and push away. Who was this woman in my arms? We stood and stood. And time seemed to no longer be interested in us, and was languidly lumbering off with boredom.

Then she said “A thousand”, removed herself from me, took my hand and pulled me out of the image. A thousand? What did that mean? Had she hugged a thousand men like this? Was I her thousandth man? Nonsense, that was impossible. “What do you mean a thousand?” “Your heart,” she said “is doing strange things” “How’d you mean?” “Sometimes it races, then it jolts, then it almost stops. Sounds a bit disorientated.” “You counted that?” She nodded and I asked “Really? I mean: really? To a thousand? She was visibly pleased that we had our own little game. “Of course: really.”

We kept walking hand in hand, and it was the first time in years that I’d tolerated this whole hand-holding thing. I’d never liked being lead around like a child by someone. It would unsettle me and throw me out of step. I would invariably revoke my hand from previous girlfriends and explain to them that I found it ridiculous and infantilising to the individual. Holding hands would be absurd. Bottom line: Children walk holding hands with their mummies, men make their way through the world alone. But it was surprisingly pleasant with her. “And do you know what the very worst – I mean, really, really worst thing, that you did was?” she seamlessly continued the conversation we’d broken off half an hour ago. “No. But I’m sure you’re going to tell me” “Even though you’d died half an hour before the end of the play, you took your bow with no shirt on. It was so vain. It makes me shudder just thinking about it. And your wig!” She had another laughing fit, clapped her free hand over her ripped mouth and shrieked into her own laugh from the searing pain of the split corners. I tried to laugh with her, but I couldn’t quite do it. We kept walking without talking about the route we were taking. Across the city centre. At first the streets were getting steeper, and then narrower, and more and more of the houses had gardens. She took off her coat and threw it at me. “Keep going, I’ll catch you up” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, wiggled her bum and started to lift her skirt in the middle of the pavement. I was so confused that I didn’t move from where I was standing. She shooed me away, wagging her hand at me. “Oh man, keep going. I have to go. What kind of creep are you? Police! Police!” I hurried on a few steps and stayed put. I heard her peeing. It sounded remarkably forceful. I looked around. She’d disappeared between the cars. If I hadn’t already known who it was peeing I would have put money on it being a tubby guy, a tanked up Oktoberfest goer who’d had ten beers too many. I heard her steps on the pavement behind me and I turned around. She was still rearranging her skirt and tucking her blouse in. We turned off into a cul-de-sac where there were only a few isolated villas. “This is where the properly wealthy Bielefelders live. A woman was found in one of these palaces recently. Dead. Along with her mummified dog.

None of her rich neighbours knew anything about it. She'd laid herself in state out on the bed, festooned in all her jewellery and the dog curled up next to her. Both of them skeletonised. She had numerous rings on each of her bone fingers. She lay there bedecked like a reliquary. Vases of dried out flowers all over the place. She was wearing a silk nightgown that was so fine it had sunken between each of her ribs. I wonder if she had killed the dog herself or if it had cuddled up to its dead mistress until it had died and withered too. What's especially peculiar is that the soup on the table was still warm when they found her. And somewhere that way," she pointed up the slope "is where Doctor Oetker lives." Far beneath the steeply sloping gardens was the city, content and filled with drowsy lights. The little street ended at a turning circle in the shadow of some trees, behind that was a pitch-black wood.

"Come on!" She dragged me head-first through the leaves into the darkness beyond. "I can't see anything. Not even you!" I said quietly, daunted by the coolly breathing impenetrability. "We just have to wait a little until our eyes have got used to it and the blindness will pass". While we stood there a thought came to mind, but I hesitated saying it out loud because I wasn't remotely sure I would be able to reach her level of eloquence. "My father worked at a psychiatric hospital." I began carefully. "We lived on the huge hospital grounds. The patients would scream in the night. Really loudly. I liked it." "You liked that someone was madly screaming?" "Yes, absolutely. I didn't know any other way. I happily fell asleep to it. It being so dark and quiet here made me think of it, the patients' screams. Darkness and silence – do they really go so well together? It makes me think of the patients being gagged, or silenced, or long dead." She didn't reply, but her silhouette looked rather sympathetic. Out from the blackness surrounding us emerged the contours of a way through, and we overcautiously felt our way into the darkness. With each step we became surer of ourselves, our worries of walking into a branch faded.

I'd plucked up some courage. "Have you ever tried walking along and seeing how many steps you can take with your eyes closed without opening them?" "No, what's the point in that?" "I've always found it fascinating how quickly an inner panic sets in, an ancient mistrust that makes your eyelids open against your will. The body begins to twist into itself, it coils like a worm into the unknown, and after thirty steps you're paralysed with fear." She let go of my hand and began to count. I watched as she began to drift after three metres. She advanced straight-backed and briskly. "Six, seven, eight, nine." For a moment I had the impulse to warn her, but what of? Was that my task? I let her keep walking. "Ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen." She'd already walked into the first set of branches. "Watch out!" "Fourteen,

fifteen.” Branches cracked. She broke through the undergrowth like a startled boar. I lost sight of her. “Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.” I heard a muffled wooden sound and a deep intake of breath. Silence. She’s crazy, I thought, and shouted “Judith? Are you OK?” There was a rustling, and between the tree trunks I saw a shadow rolling around on the ground. I went in its direction. It picked itself up. “Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one.” She just kept counting, and it looked as though she was passing through the trees, pushing her form through the trunks. Then came the next head-meets-bark impact. But she kept counting. “twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Done. I did it. Where are you?” I felt my way over to her. “Are you OK, Judith?” “Pardon? Oh right, yeah! Thirty steps into the unknown. That really was something. Huh, where have I ended up?” “Did you notice how the panic rises?” “And as if every step’s your last. A tightrope walk into Nirvana. Highly disconcerting and enlightening. It was like every organ was getting its own individual fright.”

I took her by the elbow and stooping forward we fought our way through the branches back onto the path. She smoothed down her skirt, plucked leaves off of her tights and out of her hair. “You’re right. After three steps the not-knowing starts itching wildly inside of you. Each step further makes it worse, pulls the noose tighter and feeds the fear. My stomach has a completely different kind of panic than my lungs. And my spleen was the biggest coward by a long way! Thank you.” “Did you really keep your eyes closed the whole time?” “Yes, of course, and when I opened them it was still dark, but the panic vanished.” “Didn’t anything happen to you? I heard a weird noise.” She didn’t answer, took my hand, and pulled me on.

We wandered down the woodland path for an age. At a fork in the road I found a primitive wooden sign nailed to a tree. I held up her lighter and just like in the film *The Spessart Inn* the etched writing flickered: *Hotel Restaurant “Eiserner Anton” 2km*. The air in the wood was significantly cooler than in the city, and there were sharply defined, ice-cold swathes of air that smelled like granite that we’d enter for only the duration of a single step, as if rushing passed a freezer with the door open. “Beautiful and creepy at the same time” she said, and the double whites of her eyes floated unnaturally like cue balls in her blacked out face. “It has to be here.” She let go of my hand. She took a few steps forward, a couple back, and then disappeared like in a magic trick. “Here, come on, through here.” An even smaller and steeper path, we had to keep stepping over roots that looked like petrified elephant tusks in the dark. The two remaining beer bottles struck against each other like glass castanets, and I heard myself wheeze from the exertion.