



CAROLINE WAHL
WINDSTÄRKE 17 / GALE FORCE 17

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MacBook in my rucksack, my favourite clothes in Mum's navy blue, hard-shell suitcase, AirPods in my ears and my letter terminating the lease folded up in my bumbag, I step out of the building at Fröhlichstraße 37 which is no longer my home. The suitcase doesn't roll properly, you can't pull up the handle, and I feel as though I'm dragging a lump of plastic along behind me. It's too heavy to carry and my shoulders are still sore from the wardrobe business. I'd actually love to just run, and I regret not bringing my large swimming bag, which I always use when I travel. But I had to decide, and I always regret every decision I ever make in any case. I wonder which journeys bashed this suitcase up so much. Mum's never used it since I've been around. Tilda, Mum and her dad once drove to the South of France in the car, when she was about ten. But that wouldn't have done it this much damage. I pull my phone from my bumbag.

Me: That navy blue suitcase

Me: Did Mum take it to France that time?

Tilda: ?

I send her a photo.

Tilda: no

Tilda: are you on the way?

Tilda: what time will you arrive?

Tilda: Ida, you are coming right?

Tilda and her thousands of questions makes me so cross.

I stop, bend down and take a closer look at the lump. The right wheel is almost completely worn away. There are lots of big scratches on the hard shell. Mum has never told me about any trips.

And I've never asked. Once, when I'd made baked sheep's cheese, she didn't want to eat with me as she so often didn't, because she wasn't hungry and besides, she'd hated anything to do with sheep since the time she ate a sheep's head. I asked: Where? She answered: In Norway. I didn't ask: When?

I imagine my mum in the days before she was a mum, running down the stairs in Bergen station towards a train to Oslo, maybe following some Bjorn or Ragnar. Her hair down, brown hair in her face, her brown eyes still glittering with love for life. I imagine her shouting "Stop!" while she carelessly drags the case down the stairs, Ragnar just about pulling her onto the train in time, the two of them standing breathlessly face to face, holding hands and mum panting and laughing loudly for sheer happiness. If only she knew what lay ahead. But she doesn't. Luckily. I wonder what happened to Ragnar. He probably has grandchildren and lives with his wife Lagertha in one of those red Norwegian houses by the sea, the kind you get on the covers of Norwegian thrillers, maybe with a swing bench in the garden. Can he remember the German woman he once spent a summer with? I wonder how he'd react if I told him that the eighteen-year-old Andrea is no longer alive. That she's dead. He probably wouldn't be interested, the way you aren't interested because you haven't seen someone for ages. Wouldn't care that she's just not around anymore. Arsehole. Wouldn't care that Andrea's daughter Ida, who he doesn't know exists and doesn't care about either, is running away from the flat with this old, navy, hard-shell suitcase that doesn't roll properly anymore, which he doesn't remember and doesn't care about either, just abandoning everything.

I think about the crowded flat I'm abandoning, the ugly furniture, my crate of pictures, my books, Mum's wardrobe, her clothes in her wardrobe, her clothes that smell so alive, of her, think that the woman they belong to can't actually be dead, isn't allowed to be dead. The sweet perfume, the slight hint of sweat, the alcohol breath that's still there, as if she were hiding in the wardrobe and this were all one big joke. It smells so much of Mum in her room that I could smash the place up. I've got to get rid of the stuff by the time I have to hand over the key. I've got three months, and I have to tell Tilda that I terminated the lease.

As I walk down Fröhlichstraße, I google the Norwegian for "arsehole": *drittsekk*. Then I google "decluttering" because I don't want to meet any of the eyes in the windows. The eyes of the *drittsekker* shooting their mouths off about the daughter of the dead alcoholic from the sad building, who doesn't wrap up warm enough, in a short skirt, a hot pink leather jacket and oversized sunglasses despite the grey sky, dragging a broken, old, navy-blue suitcase behind her and tapping on her phone instead of saying hello politely. That generation, always on their phones. The ungrateful brat wasn't even at the funeral. When I read "Save yourself the hassle, plus time and money too. Professional decluttering. Discrete and speedy household clearances", I stick the bloody thing back

in my bumbag. Household clearance. Clearing away everything that remains of her. Then nothing will smell of her. Tilda and Viktor can take care of the decluttering. They've had practice at it. I look back one more time. My window. Our ugly flat in the ugly building. And realise: I'll probably never set foot in there again.

At the bus stop, I stick the letter about the lease in the post box. I scribbled the sentence on a sheet of squared paper this morning. After last night, it was clear that I can't stay there. That I'll die if I stay. And I don't know whether I want to die.

Once I'm sitting on the tram, passing the outdoor pool, I shut my eyes. I can't look at it. It hurts because it's the second farewell. But once I realise that it's final, I do turn back after all, look at the entrance. And buckets of icy water, full of sharp ice cubes, are poured over me, cutting open my head and my shoulders. I focus on breathing in and out, four-seven-eight, the way Viktor told me to, as I see Tilda ahead of me, walking through the turnstile. First the smell of chlorine and rain and then the moment I catch sight of the pool, which looks different every time. Steam rising, little drops dancing on the surface, breaking through. Tilda opens the parasol over our bench, we put down our rucksacks and clothes and, like the raindrops, I break the surface. The best part is not actually the diving in and feeling as weightless as a fish. The best part of diving in is Tilda. Was Tilda. Tilda, who I could always see out of the corner of my eye as she did her lengths, as she sat on the bench afterwards. As she was just there. As we went home together, as we ate supper together. Funny that childhood sometimes feels so good even though it's really crap. I feel empty and full.

When Tilda stopped being there, I only ever went to the indoor pool to train. Outdoor pool couldn't be done, because too painful. Eventually, when I was fifteen or so, I did go through the turnstile again but only in the evenings, in the rain. I swam a few lengths, doing longer and longer stretches under water – no competition in my head – and if I sometimes caught sight of a girl, a good swimmer, from the corner of my eye, I imagined she was Tilda. I open my eyes, the sky is grey today and it might start raining any moment.

There are only clothes in the hard-shell suitcase. I didn't pack a single book, and now I'm sitting here on the tram and, so as not to see what's going past the windows, I'm letting one TikTok video play after another without really looking at them, until a notification pops up telling me I'm almost out of data. I put the thing back in my bumbag and shut my eyes. I'm cold and feel sick, my head is throbbing and my stomach aches. I clench my eyes tighter, relax my arms and legs and imagine swimming. A competition. I concentrate on my body, my muscles, my arms and legs, which need to be quicker and stronger than they are. Follow through, follow through. The water and I are one. The rushing in my ears, the goal before my eyes. Then: to my right, a swimmer I have to shake off. A

strand of black hair peeking out of her red swimming cap. Who is that? I recognise that hair. And the scent. Hypnotic Poison by Dior, always a bit too much, plus a dash of cumin. That must be Samara. But Samara doesn't even swim. Samara hates swimming. I taught her when she was twelve, in the indoor pool, and she hated it. Water just wasn't her element, she said.

She was a classic earth sign, she always said. "Star signs are such shit," I always said.

Samara: You're a Gemini. Geminis often don't believe in star signs.

I open my eyes and look out of the window, at the fields. We passed her estate ages ago. Samara lives with her family in an ugly block of flats. A three-room flat. It's nice and warm there. The walls are painted orange and yellow, the heart of the flat. The living/dining room, very small and kind of cuddly. The cosy brown-leather sofa with all its bright purple and blue cushions, the red Persian rug, the old glass table with gold legs, the silver candlestick on it with different candles every time, and the solid oak dining table with the white upholstered chairs around it. And the windowsill covered with orchids in every colour and mismatched pots. No piece of furniture in that colourful, spotlessly clean flat goes with another, but the whole effect is so harmonious that there are very few other places where I feel as good. And the smell there, her mother's sweet perfume, cumin, cinnamon, orchids, vanilla-scented candles and pipe smoke. I liked it there, was often there, love Samara's home and parents and miss them. I haven't been there for two months.

Samara came to mine regularly in that time, just rang the doorbell unannounced with a sack of fake Tupperware filled with her mum's Arabic specialities and a mountain of print-outs from uni. At the top right of every text was the date and title of the lecture or seminar. Back when I still went to uni, I didn't even read most of the texts, let alone print them out. But I did read a few then because I felt bad for Samara. The texts on literary anthropology circa 1900 were pretty cool.

I never actually wanted to study literature, that was a stop-gap solution to fill the time until I eventually got to Leipzig. But my whole life seems to be some kind of stop-gap solution anyway.

Samara is way too good for me. She wishes me good morning every morning and good night every evening on WhatsApp. In ever-changing variations, sometimes gushing with emojis, sometimes simple, sometimes in French and sometimes in English. I practically never answer.

I love Samara, she's the best thing that ever happened to me, and I mean that entirely unsentimentally. The memories of our friendship and the thought experiment that it might eventually be the same as the old days, that we might eventually go on another Samida weekend city break, to Basel or Riga, or to the sea, are sometimes the only things that stop me making very stupid decisions.

I pull the bloody thing out of my bumbag and open our chat.

Samara: *Here's the summary of the lecture on "Intermediality" on 14.06*

Samara: *Photo of her organised notes*

Samara: *I've also emailed it to you as a PDF*

Samara: *Good morning Ida*

Samara: *Prof Kuhn is such an idiot*

Samara: *Mum says shall she make you halva or falafels?*

Samara: *I told her halva*

Samara: *You prefer sweets, don't you?*

Samara: *bonne nuit*

Samara: *love you*

That's how it goes every day and I'd miss it if she ever stopped. For the first time, I type a reply. Me: *Hi Samara.*

Me: *I'm going away for a bit*

Samara's typing.

Samara: *Where are you going???*

Me: *Probably to Tilda's*

Samara: *Probably???*

Samara calls. I don't answer, shut my eyes again and swim.

I look at the departure boards in the main station. There's a train to Hamburg in fifteen minutes. While I was on the phone last night, Tilda WhatsApped me a flex-ticket to Hamburg. I thought I was having a heart attack and didn't know who to call. Classic panic attack, Viktor said, and I still find it kind of cheeky to be that dismissive of a near-death experience. I'd only heard of panic attacks on Instagram and TikTok until then.

I'm annoyed that my so-called heart attack made me weak enough to open the lines of communication with Tilda from my end, but I really thought I was dying. Now she probably thinks I really need help and she'll go back to bombarding me with questions and advice. I haven't phoned her once since the call on the night Mum died. She's always been the one to phone or come round. And I was the one who didn't pick up or answered in monosyllables when I couldn't stop the conversation before it started. *Leave me, Tilda. I'm fine. I don't need you here.* I don't know why I shut down like that, why I'm so crap to her. But there's a kind of clot of rage in my belly that takes possession of me and snarls at Tilda. And I don't even know who or what it's with, if the clot of rage is aimed at Tilda or at me or at everything, and the fact that I don't even know who or what the clot of rage is aimed at makes me so furious that I wish I could take a bread knife and cut off every one of my fingers. Very slowly or very fast.

The clot of rage doesn't want to go to Hamburg either. Part of me does want to go to Hamburg. Part of me can't stand being alone anymore and is yearning to be mothered by Tilda. I think about Tilda, Viktor and the kids. I think about the French toast and custard Tilda will make me. And I think about the words she'll say again: "it's not your fault", "she was at her wit's end", her questions: "you terminated the lease?", "what are your plans now?", "where are you going to live?", "do you want to drop out of uni?", while I look on the Deutsche Bahn app to see which trains go through Hamburg to somewhere else. There's an ICE to Stralsund. The Baltic. That sounds good. But it doesn't leave for two hours.

Now that I'm no longer writing, I hate waiting. So I have to fill the two hours somehow. I go into Rossmann and buy snacks and drinks for the journey. I love self-service checkouts. Unfortunately, thanks to the AirPods and the music in my ears, I can't hear the beeps so I only scan every second item properly and pack Mamba fruit chews, Billy-Tiger corn snacks, Coke Zero and a Kinder egg into my rucksack. The station newsagent only has trashy romances and thrillers that aren't worth over ten euros. And I don't steal books on principle. I flick through a couple of gossip mags, the Kardashians and their surrogates, the celeb fad for juice cleanses, and walk to platform eight, sit on a bench and light a cigarette. A middle-aged man beside me clears his throat. He clears his throat again. He better not speak to me. An uptight German like that is all I need. He clears his throat again.

The man: Young lady. The smoking bench is over there.

I don't identify with that form of address.

The man clears his throat again.

"You're not allowed to smoke here," he says, way too loud and unfriendly.

I slowly turn towards him.

Me in English: *Sorry, what did you say?*

As I thought, the man isn't expecting a change of language, so he points his finger at the smoking bench and mimes having a cigarette. "There! Smoke!" I shrug my shoulders, "*Sorry, I don't understand*" and watch his head begin to rattle. He stands up, walks around the bench and sits as far away from me as possible while muttering to himself about "damn Yanks".

Arsehole. I light another cigarette, even though I feel sick enough already.

The platform is rammed because the previous ICE to Hamburg was cancelled. I squeeze onto the train, really don't want to stand seeing that I have a ticket, but every empty seat is reserved. I find a group of four seats where only two are reserved, sit down by the window and hope not to get sat next to by somebody annoying. A young man of about thirty sits next to me. Black suit, doesn't make

eye contact, clearly no more in the mood for conversation than I am. He doesn't even ask if the seat's taken, the moment he sits down, he turns on his iPad and watches the second season of *Succession*. I like that show, so I watch with him a bit. He notices, our eyes meet briefly, he doesn't seem to mind. I'm just about to ask the man if I can link my AirPods to his iPad when a woman and a girl come along and join us in our four seats and my attention wanders from one creepy family to another.

The mother: Right, Lia, these are our seats.

Lia sits opposite me by the window and we study each other. She's about five, two light blonde plaits and big, curious brown eyes.

The mother: We'll be on the train for four hours now.

Lia and I watch the mother, who unpacks the rucksack with a running commentary, as if it's a performance.

The mother: We've got several items on the agenda here. You can only do one thing at a time. Divide your time sensibly.

The mother unpacks a metal lunchbox and sets it on the table.

Mummy: You can have something to eat.

The mother unpacks a magazine and sets it on the table.

Mummy: Look at your GEOLino.

The mother unpacks a tablet.

Mummy: Watch one episode of *Benjamin the Elephant*.

The mother unpacks a book. One from that British series, *Little People, BIG DREAMS. Frida Kahlo*. To teach kids young to have BIG DREAMS and turn into little Einsteins, Lindgrens or Kahlos. Load of shit, I think.

Mummy: Or look at a book.

Mummy: Which do you want to start with? Or would you like to start by looking out of the window?

Lia and I look at the table, which is covered with agenda items. I unpack my agenda items too: my phone, the Kinder egg and the Billy-Tiger corn sticks, which somehow no longer appeal to me.

Lia looks at my Kinder egg and says: "*Benjamin the Elephant*."

I don't say "I'll start by looking out of the window" because this isn't my mum. As we pass forests, mountains and fields and Lia watches an episode of *Benjamin the Elephant*, I wonder where Lia and her mother are going. To her dad's, I reckon, or to her grandparents or back home.

Lia: I'm tired of sitting down.

I'm tired of sitting down too, but somehow my agenda items and I manage to pass the time on this train journey. I watch *Succession* as far as Hannover, and with sound. While we were watching, the man opened his Bluetooth settings and looked enquiringly at me. I clicked on "Ida's AirPods". When he eventually packs away his iPad, he nods goodbye to me.

Once he's gone, I turn my attention to my Kinder egg. Lia, who is currently focussed on the *GEOLingo* part of the agenda, watches me.

Lia: I want something to eat too.

The mother opens the silver lunchbox, which contains some kind of brown mixture; it stinks.

Lia: What's that?

The mother: Lentil and bulgur salad with carrots.

I open the yellow Surprise capsule, which contains the Disney princess Mulan. Cool. Then I watch a reaction video to the latest episode of *Bachelorette* and feel ashamed of myself. After that, I watch some kind of *Arte* documentary on ex-ballet dancers who are sad that their careers are over.

Not far from Hamburg, I shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep while I listen to the announcements with quiet music in my ears. I'll have to keep it up to the end of the line. There won't be any more staff changes now, and if there are, then I'll just have missed my stop and I'll wind up in Bützow, Rostock or Velgast. I keep dozing off, probably because I haven't slept at all for two days; in my half-sleep, I think very briefly about yesterday, about the quiet, about Mum's room, her wardrobe, the smell, her smell and startle awake. I'm wide awake, tired of sitting down, and I turn the volume up to the max.

"Call from Tilda," says Siri, I say: "No", and the music plays again. Siri says "Call from Tilda," again, I say "No" again. Then Siri says "Call from Viktor," I take the phone out of my bumbag, decline the call so as not to have to say no again and wait for more calls to decline. Tilda calls again, then a stream of messages pop up. She asks: "are you coming?", "when are you coming?", "ida?", "???", Viktor asks: "Shall I pick you up from the station?", I answer "No. Sorry. I'm switching aeroplane mode on" and switch aeroplane mode on. I should probably ditch the phone as soon as possible. Viktor would be sure to find me by hacking into my iPhone or MacBook. Or Tilda will work out the probability of me getting onto all the various trains. She knows that I don't have the money for a train. She knows I'm broke. When she was last there, about two weeks ago, she emptied the letter box and there were a few demands for payment and my summary dismissal from the café in there. Tilda then immediately transferred me six hundred euros by PayPal, even though she knows I won't accept money from her. I paid her six hundred and twenty euros back again. It was bad enough already, her paying money into our family account every month so that I could never be entirely independent of her. Tilda

knows that my credit score and me are screwed, and hopes that I'll be sensible and just use the train ticket. And she'll find out which train I'm on. I bet you can do that through the stupid QR code. But in the end, that doesn't matter. She can know where I am, I just don't want to see her. I want to be alone. When I think about the sympathy on their faces, about Tilda's determination to help me, the plans she'll make, the lists she'll write, about Viktor's discretion, I feel like hurling MacBook and iPhone onto the tracks at the next station. I want to see them so much it hurts. Even the kids.

Thanks to aeroplane mode, I can't watch anything on my phone anymore. I could watch something on my MacBook but I can't open that because the keys shout at me. So I sit there with my head against the cool window, with closed eyes and try to switch off my thoughts. I don't want to think about anything. I only want to think about the outside. Open my eyes and watch the trees and the sky, which looks lovely because the clouds puff up so dramatically against the bright blue. But what else can you think about the sky and the trees, apart from that they're lovely. I think about Mum's grave, which is new and doesn't have flowers on it. Or maybe there are flowers on Mum's grave too. Maybe Ragnar or some other ex was there, or maybe some grandma who visits her husband's grave every day took pity on this bare grave for this woman who died far too young. I don't know if there are flowers on Mum's grave, I haven't been. But I don't think there are flowers on Mum's grave.

Sleeping pills would be amazing right now. I should have brought Mum's stash and just slept through to the end of the line, until someone woke me. But those things give me horrific nightmares now and then, and in its current state, I don't want to provoke my subconscious.

"We will soon be arriving into Stralsund where this train terminates. All change please. Have a lovely evening," says a way-too-cheery train conductor. Way-too-cheery train conductors can be cute, but most of the time they're total end bosses I think, and mostly I'm thinking: Fuck. Fuck, I should have used the time to think about what I'm going to do in Stralsund. I hear gulls as I get off and I like the air, the fresh breeze blowing here. But somehow this doesn't feel far enough, and I'm not ready to take any decisions in relation to my lovely evening. I look at the departure board, see a train to Binz. A seaside town. On Rügen. An island. Perfect. A local train is fine too.

It's drizzly and dark when I arrive. I hear gulls again. They're louder this time, and the breeze is fresher than in Stralsund.

Outside the station, I ask an old woman the way to the beach and drag the navy suitcase, which still isn't rolling properly, in the direction she points. At the sound of the waves, I can finally breathe. I pull the case into the sand and sit on it, breathe the sea into my body and breathe out the smell of Mum's room, my escape from the flat, the long, tedious train journey, almost hear that

black, crappy air splat on the floor. And then I just hear the sea. I hear, see and smell the sea and think about going in straight away. But I have to be sensible for once. I've mainly seen pensioners on this island so far, but even so, if anyone were to steal my case and my laptop, I'd have nothing left in the world. Everything I've written would be gone. I'd then be a virtually impecunious, homeless mermaid. I like the idea, so I consider going in after all, but I stand up and look for a Youth Hostel. I soon find a sign, which I follow, and when I see young people outside a building, I consider going back to the beach. I don't like young people. They're too optimistic for me. And I don't like Youth Hostels, or any kind of hostel. All the optimistic young people you get there are seriously chatty and up for fun. But I can't afford an Airbnb. I put on my "don't you dare speak to me" face, spend what money I have left on a shared room, and have the luck to be allocated a six-bed room where only two of the beds are taken and their occupants are out. I have a cold shower, change and feel the tiredness or possibly overtiredness pulling me into sleep. Maybe this is the long-term solution to my sleep problems: stay awake for forty-eight hours until the numbing exhaustion is stronger than the noisy thoughts in my head that won't let me sleep, that I want to forget, that tell stories I want to bury, and that primarily yell at me that I've screwed up, that I should have done more.

When I wake up at one p.m., I dress in swimming costume, baggy T-shirt and bumbag, and walk to the sea. It's cold and the sky is grey. I run to the beach to warm up. Now that I can see the sea in the light, I resist the urge to send Tilda a photo. She loves the sea as much as I do, but I don't dare turn off aeroplane mode. Tilda's seriously pissed off, I know that.

I take off the shirt, put it on my bumbag and run towards the water, which is as cold as I expected, and as soon as I'm deep enough, I front crawl into the waves. I concentrate on my body, my muscles, my arms and legs, which need to be quicker and stronger than they are. Swimming in the sea is very different from in a pool. It's hard to find a rhythm. But it's seriously good to swim into the open, the expanse, against the waves which never move the way you expect. Follow through, follow through. The water and I are one, I am part of the sea, a terrifyingly tiny part of the sea. The thoughts and the pain flow out of my body. I feel that I can't go much longer, that my arms, legs and breathing are getting heavy, that the waves are getting bigger, and I know that this is the time to turn. I've got a pretty good idea of my waning strength, but I still swim on. Just a tiny bit further. I hear a whistle and swim on, don't know what's got into me that won't let me turn, I turn and fight my way back to the beach. My legs shake as they touch the bottom. A sturdy young woman comes towards me. Red German Lifeguard Association shirt, whistle around her neck, brown curls.

The young woman: Are you mad?

I don't know how to answer that.

The young woman: You can't swim so far out. You could have drowned.

Me: I'm a swimmer.

The young woman: The sea doesn't care.

Me: Chill, this is the Baltic.

The young woman follows me and stands next to me as I pick up my T-shirt and bumbag.

She's younger than me, probably only just left school.

Me: D'you get paid to blow that whistle?

Her: Twenty-two euros a day.

Me: Twenty-two euros a day?

Her: Yeah, but our accommodation is free.

She thinks.

Her: I can give you my boss's number if you want to join us. You can certainly swim.

Me: Nah, I can't call your boss, I'm in aeroplane mode.

Her: You're weird. Come to the lifeguard station tomorrow, Mike will be there.

Me: I'll see.

I wave to her as I set off back to the hostel because I'm freezing and don't listen as she calls out: "Hey, what's your name?"

I'll have to look for some kind of job. Twenty-two euros a day isn't enough. I could easily earn a hundred a night as a waitress or something. Take off accommodation and that leaves eighty a day. If I stayed two weeks, that would be about... If I stayed ten days, that would be about eight hundred. So for a fortnight, I reckon that would easily be over 1K. I hate maths. My bank balance is zero and I need a buffer. I walk down the promenade, turn off down some side street, stop outside a bar because it's called The Seal and I like the name. I'm so cold that I'm shivering, but I still sit down on the bench under the sign, have a smoke and decide to go back to the hostel after all, to warm up and change. All I've eaten since yesterday are the Kinder Surprise and Billy-Tiger corn sticks, and the cigarette is the last straw. As I sit there, waiting for my blood pressure to settle, an old man comes out of the door next to the bench, looking exactly the way I imagine the owner of The Seal. Like a sailor. About seventy, tall, weathered brown skin, blue eyes, grey-white hair under a brown flat cap, checked shirt, faded jeans and, obviously, wellies.

Me: Hello.

He jumps slightly and turns towards me. Funny. He doesn't look like the kind of person to get startled by anything.

Old man: We open at six.

Me: Do you need a waitress or anything?

He eyes me critically. My face probably white as chalk, my hair wet, I'm wearing nothing but a T-shirt over my wet swimsuit, bumbag, no shoes, a smouldering cigarette dropped on the ground in front of me.

Old man: Ever been in The Seal?

Me: No.

Old man: Ever worked in a pub?

Me: No but I've worked in a café.

Me: And I'm not stupid.

He thinks, staring me fiercely in the eyes. I hold his gaze.

Old man: Come to try out this evening then. Start at five. Thirteen euros an hour plus tips.

Me: OK.

Old man: What's your name?

Me: Ida.

He holds out his large hand and says: "Knut".

I suppress a laugh and take his paw. Knut doesn't bat an eyelid.

"What does a waitress wear?" I ask the two trainee teachers in my room. Hannah and Nela are spending the semester break here, doing a kitesurfing course. "Plain and casual," says Nela. I put on a black midi skirt, a white crop top, bumbag and trainers. Hannah gives me a thumbs up. There's not enough colour for my liking so I add my pink leather jacket and run over to the pub so as not to be late on my very first day.

Knut starts by showing me around the Seal, which doesn't take long. The Seal is seriously dark inside. Along the length of the back wall is a huge bar, in the room there are lots of worn wooden tables and chairs, and over there in the corner is the regulars' table, which is oval. There are old black-and-white photos on the walls. I can see the frozen Rügen coastline (1921) and a farmer with a pipe in his mouth, sitting on a hay cart with his wife (girlfriend? Sister?) (1911). They're both looking straight at me. They're not smiling, but they don't look unhappy. Knut shows me where the spirits are kept, where the beer is stored, which drinks get ordered the most: beer and vodka. There are no cocktails, only a few long drinks.

Knut: Know how to make them?

"Yes," I lie. There were no long drinks in the café, only cakes and coffee. I liked the work there, making speciality coffees, watching the customers, and particularly liked the pursuit of tips. You had to act differently around every customer to maximise your tips. And I always got loads of

tips. My boss loved me, I was way better than my mother he told me once, asshole. And then he just sacked me the moment I didn't turn up for a couple of weeks because the aforementioned lousy waitress, aka my mother, had just died. Five years I worked in that shitting café, took over from Mum when I was sixteen or so and she couldn't work anymore. Then I opened my own bank account, separate from the family one.

Knut: 20-25 cl alcohol.

Me: Yeah, I know.

Before the Seal opens, I have to wipe the tables, fill the fridge with beer and wash glasses.

It's mostly locals from six onwards, not many tourists. Most of them drink beer. I clear away glasses and bottles, wash them, bring them fresh glasses and bottles and take the money.

At nine, a group of four men come into the pub. They look funny, coming in one at a time, because they totally don't go together. The make-up of the group makes me think of those badly cast high school series where kids from different cliques get put in detention together. The first is small and muscly, is dressed in kind of workwear clothes, has dirty hands and looks scary, the second looks like a posh guy with a yacht, right down to his boat shoes, gelled-back blond hair, Helly Hansen jacket over a tight polo shirt and Ray Bans, despite the gloom, while the last two look like the cool kids, the popular ones, look like they're about to star in an ad for Carhartt, Veltins or O2.

I think about Samara and me. We always looked like we were going to different parties too. Yin and Yang, Tilda used to call us. Samara seems calm at first glance, she's very organised, almost neurotically organised, has sleek, black hair and her favourite colour is black. Nowadays, she has this kind of cool, minimalist Berlin style that consists mainly of black clothes, and sometimes something in white. I'm loud and chaotic, have blonde curls, love bright, clashing colours, and like it when my long dresses blow in the wind.

The detention gang don't really fit in among all the pensioners in the Seal. But they sit down at the regulars' table and greet some of the older men. They probably grew up here. One of them, the Carhatt-ad guy, sticks out for more than just his height and good looks. He has short, blond hair, relaxed jeans and a simple, baggy white T-shirt. When he walks up to assorted people and gives them a hug or a handshake, I see the Carhatt logo on his pocket. He almost looks like the pub belongs to him.

I don't feel like serving the table. The blond giant scans the room, catches sight of me and tries to make eye contact, out of the corner of my eye, I even see him raise his hand. I take my time at the other tables, clear away the empty glasses and bottles and then, when I really have nothing left to do and I'm about to go to the detention table, I see the giant coming not to, but straight behind the bar.

Carhatt guy: You're new here.

He looks down at me. I don't respond.

Carhatt guy: What's your name?

Me: Lia.

I don't ask his name because he's about to tell me anyway.

Carhatt guy: Jasper.

Jasper holds his hand out to me and I take it.

He picks up a tray and pulls one beer after another.

Jasper: Another five shots of *Korn*, please. Top right.

As I fill the glasses, I ask: Did you used to work here?

Jasper: This place belongs to my grandad.

Me: Granpa Knut?

Jasper laughs.

Jasper: Yeah, Granpa Knut. Did he say you could call him that?

I've never called anyone Granpa and don't know where that even came from. I never even got to call anyone Dad. Only Mum. And I can't even do that anymore.

Me: Not yet.

Jasper: He generally refuses to take on any staff.

I'm surprised by that, I remember my appearance this afternoon.

Me: Does he run this place all on his own?

Jasper: Yeah, but he never complains. We grandkids used to top up our pocket money in here sometimes.

Jasper: Will you give me a hand with these?

I pick up the tray with the shot glasses, walk over to the table, put the tray down without passing the glasses around, avoid eye contact, give a quick smile, like you're supposed to, and walk away again. Jasper blocks my way, with the other tray in his left hand, and holds out a fifty to me, which I take, even though his grandpa owns the bar.

Jasper: Keep the change. For being so friendly.

I don't say "thank you" because it's such an arrogant gesture, but I don't want to turn the money down either.

At ten, Knut says I can take a break. I roll myself a joint and go outside, lie on my back on a bench facing the dunes, not far from the pub, and stare into the starry sky, where there are no stars to be seen tonight, and the raindrops run down my cheeks. What am I even doing here? I thought that once I'd gone far away, the thoughts would be quieter. But they're loud, and they hurt. I drag

too deeply on the too-strong joint, several times, hoping for anaesthesia. Which doesn't kick in. Instead, I think about Mum, the way she knocked on my door five days before her death. She never knocks on my door. She never knocked on my door. If she wanted something, she just walked in, stormed in sometimes. But that day, the first warm spring day of the year, she knocked. Twice. I called out "yes" and she came in. Grey joggers, neon yellow jumper that made her pale face look even paler, greasy hair. And glassy, sad eyes.

Mum: Are you writing again?

I look up at her from my MacBook and assess her mood. She isn't looking for a row, she looks too tired for that. What does she want? There are enough pills. I nod and look back at the screen. Type "fjsodksnd" into the document that to date only contains the words "stupid cow" from our argument the other day to make her think I'm focused on writing so she'll go again.

She stays in the doorway. She stays standing in the doorway for a good three lines of my fjsodksnd text and then asks a question she's never asked me before.

Mum: What are you actually writing?

I stop writing, look at her, long to read her all my texts, tell her about the competition I won last week with a short story, about the agent who contacted me or the novel I'd like to write, but instead I turn my face away and say "whatever".

She stays standing in the doorway while I write "whateverwhateverwhatever". From the corner of my eye, I see her turn away and shut the door. Saw her turn away and shut the door. I hate myself for that "whatever". I hate myself, I hate her and I hate everything. When she knocked on my door on that springlike Tuesday, she knew she'd go and somehow, I knew it too. I deleted "fjsodksnd" and "whateverwhateverwhatever" from the document but left "stupid cow" in there. And I let her go.

I draw more deep drags into my trembling body so that there's nothing in there but soft smoke, but all I feel is the headache and nausea getting worse. If I shut my eyes, I can see her in the neon yellow jumper and try to remember her voice because I'm scared of forgetting her. I can't do it. There's only her loud, crazy laugh on repeat, which gets louder and crazier and which I can no longer switch off. My eyes fill with raindrops. When I open them, the sky is still pitch black, the pain is still there.

Footsteps, fuck. Coming from the dunes. A dark figure. I have no fear, on principle, but I just want to be alone. I shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep as the steps grow louder. The footsteps stop.

"Are you OK? Do you need water?"

A man's hoarse voice.

Fuck. I open my eyes. A black hoodie. Wide-legged beige pleat-front trousers.

Me: I'm fine.

In the lamplight, I can see a pale yet tanned face under the hood, glassy red eyes, dark rings beneath them, pale stubble. He doesn't look good.

Him: Are you crying?

Me: No. I never cry.

Me: It's raining.

He laughs drily, says "OK", turns away and walks towards the pub.

I lie there and wait for the world to stop spinning. Every time I go to sit up, I realise that I need to keep lying there a bit longer. Knut must have noticed that my break's been too long and he won't hire me. I lie there for at least ten minutes full of self-hatred and nausea and when I stand up, I stay still for a moment, waiting for the stars in my eyes and the roaring in my ears to grow fainter, then walk slowly towards the Seal and see the hoodie peel himself off the wall by the door and walk in. He was watching out.

I step inside the pub like a wet poodle. I'm shivering but don't feel how cold I am because I'm so seriously stoned. I walk behind the bar, down three glasses of tap water and try to pull myself together.

Knut: Are you all right?

Me: Yes.

I don't look up so he won't see my red eyes, and escape to a couple at the other end of the bar, swap their drinks for new ones. Like an emotionless machine, I never stop serving fresh drinks to all the customers, except the regulars.

Of course, the hoodie is sitting with the detention gang. The stoner was the only one missing.

I squint over at him while I wash the glasses I've gathered. He's pulled down the hood. I see brown, chin-length hair with a centre parting, his eyes flit from the beer cap he's playing with to his friends. Most of the time, if the others laugh he joins in, now and then he's even a reasonably voluble part of the entertainment. But he keeps turning away. I see the sad eyes above the dark rings, which drift away into the void but then suddenly stop drifting away into the void and meet mine. Angrily, like I've caught him out.

Hundred percent drug issues, I guess, try to look back more angrily, like he's caught me out, pick up the empty beer bottles, take them into the room behind the bar and sit down on a wooden

stool for a moment. I want to get out of here. To Tilda's. Why do I always make such stupid decisions?

Jasper comes back to the bar just before midnight and I wonder when the Seal actually shuts.

Jasper: Should I ask Granpa Knut or you for your number?

Me: Neither. I'm in aeroplane mode.

Jasper: On a digital detox or something?

Me: Or something.

I really don't have capacity for this kind of Jasper right now and I study him as he stands there with his elbows casually on the bar, studying me. I'd love to wipe his self-confident smile off his face with this manky bar cloth. Before I can make another stupid decision, Granpa Knut calls out.

Granpa Knut: Jasper, leave the kid alone. Ida, you can you. I'll finish up myself. We'll settle up in the morning, OK? Come around six.

"There's really no need for the kid," I say, pulling on my pink leather jacket, say "see you tomorrow", smile at Knut and the still-self-confidently-smiling Jasper and leave.

And once I'm finally lying in my bunk bed after a trancelike not-going-home, I let it rain.