



JOHANNA SEBAUER

POPÓM

A Novel, 224 pages

July 2026

English sample translation, pp. 5-41

Translated by Lucy Jones

Contact:

judith.habermas@dumont.de

anna.ludgen@dumont.de

1

It was still summer when I saw him for the first time. The end of August, beginning of September at the latest. I clearly remember I was wearing shorts and flip flops to nip out to the all-night store for a lemonade and a bar of strawberry chocolate. Anja had a sudden craving but was too lazy to get up from the sofa. So I went.

It was late in the evening. The all-night store was blaring German '90s rap, the floor tiles were freshly mopped and still gleaming faintly, and an employee was restocking the fridge with beer. Any minute, the night crowd would come charging in here in herds, and the staff were gearing up for the onslaught. I sauntered up and down the aisles, studying the pricey candy from all over the world in one corner and the shelf with dusty wine bottles. I picked up a pack of sunflower seeds, scanned the product info on the back in a language I didn't understand, and strolled past the sanitary products and instant meals in outlandish flavours, gently nodding my head to the beat. I found Anja's chocolate and lemonade, took a tin of roasted pistachios for myself, and was about to head for the checkout . . . but then, right in front of me—

The guy was all dressed in long clothes. Long trousers, pleated at the waistband, brown dress shoes, shiny and leather, a sand-coloured coat and a hat, dove grey. He was standing by the tinned food shelf, looking for something. His gaze travelled over kidney beans, French beans, sweetcorn, baby carrots, Szegedin goulash, ravioli in tomato sauce and pineapple slices. In the end he took a tin of peach halves in syrup, lightly sweetened. From the inside pocket of his coat, he pulled out reading glasses, put them on and read the label intently.

I was standing about three metres away, rooted to the spot like a block of wood, not knowing what was happening to me. Something had entered me, passed through me, shot out of me, leapt back in, and now was tearing wildly around inside me. I came over dizzy and sick, ice-cold, then burning. I trembled. That man. He put away his reading glasses and headed for the checkout. Without hesitating, I followed him. A couple of teenagers, each with a drink in their hands, were queuing to pay. The scanner peeped at regular intervals. Right in front of me: the man. The jacket he had on was a car coat. I'd recently become something of an authority on fashion, ever since Anja had casually mentioned how many straight men she'd noticed who knew how to dress fashionably and elegantly. I'd started paying a lot of attention to Anja's throwaway remarks because WhatsApp texts from her colleague Björn had been popping up suspiciously often on her mobile for some time. Of course I hadn't snooped, but sometimes her mobile was lying around and when it pinged, the text on the locked screen was suspiciously often from Björn. Björn was the guy she did Ultimate Frisbee with once a week. Not just the two of them – others went as well. Björn was just a lovely colleague, great fun to be around. What on earth was I worried about, she asked. Surely I wasn't jealous, I mean surely, she was still allowed to—

Either way, fashionable men were on Anja's mind. So I'd googled *Basic Knowledge Fashion* and *Men's Fashion for Beginners*, things of that sort. I'd also skimmed some fashion blogs – *The Lazy Dude's Guide to Style* and *Fashion Hacks for a Tight Budget* – and had scrolled through the Insta profiles of fit hunks who sometimes looked as if they'd stepped straight out of a business-studies lecture, sometimes from a hipster flea market, and sometimes from a Sunday coffee at Grandma's. Timeless classics were recommended across the board and were easily the most important items in a man's wardrobe: a few pairs of well-fitting trousers and shirts, tailored at no great expense, a couple of equally well-fitting jackets, some pure new wool sweaters and a pair of good leather shoes, preferably stitched and made to last.

The man in front of me was wearing a car coat, which differed from a trench coat in that it lacked the military details. Its special feature were the slits sewn into the sides that weren't pockets, as many wrongly believed, but simply openings that led nowhere, so that if you put your hand through them you reached into emptiness, or the pockets of the jacket or trousers you were wearing underneath. Car coats were originally designed for drivers back when most cars had no roof and you needed something wind- and weatherproof that wasn't difficult to take off, should you happen to be pulled over and asked for your papers. That was the kind of coat he was wearing. If it hadn't been for Anja – or actually, Björn – I wouldn't have known any of this.

The queue inched forwards. The blood was pounding in my head. Because I knew. Not only about the car coat – I knew something else too. A much bigger thing which had been clear to me the very moment I'd set eyes on this man who much too warmly dressed for what was possibly the last late-summer evening of the year. In the all-night store they turned the music up louder, and into it tumbled the first of the night crowd, ripping open the glass doors of the man-sized fridges, slamming them shut, ripping them open again, slamming them shut again, making the rubber seals squelch and the bottles clink on the wire shelves. They swarmed up and down the aisles, chattering and laughing with the giddy thrill of youth at all that this coming night still held in store. I took everything in and it felt ten times louder and brighter because my senses were suddenly magnified. Yet I was still fixated on the sand-coloured car coat in front of me. Because I knew that this man – who I'd only seen briefly from the front as he turned in my direction by the tinned goods shelf before he'd picked out the canned peaches – this man – who was possibly twice as old as I was, and looked nothing like me and whose car coat I'd followed to the checkout where we were now standing, my eyelid twitching, my breathing shaky – this man – and I had absolutely no doubt about it right then: this man was me.

Here's the thing: you have to believe me. Everything that follows hinges on this, because I can offer no explanations, let alone theories or proof. You simply have to believe me, even though, from the few years' distance to this story, I can say for sure that I was an unbearably bumbling, callow young man back then, who made a rather unconvincing impression. I was in my late twenties, so definitely no spring chicken, yet far from being a proper adult, the way I ineptly stumbled through life. And even if I often felt powerful and superior to so many things, I was actually just bobbing over the waves like a rudderless boat without realising, simply lucky that a big storm had never come my way. The person I was at

the time, someone rarely certain of anything, was now one hundred per cent sure that there was only one possibility – and I’m still sure of it today: We, Mr Car Coat and I, were one and the same person.

My fingers holding the strawberry chocolate grew sweaty; the queue moved. It was his turn. He placed the tin of peaches on the counter, that was all. The young man at the checkout held it up to his scanner which beeped, and Mr Car Coat cleared his throat. Asked if he could pay by card. The young man held out the card reader. Mr Car Coat scanned his card, said thank you, doffed his dove-grey hat and turned to go. I watched him leave. The bottom seam of his coat swept across the still-damp tiles as he walked out of the door. Eventually I realised the cashier was saying something. I whipped around. He was looking at me with an expectant, impatient expression because I hadn’t handed over my items, but was just standing there like an idiot, holding up the growing queue.

‘Sorry,’ I said, placing my things hastily on the counter. Then I rushed out without buying anything. Mr Car Coat had already walked a short way down the street. My God, didn’t he feel hot in all those clothes? I rushed after him, taking huge strides without running, probably looking like one of those hip-swaying marathon walkers in the Olympic Games. My flip flops smacked into my heels, and people turned around, laughing at me. So what. I had to reach the guy. On the corner, he stopped and bent down to undo a bike locked to a streetlamp. I gave it everything I had. Almost there. Just a few more metres, then . . . Then I was standing right in front of him. Now what? I hadn’t thought before I’d run after him – it was just a reflex, an instinct. I hadn’t thought through what I actually wanted from him. But now, here I was, breathing slightly faster, probably with some colour in my cheeks. I coughed.

HIM *(looks up from his bike lock, flustered)*. Yes?

ME *(panting)*. Hello.

HIM *(looking around)*. You ran after me?

ME Yes!

HIM Can I help you?

ME Help?

HIM Yes, *help*. What do you want?

ME Ah, no. I mean... Ha! You know, there’s a really funny story behind this. It’ll probably take a while to tell you. Although I can’t really explain much. It’s... It’s more of a feeling I have.

HIM A feeling?

ME Yes, but a really sure feeling. A really, *really* sure feeling. I don't even know what to call it, it's so sure. (*Laughing nervously.*) Does it still count as a feeling if you're really sure?

It was clear he didn't share my feeling. Sceptically he eyed me up and down, his face twisting almost in disgust. How on earth was I to . . .? I had to steer him somehow towards my feeling – then he'd sense it too, at once, I thought. He'd look me in the eyes and recognise them as his own. Somehow, I just had to... And then I simply held out my hand.

ME I'm Hendrik!

HIM (*hesitantly taking my hand*). Hendrik.

ME And you are?

HIM Hendrik. Like I said.

ME (*happily*). Ha! You see?

HIM What do I see?

ME You don't see?

HIM (*sternly*). No. I don't think so. What am I supposed to see?

ME I'm not exactly sure.

HIM Then it's going to be hard for us to make any headway.

ME Hendrik and Hendrik. Doesn't that say anything to you?

HIM Do we know each other from somewhere?

ME No. Well, actually yes.

HIM So, which one is it?

ME We've never met but we do know each other.

HIM Do we have friends in common?

ME No. Or maybe? Possibly. Yes, highly likely in fact. Do you know an Anja, for example?

HIM Anja? No idea, maybe.

ME What's your wife's name?

HIM I don't see how that's any of your business.

ME Of course not. Sorry. I didn't want to ...

HIM You didn't want to, but you're doing it anyway. Please tell me why you're holding me up.

ME I don't know exactly how to explain.

HIM Please try. But be quick about it.

ME You ...

HIM *(impatiently)*. Yes?

ME You are me.

HIM *(long pause)*. Excuse me?

ME *(slowly enunciating each word)*. You. Are. Me.

HIM Haha, very funny ...

ME No, really! It's true. And I am you!

HIM *(turns to his bike)*. Well, isn't that wonderful.

ME *(happily)*. Yes?

HIM If I'm you, you certainly don't want to be held up any longer either. *(Tips his hat)*. It was a pleasure. Now I must be going.

ME No, wait! Please.

HIM I don't have time for this kind of thing. Please go now. Your friends are waiting for you. *(Indicates the group of young people outside the all-night store.)* I expect you've won your bet. Have a pleasant evening.

ME What? No, wait. What bet? There was no bet. Those aren't my friends. I don't even know them. I was at the store on my own. Right behind you. Didn't you see me?

He got on his bike – a heavy, ramshackle upright type of bike – and rode off. I briefly thought about running after him, but then I had my stupid flip flops on. His car coat was billowing. Still, he *did* lift his hat briefly. Whether the gesture was meant for me, I didn't know. As if glued to the spot, I stood there watching him go until he disappeared around the corner. Even afterwards, I just stood and stood, not moving, not thinking, for God knows how long.

The mood when I arrived home empty-handed, sweaty and with my mind in turmoil, needs no imagination. In my brief time at the all-night store and on the street corner, I'd lived three lives and died three deaths; I was completely drained, like after badminton practice, but

obviously I couldn't explain why to Anja. She wanted to know how it was possible to go out for lemonade, only to come home half an eternity later without lemonade or even an explanation of where I'd been or what I'd been doing. Typical, she said, shoving her feet into her trainers to go out to the all-night store herself, already in her nightshirt, her hair hurriedly tied up, loose strands hanging left and right across her face. Typical! Head always in the clouds. I should get myself seen to because *this* wasn't normal. The door fell shut. I stood in the hallway, breathing hard.

That man in his sand-coloured coat in the late summer heat. The hat he wore and the old-fashioned gestures that went with it. The tinned peaches in his bicycle basket – My God. I'd ever experienced anything like it before. As if I'd seen him for the first time yet always known him. Almost like a *déjà vu*. Everyone knows the feeling: you find yourself somewhere and suddenly sense – uncannily sharply – that it's all familiar, that you've been here before, that the light fell through the window at exactly this angle while exactly this song was blaring from the radio, and that the door would open any moment now and exactly this person would walk in and say exactly this. With the same certainty that grips a person having a *déjà vu* who knows they've lived this moment before, I knew that man was me. But a *déjà vu* usually disappears after a few seconds, and the person is relieved to find their senses are still intact. My feeling, on the other hand, stayed.

The evening sun was coming through the window at the end of the hallway. I shuddered, then shook myself and ran over to my laptop. *Possible to meet yourself?* I googled and *Can I exist in another person?* I scrolled and scrolled, my eyes racing over the lines. I opened a new tab in my browser, typed and scrolled, opened another, typed and scrolled, and another and another, my fingertips getting damp with sweat. At some point, the door in the hallway opened again. Trainers were flung into the corner, floorboards creaked, a lemonade bottle hissed and the TV went on. I threw a forced 'Hello' in the direction of the sounds. Anja didn't answer. She was pissed off, annoyed by my strange, unsuccessful trip to the all-night store (who could blame her?), and wasn't talking to me. That suited me fine. I stayed where I was, clicking, typing, scrolling and searching. I ended up on esoteric and mindfulness forums where users swapped meditation exercises; I came across a blog documenting a man's transcendental experiences in exhaustive detail after he drank a hallucinogenic liana concoction deep in the Peruvian rainforest; I went down a rabbit hole of essays on time travel and its possibilities. But nowhere did I find anything that even touched upon what I had experienced: I'd stood on a street corner and had spoken to myself. The man I'd spoken to

hadn't looked like me, had moved differently and yet, down to every pore, he was me. I worry that only someone who has been through something similar will really understand what I mean.

In the living room, Anja was typing on her mobile phone. I heard the occasional soft pling of WhatsApp messages appearing in a chat. Eventually she went into the bathroom, and brushed her teeth, as well as the gaps in between: I could hear the dental floss clicking. Then without saying a word, she went into the bedroom, taking her mobile with her. Pling, pling, pling.

The next day at the agency, two things happened. First, in the morning, the boss introduced us to Fritzi.

'She's doing our graphics from now on,' he said with a casualness I couldn't quite place. The rest of us had failed to notice he was even looking for someone to do graphics, let alone had already conducted interviews. Never mind, that's how things were in our firm. Things were laid-back and there was as little bureaucracy, and as few conventional office structures, as possible: *flat hierarchy*, that was the term my boss liked to use. We all got up out of our swivel chairs and trotted up to her. Fritzi, I guessed, was in her late twenties, early thirties. Thin build, brown curly hair, round glasses with gold frames, stern expression. She was wearing a big leather jacket that lent her both a laid-back and a very mature air. As if filing for communion, we lined up to shake hands with Fritzi, one at a time. Our boss stood to one side, hands in his jeans pockets, insisting on accompanying each handshake with a string of over-the-top chummy remarks.

'Good old Malte, he's a content-writer-slash-project-manager-slash-Tasmanian-Devil of the messy desk. Things would be a lot tidier without him, but we probably wouldn't have as much fun. If you want your things to stay in one place, keep them away from Malte, just saying.'

It was so cringe. Malte grinned, looking lost.

'Yes, and this here is Benny, our programmer-slash-technology-jack-of-all-trades. And – wait for it – Schlager fan.'

Fritzi squinched her eyes disbelievingly.

'I'm not a Schlager fan,' Benny corrected him. 'I'm a Wergerite. There's a difference.' Our boss slapped Benny on the shoulder like a football coach his player.

'Benny's a fan of the Schlager singer Stefanie Werger,' he said.

‘I’m a fan of the musician Stefanie Werger who is sometimes wrongly described as a Schlager singer. She’s got nothing to do with Schlager. If you want, I’ll explain it to you if we get the chance,’ he said to Fritzi, glaring at our boss.

Fritzi gave a crooked grin.

Then it was my turn. Everything inside me clenched. I was pretty sure I knew what was coming next. I’d be the only one my boss introduced by both first and surname. My name was a gift to people like my boss, who felt compelled to desperately lighten every situation. My surname is Popom, okay? What can you do? The teasing began back in kindergarten, and school wasn’t easy either with a name like mine. Even now, people didn’t shut up about it. The jokes changed over the years, but the subject of the jokes stayed the same. I endured them with as much dignity as I could muster. Many who heard or read my name for the first time couldn’t keep it to themselves. It was an almost physical thing that came from deep inside. They puffed up their cheeks, balled their fists and banged them together in front of their stomachs, as if a huge drum were strapped to their bodies – PO-POMMM. The Beethoven joke was also popular: PO-PO-PO-POOOOM. I’d started putting the emphasis on the first syllable: Pópom. It had a Roman imperial ring to it, so I could carry my head a little higher.

My boss told the drum joke for Fritzi’s benefit. I shook her hand – a firm handshake – and tried not to buckle, conjuring up my Roman imperialism. Fritzi grinned; it was hard to say why: because of my name, or my boss’ joke.

That morning, we all disappeared into meetings or behind our computers, Fritzi included. She didn’t seem to be looking for things to do on her very first day of work, unlike me when I started, still padding around like a puppy behind my colleagues months later. Fritzi, on the other hand, logged onto our system, put some clunky headphones over her curls, and got down to work. From where I was sitting, I couldn’t see exactly what she was doing, but she looked very busy. I opened an incognito browser window and googled: *I have met myself* and *One person two bodies possible?* More mindfulness, more spiritual journey, plus Buddhist theories of reincarnation. I remembered my own encounters with spirituality, which only consisted of going to church in the south on public holidays. I’d spent endless hours on pews, my Poldi Granny sitting next to me. Kneading a handkerchief in her skirt pocket, she prayed quietly, whispering to herself, as steady as a mill wheel, so that you could no longer tell where one word stopped and the next started. Poldi Granny’s soft voice added to the equally monotonous voices of churchgoers praying in the nave to form a mighty rumbling sound that gave me the chills.

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried
And so on.*

Father, Son and Holy Ghost, according to Christian belief, were not separate entities; all three were one and the same, namely God. Was there some kind of holy trinity thing going on between me and Mr Car Coat from the all-night store?

I wanted to – no, I *had* to – find out. No matter how. I wanted it so much and didn't even know why. At some point, Benni tapped me on the shoulder, and I jumped out of my skin and shut my browser. We went to lunch.

In the afternoon, the other thing happened. Our boss came up to our desks with two huge packets and a broad grin plastered across his face.

'Something's coming your way, boys,' he said. 'And girl,' he added very quickly.

'Guess what it is.'

Silence.

'New camera lenses?' Malte asked at some point.

'No,' said our boss, crossing his arms and still grinning.

'Printer ink?' Benni guessed.

'No. Oh, come on, guys, you can't be serious. Think a bit outside the box.'

Silence again.

'I've got us some Nerf guns,' the boss solemnly announced.

Still more silence. I looked around at the boys' faces. Benni had screwed up his eyes; something seemed to be dawning on him.

'Those things you can shoot in offices?'

Our boss beamed. He stretched his arms out towards Benni, made revolver fingers, and pretended to shoot. 'Pow, pow, pow.'

'Niiiiice,' said Malte and Benni in unison.

The boss' chest almost burst with pride. He slit the boxes open. Polystyrene beads trickled across our desks. Out came several purple plastic guns. He loaded them with foam bullets, fired them into the air, then reloaded and aimed at us. Malte got hit straight between the eyes – I managed to duck in time. He missed Benni, hitting his bottle of maté instead, which tipped over with a loud klonk. Fritzi hadn't noticed any of this. She was sitting with her back to us, wearing noise-cancelling headphones. The boss's grin suddenly widened, and he placed a finger over his lips with a conspiratorial look. He reloaded his gun and slunk up behind Fritzi, landed with a hop by her desk, and fired his foam bullet with a loud 'Ha ha!' It whacked Fritzi's glasses frames, which slid down her face. She pushed her headphones back with a quick jerk and stared the boss in the eye, not blinking or laughing.

'Frank, what the fuck?'

The entire office fell silent. Including the boss. Then he collected himself again, smoothed out a non-existent crease in his shirt, turned back to us and gave Malte a chummy pat on the shoulder.

'Have fun, y'all,' he said, and disappeared into his office, which lay wide open for everyone to see through large glass walls on all sides. Everything here was transparent, everything was laid-back.

Fritzi didn't touch the Nerf guns, but we boys had fun. We ran through the office, trainers squeaking across the floor, shooting the baseball caps off our heads, or the coffee cups out of our hands, yelling as if we were at a match on the sports ground. Now and then, the boss stepped out of his glass box, held up his smartphone camera to film us and then posted shaky reels on the company's Instagram channel, captioned: *Sometimes you just gotta have fun* or something similarly Boomer-ish. In his mind, he was reinforcing the whacky image of our ad agency that he tried to sell the outside world in the hope of attracting as many clients as possible who were looking for *unconventional solutions* and who would commission ad people who *did things a little differently* and who allowed themselves to *have a little fun* at work. Stuff that no one had claimed for at least the past ten years without meaning it ironically.

The new girl, Fritzi, didn't really talk to us all day. Cut off under her enormous headphones, she sat at her desk, working quietly. At lunch, she didn't want to come with us to the kebab guy; she'd brought her own food to eat. She seemed determined to keep interaction with us to the bare minimum, not asking any questions, because she already knew it all, even where the toilets were and how to use the coffee machine. And when I walked past her desk,

she did glance up and look my in the eye, but she didn't smile like any normal person on their first day at work. Malte and I exchanged looks. What kind of stiff poker rod had we taken on board?

2

Anyone who thinks I forgot what I'd been through at the all-night store over the following days is wrong. It was practically the only thing on my mind, the first thing that occurred to me when I peeled back the covers in the morning and the last thing I thought before I slipped off to sleep. At times, I was distracted by work, by Anja, or by the odd after-work beer with Benni and Malte. But the scene at the all-night store repeated itself at the back of my mind on a permanent loop. Every evening when I came home from work, I took a detour to that same store, walked around it a few times and peered down every aisle, hoping *he* would be there again. Once I even bought a tin of peach halves and hid them in the bottom kitchen cupboard at home, right at the back.

Whenever a few spare minutes cropped up at work, I launched myself into every possible corner of the Internet, searching with little success for some kind of pointer that would explain this strange incident. In the meantime, I'd found out that a large number of books covered this topic. Just that they weren't non-fiction titles based on scientific theory that might objectively explain what had happened. No, they were novels, inventions. Back then, I wasn't into that kind of thing. Why should I spend my time learning made-up stuff which had nothing to do with real life? But, as my research so far had led to a series of dead ends, I was prepared to take a look. Novelists, as it turned out, had nothing better to do than to write about people meeting themselves or something similar – their doppelganger – in all kinds of settings. I ordered a pile of novels with these kinds of plots and buried myself night after night in books from far-flung places. I struggled through a chaotic account of a man from St Petersburg who'd lost his mind believing that he was being followed by himself or his doppelganger at a time when people still drove carriages, and masters and servants were still common. I read a short story by an Argentinian writer who, while sitting by a river, suddenly noticed his younger self sitting next to him. I read some kind of confession, written in archaic waffle, about an imposter who grew up within the cold stone walls of a sprawling British boarding school – and who was also followed by himself. Or by madness. These texts didn't

entirely make it clear. By the end, of course, I was none the wiser about my own situation, just angry with the authors. What kind of people were they to spend their lives messing around with made-up stories? Writers were people who hadn't found their place in the real world, that was what I thought. But I was real – and so was *he*.

Anja wasn't angry with me for long about the lemonade; but still, I noticed something had shifted in our everyday life that I found hard to pinpoint at the time. Things between couples are constantly shifting of course; you're hitched together, and in the best scenario, you're both headed in the same direction. But naturally there are times when one wants to go this way, and the other that, or one not at all, and the other very fast, so that you sometimes make little or no headway, and the harness that tethers you, which you yourself fastened with the best intentions when you were reeling about in love, starts dangerously creaking and groaning. It could well be that Anja and I were headed for such a moment. It could well be that we'd been stuck in one for quite some time. It wasn't as if we'd never experienced moments like these before.

The love between Anja and me went way back. Way back to our little town down south. A turn of fate that I still couldn't fathom had deemed that she, of all people – the sunshine of the upper sixth, who fought in the Taekwondo club and had made it to the national finals of the speech competition with her talk on pesticide levels – had chosen me, of all people, the not-exactly-unpopular but not-exactly-popular guy either, an insecure, slightly too skinny kid, whom the more charitable of my peers called 'mysterious' and the less charitable called 'creepy'. A birthday party at a classmate's place, plenty of Cappy Vodka, a long and, in my memory, thoroughly awkward conversation with neither of us able to find a way out of our adolescent awkwardness, a brief brush of forearms later in passing, an attempt at a smile, numbers exchanged at the last possible moment just before heading home, texts back and forth on old-fashioned mobiles until late at night, CDs burned for each other, a walk just the two of us, autumn wind over our heads, a kiss behind the closed bakery — and just like that, we were together.

We made quite a splash in our little town. People stared after us, me in my beige Carhartt, she in her blue adidas jacket, my arm across her shoulders, her hand in my back pocket. Groups of girls one or two years below us stuck their heads together and whispered about us. At parties in hobby rooms of basements or in garden festival marquees, when we snuck off to kiss wildly without being disturbed and then came back to the crowd – we were

real stars. Boy, I'll never forget those times. And then we took our small-town love and moved away. At university, we ended up in two different cities and without our audience. The fact that the two of us, of all people, were an item was of as much interest to people in the city as the league results of our small-town football club. At first, this lack of interest towards us bothered Anja a lot. While I blamed the city, she blamed me – and dumped me. For half a year, I wandered around like a ghost, desperately trying to be daring and interesting and to fall in love with another girl, but I didn't manage. In truth, all I wanted was the one thing that had done me so much good until then: Anja. If it had been up to me, I'd have moved back to our small town like a shot. I'd have broken off my studies, started a training course instead, something solid in a regional firm, moved into a flat, saved some money and at some point, bought a house with a little garden, a child's swing, a kettle barbecue and a roll-out lawn, holidays twice a year in the country, weekends at the sports ground, the whole package. But that wouldn't wash with Anja. She wanted bigger things and first took off to an even bigger city in another country, but didn't stay long and came back, against all odds, to me. This was another turn of fate which I found hard to fathom. But she stayed – and stayed. We decided to save up for a long trip through South America. Admittedly, it was more her decision than mine, but I was just happy to follow her: the short time without her had given me quite enough of a jolt. I wasn't made for a life alone. Others might get along just fine, even strive towards such a life, and the freedom you allegedly find in being unattached. But for me it was pure stress. At some point, Anja was offered a job in the north that she simply couldn't turn down. I told her I'd go with her, and that I was bound to find something to do. In a nice part of town with individual boutiques and dotted with vinyl shops, we found a pretty little flat and settled in cosily. As the years went on, a small, stable circle of friends grew around us. We were doing fine, most of the time.

Because I felt that a shift had taken place between us, I invited Anja out to dinner. A few metro stations away, the Falken Café had just opened, an eatery, like so many, that boasted old-fashioned charm. That would be just our thing, I thought, Anja's and mine. It would remind us of our hometown where many cafés boasted old-fashioned charm, and waiters wore jackets and the glass vitrines were laden with cream cakes the size of bricks, and there were marble tables and high, intricately decorated ceilings, and you could sit for hours drinking coffee or eat a decent meal. Perhaps going out together to a café like that would serve as a reminder – of where we came from as a couple. And of our affection for each other that was

so well practised and strong that the occasional clumsiness wouldn't throw it off track. So I invited her out on a real date and dressed up like a man with taste who knew the right colour combination. Timelessly elegant.

It was a Tuesday evening, not the usual day for people to go out. We sat opposite each other in the back corner of the eatery at a small round marble table. Soft bossa nova was flowing from the loudspeakers. A waiter in a white shirt and burgundy apron who didn't say much brought us the menus. Anja studied it attentively. She'd done her nails and was wearing a scent I didn't recognise.

'New scent?' I asked.

'Hm?' She didn't look up from the menu.

'Your perfume – is it new?'

'Oh, that.' She lowered the menu and glanced at me, but then her gaze fell on the wall behind me to something she'd spotted.

'It's new, yes.'

We ordered two aperitifs and the three-course set meal each: mackerel soup, cheek of beef and lemon sorbet for dessert. Anja grasped my hands, squeezed them softly and looked at me.

'It's nice that we're doing this,' she said, smiling.

I told her about Fritzi, the serious new girl no one knew what to make of, about the Nerf guns and the latest contortions my boss was going through to seem like a down-to-earth kind of manager. Anja laughed. I asked her what was new at her office, how it was going with her colleagues – I didn't mention Björn – and whether she'd heard about the planned Heating Costs Act. She happily began talking – not mentioning Björn either – and I quickly relaxed. Then the door at the other end of the café opened. And in an instant, my hand lying in Anja's went ice-cold.

The hat, the car coat, the brown leather shoes – just like the last time. He was standing and looking around in the entryway, not for something, but simply inquisitively, before he took a few steps into the café. He took off his coat and his hat, hung them on a free hook on the coat stand and headed over to the bar, running his long fingers several times through his hair. Now I could see his dark blue jacket, double-breasted, with the lowest button undone just as it ought to be. He moved agilely in this outfit which, if people like me wore it, would feel like it was a costume. At the bar he leaned over the counter and said something to the barman. The

barman laughed, took the dish towel from his shoulder and took a swipe at him but missed, because the man ducked sideways in time. He laughed too.

‘Hendrik?’ Anja asked, noticing I’d frozen.

My cold hand in hers had grown damp; I pulled it back and rubbed it on my trouser leg. What were the chances of this happening? A rushing sound filled my ears and the conversations from the tables next to ours rolled unintelligibly over my head like whale song; my cheeks burned. I wanted to tear my eyes away – to look at the drinks menu, the dried flowers on the table, or Anja’s gaze. I wanted to pay her attention, to say something warm and tender, the kind of thing you say to the person you love and with whom you’ve finally dragged yourself out to spend an evening together, just the two of you, beyond the four walls of your own flat. I wanted all of this and at the same time it was exactly what I didn’t want. At least not right then. Instead, with a matter-of-factness and determination that was completely alien to me, I said: ‘Please, you have to go now.’

At first, Anja said nothing, then she gave a snorting laugh. I couldn’t see her expression because my eyes were glued to the counter where the barman had set down a steaming cup of tea in front of the man. I repeated: ‘You have to go now.’

‘Hendrik?’

I didn’t say anything.

‘Hendrik,’ she repeated more loudly now, and more forcefully. ‘What’s going on?’

‘You have to go now. There’s no way round it.’

Anja looked around the café.

‘Huh? Are you out of your mind? Why should I . . . ?’

‘I can’t explain it now. But you have to go.’

Anja now completely swivelled around in her chair and stared across the heads of everyone sitting there.

‘Have you seen someone you know?’

‘Please!’ I was pleading a little. ‘Please just go. Please.’

At which, to my greatest surprise and even greater relief, she lifted her slim frame out of the chair with resignation and pulled on her jacket.

‘I’ll say it again. This isn’t normal, Hendrik,’ she said. Then, shaking her head, she walked out of the café. Outside it had started raining and thin streaks were lashing against the windowpanes.

So there I was, all alone in the midst of this old-fashioned charm and dimmed lights, among other guests who were too deep in their own conversations to notice the momentous thing happening to me once again. I stood up and, with the same resolve I'd sent Anja away, I strode over to the bar. Chairs suddenly moved back and blocked my way because the people sitting on them hadn't seen me coming; I had to dodge them as well as climb over handbags and a labrador dozing on the tiles whose owner was trying to move him out of my path by gently tugging on his lead. Not for a second did I let the man at the bar out of my sight. He was just setting down his teacup from which he'd just taken a sip. I stepped up beside him.

ME Hendrik?

In front of him lay a newspaper opened at an article about communication difficulties within the government coalition. He slowly turned to face me and wiped his wet lips with the back of his hand.

HIM You've got to be kidding. You again.

ME And you again.

HIM Me again?

ME And me again?

HIM Which me are you talking about? You or me?

ME You ... And me ... Us. It doesn't matter.

HIM (*irritated*). Of course it doesn't matter, you're right. I'm you and you're me. How could I forget.

ME I know you're making fun of me.

HIM Me of you? Or you of me? Which is it?

ME Well ...

HIM You're following me. I don't like that.

ME I'm not following you.

HIM I'm probably following *you*, am I right?

People listening to this story will wonder how something like this is even possible. How had I recognised him – recognised myself? How I could have been so certain when he was, outwardly at least, an entirely different person. Some will even accuse me of bragging or say

that I'm just trying to impress by inventing a tall story. And to answer, I can only say this: Should you ever come face to face with yourself – and I both wish and don't wish it on you – a force will seize you, ripping the boundaries of your little world to shreds. Questions like this won't arise. You'll simply *know*. Nothing will shift it: no inner cry of logic from deep down, no memory of going through life with purely rational convictions, no recoil from a belief in the afterlife ever since you can think. Not even a barman leaning sceptically on the beer tap, or a person sitting opposite you who sighs once more and asks:

HIM What on earth do you want from me?

ME 27 July.

HIM What about it?

ME That's my birthday.

HIM Happy birthday. (*Lifts his teacup.*)

ME It was already a few months back.

HIM Please accept my belated wishes. After all, I don't know whether I'll see you between now and your next birthday, not that I particularly want to.

ME Is it your birthday too?

HIM (*hesitates*). What do you think?

ME I think it is.

HIM (*sets his teacup down and clears his throat*). It is indeed my birthday, And now please divulge how you found out this information.

ME From myself.

HIM Ah, of course. From yourself.

ME Well, because –

HIM You are me, naturally. (*Turns back to his newspaper*)

I didn't like his cynical, patronising manner towards me. What kind of behaviour was that? If he was like that, wasn't I like that too somehow? He was a git, and not a very friendly git either.

ME I've never ridden a horse.

HIM (*slowly flicks the pages*).

ME I have a terrible fear of flying. Trains are fine, but only the regional ones – the Intercity is too fast for me. When I count something, a string of numbers passes through my head: at each multiple of ten, I see a tree. Number ten is white, twenty is mustard-yellow, thirty is bright pink and forty is red.

HIM *(stops flicking pages, keeps his gaze on the newspaper).*

ME When I eat goulash, I always eat the sauce first with a spoon, then the meat. Shoes that go above my ankles give me goose bumps.

I said all this on autopilot, no having time to think up which strategy would convince him the most that what was happening here was momentous. I was too afraid that he would take off again in a fit of annoyance. I just had to, I somehow had to . . . So I carried on talking. I talked about whatever came to mind: there was bound to be something in there he would recognize.

ME I own a very expensive, very sharp Japanese kitchen knife. My girlfriend's name is Anja, and we've been together for over ten years. Right now, though, I think she's more interested in a guy called Björn. Of all household chores, I like washing laundry most but only with if the washing powder has a neutral smell. I could once hold my breath for almost one and a half minutes.

HIM *(glances left and right.)*

ME Spring days feel half-complete to me. I always fall asleep on my back with my arms crossed over my chest like a corpse in a morgue. Like this, look . . .

HIM That's enough. Come here! *(Pats the barstool next to him.)* Come over here, you maniac.

And so I sat down. The barman also served me tea although I didn't order any. Lemon-smelling steam wafted into my nose. Right then, I was the most excited person that had ever lived. I had to keep a grip on myself not to just stare at him like a lunatic. I had to force myself to look over my steaming teacup with exaggerated nonchalance at the shelves behind the bar where the strong liquor was waiting to be dispensed into optics under the upside-down

bottles. I didn't want to come across as a complete maniac, out of step with the world, though that's exactly what I was: I was quite literally beside myself.

Making it clear to him what a deep bond – well, the most intimate of all possible bonds – connected us was much harder than I'd thought, or maybe just hoped, in my initial burst of resolve. How do you explain to someone that *you are them*, and vice versa, without them thinking you've lost the plot, that you're drunk, or worse, a psychopath? A game, that's what it was at first, one we'd silently agreed to play.

HIM Ah-ha. You are me! (*Sarcastic*). What a remarkable honour it is to meet myself.

ME The pleasure is all ... mine.

He didn't believe me, I knew that. But his pretence was enough for the time being. We stayed in our seats next to one another. Not saying anything, I blew the steam on my tea, added sugar and stirred it until it dissolved into the murky yellow. He sat there not saying anything either, staring at his newspaper, absently turning the pages. Only a minute ago, he'd been so impertinent, so challenging. Now he didn't know what to say. Was it slowly dawning on him?

HIM (*clears his throat and leans closer.*) But seriously. I know you're trying to be funny here, but please drop the joke for a second and tell me who you really are. How do you know me? This is getting kind of creepy.

ME I ... Well, my name's Hendrik and before I saw you at the all-night store a few days ago, I didn't know you either.

HIM Come on, a little hint, then we can carry on playing your game. But if I can't place you right now, this instant, I won't be able sleep tonight.

At the table where I'd been sitting with Anja earlier, a confused waiter was serving the first course of our meal. He set down two dishes of soup, looked around the café and then his gaze stopped at the bar where he spotted me. I turned to my neighbour who was still looking at me, perplexed.

ME Fancy some mackerel soup?

He agreed to change places. I wasn't sure whether it was because he was starting to find it all uncomfortable in front of the barman, who he seemed to know and in front of whom he presumably wanted to maintain a certain image that didn't fit with my ramblings – or whether it was because he was on the verge of realising something he'd rather turn over quietly at a corner table at the back of the pub.

HIM Now tell me honestly: Who are you? I'm being serious. You're making me nervous. Tell me who you are, otherwise ... (*hesitates.*)

ME Otherwise what?

HIM Otherwise I'll have to take measures.

ME Measures?

HIM Of course.

ME (*amused*). Are you going to call the police because of me? Or what?

HIM The police, yes. What do you think? You're stalking me. You've told me all kinds of details about my personal life without me asking you. It's all very suspicious, clear and simple. What would you do if you were me?

ME I'd believe me.

HIM (*gives an exhausted laugh*). It was obvious you'd say that.

ME Do you think I'd make such a thing up? My imagination isn't that good. What do I stand to gain from making all this up and telling it to a stranger?

HIM (*leans back in his chair, sighing*).

ME It's completely mad for me too. I don't know how or why it's happened, but I do know it's real. From the very first moment I saw you at the all-night store, I knew it was you.

HIM (*gives a tortured laugh*). Sounds like a love story. A squalid one.

And in a sense, it was. What was taking place felt overwhelming, and that is part of a love story just as much as it is a part of this one. Except that love stories tend to begin with a feeling of mutual liking as well. But this . . . Was it liking that had drawn me to him, drawn

me to myself? At the time I believed I had a healthy relationship with myself. What I mean is: although I carried a streak of self-scepticism, I didn't consider myself the most repellent wretch in the world. But as for liking? Take my word, it was the strangest, most off-kilter thing imaginable, to sit across from him, from myself, to look myself in the eye and ask: do I actually like myself?

ME *(leaning across the table)*. I don't know how to prove it to you. *(Pauses.)* I ... I hate novels, for example. And I'm sure you hate them too. You're not interested in films either. You don't like anything involving made-up stories. All nonsense, am I right?

HIM *(purses his lips)*.

ME You quite often misspell the words *video* und *quite*. You like cats and dogs. Cats slightly more. Sometimes evil thoughts flash through your mind when you see fat children. You are ashamed of these thoughts, but you can't help it.

HIM *(crosses his arms over his chest)*.

ME Come on. No one can possibly know that except you! *(Slightly desperate.)* What about crisps? Everyone in the world likes them, apart from you! The feeling of their sharp edges on in your mouth disgusts you. You like the smell of blue and red erasers and sunny classrooms.

As if seized by a mania, I reeled off everything that flashed through my mind; things that didn't make sense, things without any context, but everything that made up what I, he and we were like in essence. I talked very fast and got louder and louder. Again, I was desperately hoping he would finally understand.

ME If you think of an embarrassing situation from the past, you start humming. You like burping loudly. You're fascinated by people who were born with a sixth toe.

HIM Enough, enough. You don't have to shout. I don't know ... This is all ... *(Leaning across the table, whispering.)* You're winding me up.

ME I swear I'm not winding you up.

HIM *(falls silent, keeps eye contact)*.

ME Look, I know how you, how I ... *We both* know what we think of spiritual hocus-pocus. I wouldn't believe it myself if I didn't know better.

And then all of a sudden – and in retrospect it's still a mystery how I managed to convince him to change his mind – he did believe me. The force that had hit me a few days earlier that early evening at the all-night store next to the tinned peaches, now hit him too. He sat there, quite still. But he was glowing. He lifted a hand to his mouth. He cleared his throat as if he was going to say something but then said nothing in the end. He just looked. He looked at me. His gaze travelled all over my face, my throat, down to my shoulders, my arms, hands and my fingernails. Instinctively I hid them under the table. His staring felt unpleasant. His silence was unbearable. He saw me, recognized me. For everything that I was. My heart thumped in my chest, my hands had pins and needles. Did he feel it too? He cleared his throat again.

HIM You, then? You, I mean really ... You? Me?

ME (*grinning.*) I'm afraid so.

He became restless. His whole body rocked back and forth, and he reached across the table several times, touching my arms, almost as if he were testing whether I was real flesh and blood.

HIM (*whispering.*) Now there's a thing!

Any doubts he'd had, and I could see this with a sharpness that was uncanny, were dispelled. He only felt awe – of himself, of me, of us – of the most miraculous thing that had ever happened. The bowls of fish soup on the table in front of us were going cold.