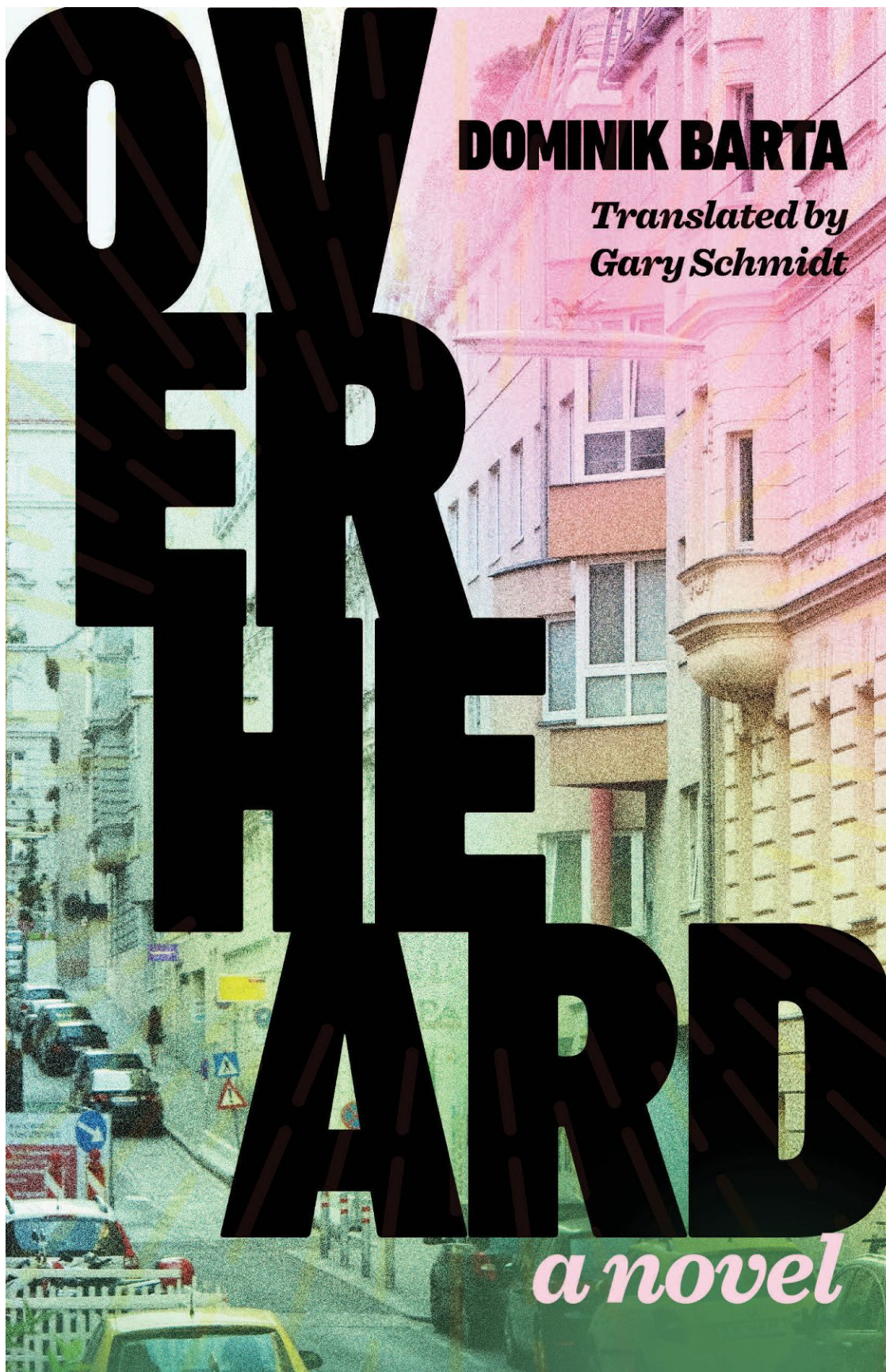


DOMINIK BARTA

*Translated by
Gary Schmidt*

LOVER

a novel



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Overheard

OceanofPDF.com

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Dominik Barta

Translated by Gary Schmidt

The University of Wisconsin Press

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For F.

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Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed.

—Henry David Thoreau

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Translator's Introduction

Gary Schmidt

Vienna, a bustling metropolis of just under two million people, lies nestled at the foothills of the Alps. The multinational legacy of the Austro-Hungarian empire lives side by side with the provincialism of rural Austria. Immersed in conversation or lost in their own thoughts, the characters of Dominik Barta's *Overheard* stroll past the Church of St. Charles Borromeo and through the gardens of Belvedere Palace, the winter residence of Prince Eugene of Savoy, who is celebrated for having secured Austrian hegemony in southeastern Europe after defeating the Ottoman Turks. In shifting pairs or alone, on foot or riding bicycles, these characters pass by the city's landmarks while remaining immersed in conversation or lost in their own thoughts. They stroll past the gilded statue dedicated to Vienna's "Waltz King," Johann Strauss, and through the immense Prater to the famous giant Ferris wheel. They pedal out into the Vienna Woods and beyond, into the idyllic landscapes of Burgenland, Austria's easternmost state.

Under the weight of such national emblems as the Habsburg Imperial Palace and St. Stephen's Cathedral, the Viennese go about their daily business whether their parents and grandfathers were born in Austria, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, or any of several other countries from which migrants arrived in the past decades. The push and pull between cosmopolitanism and xenophobia that plagues present-day Vienna is embodied in two figures from the city's past: Franz Joseph, the last Habsburg emperor and self-proclaimed protector of Austria-Hungary's diverse ethnicities; and mayor Karl Lueger, whose populist antisemitism was a source of inspiration for an aspiring young artist who, when he later turned to politics, railed against the city that had witnessed his failure. Two and a half decades after Adolf Hitler left Vienna, he returned as a conquering hero, having seized Austria without firing a shot. Jubilant throngs cheered him as he proclaimed the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria by Germany, on the Heroes' Square directly in front of Franz

Joseph's palace. Lueger was the cofounder of the Christian Social Party, not to be confused with the Austrian Social Democratic Party that ruled Vienna from 1919 to 1934, a period now known as "Red Vienna." While both parties shared a mistrust of capitalism and promoted municipal control of public services, Lueger's brand of Austrian Catholic nationalism was incompatible with the secular universalism of Marxist socialism that served as the ideological framework for the Social Democrats. During "Red Vienna," the Social Democratic municipal government undertook massive construction of public housing complexes like the Karl-Marx-Hof, which transformed the cityscape and provided clean, comfortable, and affordable homes to thousands of working-class families, including the parents of Barta's protagonist, Kurt Endlicher.

To assist readers on their walks with the characters through Vienna, a glossary of place-names and other terms has been provided. Vienna is divided into twenty-three districts, which are known to the Viennese by both their proper names and their assigned numbers. The First District is the original inner city, whose walls were torn down and replaced by a wide boulevard generally called the "Ringstrasse," which forms a circle around three-fourths of the old city. As Vienna expanded, towns outside the First District were incorporated and new districts were built to accommodate the growing working and middle classes. Simmering, the working-class Eleventh District from which Kurt and his best friend, Frederik, hail, lies two districts south of the original inner city. Kurt is a young gay man who has just moved into an apartment vacated by his aunt in Mariahilf (Sixth District), which, although just a short subway ride from where he grew up, is about as different from Simmering as Greenwich Village from Staten Island or Chicago's Boystown from Cicero. Adjacent to the First District and known for its bars, cafés, and clubs, Mariahilf is a popular place to live for Vienna's young people and the LGBTQ+ community. Yet, in spite of having moved to this oasis of queerness, Kurt is not yet completely comfortable in his own skin. He teaches German and English at a night school, where adult students, many of whom are migrants recently arrived in the country, complete an alternative path to a high school diploma. While Kurt's new apartment on Laimgrubengasse is in a cooperative building rather than in one of the municipal housing projects of Red Vienna, co-op rents are typically considerably less than comparable units offered on the private market because they are financed by a nonprofit organization that all

tenants must join. Kurt's at times hilarious interactions with his new neighbors challenge his and our preconceived notions of the building's residents, since initial encounters never reveal the complexities of lived histories and embodied experiences. Instead, neighbors' stories slowly take shape as details are filled in by different people, all of whom read each other's biographies through their own lenses.

The question of "who is an Austrian?" is hardly a new one. The dual monarchy over which Franz Joseph reigned was populated not only by German-speaking Austrians but by Hungarians, Czechs, Slovenians, Italians, Ukrainians, Poles, and many others. Many people from these groups became inner immigrants within the Empire, meaning they left the provinces for the capital. Any attempt to claim a purely "German" character to Vienna prior to the postwar Turkish and recent Middle Eastern migration is belied by a quick glance at a Viennese telephone directory, where thousands of last names attest to the Slavic or Hungarian lineage of many of today's Viennese, Dominik Barta's surname being one of them. Significantly, it was very often Austria's Jews who nurtured the German language even when living in far-flung corners of the realm where the local population was not German speaking. One notable example is the composer Gustav Mahler, born in Bohemia to German-speaking Jewish parents; after Mahler converted to Catholicism in 1897, the door was opened for him to become the director of the Vienna Court Opera (now Staatsoper, or State Opera). Ironically, it is Yasmina, a first-generation Austrian born to Lebanese parents, who is indignant when her husband, Frederik, blissfully falls asleep in this iconic opera house.

Perhaps an even more relevant product of migration to the imperial capital is Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who almost always lurks somewhere in the background of any novel set in Vienna that deals with love, sex, and death. Barta's is no exception: although the novel is set in the decade leading up to 2015, when millions of refugees from Syria and other areas of the Middle East sought refuge in Europe, Freud's insights remain highly relevant, for the pursuits and follies of this colorful group of residents and newcomers can hardly be explained solely in terms of rational self-interest and clear-cut sexual identities.

Is Laimgrubengasse a kind of Viennese Barbary Lane? The English "lane" is one possible translation of the German *Gasse*, a word commonly

used in Vienna for a narrower street, as opposed to a *Strasse*, a more generic term used in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Barta's characters are just as lovably wacky as Armistead Maupin's in *Tales of the City*, but there is no Mrs. Madrigal to hold them all together, or perhaps there is. Frau Kord's secret may be different than Anna Madrigal's, but she has one. And for that matter, so do all the residents of Laimgrubengasse. Maupin's San Francisco and Barta's Vienna are both full of dreams, disappointments, hopes, and longings. And both the house on Barbary Lane and the co-op on Laimgrubengasse provide a safe space nestled within a glamorous but chaotic metropolis. Ultimately, Barta brings Vienna alive through the perspectives of his quirky characters in a way not unlike Maupin does for San Francisco. One can only hope that we will reencounter Kurt, Frederik, Yasmina, Regina, and the others in future volumes.

A special thanks to Dennis Lloyd, Sheila McMahon, and the entire staff at the University of Wisconsin Press for bringing this delightful novel to English-speaking readers.

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It was shortly before eight in the morning when I moved in. In the days before, I had hauled away an old crate, painted the living room and bedroom, as well as the bathroom ceiling, and replaced the bed. I remembered the ever-present sounds of the elevator ascending and descending in the background from the time when the apartment belonged to my aunt. The soft hum of the elevator cab didn't bother me. If the iron exit door squeaked too loudly, the custodian would oil the hinges, and only its airy swing remained audible. My aunt had lived here for thirty years. After her retirement, she went back to Burgenland, where she had been born and raised. It was said that Vienna had become unbearable for her.

All in all, I liked the furnishings. After a thorough cleaning that dragged out until the evening, I stretched out my legs on the sofa under the skylight. Of all my aunt's furniture, the sofa was the most beautiful. It seemed to have been custom-made for the apartment from rounded pieces of cherry wood and was upholstered in red. An adult could lie on it comfortably if they bent their knees slightly or let their feet hang over the armrest. The view was of the building facades across the street. The September sun streaked the highest window sills, the sloped roofs, chimneys, and satellite dishes. Traffic noise and children's voices wafted up from the street below, Laimgrubengasse. The elevator started moving from floor to floor. Around seven o'clock, the elevator door opened, and I heard a key being inserted into a lock next door. The sound of someone noisily clearing their throat echoed through the hallway. I was amazed at how distinctly I could hear the stranger's footsteps in my own living and dining space. A door opened, someone passed water, and I heard a gush from behind the wall. A short while later, the whole wall seemed to start whistling, as if a soft train or a little ship were crossing the apartment. I didn't know what to make of it. For distraction, I turned up the radio but then surprised myself by immediately lowering the volume again to a very moderate level.

The interior walls of the bedroom and foyer, as well as the bathroom and living space, nestled at a right angle around the elevator shaft and the

neighboring apartment. The bed was placed under the second skylight, which also looked out on the street. My aunt had been content to the end with a mattress that measured thirty-two by seventy-eight inches. The skylight was wide open, and the night air was warm. The howling of the waterpipes in the adjacent apartment subsided, and the footsteps receded. For the entire evening, I had obsessed over the way sound carried in the apartment. In spite of my exhaustion, I couldn't rest. Perhaps I slept or dozed a bit. But shortly after midnight, all dreams came to an end, for a barking cough ripped through the wall. The cough was interspersed by periods of throat-clearing and wheezing.

Seven hours after moving in, I already disliked the garret. For eight years, I had dreamed of getting rid of my roommates, and after eight years, I finally succeeded in renting my own small apartment. But once again, I was not alone. From beyond the wall, the human stirrings spilled over too clearly. It wasn't just the intrusive sound of footsteps, urination, and throat-clearing that bothered me. What distressed me even more was imagining how someone else was listening to *me*. I turned to the left, and the bed creaked. I fetched a glass of water from the bathroom, and the parquet floors clattered. I listened to the horrendous coughing and was horrified by the thought that all my own bodily noises, whether of pleasure or pain, would likewise have an audience. Next door, the water pipes were whistling. It was one thirty in the morning, and the neighbor was rummaging around in his or her bathroom. A new barrage of coughing, wheezing, and spitting was unleashed. I covered my ears, but to make matters worse, an annoying sense of responsibility began to overtake me. Should I run over there? Was he or she choking? Luckily, things slowly quieted down.

The following day, I put off the encounter, but I had to address this with the neighbor before my blood started boiling or I began to regret the move. You have to confront problems head-on. It was not possible to assign a gender based on the coughing, wheezing, and footsteps, and not knowing whether a man or a woman was using the toilet next to me bothered me. Regardless, the person was a monster. Their footsteps were too loud, their cough gruesome, and their defecation brazenly impertinent. The louder they coughed, the stiller I became. And the stronger my feeling of being out of place, which should have abated by then. I wanted to feel at home here. The neighbor, whether man or woman, hacked up mucus every half hour,

followed by what was indisputably the sound of lip-smacking. I had ended up living next to the most vulgar person in the world. Shortly before noon, a plate fell on the floor. I took courage, sprinted into the hallway, and pounded on the door with my fist.

I grew up in Simmering, Vienna's Eleventh District, on Enkplatz. When I had just finished the fourth grade, my mother started working full time in a sporting goods store on the main street of the Landstrasse District. My father was a trained carpenter who had, since the nineties, worked on the assembly team for a showroom of a Swedish furniture company on the south side of Vienna. In the afternoons, I had the apartment all to myself. The first few years, I enjoyed the quiet. I ate at school then walked home and wandered through the silent rooms. I rummaged around in my parents' nightstands, sniffed at my mother's clothes or rifled through her purses. I lay down on the bed, daydreaming and fantasizing as I felt my body come into bloom. In the living room, I listened to music on my father's stereo for hours at a time. I had very good grades in English because I knew all of R.E.M.'s lyrics by heart and could translate them into German: "Losing My Religion," "Everybody Hurts," "Shiny Happy People," "Nightswimming," and so forth. Only Frederik could penetrate my autistic Mondays or Wednesdays and entice me to come outside. He lived in the next block. We had known each other since nursery school and had attended elementary school together. He was my neighbor and my very best friend.

Frederik's mother was an elementary school teacher. His father worked as a bus driver for Vienna city bus lines. Frederik's mother had a soft spot for doctors and science. My father, who spoke exclusively Viennese dialect, was obsessed with foreign languages. So Frederik and I, or our parents, rather, chose two different high schools, and therefore the two of us didn't see each other sometimes for several days. In reality, though, we were always together. He would dash over to my house or I to his, or we'd talk on the phone, which annoyed our parents. As soon as we were allowed to stay out later in the evening, we formed a new, even closer bond. Our school circles intermingled, above all because Frederik was a big hit with the girls. I attended the modern languages branch of the *Gymnasium* in Boerhaavegasse. Frederik was in Simmering, at the math and science high school. Sometimes I'd take two or three girls from my class with me to El Mariachi on Rennweg, where we played pool in the evening. That always

resulted in a longer acquaintance, for without exception, all the girls found Frederik desirable. My best friend's attractiveness filled me with pride. Only sometimes it was laced with jealousy. Above all, when one of the girls succeeded in going out with Fredrick. In such cases, I immediately felt his absence and would terrorize him and his parents on the phone and make fun of him in our circle of friends. Luckily, Fredrik only sporadically went out with his female admirers. In spite of his good looks, he was shy by nature. Most of the time, he would fall in love with a very specific girl, stubbornly and silently holding onto the idea for months. It would never have occurred to him to even look at the girl, let alone speak to her. Only I knew about his innermost passion, but sometimes not even I was privy to his top-secret obsession.

That's how it came to be that I was the first to have sex. At the end of seventh grade, we went to the Czech Republic with our acting troupe. We spent four days in an isolated hotel rehearsing a new play. After dinner, the teacher let us do what we wanted until ten o'clock. Renate and I were sitting on a wooden bench looking into the twilight. We had bought a bottle of wine that immediately got us buzzed. Renate scooted closer and kissed me. She was two years older and was expected to play the lead role. I think she liked the fact that I blushed, trembled, and hardly knew what to say. She took me by the hand and led me to her room. She got undressed, then undressed me, and I stared at her large white breasts. She took care of everything else calmly and confidently. We probably finished in four minutes, or let's say I finished. Three days later, I was sitting in Herder Park with Frederik and told him about it. Frederik couldn't hear enough about it and asked for hundreds of intimate details that I could not provide. I could only remember the warm feeling.

Kids were clamoring past the fountain. Rakish boys climbed up on the naked stone lady to copulate with her. One airplane after another came in for a landing over our heads. Fredrik put his arm around me, and we sauntered shoulder to shoulder back to Enkplatz. The last days of vacation were upon us, and I was happier than I had ever been in my life. Yet, deep down, I was choking on the truth. In the twilight, with the scent of Frederik's cologne in my nose, almost cheek to cheek with his beautiful face, I sensed more clearly than ever that Renate didn't mean a thing to me.

While he was completing his required civil service with Emergency Medical Services, Frederik started going out more and more often with coworkers. They frequented the bars on Schwedenplatz, and one night, Soraya fell into his arms. Frederik accompanied her home. She lived in the Second District, on Zirkusgasse. Under a blooming cherry tree, they kissed each other on the mouth. Two weeks later, Soraya had her apartment to herself. I could sense the excitement in Frederik's voice. He wanted me to come over to check his outfit. I pretended I had to help my father. The next day, I was both turned on and outraged by his description of the evening. He took Soraya home with him and introduced her to his parents. I had the honor of meeting her before that. As anyone would expect, Soraya was gorgeous. The three of us spent an evening together that Frederik thought was marvelous. I was so jealous I couldn't sleep. During the next few days, Frederik called a hundred times to compare notes with me. He wanted to go with Soraya and me to the movies or for pizza or to El Mariachi to play pool. My mother couldn't understand why I didn't take his calls. Frederik rang the doorbell. I asked my mother to make up a story, and she shook her head. A day later, I was turning the corner into Sedlitzkygasse in the afternoon to buy a Twix at Herr Bastug's store. Frederik jumped out of a doorway and pushed me against the wall. "What's going on?" He looked at me in a way I had never seen before. We sat on a bench in Herder Park, and Frederik got more and more unfriendly.

"What are you thinking? That you are the only one who can screw around with girls? Are you crazy? I have never been this mad at you in my life. Soraya thinks you don't like her. But you are going too far. I love her. Am I supposed to lose her because of you? I don't know what you have against her. You're a selfish asshole."

His voice was cold. I got up and ran away. I didn't want Frederik to see how my whole body revolted. We didn't exchange a single word with each other for a year and a half.

I was so nervous, my palms were sweating. I was afraid my nervousness would mask my anger and I would come across as a buffoon. I heard a shuffle behind the door, accompanied by throat-clearing. I felt the knot of negativity inside me tightening. I felt quite capable of unleashing my opinion on him. The monster was probably already peering at me through the peephole. I put on a nasty face. A key was inserted in the lock, and the

door swung open. My hatred imploded instantly, and I shifted back and forth on my feet. My neighbor looked directly at me with a smile.

“Ja, bitte? What can I do for you?”

He wore his salt-and-pepper hair combed back. His long legs were clad in blue trousers. His white shirt was a little too large and hung over his belt. He had fine masculine facial features. The spicy scent of his aftershave enveloped him in a fragrant cloud. I estimated he was around sixty.

“I wanted to introduce myself . . .” My mouth had frozen over and refused to open. “My name is Kurt Endlicher. I live next door, since yesterday.”

My neighbor raised his eyebrows. His amazement seemed genuine and natural.

“Really? I had started to wonder. Are you acquainted with Frau Resetarits? The apartment has been empty for so long.”

I nodded and briefly explained the arrangement between me and my aunt.

“I’m Paul Drechsler. I’m sorry. If I had known that you had moved in . . .” He smiled. His friendliness was tinged with embarrassment. “I’ve been dropping everything because I’m in a hurry. I’m supposed to be at the doctor’s in twenty minutes. I just can’t shake this cough. I imagine you’ve noticed.” He smiled again, and his body language asked for forgiveness. We said goodbye, and I returned to my apartment, bewitched.

Three days later, there was a knock on my door. Through the peephole, he looked even slimmer.

“It occurred to me that I still have tokens for the washing machine. But since I bought my own two years ago, I don’t need them anymore. Can you make use of them?”

I nodded. With his left hand, he waved away my question about what I owed him.

School started the following week. When I came home late in the evening, the first thing I registered was the presence of my neighbor. I was still hearing his pacing back and forth, but it didn’t bother me anymore. His visit to the doctor seemed to have made an impact, and his coughing had ceased. Only his throat-clearing remained. When I lay down exhausted on the red sofa to watch the evening news, the whistling of his pipes, the slamming of his drawers, and even the flushing of his toilet gave me a

warm and fuzzy feeling. Then I would drop a book on the floor, slam a cup down in the cupboard, or scrape a nail across the wall we shared.

We started helping each other out. If I was out of sugar or coffee or needed a hammer, I went out to the hallway and knocked on his door. About a year after I moved in, he presented me with the spare key to his apartment. The third tenant on our floor was never home, a journalist or photographer or writer who spent most of the year in Africa. After handing over his key, my neighbor came over to ask me for an even more intimate favor. He wanted to visit his son for three weeks and asked if I could water his plants while he was away. I nodded, so on a Tuesday around noon I found myself back in his apartment. It was a strange feeling. I took pains to avoid even the slightest indiscretion. He had shown me which pots had to be watered, and I did not stray one step from the path between them. Nevertheless, I couldn't avoid speculating. I had to cross the hallway from the kitchen to the living room, and there was a large photo hanging in this hallway of my neighbor as a young man. His face nestled against an attractive woman. The photo radiated warmth and happiness. For a long time, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

After completing my civil service, under no circumstances did I wish to continue living with my parents, so I looked for a shared apartment. Within the course of a year, I lived with guys from Vorarlberg and France, women from South Tirol and Carinthia, and a whole lot of Upper Austrians. Since Frederik's parents and mine were friends, I found out that he and Soraya had moved into an apartment together in the Second District. But they broke up, and now Frederik was looking for a roommate so that he could pay the rent. Our parents were convinced that this roommate should be me. I refused, but my mother would not stop asking what had happened between me and Frederik. I found myself incapable of giving her an answer. My parents considered renting shared apartments to be an absolute waste of money, and my father refused to cover the cost. "You have a free room in Simmering. If you prefer sharing a foul-smelling apartment with backwoodsmen, then you'll have to finance it yourself." I took a job and waited tables on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays on Burggasse, always in the evening. My German and English studies at the university were off to a slow start.

After my first year of college, I had the opportunity to spend the summer in London. Through back channels, I had landed an internship at a language school there. Eric Prydz's cover of "Call on Me" filled our ears in the discos and clubs. We did a lot of speed, since it was cheaper than beer. Toward four in the morning, our invisible and visible barriers fell. A young man who looked Ethiopian danced his way toward me. He grabbed my ass. Years of fears and inhibitions went up in smoke. We found a dark corner between the bathroom and coat check. Toward seven o'clock, we emerged, squinting in the sunlight. Londoners had long since started their daily routines. After a kiss, Noel disappeared among the passersby, trash bins, and cars. I called up Frederik. In spite of the early hour, he picked up immediately. His voice was more familiar to me than anything in the world. It was the voice of my youth, of Enkplatz, Herder Park, El Mariachi, my first love. Two weeks later, Frederik visited me in London. We spent a frenetic reunion weekend together. Sigmund Freud writes that discovery actually means rediscovery.

Frederik was in medical school, following the career aspiration his mother had instilled in him since childhood. In his third year, he met Yasmina. Her parents were from Beirut. She had grown up in the affluent part of the Eighteenth District. They lent each other books, saved spots for one another in the hospital reading room, and coordinated their internships. In the evening, they'd grab Lebanese, Italian, or Japanese food together. Frederik gave up his apartment in the Second District and moved in with Yasmina on Porzellangasse. His stubborn way of loving hadn't changed. He latched onto Yasmina and adored her. He cared far less about partying than I did. When the three of us did end up going out together, we all basked in the glow of his happiness. I, too, loved Yasmina, because she helped me overcome my embarrassment. At the disco, she'd give me a furtive wink when a man caught her attention. We'd dance over in his direction and check the incoming signals. Yasmina's gaydar was spot-on. The best-case scenario was a bit of flirting or making out, or even a night in a strange bed.

Unfortunately, my college years went by very fast. As time went on, my parents softened and increased my monthly allowance, so I only had to wait tables two days a week and could afford better lodgings. I changed addresses multiple times. Frederik and Yasmina graduated from med school in record time, and both got jobs working in internal medicine at Vienna General Hospital. After their first year, Yasmina's parents helped them to

move up a floor to a 1,300-square-foot penthouse apartment. They had a picture window above their bed the likes of which I had never seen in my life. I, too, finally finished my degree in education and, after an almost two-year job search and a worldwide financial crisis, I found a permanent position at the Commercial Academic Evening School on Margaretenstrasse. At the age of twenty-nine, I had the means at my disposal to rent a small apartment. Around that time—how could you forget it?—a young Austrian politician posted online that “owning property is the best measure young people can take against poverty in old age.” In Simmering, we realized that yet another idiot had made it into the cabinet.

My mother pulled out all the stops with her sister. With me as a tenant, there would be no hassles, she assured her. Pretty soon, my aunt overcame her embarrassment at the idea of taking money from her nephew. On the contrary, she was shrewd enough to make a profit on the arrangement. “By all means,” she stressed, “but I am not Mother Teresa from Calcutta.” We agreed on a fair rent, one high enough to satisfy my aunt’s greed but sufficiently reasonable to be a good deal for me. She handed over the 365 square feet of the garret to me for four hundred euros a month, furnished.

Frederik was hardly convinced.

“What on earth is this? There is so little space that the bed is almost in the hallway. Two people cannot live here. . . . It’s high time you looked for a real apartment!”

I pointed out to him that it was difficult for a single person to cover the cost of an apartment. My monthly salary didn’t equal what two doctors made.

“But I’ve been telling you for ten years: look for a husband! You’re smart, lovable, and good-looking. Why are you always alone? It’s bad for your health.”

Defending myself against the sting of his words, I answered, “But I don’t live alone. I live with my neighbor Herr Drechsler, and I . . . we get along extraordinarily well.”

Frederik shook his head. “What’s that supposed to mean? Herr Drechsler is an old fart. He’s thirty years older than you, and there’s a wall between you. Have you forgotten that he’s your neighbor? He doesn’t live *with* you; he lives next to you.”

I had grown more and more fond of Herr Drechsler. Basically, I knew nothing about him or only as much as could be gleaned from his furnishings, noises, and polite chats. We didn't talk about our private affairs. We addressed each other as Herr Drechsler and Herr Endlicher. If we met at one of our doorways, then there was a concrete reason for it, and we got straight to the point. But I knew that he lived alone. True, there was an exquisite photo of a happy couple in his foyer, but I could hear him going to bed alone and getting in the shower alone in the morning. On Saturdays, he listened to *Radio Diagonal*, and Sundays he watched Formula 1 Racing. He was a civil servant; he hadn't revealed anything more specific to me than that. I had told him that I taught German and English. Beyond that, we avoided talking about anything private. Sometimes when I heard him peeing or blow-drying his hair or brushing his teeth, I would press my hand and cheek against the warm bathroom tiles and quietly wish him good night.

My father had suffered for years from back pain and couldn't lift or move anything heavy. The Swedish furniture company granted him a generous retirement package when he turned sixty. He had barely retired when he took over the housework. My mother was only working half days at the shop, and she enjoyed relinquishing the responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping. Both of them were in good health, leaving aside my father's back problems. They no longer buckled under the stress of their jobs. The fear of losing social status no longer had such a tight grip on them. Basically, thanks to the Austrian state pension system, for the first time in their lives they experienced carefree, even happy days. I was the only source of concern for them. They had never really cared that I was gay. My parents weren't stupid. But now that their days had slowed down so pleasantly, they stubbornly longed for grandchildren.

In every conversation with my parents, they eventually homed in on the question of whether I would have children. Procreation had played a fateful role in their own relationship history. For a long time, they thought they were infertile. My birth, according to my parents, had been preceded by failed attempts, arguments, and despair. When I came into the world, I saved their marriage. The unrelenting gods took mercy on my parents only once. I was never to have siblings. After my stint in London, I squirmed for months. Then, one horrible afternoon, I bared my soul to them. They took it in stride. I didn't wear dresses or makeup. I had a deep speaking voice. I

had played soccer in Herder Park like all the other kids and even better than Frederik, for example. I had no problems growing a beard. My father's initial fears proved groundless. Yet, for them, the bleak future of homosexual relationships was a completely different kettle of fish.

"It's totally okay with me that you love men. I don't understand it, considering how beautiful women are. But go ahead! But apart from sex, how do you plan to live your life? How can you pair up with a man when you both know that nothing can ever come of it? That's what I can't comprehend." I could see the love and compassion in my father's face. He took my plate, groaning as he bent over to put it in the dishwasher. My mother handed me a cup of coffee and gently stroked my hair. They didn't sense, didn't know, or didn't want to know how hurt I was by their questions.

My father wrapped the leftover schnitzel in aluminum foil. I emerged onto Enkplatz with my schnitzel and ambled to the streetcar. Back at my building on Laimgrubengasse, I waited in vain for the elevator and then trudged up the stairs. There was a commotion on the fourth floor. People were crowding the corridor between the elevator and the stairs. I recognized most of the faces. A woman sobbed, and a man gently put his arm around her shoulders. An apartment door was open, and there were wood splinters on the floor. EMTs in red uniforms were filling out paperwork. I put on a friendly but overwhelmed face and tried to push through the crowd. Then I saw my neighbor standing in the doorway of the open apartment. His face was red. I went toward him to say hello. It was obvious that he had been crying. Herr Drechsler briefly took my hand then released his grip to disappear inside the unfamiliar apartment. I raced up the stairs to the sixth floor and sat down at a loss in the kitchen. The damned schnitzel was giving off an unsavory odor. An hour later, there was a knock on the door. My neighbor's polite, elegant appearance had vanished. He asked if he could come in and then sat down at the table. Without much ado, he started talking: "Margit Seiler died, apparently from a stroke. She collapsed in her kitchen during lunch. She was warming up a goulash in the microwave, luckily. Frau Kord heard the thud and, wondering what had happened, went out to the hallway to knock on the door. The EMTs couldn't do anything more for her. Did you know Margit?"

I shook my head.

“I knew her very well. We’re almost the same age. She spent almost her entire life in this building, always on the fourth floor. My wife and I moved in in 1979. She was already living here. Cooperative apartments were highly sought after. She, too, was married. But in 1980 or 1981, I don’t remember exactly when anymore, her husband, a long-distance truck driver named Erich Seiler, got in an accident. He was a burly guy, always ready with a joke and a helping hand, but he was often away on one of his long trips. He died on the road in a traffic accident somewhere near Milan . . .” My neighbor asked for a glass of water. “Margit worked in a pastry shop in the First District. Last year, she retired. Apparently she was having problems with her legs from all that standing around in the shop. Although many people frequented the store, she stayed single all these years. I’m sure there were one or two regular customers who were interested in Margit, but after her husband’s death, she quit looking.”

My neighbor shot me a sad look. “Thank you for listening to all of this. I hope I’m not boring you. You must forgive me, I just need to talk to someone right now . . .” He took a sip of water.

“Margit was a beautiful woman. She always kept her chin up and went to work every day. Often even on Sunday. At that time I . . . umm, we . . . lived on the fourth floor. We . . . umm, I . . . only moved to the sixth later, when my son moved out, and my wife . . . In any case, at that time, we lived next to Margit on the fourth floor, and I used to go over quite often to keep her company in the evening. Or my wife would pick up a pastry from her that she had ordered. We felt sorry for her; she was suddenly completely alone. We often heard her sobbing during the night. In 1982, our son, Fabian, was born. Our boy screamed, and across the hall, Margit sobbed. That affected us. You have no doubt noticed that the walls here are very thin. You can hear everything, and Margit, no doubt, couldn’t sleep during many a night because she heard our child screaming, and she sat alone in the kitchen eating a watery soup. She loved her husband very much, and when he was dead, she couldn’t bear the separation.

“I don’t know the right way to say it, but at that time—maybe you can understand it, or maybe it defies understanding or even sounds like a cop-out—I was often at her place during that time helping her with odds and ends. We always invited her over for Christmas. Once we, meaning my wife and I, went on an outing with her to Lake Neusiedler. I would hook up her

new refrigerator or change light bulbs, things like that, and my wife would take her places in the car . . .” My neighbor stopped midsentence to make sure that I was still listening. “I simply grew very fond of Margit. I felt so sorry for her, with all her misfortunes and her fragile figure. The way she would go to work early every morning. The way she would wipe a few tears out of her eyes and walk to the streetcar, and the way she loved our boy. The way she would bring him a piece of gugelhupf or marble cake . . .” My neighbor paused for a moment. “In any case, with time, I loved Margit more than my wife. That’s what unfortunately happened.

“You mustn’t believe I didn’t love my wife. But my love for her paled a little next to my love for Margit, for whom I felt such great sympathy. And as our son grew bigger and bigger—he must be about your age, by the way—we couldn’t stay together anymore, and my wife left me. I was—how else can I say it?—in love with Margit. I didn’t choose to be; it just happened. I tried to repress it, but that was really hard, because, after all, Margit lived right next to us. She was our neighbor, and I saw her almost every day. My wife knew or at least sensed it, and in time our entire situation became unbearable. So my wife finally moved out and took the kid with her, and I moved into a smaller apartment on the sixth floor, and Margit stayed on the fourth. We greeted each other daily in the entryway. But after my wife had gone, my visits to Margit became less frequent. She didn’t want people in our building to talk. And she really was attached to her husband. Eventually our encounters were more and more rare, only in the stairway or at a building meeting. Finally, one day I was left with nobody, neither my wife nor Margit. Margit and I lived for thirty years in the same building but only just said hello to one another and nothing more. I only just found out from Frau Kord that Margit had retired last year because of her leg pain. And now she just up and died. Can you imagine that?”

I couldn’t imagine that. I didn’t know how to react to his story. To master my helplessness, I offered him a schnapps. We drank our little glasses of pear schnapps, then he took his leave. I lay awake thinking for a long time. I knew, or sensed, or just imagined that Herr Drechsler also lay sleepless just a few feet away from me. I couldn’t help thinking of the photograph in his foyer. The faces seemed so happy, the very picture of coupled bliss. Was it his wife or Frau Seiler in the picture? Or a third person whom I didn’t know because she had played no role in his story? I wondered how far my

neighbor had gotten with Frau Seiler. Had they ever kissed or slept together? In her apartment or in his? Did it matter? I didn't know. In general, I didn't know anything about love. The longer I lay awake, the more I succumbed to dark thoughts. On top of it all, my father's words were running through my head. He couldn't imagine how two men could live together. Nothing would ever come of it, as he put it. I basically thought the same thing. Grippled by a melancholy sleeplessness, I started to lose my bearings: How could any human being live with another one on a permanent basis, for days, weeks, months, years on end? I didn't know the answer, and my dejection robbed me of my sleep.

My make-out session with the Ethiopian guy in London was followed by additional ones in Vienna on Gumpendorferstrasse, on Karlsplatz, on Danube Island, on the Gürtel, and many other places. I ended up in more or less sexual encounters in bushes, coat checks, back rooms, and finally in bars, clubs, and rooms in shared apartments. But only on the rarest of occasions did I find myself at breakfast, let alone at a properly set dinner table in someone's living room with a parquet floor and bookshelves.

My fear of diseases quickly put the brakes on my desire. It didn't exactly help that my best friend was in medical school. I ran to the doctor for every little thing and had myself tested a thousand times over for HIV, syphilis, hepatitis, and genital warts. Seen in the light of day, I behaved as harmlessly as St. Casimir. A little petting, sometimes oral sex—without oral ejaculation, of course. I read the total existing corpus of internet literature, in English as well as German, about so-called precum and its associated risk of infection. Even a purely hypothetical possibility of infection invited panic. The thought of dying did not bother me, not in the least. But I did not want to envision going back to Enkplatz and eating schnitzel with my parents while I explained to them that I was HIV-positive. The fact that the virus had long since stopped killing people did not console me. The images from my youth were ineradicable. Tom Hanks surrendering to arias of despair. Freddie Mercury's or Rudolf Nureyev's hideous rashes. They had all perished from their perversion. God didn't like gays. Whoever committed sodomy had to expect the worst.

The less sex I had, the smarter I got. At the university, there was a queer student group where we talked exclusively about identity. The most important trick in the lengthy debates was to prove to someone else that

their thinking was not free of preconceived notions. The cleverest wisenheimers always found a bone to pick. “There!” they shouted, “you just used a stereotype!” If you used a stereotype, that meant you had committed a sin.

Thomas took part in one of these discussion sessions. With him, I developed for the first time something that could possibly be called a relationship. During the endless debates in the queer group, Thomas defied every stereotype, but after two or three beers, a joint, or an especially successful orgasm, the usual declarations came out of his mouth. We slept with and next to each other, either in his shared apartment or mine. We had breakfast and went to the university together. In the evening, we cooked spaghetti with pesto for each another. Unfortunately, after three months, I found out that Thomas wasn’t cooking spaghetti only with me but also with Rafael and Sebastian and Ferdinand, etc.

The sixteen hours of teaching at the Commercial Academic Evening School were demanding. On Saturday evening, I preferred to sit at home in the apartment and stare into the sky. Sometimes I would listen to R.E.M. again, like I used to. The unobtrusive presence of my neighbor emanating through the wall was exactly the degree of human company that I could best handle. Frederik was up in arms. “How can you be satisfied with that? Why did you go to the trouble to haul up that big bed? Why do you make such a big deal about being gay? There are a hundred thousand gay men in this city. Statistically speaking, every tenth person is gay. So what? Having a stoma, sitting in a wheelchair, lying in a trench, that’s bad!”

I didn’t know Frau Seiler, but her death affected me. I was even more affected by Herr Drechsler’s being affected. I hardly saw him anymore. I heard him loud and clear, coughing and weeping. Frederik scoffed, “You’ve gone crazy. What’s with all the moaning? It’s high time you went outside! All this suffering! What you need is someone to really fuck your brains out.”

And in fact, right at this time, a change took place. Three weeks after Frau Seiler’s death, her furniture was tossed out the window. Workers, one of them quite handsome, went in and out of her apartment. The last of the snow melted into dirty little piles. Then the new neighbor arrived and disrupted all of our lives.

My first encounter with her was on my doorstep. I wasn't expecting guests and assumed it was Herr Drechsler. "Are these yours?" From behind her back, she pulled out four ragged pairs of boxer shorts. I thanked her curtly. A few days later, I smelled her before I saw her. At the supermarket on Gumpendorferstrasse, a scent of perfume was lingering in the air. I couldn't figure out who it reminded me of. At the checkout, I put my coffee, butter, prepackaged ham, apricot jam, and three packs of extra-moist toilet wipes on the conveyor belt. The scent became intense. I turned around. Her eyes darted across the conveyor belt, and she greeted me with a raised eyebrow. I returned her greeting and packed my groceries as quickly as possible in my backpack. Once outside, I was still hot with shame. The toilet wipes were super embarrassing.

A week later, I was climbing the stairs up to my apartment. I wasn't even at the fourth floor yet when I heard her screaming, "Next time I'll call the police! Old pretentious geezer—I'm so mad, I could spit!"

I considered going back down to the third floor and taking the elevator, but she had already seen me and stuck her head out over the railing.

"You're a little bit too late. Two minutes earlier, and you would have seen how this loser tried to unlock my apartment. Is that perverse or what?"

Another door opened, and Frau Kord looked out to check on the situation.

"What's going on here? Who's doing all that screaming?"

"The moron tried to open my apartment door. He was messing around with different keys in my lock."

"Who? Him?" Frau Kord pointed to me.

"No. It was . . ." She pointed up to the fifth floor.

"Someone from the building? What did he look like?"

"Gray hair, greased-back, the monster. Another trick like that and I'll report him to the police!"

“If you need anything, I’m here . . .”

I, too, wanted to excuse myself, but the new neighbor needed a favor.

It was difficult to manage the chest. My fingers couldn’t get a firm grip on the smooth wood. They were sweating profusely and kept slipping. After several attempts, we lifted it onto the spot she had chosen for it. Her sneer gave way to an almost friendly cheerfulness.

“Thank you! It doesn’t block the light here. But the workers, those morons, didn’t listen to me . . .” She extended her hand. “I’m Regina.”

I wiped the sweat from my hands onto my pant legs. “I’m Kurt. I live on the sixth floor.”

“Yes, I know because of the underpants.”

I took a deep breath and moved toward the door, somewhat awkwardly. At the doorway, I noticed the big dark wet stains under my armpits. Regina didn’t take her eyes off me.

“Do you have plans for tomorrow? Why don’t you come by around eight for a beer?”

She put her hands on her hips. Her chin went up one or two centimeters.

“I’d love to,” I said, and my voice broke. She took a long stride and closed the door behind me with a gesture that was half wave and half throwing me out.

In the bathroom, I contemplated my naked torso. An empty chest made of thin pressboard had made me break out in a sweat. My father would have laughed at me. I washed my chest and armpits and cooled my face off. On the sofa, I tried to regain the upper hand. What did she want from me? Was she attracted to me? Why did I turn into a red-faced shithead in her presence?

Yasmina called. “Do you have time? I’m right around the corner from you. It’s urgent. Say in a half hour?”

Her voice sounded worried. We agreed to meet at Café Savoy. In the bathroom, I tried on three or four T-shirts. Frederik had given me cologne for Christmas that I sprayed myself with from neck to navel. While I was standing in front of the sink, I heard Herr Drechsler clearly. He was obviously also in the bathroom. He turned the faucet on and off several

times, talking to himself with an intensity I had rarely experienced. In the end, he swore louder than I had ever heard him do before.

Yasmina gave me a hug. We sat in the sunshine and each ordered an Aperol spritz. Against all expectations, she lit a cigarette. “Things aren’t going well. We are on separate night shifts right now to have some distance from one another. There is always stress on the ward, also because of the new construction in Floridsdorf. Everyone comes running to us. For several weeks, or even months, everything has been difficult. We fight every day. We automatically get on each other’s nerves without even saying a word. Or at least he gets on my nerves. You wouldn’t believe what kind of a doctor Frederik is. How he talks to people! A little joke here, a stupid remark there. He is so rude to some patients that I think he is going to get punched in the face. But no, people love him. For example, at least twice a month, the one-legged man comes. He has a heart murmur. He is proud that he takes the subway and arrives all on his own. ‘I don’t need to be rescued!’ he shouts at the nurses. His stink of wine makes you want to puke. At his last visit, Frederik secretly rigged his wheelchair so that he could only go around in circles. For over a quarter of an hour he tried to get to the elevator. Frederik and the nurses laughed their heads off. The one-legged guy was furious. Frederik fixed the wheelchair, and the one-legged guy laughed and said, ‘Thank you, Doctor! You are the best doctor in this fucking hospital!’

“Frederik is nothing but a doctor. When he’s not at the hospital, he just wants to lie around. Or he repairs his bicycle. Cycling and going for walks are the only things you can get him to do with you outside the house. He doesn’t go out at all anymore, as you’ve noticed. I can’t even remember the last time we went to the disco together. And you can’t get him to go to the movies or the theater either! Art openings or opera—forget it! Before Christmas, I couldn’t take it anymore. I wanted at least once in the year to experience a little culture. We never interact with reasonable people whose butts are covered. Every week, we push at least five dead people out of the ward. In such a situation, culture takes on a certain importance. You immerse yourself in art and drink a glass of prosecco so you don’t become a complete brute. I got tickets for us to *The Barber of Seville*. That’s truly not hard to digest. He fell asleep after the overture! That really gets on my nerves. He thinks he has the right to fall asleep in the Vienna State Opera! But when I see him getting this idea and falling asleep in the opera chair, I want to punch him in the face.”

Yasmina took a drag on her cigarette. “Please don’t think ill of me. We’ve been together for almost ten years. No man ever meant as much to me as Frederik, I swear it! But for a while now, it just hasn’t been working anymore, and I don’t know exactly why. But, you know, he’s becoming more and more of an ignoramus. The job is killing him. And he doesn’t even notice it. He thinks it’s enough to be a good doctor, nothing more. ‘I’m a doctor at the city hospital. I save lives for all the insurance companies. That should suffice.’ He doesn’t read books. He doesn’t read newspapers. He’s only interested in medical journals or bicycle magazines. Frederik knows all the latest valves for racing bike tubes. We have four racing bikes in the basement. He can tinker with a rear brake or the gear shift for two hours. But he has no idea what’s happening in the world. Trying to plan a vacation drives me crazy. For the last ten years, he has only wanted to go to Lake Atter. Everything else is too far away. But damn it, Lake Atter, you’re kidding me! Italy is too far away for him. Besides, it’s too hot for him there. I don’t even bring up Lebanon. ‘You don’t take vacations there. You get in trouble there.’ Tell me, how can you live with a man like that? And there is so much happening! Right now, the world is falling apart, and Frederik is oblivious.

“Do you at least know what’s going on in Beirut? Do you all know that there’s a war in Syria? Do you all know Syrians are fleeing to Beirut? There are already over a million of them there, and we’ve been at capacity with the Palestinians for a long time. Every day, somebody blows themselves up. My whole family is living in fear. The fucking war in Syria is a catastrophe. It’s destroying our country. Destroying everything for the hundredth time! But nobody cares here, including Frederik.

“He’d rather go for a walk in Vienna Woods or ride his bike to Hainburg. We started a Facebook page to raise attention to the situation. We are trying to exert pressure on social media so that the Europeans finally wake up. But Frederik doesn’t even have a smartphone. Do you get it? He’s driving me crazy?

“And you, you smell like him . . . do you two even have the same cologne now?”

Yasmina dug her nose into my jacket. She grabbed onto the material and buried herself in it. After a while, she crawled out and looked at me. She was still crying a little.

“How can you stand it with him?”

Her hair smelled like no man’s hair ever smelled. I pressed her against me.

“Should I talk to him?”

Yasmina hesitated. “No. On Monday evening, we’ll both be at home. I’ll take the matter into my own hands then.”

She lit another cigarette. “What are you doing today? Wanna go out with me? Like we used to? Among people?”

All that smoking clashed with her overall appearance. Her complexion was fresh. Her whole being taut and unbending.

“I’d rather not . . .” I stroked her wet cheeks. “I have a date tomorrow evening, and I’d like to be in shape for it.”

Yasmina smiled and insisted. She said she wanted to know everything. I shook my head. It was absurd to waste one more word on the so-called date. Only a clown like me would try to get attention in such a sordid way. I regretted having mentioned it.

The bars and restaurants between Gumpendorferstrasse and Mariahilferstrasse, overlooking Laimgrubengasse, were packed on Saturdays. Young people my age sat around everywhere, chatting on their notebooks and phones, wearing pastel clothes and big sunglasses. I couldn’t imagine looking like them. I went into a branch of my mother’s sporting goods store. Thanks to her, my father and I, and even my aunts, uncles, and cousins got a decent discount. Besides, I liked to wear sweat pants, partly because my students did. The Commercial Academic Evening School was attended by people who wanted not just vocational training but also a high school diploma. They were very focused and strong-willed individuals. Most of the time, they dragged themselves straight from work to class, which lasted from quarter past five to nine. They made a polite effort not to yawn incessantly. Many still had traces of motor oil on their hands or smelled of a deep fryer or hairspray. Unfortunately, I only taught writing classes. Correcting English or German essays was one of the most arduous of all my tasks. It often provided the obvious excuse to stay home on a Saturday evening. On the way home from the sporting goods store, I couldn’t help but notice that more and more middle-class Viennese were

also spending their Saturdays in sweat pants, and I was annoyed because I considered this ridiculous false advertising.

I threw my new jeans immediately into the washing machine because that had been hammered into me by my mother. “The most disgusting pigs come through our stores. You can find soiled underwear, sweaters white with dandruff, and used condoms in the changing rooms. Before you wear anything new, wash it!” I put my name on the list for the dryer.

“Nice to see you!” shouted Frau Kord. “How are you?” She put down her dirty laundry on one of the washing machines and came over to me. “What happened back there? Was the new lady talking about Herr Drechsler? I didn’t see anything. The way she described the alleged attacker I immediately thought it had to be Drechsler. Watch out for her! I heard exactly the way she treated the workers. She likes to boss people around. You don’t think she’ll report Herr Drechsler to the police, do you? Nowadays you get reported in the blink of an eye, just like that! Drechsler is unlucky with the ladies . . .” Here she laughed and shook her head. “Margit avoided him like the devil avoids holy water. She could tell his footsteps apart from anyone else’s in the house. If he was in the stairwell, she wouldn’t leave her apartment. Once she was at my place, and Drechsler knocked on the door. Margit immediately went and hid. I got rid of him and went into the living room. She was cowering behind the sofa like a child. ‘What a curse!’ she shouted. ‘What a curse to have to live in the same building with that man . . .’ You wouldn’t have thought her capable of such anger. She was such a dainty person . . .” Frau Kord filled the machine.

“Something happened between the two of them, something ugly. I have no idea. *I* think highly of him. At the funeral, I almost felt sorry for him. If he knew how Margit bad-mouthed him, he would not have cried that way. But stirring up the next conflict right away! That’s not smart. Be careful with the new lady! I don’t trust her as far as I can throw her. I wonder if she’s a bit cuckoo. That would be most unpleasant! If she reports me, too, God help her! People who get worked up about every little thing, always know better than you, run to the police about all sorts of nonsense—those people will get to know me! It’s a disgrace. The most beautiful apartment becomes a nightmare when a moron is living next to you. That’s the way it is, my dear, a fact is a fact!” Frau Kord poured detergent liberally into the machine.

“But how is your aunt? I haven’t heard anything from her for weeks. Did she misplace her telephone? Your aunt wasn’t cut out for the city. How often she talked about Burgenland! We would have a drink together now and then, did you know that? But that’s completely understandable! Without a husband, all alone, how can you stand that in the long run? Sometimes Margit would come over too, then the three of us old widows would laugh and laugh! Give her my best! I miss her a lot.” She took the empty basket and left.

Precisely at seven o’clock, *Radio Diagonal* ended. My neighbor looked awful.

“Would you lend me your iron, please?” I asked. Naturally, I didn’t usually iron Nike T-shirts and jeans. In fact, I had never ironed any clothes ever!

“Do you need the ironing board too?”

I declined. “The new tenant invited me over.”

Herr Drechsler handed me the iron. He seemed not to care about my date. Or he didn’t dare ask questions because we didn’t talk about private matters. I had reached my door when he cleared his throat.

“You mean the lady on the fourth floor?”

Relieved, I turned around. “She told me you tried to break into her apartment?”

Herr Drechsler smiled. “That’s true. I still had Margit’s spare key. I thought it would be appropriate to bring it back after thirty years. I didn’t know if the lock had been replaced or not. I knocked and rang four or five times yesterday. I don’t know myself what came over me. I just wanted to see whether the key still worked. Then she flung open the door and screamed at me, gave me a real dressing down! She threatened me with the police, and I ran away. Then I was ashamed.”

He wiped his hand across his mouth. The whole time, he was shaking his head lightly. “Please tell Regina that I’m sorry.”

Suddenly, he was agitated and paced around, distracted. Then he disappeared into his apartment without saying goodbye.

Regina invited me into the kitchen. She had set the table with two plates and silverware. An herby smell was in the air. My new pants felt tight when I sat down. I rubbed my hands several times over my thighs and avoided crossing my legs.

“We’re having fowl, if you don’t have anything against it . . . You aren’t a vegetarian, are you? You buy ham for breakfast.”

She put two bottles of beer on the table. We drank to each other’s health.

“It’s nice that you came! I am dying of hunger. Is it true you are a teacher? Frau Kord told me that.”

I answered affirmatively and took a healthy gulp of beer. Then I crossed my legs after all, which caused the hem of my pants to slide up, revealing my ankle and very hairy calf.

“I could sense right away you are a teacher. Teachers have an unmistakable habitus, the way they dress, talk, and carry themselves. What do you teach?”

“German and English, at the Commercial Academic Evening School of the Professional Development Institute, on Margaretenstrasse. What do you do?”

“I work in St. Marx, at the Institute for Biochemical Behavioral Research.”

She pulled a metal pan out of the oven. Potatoes, carrots, onions, and pieces of meat were sizzling in a rosemary sauce. She asked me for a trivet and pointed to a drawer.

“And what exactly do you do at this institute? Whose behavior do you all research?”

“My group’s focus is on the larger family of mice-like rodents. Voles, for example, exist in different species, with two being particularly interesting: the prairie vole and the mountain vole. Although both are voles, the prairie voles’ sexual behavior is completely different from that of their relatives, the mountain voles. It seems that the prairie voles live monogamously and faithfully, whereas the mountain voles are promiscuous and asocial. But why? What has caused this difference? We try to find out things like that.”

She bit into a chicken wing that she had picked up with her hands. “How is it?”

I nodded and finished drinking the first bottle of beer. Through gestures, we came to an understanding that I would get all further beers for myself from the refrigerator.

“Sexual behavior is a great mystery. Biologists and psychologists have not made one inch of progress in the 150 years since Charles Darwin. If anything, we’ve only gotten more tangled up in the weeds. We still don’t know to this day what the exact correlation is between neuronal-biochemical processes and sexual feelings. What is sexual arousal actually caused by? How do external and internal stimuli intersect? How can the sight of something cause arousal? Is arousal coupled with a vaguely present desire to reproduce? Is the vole really thinking of its reproductive success when it yields to the same or a different sexual partner? Why is the slutty mountain vole always measurably aroused by new partners and the well-behaved prairie vole isn’t? Apparently both strategies lead to acceptable results. But why does one rodent do it one way and the other do it another way? Is it the environment? Is it ultimately feelings that make the difference? But what constitutes the environment? And what are feelings? Does the prairie vole love its partner? Should we really consider this possibility?”

My efforts to look manly started to hurt. I felt my back tense up. Pushing your chest out as virilely as possible strains your back muscles. At the same time, all hope disappeared. I saw how ridiculous my attempt was to be someone else. She was a behavioral scientist and had very sharp eyes. She had deduced my eating habits from a brief encounter at the checkout. I was horrified by how a behavioral scientist would interpret the extra-moist toilet wipes. Her pressboard wall cabinet had soaked both of my armpits in sweat. She had long since discovered that I was gay and a sissy.

“Hormones, of course, play a substantial role in sex. That’s a truism. Hormones are biochemical substances that ensure communication between the individual organs in our body. The biochemical dimension of what is happening should neither be overvalued nor downplayed. It should be taken seriously. If we drink two more beers, our thoughts will be different than if we didn’t drink them. These modifications have biochemical causes. They don’t come from the autonomous mind, from capitalist culture, or from the Christian West. Humanists and philosophers also have to deal with them. Don’t you think so? And don’t you think this chicken tastes delicious? This

very minute it is being broken down into its chemical components in your stomach. In that way, this chicken that I cooked for you is changing your organism. Nothing gets lost. The materiality of the world is a self-contained system. I think in the end the humanities experts from your faction will have to admit that too, won't they? My father worked at the post office in Wolkersdorf. He knew full well that it takes two legs made of flesh and blood for a message to get through.

"We're from Langenzersdorf on the Bisamberg. Our garden is narrow but goes way back and up the slope. I was there two days ago. The apple trees are almost in bloom. In the summer, we have cherries and figs. The climate on the mountain is mild. That's why the vineyards thrive there, all the way to Stammersdorf. We have currants, elderberries, and hazelnuts. On the right side along the path there are raised beds with lettuce and vegetables. The grape vines are everywhere. Next to the beds, there is a small chicken coop and a pen with geese. When we were still little, my sister and I would play all afternoon with the young geese. Behind the rabbit hutch, further up behind a gate, there were pigs. We don't have pigs anymore, because my parents don't have the heart to slaughter them. But throughout my childhood, my father always had piglets that he sold. There is nothing in the world more adorable than a piglet. We loved all animals, not just the dogs. That's how we grew up, my sister and I. The chicken you are eating is from our garden! Another beer?"

She took me to be a member of the humanities faction. Regina instinctively assigned me not to the athletic field and weight room but to the classroom and library. She assigned me to the Judith Butler faction to let me know that she had long since figured out I was gay. I was finding her more and more creepy. I observed her and noticed how she was observing me too. It was obvious. She was the one for whom a teacher's habitus had become second nature! She liked to hear herself talk. Without being asked, she explained the exact structure of her laboratory, where she obtained the mice and where the dead mice were disposed of. But the whole time she was examining me. To make matters worse, the beer kept flowing. The beer at least had the effect of hiding my own lunacy from me. The more I drank, the more susceptible I was to the idea that I had the ability to be very manly. Regina got up to put the empty pan back in the oven. She wanted to make space. In doing so, she bent down and pushed her butt toward me for two seconds. I actually grabbed my crotch at that moment. The heat in the

kitchen had risen considerably, and condensation from the warm air fogged up the windows. My manliness demanded that I finally say something, offer a reply, steer the conversation the way I wanted it to go, or finally take the wind out of the sails of this oh-so-clever researcher.

“And what about your mother?” I tried to put on a sophisticated face.

“My mother? My mother is Greek! Can’t you tell?” She batted her eyelashes. She seemed a little tipsy, although I had come to think her capable of anything.

“My mother showed us how to kill chickens and pluck them. You pour hot water over them. After they are dead, of course. Then you carefully pull feather after feather from the skin. My mother had many jobs. The last one was as a public librarian in Langenzersdorf. Every summer we went to Athens—to be more exact: Piraeus.”

“Do you speak Greek?”

“Absolutely! Not flawlessly, but really quite well.”

“What do you mean by ‘my faction’? What faction do I belong to, in your opinion?”

“I returned to Vienna five months ago from the States. There is a lot of research going on related to sexual neurotransmitters at the Institute of Behavioral Sciences in Philadelphia and at other American universities. In the United States, you can find people who attribute the entire human essence to genes and proteins. In their eyes, ‘personality’ is just biochemistry’s little sidekick, and the soul is an anachronism from old Europe. Opponents argue just as strongly from a culturalist position. For example, the difference between masculine and feminine, according to this position, is based in culture, not biology. You are not a man because you have masculine sex cells but because you have been indoctrinated by culture, by the media, and by discourses. Significantly, this position is not taken seriously by real scientists but more by pedagogues, philosophers, German or English professors, people like you . . .”

I nodded, although I wasn’t sure whether to take offense at the last statement or not. I almost wanted to bring up the lengthy identity debates from my queer student group. Hadn’t she just resorted to fourteen stereotypes? I bit my tongue. How could I explain having been in a queer student group? Because something was wrong with my male sex organs?

Because they were aroused at the sight of the wrong stimuli? Wrong in what sense? In any case, a Greek woman's butt did nothing for them, unfortunately.

"Oh, well, I never paid much attention to those things. I'm not a German professor; I'm a teacher. I teach electricians and fitness trainers. I show them how to pass the German exam for their high school diploma. That makes sense to me. The concept of femininity, the discourse of masculinity and so on is not so important to me."

My lie was so egregious that I blushed for a moment. Regina had a new idea: "If it's okay with you, I'll roll us a joint."

I couldn't ignore it. Her fingers measured out the tobacco and sprinkled weed over it. She ran her tongue over the paper. All the while her left knee bumped more and more often against mine. I couldn't possibly make myself believe it was unintentional.

"That's nonsense that only a man could utter. The difference between male and female is the crucial difference in the biology of mammals. Our entire body has evolved around this difference. It is the differential between sex cells that keeps the body's form in flux. That's where its diversity comes from. Sexual selection is the reason people on this planet all look so different. You sleep with thirteen women a year and think nothing of it. But we women pay dearly for your carelessness. So we think it over very carefully, check for the tiniest of differences, we *choose*. For only we bring new life into being. Biology is the business of females. You men like to flap your jaws. But in the long run, the world is formed according to women's wishes. That's the way it is, my dear. That's a fact."

Regina got up and waved me into the living room.

"Shall we make ourselves comfortable?"

When I got up, I could feel my buzz. Music by St. Germain was coming from the living room. Regina and I were approximately the same age. The sofa was white or beige, wide and comfortable. Regina stretched out her arms and legs. She seemed contented. The joint was on the table. A candle flickered next to the ashtray. I looked for a glass so I could drink some water. Then nature called, and Regina shouted directions to the toilet over the music. I locked myself in and sat down so I didn't spray everything with my male stupidity. Why had she said that I slept with thirteen women a year? Why was she messing with me? Was she homophobic after all? Was

she making fun of gays because they disrupted biological processes? And why was she bumping her knee against mine? Or was I imagining it all because I hadn't been intimate with anyone for two years, because I could only hallucinate physical closeness?

And yet I felt comfortable with Regina. Everything became easier with her. Her voice was full of mockery but still kind. Living with her had to be nice. She knew how to pluck chickens. She had studied in the US. She hauled wall cabinets like my father without batting an eyelash. Instead of voles, she should research human homosexuality. Why did such a useless thing as homosexuality exist? Why wasn't I able to give pleasure to a half-Greek woman? Why couldn't I live with a woman like my father, Frederik, and most other men? I flushed, cooled my neck, and dried my hands.

"We grow the weed at the institute. It's a special strain. You'll be hooked. It's mild and calming. I assume you are a non-smoker, am I right?"

I smiled. "You know everything about me. You are only asking out of politeness, am I right?"

Regina held a lighter to the joint. "Your clothes don't reek of smoke. I've never seen you with a cigarette. Your teeth are white. It's all obvious. What's not visible, I don't know. But what's visible, I take note of."

"I'm supposed to give you a message from my neighbor. He apologizes for what happened yesterday. He is really sorry."

Regina passed me the joint. "Your neighbor is a strange bird. Something is wrong with him. There's a darkness in his eyes. He has a secret." She frowned.

"My neighbor is a truly lovely person. I would like to marry him."

Regina's facial expression became more and more comical.

"Really?" She stared at me. She seemed to be struck by something. Her face came closer and closer to mine.

I remembered when St. Germain could be heard in every bar and nightclub. Frederik and I partied and drank until dawn. We fell asleep on the 71 night bus. At the Central Cemetery, the driver threw us out. Frederik became adventurous. He sniffed at the air and perked up his ears. We slipped through a hole in the fence onto the grounds of Neugebäude Palace across the street. Tulips and hyacinths were glistening with dew. Someone was smoking weed under a tree in bloom. Frederik, whose inebriation

shooed away some of his shyness, sat down next to a girl. Somewhere, a bass throbbed persistently. I sat on the grass next to Frederik. Two eyes lit up across from me, and a guy zoomed in on me. “What a night!” he said several times. He rocked back and forth in rhythm. Frederik and the girl kissed each other on the mouth. The guy handed me a joint, and suddenly I clearly heard the voice from St Germain’s “Rose Rouge” singing *I want you to get together* over and over again. The guy laughed at me. The soles of our shoes touched. The sun rose behind the wall. *I want you to get together —put your hands together*, sang the voice. But damned as I was, I didn’t budge.

Between songs, the rustling of the crowds outside welled up through Regina’s window. At the end of Laimgrubengasse, there was a gay bar and a restaurant. Up on Gumpendorferstrasse there was a solid line of night clubs. She had leaned her head on my shoulder, and the crown was right beneath my eyes. I pressed my chin on her hair and kissed her forehead. She sat up. She pushed her pelvis toward me and shoved a bent leg between my back and the back of the sofa. She placed her other leg in front of my chest, right above my crotch. We laughed the whole time, and the laughter was warming. The weight of her knee somehow stimulated my penis. Or maybe it was the incessant laughter that caused my pelvic muscles and diaphragm to vibrate. She blew a lock of hair out of her face. The joint was running low. We gripped the filter more and more carefully so as not to burn our fingers on the embers.

I lay down exhausted on the sofa, sipped on my beer and watched the late news on my laptop. The newscaster reported a serious bomb attack with 71 dead and 124 injured in the Nigerian capital city, Abuja. The chief suspect was the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram. The doorbell rang, and my ill humor reached its limit. Sunday had not been sufficient to get me back on my feet. I hadn't done so many drugs since college. My students, generally good-natured, could easily sniff out any possible lack of self-restraint. If the teacher was unmotivated or showed weakness, they would intentionally slough off. They came late to class, stayed glued to their cell phones defiantly, and every exercise lasted an eternity. Plus, I had absolutely no desire to discuss the evening Regina and I had spent together. Regina could wait. I considered not getting up from the sofa. Maybe she would conclude that I was not at home. But her acute senses would certainly not fail to see the light coming from under the door. It was highly likely she had observed me pushing my bike into the garage. The doorbell rang a second time, for several seconds. This was the height of intrusion! I realized my mistake when I looked through the peephole.

"What are you doing here?"

"She threw me out."

Fredrick entered the apartment, threw his bag on the bed, and went into the kitchen.

"I need a beer."

He went to the refrigerator, but I didn't have any beer in stock. I usually bought it after class at the hot dog stand.

"Can I stay with you for a few days? Talking with my parents right now would kill me. I won't cause you any trouble. I volunteered for all the night shifts. Is that okay with you?"

"What happened? Why did she throw you out?" I didn't know whether Fredrik knew that I had talked to Yasmina.

"I don't want to talk about it."

I went into the bathroom and discerned that my neighbor was also in his bathroom. I brushed my teeth. Frederik opened the skylight. He held his head outside in the fresh air. We swapped places: Frederik went into the bathroom, and I held my head out the window. Then we got in bed.

“I took one of your T-shirts. Is that okay?” Frederik had put on one of my old Guns N’ Roses T-shirts. His boxer shorts also looked familiar to me.

“Is that my underwear you have on?”

“No, what makes you think that?” He smiled, exhausted.

We turned off the light and lay quietly in the darkness.

During the next few days, I hardly saw him. He came home around noon, when I was on my way to school. When we went to bed at the same time, we were too tired to engage in conversation. Frederik felt no need to explain anything. Yet I did notice that he sought to be close to me in the evening. One time, he was already under the covers when I was correcting essays on the pros and cons of contraceptives. He shouted, “Are you coming to bed soon?”

I put down my pen, undressed, and crawled into my side of the bed. Frederik started rubbing up against me and put his hairy arms around me.

“Yasmina always predicted that in the end it would just be the two of us!”

I jabbed and pinched to get him off me. We laughed and wrestled playfully. But later in the night, he cried. He muffled it so as not to wake me. I heard him sniffing and felt his body trembling. Most of all, I wanted to hug him, but that was out of the question. I feigned deep sleep and hoped he would calm back down.

I got the spare key from Drechsler.

“My best friend is staying with me for a while. His girlfriend threw him out.”

Drechsler nodded tactfully and went to the kitchen. He rummaged around in drawers and turned over the key to me. I felt the need to do something nice for him. His hair was standing on end, a bit like Albert Einstein’s. Since he trusted me, he allowed me to see him that way. “Do you need anything? I’m going grocery shopping.”

Drechsler shook his head, but I could sense his uneasiness. We walked to the door, and he cleared his throat the way he always did.

“There is one thing I would like to know,” he said with his head down. “How was the get-together with our neighbor? Did you convey my apology to her?” Expectation and shame flashed across his face.

I concealed my embarrassment, or at least I tried to. An eternal code of silence was to be enforced concerning the evening with Regina. The less said about it, the more unreal it would become. Drechsler hemmed and hawed like a teenager. I wanted to make him happy.

“I conveyed your apology to her. She has long since forgotten it. She had only good things to say about you!”

Regina had called Herr Drechsler a strange bird with a dark secret. At that moment, however, I could clearly see who Herr Drechsler was. He perked up his ears and started sweating. As if he were in a hurry, he pushed me across the threshold.

On Saturday morning, Frederik came through the door exhausted and immediately lay down in bed. I was correcting essays and cleaning the kitchen. Yasmina had called several times. I didn’t want to talk to her in Frederik’s presence, so I went outside.

“He’s fine; he’s with me.”

Yasmina was at work. “On the ward, he’s acting like nothing happened. Nobody can repress their feelings like Frederik can. You have to watch out for him. I hope he doesn’t jump out the window or throw himself in front of a subway train. He’s capable of anything, do you hear?” Her exaggeration seemed to know no bounds.

“You don’t need to worry. He’s with me. He won’t jump out of a window.”

“Yes, of course, the two of you!” She seemed for some reason to be mad at me too. “I have patients to attend to.” She hung up.

Going to the grocery store had become a challenge, because I constantly feared running into Regina. I kept my eyes directed straight ahead of me and strode single-mindedly through the store.

Frederik got out of bed around five. “I’m going to take a bath and then masturbate. Or maybe the other way around. Then we can have something to eat together. What do you think?”

“We’ve got roulade of beef and cool beer. I’ve already gone shopping for everything.”

Frederik smiled. Of course he wouldn’t throw himself in front of a train. Friendship is a bond that truly sustains people.

“I’m going to try and explain it to you. If you don’t understand it, nobody will! Yasmina is full of contradictions. She is two opposite things at the same time. It’s unbearable! The whole thing started about a year ago, when I told her I’d like to have a kid with her because I love her. Can you imagine? I said, ‘Yasmina, I want to spend my life with you. I want to have children with you. Let’s not wait any longer!’ She reacted as if I had insulted her. What was I thinking? How could I have come up with such an idea!? Had I gone crazy? She was madder at me than ever before. Tell me, what should I make of that? I defended myself and gave her my opinion. But that she really can’t handle. If you stand up to her, she gets even more upset. So she got even angrier, and we didn’t talk for almost a week. That’s how all this shit started.

“I said, ‘If you are offended because I said I want to have children with you, that means you don’t take our relationship seriously. What else could it mean? We’ve been together for seven years. We have good jobs. We have a big apartment. We are thirty-one years old. Why shouldn’t we have children? Apparently, you don’t really want to live with me.’ Yasmina smashed a glass, which is what she does. You confront her with a problem, and she is outraged. Then she lays a guilt trip on you. She blames *you*. She twists the matter around so that you’re the one who has done everything wrong. She gets on the highest of moral high horses. Then she throws all your faults in your face. She proves to you how primitive you are. She turns everything you say into the opposite of what you meant to say. ‘Do you want to get me pregnant so you can own me?’ ‘How dare you assume that love can only be signed and sealed by having children?’ ‘You are thinking like an Arab macho! Maybe I should wear a headscarf in the future!’ ‘There’s a war going on in my country, and you have nothing better to do than think about making babies.’

“Can you imagine? She flings nonsense like that at me! We’re from the same background! Our families are social democrats to the core, or socialists, whatever the difference is. I have no problem with self-reliant women. I love them. I want to spend my life with them. Why does she blow

up like that? Where does she get this stuff from? I'll tell you where: from the internet. From her 'group.' Yeah, she's been an 'activist' for a while now. Which means she spends the whole day on Facebook with her group. This so-called activism is extremely annoying. Yasmina grew up on Cottagegasse with a silver spoon in her mouth. Okay, her parents are from Lebanon, but she was born in Vienna. She went to school in Döbling, and in the 'summer holidays,' she vacationed on Lake Como, or Lake Garda, or Lake Zürich. But since this fucking war in Syria started, she claims to be Lebanese, an Arab, even African! Sometimes she says, 'You are white; you don't understand,' as if she were black now! But yet she still rants incessantly about Lebanon, her family, Islam, and Arab culture, you see? I mean, please! Lebanon isn't even in Africa! Her idiot father owns two apartment buildings on Porzellangasse alone! He's a textbook capitalist. Always smiling politely, but behind his elegant mustache he's an insufferable pig.

"Then, about two months ago, it happened. We argued about contraceptives. She worked herself up about the feminine costs of the pill and the feminine cost of tampons, or something like that. I tried to make a joke and said I'd pay for the tampons in the future, and we could spare ourselves the cost of the pill. She flipped out and called me a typical macho man with a white brain. 'There's a war raging in my country, and you're making sexist jokes.' She accused me of being an ignoramus, insensitive, selfish, etc. Then I got angry too. I was hurt by her tirades. By her anger with me. Although I love her more than I have loved anyone else in my life. She's the one who only thinks of herself all the time! I said, 'Spare me your political babble. You are ridiculous. You're not an Arab Rosa Luxemburg but just a pretentious snob from the Eighteenth District. Well, I shouldn't have said that. She jumped up and drove to her parents' house. I apologized and took it all back. But there was no salvaging the situation, and on Monday she threw me out.

"I can't take back what I said. When you're angry, you should just hold your tongue. But she drives me to madness. Why is she always bringing up the war in Syria? What am I supposed to do about it? What do I even have to do with it? I'm Frederik Neundlinger from Simmering. I'm a doctor in the General Hospital in the Ninth District. All day long, I try to help people. That's my job! I've been trying for a long time to understand this war. What Yasmina says is not true. I've read up on it, even an entire book by an

Oxford professor. But it's not possible to understand this war. Nobody understands how to get out of the mess there. What does she expect from me? She wants me to buy a smartphone. But I don't want a smartphone! What good will it do me to ingest this unending pseudo-activist crap via phone?"

Frederik got angry. "I love her. She is the most beautiful and intelligent woman in the world. But she can't throw accusations at me all the time. I can't take it anymore."

I opened a second beer for him and told him I had met with Yasmina. "She told me you two were arguing. Maybe you really have become desensitized? You see catastrophes every day. Your job is very demanding. You both see death up close every day, how diseases ruin lives, how unfairly health is distributed. But you shouldn't be complacent about it! Perhaps you are both overwhelmed. Yasmina cried into my jacket. I don't think she's taking it lightly. A while ago on the telephone she asked me to look out for you. She thinks you might jump out a window."

He liked the fact that Yasmina was worried about him. We were both quiet for a while.

"Kurt! I want you to do something for me. I want to know what's going on in this so-called group. Who's in it? What are they writing to each other on Facebook? You've got to find that out for me. They meet once a week on Yppenplatz. I believe this group is to blame for everything. Maybe there's a guy in the group who has been feeding her all this hysterical crap. I think this whole war discussion is just a pretense. She's found someone else, and this is just a diversion, get it? Instead of admitting it, she blames me. She is very proud; she's fully capable of it. I'm not on Facebook. I'm not in this group. I don't understand Arabic or Turkish. They call themselves *Femmarab*, pronounced like in French. You have to shadow her!"

I was dumbfounded. "Excuse me? Shadow? I'm not James Bond. I don't have a smartphone either. I could give a fuck about Facebook, just like you. I speak English, not Arabic!"

Frederik was not deterred. "You'll benefit from it. It's time you met someone. Nowadays everything happens via smartphone, Facebook, Twitter, Tinder. You can make dates and have sex every day! On the side, you'll observe Yasmina. Once you dig up the asshole she's fallen in love

with, I'll handle it. You are my best friend. You know Yasmina. She trusts you. Please, it's important!"

He took my hand. "Most likely, I won't jump out a window. That's not my style. But I want Yasmina to come back to me. I really want that! Don't you understand that all the crap on the ward can't phase me? It's because I live with Yasmina and love her from Monday through Sunday."

My older colleagues were proud of our school. The director was a notable woman, and everyone respected her for her activism. She expanded cooperation with the employment service in myriad ways. More and more people from more or less exotic tracts of land sat in our classrooms. Since the uprisings in the Middle East and Africa, there were Egyptians, Somalians, Afghanis, Yeminis, Pakistanis, and of course Syrians walking through our halls. They mingled with the usual Turks, Austrians from Floridsdorf, and Poles, who barely stood out anymore. "The world is marching into Margaretenstrasse, whether we like it or not," the director said on every possible occasion. Many colleagues were happy to accept gifts of Syrian baklava, baked rice from Afghanistan, or Iraqi sponge cake with coconut flakes. The new students were popular with the teaching staff. At the beginning of the semester, they sat like lambs on their benches, took magnificent notes, and almost saluted when the teacher entered the room. Unfortunately, Austrian customs soon rubbed off on them, and they put the brakes on their unconditional submissiveness.

In the winter semester, an Iraqi man was assigned to my class. He spoke amazingly good German, was obviously smart, and a successful diploma was absolutely within his reach. However, he couldn't spell. On the first day of school, he seemed about to burst with attentiveness. He opened his book with such vigor that the student sitting next to him, a hard-boiled machinist from Ottakring, raised his eyebrows in astonishment. His name was Ferhat. After class, he offered to carry my bag for me to the teacher's lounge. Ferhat was very attractive, so I let him do it. It only lasted a few days, until Ferhat noticed that his willingness to serve was a source of amusement for his classmates. He tempered his enthusiasm and conformed to the understatement of the students sitting near him. Nevertheless, he was hardly successful in hiding how much he liked going to school. He was polite, funny, and smart. Soon he became popular with his classmates. He

smoked a lot; you could see him joking in the courtyard and turning girls' heads.

Unfortunately, after two months, Ferhat started slacking off. His asylum case had been decided positively. He had taken a job in a bakery and given up his career as a model refugee. From one day to the next, he started coming late or not at all. All real teachers get angry at this kind of behavior. I, too, was infuriated by his sporadic appearances. "Don't be an idiot! You are flushing your happiness down the toilet!"

Ferhat protested indignantly. "But Herr Teacher, I have problems!"

I had to pull myself together so as not to hug him. "What kind of problems? You have a residency permit, a job, a shared apartment, your schooling. And that's what you need to concern yourself with now."

Ferhat smiled sadly. "If it were only so easy . . ." The subjunctive had become second nature to him.

In the teacher's lounge, we tried to find out more about him. He hadn't shown up for his advanced math class for six weeks. We checked his file. He was from Erbil, in northern Iraq. His mother tongue was Arabic, and his full name was Ferhat Fersan. He had fled to Austria in 2011 and was twenty-one years old. After Christmas, he came even less frequently, and when he did come, he seemed completely stressed out. He remained tight-lipped about what was bothering him so much. The faculty decided that we would say nothing to the employment service about Ferhat's absences. Maybe he would get back on the straight and narrow. Maybe we could succeed in strengthening his bond with the school.

I slept on Frederik's shadowing assignment for three nights. Then it occurred to me that this was a way to get closer to the foundering Ferhat. Frederik would find out what Yasmina was doing to pass the time. And I would succeed in getting Ferhat back to cooperation and education. The ridiculous shadowing project would turn into social work, and everyone would be happy. At this point, I was already more or less aware of the romantic impetus behind the project. After all, Ferhat had the looks of a supermodel. But the enterprise's moral justification was so brilliant that it overshadowed its internal motivation.

On Tuesday, he showed up over an hour late to class. He had been absent on Monday. After class, I caught him before he left, and he put on a guilty

face. We sat down together in the conference room. Ferhat expected he would be expelled.

“I have a favor to ask you! I need an Arabic interpreter. You speak Arabic, right?”

“Of course! I’d be glad to help you! Is that all?”

“That’s all. Would you have time this week? Could you come over to my place, maybe on Friday evening? You would have to translate a Facebook page for us. Are you on Facebook? Actually, you’d be helping my buddy. He wants to spy on his girlfriend.”

Ferhat relaxed. He seemed to have warded off the danger of getting kicked out of school for the time being.

“Yes, of course! I will gladly do that. I’ll be at the bakery until seven o’clock, and then I’ll come to your place.”

I gave him my address and, just in case, my telephone number. Unnecessarily, I acted self-important and mysteriously added, “Please, not a word to anyone!”

After this conversation, all the signs of infatuation surfaced. The moon shone over the Kettenbrückengasse, and I ran into a garbage can with the handlebar of my bike. The following day, I was completely thrown off guard when Ferhat didn’t show up to class again. Wednesday night, my dreams were confused and dramatic. The climax occurred when Ferhat kissed me on the mouth with his shirt open, and we stripped down naked and got in the shower together. The next morning, Frederik came up to the bed.

“Kurti, last night you socked me three times. What’s going on? Did war break out with you too? Is the bed getting too small? I’m in pain from my cervical spine down.”

I bought an apple next door to the school building, and my knees were shaking. The store was full of students. They were buying those energy drinks, chocolate bars, and banana shakes that would get them through the evening. Ferhat showed up ten minutes late. He snuck in and sat down in his regular spot. I had already resigned myself to not seeing him again. He shot me a mischievous look. I had to pull myself together and suppress the biological turmoil in my body. At nine o’clock everyone stumbled home, exhausted. Ferhat winked at me. “See you tomorrow!” I nodded and smiled,

my heart rate once again rising sharply. This time I pushed my bike down the sidewalk. The night air cooled my head a little. I told myself that good deeds brought happiness. It is a joy to help someone in need. There was nothing to be ashamed of for showing compassion. Help and love are the same word in Latin, and so on. I identified with my neighbor more than ever before, and went home completely beguiled.

Fridays I didn't teach, but most of the time I did my lesson planning, recorded what I had done the previous week, or started grading. I was prepping two groups for the high school diploma exams at the end of the semester. Around three o'clock, I rode back to Laimgrubengasse. Frederik was lying on the sofa, reading the newspaper. He planned to make chicken that evening and had bought plenty of paprika. He wanted to pay Ferhat a hundred euros for his translation work. "Translating the page is not sufficient. You both have to go to Yppenplatz. Did you tell him that? You'll take a picture of the motherfucker so that I finally see who I am dealing with."

I couldn't help but laugh at him. "You are nuts. Admit that you have gotten carried away."

Frederik just raised his chin in disdain. "If you had ever loved someone in your entire life you would know what is going on with me. It cannot possibly be the case that the war in Syria is to blame for everything. That's nuts! Something's up, and I have to know. Today we were both on the ward. She has lost weight. She's been giving me my clothes in gym bags and forbidding me from entering the apartment. Can you imagine that? After seven years! Recently she's been smoking outside with the nurses so she doesn't have to be near me. I want to talk to her, but she never has time. Everybody on the ward knows what's up. It makes me want to puke. I could murder her!"

At six o'clock, Frederik started fidgeting. He put on my jacket and went outside for a bit. I lay down on the sofa. Momentarily, it was crystal clear to me that I was in love with Ferhat.

My mother called me and got straight to the point: "Listen, Frederik's mother is worried about him. She was just over here. She knows everything, but she is offended that Frederik won't talk to her. How do you two live together in the garret? Where does he sleep? Hope-fully not in your bed?"

He should get himself over to his parents' place in Simmering. Otherwise his mother will come over to Laimgrubengasse, I can promise you that. Why doesn't he sleep at home? There'd be a lot more space there, and you two wouldn't get in each other's way. One thing is certain: Frau Neundlinger is very worried, I can tell you that. When are you finally going to come by? Did you know that we bought electric bicycles? Your father and I want to ride around Wörthersee this summer. Your father will be downtown tomorrow to buy trout at the Naschmarkt for Sunday. Wouldn't you like to eat with us? But you'll have to tell him then, so he can pick up a trout for you too."

I listened to my mother chattering, and a feeling of warmth came over me. "Mama, I love you," I said suddenly.

My mother hesitated. After a brief pause she continued: "Oh, Kurti! We love you too! You mean everything to us, but you know that . . ." Her voice trailed off, and I sensed that she was holding back tears.

"Everything will be fine. Sometimes people argue. Every relationship is like that. Your father and I argued. Tell Frederik he just has to maintain faith in the relationship. I'm actually happy that you two are living together. Sometimes I worry about you being alone. At least Frederik is with you now, and the thought comforts me."

After I hung up, I cried like the tears would never stop flowing.

Around seven-thirty, the doorbell rang. Through the intercom, I shouted the floor and apartment number to Ferhat. Frederik had still not returned, which embarrassed me. Ferhat greeted me and bowed. I explained to him that my buddy was going to cook a chicken but had surprisingly disappeared. Ferhat assured me he wasn't hungry. I asked him to come into the kitchen and sat him down in front of my laptop. I offered him beer or tea. He decided on tea and praised the cozy apartment. He had a fresh haircut. He was wearing a white Nike hoodie. He smelled of cigarettes, deodorant, and the bakery. I was nervous, so I started talking about the task right away. It was embarrassing that Frederik wasn't there, and I had the feeling Ferhat was looking at me out of the corner of his eye. *He must be thinking this is all a cheap pretense*, I thought. The thought made me extremely uncomfortable. I tried again to reach Frederik, although I already knew that his cell phone was in the bathroom.

“We’ll start without him,” I said in as manly a way as possible, meaning I straightened my back and grabbed my crotch, etc. “His girlfriend left him. Her name is Yasmina, and now he’s jealous. She has recently joined an Arab activist group, and my buddy has this idea that she met someone there. She was born in Vienna, but her family is from Lebanon, so she speaks Arabic. That’s why we need you!”

Ferhat navigated through the site with the utmost concentration. He used an app on his phone to translate words he didn’t understand. I took down everything he said on paper.

“Nariman has posted that ‘Islamists can only govern where women don’t have a voice.’ Sahar has posted, ‘God is there for everyone. But we reject religion because we reject the patriarchy.’” Ferhat had to look up the word *patriarchy* on his phone.

“Nariman has posted that life in Arabia with women must have a new beginning. ‘As long as a father can force his daughter into a marriage, there will always be war. Bashar al-Assad, Benjamin Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are not fighting for different parties but for the very same one, namely the three-thousand-year-old Macho Party. Whoever doesn’t have science is left with religion.’ Yasmina writes, ‘The foundation of the family is society and not the other way around. Only when you quit believing what your father tells you will the revolution succeed!’”

Ferhat shook his head gently, which was difficult to interpret. We scrolled through the personal Facebook profiles of Hanan, Sahar, Nariman, and Yasmina. Our heads almost touched, and his eyebrows brushed against my face.

“She is very beautiful! A very beautiful woman!” he whispered as we studied Yasmina’s profile.

We were so close to each other that our breath condensed on the same spot on the screen. Yasmina had only uploaded a few photos of her mother and herself on a Vespa in Beirut, a few vacation pictures, nothing special. Ferhat scrutinized everything.

Ferhat directed his utmost attention to examining everything. We clicked on the Femmarab page again. There were photos with rainbow flags and LGBTQ motifs: Two women with Gucci bags kissing in the sunset. Two men walking hand in hand down a busy shopping street.

“What does it say?” I did my best to sound at ease. Two handsome soldiers winked at each other. They were surrounded by pink lettering. Ferhat laughed.

“It says here: ‘Make love, not war.’”

After three quarters of an hour, we were more or less in the know about Yasmina’s political activism. A suspicious lover was nowhere to be found, neither in the postings and linked reports nor in the photos. I asked Ferhat if he would be willing to go with me to one of the activist group meetings.

“Of course!” he said.

With that, the job was finished, and my embarrassment grew stronger. Frederik was nowhere in sight. Ferhat asked if he could smoke a cigarette. “Of course,” I said, even though I hated cigarettes. We stood at the window and looked out into the night. Ferhat ran his hand across his freshly shaved temple. A hint of mustache gave him the look of a soccer player in the under-twenty-one league. His calm smile drove me crazy. He kept looking straight into my eyes. I averted my gaze and looked at the illuminated windows across the street.

He himself brought up his misconduct at school. “I know it’s bad when I don’t come to school. But I have a lot of stress at the moment. There’s war in my home country. I’m here in Vienna. I am grateful and actively assimilate every day. But back home, a disaster is happening!”

For half a second, I thought he was looking at me so intensely because he too had fallen in love, but his Arab pride wouldn’t allow him to express love in any way but with his eyes. Of course, that was a stereotype without any objective foundation.

“If someone is chopping off your brother’s head, you can’t just go to school. When somebody is threatening your sister, you know, I’m of the opinion that integral calculus is unimportant. Sometimes I want to go back right now to Erbil, do you understand?”

I handed him an empty can so that he didn’t have to throw his cigarette butts out the window.

“My dear Herr Teacher!” he said in a different tone. Furrows appeared on his forehead, and he seemed to be wrestling with himself. He was obviously about to say something significant. “I’m not an Arab, although I speak Arabic. I’m a Kurd!”

I honestly did not understand the dramatic tone he was using. I didn't comprehend what he was trying to tell me. I was hoping for a different confession. Ferhat glanced at the clock. He didn't want to keep talking, and I didn't want to pressure him. When I tried to give him Frederik's money, our hands touched. We engaged in a battle of wills, and Ferhat prevailed. Then his smile took on a sly expression. "My dear Herr Teacher, let me know, and we'll go to Yppenplatz. I'll gladly help you get this Yasmina!"

He squeezed my hands before he went running down the stairs.

Everywhere it smelled of Ferhat and cigarettes. I lay awake and cursed myself. Shortly before midnight, Frederik came back and, without saying a word, stripped naked and went into the bathroom. He tried half-heartedly to be quiet. A half hour later, he lay down next to me. His body was hot and fresh. He knew quite well that I wasn't asleep.

"I've done something really stupid."

"Where were you?"

"I slept with your neighbor on the fourth floor."

At first, I couldn't believe my ears and asked him to repeat what he had said. Fredrik repeated it word for word. He curled up like a wounded animal, tears running down his cheeks. After a while he pulled himself together. "This has to stop! I can't bear this melodrama any longer!" I couldn't have agreed more and urged him to tell me everything. He refused and withdrew to the farthest edge of the bed, which I found unacceptable. Basically, his behavior was outrageous. Rage and jealousy kept building up inside me. I had taken pains to arrange his fucking shadow job and made a fool of myself in front of Ferhat. He didn't care. Instead he went and fucked Regina. I grabbed his arm and twisted it toward me. I threatened him and called him an ass. He buried his face in the pillow. And then he told the story.

"She was standing in front of the red iron grate trying to open it with one hand. She was carrying a huge cannabis plant in a pot. I recognized immediately that it was a cannabis plant. I was about to go outside, and she called over to me, asking me to hold the grate open for her. She slipped past me, and then I was supposed to hold the building door for her. Then she shouted, 'And now the elevator please!' I asked her which floor and then ran up to the fourth. She stepped out of the elevator and gave me the key. I unlocked the apartment door and was about to say goodbye when she

shouted for me to wait. She put the plant down and came back. ‘Thank you so much! You’re Kurt’s friend, aren’t you?’ I wondered how she knew that, but then I was happy, because I realized that meant you two were friends. Downstairs at the building gate, she had squeezed past me very closely. Her ass rubbed against my upper thigh. I haven’t touched a woman for five months. For two weeks, I’ve been lying here next to you every night. I was so angry at Yasmina, and there she came and pressed her ass up against me. What was I supposed to do? How would you have reacted in my place? She invited me in for a beer. The conversation was completely relaxed from the beginning. She is extremely intelligent. I suddenly had the impression that she thought we—I mean you and I—are a couple. She said it was delightful when two men live together so intimately. While she said it, she looked straight at me, and a completely different feeling came over me. In any case, I endeavored to clear up this little misunderstanding. All of a sudden, I felt so comfortable! Maybe it was the beer or the vapors from the enormous cannabis plant. Anyhow, I told her everything, and I don’t even know myself why I did. The whole story with Yasmina from beginning to end. When I was finished, I regretted it. I was sure she wouldn’t sleep with me after that. For it goes without saying: the whole time while I was sitting in her kitchen, I wanted to sleep with her. I wanted to knead her breasts with my hands like a Neanderthal and rub my head between them. Above all, I wanted to rip her pants off and press myself up against her ass. Instead, I talked myself blue in the face and told her my fucking tale of woe, and then I thought, *Shit, now you’ve messed up everything with your verboseness*. Unfortunately, I’m not a go-getter, because, like you, I am a weak-kneed wussy. So I sat there, stared at her breasts and spelled out my relationship problems to her. We had a second beer and a third, I think. Suddenly, she also started talking about her life. I didn’t ask her about it. As I said, I wanted to sleep with her, really. But then she told her story.

“How can I put it? It did me good to hear it, although it was a revolting story. Suddenly it was ten o’clock, and I thought, *Shit, the Arab guy is upstairs, the shadow!* I said I had to go. I said it, but deep down I regretted that we weren’t going to sleep together. I got up. We put the empty beer bottles in the crate. After her story, it was absolutely out of the question that I grab her breasts or her ass. But I could tell quite well that something was boiling inside her. She followed me as I walked to the door. I put my shoes on, and she handed me my jacket. She said, ‘It was a lovely evening. I had a

nice time.’ I said the same thing, but in her face I could tell she was on fire just like me.

“Then we were forced into physical contact. After all, it’s customary to kiss one another goodbye. I had to put my mouth on her cheek, and our entire bodies had to come closer together. I put my hand on her hip. She pressed her chest against mine. I pushed her up against the coat rack, and she shoved a hand under my T-shirt. We got undressed. You can imagine what came next. She moaned loudly. It took a relatively long time, and I’m proud of that. As soon as it was over, I fell into a bad mood. I wanted to shelve it and forget about it. She noticed immediately and slipped on a bathrobe. She pulled me out of bed into the hallway. Piece by piece we gathered up our clothes and nodded goodbye to each other.”

For two weeks, I toyed with the idea of throwing him out and took no great pains to hide my rancor. Yet, because I had so much work to do, there was no time to act on my plan. In the evening, we got in bed silently and each of us chewed on our own thoughts. Then Frederik flew to Seville for four days for an internal medicine conference. I was relieved that I didn’t have to see him anymore. I missed him already by the first evening. I sent him a text: “I was jealous because you slept with Regina, so I was mad at you. Now I miss you.”

Frederik wrote back within a few minutes. “I already know that, I’m not an idiot. But you ought to sleep with someone too! Preferably a man! That’s what gay men do.”

“Why aren’t you gay? I’d sleep with you in a heartbeat.”

“We’ve been sleeping together for a month. As for why some people are gay: research is still inconclusive. Regina says so too. If I were gay I’d fuck you nonstop, I swear! Please look out for Yasmina! Talk to her! But please don’t sleep with her! Kisses, your Freddy!”

We walked around the Naschmarkt. There wasn't a free seat to be found at any of the outdoor bars or cafés. Everybody sat facing the sun, pretending to be carefree. Yasmina was anything but carefree. We went through the underpass at Bährenmühl, past the Karlskirche, across Schwarzenbergplatz into the gardens at Belvedere Palace, back to Schwarzenbergplatz, through the Stadtpark, to Urania, across the Danube Canal to Jesuit Meadow, and down the main boulevard to Praterstern. We didn't sit down until the sun went down. Unlike all the other Viennese, Yasmina refused to wear sunglasses.

"I'm not putting on glasses for that little bit of sun!"

Allow me to attempt to summarize what she said during our hours-long stroll through Vienna, from the Bärenmühl underpass to Praterstern. Naturally, I hadn't given a damn about Lebanese politics up to that point.

"My father doesn't talk about the war, or at least not the way you might imagine. For him, the war began when there was no more electricity and no more water coming out of the pipes. You couldn't use the elevator anymore, and his friend lived on the seventh floor. There was a shoot-out from time to time here and there. Fewer and fewer streets were safe, fewer and fewer neighborhoods, and Beirut got smaller and smaller. Still, he had rented an office, painted the walls, and bought a large desk. He was hopeful. He was young and optimistic. The next day an artillery shell struck the building from somewhere. The walls came down, the windows blew out, and his desk fell from a height of twenty-five feet onto his car parked on the street below. Within a few minutes, he had lost all his savings. In the neighboring building, the same thing happened to seven or eight other people. You either accepted it or strung yourself up. Then people started getting abducted every day. The militias multiplied. Nobody understood their purpose or knew who their leaders were. If you were standing at the wrong spot at the wrong time, you would be picked up. My uncle Masud was tied up behind a gas station for two weeks. After paying the ransom, my father left for Zurich with my mother. He was the youngest. What he hasn't talked about

his whole life long: Maronites, Sunnis, Alevis, Shiites, Jews, Orthodox Christians, Karantina, Shatila, Safra.

“‘I’m a retailer,’ my father would say. ‘Talking about war just fans the flames.’ He would rub his hands and put on a friendly face. That’s the way it was my whole life. But then something changed. It all started the day Assad sprayed poison gas in Damascus. No more proof is necessary. Beirut is now bursting at the seams, and we have not yet resolved our own war! The recovery time was far too short. He doesn’t talk about it with us, but we hear his endless telephone conversations. When Hariri was murdered, it seemed like our father was losing his mind. Hariri was the only politician my father esteemed. ‘Hariri is not a politician but a retailer,’ my father said. In his eyes, that’s a compliment. Frederik makes fun of his wealth. He gets up on his socialist high horse and pronounces judgment. But what Frederik doesn’t understand is that wealth is a bulwark against death.

“In Beirut, every kid knows that money is the only way to escape politics. If you aren’t rich, the parties and factions will kill you. You pay just to be allowed to rent an apartment. You pay to be allowed to open a business. You pay so your store isn’t blown up before the grand opening. You pay so that you can marry. You pay when you want to smuggle a child out of the country. You pay men who are the brothers of other men from gigantic families of men. They stand around on the street smoking. They drive darkened cars. They wear sunglasses, even when it is raining. They form brotherhoods from Beirut to Damascus, from Damascus to Cairo, from Cairo to Paris. They hide behind their religious profundity. On Fridays, they take their shoes off or kneel in front of the cross. But none of them are devout. Their pride lies exclusively in the alleged weight of their gender, and a manly handshake is the only thing that satisfies them. A son makes them happy. Nothing else.

“My sisters and I are Viennese girls, although we don’t look like it. We threw parties, drank alcohol, and picked up boys. You’re my witness. Our father took us to prayer a hundred times. Every father in the world does that. But religion didn’t play a role. He accepted Frederik. He accepted the fact that I had a boyfriend and was living with him. He was appeased by the fact that Frederik wanted to be a doctor, even though he would have preferred for Frederik to own a business. The hardest thing for him to swallow was that Frederik’s father was a bus driver. The fact that the

Neundlingers are Christians or Socialists, or whatever the difference is, never bothered him. He gave us the apartment on Porzellangasse, of course. The whole apartment building belongs to him. It was out of the question for me to pay rent. Real estate is my father's only true religion, whether in Vienna or Beirut. My father supported Hariri. He met him twice in person. Once he even shook his hand. Hariri wanted to bury the war and rebuild Beirut. My father was on board any way he could be. When Hariri was blown up, my father didn't leave his office for two days. So I was allowed to move in with Frederik but not to sign a lease. Otherwise my father would have disowned me in a second.

"The worst thing happened after Assad sprayed poison gas. A very beautiful cousin of my mother lived in Mezher, in the northern part of Beirut. My father brought her to Vienna. He took care of her papers; her name is Alia. She lives in our aunt's apartment in the Second District. Until a little while ago, she sold souvenirs at Hundertwasserhaus. Why did my father bring her here? Because of the poison gas? Because there is a war in Syria? Because of the refugees? Because of the border skirmishes in Aarsal? Not even close. Alia has four sisters. They all have given birth only to boys. And now it's Alia's turn to deliver. My father impregnated her. My big sister studied at the Wirtschaftsuniversität and works for the Deutsche Bank in Munich. I am a specialist in internal medicine in the General Hospital of the Vienna Medical School. My little sister interprets for the United Nations. But for my father's world, that isn't enough. It is all nothing in comparison to having a son. How many brothers do you think I'll have? My father is sixty, my mother terminally ill. She doesn't leave the house anymore. My father's modernity was always fragile, and now it's completely shattered. The longer this so-called spring lasts, the more Arab my father becomes. Frederik says my father is an ass. But what is that supposed to mean? He's my father. We were taking a walk in Vienna Woods, and Frederik picked a primrose. He grabbed my hip and said, 'We should make a baby together!' I blew a gasket. What else can I say? Fuck the planet!"

We stepped onto the patio of Flucc, a disco. Once again, she pressed her face deep into my sweater. We ordered Aperol spritzes.

"Stay with me, Kurt! Please! There's going to be a party here tonight!"

"What kind of party?"

“A party for queer orientalists. Look, there are pink lanterns everywhere. My Facebook group made ads for it. The most beautiful gay, lesbian, and transgender people from everywhere from Istanbul to Mecca are coming. You don’t have to hook up with anyone. Just drink, dance, and protect me. What I wouldn’t give to be homosexual. What I wouldn’t give to have a father from Simmering who is a bus driver. I know that Frederik won’t jump out a window. He is too insolent to do anything like that. Frederik is at home in the world. But as for me . . . I keep losing more and more ground.”

I had no choice but to stay with her.

A few days before that, I was turning into Kettenbrückengasse when my neighbor came out of the pharmacy holding a small plastic bag in his hands. He seemed to be in high spirits. The sun was laughing. Herr Drechsler was laughing. The pigeons were cooing. He looked very elegant. We chatted, and he inquired about Frederik. Frederik and Drechsler got along famously. His plastic bag was stuffed full but was not transparent. I don’t know why, but I was immediately fixated on a theory regarding the bag’s contents: *Drechsler, the coughing silverback, has bought himself Viagra*. On the way from the Naschmarkt to Margaretenstrasse, I was obsessed with this thought. He would be the next one on Regina’s plate. The very same evening, I saw someone had left chocolates in front of her door. I walked past her apartment door since the elevator wasn’t working. Anybody could have left the box of chocolates there. Maybe even Frederik, as a thank you for the “lovely evening.” No, I knew right away that they were from my neighbor. My suspicion was confirmed, for a little bit later, I heard steps in the stairwell. I crept to the door and looked out the peephole. The light had gone on, but nobody was to be seen. But in front of Drechsler’s doormat lay the box of chocolates, clearly recognizable through the peephole.

In the night, wild dreams—not to mention my neighbor’s creaking bedframe—robbed me of my sleep. The next day, I ran into Frau Kord in the supermarket. We were pushing our shopping carts toward the deli counter at the same time. She raised her head and smiled: “How happy I am to see you!”

Her tone was exuberant, which was strange. It was a mystery to me why she was so happy. While I was still pondering that question, she continued

talking: “It’s always the same with you all, isn’t it? You’ve all got spring fever. But you know what makes me even happier than spring? That you are such an understanding teacher! That gives one hope. You don’t forget a good teacher, your whole life long.”

She patted my arm and got in line at the meat counter. I tried all afternoon to figure out what she might have meant. The most plausible theory was that she was confusing me with Frederik. If Frederik had really made Regina moan, as he claimed, it was highly possible that Frau Kord had taken note of it. What I couldn’t explain was her emphatic reference to my profession.

All in all, both encounters, meaning the one with Herr Drechsler and the one with Frau Kord, left a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. They relegated me to a sphere that is crudely encompassed by the word *sex*. How was my sex life? When asked the question, I wanted to disappear into a wall like the protagonist of Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina*. What had become of me since I had come to live in the garret? A heap of kindness, an understanding masturbator, an uptight little helper! Lately, people were using a pejorative in public discourse whose meaning I instinctively applied to myself: *Gutmensch*. Whatever a do-gooder might be, I was undoubtedly the epitome of one. I melted away at the thought of my lovable impotence. Women in their midforties patted my hand in the meat department. I lay on the sofa and felt like I wasn’t a man. I started to miss Frederik. Maybe at this point I should tell you what really happened in Regina’s apartment. Although it’s a painful story that really shouldn’t be told.

Regina stretched her left leg between my back and the back of the sofa. She put her right leg over my crotch so that it pressed directly against my genitals. As I already mentioned, we laughed the entire time from the hemp we were smoking. My whole body was pulsating with happiness. Regina lowered the remains of the joint into the ashtray. To do so she had to reposition her legs. The pressure on my crotch went away, and I felt a tingling, as if my upper thighs had fallen asleep or fourteen thousand ants were running over my hips. But absolutely nothing had fallen asleep on me, just the opposite. With the pleasurable tingling, I got an inexplicable erection, and it pointed skyward. I was as proud as a kid swaggering over to pee on some flowers. For a little while I thought, to the extent you can even call it thinking, that the curse had been lifted. I thought I had been cured.

Regina sank back onto the sofa. I had the desire to rub my penis against her body, as if to show her my penis. We kissed each other on the mouth. She pulled me toward her. She lay down and I lay on top of her. I could rub myself against her and imagine I was Jean-Paul Belmondo or a gorilla or a bull. The fantasies helped me to keep my erection at full strength. She still did not suspect. She reached for my dick, which was a beautiful feeling. I succumbed completely to my insanity. With two fingers, I unbuttoned her pants. She blew her black curls out of her face. The sweat spurred us on. She peeled out of her jeans, and I didn't want to wait one more second. I didn't want to see, hear, smell, or taste anything more. I wanted to demonstrate my full power to her. The feeling was awesome. I buried my head in her thick hair and penetrated her. I was maybe three seconds away from gratification, but she pushed her arms against my torso and sat up. She took off the rest of her clothes. She lay stark naked on her back and breathed heavily. Her desire became audible, her sex palpable. Her eyes shone, and it was all over. All my blood shot out of my loins and into my cheeks. My nakedness became a burden. Regina looked questioningly in my eyes. She pulled a blanket over her body.

"What's wrong?"

I was so ashamed that everything buckled.

"I can't," I said. "I'm gay."

Without looking at me, she held out my ratty boxer shorts. A wounded animal, I retreated to the sixth floor.

The spritzer blocked out the memories. The pink lanterns diffused warm light. More and more guests were arriving. Yasmina seemed to know everybody. In the blink of an eye, she completely changed gears. Nobody except me could have suspected that she had just been crying. A glamorous group assembled around the table. Nariman was wearing a pink headscarf, along with high heels and pink fingernails. Her face was heavily made up; her eyelashes resembled spider legs. Sahar had on a baroque dress made of orange taffeta. It emphasized her breasts and stood out in the impersonal atmosphere of Praterstern. Mehmet, a colleague from the hospital, took a seat to the right of Yasmina. He had a thick mustache and wore yellow suspenders. Apart from the suspenders, his appearance was almost conservative. Jürgen sat down next to Mehmet. They kissed each other on

the mouth, from which I concluded they were a couple. More and more people floated in through the garden gate. New people kept approaching us, and the same old banter repeated itself. The overwhelming majority had decked themselves out as if it were Mardi Gras. I didn't budge from Yasmina's side. The alcohol grounded us. Yasmina kept grabbing my arm or leaning against my shoulder while she spoke. She signaled to everyone that I was her preferred companion. At midnight, the basses got louder. It had cooled off, so we went inside.

To enter, you had to descend a staircase that led underneath the street. Flucc was an underpass that had been shut down, a plain concrete tube. The corner remained dark, out of reach of the flickering lights. Yasmina pushed me through the smoke and crowd.

"You're doing well, my darling! Everyone loves you!"

We drank tequila.

"Thank you for being with me today."

Most of the people were crowded around the bars. The dance floor had not filled up yet. Yasmina's clique staked out its territory. Three flamboyant drag queens in feathers and rhinestones sashayed around the empty dance floor. There was great joy in the reunions. Everyone kissed and hugged each other. Yasmina introduced me for the hundredth time. Their names were Rudolfo, Yuns, and Metham. Nariman couldn't wait any longer. She grabbed Sahar, and the two of them began to dance. A young man whom I took to be Ethiopian let out a trill. He spread his arms wide, and his naked torso bent majestically backward. As if on command, two more Ethiopians or Somalis or Nubians sprang onto the dance floor. The monotonous thumping ended, and "All the Single Ladies" came booming out of the loudspeakers, eliciting an outburst of cheers.

Like me, Mehmet was not an exuberant dancer. We stayed on the sidelines and chatted, which means we stuck our heads close together and screamed into each other's ears. He worked on the ear, nose, and throat ward and had been in Yasmina and Frederik's class at medical school. From the conversation, it could be gleaned that he held Yasmina and Frederik in high esteem. He seemed to be informed of their relationship crisis. He stressed that he did not understand them and felt sorry for them. That warmed me to him, and I started looking him up and down out of the corner

of my eye. I asked him if Jürgen was his boyfriend, and he gestured vaguely.

“Jürgen is a Swabian, and they’re hard to understand. Where we have a heart, they have a calculator.”

The stereotype made us laugh, and I saw Yasmina nodding happily.

People were pushing through from the entrance to the catacombs in the very back. A line had formed in front of the women’s bathroom. People were smoking marijuana everywhere. In one corner, two women were getting into each other’s pants, in another two men. In the men’s bathroom people were dealing powder and pills. Behind a locked door, someone was fucking. Finally, there was a free urinal. Next to me, a gorgeous blond boy cocked his head. We shook ourselves off, and he stepped toward me. I wanted first to wash the urine from my fingers when a spoilsport shouted from behind: “Watch out! Escort from Bratislava! You’d better keep an eye on your wallet!”

I got beers for myself and Yasmina. I let myself take on a more confident gaze and felt close to the other people. A glaring green woman was wrapping herself around Yasmina. I waved the beer bottle at her. She declined, so I handed it to Mehmet. Pomp and circumstance filled the underpass as Rihanna sang, “We found love in a hopeless place.” The spotlights highlighted faces, and a solemn spirit hovered over the crowd.

I felt Mehmet’s hand on my buttocks. I pretended to whisper something in his ear as I kissed it. Mehmet pretended to whisper something in my ear too and kissed me back. Yasmina kissed the green woman. Jürgen joined us. Thank God Mehmet and I weren’t whispering in each other’s ears at that moment. Our hands weren’t anywhere questionable either. Jürgen took Mehmet aside and shouted something at him. Wrinkles popped out on Mehmet’s forehead. I couldn’t understand a word over the thunderous music. Jürgen disappeared, and Mehmet followed him. Yasmina hissed: “That Jürgen is an idiot. I’m sure Mehmet will come back. Don’t blow it!”

Mehmet came back. He put an arm around my hips, and the tips of our tongues touched. We felt each other up and down. Yasmina laughed. Everything was like it used to be ten years ago when we were still students and life was less worrisome. Rudolfo, Yunis, and Metham pranced around us, fanning us and forming a protective grove with their fluffy plumage.

Having Mehmet close to me was the best drug. The warmth of his body was a bed, his chest a rocking cradle, and his tongue a wet anticipation. I kept my eyes closed, so I missed most of it. A familiar voice pushed itself into my consciousness. I couldn't say how long Ferhat had been standing there. He plunged his face between Yunis's and Metham's plumage and blew kisses all around. He was buzzed.

"My dear Herr Teacher," he shouted, laughing and waving his index finger in mock reprimand. His presence was a shock. Yasmina waved him over, amused. They spoke Arabic. Mehmet pressed his hand a little tighter around my hips. He called Ferhat over to him or, rather, to us. It seemed a bit like an order. Ferhat bowed his head, as if in front of a big brother or tribal leader. Now the lingua franca was Turkish, and again I didn't understand a word. Mehmet was taller than Ferhat and used his free hand to hold Ferhat by the back of his neck. Ferhat was submissive. But two or three times, he found time to wink at me. When Yunis and Metham called out to him, he switched to German: "My dear teacher, my friends are waiting. I'll see you on Monday! You are the best teacher in the world!"

He kissed Yasmina on her right cheek, bowed playfully, and shook my hand dutifully.

The green woman writhed around Yasmina's body more and more urgently. Yasmina kept removing her arms with increasing indignance. The green woman was hell-bent on kissing Yasmina, who finally lost it. She shoved her aside: "What do you think you are doing? Fuck off! That's enough!"

We started to leave, and Mehmet went with us. Yasmina was shaking all over, also because it had gotten cold. We hurried to the taxi stand, and she got in the car immediately. Mehmet stood there shifting his feet. "I live right around the corner." All in all, that remained a vague statement. I didn't want to leave Yasmina alone. Mehmet kissed me on the mouth. "I'll ask Yasmina for your number . . ." I nodded and climbed into the taxi.

Yasmina saved Mehmet's number in my address book. We snuggled up in the back seat and looked out the window.

"Three guesses as to who tried to call me umpteen times."

"The green woman?"

"Yeah, right. Frederik! Apparently, Seville is boring . . ."

“And who is the green woman?”

“She’s into me. I treat her poorly. I let her get close to me then push her away. Sometimes I really wish I could be a lesbian. I’m a monster. What’s up with the young pretty boy?”

“You mean Ferhat? He’s my student.”

“I think it’s great your students come to our parties. What a coincidence!”

“Yes, awesome. An unbelievable coincidence . . .”

“Do all your students say ‘my dear teacher’ to you? He seems to admire you. He told me you’re the best teacher he’s ever had.”

“Unfortunately, he only comes to class on holy days. We treat him completely normally, as if he were from Ottakring or Simmering or Favoriten. People like that.”

Yasmina smiled. “That’s not it, I think. Why did you get so nervous? You started floundering around like an imbecile. Have you fallen for him? Because he’s so beautiful?”

“Have I fallen for him? What do I know? Is he even gay? I like him, I won’t deny that. Sometimes I dream about him. But mostly because I’m worried about him. He’s come straight from the war. I can’t keep affection and infatuation separate. Because I am a do-gooder. That’s my basic problem.”

As if she didn’t want the taxi driver to hear what she was going to say, she started whispering. “Who do you think you’re telling that? You are a do-gooder, and I’m a bad person, and I know less about love than you do. I don’t want to be a doctor. I chose the wrong profession.”

That was news to me. “What? Now that? Since when have you thought you don’t want to be a doctor anymore?”

“Since I’ve been working so much with Frederik. It’s true. Frederik is a good doctor. He treats people kindly and naturally. But me? I loathe them. I want to turn away when the poor stinking drunks come to the ward. I don’t want to feel that way; I want to be more noble. But I can’t. I am disgusted by people. I feel no affection for them.”

“Does Frederik know? Have you talked about it?”

The taxi had passed the Staatsoper. I could have gotten out a long time ago, but it was nice sitting next to Yasmina. The empty Ringstrasse rolled

past the window. The heat warmed me, and my exhaustion relaxed me.

“He knows. Of course. He knows because he has eyes, and that infuriates me as well. It corresponds to the image he has of me. I am ashamed to fit that image.”

“Why don’t you two talk about it? Can’t you talk about the images that you have of one another?”

“That’s not the way I see it. I get shortchanged every time we have a discussion. When we really talk, I am the stupid one. And you know why? Because Frederik is perfect.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Nobody is perfect.”

“Not true! Frederik is perfect. He’s from Simmering. His mother is an elementary school teacher, his father a bus driver. He is smart and attractive. In bed, he’s a cannon. He accepts all insurance and has a heart of gold. I, on the other hand, am rich, exotic, and problematic.”

The longer we sat in the taxi, the happier I was. It was a wonderful feeling to be kissed. Of course, I was ashamed because Ferhat had seen me. But my happiness was stronger than the shame. I put my arm around Yasmina’s neck. I reached for her hand. I wanted to let all my gratitude, respect, and love flow directly into her body.

“What do you mean you’re problematic? You’re not problematic, you’re fantastic! Frederik is distraught. He thinks you are in love with another man. He wanted me to trail you like a detective. That’s the state he is in. He doesn’t understand what’s going on. He doesn’t understand *you*. You two have to talk to each other.”

We turned into Porzellangasse. Yasmina closed her eyes, exhausted. Her complexion was pale and flawless. The car stopped in front of her father’s apartment building. She kissed me, and we hugged.

“Tell the idiot that there is no other man! The last thing I need is another man. He’s coming back today, right? Tell him I miss him.”

Ferhat showed up neither on Monday nor on Tuesday, nor did he ever show up again at school. Every day I hoped to see him. Every day a disappointment. On the other hand, I didn’t have to wait long for the first text from Mehmet. Already on Saturday evening he sent a few sweet sentences. I was flattered and took my time answering. Frederik returned

from Seville but took up lodging first in Simmering. He wanted to do his mother a favor. She cooked him his favorite foods. Three days later, he came back to me frazzled. Unfortunately, he worked the night shift incessantly. I was proud of Saturday evening and wanted to tell him every detail. But the conveyor belt of our daily routines swept us past one another. A terrible incident pushed everything into the background. On Wednesday afternoon, unusual noises were coming from my neighbor's bathroom. First you could hear the water running. Then something seemed to burst or break. His curses sound strange. They made me uneasy, and I rang his doorbell. It wasn't Drechsler at the door but Regina!

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For an entire month, I had managed to avoid Regina. We hadn't run into each other in the building or on the street, in the supermarket or anywhere else. I don't know if Regina was also trying to avoid me. Now she was standing there in the doorway, waiting for me to start the conversation. I couldn't think of anything to say. I had figured that she and Drechsler would eventually end up in each other's arms. I always thought her anger against him was nothing but a pretense. In spite of all that, her presence right now came as a surprise. She stood there in his door as naturally as if she had long since moved in with him. She wasn't even wearing shoes. *Hopefully she's wearing underwear*, I couldn't help but think. Seventeen ugly statements popped into my head. I wanted to convey my assessment of the situation in as sarcastic a manner as possible. Regina read my thoughts running wild and drily informed me of the situation.

"Drechsler is in the hospital. He coughed up blood on Saturday evening. Since you weren't at home, he went to Frau Kord's, but she wasn't there either. So he rang my doorbell. He's in the General Hospital. I don't know anything more. I'm watering his plants. His stupid watering can just broke."

We went into my apartment and sat down in the kitchen. I asked her to repeat everything in detail.

"He was trembling with fear. It was creepy. He had blood on his hands and even on his collar. He was confused. 'We have to call an ambulance,' he said. The next minute he asked me to take care of his plants. I was completely at a loss. To be honest, I thought he had killed someone. 'What's wrong?' I shouted. He was shaking and had problems swallowing. He pulled his cell phone out of his pants pocket and called an ambulance: 'I've been coughing blood for an hour.' He tried to stay calm. The paramedics arrived in ten or fifteen minutes. He asked me to inform you and Frau Kord. But yesterday and the day before yesterday, all hell broke loose at the Institute. I was finally going to come talk to you today after watering the plants, you have to believe me."

Regina got up. “There’s a minor flood in his bathroom. I have to go back over. If you need anything, I’m right next door.”

Because of the thin walls, I could tell exactly which room she was in at a given time. First she tinkered around in the bathroom. Then she moved over into the living and eating space. I knew where Drechsler had his holly and his house lilies. She locked up and came back over to sit down next to me on the sofa. I felt her shoulders, her torso, and her thighs. She asked me if I had to go to school. I nodded. Naturally, I wanted to know what had happened to Drechsler. She avoided my gaze.

“It is frivolous to assume anything. It’s safe to say that one doesn’t normally cough up blood. The doctors have to say what it is exactly.”

I was horrified by what happened underneath one’s skin, in the darkness. Basically, anyone’s heart could just stop beating at any time. Then your lungs would no longer inflate, and your face would turn blue. Or the other way around: first your lungs would get stuck, and then your heart would freeze. I fell into Regina’s arms. In no way did I wish to react to Drechsler’s misfortune with a hypochondriac’s panic attack. I could hardly imagine anything more stupid than that. Still, I felt the strong desire to succumb to despair. Besides, I wished Regina would come live with me. The embarrassment of that night had been neutralized. I wanted her to eat lunch with me and brush her teeth in the bathroom. She should come directly from the Bisamberg into the garret and bring a bouquet of gerbers or, what the hell, a plucked chicken. I would polish her shoes, do her laundry, and cook for her. After hugging and vegging out for a while, we separated, each going off to work.

In the evening, I sent Drechsler a text. He answered that he was doing well and would soon be released. I wrote and asked Frederik to find out more details. But the next day, Frederik stumbled through the door like a zombie.

“Three patients died on me last night. I couldn’t take it any longer. I’m sorry.”

There hadn’t been any spare time for a visit to the oncology department. He got undressed and fell asleep immediately.

Friday afternoon, I invited myself over to my parents, since I really needed to get out of the apartment. My parents were having beef with horseradish stuffing. First, I refused to eat one bite of it. Everybody in the

world knows that beef with horseradish stuffing is a funeral dish. I told them my best pupil had disappeared from the face of the earth, that Frederik was in despair over Yasmina, and, on top of all that, my neighbor was in the hospital. My mother clapped her hands over her head. "But how can that be? It's spring. Your father and I were in the *heuriger* in Oberlaa. Claudia Trautson from the third floor even yodeled. We sat outside until ten o'clock! My darling, you mustn't take everything to heart. Out of all this consideration for others, you are forgetting yourself!"

After eating, they wanted to drive out to Burgenland to visit my grandmother and aunt. I really wanted to know what Erika knew about Drechsler. What she thought of him. How he had been as a young man. My parents were happy that I wanted to accompany them. When I was a child, we used to drive at least once a week to Burgenland. The most beautiful summers began there, where Simmering ended between power lines and sunflowers.

The white house in Oslip stood at the edge of the village. My parents went for a walk with my grandmother. Aunt Erika didn't feel like it. She made coffee and asked me to set the table outside in the courtyard. Wearing an apron and carrying a tray, she stepped under the apple tree. It was unimaginable to me that she had ever in her life set foot in a subway or lived next to a gay bar on Laimgrubengasse. She was just as curious as I was. First, we took care of routine questions: whether the stove was working, if Herr Jankovic was still the janitor, if the cherrywood sofa was still in good condition. Then I let the cat out of the bag. I told her that Herr Drechsler had been brought to the General Hospital with pulmonary hemorrhaging. She was visibly shocked and was the first to bring up the c-word. I described to her what Regina had told me. The name didn't mean a thing to her. I explained that Regina was the tenant who had replaced Frau Seiler. Erika pounded on the table. "The apartment is already rented? How was it possible to do it so quickly? Shirin didn't tell me that!"

Erika's resemblance to my mother was undeniable. She smoothed out the tablecloth again. In contrast to my mother, she didn't color her hair anymore. Her voice was raw and beautiful. "You should know that Margit and I were close friends, since she was also from Burgenland, even though it was the southern part. Her husband was never at home. Because of him, she moved from Jennersdorf to Vienna. She didn't know anyone in Vienna,

but she couldn't go to Jennersdorf every weekend, because it was too far away. Besides, she didn't want to. She wanted to live in Vienna and have children. But her husband, like I said, was never at home. Having a truck driver for a husband is like being married to a sailor or a soldier. At first, Margit worked in a school cafeteria in the Twelfth District, just like me. Neither of us had an apprenticeship certificate, a college degree, or connections. That's a hard lot. I can't tell you what was up with this Erich Seiler. You can't see inside people. I have my own thoughts about that now. When he was there, he was wonderful, funny, and sociable. He was from Favoriten, a real Viennese guy! With him, you could really laugh. But then he'd be gone for months. A phone call now and then, a postcard, otherwise nothing. Margit really suffered from that.

"The accident was a tragedy. Margit had six siblings. Nobody from the family came to the funeral. Besides her grief, she had financial worries, and serious ones! We didn't earn jack shit in the cafeteria. Her co-op membership hadn't been paid off yet. On top of that, every month there was the rent, food, electricity, clothes, telephone, etc. She applied for a widow's pension. She had to put up with a thousand impertinences from those knucklehead bureaucrats. Margit was attractive. The pension was enough for two hot dogs. Erich Seiler had hardly any years of service. He had changed his job ten times. At twenty-three, he was dead. Margit was left with nothing, but I told her she had to get through it. At least a hundred times, she wanted to return to Jennersdorf. I asked her, 'What are you going to do in Jennersdorf? Where will you work? How will you live on your own?' She stayed in Vienna. We helped her. That is to say, I helped her, the janitor helped her, and, I have to say, it was above all Drechsler who helped her. The Drechslers lived next door to her. But a new catastrophe was brewing in the shadow of this help.

"She was most afraid of losing her apartment. She feared daily having to sleep on the sidewalk. Every other day she would say, 'I can't manage anymore, I don't want to sleep on the sidewalk. I'm going back to Jennersdorf.' But what would her parents have said if she had suddenly turned up in Jennersdorf as Frau Seiler. Who had gotten it into her head to marry a truck driver from Vienna? She got a new job at a dry cleaner's, where the money was a little better. On Saturdays, she waited tables at the Espresso in Gumpendorferstrasse. I visited her there often. There were nothing but drunks at the Espresso who were looking through her blouse at

her breasts. She polished her wedding ring so it would shine like a star. But at the Espresso, the so-called gentlemen would drink seven *krügerl*. And then they saw only what they wanted to see. The Drechsler, meanwhile, had a baby—Drechsler has a son your age. Margit was having problems. The owner of the dry cleaner's was a washed-up old moron. He had a Mercedes, but he had such a fat ass that it barely fit between the door and the parking brake. He had gotten it into his head to marry Margit.

“But Margit had absolutely no desire to marry again right away and certainly not that lardass. In time, a spirit of resistance grew inside us. We started defending ourselves. The first step is joining forces. I told her, ‘You will not end up on the street! If worse comes to worst, you’ll move in with me! There is plenty of room for two!’ He promptly threw her out of the dry cleaner's. There she was without a family, without a husband, without savings, and without a job. But I had her back. And Drechsler. At first, he was harmless. He took care of little things. I encouraged her. ‘If that fop wants to help you—accept his help! You need it!’ He would go to Espresso and keep the reins on the drunken brotherhood. He took her in his car to job interviews or to the employment agency. He would bring her potatoes or ground meat from the market. He was employed at the city housing office. As far as I know, he still works there. Naturally, he has very good contacts there to the party. And I always say, without contacts, the strongest person is a wiener, regardless if you are in Vienna, the Burgenland, or on the moon. Whoever says, ‘I am where I am because of merit,’ ought to be struck down on the spot with a wet rag.

“He helped her get the job in the pastry shop across from the Ministry of Finance. The knucklehead bureaucrats liked to eat pastries, and, logically, they liked Margit. They tipped generously. That's how Margit's financial situation got better. However, the relationship to Drechsler's wife deteriorated. They had a little kid, but Drechsler was more interested in taking care of Margit than in his child. At least that's what his wife accused him of. All in all, Frau Drechsler became completely insufferable. She snubbed Margit whenever she could. But Margit always behaved properly. She was careful to maintain the necessary distance in spite of their being close neighbors. Eventually, she met someone in the pastry shop. Once, the three of us went out together. He was our age, and his name was Franz. If you ask me, he was a total loser! His father was somebody in the ministry. Margit had fallen in love with him or at least gotten her hopes up. Of

course, she didn't want Drechsler to find out about it. She didn't want to seem ungrateful or inconsiderate or selfish. But it must be repeated again and again: Drechsler had a wife and child. He was a married man!

"But there's something else: You can't just love someone who has saved your ass. Without Drechsler, Margit might not have made it. His contacts, the job, all that saved Margit from a disaster. He didn't want anything in return. Drechsler is a good person, I'm sure of that. But yet he did want something. He was in love with Margit. At the very least, he probably wanted her to love him back. Margit sensed this and distanced herself from him. Even though it was tough, since it looked like she had just been using him. Drechsler drew the wrong conclusions. He withdrew more and more from his wife, thinking that would bring him closer to Margit. But it was exactly the opposite. Margit felt guilty. Eventually she wanted to cut off all contact with him, which is difficult when you live next door to each other. Frau Drechsler blamed Margit for everything. She didn't say hello to her anymore, and she bad-mouthed her to others in the building. Margit found that to be an unbearable injustice against her. On the other hand, she was attached to the house and the pastry shop. The pastry shop and the house were the only places she felt safe.

"The Drechslers got a divorce, and he moved to the sixth floor. Where she went, I have no idea. He thought that, in a few years, everything would blow over. But Margit couldn't love him. At first, it was because of that Franz guy. Naturally, Franz was a spoiled brat. Somebody like that doesn't marry a waitress. He ruins her reputation perhaps, but he doesn't marry her. When Franz was finally history, it still didn't work out with Drechsler. Margit felt like she had ruined their marriage. She felt like she owed him her life. That is no good basis! That all took quite a toll on Drechsler. For a few years, he went to the dogs. He drank like a Russian; you could see him every day at the Espresso in Gumpendorferstrasse. We all noticed it, the whole building! Margit felt more and more guilty, if that is even possible. In time, however, her permanent feeling of guilt simply caused Drechsler to get on her nerves.

"We would see him sitting at Espresso in his drunken dreary despondency. Boy did he get on our nerves! He reproached us with his glassy stare, reproached us with his boozy breath, reproached us with his shabby clothing. In the end, his son saved him from complete ruin. He

started giving loving care to the little boy. Luckily his wife hadn't put up any barriers there. As a civil servant, he had a lot of time. He picked him up from school every day, and they'd go to the park or the museum or the movies. They spent some weekends together on Laimgrubengasse. Frau Drechsler went back to work. She must have been happy that her ex-husband was taking such good care of the boy. That's how Drechsler got back on his feet. Still, everything was in shambles between him and Margit. At some point in time, he stopped trying. Margit and I became even closer, and Shirin moved in next to her—she had her own story. Tensions relaxed a little. We weren't even thirty years old, but we'd had enough of men."

Erika dumped the cold coffee on the grass in disgust. We heard the walkers coming back from the street. For a moment, she was overcome by emotion. She pulled herself together and wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. My parents were slowly walking toward us. Grandma arrived last at the table. Hardly had she taken a seat when she sent Erika into the house for a blanket. Later, Uncle Bertram and Uncle Karl came by. They lived in the neighborhood, and we ate supper together. On the drive back, I sat in my usual spot in the back seat and gazed dreamily at the landscape.

"Did you always know what was up with Aunt Erika?"

My mother shrugged her shoulders. "We never talked about it."

My father sat behind the wheel muttering to himself indistinctly.

"Did you always know that I was gay? Did you know when I was a child?"

My mother turned around to look at me. "What kind of questions are those? You hardly spoke to grandma at all! Always just with Erika. Are you two conspiring against us?"

My father cleared his throat. "I didn't know, and I never would have believed it. You were a completely normal child, with the emphasis on 'normal.'"

My mother replied, "That's not true. I remember one day in spring, when you were still little, maybe in kindergarten. Frederik and you played in the courtyard all day. From time to time, I watched you from the window. When you came inside, you were covered in dirt. I put you in the bathtub. Your father was on the phone with his brother talking about his wedding. I had to wash the dirt out of your ears. 'And who will you marry one day?' I

asked you. You answered, ‘Mom, I’m marrying Frederik.’ At that moment, I had a strange feeling.”

I spent the rest of the trip back imagining chivalrous scenarios with Ferhat. I bought him a bicycle, and we rode together beyond the Bohemian Prater, out of the city. At the spot where the hills open up to the lake, we leaned our bikes against a hut. The grape vines were bright green, and an old fig tree stretched out toward the sun. We drank from our water bottles, and the water ran over the parched corners of our lips onto our throats. We kissed. I saw us grilling together in my aunt’s garden in Oslip. My grandmother served sparkling grape juice in half-liter glasses. We roasted corn and chicken legs. In the evening, we rode through the corn to the reeds. Ferhat laughed because he was able to forget all his worries and be happy. We showered in the darkness behind the tool shed. Under the roof, it smelled of wood and dusty mattresses. Grandma hadn’t managed to ascend the steep staircase for some time now, so we lay together like man and wife, and a meteor shower moved across the sky.

The garret was tidied up and clean as a whistle. Frederik had even washed the windows. He pushed aside his newspaper to return my greeting. It was unmistakable. Something was wrong. I put the eggs in the refrigerator. Frederik put down his newspaper and came toward me. His eyes were red from crying, his complexion unusually pale. In Oslip, I had forgotten everything Viennese except Ferhat. I had been that way since childhood. There weren’t any messages or missed calls. For a moment, I feared that it had something to do with Drechsler. We lay down on the bed, since only one person could sit comfortably on the sofa.

“She says, ‘You can’t help it. You are how you are, and I am how I am. I don’t know exactly what you see in me, why you love me, as you constantly stress. To be honest, I can’t comprehend it at all, because I’m not at all like you. Unfortunately, I have become aware of this in the last few months. We aren’t right for each other. Even if it hurts, it’s the truth: I don’t love you anymore.’ This is what she said: ‘Maybe it will be less painful when I express it as follows: I absolutely do not want a family, not with you, not now, not with anyone. We have different visions of the future, so it’s not possible for us to stay together.’ I explained to her that I want to help her, to support her. That I want to be there for her twenty-four hours a day. That I’ll go to Beirut with her, that we can take a vacation in Sicily or, what the hell,

in the Sahara, that I'll join her group, that I'll buy a smartphone. She said, 'I don't want you to change for me. You don't understand me. No, the truth is that you *can't* understand me. It's not your fault. C'est la vie.' That's what she said. As if I were too stupid to understand her highly complex nature. I could kill her. What happened in the last five months? If I am such a dumbass, why did she stick it out with me for seven years? She's leaving in two weeks. Did you know that? Tell me the truth! Did you know?"

I showed Frederik all the messages that Yasmina and I had sent one another. I told him from beginning to end what had happened that night in Praterstern. I told him about making out with Mehmet, about the green woman, about Ferhat turning up and then disappearing. I repeated to him the conversation in the cab and told him that Yasmina had said she missed him. We lay next to each other and stared at the ceiling. What had happened to her? All of a sudden, I understood why Frederik wanted to shadow her.

It was weird that she was leaving for America in two weeks and had never said a word about it. We spent seven—actually eight years together. We were there for each other, had leaned on each other and laughed together. She had just sat next to me in the taxi. It turned out she had been carrying a secret around with her for months. Frederik slept badly, if he slept at all. I lay next to him and watched over him. I no longer thought it far-fetched that he might jump out the window. He complained of a headache, and in the evening he had a fever.

He ran a fever, wept, ranted, and went hungry. Yet, to be honest, the haggard face of lovesickness looked exquisite on him. His beard sprouted wildly over his cheeks, chin, and throat. Soaked with sweat, he tossed and turned in the sheets. Sometimes he slept, and I immersed myself in his stillness. His fingers or eyelids twitched like a young dog dreaming. A wall away, Herr Drechsler swallowed and spit. Lying down, as his doctors had told him to do after his release, was impossible for him. He couldn't stay still for a minute. He cleaned, cooked, and talked on the telephone. He received visits from sauna buddies or cafeteria colleagues from the distant past. His wraithlike body scurried restlessly through the apartment. Every day, there were special moments for Mick Jagger, at a volume I would never have thought him capable of. The titles spoke a clear language: "Honky Tonk Woman," "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and "You Can't

Always Get What You Want.” He was sick and in love at the same time, and when unrest got the better of him, he came over to our place to talk.

Frederik had taken two weeks of sick leave. All the nurses and physical therapists, even the cleaning crew and receptionists knew about it. The head doctor, who, as it turned out, had already sent a glowing letter of recommendation for Yasmina to San Francisco, sent her condolences via text. At night, he was racked by the desire to contact Yasmina. The more days that went by, the more intense were the attacks. We went over the same topic a hundred times: at some point there has been enough talking, even if nothing has been understood. There is no point in talking to someone who insists that he cannot be understood. Frederik had fits of rage. Then he'd doze off. When he wasn't sleeping and I wasn't at home, he listened to the radio. Since there was no television in the garret, he asked me for newspapers. At first, Austrian newspapers, then German, English, and French ones. He didn't want to read anything online because the comments beneath the articles made him blow his top. Printed paper piled up next to the bed as if he were a pretentious student or journalist.

When the fourteen days were almost over, his frenzy reached an initial climax. A long conversation with Herr Drechsler at which I was not present had been the straw that broke the camel's back. He sent a hundred short text messages to Yasmina. She didn't answer, so he tried a hundred times to call her. She didn't pick up. He jumped out of bed and drove to the apartment on Porzellangasse. He had learned from his colleagues that she wasn't on duty. He didn't find her on Porzellangasse, so he drove to her parents on Cottagegasse and rang the bell. Since nobody opened the door, he climbed over the garden wall. The vigilant guards at the Canadian Embassy noticed him immediately. He pounded on the living room window. Yasmina's mother opened the window. Of all the members of Yasmina's family, Yasmina's mother was his favorite. Since the incident with the cousin from Mezher, she wore black and smoked nonstop. She assured him credibly that Yasmina was not there and she didn't know where she was. Two police officers came to the garden gate. Yasmina's mother called to them that everything was okay. For all to see, she took his head between her hands and kissed his forehead. Frederik sat down, defeated, next to a bed of flowers. Yasmina's mother closed the window. The police officers ordered him to leave the garden and the block without delay.

The next morning, with Frederik hardly recovered from his exertions, Monika Neundlinger was at the apartment door. Most likely the building gate had been open, so she was able to advance to the sixth floor without resistance. She had heard our voices and footsteps. It was impossible to feign absence or sleep.

“What is going on? I was at the hospital yesterday since I haven’t seen you for days. I was told you are sick. I start to panic, and the nurse tells me it’s nothing serious. Freddy, what is the meaning of this? You aren’t going to work even though you are healthy? Your life is going down the toilet! And all because of Yasmina, am I right? She left you, but you know what? I never liked her. Freddy, why don’t you finally look for a normal woman? First a black woman then a Muslim—is that necessary? Don’t get me wrong, but I’m your mother. I just want you to be okay. There are a lot of pretty Viennese girls, or am I wrong? Does it always have to be something exotic? In the end, you’re the one to pay. These people have a different culture. You have to realize that. Common sense tells you that. How can there ever be harmony when your partner is completely preoccupied with herself? How can you have children if you yourself act like a child? And please, Freddy, why are you sleeping in the same bed with Kurti now? That isn’t necessary. There is plenty of room in our apartment. Your room is empty. I’ll cook for you, do your laundry—we are there for you! Don’t let her get you down like that. The whole building is going to the May Day march the day after tomorrow. The building administration approved for us to have a swimming pool on the roof. We’ll be the first municipal housing development in Simmering with a roof pool! Isn’t that great?”

On the first of May, an email from Yasmina finally arrived in Frederik’s inbox. In the subject line, she had pasted a photo with the typical view of clouds offered by an airplane window, and written underneath: “I am flying away because I can’t stand it here anymore. You are a good person. I’ve never doubted that. Please respect my decision. Please don’t jump out the window! You deserve the best woman in the world.”

The message became Frederik’s new anchor point. We spent a great deal of time poring over the contents of those five sentences. He tended to read love in them, but I urged him to see the writing on the wall and thus incurred his wrath. “You are only saying that because you don’t understand anything about love.”

“Freddy, you are not ready to accept the truth, which is understandable because your pain is fresh. But you’re an ass for insulting me because of it. That hurts me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m a wreck. You’re all I have left. But I really do believe that you don’t know much about love. You just don’t have the experience. I think that basically you haven’t come out yet.”

“What do you mean by that? Of course, I’m out. To you, to my family, to our friends.”

“But not to yourself. Why did you sleep with Regina? Why are you ashamed that Ferhat saw you making out with a guy? There’s nothing to be ashamed of. You are gay, and making out is nice.”

“I am not ashamed in front of Ferhat.”

“Yes, you are. You are afraid he won’t come back to your class because he doesn’t want a gay teacher.”

“It was stupid of me to say that. Ferhat hasn’t come back because he has some kind of problem. His life is more stressful than ours. Maybe the fascist Viennese police locked him up for some minor offense. Maybe he is working night shifts because he wants to send money to Iraq. Maybe he has to paint a relative’s apartment or put a new roof on or build a garage, or maybe he was forced to marry his cousin overnight. His life is full of hardships. He doesn’t have time to rack his brains over sexual orientation and other luxuries.”

“Why don’t you sleep with him? Why don’t you sleep with anyone at all? Why don’t you have sex? We are thirty-one years old. Everything is in the best working order. Even now, in my hour of catastrophe, I want to sleep with a woman. When I think about it, it’s really the only thing I want to do now. I know you. There’s nothing but naked butts floating around in your head, but you are getting more and more uptight. You’ve become a prude.”

“You are getting on my nerves. What do you want from me? I’ve been sleeping next to you for over a month, you fucker! Instead of thanking me, you fling psychological bullshit at my head. You are bathing in your own separation grief. But have you ever asked yourself what it is like to *always* be alone? Your whole life? Because you are condemned to solitude?”

My voice trembled, my legs wobbled, and I couldn’t breathe. We blubbered all over each other’s shirts.

“Kurti, I’m sorry! I really hate my situation. You are the only one I can lash out against.”

I couldn’t stay mad at Frederik. It just wasn’t possible.

“Freddy, I think of Ferhat all the time. I imagine what it would be like to ride with him to Oslip or go for a walk with him. I dream every night about him, that we are showering together. Is that love? It’s completely out of the blue! I don’t even know Ferhat. Maybe he’s not into men? And above and beyond that, I love you. Isn’t that love? Doesn’t that count? Why not? I could spend my life with you. I even love you when you are full of shit, like right now.”

“I love you too. I’d love for us to live together. But my mother wouldn’t like it. You heard everything she’s thought up in her birdbrain. She’s afraid that your gayness is contagious. She’s a dolt. But how would we deal with sex and tenderness? We can’t sleep with each other. I can’t kiss you. That just won’t work. I find men disgusting, I can’t help it.”

“That doesn’t matter. I also find you disgusting. I couldn’t possibly sleep with you.”

“Excuse me? I always thought you found me handsome?”

“Of course I think you’re handsome. But I don’t want to grab your ass. You’re like my brother. I’ve been familiar with your dick since kindergarten; that’s a turn-off.”

Outside, the Austrian flag was flapping. The custodian had already hoisted it the day before. True, we weren’t a city building, but the co-op also felt a deep affinity for the social democratic values of the previous century.

Naturally, Herr Drechsler wanted to talk about bronchial carcinoma, but he chose the afternoons when I wasn't home to do so. Frederik went back to work. In the hospital, he made use of his connections to Drechsler's advantage and brought him up-to-date on the latest research and treatment options. What Drechsler seemed to appreciate even more than that was how Frederik acted from time to time as if not cancer but Yasmina was the cause of the greatest suffering on earth. I had become somewhat jaded by his lovesickness, but Drechsler never tired of lending an ear to Frederik's woe. This, of course, was related to the fact that in spite of his bronchial carcinoma, he was head over heels in love with Regina. Whenever Frederik needed to talk after coming home from the night shift, Herr Drechsler was on the spot without fail, and they bathed together in heartache. On the occasion that I had the honor to attend one of their discourses, I quickly tired of it. I packed up my things and left early for school.

We found out that Drechsler had played a critical role in reassigning the lease to Margit's apartment. Margit had no relatives who wanted to live there. Drechsler was on the co-op administration board and exerted his influence over the decision process. Eighty-seven applicants had applied for the six hundred square feet by the deadline. Even though Regina had no children, no low-wage job, and no relatives in the building, she got the subsidy. Drechsler did not indulge in salacious details, but you could see the spark in his eyes when he told the story.

I turned onto Barnabitengasse when I was drawn on a whim to the church there. We had never once in my whole life attended mass, but I copied my mother's cult of the candle. Whoever sincerely asks for something, my mother said, will have their prayers answered. I wanted to plead for Ferhat's return to school. Or at least for a phone call from him. I would renounce my dreams of showering and spending the night with him in Oslip if he just reemerged. I had tried several times to write to him or call him, but something was wrong with his number. He didn't answer and didn't write

back. My colleague from the math course knew the address of his bakery in Favoriten. I pedaled up Vienna Mountain three times to buy a nut-filled sticky bun. Ferhat wasn't there. I was struck to my core how the city simply swallowed people up. Even though it was highly probable that we lived in the same zip code, it was within the realm of possibility that we would never see each other again. This thought was difficult to bear. So, in order to defy fate, I went inside Mariahilfer Church. I stopped abruptly because the image of Judas Thaddaeus was taken. The praying person who had beaten me there held two hands in front of his face. His throat-clearing was so distinctive that there was no doubt who it was.

"Drechsler is morbidly depressed. He's weeping in the church in front of St. Jude."

"How do you know that? Who is St. Jude?"

"Judas Thaddaeus is the patron saint of hopeless cases. I wanted to light a candle and caught him praying."

"Why do you think you are a hopeless case?"

"I wanted to pray for Ferhat's return."

"Where is this church? I'd like to ask for Yasmina to come back from San Francisco and marry me."

Frederik and I talked about Drechsler's illness. I hated medical terminology and avoided it wherever possible. Moreover, decency and thin walls prohibited us from talking about him behind his back.

"His situation is not favorable. Chemotherapy will take a toll on him. The chances of recovery are difficult to estimate. Worst case scenario: he goes through hell and nothing improves. He must keep the idea of love alive. It can help him. We have to support him."

"What should we do? We can't force Regina into anything."

Frederik hung his head. "I know that. Tomorrow *I* will go visit St. Jude. Maybe I'll think of something . . ."

In mid-May, my groups would take the written exam for the high school diploma. Every morning, I went to the terrace of the Café Rüdigerhof to grade the thirty-six essays in peace. Once I observed Frau Kord and Regina coming onto the terrace. They were wearing summer dresses and open-toed

shoes. They didn't see me because my usual spot was hidden behind a lilac bush. Frau Kord had strands of gray at her temples. Regina was obviously a few years younger. Apart from that, however, they seemed like sisters or cousins or best friends. They engaged in an intimate tête-à-tête. Frau Kord whispered something in Regina's ear. They both brought their hands to their mouths to hide their laughter. They bantered with the waiter. I kept my head down as well as I could. At the gate, they kissed each other on each cheek and went their separate ways.

On Saturday, Frederik was on night duty. The early summer weather invited us to spend the evening outside. Regina and I walked down Gumpendorferstrasse to Heldenplatz. Young people with beer and cigarettes sat among the equestrian statues. Regina felt like talking, and without much ado, we got to the topic she was concerned about.

"It's not any of my business, and I have no right to lecture you on anything. But we spent a special evening together and haven't talked about it yet. You have to know, and indeed you already know to some degree, that I've been studying sex for many years, basically since my childhood. There is nothing unusual about that. Many people have a topic that fascinates them. Some people are enthusiastic about modern art, others about railroads or astronomy. I am interested in sex. Sometimes I encounter people who find that inappropriate or ridiculous, even more so because I'm a woman. But I find *that* ridiculous! We don't have much say about our interests and passions. They hound us like fate. Every true scientist will attest to that.

"I know Drechsler visits you guys a lot. Frederik takes walks with him. I want to revise what I recently said to you about Drechsler. He is a good person. But he also has his deficiencies. There are things he has no understanding of. I don't know what he told you both, and I don't care. But I absolutely want to tell you my side of the story.

"Because of my mother, I had darker skin than the other children. I had darker hair and a stronger build. In the midnineties, the Yugoslavian children came to Langenzersdorf. We all got thrown together into the same pot. On the playground, I was ridiculed like the Bosnian girls. The Germanic barbarian kids with their imbecile ultra-right parents must have called me *Tschuschin* a hundred times. I could protest a thousand times that my mother was Greek and a communist, but the barbarians would have

nothing of it. Do you understand? Your body is not something you can just block out or paint over with ideology. The body has a material reality, a facticity that is perceivable through the senses, and it plays a determining factor in the way other people treat you. You are judged by your body and in accordance with your body. I understood that earlier than other children, and it was very painful.

“My greatest happiness was the wisdom and love of my parents. My mother instilled in me that I should not believe for a second what the other children called me. When I was distraught, my father took me in his arms. He held me tight and kissed my face. He took me and my sister by the hand, and we took a walk to the woods or the vineyards. We watched the buzzards, lizards, deer, and mice. My father loved every living thing. He would have loved to be a biologist if he’d had the chance. In high school, my life changed. I can tell you the exact day—I’ll never forget it! It was my junior year of high school, in May, after gym class. My friend Tamara and I were going back to class from the locker room. We had played soccer and were totally exhausted. We showered. Solidarity among us girls was growing, and our shame was diminishing. Everything about us was fresh, supple, and exciting. I felt the athleticism of my body. I felt how much I loved my muscles, that I could live in them. We went up to the second floor. Upstairs, three boys were leaning against the railing watching us. The one in the middle was named Jakob. He was two years older than us. His father owned three gas stations in Floridsdorf, and he played soccer with the SC Columbia under-seventeens. His eyes were dark birds that darted toward me. I felt it all over my body, and it was wonderful!

“We feel each other’s proximity even under our skin. Therein lies sexuality’s complexity. Jakob’s look triggered sensations in me that we can describe biochemically. These feelings gave me self-confidence. They changed the way I walked down the main street of Langenzersdorf. They made me prouder and more independent. Sexual feeling is a process that begins with the palpable proximity of the other person, penetrates the cell structure of our body and emerges again through our psychological behavior. If we are desired, we hold our head up higher, have a more beautiful mouth and more dexterous legs, as Brecht says. As a result, we are instinctively seen with more respect by our fellow human beings. Many people, mostly men, talk constantly about love and relationships, for example Drechsler or your friend Frederik. I don’t do that. My passion is

for the materiality of desire. The fact that you can also love your work is something completely foreign to Drechsler, for example. He senses a deficit or a pathology in this. But that's not my fault, is it?"

We started walking again. It was a mystery to me what she was getting at, but her tone was far less arrogant than at our first meeting. I sensed that she wanted to tell me something. I asked her about the thing that was eating at me: "Don't you want children? Don't you want a family? Isn't family the reason we talk so much about love?"

Regina put her arm around my hips almost tenderly. Our bodies swayed in unison. For the first time, I saw something resembling sadness or melancholy in her proud face. "In nature there are a thousand variants of family. In light of this abundance, the term becomes almost meaningless. Baby snakes hatch without family ties. They don't need anyone to start their life. Human young, in contrast, are completely helpless after birth. They must be taken care of for years, or they will perish. There are a thousand gradations in between. There is a correlation between family structure and need. Yes, I want children! But I don't want a man by my side. By my side, that's too close for me. Plus, I don't want to have to give up my job for a single day. I wish we had a family structure without owing a debt of love. Like you, I want to take responsibility for my children but without maternal kitsch and vows of loyalty. I think about it a lot. We women bear the entire burden of procreation. We should be the ones who design the family strategies, but this is not the case. Discourses on love are nothing but men's monologues, therapists' hot air, and priggishness. Our reputation goes down the drain quickly. We are either career-driven, perverted, or crazy. You can believe me, I understand your longing. But ultimately it all depends on whether we are confident enough. Do we have the courage and faith to rebel against any and all opinions? That's the most important thing."

"And what about Drechsler?"

"What did he tell you? What do you know? I'm really sorry about the cancer. He is an attractive man. But I don't owe him anything!"

"What do you mean by owe?"

"From the very beginning, I told him that the one thing has nothing to do with the other. The apartment is one thing. The other thing is whether we go to bed together. He agreed. I could have moved to the Second District. The

apartment would have been closer to the lab and almost the same price. He can't act like I'm obligated to do anything for him."

"You slept with him?"

Regina lifted her head. I feared ridicule and mockery. She refrained.

"I told him we would keep that and the matter of the apartment on separate accounts. But what happened? Three days after I moved in, he goes and unlocks my apartment! That was not part of the agreement."

"He's in love with you."

"Is that supposed to be relevant? Do I have to react to that? I am not in love, sorry. The cancer doesn't change that. He should be careful not to bad-mouth me because of it!"

We went down the Rahlstiege and sat down in Top Kino at a free table. Regina did not continue talking. The topic of Drechsler was unpleasant for her. We ordered two Aperol spritzes.

"It's time for you to tell me something about *your* life! Your little secret has since been aired."

I blushed and told her what came to mind. Later we went home singing. She said goodbye with a kiss directly on my mouth. She was an unbending being from another star, and I admired her.

Frederik kept up the practice of reading international newspapers. He had infected me, too, with it, and we enjoyed it together. We saw it as an act of resistance against the nerve-killing smartphone. Seated cozily on the cherrywood sofa, we held the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and *Le Monde* like a monstrance or heraldic shield in the air. Frederik focused on Lebanon, while my interest was directed at Iraq. The Iraqi city of Mosul was surrounded by ISIS troops and threatened to fall. Hundreds of thousands of people fled to the Kurdish regions of Iraq, above all to Erbil, which was fifty miles away, which of course especially concerned me. The resources were scarce in Erbil. The United Nations warned of a humanitarian catastrophe. And then there was the fear of an Islamicist occupation. The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was playing an opaque game. Several journalists reported that Erdoğan had helped the Sunni fundamentalists across the Syrian-Turkish border. Meanwhile, he

kicked the Kurds in the crotch. I was furious, but Frederik remained skeptical.

“You aren’t an impartial observer of the situation. Your heart is beating for the Kurdish team.”

The situation was much more difficult for him. “I can’t tell you who I’m rooting for. In Beirut, it’s impossible to figure out. One could side with the Maronites, Alevis, Shiites, Sunnis, Druze, Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, Armenians, Jews, Palestinians, Egyptians, Iranians, Americans, Russians, the anarchists, the believers, the agnostics, the rich, the poor, the men, or the women—if I haven’t forgotten anyone. The best thing would probably be to bulldoze the city and start over again from the beginning.”

Since the night in Praterstern, Mehmet had written me twice and even called once. I didn’t react. By the time his third text message arrived, my arrogance, which I had acquired from reading on the sofa, was at full strength. In front of Frederik, I said out loud what had been brewing inside me: “Who does this Turk think he is writing to me three times? Even though I’ve never once answered him?”

Frederik shook his head. “How can you talk like that? Do you know how many millions of Turks there are? Mehmet is gay and lovable. He is a doctor. He studied with Yasmina. You should be in love with him and not with some random sketchy guy. You should fuck Mehmet instead of blaming him for something he has no control over.”

I retracted everything. But still, I sensed that I didn’t like Mehmet. I couldn’t help but think of the hand he had put on Ferhat’s neck. *The root of all evil lies in that gesture*, I thought, and nothing could convince me otherwise.

On the weekend before Drechsler’s first chemotherapy appointment, the three of us got together at Alter Beisl. It was the first time I had ever gone out with him. We had a hearty meal and drank accordingly. Drechsler asked us to call him by his first name. Since we knew that he wept in front of St. Jude several times a week, we were prepared for this.

“I would like to tell you both that I haven’t felt so at home in the Laimgrubengasse for a long time. It’s because of you two.”

We returned the compliment and awkwardly shifted gears to our new informal mode of address.

“It is typical for my life that this illness is showing up now. For the first time in years, I had the feeling that things were going in the right direction.” We expected him to burst into tears.

“Thanks to you,” Drechsler turned to Frederik, “I have the best possible preparation. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone. But it’s good to know that you are both nearby.”

Frederik nodded appeasingly.

“As for women, I give up. I am probably doing everything wrong by nature. Do you know what’s behind it? Why she is suddenly distancing herself again? What have I done wrong this time?”

Frederik and I closed ranks. Whatever we knew, we only knew the half of it. I tried to keep him in line. “Tell us what happened between you! How did it start?”

“When she left, it was clear she would get the apartment. Frau Klemperer still had eight interested parties booked for the afternoon. But she didn’t feel like meeting them, I knew that. It gets on your nerves to get dozens of people’s hopes up in vain. I handled the remaining appointments. As soon as the last person left, I called Regina. She was happy. I told her to come to the co-op office in Ottakring the next day to sign the contract. In the evening, I found her standing at my door wearing a yellow winter coat, which looked exquisite on her. ‘Shall we go for a drink?’ she asked. It was a miracle for me. I hadn’t gone for a drink with a woman for ten years. And certainly not with a woman like that! I had resigned myself to it; my time had been played out. You two are so young; you can’t imagine it. The body gets old, but the heart is stubborn. You don’t stop dreaming. I tried to turn it off. I told myself that I no longer had a claim to please women. But longing cannot be eradicated.

“Almost everything in my life has gone wrong. I have no talent for being happy. I didn’t want an expensive car, nor a roof terrace or trip to the Seychelles. I wanted to be in love, live together with a woman and have children. Yes, it’s the truth. There is no bigger happiness under the sun. I didn’t go to college; I don’t have a degree. You both are a thousand times more refined than I am. Some think a work of art is beautiful or the Matterhorn or six thousand euros a month. But you can take the Matterhorn and shove it. A woman is beautiful. *All you need is love* is what we used to sing in my youth. For educated people today, that’s probably an

embarrassing sentiment. I get it: Seen scientifically, everything is super complicated. But outside, it's snowing. It's cold. You are all by your lonesome. You have an apartment, a job, a grown child. Your pension is guaranteed. But what good is it to you if nobody needs you or wants you anymore? Should I get a dog, one with claws on its paws, that barks at me instead of talking to me? That's hell. Then the doorbell rings. A woman is at your door, and she is exquisitely beautiful.

"We went to Sophie on Wienzeile and sat at the table farthest in the back, where it was warmest. She ordered a wine spritzer, and I did the same, even though I actually don't drink anymore. She thanked me a hundred times. She was truly relieved. She didn't mention it any further, but something bad must have happened in America. I told her there was no reason to thank me. Apartments are there to be allocated. Every human being has to live somewhere, or life can't even start. She laughed out loud. She started railing against real estate administrators, speculators, politics, and the 'cowardly inheritance culture of the privileged.' The sun rose in my heart. I felt my pulse beating. It felt like it used to. I grew up here in Favoriten, on Troststrasse, in a municipal housing development where approximately four thousand children lived. We drank another wine spritzer and then another. She told me everything about her lab and her mice. I understood nothing. It was unbelievable to me that she was sitting there with me at the table talking uninterruptedly about sex. We went back up Laimgrubengasse. I thought she had to catch the 57A bus. As we were standing at the building gate, she asked, 'May I look at the apartment again?' I fetched the spare key, and we went inside.

"I am not superstitious. I am not even religious! But when we entered Margit's apartment, my hair stood on end. Regina inspected everything. 'The apartment will, of course, be cleared out and refurbished,' I said. In the living room stood the same sofa as way back then. The kitchen unit was the same. *Margit is dead*, I thought, *and now this woman is moving in*. Life is unfathomable. Regina is the most unfathomable of all. After four minutes, she was finished. 'Let's go,' she said. My heart was beating into my throat. I didn't know what *go* meant. Even in my wildest dreams, I would not have dared think that *go* meant go to my place. She looked at me. I was stunned. *What does she see?* I asked myself. *My skin is an old rag. My legs are desiccated twigs. I could be her father. Nothing is as ugly as an old body. She will be disgusted*, I thought, *and she will regret it*. It is impossible to

describe what it was like to go up to the sixth floor with her. I put on an Aretha Franklin record. Aretha Franklin is the best. After that, I was happy, understandably.

“I resolved to accept everything like a gift. I pinched myself in the arm and thanked God. Even though I don’t even believe in God. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Better to go through life not wanting anything. Happiness comes to those who wait. Those were the platitudes I comforted myself with. But I had her telephone number. It was still a month until her move-in date. It was so beautiful to wake up with such sweet thoughts, hope, and a vision of concrete happiness. I took my cell phone out in the subway and stared at the display like the youngsters do the whole way from Kettenbrückengasse to Erdberg. I held out for four days. Then I called her. She didn’t answer. It was horrible. Day after day, I waited for her to return my call or message me, from the time I got up in the morning to when I went to bed at night. Nothing. After a week, I was downstairs at Frau Kord’s and had left my cell phone in my apartment when there was suddenly a call in my absence. We went back to Sophie and then to bed. It was even better than the first time. She absolutely refused to stay the night. After that: radio silence again for weeks.

“I waited and waited in purgatory. My God, what would it be like when we were living in the same building? I was plagued by the most horrible thoughts. I didn’t see her again before she moved in. I couldn’t reach her on the phone. I wrote her at least ten text messages. Then there was the incident with the key. I still cannot comprehend what that was all about. Did she want to snub me? Humiliate me in front of you all? Did I really go too far? I apologized, and a few days later, she apologized. She stayed until breakfast. My heart was overflowing with happiness, and I rode my bicycle to Prater. I wanted to embrace the trees like a crazy man. But then I made a fruit salad in the kitchen. I swallowed and then swallowed again. Something got stuck. I have a strange feeling in my throat. My chest starts to hurt. I can’t properly exhale, and I feel a stabbing pain. I feel like I am suffocating. *She* called an ambulance. Everything was ruined. She visited me every other day in the hospital and brought me flowers and homemade cookies. There was marijuana from her laboratory in the butter. The cookies helped me far more than all the pills. Then I received my diagnosis, and now . . .”

Drechsler turned away. He pulled a large handkerchief out of his pocket, and we heard him sobbing for a while. We had expected him to be distraught. Still, we were moved. He turned back around and finished his sentence: “Now it’s radio silence again, as if she had forgotten me or I had already died. That’s what’s so harsh. I know she spends thousands of hours at work. She has two new employees and is under enormous pressure. The university expects results. I am aware that she doesn’t owe me anything. But the idea that she doesn’t want to have anything more to do with me because I have cancer is killing me.”

He insisted on paying the bill. We forced him into a taxi, and he sank down feebly onto the back seat. He smiled and raised his hand to wave goodbye. His eyes were vacant and sad. We stood around clueless on Reumannplatz. Frederik was the first to pull himself together. “We can’t possibly go home. Let’s get drunk!”

We took a taxi to Café Leopold, which was a bad idea.

Frederik was in a dangerous mood. Halfway to our destination, he started bad-mouthing Regina. More or less, he called her career-obsessed, perverse, and crazy. I reprimanded him, reminding him that Regina genuinely cared about Drechsler. She had called an ambulance, watered his plants, and visited him every other day in the hospital. But she wasn’t about to pretend she was in love out of pity.

“Regardless. Women today aren’t normal. They only think of themselves. What will that lead to? We have to stick together, or we’ll go to the dogs! Our civilization is done for if relationships become the most complicated thing in the world.”

“Bravo, you sound like my mother.”

“Do you know what your problem is? You always root for the women! Is it because you are one yourself? Whose side are you on? How can you defend Regina when you see how miserable Drechsler is.”

“Asshole! You’re drunk. You’re getting everything mixed up. Regina is honest. She isn’t trying to fool him. Unlike others, she hasn’t been harboring a secret for months.”

“Are you talking about Yasmina? Your best friend for seven years? The woman I wanted to marry and still do?” I wanted to kill him.

“I’m not bad-mouthing her. I’m only saying that Regina is not like Yasmina. And you’re not Drechsler. Where is your ability to differentiate? You only make use of it when it doesn’t concern you. I don’t know either why everything is the way it is. I understand nothing and am rooting for nobody. I am just an observer; that’s my fucking life! Everybody tells me everything, pours out their heart to me because I’m such a sweet gay man. But who wants me? Who smashes a glass against the wall because of me? I’m filled with jealousy, shame, and convulsions. It’s going to kill me. What I wouldn’t do to be like you! I, too, would like to jump headlong into love and suffering. I’d like someone to take me passionately, without a condom. But no, I’m always on the sidelines . . .”

Frederik begged my forgiveness and pulled me close to him. I was ashamed before God, the world, and the taxi driver. We should have gone home.

Café Leopold was packed. Attempting to carry two beers to our table, Frederik more or less unintentionally bumped into a young man in a suit and turquoise socks. The socks looked so silly that you immediately wanted to punch him out. The gentleman complained and called Frederik a clumsy oaf. Frederik poured both beers over his suit and socks and threw the glasses at his feet. The gentleman flipped out. The bouncers were on the spot immediately, and Frederik apologized, claiming he had been pushed and had dropped the glasses. A squad of like-minded individuals surrounded the drenched dude, and we beat a hasty retreat. Outside, Freddy unleashed all his anger. A parked Porsche Cayenne, like the one Yasmina’s father drove, provided the perfect target. He jumped up on the hood and urinated on the windshield, swearing up a storm that could be heard all the way to Mariahilferstrasse. “Fuck off, you perverse motherfucker!”

Passersby started to notice us. A window opened overhead, and a middle-aged lady shouted, “I’ll kill you! Get off my car immediately!”

She called the police. We ran through the courtyard of the Technical University to Girardigasse, and from there, we ran home through Grünwald Park. Frederik went in the bathroom and locked the door.

I was afraid he’d slit his wrists with the straight razor or electrocute himself with the electric one. I heard the water running into the tub and was torn between knocking softly or pounding on the door. I didn’t want

Drechsler to notice anything. His sleep was sacred to us, for his life was hard enough as it was. On the other hand, it was irresponsible not to save Frederik's life out of consideration for Drechsler. Finally, he opened the door. I could tell he was also trying to be quiet. I asked him to come to bed. Before he fell asleep, he whispered, "Her father is to blame for everything. What kind of accomplishment is it to buy up houses cheap so you can resell them at an expensive price? Who knows what that swine did in the war. And now he's putting a bun in his cousin's oven. He's having children while we lacerate ourselves. People like him are the scum of society. She didn't flee because of me. *He* is the one she can't take anymore. I puke on myself when I think about him. He should be struck dead."

The next day, Frederik admitted his heroic deed, and Drechsler went to look at the Porsche. He couldn't see any damage. Out of caution, we packed our clothes in a garbage bag and hid it in the laundry room. In case somebody turned us in, we agreed we would vehemently deny everything. We avoided the area between Gumpendorferstrasse, Laimgrubengasse, and Getreidemarkt from then on. After the incident, Frederik's sadness changed its character. You couldn't tell from his daily behavior that he had melancholy thoughts. He reduced his alcohol consumption to a minimum and in his free time took long bicycle rides on Danube Island or in Vienna Woods. He talked more and more of looking for an apartment. Luckily, his search got off to a slow start. Plus, he signed up for all the professional development classes offered in the hospital. Cardiac muscle illnesses had been his specialty since he had written his dissertation. He distanced himself from Vienna and its painful reminders at cardiological conferences in Utrecht, Paris, and Edinburgh.

The initial results of Drechsler's chemotherapy were pitiful, the side effects frightful. Nausea persisted, and he could barely stay on his feet. He was regularly called in to the ward to have his medications modified. His jaw got infected. His entire throat began to crust over. It healed again, but then his stomach failed him. He had constant diarrhea, and his hair was slowly falling out. At first, he cried constantly. Soon, his body and soul ran dry.

By the end of the month, Ferhat's absences had exceeded the excusable. The director asked me to contact the employment service. He'd pushed the envelope too far for even the most tolerant of schools, so we dismissed him.

The administrative assistant from the employment service reacted politely. They would try to contact Herr Fersan and the bakery. They could provide no more information beyond that. We verified the address: Engerthstrasse 77. The notification of dismissal was to be sent directly, please, from the school director to the concerned party. Finally, I had a good reason to call him. But Ferhat could not be reached on the phone. I wondered if I should ride over to Engerthstrasse and tell him the decision of the school face-to-face. For a few days, I considered talking to my boss about it, but in the end, I deemed this outrageous. She would immediately sniff out the scandal. Uptight writers or art historians or classicists with silk headbands lusted after Midde Eastern students, but that had nothing to do with professional social work. I despised myself and lay low for a few days.

Then all my self-control was used up. It is well known that Engerthstrasse is very long. *Dear Ferhat*, said the voice in my head. It was sweet and a bit sappy. *Is that your house? What do you know, somehow I stumbled onto it. What did I want to tell you? Oh, yes, we kicked you out of school. But why aren't you coming back? Don't you want to assimilate any longer? Is it because I made out with a goddamned Turk? My dear Ferhat, that truly does not mean a thing. I don't even know Mehmet. He's a friend of Yasmina, the one you were supposed to spy on, remember? I was drunk. You don't need to worry. Recently I even slept with a woman. I swear it was exquisite. Come, let's hug!*

Shame, desire, and wickedness alternated in rapid succession. I had to stop several times so that I didn't crash my bike. Having arrived at number 77, I fumbled around with the bicycle chain. It was still possible to turn around. I looked at my filthy fingers and felt the stickiness in my boxer shorts. An impulse stronger than all shame impelled me toward the intercom.

"Yes, may I help you?"

"Hello, is Ferhat at home?"

"Who?"

"Ferhat. Ferhat Fersan!"

"You are at the wrong address. He doesn't live here."

At first, I felt a great sense of relief. On the way home, however, I began to understand the results of my outing: all paths to Ferhat were blocked. He

had disappeared, at least for me.

I persuaded myself that he had returned to his homeland. Mosul could fall at any minute. The Americans refused to send ground troops. The Europeans directed their attention to the World Cup, their Instagram accounts, and equal rights for golden retrievers. The Islamists had a clear path. They raised flags and shouted, “God is great!” They chopped off the heads of men younger than me. In the villages around Erbil, Yezidi women were raped and killed, their bodies left lying in the sun. How could there be a doubt? Ferhat wasn’t able to sell nut-filled sticky buns any longer. He could give a fuck about his German diploma exam, and pissing on a Porsche Cayenne was not the appropriate form of resistance; for do-gooders like me, it was self-flagellation. Frederik was at work or in Utrecht or in Edinburgh. Regina stayed with her mice late into the night, and Drechsler, branded by cancer, stared at the ceiling. On Saturday, June 7, 2014, around nine o’clock in the evening, I considered castrating myself for the first time. I considered what it would be like to cut off my balls with a sharp kitchen knife.

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I couldn't tell you why I had never set foot in the gay bar on Laimgrubengasse. Maybe Frederik's diagnosis was correct: I was basically not out. But what does *out* mean? What does this strange Anglicism require of a normal, decent person? I didn't think much of gay bars; I didn't think much of bars in general. Hardly had I set foot in this one when I felt eight pairs of eyes all over me. I flinched and resisted the flight instinct. I still felt the menace of an insane self-castration impulse. The place wasn't very big. Only the earliest of early birds were already out partying. The bartender gave me a friendly hello, and I found a seat in the corner, in the shadow of the popcorn machine. It offered me cover and an overview at the same time. I took a deep breath. The few guests there were quickly attended to, and the bartender was bored. He brought me a bowl of popcorn, which I ate in the blink of an eye. He filled it a second time and gained my absolute confidence.

Five of the seven guests were smoking. It bothered me, but I attempted to accept it. Asking them about it was not an option. It was unfriendly to question the daily habits of strangers. You didn't ask someone, "Why are you left-handed?" or "Why do you wear your hair short?" To my surprise, the bartender lit up a cigarette. In my estimation, he didn't look like a smoker. His body was muscular. He had a nice complexion and an attractive face. He could have been a dancer or a lightweight boxer or maybe a swimmer. The stinking cigarette between his fingers disfigured him. To get his attention, I just had to lift a finger.

"Why do you smoke?"

He raised his eyebrows and excused himself. More urgent matters drew him to the other end of the bar. After a few tugs on the tap he came back over to me. "I've been smoking since I was a teenager. It's a habit, isn't it?" I nodded. Habit was the perfect word for it. I ordered a second beer. Cancerous growths could afflict anybody. From a medical standpoint, nobody was immune from that. However, it was also medically proven that smoking increased the possibility of lung cancer. A few years before, the

European Commission had issued a decree that 65 percent of a tobacco package had to have warnings printed on it. “Smoking can be deadly” or “Smoking leads to infertility” or “Smoking causes impotence” was now in big fat letters on all the packs of cigarettes. The bartender’s pack was from a country whose language I didn’t understand. In addition to the warning, it also displayed the nightmarish image of a tongue carcinoma.

But medical science had no power over habit. In this respect, the key thing was *which* habit you acquired. The word didn’t reflect this gravity. There was almost a kind of comfort in speaking of a bad habit. Yet, at the same time, habits determined life and death. Drechsler had a tough battle to fight. His condition was neither habitual nor comfortable. In the morning, I had gone grocery shopping for him. For days, he had partaken of nothing but bananas and chamomile tea. While I was stocking his refrigerator, he asked, “How do I look?” I told him the truth. There was no point in telling him anything else. He looked terrible, as if he wasn’t himself anymore.

All theories about the world were flawed because of their irrelevance. The bartender shoved another cigarette in his mouth, which would significantly increase his risk of lung cancer. Apparently, he didn’t care. “Another beer?” he called to me encouragingly. I nodded. Within thirty minutes, I had drunk two beers. The only theorist you can respect in good conscience is Sigmund Freud. Like Frederik, Freud was a doctor. At the end of his life, he could look back at a fifty-year career. Freud claimed that love played a decisive role in human life. He also claimed that people were intent on destroying themselves. Hiding behind the popcorn machine in the gay bar, I found this theory to be reasonable. Thanks to the beer and the lovable bartender, I could feel my sex organs. I was overcome by an anchoring feeling. Maybe I would manage to get liver damage, but I would certainly not castrate myself. Not tonight and not ever. Maybe you have to do partial damage to yourself from time to time in order to save yourself in general? The music got better, and people of all different stripes swept into the bar.

A larger group gathered in the entryway. They knew each other, so there were shouted greetings and dramatic gestures. From the depths of the bar, they were joined by men whom I hadn’t even noticed were there. From among the leather jackets, beards, T-shirts, and hugs, Ferhat’s face flashed out. I ducked behind the bottles of spirits and gasped for air. The bar area had no windows. The cigarettes filled the air with white streaks, and the

ceiling lighting didn't do much to illuminate the room. On top of that, my vision was fogged up from within by alcohol, theory, and desire. I had deceived myself; my imagination had clearly distorted reality. But no, I hadn't deceived myself.

Ferhat pried himself loose from the group. He stood at the bar, strong and tall. The bartender was happy to see him. Ferhat ordered three beers and three vodka Red Bulls. His voice was magnificently audible. He pulled a large bill out of his pants pocket to pay for the drinks. He went back to his group without looking around. Everybody had taken a seat. Everybody had dark hair and more or less bearded faces. When the man Ferhat was sitting next to laughed, everybody laughed. His name was Sezgin—you could hear his name being called nonstop—and his gestures were unambiguously resolute. He talked without interruption. He was the leader.

More and more people sat down around the bar. I was blocked by a strong back, a fat belly, and then a bunch of guys closely entwined with one another. Over at Ferhat's table, mostly Turkish was being spoken. The mood was relaxed; they felt free and at home. I stayed glued to the wooden bar and considered slipping outside unceremoniously. What was I doing there? How stupid was I to cower behind the popcorn machine? How long was I going to play the wallflower, crushed and cringing? But the allure of Ferhat's presence overpowered me. He was sitting perhaps twenty feet away. His relationship to Sezgin revealed affection. Every few seconds Sezgin patted him on the back. They sat huddled close together. I saw Sezgin touching Ferhat's thigh under the table. He was disgusting. A Mercedes emblem hung from his breast pocket. For a while, he even put sunglasses on. I became nauseated at the thought of what else Sezgin was doing with Ferhat.

A second bartender took up his shift. The bar area was packed all the way to the back corners. As one would expect, with the exception of a few women, there were only men in the establishment. I had finished my third beer and had to go to the bathroom. The smartest thing to do would be to settle up and go home, but I couldn't peel my eyes away from Ferhat. Over and over, some numbskull blocked my line of vision. With the utmost caution, I had to crane my neck, turn my head or even my whole torso. The guys standing around me smoked like chimneys. Some sad old sack with a silk headband addressed me: "Hi, baby. I've never seen you here before.

Are you from the police?" I wanted to throttle him on the spot. A gap in the crowd opened up a new line of sight, and I stared over at Ferhat. His facial expression didn't change one bit. It was unclear whether he had noticed me or not. He turned his head toward Sezgin, laughed, and babbled on. His profile exceeded art historians' wildest dreams. Ferhat was more beautiful than the marble statues in the museum or the protagonists in immoralistic colonial fairy tales. Slowly, he turned his head in my direction. His chest had expanded. Apparently, he was going to the gym instead of night school. There was no longer a doubt: he was looking right at me.

I felt like an idiot caught in the act. I had a liter and a half of beer sloshing around in my stomach, and the pressure on my bladder became very uncomfortable. I settled up, unfortunately with the new bartender, since the smoking Adonis was clearing tables. The path to the door was lined with men. Even outside, clusters of scented men were standing around. The cool air was pleasant, and my reason returned. I immediately wanted to go back inside. What kind of a thirty-one-year-old was afraid of going to the john? How unmanly could you be? But how was I to behave with Sezgin? There wasn't a lot of wiggle room. In order to free Ferhat from the men's group, I'd have to stomp on Sezgin's sunglasses and shove his flashy car keys up his ass. The way Sezgin was grabbing Ferhat's thigh was the true decline and fall of the West. I could almost feel the urine flooding my underpants when Ferhat grabbed my shoulder.

"Wait!"

He leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette.

"How are you? Is everything okay?"

His voice was soft but resolute. My words were hasty and awkward: "Do you come here often?"

"No, I don't come often. You?" He smiled, not without a hint of impertinence.

"How do you know the bartender? You guys kissed each other? For me it's the first time here. But you know that I live right next door. I wanted to have a beer, that's all."

Ferhat's voice sounded hoarse. "You think poorly of me. My dear Herr Teacher, I'm sorry. But you wouldn't understand."

“Who is that Sezgin guy? I was watching you. Are you two together?” My jealousy was super embarrassing.

“It’s not what you think. I miss you a lot, I swear it!”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “What’s going on? Can I do anything for you? Can I call you tomorrow? What’s your telephone number? I tried to reach you a hundred times, also because of school . . .”

Ferhat ran his hand across the back of his head. He had to or wanted to go back inside the bar.

“I can’t talk right now. In twelve days, everything will be over. Then I’ll call you, I promise!”

Three days later, Mosul fell. The *Guardian* reported that in Erbil, where at the time there were already half a million refugees, water and food were becoming scarce. Thousands of children were threatened with starvation, and the United Nations broadcast its pleas for aid to the world. After marching into the city, the jihadists distributed flyers stating that life in Mosul would continue as normal. Whoever followed the Sunni laws had nothing to fear. For women, however, it was best to stay inside. Otherwise you ought not be surprised if your arms got chopped off. In spite of the invasion, the Turkish consul in Mosul had no intention of fleeing. Interestingly, he was not the least bit afraid. He was promptly taken hostage, but both Erdoğan and the Islamists asserted that not one hair on his head would be harmed. More than a few commentators saw that as an unmistakable sign that Erdoğan was in bed with the terrorists. Another head chopped off here or there—the main thing was that the Kurds did not conquer their own country in the wake of the Syrian Civil War.

Frederik rejected my reading of the matter. “You aren’t objective, because you’ve fallen in love with a Kurd. Erdoğan is no saint, but he’s just one player in this whole mess. You are forgetting that Iran is basically to blame for everything. Iran is helping the Syrian dictator stay in power. At least Erdoğan is doing something about it.”

“And you call that objective? You only think of Beirut and Yasmina! That’s why you blame Iran and Hezbollah for everything. You want the Syrian refugees to stop coming to Beirut so Yasmina isn’t mad at you anymore. But you don’t give a damn what that means for the Kurds. Your impartiality is a joke!”

Frederik began to laugh. “Our conversation is a joke. It’s absurd. We know everything only from the newspaper. What’s certain is that you can’t take just one side, not even the side of the Kurds. They don’t have a country, and that’s a problem. But do you know why? Because they are at each other’s throats! Yasmina was right all the time. The world has become completely balkanized.”

As usual, this conversation also ended up with Yasmina. Sometimes she was to blame for everything, but then she was right about everything again.

“The main thing is that the conversation always comes back to Yasmina.”

“What do you want from me? Seven years is a long time. Until a few weeks ago, I thought we would marry and have children. My life is ruined. The very least I can do is try to understand why she left. By the way, I see Mehmet regularly in the hospital. Last week we had coffee together at the automat. He always asks about you. I lie to him and tell him your cell phone is broken. He’s a good-looking man. If I were gay, I’d fuck him. Maybe I’ll fuck him anyway. Maybe I’ll give that a try. Maybe I can impress Yasmina that way. She loves all the queer hype. His family is from Istanbul. They don’t have anything to do with Erdoğan.”

“You just don’t get it. I don’t like Mehmet. He’s not my type. What am I supposed to do? I can’t force myself to find him attractive. Attraction is something biological; it comes from hormones or genes or blood sugar. Ask Regina! It has nothing to do with politics.”

Frederik mocked me: “Ask Regina . . . Ask Regina!” I hit him over the head with the newspaper.

A day later, the worst possible news came. I was visiting my parents, and my father gave me some goulash to take home in a plastic container wrapped in one of those free newspapers. When I unwrapped it, the name immediately caught my eye: *It’s set: Erdoğan is coming to Vienna*. On the nineteenth of June, the following Thursday, Erdoğan would give a campaign speech. *Austria’s Turks are totally excited*, the headline proclaimed. However, where it would happen was still unknown, since Austrian politics rejected the visit. *No one wants to host Erdoğan. Ernst-Happel Stadium, Stadthalle, and Burgtheater all refused*.

The Vienna Police expected violent protests on the day of Erdoğan’s appearance. The Austrian Foreign Minister was quoted several times in the

text: *Nobody needs Ottoman nationalism in Vienna now. Turkish sieges must end once and for all. His excessive election campaign is undermining our integration efforts. If Erdoğan wants to incite supporters in Vienna, he will have to pay for his own security.* He would certainly not be offered a diplomatic reception. Police protection would be limited to his public appearance. Furthermore, *Austrian tax money would certainly not be used to support Turkish propaganda.* Incidentally, the Austrian Foreign Minister was the same young man who had previously insisted that property was the best retirement plan. His anti-Turkish agitation brought me closer to Mehmet within seconds. I vowed to finally call him back. I started doing the math, and my knees weakened. Ferhat had spoken of twelve days. Everything would be over in twelve days. That could not possibly be a coincidence.

Frederik made a mockery of everything: “Watch out! Now *you* are letting your imagination run wild. You’re the one who has seen too many James Bond movies. Erdoğan is the president of the Turkish Republic. Do you remember when George W. Bush was here for a visit? Ringstrasse was completely blocked off. The military was everywhere. There were helicopters circling over Stadtpark. There were heavily armed police all the way to Marxergasse. Yasmina was searched by a policeman down to her underpants. She even had to take her T-shirt off! Have you forgotten that? Do you imagine that your little refugee will just pedal through the blockades, climb onto the roof of the Staatsoper, and shoot Erdoğan?”

I didn’t really know myself what I feared would happen. But there were attacks everywhere. In Abuja, hundreds of people had been killed by a car bomb. In Oslo, a crazy guy had reduced half the government district to ash with a car bomb and then driven to a lake and shot sixty-nine people. In Boston, Islamist brothers had blown up three people at a marathon. Hundreds were gravely injured. People who had a mother and father and perhaps lived next door to someone were setting crimes into motion while, who knows, they listened to “Paradise City” by Guns N’ Roses or “From a Distance” by Bette Midler.

“But it all makes sense! That’s why he stopped working. That’s why he isn’t coming to school anymore. That’s why he’s pumping iron at the gym. It’s no coincidence. Something terrible is going to happen!”

Frederik's eyes widened. "Kurti, what on earth is wrong with you? You've totally lost it. There are hundreds of possible explanations why a young man would drop out of school and start working out at the gym. You are reading the newspaper too much. You've totally bought into a stereotype. Do you really believe all Kurds are terrorists?"

Between infusions, Drechsler's condition improved. He was able to concentrate for several hours a day and walk a bit. I picked him up. He was wearing an ugly cap. We took the elevator down, and his effluvia were atrocious. We sat down in the sunshine in Grünwald Park. His breathing was short and irregular. A malodorous wind escaped from him that I attempted to cover up with a question.

"Did you actually know that I'm gay?"

He grinned. "I thought as much."

"How could you tell?"

"Regina would say: By your behavior. If a handsome lad doesn't bring home a woman in two years, you ask yourself why. Besides, I was able to develop reliable gaydar in my family."

He jiggled his legs. I tried not to stare constantly at his bloody fingernails.

"Do you think it is possible to love a terrorist?"

Drechsler gazed unfazed into the sun. "Of course. Somewhere someone always loves someone else. Even pop music has reached this insight. Somewhere there is a gorgeous woman idolized by a hundred men. At the same time, there is one man who is sick of her and dreams of getting rid of her. A thousand people hate the terrorist and want to kill him. But not his lover. And certainly not his mother. She is ashamed and filled with grief, but she still loves him nonetheless. Love tolerates no judgment. It has nothing to do with morality."

"Have you heard from Regina?"

"No, not a word. Why would I? What does she want with a flatulent old fool? When the pain recedes, that will be true bliss. Shall we return?"

We walked the fourteen steps back to the house. At this very moment, Regina came out through the building gate. Actually, she should have been at work. Drechsler hung his head and scrunched his shoulders together. She

said hello quietly and walked down the street. In the elevator, he shut his eyes tightly. He was shaking all over, and I accompanied him to the bed. He sank onto the mattress and cried.

That evening, I knocked on Regina's door so that I didn't have to be alone. I truly had come just for myself. She flung open the door. Her eyes were red. Her mouth was contorted in a mocking grin.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to stop by—"

"Now nice of you. Are you by chance bringing me a heap of accusations? I'm terribly sorry I was so short with him earlier today. I'm happy for you to tell him that."

She blocked my way inside with her arm.

"I just wanted to ask if you'd like to have a beer together. My day was exhausting."

"Oh, geez! I'm really sorry about that! Now you want to have a beer with me? And then? Will it be followed by more experimentation? Will you try yourself out on me a little more? *Strive!* That's Greek and means fuck off!"

I was dumbfounded. I couldn't spit out a response. She slammed the door.

Upstairs, I lay down on the sofa. Frau Kord had predicted it from the beginning. Regina was deranged. I was about to fantasize her demise when there was a knock at the door. She had changed clothes and stood there shifting from one leg to the other. I'd never seen her in sweatpants before. I let her in, and she sat down on the edge of the bed and immediately began to bawl. She tried to sniffle as quietly as possible. I asked her if she'd like a cup of tea or a glass of water. She shook her head. "Can I sleep here tonight?" She buried herself under the covers in spite of the mugginess. While I brushed my teeth, I kept an eye on the bed through the door crack. Tears were flowing without interruption from her eyes. I lay down next to her. She turned her face toward me, scooted over close to me, and rolled into the fetal position. Later, in the middle of the night, we both lay awake. She didn't let a single word slip about what was going on with her, but for reasons unknown to me, she felt like talking about America.

“I was on a good path. Our group leader, Professor Marcel Simeone, had put together a perfect team: two endocrinologists, two psychologists, and two biologists. We were close because all of our dissertation projects were related to hormones and peptides. I was the only woman and the only European. We got along well, and we all lived close to the veterinary medicine campus. We worked from early in the morning to late in the evening and often went out for a beer together afterward. I had no problem with being the only woman. In the lab, only your ability counts, nothing else. The conditions were a dream. We had space for the mice, excellent lighting, and first-class equipment. Moreover, we had contracts at salaries that simply do not exist in Vienna. Except for Han and Javi, we all knew how to handle mice perfectly. It was completely unnecessary to hire an assistant to take care of them, but for reasons unclear to me, our boss brought in a guy named Robert Roddick. And he really was a dick.

“Roddick was from the Institute for Veterinary Medicine, sort of on loan to us. Rodents were his alleged specialty. He was responsible for cleaning the cages, supervising the breeding, and keeping the mice in the best of health. In addition, he was supposed to assist with the interventions, or at least be present. He had the reputation of being a master surgeon. At some point in time, however, it was leaked out that the dean had been responsible for assigning him to us. We never did figure out what was behind that. As I mentioned, we all lived within easy reach of campus. One Friday night in September, I entered our building around eleven o’clock. I had forgotten my external hard drive on my desk. There was hardly a soul on the premises. I always went in through the back entrance because it was more practical for me. I saw that there was a light on in the dissection room. Roddick was sitting at the table. He had a white female mouse clamped in a restraining device of about eight centimeters. Her abdomen was open. I tap on the window pane and open the door. He smiles at me and says he hadn’t finished an ovariectomy. We remove the females’ ovaries so that they don’t get pregnant during the course of the trials. I see clearly how her heart is racing. Her snout is twitching. I feel nauseated: Did you anesthetize her? He grins right at me like an idiot. Half-heartedly he grabs the ketamine. I watch him fill the syringe and make the injection. I am completely speechless.

“I call Marcel while I am still eating breakfast and describe the incident to him. He assures me he will handle it and asks me for my discretion. Around noon, I see Roddick coming out of Marcel’s office. A half an hour

later, I am in there with the boss. Marcel offers me a coffee. We sit on his couch, not at the conference table. Roddick claimed he carried out the ovariectomy properly and used anesthesia. I had imagined everything and bad-mouthed him without reason. Denunciations were covert acts of violence. Roddick felt bullied by me and would bring the matter to the Integrity and Diversity Council. It was my word against his. Marcel made it clear to me that he would keep an eye on Roddick. He believed me, not him. I kept the story to myself so as not to exacerbate the bullying charge. I decided to avoid Roddick at all costs. Above all, I protected my mice from that point on. I took care of them entirely myself and forbade him even to get close to them. I didn't know why he hated me so much. I think it bothered him that he was subordinate to me. He was a psychopath. Anyone capable of cutting open a mouse that is fully conscious belongs in the psych ward.

"I knew my roommate Raul already from Vienna. We had worked together for two semesters on Währingerstrasse. His specialization was leukemia. He conducted research in a pharmacology department and earned three times as much as I did. It was wonderful for me to have a friend from back home in Vienna in Philadelphia, although Raul is actually from Madrid. Shortly before Christmas, we went to a queer anthropology party in Lombard Street. Raul had fallen head over heels for an anthropologist. It was a fun party until Roddick showed up. He didn't see me because he was drunk. Plus, I was sitting with Raul and his lover off to the side behind a giant rhododendron. I saw Roddick dancing to 'I Am What I Am' by Gloria Gaynor, blowing kisses majestically and corresponding to pretty much every other stereotype. I couldn't stand his presence and slipped away. In the meantime, apart from Roddick, everything went like clockwork in the institute. We were primarily researching kisspeptin. We had installed open brain access devices in the lab females. To do so, a hole is drilled through the top of the mouse's skull and a cannula inserted through the hole and attached to the skull, using total anesthesia, of course, and applying postoperative painkillers and the most scrupulous avoidance of any excitement. Roddick was now only coming two days a week. Marcel had seen to it that his contract would be terminated at the end of the semester.

"At the end of January, Jan, Josh, Javi, and our boss took a few days of vacation. It seemed necessary to hire someone to take care of the mice. Theo, Class, and I couldn't do everything by ourselves. Nobody suitable

could be found at such late notice, so we resorted to Roddick. I knew that Roddick's days were numbered and accepted the decision. I tried my best to check on all of the animals, but by then we had over fifty cages. Once, Roddick was supposed to refill the water, change out the straw, and give the jars with the frozen cadavers to the waste removal service. I had a queasy feeling. I simply couldn't help but watch over him like a hawk. To enter the room with the cages, you had to go through an airlock. Roddick was completely immersed in what he was doing. He sat at the dissection table in the back by the freezers with his victim firmly lashed in the restraining frame. The grinding of her teeth could be heard all the way to the door. Mice grinding their teeth are in a state of maximum panic. Roddick was driving a plastic cannula through her vaginal tract, without anesthetic. When he noticed me, he calmly pulled out the cannula. He broke her neck. 'A tumor, the poor thing.' He turned around and disposed of her in the freezer bin.

"It was true that she had a tumor. She was from one of Javi's cages. I had given her Metacam for the pain. She was beautiful and docile. I didn't have the heart to kill her in Javi's absence. Of course, killing mice by breaking their necks is part of the routine. Hardly a single lab mouse lives beyond four months. Tumors happen. But why had that beast shoved a cannula in her vaginal tract? I screamed at him. I wanted to kill him. Maybe I actually did hit him. I can't remember exactly anymore. But I know I called him a faggot. When Marcel came back from vacation, I asked him to ban Roddick from the lab. But Roddick's contract was over anyhow. I thought that was the end of the matter. But it wasn't. Roddick brought a grievance against me in the dean's office, claiming I had harassed him, slandered him, and abused my position of authority. He asserted I was clearly not able to work in a lab with living animals. Giving tumorous mice painkillers was by no means preferable to killing them quickly. Moreover, I was homophobic. Marcel advocated for me, but after the semester ended, my contract was not renewed.

"Marcel apologized to me. He was sorry for what happened. He assured me he was 100 percent on my side. But he had to maintain harmony in the lab. He didn't need any bad press, especially from the integrity and diversity faction. I myself knew, he said, how difficult it was to explain to people why we drilled holes in mice's heads. Especially in the context of basic research. He wrote me an enthusiastic letter of recommendation and

promised he would include me on at least two publications. But in the end, he advised me to consider switching to non-invasive behavioral research. Observing chimpanzees like Jane Goodall was also something fantastic! Risking a top position at an elite university because of a screaming mouse was not quite understandable to him. I was devastated and went home to Europe.”

Regina cried until dawn and then finally fell asleep. In the afternoon, she texted me that she was ill and would like to stay in my apartment. I had no problem with it, since Frederik was in Padua. After work, I made the bed. I wanted her to sleep in fresh scented sheets. I checked in quickly on Drechsler. He asked how Regina was doing, which I found suspicious. Had he sniffed out her presence through the wall? Had he gone over to her? “She’s doing better,” I said and added, “She’s sleeping in my bed right now.”

That made Drechsler laugh, just as if I had told a joke. I forgave him for it, took his garbage bag, and wished him a good evening. We watched Regina’s favorite movie, *Una Giornata Particolare*, with Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni. After ten minutes, she dozed off. She had still not said a word about why she was so sad. The main thing was that she was lying next to me. On Monday, her illness had passed. She went to work. I went to work. Everything was as it always was.

The nineteenth of June started out cool. Frederik and I had breakfast together. I was too nervous to stay in bed. The early news reported on the swearing-in of the new Spanish king, the Kurdish conquest of the Kirkuk oil fields, and the upcoming soccer match between Uruguay and England. The rest of the time was devoted to Erdoğan's visit. He would arrive from Cologne, land around noon in Vienna, give a speech at 2:30 in Kagan Arena, and depart again the next day. Frederik made fun of me and drove to the hospital. I listened to the early morning news, the eight o'clock news, and then consumed all news accessible on the internet. Starting at eleven, the facts simply floated in through the window. Helicopters circled over the city center.

I had spent the previous evenings at the gay bar. Ferhat was nowhere to be seen. Emil, the friendly bartender, at least pretended to know nothing. He knew who I meant but couldn't give me any details. He was only informed about the patrons' private lives in exceptional cases. He lit a cigarette and grinned. I found that to be neither dishonest nor credible. They had hugged and kissed. Ferhat was an exceptional beauty. On the other hand, it was probably true that Emil knew nothing about the political views of his customers, not to mention their attack plans, even if he slept with them now and then. Had he slept with Ferhat? He shook his head vehemently. "I didn't sleep with the guy I think you are looking for. Sure, I've slept with slim dark-haired bearded guys who are about five nine, but definitely not with a Ferhat. In general, I prefer blonds, you know?"

It occurred to me that possibly Ferhat was using a pseudonym at the gay bar. But no, I was probably just crazy. The sessions next to the popcorn machine were unproductive. They merely intensified my aversion to smoking.

At noon, I got on my bicycle. Except for the helicopters, I didn't notice anything unusual on Burgring. The sky over the city was gray. Students were lying in the grass in the Burggarten. A young man was tightrope

walking. Next to him, a girl sat reading *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Behind the Staatsoper, props were being delivered, a gigantic fist made out of papier-mâché and, I think, an oversized phallus. The sun pierced through the cloud cover. Two women in blue smocks leaned on their cleaning carts. Around the Sacher Hotel and further down the Ring, huge cars kept driving by. They stopped in front of the luxury hotels, and it goes without saying that each one might have been delivering a bomb.

Preventative measures were being taken at the Grand Hotel. The green strip in front of the hotel was lined with barriers, and police were stopping all cars before they entered. Two young women were standing in front of the palisades. A limousine passed through the checkpoint. Both women observed the comings and goings.

“What’s happening here?” I feigned aloofness. I parked my bike on the green strip so as not to block bicycle traffic.

The woman standing closer to me filled me in. “The Turkish dictator is about to arrive. He’s going to spend the night in Vienna. Can you believe that?”

“You mean Erdoğan?”

“Who else would we mean? The hotel owner is a Saudi, so dictators feel right at home!”

I didn’t know that the Grand Hotel was owned by a Saudi.

“There’s going to be a demonstration here at five o’clock!” The other woman handed me a flyer. “The rally in solidarity with Erdoğan’s victims begins in thirty minutes in Praterstern.”

I took the flyer, thanked them, and got on my bicycle. Somehow I was relieved. Reality seemed to be good for my portentous visions of the last few days.

The demonstration couldn’t be very large. The green strip in front of the hotel had no space for it. Besides, the Ringstrasse was blocked. But if they wanted to downplay Erdoğan’s visit, certainly the main traffic arteries of the city would not be blocked, neither to him nor to his critics. The unpopular guest would be escorted to the hotel and his presence hushed up as much as possible. That seemed to me to be the right way to handle it and therefore the least likely to happen. The mayor of Vienna was a smart man, the pride of my social democratic family. On the other hand, there just needed to be a

single deranged soul, like Anders Breivik, for example, to blow up half the hotel with all its employees, guests, and passersby. Yet, as far as I knew, Ferhat couldn't even drive a car. When would he have learned how? In Erbil? At the age of seventeen? Plus the Austrian authorities were hardly more efficient in any matter than invalidating foreign drivers' licenses. A few hundred meters away, my visions of horror vanished. Hydrangeas and hibiscus bloomed in the city park. A group of Chinese tourists oohed and aahed at the monument to the Waltz King, Johann Strauss. There was a happening or even a performance in front of the University of Applied Arts. At the Danube Canal, a woman led her dachshund over Aspernbrücke. The inner city lay like a toad under the oppressive sky. There was nothing to suggest that anything would ever happen.

The atmosphere changed in Praterstern. You could see more and more people with the requisite flags, T-shirts, and other protest accessories. A crowd gathered behind the commuter rail line. *Rojava* and *Afrin* flags were fluttering in the breeze. Along with those, there were flags with red and green stars, with Kurdish, Arabic, and Armenian letters, white flags, a flag with the face of Che Guevara, and banners with slogans that I couldn't decipher. Cardboard boxes were being held up in the air, people were drinking beer, drumming, smoking, and looking up at the tribunal being constructed. I pushed my bike through the crowd and got chills at the sight of every dark head of hair. Ferhat had to be there; this was certainly his world. I ran into Nariman. She was wearing a rainbow scarf wrapped around her head. We were chatting when Mehmet came up to us.

"Well look here! Finally, a native! Thank you for your support. How are you?"

We hugged, and I was happy to see him, although I was also a little embarrassed.

"I'm doing great. Unfortunately, I can't stay long. I have to go to work."

His polo shirt was open down to his sternum. What I had simply refused to notice was obvious: he was fit, elegant, and committed. Going to bed with him had to be magnificent.

"Promise that you'll call? Even I have my pride. With Freddy, I only talk about you."

I promised him the world on a platter, and we kissed each other goodbye on each cheek.

I forced my way through the crowd, brushing against dozens of bodies and getting drawn in by random voices. Ferhat was nowhere to be seen. I still had two full hours until class started. The protest crowd got denser and denser. Speeches were given and slogans chanted. The uproar started to ratchet up, and you could sense that there was genuine anger there. I pushed my bike toward the bike path. If Ferhat wanted to commit an atrocity, he certainly wouldn't direct it at his own comrades. On the Reichsbrücke going toward Kagran Arena, my view opened up. The expanse of the Danube made everything seem absurd. For days, I had been aimlessly following hunches. I was among people who were protesting against genuine injustice, while I was driven by mere lust. An inner voice spoke to me: *Down there is Danube Island. Go find a thick bush and jerk off! Become a man at last! Turn around!* But my fingers clung to the handlebars, and my legs kept striding forward without stop.

Thousands of people had gathered in front of the Kagran Arena to see Erdoğan. Women from another world gestured with tightly wrapped hair. The coats that extended from their necks to their heels made them look like cones or boxes. The husbands wore mustaches, jackets, pressed trousers, and leather shoes. The young men presented their meticulously trimmed hairstyles with their heads held high. They proudly stroked their well-groomed beards. Among the adults, thousands of Turkish flags were flying, and among the flags cavorted an army of children, hiding in the hems of their mothers' skirts or wrapping themselves in the red fabric of the flags. A little girl was waving a banner. Wind blew across the square, billowing out the patriotic symbols. Police officers stood guard around the crowd. Pistols in their belts, long-barreled guns in their hands, they lined up on both sides of the square. The access roads were closed. The floodgates of the arena opened, and everyone started moving. It was almost four p.m., and Erdoğan was late.

I was resolved to despise the whole crowd. This wasn't at all easy, in light of the many children. I was attempting to limit my disdain to the adults when a man approached me and reached for my hands.

"Kurti, what are you doing here? How are you? Have you come to see Erdoğan? He'll be here any minute. How are your parents?"

Herr Bastug was completely gray. A web of little wrinkles had formed around his eyes. His German was more Viennese than it used to be, or at

least it seemed so to me. Before I could answer, he turned to his wife and two children.

“Look! This is Bensus, my daughter. And this is Mutlu, my son.”

Bensus was an attractive young woman. I had last seen her when she was in elementary school. Mutlu was also good-looking and athletic. He was wearing the jersey of the English national team. Herr Bastug’s wife gave me her hand. The parents couldn’t fail to notice that I admired their children. Bensus had to be about twenty, Mutlu perhaps fourteen. Herr Bastug extended his arms around the two of them.

“Bensus received her diploma from the Handelsakademie last year, almost all As. She’s taking over the business on Gottschalkstrasse. Did you even know we have a branch on Gottschalkstrasse?”

He kissed his daughter’s hair. She looked down, embarrassed. Mutlu leaned on his father’s shoulder, smiling. Frau Bastug straightened his collar. They were the happiest family in the world. After that, I didn’t have much to say. I told them my profession, and Herr Bastug winked mischievously. “Very good, very good, but when’s the wedding?”

Unfortunately never. I am cursed, I wanted to answer. In reality I shrugged my shoulders sheepishly. I wanted to lean on Herr Bastug’s shoulder like Mutlu and hide my face in his blazer.

In my father’s eyes, Herr Bastug was the hardest-working citizen of Simmering. From the first to the sixth floor, nobody toiled as hard as Herr Bastug. His shop windows had been smashed in several times. At the beginning, he was bullied relentlessly in the housing complex. One of his biggest adversaries was Frederik’s mother. She reported him to the police twice. Once for allegedly accepting illegal deliveries on Sunday and a second time for aromatic nuisance.

In the nineties, like many others, Herr Bastug had started selling döner kebabs on Enkplatz. He swallowed the injustice with unbreakable affability. My carpenter father respected him. The fact that Herr Bastug worked nonstop made an impression on my father. Herr Bastug also sold things that my father valued. For example, he thought Herr Bastug’s fishing hooks were the best around. When we went fishing on the Schwechatbach, we bought hooks and maggots from him.

Apparently, Herr Bastug admired Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It was impossible to despise him for that. How could you wish misfortune to his magnificently beautiful children? How could you write them off as collateral damage? You had to be crazy. Maybe Ferhat was a Kurdish hothead. But he wasn't crazy. I'd seen enough, and I pedaled back into the city.

On Reichsbrücke I spat out a huge gob in the Danube. Politics were prostitution. Drechsler was right. Judging was for idiots. Desiring was a thousand times better.

My students, in their youthful dignity and beauty, had a healing effect on me. They needed to talk, and everybody had important things to communicate about Erdoğan or the World Cup. We discussed the procedure for the oral graduation exam for the hundredth time. To finish up, we watched the first half of England versus Uruguay. On the way home, I suddenly had the desire to have a beer with Frederik. I bought a six pack of Ottakringer beer at the Kettenbrückengasse subway stop. Freddy was sitting in his boxer shorts at the kitchen table, and Regina had her feet stretched out on the sofa.

"Here comes the master of the house with beer. How nice."

Regina was fully clothed. It didn't look as if the two of them had been intimate in my absence. I sat down next to Frederik.

"How are you?"

He was in the best of moods and perhaps even a bit hyped up. Maybe the two of them had slept together after all.

"I am doing well. The lady wanted to see you. I asked her to wait for you. I was sure you would arrive soon. In any case, all has remained peaceful, am I not right? In the Second District, someone ran over a dachshund. Aside from that, to my knowledge, nothing has happened. Or are you better informed? You have to know . . .," Frederik turned to Regina, ". . . Kurti has believed for days that his Kurdish sweetheart wants to blow up Erdoğan. Deep inside his uptight heart he is obviously wishing for explosions and eruptions of a completely different nature."

Frederik made an unmistakable gesture, and Regina laughed. Then he revealed where his cheerfulness came from.

“I was at Drechsler’s. The guy who keeps the third apartment on the sixth floor even though he never lives there has decided to sell his shares. Drechsler is going to fix it so that I am the first one to view it.”

That was fantastic news. I pressed Freddy to me. We discussed the size, layout, and lighting of the apartment. He seemed confident for the first time in a long time, and that confidence came from wanting to start a new life next to me, *right next to me*. I sat down next to Regina, and we toasted each other. “And you? What news do you bring?” She leaned back. “Nothing, I don’t bring any news. I’m your neighbor. I just wanted to see you. Is that allowed?”

At two in the morning, there was a knock on the door. Someone was shuffling around in front of the door. Frederik sat up silently, walked to the peephole, and returned to bed. He whispered, “I don’t know who that is. His face has dirt on it. It might be blood.”

There was another knock, this one somewhat louder. Next to Frederik, nothing bad could happen. My whole life long, it had been that way. He protected me in kindergarten and defended me at school. His presence deterred dangers and mitigated all disaster. I went around the bed to the peephole. Freddy covered my back. Based on the silhouette, it was neither Herr Drechsler nor the custodian, nor was it anyone else from the building. The person teetered backward, and the light went on. Ferhat was holding a motorcycle helmet, and his cheeks were covered in blood.

“My dear teacher,” he said. He sat down on the first chair he came to.

Frederik took command of the situation: “Take off your shirt! Come in the bathroom!” Ferhat unbuttoned his shirt. He tried to slide out of the sleeves but wasn’t able to, so Frederik assisted him. Ferhat’s torso was covered with bleeding cuts and abrasions. On his right shoulder, there was a gaping cut that a crust had formed around. Frederik carefully scraped off the crust and the dirt. Ferhat held his breath.

“We have to clean everything! Get undressed!”

Ferhat took off his clothes and stepped into the bathtub. Frederik checked the water temperature, then he rinsed out every wound one by one. I stood next to him gaping.

“Fetch my bag and the first aid kit! It’s in the left kitchen cabinet, all the way at the bottom.”

I hadn’t even known that we had a first aid kit.

“You have to go to the hospital!” Frederik tested the mobility of Ferhat’s left shoulder.

Ferhat shook his head. “No hospital! Absolutely not!”

We poured disinfectant into the wound. Tears were streaming out of Ferhat’s eyes, and Frederik said to him, “That’s not possible. You are crying in pain. You have a hole in your shoulder so deep, you can almost see the bone. We have to sew you up, otherwise everything will get infected. We’ll end up having to amputate your arm!”

But Ferhat didn’t want to hear anything about a hospital. “No hospital, please no, or I’m a dead man!” We wrapped all the gauze bandages around the hole in his shoulder. There was nothing left for the remaining wounds. Frederik turned to me at a loss, but I knew even less than he did what should be done.

“Fine, then I’ll sew you up tomorrow. It really shouldn’t be done like that, but please. I’m warning you: I am no professional in stitching. My specialization is the heart, which doesn’t get sewn.”

Ferhat expressed his gratitude. Frederik whispered to me, “Bring him some fresh clothes. It seems like his circulation is collapsing.”

He forced Ferhat to take two pain pills and drink two glasses of water. He helped him change clothes and brought him to bed. He covered him up, not without tenderness. I threw the torn shirt and filthy pants in the dirty clothes. I hung the wet boxer shorts over the bathtub. Frederik packed his toothbrush: “I’m off duty at three p.m. Until then, good night! I’ll sleep at Regina’s.”

The strangest thoughts went through my head. I was uncomfortable staying alone with Ferhat. “Wouldn’t it be better if *I* slept at Regina’s? In case something happens during the night? A cardiac arrest or a circulatory collapse or a pneumothorax?”

“A pneumothorax? Where’d you come up with that? He has an injured shoulder, nothing more. He’s in shock, and now he’s sleeping. If the pain returns, he should take a pill.”

“But maybe he has a blood clot in his brain that we haven’t noticed yet. He came by motorcycle. Maybe he had an accident.”

“Nonsense. Then he would long since have had a severe headache. What’s wrong? Isn’t this what you’ve always been dreaming of, even praying for? And now it’s time. I have to get up in three hours. I need rest.” Freddy yawned. “Furthermore,” he pointed with his right thumb toward the bed, “I am certainly not sharing a blanket with that guy. What if he turns out to be a murderer? Well, you’ll handle him, I’m sure. Good night!”

That was nonsense: Ferhat was not a murderer. It was clear as day what had happened: The hard-working heroes in front of the arena and the angry campers around Praterstern had butted heads. The rage of the one side had boiled over upon encountering the enthusiasm of the other side. On a streetcorner in early summer, it had come to a confrontation. But luckily, political disputes in Vienna never went beyond abrasions and more or less deep cuts. The Turkish ruler had long since been sleeping in his Saudi suite, self-righteous and unharmed. The great rulers did not take notice when the rabble stabbed each other. I couldn’t stop looking at Ferhat. He still called me “my dear teacher.” But I had long since ceased to be his teacher, and he knew exactly what my name was. His sinewy body poked out from the thick bedcover. St. Jude heard not only the prayers sent to him but also the ones concealed from him.

When I woke up, Ferhat was still sleeping on his back. He had pushed most of the covers off. I checked the news. All Vienna newspaper portals had coverage of Erdoğan’s visit. He was long since in Ankara. There had been no incidents worthy of mention. Possibly there had been scuffles in Praterstern, but the police had been on hand, and nothing came of it. Around noon, Ferhat opened his eyes and moaned. I offered to bring him something. He asked for a cup of tea. After two sips, he dozed off again, which suited me fine, because I had no idea how to face him. When he looked at me injured, almost naked, and smiling, I turned into an ox or another kind of cattle. With Frederik’s arrival, the oppressive embarrassment vanished. He opened the windows, and Ferhat had to sit in the kitchen. Sterilized tools were laid out on the table. Frederik trimmed the edges of the wound and sprayed anesthetic all around. In order to make sure Ferhat stayed conscious, he asked him to tell him, point by point, what had happened.

“So Sezgin, the one you saw at the bar with the sunglasses, he already knew in May that Jamal Al-Khouri was coming to Vienna. He knew from the so-called Union of Austrian Friends of Lebanon—UAFL—which often contracted him. Sezgin’s family was from Antakya, so he speaks both Turkish and Arabic, just like me. That’s why he always told me everything and trusted me. Then he found out from the so-called European Union of Islamic Turkish Democrats—EUIT—that Erdoğan would also be coming to Vienna, on the same day as Jamal Al-Khouri. Whether that was a coincidence or not, I can’t say. It all comes down to the fact that Erdoğan was supposed to send someone to Jamal Al-Khouri’s dinner, one of those who shine Erdoğan’s shoes or his ass and whisper anti-Kurdish shit to him. Sezgin is actually a chef. But he was always organizing things, for example, arranging documents, or organizing an apartment for someone, or ordering a taxi service, and of course he was organizing weddings all the time. In any case, the UAFL gave Sezgin the task of organizing the catering for the dinner with Jamal Al-Khouri.”

What I found most lacked credibility in Ferhat’s story was his portrayal of his relationship with Sezgin. “What do you mean he trusted you because you speak Turkish and Arabic? That was the reason? Where did you meet him? You’re certainly not a member of the UAFL or the EUIT or some other group? Why were you even with Sezgin?”

Frederik asked me to hold the edges around the incision together more tightly. I wanted to pursue my speculations about the relationship between Ferhat and Sezgin, but Frederik interrupted: “That doesn’t matter one iota! But please, who is Jamal Al-Khouri?”

“To be honest with you, I didn’t know, either, who he was. At least at the beginning. Sezgin had absolutely *no* idea who Jamal Al-Khouri was. But in the group, everybody’s jaw dropped: Jamal Al-Khouri? Jamal Al-Khouri is coming to Vienna? Personally, I wanted us to blow up Erdoğan—for example, by mixing in with the kitchen staff in the Grand Hotel and bringing a dynamite-filled Sachertorte to his room. Or by shooting him from the air with a drone or smuggling ourselves into the arena with his fans and stabbing him with a dagger. But nobody in the group was interested in Erdoğan. Everybody wanted only Jamal Al-Khouri, and they made phone calls and posted on Facebook and did internet research and so on. That’s how we knew that Jamal Al-Khouri was only five foot seven and

had a birthmark next to his right ear and that he had a high voice like a woman. He is Syrian-Lebanese or Lebanese-Syrian, what do I know? His whole damned family makes money off the war. We get killed, and they buy Gucci bags. They are the ones who sell ammonium nitrate to Assad and the madmen from Daesh for the barrel bombs. There is so much nitrate in Beirut harbor that you could blow up the whole city. Everybody from Afrin to Erbil knows that Daesh gets its ammonium nitrate, SVD rifles, PK machine guns, and hand grenades from Jamal Al-Khouri.

“It was my job to find out everything about the dinner. That wasn’t hard, because Sezgin was so stupid. In his addled brain, Sezgin thought the whole time that Erdoğan was going to come to the dinner himself. He couldn’t talk about anything else. ‘He’ll be bored in the Grand Hotel. The Saudis can’t cook. And besides, they’re dangerous. Recently they chopped up a guy and dissolved him in hydrochloric acid. Our president won’t feel at home with the Saudis. They are barbarians; they eat camels and scorpions. He’ll prefer to be with his Levantine friends and eat *lokma* and *köfte*. Especially when he is so far away from home. What do you think? He’s insulted because nobody in Vienna wants him. I’ll cook *lokma* and *köfte* for him like he’s never eaten in Ankara, so that he has a nice time in Vienna, in spite of all the racism and Islamophobia!’ That’s the way Sezgin talked all day long, from early in the morning to late at night.

“Four days before the dinner, Sezgin was extremely nervous. He had been on the telephone nonstop with butchers and bakers and greengrocers and, of course, his chefs. He talked on the phone at the top of his voice, because he doesn’t know how to speak softly. I was standing next to him when he let the address slip: Wildbrandtgasse 49, Eighteenth District. He didn’t think anything of it because, like I said, he trusted me. Two hours later, the whole group knew the address. We had four days. We occupied a parking place on Wildbrandtgasse and Peter-Jordan-Strasse. We switched out the car every evening so as not to be conspicuous. For the nineteenth of June, we arranged a Mercedes S-Class with a German license plate, 455 horsepower, metallic paint, interior completely in black leather. It’s all mansions in the Wildbrandtgasse. Only rich people live there. There is nothing but fences, hedges, and garden walls. It’s as quiet there as in winter. You can see the Danube and the vineyards and Vienna Woods. The mansion is not pretty. If you ask me, it’s ugly. It belongs to a Lebanese motherfucker. We had to find out when Jamal Al-Khouri was coming, in which car, when

he would be leaving, and where he was going. That was the most important thing, and we found out, thank God.”

Frederik stitched. Ferhat paused. “I prefer not to tell the rest.”

Frederik looked up. “Excuse me? That’s not okay. You are in our apartment. We are helping you. We have to know what happened.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s better if you don’t know what happened. Better for you both. I don’t want you two to have any trouble.”

“Listen, dude! It’s too late for that. Tell us more right now about the Lebanese motherfucker, or I’ll call an ambulance and the police.”

Ferhat looked at me as if it was up to me to defend him against Frederik. He insisted: “But it is better when you don’t know what happened, don’t you understand? You don’t know how people are. You’re from Europe. You are good people. You don’t understand certain things.”

Frederik stuck the needle into his flesh, and Ferhat screamed. “But we’re good enough to give you medical care? If we are so childish, why did you come to us?”

Ferhat raised his head to get into position for the hostile tone. “That wasn’t my idea, you can believe me!”

Frederik threw the needle down on the table. He stood up and paced back and forth in the kitchen.

I picked up the conversation. “Whose idea was it then? Who told you to come to us in the middle of the night?”

Ferhat stared into the air for a while. Frederik whipped his cell phone out and dramatically indicated that he was about to call the police.

Ferhat lowered his eyes. “Shirin sent me to you, Shirin Kord, from the fourth floor. She said I could trust the two of you.” He smiled. Frederik and I were lost.

“But please! Without the two of you, I would never have met Shirin. I came to translate Yasmina’s Facebook page. You were going to give me a hundred euros, but I didn’t take the money, logically, because you don’t take a hundred euros for a little thing like that. I said goodbye and went down the stairway. I never take the elevator, because in Erbil every elevator is like roulette. I don’t know exactly what Shirin was doing. She was standing in the hallway, and it looked like she was eavesdropping at her

neighbor's door. I wanted to sneak by, but she noticed me. She saw immediately that I was Kurdish. 'Good evening,' she said to me in Kurdish. Then she immediately interrogated me. 'What are you doing here? Where are you from? Where are you going?' I told her everything, because Shirin could be my mother. After all, I live here like scum, like a lonesome lamb that has lost its flock. Shirin had the idea that I should go to the bar to shadow Sezgin. She knew very well that he hung out there. So I went to the bar and shadowed him."

Frederik's sense of medical duty was stronger than his irritation. He continued his patchwork. We were both taken by surprise. Until just a few minutes ago, I had thought Frau Kord was a lovely lady. But as remarkable as the news was, I was dominated above all by jealousy: "It didn't bother you that the bar where you had to shadow Sezgin was a gay bar? You found that to be perfectly normal? Isn't it the case that Sezgin trusted you because he likes you? Because he is infatuated with you? He grabbed your thigh. I saw it quite clearly. Is that normal?"

Ferhat pursed his lips and showed a definite hint of condescension. "Of course I noticed what kind of bar it is. Do you think I'm stupid?"

Frederik pierced Ferhat's skin one last time and tied a knot. He wasn't interested in all the gay stuff and got back to the heart of the matter. "Where is Jamal Al-Khouri? Is he dead? Did you kill him? Is that how you got this wound?"

Ferhat was relieved that the conversation had found its way back to this path.

"Jamal Al-Khouri is in hell. Unfortunately, I am not his murderer. The wound came later."

We tied a thick gauze bandage around the suture. Frederik picked up another injection that had been lying on the table the whole time. Ferhat got scared.

"Another injection? Why? You finished the suture. Are you trying to poison me?"

Frederik twisted his arm roughly. "Stay still. It's for tetanus."

Ferhat cramped up. It wouldn't have taken much for him to faint again.

After all the turmoil, we needed to get some air on Sunday. We cycled toward Purkersdorf, where Frederik knew a mountain bike path that led back through Vienna Woods to the city limits. The path climbed, and we struggled with all our might. Frederik was itching to let off steam. He set a brisk pace from the Naschmarkt and ascended the Buchberg trail to Mauerbach standing. I wondered where he got the energy. We reached the Sophienalpe, and Vienna lay at our feet. It was nice for once to stand above things.

“Is he telling the truth?”

“I think so. Frau Kord called yesterday. She invited us over on Tuesday. We’ll find out more then. She said that Ferhat can stay at Drechsler’s in July, and you can move back up. Unless, of course, you now prefer Regina’s bed.”

“I don’t care one way or the other. I’ve gotten used to being handed around. I’ll stay at Regina’s if you want. She gave me a key.”

“Did you sleep with each other?”

“The ideas you get! She is always working. She’s cooking up something big. I’ve hardly seen her. And you? Have you made any progress?”

“What do you mean?”

“Quit pretending to be the Virgin Mary! Have you finally had sex? You and the sweet terrorist?”

We sat down on the grass.

“Yeah, right. He sleeps most of the time. We watched three movies. He knows a thousand ways to download free movies.”

“Why aren’t you sleeping with him? He’s lying in your bed. You can’t get any closer to him.”

“And how do you imagine I should do that? Should I force him? He’d stick a knife into my back. I don’t even think he’s gay.”

“Excuse me? So why is he always hanging out at gay spots? That cannot be a coincidence.”

“If I only knew! I don’t understand him. He lies silently in bed and stares into space. I think he’s ruminating. Sometimes his eyes become moist, and sometimes he moans. When he’s awake, he is friendly, and his friendliness is honest. But it’s always at a distance of two centimeters. He lies next to me, and I sense that he feels comfortable. But it would be unthinkable to touch him. He knows full well that I want him. He enjoys it. I can tell from the way he moves, how he takes off his T-shirt and gets in bed. He watches me watching him. My hungry eyes flatter him. He takes sustenance in my longing.”

Frederik twisted the corners of his mouth mockingly. “Have you gone to the poets?”

“I can’t help but think about what Aunt Erika said. ‘You can’t simply love someone who has saved your ass.’ We saved Ferhat’s ass, so it would be weird having sex with him. You heard what he said. He feels like a poor lost lamb. What if I wasn’t into him so intensely? Then maybe we wouldn’t give a damn about his fate. We’d probably even be outraged by what he did. At the very least, he certainly wouldn’t be sleeping in our bed. He senses that and is reclaiming his independence by not giving in to my desire. At least it seems that way to me.”

“And it seems to me that your prudishness has taken on unimagined dimensions. It provides you with intellectual claptrap so you don’t have to make use of your dick. Should I ask Regina if she has any disinhibiting drugs for you?”

We lay down on a towel that Frederik had taken out of his backpack. We both avoided direct contact with the earth.

“I have to tell you something.” Frederik raised and lowered his pelvis as if he were in a Jane Fonda workout video. “The last few weeks have been hell. I have to take a vacation, or I’m going to kick the bucket. I’ll be gone the whole month of August, okay? I’m using all my overtime hours as vacation time; my boss approved it. I’m going to spend five days in Valencia, then fly from Madrid to the US. I booked my flight yesterday. I had to do it right away or I would have hesitated and ended up on the Attersee again.”

I wasn’t particularly surprised.

“I assume you are flying to the West Coast?”

“Correct. You have to see the Golden Gate Bridge once in your lifetime.”

“Have you talked on the phone?”

“She sent us an email, both of us. You should check your inbox!”

“What did she write?”

“I’m not saying anything, or we’ll start arguing again. Read it yourself! In any case, it motivated me to stop by in San Francisco.”

He turned toward me. We were behaving like a pair of lovers in the sunshine.

“Will you come along? Yasmina wrote that Castro Street would be paradise for you.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m not flying to San Francisco right now when paradise is lying right next to me. . . . Freddy, I can’t help it. I don’t know why it is the way it is. Do you know why you can’t stop loving Yasmina? Even though she’s now living on the Pacific at the other end of the planet?”

“Yes, I can tell you. I love Yasmina because she’s better than me. She is perfect. Perhaps not her character, but her very essence. Yasmina simply has class. Ferhat is a sheep, I’m a donkey, and Yasmina is a horse.”

“A horse? That’s why she left you, because you compare her with a horse!”

“I’m not talking about a pitiful nag. I’m talking about a black Arabian. Haughty and shy. Wild and noble. A herd animal but still stubborn. That’s Yasmina.”

“Maybe Yasmina doesn’t want to be compared to an Arabian horse? Maybe she thinks such comparisons are stupid and clichéd?”

“But that’s where the true stupidity lies. Comparing is rational, honest, and human. When we compare, we juxtapose different things. Comparing takes it as given that everything is proximate to everything else. It is the best thing that our dumb mind can muster. Whoever resists comparisons is also resisting the proximity of others. Whoever refuses to compare claims to be unique. But uniqueness is a joke.”

“My goodness! Have you gone to the philosophers?”

Frederik spat, as if to immediately dispel the aura of wisdom.

“Kiss my ass! What else am I supposed to do? All sorts of thoughts come into my head. I’m a donkey in love with a horse. That’s why I am doomed to mental masturbation. It’s unfair. Donkeys may be small, but they have an imposing tail!”

When I was back home I read Yasmina’s email. It was the first message from her since her departure:

Dear Kurti and dear Freddy, I’m writing the two of you because you tell each other everything anyhow. I wanted to apologize, Kurt, that I never told you I was going to San Francisco. When we were sitting in the taxi together, I felt awful. But what could I have done? How could I have been honest with you without being honest with Freddy? That doesn’t work, and I knew it. Now things are wonderful. In Vienna, I wanted to move into the administration, but being a doctor here is great. The patients respect me, even though I have an accent. They don’t ask me the whole time when the real doctor is coming like at General Hospital. Nobody gives a damn that I have dark hair. I am living in a shared apartment, I pay rent for the first time in my life, it’s fantastic! By the way, the apartment is very close to Castro Street. Kurti, you’d have lots of eye candy here! There are men from every corner of the earth, someone for every man and woman. The only thing I miss is the two of you.

All my love,

Yasmina.

Frau Kord invited us into her living room, where she had set the table. There were large Oriental rugs on the floor and wooden shelves on the wall filled with books and picture frames from floor to ceiling. Most of the book spines revealed languages that I didn’t understand. I had neither known nor suspected that Frau Kord lived in a library. She came to the table with a pot of tea made from St. John’s wort.

“Ferhat is innocent. If you want to condemn someone, then, in the name of God, condemn me. However, I was in the Waldviertel—the Forest District—from Wednesday to yesterday, because certain things are just too stressful for me. Still, I know everything. You can put me on trial if you feel like it. But slowly, please! Nowadays people condemn you in the blink of an eye, but most people haven’t got a clue. They leaf through the

newspaper, sit drinking wine spritzers and passing judgment on Islam, the Middle East, and nuclear fission. And while doing so, they are swiping aside lovers on Tinder. They have an opinion about everything, although they haven't got a clue about anything. They confuse Persian with Arabic, Turkish with Kurdish, left with right, top with bottom. But they've got a judgment ready at hand.

"I can't sugarcoat anything. Of course, you shouldn't murder anyone in our peaceful idyll between Gumpendorferstrasse and Mondscheingasse. Unfortunately, there is just no other way. We killed Jamal Al-Khourri. At the moment, we don't know where his body is. But he's dead. I know that means the party is over. I know that it contradicts European values, the so-called rule of law, and the Christian gospels. But you can believe me when I say we thought long and hard about the matter. We voted on it. Except for one abstention, the result was unanimous that the best thing to do was to shoot down Jamal Al-Khourri right in the Wildbrandtgasse.

"Before you are overtaken by indignation, I recommend a brief political reflection. If a state decides to destroy someone, nobody as a rule gets upset. States home in on their enemy, catch him, and then kill him, all while basking in the glow of their state principles and laws. There are thousands of examples of that. Who shot Osama bin Laden? And Muammar Gadaffi? In whose name was Saddam Hussein hanged? It is well known none of those three died in sporting accidents. They were killed at the order of the state. But when we vote democratically and decide as a majority to shoot the devil himself, then it's murder, mafia, and terrorism. People shake their heads in disgust. And why? Because *our* violence is not cloaked with state authority. From the Kurdish standpoint, not to mention the standpoint of the Hazaras, Rohingya, Palestinians, Uighurs, Sioux, Aborigines, and all refugees on this planet, that is unjust. From our standpoint, the states are the biggest terrorists. In terms of pure numbers, they produce the most victims."

Frederik got impatient. You could tell, because he was tapping his fingers on the table. He didn't want to talk about the Aborigines but about Ferhat. He stayed formal, even though Frau Kord was addressing us informally. His tone was unfriendly. "What kind of stories are those? Who is this 'we' you are talking about the whole time? What's up with the dead Lebanese guy? What did you get this boy mixed up in?"

“We are a political organization like a thousand others in the world. We concern ourselves with the Kurdish cause, and we do it through true activism, meaning we don’t just tweet, like, or post. We act, with our hands. We are networked across the world and have thousands of members. I won’t tell you the name. In the end, you’ll have an attack of morality. We didn’t pull Ferhat into anything. At most we kept him out of something. We are not a cult or a secret society. We operate like any normal party. People are free to join us or turn their backs to us. We have statutes, procedural rules, and an office. We have a president and an executive committee. Every third Saturday, we have an open house with beer and vegetarian hot dogs. It was the first murder for those of us in Vienna. It’s not as if we have been taking someone out every week.

“You think Ferhat is a helpless refugee. You call him *boy*. You think we exploited his situation. You think he doesn’t have his own mind because he has been saved from the war. You think he’s poor and uneducated. You think his dream has always been thawing out prebaked rolls for nine hundred euros a month, which is not enough for a living or for a life. But you are wrong. Ferhat did not flee because he dreamed of a fucking neoliberal shit job. He fled because he couldn’t take it anymore in Erbil. Because his life was so dominated by politics that he almost choked on it. Most likely, he doesn’t have less life experience than you do but more!”

Frau Kord got up to turn on the light. She seemed unhappy with the course of the conversation.

“Listen! I sent Ferhat to you two because I trusted you. I knew you were his teacher and doctor. Like I said, I was in the Forest District. We hadn’t counted on something happening to him, of all people. We’re not the RAF or the ETA. I’m not Josefa Ernaga or Gudrun Ensslin. On the contrary. I would love to be a moonstruck creature like the Viennese. My parents also wished nothing more than to keep me out of politics. That’s why they came to Vienna from Iran. Unfortunately, it was all for nought, since being Kurdish is like a curse. Who knows, maybe it’s like being gay?”

Frederik remained reserved, and I struggled with the image I had constructed for myself of Frau Kord. I wanted her to backpedal and become the nice lady from next door again. I had absolutely no more desire to talk about politics. And I certainly did not want to exchange another word about

the murder. She ought to talk about drinking wine with Aunt Erika or Drechsler's affair with Frau Seiler or any other normal occurrence.

"He's the only one who is gay," Frederik clarified. "Being the central European dumbass that I am, I don't have a clue about being gay."

"Be that as it may," Frau Kord returned to her thought, "being Kurdish always means more than it ought to mean. Maybe being gay is similar? Nobody knows anything about it. People say, 'Aha, Kurdish, that's a Turkish dialect, right?' Or 'You are a Kurd? Why aren't you wearing a headscarf?' Or '*Travels through Wild Kurdistan* by Karl May, have you read it?' Those are the types of things you have to listen to. As much as you just want to be normal, it simply isn't possible. You always are the bearer of some meaning that doesn't mean anything to you yourself."

"I went to high school in Ottakring, where the real question was whether I was Kurdish, Iranian, or Turkish. I was lucky with my class. Sometimes I stood out because of my dark hair or my eyebrows. I lied and said I was Greek or Italian, or sometimes even Persian. That was enough, and people let it go. I had a happy time at school, and my parents were proud of me. My father had an electrical appliance shop on the main thoroughfare of Hernals District. My mother assisted him in the shop. They just wanted to be Viennese, own a business, and go out for pizza on Friday. They wanted to have a car and drive to Rimini in the summer. I was to study law and become a judge, criminal defender, or even state's attorney. But then came misfortune: I fell in love."

"I met Fadel on Yppenplatz, where we went grocery shopping. You could see right away that he wasn't a salesman. He looked as if he was deep in thought or full of knowledge. My parents absolutely did not want me to get involved with him, so we met in secret. I was in the first semester of college, so it was not difficult to find excuses. I'd say I was going to the library or to class. But in reality, I went to Fadel's. He lived on Grundsteingasse, in a shared apartment. His colleagues were bohemians. They had girlfriends, except for Engin, who had a boyfriend. We sat in the kitchen, drank tea or beer, and smoked pot. The last afternoon is an unforgettable memory for me. It was summer, and we had made love. Fadel was sitting in his undershirt on the bed. In the courtyard, it was so quiet you could hear the flies and the bees. Engin served *palatschinken*. *Hey now, hey now, don't dream it's over*, came from the radio. We wanted to ride out to

Neusiedlersee and were thinking about which pretense I could use to fool my parents. The next day, Fadel was dead.

“I don’t want to go over all the details. Twenty-five years have passed since then. But one thing is clear: It changed my life. It propelled me into being Kurdish. I was in love with Fadel, and at first, of course, my grief made me want to die. But then anger showed up. I began to look circumstances in the eye. Fadel was shot in the Third District, along with his colleagues Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and Abdullah Ghaderi-Azar. *Shot* is not the right description: they were riddled with bullets. By whom? Why? Where were the perpetrators? I had to find out. My naive life was over. That’s how I got into politics.” She studied our faces. “Have you heard of the Vienna Kurdish Murders?”

Frederik shook his head. I hadn’t heard of them either. It rubbed me the wrong way that yet another murder was being brought into the picture. I wanted the conversation to come to an end.

Frau Kord only nodded. “That’s what I thought. You have nothing to be ashamed of. I’m used to it. But let me tell you one thing: a state killed my man, and a state let the murderers go free. But against a state, you are nothing. I was a nineteen-year-old girl. My parents couldn’t mourn with me. They were ashamed. Deep down, they thought I was a disgrace. In their eyes, I had given myself to a terrorist. But Fadel was no terrorist. He wanted to negotiate the rights of the Iranian Kurds, nothing more. He didn’t even have a knife with him. My parents didn’t believe me, and I moved out. I chucked college and lived miserably for a few years. The hatred almost consumed me from within. By chance, I found this apartment. I was tired of my life and lay in bed for days. My man was dead; my family was broken. I would have preferred to die. But the walls here in the house are thin, as you’ve probably noticed. While lying around, I heard someone crying next door. It was a soft sound but regular and constant. I pressed my ear against the wall, and things got better from there.

“Margit and I became friends. She missed her husband, and I missed Fadel. She struggled with her life, and I struggled with mine. Through Margit, I met Erika, and through Erika, Herr Drechsler. Erika was our cyclone, our sunshine, our love. She took care of us from morning to night. Only much later did I realize why she took such great pains with us and where she got her energy. But that’s another tragic story. Thanks to Erika’s

help, I got my life back in order. I found a job as a secretary and interpreter in a lawyer's office. My boss specializes in family law and immigration law. He does outstanding work.

“Things stabilized, and I joined the party. I owed that to Fadel. Since then, I am partisan, and I stand behind that. Life is not a political science seminar. Neutrality is a lie. I would shoot Al-Khouri a second and a third time. The Kurds conquered Kirkuk. The chances for Kurdistan are good. Only the crazy ones cause problems. The machine guns that Al-Khouri sells to the Islamists annihilate Kurdish men, women, and children. We wanted Al-Khouri to die, and we accomplished it admirably. Nothing happened to his driver. A hole in the rear window, a stain on the back seat, nothing more. When he saw the leather skirts and the high-heeled shoes, he craned his neck. He even rolled down the windows. Allegedly he shouted, ‘Hello, dolls! I’m in a hurry.’ It was easy to shoot him in the head.”

Frau Kord put her hands in her lap. Her lower legs swayed back and forth. Her relaxed posture contrasted sharply with the story she was telling. She visibly relished relating Al-Khouri's demise. Frederik furrowed his brow. My sole wish was for the story to end.

“A minute later we had hightailed it out of there. We don't think anyone called the police. The car is still parked on Wildbrandtgasse. They probably buried him in the woods or threw him in the Danube, or—using the Saudi method—he was dismembered and dissolved in acid. We believe the Lebanese avoid the police. They prefer to handle matters on their own. But they are groping in the dark. The security services were fixated on Erdoğan. Al-Khouri felt unobserved. Everything went perfectly according to plan, except for Sezgin's pitiful intervention. He is the one who ambushed Ferhat with two henchmen. Who knows, maybe he really wanted to kill him. Luckily, Ferhat is as strong as a lion. Luckily, a neighbor noticed the commotion and called the police.

“I had forbidden Ferhat to come anywhere close to Wildbrandtgasse. He was supposed to watch the soccer match with his friends, preferably in a bar at the other end of the city. He adhered to that until it was over. Probably Sezgin is not as dumb as we thought. Presumably he is driven by passion, which is the most dangerous thing. He wasn't supposed to know where Ferhat lives, but he did. Ferhat had lied through his teeth to him, but maybe he went too far and somehow spilled the beans. In any case, Sezgin is the

reason we are hiding Ferhat right now. As long as we don't know how Sezgin and the Lebanese are going to proceed, we'll keep him under cover. If, contrary to expectations, the police become involved, it's better that he isn't staying with me. I'm somewhat famous in police circles, so I prefer Ferhat to stay with Drechsler, with Regina, or with you two. That's everything in a nutshell. Is there anything else you want to know?"

"No, thank you, all okay." I got up to leave the living room. Frederik said nothing and followed me. We hastily said goodbye.

Under the covers, Frederik turned to me. "I'm glad Yasmina went to San Francisco and didn't join a party. I'm glad her activism is on Facebook and not with her hands. Partisanship and fanaticism are hard to tell apart."

I said nothing, for I was through with politics.

Summer vacation began with an infatuation that was like a sickness. Instead of going to the Wachau or to the sea, I tiptoed around on eggshells in the garret and around Drechsler's apartment. During breakfast, I listened closely to determine if the two of them were awake yet. At midday, I sweated and waited for Ferhat's visit. In the afternoon, I pulled myself together somewhat. If the temperature got up into the high eighties, I went to Prater or to Danube Island. My thoughts were constantly circling around Ferhat. I pulled out my phone wherever I was, even on my bike or at the Schönbrunner Pool. After I had swum two laps, I got out of the water and checked the display with dripping fingers. In the evenings, I played the role of a casual visitor, although my restlessness bordered on obsession. The phrase *dropping by* seemed stupid and unbearable even to myself. Drechsler had a good time. In order to fan the flames, he left his apartment door open all day long, allegedly to get better cross-ventilation. In truth, he got a kick out of it that I loved Ferhat and made a fool of myself because of him.

Once, we were sitting in Grünwald Park. Drechsler had swollen fingertips, scabs on his face, and cracked lips. "It sounds ridiculous, but I am almost enjoying how life is now. Frederik and you are a stroke of good fortune. I've been sleeping better since the boy is with me. It's reassuring that someone is there. Frau Kord brings us goulash or bean stew or cabbage rolls every day. Even Regina comes by every now and then. I never smoked, even as a teenager. The fucking cancer, I'm sure, was fertilized by

loneliness. I like how you love this guy. It makes him proud and warms my heart.”

Drechsler and Ferhat killed time to the best of their ability. When Drechsler had a good day, they played chess, nine-men’s morris, or schnapsen. When the heat was bearable and Drechsler was up to it, they would walk around the block in the morning. Through the wall, I heard them talking. I didn’t understand anything, but the sound of their voices enthralled me. I could distinguish Ferhat’s footsteps and movements from Drechsler’s. When Ferhat went into the bathroom in the evening, I eavesdropped with bated breath as he rinsed out his mouth and peed into the toilet.

After a few days, Ferhat’s shock and pain had abated somewhat. Around noon, he usually came over to my place. We would take a stroll to Mariahilferstrasse and sit in Aida, a pastry shop. He wore sunglasses and a cap. Aida was frequented exclusively by guests we considered not to be dangerous. Even Frau Kord had no objection. Of course, we had to protect Ferhat from Sezgin, but we also had to keep him from going crazy. Frau Kord wanted to take him with her in August to the Forest District, where she traditionally spent her vacation. Until that point, we tried to make being on our guard as pleasant as possible for him. Ferhat knew that I was smitten with him. He bore it less with pride, as Drechsler claimed, than with a certain cautiousness, for which I was grateful. On our stroll, we’d talk about one thing or another. He asked about my family. I tried to get closer to his inner life. Had he ever had a girlfriend? Or a boyfriend? Ferhat kept a low profile. I didn’t get the impression that he was hiding anything. But it wasn’t his way to talk about these things. He wanted to have four children. That was all. He bowed his head and lit a cigarette.

When asked why he had fled Erbil, he went into greater detail. “There is not one reason for that but a thousand. I fled because my father and uncle have been fighting over a house for twenty years. It has three stories and therefore has led to numerous fistfights. At the same time, our family was feuding with a much larger family. In Erbil, there are two large families that have been feuding for centuries. At the same time, all the Shiite Iraqis are at odds with the Sunni Iraqis, and Iraq is at odds with Iran, and Iran is at odds with America, and so forth. My brothers joined the militia. My mother didn’t want me to join, because I was the youngest. She said I can best help

by sending money back home. So I left. That was seven reasons. There are seventy-seven other ones besides those.”

The last week of July, I invited Ferhat to Burgenland. We had a month of peaceful coexistence behind us. We had slept for three days in the same bed. He didn't have anything to fear from me. I had given up all my fantasies. I didn't want to make his life difficult with a desire that would impose additional restrictions and burdens. I just wanted to be next to him. The distance between us had gotten smaller. He let me hug him or touch his arm from time to time. He let me do it because I didn't make any scenes. I wasn't embarrassing or intrusive. I controlled myself, and it was easy for me because I had controlled myself my whole life. My parents pointed out to me that Uncle Bertram's reed hut was empty. They lent me their car and rejoiced that I was taking a vacation near Oslip.

Frederik removed Ferhat's stitches. A pink line remained. His shoulder joint did not seem quite right, but Ferhat was not worried about it. The hut was close to the reeds behind the Oggau Swimming Pool. There was a veranda and a small garden with fruit trees and a boathouse. There were several bikes in my grandma's garage, and we pumped air into the flat tires. I could barely take it all in when we rode back from Oslip over the Ungerberg to Oggau. The sky was blue and the air full of dry scents. Ferhat sat upright on his bicycle seat. He stroked the sunflowers with his hands, sniffed the blossoms, and laughed. He was a cowboy or a Kurdish rider or simply a proud young man.

In the mornings, we dragged Uncle Bertram's wooden boat into the water and paddled out onto the lake. The passage through the reeds was like an expedition into a foreign realm. Birds, flies, frogs, and fish chirped and gurgled everywhere. Rats sought shelter among the stalks. Snakes made elegant tracks. Out on the lake, we got high on the vastness. We took gear with us on the boat and tried to fish. We didn't get a single bite in four days. We had to buy fish from the vendor in Rust. In the afternoons, we went to the swimming pool or cycled through the countryside. In the evenings, we spent our time cooking, meaning we grilled. We grilled the fish. We also ate grilled bread, grilled corn on the cob, grilled tomatoes, grilled peppers, and grilled cheese. We weren't interested in the nightlife around the lake, the trendy bar in Ruster Bay. We sat in front of the fire with naked torsos and beer and flipped the fish.

Under the roof of the hut, there was a wooden platform with mattresses laid out on it. You climbed up a ladder, and once you were there, you could only move around in a crouched position. Through the skylight, which was decked out with a layer of gnats, shimmered a hint of moonlight. Spiders grossed me out, and I didn't like primitive sleeping arrangements. Because of the heat, you couldn't possibly get in the sleeping bag, so it was an absolute prerequisite for me to inspect every nook and cranny in the floor, the ceiling beams, and the mattresses using the light from my cell phone display. Cowboy Ferhat laughed at me. He threw himself down on the mattress and stretched out his arms and legs. I lay down next to him and, feeling his presence, clenched my teeth. At the first rays of sunlight, the birds burst into song from the fence, quite as if every day was a festival of life.

On the final evening, we rode to Rust to the *heuriger*. I had been familiar with the wine locale since my childhood, and I wanted to show it to Ferhat. The garden was shaded by walnut trees and was full of flower pots and drunk patrons. Grilled fish was on the menu. Along with that, we ordered a liter of wine, as well as water. Within no time, we were buzzed. Ferhat started to make faces. I was aroused and happy. On the way home, we didn't take the shortest route but instead went through the fields via Oslip. Ferhat rode with no hands and sang. Before the intersection at Steinhut, he turned off onto a dirt trail that ascended between the grape vines. I shouted after him that he'd gone the wrong way. He kept riding, unfazed, to a thicket, leaned his bicycle against a fig tree, and lay down in the grass.

"Come!" he said and beckoned me with his hand to his side. He stretched his head toward the twilight sky. Over Rust and Oggau you could see the glow of the building illuminations. The lake was a line at the horizon. "It's beautiful here. Thank you for taking me along with you." He reached for my hand and pulled it under his belt.

He kneeled over me. He pulled his pants and underpants down below his knees and pushed his penis against my lips. I smelled his crotch and opened my mouth. He grabbed me with both hands by the back of my neck and penetrated my oral cavity as if it were a hollow piece of plastic. I felt sick and pushed back against his thrusting hips with all my might. He pulled his dick out, came on my hair, my cheeks, and my T-shirt. He turned over on his back. I wrestled with him to at least kiss him. We kissed for five

seconds. He pushed me off him and pulled his pants up. We pedaled back to the hut. He stuck his head under the covers and slept like the dead. On the drive back, I flipped my lid. I screamed that he should talk to me. Ferhat put his head down. He begged me to let it go. At Drechsler's door, he whispered in my ear, "Thank you for taking me along. It was the best vacation of my life."

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The European Research Council awarded Regina Schneider-Papaioannou a so-called Starting Grant. The decision was announced in the middle of August. The stipend amounted to 1.5 million euros, to be used for research purposes and enabling her to employ two or three doctoral students. She received the award after she was listed as third author in *Nature* for the article “Female Sexual Behavior in Mice Is Controlled by Kisspeptin Neurons” and was the lead author of the article “Hormones and the Riddle of Love” in the *Journal of Biological Psychology*. She was elected Young Scientist of the Year for 2014 by the Austrian Academy of Sciences. *Vienna Today* invited her to do a television interview, and all the more serious newspapers carried reports about her. Last but not least, the University of Vienna took the accumulating laurels as an opportunity to offer her a junior professorship at the Institute for Biochemical Behavioral Research. You could say that Regina had arrived.

Amid the landslide of joyful news, we found time for one another. She sought distance from her sudden prominence. I sought company for the warm nights. Frederik was in the States, Drechsler was preoccupied with his son, and Ferhat was wasting away in the Forest District.

At first, I had looked ahead anxiously to August. But I could count on Regina. We went out for pizza or to the fish grill master under Franzensbrücke. Satisfaction radiated from within her, and the waiters served her with reverence. She was more affectionate with me than ever. I asked her for her take on what had happened under the fig tree.

“He has nothing, and you have everything. That is no basis for parity in love. You can blame him for his behavior, but you don’t have to.”

“Is he even gay?”

“What evidence will convince you? What facts make his erections gay? Do you want to know what he felt when he poked around in your mouth? Would that help you? What did you feel when you were with me?” The embarrassing experience with which our friendship had started had long

since become a blessing. Regina and I not only spent the summer evenings together, we also shared the bed afterward. We lay casually next to each other, either at her place or mine, and looked forward to breakfast as we fell asleep.

The vacationers returned at the beginning of September, and Regina threw a party. She invited friends and colleagues, as well as us neighbors. The event was supposed to start at six. She thought she was accommodating Drechsler, who was often overwhelmed by exhaustion in the evenings. A Greek restaurant delivered olives, cheese, salads, tzatziki, and flatbreads. There was also wine, beer, and Metaxa. The apartment was bursting at the seams, and soon everyone was in high spirits, mostly due to Regina's colleagues from the lab. Still, you could tell Regina was their boss. No joke went too far, and between them, there was undisguised respect. I had never seen her so beautiful. She wore a black summer dress with red shoes and a red pearl necklace.

Drechsler couldn't get enough of her. He sat among the guests, enjoyed the flurry, and didn't take his eyes off the lady of the house. Ferhat had bought him an Ayrton Senna cap. It gave him a mischievous look and concealed his bald head. He seemed relaxed, which was probably due to Regina's hemp cookies. Frederik, who had been shining like a lamp since his return from the States, sat next to Drechsler. Regina strutted back and forth between the groups, exchanging a word here and there. Whenever she paused in front of Drechsler, he immediately stopped talking. He looked up at her and repeated the same compliments over and over.

Ferhat, for whom this was his first public appearance in Vienna, sat somewhat off to the side. He was in charge of the music and handled the laptop. I tried to ignore him haughtily. I didn't succeed one bit and instead sat down next to him. "So how's it going?"

"I am doing better now. I was afraid you wouldn't talk to me anymore because you hate me."

"Why should I hate you?"

"You know why."

"I know that you're an idiot. I don't hate you. I love you—that's my mess."

He smiled. Naturally, he didn't respond. Where we had words and sentences, he had a lowered face and a mischievous mouth.

"Did Regina or Shirin tell you?" He put on a new playlist and leaned back.

"What do you mean?"

"That I'm going away the day after tomorrow."

Neither Regina nor Frau Kord had spoken to me about it.

"Where are you going? Back to the Forest District?"

"What are you talking about? If I have to go back once more to the Forest District, I'll hang myself. No, I'm going to Greece. We've organized everything. I can ride along in the truck with Regina's uncle."

"Excuse me? What are you going to do in Greece?"

"Regina's uncle lives in Thessaloniki. He sells oil and lemons. From Thessaloniki I'll take the train to Athens. I can stay with Regina's grandparents. There are a lot of refugees there, very many. Thousands or tens of thousands. Many are from Erbil. I want to make myself useful and do something. Maybe I'll take a boat to Antalya and from Antalya to Efrin. Shirin gave me money. The main thing is I can finally leave."

"Why are you so set on leaving?" I tried to react as calmly as possible.

"Because I can't stand it here anymore. I don't like the way it is here. Everything is so difficult and complicated. There is no lust for life. Here, people only laugh when they are drunk, and that's why they drink so much. Many are nice on the outside. But inside they are complete wrecks. Many have bad intentions."

I started seething inside. I took every word personally and wanted to get up and leave. Ferhat noticed that I was hurt by his remarks.

"You're the one who always wants to talk! Now you see what comes out when I do. I didn't mean you, I swear it! You are the best. You and Freddy, Shirin, Drechsler, and Regina. You all are a thousand times better than the people in Erbil, Ankara, or Kuala Lumpur. If everybody here was like you, Vienna would be the greatest city in the world. Then I'd stay here for my whole fucking life."

He kept his eyes directed at the ground. "I can't say certain things, not in German, not in Kurdish, not in Turkish or Arabic. I come from another

world. You have to believe me. I kiss your eyes. I love you like my eyes.”

Drechsler had snuck up from behind. “What a party! Go on, Feri, will you put on a song for me?”

He bent down to meet our contrite faces. He had probably been observing us. He certainly felt responsible for ensuring that not a single cloud darkened the sky over Regina’s party. As usual, I kept myself under control and choked back the storm with all my might. Ferhat added Drechsler’s song to the playlist, and Regina, Shirin, and Frederik joined us. Regina had a bottle of champagne in her hands; Frederik had six glasses.

“To good neighbors!”

Drechsler shook his head, gobsmacked. “Champagne in the co-op! Who would have thought it!” He took a sip and sat down in an armchair. Regina’s speakers weren’t the best, but Ferhat and I could hear the subject of Drechsler’s music request.

I was born by the river, and just like the river, I’ve been running ever since. . . . It’s been too hard livin’, but I’m afraid to die. . . . I went to my brother, and I asked him: Could you help me, please? He said, I’d like to, but I’m not able. The refrain, *A change is gonna come*, provided no comfort. I didn’t know the extent of Ferhat’s English, but even he understood what would happen next. We moved closer together and hardly dared look over at Drechsler. He sank deeper and deeper into the chair. A cursory glance might lead you to believe he was a guest at the party. He had pulled the Ayrton Senna cap over his forehead and was swinging his champagne glass back and forth. He kept his eyes closed. He wasn’t at the party anymore but inside Aretha Franklin’s aching song.

The third renter on the sixth floor sold his shares in the co-op. As promised, Drechsler conspired to get the apartment offered to Frederik. It had southern exposure, a potential kid’s room, and a balcony. Freddy took it in spite of the need to renovate. He had saved money for years by living with Yasmina. Now he wanted to provide for his own apartment and had workmen coming in and out. Regina observed the traffic in the stairwell and compared him to a baya. The male baya, she lectured, impresses the females with an artful nest construction. They knit magnificent structures in the bushes in order to curry the favor of the females. Frederik did not knit himself but delegated the work. In the animal kingdom, he certainly would not have impressed

anyone that way. But Regina was right. The paint was barely dry on the walls, the bathroom tiled, and the kitchen appliances installed when he sent a hundred photos to San Francisco on his new smartphone.

Frederik's vacation had not been in vain. He and Yasmina had found each other again, and it is well known that true discovery is rediscovery. They talked to each other, made love, according to Frederik several times some days. Yasmina wanted to stay in San Francisco. She felt like she was being taken seriously as a doctor for the first time. They planned to meet in Lisbon over Christmas. Moreover, there were several partnerships between Vienna General Hospital and UCSF, and Frederik applied for an exchange semester. Parallel to that, quite the baya, he prepared a nest in Vienna. We were in an optimistic mood. I thought less about Ferhat and resolved like a civil servant to visit the gay bar once a month. Regina supported my decision and even promised to accompany me from time to time. Frederik's apartment took shape. The drilling, spackling, and hammering shook off the last pollen of summer. Soon furniture was delivered, bright carpets, shiny fixtures, and a huge bed. My school operation was running like clockwork, and the October sun made for mild days. Drechsler helped wherever he could. He opened the apartment for the workmen and checked on everything when Frederik and I weren't there. He was happy with us and enjoyed the breath of fresh air on the sixth floor. Death took him with one fell stroke. At the end of October, he went to chemotherapy, experienced and well prepared. Septic shock forced him into the intensive care unit. His liver, lungs, kidneys, and heart quit before he could say a word. He died before sunrise, surrounded by machines and staff rubbing their exhausted eyes.

From a medical point of view, his passing was no surprise. But in the light of a Wednesday morning, the news shook us up. I tried to stave off despair until the funeral. When we returned to Laimgrubengasse from the Central Cemetery, I sat down at the kitchen table and didn't get up. I went on sick leave for two weeks, for psychological reasons, as the doctor firmly stated. He advised me to see a therapist. But I didn't have the nerve for that. The last thing I needed was a therapist's prattle and panpipes. The most helpful thing was to lie on Erika's sofa and avoid any movement whatsoever. After days of fixating solely on Drechsler and the injustice of death, my thoughts took a different turn. I beat myself up, sneering at the

prison of my own senseless subjectivity. My life seemed to me nothing more than a series of cramped little steps spiraling around a void.

Fortunately, I was not left alone. Frederik spent every free minute with me and slept in my bed again. When he was on duty, he called almost hourly. He made no bones about protecting me twenty-four seven. My parents came over. My father replaced the fume hood and the loose hinges in the kitchen. My mother cooked stews and cleaned the skylights, inside and out. Frau Kord brought tea in the evening and the latest news from Ferhat in Athens and Erbil. When nobody was there, the building noises dispelled the silence. The elevator cab rattled. The water pipes whistled, and on the other side of the wall, the parquet floor creaked. Drechsler's son, Fabian, had moved into the apartment one day after the funeral. The move had been planned for months. Fabian wanted to stay in Laimgrubengasse until he found a job in Vienna. In August, I had hardly noticed, because I was in love with Ferhat and went through the days in a daze. Now it was painful and yet somehow consoling that next door the toilet flushed as if nothing had happened.

In mid-November, Regina grabbed me for a Sunday outing. After breakfast, we rode out to Stammersdorf, where she knew every bush and country lane. We found a sunny spot to sit overlooking a vineyard.

"Are you still very sad?" she asked.

We had avoided talking about it until now. Tears welled up in my eyes. I didn't know why Drechsler's death devastated me so much. Besides the sheer absence that tormented us all, there was something that I found difficult to put into words. The closest I could come to it was compassion. I tried to explain it to Regina. She listened then chimed in: "I am one of the best biologists in this country. I don't mean that in an arrogant way, I'm just being realistic. I know my field, I know my colleagues. Sometimes we drill open a mouse's skull. That sounds terrible, and in a way, it is. But, believe me, we don't shed a drop of blood too much. I see to that. Anyone whose work is sloppy and who causes unnecessary pain gets kicked out. The people who are outraged at us are bigoted philistines. They condemn the laboratory. But they have nothing against schnitzel and chicken kebab. They are the first to beg for pills when they have the slightest illness. How and where the active ingredients are tested makes no difference to them. I see

the world more and more like Shirin does. We are friends. The hardest thing to bear is the platitudes people spout forth. My mother took to the streets in support of legalized abortion, in Greece and Austria. She explained to me how children come into the world.

“She instilled in me the idea that there is no shame. The word *shame* has no meaning in nature. Still, it was horrible. Only when you yourself embody a truth does it become really true.

“At first, I didn’t want to tell Drechsler, but he wouldn’t let it go because of his infatuation. I told him the romance was over. ‘You got me pregnant!’ I said. He was shocked by the way I expressed myself. It forced him to see that he was actively involved in it. Then it seemed like he was proud of it. He started dreaming, but I immediately throttled his dreams. ‘What are you imagining? That I should give up my career? Because of a one-night stand?’ The clinic was a nightmare, the furniture made of organic pine, the scent of lavender oil in the air. The cost was outrageous. I paid 590 euros. It goes without saying that the insurance didn’t cover it. I was ashamed and ashamed again because I was ashamed. Abortions shouldn’t take place in pastel-colored private practices somewhere in Döbling. That’s absurd.

“I couldn’t look Drechsler in the eye anymore. That had never happened to me in my whole life. I think it was his age that threw me off course. Besides, he was an outstanding lover. In an attack of instinctual stupidity, I thought that at sixty-two or sixty-three, he was too old to father a child. But biology is relentless. One careless moment between waking and sleeping, and a new life is already brewing. I was annoyed by Drechsler and by myself. But what annoyed me most of all was the primitiveness of our culture. It would rather cast shame on a woman than show solidarity and take responsibility. Ultimately, you’re all alone with the situation. Men, when they are nice, limit themselves to moralizing. They have their grand theory at hand that includes you without being asked but actually excludes you. On that ugly day, you were my only light. You didn’t ask me any questions and even washed your sheets for me. For that, I thank you and love you.

“He received the fucking diagnosis. I couldn’t be angry with him anymore, and suddenly I felt sorry for him. I understand it well when you talk about compassion. I, too, felt compassion for Drechsler. But compassion is poison for love and certainly for sex. I felt sorry for him and

couldn't desire him anymore. He sensed this, and it was certainly humiliating for him.

"Still, compassion is the most decent feeling between two living beings. We have it in common with many animals, for example, apes, elephants, and dolphins. Probably even chickens feel compassion. It shows that you are tied to the others. Only ideologues despise compassion, opposing it with irony or with the law. That's how you can tell they are monsters."

Anger and tears mingled on her face. Light bounced off the skyscrapers of Donau City. All around, it smelled of wet leaves and plowed earth. Somewhere there were even sheep bleating.

"I know when a blastocyst cavity forms. I know when the uterus starts to grow. I love children, and I want children, just as you do. But I didn't want a child with Drechsler. *Bios* is Greek and means life. Sometimes I remove the ovaries from a mouse. But I do this because I love life. Because I want to know how it is created. I'm not religious, and I'm certainly not moral. But within me, there is a connection to life that has nothing to do with that. It comes from a time when I was walking around here on Bisamberg afternoon after afternoon. I cried a lot. Some kid called me a fat pig or a *Kanakin*. Among the poppies, ants, and rose hips, my tears stopped. A hawk killed a hare or a squirrel. Nature is anything but kind. But it doesn't insult. It doesn't despise. Nobody has to be ashamed."

She put her head on my lap. We sat there for a long time, and I began to dream, just like Drechsler.

In the winter and spring, Frederik and I mostly studied English. We listened to R.E.M., Guns N' Roses, and Radiohead. The famous line *I wish I was special, but I'm a creep* seemed to Freddy to be a philosophical masterpiece. At the beginning of April, I dropped him off at the airport. We hugged, and he promised to return with Yasmina.

An extraordinary summer followed. First, a heatwave descended on Vienna like none we had ever experienced before. In the afternoon, the thermometer went up to 104 degrees. The flower beds withered, all the earth turned to dust, and mirages trembled over the asphalt. Those who could drove out into the country. Fabian and I got fans, because opening our doors no longer brought any relief. Avoiding the house was the best way to escape the attic incubator.

Something else unusual happened. At first, the strangers were mistaken for tourists. They were mainly grouped around Westbahnhof, and as the summer progressed, there were more and more of them. They scattered onto Mariahilferstrasse, into the adjacent green areas, and some of them camped on the dry lawn in front of Urban-Loritz-Platz, surrounded by eight-lane city traffic. The phenomenon entered public discourse and was placed under the heading *wave*. Frau Kord and I followed the news from Ferhat closely. He reported daily on what was happening in Piraeus and Turkey. Hundreds of thousands of people were on the run in southeastern Europe. Ferhat had found work in Athens. He had hired on with a Greek or Turkish-Greek shipowner. Frau Kord was unable or unwilling to provide any information about what exactly his job entailed.

The most beautiful thing about the so-called wave was that, night after night, it spilled into the gay bar. Promising faces mingled among the regular crowd. Nobody had the slightest objection. The word got out quickly about the unpretentious warmth of the ambience. By mid-August the crowd of guests had grown so large that you could imagine you were no longer in Vienna but in Sodom in the Levant. Every evening, there was an influx of more and more colorful characters. It was impossible to say where the people were coming from. Their languages were unknown to me, and their appearance could not be neatly reduced to a common denominator. Their beauty, however, was obvious. They appeared thirsty for life and hungry for love. Some wore makeup that was over the top; others were virtually naked. Old acquaintances rolled in, such as Sezgin, Nariman, and Mehmet. Yuns and Metham also showed up. Their appearance was mundane. They blew kisses, fanned themselves under their leather skirts, and posed like Marilyn Monroe. They promptly sashayed over to me. We kissed each other on each cheek and drank a shot of tequila to Ferhat's health. As of two in the morning, the bar was bursting at the seams. People were dancing on tables. There were fistfights, and everywhere people were making out. I made out too, and from time to time did a little bit more than that, thank God.

I was so smitten that all I did was go to the gay bar. Actually, I was supposed to have flown to San Francisco to visit Frederik and Yasmina. We had agreed that I would visit them in August. But I didn't get a visa or book any flights. I didn't regret not going to San Francisco, because nowhere could be nicer than my gay bar in Vienna.

The euphoria soon came to an end. “Culture” became the rhetorical body armor of the citizen. People demanded borders, fences, and barriers, and had wet dreams about homogeneity. Soon the media and the politicians were driving the refugees through the village like pigs. Fleeing was declared an affront, and the state changed course in favor of sterility. But in the heat of August, we didn’t yet know anything about it. Whenever possible, I took Regina into the fray. As you might expect, she loved the bar. I loved Regina, and we had tropical nights.

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Glossary

- Alter Beisl**—literally “old pub,” a traditional eating and drinking establishment with Austrian cuisine in Vienna’s Favoriten District
- Attersee (Lake Atter)**—a lake in northwestern Austria that is surrounded by several small towns and is a popular vacation spot (*See* = lake)
- Belvedere Palace**—palace commissioned by Prince Eugene of Savoy as his winter residence and consisting of two baroque structures separated by a terraced garden with a breathtaking view of central Vienna and the foothills of the Alps
- Bisamberg**—both the name of a small town just outside Vienna and the mountain approximately 1,174 feet high on whose slopes it is located (*Berg* = mountain)
- Burgenland**—the easternmost of Austria’s federal states, bordering Slovakia, Hungary, and Slovenia
- Burggasse**—literally “castle lane,” a street leading from Vienna’s historic First District westward
- Daesh**—acronym based on the Arabic for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
- Döbling**—Vienna’s Nineteenth District, located at the northern edge of the city
- döner kebab**—a Turkish fast food popular in Austria and Germany that consists of meat shaved from a spit, vegetables, and sauce in a bread roll
- Enkplatz**—a square in Vienna’s Simmering district
- Favoriten**—Vienna’s Tenth District, located to the south of central Vienna and west of Simmering
- Freud, Sigmund**—father of psychoanalysis who lived and worked in Vienna where the Sigmund Freud Museum is now located, not far from Porzellangasse
- Gürtel**—literally “belt,” a series of streets that circle the districts just outside the First District

Gymnasium—a high school in German-speaking Europe for students planning to attend university

Herder Park—largest park in Vienna's Simmering District, location of the Mermaid Fountain

Herr—German equivalent of Mister

heuriger—an eating and drinking establishment specializing in wine from the most recent harvest and Viennese cuisine; many are located in Vienna's suburbs

Karlsplatz—literally “Charles Square,” the site of the Karlskirche, or Church of St. Charles Borromeo, one of the most notable baroque churches north of the Alps and a recognizable symbol of Vienna with two columns modeled after Trajan's column in Rome that soar almost to the same height as the dome

köfte—a type of seasoned meatball popular in Turkish cuisine and other European and Middle Eastern cuisines

krügerl—a half liter of beer

Laimgrubengasse—short side street in Vienna's Mariahilf District that extends for two blocks north of the Naschmarkt and is approximately a ten-minute walk from Vienna's historic center

lokma—A Turkish pastry made of fried dough soaked in sugar syrup or honey and cinnamon

Naschmarkt—an extensive open-air market in central Vienna that extends for almost a mile and offers food, beverages, and wares from around the world

Porzellangasse—literally “porcelain lane,” a street in Vienna's Ninth District (Alsergrund)

Prater—a large public park in Vienna's Second District (Leopoldstadt) with extensive green spaces, at the northwest corner of which is located the amusement park that houses Vienna's *Riesenrad*, or giant Ferris wheel

Praterstern—a large square located at the northwest end of Prater

Radio Diagonal—a prize-winning radio program broadcast by Austria's public radio Ö1 that aired on Saturday evenings between 1984 and 2011

Rahlstiege—a wide, ornate stone staircase leading up approximately sixty feet from Rahlgasse to Mariahilferstrasse, Vienna's main shopping street (*Stiege* = stairs)

Ringstrasse—a wide boulevard forming a circle around three-fourths of Vienna's First District and leading past many famous sites, including the Hofburg, the Austrian Parliament, the Vienna State Opera, and the Art History Museum

Sachertorte—a torte containing layers of chocolate cake, apricot jam, and chocolate icing named for Franz Sacher, who is alleged to have invented the recipe for Prince Metternich, the original version of which can be enjoyed at the Hotel Sacher in Vienna

Simmering—Vienna's Eleventh District, located in the southern part of the city, historically a stronghold for the Social Democratic Party

Tschuschin—feminine form of the ethnic slur Tschusch used in parts of Austria for southeastern Europeans

Wiener Staatsoper—the Vienna State Opera, referring to both the opera company and the building that houses it, constructed as the Vienna Court Opera in 1869

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