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Half Serving

A Novel

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Nobody frees you from your body

Beyoncé, *Pretty Hurts*

She feels immersed in an atmosphere of superiority – impalpable, intimidating. ... accepting it as natural...

Annie Ernaux, *A Girl's Story*

Prologue

It starts in July of 1995. I'm here because you met a man. A man who was twenty-four years older than you. You say you were in love. Я влюби-лась. I fell in love.

Is it true that while you were pregnant, you deliberately made a concerted effort to lose weight?

Is that true?

HELLO?

I'm trying to find you, but I can't find you anymore.

1 now

I recently moved into a one-bedroom apartment. A sublet. It all had to happen quickly, I had no time to cull my stuff. So I just bought a bunch of cardboard boxes and threw everything in at random, no system to it at all. Marina, Lina, Richard, and three other loose acquaintances helped with the move. Timo and Laura just stared at the boxes and laughed, asking what on earth was inside them all. I shrugged my shoulders, answered: “books, mostly books.” Which wasn’t a total lie. But I didn’t waste a single syllable on all the food I’d been hoarding, plenty of which was already expired, food I had seen in supermarket brochures and then bought while they were on special at some point.

Ever since I’ve had to look after myself, my week has begun with going through all the brochures, so I know exactly which supermarkets have the best deals. It calms me to know that the brochures all arrive reliably right at the start of the week, meaning I always know where I can save the most money.

Now, sitting here in this one-bedroom apartment that I found through a contact, I feel like a stranger surrounded by so much of someone else’s furniture. The plastering is flaking off the kitchen ceiling, the result of some water damage that seems to have just been ignored. The bathroom has no window. The grey corner sofa in the lounge room has a stain on it, I sniff at it, smells normal, nothing alarming. The desk is up against the wall. I want to move it closer to the window so that I can look outside when I’m writing. The table is heavy and scrapes along the floorboards. I take an old synthetic blanket that had obviously been used as a picnic blanket, lift up one side of the table, shove the blanket under the legs and try to keep carefully inching the desk across. It’s only then that I realise there is already a chest of drawers in front of the window with an old stereo system sitting on it. How could I have missed the chest of drawers?

So I push the desk into the middle of the room. It's not practical, but maybe that's precisely the point: to occupy the space, a sign that I am here now.

I'm hungry, I always am, and I look to see what Olli, the guy I'm renting the apartment from, has left in the pantry. I find a packet of Maggi alphabet soup. On the packet, it says that it's the equivalent of four bowls of alphabet soup. Well, four bowls of alphabet soup it is then. That's hardly going to do me any harm, eating something warm and soft that evokes memories of childhood – not necessarily of mine, we never had noodles at our place out of principle, but I've heard from lots of people that alphabet soup brings up warm and fuzzy memories of childhood.

1 before

Your child, to whom you yourself gave birth, laughs. You're happy that the baby is so uncomplicated, only cries when it's hungry or tired, spends most of the rest of its time asleep. You take the bundle with you to the dentist who reattaches the gold crowns that have fallen off your rotten teeth. You're ashamed of your bad teeth. You smile at the child, it smiles back. You show the child your teeth, you say that your teeth are brown, that it won't want something like that later, the pain, the shame you feel with every smile. When you were little, your mother always said that you didn't need to brush your teeth, and so you were 18 when you held a toothbrush in your hand for the first time. And look, this is the result. The baby on your lap wouldn't want something like that, right?! You ask the dentist if she could maybe have a look inside the baby's mouth, as a preventive measure, or if you should maybe scrub its gums yourself, or rub something into them, so that your child's teeth would be spared the curse of cavities. The dentist looks at you with a puzzled expression and says that you can't brush anything yet because there is nothing in its mouth to be brushed.

2 now

I can still feel a little hint of hunger. Last Black Friday, I couldn't resist the offer on Amazon and ordered a kilo of Lindor balls from Lindt, because they were going for 29.70 euro instead of 38.99 euro. The box says there are 80 balls inside. It's still three quarters full. One hundred grams contain 620 calories, one ball is 74 calories, there were 5,920 calories in the whole box. I cautiously look for the best-before date, the chocolates have been expired for thirteen months, but everyone always says that chocolate doesn't go bad. I unwrap one of the Lindor balls, it is white on the outside. I bite into it. It tastes normal, tastes good. I eat the chocolate and want another one. I mean, who is satisfied after just one? So I take a second one, I already know I'll feel guilty afterwards, peel open the red wrapper anyway and put the chocolate in my mouth. It melts on my tongue, and I taste that PERFECT UNION of sugar, cocoa butter, cocoa solids, and full-cream milk powder. Total calorie intake: 148.

I want another chocolate, open the wrapper, I mean, they all need to go anyway. And who knows how long the chocolate will still be good. I eat the third one more quickly, I still enjoy it, but now, now something snaps, 222 calories, now nothing matters anymore. It will make me happy, I think, the eating, the unrestrained eating and then throwing up, isn't that better than just chucking all the chocolate in the bin or putting it out on the street, where it probably won't even be taken by anyone, maybe just inspected by some old people, or perhaps put in the basement in case a Third World War really does break out. It's okay to spoil myself a little, I think, so I eat the fourth one, and I eat the fifth one, the sixth, and I'm not sucking them anymore, but chewing faster and faster, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth, the tenth, 740 calories, but it doesn't count anymore, it's all coming back out, isn't it, the eleventh ball, the twelfth, what the hell, let's see if we can hit the 1,000 calorie mark, 14 chocolates, I'm feeling a little queasy.

Time to see if the old trick still works.

It does.

I feel guilty, feel bad, feel like I've regressed, feel listless, feel weak, feel guilty again, because I've wasted things: food, energy, and time. Mental capacity.

I haven't just thrown up the chocolate, I've thrown up the alphabet soup as well. Even the carrots that I had painstakingly cut into strips a few hours ago and then dipped in hummus have ended up in the toilet.

Did my body absorb any nutrients at all?

Have I messed up my metabolism?

No idea. I don't know.

But now, the very thing has happened that I so desperately wanted to avoid – christening the toilet straight away, which makes me afraid that I'll have less willpower in the future when it comes to resisting the urge to deploy the old trick.

2 before

It creeps you out a bit that your baby drinks from your breast, you don't want to have to be constantly bearing your breasts, which also ache, you no longer want to have to let your nutrient intake be determined by the baby, and you begin to feed the child jars of baby food.

She gets a jar at every mealtime. The child's father says: "Jesus Christ, give the kid a banana, will you?" but you do not give the child a banana, and the child will later have quite a tough time trusting all the different kinds of unprocessed foods. You, on the other hand, trust the advertising industry. If they say that it's good for the baby, it must be good for the baby.

3 now

There is only the one mirror in the bathroom, in which I look at the bags under my eyes and cover them up with concealer. I tried going a few days without a full-length mirror. I can't. I want to know how I look. I need to know how my body looks.

For a second, I thought about asking Richard if he felt like going to IKEA with me, but I didn't have the strength to ask him for help. So I went on my own, looked at the full-length mirrors in the showroom and decided on NISSEDAL in black, in the dimensions 65 x 150 cm, price point: 49.99 euros, and I carry the 9.72 kilogrammes into the apartment VERY HAPPILY, THANK YOU, lean the mirror against the wall, can finally look at myself from head to toe every day. Another attempt on my part to make the apartment my own.

I take a few steps back, look my body up and down, pull up my blue jumper, the top I'm wearing underneath as well, pull my belly in, look for my ribs. I can't help it.

I can't help but feel for my ribs, feel this body with which I entered the world, feel for my heart, which has been beating since the very beginning, which is so incredibly tenacious and works so hard. You've got to give it to the heart, that in all these years, it hasn't missed even a single beat, hasn't stopped working, that it never gave up. And despite this, or perhaps because of it, it seems so abstract to me that my heart is dependent on my nutrition. That there is so much inside my body that I don't see, that I can't touch, but that nevertheless needs energy that *I* end up having to feed *myself*.

3 earlier

You are amazed at how your child's hunger just keeps on growing, and yet you try to stick to the calorie intake that you got from a book about infants. 850 calories between four and twelve months.

When the baby starts crying again at night and its father says it's hungry, you know that's impossible, because you have added up all the calories listed on the jars it's been fed. The child's nutritional needs, my hunger, my needs, had to have been well and truly accounted for.

The child's father shakes his head, but there's no arguing with your fierce belief. You're stubborn about this, and he doesn't want to fight any more than you already are.

4 now

I strip down to my underpants, place my phone on the windowsill, set the self-timer to three seconds, jump back from the camera and photograph myself from the front. I repeat the same procedure until I have photos on my iPhone from all possible positions, saved automatically in the cloud. I put my clothes back on and then look at the photos, ask myself what I think of my body, look for repulsive characteristics, still always looking for signs that I am thin, too thin to be healthy, thinner than the norm. In one of the photos I'm standing with my back to the camera and bending forward, my spine standing out clearly beneath my skin. Alien-like, the individual bumps of the skeleton visible beneath the skin.

I connect my external hard drive to my laptop and drag the photos into the folder called "Bodily Transformations", and see my archived naked body in various positions, in various phases of my life, in various settings.

I look for changes.

Of course I see changes, changes my body has gone through over the years. How my face has changed. How it looks more grown up, how the curves in my face have disappeared over time.

4 earlier

You never wanted to be a single mother.

You never wanted to be beaten either.

And you never wanted to be so badly deceived by a man that you were left with absolutely nothing.

With nothing at all, just a toddler who also kind of resembles this man.

You're standing on the street with your child holding your hand. It asks if you'll have to sleep on the streets. It's dark, and I watch the blue light, watch as it spins round and round.

Do we have to sleep on the street? You call the sister of the child's father, and we stay with her for the first few nights. Over the following days, you sort out a spot at a shelter for single women and single mothers with children. We're assigned an apartment that we have to share with a woman without a child. There is a bunk bed in our room, I sleep up top, you down below. You take me to some random daycare centre to give yourself some time during the day to look for a more long-term place for us. I cry and watch you through the window as you leave. I'm positive you'll never come back. But you do come back, because you love the child, because the child is going to have a really good, proper life in Germany, despite the difficult start it had.

5 now

Marina and I are meeting up in the morning because her shift doesn't start until 4 o'clock. She is the only person from the clinic that I'm still in touch with.

We wrote to each other on WhatsApp and agreed on a café that is marked with a single euro sign on Google maps, meaning it should be particularly affordable. We both feel better knowing exactly what's going to happen when we meet up, if we're going to eat and drink together, and if so, how much it will roughly cost. Usually, we meet up for an hour or two at most, because Marina always has so much to do.

Marina orders a latte macchiato, I order a filter coffee. She tells me that she can't sleep, that it's gotten worse again lately, that some nights she doesn't sleep at all. That she's started doing these sleep hygiene rituals, but that they don't do anything, that she's just hanging on until she can see her psychiatrist in a week, who will hopefully prescribe her some tablets that will knock her out. Though she can't rock up to work completely zonked out, because she hands out medication to young people herself and she really can't afford to make mistakes. Marina sighs, asks what's going on with me, how my writing is going.

We know that we don't have to hide anything from each other, that we operate on a different level than with most of our other friends. But I don't let on about my Lindor episode,

tell her instead that I hate the fact that I don't know what I earn an hour when I write. I tell her that I hate sitting in silence at my desk, all on my own, hate that there is no one there to talk to me, that I never lose my sense of time, never get into a FLOW state, that instead I am constantly thinking of FOOD.

Marina says she's not going to celebrate her birthday, because she can't help but think of Zora, whose birthday is on the same day, or was. Zora didn't leave behind a letter or a message – to this day, Marina still asks herself if there was something she could have done, blames herself. I put my arm around her gently, tell her it's no use wondering, that she'll never know, that nobody is to blame.

I ask her if she would maybe like to at least have some cake with some close friends on her birthday. I could bake the cake, an apple cake with a crumble topping, you love that one, right? Marina says that she doesn't want to talk about it, asks if we want to go and browse. I nod. We decide on ZARA, because neither of us buy anything there anymore. Unlike in the old days. When we get there, we pick up an item of clothing every now and then, put it back on the rack, keep walking down the aisle until we've seen everything, and then we head to Viani. There, Marina points at various tartufo chocolates that are lined up next to each other, elegantly wrapped up, and says that she loves them. I ask her if she wants to buy one or two chocolates, she shakes her head. They're too expensive, she says, one of them costs the same as an entire block of Ritter Sport.

Suddenly, I feel completely drained, don't know if I'm getting sick or just need to eat something, quickly say goodbye so that I can lie down at home for a bit, just to be sure. That suits Marina just fine, she's too tired to think straight at the moment anyway.

5 earlier

I have a fever. I'm lying on the fold-out bed left behind by the previous tenant. We are sleeping together on the mattress while you save money to buy the cot that you saw in a second-hand shop and which, once you're finally able to buy it, really only fulfils the function that we no longer have to sleep on a single mattress, because I'm already too old for a cot.

So I'm lying there with a fever, listening to the radio, you get home after running down the street to grab a few things. I don't know how long you were gone because I had fallen asleep while you were out.

You say you have a surprise for me. You pull a gingerbread heart from your purse with the word DOUGLAS written on it. I don't ask if you went to a Douglas, if you just walked past one, or if a person called Douglas handed you the heart.

Exhausted, with not much of an appetite, I bite into the gingerbread heart.

It tastes good. Really sweet.

I love everything that tastes sweet

Of course I infect you too, and now you are the one lying in bed with a raging fever. I let you sleep in the morning, creep into the kitchen and hold a knife in my hand for the first time. I slice open the bread roll that you'd bought from Thoben the day before for a few pfennigs, and I spread low-fat margarine on both halves. I'm proud of myself. I don't need you at all.

[...]

22 now

When I get to the cinema, I count the cash in my till at the snack bar. My shift hasn't actually begun yet. It's 4:15 pm, so I'm basically gifting the cinema 15 minutes of labour time, nearly three euros that I'll never receive. The foyer is full, there are people standing everywhere; left

and right of me, employees are shovelling popcorn into bags, filling cups with postmix. Despite the fact that I don't look up and continue counting the change industriously, somebody walks up to me and snappily orders a large nachos with cheese sauce. I look at him and say in a calm tone of voice that I haven't yet logged into the till, that I need to count the float first, suggest he order with someone else. He sighs angrily and mumbles so I can hear it: "You can't be serious!" and goes to the back of one of the queues.

When I'm finally finished doing my till I look up and smile, signalling that people can now also order from me, a teenager steps up and orders the Mega Combo, a bucket of popcorn and a litre of Coke for 11 euros. He counts out the exact change and places it on the counter. I shovel the popcorn into the bucket, tell him to enjoy the movie with a fake smile and hope that it makes the teenager sick.

Over the following hours, I smile at customers and ask: "What'll it be?" and take their absurd orders and shovel scoop after scoop of popcorn into the bags, say the price for a 330 ml bottle of Desperados, 4.50 euro, the same price for a tin of Sour Cream & Onion Pringles. The next customer asks me if we also have uncarbonated bottled water, I answer: "Of course we have still water, 500 ml Viva con Agua Leise for 3.80 euro." I quickly mention that I can also just give her plain tap water. Her eyes narrow. What's that supposed to mean?! Of course she'll take the bottled Viva con Agua Leise and a medium popcorn as well, half sweet, half salty, please, in the following order, from bottom to top: sweet, salty, sweet, salty, sweet, salty. I tell her that the bottle of still water and the medium popcorn cost 8.10 euros all up, but that I could make a combo deal out of it if she took a 750 ml cup of soda water, which would actually be 30 cents cheaper. She doesn't want to save money, doesn't want a bigger water or a combo deal. She's the boss. I shovel the popcorn into the bag, just as she requested, sweet, salty, sweet, salty, sweet, salty, take her money and wish I could go to our break room for a second and scream, but the next customer is already standing in front of me, he wants M&M's, the yellow ones. Of course, here's your M&M's with peanuts, that'll be 4.20 euro. I don't tell him that at Netto,

M&M's are going for 1.99 euro and there is a Netto 500 metres away. Even if they have plenty of time to walk there and back before the movie starts, people are happy to pay the premium. Money for convenience.

I notice that my attitude towards the customers is getting worse and worse, that I've probably been here too often recently, covered too many shifts, that I really don't enjoy this anymore. But I also don't enjoy being at home. I don't know what I enjoy anymore. At the thought of that, tears start to well in my eyes, but the next couple is already waiting to be served. They order a MEGA serve of popcorn and two cheese dips. They laugh, kiss each other, tell me that is the ultimate pro tip. They think they're the only ones, and I let them have their illusion and charge them an extra euro for each of their dips. I put the two euros in my pocket, increasing my hourly wage.

I pop to the bathroom, take some deep breaths, in and out, the way I always do. Everything inside me is telling me to not go back to the counter, I don't want to flog overpriced snacks and drinks to people that they'll only drink or eat half of anyway. Who drinks a whole litre of Coke over the length of a film? And yet, I have the feeling that it's better to get worked up about the consumption habits of other people than to be at home, pressuring myself to write but not achieving anything, looking at the weekly specials brochures instead AND SO ON AND SO FORTH.

I take another deep breath.

At least the cinema is busy. Lots of popcorn being sold. That keeps the bosses happy, the cinema operators, because it's snacks that generate the profits. And if I'm not making a profit, then at least the company should be.

While the films are showing, we have to fill the troughs with popcorn. At our cinema, the popcorn is popped in the popcorn kitchen, the troughs just keep the popcorn warm, suggesting that the popcorn inside is fresh. But sometimes the popcorn is a few days old.

Right now, though, there is no popcorn left with which to fill the troughs. Someone has to volunteer to make popcorn. I volunteer. At least I can have some peace and quiet in the popcorn kitchen, no one will order cheese dips from me there, which is only one per cent of cheese anyway.

I go to the popcorn kitchen, tie my hair back, start heating up the big pot. I tip four scoops of corn into the pot, press the oil button, the oil flows into the pot, I add sugar – officially, the amount you're supposed to stick to is set, but I don't stick to the recommended amount, I want the popcorn to be really sweet, I throw in double the normal amount. It all goes quickly, the pots are turned up high. The popcorn plops out, warm and fresh. I have to tip the heavy pots to the side and scrape it all out with a big wooden spoon, I can feel the strain in my arms. The popcorn is lying clumped together in a tub. I stick my hand in, almost burn my fingers, shovel it into my mouth with my bare hands anyway, burn my tongue, it tastes so damn good.

I use the big wooden spoon to spread the popcorn out in the tub so that it can cool off. Then I have to quickly refill the pot with corn so it doesn't burn. To make space in the tub for the next load, the cooled popcorn is tipped into bags. But I just want to keep shovelling the warm, sticky popcorn into my mouth, make myself feel good with the warm, sticky popcorn; I've earned that, haven't I? What with all I've gone through in my life. Holding nothing back now, I shove whole fistfuls of popcorn into my mouth, fill the pot again with corn, oil, and sugar. While the new load of popcorn slowly starts to pop out of the pot, I run to the bathroom, stressed, even though it is strictly forbidden to leave the popcorn kitchen unattended.

Back in the kitchen, I start shovelling popcorn into my mouth again until my tongue is burning, I run back to the bathroom. The procedure repeats, I can't help myself. After two hours, I have popped almost four full sacks of popcorn – that'll surely be enough to last till the next scheduled popcorn shift, during which popcorn will be produced for eight hours straight and the pots will be cleaned painstakingly. I go back out to the snack bar. I smell of sweet popcorn, my mouth is burning, my throat is sore. I'm completely exhausted, still manage to smile at two

children that are standing in front of me and asking how much an XXL slushy flute costs. I tell them the ridiculous price: 5.20 euro. They scrape together their coins and ask me if they have enough. I look at the coppery coins and tell them it's not enough. They look genuinely sad, I take pity on them and tell them they can keep their money and hand them an XXL slushy flute that they can fill with slushy themselves and hold my finger against my lips, tell them not to tell their friends or

there'll be trouble. Everything here is counted, and when they do the inventory, there will be a slushy flute missing. I don't care. The company is exploiting me anyway. And it made the kids happy.

Jens comes over towards the end of my shift. None of us know how long Jens has been working here, not to mention how old he is. He's certainly not a trained projectionist. Nevertheless, he enjoys a certain status, is allowed to do the roster and always gives himself the easier shifts. "How's tricks, Kalinka," he says, "I heard you put your hand up to do the popping today." Ever since Jens found out I have Ukrainian roots he has called me Kalinka. He laughs and tells me the story about his Russian ex-girlfriend with the eating disorder for the umpteenth time. A ballet dancer. She'd been able to stick his penis crazy far into her mouth, almost all the way to the back, because she regularly stuck her fingers down her throat, had no gag reflex.

As always, I don't know what to say to that, say nothing, swallow my rage. There would be no advantage to giving my rage free rein, only disadvantages, because the consequence would presumably be that I get the worst shifts in the next roster. It's 10:45 pm. I can finally go home. I go and get changed, sneak back into the kitchen, nick a pack of Crispy M&M's and leave the cinema.

Back home, I tiredly open the front door, ask myself why I even subject myself to this wage labour, why I've done it once again. Ultimately, there's a very simple answer: money.

Lina calls me and asks where I am. Lina is already a few drinks down and says she misses me, asks if I would come and join her and her other friends. They're in some random bar in Neukölln. For a second, I think about it, but really I just want to go to bed.

I tell her I'll head over, Lina cheers and yells out to the others: "SHE'S COMING." I don't want to spoil her happiness so I hang up. In an hour, they'll all be even more drunk and in three hours they might wonder where I am. Lina will write: "Wherr are youuu????", and by then I'll be deep asleep.

Before I go to bed, I supplement iron and omega 2, ginkgo biloba, probiotics, vitamin B3 and B5. I grab my phone and type into the search field: How can I calm my nervous system?

It recommends an online shop that sells CBD oil. It claims that it keeps your nerves in check. I think about that expression, keeping your nerves in check, and look around my room for the lavender spray that Marina gave me for my birthday a few years back. I stop for a moment in front of the unfamiliar bookshelf and look at the spines, which are sorted by colour. I have no idea what to make of most of them. All former *Spiegel* bestsellers. I grab the book *Murder Mindfully through Conscious Eating* by Karsten Dusse, look with puzzlement at the cover, a cross perched atop a green apple. I put the book back on the shelf, open the cardboard box sitting on a small dresser and find a photo inside. Two old people smiling at the camera. The photo seems to not be so old. Maybe the parents of Olli, whom I barely even know. I should stop examining the private possessions of the person whose apartment this is, but for a brief moment, it helps me to feel less alone.

22 earlier

You take me with you to the first two parent-teacher nights. I hate sitting around with the grown-ups. I'm bored out of my brain and feel out of place. But we don't have the money for a

babysitter, and you wouldn't have known where to find someone who could look after me anyway.

When the third parent-teacher night comes around, I ask you to let me stay home. You agree. As soon as the door closes behind you I get bored, try to convince myself that I am scared being home on my own, which would be natural enough. I call my father, tell him I'm home alone. He heads straight over. Shortly afterward, I get into his car with him. When I get to his place, I'm allowed to lie down on the big, comfy sofa, switch on the television and watch *Lucky Luke*. He asks me if I've already had dinner, I shake my head. But I have had dinner, a chocolate Müller rice pudding. I'm still hungry though. My father makes me noodles with scrambled eggs and ham. It is so simple and tastes so good. You never let me eat noodles, because in your opinion, noodles are too high in carbohydrates. I call home and leave a message on the answering machine, say that I'm at my father's house.

After the parent-teacher night, you search the apartment, don't see the flashing light on the answering machine at first, you yell my name at the top of your lungs before you finally see the flashing light on the machine. You call my father and come over on the bus.

It's the first and last time that I see you in my father's apartment. You scream at each other, yell across the apartment that he can't just come and pick me up like that. I feel guilty, because I hadn't really been scared at all. You look at me, find it ridiculous that I was supposedly afraid, say you knew damn well that I wasn't afraid. You take me by the hand, pull me out of the apartment, don't say goodbye to my father. We go home by bus, you don't say a single word to me on the way home, you punish me with silence. That's just fine by me.

23 now

I'm starting to wonder if something might be wrong with me. Something utterly banal that nobody has noticed yet. Something in my body, some hormone, some vitamin, some deficiency. I mean, there must be a reason why I find everyday life so hard, so draining.

I jump on my Doctolib account and click through it, looking for appointments with doctors from various specialisations that I hadn't thought of before: cardiology, endocrinology, gastroenterology, dermatology, and neurology. It's outrageous, I can't find a single free appointment with my public health insurance. All right, then I'll go and get an emergency appointment at the places where they already know me. What the hell. I jump on my bike and ride straight to my GP. When I get there, I find out that the time slot for emergency appointments is already over. That's inconvenient, but it doesn't matter, it just so happens that someone has forgotten their appointment. After thirty minutes, my name is finally called out. I sit down on a chair across from the doctor. She doesn't have the slightest idea who I am, quickly reads through my file, looks me up and down, smiles at me and asks if my emotional state is the major problem at the moment or if there is another reason for my visit today. I answer that I obsessively control my eating and have difficulties with my career, have difficulties spending money on food, or spending money at all, actually. "But you eat regularly?" I nod. That's enough for her. She types something. I ask her what the cause could be, why I have such difficulties concentrating. She asks me if I drink enough. I nod. Of course I drink enough. She asks if I do enough exercise. I have to be careful not to react like a spoilt child and just storm out. I nod, YES, I do enough exercise.

She sends me off for a blood test. I tell the nurse that I have a tendency to faint, she asks if I'd like to lie down. I lie down. "You have great veins, I can just about pick my spot." I mumble something and look away while she sticks the needle in my vein. I try to think about something nice. About a delicious ice cream, a croissant with pistachio cream filling. She puts a bandaid on the spot where she took the blood, I stand up, my vision goes black for a second, whatever, the show must go on. I ride to my gynaecologist. I sit down in the waiting room, I'm happy to wait as long as it takes. I watch an expectant mother flicking through a magazine for expectant mothers. Just as I start wondering if they might have forgotten me, my name is called out. The gynaecologist orders me to get on the chair and looks into my vagina. Everything fine

in there. Great. She asks what brings me here. I answer that my cycle is fairly irregular, that in recent months, I was always two or three weeks late. She says that's totally normal for young women. I wonder whether she has the right file open, if she's seen my date of birth, knows that I'm pushing 30. She asks if I've thought about going on the pill, says that would normalise my cycle. I ask if it's possible to check specific hormones, because I really have been having trouble concentrating. She says that there are online saliva tests for hormones that I could use to check my hormone levels myself. For example, I could quickly and easily order a test kit for testosterone and progesterone on Amazon for 117.31 euro. I thank her, leave the consultation room, leave the practice, get on my bike in a rage, am hungry, ride to my psychiatrist. He'll help me. I wait for an hour and a half in the waiting room. I flick through various magazines and ask myself who writes all these articles and who still buys magazines like this these days, until the psychiatrist calls my name. He's holding a folder in his hand: "Ah, my most famous patient." He knows that I write, the other people in the waiting room look at me curiously. I'm embarrassed. Of course nobody recognises me.

"How you travelling?" he asks. I tell him I can't concentrate, that I'm constantly jumping up from the desk, that I misplace things, have become forgetful, that I'm starting to suspect I have undiagnosed ADD and would like a prescription for Ritalin. I can tell that he's had a gutful of this ADD and ADHD stuff. He gives me a questionnaire that looks as if it has been photocopied a thousand times, in which I am supposed to tick statements that applied to me at the age of ten. I intuitively place a few ticks – very true, partially true, no idea, it's a while ago, how am I supposed to know if I had difficulty following instructions back then. Things weren't exactly easy when I was ten years old. I hand the psychiatrist the finished questionnaire, he adds up the points, says: "Congratulations. You've passed the test. You have ADD, with an inclination towards ADHD." I want to ask what that means, exactly. Whether I am constantly making sure I get my steps in because I actually have ADHD. But he doesn't have any time to talk to me about my new diagnosis, the waiting room is full, says I must have seen that when I

came in. He doesn't prescribe me Ritalin but MEDIKINET adult instead, 78 tablets right off the bat. Says I can take them as needed. But that it could reduce my appetite, but it couldn't hurt to try it out. He wants to see me in four weeks to give me some time to see how I go with them. Is Medikinet compatible with my Escitalopram? He says I shouldn't worry about that. All right, if you say I shouldn't worry, I won't worry. My odyssey has paid off immediately. I'm holding a yellow script in my hand. There is hope that things will improve with my new medicine, that my feelings will fundamentally change. That I will feel good.

23 earlier

And then the good moments, when we leave the familiar confines of our home. When we head to Czernowitz. Even though the trip there is torture, because we spend 32 hours on the train, it does have its upsides, during our three-hour stop in Przemyśl, for example, I get to have a sweet sparkling cherry juice. I wait with our bags while you grab a kawa czarna from the vending machine at the train station. You sit down next to me, completely exhausted, wrecked, barely having slept at all on the night train. When we get to the train station in Chernivtsi, Czernowitz, you wave over a taxi. We never do that kind of thing in Berlin. But there are so many ways in which you act differently than in Berlin. Here, you look at people instead of staring through them, and you're not afraid to talk to them. It's also much cheaper than in Germany. That makes things a whole lot easier. The 25-minute taxi ride home from the train station saves you a whole lot of stress and costs the equivalent of just three euro.

I'm constantly fascinated by how differently everything works here, that there is no seatbelt on the back seat of the taxi. That even the driver isn't wearing one.

When we enter the apartment building, I'm met by a familiar smell, the stairs up to the third floor are bumpy.

When my grandma catches sight of us, she starts crying, kisses your cheeks, left and right, over and over, then she walks toward me, all fragile, and kisses both my cheeks back and

forth, muttering non-stop “Боже мой.” Oh my god. That’s not just something she says, she really is thanking god. You find the greeting visibly uncomfortable, but you let it wash over you. Then grandma drags us into the kitchen, says she’s made блинчики, bliny, baked, says we must be so hungry from the journey. You hate her blinchiki. You tell her every time that you don’t want her to make them, and every time, they’re sitting on the table when we arrive. She cooks them in far too much oil for your liking, it makes your fingers all greasy when you touch them. You tell grandma every time that if she absolutely must make blinchiki, then the least she could do is use less oil, but she doesn’t even manage that. Grandma puts three different jams on the table, all of which she made herself, with the fruit с дачи, from her dacha. The thickened gelees weird me out a little, and I like the blinchiki best with a chocolate spread that grandma couldn’t buy this time because it was too expensive, no big deal though, there’s always cinnamon and sugar.

You don’t touch a single blinchik. Grandma looks over at you and asks why you don’t want anything to eat when you could stand to have a little more meat on your bones. You hate the fact that even now, Grandma is still trying to force you to eat more. It reminds you too much of your childhood, when the other kids at school teased you, said you were too fat, and Grandma always pressured you to eat anyway. Grandma is happy to see me digging in, while you look on disapprovingly as I slap a third blinchik on my plate. Grandma says it’s a good thing that I have a healthy appetite. You shoot grandma a dirty look because she’s on my side. I find this dynamic quite refreshing. Finally, you can fight with your own mother, get annoyed by your own mother, and you leave me more or less alone.

The next day, we stroll through the city you grew up in and you remark with amazement at how much has changed, how many things have stayed the same, and how everything is so much вонючее, stinkier, as it is in Berlin. To me, everything does smell different, but different in a good way. We take bus rides. We do things, visit cafés, restaurants. We can do this stuff here because everything is so much cheaper. Here, you can buy a ticket for the tram or take me

to the theatre without mulling over the decision. We eat Наполеон, Napoleon cake, which is made of multiple layers of puff pastry and butter cream, and Пончики, fried doughballs. It feels like you are easier on yourself here, you eat more freely. When we go for pizza at night, you even buy one for yourself and you rave about the thin, crispy crust. Is it just because of the price of things that you let yourself have more here, or is it because you feel like you belong?

I buy CDs by Beyoncé, Avril Lavigne, and Rihanna, for the equivalent of two euros a pop. We go to the movies and watch the latest instalment of Harry Potter in Ukrainian. I understand next to nothing, because you and Grandma only ever spoke Russian to me. But that doesn't bother me, what matters is that we just went to the movies on a whim, without debating if we could afford it first. The seating in the cinema is unassigned. Unlike in Berlin, I don't have to be stressed about sitting in a seat reserved for strangers who have paid for the good seats. At the bar, they sell neither sweet nor salty popcorn, but instead brightly coloured popcorn that's supposed to taste like cheese. You agree to buy me a small bag, because it's a bit special, something you can't get back in Berlin. Before we enter the theatre, I go to the toilet and see that they have squat toilets, like on the last leg of the train trip to Czernowitz. In Germany, I have never seen or used a squat toilet. In the theatre, we sit way back from the screen. The chairs are hard, have no padding. I try to follow the plot from the pictures. I'm content.

The days fly by.

I don't want to go back to Berlin.

Grandma goes with us to the train station. I'm dreading the goodbye, because every time we do it, you break out in tears and keep on crying on the train, and I never know what to do. Grandma pulls some blinchiki wrapped in cling film out of her bag. You huff angrily and explain loudly that you hate her blinchiki. She looks at me and says: "But the little one is hungry." You look at me, give a snort of disdain, because I have put on weight over the past days and weeks. No wonder, what with all the food that Grandma had placed in front of me. All the сырки з

шоколадом, curd bars with cream cheese and a dark chocolate glaze, and пиццы, pizzas, have evidently taken their toll.

You say that when we get back to Berlin, I'll really have to lose some weight. I don't want to go back to Berlin.

When the train pulls in, Grandma gets on with us. I'm worried that the train will just leave and Grandma will have no option but to come with us. She has tears welling up in her eyes, you don't cry, you try to keep your distance. Grandma presses kiss after kiss on my cheeks, left and right, and then the entire procedure repeats with you, until it really is time for her to get off the train. She stands outside our window, holding in her hand the blinchiki that you so vehemently rejected, and waits until the train rolls away. You start crying, now you're crying like crazy. I want to cry too but I have to be strong, I don't touch you, force myself to look away from you, as usual.