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Sky Glow

Novel

(Original German title: Streulicht. Roman)

285 pages, Clothbound

publication date: 17 August 2020

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Sample translation by Imogen Taylor

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The air changes as you enter the town. It has a hint of acidity to it and tastes as thick as cotton wool in your mouth, as if you could chew it. No one here notices and after a few hours I too will have forgotten that air can have any other texture; anything different would seem strange. My face also changes at the town sign, hardening into the expression my father taught me, a look of anxious indifference that he wears himself whenever he ventures out—a look to stop you from being seen. I cross the boundary into town at the bus terminus where the buses loop round and take a break at the main cemetery gates. Here the light changes; my cheeks tauten over my bones like painted clay, and at every step a streetlamp looms up out of the darkness. The roofs of the detached houses that edge the road to the Great Oak stand out so clearly against the sky that I can see them even when I close my eyes, as if I'd been staring at the sun for too long. But by the time I reach the Great Oak I have resumed my old expression, careful not to focus on anything particular—not that anyone can see; there is no one on the street to notice me; only here and there a light still shows in a window, and silhouettes move in the rooms, rising from their TV chairs to get ready for bed or clear away the dinner trays. It feels as if death is lurking behind every facade, as if ailing people in sickbeds are concealed behind the dark windows. No sound reaches the street except the low hum that pervades the place at all times, but is most noticeable at night—a white noise that comes from the other side of the river and

even now is worming its way into my ear, soft and rough at once, like a much-used blanket. It is another of the town's peculiarities and, like the rest, it will no longer seem strange in a few hours. Not until the last crossroads before the block of flats do I come across someone: a little girl holding her father's hand, who has discovered her own shadow under one of the streetlamps; it fans out around her, faded at the edges, and she tries to jump on it. 'Die, shadow!' she shouts with glee, and her father smiles at me proudly. I smile back, expecting my cheeks to crumble from my bones like parched earth.

The key turns slickly in the lock of the beat-up door; it makes the same sound as ever, as if I were coming home from school, sweat from PE between my shoulder blades, balls of sandwich paper in the pockets of my rucksack—but it's dark, later than after school, and I switch on the light on the stairs. On the first floor, cardboard boxes and wooden crates of potatoes and onions are stacked next to the flat door. Up here the key is in the lock, on the outside, an old-fashioned ward key, thick and heavy. 'Shut the light,' my mother used to say when we came home, because the light on the stairs isn't on a timer. She always spoke of 'shutting the light'. I close the light and open the door. The smell of cigarette smoke hits me in the face. Everything in this place smells of smoke; nothing escapes the wafting fumes that penetrate every crevice. The bedclothes, towels and sofa cushions are regularly put through the washing machine with lashings of detergent, but smoke clogs the fibres again as soon as they are taken out. Even my father's recent habit of closing the kitchen door does little to help. I push down the handle, the doorframe creaks, the smoke is even thicker in the kitchen, and my father, sitting on the bench, turns his head with a look of joyful anticipation until his eyes come to rest on me standing there, the rucksack on my shoulders knocking against the door that keeps bouncing back because it doesn't fully open. I take in the stacks of groceries on the counter, the blue plastic bread bag, the excessive quantities of food and cheap furniture, the low ceilings, the white of the walls that has yellowed over the years, the piles of TV magazines, the PVC flooring in front of the cooker

and the cork flooring in the hall that is coming loose in places—so many familiar things. The stained table cloth half cluttered with cups, the old thermos encrusted with cold coffee, the fridge magnet advertising processed cheese (a freebie given to my father and me the day we bought the pink rice wine on special offer that I later puked up in the toilet). The red hairclip my mother used to wear at the nape of her neck, now languishing in a basket of old flyers. The big paper bag on the door handle, overflowing with recycling.

‘There you are!’ my father says.

Talk goes to and fro for a while. Did I have a good journey? Do I still know my way around? ‘All looks the same, eh? Nothing’s changed here,’ he says coyly. I put my things down and join him on the bench; he gives me a cup of tea. ‘Everything’s the same here,’ he says again, ‘except that you’re old enough to have friends who are getting married. Incredible, eh? That’s how it goes. That’s life for you.’ His voice sounds strangely deep and worn, the way my grandad’s used to sound. ‘Long time in the making though, this wedding. Proper kindergarten sweethearts, the pair of them. Like something in the movies. Pikka and Sophia...’ He stares into space, still clutching the handle of the kettle that he has just set down on its stand. ‘Sometimes see them in the supermarket. Real grown-ups they are now, Sophia all posh in a skirt and a white blouse—but then she always was well turned-out, almost too much so for a little girl. Some kids are born grown-up. And Pikka, I remember him worrying himself over a bit of a grass stain on his trousers—almost crying, poor mite, because his mum didn’t like him going home dirty. You used to spend a lot of time down on the flood meadows, the three of you, and quite right too: kids need to be outside. That’s one thing I never did, at least. Told you off because of a few stains. We were never that posh. What time does it kick off tomorrow?’

‘Twelve,’ I said.

‘Well...’

And my father launches into his usual spiel about train times and the traffic on the A66, about the weather—which used to be different—and what’s on TV. His favourites are

programmes about the past, or rehashed versions of old shows: *Manor Life in 1900*, *Anno 1746*, the *Winnetou* remake, the *70s Hit Parade*. The town chronicle, painstakingly compiled by the local history society, lies beside him on the kitchen table, printed on white copy paper and bound in A4 with grainy prints of black-and-white photos—women in pinnies, standing outside their houses. Always this hankering for *the way things used to be*.

For forty years he worked for the same company—another spiel of his. That working man’s pride mixed with defiance and an arrogance born of necessity (chin slightly raised, eyelids drooping a few millimetres, shoulders down). My father spent forty years dipping aluminium sheet into electrolytes, forty hours a week.

Confront him with anything outside that world and he’s helpless as a baby.

He doesn’t go to church, doesn’t belong to any clubs (or to *Fortuna*, the all-male choir), won’t have anyone in the house. Visitors are alien to him; he wouldn’t let me have anyone round as long as I was living with him. Visitors were strangers who wanted to invade our lair; we had to defend the house against them by double-locking the front door and not repairing the broken blinds—after all, it was no bad thing that they kept out prying eyes. He sometimes walks down to the river and has a look at the ships, turning away if anyone comes too close. He greets no one. When he goes to the cemetery he always takes the same route, sticking to the side streets, as if on some furtive mission, and not entering through the main gates with their stone arch, but through the green iron gate that’s meant for the gardener. In return, he himself is left in peace. In the newsagents where he goes for the local paper (and where the window display of sun-bleached dolls and cheap novelettes hasn’t changed in twenty years) the woman was curt with him from the first, though she’s happy enough to chat on about local affairs with her other customers. The satellite TV shop turned him away when cable went digital, citing too much demand. How did they manage to make any money at all, he asked, seeing as everyone connected themselves up to the internet these days? The small metalwork company he approached when my mother died refused to make the miniature garden railings he wanted on

her grave. He hitches up his braces whenever he passes the cardboard boxes and stacks of paper going up the stairs, and I remember how he used to say to me, when he reached the top, what stupid people the locals were—*we don't want anything to do with them*—this in tones of deep suspicion, not that he had any particular grounds for suspicion; it was just part of his unconscious attitude, an attitude that still makes itself heard today when he asks me where *that* (my degree) is *going to get* me—though he used to say to me, *see to it that you earn your crust*. In those days, I was the one who didn't understand, and for a long time I only *looked on* as nothing happened. The chimneys of the industrial estate belched smoke in the background and nothing happened at all.

[...]

pp. 45 – 50

When I asked my mother about her past, her answers always sounded like a fairy tale. 'I come from a little seaside village, far away. The village is in the mountains and the mountains bow down to the sea. The only roads are narrow, dusty tracks leading to the coast, and people have donkeys instead of cars. They drive their sheep along the roads; they push carts stacked with water. There is no good water in the village; you have to buy it. Selling water was my brother's first job. We lived in a little house, the six of us and our parents, but my brothers and sisters were older than me and all moved out, and so I had a room of my own—a luxury. In the room there was a bed and a small table. Early every morning we were woken by the cry of the muezzin, and if you didn't go to mosque on a Friday, people talked about you. I liked it in the mosque; it was nice and cool, and you could drink as much tea as you wanted. I liked it too because you could hide out there and nobody minded. In the village, there are chickens wandering about on the roads, and mulberries fall from the trees in summer. There's a mulberry tree here by the river—have you ever noticed it? It's just a few metres from the hill. No one

here knows that you can eat the berries; every summer they lie trampled beneath the tree, a mass of black stains. The only things people pick here are blackberries, but the mulberries remind me of when I was young. Every day I would sit on the ground preparing food; I used to sit for hours at a time rolling vine leaves stuffed with rice and pine kernels and raisins. In the autumn I pickled vegetables. The village people say that no doctor need ever set foot in a house where those vegetables are eaten, and it's true, we never had to fetch the doctor. Most of my family lived to be over a hundred. You and I will live to be over a hundred too. It's all because my mother asked a favour of the djinni and the djinni obliged. My mother was a wise woman. "Watch over my family," she said to the djinni. "Protect them from the evil eye." Ever since then, the djinni have protected us: we never get sick because no one gives us the evil eye. That and the vegetables and the sea air—there's no sea air here, of course, but it doesn't matter; the djinni protect you. They bring the sea to you, even if you can't see it. And at night they sit around your bed. You needn't be afraid; they're not visible. They keep watch over you, warding off the evil spirits so you can sleep peacefully. Where I come from, we believe in spirits; there are spirits for everything—the sea and the berries and the dusty mountain roads. I loved my village, but I did sometimes wonder if it was all there was. "Am I to see nothing else all my life?" I would ask myself. "It's lovely here, but is it enough for a whole century?"

She heard things that weren't there. It was her trademark. 'Need to slow down,' she would say—talking about her work, the laundry, the dirty plates that she fetched from the living room. 'Need to ease off a bit.' She was always on the lookout for ways of keeping calm or lowering her blood pressure; she hung a table of the cholesterol levels of various foods on the kitchen cupboard, though she paid no attention to it. She thought nice thoughts to help herself fall asleep. 'I imagine blancmange,' she said.

‘Need to protect myself.’ She left her bedroom door open a crack, so that my father felt he could enter whenever he liked. It was the surest way of keeping him out. If he found it shut, he would hammer at it, kick the doorframe and shout, ‘Let me in!’

She heard a beep in her right ear and noises ‘like crumpled-up paper or someone rustling old leaves very close’. Sometimes she even thought the siren on the industrial estate was something in her ear. I told her what we were taught to do in school when the siren sounded.

‘It’s only a drill,’ I said. I knew that from the tinny, slightly droning sound of the all-clear signal that was given first.

‘What’s only a drill?’ she asked.

‘The siren.’

‘Oh, it really is sirens,’ she said, and her eyes, that had been darting nervously back and forth over her hands, suddenly relaxed.

‘If it was for real, we’d have to close the windows,’ I said. The sound swelled and faded.

We did chemical disaster drills the way we did fire drills. Every few months the industrial estate sent its siren blast through town, like a giant with a round open mouth. We were never told when it would happen, in order to make the situation as authentic as possible. Once the siren sounded in the middle of lunchbreak, as Sophia was teaching me clapping games surrounded by a cluster of children. Behind us, a few more kids teetered by on bucket stilts; a little further away, softballs flew through the air. The alarm sounded and although everyone knew at once that it was only a drill, the children began to stir; the buzz of voices grew louder. Sophia and I lost sight of each other and the next thing I knew I was face to face with a blond boy from one of the older classes.

‘What are you goggling at?’ he asked, narrowing his eyes to slits, and I averted my gaze.

‘One of those welfare kids,’ I heard him say behind me as I turned to follow the others who were jostling at the school entrance. ‘...those welfare kids,’ I heard, and then another word beginning with W, a different one. Then I felt a hard shove from behind, saw the grey of the

asphalt rearing up at me and then—nothing. For a long time—although long is the wrong word, because time came right off its hinges—I knew nothing.

When I raised my head, the school yard was deserted. I saw the double entrance doors swing open and two older girls step out with pieces of paper in their hands. When they saw me lying in the middle of the yard, they started to run. One on each side, they grabbed me by the arms and heaved me up. The drill was over and afternoon lessons were in full swing.

I leant over the washbasin, blood pouring out of my nose. My wrists rested heavily on the edge of the basin, and my hands, cold and bruised, hung limply over the white enamel.

‘An accident,’ the school nurse said. ‘You’re all right.’ She ran her fingers over my face where it had hit the ground; my left cheekbone and the bridge of my nose were grazed and rapidly swelling; my skin was so taut that it gleamed as if it were wet.

‘An accident,’ my teacher told my mother. And unfortunate that it had happened during drill.

‘The children run without looking where they’re going.’ That was something they would have to work on. (It was what the drills were for, wasn’t it? To make sure everything went smoothly in a real emergency.)

‘And this little girl,’ my teacher added, indicating my swollen face, ‘is rather delicate, isn’t she?’ It wasn’t the first time she had noticed that I wasn’t so good at asserting myself; I was thin-skinned. (‘Might be an idea to grow a thicker one.’) She had no concerns about the others—there were scuffles, of course; it was all part of the growing-up process—and then there was the way I tended to get lost in the commotion, ‘with that reedy little voice of hers—she could do with being a bit louder sometimes, a bit tougher.’ My teacher bent down to me as she spoke. ‘She is rather on the oversensitive side.’

On the way home I told my mother the word I had heard, just before I was pushed. I asked what it meant and she said it wasn’t possible, he couldn’t have meant me. ‘It’s a bad word,’ she said. ‘But he can’t have meant you. You’re German.’

‘It’s because I’m too sensitive,’ I started saying after that. ‘I need to grow a thicker skin.’ I said it with a grown-up expression, as if I knew what I was talking about—as if I had a clear idea how you went about growing a skin thick enough to deflect shoves from behind, a skin so resilient that those shoves would bounce off your back like anything.

One night my mother heard a lorry come through the wall. ‘There was a big crash,’ she said, ‘as if something huge had fallen down right next to my head.’

She lay under a white hospital sheet with yellow pinstripes and looked at me with the smile she gave me some mornings when all the glass was swept up and my father safely out of the house.

‘It’s nothing serious,’ she said. ‘Soon be home again.’

[...]

pp. 60 – 67

In 1999 Sophia and I started at grammar school. It was tremendously important to the teachers to impress on us that we were the *future elite*; they slipped the words in wherever they could, sometimes simply yelling into the classroom, apparently at random, ‘You are the elite!’ and then looking at us expectantly—thirty ten-year-old kids with their trousers at half-mast. It was an implicit challenge—that much I guessed even then—but how exactly I was expected to behave, and what my supposed elite membership involved, was beyond me and it wasn’t something I gave any conscious thought; I only felt a general sense of bewilderment at the whole thing.

I would stare for hours at the dark varnished desktop of solid wood, my back pressed into the chair. I would stare at grey copy paper printed with graphs and sections of text, bending my head as low as I could without letting it blur, my eyes resting on the texture of the paper.

The undersides of the desks were stuck with dried chewing gum and had wire baskets hanging from them where people had tossed balls of old sandwich paper and empty juice cartons. The tops were carved with names and defaced with marker pen and Tipp-Ex. In the summer our arms stuck to the varnish, and on particularly hot days the paint on the chairs came off in our sweat, leaving reddish-brown stains on our clothes.

I suspected that it had something to do with the way you came across. That it was perhaps not a good idea to show up at school with unwashed hair or holes in your jumper. I suspected that my grey tops printed with dragons and bobbly from the wash were not quite the thing, that my flat was not quite the thing—that the old kitchen units and the film of grime on the brown counter were objectionable, and so was the torn elephant wallpaper in my room and my habit of doing fractions on a white plastic stool in front of a talk show. I had a feeling that it had to do with the way I laughed. That I wasn't expected to do more than smile meekly—and even that only if the joke was at my expense.

It was the difference between elaborate wispy hairdos and plain wiry hair parted in the middle and worn loose over a white hoodie whose cuffs were yellow from my father's cigarette smoke. It had to do with that smoke that clung to every fibre—and with the oriental patterned mat outside our flat door.

It had to do with my secret name, with the fact that I didn't eat a lot of vegetables, the fact that my father cut me a bit of fruit every few weeks and thought it enough to keep me healthy, the fact that I had frozen pizza for lunch and that none of us ever ate at a table because every surface in the flat was covered in newspapers and empty tins.

The whole class was standing. I stared with lowered head at my closed exercise books, listening to our form teacher Mr Kaiser pacing the rows, stopping at each desk in turn. He was drilling

us on vocab, his voice hoarse. I twisted round and saw Sophia. She was one of a small group who raised their hands every time, pens waving in the air.

Mr Kaiser stopped in front of me. He said my name and then, ‘Market—qu’est-ce que c’est?’

It had to do with the vacuum that appeared in my head as soon as I was asked a question. I probed this void from all sides, while the lesson went into limbo around me and everything seemed to be waiting for me to speak. I scoured my memory for the word, but couldn’t find it. I stood there, unresisting, as the blood rose to my cheeks and ears, and my breathing grew shallow. I stared at my desk, at a corner of paper, at my fingertips resting on the varnished surface, and Mr Kaiser looked at me over his brown-tinted glasses, his weak left eye drifting even more fiercely than usual. He repeated his question, louder, more emphatically: ‘Market—qu’est-ce que c’est?’

At the age of ten I stood at my window and looked down at the street. It could be over, I told myself, and then recoiled in alarm from the thought and began to knock a hole in the wall behind the curtain to make myself a secret place to hide things. When I hit brick I gave up. I wouldn’t have known what to keep there anyway. I skirted around the places in the hall where the boards creaked under the cork flooring. There were times when my father kept the living-room door closed and then my mother and I knew that he had started to buy beer again. We slid the dishwasher racks home quietly; we tiptoed about the flat; we only used the short flush on the toilet; we didn’t open any windows.

My father spent the nights in the living room on an old coil-sprung sofa bed next to the black display cabinet where the good glasses were kept and a coffee set that Sophia had given me for my last birthday (still in its cellophane gift wrap because my father had declared it too precious to use). My mother slept on her own in the double bed with the dark blue imitation-leather headboard that she had bought herself out of some sense of duty. Only my father shut

his door. I didn't have one to shut because no door would fit in the makeshift frame that was nailed to my bedroom wall at that time, and my mother didn't shut hers because she hung all the shirts she ironed on the door handle. The crystal ashtrays that my parents had bought on a flea market before I was born were scattered about the flat, one in each room. On the dining table was a cloth that my mother changed every two weeks, not because it got stained during family meals, but because it got coated in layers of dust. My meals were brought to my room, and I was usually given the same as my grandfather, except that I might have a bit of salad as well—iceberg lettuce with finely chopped onion and lemon juice. I ate sitting on the floor, between one game and the next. My father ate the leftovers at night. He got them out of the fridge and heaped them onto a plate which he took back to the living room and scraped clean in the blue glow of the TV. The non-stop murmur of the television lulled me to sleep and took turns with the radio which was switched on first thing in the morning. To begin with, it came from the speakers of a portable tape recorder; later, incorporated into the microwave, it blared the greatest hits of the eighties and nineties into the kitchen through little holes. My father sat in the far corner of the living room with his legs crossed, staring at bills and clearing his throat. My mother swept up the hairs on the bathroom tiles with a dry mop. She stirred vitamin tablets into her water, which fizzed and dissolved, turning the water orange and filling the kitchen with the synthetic smell of mandarin. Even her caustic cleaner couldn't rid the work surfaces of their sticky film and it clung stubbornly to the PVC beneath the boiler, where the copper pipes vanished into the floor and carried sounds from the flat below so that we could hear it when my grandad went into his kitchen.

I was living in an alternative sign system and my survival depended on reading the code right; even a minute change to the arrangement of the furniture could be loaded with meaning. As soon as I walked through the door I had to gauge the situation, to figure out how charged the atmosphere was, like someone in the country who has to take shelter before a storm hits. 'Do

not stand under a tree in a thunderstorm!’ we had been told in general studies, and: ‘A car is a Faraday cage.’ But such information was useless to me; my guiding principle was: move quietly when the living-room door is shut. The broken glass was only the final sign. By that stage the crisis was apparent to all; it was what came before that mattered. I had to be careful how I acted *before* things got going, keep out of the line of fire, make sure I wasn’t responsible. Not put a foot wrong, not set off a rush of anger by walking too loudly or flooding the table when I poured myself a glass of water and then standing there watching the water slowly drip onto the kitchen floor. ‘You can’t even do that properly,’ my father would say and the door would slam and he’d start on his next grievance: something my mother had done—not swept right, not made the coffee right. If I took over and did the job for her—which, on a good day, would elicit a pointed ‘See, that’s the way to do it!’—I only risked making things worse. ‘Shh!’ he would call. ‘Quiet, quiet!’ and the tense lines at his mouth, which I should have recognised as warning signs, deepened to furrows and joined up with the permanent lines of anger on his forehead. It had to do with those lines. It had to do with the way my mother silently gathered up my father’s clothes. The time of day he fetched his food. Whether or not he washed his hair. The living-room door. And the silence—the ubiquitous silence, for which I developed a sixth sense.

‘Some people call me a walking dictionary,’ Sophia said. She had picked up the expression from a detective series on a children’s TV channel—the only one her parents allowed her to watch—and, as if to make good her claim, she started going through her mother’s *Langenscheidt French-German Dictionary* every night before she went to sleep. ‘It’s educational,’ she said—another phrase that sounded as if it came from someone else. My dictionary was of a different nature. While Sophia turned the pages of her *Langenscheidt* in the warm glow of her bedside lamp, I lay rigid in the dark, translating the creaks of the old joists, and the glasses that were missing from the kitchen cupboard, some of them piled in the living room, others lying cracked and chipped in the bin. I tried to leave as few traces as

possible, to avoid being confronted. The glasses seemed to move of their own accord, like at a séance. One day I got back from school to find that the glass door of the cabinet had been torn off its hinges, as if by some cosmic force. My mother had swept up the broken glass.

There was a new episode of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* My father switched on the TV ahead of time every week, and dragged smugly on his cigarette when he answered a question right. Believing school to run on similar lines, he thought the same was expected of me as of the contestants, namely to produce one-word answers, and since I thought that too, I invariably lost marks in tests for writing one short sentence under each question and ignoring the train of thoughts that had got me there. I didn't know that anyone was interested in my thought processes. I thought they wanted answers from me, and I wasn't good at answers; there was no room in my head for *accent aigu* or *accent grave*, the meaning of *le marché, des légumes, des fruits, un kilo d'artichauts*. Mr Kaiser mimed pulling the leaves off an artichoke and dipping them in melted butter. 'As a first course, with a little garlic in the butter and a nice apéritif—un verre de vin, s'il vous plaît,' he said, and his little fingers stuck out as he demonstrated, invisible leathery leaf in one hand, imaginary wineglass in the other. But all this was empty of meaning to me; interpreting Mr Kaiser's signs was not a matter of survival. Dried wine in the saucepans, on the other hand, triggered a reflex like that of blinking and ducking to avoid danger. 'Be quiet,' my mother would say, 'be quiet,' and I was quiet. Where others had an area in their brains responsible for memorising vocab, I had a zone of silence, and it was the same quality of silence as followed the crash and splinter of glass.

[...]

pp. 69 – 72

My failure to belong to the elite also had to do with the fact that all the local barmen had our phone number. ‘He’s singing again?’ my mother would whisper into the receiver, late at night, and I would hear her softly slip on her jacket and take the key from its hook. She was forever going to pick my father up and walk him the short distance home from Conny’s Corner or the Boozer, holding him by the arm when he looked as if he might stray onto the road, staring at the ground in embarrassment when anyone passed. It was a scene that could have played out in any century. The only signs of the present were the flashing fruit machines in the pubs, the electric lights, the TV in the corner, and the existence of a telephone on which my mother could be contacted. If it hadn’t been for these, the scene could just as easily have taken place in a dusty fifties pub such as my grandad used to frequent—and for which he retained a tender nostalgia. ‘Down the pub again, were you?’ he’d ask my father indulgently, after one of his benders. It was a scene that had taken place countless times before and could have taken place anywhere—high up in some mountain village or in a seaside fishermen’s tavern on one of my mother’s dusty roads. It was an experience so timeless and placeless that it must have been written into human DNA, and my mother knew exactly what to do, pushing my father into the flat, laying him down on the sofa and pulling off his shoes, as if it were what nature had intended for her.

In the morning, fumes of alcohol filled the flat and when I got back from school in the afternoon the key would be in the door on the inside and I would have to take a pen out of my pencil case to push it through the lock. I always expected to find something horrific, but there was only sunlight falling on the bottles, illuminating the lingering smoke. I would stand there in the empty flat, schoolbag in hand, and it would hit me: my father had gone off and forgotten me again.

It had to do with the TV magazine that my parents subscribed to instead of reading a newspaper. Newspapers, at least, got explicit mention from our teachers; they were a feature of their world.

But I didn't know how I was supposed to tell my parents to start buying a newspaper as long as all this was going on.

'*Market*—qu'est-ce que c'est?' This time Mr Kaiser put the stress on the German word, as if I might not understand that either.

It had to do with my father's recent purchase of a book called *Education: All You Need to Know*, which he had begun without getting beyond the first few pages. Thinking, like him, that this book was the remedy for all my shortcomings, I told Sophia, when she inquired, that I planned to spend the weekend 'just reading'. She gave me a sidelong look that seemed to me vaguely disparaging. Because I was trying to act like one of the elite. Because I was striking a pose that fooled no one. Because I was probably lying and wouldn't actually read at all, but would sit in front of the TV eating sunflower seeds until my lower lip was white and tender.

Watching TV and eating between meals were rare treats for Sophia. On such occasions her mother would make her a special plate of 'nibbles' from a high-up cupboard that was strictly out of bounds, unwrapping everything and throwing away the packaging before arranging it on a plate.

It was through rituals such as this, I felt, that her parents' mature serenity communicated itself to her—as if the secret of all success lay in carefully counted sweets, Capri leggings, real Adidas shoes and colour-co-ordinated scrunchies.

The heat was gathering under my jumper, the saliva had drained from my mouth, my tongue was a numb piece of flesh pressed against my palate.

'You should be able to do this standing on your head,' Mr Kaiser said. 'Well?' He waggled the book in his hand; his scornful coffee breath hit me in the face; he turned away.

'Sophia. *Market*—qu'est-ce que c'est?'

‘Marché.’

I saw the damp marks my fingers had left on the wood.

[...]

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I stood on the dais, my hands clasped in front of my body. The floor felt bouncy beneath the soles of my shoes; it was a special kind of wood—stage wood—and generations of pupils had stood here before me and received their reports. The faded blue gym mats had been pushed against the wall. Some of them, I knew, were missing the strap to pull them along by; you had to take hold of the sides and your hands chafed against them. I stared at those gym mats from the stage, with its frame of old red curtains, and thought of all the times I had been landed with one of those strapless mats and had to drag it clumsily by the corners—all the times they had slipped out of my hands and the PE teacher had watched with sadistic pleasure. It wasn't as if I'd wanted a mat in the first place. It wasn't as if I'd wanted to sit on a bench or lob volleyballs through the air or do serves from the back line that invariably landed in the net, so that the team had to wait ten minutes, quarter of an hour...serve number five...serve number seven...while the boys plunged their fists into the pockets of their silvery training shorts, and the girls grimly applied mother-of-pearl Labello, until, at last, the ball fell into someone's hands just the other side of the net and I could move along a place and stand in the middle of the field in my skimpy T-shirt.

I saw all the parents and grandparents in their stiff jackets and blouses, sitting on the chairs that we had put out in rows the day before. Luckily it was cool; it had rained that morning and the sky was still overcast, so no one was sweating and the varnish wouldn't leave streaks on people's backs. For a long hour and a half, the parents and grandparents leant back in their chairs, crossing first one leg and then the other. A few degrees warmer and they would have

had brown stains on their clothes as they milled around afterwards, clutching their glasses of fizz or Bucks fizz—a gathering that reeked of eau de cologne and looked as if they'd been rolling in manure.

The headmaster had made a speech, a few Year Eight girls had danced hip hop to a Rihanna song and the Year Five and Six wind ensemble had played a piece, dragging slightly behind the beat no matter how vigorously the music teacher swung her baton. Afterwards she bowed with a flourish, as if she were standing in a large concert hall. Maybe she had wanted to be a conductor, just as our PE teacher had originally wanted to be an athlete; he was always telling us about the obstacle-course records he had held in his youth. Instead, he now waited at the door to the girls' changing room every day, holding a cardboard box through the crack, his eyes averted, as we queued up to deposit our wallets and clunky mobiles. Instead, he now stood in the gym every morning at eight in his very clean trainers and watched panting schoolchildren doing circuit training, occasionally giving one or other of them questionable assistance in the form of a light tap on the hip. Afterwards he smoked a cigarette in the schoolyard and stared into the distance at some imaginary horizon, his back still broad from all the push-ups he used to do.

We had arranged ourselves in a row, alphabetically; some children waved to their parents in the audience. Mr Kaiser strode from one end of the row to the other, a pile of thick, creamy-white envelopes and a bunch of orangey-yellow roses in his arm. Each time he handed over an envelope and a rose, he shook hands with whoever was in front of him. When he got to me, he did the same, peering over his tinted glasses; his right eye and I exchanged a glance, and he held out his hand and said mechanically, 'Congratulations.' He had evidently forgotten the contents of my report: Will not be transferred to the next academic year. And: Must change type of school.

‘On nothing,’ I retorted. He gave a jerky nod and his mouth snapped open. Like an embarrassed, gasping fish, I thought; then he came to his senses, shook himself briefly and went on his way. ‘Congratulations,’ I heard him say to the girl next to me, as I clutched the paper in my limp hands.

Rows A to D and O to Z stepped forward and arranged themselves as we had rehearsed; the music teacher pressed PLAY on the stage stereo system and we began to sing the song from *Dirty Dancing*: ‘‘Cos I’ve had the time of my life, // And I owe it all to you.’

The heavy rain had left the trees looking fat and green, the branches hung down to the ground and the unsettled weather showed no signs of let-up. In the mornings it was hot; in the afternoons, storms cooled the air. Lush grass and wild flowers grew on the flood meadows, weeds sprung up in the front gardens, and in the soil around the street trees, poppies ran riot, washed colourless by the rain.

I could have spent the summer holidays watching one coming-of-age film after another in which the teenage heroine lay on her bed, staring meaningfully at the ceiling. I could have gone for long walks by the river, following the same paths over and over, always climbing the steps by the flood barrier and slithering down over twigs and earth, always on the lookout for a hint of what I saw in the films—some sign of self-discovery. I could have grown my hair. I could have become someone’s girlfriend. I could have made myself a hideout in the bramble hedges by the river like the film heroines’ treehouses and pretended that the summer holidays were never going to end. I could have sifted through my old magazines and tested the effects of a mint facemask, picking the herbs from the bed under my grandfather’s kitchen window. I could have bought myself a studded bag in the shopping centre, and then sat in the ice-cream café, watching and being watched by the mother-of-pearl girls, as they pulled their ice-cream spoons very slowly out of their mouths and stared at me in my old flannel shirt as if I were an accident. None of that would have matched up to the role of charming outsider played by the

girls in the films. None of it would have matched up to Sophia, who had stood on stage with me but had no trouble identifying with those girls—feet on a soft carpet, back against a cushion on the windowsill. Hers was a world of harmless changes, of pleasant confusion and endless possibilities. When she returned from family holiday in Fuerteventura at the end of the summer, with a crop top and a gentle tan, there would be no scar cutting through her CV.

In the afternoons I was washed up from a black sleep that lay heavy on my chest and kept dragging me back down, even when my father came and tugged at the duvet. I saw his warning gaze through gummed-up eyelids and tried to explain, but already a dream was pulling me under again, though I could never remember it when I next resurfaced and lay there staring at the bright light coming through the curtains. I went out at the first rumblings and sat on the sodden earth of the flood meadow, waiting for it to start, and when it did, the rain streaked my cheeks with the red hair dye that I had bought in the drugstore soon after the report ceremony, to mark something that eluded me. The river burst its banks and lapped over the paths. I walked across country, until the wind was so strong that the power lines swung wildly against the grey sky. I wasn't really scared, but something in me thought it best to turn back and go home. Somewhere below the deep layers of indifference, something said, You might get hit. As I headed back—it was getting late by then—one of the young trees at the side of the road snapped over in a gust just as I was about to walk underneath it.

It wasn't boredom that drove me out of the house, like in the movies, but a heaviness and a constant sick feeling in my stomach that only went away when my father took me for rides in his car. There was a crack in the windscreen on the passenger side. I clutched the seat with both hands, as if I were on a roller coaster, and the traffic lights and road signs shattered into fragments.

My father tried to comfort me by taking me to every flea market in the area. He walked round the stalls with me in silence, keeping an eye on me whenever I was hit by a new wave of

dizziness. When it was over, he said, ‘Come on, now we’ll try the one by the DIY centre,’ and we drove up and down the hilly country roads, stopping at every car park in the area where people had set up their stalls. The things piled up in the aisles between the trestle tables were the same things we had at home in the cellar. My father ran the flat of his hand over the glass figurines and as I dragged myself from one stall to the next, a sudden pain pierced my consciousness. It had travelled a few centimetres down my leg from my thigh when I realised that something had stung me—that an insect must have found its way into my trousers. I knew the pain from a previous summer by the pool when a wasp had strayed into the crook of my arm; my mother had pressed a cut onion onto the stings. I wandered up and down the rows past cardboard boxes of crocheted doilies, my teeth clenched as I tried to walk normally. At the edge of the flea market were two light-blue mobile toilets and I waited in a queue of short-haired elderly ladies clutching their bags to their stomachs. In the cubicle, the creature at last fell out of my trousers; it lay on the floor, curled up, dead. I shook my trousers more than once before putting them back on; a trail of fat, red lumps was forming on my thigh. It was a while before the pain subsided to a dull tingling and when we got back in the car, I put all my weight on the other side, so that the sore places wouldn’t touch the seat.

While I had been in the toilet, my father had gone up and down the rows on his own. ‘Only a euro,’ he said, putting a necklace of amethyst chips into my hand. We drove to the big supermarket and took it in turns to push the trolley. My father took two of everything, although we were always throwing out gone-off food. He stood for a long time in the chilled section, looking at the dazzlingly lit dairy produce. We began to shiver in the cold air coming off it.

‘Look, how funny,’ he said, a packet of sliced cheese in his hand. A fridge magnet was stuck to the plastic, the words I am so sophisticated picked out in red letters against a background of green herbs. I managed a feeble smile and my father put the cheese in the trolley. In the delicatessen department he took a slender glass bottle from the shelves. ‘Let’s treat ourselves.’

I twisted the bottle in the light; it was rice wine and shimmered pinkly.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked. ‘I think it’s too sweet.’

‘It’s pretty though,’ he said. ‘And it’s on special offer.’

The pink liquid that ran down my throat that evening was certainly sweet—more like liqueur than wine. My father had been in bed for a while; I could hear him snoring in the next room. The last drop spread through my mouth, but twice more I put the glass to my lips, forgetting that it was empty. In the bathroom, the grouting between the tiles reeled as I crouched down in front of the toilet, my arms propped on the seat and my forehead on the back of my hand. It was beginning to get light and my father was getting ready to leave for work. I heard him put on the kitchen radio; I heard him take his jacket from the hook in the hall.

I sat at the window, staring out at the white streetlamp until it was switched off in the first light of dawn. The rush-hour traffic subsided and the street was quiet again. It was well past midday when I woke. Still heavy with sleep, I looked down at myself and saw the wasp stings on my leg. Then sleep pulled me under again. The bruises lingered until the end of summer, first red, then blue, then green, then yellow. I did nothing all day but watch courtroom shows and smoke my father’s cigarettes. He came back from work in the afternoon and stood there, clutching his bag, looking at me helplessly.

‘It’s up to her,’ he said with a shrug—as if anything had ever been up to me. I came across internet forums where people ate nothing but fruit. Because we hardly ever had enough fruit in the house, I ate nothing but sliced white bread. I weighed thirty-five kilos and had a high temperature every four weeks.

Instead of taking shape, my identity was being taken away from me. It vanished into the school basement, in amongst all those files going back to the 1960s—because I was the only one in my year who didn’t go on to a sixth-form college and so the only one whose file didn’t have to

be sent anywhere. It lay on top of a dusty cabinet, coldly illuminated at night by the lights in the schoolyard.

[...]

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In my first year of sixth-form college we were set a brainstorming exercise. My new form teacher, a woman with kind eyes, distributed sheets headed *Identity* in thick felt-tip pen, and asked us to make a list of whatever associations the word had for us. *Identity* was part of the Lower-Sixth curriculum. The sheet had been photocopied many times over and was flecked with grey and black blots. I knew it was meant to be educational. I knew that I was supposed to think about what was and wasn't part of my identity, to write down: *woman*, *German*, my date of birth and perhaps my name, and to be struck by the hollow, husk-like quality of my name on the page, the interchangeability of both my names, secret and public. That I was maybe supposed to come up with adjectives to describe myself, like the girl next to me who was writing *helpful*, and to ponder the relationship between identity and character.

I hadn't been there a week when my name appeared on the screen in the foyer where cancelled lessons were announced, purple on black, like teletext. I was to report to the secretary's office. 'We don't have a file for you,' the secretary said, leafing through her papers. 'What school were you at before?'

I didn't correct my teachers when they heard 'Stevens School' for 'evening school' in the rounds of introductions; I folded my hands on the desk and stared at my fingertips, hoping they wouldn't clock my age. When the first marks tables went up, I lifted apprehensive eyes to the dreaded grid where my place had always been right at the bottom. A single F, in the past, had invariably been mine; the others had turned and stared. I couldn't get used to being at the

top of the table, up in the As and Bs. Now the others turned and stared when there was only one A, but they looked at me in a different way. I kept my eyes riveted on my fingertips and said nothing, so as not to give myself away.

Fifteen minutes later I was still sitting in front of an empty sheet. The teacher came over to me and leant her hands on my desk. Was there a problem, she asked, fixing me with her big, round eyes. I said I couldn't think of anything, which wasn't true. 'Just write down the first thing that comes into your head,' she said.

[...]

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Not for a second could I shake the feeling that I had to defend something, to prove something. If I didn't want to slide to the bottom of the heap again, it wasn't enough to hold my own in the marks table. I kept a book, listing and ticking off everything I had to do, following a system of my own devising, and I checked the calendar several times a day for approaching tests, study time and holidays. I tried to go to bed at nine o'clock, so that I could get a good night's sleep before my alarm went off at half past five, but it was still the tail end of summer when school began and light late into the evening. The birds struck up their end-of-day song outside my bedroom window and I lay awake, sweating into my sheets. In the morning I walked the half mile to the station rather than get the bus, hoping to make my efforts palpable, to prove I was serious.

When winter came, I wore heady perfume samples from the drugstore, that rose from my scarf into my nostrils as I moved. Sometimes there was black ice in the morning and I saw people skidding over the pavements; a man whose suit trousers were too short dashed across the square in the town centre as if he didn't care about the ice and fell on his hands every few

metres before coming down hard on the asphalt on his head. There was a woman in a flat black cap who was at the bus stop at the same time every morning; she wasn't put off by the ice either. Her white hair was tied back in a short ponytail and she stubbed out her cigarette in a portable ashtray that she took out of her jacket pocket. On Tuesdays, when the streetcleaners swept the bus stop, she would hold it out to them, as proof that she didn't throw her cigarette butts on the ground, and they would glance at the small black box in the hollow of her hand, and nod.

I walked quickly, arms bent, teeth clenched, aiming for an earlier train than necessary. On the platform I stood stiffly, well clear of the yellow line, under the clock whose second hand hesitated for a moment at the end of each full minute. One of the panes of the intricately constructed waiting room was always smashed. On the grass behind the platform, rabbits scampered—sometimes there'd be a white one—and squirrels nibbled at school sandwiches that had been tossed into the bushes. Once a young man approached me: he had just finished night shift at the factory and it was the only time he could talk to anyone. He thought I was older than I was. A goods train passed through the station. The signals lit up yellow, then white, then green, and there it was, pushing the air along in front of it—a blast of air that burst in people's faces and made their hair fly. The iron wheels sped past, singing a note higher before the train vanished into the distance, dully, as if nothing had happened. My train only had to be a minute late and I began to get nervous.

Looking out of the window, I could see over the wall to the industrial estate—to the big building with its steel supports painted turquoise, and white lamps hanging from every girder; to the tangle of pipes behind and the faded company sign on the gable, the chimney slowly belching steam, and beyond it the waxing moon in its halo. I saw the goods tracks, lined with orange lamps that flashed rhythmically like lights on a runway, but no goods train. I held tight to the straps with both hands, always standing just to the right of the door, always first to the door-opener, the other commuters behind me, following with hurried steps. The underground tunnels were lined with yellow tiles, and at the station where I got out the walls were hung with

big photographs of the student protests of 1968; I passed them, my hands in the pockets of my stripy coat that was a little too small for me, my rucksack heavy on my back, weighed down with thermos flask, lunchbox and folders, and the books that I had covered in see-through plastic film.

My success was threatened by the tiniest of discrepancies; a one-off event could throw everything off-balance. It all depended on the way I held my pen and whether I opened my eyes wide enough; whether I had the necessary poise, in school and out; whether I walked with my shoulders back and my head high.