



**Mascha Unterleberg**

**Wenn wir lächeln / When We Smile**

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*That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighborhood*

*I got news for you, she is!*

*Rebel Girl, Bikini Kill*

We stand tall, drive steel plates through our shoulder joints.  
Dance around on the spot, balance out the weight of the metal.  
Toss our heads from left to right before the mirror.  
Lean forward to study ourselves up close.  
See every eyelash, every pore, every blemish, and love everything we see.  
Toss our hair back, straight, smooth.  
Put on lip gloss, and it smells of cherries.  
Get ready for the night, pump *Survivor*, pump *Fighter*, pump *Stronger* through the bright-blue ghetto blaster. The mix CD spins, and we spin too.  
Know all the choruses, all the choreography, every video on MTV and every detail in them.  
Pause for a moment, but not 'cause we're tired.  
Paint on the final stroke of eyeliner with moistened black kohl.  
Tilt back our heads, pass the bottle to one another.  
Smack each other on the back when we choke, smack each other on the back whenever we feel like it.  
Check the contents of our handbags, check the fit of our viscose tops, our faux-leather skirts and bleached jeans. Pull on delicately-wrought knuckle dusters before we leave the house.  
Run out onto the street, run to the bus, the rings glittering in the glow of the street lamps.  
When we sit in the bars of this city, everything glitters, and everything is endless. Until daybreak, still so many hours away it's hard to grasp, and the money doesn't run out.

Anto's had her nails done, neon green and white.  
They taper off sharply and still smell of acrylic, even two days later. Whenever she touches something, the table or her glass, there's a quiet clicking sound, and something inside me contracts.  
Like claws, I say,  
If I didn't know better, I'd be afraid of you.  
Well, says Anto,  
Tonight's a slashing night.  
Our baseball bats are beneath the small, round table. Mine is varnished blue, Anto's is made of pale, untreated wood, everything gets inscribed in its grain.  
We'll throw them in the river later, she says, like she can read my thoughts, and props her outstretched legs on the chair opposite. Her feet are encased in black, thick-soled boots.

When we sit in the bars of this city and Anto throws back a round of rum-and-coke, which means we'll be skipping out on the bill, 'cause Anto would never pay money for rum-and-coke.

When we sit in the bars and feel the gazes on us, we remember, our bodies remember what it was like when these gazes found us for the first time.

How exciting it was, how flattering: strange gazes from strange men, who must have seen so much already, so much older than us, and yet they still considered us worthy, saw us, and through that we became bigger and more grown-up and yet at the same time didn't.

When we feel the gazes on our backs and the memory comes back into our bodies, then it's time.

We stand up, sometimes swiftly and steadily, and on other days swaying, as though we're lightweights. As though one laughable rum-and-coke could throw us off balance, but it's all just a game.

Then we stand up, we turn around, and if we can, we smile.

We smile, we lean against one another, we return the gazes.

We wait.

## ONE

### 1

We're standing on the railway bridge that isn't one anymore, now just disused tracks and rusted struts, and Anto launches her bat into the water like a spear.

It half submerges, the handle juts up in the air almost vertically, then it tips and floats on the surface.

I look at her from the side,

Did you really think it'd sink? I mean, it's wood, and wood floats, doesn't it?

Shut up, she says, staring at the water as though she can make the bat disappear through sheer power of thought,

It'll sink.

But I can tell from the way she's sucking in air through her nose that she's doubtful too.

The river is a smooth black surface; the sound of a body diving in; a splash.

Rings that expand in the light of the few streetlamps.

The river is: invisible whirlpools and flooding in autumn and a man who's drunk when he wanted to rescue his dog.

The river swallows Anto, makes her disappear, and the bat still drifts on the surface, just a few meters from where her body plunged in.

Anto, I scream.

Fuck.

But I can't bring myself to follow her.

Not this time.

She knows about the whirlpools. About the undertow that renders even good swimmers powerless (and Anto isn't a good swimmer), and if you ever get caught in it, you have to let yourself be pulled downward 'til there's nothing left. Downward, to escape the whirlpool and then duck away to the side.

Could she have lost consciousness when she hit the water?

Never jump into the water if you don't know how deep it is, that's one of those rules like: don't go swimming on a full stomach, don't blow-dry your hair next to the bathtub, don't poke a knife into the toaster.

I don't know how deep the water is here.

I know we've never jumped down from here.

I haven't, anyway, and neither has Anto, even though a few times she pretended she was about to.

I'm standing on the railway bridge, and Anto is gone, and on the water's surface only the expanding rings.

I run through all the possibilities in my mind, and then the possibilities run through themselves, faster and faster, from front to back and then from the front again.

I see myself wrapped in a rescue blanket on the riverbank, they're searching the Ruhr for Anto with floodlights and motorboats. I burn my tongue on scalding-hot tea, a psychologist wants to take me aside, but the police still have questions. I rummage around in my handbag for my ID, the boats dock on the jetty, and all they've found is the baseball bat.

The boats dock on the jetty, and they've found Anto, who's swallowed water and vomits, almost blue in the face, but alive. The boats dock on the jetty, and they've found a lifeless body.

## 2

I can't remember when I was last this on edge. Maybe the first time we properly hung out, and how many years ago is that now?

Come whenever you want, she said on the phone,

It's not like I'm going anywhere.

Her voice sounds the same as always. As though we'd seen each other only yesterday, as though there were no issue between us.

Perfect, I say, and then, without thinking,

Is my toothbrush still there?

Your what? I dunno, Jara, I mean, I haven't thrown it away.

Okay. Sorry, it doesn't matter. I'll come around six, okay?

Yeah, whatever.

She's sitting in the attic window, legs bent, feet propped on the sloped wall. She sees me approaching when I'm still a distance away, but doesn't need to wave.

Only when I'm so close that I almost disappear from her line of sight will she call out.

Every time I see her like this, for a moment I can't stop myself picturing her hitting the ground in front of me.

That I'll be there when it happens, but won't be able to save her.

I have to turn her on her back to see she's no longer breathing.

I turn her on her back and see there's just a gaping wound where her face should be, one that can never breathe again.

I have to wait next to her body for the ambulance, and at the time it won't feel difficult, but afterwards it will replay in my dreams, over and over.

I've imagined this kind of thing so often. Whenever I've tried to push the thoughts away, it usually only gets worse.

We sat up there together just the one time, squeezed in next to each other on the narrow windowsill, our bare thighs sticking together. To me it felt like safety.

In that moment I wasn't afraid she would fall out of the window.

She looks insanely small, but that's partly because the house is enormous, with about a thousand window shutters painted pale grey and a matt-silver iron door, which must be twice the size of normal doors.

I don't know whether it's a beautiful house. I just know that I'd like to live in it too.

Imagine the two of us living here together, I said on one of those evenings when we were lying in her living room, bags of crisps and wine gums between us on the rug, a half-empty bottle of cognac from the cabinet in the hallway,

It would be perfect.

And my mother? Where would she go?

Her voice suddenly harsh, all its lightness gone in an instant. As though I'd insulted her, and yet she was the one always acting as though her mother didn't exist.

I was starting to think you'd gotten a better offer, she calls now from above,

Come in, I'll make us a drink.

She disappears inside the house, leaving the window open.

The front door is ajar, music blares from the kitchen.

As I get closer, I recognize *I'm like a bird* by Nelly Furtado. I haven't heard the song in years, but I remember Mum always turning up the volume when it came on the radio, and how she

knew all the words. There are bottles of cheap booze on the dining table, and among them two glasses for which I've now learnt the name "champagne coupe". That's what Anto says they're called, anyway, even though I secretly doubt anyone besides her still calls them that. It sounds like something she picked up one Sunday evening on an old TV re-run.

We don't have any champagne coupes at home. We have old mustard jars with funny motifs on them, and for a long time I didn't give that any thought. The impression our decor makes when someone enters our apartment for the first time, I mean.

A shame to throw them away, says Mum every time she scrapes the dried-up dregs from a glass imprinted with Baloo the Bear or The Smurfs or those Stone Age people, I forget what they're called.

The marble worktop next to the sink feels sticky. Slices of lemon, an open packet of sugar, the white grains spilt everywhere.

It looks like Anto started drinking a while ago already.

She comes into the kitchen and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

Her lip gloss smells sweet and leaves a sticky film on my skin.

Are you alone?

Yes, of course, Mum's at the spa, isn't she. Oh, sorry, how could you have known.

There's no accusation in her voice. She's holding a cocktail shaker, the ice cubes clink inside it, and when she meets my gaze, she grins:

I've invented a new drink, you'll have to tell me if you like it!

I think the new drink tastes shit, of pure alcohol, and she's pleased when I tell her.

Maybe instead of scattering the sugar all across the kitchen you could have put some of it in the glass?

You're welcome to top yours up with juice, she says,

I'd forgotten how sensitive you are.

How are your arms?

Anto looks down at her forearms, as though she's forgotten they were in elbow-high plaster casts only just recently, then stretches them out towards me,

Pretty good, I'd say. The plates still need to come out at some point, but I can do everything again.

As proof, she rotates her wrists this way and that, and I immediately notice two pink scars that weren't there before.

You should've been there when the casts were taken off. It was really disgusting, look how thin my arms are now. I mean, it's not normal.

I glance at her pale wrists, shrug my shoulders.

They look the same as always to me.

Sure, Jara, thanks.

She acts like she's offended, but I can see she's stifling a grin. All of a sudden, she looks at me,

Are we going out?

Now?

My champagne coupe is almost full still, and the bag with the new things I wanted to show her is waiting in the hallway.

### 3

One night, when I can't sleep, I watch a black-and-white film on TV. It's not the kind of thing I would usually watch, but the other channels only had teleshopping, and a sports channel was showing one of those soft pornos – a woman kneeling on a billiard table and so on. There was a time when I would have lingered on that, with a strange feeling in my stomach, but I think I'm past that now.

When I eventually switch to this film, there's a woman lying in a shimmering, silky nightie on a hotel bed, cigarette in her hand. Her face is shown in close-up.

There's something about her gaze. For some reason I don't change the channel, even though old films really aren't my thing.

Once she's finished smoking the cigarette, the woman stands up and opens a window. She crosses the room and picks up an item of clothing from the floor. Then she disappears out of shot. The camera films the bed, the curtains swaying in the breeze.

The woman comes back. Now she's wearing a dark dress with a long line of buttons on the front. She lights another cigarette, fastens the remaining buttons of her dress with one hand.

Then she goes over to the open window, climbs up onto the windowsill and jumps.

I genuinely didn't see that coming.



Don't be like that. Anto is sitting cross-legged in front of the mirror in her bedroom, running the same strand of hair through a straightener again and again. There's a burning smell, and I'm not sure what happens when hair catches fire. Whether or not it can be easily extinguished.

It's strange that Anto doesn't seem to be worried, I know she's afraid of fire.

A few times I've seen her pour water or stale cola into her ashtray at night, to drown any cigarettes that might still be smouldering. Even if we haven't actually smoked that day.

That's unnecessarily gross, I said, whenever she used cola instead of water, and

Everything gets mixed in the stomach anyway, she answered each time.

I desperately need to get out, she says now,

You can't imagine.

I can, I say,

But couldn't we chill out here a bit longer?

Just an hour or so?

No, Jara, we reeeally can't. Sorry. Let's get ready and go for a drink in town, okay? That's chilling too, just somewhere else.

I shrug my shoulders,

Okay.

I can't object anyway. If Anto says she needs to get out, after being in hospital for weeks on end – after I simply abandoned her and didn't get in touch – then there's really nothing I can say.

I put on a rhinestone top, one I've worn a thousand times before, then take it off again. I try on one of Anto's tops, which is held up by a thick strap solely on the left-hand side, then a bandeau top, then a tight denim dress.

In the end I decide on an old grey Puma T-shirt, one I know she only wears in bed. It has holes along the hem and is faded from being washed a lot.

Anto throws me a questioning glance, but says nothing.

It's an unspoken rule that we wear whatever we feel good in, and that we don't make disparaging remarks, and Anto only broke that rule one single time, when I wanted to buy a pale-blue Marc O'Polo blouse.

Sorry, but that's going too far, she said, taking the hanger out of my hands.

I really like you, but I don't want to be seen with you wearing that.

And today too, I know she's right. The Puma T-shirt is old and ugly. It's not the right thing for this night, when everything should be perfect.

Anto stands up and rummages around in her wardrobe, then throws an item of clothing over her shoulder at me,

Try this.

I hold it up. It's a straight-cut dress made of a dark-blue shimmering material. It's totally different to the things we usually wear. It's beautiful.

I take off the T-shirt and pull the dress over my head.

It's cool against my skin. Anto gives me an appraising glance,

Looks good.

I watch her kneel down and pull the baseball bats out from under her bed.

I'm taking my jacket, she says,

We can hide them under it to start with. While we're still in the neighbourhood.

Okay.

While the neighbours are still looking.

Sure.

I pick up one of the bats. It's the dark-blue one, with stars around the handle. I stroke my finger over it. The stars are painted on with thick paint. Even when I close my eyes, I can still tell exactly where they are.

## 4

The first time I saw her, she was wearing sandals, even though we were meeting to play football. None of us had seen her anywhere before, apart from Ilya of course, who brought her along and keeps sneaking shy glances at her. He's wearing the sweat-drenched Germany strip again. Ballack, of all people, emblazoned on the back. Over the past few weeks, I've never seen him in a different shirt, and he doesn't miss a single opportunity to tell us what we'd all rather not know: that you shouldn't wash proper strips, that's what keeps them looking new, even years later.

Anto has two piercings in each ear with tiny glittering stones, and chipped blue polish on her fingernails. She's wearing a white T-shirt with fringed seams and short, dark-blue jeans. She looks like the kind of girl I'd never usually associate with, if Ilya hadn't brought her along.

Anto, she says, looking around at the group,

And who are you guys?

We stand in front of her on the gravel pitch, in our shorts and football socks and studded shoes, and I'm convinced she looks at me for longer than the boys. Without wanting to, I evade her gaze. There's something about her eyes, something that makes me nervous.

Anto can pick her team, says Ilya,

It's only fair, she doesn't know anyone.

The others mumble in agreement, and I manage to keep my expression neutral. On Sundays, if there's no match and we meet for a kickabout without Vlado, our trainer, Ilya and Leo always fight over which of them is more in charge, and sometimes I intervene, but today I'm not in the mood.

Anto doesn't hesitate for long.

You, she says,

In the blue T-shirt. You're with me.

Her tone is brisk, almost unfriendly, and I don't say that it's a strip, a Zidane strip, a fake Zidane strip, as Leo immediately spotted.

I don't say anything, I just nod and go to stand next to her. I look at the others' faces. No false gratitude just because she picked me first.

After me she picks Ilya, because he bought her along, then Leo and a couple of the other boys, seemingly at random.

I play central midfield, I explain, and feel relieved when no one objects.

I pass to the left to Ilya and wait for him to play the ball back. Because he usually always plays the ball back. Because we've done it like that a thousand times already, it's our opening when we're playing as a team.

But Ilya, who in this moment has become a traitor, tries a crossfield pass to Anto, and of course the ball flies metres past her, out of play. I run over to him,

What was that about?

He pretends he can't hear me. Runs on, looks over at Anto, who plays such unbelievably bad football that for a moment I think she's winding us up. As though she's never had a ball at her feet, never seen a single pass on TV. She demands the ball only to kick it into the bushes, far away from the goal. Trips over her own feet at every attempt to dribble past her opponent.

But even though she's so incredibly bad, messing up every pass and immediately losing the ball again, the others pass to her whenever she asks. They give her the ball and let her ruin

the game. Watch her doing it and don't complain. I'm sweating. Getting moody. I start refusing to pass to her.

We stand in a circle and don't talk about the game. A box of iced tea gets passed around, and Leo can't think of anything better to do than kick the ball at a crow.

Bet you I can hit it, he says, getting himself into position.

The crow is about twenty metres away on the outside line, by the puddles that never disappear, not even when the sun shines for days on end.

Leo launches in to shoot and is just as sure as us that he won't hit the mark. But the crow, its head turned in our direction, doesn't fly away, and Leo hits it.

I'm the first to move, or at least the first to reach the edge of the playing field.

It's still alive, I say, after I've gone up close.

It's suffering.

Leo says nothing. His bottom lip trembles.

It's suffering, I repeat.

Anto looks at Leo.

I'll do it, she says, running along the stands and disappearing into the bushes.

When she comes back, she's holding a rock the size of a fist. She kneels down.

It's gonna be okay, she says to the crow,

You don't have to be afraid anymore.

She briefly strokes its wing, then in one quick movement, she strikes.

It's okay, she says to Leo, who stares at her wide-eyed,

It's nothing.

She wipes her hands on her jeans, carefully lifts what remains of the crow and carries it over to a tree.

I just hope you're quicker up there than you were down here, she says, loud enough for us to hear, and then she turns to us:

Don't just stand there, bury it.

There's this webpage that lists all the people who one day just disappeared for good. People for whom no remains have been found, to this day, and who, according to their entry, are regarded as encyclopedically relevant.

What exactly makes a person become encyclopedic relevant? Famous parents? Money? A special talent? Who decides?

The list is continually being expanded. A large proportion of the missing people met with an accident while doing some extreme sport, in the mountains or out on the open water. For a few isolated people, it said they might have disappeared voluntarily, to begin a new life in a different place.

I wish I knew what Anto would do if she were me.

If she would have called the emergency services by now, if I'd been the one who just jumped into the Ruhr River. My guess is that she wouldn't have. I'm probably overreacting, completely misjudging the situation once again.

Did she think for even a second about the shitty situation she's putting me in?

If I call the emergency services now, the police will come too, that's always what happens.

Every time an ambulance races through a red light, sirens wailing, it's swiftly followed by a police car. That's something I've noticed, and it's really the last thing we need right now.

Guys in uniform, who, once they're here, will want to take down our details.

Studying our IDs in close detail, shining their torches on them, as though there was some secret message to decode. Wanting to know what we're doing here, in the middle of the night, on this bridge.

Probably they'll also tell us this isn't legal, that the bridge is too old, too dangerous, something like that. They'll want to take us home and inform our parents.

But this isn't the first time we've been here, and I swear:

The bridge is safer than most other places in the city.

As long as you're not planning to jump off it.

If I call the emergency services now, Anto will suddenly reappear as soon as I've hung up.

She'll look at me in annoyance.

If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be in this situation, say the looks. What were you thinking calling the police, say the looks, and I get nervous, because I can't bear it when she looks at me like that. As though, in her eyes, I've completely failed, but as though she actually didn't expect anything else.

I know, I look older, she might say to the policeman who's holding her ID, as she gives him a beaming smile. No trace of uncertainty, even though at precisely this moment the other policeman is pulling the baseball bat out of the water down by the riverbank. He's wearing black plastic gloves, an indication that he unfortunately thinks the baseball bat is suspicious. That he doesn't want to contaminate the evidence.

What can you two tell me about this? he asks once he's standing next to us again, holding up the bat,

Is it yours?

No, says Anto,

I mean, seriously, do we look as though we've just been playing baseball? We were chilling, that's all. I fell in – stupid, I know – and now I'd really like to get changed. Out of these wet things, do you understand?

The policeman, both men, glance at one another, and I think I spot something like mental exhaustion in their eyes.

Okay then, one of them says eventually,

If the ambulance crew don't have any objections, you can go now. But make sure nothing like this happens again, we've got more important things to do than fish drunk kids out of the water.

Understood.

He's addressing Anto like a child, now he's realised she's a minor, and I know even without looking at her that she doesn't like it.

That's pretty much how it will go if I call the ambulance now, and everything's almost okay again, but when they're about to leave one of the paramedics notices the cuts on Anto's hand, which look like she's reached into a mountain of glass shards.