



Dana Vowinckel

Anton and Alma

A Novel

(Original German title: Anton und Alma: Roman)

ca. 550 pages, Clothbound

Planned publication date: Autumn 2026

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Sample translation by Charlotte Collins

Selected passages

Prologue

The steak haché tasted so like flesh that, on the first day, Alma spat it into a napkin. Anton gave her his yoghurt and smiled at her, as if he knew how hungry she was, and she knew then and there that she wanted to fall on his body, that she could spend every second of her life falling into him.

Alma didn't know if Anton noticed her again after that. She didn't know if sometimes he saw her without her realizing, if sometimes he observed her when she was distracted, but she knew all too well that she was seldom distracted. Alma never forgot herself; Alma was so conscious of her consciousness that she could scarcely fall asleep for fear of losing it.

Alma was constantly seeing Anton without his being aware of her, or perhaps he was just better at pretending he didn't notice her; that was what she told herself, anyway. She often wished that she didn't notice herself, didn't feel hunger or have to memorize any more words, wished she could just spew French words that would unroll before her like a red carpet and form full sentences. She wished she could not notice that no one liked her, but she did; she felt

the loneliness at the end of the day, and her body retained the loneliness of the night and exuded it so everyone else noticed too, that she was unhappy, so unhappy you couldn't speak to her without tears springing to her eyes.

Sometimes, after school, Alma arranged to meet up with an Australian exchange student she'd met at a welcome evening who was at another school in the town. They would drink a bottle of red wine together and share a bag of Carambar or Dragibus, and Alma would talk about Anton as if they were about to embark on a passionate affair. In reality, she had offered him her yoghurt a couple of times to say thank you, but he had declined, and once she had WhatsApped him and he had replied, they had chatted briefly, then he had written that he had to go and cook, and Alma had asked if his host parents made him slave for them. He wrote that he just cooked better than them, they usually had turkey escalope heated in the sandwich toaster and boil-in-the-bag rice. Alma didn't know what was so terrible about boil-in-the-bag rice. Her host family ate normal food: pasta with butter or bolognese sauce out of a jar, baguette with Nutella instead of toast with Nutella in the morning. Alma asked what he was cooking. Anton wrote: potato gratin with salad, and Alma answered: wish I could try it. He never replied.

Once, Anton was absent for three days, and Alma thought he'd left and that she would kill herself now, because she no longer had any reason to stick it out and keep on going to school. Then he was back; he'd been sick, and when she asked what he'd had, he said, 'Fever,' and she fantasized about warming herself on his fevered body and him biting her nipples.

Again Anton was absent for three days, then back, and again Alma had thought he wouldn't return; it was November, and the school toilets didn't have seats, the ceramic so cold on the thighs that it felt almost hot, a searing pain each time you sat down. The toilet seats couldn't have been the reason why Anton had been away, he could go standing up — and it turned out he'd been sick again, a tummy bug, he said, when Alma asked.

Music videos played in the common room; over and over again Adele strolled along the Seine in black and white, singing from somewhere very deep down *never mind, I'll find someone like you*, and Alma tried to catch Anton's eye but he was always looking away, looking as if he was able to concentrate on the book he was reading.

Again Anton was absent for three days, and on the fourth Alma thought: he's bound just to be sick again, he's always just sick, but after the weekend he still wasn't back. There were rumours. Someone said Anton was a Jew and that he'd claimed his host family had something against him. Someone else said, 'You couldn't tell at all from looking at him,' and Alma said 'But he ate pork,' — to which Gwenaëlle, who was desperate to be friends with Alma, but not Alma with her, said, 'Some Jews eat pork, and some are like pigs in bed, *des vrais cochons*, Alma,' and grunted, and Alma never mentioned Anton again.

The six months came to an end, Alma flew back to Berlin, drank alcopops in Biesdorf with her girlfriends, slept with Marlon on a few occasions until he dropped her for the first time, suffered a broken heart and still scored 1.9 in her school graduation exam. Over the years she would check out Anton's changing profile pic on WhatsApp: sometimes a pretty girl was in it, later it showed him in the big kitchen of an old, high-ceilinged building, once posing in the mountains on the edge of a ravine, once in a city of skyscrapers, presumably New York. For a long time Alma continued to select the photos she uploaded with the question of what Anton would think of them at the back of her mind, not because it was important to her but because it had become a habit. It was only ever a momentary thought, a momentary shift of perspective that wasn't about Anton any more but observing herself from the outside, through an imaginary person's eyes, and eventually she stopped.

1.

Eight stops on the U7, each with at least one memory attached to it.

Hermannplatz: the supermarket in the basement of the Karstadt department store where it was really easy to nick beer. Südsterne: the first and only time Anton got so drunk he threw up, in Habibi Falafel. Gneisenaustraße: here, on the median strip, he'd fingered a girl called Esmeralda he'd met that evening in Melitta Sundström, and for the next three months it had felt as if she were deflowering him over and over again, until he wanted to be deflowered by other women — girls — as well. Mehringdamm: the therapist he'd gone to until he was too old for child therapy was here. Möckernbrücke: this was where he'd come for piano lessons. Yorckstraße: he'd smoked countless joints with Ariel on the bridges over the road, listening to misogynistic German rap he didn't actually like on the speakers of their mobile phones. Kleistpark: he'd kissed Frederike for the first time on Winterfeldtplatz, the same night his phone was stolen. Eisenacher Straße: this was where he got out, this was where his parents lived. There were too many memories here, and it was so cold that he ran almost all the way to their front door.

You could taste when there had been a row. The air tasted sour as Anton stepped through the door, and his parents knew he would go and walk around the block for another half an hour so they could pull themselves together, and they would let in some fresh air before he got back. But that wasn't what Anton did this time; this time he just left, went to Nathanja & Heinrich and ordered a beer and read a book, and went to the student union party at the uni later on.

The foyer of the Hegelbau was loud in that hollow sort of way he'd only ever encountered in the draughty foyers of rundown university buildings. Jangling music, sticky glühwein fug in the air and on the floor under his trainers, which he was wearing even though it was below

freezing outside and ice-cold in the foyer too, thanks to the automatic door that refused to close for several minutes after you opened it.

He saw Alma before she saw him, but he didn't go over to her, didn't wave; waving was for parents and losers. Besides, they hadn't seen each other in so long that he didn't know if she would even remember him, although the moment he saw her face he immediately recalled her eyes fixed on him, her clear, almost invasive gaze. This evening, though, he saw her without her realizing. After a discussion with two classmates about whether the semolina in the student canteen tasted of rancid milk, he stood on his own for a second, then walked towards her and, at the last moment, made for the drinks table. She was staring past Elias, looking bored; Anton knew him from a seminar on the history of social etiquette that he'd stopped attending in part because it was people like Elias who were interested in the Knigge etiquette manual. He fetched himself another bottle of beer, which tasted like dishwater; he felt shaky, and he knew why, he hated events like these, but he'd forced himself to come, and in a conversation just now a classmate had clearly found him so boring that Anton had locked himself in the toilet for a quarter of an hour and played Duolingo. He had had to persuade himself not to go straight home after his beer in Nathanja & Heinrich; it had made him lethargic, he could have gone to bed at nine instead of to a student party, but a classmate he liked had been talking earlier about going to Tresor later on. That classmate had left at eleven, though. One last attempt, he said to himself, and Alma had been totally uncool back then, as if that wouldn't still be true of her now. The sweat was cold under his armpits and his toes were clammy.

He walked up to Alma.

'Crazy,' she said, 'that you're here, what a small world.' Elias went out for a cigarette: 'I'll leave you two together,' he said, as if fully aware that he was doing them a favour.

'You saved me,' whispered Alma, her breath warm on his ear.

'For all you know, I might be just as boring,' Anton replied.

They talked about how Alma was doing. Whenever Alma tried to ask him a question, Anton interrupted with another; he had no desire to talk about himself. Alma was entertaining; she kept repeating ‘crazy’ and ‘insane coincidence’.

‘What are you studying?’ he asked. ‘Or are you here with someone?’

‘Rubbish,’ she said, then left a neat little pause. ‘I’m writing my B.A. dissertation on rubbish in modern German literature, but I’m minoring in History; that’s why I’m here, I know some people in the department.’

He nodded.

‘I just love rubbish,’ she said. ‘I went to Poland on a school exchange, and afterwards I had to give a presentation on rubbish in Poland, and since then I seem to come across rubbish everywhere, and once you start to think about it’ — she was scarcely drawing breath — ‘the world is more rubbish than not rubbish.’ And this was the best moment of the evening: Alma was in high spirits, and Anton looked around and suddenly everything really was rubbish, including his response — ‘Do you recycle religiously, then?’ — but Alma laughed as if no one had ever asked her that before.

Shortly afterwards he felt drunk after all. They went outside to smoke, Alma rolled him a cigarette, he thanked her, she asked him what he was studying — ‘History,’ he said, ‘American mainly, I’m doing an M.A.,’ and didn’t mention that he’d completed his bachelor’s degree early and had been studying for the master’s for three years already.

‘Ah,’ said Alma, ‘cool, yeah, I started out doing law, but law really *is* rubbish,’ and Anton said, in English, ‘One man’s trash is another man’s treasure,’ but she didn’t seem to understand, and he didn’t want to have to explain, so for a moment they were both silent.

Someone held the door open for someone else; Wanda pulsated out of the foyer, *Bologna, meine Stadt*. A few students were jumping happily about, bellowing *Tante Checker Etihad in Bologna Amore gemacht*. ‘What on earth are they saying?’ cried Alma. He googled, and she

hunched over the display; he liked her perfume, astringent, as if she'd selected a men's fragrance. *Tante Ceccarelli hat*, it said, *in Bologna Amore gemacht*, Aunt Ceccarelli made love in Bologna, and the sorry party bellowed *Amore* and he smiled at Alma. The door closed again.

Anton asked, 'How was the rest of the time in France?' It sounded stupid, as if it had been just a few months ago, not years. Alma told him how much she'd hated it, Anton didn't say much; then they realized they both lived in the same district, Neukölln, and when they got to Hermannplatz they went to another bar, and Alma showed him all the things that were rubbish, and at some point they emerged and saw a fox making off with a takeaway chicken carton, head held high.

Not long afterwards they happened to meet in the canteen, and a few days after that in the U-Bahn. For Anton, Alma was like a word you didn't know that, once you learn it, you suddenly see everywhere. In the U-Bahn she gave Anton her number, apparently carelessly, as if it was simply the natural thing to do, but he could see in her eyes that she wanted to sleep with him. Nothing had changed, except that it wasn't embarrassing or radical any more to want to sleep with someone very badly.

Anton kept thinking about rubbish. Alma was right; it was everywhere. His whole room was full of things that would be rubbish eventually. The books in the rainsoaked box outside his house on Pflügerstrasse, made rubbish by the weather; his clothes, made rubbish by time; everything he ate could, eventually would, become rubbish; his thoughts, he thought — also rubbish. He googled *rubbish in literature* and found an anthology. Rubbish, he read, was a semiotic sign.

That evening he wrote and asked Alma what she was doing at the weekend.

2.

At the party, all Alma could think was: I'm talking far too loudly, and rubbish as well, rubbish and more rubbish, but she couldn't stop. Sometimes she was quiet Alma, whom she preferred, and sometimes loud Alma. Loud Alma caused her pain and tunnel vision: migraine, tonight as well, but she had ignored it, and Anton had been polite and interested and was still beautiful, tall, with protruding ears; she loved protruding ears on men, and a clean-shaven face. He wore a chain around his neck with a pendant in the unmistakable shape of a gherkin. She took it as a sign that he had a girlfriend; girlfriends were the ones who gave presents like that.

Nonetheless, to her astonishment, Alma wasn't actually surprised when her phone lit up with his name: ah, right, she thought, of course, there you are, and they arranged to meet on Friday. When Anton cancelled on Friday afternoon, Alma just thought again: ah, right, of course, and Anton asked if she could do the following evening instead, and she said yes, and spent the whole of Friday evening in the library. She rewarded herself with a halloumi-maqali-falafel sandwich from her favourite snack bar on Weserstrasse, ate it standing in the sleet, and when she got back to her little apartment she ran a bath, masturbated with the shower head and thought of Marlon.

3.

It was only on Friday morning that Anton had remembered it was his mother's birthday. She had sounded so disappointed on the phone when he said he didn't know if he'd make it that evening that he had cancelled the meeting with Alma while still listening to Orna on speaker. Then he went to a fair-fashion shop on Parallelstrasse and bought her a cashmere balaclava, because she'd said that if he ever gave her a book again she would go to Bebelplatz and burn every single book she had ever received from him. Orna only ever read specialist literature, and whenever Anton gave her books, they had titles like *White Fragility* or *Goynormativity* or *Getting Out of the Mental Load Trap* or *The Exhaustion of Women*, and last time she had said that she knew she was an exhausted Jewish racist, and Anton had felt ashamed.

Orna liked the balaclava. 'Practical,' she said, and put it on.

'You look like an ultra-Orthodox woman about to punch a hole in the bedsheet,' said Gary, in English, and to Anton's surprise she laughed at her husband's joke.

Orna poured wine for herself and Paulina and opened a beer for Anton. 'Bit sexist,' said Anton, and Orna rolled her eyes and said, 'Are you telling me you want wine?'

'No,' said Anton. He put his arm around Paulina's shoulder, took the wine glass out of her hand, sipped, and made retching sounds. Gary was roasting a chicken according to a recipe he'd found in the New York Times app, which involved dousing the bird in a jar of pickle brine. Paulina went out onto the balcony to smoke a joint and Anton rinsed lettuce until Gary yelled that they had to set the table right away, even though he was only just putting the potatoes in the oven.

They sat down at the table, Paulina put on some music: house — it was through Anton that she knew the DJ, she only really listened to Taylor Swift, but he didn't say anything; it made him uncomfortable that in certain things she looked up to her little brother. There were antipasti

from the Turkish supermarket, pastes and olives, and Parma ham, too (not from the Turkish supermarket), which Paulina didn't eat because when she was thirteen she had got it into her head that she wanted to keep kosher, and Gary had said, 'No chance, we don't do that, but you can be a vegetarian, or a vegan, even,' and now Pauli was a vegetarian and sometimes a vegan, even.

'A toast to my beautiful, brilliant and annoying wife,' said Gary, and Paulina and Anton shouted, 'Hayom yom huledet,' one of the few phrases they could say in Hebrew, followed by 'Happy birthday.' Orna laughed, downed her wine with flushed cheeks and said, 'Sometimes I don't regretten meine mutterhood quite so much after all.' Anton found it funny, Paulina not so much. Anton knew she'd always felt she was just an inconvenience in her mother's life, and Orna's frequent half-sarcastic comments along the same lines didn't help. Anton could see Paulina squirming because Gary was stuffing bread and paste into his mouth as if it was about to be snatched away before frantically leaping up, mouth still full, almost tripping over his own feet, to check on the pickle brine chicken.

Gary was a very good cook, but when cooking he had to curse, drop things, get in his own way and then blame everyone else. But as soon as the food was on the table he was inordinately delighted with his achievement, which was so endearing that all the preceding chaos was worth it, for Anton, at least. Paulina hated the bit when everyone pounced on the food; her anorexia would raise its head, along with her almost Protestant revulsion for gluttony. 'Jews have no table manners,' Orna would say if Paulina complained, 'because we always have to eat as much as possible in the shortest possible time, you know perfectly well why.' Anton just gobbled it down like the others; luckily he was capable of devouring huge quantities, because as long as he was eating he could blank out the aggressive atmosphere around him.

Orna started to tell hospital stories. Yesterday they had admitted a child that had seen its father set its mother on fire. Paulina got up and fetched glasses of water; he saw her rest her

forehead for a moment on the door of the fridge. Anton popped three olives into his mouth at once; he had to restrain himself from telling Orna that that was enough, this was no subject for a family dinner; but then the pickle brine chicken was placed on the table, roast potatoes, salad, yoghurt sauce, vegan sauce and, Gary announced proudly, home-pickled radishes with herb butter, plus — his chest swelled — ‘vegan butter for my princess,’ and Paulina smiled like a real princess.

And they all restrained themselves.

There wasn't a row.

The chicken was perfect. Paulina ate roast potatoes as if she'd never been anorexic, and Anton liked his family; Orna looked content, there was a shop-bought chocolate tart from the KaDeWe department store, because Gary couldn't bake but was very good at shopping, and after Paulina had eaten the two slices of dark chocolate that Gary put in front of her, Orna said she had to get back to her desk now, and Anton and Paulina said goodbye before Gary could make them help him with the chaos in the kitchen.

That night, Anton was freezing; he put on more and more clothes, ski underwear and thick socks; at some point he started to sweat, and the following morning he realized he was getting sick, but he didn't cancel the meeting with Alma because he knew how that would look.

In Ratzeputz on Weserstrasse she talked about her student job in the university's international office with a passion Anton had only ever encountered in his mother. She talked about ‘incomings’ weeping with homesickness in her office and ‘outgoings’ who returned from Naples hopelessly in love, and when he asked ‘What are outgoings?’ she was aghast. ‘Weren't you one, too, didn't you do an Erasmus exchange?’ And Anton said, ‘No, I always get homesick.’

He didn't tell her that it had all been arranged, that he'd had a university place in Paris and had cancelled everything a week before departure, that he'd had to confess to the girl who was

supposed to sublet his room in the shared apartment that he'd be staying on after all. And of course he didn't tell her about his panic attack in the apartment kitchen after the goodbye party, when everyone had left; because he didn't want to go, because he wanted to stay where he was, because he was counting the hours in which he could still sit at his own kitchen table, sleep in his own bed, stand under his own shower.

4.

Alma was charmed. Homesick. She went to get more beer; she was wearing a short dress over too-thin tights and a chunky jersey on top. She knew it made her legs look thin and slightly longer, and you couldn't see her stomach; she felt good leaning on the counter, and hoped Anton was looking at her. But Alma wasn't the sort of girl who could sense people's eyes on her, unlike her girlfriends, who would sometimes flirt with strangers in bars and then sleep with them. Alma had slept with five men in her life, and had fallen so desperately and hopelessly in love with one that she'd forgotten the other four. Nobody flirted with her in bars.

She came back with the beer, said that she was never homesick, that even as a child she would rather have been very far away instead of in her own bed, and so they got to talking about France. She felt the alcohol firing up her synapses. Anton was irresistibly, indecently beautiful.

She asked why he'd actually left back then, in France.

He said, 'The real question is, why the hell didn't you run away,' and she had to laugh. She lit another cigarette off one of his Parisiennes. Alma had started smoking at fourteen, even before France. These days she only really smoked when she was drinking, but she'd run out of papers and Anton kept offering her his cigarettes, although he only smoked every third one with her.

'My host parents were antisemites,' said Anton, and Alma didn't know what to say. 'And I'm a Jew, so.'

'That would have been awful even if you weren't a Jew,' said Alma, and Anton gave her a funny look, said, 'Yes, but not a reason to leave,' and Alma agreed. She didn't know how much to ask, or what, even.

'I'm sorry,' she said eventually, and Anton said, 'Yeah, well, they didn't murder me.'

‘Bare minimum,’ said Alma. Apparently he found this very funny, because he laughed, quietly but for a long time, and so she dared to ask what they had done.

Anton sneezed; it sounded like a barking dog being choked. Then he said, ‘They said some pretty grim stuff when they thought I wasn’t home.’

‘Oh,’ said Alma. ‘Like what? I mean, sorry, not that I don’t believe you.’ And Anton said, ‘They said I had a Jewish nose and Jewish greed and a Jewish smell and’ — he gave a short laugh — ‘a Jewish penis.’

‘What assholes,’ said Alma, and Anton said, ‘Well, they just weren’t all that intelligent.’

‘Mm, but aren’t intelligent people also antisemites?’

Anton looked at her as if surprised that she was able to formulate such an idea. His eyes were glazed, presumably from the alcohol, and it took him a few seconds to reply. ‘Yes, true.’

There was a brief silence. Alma hummed awkwardly, then said, ‘Did you take the seminar on children’s literature, with that professor?’ and Anton said, ‘No, what do they talk about there? Pippi Longstocking?’

‘Well, everyone has to say what their favourite books were, and either they show off and say *Faust*, or something ridiculous like that, or else they say *Harry Potter* and out themselves as immature kids from the teacher-training course. What was your favourite book?’ Alma asked. As he considered the question, she said, ‘*Harry Potter!*’ and clapped her hand dramatically over her mouth, but he said, ‘Never read it.’

‘What?’ cried Alma. ‘Are you serious?’

‘So, what — you’re supposed to have read it, but you shouldn’t be so basic that you actually think it’s good?’

‘Correct.’

‘My favourite book was *Love Life* by Zeruya Shalev,’ he said, ‘because there’s sex in it. But that’s not a children’s book.’

‘Cringe,’ said Alma. Then: ‘My favourite book was *Harry Potter*.’

Anton practically hooted; a raw, unrestrained laugh. Alma felt proud. She reached for another of his cigarettes.

‘Joke,’ said Anton. ‘My favourite book is *La Douleur* by Marguerite Duras.’

Alma hadn’t expected that; she’d thought Thomas Pynchon or David Foster Wallace, and knew that her pleasure was a bit too obvious; she was drunk now. ‘A banger,’ she said, and Anton said, ‘I wouldn’t have thought you’d use the same vocabulary millennials use for Ottessa Moshfegh,’ and she choked on her cigarette smoke. He read. Anton read books.

‘Do your parents read a lot, as well?’ Alma asked, and Anton grimaced. ‘What is it?’

‘My father is a lecturer in German literature,’ said Anton.

‘Oh, sick,’ said Alma.

‘He’s an adjunct at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder.’

‘Wow,’ said Alma.

‘I know,’ said Anton. ‘After thirty years you’d think he’d have made professor by now, but he looked after me and my sister; my mother’s a head physician at the Charité ...’

‘Oh — no,’ said Alma, ‘I was impressed.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Anton, and there was a silence, because Alma was embarrassed and Anton probably was, too. ‘It really isn’t that impressive,’ he added, ‘I just meant that we had to be able to read by the time we were four, or we’d be locked in our rooms during dinner parties as it would have been embarrassing.’

‘In my house you were locked in your room if you hogged the remote control,’ she said. It was meant to sound sarcastic, but she remembered that she really had been locked in her room; she didn’t remember why, only how it had felt to rattle at a door. Alma wondered what those dinner parties were like. The only people who had visited her ‘parents’ (not that Dirk was her father) were friends who were actually distant acquaintances, and Alma always had the

impression that they only came for the expensive wine they could get either gratis or at cost price.

‘We didn’t have a TV,’ said Anton, and silence fell again. It wasn’t silent, the bar was very noisy, but there was silence at their table.

‘Awkward,’ said Alma. ‘Are you one of the ones reading loads about class right now?’

‘Sure,’ replied Anton, grinning sweetly. ‘Édouard Louis, top to bottom. What do your parents do?’

‘Act like shit,’ said Alma.

‘Ah,’ said Anton.

‘My mother works for my stepfather’s wholesale wine business because she jacked in her economics Ph.D. when I was born, and my stepfather is a wine wholesaler, and my father’s dead,’ said Alma.

‘That was really shitty of your father,’ said Anton.

She could have kissed him. She actually did want to kiss him. She thought about what he’d said. Alma didn’t know any Jews, and back then she’d thought, like everyone else, that he was lying. She also wondered what a Jewish penis looked like. The ones in American pornos?

‘What was he like, your father?’ asked Anton.

Nobody asked her that. They only ever asked how he had died. As if that said more about him than how he had lived. She said so to Anton. Anton looked like a dog watching its owner cry.

‘He was funny, and he was difficult,’ said Alma, and went to get more beers, not because she didn’t want to talk about it to Anton any more, but because she wanted to talk to him about it another time. To save it up. To go on wanting to kiss him.

5.

Anton wished he hadn't talked about his host parents. Alma had looked at him as if his face had had an accident: as if his nose had smashed into his eye and both were now on fire. He knew that look; he often said things like this, forgot himself, kept making the same mistake, and then people looked at him and he knew that he was the problem, not the anti-Semites. If no one said anything, the problem didn't exist. Afterwards he had waited for Alma to ask if he was *religious*, as most Germans did. They could still relate to Jews who weren't *religious* (as in, celebrated Christmas and acted like they weren't Jews at all), but the *religious* ones (as far as they were concerned, this started with people fasting on Yom Kippur — borderline fundamentalist, inconceivable!) you could hate without scruple — but she hadn't asked, she'd only wanted to talk about books; she'd been funny, had seemed to relax somehow. He'd expected the opposite after outing himself. Her laughter after his remark about Ottessa Moshfegh hadn't really been goyish at all, a filthy laugh — you could call it squealing, thought Anton, delighted squealing.

When they'd almost finished their beers, he said, 'I'm hungry,' and Alma said she was, too, and suggested falafel, but Anton's throat constricted at the thought. Eat falafel — you might as well scrape a fork over his tonsils. By now his throat felt as if he were trying to swallow a cheese grater.

'I've got soup at home,' said Anton, 'do you fancy that?' He'd made pumpkin soup at lunchtime, and even as he said it he thought, now she thinks I want to pull her, but his whole body was feverish and heavy, only the alcohol was somehow keeping him going, there was no chance of him sleeping with Alma tonight even if he wanted to, and he didn't know if he did want to, but she'd already nodded.

6.

‘The others aren’t here,’ Anton announced, ‘you can put some music on,’ and pressed his phone into her hand. Weirdly intimate, thought Alma, a mobile phone, he might just as well give me his underpants and his passport, or an STD. But it meant he wasn’t worried that she might see a text message. And that meant either he couldn’t care less if she knew he was sleeping with someone, or he wanted her to find out. She was embarrassed by her taste in music. The search history on his Spotify was mostly men she didn’t know. She put on Sharon van Etten. Anton heated the pumpkin soup. *I washed your dishes but I shit in your bathroom*, sang Sharon van Etten. Alma let him ladle her a bowlful of soup; Anton asked if she liked coriander. ‘I love coriander,’ she said, ‘sometimes I even put it on my muesli in the morning.’ Anton shook himself and laughed. ‘Get outta here,’ he said, ‘that’s gross.’ Alma was proud that she’d made Anton laugh. They talked about food for a long time, what was tasty and what was disgusting. ‘If I have to eat one more coconut milk curry made with Rewe supermarket paste, I’m going to emigrate,’ said Alma, and Anton said, ‘Or wraps for you to put together at home, full of watery lettuce and chilli sin carne but con tofu,’ and they both made retching sounds. But neither suggested that they might cook together some day.

‘What did you usually eat at home?’ asked Alma, and Anton talked about Jewish food, American food, and how his mother couldn’t even make pasta with tomato sauce, and his father never cleared up the kitchen but only ever cooked gourmet meals. That he himself had been working as a waiter in an Israeli restaurant since he’d moved out of home. ‘What was it like at yours?’

The question made Alma uncomfortable. ‘Not as fancy as your family, that’s for sure,’ she said. ‘It was usually toast, and some sort of horrible experiment of my stepfather’s on Sundays. They were so disgusting that the first thing I did after I moved out was teach myself to cook. I

even took one of those cringy cookery courses.’ She realized her cheeks were burning. ‘Other people spend their money on clubs and drugs, mine goes on this,’ she said, and laughed. She suddenly felt totally uncool, but couldn’t stop talking; she told him how Dirk had once made coq au vin, but with whiskey, and how the chicken meat had been steeped in acrid, unevaporated alcohol.

‘À propos’ said Anton. ‘Nightcap?’

Alma nodded, but when she nipped at the smoky whiskey Anton had bought in duty free on his last trip to the U.S., she made a face. Anton was fiddling with his necklace and blinking slowly.

‘You look tired,’ said Alma. The neon striplight above the kitchen unit was humming a quiet tune, up and down.

‘Yes,’ said Anton. ‘Does it taste of trauma, the whiskey?’ She looked at him, in the cool hoodie with his biceps clearly outlined underneath, the way he sat there, not looking nervous but calmness itself, and suddenly felt oddly shy.

She nodded. Then she said something that wasn’t shy at all: ‘Show me your room.’

Anton’s room was tidy, the bed made, the furnishings sparse: a nice bookshelf, an old wooden wardrobe, a desk with a MacBook and a notebook, two empty beer bottles, and a tube of mustard. Alma held it up; Anton shrugged apologetically. ‘My roomies nick it otherwise.’

‘Roomies?’ asked Alma. ‘Do you live with a bunch of kids?’ And Anton said, ‘Sure, I’m one too, what did you think?’

Alma hoped he might come closer, but he went on standing by the wardrobe near the door, leaning on it with his full weight, as if the wardrobe had to hold him up.

‘How many *roomies* do you have?’ asked Alma, making a mocking face.

‘Three,’ said Anton. ‘Two are off in Brandenburg right now, and the third is with his girlfriend.’

Alma wondered why he'd told her that his *roomies* weren't home.

Anton played with his necklace with the gherkin on it. There was nothing here to suggest that he was in a relationship. For a moment Alma wondered why she had assumed that Anton liked women; but he looked nervous, or utterly exhausted. She hoped he was nervous, the way you're nervous before a first kiss. She didn't want to leave the room; she wanted to know what his bedclothes smelled like and she wanted to know what it would feel like to sleep with someone you found attractive even though you hadn't known him since primary school, but then it occurred to her that they'd known each other since secondary school. It was seemingly impossible for Alma to find people attractive if she'd only met them after her synapses were already all wired up; it always had to be men she'd idolized as a child or adolescent. Her thoughts ricocheted around: desire — what was it, actually? And how crazy it was that there were places where cows grazed on landfill, or people just dumped their rubbish in the pasture, and it was simply accepted that they ate battery acid, and how literature had not engaged sufficiently with this topic. Someone should write a novel about rubbish-eating cows, about acid-contaminated milk, instead of yet another book about desire; nobody wanted to read about desire any more.

She took a book off the shelf, one with Hebrew letters on the cover, at least she assumed that was what they were.

'What's this?' she asked.

'The Holy Scriptures,' he said. 'I got it for my bar mitzvah, but the one next to it is much more exciting, about the Six Day War.' And because Alma didn't know when the Six Day War was, she just nodded appreciatively, put the Bible back and took down *The End of History*.

'I've always wanted to read this,' she said, and Anton gave a pained smile. He wiped his forehead. Alma saw that he was sweating.

'Shit,' he said. 'I think I'm getting sick.'

‘Oh no,’ she said, ‘I’d better go, then.’

And went.

Anton dreamed noisily, dreamed the evening all over again, kept waking up with a start. At some point morning came; he took ibuprofen, made himself tea, fell asleep again before he could drink it, texted his flatmate, who knocked at some point but kept her distance; at some point it got dark, and he woke up, heated what was left of the pumpkin soup and watched a documentary about truck drivers in Yakutia. From time to time he thought about Alma, that he should text her; her disappointed expression as she put on her shoes, the feeling that he was sending her out to cry in the street, his hope that he'd just imagined it. He cancelled his next few shifts at Yafo — they wouldn't pay him; he called his mother, who said she could transfer his rent; Anton said, then just don't give me any money for my birthday in May, so his rent was his birthday present, but his fever was so high he didn't care. He thought about Alma, and the way she'd talked about her stepfather; it seemed that if something made her uncomfortable she talked about it with excessive openness, and did herself down so thoroughly that nobody else got the chance. It had appealed to Anton somehow, in a sad kind of way, and that disgusted him a bit; he asked himself if he liked it when a woman belittled herself. He decided not to message for now, that for now he would sleep, and wake up again hours later with a full bladder; for now he would take a piss, drink from the tap; and then it was no longer for now, and he'd already forgotten the evening with Alma. Day was dawning, his lips were tingling, he was going to get cold sores; a pigeon cooed outside, he thought of the baby elephant in the Berlin zoo when he was little that died of herpes, Kiri, he murmured, Kiri was its name; he remembered his grief, and that back then he'd thought Paulina was only grieving to copy him, she'd always preferred the monkeys to the elephants. He took his mobile out from under the pillow, googled *Kiri elephant*, found pictures of Kiri, so unfair, humans gave defenceless

elephants cold sores and they in their enormous bodies died of it. With the phone in his hand and the pungent smell of the Zoological Garden in his nose, Anton fell asleep again.