



**Christian Huber**

# Swimming Is Like Riding a Bike

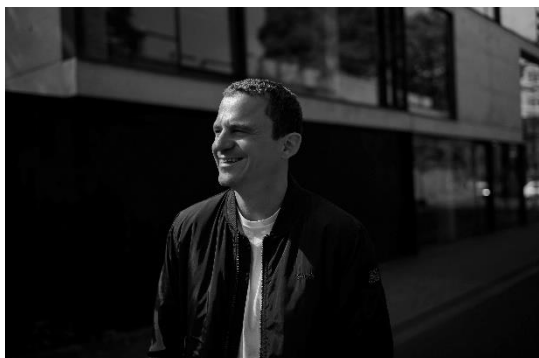
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## **A friendship, a love story, and a death – it's the last day of summer in Bavaria, and a boy's life is about to change forever**

August 1999. A scorching heat has settled over Bodenstein, the dump of a town that 15-year-old Pascal calls home. It's the holidays and he should really be enjoying the summer and all the joys that it brings: the lido that sells the best chips in the world, the water that sparkles in the sun like a promise. But ever since Pascal stopped swimming, summer has lost its charm. Why he stopped is a secret, though. As is the reason everyone has started to call him Krüger, or why he is not allowed, under any circumstances, to fall in love. Anyway, Pascal prefers to daydream and write stories in his tattered notebook. But soon a girl called Jacky crashes into Pascal's world with her red hair, water-blue eyes, and fearlessness. They spend one last summer's day together which changes everything, forever, and ends in friendship, a love story, and a death.



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## Sample Translation

By Deborah Langton

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‘So you were minding her weird brother? Hey, not down there!’

‘I’m concentrating, shut up.’

Gripping the PlayStation controller tight, I sent Tony Hawk whirling across the rooftops of New York, turning trick after trick across the skate park, Fakie Frontside, Nosegrind. Massive risk. Massive score.

I was overheating so hit pause and took off my hoodie, checking I didn’t bare my back in the process, and stuffed it in my Eastpak rucksack, still propped against the wall of the electrical department. That Goldfinger soundtrack kept on rolling through the speakers.

Right now Viktor held the current high score but was still gaping at me in bewilderment.

‘You’ve been minding her kid brother and it hasn’t entered your brain to mention her party tonight and ask if you can go along? How can you just sit there and do nothing? Freddie Krüger, are you serious?’

Yep, I said to myself. I thought it was smarter to do nothing than Stupid-Embarrassing-Mistaken Man of Action. He who does nothing keeps his nose clean.

I tutted to show he’d annoyed me. ‘So how exactly did you see that one going, Vik? What was I s’posed to say? ‘Hey there, I’m mates with a six year-old who’s some relative of yours, an’ he and I are going for another smoke by the Janus statue. Or maybe he’ll show me his Playmobil zoo. I’m so cool, aren’t I?’ Can’t you see that’d be a crap convo? Anna and Ayla...the Münch twins... goddesses, they are. They’d never ask someone like me over.’

‘You could’ve tried, at least.’

‘And so what should I have said, according to you, Mr Expert?’

‘Well, anything really. We’ll never have a chance like that again.’

‘Exactly. We.’

‘I, listen, I want to go to this party. Full-stop. And you’re the one who doesn’t want to do anything. Yet again, Krüger. Dossing around. Snoozing. Wasting the whole day. It’s so tedious. You’re just a fucking sloth, and a boring one, at that.’

‘A sloth that’s just smashed your record, you retard,’ I said with a masterful final jump that noticeably impressed even Viktor. ‘Take it.’ More aggressively than intended I shoved the controller into his hand, and we both watched as the next level loaded in fits and starts.

We’d been playing for half an hour or so, the first ten minutes in near silence, the incident with the Huns in the Mercedes still not referred to. I’d have loved to ask Viktor how he felt and if he’d been scared. But guys don’t say stuff like that. Instead I’d greeted him by treading on his injured foot, he’d responded with ‘Sod off, loser,’ and we’d gamed on.

Then I’d told him what had happened with the Münch sisters outside the stonemason’s place.

‘Dirty bastard,’ said Viktor. ‘It’s always the bloody same with you, Krüger.’

‘What the hell you are getting at?’

Behind us someone clearing his phlegmy throat made us jump.

‘Are you two aces going to buy something or what?’

The store manager always had it in for us. He was a fat guy who patrolled the aisles from morn ‘til night like some overfed guard dog. As he dabbed at his bald head with a handkerchief, his shirt collar shifted enough to show the tell-tale number 18 tattooed on his neck. First and eighth letter of the alphabet. AH. Guess who.

‘I said are you two buying anything,’ he said rather accusingly.

‘Yeah, your mother,’ murmured Viktor.

‘But she’s down on the ground floor with the special offers,’ I added, laughing, and Viktor joined in. Buddies again. Finger-flick. Our sign. The store manager muttered something along the lines of ‘little wankers’ and ‘firing squad for you two’ before he lumbered off to the warehouse to receive a delivery.

Viktor sank back into the game while the air-con hummed on in its brave attempt to keep the temperature tolerable.

‘I’m going for a look round,’ I said, slinging my rucksack over one shoulder as I wandered off.

Hardly anyone else was in this chain store that day. Just a guy asking about stuff at the video counter and a woman assistant with a fierce perm slotting CDs in the racks for new releases of 1999. They were all there. Rage Against the Machine, *The Battle of Los Angeles*, Dr Dre, *2001*, Slipknot, *Slipknot*, Silverchair, *Neon Ballroom*, Foo Fighters, *There is Nothing Left to Lose*, Nine Inch Nails, *The Fragile*, Britney Spears, *Baby One More Time*, Blink-182, *Enema of the State*, Red Hot Chili Peppers, *Californication*, Freundeskreis, *Esperanto*, Absolut Beginner, *Bambule...*

A pathetic cardboard cut-out figure urged us to countdown to the Millennium. So crap. And yet everyone was getting worked up about this big change. The Millennium. Some believed the future would start with the twelfth bong on New Year’s Eve. Like there’d be cars propelled by fireworks flying through the air and robots beckoning us into towering skyscrapers with gleaming facades, our wallets and mobile phones now nothing more than chips implanted into our wrists.

But others believed it would be the end of the world, that the sky would fall in and create an avalanche of fire and chaos, burying people, cars and skyscrapers. Every apocalyptic prophesy ever made, right from the Maya calendar to Nostradamus, but all in one go. As devastating as being hit by a comet. All down to The Millennium Bug. 1999 becomes 2000. It had struck software programmers that they’d only ever considered a two digit change. So 99 jumps to 00 and we’d be catapulted back to the Stone Age. Aircraft would fall from the sky at midnight, nuclear reactors exploding in colossal mushroom clouds, and every stock exchange screen would flatline....third world war. One huge cardiac arrest for mankind and for the planet.

So whether it was the future, or the end of the world, something would be happening, that was the main thing.

The slap head of a Store Manager was now busy placing pristine boxes containing the new Nokia 3210 in one of the display cabinets. For months now this was what Viktor had been saving for while I’d remained convinced that I’d never need a mobile.

Lost in my own thoughts I wandered up and down the aisles, briefly picked a super-soaker off one of the shelves, prodded a little Furby, stroked a stuffed whale and examined the sweets at the check-out. I hadn’t ever dared nick anything from here.

Viktor did it all the time. ‘My five finger discount’. Victimless crime. If nobody was about, he’d let CDs slip from their cases straight into his bag, pilfer chocolate bars and even manage to spirit a Tamagotchi into his sports bag where it died an agonising death of starvation.

I wanted to do that too. But I’d already lingered too long. Mrs Perm was giving me suspicious glances. With a casual cough, I made as if to put my rucksack on properly.

And that’s when it happened.

Shoes screeched on the linoleum.

The store manager shouted out.

I wanted to turn.

That really was when every apocalyptic prophesy, right from the Maya calendar to Nostradamus but all in one go, hurtled into my world and I was the one hit by a comet, its tail a streak of fire.

I’ll never forget that moment. The collision that threw my world out of its orbit. And all it took was a fraction of a second. If I’d been at just one arm length’s distance, it would have been a day like any other.

Something had left me stunned. A girl. She’d been racing ahead of the store manager who, his ugly visage yet more contorted than usual, was puffing along behind. On the floor at her

feet was the Nokia 3210 that she must have taken from the display cabinet, together with my rucksack. I clutched at my ribs as I squatted on the floor.

The girl was my age, fifteen, maybe she’d turned sixteen. Her flame-red hair brushed her shoulders and framed her sensitive face. She had beautifully shaped pink lips, a broad forehead, high cheekbones, and a fair complexion that was generously covered in freckles. Beneath an angry frown glowed her aquamarine eyes, even more angry.

‘Stop that lousy thief! Filthy slut!’ The store manager was so close. Fascist git. I straightened up.

The girl did the same but her hunted gaze seemed to look beyond me and she grabbed not just the mobile but my rucksack too. With my special notebook inside it! What the...!

‘Hey!’ I meant to catch her by the wrist but only got her sleeve and she broke free with more strength than I’d expected and made a dash for the exit with her prize, the store manager in hot pursuit.

After a moment of hesitation I set off too.

God, she was fast. Her red hair blazed behind her. Skilfully she threaded her way through toiletries. The guard dog huffed and puffed his way after. Then me behind. Oddly, I hoped she’d get away. From him and from me.

Her shoes skidded on the lino again. The store manager had almost caught her. As she overturned a stand of greetings cards, he was forced to stumble and I to swerve. The store manager was cursing her. ‘Filthy brat!’ Now the girl made a dash for the double doors, the Nokia still in her grasp and my rucksack hugged to her slender body. The store manager seemed to have given up. But now I was outside as well. I spotted her sprinting down the main street and carried on running, but the gap between us wasn’t closing and I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep up that pace.

With a glance over her shoulder, she suddenly darted down the shingle path that led to the entrance to stonemason’s, scattering the gravel as she went.

Me behind her.

I’d run out of gas.

I had to stop.

I tried to catch my breath as I wiped sweat from my neck.

It was gloomy within these old walls and whatever light managed to penetrate the interior was tinged amber by the dirty glass of the windows. On the sales desk stood a cash register. Tools lay on a marble block. A forklift was parked against one of the walls. Towards the back an archway led to the exhibits.

‘Anybody there?’ I kept my voice low, still puffing a bit.

The shoplifter must be in the garden. I’d been in that garden before, of course. As a dare when I was a kid. For handicraft lessons with school. That’s how I knew how it would look, smell and sound here. And yet every time it felt like the first.

It was as if every sense was being overloaded. The light was brighter and stronger than at the entrance. And the climate was something else. This was the first thing I felt as I passed beneath the arch in pursuit of the girl with the flame-red hair. This otherness in the climate. The air smelt brand new, and all because of the mass of greenery. High, dense hedges ranged around the exhibition area, the whole thing hung about with a steel cable structure that had seen better days. Wherever I looked there was a profusion of untamed bushes and plants that fell into the narrowest of natural walkways.

Amongst this shrubbery, where the rows met and created a suitable corner, were dozens of statues, men, women, praying figures, angels, maidens with laurel crowns, Olympians adopting victory poses, some new, some covered in creeper and moss. Beasts made of stone stood on various walls and pedestals. Here and there a number of statue were clustered to create a tableau.

I stepped first into one green walkway and then another and, finding myself in a clearing, stopped to listen. The hum of insects filled the air. I heard wind chimes.

And voices. One old, the other young and velvety, one the woman stonemason, the other the girl, as I’d suspected. They were on the other side of the high hedges.

The older woman was speaking, her tone severe and yet not angry. The young girl said something in reply. I tiptoed closer, determined not to give myself away. Their words became clearer.

‘I’d guessed you were one of them,’ said the stonemason. ‘Why are you here?’

I peered through the hedging. Now only a few metres away from me was Frau Berger, clad in a flowing black and white gown, leaning against a pillar and supporting herself with a stick. Before her was a pair of stone lions in a pose that suggested they were about to pounce on the figure of a maid, her arms outstretched in the style of a sacred image.

Near the maid statue was the girl with red hair, my Eastpak on her back, buckled at the waist. She was wearing denim shorts, battered trainers, and still had a tight grip on the cuffs of the black long-sleeve, now sticking to her with the heat of the chase, her blue eyes shining, her cheeks flushed and her freckles subsumed by the warmth of her skin. She seemed to glow from the inside out. I’d never seen anything so beautiful before.

Paying no attention to the woman’s questions and without releasing her grip on the cuffs, the girl gestured at the tableau of beasts and maiden. ‘This is total crap.’ Her defiant voice was clear enough but her words blurred with dropped syllables.’

The woman sounded taken aback.

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Lions don’t do stuff like that.’

‘You mean attack young women?’

‘They do that alright. But not like that. Not head on. Lions are dead devious. They don’t dare attack head on. They avoid all the fighting. They love to go stalking through the high grasses and pounce on their victim from behind. That’s if they bother hunting themselves. Mostly they send out a lioness to do the dirty work and then take the kill off her by force. The King of Beasts is in reality a lazy rotten coward.’ For a moment her voice trembled with rage.

‘How do you know all that?’ The stonemason seemed impressed.

‘Seen it myself. I hate lions.’

‘That’s unusual.’

‘But that’s how they are. If they so much as suspect they’ll be seen, they don’t dare do a thing. That’s why tribes in the Botswana steppe always tie clay masks to the back of their heads. They call it a ‘second face’. Then they won’t get attacked by a lion coming in from the rear.’

‘Well, well, two faces. And so...’

Shit. A noise had stopped her in mid-sentence. A crack. Yours truly had stepped on a dry branch making both of them whip round to stare straight at the hedge I was crouched behind.

For a moment they both looked like the statues surrounding them. But then the girl moved out of my line of vision.

‘Wait!’ I couldn’t believe I’d said that.

I heard her scrambling over a fence. Then she’d gone.

Knowing I’d never find her there, I ran back to the workshop via the street. Nothing. I looked left. Right. All in vain.

I’d paused at the gate to the stonemason’s. Indecision had cost me valuable time. I’d set off one way. Then turned and gone the other. My head was buzzing. Ideas came thick and fast. But a feeling of nausea churned deep in my belly. An unclear feeling I couldn’t name. Even now it still surfaces if I sense my life is about to change. Like something’s going on, something new.

What was that feeling all about back then? Fear? Maybe. Curiosity? Possibly.

Did I want to find the girl and see her again?

Looking back I’m not sure what I really wanted then. And on that summer morning I wasn’t sure either.

As I stood in front of the stonemason’s the only thing I knew with absolute certainty was that if I didn’t find the girl, if I didn’t see her again, I would never get back my rucksack and notebook. All my ideas, first drafts and stories would be lost. Including that story. The only one I’d ever written about myself. The story – and this was the most important thing for me – nobody else was allowed to read. Nobody. Especially not this girl.

It was the story that made all the connections and told about the thing with my chest, about why I was called Krüger and why I could no longer swim.

That notebook held the story of my secret. The reason for everything. The story of why I wasn’t allowed ever to fall in love.

[...]

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We slipped past the stonemason’s heavy door and then through the workshop and into the garden to wander at will among the maze of wild and overgrown pathways. We walked between rows of angels, Olympians and praying figures of granite and marble. Moving as quietly as we could, we threaded our way along the twists and turns, passing gravestones and pillars as we went.

Among the unruly climbing plants we glimpsed chains of pretty lights with additional, albeit meagre, illumination coming from a couple of spotlights attracting flying insects that surged and swarmed in the glow. Nobody saw us. We hadn’t talked about where we were supposed to be heading but both knew perfectly well.

‘You sense it too?’ asked Jacky. I gave a nod.

We both sensed it. The special climate here. ‘It’s like you could just, you know, stay here,’ she went on, as the party music behind us grew softer and softer.

At last we got to the spot we’d both felt drawn towards. It was the spot where I’d overheard Jacky and old Frau Berger talking and where the tableau with lions had since been changed by the stonemason herself.

Rows of gently swaying lanterns cast so many shadows and shapes it looked as if the statues were in motion.

As Jacky moved among the sculptures she ran her hand over the armour on the female warrior.

‘Old Berger rearranged things after you spoke to her,’ I said, taking a seat on a rock. ‘She wanted to change the narrative. All because of you. I was allowed to pick something out for myself.’

‘And now it doesn’t look like the lions are going in for the kill,’ said Jacky.



‘No, nor that either.’

Jacky seemed pleased. And I was glad. It made me happy to see her looking like that. But it made me fearful of what I might do.

‘But I didn’t bring you here to show you the new arrangement of statues,’ I said.

‘Oh yeah?’ Now she had her back towards the sculptures.

I realised how hesitant I sounded. Jacky was waiting, eyebrows a bit raised. I’d wanted to be alone with her and now I was. It felt like I’d slid into slow-motion as I opened the outer pocket of my rucksack. My hand shook a bit as I pulled out the notebook.

‘It’s not a diary.’

‘Okay.’ Jacky looked calm but full of anticipation for what would come next.

‘I write things here,’ I went on. ‘Stories. Stuff I dream about and imagine.’

‘Oh.’

‘I’ve never told anyone else. Absolutely nobody. It’s you I want to tell it to.’

Jacky was looking at me pretty hard. Taking her time she came to sit next to me. Her cuffs were still right over her fists. I could tell she didn’t want to interrupt. At least she hadn’t greeted my confession with laughter.

I want to do this, I told myself. There was no going back. ‘I’ve written something that I want to read to you,’ I said as I unlooped the elastic from the cover of the book. I flicked through its well-thumbed pages. Through all the dreams and thoughts.

Momentary hesitation now. I felt unsure. There was that powerful urge to shut the book again. Maybe forever.

Then I began to read out the story, the one I’d written on the site of the circus. The story for Jacky:

*The Girl and the Lions*

*When the girl awakes her fingers are numb. As darkness fell she’d put out the fire in her hideout, a cave on the hillside, for fear its smoke would give her away. Since the Dark Millennium the world has been a different place. At midnight everything had gone back to zero and chaos ruled.*

*As the bombs rained down, destroying cities and lives, few got out alive. It’s been two winters since the Dark Millennium, and three days since the girl left home.*

*She stretches. Dawn gradually lightens the mountain’s greyness. She shakes out her arms and legs then eases her feet back into her boots, the laces still done up. In this world you have to stay on the move. Now freeze! A sound. The lions have scented her. The girl looks around frantically, right, left, her red hair swishing with her every movement. Please, not here!*

*At the time of the Dark Millennium, two young lions had escaped from the zoo and still reign supreme here, going in for the kill under the cover of gloom, always sneakily from the rear. The girl feels for the knife in her bag and yet knows she wouldn't stand a chance. A lion would always attack from behind. If the lions catch her, they'll tear her apart. She senses the proximity of the beasts, feels they're already stalking to trap her in the cave.*

*'You're not going to taste one drop of my blood,' she snarls under her breath, snaps shut the knife, grabs her hooded jacket and leaves the cave in one bound. Fast. On the run she spots their shaggy manes as she races down to the wood, pushing at whip thin branches that snap back in place behind her, where she hears their greedy panting and imagines outstretched claws.*

*She has the edge. She doesn't look back. Lions can't maintain speed for long, she knows. She knows plenty about lions. She runs and runs. An enraged roar leaves her sure that her pursuers have abandoned the chase. For now. But they'll try again.*

*Hidden from wind and weather beneath her hoodie is a drawing. Detailed pencil outline with shading on plain paper. Her face.*

*Drawn by her family. A gift. Everyone has done a bit. The broad forehead, the flashing eyes, the untamed hair. The real thing. Almost.*

*'Keep still or it won't come out right,' they'd all kept saying. And the girl kept still. Well, at least until the outline and shading was done. She couldn't stick it any longer than that. 'But there's no colour yet,' said her family. The girl simply could not have stayed still any longer.*

*'We'll do it tomorrow,' she'd told them.*

*But before sunrise she'd sneaked past the guards and out of the camp while her family still slept.*

*The drawing was the only thing she took away, together with her knife and some provisions. She knew she'd need nothing more.*

*Her goal was in sight and the climb nearly done – to the plateau itself.*

*At last she's up there. High on the rock with the huge sculpture and its two faces. High above the river covered in a thick layer of ice. This is where she wanted to be. What place could be better for her plan than here with the statue with two faces?*

*The lions aren't hunting the girl. It's the girl who's hunting the lions. The lions have terrorised her family ever since taking over. They strike repeatedly in the knowledge that nobody can oppose them. That they have no enemies and nothing to fear. Every night they wreak havoc. Their jaws around lambs' throats, their teeth stripping the flesh from hens, it's only a matter of time before one of the family falls victim. The lions are threatening to destroy the family. The girl wasn't going to wait around for that.*

*She'd set off three days before. She knew the lions would see her as easy prey and tail her. Her plan had been to entice them to join her on the long march to the top. Once there, the girl*

*made her way towards the huge statue that loomed large against the background. It was an imposing sight. Of its two faces one looked out across the water while the other, sculpted on the back of the first, gazes back to the woods. This is where it's going to happen. This is the place.*

*Time for her plan to be put into action.*

*She puts her jacket on back to front.*

*This is when the knife first come in. She makes two tiny slits in the hood. Now she reaches for the drawing of her face but then hesitates. Is this enough? Something's missing from the picture. The white paper is slightly blotchy, and so not dissimilar to her freckled complexion but without red hair this won't work.*

*Just then there's a crack in the undergrowth. The lions are almost there. They approach with teeth bared, their breath coming out in puffs like a harbinger of death. They can smell the girl. But they can't see her.*

*'You're not going to taste one drop of my blood,' she murmurs.*

*She knows what to do.*

*With her knife she makes a cut along the heart-line of her own hand. The line for friendship, love and death.*

*Blood flows from the wound. She remains quite still. Silent. And she lets the blood drip onto the drawing and sink into the pencil shading that marks her hair. The hair's now red.*

*Now she binds the drawing to the back of her head with string and pulls the hood up over her face. Just in time.*

*The lions have spotted her. With the jacket the wrong way round, they readily think she has her back to them. She turns. The lions look up into her false face. She stumbles towards the edge of the plateau, a movement the lions see as backwards.*

*'Help!' she shouts. The lions' roar is like mocking laughter.*

*The girl crouches close to the ground but also close to the drop, turns her drawing face away and seems to await the end. But she's actually watching the lions through those slits in the hood.*

*The animals are now really close to her. They're ready to pounce on their prey. But they pause. Do they suspect? The girl feels like jumping up and fighting.*

*Stay calm, she tells herself. Don't move.*

*The lions spring into action. The girl does a backward roll to get behind the statue. This momentarily confounds them. Their claws miss their prey, their open jaws bite at nothingness. And their unthinking momentum sends them plunging into the void.*

*As the lions plunge from the edge of the plateau, there’s a long yowling until the moment their bodies hit the thick ice of the frozen river and their bones shatter.*

*Warm blood still trickles from her hand wound and helps ease the numbness in her fingers as she sets off for home.*

*The End*

I snapped shut my notebook and stared blankly at its battered cover. I didn’t dare look up. I was too scared of finding a mocking, worse still, a pitying look on her face.

Jacky was silent. I kept my gaze lowered. Had it been a mistake to be so open with her?

The muted sounds from the party wafted over to us through the stone walls and the proliferation of greenery, and so were further reduced to an insignificant hum. From the other side of the road. And couldn’t have felt further away.

Jacky said nothing.

Eventually she spoke. ‘You’ve known me for one day. And you know all that about me? You’ve got that much, I don’t know what, insight? And you see me like that, like you’ve written?’

My breathing felt shallow.

She sounded calm and yet inwardly preoccupied. A mixture of pride and emotion. ‘I’m that brave? Like a real heroine?’ Then she added, ‘Like a warrior?’

I nodded. ‘You’re so confident, so determined and so incredibly bold. The way you pitch in. Right in. But me, I’m scared of pitching in.’

‘You don’t need to go pitching in. You could just let yourself fall,’ she said, a smile in her voice.

Now I dared to lift my head. Jacky looked quite small as she sat there next to me. Her eyes were full. Not in a sad way. More a fond way.

‘Janus...the rock,’ she said. ‘That sounds a really good place. I mean for defeating lions. Shall we go right now?’

‘Yep.’

‘Promise? Whatever happens. Before I leave tomorrow?’

‘Promise. Whatever happens. Before you leave tomorrow.’ A pain shot through my chest as I spoke. Tomorrow she’d be gone. And I didn’t want her gone. Not tomorrow. Not ever again. I wanted her to stay. Near me. *With* me. I could see that now. Utopian, yes. But then everything here was Utopian.

I felt I was actually in a dream and about to wake. Anyway, it definitely wouldn’t achieve anything even if she did. Quite the opposite. I’d wanted to read the story to Jacky. I’d done that. And now everything was fine again.

But it was the *other* story that I absolutely couldn’t read to her. No way. The only story I’d ever written about myself. My secret. The story about why I wasn’t allowed to fall in love. And nothing made sense until I could tell that story.

‘I wish it had been like that,’ said Jacky.

Glad she’d picked up the conversation again, I asked what she meant.

‘The thing with the lions.’

Too fast I said, ‘How was it then?’ Her smile faded.

‘Sorry, I didn’t...’ She cut across me. ‘It’s okay.’

She gave a sort of preparatory cough before speaking again. ‘I really like your story, Krüger. It’ll be there forever. Written down for all time. That means so much to me. Thank you.’

‘It’s for me to thank you.’

‘For what?’ She sounded puzzled.

For just being, I thought to myself but then said, ‘For not thinking I’m a loser. That means so much to me.’

Jacky’s laugh lit up her face. Then her eyes looked right into mine as she said, ‘There’s no way I think you’re a loser, Krüger,’ she said. I held her gaze and didn’t waver. Her pupils seemed so dark against the aquamarine of her eyes. God, those eyes. Until that moment I’d never known that eyes could even be like that. Drawing me in to their innermost depths like a whirlpool.

‘To be honest, Krüger, I like you.’

I didn’t speak. She’d said that? I couldn’t speak. She’d really said that? I wanted to pinch myself so hard. She said she likes me. I wanted to shout out loud. She said she likes me! And I wanted to run because she likes me. I stayed.

We were only a fraction apart now on the rock. Had she shifted a bit? I certainly hadn’t. I felt the warmth of her breath and body as her flame-red hair brushed my shoulder. I smelt apples and honey...no! This can’t happen! None of this can happen. Everything inside me screamed out, ‘Run!’ Every instinct said it. But I didn’t move. Her head came close as her lips met mine. And I didn’t shy away when Jacky kissed me.

I hadn’t shied away when we crossed that line between dream and reality and something more.

[...]

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It’s spring.

The air feels crisp but hints at a change of season, the light is no longer so harsh and on the waysides a few crocus have already burst through.

Something’s bothering Karla.

She’s fidgeting with the seatbelt and chewing her lower lip. Stoertebecker has taken a tumble.

I keep my gaze fixed on the road ahead while, in the hope of propelling him back towards her lap, I feel behind my seat for the shaggy fur of her favourite stuffed toy, a dog with one huge eye missing ever since the day of her birth when my mother had presented him as a gift.

‘How long can I stay with Grandma?’ She cuddles Stoertebecker close. When you’re six, a weekend at Grandma’s equates to an all-inclusive spa weekend at a luxury resort for a grown-up.

‘I’ll be collecting you the day after tomorrow.’

‘So that’s two sleeps,’ calculates Karla. She smiles so broadly that the gap in her milk teeth front left seems to fill my rear view mirror.

I do a thumbs up to her reflection and am rewarded with the sight of a tiny little thumb in return.

We leave Fichtenstrasse and go past the park and Troisdorf Fire Station, soon taking a right into the road at the end of which is the cosy house my mother and I moved to when we left Bodenstein. She still lives there.

On the car radio a young woman presenter is saying something or other about the astronomical importance of the following day, 20 March. She talks about the equinox, when day and night are of equal length. I can’t help but smile, as I always do on hearing about this stuff as it’s forever tied up with my memories, some still clear as crystal, others no more than fragments of a dream that’s faded away.

I ease my estate car into the driveway.

‘Where are you actually going, Daddy?’ Karla’s come out with the question before I can even get out and come round to her door.

Releasing my seat-belt I turn to look at my daughter, now subjecting Stoertebecker to a headlock.

She’s been told where I’m going, of course. We talked about it for a long time. But it’s a tough topic for a child to get its head around and that’s why Karla seems to feel the need to go over it once more.

The Velcro fastener has come open on her left shoe. I get hold of the tab and press it down so that the fuzzy hooks rejoin the opposite surface. ‘I’m going to a funeral.’

Stoertebecker must have passed out by now.

‘Who’s died?’ asks Karla.

‘Someone I haven’t seen for a long, long time.’ I’ll tell her who it is when she’s older.

‘Are you sad, Daddy?’

With a little shrug I give her the honest answer. ‘A bit, yes.’ Karla nods solemnly, her chestnut curls bobbing in empathy.

‘Don’t be sad, Daddy.’ She reaches out towards me and I let my forehead brush her small hand.

The matter is dealt with for the time being. But she’ll bombard Grandma with questions later.

*Do people go to heaven when they die?*

*Will Daddy die some time?*

*Children can’t die, can they? Except if they’re very sick...*

I get out of the car.

My mother’s standing in the doorway of the house I shared with her until I went away to study in Hamburg. She’s waving to us.

It’s a good six weeks since we last saw each other. When you look at yourself in the mirror each day, you barely notice the changes that sneak up over time and see yourself looking more or less the same, but when there are gaps in seeing someone else, it’s like a time lapse.

She’s aged over the last few visits and her posture has become slightly more stooped, but her short silver hair’s been trimmed and she’s discreetly made up. She’s wearing a knitted waistcoat over an amber-coloured blouse and then lightweight trousers.

There’s a year to go before she can retire from the cleaning company where she’s an administrator, but she’ll stay on in Troisdorf. Her life is here.

I notice an opaque dark pin on the lapel of her blouse.

Karla hurls herself at her grandmother like a goalkeeper at the incoming ball and they throw their arms round each other in one huge hug. I take her overnight bag from the boot of the car. Once my mother has showered kisses on her granddaughter, she hugs me as well.

‘You’re looking good, Mum.’

‘And you’re going a bit grey at the temples,’ she says as she fondly reaches up and strokes my hair whereupon I instinctively brush my own hand over my head.

‘Is there chocolate cake?’ calls out Karla as she heads for the kitchen. I can hear a chair being pulled out and the clatter of plates on the table.

‘Yes, my love. Chocolate cake. And cream. You’ll have some with us, Pascal, won’t you?’

I nod readily. It’s been a five-hour drive from Hamburg and I could really do with something, all the more so as there’s still a long way to go.

‘You can stay over if that helps. That goes without saying,’ says my mother, her voice warm and reassuring.

‘Thanks but no. I’d rather press on today and just stay at the hotel. The bur...it takes place tomorrow at 11.’ I struggle to find the words.

‘It’s okay to say burial.’

My mother tries to sound light but swallows hard.

Her mind seems elsewhere for a moment as she fingers the lapel pin. ‘You haven’t been back since, have you?’

‘No.’ My voice sounds husky. ‘I’ve not been back to Bodenstein since.’

‘I’m hungry!’ A certain someone shouts from the kitchen and we can’t help but smile.

‘Coming!’ My mother trills back.

‘Can I give Stoertebecker a drink while we’re waiting for you? He’s sooooo thirsty.’

‘Poor fellow. Of course. Quick – fill your beaker for him.’

We hear the gurgle and splash of something being poured out.

‘You might find me wanting to keep her when you come back on Monday!’ Mum gives a giggle.

‘We could come to a leasing arrangement, Mama,’ I suggest and she bursts out laughing.

‘And how’s *her* mother?’ She gives me a hard look and I get that pain in my chest.

‘Fine,’ I reply.

‘Give her my best wishes when you see her.’

‘Will do. She’ll be pleased about that. In fact I’m supposed to give you hers.’

‘Thank you. What’s she doing at the weekend?’

‘Nicole’s gone hiking in the mountains with her boyfriend.’ There’s that pain again. But less this time. ‘Otherwise she’d have been able to take Karla with her.’

‘It’s nice for me that she couldn’t.’

‘It’s not so nice for your kitchen décor.’ I pull a face at the sound of yet more clattering. ‘It’s okay!’ Karla sounds suspiciously contrite.

‘Oh-oh!’ calls out my mother, a smile in her voice.



Before we go into the kitchen, she grasps my arm and I notice tears in her eyes as she says, ‘Pascal, you don’t have to go tomorrow.’

‘I know that.’

Then we sit down at the table with innocence personified, aka my daughter, and any gloom is banished.

The three of us polish off half a big chocolate cake.

My mother tells us about the new vegetable patch she plans to make in her little garden, and I tell her about our new flat. And about the book I’m working on and can’t think of an ending for. There are too many different possibilities and I’m afraid of choosing the wrong one.

Meanwhile Karla, all the sugar going to her head it seems, babbles excitedly about her friends from kindergarten and how she’s starting proper school next year as kindergarten’s just for babies. We nod in agreement with it all.

When we finish at the table, Karla and her Grandma clear everything into the dishwasher while I take my daughter’s overnight things to the room she’s to sleep in.

Every time I step back into that room, it feels strange. It’s my old room and yet isn’t. My room in Bodenstein but in a parallel universe.

The curtains are still the same. But wall posters have been replaced by pictures. There’s an enthusiastically executed sketch of a sunflower and a watercolour of a swallow’s tail. My little old tube TV is there but on a new chest and instead of my wardrobe there’s now a bookcase fixed to the wall. The fake leather sofa has been disposed of and yet my bed’s still there, in exactly the same spot as when I lived here, and in the same position as it had been in the room I’d had as a fifteen year-old back in Bodenstein.

My old side cabinet has been positioned next to it.

I put Karla’s bag on the bed.

I sit down on its edge and the slats creak as I slide open the top drawer of the cabinet. It’s empty but for a scratched tin box.

On the lid it says *Summer 1999* in spidery writing that looks more like a type of graffiti. It’s years since I held this box in my hand. It’s lighter than I remember it, weighs maybe a kilo.

I ease the lid open. On the top is my well-thumbed notebook, still bound by elastic but that’s perished a fair bit. *The Huns and the Plantation of Weeds. The Stonemason and the Figure of Janus. The Girl and the Lions. The Boy and the Moloch.*

At the very back of the book was a copy of the police report and some press cuttings. I know what’s in them and don’t need to go through them again. Taking care not to break the elastic, I carefully loop it back over the cover.

I take from the box a five mark coin, a tin soldier and a pack of cards. Then there’s a CD by Eins Zwo, another from Oasis, and *Tony Hawk’s ProSkater*. Still in the tin box there’s my old Casio watch, its display blank, the battery dead, and my cigarette lighter, its plastic casing tarnished by the flames, and the black jack-knife, its handle completely burnt by the fire at the plantation.

And almost at the bottom is that Polaroid photo.

It’s us.

Jacky, Viktor, me.

It’s faded with time but it’s so obviously us. Exactly that memory of Colorado. Jacky looking straight at the camera, eyes shining, red hair tumbling over her shoulders, the cuffs of her long sleeve pulled over her fists. Viktor has shrugged off his Hawaii shirt to assume a body-builder pose, flexing his biceps, the camera flash reflecting off his spectacles. And then there’s me. The fifteen year-old version of what I am today. I’m a bit behind the other two, looking beyond the lens. The rings under my eyes look as though they’ve been painted on, my face is thin, fragile, almost translucent, and I’m plucking nervously at my sweatshirt. And yet smiling.

On the back of the photo is Jacky’s note to me. *A Day Like a Life*. The words are still easily legible, the blue ballpoint had gone deep into the smooth paper. I run my hand over its grooves and furrows to track the course of the writing, and beneath my fingertips its grain feels like the lifelines and bumps that are my own scars.

I put the photo to one side.

Then I take the Nokia out of the tin box and turn it back and forth in my hands.

Jacky had never called.

Or maybe she’d called and not been able to reach me.

Of course not. Life wasn’t like that.

The mobile phone provider had eventually taken the number out of service and never reallocated it.

Back then I’d gone on using the phone for a while to keep in touch with Viktor but then I’d got a new number with some other contract and the Nokia had ended up in my drawer.

I’d have liked to spoken to Jacky again. Not out of any hope to fall head over heels in love once more, like I did as a kid. That would be so corny. I’d just like to know what had become of her, of this extraordinary person.

We all sometimes look back at people who’ve been in our lives and wonder how things turned out for them. You know, the funniest boy ever, six months in your class at school before moving away again, the elderly lady next to you on some long train journey, or the punk you talked to on a park bench. The female vocalist in the coolest band in town. The holiday romance.

Sample Translation “Swimming is like Riding a Bike” (C. Huber)

So what’s she doing now? And what’s he up to?

For me this extraordinary person is the girl from the circus, the girl with flame-red hair, eyes of aquamarine, and fear of nothing. I’d just have liked to know where she went and, ever restless, whether she ever settled.

And I’d have liked to tell her about me.

I’d have told her how the last few years have gone. That I’d been in love a few times but really loved just once. That I’ve got a daughter who’s everything to me and that I’ve moved to Hamburg. That I decided not to have anything done about my scars. That in my spare time I coach a youth swim team. That I just about live off my writing but can’t finish the current book as I don’t know how it can end.

On top of all that I’d tell her that I’ve kept my promise to her. And since then I’ve never wasted a single summer.

I’d have wanted to know all about her. And I’d have told her all about me. Including that I’m on the way back to Bodenstein because tomorrow is my father’s funeral.

*Translation by Deborah Langton*