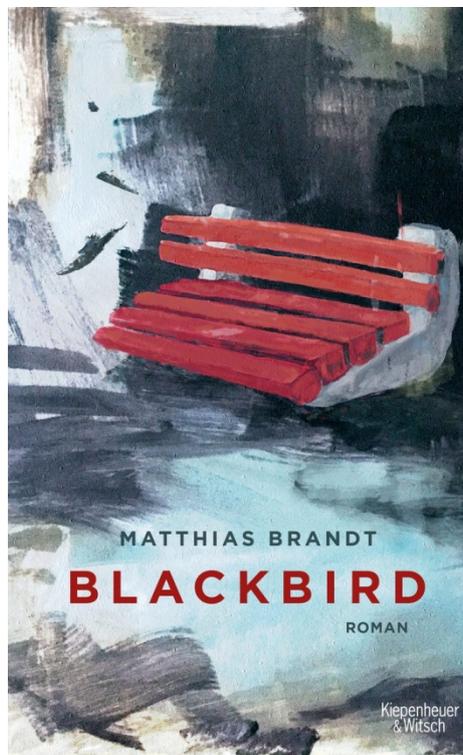


BLACKBIRD

by Matthias Brandt

Sample Translation by Ruth Martin



Novel

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Iris Brandt (ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de)

Aleksandra Erakovic (aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de)

ONE

–Mid August –

Why wasn't anyone answering the phone?

The bass was pumping up here in my room, but I could still hear the constant ringing from downstairs. A rustling and crackling came from beneath the cracked red patent leather I was lounging on. There was a little hole in the left-hand seam, and whenever I flopped down onto the beanbag, a few of the little Styrofoam balls it was filled with would shoot out. I moistened my finger with spit, collected up a few of the little balls and flicked them. The third one (finally!) stuck to the ceiling.

After the eleventh ring, I jumped up after all: it might be Bogi calling. I ran down the stairs and, although the phone in the hall was closer, went to the one in the living room. Or at least, what had been our living room until recently.

It was now just full of half-packed cardboard boxes. My father and his new girlfriend were moving to some little backwater I wouldn't want to be seen dead in. It wasn't quite the arse-end of nowhere, but you definitely see the arse-end from there. "My partner," he'd said, a little sheepishly, as we stood facing each other in his room, and all I could think was that I wouldn't use that word for someone I was in love with. Not that I had any better suggestions. And why would I? I was fifteen and not in love with anyone. At least, not the way my father was in love with this Claudia.

My mother and I didn't know where we were going to live yet.

On the way to the phone I passed the half-bald cockatiel. "Poo-face," I hissed at him, hoping that eventually he'd repeat it. Rather than just staring at me and ripping his feathers out.

I picked up the receiver without saying anything.

I never did. After all, the caller had phoned our number, so *he* was the one who needed to explain who he was and what he wanted.

"Er... Schnellstieg."

"What?"

"Schnellstieg. Mr Schumacher?" said the caller.

"Nope, this is Morten."

"Oh, I see. Morten. Hello. This is... Dieter."

"What?"

"Mr Schnellstieg. Dieter Schnellstieg. Manfred's father. Bogi."

"Oh, right, yes. Hello."

"Yes, hello Motte."

"Hello."

It had taken a little while for me to grasp the situation. Him too.

Bogi's father had called me.

I'd never spoken to him on the phone before.

Whenever I phoned Bogi, either he would be waiting for my call and pick up himself, or it was his gormless sister Anette, or his mother. But never his father.

Bogi was my best friend and his real name was Manfred Schnellstieg. But no one except teachers actually called him that. Or maybe his parents, sometimes.

Bogi had been called Bogi ever since that breaktime time a few years ago when Udo Mönch asked us if we'd seen the film last night with Manfred Bogart.

"Eh?"

"You know, that film!" said Udo. "What was it called again? Cassaplanka! With Manfred Bogart!"

We pissed ourselves laughing, and that absolute moron Udo Mönch stormed off in a huff. "Are you taking the mick? What kind of name is that – Hampfree?" he roared at us as he left.

And after that, everyone called Manfred Schnellstieg Bogi. And it wasn't like there was another Manfred in our school. He had his parents to thank for that, for giving him such a great name. Seriously, people. Manfred. Really?

By rights, Udo Mönch should have been given a nickname after that little episode as well. And not a nice one like Bogi; something like dumbbell or space cadet. But the guy was so stupid we couldn't come up with anything for him, not even that.

What did Bogi's father want with me? Were we in trouble? Had he found the Amselfelder that Bogi had hidden in the garden? Our tournament trip was scheduled for that weekend, and a few days previously we'd bought two bottles of red wine in Kaisers to take with us. They didn't ask for ID in the supermarket, even though they knew us, and knew that we

were too young to buy it. Amselfelder, a Yugoslavian wine, was the second cheapest they had. But the even cheaper wine was made of blackberries, and someone had told Bogi it gave you the shits, so we decided to steer clear of that one.

“Wonderfully digestible”, the label on the Amselfelder bottle said, “pressed without stalks and stems”. If I was honest, I couldn’t imagine what was meant by digestible. It sounded like it was for old people. Also: wine made from stalks?! “Digestible” probably just meant that you’d only throw up later, rather than right away.

“That Blackbird-fielder has a real kick to it.” Recently Bogi had started translating everything into English, and I’d thought: alright, Bogi, and how come you know that, if we’re going to be trying it for the first time on the trip?

While Mr Schnellstiege and I were speaking, I imagined him standing at home, by the old phone in the hallway. Twisting back and forth in his beige corduroy slippers with soles the pinkish colour of gums. I could prove the gum thing because Bogi and I once took one of his father’s slippers into the bathroom at their house to compare it with his dead grandmother’s false teeth, which were still sitting in there. One minute I had a clear image of Bogi’s father in my mind’s eye, and then it would grow hazy again. Like when you looked through the frosted glass in the swing doors at the Schnellstiegs’ house that separated the porch inside the front door from the hallway. When you first came into the house, for a moment it was like everyone on the other side of those doors was a ghost, not a real person, or as if they were shrouded in

mist. It was only once you had gone in through those doors that they gained a clear shape, and you could tell them apart.

“Is there a problem with the football trip?” I asked.

“No. Now, listen a minute. I’m afraid Manfred – er, Bogi – has had to go into hospital. He won’t be able to go.”

Even the Schnellstiegs called their son Bogi now.

How come he was in hospital? He’d been at school the day before. “See you tomorrow,” we’d said to each other. And now it was Saturday; we were supposed to be going to the football tournament that afternoon. I didn’t understand what was going on.

“Are you still there?” Mr Schnellstieg asked me.

“Yes.”

“Yes. They’ve, er, found something and they need to run some tests. Because, if it... Well, that’s why he’s in the hospital. St Joseph’s.”

“Oh, I see. St Joseph’s,” I repeated, as if I was some kind of expert on hospitals.

“Ahem,” Bogi’s father cleared his throat. “Petra! Can you come here a minute?” he called out. “I’ll pass you over to Manfred’s mother, alright?”

“Hello, Motte?” Now Bogi’s mum was on the line. I let out a sob. Oh, great, this had set the blubbering off again. It kept happening to me recently, though I had no idea why. Just like that, pressed without stalks or stems.

“Oh, listen, Motte, there’s really no need to cry. Manfred was at the doctor’s yesterday afternoon for his vaccination. And

they found something that they thought the hospital should take a look at. But it's probably nothing."

I sniffed loudly and said nothing. Nor did Mrs Schnellstieg. We both just breathed into the receiver for a while. Bogi's granddad had once told us that the Nazis wanted people to use good German words and say "long-distance-speaker" rather than telephone. And to call the receiver a handset. They had issues.

Then suddenly Bogi's mum was crying too, although just five seconds before she had been telling me there was nothing to cry about. She was crying very quietly, but I noticed. When someone doesn't want other people to know they're crying, the sniffing is the first thing you hear.

What now? We were both weeping, and I still didn't really know why. The doctors wanted to take a look at him, she'd said. Aha. Eventually I just hung up.

I went back upstairs to my room. Everything has just changed, I thought to myself. No, I have no idea what I was actually thinking. I might just have wondered whether you could still see the impression of my bum on the beanbag.

Before I closed the door, I paused for a moment; I'd heard something behind me. "Coco!"

The cockatiel. What an idiot. Get knotted, Coco.

TWO

– Mid September –

I took the number seventeen to the station, then changed onto the four, got off at the museum, and from there it was only a five-minute walk to the hospital.

For a few days already you could tell it was starting to get dark earlier again. It was a week until my sixteenth birthday, and three months until Christmas.

I'd arranged the visit with Bogi's mum. The others were going to come later, to say hello to Bogi. Others meaning Walki – Detlef Walkenhorst – and Jan Borowka. But we couldn't stay too long, Mrs Schnellstieg had said, because the treatment meant that Bogi got tired very quickly.

It was weird. Bogi, with whom I'd spent almost every day for years, had disappeared from one minute to the next. I couldn't actually remember how we'd become friends. One day he was just there, in my life, and I was there in his, and from then on neither one of us ever questioned it. And now all of a sudden I couldn't talk to him, and all I got were these weird messages from his mother. That he was very pleased to hear I had sent my regards, that kind of thing. So bizarre.

The last time we'd spoken, before he went to hospital, it had been about... okay, fine, we were talking about farting.

About lighting farts, to be precise. Bogi knew a fair bit about the subject, in all seriousness.

For instance, he knew that methane farts burned well, but carbon dioxide farts, the kind you get from drinking too much Coke, didn't.

Things like that. We didn't know it would be our last proper conversation for a long time. If we had, then obviously we'd have chosen a different topic. Pythagoras' theorem. The hypotenuse, the catheti. God knows. But we didn't. In any case, Bogi had just read somewhere that you should never light your farts, because there might be a backdraft, and then you'd explode or something. He'd done it a few times – the lighting, not the exploding – and now he'd retrospectively scared himself. On the other hand, he was in hospital now anyway, I thought. A stupid thought, but you can't help the things that go through your mind.

Anyway, it was one of Bogi's hobbies. I'm not making this up. He liked talking about it, and he did it often. Farting, I mean, not talking. Well, talking too, but not as much as he liked farting.

Okay, that's enough of that now.

I had to cross Kaiserallee, which wasn't an easy matter, because I didn't want to traipse all the way up to the pedestrian lights. Everyone drove like the clappers down here. The speed made people crazy. They bombed through the city at 100km an hour and thought that made them the greatest.

And they thought that even if – I don't know – they were the caretaker at the Brahms school, for instance, like Mr Schaff.

And he definitely wasn't the greatest, I could prove that. Mr Schaff had recently bought a leather belt with a wide buckle that said "*Chef!*" on it. Now, think about that: you actually have to go into the shop, see the belt and think, wow, great belt, and then go to the sales girl and say: this is the exact belt I want, this one with the insane buckle. This is the buckle I like best out of the, I don't know, hundred and seven others in the shop. Much better than the ones that say *War* or *Peace* or whatever else. But – and listen to this – Schaff then went straight down to his basement workshop and took his soldering iron or his welder, or whatever it is you use for these things, and made a big S to go in front of the Chef, and then turned the exclamation mark into a second f, which was only partly successful. So that now, if you tried hard enough, you could read it as "SCheff". Not even "SChaff". The whole thing was kind of depressing. It just meant people stared at his groin, trying to figure out what was written there.

But – important question – why on earth did *I* find this embarrassing? Could anyone explain that to me? Schaff himself obviously wasn't embarrassed by it; he strode proudly along the corridors at Brahm's, hips first.

The answer is that idiots have never found anything embarrassing. Schlager singers don't, either, while we're on the subject. You could only become a Schlager singer if you weren't embarrassed by anything. There's no way you could do it otherwise. Like the dorks who went on that cheesy Dieter Thomas Heck show, singing folk-pop nonsense in front of all those people. Although, on the other hand, it was also funny.

Or, I thought, Dietmar Rosin from the top year, for instance, who got a tattoo on a school trip to London, but had got drunk with the tattooist beforehand. And now he had “Led Zelepin” on his right bicep. It was no surprise that he was still trying to pass his final year at the age of 21. Walki said, incidentally, that Rosin was already starting to go bald. And he was still at school! Seriously.

Anyway, the school caretaker Karl-Heinz Schaff might be bombing along here right now in his mouldy Ford Taunus, while I was trying to get to the other side of Kaiserallee.

And another thing: just before the holidays, when Schaff and his new belt were the hot topic for us, our biology teacher Mrs Strobel had shown us a film about cattle farming in one of her lessons.

“The belted Galloway has unusually coarse hair and can weigh over 1000kg,” the film’s narrator said. As the projector rattled, Mrs Strobel was concentrating on her macramé or whatever that stuff is called. She’d seen the film about a hundred and thirty-four times already.

And at the exact moment the narrator said those words, Schaff actually appeared in person outside the window, raking up big piles of leaves that Walki, Jan and I, and the others, would kick over once he’d gone, spreading the leaves back out to where Schaff had raked them up from.

That was long before he got his mental leaf-blower. Anyway, we fell about laughing in this stupid biology lesson, and Mrs Strobel couldn’t understand what was so funny about the film.

Why this crap came into my head just then, when I was trying to cross the road, is a mystery. It was a mess in there. I was probably just a bit worked up because I was about to see Bogi for the first time since he'd been admitted to hospital, and I was trying to distract myself.

In the end, I did somehow manage to get across Kaiserallee. There was a long red-brick wall separating the hospital grounds from the road. After a while, there was a gate on the right.

I looked at the man in the gatehouse and waited in case he was going to ask me anything. To see my ID or something, I had no idea how it all worked.

But the man just nodded and said nothing.

His illuminated box looked like an aquarium. Mr Gallenkamp, our physics teacher, had one that he was always telling us about, with ornamental guppies in it.

He said: "gubbies".

We always asked him about them, because as long as he was talking about his fish, he wasn't teaching us.

I got a B in physics for class participation – although, God's honest truth, I didn't understand any of that shit. It was purely because I kept asking after Mr Gallenkamp's gubbies.

I walked up to the hospital's main entrance. The building was large and old, made of the same weather-beaten brick as the boundary wall.

The lights were already on in many of the windows, although it was still only four o'clock in the afternoon. They

probably left the neon tubes on day and night, so that no one would forget they were ill for a single second.

There was an ambulance parked outside the entrance, and someone was being taken out of it on a stretcher.

I didn't look too closely, not wanting to see blood. Four metal legs with little wheels at the bottom unfolded from the stretcher with a loud clank. I couldn't imagine it was a great experience for the person lying on it.

One of the paramedics was wearing a hairnet; he had to be a conscientious objector on national service – a slacker, as Kragler, our PE teacher, would have said.

First and second lessons on a Wednesday were always double PE. With *Oberstudienrat* Horst Kragler. "Right then, my friends: physical jerks!" he would roar, and then we'd have to line up and do all this military shit. Jump over obstacles, crawl underneath other ones. Climb ropes, the whole works.

"Hup, hup, hup, men, don't tell me you're tired!" Then we had to throw the little leather balls as if they were hand grenades. Kragler didn't say that, but that's how we understood it.

If he thought you were too slow, Kragler got out his little red notebook and scribbled something in it.

"Schumacher: unfit for close combat," or whatever. And I didn't care, either, to be honest.

Michael Habel once just about made it to the top of the rope. He was – without beating about the bush – quite fat. And it wasn't a good idea to make him climb up there, although he did his best, of course. Anyway, when he got to the top he had

no strength left, and slid down from a height of four or five metres, ripping all the skin off his hands in the process. He lay at the bottom screaming like a stuck pig, you could see the raw flesh on both his palms, the floor was covered in blood, and they had to call an ambulance. Michael Habel had also broken his leg; the pathetic crash-mat had been no use at all. The bone was sticking out of his shin, all yellow, no word of a lie. Even the paramedics' eyes popped out when they saw Habel lying on the floor like that. Kragler stood there acting as if he couldn't explain how it had happened.

A few weeks later Michael Habel was back in lessons, though still with bandaged hands and his leg in plaster, looking even more of a dork than he had before. If he ever said anything, it was only to tell you how many plates and pins he now had in his leg. But we had no desire to know the details. Someone always had to go with him to the toilets and take his trousers down. Seriously. I'd rather have jumped out the window.

For once, Kragler had probably got into trouble over it, and was quite restrained for a while afterwards, though he started muttering inaudible things to himself even more than he used to.

We had him for geography as well, incidentally. I made sure I was on map duty with Bogi as often as possible, so that we at least missed a few minutes at the start of the lesson.

He always greeted us with: "A good soldier is always five minutes early, Schumacher."

“Sorry, Mr Kragler, there was just so much mess in the map room,” I said before we clipped “The German Reich: Borders as of 1938” to the stands and unrolled them. Kragler was desperate to go back to Silesia, if I understood it correctly. Or he wanted Silesia to come to him. Or to us, I don’t know. Kragler wanted to get Silesia back, with our help. Because Silesia was probably a great thing. Honestly, I didn’t even know where it was.

For Kragler, Silesia was what the ornamental gubbies were to Mr Gallenkamp. Did Kragler imagine that all our daydreaming in class was because we missed Silesia so much? No matter, I certainly had no desire to go there. And the likelihood of Silesia coming to me was also pretty slim. And even if Silesia were to arrive here at some point, I’d be long gone; I wanted to disappear off to Berlin as soon as I could. Because of bloody military service and everything.

They held your balls during the army medical exam. Honestly. Ludger, Detlef Walkenhorst’s older brother, had told us that. The doctor had told him to pull his pants down – “Lift up your member for a moment,” – then he took hold of his sack and ordered him to cough. Which Ludger did, cough, cough.

And the doctor went: “One, two, all there.”

Unbelievable.

Walki and I fell over laughing when Ludger told us that.

On the other hand, maybe it wasn’t all that surprising when you looked at these army types. You wouldn’t put anything past them. Udo Mönch’s father was in the army, for instance; he was an officer or something. Udo was always

telling people he was going to sign up for twelve years when he finished school. Twelve years! Twelve! He and a few other morons had started a club. And now they were advertising it everywhere: "Brahms Gymnasium Army Fanclub!" How dim did you have to be? And Udo Mönch was shitting himself that the army wouldn't take him because he had Scheuermann's.

Anyway, I was still standing around outside the hospital, and the national service people were taking someone out of the ambulance and pushing them into the building on a trolley. Was that how Bogi arrived here, too?

"Wilhelm Verderblich Medical Vehicles," I read on a small plate on the back of the ambulance as I passed it. Great name.

Once I was inside and standing there, looking around, a nurse asked me where I was going, and I said to see Bo... Manfred Schnellstieg. She checked a list and told me there was no one of that name here. But then it turned out I was in the emergency department and had to go across to the main entrance next door.

Okay, another security guard behind glass. I bent down to the flap made of perforated, yellowing plastic and said I was here to see Bo... Manfred Schnellstieg. The guard checked in a book. It looked like a class register.

"Mpfmmpfmmpfmomommpf?" I heard from inside the cabin.

"Excuse me?"

My mother claimed that you got further by saying "excuse me?" than "Huh?"

“Mompfmmmpfmpf.”

Well, it looked like that wasn't always true.

So I stopped being pointlessly polite and went “Huh?”

“MOMPFFFFFPFFPFMMOMP!”

It was hopeless. I shrugged.

Then the guard wrote me a note: *3rd floor, right, ward 3b*, and finally opened the speaking hole to pass it to me. “There you go. Third floor, right hand side, 3b.”

Yes, that was what he'd written down, but he could have just opened the stupid flap and... never mind.

I could now hear exactly what the guard was saying, but I didn't want to go over the whole thing again. It wouldn't get me anywhere.

“Thanks,” I said, and left.

A wide staircase led to the upper floors. To the right of it were a set of lifts, which ordinarily I would have used; I wasn't crazy about the idea of traipsing up three floors if there was a lift. (I was fundamentally quite lazy). But suddenly I was afraid of getting stuck in a lift with someone who was injured and would cause a bloodbath in there like Michael Habel did that time in the school gym.

I took the stairs two at a time, eyes fixed straight ahead. There was no way I wanted to be one of the people in here, I was thinking the whole time. And because all the people who belonged here were so slow, I moved as fast as I could.

Then I was standing at the door to the ward, out of breath and trying to calm myself down.

I always got a bit worked up about these situations. And actually it was ridiculous to be making such a fuss over it. After all, Bogi was the one stuck in here, not me.

The glass door was covered in comic-book pictures: children's ward.

Bogi was a year younger than me and, when he'd still been properly clever, he'd skipped the sixth year. From then on, we were in the same class. Then, a little over a year ago, when he was thirteen, Bogi lost his brain and came back to school after the summer holidays without it. Fact. It probably disappeared in the waters of the Mediterranean off Formentera, just like that. Anyway, his age had landed Bogi here, rather than on the adult ward.

The bell was just above Donald Duck's beak. A nurse came and opened the door. She was quite pretty.

"Nurse Merle" said a badge on her tunic.

"Is, er, Manfred Schnellstiegl there?" I knew that must be the silliest question I could ask.

"Bogi? He's in giraffe."

So they were already calling him Bogi here, too.

"Er, sorry?"

"The giraffe room. There are animal symbols on the doors. You'll find it."

And then she was gone, on her squeaking sandals.

I walked down the corridor and found the characters on the doors: tortoise, mouse, and at the far end on the left there was finally a giraffe.

The door to Bogi's room was closed. I knocked tentatively, put my ear to the cold wood and at first heard nothing from inside – then, when I knocked again, a soft “yes?”

He was sitting cross-legged on the bed.

How long it was since I'd last seen him.

Bogi looked completely changed. He hadn't suddenly lost all his hair, or whatever other shit the treatment might do to you. My mother had told me all kinds of things. It was nothing about his appearance. But... How can I put it? It was as if, even though he hadn't been here that long, he already belonged here and not in our world – my world – any more. Of course, I couldn't think like that, it was the opposite of what had been drummed into me by Bogi's mother and mine. They'd said that now was the time when Bogi desperately needed to feel like he was one of us, etc. It was an important part of the healing process, they said.

But how was that supposed to work, being one of us, when he was lying around in terrycloth pyjamas all day in this stupid giraffe room, while we were busy rearranging our world outside? Of course, no one explains that to you.

The next problem was that all this shit had been making me feel quite aggressive. And unhelpfully, it was coming out now, when I finally saw Bogi again. But it had been bubbling away inside me ever since I went and sat back down on my beanbag after the initial shock, when I cried on the phone, and turned the music up even louder so that I could think about what Bogi's parents had just told me. I was waiting to start feeling sad, because I thought that's what people expected of

me, but if I was honest, I was only sad maybe ten per cent of the time, and angry for the rest. Even at Bogi himself. Which was idiotic, I knew that. But he needed to stop this shit, do something about it. Get better. This was no state to be in, with this disease that sounded like it wasn't a disease at all. At least, not a bad one. Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma: sounds like not a disease, right? It definitely would've been better if it was called Hodgkin's non-lymphoma. Especially for Bogi.

But actually, I was angry at him because I wanted my old life back, including Bogi. I simply thought I had enough crap to deal with as it was. And I wasn't *trying* to think all this just at that moment. But thoughts don't knock and ask for permission before they come in. They just appear.

Bogi's mother had explained the illness to me in detail – it was something to do with his lymph nodes – and I'd listened to most of what she was saying. Which was not all that easy, to be honest. But the fact that it was cancer and you could die of that shit – in fact, dying was actually quite likely – was something she only came out with once I'd asked her four times.

“Alright?” I said, grinning at Bogi.

I had the feeling it took him a minute to recognise me.

Then, when we looked each other in the eye, a shudder went through me, though I didn't know why. I was really glad to see him, and at the same time all I wanted to do was run away. I glanced at the mangy teddy bear on Bogi's bed.

There are probably no words for the really important things you feel. At least, not the right words. You just always act

as if there are. Because you have to talk everything into shape, so that the world doesn't stand still and you can somehow carry on.

Up until a little while ago, everything had been easier for me to understand. When I'd been really angry about something, for instance, I was completely, one hundred per cent angry, until the next feeling turned up.

And usually, that feeling had been the complete opposite of anger. The next minute I'd be pleased or in a silly mood, no problem. Sometimes the change was quick, and sometimes it took a bit longer, but it had always been a sequence. And one day, without my noticing, the sequence had gone and all the emotions started happening at once. Feelings were bouncing around inside me and I couldn't keep them apart any longer. All of a sudden I was happy and sad at the same time. I laughed myself stupid even though I was sickened by everything. I'd fallen in love with... well, that's no one's business but mine, and I hated her at the same time. And I didn't even know why. Well, probably for the fact that I was in love with her. It was actually really stressful, and I couldn't bear it, but I'd stopped trying to fend it off and waiting for it to pass, because I guessed that it was pointless; I was going to feel this way forever.

And so now I was standing here in Bogi's room.

I went over to him and we hugged. But not properly; a bit awkwardly. We put our arms around each other without the rest of our bodies joining in. I think I was just afraid of hurting him, and Bogi realised that.

"Motte. Alright?" said Bogi.

Bogi always called me Motte. Actually, so did everyone else. Then there was silence. Was that it? Was that all we could think of to say now we were together again? As we were hugging, I looked again over my left shoulder at the mangy old teddy that I recognised from Bogi's room at home.

But I'd always thought it was there as a kind of joke. And now I was taken aback to realise that the bear seemed to genuinely comfort Bogi. His name was Lucky. He'd belonged to Bogi's mother when she was little.

I really couldn't think of anything else to say, so I finally said: "Bayern won three-two." Bogi was a Bayern Munich fan. Seriously. It was a genetic thing with the Schnellstiegs. He hadn't been in the world for more than a few days before he was named Manfred, and had become a member of the Catholic Church and Bayern Munich. And those were three things that could take you down a very specific path in life, right? Broadly speaking, when Bogi was barely a week old it was already clear where he was heading.

Ricarda Hummel from our primary school, for example, had no arms. Or rather, just little stumps with fingers, and not the full ten fingers, either. I don't know how many, I never counted them. And yes, of course, you can't compare that with being called Manfred. All I mean is: everyone pretended we could become whatever we wanted if we just made enough effort. As if it was all down to us. But that was rubbish.

In any case, we always had to act like it was nothing unusual when Ricarda sat at her desk writing with her feet.

And it would actually have been much more normal just to talk to her about how she managed it. To ask her how she got her leg up that high and held a pencil and things.

At least that was something other people couldn't do. My own writing was illegible, and *I* used my hand. I had no desire to see my footwriting. Anyway: no, we were supposed to act like it was normal to write an essay with your feet. Bullshit, if you ask me.

But what I'm talking about is this: Ricarda Hummel's mother couldn't help not knowing that she shouldn't have taken those sleeping tablets. But calling your son Manfred when he's barely filled his first nappy, taking him off to church to be baptised, and then signing him up for bloody Bayern – all of that is entirely deliberate.

I didn't make this up; there was proof. There were photos of Bogi as a baby wearing a little red and white cap in the Schnellstiegs' hall. You just had to hope that he didn't simply resign himself to his fate. Otherwise, his parents were really nice – I don't want to give the wrong impression here.

Anyway, Bogi could always go to the town hall when he was older and get his name changed. I'd read it in the paper. I mean everyone could, not just Bogi. I could, too, if I didn't want to be called Morten any more but, say, Ludolf. So, people, let's hear it for Ludolf Schumacher on drums! Bogi didn't have to stay a Manfred forever. Although, if you'd let him choose his own name, he probably would have come up with something even worse. Bogi wasn't exactly a paragon of good taste. At least, that's what my mother once said when my parents invited

him out to dinner with us, and he got dressed up for the occasion, i.e. turned up in his parachute-silk tracksuit. The longer I thought about the name-changing business, the more I thought: best just to leave everything as it was.

So, Bogi and I were sitting on this crappy hospital bed and realising that we didn't really know what to say to each other. It was pretty sad.

"Yeah, yeah. Three-two. Not bad, huh? My father always brings the latest copy of *Kicker* with him now," Bogi said eventually.

"Oh, really?"

We fell silent again, having hit a dead end.

"So, how are you doing?" I said. It was the stupid question I really didn't want to ask. I'd sworn to myself earlier that I wouldn't. How was he supposed to answer that?"

But then Bogi said: "Oh, not too bad. They say I'll probably be out of here by Christmas."

"Really? That's great!"

In the pause that followed, I looked out of the window at the tree that reached all the way up here, and even up to the next floor. A beech or an oak, I don't know, something like that, I can't tell these things apart. There was a blackbird hopping about in the branches, a writhing worm hanging out of its beak. It probably had its nest up here. Although, it was autumn; did they need nests at this time of year? On the other hand, birds still have to sleep somewhere in autumn. What do I know? For a moment, I thought the blackbird was looking in at me through the window.

“What’s *Eiche* in English?”

“Oak,” said Bogi.

“And *Amsel*?”

“Blackbird.”

“No way, really? Like the song?” I asked.

“Mhmm.”

Then there was silence again.

I was disgusted with myself: it should have been my job to make this easier for both of us by keeping the conversation going; it certainly wasn’t Bogi’s. But recently my problem, or rather, one of my problems, was that while more and more words and thoughts accumulated in my head, fewer and fewer of them ended up coming out as comprehensible sentences. It was like the film we’d watched in geography at the end of term – not the belted Galloway film, the other one. The kind of stuff we always had to watch when the teachers just needed to keep us occupied for a final few hours. At the end of the school year, all they did was carry the Super-8 projector from one classroom to another, to be honest.

Anyway, I mean the film where they cut all the trees down and threw them in the river, so they’d float down to the sawmill. “How is Paper Made?” I think it was called. But eventually the process stopped working, there were so many trees that they blocked up the river, and then there was a huge flood and all kinds of other crap. Not a single tree made it to the sawmill, until some clever Dick from the city turned up with tons of dynamite and got it all moving again.

That river was what my brain looked like now. Except that there wasn't a guy with explosives anywhere in sight.

Luckily, there was a knock on the door just then, and Walki stuck his head into the room. His hair came in first, and then the rest of him.

I think the style is called an Afro. But Afro is kind of a stupid name for it when someone has red curls and is otherwise as white as cream cheese, apart from his freckles. Someone called him chalk-face once, which wasn't very nice of them. Walki had grown freakishly fast in the last year and was nearly one metre ninety tall. He always ducked when he walked through a door now (though that was overplaying it a bit).

"Hey, retard! Heh heh, there's Bogi, the spaz – hanging out in hospital!"

That wasn't Walki's voice; it was Jan Borowka, calling out from behind him. Walki's growth spurt meant that Jan was now a head shorter than him, and you couldn't see him behind Walki. The pair of them came in and gave Bogi their hands. They're doing it right, I thought. The handshake business was kind of weird, but at least it was a real thing. I'd have to start doing it too. Jan also liked to rap three times on the table with his knuckles as he passed, but to me that felt like too much.

"Boginski, my friend," said Jan, and looked Bogi straight in the eye as he took his hand.

Jan, as I said, was quite a lot shorter than Walki and me. There could be no talk of a growth spurt where he was concerned. At least, not so far. Although it didn't seem very

likely that anything fundamental was going to change there. It was just a feeling.

For a while, Jan had been trying to make up for it – by smoking rollies like a chimney, for instance – though the smoking did nothing to increase his height. He'd got himself a pair of cowboy boots with these sloping high heels and walked around in them like he had four balls, not two. That's just what it looked like, don't blame me for the image. And, as I said, he'd started greeting everyone with a long, firm handshake while staring into their eyes. Stuff like that. But, well, if it made the centimetres he lacked easier to bear, it didn't matter to me. Jan was basically a really good guy – I don't want you to think I'm just slagging him off here. And he was pretty muscly: he had proper biceps, and pecs as well, rock-hard ridges and bulges. Walki and I were nothing but skin and bone.

We never talked about what our parents did. Their jobs, I mean. You kind of had the sense that most people in our city worked in some office or other, but I had no idea what they did there, and none of us ever seriously thought about asking. The olds just weren't interesting enough for that. I thought my parents were the richest, but it was never an issue. Jan's parents were the poorest, anyway, that much was certain. When I was younger, I would never in my life have gone to the estate he lived on. They weren't really proper houses, they were more like cabins that someone had tried hard to make look a bit less shabby. They'd been painted in bright colours and stuff, I mean, but that was a long time ago, and now they looked even more depressing than if they'd just been left as

they were before. If you paint a turd in cheerful colours, it's still a turd, right? Something like that.

The first time I went to visit Jan, his mother had brought us cheese-spread sandwiches and he'd immediately had a go at her, telling her to get lost. I remember being shocked, because she was just trying to be nice and I wasn't used to hearing things like that from Jan. He kind of treated her like an animal. A working animal, I mean, not a pet; people were usually nice to pets. And later Jan's father got home, but all he did was glance in through the door, and I think he'd wanted to give Jan a telling-off about something – he looked pretty angry, at any rate – but when he saw me sitting there, he turned around without saying anything. Jan had gone completely silent when he heard his father coming through the front door. Honestly, I was glad when I left the building. Jan's mother waved me off, and when I saw her loving, tired face, I was ashamed that I'd been disgusted by the smell in the flat and could only breathe properly again once I was back outside.

I now saw that there was something stuck to the back of Bogi's left hand. It looked like the barrel of a clear plastic biro, with a piece of white tape stuck over it.

"What's that thing on your hand?" I asked.

"It's a cannula," said Bogi. "The tube they put drugs and stuff in." He started to pick at the tape, and I could see the little tube moving; you could pull it up with the skin and – oh my God – that thing was sticking into Bogi! I looked away quickly, not wanting Bogi to see that I was about to keel over. I wasn't a massive fan of injections and blood and things. Cannula. Uhuh.

Didn't exactly sound reassuring. Bogi acted like it was nothing, although he also must have noticed that I felt like puking in a corner. I'm pretty sure.

"So, what are the nurses like? Getting any action? Heh, heh," said Jan, slapping his fist into the palm of his right hand. Walki and I rolled our eyes.

Yes, Jan, that was exactly how our Bogi was passing the time in here: shagging the nurses, who were all queuing impatiently outside his giraffe room. And afterwards they'd pump stuff into his veins that would later make his hair fall out.

But Bogi actually laughed at the nurse thing, and chatted a while longer to Jan about the food in here and what else he did all day. Normal questions that Bogi enjoyed, it seemed. More than he'd enjoyed my lame umming and ahing before, at any rate. I wondered why I couldn't manage to have a normal conversation with my best friend, who wasn't doing too well and who might just want to be distracted for a little while.

Jan and Walki (who until this point had sat there looking quite content but saying nothing) had just been to football practice and had their sports bags and a ball with them. It was the World Cup ball that Jan had got for his birthday, much better than the ones at school. Walki had been in a weirdly good mood all the time lately, and I wondered if that might have something to do with the fact that he was always hanging around with Neanderthal Klaus and the other stoners down by the bike racks at break time.

"Shall we all go outside for a bit and have a kick-around?" Walki now asked, grinning. Walki was trying to grow

a beard, but the few patches of red fluff on his chin looked like pubes that had migrated upwards.

What kind of stupid idea was that? How the hell was Bogi supposed to go out and play football in his pyjamas, with that weird tube in his hand? He wouldn't even make it down the stairs, I thought. Though obviously I didn't say so.

"Nah, I can't. I get tired pretty quickly at the moment," said Bogi, with a bit of a grin, as if he was embarrassed by the fact. And instead of comforting or protecting him, I just stood there staring, gawping at his illness and feeling stupid, incapable of doing anything else. The four of us were all as awkward as each other, and eventually poor Bogi had to resolve the situation.

"Maybe you could go out and have a game, and I could watch you from up here. That's almost like playing myself."

We three idiots brooded over this suggestion for another thirty seconds. Then Walki said: "Yes, alright, excellent idea." He was just glad to be able to get out of there and do something he was good at. Jan, who most of the time did whatever Walki did, was ready in an instant, the ball in his right hand and his sports bag in his left.

"Okay, *hasta la vista* then – and chin up, Boginski."

"We can come back up afterwards and say goodbye." I wasn't particularly good at farewells.

"No, don't worry about that, it'll be dinner time then anyway." Was he glad to get rid of us? On the other hand, you couldn't blame him if he was.

"See you, Bogi," said Walki.

Another handshake, of Bogi's right hand, the one without the cannula.

"I'll watch you from the window in the corridor up here," said Bogi.

I went over and hugged him tentatively again.

Felt his ribs. He'd always been that thin though, hadn't he?

"See you soon, Bogi, yeah? Next week," I said.

"Okay, see you soon."

I waved, thinking that I needed to do a better job of this visiting thing next time.

Then, as we were on our way out of the door, I saw Bogi lie down. We walked down the stairs in silence. I thought, "Bogi..." – and then I felt something I had no words for, which hurt a lot, first under my tongue, and then on my left side, right under my ribs. Something that tasted bitter and lit up dazzlingly for a moment, as if I'd swallowed the flickering neon light we'd just passed. Then I shook the thought out of my head with a jolt, as I would if I'd got water in my ear at the swimming pool. To be on the safe side, I tried not to think of anything at all for a while – and, by concentrating for once, I actually managed it.

And when we got downstairs and I readmitted the thoughts that had been buzzing around my head like shimmering blue flies around a cow pat, I thought that Bogi was definitely going to get better.

It was already starting to get dark outside.

We went to a patch of grass that Bogi could see from upstairs, and stood as close to the street lights as we could. Bogi watched us, in the neon light. My Bogi, who had bought the Yugo-booze just a few weeks before. Digestible, pressed without stalks and stems.

Then we messed about, playing keepy-uppy and two-on-one and stuff, and felt kind of silly putting on such a show in front of all these sick people, but somehow it was also funny and a relief to wear ourselves out. Bogi stood at the window, not moving.

We waved to him again before we left, and he waved back. We walked out of the gate. There was a different guard there now. Jan had brought a Cappy juice and we took turns swigging the sweet, flavourless stuff out of the plastic carton. I took a drag on the cigarette that Jan had rolled, which made me cough so much I nearly threw up in the gutter. We didn't really know what to say about the whole thing.

"What's the disease called again?" Jan asked me.

"Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma."

He considered this for a while and then said: "Funny name. I mean, you don't say – I don't know – non-poodle dog; you say terrier."

We shook hands and I got on the number four. Walki set off towards Neuberg on foot because he'd forgotten his monthly ticket and had been caught without it twice already, and Jan, who had to go north, waited for the twenty-two.

On the bus I thought about how long Bogi and I had been friends. Probably since the day when – at primary school, we

were always allowed to dress up on Fat Thursday – he came up to me in the playground wearing red pyjamas with gold stripes across the chest, and a yellow woolly hat with green washing-up sponges sewn onto it. I asked him what his carnival costume was supposed to be, and he said: “a leaking battery.”

THREE

- Late September -

I didn't know her name was Jacqueline Schmiedebach until Jan told me. We were standing outside school, and she rode past us on her Dutch bicycle. She looked over at us just for a second, and smiled. Or maybe even laughed. And then pretended it was because of something else, and nothing to do with us. I had a tingling feeling everywhere, and then the tingling had a name.

When she turned the corner, Jan, who had been standing beside me smoking, looked after her and muttered: "Jacqueline. Foxy."

And a bit later, when I was still staring at the street corner round which she had long since disappeared: "Jacqueline Schmiedebach. She goes to Einstein. 10c. She lives over the river. Buchberg or Kiesheim. She's the bomb."

I just stood there.

"What?" Jan asked me.

"What do you mean, what?"

"Go after her."

"Are you insane?"

"Go after her, you spaz."

"What good would that... come on, I don't even know her," I said, and Jan replied: "Exactly. That's why."

I jumped on my bike, followed her as far as the ferry, and watched her go. Her straw-blond hair blew in the wind all the way; it shone so brightly that I could still see Jacqueline riding off on the far bank, when everyone else who had been on the ferry had become small, indistinguishable pin-heads. My first thought had not been how beautiful she was, but how upright she had been sitting on her bike. That was the very first thing I noticed. How bolt upright she was sitting on her bike as she whisked past me and Jan.

There was this word that had come up in a German class recently: *Anmut*. It means grace, elegance, beauty, and Frau Standfuss had tried to explain it to us, but I couldn't really picture it. I also thought it sounded stupid. Like Almut – and Almut Gerhardt's was the dorkiest girl in our class, if not the whole school. So it was difficult to connect a word that reminded me of that idiot to something beautiful. But now, as Jacqueline rode past, I had some idea of what *Anmut* might mean. Or rather, what its meaning might feel like.

Over the next few days, I tried to make our paths cross seemingly by chance. First, I wanted to find out what time she took the ferry. I hung around the jetty for hours, but never saw her. She lived on the other side of the river, I knew that already, and went to school on our side, to the Einstein science academy, which was in the same area as my school.

I would have to talk to her, to go out with her, that much had been clear from the moment I first saw her.

“Moment” – that was another of those words that I felt I really understood only now. As in: momentous. I would have to

be patient; I'd probably have to wait at the jetty a good few times before I saw her again. But for the first time in my life, waiting was not the same as being bored. All at once it was good to wait, and I now wouldn't swap this waiting for anything in the world. I spent several afternoons standing at the jetty where the ferry docked, watching all kinds of people. Jacqueline Schmiedebach was not among them. There were some odd characters. Usually, when you just spent a few minutes down there waiting for the next ferry, you didn't notice them. The guy with the briefcase, for instance, had been looking over at me for quite a while. No idea what he wanted with me. Funny haircut. Looked like a moped helmet, but made out of hair. He reminded me of one of the old teachers at Brahms, Mr Seegler; I always had the feeling that he'd been a teacher even before the Brahms school existed, when the whole area was still meadows grazed by aurochs and bison. And even then, I was sure that five days a week he would have taught voluntary pre-school classes in ancient Greek at a quarter past seven in the morning. To some kind of giant lizards or something. With a bicycle clip always still attached to the right leg of his grey suit trousers. That's the kind of thing you imagined him doing. And in the end, once the ice-age made it too cold in the meadows, they built Brahms around Mr Seegler. And once the monitor lizards that had been learning ancient Greek from him had waddled south in search of a better climate, they were replaced with human students. That was kind of how I imagined it. Anyway, Mr Seegler had been there a really long time, that much was certain.

God knows where I would end up if I didn't learn to concentrate. That was what everyone said to me.

I was trying to work out what the ferry guy's hair-hat reminded me of, and then it struck me: Bogi's little sister Anette had these Playmobil figures that you could take the hair off like a helmet, and then put it back on. He had been staring at me for a while, and then he nodded and came over. Oh, for God's sake. I looked away at once, at anything but him, but it didn't help. The guy was heading straight for me. Briefcase, helmet hair, socks and sandals.

"Hello there, my friend," he said. I didn't respond. "Afternoon off, it is? What attractions might there be around here? Flirting with the young ladies? Petra, Babsi, Susi?"

What was he talking about?

He rocked back and forth on his sandals for a while, looking out at the water. And then he said: "Do you want to earn 50 Marks?"

"Eh?"

"Come back there in the bushes with me and I'll toss you off."

He spoke a strange dialect, from Hessen or somewhere. Like Heinz Schenk, the guy on TV. He didn't say "toss", he said "toash." And "fefty Maarksh".

"Ah'll toash yer oaff."

I wondered for a moment whether I'd really heard that, or whether I was still imagining things and this belonged in the same bracket as the aurochs and the monitor lizards and the ice age.

The helmet-hair man grinned at me, and I decided the best plan was to get out of there. Then I rode off along the riverside road as fast as I could. I didn't look back, for fear that the guy might be running after me. I had no idea what else someone who made an offer like that might be capable of. When I was sure I was far enough away, I stopped.

Saw him still standing there, gazing after me.

And just then, the ferry that Jacqueline Schmiedebach might be on set off from the other side. That meant I had to get closer to the jetty again as quickly as I could. But as long as that bastard was still staring in my direction, I couldn't just turn around and ride back. He might think I was coming back to him. So I got off, lifted my bike onto my shoulder and ran up the embankment with it, so that I could ride back unseen along the top promenade. However, I had underestimated how steep the slope was, and how heavy my bike was, so that when I was nearly at the top, I first slowed down and then fell over twice in slow motion. Although I'm not sure if falling over is the right expression for what happened to me. Because of the slope, the embankment hit me full in the face. Another new experience.

I am the straight line and the hill is the vector, I thought as I toppled over. Or the other way around. My hands and knees looked a mess afterwards. Thank God no one heard me gasping and wheezing. All of which provided the perfect conditions for talking to Jacqueline Schmiedebach and asking if she wanted to go out with me sometime.

When I finally got to the top, I jumped on my bike and raced back towards the jetty. The ferry was almost there. I ran

down the broad stone staircase, my bike bouncing down the steps at my side, dong dong dong. And when I got to the bottom, I could see Jacqueline coming up the ramp. She rode right past me and looked me straight in the eye. I must have looked a proper fool after everything that had just happened. She frowned for a split second, but then laughed and rode on. I'm sure I had gone bright red, but at the end of the day, at least she laughed and didn't turn away in disgust.

When I took another quick look around, the guy with the ridiculous toupee was still standing there, grinning. He wasn't waiting for the ferry at all; he was just standing around waiting for saps like me to come along so he could chat them up. And of course, that meant that I was going to see him at the jetty now every afternoon while I was waiting for Jacqueline Schmiedebach. And he might think I was there because of him.

I leapt onto my bike and rode after her, not caring how awful I looked, sweaty, dirty and bright red in the face. And it didn't matter now, anyway. Jacqueline was riding down the avenue towards the city centre. She had a sports bag in her basket with a tennis racket sticking out of it. When she stopped at a traffic light, I remained a safe distance away. But the next time I decided I didn't care: I pulled up alongside her, and looked the other way.

That wasn't easy. When the light turned green, she went straight on – I was sure she had looked at me again for a second when it was on amber. I pretended I was going to turn right, but when she was a little way ahead, I started following her again. She turned off at the park where the THC tennis courts were.

Later, I secretly watched her play until I had to leave for a maths catch-up lesson. I was already really late. My heart was pounding. I mean, okay, it did that all the time. But now I was noticing it. That was the difference. The pounding of my heart was louder than the plopping of the tennis balls that Jacqueline Schmiedebach was now chasing across the cinder court. I knew exactly what it looked like when she picked them up, without having to turn round once.

FOUR

- Late September -

In the evening, I suddenly found myself standing opposite my father in the living room; we'd just happened across each other there. I don't know if we'd ever actually run into each other deliberately.

We had frozen on the spot as soon as we met, as if we'd been stapled to the floor at that moment.

I'd seen him standing at the window just before that, looking out at the bushes. The setting sun reflected on his bald head, making it look even chubbier than usual. The bald head, not the sun. Maybe he was thinking about what plants to dig up and replant in his new garden in the tundra. Although I honestly didn't know whether there was even a garden there.

He wouldn't have noticed me if I had just taken an apple from the bowl while his back was turned and then slipped out again quietly. But I thought it was odd not to say hello to him, at least. It looked like the fact I was standing behind him had given him a fright. Ridiculous. I did live here, after all. Well, whatever; in any case we were now standing around in the living room.

If we were going to snap out of this freeze-frame then one of us would have to make a decision, make a move, somehow approach the other. But that was neither my strength

nor my father's. Especially not now, when everything was falling apart here.

One option might have been to sit down on the sofa. Or to simply walk out of the room again after saying hello and leave him standing there. He seemed to like it in here, standing alone at the window. But we had gone too far down a dead-end road. All because of the stupid apple.

The television was on.

My father had been giving it an occasional sideways glance from where he stood at the window. You'd probably call it morose. The glass in his left hand contained that yellow liquid that smelled of liquorice but didn't taste like it. I've forgotten the name, *pardon* or something like that. He once told me he was a "Francophile", but once again I'd forgotten exactly what that meant. Something to do with France and alcohol, anyway.

A couple of ice cubes, almost melted down to nothing, clinked in the glass.

We'd been avoiding each other for the last few weeks, so it was only then that I realised I must have grown quite a bit. I was now easily half a head taller than him. He had undone the top three buttons of his shirt, there was a fuzz of grey chest hair poking out, and I saw that he'd started wearing a chain. Crazy. I myself had been wondering recently if it would be a good idea to get a chain like that, a chain or a bracelet, I had thought, or maybe both, but this put a stop to that idea altogether.

Finally, he broke the silence: "I'm sure your mother has explained everything to you-"

Explained? What exactly? Was it a full stop or a question mark I'd heard there?

What my father had just said immediately soaked into the carpet or maybe just remained hanging somewhere in the air, which meant that I didn't know if he was expecting an answer from me. If in doubt, better keep quiet. Please just don't give me a *talk*, I thought. I didn't need that, I really didn't, everything was fine as it was. My parents could just arrange things however they thought best. Or not. The main thing was that they left me out of it.

My father's words had now been hanging in the air for so long that he must have stopped expecting an answer from me. Right, so now we were just standing there wordlessly again.

He'd been sacked by his company a while before, and I'd wondered how it was possible to get thrown out of a company that you were supposedly the boss of. That was always what it sounded like, anyway, when he talked about "his company". Until now, I'd thought being the boss meant you were the one who threw other people out.

After that, my mother and he must have thought they'd just deal with everything else in one go, get divorced, split up the family and everything. Or what was left of it.

I would have liked to let my father know that none of this really mattered to me. The business with him and my mother, and the fact that he was moving out and going to live with his "partner". And I didn't mind that he didn't know what to say to me, either. If anyone understood that, it was me. Okay, perhaps this wasn't the moment to explain that. But purely so

that we could move on, I lied and said: “Yes, she did. She, err, explained everything.” My father nodded. So did I. A long nod from both of us. Then nothing for a while. Then another very long nod from him.

“Hmmm,” he murmured, approvingly.

Silence. The only thing chattering away this whole time had been the newsreader. Apart from the cockatiel, who screeched “Coco!” twice – surprise, surprise.

And then my father started to laugh. Or what passed for laughing with him. First, his eyes narrowed to two small slits. From their corners, deep furrows fanned out across his face, a few upwards towards his forehead, others sideways to his ears, and some down across his cheeks. I couldn’t imagine ever getting as old and leathery as he was. His mouth slightly open, for a long time he made no noise, and I thought, I hope he doesn’t choke and keel over right in front of me. But after a while I heard a gasp, which was like the noise our dog had made the winter before he died, when he had bronchitis and we were constantly taking him to the vet.

And only then did my father do something that actually sounded like laughing. Although backwards, as if he’d turned the syllables around. He didn’t go “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,” but “Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah.” Because he was breathing in, not out. It was like he’d somehow misunderstood the principle. Although laughing isn’t something you have to learn; that happens by itself, doesn’t it? It did for me, in any case. Finally my father went first red, then purple in the face. No wonder. You can’t manage without breathing altogether. The laughter turned into a

coughing fit, and he left the room without looking at me again. His coughing and wheezing receded, but I could still hear it even after he'd disappeared into his bedroom at the top of the stairs.

Then there was silence. My father had probably had to light a fag to get over the shock of encountering his son in the living room. Right, then. So that had been the talk about the approaching change in our lives.

Okay, to start with there wasn't much to object to about a change in our lives. If we moved house, then I wouldn't have to ride my bike up a bloody mountain to get home to Waldstadt every day, until my lungs were hanging out of my throat. Or get on the stinking number seventeen bus and listen to its gears grinding as it struggled up the hill. There were lots of advantages, not least when it came to Jacqueline Schmiedebach. The fact that Bogi and I wouldn't be neighbours any more was just something I'd have to accept. And that had happened already, to be honest. Although I didn't like to think too much about that, because I kept imagining him lying alone in his hospital bed, and feeling that I should really be there with him. But instead of taking that as a reason to go and see him straight away, I tried to stop thinking about him. That's how it was.

My mother had recently decided to start taking more care of me. She was always interfering with my stuff, and wanting to have conversations with me. About how I was feeling and stuff, for God's sake. Because of the Bogi business. And how I saw my future. Once, she even wanted to talk about sex. Seriously. Just

imagine it. My mother! I pretty quickly made sure she kept her trap shut on that issue and was never going to try it again. Madness. Let her find someone else's ear to bend.

The sex education lesson at school had been kind of funny, incidentally. Not because of the topic, but because Mrs Strobel in biology was so embarrassed and red-faced all lesson and was only teaching this stuff because she'd been forced to. She was Catholic, etc. Our headmaster had even written a sex education book himself, and I'd once seen him coming out of the sex shop looking really chuffed. I swear, I'm not making this up! I was going into the old Musikhaus Bornstedt record shop when I saw him. The one everyone went to before they opened Rockworld. It was weird. We looked each other right in the eye. Stupidly, *I* was embarrassed by the situation, though he clearly wasn't. I looked away quickly and pretended I hadn't recognised him.

He stood around for a while longer, taking his time, looking in the windows of the sex shop. It was a professional visit, for sex education and stuff. The sex shop was called Dr Müller's, and when my father first moved into Claudia's flat, in an area where you could guarantee nobody would *ever* open a sex shop, the bell by their front door said "Dr Müller"! I pissed myself laughing when I read that. Maybe the sex shop guy used to live there. Claudia's name wasn't Müller, at any rate. It was Hunger-Löper. I'd tried to imagine what a hungerloper would look like. A very thin marabou, but with frizzy red hair instead of feathers, maybe. If she married my father and added

Schumacher to Hunger and Löper, the sign by the bell would be pretty crowded.

I had the feeling that my parents, especially my mother, were just waiting to be able to foist a problem onto me, because they were getting divorced. Like I said, they were always trying to draw me into their stress. Which made me think that whether the two of them were not speaking to each other in one flat or two separate ones didn't really make any difference. To me, at least.

Earlier, when I'd come home and dropped my bike beside the garage, I went through the garden and slipped into the house through the kitchen door, trying to get to my bedroom without being spotted. But my mother heard me all the same and jumped up to come and find me. I ran up the stairs three at a time and escaped her.

"Hello, Mum," I called out, before slamming my bedroom door shut a second later.

If I hadn't had to rush, I could have grabbed something to eat on my way through the kitchen, because I was pretty hungry after pedalling up the mountain. But the risk of getting my ear chewed off was just too great. I locked the door, turned the music on and threw myself onto the bed. The music did me good. Music didn't want anything from me. It was just there, and it wrapped itself around me.

In the Ringwald, the woods that began at the end of our street, someone was supposedly growing a plantation of marijuana in a clearing.

I'd heard this in the playground at breaktime from Walki, who'd heard it from Neanderthal Klaus. And if there was anyone who knew about these things, it was him.

Neanderthal Klaus had probably planted it himself, and then told people about it, like you do with something you should really keep to yourself but can't, because you want to show off and haven't got anything else to show off about. Something like that. Neanderthal Klaus looked exactly as his name suggests, by the way. Or maybe it was the other way around, and over time his appearance had come to fit his name. In any case, I really wanted to know where this plantation was. I knew the Ringwald better than anyone. Well, not better than Bogi or the forester, perhaps. But just as well as them and better than all the others.

The Ringwald, as Mr Kragler had taught us in geography, was a "geological half-horst". Kragler would have torn us a new arsehole if we'd laughed at that. His first name was Horst. Or, from that point on, Half Horst. *Oberstudienrat* Half Horst Kragler. Sort of thing. He was lucky the Ringwald was only a half-horst, not a total horst; *then* we would have been in trouble. I would have to tell Bogi about the grass plantation next time I visited him.

If I went to visit him.

I preferred to go back to thinking about Jacqueline. I didn't miss Bogi when I was doing that. I mean, he probably would have ruined everything with all his chat. It's quite possible that after I'd got to know Jacqueline properly, and we were finally a couple, and the two of them met, the first thing

he'd have done would be to let out a fart. I wouldn't put him past him. It made me laugh.

Funny: suddenly there was now something called "my life", which I was always thinking about as if it were somehow taking place outside of me. It was something that I ought to "shape", or at least, that's what my father had told me a while ago. I should think about the shape my life was going to take, he said, and I wondered what the guy was on about. I thought: the fact that I'm me is probably nothing but a coincidence. I could just as easily be someone else. If a different sperm had been that bit quicker, I might now be just one metre fifty-three tall with a gigantic nose – way bigger than my schnoz already was, I mean, and I'd be going to meet-ups for model railway enthusiasts or God knows what else. Would I still be me then, or someone else? Hard to say, because in that scenario, the person I now call "me" wouldn't even exist. My brain was melting with all this stuff – no wonder I could hardly come out with a coherent sentence any more. Recently, my whole life had been feeling like a huge BUT had fallen out of the sky. Every time I did or thought anything, this BUT would show up.

I wasn't happy in the way I used to be when something was brilliant, or even when something just worked out – instead, all I thought about was how it could have gone wrong. And the two times that Jacqueline Schmiedebach smiled at me? Yes, I felt it deep down inside, *but* there was always a nagging doubt that she might just have been laughing at me. That BUT was worse than anything, quite honestly.

Where had it come from, all of a sudden? And above all, I thought, as I carried on staring at the ceiling: why?

Although, no, you couldn't really call it thinking. It was more that I could feel something heavy swirling around inside me. Whenever I tried to grab it and get rid of it, it slipped through my fingers.

Maybe I should have a cigarette. I wasn't actually a smoker, but I wanted to become one, and had recently liberated a pack of menthol cigarettes from the drawer in the living room. My mother smoked them. I hoped the peppermint scent would make the revolting taste of tobacco more bearable, and eventually I would get the hang of inhaling. All that coughing was so embarrassing.

I took the pack out of its hiding place in my bookshelves, behind the Karl May books. They were still there even though I'd never read them: all that adventure and Western bullshit didn't interest me in the slightest, God knows why everyone loved it so much. I tucked the cigarette packet down the front of my trousers, under the elastic waistband of my pants, so that it wouldn't slip down my trouser leg if I had to walk past my mother. Then I pulled my sweatshirt down over it.

I had slipped the lighter inside the box. I put an ear to my bedroom door, and when I didn't hear anything, I turned the key very slowly, quietly opened the door, grabbed my army jacket, crept out onto the landing and listened to what was going on downstairs. My mother was still in the living room, on the phone. So: down the stairs quickly and out of the front door before she could say anything else.

I heard something behind me, but by that time I was already on my bike and pedalling off towards the Ringwald. At the end of the road I turned left and almost ran over the dachshund that belonged to Mr Schliemann, who lived on the corner. The two of them were just coming back from one of the four thousand walks they went on each day. Schliemann was ancient and liked to wear hunting gear, knee breeches and so on. But I don't think he had a gun or went out shooting animals. At least, I'd never seen him with one. Although I wouldn't put it past him; people said he'd worked for the Nazis. But then, it seemed everyone had. His house looked like a kind of log cabin. Weird guy. But the dachshund was actually a nice dog.

Schliemann yelled after me, and I accelerated and rode off down the rustling woodland path towards Kreuztal.

I really did want to know where this bloody plantation was, but the Ringwald was quite big. Although, as I said, it was only a half-horst. For a while now, I hadn't dared go off into the undergrowth like I used to. I'd read in the paper that wild boar – of which there were loads here – could eat people. Whole people, every last bit of them. Killer pigs. Bones and everything, I mean. The interview quoted a policeman saying that the best way to get rid of a body was to leave it in a forest where there were a lot of wild boar. It would disappear without a trace in two or three days. I'd been a bit surprised that a policeman of all people was giving out those kinds of tips in a newspaper. On the other hand, maybe it was a way of finally getting someone, anyone, to listen to him. I needed to stop reading the stupid

paper. My father spent half the day on that rubbish and you could see where it got him.

I stood, smoking, in the dried-up stream bed under the little wooden bridge in Kreuztal, and tried not to cough. I concentrated on the menthol taste. The wind whistled and the first yellow oak leaves were spinning down from the trees; they were so solid that it hurt if one landed on your head.

I thought about Jacqueline Schmiedebach, and instantly felt guilty that all I thought about was her now, and not Bogi. The way he had stood there at the hospital window. Although, if I'm completely honest? I was actually still just thinking about Jacqueline. Maybe a few other incidental things from time to time. But not as a rule.

On the way back, I went down and cycled past the lido. Through the fence, I looked at the empty pools and the two diving platforms: the three-metre one, and beside it the five and the ten.

Hard to imagine that next summer, it would be full of people again, and I'd make my next attempt to jump off the ten. "Attempt", meaning: I'd probably just spend ages standing up there again, completely numb with fear, although I had this idea that the jump might change something – inside me, I mean. But perhaps I was wrong about that. Perhaps it was just a thing you were always told, and after you jumped your skin would just sting for days and everything else would be exactly the same as before.

As I was nearing home, I saw two black figures doing acrobatics on the roof of the house. A fairly tall one and one only half as big. The chimney sweeps had come. I watched for a minute as they busied themselves up there with metal balls attached to chains, which looked like something out of one of those middle-ages comics.

Playing yet another round of the same game as earlier, I crept in through the kitchen and tried to get past the living room unnoticed. But this time my mother was faster than me, and was already waiting for me in the hall. She looked sad. That was the thing that really got me, much more than the arguments. It wasn't actually her I was avoiding; it was just this horrible sadness. My own sadness about Bogi was quite enough for me.

"Motte, we can go and look at a flat in the new town tomorrow."

"Er, what time?"

"Three o'clock."

That was no good. That meant I couldn't wait for Jacqueline Schmiedebach at the jetty.

"I can't make it."

"What do you mean, you can't make it? It's important."

"Yeah, pff, just take the flat. It'll be fine," I said. Quite honestly, it didn't matter to me.

"Don't you even want to know where we're going to live? Aren't you interested in what we do next? *I* am."

Okay. Her voice was starting to waver again, and if there were two or three more of these exchanges between us now,

she would disappear into her room for the rest of the day and have a headache, and eventually I'd have to go up and apologise. Then we'd spend half an hour standing in her room and hugging and stuff. Or rather, she would be hugging me.

"So where exactly is it?" I asked, hoping to spare myself all that. But then she wanted to put her arms round me then and there – only, I was able to wriggle out of it straight away, because someone was coming down the stairs behind us. It was the chimney sweep who I'd just seen on the roof.

"Right then, that's us finished, Mrs Schumacher."

My mother disappeared into the kitchen, probably to fetch a tip. She always pressed money into these people's hands the minute they came into the house. I found it fairly embarrassing. Later she would always tell me how incredibly nice they'd been. No wonder.

"Thank you so much!" she trilled, and bang, the man had a tenner in his hand. Ten Marks! I'm not even kidding.

There could have been a bit of a discussion about that. That was my pocket money for two weeks. And he was getting it for doing what he would have done anyway, in addition to his chimney-sweep dough.

"For the biscuit fund," my mother said, and the guy muttered something like "The company's very grateful".

I was sure the company was never going to see that tenner.

"Motte, don't you want to touch the gentleman? Chimney sweeps bring good luck," my mother said.

I thought I was hearing things.

In any case, I didn't like being called Motte in front of strangers. They would think it was my name and they could call me that, too. But I was picky about who got to call me Motte and, more importantly, who didn't.

I'd had enough of all this standing around. And I was also scared that I still smelled of cigarette smoke. I was about to try and slip away when the half-chimney-sweep, who had come down after the first one, also said something.

"Hi, Motte."

I was so gobsmacked that at first I just stared at this strange figure, the black clothes, the funny cap and above all, the black face.

"Don't you recognise me? It's Steffi."

My mother and the big chimney sweep smiled, as if we were two poodles sniffing each other, or something.

Who the hell was Steffi?

"We were in the same class at primary school. Steffi Fuchs," said the little chimney sweep.

Steffi Fuchs, Steffi Fuchs ...

Ah, right, of course, Stefanie, the short one with the crooked teeth. Who once jumped out of an apple tree into a haystack that still had a pitchfork in it. Afterwards they said at school that she had to have a long operation, because the pitchfork went in one side of her belly and came out the other. But it missed all her organs, otherwise she would have died, or something like that. Steffi had been put into the ambulance with the pitchfork still inside her. They'd cut away the handle first – God's honest truth. Frank Wolters told us that, and he was

there. The two of them lived in one of the new-build blocks they'd thrown up on the edge of the farmland, so they played together a lot.

The prongs had been pulled out of her once they got to the hospital. It had been the most interesting thing that had happened in the whole time I was at primary school. If only because we didn't know anyone else who'd had an operation. Afterwards, we had always looked at Steffi Fuchs funny, wondering whether she now had holes in her belly that the wind whistled through. The things you think when you're a kid.

But what was she doing here now, dressed as a chimney sweep? At least it looked like that episode hadn't put her off climbing.

"Steffi is my apprentice. She started in the summer," said the ten-mark man.

"You're the pitchfork girl, right?" I asked.

Then she grinned, and with her face all black it looked quite funny, and made me relax a bit.

"Yes, that's me. You remember that?"

"What do *you* think?" A pause.

Mother stared. The chimney sweep stared. All the things they taught you never to do, like staring at people, they were constantly doing themselves, without any shame about it.

"And you're.... Er, so you're doing..."

"A chimney sweep apprenticeship, yes," she said.

"Right. Of course. Cool."

It was strange that she was doing a real job already. I suddenly felt quite childish, with Steffi standing in front of me in her work gear.

Which was also odd because, since we'd gone to the more academic Gymnasium, we'd always treated the kids at the non-selective school quite condescendingly. Like semi-idiots. To say nothing of the kids from the Brettergymnasium, the lower secondary school. To be honest, I didn't know a single lower-secondary kid. Everyone was supposed to be doing their university entrance exams and going off to study and things. And if even a blockhead like Udo Mönch could get into the Gymnasium, it did make you wonder who went to the lower secondary. No matter; Steffi at least managed to speak in whole sentences. Which was better than I could do, if I'm honest.

She really was quite short. Her bottom lip protruded a little, and she had dimples, because she was constantly grinning. Her front teeth were the opposite of buck teeth, if such a thing exists: they were set back a little way. And they glowed in her sooty face. She had taken her cap off and her haircut was like Bowie's on the cover of *Low*. Kind of incredible, really, because he must have had at least fourteen hairdressers working on him, and Steffi had simply had her chimney-sweep cap on, and yet the two had come out the same.

"Come on then, Steffi, we're not done for the day yet," said the chimney sweep.

The two of them moved on to the house next door. I watched them go. The chimney sweep and Stefanie Fuchs, who once jumped onto a pitchfork.