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**Opening Extract from...**

# Sorry

Written by Zoran Drvenkar

Translated from the German by Shaun Whiteside

Published by Blue Door

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# Sorry

Zoran Drvenkar

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY  
*Shaun Whiteside*



blue door

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.  
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are  
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to  
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*For all the very good, dead friends.  
I miss you.*

*A good apology is like a farewell,  
when you know you won't see each other again.*

Sorry

# In Between

## YOU

YOU'RE SURPRISED how easy it is to track her down. You've been hiding in such a deep hole that you thought nothing was possible any more. You lost yourself more and more, and when you thought you'd never see light again, his other address book fell into your hands. He had two; you didn't know that either. There was so much you didn't know about him.

One address book is bound in leather, the other is an octavo notebook like the ones you had in school. You happened to find the octavo notebook among a stack of magazines on his bedside table. It's full of names. You counted them. Forty-six. You're still filled with longing when you see his handwriting. Sloping to the right, with the despair of the left-handed. Your fingers wandered over names, addresses, and phone numbers as if you could sense what he felt as he was writing them down. Two of the names are underlined; they are the only names you know.

The day you found the octavo notebook, light entered your darkness. The names are the signs you were waiting for. Six months of waiting, and then this light. And how could you have known that sometimes one must search for a sign?

No one told you.

One of the two addresses is no longer valid, but that's not a problem for you. You're experienced in tracking people down. Our system works chiefly through information, and these days nothing is easier to get hold of. It took you two minutes. His wife moved to Kleinmachnow. On the map you find out that her new home is exactly three kilometers south of the old one as the crow flies. The new block is very much like the other one. We are creatures of habit. When we turn around we want to know what lies behind us. You wait patiently until one of the tenants leaves the building, then you climb to the third floor and ring.

"Yes, who is it?"

She's in her late forties and looks as if the last few years have been a long, tough journey that she had to travel on her own. It doesn't matter what she looks like, you'd have recognized her anywhere. Her posture, her voice. You're surprised that you've internalized her gestures. You have never had a relationship with this woman, but everything about her is familiar to you. The way she leans forward when she looks at you, the narrowing of her eyes, her quizzical expression. Every detail has burned itself so deeply into you that it's more than just memory.

"Hello," you say.

She hesitates for a moment. She isn't sure whether you're a threat. You'd like to ask her what kind of threat turns up in broad daylight outside a block in Kleinmachnow and smiles.

"Do we know each other?"

Suddenly there's interest in her eyes. You aren't surprised. She's a curious person; even if she can't place you, she doesn't show a trace of suspicion. The most dangerous people aren't suspicious, they're interested. You know that expression. As a child you studied an accident on the highway. All that blood, the broken glass, firemen running around, flames and oily black smoke. Every time you drove past the place of the accident with your parents afterward you felt that same excitement.

*This is where it happened. Can you still spot anything? Is it all gone?*

She looks at you the same way.

"We know each other from before," you say and hand her the photograph. "I just wanted to say hello."

You know that as soon as she sees the photograph she's going to be filled with panic. Perhaps she'll shut the door. She'll probably deny it.

She surprises you, as she has always surprised you. She's good at surprises, because she's unpredictable.

"It's you!"

A moment later she opens her arms and gives you a warm, safe hug.

In the apartment she explains that her husband will be back around six—there's more than enough time. You know she's divorced, and her ex lives near Bornholm. It's good that she's pretending to trust you. Any insecurity is good.

You sit down in the living room. From where you're sitting you can look out at the balcony. A table, no chairs. Beside the table a sculpture. A boy lowering his head, hands clasped in prayer. You've noticed sculptures like that at the hardware store. Some of them hold books, others have



wings on their backs. You look quickly away, you feel dazzled, although the sun shines down pale and weary today.

“Would you like something to drink?”

She brings you a glass of mineral water and sets it down on the coffee table next to the photograph. Two boys on a bicycle. They’re grinning, they’re so young that it hurts.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” she says and leans forward to brush a strand of hair from your forehead. Intimate. Close. You don’t flinch. Your self-control is perfect.

“Did you miss me?” she wants to know.

*I’ve dreamed about you at night*, you want to reply, but you’re not sure whether that’s the truth. There are dreams and there’s reality, and you wander back and forth between them, struggling to keep them apart.

She smiles at you. Now there isn’t just curiosity in her expression, there’s also a trace of desire. You force yourself not to look at the sculpture, you force yourself to return her smile. At the same time something in you tears. As silently as a cobweb. Her desire is too much for you. And you thought you had self-control. And you thought you could do that.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“Hey, come on, you’re not ashamed of me, are you?” she asks.

Your face is red, your fists clenched under the table. Shame.

“Second on the left,” she says, tapping your knee. “Hurry up, or I’ll have to come and get you.”

She winks at you, lascivious and playful. *I’m not nine years old any more!* you want to yell at her, but there’s only a cold stiffness in you, and that stiffness lets nothing through. You stand up and walk into the corridor. You open the second door on the left and shut it behind you. In front of the mirror you look up, but your eyes avoid you. It hurts, it hurts again every time. You hope it will be different one day, and that hope holds you upright and eases the pain.

*It’ll soon be over.*

You kneel on the tiled floor and lift the lid of the toilet. You’re quiet, no coughing, no groaning, just the sound of a splash. When nothing more comes you take the toothbrush from the toothpaste cup and shove it into your throat to be sure that your belly really is empty. Then you wash your hands and rinse out your mouth. Before you leave the bathroom, you put the toothbrush back and, with some toilet paper, carefully wipe clean all the surfaces you have touched.

*Soon.*

She's still sitting in the armchair smoking—arm bent at the elbow, head tilted slightly back when she lets smoke escape from her mouth. Even that gesture is so familiar to you that the memories overlay one another like a handful of slides. Back then and today become now, and now becomes today and back then. She holds the photograph in her hand and studies it. When you are standing behind her, she turns her head and her eyes flash. You aim the gas at that flash until the can is empty and she is lying on the floor in a whimpering heap. Then you start removing any trace of yourself from the room. You drain the glass and put it in your pocket. The photograph has fallen from her hand. You pick it up and put it in your pocket. You are careful, you are precise, you know what you are doing. When she tries to creep away, you turn her on to her back and sit down on her chest. Her arms are trapped beneath you, her eyes are swollen. She rears, her knees come up, her heels drum on the carpet. You put one hand firmly over her mouth, and with the other you hold her snot-streaming nose closed. It all goes quickly.

You make a package out of her. You press her thighs to her chest and shove her arms behind her knees. She's not very big. You've thought of everything. Ten days of planning was enough. She fits in one of these black 120-liter trash bags. You carry her out of the flat. On the stairs you meet an old man. You nod at him, he nods back. It's as easy as taking out the garbage.

It's late by the time she wakes up.

You were a bit disappointed when you first stepped into the apartment. It was dirty and deserted, it was nothing like what it had been. You had expected more. Places with a past like that shouldn't be deserted. It's disrespectful. People make pilgrimages to Dachau and Auschwitz, they look at the concentration camps as if they could read something from them, while a few yards from their homes a new form of horror is taking place and they aren't even aware of it.

It was very hard to find the right photomural. You drove all over Berlin, and it was only after the fifth specialty store when you described to one of the clerks exactly what you were looking for that he went to the storeroom and came back with several rolls.

To your surprise he let you have them all for nothing.

"No one buys this kind of crap these days" were his exact words.

Sometimes you wonder if you aren't exaggerating the details. Then

you give yourself the only logical answer. This is all about memory. It's about details. Details are important to you. You prize details.

The wall is still wet with glue. At the spot where the metal ring used to be, there's now a hole in the wall. Before you glued the photomural over the hole you had to stick your index finger into it. You marked the spot: the X is exactly at eye level.

The left shoe falls from her foot when you press her against the wall. As you do you get so close to her that you feel ill. Her unconscious body is soft, and it's hard to keep it vertical. Your strength calms you down. You're chest to chest. Her breath smells like cold smoke. You lift her arms up, her feet part a few inches from the floor, you swing the hammer back and strike.

The nail easily penetrates the palms of her hands, placed one over the other. Three blows are enough and the head of the nail is all that sticks out from her wrists. The third blow wakes her, your eyes are level now and she screams into your face. The scream fizzles out in a dull tap against the insulating tape you've stuck over her mouth. You look at each other, you will never be as close to her again. She twitches, tries to kick; your body presses her against the wall, holds her in position. Panic and contentment and strength. Strength, every time. Tears shoot from her swollen eyes and hit your face. You've seen enough and step back. Her weight pulls her down. The surprised expression. Something jerks. The pain makes her tremble, a shudder runs through her body, her bladder empties. The nail holds. She hangs on the wall with arms stretched upwards. Her right shoe falls with a quiet click, her toes scrape over the floor in search of purchase. If looks could kill, you'd be long dead.

It's time to part. You show her where to look. She tries to turn her head. You knew she would do that. It fits. So you walk over to her and place the second nail on her forehead. It's bigger, sixteen inches long, and has a special name that you don't remember. The man in the hardware store told you it twice and you nodded and said thank you. She freezes as the tip touches her skin. Her eyes speak to you. They say you won't do it. They order you not to. You shake your head. Then she closes her eyes tight shut. You're surprised, you expected more resistance. You expected her to kick out at you again, to defend herself.

*She gives up.*

Your lips touch her ear and you whisper:

“It wasn't me.”

She opens her eyes wide. And there's the look, and there's the understanding.

*Now.*

You drive the nail through the bone of her forehead. It takes you four more blows than the hands did, before the nail pierces the back of her head and enters the wall. She twitches, her twitch becomes a quiver, then she hangs still. Bright blood trickles from the ear you whispered into; a dark thread of blood emerges from the wound in her forehead and wanders between her eyes over the base of her nose and her cheek. You wait and study the elegance with which the thread of blood moves over her face. Before it reaches the insulating tape, you pull it from her mouth. Spittle seeps over her lips and mixes with the blood. Her right eye closes, as if it's weary. You open it again, it stays open. You follow her frozen gaze. It's fine, you don't have to correct anything, everything is right.

# PART I

# After

*IN THE DARKNESS of your thoughts I would like to be a light.*

I have no idea who wrote that. I just remember the piece of paper that was pinned up on the kitchen wall one day.

*In the darkness of your thoughts . . .*

I want someone to come out of the forest with a flashlight and aim the beam at my face. Being seen can be so important. It doesn't matter by whom. I'm disappearing into myself more and more.

It's the day after. My hand rests on the cold metal of the fender. I listen as if my fingertips could hear the vibrations. I need more time, I'm not yet able to open the trunk. Perhaps another hundred kilometers, maybe a thousand.

*. . . I would like to be a light.*

I get in and start the engine. If someone should ever follow my journey, he'll get lost in its incoherence. I'm moving through Germany like a lab rat in a maze. I lurch and every step is uncertain. I step sideways, turn in circles. But whatever I do, I don't stand still. Standing still is out of the question. Sixteen hours are bundled together into sixteen minutes when you travel aimlessly. The boundaries of your own perception start to fray, and everything seems meaningless. Even sleep loses its significance. I wish there were a light in the darkness of my thoughts. But there is no light. So I'm left with nothing but my thoughts.

# Before

## KRIS

BEFORE WE TALK ABOUT YOU, I'd like to introduce you to the people you will soon be meeting. It's a cool, late August day. The sun is extremely bright in the sky and resembles the flickering gleam of light switches in corridors. The people turn their faces to the sun and wonder why so little warmth comes back.

We are in a small park in the middle of Berlin. This is where everything starts. A man sits on a park bench by the water. His name is Kris Marrer; he is twenty-nine and looks like an ascetic who decided a long time ago not to be part of society. Kris knows only too well that he is a part of society. He has finished school and his studies. He likes going to the seaside, he enjoys good food and can talk about music for hours. Even if he doesn't want to be, Kris Marrer is definitively a part of it, and this Wednesday morning he feels that clearly.

He sits on the park bench, as if he were about to jump up at any moment. His chin is thrust forward, his elbows on his knees. It isn't a good day today, he knew it wouldn't be a good day when he woke up, but we'll get to that later. What's important at this moment is that he regrets seeking out this particular park bench at the Urbanhafen. He thought a few minutes' peace to gather his thoughts was exactly what he needed. He thought wrong.

A woman sits on the grass a few yards away. She's dressed as if she can't believe the summer is over. Sleeveless dress, sandals. The grass around her looks exhausted, the ground is damp. A man stands in front of the woman talking to her. His right hand is like an axe cutting silently through the air. Sharp, angular, quick. Every time the man points at the woman she flinches. The couple isn't particularly noisy, but Kris can clearly, distinctly hear each of their words.

He knows now that the man has been unfaithful. The woman doesn't believe him. When the man lists all the women he has slept with, the

woman begins to believe him and calls him a bastard. He is a bastard, there's no getting around it. He laughs in her face.

"What did you imagine? Did you think I'd be faithful to you?"

The man spits at the woman's feet, turns his back on her and leaves. The woman starts crying. She cries silently; the people react as people always do and look the other way. The children go on playing, and a dog barks excitedly at a pigeon, while an indifferent sun sees nothing it hasn't seen a million times before.

*On days like this it should rain, Kris thinks. No one should split up with anyone while the sun's shining.*

When the woman looks up, she notices him on the park bench. She smiles embarrassedly, not wanting to display her sadness. Her smile reminds Kris of a curtain that he's been allowed to glimpse behind for a second. *Nice, inviting.* He's touched by her openness, then the moment is just as quickly over, the woman rubs the tears from her face and looks across the water as if nothing has happened.

Kris sits down next to her.

Later he will tell his brother that he didn't know what he was doing. But that's later. From here on it's all very simple. It's as if the words had always been in his head. Kris doesn't have to search for them, he just has to say them out loud.

He explains to the woman what's just happened. He takes the bastard who cheated on her under his wing, and invents a difficult past for him. He talks about problems and childhood anxieties. He says:

"If he could, he would do lots of things differently. He knows he's screwing up. Let him go. How long have you known each other? Two months? Three?"

The woman nods. Kris goes on.

"Let him go. If he comes back, you'll know it's right. If he doesn't come back, you can be glad it's over."

As Kris is talking, he's taking pleasure in his words. He can observe their effect. They're like a calming hand. The woman listens attentively and says she wouldn't have been sure what to think about the whole relationship.

"Did he talk about me a lot?"

Kris hesitates imperceptibly, then pays her compliments and says what you say to an insecure, twenty-three-year-old woman who will find her next lover without any great difficulty the very same week.

Kris is good, he's really good.



“Even though he’ll never admit it,” he says at last, “you shouldn’t forget that he’s sorry. Deep inside he’s apologizing to you right now.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

The woman nods contentedly.

Everything starts with a lie and ends with an apology—even this morning here in the park. The woman doesn’t know who Kris Marrer is. She doesn’t even want to know how he knows the bastard who has just left her. And although she has no other connection with Kris, she asks him if he’d like to go for a drink. The woman’s pain is like a bridge that anyone can walk on, if they can summon up some compassion.

*Sometimes, Kris thinks, we’re so interchangeable it’s embarrassing.*

“A glass of wine would do me good,” she says, smoothing her dress over her legs as if the dress were a reason to think about her offer. He sees her knees, he sees the red-painted toenails in the sandals. Then he shakes his head. He didn’t do this to get closer to the woman. He acted purely out of instinct. Perhaps it was the banal primal urge of the protector. Man sees woman, man wants to protect woman, man protects woman. Later Kris will reach the insight that he has pursued his vocation—he had an urgent need to apologize. Later one part will find the other and form one big whole. Later.

Kris rests his hand on the woman’s and says, “Sorry, but I’ve got a date.”

There’s her smile again, but it’s not tormented now; she understands Kris, she trusts him.

“Another time,” he promises and stands up.

She nods. It’s over. The pain of separation has vanished, because she has seen a glimmer of light. A nice man has opened her eyes. And so we leave the woman sitting alone on the grass, and leave the park with the nice man. We are on the way to his job. It will be his last working day, and the nice man is not in a good mood.

“You’ve got to understand this,” says Bernd Jost-Degen ten minutes later and sticks his hands into the front pockets of his designer jeans. He stands with his back to the window, so that Kris can only make his face out as a silhouette. A digital hand twitches between a Chagall and a Miró above a digital clock projected on the wall. The boss’s office must always be in semi-darkness, or else you wouldn’t be able to see the

clock. Bernd is three years older than Kris and doesn't like people calling him "boss," or pretends not to.

"There's a lot of rationalization going on," Bernd continues. "Look at me, I'm up to my neck in shit, as well. The structures aren't the same any more, the world has moved on, you know? Back in the old days, people did good work for good pay. Now they have to do fantastic levels of work for bad pay. And they're supposed to be grateful, too."

He laughs the laugh of someone who isn't one of those people. Kris feels like an idiot and doesn't know why he wanted to speak to his boss again. At his feet are two paper bags that the cleaning woman handed to him after she had cleared his desk.

"It's a market economy, Kris, it's overpopulation. There are too many of us, and our souls belong to capitalism. Look at me. I'm dangling on strings. I'm a puppet. The guys at the top are saying, Bernd, we want twice as much profit. And what do I do? I give you cheaper mineral water and order the cheapest kind of coffee and make cuts wherever I can, so that the people up there don't get rid of me."

"What on earth are you talking about?" asks Kris. "You fired me, you've made me one of your cuts."

Bernd rests one hand on the other and leans forward.

"Come on, Kris, look, my hands are tied, kill me if you want, but my hands are tied. It's last in, first out. Of course you can go straight on to another job. And if you like, I'll write you a reference, I'm happy to do that. Of course. Try the *Tagesspiegel*, they're a bit slow off the mark. Or what about *taz*, they're . . . What's up? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Kris has laid his head on one side. His thoughts are focused. It's a bit like meditation. Each time Kris breathes in he gets bigger, and each time he breathes out his boss shrinks a bit more.

"You're not going to get violent on me, are you?" Bernd says nervously, and steps behind his desk. His hands disappear into his trouser pockets, his torso leans back as if he were standing on the edge of an abyss. Kris doesn't move, he just observes, and if he were to step closer to his boss right now, he'd be able to smell his fear.

"I'm really sorry, man. If you want—"

Kris walks out on him mid-sentence and crosses the editorial office with the paper bags under his arms. He's disappointed. Bernd Jost-Degen has never learned to formulate an apology properly. Never say you're sorry and hide your hands in your trouser pockets as you do so. We all want to see the weapons we're being injured with. And if you're

going to lie as he just did, then at least take a step toward the other guy and let him feel you're telling the truth. Fake closeness, because closeness can mask lies. There's nothing more pitiful than someone who can't apologize for his mistakes.

No one looks up when Kris walks past. He wishes the whole gang of them would choke on their own ignorance there and then. He's worked closely with them for a year, and now not a single one of them looks up.

Kris sets the bags down on the floor of the elevator and looks at himself in the mirror on the wall. He waits for his reflection to look away. The reflection grins back.

*Better than nothing*, Kris thinks and presses the button for the ground floor.

The two bags contain all his research and interviews from the last few months, which no one's really interested in. Current for a day, then just some junk that's recycled over and over. *Journalism today*, Kris thinks, really wanting to set the whole pile on fire. When the doors open again, he steps out of the elevator and leaves the bags on the floor. At almost the same time they tip sideways with a sigh, then the elevator doors close, and it's over.

Kris steps onto the pavement and takes a deep breath.

We're in Berlin, we're on Gneisenaustrasse. The World Cup has been over for nine weeks, and it's as if it never happened. Kris doesn't want that to happen to him. He's in his late twenties and after twelve months in a steady job he's unemployed again. He has no interest in looking for another job, and neither does he want to switch, like hundreds of thousands of others, from one internship to the next, getting by on starvation wages and hoping someone takes him on sooner or later. No. And he doesn't want to work as a trainee, either, because he's had training and he's been through university. His attitudes are at odds with the job market—he's bad at begging and far too arrogant for small jobs. But Kris doesn't plan to despair. He won't end up with his head in the oven, no one will be aware of his problems. Kris is an optimist, and there are only two things he can't stand: lying and unfairness. Today he is aware of both, and his mood matches the fact. If Kris Marrer knew now that he has been moving toward a new goal since waking up, he would change his attitude. You'd be able to see him smile. But as he is unsuspecting, he curses the day and sets off for the subway. He wonders how to straighten a world in which everyone's used to standing crooked.

## TAMARA

JUST AS KRIS IS leaving the editorial office, Tamara Berger is sitting up in bed with a start. The ceiling is just a few inches away from her head, and Tamara knows she will never get used to it. Like waking up in a coffin. She falls back into the pillows and thinks about the dream that is echoing around in her head. A man asked her if she had made her decision. Tamara couldn't see his face, she could just see the tensed sinews at his throat. So she tried to walk around the man, but his head kept turning away from her until hairline cracks formed at his neck that made Tamara think of dried-out earth. Finally she laid a hand on the man's head so that he couldn't turn away any more. She walked around the man and woke up.

We are in Berlin South, two streets away from Steglitz Town Hall. The room looks out onto a courtyard to the rear, the curtains are drawn, and a wasp is flying tirelessly against the windowpane. Tamara doesn't know how the wasp got through the sealed window. The alarm clock shows 11:19. Tamara doesn't believe it and holds the alarm clock right in front of her eyes before she gets cursing out of the bunk and puts on last night's clothes. A minute later she dashes from the apartment as if the house were in flames.

You'll now be wondering why we are spending any time on a woman who can't even manage to wash her face or put on fresh clothes after she wakes up. Tamara asks herself the same question as she looks at her face in a reflection on the subway. When she got home at four this morning she was far too tired to take her makeup off. The running mascara left dark traces under her eyes. Her hair is straggly, her blouse crumpled and open one button too far, clearly revealing her cleavage. *I look like a tramp*, Tamara thinks and buries her face in her hands. Without a word, the man diagonally opposite hands her a tissue. Tamara says thank you and blows her nose. She wishes she had slept through the whole day.

Even though it's hard for you at the moment, you have to believe that Tamara Berger is an important element in this story. One day you will sit opposite her and ask her whether she's made her decision. Without her we'd have to part now.

The job center is closed. Tamara gives the door a halfhearted kick and walks to the nearest bakery. She eats a sandwich standing up and sips at a coffee that tastes as if it's spent a third night on the hot plate. The

woman behind the counter shrugs and refuses to make a new pot. She says what's there has to be drunk first. And no one else has complained. Tamara thanks her for her terrible service, and when the woman turns away she steals her packets of sugar. All of them.

The apartment belongs to Tamara's sister, Astrid. First floor in the front of an old building. Not beautiful, not ugly, just practical. Two rooms lead off to the front, and the third, next to the bathroom, is Tamara's. It has a depressing view of a gray courtyard that has never seen sunlight. In summer the stench of rubbish bins is so bad that Tamara has sometimes woken up choking in the night. When she complained to her sister, Astrid said that as far as she was concerned Tamara could go back and live with their parents if she wanted. Tamara kept her mouth shut and sealed up the chinks in the windows.

*We are family, she thought, that's how things are, you keep your mouth shut and hope things will get better one day.*

Tamara really thinks that. Her father took early retirement, at thirty-nine; her mother spends her days behind the till at Kaiser's supermarket, and in the evening she sits and crochets in front of the television. Apart from Astrid, Tamara has an elder brother who disappeared from home at some point to emigrate to Australia. The children grew up with the traditional bourgeois philosophy that life is no one's friend and you should be content with what you have.

When Tamara gets back from the job center, Astrid is standing at the stove stirring a kind of green cream. The flat smells like the locker room after a game.

"It stinks in here," says Tamara by way of greeting.

"I can't smell anything any more," Astrid replies and taps her nose. "It's like Chernobyl in there."

Tamara kisses her sister on the cheek and opens the window.

"So? What happened?"

Tamara would like to answer that nothing's happened, because nothing actually has happened, but she knows exactly what Astrid means. So she keeps quiet and pulls off her boots and hopes to get away without any further questions. There are days when she manages to do that.

Astrid studies each of Tamara's movements. Not a lot has changed between the sisters since childhood. They might be four years apart, but no

one can see the difference. Tamara doesn't know whether that speaks for her or against her. In the old days she always wanted to be the older one.

"Don't make that face," says Astrid. "One of those big bookshops will take you on eventually. Dussmann or someone. They're always looking for people."

Astrid can talk. People with jobs are always hearing that there are jobs everywhere. A year ago Tamara's sister set up a nail studio in the basement of the building. She also mixes up creams and face masks to order. At the end of the year she intends to specialize in massages. Astrid runs the nail studio on her own. Tamara would like to help her, because anything would be better than sitting around idle, but Astrid thinks Tamara is overqualified.

Tamara hates the term. It sounds as if she'd developed an infectious illness after she took her final exams. Normally qualified is always better, it means the employer can pay less. Student is best of all, of course, but Tamara has sworn never to study again. She's glad that school's behind her; she doesn't have to wear the academic invisibility cloak all over again. She doesn't even expect much from life. She just wants to make a bit more money, travel a bit more, and she wants things to be a bit better overall.

"Did you call in and see them?" asks Astrid.

"See who?"

"Are you even listening? Bookshop? Big one? Dussmann? Something'll come up there soon, believe me."

Tamara nods even though she doesn't want to, then stands by the kitchen table and empties all the sugar packets from her jacket pocket.

"Look what I've brought."

Astrid grins.

"So who got on the wrong side of you this time?"

"A member of the working class," says Tamara, kisses her sister on the cheek again and disappears into her room.

Even though she's only been living with Astrid since the spring, it's felt like an eternity. It was Tamara who chose to move in, but sometimes you just go with it and then you're surprised that things happen the way they do.

If you could look around Tamara's room, you'd think the person who lives here is just passing through. Two open suitcases with clothes spilling out of them, two rows of books along the walls, no pictures, no post-

ers, not even any little ornaments on the windowsill. *Having arrived* is a state that Tamara is still waiting for. She doesn't dream of owning her own house with a parquet floor and a husband whom she will bless with three children. Her dreams are bleak and feeble, because she doesn't know what she wants from life. She doesn't feel any sense of vocation, she isn't enticed by a mission. There's just the desire somehow to fit in, but without really having to belong. She likes society too much to be an outsider; she's too much of an outsider to conform.

After Tamara has closed the bedroom door behind her, she listens to the treacherous silence. Through the wall she hears first a quiet cough, then a loud groan.

*I've got to get out of here*, Tamara thinks, and resists the urge to hammer on the wall. Werner is on the toilet again. Werner is Astrid's current boyfriend, and he spends five days a week at her place, even though his flat is twice the size of hers. Astrid doesn't see him on the weekends, because that's when Werner goes from one house to another with his friends, getting so drunk that he can't be bothered to see anybody. Werner is a high school gym teacher, and he's had hemorrhoids since childhood. Every day he sits on the toilet for an hour and groans. Tamara hears every sound. Except on Saturday and Sunday, of course.

She climbs onto her bunk bed, grabs her headphones and the historical novel that lies open and facedown beside her pillow. Seven pages later the ceiling light flickers on and off. Tamara takes the headphones off and looks down from the bunk. Astrid is standing in the door frame, waving the telephone.

"Who is it?"

"Who do you think?" Astrid replies and throws her the phone.

Tamara's heart starts thumping. There are days when she hopes to hear an elegant, almost tender voice at the other end. She knows it's an idiotic hope, but she still excitedly presses the receiver to her ear and listens. She hears breathing, she knows the breathing and is disappointed, but tries not to let any of her disappointment show.

"Save me," says her best friend. "I'm on my last legs here."

Tamara Berger and Frauke Lewin have known each other since grade school. They ended up at the same grammar school, fancied the same boys, and hated the same teachers. They spent almost all their evenings with the clique at the Lietzensee. From the first kiss to the first joint they experienced everything there—lovesickness, crying fits, political

discussions, arguments, and the depths of boredom. In the winter you could see them sitting on the benches by the war memorial. The cold couldn't touch them in those days. They drank mulled wine from thermos flasks and smoked their cigarettes hastily, as if they might warm them up. Tamara doesn't know when the cold took hold of them. They feel it much more quickly now, they whine more, and if anyone asks them why, they reply that the world is getting colder and colder. They could also answer that they'd got older, but that would be too honest, you don't say that until you're forty and you can look back. In your late twenties you go through your very private climate disaster and hope for better times.

Frauke waits by the war memorial, which looms out of the park like a lonely monolith. Her back rests against the gray stone and her legs are crossed. Frauke is dressed in black, and that has nothing to do with this special day. In her teenage years Frauke went through an intense Goth phase. On days like today she looks like one of those innocent women in horror films whom everyone wants to protect against evil, who then suddenly transforms and shows her fangs. Take a good look at her. You can't know it yet, but one day this woman will be your enemy. She will hate you, and she will try to kill you.

"Aren't you cold?" Tamara asks.

Frauke gives her a look as if she's sitting on an iceberg.

"The summer's over and my ass is an ice cube. Can you tell me what I'm doing here?"

"You're on your last legs," Tamara reminds her.

"How I love you."

Frauke slides along, Tamara sits down, Frauke offers her a cigarette, Tamara takes the cigarette, although she doesn't smoke. Tamara only smokes when Frauke offers her a new cigarette. She doesn't want to disappoint her friend, so she keeps her company. Sometimes Tamara doesn't know if there's a name for women like her. Passive smoker doesn't capture it.

"How did you even manage to get out of bed this morning?" Frauke asks.

They danced the previous night away at a disco, and got so drunk that they didn't even say goodbye.

Tamara tells her about the closed job center and the coffee at the bakery. Then she draws on the cigarette and coughs.



Frauke takes the cigarette from her and stamps it out.

“Has anyone ever told you that you smoke like a fag? People like you shouldn’t smoke.”

“You’re telling me.”

They study the few strollers who risk going to the park in this weather. The Lietzensee glitters as if its surface were made of ice. A pregnant woman stops by the shore and rests both hands contentedly on her belly. Tamara quickly looks away.

“How old are we?” asks Frauke.

“You know how old we are.”

“Doesn’t that worry you?”

Tamara doesn’t know what to say. At the moment she has other things to be worried about. Last week she split up with a musician whom she met on the subway. His notion of a relationship was for Tamara to rave about his talent during the day, and in the evening keep her mouth shut when his friends came by for a jam session. Tamara doesn’t like being alone. She sees loneliness as a punishment.

“I mean, doesn’t it worry you that ten years after leaving school we’re still sitting here by the war memorial and nothing has changed? We know this place like the back of our hands. We know where the winos hide their bags of returnable bottles, we even know where the dogs like to piss. I feel like an old shoe. Imagine going to a class reunion now. God, how they’d laugh.”

Tamara remembers the last reunion a year ago, and the fact that nobody was doing particularly well. Twelve were jobless, four were trying to keep their heads above water by selling insurance, and three had set up on their own and were just short of bankruptcy. Only one woman was doing brilliantly: she was a pharmacist and couldn’t stop boasting about it. So much for high school graduation.

But Tamara doesn’t think that’s really Frauke’s problem.

“What’s happened?” she asks.

Frauke flips the cigarette away. A man stops abruptly and looks at the stub by his feet. He touches it with his shoe as if it were a freshly killed animal, then looks over at the two women on the park bench.

“Fuck off!” Frauke calls to him.

The man shakes his head and walks on. Frauke snorts and grins. On days like this it’s plain to Tamara that Frauke is still a street child. While Tamara had to fight to leave the house for as much as an hour, Frauke had wandered around freely, taking advice from no one. The girls looked up to her as a leader, while the boys feared her sharp tongue. Frauke

has always had both pride and dignity. Now she's working as a freelance media designer, but only takes on commissions that she likes, and that often leaves her broke at the beginning of the month.

"I need a new job," she says. "Just anything, you know? But really urgently. My dad has another new girlfriend, and his girlfriend is of the opinion that I should stand on my own two feet. I mean, hey, am I like fourteen years old or something? He stopped the checks. Just like that. Can you tell me what kind of sluts my dad's hanging out with? Let 'em come and ring my doorbell, I'll tell them a thing or two."

Tamara has the image clearly in front of her eyes. She doesn't know whether there's a Latin name for Frauke's father complex. Any woman who gets involved with Frauke's father experiences his daughter as a Fury. Tamara was there a few times, and the memories aren't good. Tamara sees the father as the problem, not his girlfriends, but she keeps that thought to herself.

"And now?" Frauke asks, suddenly feeble. "What do I do now?"

"We could mug somebody," Tamara suggests, jutting her chin toward the man who stopped when he saw the cigarette butt.

"Too poor."

"We could open a bookshop?"

"Tamara, you need seed money for that. Monetos, capice?"

"I know."

It's always the same dialogue. Tamara dreams, Frauke wakes her up.

"And don't suggest I go to the job center," says Frauke, tapping a new cigarette out of the box. She offers one to Tamara, Tamara shakes her head, Frauke puts the pack back in her pocket and lights her own.

"I have my dignity," she says after the first drag. "I'd rather beg in the street."

Tamara wishes that Frauke's character traits would rub off on her a little. She'd love to be choosier. In men, in work, in her decisions. She'd also like to be proud, but it's hard when you've got nothing to be proud of.

*I've got Frauke*, Tamara thinks and says, "You will manage."

Frauke sighs and looks into the sky. Her neck lengthens as she does so; it's white like a swan's.

"Look down again," Tamara says.

Frauke lowers her head.

"Why?"

"I get dizzy when people look into the sky."

“What?”

“No, it’s true. It makes me really ill. I think it’s some sort of nervous disorder.”

“You really are a case, aren’t you?”

And she’s absolutely right, Tamara is a case.

An hour later they share a bag of chips by the district court building, and wait for the 148, toward the zoo. Frauke is feeling better. She has worked out that she sometimes sees nothing but storm clouds everywhere. When Tamara tells her to take less medication, Frauke doesn’t even pull a face and says, “Tell that to my mother, not to me.”

At Wilmersdorfer Strasse they get off the bus and head into the Chinese supermarket opposite Woolworth’s. Frauke fancies stir-fried vegetables and noodles.

“It’ll do you good to eat something healthy,” she explains.

Tamara doesn’t like the smell in Chinese shops. It reminds her of the hallways in the blocks of apartments with corners stinking of piss, and it also reminds her a bit of an InterRail journey when she got her period and couldn’t wash herself down below for two days. But what bothers her most is that she has gotten used to the smell of dried fish after a minute, but knows very well that it’s still in the air.

Frauke isn’t worried about that. She puts bok choy, baby eggplants, and leeks in the basket. She weighs a handful of bean sprouts and searches for the right noodles. Then she runs back to the vegetables to get ginger and coriander. She doesn’t like the coriander. She talks to a saleswoman and asks for a fresh bunch. The saleswoman shakes her head. Frauke lifts the coriander and says, *Dead*, then taps herself on the chest and says, *Alive*. The saleswoman holds Frauke’s stare for a minute before disappearing into the storeroom and coming back with a new bunch. Tamara thinks the new bunch looks exactly the same as the old one, but she says nothing, because Frauke is content. Frauke thanks the saleswoman with a hint of a bow and marches to the register with Tamara. The Vietnamese man behind the register is about as nice as the kind of uncle you might imagine trying to grope you under your skirt. Frauke tells him he can stop grinning. His mouth becomes a straight line. Frauke and Tamara hurry out of the shop.

“Plan B,” says Frauke, dragging Tamara over to one of the phone booths. Plan B can mean anything with Frauke, but in lots of cases it just means that no Plan A exists.

As Frauke is making her call, Tamara studies the people outside the

Tchibo coffee shop. Even though it's overcast they're crowding around the tables under the umbrellas, shopping bags crammed between their legs. Grandmas with cigarette in one hand and a coffee cup in the other; grandpas silently guarding the tables, as if someone has forced them to leave their flat. Among them are two laborers bent over their tables eating as if they aren't allowed to leave crumbs on the pavement. Caffè lattes and apple tarts are on sale. Tamara imagines herself standing there with Frauke in thirty years' time. Fresh from the hairdresser's in their beige orthopedic footwear, their plastic bags full of booty, lipstick crusted in the corners of their mouths.

"It's been months," Frauke says into the receiver. "I can't even remember what you look like. And anyway my kitchen's too small. I hate cooking in it, is that something you can possibly imagine?"

Frauke looks at Tamara and holds up her thumb.

"What? What do you mean, when?" she says again into the phone. "Now, of course."

Tamara presses her ear to the receiver as well and hears Kris saying he thinks it's nice of them to call but he has no time right now, his head's in the oven and they should try again later.

"Later's not good," Frauke says, unimpressed. "Do you *really* not fancy stir-fried vegetables?"

Kris admits that he isn't in the slightest interested in stir-fried vegetables. He promises to call again later.

"After the autopsy," he says and hangs up.

"What does he mean by autopsy?" Tamara asks.

"For God's sake, Tamara," says Frauke and pushes her out of the phone booth.

Whenever Tamara thinks about Kris, she thinks of a fish that she saw once in the aquarium. It was her twentieth birthday. Frauke had bought some grass from a friend, and the plan had been to get completely stoned and look at the fish in the aquarium.

"You can't beat it," she had said. "You suddenly understand what a fish is really like."

They strolled giggling from one room to the next, got terrible munchies for Mars bars and stocked up on them at a newsstand before entering a room with a big pool. A handful of tourists had assembled, students sat yawning on the benches. Tamara's mouth was full of chocolate when she stepped forward and saw the fish.

The fish wasn't swimming. It floated among all the other fish in the water and stared at the visitors, some of whom pulled faces or knocked on the glass, making the fish jerk backward and swim away. But the one fish remained still. Its eyes were fixed, and it looked through the visitors as if no one were there. Tamara thought, *No one can hurt him*. And Kris is just like that. No one can hurt him.

At the time they all belonged to the same clique. Kris and Tamara and Frauke. There was Gero and Ina too, and Thorsten, Lena and Mike and whatever all their names were. They sailed through the nineties like an armada of hormone-drenched seafarers with only one goal in mind: one day to reach the sacred shore of high school graduation, and never to have to take to the sea ever again. After school they lost touch. Years later they bumped into each other by chance and were amazed at how much time had just slipped through their fingers. They were seafarers no more, neither were they shipwrecked; they were more like the people who walked along the beach picking up flotsam and jetsam.

"What's up?" Frauke asks, turning to Tamara, who is still standing beside the phone booth. "What are you waiting for?"

"Are you sure he wants to see us?"

"What sort of a question is that? Of course he wants to see us."

The last time Tamara talked to Kris was New Year's Eve. Kris described her as irresponsible and incompetent. Tamara is in fact irresponsible and sometimes incompetent as well, but there was no reason to rub her nose in it. She has no great desire to listen to this tirade all over again.

"Today's his last day at the paper," says Frauke. "Wolf mailed me. Kris *has* to see someone, or he'll go off the edge."

"Wolf said that?"

"I said that."

Tamara shakes her head.

"If Kris wants to see anyone, it's certainly not me."

"You know he doesn't mean it like that."

"So how does he mean it?"

"He . . . he gets worried. About you. And about the little one, too, of course."

Frauke deliberately doesn't say her name. *The little one*. Kris, on the other hand, always says the name, although she's asked him not to. And that hurts. They don't talk about Jenni. Jenni is the wound that does not stop bleeding.

Tamara tries to see Jenni twice a week. She isn't allowed to talk to her. She isn't allowed to show herself to her. On especially lonely nights Tamara walks through the south of Berlin and stops in front of Jenni's house. Always well hidden, as if waiting for someone, she looks to see if there's a light in Jenni's room. That's what she and David have agreed upon.

Jenni's father worked his way up over the last two years and now owns a bookshop in Dahlem. Tamara met him at accounting school in Leipzig and became involved for the first time with a man who was grounded and had goals in life. After the relationship had been going for a year Tamara got pregnant. In spite of the pill. Frauke said it was all due to her hormones.

"If your hormones are going crazy, you may as well chuck your pills down the toilet."

Tamara wasn't ready for a child. Although her hormones claimed the opposite, she didn't feel like a mother and wanted an abortion. David fell to pieces when he heard that. He talked about their great love, their future, and how wonderful it was all going to be. Tamara should trust him.

"Please, trust us."

Interminable discussions followed, and in the end Tamara gave in, even though she didn't love David. Being in love with someone and loving someone are two completely different things as far as she's concerned. She can fall in love with a new person every week, but she only wants to love once. David just wasn't the man who totally set her heart alight. He was good to her, he laid the world at her feet, but for true love that wasn't enough. Tamara stayed with him because he had goals and had determined their course

Jenni came into the world, and it was a fiasco. Tamara learned too late that you should never try things out on a child. It's not like choosing a kind of wallpaper, getting out at the wrong station, or entering a relationship. You can take wallpaper down again, there's always a next train, and relationships can be ended—you can't do that with a child. It's there, and it wants to stay.

To make things worse David was the ideal father; he never lost his temper and always took plenty of time, while Tamara was climbing the walls.

She managed seven months before giving up.

She knows it was wicked and mean to go, but she couldn't help it. She didn't feel enough for little Jenni, and was afraid of becoming one of

those women who bring up a child who'll spend her whole life in therapy talking about the lack of affection she received from her mother. So Tamara took flight. And it wasn't that Tamara didn't feel anything at all. It was a slowly progressing detachment from herself. She had the feeling of becoming less and less every day, while Jenni was taking up more and more room. As Tamara didn't want to lose herself, she went, leaving father and daughter in the lurch.

David was disappointed, David was furious, but he said he understood and accepted Tamara's decision. He assumed custody on the condition that Tamara gave him the chance of a new start. He didn't want any half measures. He wanted Tamara completely and totally, or else she was to disappear completely from his life.

And that was how Tamara became a ghost.

That same year David married another woman, they started a family, and Jenni got a new mother. For a year Tamara was fine with that, a second year began, and then everything happened as she had been warned it would. By girlfriends, by her family. A painful longing for Jenni exploded inside her. She started to doubt her decision, she started to burn with yearning.

David didn't want to know anything about Tamara's change of heart. He said the door was closed now, and would stay closed.

It hurts Tamara when people talk about Jenni. And for this reason she stays out of Kris's way, because Kris is of the opinion that Tamara should do something about her yearning. He thinks that Jenni belongs with her mother. Regardless of what David has to say on the matter.

"Whatever the two of you agreed on," he said on New Year's Eve, "is completely worthless. You are and remain her mother. It gets on my nerves the way you run around the place suffering. Pull yourself together, damn it. Everybody makes mistakes. You have to stand by your daughter. No ifs or buts."

*Everyone makes mistakes.*

Tamara understood all that. She gets more advice from all sides than she can deal with. And yet she doesn't want to meet her daughter. Because what if that feeling of estrangement came back one day? Who's to say that Tamara wouldn't take flight again after two days by her daughter's side? There are no guarantees. Tamara would give anything for a few guarantees.

That's almost it. You've met nearly all of them now. Kris and Frauke and Tamara. The fourth member of the confederation is missing. His name is Wolf. He will be the only one that you will meet personally, for

just a moment, which is a shame because he's like you. You'd have got along. You both walk through life feeling guilty. The big difference is that Wolf is wrong to feel his guilt, while you are completely aware of your responsibility, which is why you're slowly going mad.

At the moment Wolf is less than thirty yards away from Frauke and Tamara. He is holding a stack of books in his arms, and even though he would never admit it, he'd be really glad for a bit of company.

Let's not keep him waiting.