



**VERENA GÜNTNER  
MEDULLA**

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English sample translation:  
pp. 7-11; 15-20; 95-101; 167-174

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**pp. 7-11**

The crossed arms are her blades. With a loud sigh, she turns to the window. Seagulls drift through her mental viewfinder, she zooms in, focuses on their movement then lets them fade out. The doorbell had gone fifteen minutes ago and she'd opened up thinking it was a delivery. She hadn't offered him anything to drink, had sunk down into the sofa, giving only monosyllabic responses to his questions and not once looking at him. He was holding the cake the whole time.

'Do come over later,' he says.

'No, I'd rather not.'

'Why so?'

'Cos I don't want to.'

The dialogue isn't working. Her father senses that and his shoulders sag. She goes to the flat door, yanks it open and pointedly stands there.

'Wouldn't it do you good?'

'No.'

'It'd please your mother.' Her father hesitates. 'We'd be glad if you could just phone him, give him the opportunity for a conversation.'

'Another one?'

‘He calls us too you know.’

‘I do know.’

‘Every day.’

Suddenly suspicious, she raises her head. ‘Is he at yours? Is he waiting there for me? Is that why you want me to come over?’

‘I’d just feel better if you weren’t alone today.’

‘And I’d feel better if you left right now.’

She makes a face designed to show he wouldn’t get anything more out of her. It works. On his way out he places the cake on the hall bench, a fifty euro note next to it.

‘Buy yourself something nice. And please ... .’ In the doorway he turns only to see vigorous shaking of the head.

Once he’s gone she opens every window to let out the bad air he’s left behind. She steps into the shower, scrubs her whole body and washes her hair with soap as there’s no shampoo. Then she just stands for a while, letting the warm water course over her, oblivious to everything until a sound catches her attention. It’s the phone. Leaving the shower running, she steps out and goes to answer it, creating a wet trail through the flat. Her parents’ old phone, with its classic dial, and a ring that remains forever ingrained, is kept on the table in front of the window.

‘Yes?’ she says, immediately sucked in by the deafening silence at the other end. Water drips noisily onto the floor, her wet hair clings to her breasts like tentacles. She stays on the line, listening intently to the abyss, then hangs up. It rings again straight away.

‘Yes?’

Silence. She hangs up. Almost immediately it rings once more.

‘Yes?’

She hangs up. Ring ring.

‘Yes?’

Hangs up. Ring ring.

‘Yes?’

Ring ring.

‘Yes?’

Ring ring.

‘Yep?’

Ring ring.

‘YES?’

She shivers as a blast of wind gusts through the open bedroom window, striking her bare back like a gunshot.

‘Today’s my birthday,’ she says feebly, as if that would change anything. ‘Please just leave it now.’ Her words sound ridiculous. ‘I’m hanging up for the last time.’

The silence devours the receiver and clings to her, like a killer dog, its teeth embedded in her neck. The phone goes on ringing for hours on end, rings until late into the evening and the night. It brings them both together, this ringing, it’s a kind of conversation after weeks on end, after the separation that never was. Worn out, she falls asleep right there on the floor, her arms hugging her legs, a human bundle gradually losing all body heat. The ringing penetrates her dream like an echo from the wide awake world within her flat, driving her onward in blazing heat through a mown field, the child in her arms.

When she wakes, the phone is silent. At some point overnight he must have given up. She’s sure it won’t be for long. He’ll start again as soon as he’s up.

Her limbs are stiff from the cold and the hard floorboards. She struggles to her feet, goes to the bathroom, opens her mouth wide beneath the still coursing shower, drinking with increasing greed until ready to turn it off and step into the clothes she’d left in a heap yesterday. She goes to the kitchen. She’s eaten nothing for twenty-four hours. The fridge is empty apart from one huge beef tomato. Three bites and it’s finished. For a few moments she stands at the window and stores in her mind the familiar image of the house wall opposite. Plants on the ledge, half-closed curtains and dirty windows. Behind them, all the people in their flats, their daily lives known to her without her knowing them in person. Arguments between the children, between the parents, the loneliness of the lonely.

She fits two pullovers into her rucksack, one thin, one thick. A flannel shirt, a pair of shorts and a pair of longs, two t-shirts, her swimsuit and a hand towel. Eight pants and five pairs of socks. A light plastic raincoat, a warm hat, a big scarf that doubles as a blanket. On top she places a toothbrush, toothpaste and a plastic beaker, plasters, spray disinfectant, a spoon and a sharp knife. A bottle of water. She secures the rucksack and slings it on. She slips out of the flat before the phone starts again. The door’s left open a crack, a note on the dining table: *Leave it.*

The bus will take her most of the way, she’s got a seat upstairs, front row. The double-decker eats up the miles, the city gradually fades out.

She covers the distance from the station to the lake on foot, it takes three hours, it’s dusk now. She props her rucksack under a tree, stretches out in the water like a beached whale, keeps her clothes on. Whales don’t beach themselves on the brackish shores of

lakes. She knows that but does it anyway. There are clouds in the sky, they don't look real, as if shredded. She goes under.

**[pp. 15-20]**

Water shoots up Siv's nose as she turns somersaults. Round and round until she runs out of breath and has to come up. The noise is deafening. Saturday afternoon, a wet hell on earth. The shrill voices of children collide with the pool's surface then resound around the vast hall as hollow echoes. She goes under again and opens her eyes. A mass of floundering legs mingle with the orderly movements of the retired as they stoically plough through the throng.

Hanna's sitting on the edge of the pool, her feet in the water. She waves, wants to leave.

'Already?'

Saying nothing, Hanna gets up and goes over to the showers. Siv pushes herself up and over the pool edge and follows slowly after.

Under the fierce jet of the showers they pass shampoo and shower gel back and forth. Foamy islets drift across the tiles and down the drain. Siv gives in to the urge to pee. Hanna does the same. Standing with their legs spread, they laugh when a little boy, his diving goggles pushed up to his forehead, runs to his mother and indignantly points out what they're doing.

On the way home they hold hands. Hanna's smoking a cigarette that she puts between Siv's lips now and again. Since giving up Siv has particularly enjoyed that scratchy feeling in the throat, the intense taste of tobacco that reminded her of when she'd started as a teenager. Back then, this was at fourteen, she would shut herself in the bathroom the moment her parents had gone out, pull down her trousers and pants and hold the shower head between her legs. Then she would squeeze through the tiny window above the washbasin and clamber onto the flat roof, light up a Camel and get deliciously dizzy as she'd flick the ash over the gutter and down below.

Hanna takes back the cigarette and runs backwards in front of her. She's wearing black denim shorts and lace-up boots. No socks. Siv's mind went straight to the patch of hard skin on Hanna's right ankle, the part of her body she loved to hold.

'Are you still coming to my place?' Hanna asks, her head slightly to one side.

On the staircase they pass Hanna's overflowing mailbox and the first-floor tabby. As Hanna gently runs her hand over the cat's back she looks at Siv as if to say this caress is also for you.

The mattress lies beneath the open window, one of the two duvets is drawn back. Hanna's skin, so pale it's almost white, still smells of chlorine. Siv buries her face in Hanna's belly and sucks her navel.

Afterwards Hanna slides a pillow between Siv's legs to dry her and reaches for the water bottle next to the bed.

'Open your mouth,' she says and Siv turns onto her back. Hanna's off target so the water runs out from both sides of Siv's mouth, down her neck and onto the under sheet.

'Hey, I'm really thirsty,' says Hanna, leaning over Siv to stick her tongue in her mouth and make sipping sounds.

'What's the time?' asks Siv, sitting up.

Hanna leans over to grab the open laptop and holds it up.

'Gotta go.' Siv gathers up her clothes, strewn around the floor. 'I promised Jan I'd go to the theatre with him this time.'

'But you hate the theatre.'

'Yeah, but he doesn't give up.'

Hanna laughs, sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, the tablet on her lap, and starts typing.

'You're writing everything about today?'

'Everything, yep.'

'Including just now?'

'Yes, of course.'

'But I'll need to see that and sign it off.'

'You will absolutely not see it. It's just for me, anyway.'

Hanna's diary pages. She's been writing them since she was fourteen, capturing daily what happens, and what happens to her. She's got a cupboard full of notebooks from the time when she had no computer. 'It's not a diary, more an obsession. The obsessive chronicle of my existence,' she'd said to Siv on her first visit.

'I'd love to read it some time.'

'Yeah, I bet you would.' Hanna pointedly flaps the laptop shut. 'When it's ready.'

'When'll that be?'

‘Never, of course.’ She rubs an itch on her chest and Siv leans over to plant a kiss between her eyebrows. At the door she turns back. Hanna’s thrown off the quilt and is sitting with her legs spread, staring at a red patch on the under sheet.

‘Hang on.’ Siv goes to the bathroom and comes back with a tampon. ‘Don’t move.’ With care she pushes it in place.

‘Thank you. Most kind.’ Hanna leans back, a provocative look on her face.

‘Got to go to Kleist now.’

Jan is standing at the entrance, smoking. He’s wearing a mauve suit that’s too tight, with loafers and lilac socks.

Liv laughs. ‘Premier night?’

‘You’re bloody late.’

Jan takes theatre very seriously. He gets annual subscriptions for three of the big Berlin theatres even though he rarely makes more than a third of the performances.

‘Come on!’ He discards his cigarette and holds open the door for her, clearly impatient. They sneak into the auditorium at the last minute, awkwardly working their way along their row amid irritated chuntering and sighing from those already there.

‘Apologies,’ murmurs Jan as he squeezes himself into his seat, his face red with embarrassment.

The lights go down and Jan relaxes a little. Siv rests her head on his shoulder, lets her breath fall into the rhythm of his as the play drifts by without her involvement.

On the S-Bahn home Siv sits on Jan’s lap. She whispers in his ear, every detail of her afternoon with Hanna, omits nothing. Jan nods as he listens, his hand on her bare thigh. He grins at the bit with the tampon and says, ‘You got that from me!’

Once home she says she wants a tomato salad and goes for a shower while he prepares it. Still swathed in a huge bath towel she laughs and nods appreciatively at the way he’s fried some prawns to go with it, throwing in lemon, chili and garlic. While eating they gossip about the production, about Lars Eidinger and the bad prosecco. Just as Jan is about to wipe his mouth with his serviette, she leans across and licks it clean for him.

‘Good service. Thank you.’ He leans back in the chair.

‘Are you tired?’

‘A bit. Is that a problem?’

‘Not at all.’ She strokes his face.’

When he makes a move to start clearing, she puts her hand on his arm.

‘Come on, let’s leave everything and go to bed. Just for once, no sweeping up crumbs, no washing up. No fuss about stuff drying on the plates. I dare you!’

Jan groans. After years in the kitchen, keeping order and being in control are ingrained in him. He puts on a tormented look.

‘OK then,’ says Siv, and he jumps up, clearing the lot in no time.

‘Looking forward to tomorrow?’

Jan rolled his eyes.

‘Not at all?’ Another laugh. ‘*It’s just a number, darling.* As the saying goes.’

In bed they lie close. When he used to get home late at night, Siv could smell on his hair everything he’d prepared at the restaurant. She’d play at guessing. ‘Turbot with cream of horseradish? No, hang on ... sea bream!’ Jan would join in, a nod or a shake of the head as Siv rooted with her nose in his dark curls. Now she strokes his shaved head instead, sniffs at it, searching for lemon and garlic, for pungency, but there’s nothing. She falls back into her pillow and fast asleep.

Siv’s the one who dreams, Jan never, and recounts in the morning everything of her night, with all manner of embellishment and even invented detail. Wild, breath-taking dreams which Jan greedily absorbs, as intoxicated as if they were his own tales of the night. Siv sometimes says he feeds on her like a vampire, something he readily admits. They both know he’s addicted to her energy. ‘I’m the mistletoe to your life,’ and then tries to shape his body like one of the mistle clusters that hang from the trees in Victoria Park. The sight of them always gives him the creeps. They laugh about it, she calls him *Misty* as she thinks it really suits him. ‘You’re not fully transparent, you.’

## [pp. 95 – 101]

A wasp’s buzzing around the room. David goes to the window and opens it, trying to shoo the insect out with last week’s menu.

On Fridays he always visits his parents. Cancer hit her first, then him. Now they lie together in the hospice, their clasped hands dangling in the narrow gap between the iron bed frames.

He’s done it. The wasp drifts away. He’s quick to close the window behind it. With great care he lifts from his shopping bag a punnet of blueberries for his father, one of strawberries for his mother, and then holds them under the bathroom tap. Their dressing-gowns hang side by side, suspended from hooks, and lower down the wall are two

facecloths that he remembered using as a child. He looks round the place. The familiar possessions of his parents seem lost here. His mother's face cream, the one she'd used for decades now, their electric toothbrushes clogged with toothpaste, her wide-toothed comb and his shaver all combine to resemble museum exhibits, economically illuminated by the LED bulb above the mirror. For a moment he just wants to pack everything away and take it back to the family home where he'd been born and brought up and they'd spent all their married life. He turns off the tap and tips the fruit into two small bowls given him by the carer.

His father's dozing, the latest round of treatment, the final attempt, had hit him hard. But his mother's the same as ever. Up to now she's seemed indestructible, no hint that a cytostatic drug has been put into her veins every three weeks. All her life she'd been dainty and yet wiry, her arms strong, her legs powerful. Heaving crates of bottled water out of the car and into the house, splitting firewood in winter. She pulls her husband towards her a little.

'Here,' she says, tenderly. 'Come on, open your eyes now.' And he does, the moment she puts a blueberry between his lips.

'How much longer?' David asks the woman doctor in the corridor.

'Hard to say,' she replies. 'Just come every day. Sometimes things happen quickly.'

He's placed the flowers on the tall chest near the balcony door, just as his mother wanted. Red and yellow gladioli. Ten stems. The other ten are at home on the kitchen table. 'Take it easy,' Leyla had said, handing him a rubber band. She doesn't go with him. Ever since his parents had come into the hospice, he'd been travelling there alone.

'She's seen too many people dying and can't easily handle coming here,' he tells his parents when they ask after her. He doesn't really know if that's true. She never talks about her time coordinating projects in southern Afghanistan and always dodges his questions. In his head he has fashioned a version of her history that feels so logical that he sometimes forgets that maybe things didn't happen quite like that. So he understands why she doesn't come with him. But he would love her to. Then after every visit he could walk in the woods with her instead of on his own. Could show her the trunk of the maple where, as a teenager, he'd carved the opening lines of *I'm not satisfied* by The Fall: *Got no place to go / I'm tired of walking / Up and down the street all by myself / No love left for me*. When the hospice had been built, he'd just turned sixteen and used often to hang around the construction site with his friends. They would steal a few bricks and garnish them with dead mice and dung beetles before roasting them on a camp fire and watching the tiny bodies slowly shrivel. Then later they'd crouch behind the bushes and spy into the rooms, taking bets on who'd be next to pass. When, after many defeats, he actually won his bet, he cheered so loudly that three of the nurses came charging out, got them by the collar and hustled them inside the hospice building. They lined them up in the



chapel for a sound telling off and then left them in the basement for two hours cleaning bedpans. One of those nurses still works there. When he'd handed in the application for his parents a couple of months back, she'd been the one to take it from him. For a moment he feared she would recognise him. Game over. But she didn't, of course.

'Your mother's definitely still got some time.' She gave him a questioning look.

'I know.'

'So why's she here?'

'They won't be separated.'

His father's fallen asleep again and his mother's now dozing.

David rolls the rubber band over his hand as far as his wrist, where it digs in a bit, and looks out of the window at the garden. The little summer house, twined around with roses, looks forlorn, and he thinks how pointless it is in a place like this, where most patients can barely get out of bed. But his mother liked it from the outset and has taken herself there daily ever since, just to be out and to sit there a while.

On his journey home the houses lining the road appear diminished. Every time he passes there seem to be fewer. He attempts to picture the place without them. Without their grubby grey facades. Without the mossy rooftops and heavily curtained windows. But he can't. It's as if a ghostly ache ahead is drawing him in its cold hands along the main road back to Kreuzberg.

Leyla isn't back yet. He looks at the clock and his phone. *Where are you?* he taps out before putting the rest of the shopping away. They'd argued all night about the thing with Siv. What the hell were you thinking, she'd raved, are you off your head, asking Siv something like that? And without her even knowing? She says she doesn't want the child.

Leyla's work stuff is on the dining table, folders along with scribbled slips of paper. He casts an eye over them, barely decipherable fragments about the democracy project, rough calculations and a list of potential funders. Dirty cups, a teapot, a plate with a vine stalk. He clears away, stacks the folders and makes a tidy pile of the notes. On the sofa there's a compressed heap of tumble-dried clothes, still shaped by the rectangular wash-basket. He moves it aside without it collapsing and sits down with his phone. He scrolls through his feed and pauses on the Leppert channel, a place where he spends far too much time. Scrolling some more he takes in new posts and stories, images of interiors or lavishly presented meals interspersed with video clips of colleagues with their wine recommendations. Naturally Jan doesn't do the restaurant's social media himself. He's taken on a young media student for that, a girl who puts up new content several times a week. He carries on swiping with a growing sense of emptiness, throws the phone aside as if it were toxic, sighs loudly and gets to his feet.

Now in the kitchen he crushes four garlic cloves with the side of a knife, chops two small onions and puts a beet to blanch. He drinks a chilled ale, good and dark, and turns up the radio. Sweat stands out on his forehead, he opens first the window and then his shirt, casually tosses a few pine nuts in the frying pan and gives them a swirl. The minute The Pixies come on, he rips off his shirt, uses it to wipe his face and neck, undoes his jeans, kicks them off as he dances, and lets the tagliatelle slip into the boiling water. Holding a wooden spoon, he moves in circles, dances with his eyes closed, wearing only his pants, feeling light, as if floating, and wraps his arms around himself as he rocks from side to side with the music. He smells burning. His eyes open. He whips the pan off the heat and spins round. Leyla's leaning against the door frame. 'Captain Underpants. Such permissiveness on a weekday?' She throws down her bag on the table.

David reaches for his trousers. He gets them back on swiftly while Leyla fixes herself a glass of fizzy water and goes to the fridge.

'I'm having a salad.'

'But I'm doing some pasta.'

'I don't feel like hot food in this weather.'

'Shame.' David's now nudged the pan aside and turned off the hob.

'Been to see your parents?'

'Yep. You know I have.'

His mood changed.

'How are they?'

'Bad.'

Leyla turns to him. 'In what way exactly?'

'My father's really gone downhill.'

'And your mother?'

'How d'you think?'

They fall silent.

David watches Leyla as she prepares a cucumber. It makes him feel angry, the way she holds the knife, the way she cuts the cucumber into cubes instead of slices even though he has told her countless times that thin slices are better for absorbing the dressing. He's sure she hasn't forgotten, is sure she's doing it on purpose to annoy him, is imposing her will by doing something that means little to her but a lot to him. He acknowledges that

the way he likes things to be, and to be done, is demanding, yes, okay, but still he thinks Leyla could simply do him the courtesy when it comes to the cucumber.

He drains the pasta, leaving a little water at the bottom to moisten the tagliatelle and then slides it into the fry pan with the sauce. He stirs everything together, tastes it, adds salt and pepper, a shot of pure lemon juice and then tips a large helping onto a plate.

‘D’you really not want anything?’

Leyla doesn’t answer. She has stopped chopping and is staring straight ahead.

‘Leyla?’ David’s voice is louder now.

‘Yeah?’ She turns but her gaze is somewhere else.

‘The pasta. Wouldn’t you like some?’

She shakes her head and turns back to the chopping board. ‘I’m pregnant,’ she says, cleaving the Iceberg lettuce in two with one determined stroke.

## [pp.167 – 174]

Esther sits at the window, she’s dragged the desk chair over, and stares out. The heat outdoors seems to push against the glass, demanding to be allowed in.

Her laptop’s open on the floor. It gapes at her like an animal’s jaws. She slides her foot under her bare thigh. After taking a shower and not drying herself, she’d just slipped on a baggy shirt and sat straight down at the computer. Three hours have passed and she hasn’t written a single line about the idea she’s been agonising over for days.

She runs her fingers over her leg, pressing down on the thread veins. They spread from knee to ankle like a badly woven spider’s web. A woman she didn’t know, sitting opposite her on the city train, had recently told her you could actually get rid of them. She’d been around sixty and had smiled at her kindly as she said it, as if paying her a compliment. Esther had stared at her, made no reply, and looked back at her without expression until the smile vanished.

Esther reaches down for the laptop and opens her Instagram feed. For days she’s been scrolling through Lem’s photos, always revealing only selected extracts, just parts of his body. An arm covered in red-blond hair, a stubbly chin, a closed eyelid shot through with tiny blue veins, toes spread apart, the tiny tattoo on his wrist. What’re you up to here? She’d DM’d him a few days ago. ‘Is it a project?’ He’d written back straight away, no, it just felt good to dissect himself. She was amazed by his openness because they didn’t exactly know each another. They’d met barely a fortnight ago at Jan’s birthday party in *Leppert’s*, had shared a few thoughts on David’s pencil drawing as they queued for the unisex toilet, couldn’t agree whether he’d captured Jan well or not or whether he’d even wanted to. When it was his turn, he’d let her go ahead and asked her name. ‘And then

what?’ he’d added because she’d given only her first name. She was still on the toilet when she heard a new message coming in, a notification that *lem\_lem* was now following her on Instagram. Later she’d watched him from the edge of the improvised dance floor as he worked the deck. He didn’t look up at the dancers at all, seemed to have forgotten them and got lost in the music as if playing for himself alone.

She ‘likes’ his latest picture, posted at midnight, showing a small freckle on his right nostril and then moves the cursor toward the paper plane in the upper right corner of the screen and scrolls down the chats. Past Jacob’s own black and white profile photo of a cobra, past the faces of Adam, Jelena and Hanna, down to the pale pink square with an image of a dismembered finger dripping AI-generated yellow fluid. *Last active 56 minutes ago*. If he’s away for a few minutes, she’s up, if it’s hours, she’s down, and her heart beats faster when the green dot appears at the corner of his profile photo, showing he’s online. She opens up the chat and scrolls away until she’s at the start. Once more she reads this ripening conversation they’ve been working on over last few days, goes through the mostly single-liners, pauses a while on those he’s highlighted with a little red heart. With hindsight the communication comes across as less ecstatic than before, her own responses not especially quick-witted, and even his lines now seem pedestrian in a way they didn’t at first. She checks what’s under his profile photo. *Online two hours ago*. Angrily she shuts the laptop, shoves it aside with her foot, gets up and opens the window.

The heat hits her with a ferocity that makes her take a step back and gasp for breath. She climbs onto the chair to unlatch the ventilator before going into the living-room to open the door onto the balcony. Then she sweeps through every room, one by one, throwing open window after window, ending up in the kitchen where she sinks down onto the bench, her long-time *bête noire*, upholstered as it was in a mocha-coloured leather, now cracked and tatty. A few weeks ago she’d asked a local business for a re-upholstering estimate. When the woman named the sum, she’d left the premises without a word.

She must have fallen asleep, sits up, wipes the sweat from her face, and sees Jacob hurrying through the flat to close all the windows again.

He’s in the kitchen. Energetically he swings open the dishwasher and with a clatter starts loading the muesli bowls and tea cups they’d left on the table earlier. His shirt’s sticking to his back. He gets on with putting the shopping away in the fridge.

‘How was your morning? How did the appointment at central office go?’

‘Fine.’ His tone is curt. He walks into the hall.

She listens to him opening the utility room door and noisily putting down the wash basket. She’d run the machine last night but hadn’t emptied it this morning. Now she pictures him burying his nose in the damp clothes to see if they’ve gone musty, in which case he would wash them all over again. Slowly she gets to her feet, fills a large glass with water

then heads for the hall and stands in the doorway to watch him hanging up the washing. She knows she should help. He already does more housework than she does, as it doesn't bother her if things are left. Before she'd got together Jacob, she'd only wash up when every crock was dirty. In a brief spell when she'd been earning a bit more, she'd taken on a Polish cleaner to despatch the worst every fortnight. She knows that her indifference to the state of the flat seems to others out of character. In her work she's structured and clear to the point of pedantry. It's the only thing in her life for which she feels any passion, and she displays little interest in the people around her. She's often wondered where this inability to love comes from and once even made an appointment with a therapist but was so put off by the interior decor at the practice that she never went back.

She goes past Jacob and into the study, picks her laptop off the floor and gets into bed with it. *lem\_lem* had been online six minutes ago and this calms her straight away. She closes the window and checks her emails. There's one from Leyla. She skims the message, it's about an appointment at the Afghanistan Consulate the next day, she wants to meet up beforehand to discuss something. '*What's it about?*' she replies without proper greeting, she doesn't like being taken by surprise. Even after all this time, she can't work Leyla out. She seems withdrawn, as if constantly holding something back or as if she knows more than everyone else in the room. She hardly ever makes an error, something which irritates Esther and yet somehow also spurs her on to compete but Leyla doesn't rise to that. Esther had been against her being in working group but was outvoted by everyone except Jacob who joined her baseless veto. In the first few weeks she secretly watched Leyla, studied her facial expressions, which revealed nothing and this was annoying. She stalked her online, obsessively so, but found as good as nothing. Leyla didn't belong to any social media networks and items about her time in Afghanistan were sparse. The one tiny photograph of Leyla on the NGO website was all Esther found and repeatedly pulled it up, enlarging it so much that the overly pixelated Esther was unrecognisable. With time this eased off and she forced herself not to click on webpage and ignored Leyla at work, as far as she could.

'D'you want some fizzy lemon?'

Jacob's clattering crockery in the kitchen.

'Yes,' she calls back, opening Instagram again. *lem-lem* hasn't been online again. She shoves the laptop under the counterpane and goes to the wardrobe. She takes her shirt off, puts on a bra then slips into a plain summer dress, made of cupro and slightly see-through.

'Have you seen my flesh-coloured knickers?'

Jacob's walking in with a glass of water with ice and lemon.

'No. In the wash?'

He looks past her to the bed. She knows he'll plump up the pillows for the second time, tidy the bedding and smooth it over, just like he'd done when he got up this morning.

She swallows half of the drink, puts the glass down on the hall floor and rifles through her underwear drawer.

'When's the next check-up?' he asks, thumping the pillows into shape.

'It was today.'

He pauses, looks at her.

'Oh, I see. Shouldn't I have been ... ?'

Esther closes the wardrobe door and leaves the room. Now she's in the bathroom and tips out the laundry basket, using her feet to separate out the pile of clothes. She doesn't want to touch anything of Jacob's that's not been washed. The back of her hand covers her nose as his odour reaches her. She leaves everything on the floor and heads for the drying racks in the hallway. There they are. Tidily hung and pegged out. She grabs them.

'They're here!'

Jacob appears in the doorway. 'They're still damp,' he says as he sees her putting them on. 'Won't you get cystitis?'

She pushes him aside. 'Got to start work,' she says and closes the door behind her. The laptop's on the desk. He must have found it under the bedding and put it there. He pokes his nose into everything, can't leave anything alone, she thinks to herself as she goes to the window, pulls it open like she did earlier, breathes in the heat through her mouth and swallows it down. A chorus of shrieking distracts her and she notices children from the nearby nursery, laughing and running about on the pavement, all in their swim stuff. One of the staff is chasing them with the garden hose as he unreels it through the open gate of the courtyard.

In the mornings she often watches from above as parents drop off their children, sees them prising the little ones off the child-seat of their bikes, calming them as they cling on and cry. Then she sees them blowing kisses towards the nursery windows, visibly relieved as they get back on the wheeled beast of burden and cycle away without a backward glance. For a long time she enjoyed these scenes, and her personal distance from them. It pleased her to take on the role of the observer whose perspective transformed something banal into something special, condensing the joy, weariness and exhaustion of these parents into an epic tale. Esther, our eye witness, reporting for Drama Daily. And yet now she watches with an increasing scepticism and fails in her attempt to blend with the scene below.

She pushes away from the radiator with her hip, reaches for the mobile and messages *lem\_lem* that he can dissect her, too, if he wants. Immediately she's embarrassed, thinks about doing a recall but he's already read it. Her face is burning and she's mesmerised

by those three flickering dots that show he's replying. *It's not that easy*, he's written, *not everyone's suited to it*. She asks, 'So what does it take?' and he writes back, 'Commitment, what else?' and follows it with the melting face emoji. 'I've got that,' she types in. 'You have, have you? Then show your first segment.' She wipes her mouth, smiles, looks down at herself and draws up her foot, spreads her toes and take a picture. Sends it to him immediately. *More, more detailed!* She lifts her dress, holds her mobile in front of her curving belly and tries to photograph her navel. It doesn't work so she lies on her back, straining to see herself in the mirror and takes several. Only in the last one is her protruding belly button visible. She uploads it to the chat but sees at the last moment that *lem\_lem* is no longer there. She waits several minutes for the green dot but nothing happens. Disappointed she closes the App only to open it again a few seconds later. There's the green dot and she's there, live, when *lem\_lem* posts a heart on her photo. Now satisfied she puts her phone aside, settles at the desk and tumbles into her writing with nothing holding her back.