



**Simone Buchholz**

**This Side of Heaven**

A Novel

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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*He said all men will be sailors then*

*until the sea shall free them*

*But he himself was broken*

*long before the sky would open*

Leonard Cohen, *Suzanne*

## OFF AND AWAY

For the two hours leading up to that moment, everything had been perfectly normal, perfectly boring. The whirring of the engines, the service of the stewards, the pilot's friendly announcements, the plane flying high above the clouds. Every now and then the plane shuddered for a second, maybe just to remind them they were in the air. Meanwhile, people talked too much or snored too loudly, read too obsessively or flicked absentmindedly through their books, pulled the onboard magazine out of the back of the seat in front of them and shoved it back in frustration, chewed chewing gum, dozed lightly or slept soundly, moaned, whined, are we there yet, the next subliminal act of aggression, holding hands, sweets, a packet of chips. It's no picnic, people on planes, people packed so close together, whether they want it or not. You always kind of feel sorry for the cabin crew with all the buckled-in people with their faces and their looks and all the stories behind their brows.

The pilot and her co-pilot have seen it, but obviously don't think it's dangerous enough, outside, a weather system is rearing up, coming together at breakneck speed, the temperatures and layers get mixed up, warmth slams against cold, bang bang, and then, much too suddenly and much too quickly after the usually so nonchalant *cabin crew, prepare for landing*, come the blows against the steel, multiplying themselves on the inside of the aircraft; this is not the kind of turbulence that a plane just takes in its stride, this is violence. The violence lifts the people out of their seats and thrusts them against their seatbelts, it crowbars the overhead compartments open, flinging the suitcases and bags through the air, arms are torn upward to protect heads, stomachs turn and hearts lose their composure, the stewards are thrown about on their light seats, and even the face of the most experienced of them, the salt-and-pepper head steward, was suddenly overcome by a look of panic, there is no hint of the usual behaviours found in dicey situations, there are no jokes, no winks, no *it'll all be okay, everyone*.

This goes on for a good half an hour, accompanied by the bangs and thunderclaps and lightning bolts outside, the violent force of nature is battling with both plane and pilot, hurling themselves at each other and wrestling with each other, and time starts to stretch, as it so often does when a dogged battle is taking place, when neither party wants to give in, pow, right in the kisser, in the organs, on the bones, something's about to give, about to rip completely, and then the unceasing screams of women, men, and children.

In the end, the pilot aborts the landing, I'm sorry, she says, we can't land like this, the storm is too strong. And: we need fuel, we're heading back to Athens.

Landing aborted seems like good news, needing fuel somewhat less so.

As silence slowly returns outside, the silence inside the cabin also grows, and when forty minutes later the plane, in which there had been a collective holding of breath, finally lands safely on the tarmac in Athens, in the searing midday heat, nobody says a word.

Some breathe a sigh of relief, others have forgotten how to breathe altogether, but at least they remember how to unclaw their hands and let go of the things they'd been gouging, the armrests or the blood-drained hand of the person next to them, while the engines grow calmer and more quiet, and then fall silent, because they too are out of energy, and more importantly, out of fuel.

Let the silence glow a little, thinks the pilot, let the silence sink in for a few seconds, just switch off for a moment, exhale, inhale. Then she reestablishes some kind of contact with the tower.

*4621 Cahuenga Boulevard, Los Angeles*

Fuck it.

## NO ONE, ABSOLUTELY NO ONE

It takes a while for the stairs to arrive and the goddamn bus that's supposed to drive the passengers across the airfield so that everyone can finally get out of here. But the door eventually opens, allowing first the passengers and then the crew to tremble down the stairs that have been shoved up against the plane, and they keep trembling over to the bus, where the first ones begin to stop trembling and have a go at some small talk, there are always a couple of people who want to give something a go, regardless of what it is.

Like talking about the landscape when your internal geography is in the process of disintegrating, or about the weather, about the delicate fog lying over the airfield, about the unreal-seeming light, about the vestiges of the thing that almost killed them. While others just lift up their kids and play around with them a little, you know, kind of an everything's okay gesture, the usual stuff.

The utterly human helplessness when something appears that is so big that the only thing you can really do is try to get through it. In one of the middle rows of the bus, on the left, an old man breaks down in tears.

The bus sets the passengers down in front of the terminal. Someone holds a big door open for them – or more like a flap with no handle. Behind the flap is a room, a bit small for the contents of an entire plane, but it's okay – well, a few windows wouldn't go astray, although, to be honest, right now all that matters is having solid ground to stand on.

Whatever that means.

The room is bathed in a yellowish, greenish light, and it's warm and cold at the same time, as if an afternoon fog had suddenly descended over a narrow street that had been warmed up by the sun. The walls are tiled, the ceilings low and clad with white boards, floor covering

glued to the floor, maybe a grey carpet, but the colour is hard to determine, in some sections, it blurs in the direction of eggshell.

There is no seating – no big deal, think some of them, we won't be here forever; shit, think others, even ten minutes is too long to stand around in an enclosed space with so many people. There is faint elevator music coming from somewhere, the really cheap version, an almost angelic, electronic female voice is singing about drinks and love and lounge furniture.

The first people start to sweat and lose their mind a little, but to stop it from showing, they paint a thick layer of composed face over it.

Cleaning staff move through the room with vacuum cleaners, three women of indeterminate age, wearing clean, somewhat worn-out wraparound dresses and old-fashioned, pinned-up hairstyles. They smoke really thin cigarettes, sucking down one after the other, flicking the ash on the ground and vacuuming it away with their machines. They scuff along, though that might just be an effect of the unusual temperature. The fingers their cigarettes are jammed in are stiff, as if they were pointing somewhere, except there's nothing there where they're pointing, just this windowless room.

A man speaks to one of the vacuum-cleaner women and asks for a bathroom, but she doesn't reply, just turns around and keeps vacuuming somewhere else.

Okay, says the man, then I'll pop outside for a bit, and he looks for the door or the big flap, but the walls are too smooth, he can't find the exit, so he bottles his rage and everything else that's bubbling inside him, but then bus reappears and the flap is open again, and they head out over the tarmac and up the stairs and onto the plane, the late afternoon sun tumbling across their faces, the moment when everyone fastens their seatbelts is marked by equal amounts of hope and fear. Okay, says the pilot, the tank is full, the weather has improved, let's try this again; she starts up the engine, rolls onto the runway, *cabin crew, prepare for take-off*, she starts to

accelerate, the plane lifts off, the plane is in the air, average cruising altitude of 10,000 metres, some people pray, some talk quietly, some just act like nothing's happening, the man from before can finally disappear into the bathroom, and perhaps he's not the only one experiencing a gradual sense of relief, but once they hear *cabin crew, prepare for landing*, a dull squeamishness arrives on the scene, and no one, absolutely no one, is looking forward to this approach, but that's how it is: if you want to be somewhere, you first have to get there, so let's go, *prepare for landing*, even the steel is concentrating, and it heads down through the remains of the Mediterranean storm, which is now drifting off to the east, there are the lights on the ground, the landing strip, and the plane lands safely, the only thing is that the wet asphalt is a little slippery, particularly at the end of the strip, which virtually leads directly into the old town. But hey, that's no problem for an experienced pilot, the aircraft comes to a halt just in time, a little closer than usual, perhaps, but all in all, it's finally time for everyone to exhale.

Above the city, above the entire island with its hills, its villages, its churches, its countless bays, sits a layer of vapour, the storm wasn't able to drive out the low-lying warmth, on the northwest coast, a good twenty kilometres away, for a few seconds, the setting sun breaks back through the thinning clouds, but the eastern side of the island is kept completely in the dark about it, over there, the sky long ago turned grey, and the people are far too exhausted from – oh, never mind.

Later, at sunset, eight of the passengers sit scattered around the little city, on the main boulevard with a view of the fort, by the marina out on the edge of the city, and later in the old town in front of the churches and by the fountains and on the squares and in the alleys beneath the palms and by the oleander bushes and the bougainvillea, and even if they only see each other out of the corner of their eyes, they recognise each other as they walk by, because what happened this

afternoon is not the kind of thing you forget too soon, they can still feel the shuddering in their solar plexus and in their neck muscles.

The vast sky is strung up above the island and glows in countless shades of violet and blue, which is perfectly normal, because they all have something with squid on their plates, and everyone knows that the souls of the squids dye the skies.

What's not quite so normal on an evening in August is the silence hanging over the city. As if the sky had landed on its head.



*4621 Cahuenga Boulevard, Los Angeles*

The sun outside my window gives it one last try, labouring its way through the dark wooden blinds.

I just can't take it seriously.

How could I.

Why would I.

We're too similar. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we get it wrong, nowadays though, it's wrong more often than not, and when we get it wrong, we *really* get it wrong.

"If we're going down, then we're going down together," I say, and it says: "No need to get melodramatic."

"Who's being melodramatic," I say, "take a look at yourself, always this circus with the light, with the colours, with the heat. But at the end of the day, you always pack it in."

The sun doesn't answer. It just pulls an offended face and disappears behind the rooftops.

That's its oldest trick – just pissing off.

A silhouette appears behind the frosted glass of my window, taller than me, narrow shoulders, a dark suit, no hat, but with hair, light.

I take my feet off the table and stash the half-full bottle of scotch and the half-empty tumbler in the bottom drawer.

## AT THE THOUGHT OF...

Benedikt wakes up early, as is almost always the case, there's something in his inner being that wakes him between six and seven, though to be perfectly accurate, what wakes him is his loins, his loins have been doing that without fail ever since he started thinking, but that's not something Annike can really do anything with, she doesn't like it in the morning. Nowadays, she only likes it in a few little nooks in the day or the night, though, you could hardly really call it *liking*, she lets it happen and acts like she likes it, but more out of an old sense of solidarity.

Elisabeth is rarely with him at this time of day. At this very moment, she's sleeping next to Claudius, which is who she usually sleeps next to. Benedikt gets up, makes himself a coffee, goes out onto the rooftop terrace, and looks out at the sea; it's six thirty, in a moment, the sun will come up, the sky is changing its colour by the second, from red to orange to pink, which here and there merges into a faint blue, soon the blue will be blazing, and won't change all that much over the entire day, until the sun drastically tips into the sea, because it's completely had it with the day.

The Mediterranean, right?

Benedikt drinks his coffee, chasing it down with a big glass of water, then throws on his sneakers and starts running before he even leaves the apartment, jogging down the steps and onto the street, maybe he'll even manage to run away from yesterday, though he couldn't quite tell you what he's actually running away from. Whatever, he thinks, and runs, he'll keep running until his thoughts have calmed down, and that might take a while, but nobody stirs around here before nine anyway, and he'd just be standing around like an idiot if he plonked breakfast down on the table at eight, and everyone was like: oh, Benedikt.

Annikе rolls over again and feels for Benedikt, purely out of habit. The fact that her hand doesn't find him tells her: it must be after six.

Elisabeth heard Benedikt in the kitchen and for a second thought about seeing if he'd like some company, so to speak, but maybe they should keep a lid on things. Since their almost-crash yesterday she's had a guilty conscious for the first time, not so much because of Claudius, more to do with life more generally. She did almost die, after all, and she finds herself wondering why she never really grew up and whether it might not be time, time to finally, etcetera, the usual bullshit, blah blah blah.

She looks at Claudius, the way he's lying there on his back, snoring, how his belly rises and falls, how the threads of silver in his beard quiver, he looks kind of content, somehow, she likes the beard, and she also likes his belly. She scoots over closer to him, places her head on his chest, which is growing broader with every passing year, and places her right shoulder under his left arm. Slowly but undeniably, the arms slides back away.

Claudius is dreaming of a meal with a bunch of business partners. A big table by a river, underneath some trees, the trees wrapped in wild vines, there is everything imaginable to eat and drink, there is music and women with bare breasts, and they are all friends and are making love with each other, even on the table, it's one great big spectacle, but Claudius is just sitting there like a dope at the head of the table and for some reason he can't join in, which irks him, because after all, he's the one who paid for the whole shebang, for god's sake.

Then the table collapses.

In a bed-and-breakfast in the old town, it's a little after seven. Sara rolls over to face the middle of the bed and her gaze falls on Marc, lying there asleep he seems peaceful and almost gentle, but she knows that the tension inside of him comes when he wakes up, together with his foul mood. And though her first glimpse is of her husband, her first thought is of her son, and she asks herself whether he slept, how he is, is he still alive, and then that darkness starts to creep up in her again, regardless of how resolutely she tries to ward off the darkness, for a year now, this emotional colour has been in Sara's personal paintbox, and the darkest thing about the darkness is that later, when everyone's awake, they will spend one more day acting like everything's hunky-dory. They do it for their son, or at least, that's what she tells herself, but in truth it's their son who does it for his parents, which of course she knows.

And yet.

Sara rolls back to the other side of the bed, erects the usual wall around herself, the one that protects her from all that stuff, she resists the urge to jump up and fling open the door connecting their room to the other one and to grab her sixteen-year-old son and pull him against her chest. Instead, she lies there and waits for one of them to start another new, complicated day.

Marc has been drifting in and out of sleep for hours, here and gone and then back again, sometimes this state calms him and sometimes it makes him boil with rage. He senses Sara's gaze on his face in one of the phases where he switches from gone to here, and then switches quickly back to gone again, at least for a few minutes, just until she rolls back onto her side.

Meanwhile, a knife is twisting in his stomach. A monstrous pain.

At the thought of.

Why couldn't the stupid thing just crash and burn, then it would all be over once and for all – well, at least this specific pain.

After staying up till three in the morning, Vincent sleeps deeply, like a log. His sleep is actually astoundingly solid, he sleeps in a way that shouldn't really be possible anymore. There was also something log-like to his wakefulness. He didn't really ask himself why that was, he just accepted it, the way he accepts everything, and with the sleep came the usual journeys to other states, other places, faster ones, better ones, brighter ones.

Heidi lies in bed and services her needs, then she gets up and takes a shower. Man, this bathroom is nice, so small and elegant, with the old tiles and the golden borders and the stone floors, she didn't notice that last night, in that headfuck of an evening, in her internal wobbling after that botched flight. She couldn't get her head around the fact that the family that had been on the flight with her and was obviously staying in the same bed-and-breakfast was able to sit so calmly in the bar, while she, having completely lost the plot, couldn't even finish her glass of wine, meanwhile they had already had something to eat, in one of the restaurants she had walked past on the way. No idea, maybe that's the kind of thing you do as a family, you probably have to do that kind of thing as a family. And then, having finished her shower, she dries herself off and moisturises, still taking care around the scar, even though it doesn't actually hurt anymore, but it feels wrong and way too new, she doesn't like touching it, it's not a part of her, she wishes she could just forget it, she gets dressed and goes down to the courtyard and grabs a green tea at the breakfast buffet and for a second she is seized by panic because she thinks of the sale, but then she realises that the sale went through ages ago, there's no reason to twitch, she can neatly cross the sale from her list, the business is history.

No need to rent a car today, she thinks, not today. Maybe tomorrow.

*4621 Cahuenga Boulevard, Los Angeles*

She takes big strides, and in three, two, one she's standing in front of my desk and drops a file on it. The file doesn't weigh much.

Just a thin noise on the desktop.

But I know that what's inside that folder is going to be heavy, and it's going to land on my shoulders.

The inspector doesn't bother with a greeting, she just looks at me. She is slim as a cypress, her grey suit is well-cut and sits razor-sharp on her shoulders, her waist, her hips. I held myself back from stealing a glance at her ankles when she barged into my office.

Her hair is chin-length, presumably a light-blond colour, even though in the usual black-and-white soup I can't say for sure, it could also be a very light grey. Her face has been hewn with a fine chisel, her lipstick is dark.

"Take a seat," I say.

She takes the chair that's always sitting by the window looking lonely, sits down, places her feet on my desk, and says: "Thank you."

The dust scattered across all the surfaces in the room vibrates.

"What would you say to switching on a light?"

"Not a bad idea at all," I say, and tug on the brass chain dangling from my desk lamp. It takes a moment for it to really get going. We have that in common, me and my lamp.

The visibility in my office doesn't improve a great deal though, the light outside is too dim for that, but at least I can look the inspector in the eye. Her gaze has the penetrating force of a machete.

She places her elbows on the armrests of her lonely seat and presses her fingertips together.

"How old are you nowadays?"

No idea, I think, and motion towards the folder next to her elegant ankles and say: "It must be written down in there."

"I'm not sure I like your manners."

"Understandable," I say, "I've never been too fond of my manners either."

She grabs the folder, opens it up, and begins leafing through it. Time starts to stretch, my heartbeat grows slower and slower and slower. Actually, I think, it's interesting that I still have or need one.

I light myself a cigarette.



## EVERYTHING FADES IN A SECOND ANYWAY

Benedikt runs. He runs fast, almost sprinting, is constantly in the anaerobic zone; back home, his neighbours are always shaking their heads when he flies past them at the crack of dawn, but here, in this holiday idyl, in this picture book of romantic Mediterranean architecture, in this old town with its crazed alleys, on this jagged coastline of cliffs with so much green and the gentle water with hardly a speck of foam, in this paradise under this radiant blue dome, most people are still curled up in their cots. From the road along the coast overlooking the city walls, the only people to be seen are a few swimmers, they are heading out from the shore into the peaceful waves or from the peaceful waves back to the shore.

Benedikt runs purely for himself, and it's easy for him, he is naturally quick on his feet, he was like that as a kid, and he kept on as a teenager, after the others had long since stopped running and their tempo ticked over to the bouncing strides of young adults, he kept running everywhere, and he never stopped. Slowness drives him mad, speeds combs his synapses. Back when things were still good between him and Annike, right back at the beginning, that is, she would sometimes say that he was like the rush of a rollercoaster, and that's what made it so easy to fall in love with him.

He runs and breathes his way along the coast, his breathing also moving at his light-footed tempo. After the first kilometre, those racing thoughts catch up with him, they sail through his head like swallows. Last night, at the restaurant, the four of them having dinner, their roles divvied out the same way for the past twenty-five years, like back in the kitchen of Annike and Elisabeth's flat back in their uni days: Annike, the quiet soul with the profound gaze, the perfect listener, but also ruthlessly observing everyone, and god knows what's going on in her head; Elisabeth, the butterfly, fluttering and colourful and beautiful, here one moment, gone the next, and a great blissfulness but also extremely annoying, because she sometimes

completely loses track of everything, and Claudius, the big trumpet, the ego-machine, the incarnation of the successful go-getter, he had the biggest bulldozer back in the sandbox, at school all the teachers went gaga for him, he had the best jobs during uni and his own business by the end of his degree, first it was just the logo that was big, nowadays so is his empire and his fleet of cars, and when the cheque comes, he typically just puts the money down on the table without saying a word, there's no question that he's paying, "Papa Claudius'll take care of the damage," he often says in these kinds of moments, and everyone laughs dutifully, though Elisabeth laughs seriously, he damn well should pay, she probably thinks – well, actually, Benedikt knows that she thinks that. Annike on the other hand doesn't care, she doesn't give a hoot about the pictures other people paint of her, "if it's so important to him," she says about all these men who have unpleasant habits, it's only Benedikt who finds the eternal bill-footing condescending. He paid for the whole two weeks here, for the digs, that is, not their flights, Benedikt was able to put his foot down there, but Claudius wouldn't let him take the bill for the fancy apartment with the ocean views and a rooftop terrace. Benedikt had suggested that he and Annike get a room somewhere else, one they could afford, but Claudius said: "Absolutely not, Papa Claudius'll take care of the damage."

Sometimes Benedikt would like to knock that smile off his smarmy face. But then he remembers that he *has* been sleeping with the wife of that smarmy-faced man for twenty years, so he decides to leave the smile where it is. To be honest, he feels kind of sorry for him, old Papa Claudius.

After three kilometres, he stops and looks out at the sea. Tomorrow morning, he might strap his guitar to his back when he goes for his run and then play a bit of music for himself and for the water and for the rising sun, maybe write a song, maybe for Elisabeth, maybe for Annike, the old Annike from back at the start.

Then he turns around and runs back, the sun on his neck, the romantic coastal vistas roaring at this back.

The sex is functional, routine, efficient. Elisabeth doesn't really need it, if she's honest, and yet she is always the one who initiates it, because she feels like Claudius has earned it, because it's kind of like, part of the deal of being married, and because she can't imagine that a man could physically tolerate *not* sleeping with a woman like her for too long, and she doesn't want him to get sick. And besides, he does pay for everything.

So she initiates it. Touches this and that and moves this and that back and forth, and he wakes up and hauls himself onto her and touches this and that and moves this and that back and forth and of course he immediately starts sweating, even though it's neither particularly exciting nor draining, and at some point, a bored grunt creeps out of his mouth and he hauls himself off her and groans with exhaustion. She gets up, and as she closes the bathroom door, she says: "You really need to start exercising again."

But he's already fallen asleep again.

How can something that is as fundamentally sensational as the coming together of two people be so devoid of any sensation, she thinks and looks in the mirror, and like every morning she sees herself growing older, around her eyes and around her mouth, and her red curls could desperately do with a touch-up at the roots, but it wouldn't have made sense before the holidays with the sun and the sea, because then everything fades in a second anyway.

She steps into the shower, lets the warm water run over her hair and her skin and thinks about Benedikt.

On the way back, Benedikt ran along the shore, down beneath the promenade; in a small, not entirely official harbour, a few small, not entirely official fishing boats are moored, and tired men with cigarettes in the corners of their mouths are passing crates full of fish to other tired men with cigarettes in the corners of their mouths. Benedikt stops for a second, props his hands on his knees, and now his lungs are actually pumping a little, after six-odd kilometres of sprinting. He looks up and gives the men a smile. They don't react. He stands up, takes a few steps toward the boats and asks if he can buy something, says he'd just need to run and grab some cash, just up in one of the buildings in that first row there, asks if they'll still be here in ten minutes.

Two of the men look at him with empty eyes, it seems like they're nodding, but Benedikt isn't sure – fine, he thinks, I won't then, I don't *have* to buy anything from you, but then still raises his hand in a kind of wave, though that already seems excessive in response to their detachment.

He heads off and runs up the stairs to the promenade, runs from there up the stairs to the building, runs up the stairs in the building to the apartment, opens the door, now a bottle of water, Elisabeth is standing in the kitchen looking up at the ceiling, as if she's slipped in time. Her long, red curls are dripping wet, and she's wearing a white, untied kimono

Annikе has disappeared behind her personal moon with her mind, body, and soul, with her entire existence, she sleeps deeply, descending all the way to the bottom of sleep, and when she has arrived there, on the dark side of the moon, where she now spends an increasing amount of her time, she is so alone with herself that nothing hurts anymore, not even the three miscarriages, not even the empty husk of her love for Benedikt, not even her foundered plans for her life. Behind the moon, everything is fine, and that's why she stays there as long as she can.

Elisabeth is standing in a corner of the rooftop terrace that is not visible from the kitchen, the morning sun is glittering in her eyes. Benedikt is standing in front of her looking at her, in his right hand he has a bottle of water, and his left is tracing the edge of her white kimono, he holds his breath as he does it, Elisabeth laughs softly, she likes it when he has to work to keep himself under control, when she can feel how much energy it costs him, when the muscles in his forearms and in his neck twitch just a little; impulse control, she thinks, so interesting, especially in men, she thinks, as if all this were just an experiment.

“Jesus, look at you,” says Benedikt, his voice is breathy, it’s coming from the region between his legs, which is also interesting, thinks Elisabeth, and says: “You know it is possible to leave an erection on the table, I’ll just order myself a new one later.”

“What time is later,” says Benedikt, pushing the kimono to the side with his left hand, which lands on Elisabeth’s waist.

“I want to go for a proper swim in the afternoon,” she says, “swim along the coast for a bit, maybe...” and Benedikt whispers in her ear that around that time he might just need to go for another run, his big run for the day, that takes at least an hour, “okay,” says Elisabeth, kisses him on the spot between the corner of his mouth and his cheek, and Benedikt pulls her in, but she slips away from him and wants to head to the kitchen, he grabs her hand and says: “don’t go.”

“I’ll go when and where I want,” she says without looking at him, and he lets go of her straight away; I’m not going to stand here and be her punching bag, he thinks, just because something happened with Claudius.

She lingers in the doorway to the terrace, turns around and looks at him. “What,” she says.

“Nothing,” he says.

“So what’s the deal with this afternoon, then,” she says.

“You swim, me run,” he says.

With a quick motion, she throws her drier and thus also now lighter hair over her shoulder and pulls her kimono shut and ties the belt, and takes a few steps back towards Benedikt.

Benedikt places the water bottle to his lips and guzzles half of it, you bitch, he thinks, and smiles. Then he goes to take a shower; as he passes her, his left hand brushes her hip, she freezes, he leaves his hand where it is for a moment, then he disappears.

Claudius is woken up by his own snoring, Jesus Christ man, he thinks, why do I snore so damn loud, how embarrassing. His tongue feels like it has fur.

He rolls across the empty side of Elisabeth’s edge of the bed and fishes with both hands for the damn bottle of water that’s always standing there, knocking it over in the process. He picks it up, screws off the lid and so on, then it gets better, the fur is not gone, but at least now it’s been brushed back in the direction of growth. He sits himself up, shoves Elisabeth’s pillow behind his back, and lets out an extensive fart.

He peers out of the corner of his eye toward the bathroom just to make sure – the door is open, the light off, ah, perfect, she’s not there.

Outside the sun is shining. As it should, he paid for that too, does he need to now go and rent a boat or something, it’d be worth it just to see Benedikt’s fuming face, he loves to humiliate him, no idea why he finds it so enjoyable, neither of them are actually bad people, but he doesn’t even feel bad about it. That’s a bit odd, he thinks, but maybe that’s just a way of expressing their friendship, as men.

He plays it out in his head just to wake up: how they'll be sitting there eating breakfast in a second, Elisabeth will have probably made the breakfast, all kinds of healthy shit, yoghurt and honey and all that jazz, and then there'll be a mountain of vegetables, but not a single buttery croissant, and a complete absence of processed sugar.

And how they'll all be annoyed by his drive, by his eternally charged battery, by his CEO constitution. How Elisabeth will at first suck on her coffee like a pacifier and want to "be on holiday" and not have to "rush around" straight away, how Benedikt will try to keep his jawbones under control, while the sun will belt down on the cream-coloured shade cloth above the rooftop terrace, or was it light blue?

"So what's going on with the boat," Claudius will say, "Papa Claudius'll take care of the damage."

Elisabeth will tuck her hair behind her ears, reach for the yoghurt, and shrug her shoulders.

Benedikt will loudly slurp his coffee and pull up his nose. Annike will smile, breathe in and out, and say: "if it'll make you happy...?"

A few hundred metres away, Sara and Marc are sitting on their respective edges of the bed and staring at the wall, between them a blanket of loneliness and inner cold. No touching, please. Thank you. No questions from the woman to the man, no questions from the man to the woman, the room is full of answers anyway, answers both of them know by heart.

Sara permits herself the only question that still makes any sense: "You think Vincent is already awake?"

"No chance," says Marc.

Sara thinks back on last summer, the last officially good season they had, that was the time when their son began to lie awake at night and only sleep in the morning, but nobody knew where the restlessness and then the leaden fatigue in his young body came from, and they just thought, ah, I'm sure that's just the puberty having its way with him, that's normal. And besides, other than that he was doing well, he was growing longer by the day, and it made sense that he was getting thinner in the process, and his dark-red hair faded more and more to a light red, but that might have just been the summer, you don't have to over-interpret everything; and every evening, in the muggy and evaporating heat, the whole place was full of teenagers, there were usually six or seven of them, all between six foot and six foot four, they were like an invasive species, they mercilessly occupied the rooms, and two of them were always standing in the kitchen to bake cheese over something, and sometimes Sara thought, who knows, next they'll just cover me with cheese and stick me in the oven, maybe wrapped in some bread, then at least I'll finally have some peace and quiet, and it'll also be nice and warm and heavy.

"I'm going for a shower," Marc says and stands up, and Sara feels the movement in the mattress. She doesn't feel anything else.

"Yeah," she says without rolling over, "you do that, and then we'll have a really nice first day of holidays."

"Sure," says Marc, walks into the bathroom and closes the door behind him. "Sure."

The bathroom doesn't answer, he turns the water on and stands under the showerhead and sticks his arm out of the shower, reaching for the toothbrush and toothpaste and scrubs his teeth, later he scrubs himself with a bar of soap and lets the water run, mainly over his head and his neck, and then he rubs himself dry with the hard towel, he rubs himself so hard that it almost hurts, and then he stands in the warm steam of the bathroom and his face dissolves in the mirror, the only thing that doesn't disappear, of course, is that tension inside of him. How could it.



When he gets back into the bedroom, Sara is still sitting on the edge of the bed, or she's sitting back down there, because someone must have pushed aside the curtains and opened the window wide, as if they wanted to let out an evil spirit.

He gets dressed in silence and then says: "I'll head down, have breakfast, I gather you'll just come down when you're ready."

"Yeah," says Sara, "I'll just come when I'm ready."

For three seconds, he asks himself whether he should give her a kiss on the forehead. They are on holiday, after all. But then he decides to leave it.

Vincent is sitting on a wall in front of a café and is slowly and very precisely sucking his way through a strawberry milkshake. A croissant to go with it wouldn't be bad, or grilled cheese on toast, but he didn't have enough money in his pocket. But the breakfast room is also not an option. The breakfast room is not radical enough for the holidays, and the breakfast room with his parents is an insult, just like everything related to his parents is an insult.

He squints into the far-too-bright lightbulb in the sky. Forgot his sunglasses.

"Hey, where'd you get that milkshake?"

He looks up to see a woman with black hair, she is relatively tall, not much shorter than him, lego figurine hair and also kind of a lego figurine body. Everything about her is cut perfectly straight. Even her dark-brown, hexagonal sunglasses.

He points at the café behind his left shoulder.

"Do they also have frappés?"

"What's a frappé?"

“A coffee shake,” she says, “like, coffee with milk and sugar and ice cubes in it.”

“Who would drink something like that?”

“Grown-ups, you baby.”

He smiles at her.

“You’re staying in the same hotel as me,” she says.

“If you say so,” he says.

“I saw you last night, with your parents. After that nightmare of a flight. You were on the nightmare plane too; I mean, that was pretty intense, you need a flight like that like you need a hole in the head, and then that whole *we’ve got no fuel left* stuff, I almost lost it when they said that.”

Man, why does she talk so much?

“I didn’t think the flight was *that* bad,” he says. “And it’s not a hotel, it’s a bed-and-breakfast.”

“Same difference.”

“My mother says it actually makes a big difference, that a bed-and-breakfast is actually more beautiful than a hotel.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.”

“Wait here,” she says, “I’m gonna run and grab something.”

“Will you get me something?”

“What do you want?”

“Something with cheese,” he says.

Heidi walks the five steps to the café and waits at the counter, why on earth did she strike up a conversation with that baby, and why did she blather on so much again, why is she always doing that, she actually prefers being alone, but her blabbing constantly gets in the way, she just enjoys talking to other people too much, or even to animals, and she just takes too much pleasure in deciding on who she talks to, and then he was just sitting there on the wall, so tantalisingly alone, and sitting around tantalisingly alone, that’s something she tends to like very much, and she has to talk with *someone* about the nightmare plane, so why not with people who happen to be sitting on a wall near her.

The guy behind the counter looks at her with empty eyes, she can’t tell if he has even seen her. She says “hello,” and though he doesn’t answer, he tilts his head to the side for some reason or another, so she orders something.

“One frappé, please. And something with cheese.”

The guys turns around and busies himself with a few things, she can’t quite see what he’s doing. Then he places a steaming black coffee on the counter and puts a croissant in a serviette next to it.

“Hm,” she says, “Thanks, I guess.”

She slaps a note on the counter, the guy takes the note and disappears. She goes back to the boy, his hair is glowing light red in the early light, it’s still tousled from his teenager sleep, he probably hasn’t even run his fingers through it to at least sort it out a little. His neck is long and smooth, he looks a bit like a baby swan, sitting there so light and thin and upright and shaggy; she sits next to him, gives him the croissant, and takes a cautious sip of her coffee.

“Thanks,” he says, “that’s really sound of you.”

“There was nothing with cheese,” she says.

“Whatever,” he says. “Sound anyway, a sound croissant.”

He smiles.

She smiles back.

“Didn’t you want something with ice and sugar and milk?”

“There was nothing with ice and sugar and milk.”

“Strange island,” he says.

She takes another sip of coffee, this time more courageous, it’s actually not that hot, and she says: “I’m Heidi.”

“I’m Vincent.”

“Vincent,” she says, “do you have a phone on you by any chance? For some reason I haven’t been able to find mine since last night.”

“What’s a phone?”

“Are you really asking that? Seriously?”

“Yeah,” he says, and rearranges his brow into a few touching wrinkles.

“Wow.”

Sara arrives at the breakfast room and sits down next to her husband at the table.

Next to her husband.

At the table.

In a corner beneath the window.

The table is covered with a blue-and-white patterned tablecloth, waves, the sea, something like that, faded, gauche, that fits, she thinks, but she doesn't think of grabbing something to eat from the buffet, oh yes, coffee, she thinks, but she feels exhausted from the shower, from getting up, from the night, in a minute, she thinks, I'll grab a coffee in a minute.

Marc is already done with breakfast, is sitting in front of a plate that's been picked clean, there had been a bread roll on it and an egg, she can see the traces, crumbs, shell, a bit of butter, a used knife, salt, beside the plate are a half-empty glass of orange juice and a half-full cup of coffee.

"Why aren't you sitting outside, in the courtyard, it's lovely there."

"Don't start with me," he says. "It's fine here."

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I look at my hands in the glow of the desk lamp. I never look in the mirror, but I often look at my hands. They've changed, they're all dried out, the skin almost crinkled like paper. I subtly move my fingers and notice again that the bones also seem to have dried out, or probably more the joints. They don't move as quickly as they used to, my middle finger in particular doesn't seem to want to follow the orders issued by my brain, instead it just hurts.

"What's with your hands?" asks the inspector, but not out of sympathy but because she wants to know everything, a mercilessness learned over millennia.

"I have arthritis in my rude finger," I say, and she says: "interesting."

"I dunno," I say. "There are more interesting things."

She has the face of a cold angel, her hair is shimmering, I reckon it glows in the dark. She grabs one of my cigarettes.

"Oh yeah? Like what?"