

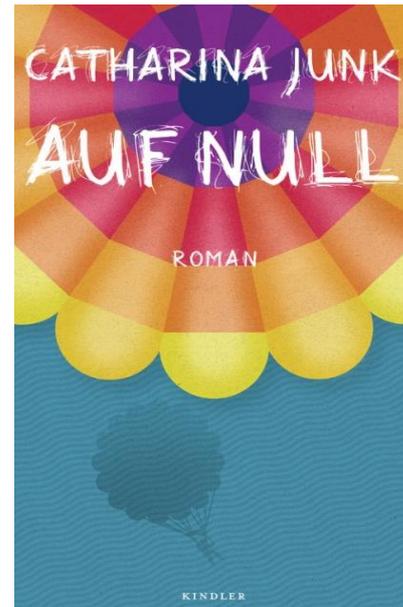
Catharina Junk

## Day Zero

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In good health – but not cured. That is Nina’s diagnosis after surviving leukaemia. In her early twenties, to Nina this suggests: Don’t you dare rejoice too soon. The illness has changed everything anyway. She and her best friend Bahar have fallen out, her little brother has discovered religion in a big way and Nina has more trust in a game of chance than in her own body. How can she engage with life in a confident way?

After a year in hospital she initially moves back to her small-town family home where at least her old school-friend Isabelle hasn’t changed – she is as reassuringly unreliable as ever. But then Nina meets Eric who broaches the subject of illness with ease and openness. Nina feels herself falling in love far faster than her fear of a relapse can cope with. So she tramples on such dreams and kicks them into the long grass. Until, in spite of herself, she discovers an urge to fight for Eric, to restore her friendship with Bahar – and to make her peace with life and living. Has it come too late for Nina, this recognition that every day she hesitates may lessen her chances of happiness?



“Catharina Junk has created a moving voice for her protagonist: beneath the surface that is direct, joking, a pointed humour that moves jauntily from irony to sarcasm, beneath that surface, then, shimmers all the uncertainty and vulnerability that accompanies Nina’s step-by-step re-engagement with life. The frank and unflinching gaze of the first-person narrator who eventually realises (with some help) that she herself has grown used to “playing the cancer card”, is both entirely refreshing and has a contemporary feel.”

(Jury of the *Literaturförderpreis der Stadt Hamburg*)



**Catharina Junk** was born in Bremen in 1973. She studied German Language and Literature, Psychology and Folklore at the University of Hamburg. Junk spent several years working as a producer of various television programmes and series for the NDR network (the Hamburg-based Norddeutscher Rundfunk). Since 2008 she has been working as a freelance scriptwriter. Following on from numerous screenplays for film and television, *Auf Null* (*Day Zero*) is her first novel.

- > English sample translation available.
- > The exceptional debut of a promising author.
- > An intense piece of prose with a strong, humorous first-person narrator.
- > A love story between two young people who already have some battle-scars from life.
- > A novel about growing up and about finding one’s way and one’s voice in life.
- > Catharina Junk received the prestigious literary award of the City of Hamburg for this project.

# Day Zero

A novel by Catharina Junk

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Chapter 1-3

Sample translation by Rebecca K. Morrison

1

What I'd give for a life without Van Gogh! I sit on the edge of the bed, eyes fixed on the framed print on the wall, hoping I'll never have to look at those fifteen sunflowers again. Not here, not anywhere. It's all over between me and sunflowers, I suspect, and I'll be avoiding them for the rest of my life. However long that may be. Note to self: inform the family that if the worst comes to the worst, definitely no sunflowers on my grave. I'd rather have box-tree, to be honest, lots and lots of box-tree. Planted in the shape of snails. I saw that once. Bland and boring? Blame Van Gogh.

I've spent four months in room nine with this print; before that, January through April, it was his rustic chair and pipe in room four; and right at the start, post-diagnosis, I spent four months in room eleven, along with his fishing boats at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. It's not as if the fact he cut off his ear is a secret. To be frank, when you've spent months in the company of these images, a time comes when cutting off your own ear seems a reasonable option. Beats slashing your wrists.

Sure, it could have been worse. Matisse, for example, *The Dance*. You'd soon be begging for that chair and pipe. Suddenly it would be like: Leukaemia? Not without my Van Gogh!

I wait. That's pretty much all I've done for the past twelve months, but I've not got any better at it. My bags are next to the built-in cupboard, packed and ready to go.

2

I've cleared out the cabinet above the sink, and there are only a few telltale remnants of sticky tape on the wall above the headboard of the bed hinting at the photos and cards of before. The door opens at last and in comes Professor Schüttler.

“So, you're going home today?”

“Yes.” I smile, for we both know this was by no means a foregone conclusion.

“About time, too, wouldn't you say?”

I couldn't agree more.

“Now, those pills...?”

“They've run through it with me.”

“Your prescription?”

“Got it.”

“The letter for the doctor of internal medicine is going out in today's post.”

“I'm to go to the clinic every Monday to have my blood-count checked.”

“Okay, and we have discussed the fact that the port will stay in for the time being.”

She's referring to the implanted catheter beneath my left collarbone, the entry point for my chemotherapy. A small box with a silicone membrane under my skin and a tube into the vestibule of my heart. I grimace, give a wry smile and nod. “In case it's needed again.”

Professor Schüttler is keen to return to more positive talk, and says briskly:

“Every day that you are well increases the likelihood that you will stay well.”

“The relapse rate isn't insignificant though.” Something in me rebels against the All-Will-Be-Well script.

The doctor gives me a level look: “Statistics have no place in our thinking now. We are looking at you, the individual, and what we see is a healthy young woman.”

“With hamster cheeks.”

She laughs at my lame attempt at a joke. “They are part of the package. The cortisone can’t be stopped suddenly. We’ll gradually reduce the dose. It takes a while, but those swellings should have disappeared in a month or two.”

I nod. Okay. I know. In my situation vanity smacks of bad taste and ingratitude and is, quite frankly, ridiculous. But I can’t pretend it’s fun looking like a rodent with pouched cheeks hording a winter’s worth of fodder.

“Never lose sight of all you have already achieved.”

Does the poor woman never run out of motivational steam? I immediately feel contrite. People are dying in other rooms and I am involving the doctor in a discourse on aesthetics. “Yes, I know.”

“Well...” Professor Schüttler nods at me encouragingly. “I wish you all the very best.”

“You, too. And thank you, again, thank you very much.” I mean this with all my heart, but it seems so inadequate an expression for what I am trying to say. I try again: “Thank you so much for everything. Honestly. Without all of you...” I make a grand gesture like some Roman emperor, but then my voice breaks, and I trail off. I mustn’t cry. She’s only doing her job. You don’t cry at the baker’s when the bread rolls taste good. But then again bakers, as a rule, don’t save lives. So the comparison is useless. I try my hardest, but tears come rolling down my cheeks.

Professor Schüttler smiles. “It’s time for the beautiful sides of life.”

Offering me her hand, the doctor gives mine a firm, confidence-inspiring squeeze. I wonder whether her conviction is real or a façade. But I can hardly ask her that.

Pit’s carton of chocolate desserts on the windowsill has attracted the Professor’s attention. “My goodness!” she exclaims with a smile. “Somebody’s wishing you well!”

I simply smile and don't bother to set her straight. Both Pit and his desserts are definitely going to be left behind.

The doctor nods again before striding out to prolong the lives of others, leaving the door of the room ajar.

My mother is waiting for me downstairs by the main entrance, the domain of the smoking patients, a zombie-like huddle of figures hunched over wheelchairs, propped up on crutches, attached to drips as they get their fix.

When she catches sight of me, my Mum's face lights up and she holds out her arms. "Nina! At last!" I put my bags down and allow myself to be hugged. How unfamiliar it is to be breathing in air unprocessed by the ward's whirring air conditioning. The sun is out, but we are in the building's wide shadow, and there is a cold breeze. I am shivering, but that could also be the excitement.

Mum is looking at me joyfully. "How does it feel?"

"A little strange." I shrug and give a baffled laugh.

My mother pulls me in tight again. "Oh, I am so thrilled! You've done it!"

"Yes, fingers crossed." We disentangle and not knowing where to look, I turn back and gaze up at the tall tower of hospital beds that was my world for a whole year. My mother follows my gaze. We stand there together, necks craned, looking up. There's the eleventh floor with its views over Munster. I had moved to the city as a student, but got sick before I'd even figured out the refectory. "It's all so crazy," I say.

"Yes, but it is behind you now!" My mother gives me an affectionate prod, and I nod.

"Tarragon chicken. Every other Wednesday! Never again!" My mother laughs, puts her arm around my shoulders and pulls me close. "No chemo ever again!" She says it so portentously.

And for a moment I allow myself to believe she could be right.

We coast the motorway in silence. Mum's uncertainty about whether to chat or leave me in peace is tangible. I'm no help, because I don't know myself. I can sense her relief, her happiness that I am here, sitting next to her, alive, that we are driving home together, and that everything will be all right now. She takes these deep breaths in and her chest trembles with each exhalation. It's almost more than I can bear. If I have a relapse now, it will hit her doubly hard; she is so full of hope at the moment. My Mum has a penchant for sayings like: "Better a swift, sharp shock than suffering without end." And while I know that she would never use it in conjunction with me, the sentence goes buzzing round my head, like a world-weary blue-bottle. It's strange because I want to be well more than anything in the world. I don't have a fantasy of dying at twenty, and I don't want everything – the chemotherapy, the pain, the vomiting, the fortnightly tarragon chicken, and all that jazz that comprised the general shittiness of hospital – I don't want it all to have been in vain.

And yet. If I had simply died a year ago, maybe by now my family would be getting over the initial shock and adjusting to life without me. There might be a few sunflowers on my grave and that would be fine. Instead, I recovered and here I am in the passenger's seat with my cortisone hamster-cheeks and my freshly washed ridiculous poodle-curls and a capricious body that is revelling in the mystery of healing.

Maybe you will, maybe you won't. Wait and see.

I close my eyes and pretend to doze. It feels wrong that Bahar's not here today of all days. She should be sitting in the back, celebrating my release from hospital with my parents and me. And later Bahar and I would sprawl in my old teenage room, and stay up all night watching *How I Met Your Mother*. But I don't even know where she is living now.

Two hours later we turn off for Varrendorf.

It's a small town in Lower Saxony and there's not a whole lot to say about it. It seems to have a disproportionate number of discount supermarkets, petrol stations and car dealers. Some of the shops have gone out of business. Saddest of all is the cinema. It's at the far end of the pedestrian zone, shut its doors eight years ago, and now serves as a billboard for funfairs and parties for the Over-40s. If I had to recommend something to a tourist in Varrendorf, it would have to be the pumpkin bread at Meyer's Bakery, then getting a ticket, pronto, for the express train to Bremen. But there aren't any tourists.

We turn into the driveway and Mum stops just short of the garage gates, which are open, to let me out. While she parks the car in the garage, I make my way towards the steps that lead up to the front door. It is an incredibly beautiful old house, red brick with lattice windows and white woodwork. It is completely covered in Virginia creeper, and ever since my parents bought it – ten years ago – they have been battling valiantly to save it from decrepitude against the odds.

My brother, Theo, appears at the front door and leans against its frame, smiling self-consciously. His face has a profusion of pimples and he is stooped as if ducking to avoid the onslaught of puberty. He recently turned fifteen and I'm struck by the fact I hardly know him.

Mum carries my bags past us into the house with a merry smile.

"Hey," I say, when's it just Theo and me again.

"Hey," my brother says, stiff with shyness, and stoops a little more.

"So, how's it going?" Maybe we'll manage to creak into conversation.

"Good," he shrugs as if he lacks words for why the opposite is true. "Yourself?" Quite why my "Fabulous!" comes out with such a sarcastic edge, I don't know.

Theo looks at me and gives a startled smile. Suddenly a horn honks loudly, and Mum runs out of the house excitedly. "There's Dad!"

A white Golf is crawling up the drive. My father is at the steering wheel beeping the horn and flashing the headlights.

“Gracious me, what on earth?” my mother exclaims in a pantomime of surprise. Slowly it dawns on me.

“Mum, that’s not for me, is it?” I look at her seriously.

She is taken aback – it is not the reaction she had been expecting. But now my father is getting out of the car, and she is frantically trying to think up a way of averting the inevitable scene. Her eyes flick back and forth nervously between him and me.

“Hello there!” my father shouts, his face wreathed in smiles.

My brother is still at the top of the steps by the front door. Our eyes lock briefly, then I greet my father with an ominous, “Please tell me you haven’t bought that for me.” Dad stops in his tracks and I can read the disappointment on his face. “Yes. Why?”

The answer to this question is, to my mind, obvious. “You can’t just go buying me a car!”

My parents exchange a harried glance then look at me again.

“It’s far too expensive! I don’t want it!”

My father opts for the logical angle. “But you need a car to drive yourself to the clinic in Bremen.” “Precisely. This way you can be independent. And you must remember your immune system. There are so many germs in trains, you could easily pick up an infection,” my mother finishes.

I swallow, but the big lump in my throat is still there. My voice sounds quiet and despairing, which is just how I feel. “It’s not worth it though.”

I’m crying now and I press my lips tightly together to stop my mouth from trembling uncontrollably. Hamster-checks and dignity are not a match made in heaven. For a moment no one says anything. There are worried expressions, and a rapid exchange of baffled looks.

“What do you mean?” my father asks.

I dab at my tears with my sleeve and say with a sob, “I could have a relapse next week! And then the car will have been a total waste of money!”

I shoot my brother a look of entreaty, but Theo is now so stooped he resembles a question mark.

My mother’s eyes have filled-up, too. “Do you think we care an iota about the money for the car?”

Okay, I think. Put like that, I concede my attitude must seem a little odd.

But from my perspective, it is sheer foolishness to invest a cent in me. It would make more sense to spend the money on painting the garage gates. To use it for something practical, something lasting.

I shrug. “I’m still not sure.”

My father is sad, but blusters. “Listen to me, this is nuts!”

My mother has got it though. “If you die, we’ll sell it.” She looks at me and her eyes are telling me not to worry.

I find this helpful. I hadn’t thought it through that far. The car can always be sold. And the money used for the garage gates. Or the graveside box-tree snail.

I can breathe freely again. “Okay.”

My mother smiles in relief. “Okay.”

My father is discomfited by the abrupt change in mood. “Okay?” I nod my assent.

“Fine.” But he is still a bit on edge. “You might be relieved to know that it is only taxed until the spring.”

I’m temporarily lost for words. My jaw drops and I stand there gaping. A little hamster alternating between indignation and disbelief.

The tension is more than my brother can handle and he suddenly guffaws with laughter. He tries to disguise it, but he splutters and spittle goes flying, and he makes a clownish attempt to contain it. I am so grateful to him. We are all laughing now.

“But you *are* nuts,” my father says again, and he gives me a mock little box on the arm. It is a gesture loaded with significance, for my father hasn’t touched me since my diagnosis, always afraid he could do me some harm.

By the time I reach my old teenage room, I am out of breath. I feel a deep burning in my chest and my muscles are trembling as if an electric shock has passed through them. I feel cold sweat running down my back and I’m freezing. Those few stairs up to the first floor have exhausted me. When I think of all my body has been through recently, the tremor in my legs strikes me as almost poignant. But that sort of response would entail a kinder attitude towards my body. Whereas in fact I’m pretty mad at it for leaving me in the lurch just short of my twentieth birthday and abandoning me to that illness from hell. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to forgive it.

If I weren’t on my own right now, this would doubtless be the cue for a sermon on the unity of body, mind and soul. A riff on the power of self-healing and all the rest. I have had plenty of time to chew over this subject and theoretically I can see the appeal of the concept. But it is less easy in practice when your body insists on producing mutated blood cells that will kill you. How can you feel empathy for, and cooperate with, a body like that? It sounds a bit like the Stockholm syndrome to me.

I stretch out on the bed beneath the slanting eaves and pull the covers up to my chin. My heart is beating frantically like a frightened bird. I focus and try to breathe rhythmically, calmly, in and out. This always proved elusive at the hospital yoga class. Find your inner centre, yeah, right.

I am slowly warming up. So, here I am. Back home. What now?

I check my watch. Almost noon. Time for the lunchtime trays in the ward. Today is Monday: chicken fricassee with rice. Quark and tinned fruit for dessert. I can almost smell it, that warm, heavy pong of food that cuts through the clinical hospital smells. Until it has almost all gone, and the air-conditioning system inhales in exemplary yogic rhythm, filters, and exhales.

There is something to be said for the regimental routine of the hospital. The monotony sustains those in that state halfway between despairing self-pity and an almost reckless self-abandonment to fate. 7:00 – wake up, produce the morning urine sample, temperature and blood pressure readings, small-talk with the nurses and carers, and the daily challenge of cracking the best – that is to say the worst possible – cancer joke. 7:30 – breakfast, then shower, brush teeth, give the body a once-over for any notable changes, which are to be discussed during the ward round between 8:30 and 9:00. Next it's time for infusions, the distribution of medicine, and blood tests, then a change of bedclothes, followed by watching TV, sleeping, gargling with sage tea, pacing the corridor, or phoning. 12:00 – lunch, then watching TV, sleeping, gargling with sage tea, pacing the corridor, or phoning. In between times, cracking cancer jokes to annoy the grumpy cleaning brigade. Depending on blood-test results there may be blood or platelet infusions and the associated daily digressions into the realm of HIV. Sometimes allergic reactions to infusions may occur, and then it's time to press the emergency button and wait for the cortisone injection to take effect. When that happens, fall into an immediate deep sleep and waken just in time for the evening meal. If no allergic reaction, the day continues with visiting-time from 15:00. Talk with the respective visitors about a variety of innocuous subjects until both parties are exhausted and take their leave from one another with thinly disguised relief. 17:30: evening meal. Followed by phoning, pacing the corridor, gargling with sage tea and watching TV. Brush teeth. 22:00 onwards – sleep.

I'm not saying I miss it. As of today, I'm free to do whatever I want. I've been waiting for this for months. So why am I not going out to the garden? The summer sun is shining and I bet it's lush, bursting with colour. When you have spent months in the isolation unit you imagine that the desire for fresh air, for sun and being out in nature will be all-consuming. I don't feel quite ready for it. So I simply lie still and try to contain the expectations of the delight in it all.

There is a cautious knock at the door. "Nina?"

My Mum. She opens the door and looks in. She is surprised to find me under the covers. "Are you feeling cold?"

"Not really." I shake my head, but make no move to get up.

"Wouldn't you prefer to be out in the garden? It's such a lovely day."

"Not right now. Later on, though, for sure." I smile serenely. I don't want my mother to worry.

"How about something to eat?"

"As long as it's not chicken fricassee."

My mother smiles. "Lasagna."

"On my way."

Mum nods and shuts the door behind her. I stare at the ceiling and try to listen in to myself. Perhaps my lack of desire for butterflies, flowers and birdsong is a worrying sign. But my sudden appetite for lasagne gives me hope.

We are always being told to avoid sun-beds. They are bad for our health and can cause cancer. I'm not going to argue with that. I happen to agree that leathery, bronzed skin straight out of the socket is madness personified. And yet sun-beds have earned a place in my heart – it is thanks to my one and only visit to the Sunpoint Studio that the cancer in my body came to light. Not that I recognised it as such.

Bahar and I had been waitressing for weeks to get the money together for a holiday in Sardinia and had just collected our tickets from a small travel agency. We were in that exuberant, verging on the hysterical, frame of mind that excludes the rest of the world when we happened to pass by a tanning studio that drew the eye with its neon-coloured offers. “Come on!” cried Bahar, “Let’s get our first roasting!”

That was fine by me. Ten minutes on the sun-bed couldn't hurt. So in we went, coughed up, and, amid much laughter, were zapped in our respective ultra-violet coffins. We agreed afterwards that our skin smelled funny and all our tanning salon prejudices were justified.

Then Bahar asked suddenly, “What are all those little spots on your skin?”

It was true. My body was covered in red freckles. Particularly my arms and legs, and, brushing my teeth that night, I noticed they were inside my mouth, too. It must be some kind of sun allergy, I thought. I'm sure somewhere in my subconscious a niggling voice questioned whether a sun allergy could be this acute. But if doubts did surface, they were easily quashed.

There was no ignoring the sudden flu that flared up that night though. I was woken by the pain. My whole body was aching inside. And I really mean inside. My bones hurt. My arms, my legs. Worst of all was the pounding pain in my hipbones. It was as if my entire body had a migraine. It was three in the morning and my temperature was nudging forty degrees. My body hurt so much that I could not lie still, but I was too

weak to get up. I was freezing cold and the duvet felt incredibly heavy as if covered with quickset cement. I spent the next few hours sweating and tossing about in bed. At some point I made it through to the bathroom on all fours and swallowed two pathetic aspirin, which had no effect whatsoever. I had never experienced a physical state like it. And yet I reprimanded myself for this self-pity. What a fuss to be making over the flu! The pain persisted and at the end of my tether at eight in the morning I dragged myself to the nearest doctor's surgery. When the receptionist informed me that without an appointment and without a referral there was no chance of being seen, I lost it completely and started to wail: "But there is something wrong with me!"

I have never been the sort of person to create a scene in public, but that day I really went for it. I sobbed and howled about "sun-beds", "a migraine in my bones" and "going mad" until the other patients became my audience and the receptionist hustled me into the surgery kitchen and discretely shut the door.

I got to see the doctor without an appointment or referral. And as luck had it, the man in question was a doctor of internal medicine with an array of apparatus for checking bloods. I was back in front of him half an hour later and he was looking rather serious. There was something about his look that chased all the pain from my bones.

"I have your blood results here and there are some abnormalities." The doctor watched for my reaction. And I waited for him to say something reassuring. Because that is what doctors do, right? Along the lines of, "We've found something, but it's nothing to worry about."

But this one said nothing. So I asked, "What sort of abnormalities?"

"The blood tests have shown up an extremely high number of white blood cells. While that's not unusual for an infection, in your case the results are too high. There will have to be further examinations."

"What sort of examinations?"

The doctor reached for a sheet of paper from his printer with exaggerated care and held it between his fingers. “My colleagues at the hospital will explain.”

I swallowed. Hospital. Hmm. Okay.

He handed me the sheet of paper. “This is your referral. My ladies at reception will call you a taxi and I’d like you to make your way there immediately. Report to the emergency department. The drivers usually know where the entrance is.”

Under any other circumstances I would have bristled at the phrase “my ladies at reception,” but now it was another phrase that had lodged in my mind.

“Emergency department?”

When I was ensconced in the taxi, I did not make straight for the hospital, asking instead that the driver make a little detour to Bahar’s flat. Surely there was time enough for that. I had called her, and she was waiting outside.

Bahar sat down next to me on the back seat and looked at me searchingly. I gave a wry smile. “Sardinia may be a pleasure postponed.”

Bahar waved that aside. “That’s what holiday insurance is for.”

“Right. I’ll never call it a bourgeois luxury again.” We’d had a heated discussion in the travel agency because I hadn’t wanted to splash out on it. Naturally Bahar had soundly out-argued me.

“That doesn’t matter at all now,” my friend said.

“The emergency department?” the driver checked. “That’s right,” I replied. We drove on in silence.

Bahar was so tense that she gave off a kind of electric energy. It wouldn’t have surprised me if our hair had stood on end with static, floating up to the roof of the taxi. And if the driver were to let off a silent fart, the taxi might explode. I opened the window, breathed in deeply, and looked at the people on the street as we drove past. I was aware suddenly of a sense of farewell and the deep tug of melancholy.

Approaching the university hospital with its two tall towers of beds I tried to give myself an inner kick up the backside. In an attempt to lighten the mood, I put on my best cold-war accent, and mimicked the 80s graffiti: “Sometime there’ll be cancer, and nobody will come.”

Bahar and I looked at each other and burst out laughing. When I glanced in the rear mirror I could see the taxi driver was also suppressing a smile.

I sighed with relief. As long I was able to crack silly jokes, there couldn’t be anything too badly wrong with me.

But then a shock ran through me. I had just said the word cancer. And there was nothing funny about that.

“Do you fancy coming to a party?” my friend Isabelle asks when I call her in the late afternoon to let her know I’m back.

“Whereabouts?”

“Round at Florian and Karli’s – that crowd. It’s a house party.”

“And what’s the occasion?” I realise I am avoiding giving an answer. The mere thought of going to a party makes my blood run cold.

“Florian is off to India. He’s going to become one of those silent Buddhist monks. It’s his leaving party.”

“Oh, right.”

I barely know Florian, and I really don’t know what to say. I consider briefly whether being a silent monk would be a good option for me. It can be good sometimes to reflect anew and to explore possibilities hitherto unconsidered. But it’s clear. The answer is no. I wouldn’t mind the silence too much, but it’s the shaven head. Once was enough for me in this lifetime.

“Hello? Have you had a heart attack or something. Why aren’t you saying anything?” Isabelle laughs. And then there’s a brief pause. “Um, was that tactless of me?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I say.

“You’re not coming?”

“No, I meant, I don’t think your comment about the heart attack was tactless.”

Isabelle laughs again: “So you are coming to the party?”

Not wanting to say “no” again so soon, I say, “Yes.”

“Wow.” Isabelle is surprised. “There was me thinking you wouldn’t want to.”

“I can even drive us there. My parents have given me a car.”

“No way, really?” Isabelle squeals down the phone. “You are so lucky!”

In the grand scheme of things I think I'd put my luck in the modest category personally, but maybe everyone feels that way. I'm actually relieved that Isabelle still doesn't think before she speaks.

Isabelle and I met at riding club when we were both ten years old. To begin with all that connected us was our girlish belief that we had telepathic powers in understanding horses, but gradually we started to really like each other. We spent every day together and we even had the blessing of her stuck-up parents. For whatever reason Ma and Pa Taake considered me a suitable companion for their daughter.

Isabelle's mother had fully embraced the nouveau riche exotic creature look. She sported the make-up of a silent movie diva and wore dramatic dangling earrings and her hair, dyed a copper red, was cut in asymmetrical lengths. The father was less in thrall to fashion and simply wore whatever his wife bought for him in Hamburg. His smile was a gleaming flash of porcelain-white crowns and his youthful air was enhanced by blond highlights. He had two passions: Werder Bremen FC and big cars, upgrading to the latest model every couple of months. Isabelle's father had made his fortune by selling carports, and her mother owned a small gift boutique in Varrendorf's reduced-speed main street with a host of hideous objects that sold like hot cakes.

Isabelle suffered under her parents' swanky pretensions. It was only a question of time until she expressed her views about the gilt taps and the koi pond in the garden by skiving school, getting piercings, and looking as unkempt as possible.

And it was natural that our friendship, too, changed as the years passed. While the fifteen-year-old me still loved baking horse-treats from oats and honey and mucking out the stables, Isabelle took up smoking, snogging and being cool. When she outgrew her riding boots one day, rather than buying a new pair, she bought hash. I could hardly recognise her anymore.

I was left behind to listen to mother Taake's despairing laments about the hygienic and stylistic disappointment her daughter was. I shared the sense of abandonment, but for other reasons, of course.

Puberty hit me quite late and I was never able to catch up with Isabelle's head's start. I had crushes on boys at a distance but was too shy to ever follow up Isabelle's advice. I'd had the upper hand slightly at riding club before because I was the quieter one and horses seemed to like my presence, but now I was simply Isabelle's sidekick. The sober companion to her experiments with drink, drugs and boys, the person who trotted over with her telephone number, and held her hair back when she threw up. It didn't feel particularly great, but at least we were getting on better again. Besides it suited me to have this role at parties, the role of making sure Isabelle didn't succumb to alcohol poisoning or become pregnant. It meant everyone viewed me as the ideal friend and nobody noticed that I was the most boring girl in the world.

When I was getting chemo and it was my turn to have someone hold back my hair while I threw up, Isabelle wasn't there. When I asked her on the phone if she would be coming round soon, she hummed and hawed, muttered that she had a lot of stress, or that she had another cold and didn't want me to catch it, with my immune system being more or less non-existent. When Isabelle eventually ran out of excuses and couldn't put off visiting any longer, there was no hair to hold back.

It was the day after Bahar had shaved my head – my hair was coming out in clumps and it was prickly on my pillow. I was feeling totally lousy and ugly and powerless and stubbly-haired and sick. Then my door opened and in came Isabelle: blue hospital smock, a mask over her mouth, and gleaming, thick hair swaying loose down to her bottom.

I felt like thumping her.

But instead I said, “Gosh, that’s really thoughtful.”

“Huh, what’s that?”

“Your hair.”

Above her mask Isabelle’s eyes flickered with uncertainty, and it took her a moment to realise what I was referring to.

“Oh!”

We never really hit our stride again after that. Isabelle never returned to the hospital but we spoke on the phone about once a week. I was too caught up with my own stuff to get into a proper conversation with her about it. Against the backdrop of my diagnosis and with all the medication, which meant I sometimes spent days on end in a numb haze, her absence mattered less. To be honest I had never expected her to sit at my bedside every day holding my hand. I couldn’t claim that the illness had brought us any closer but nor had it driven us apart. As it had Bahar and me.

Isabelle bounces into the car in a cloud of perfume. She has been washing again, epilating and the works, for a couple of years now. Her new way of rebelling against her parents’ smothering is to continue living at home although she left school over a year ago. It took very little effort for Isabelle to perfect her lack of purpose: she sleeps until noon, spends the rest of the day playing Minecraft on the internet, and goes out at night. All thoughts of her future professional life are on ice for an unspecified later date. Presumably she doesn’t feel great about this, but she doesn’t want to talk about it.

Isabelle won’t realise that since chemo I’m incredibly sensitive to smell, and I won’t mention it. I have made the firm decision that tonight I will behave like a normal human being and I will not talk about my illness. Isabelle won’t mind because she goes out of her way to avoid serious conversations and heavy subjects. I used to regard this as a weakness but I’m grateful for it right now.

Isabelle gives me a hug. “The short hair suits you.”

“And what do you think of my cheeks?” I inflate them even more to show her how god-awful I find them.

“Cute.” Isabelle smiles. “You look like that picture-book character, Little Hobbin.”

“You cow!” I turn the ignition key and the engine splutters and dies. Isabelle and I look at each other in surprise.

“But it’s insured until the spring,” I say, as if that made the slightest difference.

“We can always hitchhike.”

That is vintage Isabelle. Not “hopefully there’s nothing seriously wrong with your car”, but “how on earth will I get to the party?”

My response is unnecessarily grumpy: “Hitchhike?! I have not made it through a year of chemo to be driven into a tree by some drunk.”

Isabelle is taken aback, and the little line between her eyebrows that appears when she is stressed deepens. But then she recovers and addresses me, gently. So gently it is almost grotesque. As if I were a confused old biddy in a nightie washed up on a traffic island on a six-lane carriageway, practising my forward and reverse. “Now, let’s just try it again. Nice and slow.”

“Um, good idea.” Have I always been so snippy, or is it the cancer that has made me like this? I turn the key and press the accelerator. The engine splutters a few times and then purrs smoothly. We look at each other, and the tension between us evaporates. As it often does with Isabelle.

She navigates me along several kilometres of country road, then we turn off and jiggle over a criss-cross of tracks through fields and I almost run over a fox before we eventually arrive at an old farmhouse. It looks as if it might tumble down any moment. There is light coming from one of the open windows and music blares out. A few figures

are sitting in front of the house, some I half-recognise, a couple of old classmates among them.

I give a groan. “Okay, have fun. When should I collect you?” Isabelle ejects my seatbelt and the metal buckle whizzes past my face. “No way are you chickening out!”

Inside, the house has the look of recent abandonment and nomadic tenants. It is difficult to tell what is décor and what is simply being collected up until there’s enough to fill a skip and warrant the trip to the recycling yard. There is no light in the hallway and Isabelle and I have to clamber over a broken rocking horse to reach the next door. We step into a room illuminated by the blue-ish glow of a neon strip-light covered in dead flies. There are about ten people around the fold-down Formica table sitting on beer-crates and smoking joints. As well as the smell of marijuana there’s something else in the air that I can’t decipher. A dead animal perhaps, I don’t know. Once I’ve noticed it, the stench is so vile it makes me want to vomit on the spot.

“Hello!” Isabelle shouts out in high good spirits, and all the heads turn towards us. A couple of the faces are familiar, Florian’s among them. He is in the process of rolling a joint.

“Have you brought any food?” one of the others asks. He is perched somewhat lower than the others and has difficulty seeing over the table.

“Nope,” says Isabelle, helping herself to a beer from the tub. She sits down with the others and uses the table-top as a bottle-opener. There’s no conversation. The joint is passed round. I am still hanging about by the door.

“Jeez, man, what’s going on? Even my ass is falling asleep!” Isabelle whacks the table with the flat of her hand, and two or three of the guys start to giggle uncontrollably.

Isabelle grins and enjoys the effect. I have to smile, too, because she is always like this and I love it about her.

Florian asks loudly in my direction, “That’s you out of hospital?”

And the attention swiftly shifts. Suddenly everyone is looking at me curiously.

I nod and say, “Yes.”

Florian looks at me respectfully and says, “Cool.”

The guy with the munchies and the low seat pricks up his ears. “Why? What was wrong with you?”

I cast about for an answer that will save me from using the C-word. “Ummm.”

“Is that all you’ve got, nothing else?” Isabelle is pointing at the joints and unwittingly comes to my rescue.

“Ta-daaa!” A skinny girl pulls a pouch of dried mushrooms from her bag and all attention is now focused enthusiastically on her. The pouch is ripped open and passed around. Everyone takes a small mushroom and starts chewing on it. Isabelle does the same then holds the little bag up towards me with a grin.

“No thanks,” I say and wonder whether that was the right answer. Isabelle gives an indifferent shrug and passes the mushrooms along.

Was that wrong of me just now? Perhaps I survived cancer in order to make up for everything I was too fearful to try in my teenage years? A chance to really let go and explore all that drugs, alcohol and sex have to offer? Wasn’t one of the illness’s lessons that life is short and every minute should be used to experience everything to the full? Dive into life, not miss out on anything, ignore all boundaries and drink deep of human experience of the abyss, or something? Or is my task rather to fully focus on healthy nutrition and plentiful sleep and look for a job that will be fulfilling – I’ll make something perhaps, use my hands? Something practical, although that means conveniently forgetting that I never even have the patience to change the fitting on a drill to make the right size of hole for a wall-plug?

Halfway sensible questions, but not an answer in sight.

All I do know is I haven't the slightest desire to eat hallucinogenic mushrooms. I wish I did, but alas...

Standing in the doorway I watch Isabelle keeping the entire table entertained. She is in such a good mood and somehow this depressing atmosphere doesn't faze her. It's enviable. I'm feeling increasingly superfluous and have a sudden urge to wash my hands, so I leave the kitchen and go in search of the bathroom.

There are three doors in the hallway and I knock at the first one. When there is no answer, I open it and find myself in the bathroom. The tub is filled with washing in soapy water. I turn the tap, but nothing comes out. So I leave the room, shut the door, and take a cautious look at the second room. Two stained mattresses are hemmed in by stacks of books that have toppled over. I continue onwards. The third door opens to reveal a staircase leading down to the cellar. The smell I noticed when entering the house seems to emanate from here. Perhaps the loo is down there? There is often an unusual kind of architectural logic to these old places.

I find the light-switch immediately and a dim glow comes from the dark hole. It barely brightens the steps. I carefully feel my way with my toes down the rotten stairs. They creak but nothing breaks. The smell gets more intense with every step. I'm fairly sure now that it is not the sickly-sweet smell of a dead animal. It is something else, something I have never smelt before.

Nor seen before!

When I reach the bottom I can't believe my eyes. The cellar floor, an area of about seventy squared metres, is covered entirely by a carpet of white, hairy mould. As if a small herd of white, furry beings had curled up to sleep side by side, tightly packed. I stand stock-still and stare. It has a certain beauty. Like something from a fairy-tale.

I stand on the bottom step of the cellar stairs and the tendrils of mould touch my shoes. The carpet looks soft enough to sink into. I dare a first hesitant step, then a second. I leave deep traces in the cotton-wool whiteness and imagine I am walking on clouds. There is a sublime quality. A sky in the cellar, I think, and move into the centre of the space.

I stand there and look around, smiling. I have a tingling sensation in my belly, and there's a lightness in my heart. It is a little like being in love. I remember the feeling although it's eons since I felt that way. I realise I've missed it. So, this is how it feels to be happy. This is very thing that had slipped away from me.

And now I have it back again?

Where has it been, and where has it suddenly emerged from?

I start to rummage around in myself, as if opening drawers full of bits and bobs. There must be more of this, I want to hold onto it, it mustn't slip away again... At that moment the powerful scent of mould invades my nostrils again. Musty vapours. A stench of mildew and decay. A jolt of fear goes through me. I cannot believe that I haven't considered how poisonous this stuff must be! I almost died of a fungal infection a few weeks ago in hospital, and now I'm standing in the middle of the stuff as if it were a summer meadow!

I hardly dare breathe any more and I can sense the panic starting in my stomach and spreading rapidly in every direction. I am simultaneously nauseous and dizzy, cold sweat beads my brow. I want to run away, but my legs won't move. My heart is racing and I'm not sure how much longer my ribs can contain it. I cover my mouth with my hand as if my fingers can filter the poison out of the air. My knees start to wobble, they won't be able to hold me up much longer, and the fluffy furriness comes closer and closer. I lose my balance and tumble into whiteness.

My head hits the ground with a thud, and I'm surprised momentarily that the bed of mould is not soft after all, but rather mushy, and then – only blackness. Over and out.

I don't think I lose consciousness for long. When I open my eyes, the room has lost its magic of course. I sit up with a jolt, and feel only disgust. My hands, my jacket, my trousers, my hair – it's all covered with a layer of damp mould. A multitude of spores, everywhere. It is totally repulsive. I jump up and try to wipe off the poisonous strands that will probably cause my swift demise. I frantically swipe at myself – in vain. I've got to get out of here!

I storm clumsily up the stairs and clatter through the hallway. From the kitchen behind me I hear Isabelle's astonished voice. "Nina?" I race out of the house, through the muddy puddles to a thicket where I promptly throw up.

Shortly afterwards I am sitting in my car, freezing cold and shivering. I have stripped off all the mouldy clothes, and am now in my underwear and wrapped in the rescue blanket I found in the first-aid kit. The layer of foil is scratchy against my skin, but that hardly matters. Maybe I've got away with it once again. It's possible, time will tell.

But one thing is clear. I have to get out of here. The party is over for me. I take my mobile phone out of the cubby hole and type a text message to Isabelle: "Sorry. Don't feel too good. Will call tomorrow."

And then I scroll to the emoticons and consider which of the silly yellow faces is most appropriate for taking the edge off my abandoning act. First I choose the one with the halo then delete it. I try the winking face next. It's not quite right either. Finally I plump for the cancer-card selecting the smiley with a mouth-mask. A little nod at the leukaemia – part self-mocking, part subtle-as-a-brick. She can't hold it against me, can she? I realise it is a cheap trick when I had resolved to be as normal as possible this evening. But what happened just now was a full-blown panic attack, I was in turmoil, and

now I am wearing an emergency blanket. Extreme situations demand extreme measures.

Or something like that. I press “send” and drive off.