



**Nina Bußmann**

**Three Weeks in August**

A Novel

(Original German title: Drei Wochen im August: Roman)

317 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 24 February 2025

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2025

Sample translation by Joel Scott

pp. 7–36

**ELENA**

I was the one who wanted to come here and talked everyone else into it. I was craving the light. Perfectly smooth beaches, the Atlantic rolling in. Gold-mining towns on the coasts, a garden in the hinterlands. In September, the tents and stands get packed up, the coastal towns shut down. You come for the sun and the spindrift. Eve says she can't look at these waves for too long, they suck everything out of her.

When Ali mentioned on a lunch break back in winter that Nana's place in France would be empty in the summer, that we could use it if we wanted, I said yes without a moment's thought. So fast that even she was taken aback. "Don't you have to ask your loved ones?" – "Best not to," I said, and watched her trying to make sense of it. My boss. My oldest friend. For once I had surprised her.

All the best decisions in my life I've made without mulling over them. I knew about all the problems, I knew that her partner in New Mexico was being eaten away by a glioblastoma. And when Ali said something like "It might be too late to get married now," it finally drove home to me how grave the whole thing is. Sad things happen to rich people too. I know all that. But I completely forgot it all in that moment, it didn't even occur to me to ask why the house was empty. In peak season. I cleared up our plates, put some coffee on, and sat back down at my desk so I could get some work done before I had to run off and take Rinus to his occupational therapy. I finally managed to get in touch with the curator in Switzerland I'd been trying to get a hold of for weeks, I ordered irises for the next open studio event, and still had some time left to look for flights.

"Did you already say we'd go," was Kolja's first question: three weeks in August. He'd never be able to take that long off. He'd just taken on a new contract. We wouldn't be able to leave our house empty for that long. We had so many plans for the summer. We wanted to finally finish off the eternal construction site. He looked at me the way he had when I bought that piece by Anna Zemánková at auction and then hung it on my bedroom wall in my share house. That look, as if he knew how much I'd paid for it.

"We won't have to pay any rent," I reminded him, which only made it worse. He'd been taught never to borrow anything you couldn't pay back, and you sure as hell shouldn't accept it as a gift. Nowadays, he earned enough to buy bikes with electronic gears and frames made of aluminium alloy that weighed next to nothing and cost more than a three-week family holiday. But he'd never seen that light, felt the force of that ocean. At low tide, the shoreline recedes about a hundred metres. High tide approaches patiently and then, all of a sudden, is just there. Where just a second ago there had been expanses of hard sand, the only thing left is dwindling islands. The sea follows the moon, a compliant herd of strong animals.

Only people with a death wish swim further out, the rest play in the waves on the shore.

Stiffening your body into a board and lying face-down in the wave just as it breaks.

“We haven’t gone away for years.”

“I can’t lump the others with all the work.”

“Do *the others* also say that?”

“Elena. I have to make a living.”

*Someone* has to make a living. I get the message loud and clear. He would never go on this trip of his own accord. And he wouldn’t be able to sit still in someone else’s garden. He’d be plagued by the thought of his withering berries, the shade cloth we wanted to install over the courtyard, the fence that needed mending. There are blackberries in Nana’s garden too, a great big field of them. In the midday heat, I wander around the property and pick myself a handful, we eat the ripe ones straight from the bush and leave the rest to the birds or the sun. Kolja would look in the downstairs shed until he found a ladder and some decent protective clothing, he would start a harvest, let nothing go to waste.

Ever since we bought the house on Finkenweg, he’s spent all his spare time trimming trees, sanding floorboards, building a mezzanine bed for Rinus and a raised platform for Linn’s room. In summer and autumn, he stands in the kitchen till late at night preserving fruit. Last winter, he rammed a splinter into the ball of his hand and only stopped working when his hand turned violet and began to throb. When he’s not working, he’s playing. He takes the kids to the lake, to the pool, to the basketball court, he goes climbing with them. Even when we have friends over, he prefers the company of children. He’d rather play with the kids than stand around with a glass of wine in his hand making conversation. I always want to tell everyone that when they ask if he ever actually lets his hair down? Does he have a soul? He’d never be able to admit defeat at the hands of the heat, hold an ice cube against his temple and wait for the sun’s slow descent.

Sometimes I wonder what was going through my head when I decided to bring Eve: a friend for Linn, and an Eve, as Rinus says, for all of us. A babysitter. A nanny. Some help. I don't have the right word for it. She's been helping us for years, she picks Rinus up from day care, keeps the house tidy, and stays till late at night when I've got an event and Kolja doesn't make it out of the office on time. The kids really love her, even Linn. No one in her class at school still has a nanny. When she points this out to us, I remind her that her brother is still little and needs more care. There may well be thirteen-year-olds who can look after themselves and who you can even leave alone with babies. But Linn's never had to learn that. She's still a kid herself. She doesn't wake up when he has a nightmare. And when she's awake she doesn't hear him. There's nothing wrong with her ears. She has a gift for becoming completely immersed in something in an instant. Even as a one-year-old you could sit her on the floor in front of the balcony door and she was happy doing nothing but looking at the clouds, at the movement in the treetops behind the ridge of the roof of the building across the road. Rinus grasps at the world instead of just observing it. When he was still tiny, he started pulling himself up by the door handle and pressing the palm of his hand against the glass. He wanted to get outside.

Even if Linn had no little brother, I still wouldn't leave her alone for even half a night. She gets that. My daughter's not dumb. She was always happy to receive Eve's gifts, though sometimes with a certain hesitation, because Eve would bring them for no reason. Stuffed animals made of crinkly synthetic fibres, blue plastic ponies with manes down to the floor that smelled like raspberries, and a talking doll with platinum blonde hair. Swords and pistols for Rinus. I couldn't take them away from him in front of Eve, and later he wouldn't let me have them, he never grew tired of running around and shooting people dead. Eve said she'd found the stuff in the hallway of an apartment building, still in the original packaging. I

looked up that doll. It wasn't cheap, but I didn't push. I just waited until Linn got tired of the voice of that strange being on her own. It was just as I had suspected, it got ratty really quickly. Linn was almost ten, too big for dolls. But she finds it hard to let go of things. She keeps dead butterflies and moths in her room and experiments with methods of preserving them for all eternity. That's the only thing she uses her hairspray for. She didn't want to get rid of that doll for a long time, even after its plastic hair was all matted and the speaker in its chest had given up the ghost. She would sew clothes for it and spoke to it when she thought she was alone. I listened to her through the thin wall and it made me sad to think that at some point, she'll stop bringing things to life. That she'll stop trying to arrest natural processes on other bodies and turn her focus to her own. She'll ask for make-up, for her own electrical devices and fake lashes like her friend, she'll grow and want to fight against that. Maybe she'll shave her head and make her breasts disappear. I don't deal well with changes either.

Sometimes Eve paints her nails for her, dyes brightly coloured streaks in her hair and teaches her to press ice cubes against her eyebrows before she plucks every little hair. I try not to get involved, but also to let Linn know that her body is fine just the way it is, I try to think of Angela McRobbie: the beauty practices carried out in a girl's bedroom form part of a diverse suite of subversive rituals.

Eve knows that there is an agreement among the parents in Linn's class not to buy the kids their own phones until they get to year eight. She sees how it affects me when Ali makes enemies online and I try to do my job and the response I get is that I'm an underfucked cat lady. "The invention of the net has changed us more comprehensively than the nuclear bomb." That's not mine, it's from Ali, who can't even go to bed without her communication devices.

Before their fourteenth birthdays, I don't want any pictures of my children on the net, no filters on their faces, I don't want them being subjected to any comments. I don't want my

daughter using her willpower and her beautiful life force to make her waist thinner than a sheet of A4 paper.

“I don’t think there’s any danger of that,” laughed Eve, pointing at the tray of cinnamon scrolls she had baked just that morning. One of Linn’s black onesies was hanging from the back of the chair, speckled with dark syrup. Eve had had to force Linn to put it in the washing.

“I don’t want her to have to see herself through the eyes of the outside world.”

“Okay, okay.”

She thinks I should calm down. I know she does. She earths me, and usually I’m grateful for that. Eve is the only one apart from me who can soothe Rinus in the evening. The only one who’s allowed to do anything with Linn’s hair.

Linn’s about to start the eighth grade, while we’ve decided to give Rinus some more time before he starts school. Eve looked after him when we’d had to take him out of kindergarten after just a few weeks. She practiced reading and writing with him, and above all, painting. He has trouble with the letters, or they don’t interest him. But anyone who’s seen the houses and ships he draws would never think there was anything wrong with his cognitive faculties. His strokes are fine and straight, as if they were drawn with an invisible ruler. Concentration is not his problem.

I want them to have time, I want them to come home in the afternoon and be looked after, I don’t want them to spend half the day in class and the other half in after-school care, surrounded by screaming kids, terrified nobody will hear them. Neither of them deal well with that. But we won’t be able to hold onto Eve forever. I’ll have to let her go at some point. But before that day comes, I should give her something, I thought on that evening in spring, and asked, “would you maybe want to come with us?”

She thought I was joking. I was surprised myself. It was night-time, one of our fleeting, whispered conversations in the hallway. She already had her boots on. She wanted to know who had been at the party, what finger food and drugs there had been. In her inquiries, my experience became bigger than it had actually been. I didn't have to lie, and yet I felt like an impostor. But it feels good to talk to people who look at your life from a distance, a little jealous, with unjustified admiration. I can see the glitz reflected in her gaze.

She asks me who I spoke to and wants to see photos of Ali's new works. She studied art history for a few semesters until she realised it "wasn't for her," but she's interested in art and knows names. I'm surprised we don't have any common acquaintances. We lived in the same neighbourhood for a while, we're the same age, we must have run into each other somewhere, I wonder why I never noticed her. She is so slight she can wear my daughter's hand-me-downs. But you'd never overlook her. Compared to her, I'm a solid, well-fed child. Sometimes, when I come home, I'll find her bent over the kitchen table painting a large-format picture with Linn's watercolours. Her paintings evince a confident abstraction, and yet they have a delicateness that you can't learn. I don't quite understand what went wrong in Eve's life. To be honest, I know next to nothing about her. Once, during her time with us, she took some time off to move house, and ever since she's had that long commute. Lots of the people who I went to art school with me didn't get rich, some are raising a child on their own. But none of them live in a tower block on the edge of the city, and none of them work in other people's homes. None of them pinned an ad to the notice board at the organic supermarket offering their services like she did.

I instantly wanted to be friends with her. Why are you so exhausted all the time, I would think back then, there's absolutely no reason, and I ripped off the little strip of paper with her phone number on it. I was imagining an older person who didn't know how to use the

internet, I wasn't prepared for the woman who appeared in front of my door later that same day. Red hair and intimidatingly pretty. She wore her fox-coloured hair bunched up high, had a big sports bag over her shoulder, and shook my hand. That was a completely normal gesture back then, it was just that I hardly knew anyone who did it. My friends and I kissed and hugged each other, but you never touched anyone else at all. She looked past me and crouched down as if she were coaxing over an animal. Rinus walked toward her as if she were not a stranger. Later, he dragged her away from the table to show her something and didn't want to let her out of his room. "He doesn't do that with everyone," I told her. She seemed unmoved: "I know. I'm good with kids."

A housewife assessing the suitability of a domestic employee: I'd never had to play that role before. I asked her questions about her prior experience, ran through all the things that needed doing at our place and everything you had to look out for, showed her the house, the garden, the kids' bedrooms, and my desk in the loggia, "We only just moved in," I explained, she nodded: "I know."

How, I thought. I had never seen her before. I would have remembered her face. Even though I was used to the fact that everyone in our little community knew us, what with our bike trailer, our scraggy wildflowers out the front, our daughter's girl scouts backpack. People knew who we were. It was the women in the neighbourhood that I still really struggled to tell apart. I would have noticed Eve.

In actual fact, we had moved in six months ago, and apart from the kids' rooms, nothing was finished. She probably knew that too and said nothing, just followed me through the house and looked at the drawings on the walls of the hallway, the tiles piled up in the bathroom, the attic with the bare concrete floor, my workplace with the little notes stuck on the wall and the milky windowpanes in the loggia. "This is where I work," I said, "or try to." She didn't laugh, and she didn't ask any questions. A post-it detached from the damp glass



and sailed to the floor like a dead moth, joining the others. This space must look to her like a children's room as well, I thought. Lilacs frothing behind the windowpanes, colourful paper floating around.

In reality, she was the one assessing me.

"I need someone to take the kids off my hands for a few hours, otherwise I'll go batty," I said, and tried to explain to her how life as a freelance curator worked. I booked flights for my friend and organised the catering for her openings, I wrote virtually unpaid texts for magazines and put together grant applications for my project space. – "Project space?"

There's no real need for me to do this work. I earn hardly anything from it, and I spend more than half of what I do earn on Eve, it wouldn't make a difference if I gave it up. We live from my mother's money and my husband's salary. Always have. Back then, I would often pour myself a drink at eleven in the morning, just a splash, the dregs of white wine left in the fridge, too little to keep anyway. "A splash is enough," I said to her. I had never told anyone that. I told her all kinds of things that I'd never told anyone else. "Other people have very different problems," I said, so that Eve didn't have to think it. "Of course," she said, "of course you'd go mad otherwise."

Eve doesn't say those kinds of things to please people. I was the one who wanted to impress her. I had tidied up the lounge room, put flowers on the table, and baked an apple cake. And when she surveyed all of this, with an entirely neutral gaze, at most a little surprised, and then ate two pieces of cake and remarked, "I can't smoke here, right?" I tripped over myself to say of course you can, you can do everything here. If we'd been alone, I'd have plonked an ashtray on the table. Instead, I followed her outside onto the landing and must have looked at her so intently that she offered me the pack without a word. The headrush seized me instantly, as if it were the first cigarette I'd ever smoked.

“Can I call you Eve?”

“Of course,” she said after a pause, what other option did she have?

I’ve overstepped this boundary countless times. And she always takes care to respect it, but without showing me up. She must have realised how lonely I was back then. I now know that she was too.

“Geez, you’re glowing,” said my husband when he got in.

“I met someone,” I said with a laugh, suffused with the feeling of newness.

“What’s she like?”

“The kids trusted her instantly.”

And I promised him he would get to meet her, invited her straight away to my birthday breakfast on the weekend. She was pleased, you could tell that, she didn’t say whether she would come; I knew she wouldn’t, but I still waited for her all afternoon.

She only ever did a no-show once, much later, and just said: I couldn’t make it. She never lied. But she also never explained anything. On the Monday after my birthday, she brought me a gift. “I couldn’t get away,” she explained somewhat brusquely, and handed me a package wrapped in tissue paper. Swaddled in numerous layers was a little golden chain with an amethyst pendant. It was just like all the presents she would later give my kids, a little too big, a little too personal, and never anything I would have picked out myself.

“You shouldn’t have done that!”

“Why not.”

Her voice didn’t go up at the end, it sounded aggressive. She watched as I put the necklace on.

“A friend of mine made it.”

“A goldsmith!”

She didn't react to my enthusiasm, it wasn't until we were standing next to each other looking into the bathroom mirror that she seemed content. From that day on, I would always wear that necklace whenever we saw each other. Here, on holiday, I've given it up. My skin never really liked the material, and combined with the salt and the sun I'd end up with a ghastly rash. I just hope she understands. She hasn't asked about it yet.

Her husband ended up in prison because of his gambling addiction. She'd be paying off his debts for the rest of her life. She told me that the first time we met. How she'd been sitting at the table eating breakfast with her daughter in their modest terrace house, trying to hurry the little one along, saw that the cat hadn't been fed, and the next thing she heard was the police kicking down the door. Colleagues of her husband. The woman had highlighter on her cheekbones. Why would someone put highlighter on before getting into uniform and bursting into the house of a friend. The day before, she'd been at Krav Maga with that same Natascha. She had absolutely no idea what her husband had been doing on his computer in his room down in the basement. Of course she'd been worried, but her worries had been totally off the mark. She thought he'd been chatting to people with strange ideas.

I still remember how relieved I'd been. That we were evidently in agreement about those strange ideas. When she told me how she would let out a sigh whenever she saw the symbols of playing cards on his screen, jacks and queens against a green background.

I was pleased that she told me that, and that she told me so early on, even though it sounded like some story from below the fold of a regional newspaper. But I suppose these dreadful things have to happen to someone. I promised to keep it a secret, even from my husband.

I know this story can't be true. There is no mountain of debt anymore, and for this kind of thing, no police officer would kick down the door without even knocking. I did a bit of research, and everything backed that up. I also know that Eve wasn't lying. She just bumped up the colour a little, worrying that otherwise she wouldn't have been able to hammer the point home to someone like me.

"She was right to worry about that," I said to my husband when I broke my promise of secrecy not long after. Back then, I couldn't imagine keeping secrets from him. He'd probably already realised that it was eating at me, the question of how she had managed to get into this situation. She can drive a van and knows how to fight, she moved into her own place at sixteen, she doesn't seem like someone who fools easily.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked when I got back from the opening earlier than usual. She was still tidying up the kitchen, wiping down the pantry, cleaning every nook and cranny, the detergent was frothing, I managed to avoid a response.

"Are you going anywhere for the holidays," I asked, deflecting, and regretted it straight away.

"Maybe just to a lake at some point."

She smiled charitably and plucked a dry leaf from my hair.

When Eve had not come to my birthday that time, I'd been disappointed, but also thankful for the discreet message her absence conveyed. I realised she was right. She loved our kids, and us too in her own special way, unfiltered and impulsive, but she was professional.

"Rinus would be over the moon," I added, undeterred. Just as he hauled out his imaginary friends or his stuffed toys to express his needs, I was now using him. It's true, of course, he'd already asked a few times, "Is Eve going to come to France with us? If Linn's

allowed to take Noémie, I want Eve to come.” Every now and then, he would want to invite one of his teachers from day care, or his occupational therapist, or Sanna from his early childhood music education classes. But this is different. He genuinely loves Eve. I could just about get jealous.

“Don’t you guys want to be alone?”

“You’re part of the family!”

I was positive she would say no. She grabbed her heavy bag, lifted her hand to wave goodbye and walked down the street toward the train, always with big, loping strides, not like someone who just wants to go to bed. Not long ago, she had sold her old moped. We should get her a bike, I thought, she could have Linn’s old one and use it for the way to the station and leave it there. She always has that bag with her. I had stopped asking what she’s lugging around. She reacted sensitively to questions like that.

We didn’t speak about the holiday again for weeks until she called me at work a few days before we were due to leave and asked, “Does the offer still stand?” The first time she’d ever rung me. She prefers to send strings of voice notes. I saw her name light up and thought something terrible had happened.

“Which offer?” At that moment, I genuinely couldn’t remember.

“The house in France.” She said: the house. As if she wanted it all to herself. I noticed that she was nervous. That was new for me. Offer, I thought, “Yeah, of course,” I said, “we’d be delighted.” And I was delighted. So was she. We’d rent a big car, she could drive it, she loves driving. She knows I hate it, how much I dread it.

For a moment, I didn’t understand what she meant with her question, “Would a thousand euro be okay?”

“You don’t have to pay anything. The house belongs to my friend.”

“Sweetheart,” she said to me. Who else would I take that from? “I was talking about my pay. Per week.” And she ran me through the calculations of how she’d come up with that figure, “or you make a suggestion.”

She dictated the conditions. We came to an agreement. When I think about it now, I still get hot and start tugging at the fabric of my clothes. I had thought she might give us her time for free.

“The kids’ll be so happy,” I said to her. Rinus was certainly buzzing. The green of his eyes gets even more intense when he’s in this state. You could feel his heart racing right throughout the entire room. Linn picked up the breadbasket that he’d knocked off the table when he jumped up: “Seriously? We need a babysitter while we’re on holiday?”

But I know that she loves Eve too. When I asked her “Do you want to bring a friend? Maybe Noémie?” her reaction had been the same. Sometimes I want to grab her and shake her and ask if she has any actual desires. People say that these past years weren’t easy for kids. Three years – for Rinus, that’s half his life. Linn has never been bothered by the idea of spending time alone in her room. Now she can’t find her way back into life. When I look at her, she stares back with her eyes wide open until I drop my gaze. No matter what I say, it’s always wrong. Once, when I picked her up from the clinic, I saw her before she caught sight of me. When she was a little kid and went to day care, there was hardly anything that fascinated me more: how she moved when she had forgotten or didn’t know that we were watching her, alone, surrounded by other people, so different to when she was at home, where we were always close by. I wished I could have stayed behind the hedge for longer, to see how she *really* is. Different to the version she tailors for me. To see what she doesn’t tell me. Because even then, she hardly ever told me a thing. On the grass behind the tinted glass

façade of the clinic foyer I saw her playing squash, cheered on by a man with a razor-sharp part in his hair, who looked like he was one of the guards. Somebody had given her sports clothes, a pea-green football jersey and shiny shorts. I saw her squeal as she stretched to get to a ball that was flying toward her, sweat on her brow. For a moment, I wondered if I had mistaken her for someone else. Another girl with light curls, to whom this football jersey actually belonged. I later found out that the shirt did belong to her, the man with the severe appearance was a social worker and had evidently taken a shine to her and given it to her. She never wore it at home. She doesn't wear anything but black men's-size T-shirts, with sleeves down to her elbows, and trackpants, leggings, always long, stretchy, soft fabrics. She rarely changes them. At first, I was happy when she went out and bought herself this new uniform with her pocket money. An act of refusal is how I like to see it. Maybe it's also a way of hiding, I don't care. I just wish she would wash herself more often. And I would like to know what she's hiding beneath that shell. A hunchback. A pair of wings.

"What do we need a babysitter for when we're on holiday, you'll be there," she asked again, and raised her muesli bowl to her lips to slurp up the rest of the milk. Kolja reached over and wiped the moustache from her lip. How long those little hairs are. It's amazing, the things she lets him do, I thought.

"Eve's not a babysitter. And you two aren't babies."

"What is she then?"

"A friend."

"Oh yeah?"

In the end, it was mainly other people who were surprised that I stuck to my plan. Friends who were usually less fearful had heard about the travel warnings. You might even be able to

cancel free of charge, they said. But I looked closely at the maps, the epicentres of the fires were in a completely different region, hundreds of kilometres away, and they were gradually being extinguished in the lead-up to our departure. “Of course you’re going,” said Ali when I reached her in Albuquerque. She was standing on the patio of Nana’s hospice and had no idea what I was talking about. She wasn’t sure whether she’d be able to come too, “but of course you should go!”

Kolja and I stopped discussing the matter. He would come later, by train, the last bit by bike. The kids, Eve, and I would go ahead by plane. I don’t have the nerves for a fourteen-hour train ride, changing in Paris with a small child and two braindead teenagers. But I didn’t even have to explain that to him. He’d accepted the whole thing with so little fuss that it could have made me suspicious, but perhaps he’d just decided to pick his battles more wisely. The night before we left, he helped me to get together Rinus’s things and made up a first-aid kit for all of us, we picked out hiking routes, caves and churches and bird sanctuaries that we wanted to go and see just the two of us. When was the last time we were alone? I was already missing him by the time I got to the airport. His narrow, firm shoulders, his hand gripping my neck to earth me.

“You look like you’re on the run,” laughed Eve, pointing to our duffel bags. I laughed too. She was noticeably nervous and wearing a kind of dress I had never seen on her before, it took me a second to realise it was my own kaftan. It made her paces shorter. It gave me a boost to be the more fearless one for once. I consider plane crashes to be improbable. Like all true disasters, they don’t spark fear in me. Kolja says it’s because they’re too abstract. The reason blockbusters about the end of the world are so successful: because they paint a scene like in a comic, one that people don’t believe in. That’s not true for me. I believe the prognoses. But I also believe that after the tipping point, you’re not alone. When that comes, it hits everyone equally. I’ve always felt alive in the face of the collapse.



## EVE

I only accepted the invite because it wasn't actually an invite at all. It was a request. "Don't you guys want to be alone?" was my first question. And she didn't want that. Sometimes I think she's afraid of her own children. She wanted to work during the vacation. "And save my marriage too." Or take a break from her marriage, clear her head. In any case, she doesn't want to be without me. In the evenings, she goes into the garden to make phone calls, she has to get in touch with her friend, who is also her boss, or her husband, or the parents of Linn's friend. There's always something to talk about. The reception here is a disaster. You have to go down to the very back corner of the garden to get a message to load. When she comes back, she's in a huff.

Three weeks by the sea, paid. All my friends agreed I'd be mad not to accept the offer. Dennis was the only one who reckoned there must be a catch somewhere. If he were me, he'd be careful. He left it at these kinds of allusions. That's when I decided to go.

At the airport, I recognised the family from a mile off and felt like turning straight back around. They were wearing dark linen and carrying brown duffel bags, as if they were pretending to be on the run rather than heading off on a holiday. Even in sackcloth and ashes Elena stands out from the crowd. Even if she's not trying to. She's got an odd face, eyes big and far apart. Not pretty, but attractive.

She'd been so excited about this trip. "You just *have* to smell the sea there," she said and showed me a photo of the house. A weathered country manor surrounded by old oaks. There was just the one picture. "A perfect spot for burglars," said Dennis when I told him that the house seems like it's all alone in the world. He didn't want to know what the bathrooms looked like. His way of being happy for me. "Take plenty of disinfectant with you," he advised, and kissed me on the forehead. I assumed that the photo had probably been cannily framed and that the next holiday resort was right next door. On the other hand – that friend of Elena's, or her partner, at least, was rich, properties in Vienna, New Mexico, and then the one in southwest France, Elena had told me enough about her to know that.

We were going to go swimming in the morning and the evening, and drink pastis on the veranda in the afternoon. "And you can rent a moped," she told me, "and at night, you can head into town and snag yourself a gorgeous man." You've never seen mine, I thought. She gave me clothes for the trip. She had often tried to give me things of hers that didn't fit her anymore or that she didn't like, but until now, I've always managed to politely decline. This time she insisted I try them on. They sit better than anything I ever buy. Beachwear made of high-quality fabrics. I won't keep them after this trip. She says I don't owe her anything.

Not even my good friends would recognise me in these clothes. None of the stuff that happens here counts in the real world. "That's part of being on holiday," laughs Elena. Sometimes she treats me as if I knew nothing about anything. I hitch-hiked all the way to Morocco, but I'd never had such a strong feeling of being looking in on something from the outside as I did here. Slipping out of something and heading off in a cloak of invisibility. The morning we set off, I still felt uneasy about it. I wore her reed-print kaftan and smelt of lavender sachets. I was in disguise, but nobody seemed to notice. They were too busy with themselves.

Little Rinus must have just been crying, his hair was hanging all tangled in his eyes, he looked away when I hugged him. As she always did of late, Linn was wearing her pyjama-like outfit, and a baseball cap pulled down over her eyes, a pattern of blue curlicues on the backs of her hands. She had just said goodbye to her father. His hi-viz vest was trailing off into the crowd. He laid the tiles in the bathrooms in their house himself and does all the repairs, he sings in a choir and rides thirty kilometres to work each day. Everything I know about him I know from Elena's stories. That he was raised by his mother, a piano teacher, and that he still buys CDs instead of streaming. Because it makes a difference to the sound, and he can hear the difference. That they met in a bar, which was highly unlikely, because even back then he liked to spend his time differently. He loves art and finds artists difficult. He gets along with her friends and he's actually one of the most amiable people she knows, she said to me, "he has a winning personality." You get jealous just standing next to him, she said. He can enjoy a fun night with her people. But he can't really *stand* them. All winter long, he and Linn go swimming in the lake. They don't just go a few steps in with a beanie on their heads. They dive in and swim freestyle. He and Elena have known each other for more than twenty years. They'll be paying off the house for the rest of their lives. "But we still sleep soundly."

Elena's husband's job seems hazy even to Elena. "I certainly couldn't explain it to Rinus," she told me. Organisational development and rhetoric, he teaches executives to communicate their decisions more effectively. He helps decision-makers to become more powerful is how I would explain it to a child; in my language, that would be business consulting, but they don't like to hear that term. He talks so much all day long that at night, he's too exhausted to explain things. In his office, he has space for sprawling buildings made of Lego bricks for his

ideas and walks around barefoot, “There’s no better place to practice cartwheels than on the carpet there,” Linn told me.

During the pandemic, he began spending multiple days in a row in that office, which then turned into weeks. His business was doing well, certainly no worse than usual. He had big contracts and couldn’t get anything done sitting at home at his construction site with the kids singing and screaming downstairs. “He has a lot of work to do,” said Elena when something seemed off to me after a few days and I asked her if he was on a business trip. There were no business trips, I knew that myself. “A demanding project.” Apart from me and the kids, I don’t think anybody noticed his weeks-long absence at all. Whatever he does at his agency, it brings in a fair bit of cash. No wonder she wants to keep him.

I’m her responsibility, not his. When she’s not home and he does the handover, he tells me what leftovers there are in the fridge, whether Rinus has slept, and for how long, what appointments the two of them have, how their mood is. And then I explain the same things to him when he is the first one to arrive home in the evening. But that’s the extent of our conversations. One time I saw him in the supermarket, filling up his shopping cart, he hadn’t even taken off his helmet. He didn’t recognise me at first, then he was terribly embarrassed. He seems like a decent guy.

Elena pushed my suitcase to the side and hugged me, her stomach pressing up against mine. “Transitions are always tough,” she explained, stroking Rinus’s hair, and told me about the spaceship they’d had to look for that morning, the diving mask they had only found at the last minute, the racoon he had almost lost on the train. And so on. She was worked up. She wanted to know if I had already checked in and ordered Linn to help me with it. Perhaps happy to get rid of her.

Linn walked alongside me with her eyes pointed at the ground. She is a bulky girl but walks as quietly as a ghost. And yet the crowds still parted before us.

“Did you have any problems?”

She lifted her hand ever so slightly as if to brush away the question: “My brother. You didn’t miss anything.”

“And you? What’s with your friend?”

I tried to remember her name. Helene, Ismene, Madita, Sophie. I knew a few of these girls; back in the spring, I’d driven them all to go riding, dancing, to the theatre. I have a good memory, but I’ve never learnt the names of these friends. Linn has always stressed that she likes them all equally. It was only recently that she had begun spending most of her time with her new best friend. Her “BFF,” Elena had announced, with a mixture of mockery and pride.

“Her name is Noémie.”

“Are you excited?”

Silence.

“A pipe burst, that’s why all the subway lines are running late. I had problems getting here too. I’m sure she’ll make it. We still have time,” I claimed, though I had no idea, I was getting nervous myself.

It wasn’t until we were standing in front of the check-in desk that she became alert and clear-headed, “ID,” she asked brusquely, held her hand out and then placed it under the scanner, lights flashing in her face as she grabbed my boarding pass out of the little compartment.

“Thanks. I wouldn’t have figured that out so quickly!”

“Really? It’s super easy.”

For a while now, she's been making an effort not to show her teeth when she smiles. For years, she could think of nothing better than doing the grocery shopping with me, she walked through the aisles of the supermarket transfixed, throwing expensive sweets into the cart. Then suddenly she lost interest in it. Sometimes I lend her my phone, or we watch tutorials together. She stares at the screen as if her brain's been switched off. Moonstruck is Elena's word for it. Linn doesn't notice what she's doing with her hands. She's constantly folding and clasping them, she makes fists and rubs them on her thighs. She started doing it again as we approached the others, her friend still hadn't arrived, Elena had her phone against her ear and was pulling at her hair. Just a single family in front of us, a woman was trying to soothe the baby on her hip and to get her other kids under control, boys and girls between five and twelve, it didn't look like the line was going to move too fast. Elena reached out to usher Linn's along, Rinus wanted me to carry him, a woman in a hi-viz vest pushed us along, he was about to break into a whimper. He still thought everyone in a hi-viz vest was his father, or it made him think of him; I had to distract him, the last thing we needed now was another episode. I put him down and let him go through the scanner before me. He'll do anything, you just have to sell it to him as an adventure. Linn followed us. A decision was made not to wait for her friend any longer.

"It's fine," mumbled Linn as we waited at the gate. She's not the kind to make a scene. She sat down beside me on the plane, did up her seatbelt, opened a book, and didn't look up again, not even when the girl got on the plane. It was hard not to notice that. Even I briefly forgot my parched mouth and stopped looking for the exits.

She walked between the rows in a tight white singlet, two stewards behind her, two in front. A little popstar with bodyguards. A terrorist at the moment of her arrest. Big eyes, heavy lashes, round mouth. I would never have thought she'd have anything to do with Linn,

she looked much sweeter and way more grown up. It only started to make sense to me when Linn did finally slap her book shut and waved at her wildly. Her friend lifted her hand an inch in response, followed the stewards to her spot right behind first class, and didn't turn around to look at us for the rest of the trip. The two girls met in the clinic. Neither of them seemed sick, no more disturbed than other kids their age. Linn began skipping school and fighting with her friends and put on a few kilos. They wanted to understand what was going on, that's how Elena explained it to me. It wasn't her idea to have her put into an outpatients' programme. But apparently Linn actually seemed grateful when it was suggested. Maybe she was just happy to get out of the house for once. Though apparently the psychologists didn't really find out a great deal. As far as I know, they weren't able to identify a specific condition.

At the conveyor belt, the two of them stood next to each other like a couple that had just had a fight. Noémie was watching videos, Linn was standing behind the baggage cart, her hands clasped behind her back like a security guard, her gaze flitting absently between her friend's phone and the dark opening from which nothing had emerged for some time now. We were the last ones, only Noémie's suitcase was missing, Elena had walked with Rinus to the car-hire desk. I was trying to make conversation with the girls. I asked what colour it was, if Noémie had used a luggage tag, and went with her to find a desk where someone could help us. Her charger was in her bag, she explained. With an air of accusation. Or she wanted me as an ally. In any case, Elena was of the opinion that we shouldn't hang around here too much longer. Before we went anywhere else, she wanted to head to the sea. Not to the house first, to unpack and have a shower, she wanted to go to the first beach we came across and greet the ocean. The big breakers. The end of the world. On the ridge of the dunes, Linus suddenly stopped still and let out a scream. Elena grabbed my arm.

Linn walked straight into the sea, in her shirt and trackpants. She stepped on other people's towels multiple times, when she hit the water, people moved out of her way. Elena pulled her dress over her head and followed her. The whole way there, she'd had her swimming costume on under her rough garments and been eagerly awaiting it. A small figure in a cobalt-blue one-piece next to a broad shadow covered up like a Muslim. I hung back with Rinus and helped him to put on his swimming belt and sunscreen, he was annoyed, he looked out at the others, agitated. Elena was still bobbing up out of the foam every now and then. Linn swam until she could no longer stand. She was called back twice because she'd swum or drifted too far out, constantly veering into the realm of the surfers. Black beings with dorsal fins on their boards like sharks. They could hurt her, she was in the way. She doesn't notice things like that. The third time, a lifeguard swam out to her. Even from a distance, I could see how she resisted. They struggled with each other among the breakers, as if they were trying to drown one another. Briefly, it was unclear who would win. I taught her how to break someone's grip, and she's strong when she wants to be. He didn't let go until she was back in waist-deep water. Elena had evidently missed the whole thing. Noémie had put her sunglasses on and was reading a thick book decorated with violet edges. Now and then, she would put it down and make notes in a book wrapped in gold paper.

“Are you studying for school? The holidays have only just begun?”

She adjusted her sunglasses and decided not to answer.

That afternoon, I watched as she wiped the deckchair by the pool first with a damp cloth, then with a dry one. Linn had long since spread herself out on hers, also with a book in front of her eyes, a pair of plastic sunglasses on her face. When she later got up and dived into the water, she had the pattern of the weave of the deckchair on her thighs. That kind of thing never



happens to Noémie. She always makes sure to lay down a fluffy towel, she doesn't eat wheat and abstains from cow's milk, in fact, she hardly consumes anything that gets served up around here, and she doesn't go in that *natural pool* either. It's as green as it smells, it was called natural because somebody couldn't be bothered organising a proper pump system. Twice a day, the caretaker drags his net across the water and fishes out the biggest bits. Desiccated pine needles, cones, leaves, and needles from the other trees from the adjoining property. Birds' feathers. Fur and hair. I don't want to know what else is brewing in this soup. Linn's not bothered by it. She does her laps or drifts about on the surface, face down, her T-shirt bloating around her body, her face stays under water for so long that at some point you really start to worry. Noémie sits on the edge with her notebook beside her. She sunbathes and takes care not to get splashed when Linn dives. Though Linn's quite good at it, she stretches her arms above her head and glides into the pool, hardly making a sound. She knows how to move in the water.

When the two of them are together, they write or draw. They fill book after book as if they're doing homework. It takes some effort to get them to do anything else; in general, they don't like interruptions and dumb questions. Elena is happy that they have a project.

"Are you writing a book?" she asked at dinner and received eyerolls:

"A trilogy."

"And what's it about? Or is that a secret?" I wanted to know, but that question was even dumber.

"It's about the entrance of darkness into a mundane world," she said, and that they were already pretty far along, so it would be too complicated to explain it all, "the characters alone would be too much."

"In German, we call them *figures*," explained Elena. "Not characters." She finds Noémie affected. And she is. She often controls her face, she is probably not always

completely honest, and generally she's a bit chaotic. But I don't really get what she wants to punish her for.