



CAROLINE WAHL
22 BAHNEN / 22 LENGHTS

A Novel, 224 pages

April 2023

English sample translation, pp. 9-22; 102-104

Translated by Gesche Ipsen

Contact:

judith.habermas@dumont.de / anna.ludgen@dumont.de

Pages 9-22

Oat milk, almond milk, cashew pulp, frozen raspberries, hummus, Kölln porridge oats, chia seeds, bananas, Dinkel pasta, avocado, avocado, avocado. I play a game: Don't look up. Guess. 30ish, male, lanky, rimless glasses, Levi's shirt. '30 72,' I say, and finally look up, and when I see the Levi's logo I'm pretty pleased with myself. Might even be the highlight of my day so far. Granted, it's a woman, and she's a bit younger, but to have guessed the T-Shirt correctly was still cool.

4 hours later, I put Edeka's own-brand pasta-dinner-in-a-box, own-brand porridge oats, Dr. Oetker bourbon custard and full fat milk on the conveyor belt. '4 euros and 6 cents,' says Mrs Bach. I pay, stuff the things in my rucksack and run to the station.

Tram, uni, practice problems, photocopying. I'm on a strict schedule, and simply have no time for photocopiers that don't work 3 times out of 4.

'Paper jam.' I feel the anger rising inside me at the sight of those words. I clench my fists and stare at the dumb white lump. Destructive anger.

Tram, solve the practice problems, swim, Ida. The problems are doable, and I manage to complete the sheet during the 69-minute journey from uni to the pool. I inhale the chlorine smell, throw my rucksack on the bench next to Ursula's multicoloured basket, pull my dress over my head, jump head first into the water, dive right down to the bottom of the deep end, sit on the floor of the pool and watch the goings on above me. Lots of uncoordinated, flailing children's legs, a pair of more or less coordinated elderly legs, diving children's bodies, mixed legs at the edge of the pool. Taken together, and as far as I can judge from down here, the interplay of all this movement looks like fun. I push myself off the floor to swim my usual 22 lengths, and when I lose count during the 20th or 22nd and can't be sure whether it's the 20th or the 22nd, I get annoyed and swim an extra 5 lengths as punishment.

Ursula: A little boy jumped on me earlier. For no reason.

I look at her questioningly.

Ursula: I was just swimming along normally, casually heading for the edge, and suddenly I see this little ginger-haired brat in front of me, he takes 3 steps back, runs up and jumps on top of me. For no reason.

Me: Unreal.

Ursula: I could swear he was staring at me the whole time, even before he took those 3 steps back. It wasn't accidental.

I nod.

Me: He just wanted to jump on top of you.

Ursula: Yep.

Silence.

Me: Which one was it?

Ursula nods.

Me: Maybe I'll jump on top of him.

Ursula nods.

Silence. Sitting in silence with Ursula is easy. She doesn't ask stupid questions. She only talks when there's something worth saying, such as that a boy jumped on top of her. On some days, we sit next to each other on the bench without exchanging a word. We close our eyes and let the sun dry our skins. And when we leave we nod goodbye.

Ursula: Where's the little one?

Me: Remember, Ida only comes when it's raining.

Ursula nods.

I flatten my back against the bench, which is warm from the sun, and close my eyes for a moment. It's one of the first properly hot days of the year. June was so-so, more like April or May. I inhale the summer air. Sun cream, chlorine, fries and Ursula's intense perfume fill my body. I open my eyes and look at the pastel evening sky, inhale it too, and feel light and warm. I survey the pool. The non-swimmers' end has largely been taken over by a group of boys about Ida's age. They're totally hyper, shooting down the slide into the pool like a machine gun. Opposite are 2 mothers with toddlers in their arms, gossiping, and this side of the rope that marks off the swimmers' end a man's playing water polo with a girl and boy. I reckon he's their father. The kids are giggling happily, and I wonder whether they do this often, or whether it's a one-off and that's why the kids are so happy. Some teenagers are hanging out at the edge of the pool by the swimmers' end, and I recognise a few girls from my old form, Angelina, Lena and Jana. They're getting tans. I raise my hand in a greeting. Angelina waves back with a forced smile. I don't think we like each other. My warm body flinches and a shiver runs down my spine. Ivan, I think, when I see the tall fair-haired guy in black trunks on the diving block, his face with that unmistakably hostile look in his eyes. I gulp. Ivan's distinctive, narrow, tanned face, his ice-blue eyes, with those always slightly frowning thick eyebrows, that little angry wrinkle between them, his thinnish lips stretched into a straight line. After Ida's face, Ivan's is the second most beautiful face I know. Knew. I feel sick. A rope tightens round my neck. I swallow a few times, try to draw the summer air deep into my contracted throat, to make room. I blink and focus. It must be Ivan's big brother, because it can't possibly be Ivan. I try to remember his name, and I'm furious that I can't. As I rummage around for it, I try to get a closer look at his face, which is difficult because it's so far away, but it is clearly not Ivan's. It's even surlier, and above all more impenetrable than Ivan's, the eyebrows are even closer together, the angry wrinkle is deeper, and the lips are stretched into an even straighter line. What is he doing here? Doesn't he live in London or somewhere? He pulls the swimming goggles over his eyes, dives elegantly head first into the pool, and swims off. His powerful, fast front crawl, straight as an arrow, makes him stick out from the rest of the chaos in the pool. When he pushes off the edge, he swims under the surface for at least 10 metres before he coming up for air, then reaches the other side in half a minute tops before pushing off again with a flip turn. My eyes watch his every move, and I think of his little brother, his low, rustling laugh, his hoarse voice. I don't take my eyes off the big brother. I'm scared of losing him. Also, his front crawl is properly beautiful, a rarity around here. After the 22nd length, he doesn't do a flip turn. He stays there at the edge, takes the goggles off, turns round, and his eyes meet mine. We look at each other. There are 51 metres between us, and everything seems muffled. Then he raises his eyebrows, and I don't know what to do. I

frown, pull my dress over my still-wet swimsuit, throw the rucksack over my shoulder, give Ursula a nod and head home. On the way, I feel like I'm in a trance, and think about the big brother whose name I can't for the life of me remember. Marlene will know. She's coming home at the weekend for some sort of party. Starting tomorrow, I'll swim 23 lengths, even if the number makes me a bit uneasy.

In Fröhlich Street, I say hello to Mr Feigel, who's mowing his lawn, and nod at the young family of 5 who moved into the pale-blue house next door a couple of weeks ago and are having a barbecue in their front garden. The building we live in is the only block of flats in the street, and on this summer's evening it looks even sadder than usual among the detached houses, where people are cheerily mowing lawns and having barbecues. As always, I scan the windows of our flat. The kitchen window is misted up. Mum's been cooking. I quickly open the front door, walk into the cool and quiet of the hallway, and open the door to no. 1, the one with the mat that says 'Welcome', even though no one's really welcome here. There's a smell of curry, probably chicken curry, as well as of something burnt. I walk into the kitchen and stand there in the hot steam. Ida has already turned the stove off. There are 2 saucepans on it, one with burnt rice and one with a slightly charred and unidentifiable curried concoction. I open the window, relieved that the fire alarm hasn't gone off again. That would have been embarrassing. On the worktop there's a tub of cream on its side, flour, and all the spices we have. One of the drawers is open, and the contents are on the floor. Loose pasta, cornflakes, breadcrumbs, porridge oats and an empty wine glass. She'd been looking for something, and probably ended the cooking session in a fit of temper when she couldn't find it. The chicken sitting there on its own on the kitchen table, unwrapped, somehow looks creepy. I put it in the freezer and open the door to the living room, where the chef is lying on the sofa. Her brown hair has fallen over her face and her mouth is slightly open. The stained white summer dress looks like an infant's bib. A wine-drinking infant's bib. Mum likes putting on a dress when she cooks, because when she decides to cook it usually means she's in a good mood. I won't be able to get those curry and red wine stains out. I'll have to chuck the thing in the bin. The figure-hugging faux-crochet dress was my birthday present to her last year, but it's got too big for her now anyway. I brush the hair out of her face, put a pillow under her head and say, 'You silly goose,' which she obviously doesn't hear because she's fast asleep, leave the living room and knock on Ida's door, 2 quick taps, pause, 3 slow ones, and open it. Ida is drawing, as usual. 'Mama was cooking again,' she says quietly, without looking up from her drawing.

Me: I know. Have you eaten?

Ida shakes her head.

Me: Pasta-in-a-box?

Ida: Miracoli or own-brand?

‘Miracoli,’ I lie.

I clear up the battlefield in the kitchen, cook the pasta, call Ida, we eat. Ida is in no mood to talk today. We brush our teeth, I take her to her room, she gets into bed and I sit on the edge.

Me: They say it’ll rain tomorrow.

Ida: I know.

Me: Swimming pool?

Ida: Yes.

Me: Good. Sleep well, now. I love you.

As I close the door, I hear a muffled ‘Love you too.’

I’m finally lying back on the mattress in my shirt, the blanket bunched up at my feet, letting the cool summer night waft over me. I’m worn out. Exhaustion is weighing down every fibre of my body, and know I’ll fall asleep the second I close my eyes. I want to draw the process of falling asleep out as long as possible, because this is one of the best moments of my day, and I don’t want to miss out on moments like this, which are mine alone, when I don’t have to do anything or think anything, when I can just lie there and let the cool summer night come in through the wide-open windows and cover me. I gaze out of the window, where I can see the silhouettes of the fir trees behind the house. I focus on the noises and smells. I can hear the crickets chirping, now and then a car, a cat meowing, nothing else. I can smell the summer night, lawns, flowers. When I lie on my mattress at night, and the wind or a summer night’s breeze like this comes in through the wide-open windows and covers me, there’s a brief interval when everything seems OK, and I feel light. When I lie on my mattress at night, I think I can put up with the world out there for a lot longer yet. I think that, as long as the breeze covers me during the night, I’ll be able to throw myself into the battle out there during the day. The battle I’m fighting with my mother, with her moods, with this small town. For Ida.

The rain is drumming on the window of the seminar room, and I need to get out of here. Mr Grung is going through a problem from the most recent practice sheet on the board, and Anna is annoying me with her dumb questions, because she’s trying to copy my answers to the new batch of problems and can’t read my writing. There’s no way she’ll pass the exam. It’s a mystery

to me how she managed to get into the advanced study module and the MA seminar in the first place. It's not like we're studying German or history of art or something.

Anna: Tilda, can you email me your answers? It takes ages to copy them out.

Me: I haven't typed them up.

Anna: But you need to upload them to Moodle anyway.

I do not. I prefer to do my thinking and calculating with pencil and notepad, and even print out research papers and take out books from the library. I can't think when I'm on my laptop. I wrote and edited my BA thesis on an A4 pad, then typed it up at the very end, and it was torture. The fact that I'm one of the few students – if not the only one – allowed to submit handwritten work for every module is something I've had to earn first, by making sure my work was practically flawless and that I handed it in well ahead of time. As if I would open my laptop today, let alone queue for the photocopier to scan the sheets, just because Anna can't be bothered. She doesn't give in, and follows me when I leave the seminar room and push my way through the other students towards the exit.

Anna: Can I photocopy it? We could go to the library for a sec. I'll buy you a coffee.

Me: Why can't you photocopy it here?

Anna: Look at that queue – only one of the photocopiers is working. Some nutcase poured water into the other one.

Me: Really? I really have to go, sorry. Take the sheets with you, or just take a photo.

Anna: In that case I'll take them with me. I prefer A4 to photos.

Anna often says dumb things like that.

Me: Take a photo. I want to hand them in tomorrow.

Anna sniffs, stops and takes a photo of my work, despite preferring A4 to photos.

Anna: You coming to Science Slam tonight?

Me: Nope, sorry, can't. Got something on.

Anna: Such as?

Me: I'm going swimming.

Anna points at the building's glazed front entrance.

Anna: It's pouring?

Me: You can swim in the rain.

Anna: You're weird, Tilda.

I shrug, say goodbye and run to the tram stop. The tram is packed because of the rain, and I have to stand. I hate standing on the tram. It's hard to read or do maths then, and it means I can't optimise the journey. Today I don't even try, and just look out of the window at the rain,

wasting time. I look at the city with its cafes, restaurants and shops, the colourful chairs and plants on the balconies above, and ask myself, as I often do, what those old flats look like inside, and what kind of people live there. The tram slowly empties out. I sit down, take Karatzas and Shreve's *Brownian Motion and Stochastic Calculus* from my rucksack, put it in my lap and keep looking out of the window. I watch the city turn into suburbs, watch the shops, restaurants and cafes thin out and the blocks of flats turn into villas with fenced-in gardens. I watch as the suburb turns into a residential development and the villas into dreary, greyish-white terraced houses and big blocks of flats. And then I see fields, lots of fields, passing by the window. I see fields for most of the journey, and in-between small towns that all look alike, until I finally spot my small town, which looks like the other small towns that came before it, and get off.

I pop into Edeka to buy vegetables and pasta shells for the chicken soup and run down Fröhlich Street, which isn't living up to its name today, in the rain, and looks anything but happy. Instead, when I open the door I find a happy-looking Ida sitting on the shoe rack, wearing her favourite pink leggings with the blue dolphins, my red shirt that's much too big for her and the fake white Converse I bought her at Deichmann the other day, her Snoopy backpack and umbrella in her lap. I love her style, especially because she's generally such a shy girl. When we're on the bus or the tram or at the pool, she hardly talks to me, and when she does it's in a near-whisper. When I make her laugh, she puts her hands over her mouth. At the pool the other day, when I suggested she talk to a girl who'd dived off the block all on her own, she let out a short laugh and then immediately stopped herself. Ida doesn't have any close friends at primary school who she meets up with outside class, but the other kids don't bully or exclude her either. Mrs Schwöbel told me at parents' evening that Ida is a very quiet pupil, but that she participates well in lessons and her classmates accept her. I was surprised by that, and when I asked Mrs Schwöbel what Ida does in breaktime, her answer surprised me even more: 'She hangs out with her classmates. Usually Karlotta and Finja. They play catch or ball games.' I somehow expected her to sit quietly on a bench, drawing. And Ida's bright and colourful outfits surprise me as much as what she does during breaktime.

Me: Hi there, my little fashionista.

With her round, beaming face, blonde curls and big brown eyes she looks like the sun baby from the Teletubbies.

'It's pouring,' the sun baby says.

I pat her curly head, put the vegetables and pasta on the rack, pick up the umbrella, open it and run out into the rain, in the direction of the pool. Ida laughs, slams the door shut behind her and runs after me. There's nothing better than hearing Ida laugh.

The pool is nearly empty. There are just 2 elderly men in the water, doing lengths. As soon as Ida sees the empty pool she's as if in a trance. She pulls her 5 dive rings out of the rucksack, throws them into the pool, takes a run up, jumps in and starts diving. After 23 lengths, I sit down on Ursula's bench and watch Ida. She's tireless. She keeps throwing the rings further and further, and sometimes even manages to fetch 2 of them in a single breath. At some point she drops a ring somewhere about halfway down the pool, swims up to the diving blocks, takes several deep breaths and dives for it, the whole 25 metres or so. When she resurfaces with the ring, she looks towards where I'm sitting, and when I give her a thumbs up she beams, and then I beam too. Until I feel someone looking at me. Out of the corner of my eye I can see someone sitting on the block, and I already know who it is. Our eyes meet, and we stare at each other. I want to look away, but when he doesn't it means I'm allowed to keep staring. Has he recognised me? We were at school together, and he must remember that I was friends with his brother. He would have seen me at the funeral. Something in his face won't let me go. Maybe it's the haughty, amused glint in his eye and the barely noticeable twitch in the corner of his mouth, which I can only surmise. He grins, stands up, pulls the goggles over his blue eyes, dives in head first and does 22 lengths without stopping. Just like yesterday, I watch his every move and wonder what he's doing here. Probably something to do with the house. Tomorrow he'll be back in Seoul or Dublin, though something inside me hopes he'll stick around a bit longer.

He even manages to pull Ida out of her diving trance with his front crawl. She swims up to me and whispers –

Ida: Look, Tilda! He swims faster than you.

Me: Who?

I watch as he gets out of the water, stands under the cold shower and disappears into one of the cabins. A minute later, he comes out in baggy jeans, a loose white shirt and sliders. He sees me still staring at him, grins and raises his hand by way of goodbye. Dazed, I raise my hand too. Ida splashes and dives until she's tired herself out, then sits down next to me and whispers, 'Do you know that swimmer?'

Me: No.

While I make chicken soup, Ida sits at the kitchen table doing her homework and Mum lies on the sofa in the living room doing nothing. The light is on in the kitchen. It's already dark outside, because of the bad weather. You can hear raindrops rapping on the panes and sills. While I shape the semolina dumplings that Ida always insists on – 'so long as we're having food for sick people' – I feel myself relax, and realise that I'm loving being here in the kitchen with Ida, all quiet and cosy, with the rain outside. I finish the last dumpling, turn round and lean against the worktop. I watch Ida, all immersed in writing her essay, smell the chicken soup and decide to make vanilla pudding. It's so nice and cosy.

Me: It's so nice and cosy.

Without looking up, Ida mumbles: Mmm.

Me: Shall I make vanilla pudding?

Ida looks up and clearly and loudly says: Yes.

Viktor. As I lie on the mattress and look through the window at the fir trees, his name suddenly comes to me again. It suits him even better now than it did back then. A Viktor doesn't laugh. A Viktor is serious. Russian competitive swimmers are called Viktor. I also remember Mr Weber introducing us in high school. I was in year 8, and he was in year 12. I already knew who he was, of course, and knew his name too, because everyone knew his name and who he was. He was tall and beautiful even then, and most of all shrouded in legend. I close my eyes and see him striding through the building with his rucksack over one shoulder with that forbidding look about him, girls from every year casting bold glances in his direction which he doesn't acknowledge. They would tell stories about him, saying he was a sick programmer, that he knew the dark web like the back of his hand, that he was gifted and/or autistic and went out with university students in the city. He didn't really belong anywhere, but everyone respected him and accepted his presence. Now and then I'd see him hanging out with the stoners in the park on my way home, or at the corner shop with the spotty computer geeks or playing basketball with the sporty kids. That day, I'd been waiting impatiently for Mr Weber, my maths teacher. Mrs Neugebauer had gone to fetch him from the staff room for me. Mr Weber was cool. Ever since I was in year 6, he'd photocopied pages from textbooks, problem sheets and older kids' coursework for me, and the faster I solved them the faster I progressed. By that point, I was in year 11 or thereabouts, mathematically speaking. When Mr Weber finally walked towards me with a fresh stack of papers and Viktor suddenly stood directly between us as if I wasn't even there, I was furious.

Viktor: Mr Weber, I need to talk to you about the exam tomorrow—

I tapped Viktor on the shoulder. He turned round and gave me the once-over.

'I'm the one who asked to speak to Mr Weber,' I said, pushed past him, handed the grinning Mr Weber my answers to the last worksheet and grabbed the new batch.

Mr Weber: Isn't this nice. At last, a chance for my two star pupils to meet. Viktor Volkov, Tilda Schmitt.

Me: Hi.

Viktor: Hi.

He actually stretched out his big hand, and when I shook it I could feel myself blushing. How embarrassing.

'Bye,' I said, and left.

[...]

Pages 102-104

I've set the dinner table, but Ida isn't in the kitchen. I knock on her door, 2 quick taps, pause, 3 slow ones, open it and go in. I'm a little nervous, like I'm about to give a presentation. Ida is sitting at her desk. She turns her chair 180 degrees, like when you've been told to go and see the school head and they're about to reprimand you for something. Her cheek is yellowish-brown today. I'm so glad the shit happened on the last day before the holidays and that she doesn't have to go to school like that. At least the timing was good.

I stand in front of her, press the stuffed carrier bag from the university library into her hand, and sit down on the bed.

Me: OK, so I know that the summer holidays are tough for you, because you spend most of the time hanging out at home and we don't go away on holiday or things like that. I had a bit of a think today, and have come up with a plan. It might help you get ready for the new school too. I want to say right from the off that these are just suggestions, and you don't have to do any of it. So: pick something from this bag, and I'll tell you what I propose, and then you tell me what you think. OK?

Ida: OK.

Me: Stop, don't take anything out yet. The bag is a proposal too. Proposal number 1: from now on, during the holidays, you can come with me to uni sometimes. It's the end of term, so I have to spend most of my time reading and writing my thesis, but you can draw or read while I do that.

Ida: Proposal accepted.

Ida pulls the pink cat-eye sunglasses out of the bag, puts them on and looks sweet as anything.

Me: Proposal number 2: it hasn't rained in over a week, and the weather forecast says the heatwave will go on a while longer. How about coming to the pool again one of these days?

Ida: Proposal rejected.

Me: What if we go even later than usual, just before they close?

Ida: Proposal rejected.

Me: OK.

When Ida pulls out the smartphone, she takes off the sunglasses to stare at me with wide-open eyes.

Ida: A smartphone?

Me: Proposal number 3.1: actually, it's not really a proposal. I just want you to call me right away if something happens – and if Mama's lost it and you can't reach me for some reason, or I'm too far away, then you call the police. Deal?

Ida: Deal.

Me: Proposal number 3.2: I was actually going to get you a pay-as-you-go phone, but I thought you could take photos of your drawings and upload them to Tumblr or somewhere. As you know, I think social media and all that stuff is bullshit, and you're probably still too young for it, but Leon thinks these platforms are really important nowadays when you're arty, you know, and maybe you'll find some likeminded people there.

Ida: Proposal to be considered.

I smile at her.

Ida: Thanks, Tilda.

We smile at each other.

Ida takes the envelope out of the bag, opens it and pulls out the library card.

Me: Proposal number 4: you can't spend the holidays sitting in your room drawing or going to the library with me. You need a 2nd place to hang out in and a 2nd hobby. The public library in the city is brilliant, no one ever goes there, and they have seating areas and desks. You like stories, and you're linguistically quite advanced for your age, so I think you should read more.

Ida: Proposal accepted.

Me: I've already used the card to borrow a few novels you can start with.

Ida: Thanks.

Me: Pleasure. Proposal number 5: If we go on an excursion, you'll have to have a conversation with someone other than me. And when we order takeaway, you will call them up.

Ida: Proposal rejected?

Me: Please?

Ida nods.

Me: Proposal number 6: you join a sports club. Maybe swimming?

Ida: Rejected.