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Young Light

Novel

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It was a warm night, and once a noise in the house somewhere had woken me, a door slamming, I couldn't get back to sleep. My sister was allergic to mosquito bites, which often turned into proper welts and gave her fever, so we had to keep the windows closed at night. I pushed the curtain aside. The moon was almost full, and in its light I could see that Sophie, too, was sweating. The fair hair plastered against her temples had turned a shade darker, and her nose was covered with shiny little droplets. But she slept soundly, clutching her yellow teddy bear. It only had one eye, which was drooping a little.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. The glass on my bedside table was empty, and for a moment I considered drinking out of the watering can behind the cactus plants; the floor planks squeaked, and I didn't want to wake up Sophie. But then I made the trip via my bed; the foot of the bed was only a single step away from the door.

My father's trousers were hanging up in the cramped hallway. A pair of bicycle clips were hooked over the edge of the right-hand pocket. The floor in the living room squeaked too, but here there were bridges so it wasn't as loud. The large leafy plants arranged behind the curtains blocked out the light of the streetlamps, and the corner at the back of the room was so dark I could hardly see a thing besides the cold screen of the television set and the gleaming letters that spelled out its brand name, "Loewe-Opta." A

pack of cigarettes and a lighter lay on the arm of the sofa, and on my way to the kitchen, I noticed that the door to the apartment was standing open, just a crack. Carefully I pulled it shut.

The dishes stacked beside the sink had been washed. Glasses and salad bowls sparkled in the moonlight, and I went over to the sideboard to look out past the garden with its fences and their blue shadows, all the way to Fernewaldstraße. There was no one on the street. A fox trotted past beneath the streetlights on his way to the tower at the mine.

I opened the refrigerator and squatted down in front of it. The door rack held a bottle of milk with a silver cap, and three boiled potatoes shared the middle shelf with a bottle of Chicogo brand nail polish. There was also a block of margarine and a few slices of salami wrapped in butcher's paper; I rolled one of them up and popped it into my mouth, skin and all. There wasn't any seltzer or raspberry syrup, and I was about to shut the door again when I discovered, hidden away on the bottom shelf behind the package of rolls, my father's tea thermos. It had a cap with a rubber ring like an old-fashioned beer bottle, and there were beads of condensation on the dented aluminum.

I took it out and pressed it against my forehead, the nape of my neck and the undersides of my arms. The tea inside was so icy it gave me a headache after just two sips; but it tasted wonderful, black tea with sugar and lemon, and I sat down on the floor in front of the open refrigerator, taking little sips of it. Drops of water fell from the thermos onto my sweatpants and undershirt, and when at one point I released a silent belch, my breath on the back of my hand felt almost as cold as the tea itself.

I kept drinking, telling myself with each sip that it would be the last. But then I would take yet another sip, an even smaller one, moaning softly, until finally the thermos was empty. There were only a few drops left sloshing around at the bottom when I held it to my ear. I got up, put in two spoonfuls of sugar and added tap water until it was full again. Then I put the thermos back.

Through the closed door to the balcony I could see into all the gardens. The trees and bushes were paler than their shadows, and some of them looked like the silhouettes of animals; others appeared to have faces with black eye sockets and shaggy eyebrows. Behind the Tszimaneks' beanpoles stood their new car, a DKW. Not a soul anywhere.

Only the fox was still out on Fernewaldstraße, it must have been a young one. He got up on his hind legs to snap at the mosquitoes and moths dancing in the light of the arc lamps. Once or twice he even leapt into the air.

I went back to the hall. There was a rustling sound in my parents' bedroom; I held my breath, staring at the crack beneath the door. It stayed black. The only light was in the bathroom. Probably my sister had left it on. The light switch next to the mirror was too high for her, and most of the time she didn't feel like climbing back up on the little stool she used for brushing her teeth after having a pee. I cleared my throat. The door wasn't locked, and when I stepped over the threshold, the door handle slipped out of my sweaty hand.

"Be quiet!"

I hadn't said a word, only gaped. She wore a light-blue T-shirt and stood in front of the toilet with her legs spread as wide as possible given her tight panties, which had slipped down around her knees. Her skin was the color of caramel with a subtle sheen to it; almost every day she went to Alsbachtal, the only beach in the region. But where she usually wore her bikini bottom, Marusha was white, and her thick little patch of hair shone like the fur of a mole. She looked at me without moving, as if waiting for me to leave. She was holding something between her muscular legs, a bit of cloth maybe, a cotton ball. Quickly I closed the door.

Back to the kitchen. The fox was gone, and I stood on my toes to pee in the sink. Marusha's room had a washbasin and a chamber pot with a lid that she brought downstairs every morning. As far as I knew, she had never used our bathroom, although my mother had given her permission to do so "in emergencies." That's why the front door was never locked. I turned on the water to rinse the sink.

There was an alarm clock ticking on one of the cabinets. In one hour, my father would get up and start preparing for his shift. I opened the refrigerator, turned down the temperature and took another slice of salami from the paper, but when I was holding it in my hand, I suddenly had to belch, the acidic taste of the tea filled my nose, and I put the salami back and closed the refrigerator.

I wasn't tired at all any longer. The toilet flushed, and Marusha emerged from the bathroom, oblivious to the creaking floorboards. She clomped across the room to the door

and I hissed “Psst!” This time she was the startled one, she put a hand to her chest and blinked once. The moonlight was streaming into the room from behind me, and I could see the sanitary napkin through the cloth of her underpants, clean and white.

“Did you have to scare me like that?”

This was spoken in a voice less than a whisper, barely a breath, and I grinned. “Are you injured?”

“What?” She scratched the nape of her neck. “Go back to sleep, kid. The night’s almost over.”

“Why should I?” I leaned against the frame of the kitchen door, arms crossed over my chest. “It’s still vacation.”

“For you maybe.” She gave a yawn. “But I have an interview tomorrow. Kaiser and Gantz.”

“In Sterkrade? What are you going to do there, sell curtains?”

She didn’t answer, just pointed to the arm of the sofa where the cigarettes lay. “Mind if I take one?”

I shrugged. “They’re my father’s. No filters.”

“So? Think I’m going to pee my pants?”

“No. You just did.”

She brushed a curl behind her ear. In the moonlight, her smile looked even more dazzling than before. “Just did what?” Then she tapped a Gold Dollar out of the pack. “Say, you’re not bad looking, but don’t you have a screw loose or something?” She moved into the hall, gesturing for me to follow. “Come on, let’s have a chat.”

I pushed off from the doorway. “What do you mean not bad looking?”

But she disappeared into her room without a word. I’d never actually been in the room, just looked into it from our balcony. Although one of the windows was open, there was a cloying smell in the air, like sweated-in bedsheets. The life-size Graham Bonney cut-out whose sections she’d been snipping out of *Bravo* in weekly installments was still missing a leg, and a recorder lay atop the small shelf of books by Enid Blyton; there was hardly any lacquer left on the mouthpiece. Her new record player stood on the rug in front of the bookshelf, a portable battery-operated unit with a slit for inserting the singles.

A few of them lay scattered on the floor: “She Loves You,” “Marmor, Stein und Eisen,” “Poor Boy.” Marusha sat down on the old bed.

Gathering the comforter around her hips, she leaned back against the headboard, which had fruit carved into it, apples and grapes. Then she sniffed at the cigarette, lit it and spat out a crumb of tobacco before blowing out the smoke. I went over to the little desk on which lay a dozen passport photos. In some of them, she had pimples. “When are you planning to move out, anyhow?”

With a frown she inspected the cigarette’s glowing tip. “Thought it would be stronger, this is nothing... What did you say? What do you mean move out?”

“Well, if you get a job... You’ll be able to afford your own apartment then, won’t you?”

“Are you nuts? On a trainee’s salary?”

“Or move in with your boyfriend.”

“What boyfriend?”

“The one with the Kreidler.”

“Johnny?!” She snorted. “Don’t make me laugh. I wouldn’t let him so much as kiss my feet. Or maybe you think he’s nice?”

“Dunno. No. He’s a bully.”

“Exactly.” She gazed at the cloud of smoke forming beneath the lamp. “Strong though.”

“But he doesn’t look right next to you. He has those scars.”

“What scars? Oh, d’you mean the ones on his chin? You know, scars on a man aren’t such a bad thing. They look interesting.”

“Not to me. My father has scars all over his body. From the war, and from working underground at the mine. The wounds were full of coal dust when they healed. If I had something like that I’d have an operation to get rid of it.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, and her smile took on an indulgent quality. There was a tiny down feather caught in her hair. “Is your mother going into the hospital now?”

I shrugged my shoulders and sat down on the chair. “Dunno. I hope not. If she does, I’ll have to watch my little sister all day.”

“So? Little girls are sweet. You can take them anywhere.” She exhaled through her nose and knocked off the ash on the edge of an old Penaten cream tin on the table beneath the night lamp. There was a hard candy inside that had already been sucked on. “And then no one could barge in on you, you could have your buddies over, or your girlfriend...”

“Who?” I put my feet up on the seat and wrapped my arms around my knees. “You think I have a girlfriend? I’m twelve years old!”

She nodded. There were a few fingernail clippings sticking to the candy. “But you’re old enough to jerk off, aren’t you?”

I felt something in my face as if my tongue were being held to a battery, and Marusha grinned. “Oh God, I shouldn’t have said that. You’re blushing!”

“I am not.”

The words somehow got stuck in my throat. I had no desire to talk about these things, and acted as if I had to yawn. Marusha leaned her head back and blew a few perfect smoke rings into the air, each smaller than the last. At the same time, she scratched herself under the comforter. “Just don’t let yourself be corrupted, whatever you do... Say, what’s going on with your mother? What’s wrong with her?”

“What do you mean wrong with her? Her gall bladder!”

“That’s not what I mean. How come she’s constantly slapping you around? Do you get into that much trouble? You’re a good boy, aren’t you?”

“Dunno. She doesn’t hit me so much.”

“Not so much? I hear her going at you all the time, every week practically. She breaks her wooden spoons beating the two of you.”

“You’re talking crap. She doesn’t hit Sophie, she’s still too little. And sometimes I screw up. Cutting school and stuff like that. And when I’m bad...”

“That’s no reason to strike a child!”

“So? Don’t you ever get beaten? Your father’s smacked you one before.”

“What father? I don’t have any father.”

“Gorny, I mean. Like the time you wanted to wear a miniskirt to church.”

“That’s my business. And if he so much as lays a finger on me again, I’ll tell Johnny. He’ll go looking for him at the mine.” She was leaning back in the corner with a

pillow behind her head and held her arm out with the cigarette butt. "I'm going to be sixteen. No reason why I should put up with any more of his shit. Could you...? She smacked her lips. "This stuff tastes like straw."

I got up and put out the cigarette in the metal lid as she pulled off her friendship rings, all four of them, placing them on the windowsill. Then she stretched and yawned, and I went over to the bed and showed her my wound, the gash on the ball of my thumb that was gradually healing. "Look, that'll be a scar some day, too."

She smirked as she reached for my hand. Her fingers were warm but dry, and when she bent over, I could see inside her T-shirt, glimpse the golden anchor hanging between her breasts on a thin chain. "That's no scar, kid, it's just a scratch!"

I swallowed hard. "But some day it will be one."

My arm began to tremble. She wasn't holding me very hard, but she didn't really let go of me either as she began to drag her fingertips back and forth over the palm of my hand, as gently as though she were just stirring the air. All this time she was gazing into my eyes with a smile. "You're turning red again. D'you like that?"

I shook my head, pulled my hand away, maybe a bit too sharply. The rug slipped to one side and I stepped on a record, something by Udo Jürgens.

"O crap, I didn't mean to do that, sorry."

"It doesn't matter." She sank back onto her pillow. "It's your mother's anyhow."

I bent over to pick it up and remained squatting there for a minute so my hard-on wouldn't show. There were only three records in our cabinet, one by Chris Howland, one by Rita Pavone and one by Billy Mo. This one I hadn't seen before. "It's a new one, she must have bought it in town. Is it any good?"

"Dunno. OK, I guess. You can take it back when you go."

She pulled the thin blanket up to her chin but then stuck both legs out from under it, and I looked at her toes with the dark nail polish. In a few places she'd gotten polish on the skin, too. "How come? If Mom lent it to you, I'm sure you can keep it longer."

Marusha gave an even deeper yawn, it sounded like a cat hissing. "She never lent it to me." Then she closed her eyes and turned to face the wall. "I just borrowed it. Turn off the light on your way out, OK?"

* * *

The next night, Marusha wedged a bit of cardboard between the bell and its ringer, and I didn't go to the door when it clattered, or rather, I went only afterward, to lock up. Apparently Johnny had kept his shoes on and was carrying a bag filled with bottles. I went out to the balcony and leaned against the railing. The window was open, but the gap between the two halves of the curtain was too narrow to see anything. Besides which the nightlamp was illuminating the rust-red fabric.

The door of the armoire squeaked, and suddenly the music, a Rolling Stones song, was cranked up loud, then turned back down again right away. Johnny laughed in a way that was supposed to sound sinister, opening a beer no doubt, and a moment later, after a creaking of bedsprings, he belched, a dark bubbling sound. "The boys down in shaft number seven say hello..." Marusha giggled and turned out the lamp, and now the red curtains were gray; glimpsing my own narrow silhouette projected onto the fabric by the moonlight, I withdrew.

Zorro was sleeping on the sofa with the TV on, but the moment I sat down next to him he woke up and I scratched the back of his head and plucked a few thistle seeds from his fur. "You smell all musty, pal," I said to him, "like an Askari." I didn't have a clue what an Askari was; my father always used to say "We stank like Askaris" when he was talking about work. Zorro bit at my hand playfully.

I went into the kitchen, unwrapped a slice of salami and held it above my head. His tail beat against the glass-doored cabinet. Whimpering, he followed me into the bathroom, and after shutting the door behind him, I brought my hand down and tossed the treat into the bathtub. Startled, he put his paws over the ledge, but was unable to reach it, and I grabbed him by the hind legs and helped him in. His claws clicked against the enamel, and he wolfed down the salami in a single gulp, giving a short bark of thanks. Licked his chops.

I patted him on the head, slipped a finger inside his collar and turned on the water. Although it was still warm from the heat of day, he started when the stream from the handheld shower attachment struck him. He tried to pull away, his paws squeaked and skittered, but I held him tight, speaking to him in a reassuring voice. His wet fur looked black now.

He growled, rolling back his bloodshot eyes, and while I was pouring the egg-shampoo along his spine in a long stream, he reared up on his hind legs. But I twisted his braided-leather collar until it was hard for him to breathe and he couldn't even howl or bark any more, just make a rasping sound. My arm was pulled taut like in autumn when there's a storm and you have a kite far off on its string. But I held on tight, even when he started slipping around in the foam and knocking against the sides of the tub and its fittings. Finally he seemed to surrender.

He stood there with his legs splayed, trembling, and I lathered him up well and rinsed him off, twice. The water was gray, but the fur plastered against his bony frame already felt softer, and I draped the white towel over his body and rubbed him down. He offered no resistance. When he was halfway dry, I grabbed him around the chest, helped him out of the tub, where his claws had left behind a few scratches, and opened the door. But he wouldn't look at me, wouldn't even follow me over to the television. He trotted into our bedroom and crawled back under Sophie's bed.

I lay down on the couch. One of the channels was showing a love story, and when the lovers kissed I knelt down before the TV to see exactly how they did it. They kept their lips closed, with no sign of any tongue action, and I found it strange that their prominent noses didn't get in the way. It must have been the way they were holding their heads, so I took a soft pencil and drew a face on the doorframe: dot, dot, comma, line. Then I traced out the lips more clearly. I placed my hands on either side of the wood around hip height and pressed my pelvis forward. Every time I got close to the face, the tip of my nose bumped against the doorframe. But if I tilted my head to one side, my nose stuck out over the edge, and I could kiss the mouth without interference.

I practiced this a few times, including with my eyes shut—when suddenly there was a knock, a very soft one. Someone rattled the door handle a few times, but I didn't respond. I spit on my fingers and wiped the drawing off the paint as best I could, but all I did was smear it. There was another knock, a bit louder this time, and I glanced over at the alarm clock. It was eleven.

“Who's there?”

“Who do you think?” Marusha hissed. “I hope you're planning to open up some time soon.”

“Why should I? I’m sleeping.”

“With the TV on? Please! It’s urgent!”

I pulled the chain to turn on the torch lamp, then reached into my pants pocket, put the key in the lock and opened the door, but just a crack. I kept one foot pressed against its base. Marusha was wearing her robe with the Disney motifs. It was from Woolworth’s, and the pieces had been sewn together without taking the pattern into account. A chunk of Goofy was connected to part of Minnie, and Scrooge McDuck’s hat perched on Pluto’s rear end. “Can we come in and use your bathroom? We were talking and drank kind of a lot of beer... My sink is broken.”

“Why don’t you just use your chamber pot?”

“It’s full!” She pressed her knees together like Sophie when she can hardly stand it any longer. “Julian, please! I’ll pay you back!”

“All right.” I stepped back. “But no semi-sweet this time!”

Johnny, whose cowlick was standing up as if he hadn’t been in bed at all, placed one hand on her shoulder and pushed past us. His black bathing trunks, shiny as coal, had a sports patch in front. Barely glancing in my direction, he went straight through the living room to the hall and disappeared into the bathroom before I could even call out “on the right!”

Marusha smiled at me. “He knows where it is.” It was a serious smile, like the smile of a woman.

“He does? How come?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “All these houses are the same.”

He hadn’t closed the door, and we could hear his stream splashing into the toilet, but this didn’t seem to embarrass her. She looked around the room. “I have to say, you really do have nice furniture. Your mother has good taste. Some day, when I have my own place...”

“What do you mean? Are you moving out?”

“Me? You’d like that, wouldn’t you. Well, who knows...”

Her robe wasn’t pulled very tightly around her, and I thought there was a strange smell about her, like Red Riding Hood brand camembert. I pointed to her throat, whispering all at once, though I had no idea why: “Did he choke you?”

She opened her mouth. It looked as if her lipstick were smeared, but she wasn't wearing any. Next to the front door there was a round mirror with a star-shaped frame made of wire and woolen threads, and she inspected the two violet-red marks on her throat, murmuring, "That pig!"

Just then Johnny pulled the chain, the toilet flushed, and when he came back to us, he was still doing up his jeans. He made no effort to be quiet. His chest was hairless, and the muscles there shifted with every step. He grinned at us, but Marusha's eyes were bright with fury.

"What the hell is this, you moron! Are you nuts?"

"What?" He winked at me. "Just a little brand, so everyone can see you're Johnny's"

"Aha. And how am I supposed to explain this at work? What do you think they're going to say! I can't serve customers with a scarf on in this heat!"

He tsked his tongue and motioned with his head. "Don't talk so much. Go have a piss."

She took a deep breath but didn't say anything. She jerked her belt tight. Then she turned away from us, and her backside jiggled beneath the colorful fabric, her brown calves gleaming. Johnny looked at me.

"It's her own fault, that's all I have to say. If they're so horny they don't even notice... wouldn't you agree, kid? How old are you anyhow?" He smelled of Brisk pomade and beer.

"Me? Almost thirteen."

"Twelve then. D'you have hair on your balls yet?"

I didn't answer, just snorted, and he laughed. "Don't be insulted. You're not a girl. Wanna take a ride on my Guzzi?"

"Don't you have a Kreidler?"

"I *had* a Kreidler. How come?"

"Is a Guzzi better?"

"Better?! Man, it's like the difference between a Goggo and a Mercedes!"

His arms were covered with homemade tattoos, anchors, flaming hearts, a cross on the hill. Also a bit of writing: Johnny loves... I turned my head to the side, but

couldn't find another name. After "loves" there was a gap, a pale oval. Then the next motif, a nymph with a sword. The toilet flushed again, and when Marusha came out of the bathroom she didn't look at us. Fists in the pockets of her robe, she pressed her lips together in a thin line and glanced at the TV as if there were more on it than the test pattern.

Johnny gestured with one arm. "Don't make such a big deal. That mark will be history by tomorrow."

He probably wanted to slap her rear, but she twisted away and stroked my hair. "Thank you, Julian. And go to bed, you hear? It's late. I'm going to bed now too." Her chin raised, she left the apartment without so much as glancing at the man. But he winked at me, and not long after I heard them giggling again, in the dark. A Beatles song faded into silence.

I took a piece of salami from the refrigerator and threw it under Sophie's bed. Zorro sniffed around and smacked his lips, but didn't come out, or rather didn't come out until I dangled a second piece in front of his nose. He was still a bit dank, but didn't seem to be mad at me any more. His fur smelled nice. I put a bowl on the balcony for him and poured milk into it, and his tongue slapped around so wildly that the porcelain clattered against the stone floor. But although their window was tilted open, the couple seemed not to hear anything.

The bedframe creaked, the springs protested, and Marusha was breathing fast and trembling and moaning softly. I didn't hear anything from him, and I sat down on the floor, pressed my back against the wall and looked up at the sky. The dog also raised his head for a moment. There was something silvery about the sounds, perfectly delicate, like moonlight on milk; I felt the little hairs on my lower arms stand up and scratched at them.

An airplane was blinking between the stars. The two were moving more vigorously, Zorro licked up a few spilled drops from the floor, and I held my breath as Marusha suddenly whispered "Hold on a sec! Wait!" Suddenly it was quiet, crickets were chirping in the garden, and then something rustled, pillows probably, and her voice behind the curtain sounded, as always, perfectly calm, almost grown-up. The bowl was empty. "Julian? Would you go back to your apartment, please?"

I got up, tugged the dog back across the threshold and shut the door.