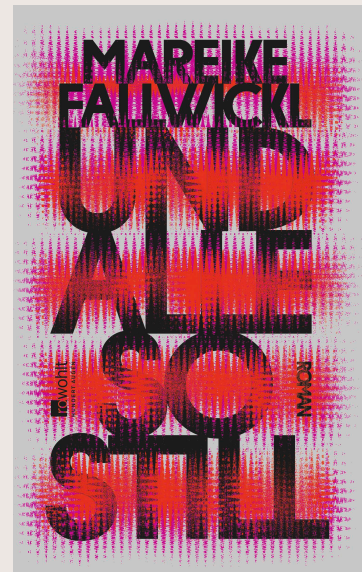


Mareike Fallwickl

AND ALL SO QUIET

Und alle so still

- A powerful feminist novel about dissent and solidarity.
- The old narrative of women being each other's worst enemies is played out. It is time for new stories!
- *Die Wut, die bleibt* sold 70,000 copies! Rights were sold to Croatia (Hena Com) and Poland (Muza).
- English sample translation available.



April 2024 · 368 pages

What if all women refused and went on a care strike?

Elin is in her early twenties and lives with her mother in a wellness hotel. During the lockdown, she became an influencer, and since then, she has been confronted with misogynistic hate online. Nuri comes from precarious circumstances and lacks a formal education. He now tries to make a living as a bicycle courier, hospital orderly, and food delivery driver. Late capitalism has a firm grip on him. Ruth is in her late fifties. After the death of her disabled son, she returned to work as a nurse in the hospital. Every day, she pushes her limits, and her sense of duty seems inexhaustible. One Sunday, all three find themselves in an unforeseen situation: in front of the hospital where Ruth and Nuri work, women are lying motionless, in silent protest.

It is the beginning of a revolt in which women no longer do what they have always done. Suddenly, everything that our system is built upon is called into question. Will Elin, Nuri, and Ruth seize the opportunity for change?

Mareike Fallwickl was born in Hallein near Salzburg in 1983. She is a freelance author and lives with her family near Salzburg. In 2018, *Dunkelgrün fast schwarz* was published, followed by *Das Licht ist hier viel heller* in 2019. Her bestseller *Die Wut, die bleibt* received acclaim from both critics and readers. The stage adaptation premiered at the Salzburg Festival in the summer of 2023. Mareike Fallwickl is committed to promoting literature, with a focus on female narrative voices.

**MAREIKE FALLWICKL
AND ALL SO QUIET**

[pp. 96–111]

ELIN

The women are lying as if someone has flung them down; there seems to be no pattern to their bodies. They look like smashed objects. But they're not injured. That had been Elin's first thought when her grandmother answered her mobile. Elin had called from the car the number Alma had given her with only a few words of explanation. Alma herself hadn't known what was the matter with her mother, Iris, and Elin had still thought that perhaps it was all a misunderstanding, perhaps she would be able to turn around and drive home.

'Where are you?' Elin had asked.

'On my way to the hospital,' Iris had answered. 'Are you coming?'

As if it were obvious that Elin was on her way, that they would meet there, and she couldn't think how to contradict this. She had listened to the sound of her grandmother's voice, and was suddenly happy that there were firsts in her life again. And had feared that her grandma was sick, or in danger; a broken hip, perhaps, or cervical cancer. That their first meeting might also be their last. She had imagined a thousand terrible things, but this ... this she had not anticipated.

The women have left the approach to the entrance free, a carefully delineated passage; they are not lying in the way. Elin gets out of the car and stands there. She feels tall and very upright in front of the prone women, a long-tailed rocket shooting up towards the sky. She cannot scrunch herself up, cannot gather herself in. She would like to get back behind the steering wheel and step on the gas. She wants to be gone, or beneath a bell jar. Only a few steps separate Elin and the women, but this is not just any distance. It is a fork in the road, the start of something, Elin can feel it.

Her fingers grope for the phone in her trouser pocket; she doesn't take it out. She mustn't flee now, mustn't read comments. It would distract her for a few minutes, but afterwards she would still be standing here not knowing what to do.

The problem is the pull of it. It draws her forwards and downwards, it wants Elin to come closer, to lie down as well. The idea is so tempting that she suddenly feels faint. Surrender to the tiredness, respond to all questions by never seeking answers ever again. Touch the back of her head or her cheek to the asphalt, close her eyes, lie parallel to the clouds. But stay awake, not even sleep any more.

She doesn't count the women on the ground; there are definitely more than twenty. What brought this group together? What happened while Elin was in the water, unsuspecting, without any thought of anyone making a stand?

But no one is making a stand, not even literally; no one is on their feet. Apart from Elin, and a few people who stop for a moment in the road, on the pavement; some walk on, shaking their heads; a couple take photos; bemusement drifts down the passage to the hospital entrance and back again. A woman holding a child by the hand steps out through the sliding doors and stops abruptly; Elin can't see her expression. She looks at the women, who are not moving and not shouting, who have no placards and no slogans; she is fighting the same pull as Elin. The woman's knees give way, twice, three times, they're ready to buckle, to let her body down onto the June-warm tarmac. What's stopping her is the hand holding the child. And because the hand is stronger, the woman eventually walks away, down the passage, as if it were a forest aisle and the women on the ground fallen trees. She walks fast, with the hurried steps of those who run because they want to stay.

Elin has often been abroad with her mother, to Paris, Barcelona, Istanbul; in summer to Croatia, Sweden, Greece. In Italy once they saw an old woman pass out in a market. One minute she was selling cheese on her stall, the next she had collapsed without a sound. Several other women, equally wrinkled and wizened, bent over her, shook her. What the hell, thought Elin, quickly getting out her water bottle; these women shouldn't have to work anymore, they should be sitting comfortably on a bench outside their house, reposing on the achievements of a lifetime, looked after by the rest of the world.

'Still independent in their old age,' Alma had said, impressed, as they walked over.

The glass door slides open again; a man in a white coat is pressing a phone to his ear and gesticulating. Two nurses are standing beside him, and now Elin starts to move. She has spotted her grandmother among the women, almost on the edge of the group, further up, towards the car park. 'I'm wearing a blue jersey,' Iris had told her on the phone. Elin found it embarrassing that she probably would not have recognised her own grandmother. She feels a twitch in her face, a pain in her chest. It could also be fear.

'Grandma,' she says, not knowing how to position herself, whether to sit or crouch down; she remains standing, lopsided, her body bent forwards. 'Grandma, are you all sick?' Iris has stretched out her arms and fingers; it almost looks as if she's trying to make a snow angel in the sun. Her long grey hair fans out around her head; there are sure to be little stones in it, and ants.

'Elin,' she says. 'We meet at last.'

So it's from you that I get my green eyes, thinks Elin, and tries to work out how old her grandma must be; she reckons seventy-six, but isn't sure.

‘Should I help you up?’ Elin asks, and notices that the other women are not looking at her. This is disconcerting, and also logical; they’re not lying here in order to see something, but in order to be seen.

‘No,’ says Iris. She has lots of wrinkles around her mouth and eyes, so many wrinkles, and Elin wasn’t there when they were created, was never part of her life. ‘You should lie down with me.’

She beckons to her, inviting her, as if she were sitting on a living room sofa in the Sunday afternoon light, with a walnut cake on the table. Elin imagines taking her grandma with her to the spa. She could introduce her to flotation. They could have the conversations they missed out on; they could hold hands, too, the very young hand in the very old one.

‘I can’t,’ Elin whispers.

‘Why not?’ asks her grandma.

And yes. Why not.

It looks so easy.

Elin straightens up, with an unusually great effort for such a small movement. Is this a silent protest? Was it announced on the old people’s networks, Facebook and Twitter, and she didn’t hear about it?

There must be demands; where have they been posted?

Elin rubs her hands together; they are cold. Everything in her is crackling, not just her mouth, not just her throat, the crackling is in her bones and in her veins, a dusty, hollow sensation.

Iris is smiling at her without speaking; and what does it mean, parentage? Elin was not created by the interplay of genes passed on in an act of love; she doesn’t even feel like the next generation of a family. She is a conviction incarnate. It would have been good to be able to talk to someone who knew her mother, someone who belonged and also had a degree of distance; to have an extended family. She cannot fight the slippery resentment that her mother made an unfair decision.

And just as she is about to ask Iris what’s going on here, the hospital worker who has suddenly popped up beside them asks instead. She kneels down, touches Iris on the shoulder with a practised gesture. These are the people who have made helping others their profession, those who are on the spot when someone is bleeding or choking, or simply lying in the road.

‘Mama,’ says the nurse, and Elin’s heart gurgles. She takes two steps backwards, stumbles over something she can’t see, staggers briefly, manages to catch herself.

‘Mama, what are you all doing here, do you need help?’ the woman asks.

Elin can’t understand what Iris murmurs in reply.

‘Is it because of the shortage of children’s medicines? We talked about it last week, you know our hands are tied. I’ve tried everything, I ...’

Iris reaches for the woman's hand. She has grey hair and a round back, blue hospital uniform stretched tight across it as she bends over Iris, pulls her towards her.

So many years have passed since Elin found the photo that now she sees before her. She took it, secretly, sneaking into Alma's drawer like a thief, but she feels she has a right to it. The photo is now in the glove compartment of her car, as if Elin thought she might have to show it, to identify herself, prove the connection.

She looks for signs of sadness in her grandmother's face, and there are none; looks for cheerfulness, and there is none. What there is, is a clear, all-encompassing resignation. A tremor scatters Elin's body into droplets; she cannot speak. She belongs to these two women; these two women are her origins, the nest she left behind.

Alma's sister turns to her, frowns; there is bewilderment in her eyes.

'Why are you —' she begins, and just at that moment the police arrive.

Alma's sister detaches herself from Elin, detaches herself from Iris, starts walking over to where the police cars are standing, stops after a few metres and seems to consider. Then she bends down to the other women on the ground, asks questions, touches wrists, looks around for her colleagues. Elin watches her, burning with curiosity. She wants to see whether her aunt will turn around to look at her again.

They recognised Elin, both of them. They knew what she looked like. Has Alma kept them informed, was maternal pride stronger than the desire to cut herself off from her family? Or are they among Elin's followers, that abstract mass of people who look at her photos, read her posts, follow her and think they know who she is?

Elin counts six police officers, who are glancing around, fingers hooked in their belts, feet apart and guns on their hips. One of the them marches up to the hospital, enters, and comes out again a minute later. He doesn't speak to the women he walks past. Elin waits for a wave of resistance, noises. If the women were to yell or shout slogans she could come to terms with the situation, fall back on what she knows: this is what protest looks like, this is what an outcry sounds like. But the silence is massive and leaden; they have lain down here, but they are actually somewhere else entirely.

On the way back to his colleagues, the policeman makes a gesture, the meaning of which is clear. The officers speak into their walkie-talkies several times, then two big police vans appear, with stripes and lettering. The crowd has grown, a cluster has formed, numerous phones are being held aloft.

She places a hand on her stomach, as if touching the surface could reveal to her something about the inside of her body, could answer the silvery question that glitters constantly at the edges of her consciousness. Because what's there is no longer just bewilderment; there is also a whirling fear.

Later, in a quiet moment, she will stop and think. Calculate. Which day of her cycle she is on, and what that means.

The policeman shouts through a megaphone that the women are endangering the security of the populace and demands that they leave immediately, and although that is not true, although many people have gone into and out of the hospital since Elin has been standing here, and in any case the ambulances arrive on the other side near A&E, no one contradicts him. As his artificially amplified voice booms out across the square, some who until then had just been watching lie down on the ground. Extend the expanse of bodies. Two men with narrowed eyes and jutting chins tug at the women who have lain down.

‘Please get up and go home,’ the officer says, and part of Elin hopes that the women will listen to him, that the fuss is over and she can invite her grandma for a coffee; she would like to talk, that’s all. I hate my job, she could say to her, because she can never say it to her mother; I should be happy and I’m not, I don’t know any more what my body felt like before thousands of people commented on it, I can’t see it through my own eyes any more.

‘I hope you haven’t glued yourselves down,’ a policeman shouts; then the emergency services get to work. They lift the women up; they carry them away, two officers per woman, and no one resists. They say nothing, they don’t thrash, they don’t yell. They sag as they are carried off, as if in any case they were incapable of walking unaided. Elin has seen enough pictures of demos and police operations to recognise the pain-compliance holds some of the men in uniform are using, for no reason. The women do not react; they are probably well beyond feeling specific pains.

Elin glances at her car. It would be so easy to get in, drive away and never think again about these women’s bodies lying on the early summer ground, in a pattern of heaviness Elin didn’t initially recognise. Alma’s sister turns away and marches straight back towards the hospital. She has to go back in; she’s needed. Elin catches her grandmother’s eye. She goes back over to her, kneels down.

‘Grandma, you have to come with me now,’ she says, ‘you have to stand up, you have to ... be normal again.’

She tries to instil some urgency into her voice so that Iris understands: it’s serious.

‘What are they going to do to us that they haven’t already done?’ says Iris quietly.

She opens her arms wide, and it happens astonishingly fast. Elin gives in, gives way, sinks down.

The heaviness, held at bay for so long, drags her down with it. Now her grandmother closes her arms, closes them around Elin. Something clicks into place, clearly audible, and Elin feels relief, greater than any feeling she has ever had before. The sky is pale, the droplets fall back to her like hail. She breathes in the scent: this is her grandmother. She is embraced by her, presses herself against her,

nuzzles her head against her shoulder. Lie, lie, just lie there. Without tensing a single muscle. How could she have known that it felt so good?

Soon police hands will grab hold of her, soon she and her grandmother will be pulled apart. Elin looks at the hospital entrance. At the door, Iris's other daughter, perhaps sensing Elin's gaze on the back of her neck, stops, turns her head, searches, looking anxious, finds Elin. Their eyes lock across the distance. If I had a sister, thinks Elin, she would be my light, I would raise her up and trust her like no other. Her aunt is not very tall, with a broad, sturdy body and something brisk about her, and Elin looks for similarities. They must be there, they simply must.

THE REPORT

The 'prisoners of love' effect says teachers develop a close bond with the children they look after. This bond goes hand-in-hand with caring and responsible professional ethics. And because they are 'prisoners of love', they don't go on strike. This is true of all those who do care work: they are emotionally involved. They empathise with those they look after. They resign themselves to society's contempt, low remuneration, shitty working conditions. They do not join forces to fight collectively for their own interests. You have found an expression for this as well. The martyred heart. You name phenomena, and then you still don't talk about them. And you do it with such magnificent pathos. The martyred heart. Or, no, wait, let me be more precise, we want to be truthful at last, don't we. In truth – you know it as well as I do – the martyred hearts belong, of course, to women.

NURI

With every meal he delivers, his anger grows. He is so furious that he takes tips without saying thank you; he would like just to snatch them, he would like to growl. But then there would be a complaint, and he can't afford that. He can't afford anything. And because his money is gone, because he is now someone who doesn't have a home, he thinks of the vomit in the club toilets, the hours he has scraped and mopped and cleaned for nothing. He has done all this work for free and has wasted hours of his life. He is nineteen and he feels as old as a lump of earth.

People are lazy on Sundays, they don't want to cook. They have to recover from the working week, from looking after the children and earning money; they want someone to bring them their food. Someone like Nuri.

Six euros seventy-one per hour is what he's left with after all the deductions. He's worked it out. A certain amount is not paid out but converted into vouchers for a bike shop where they can buy

replacement parts. Except that they cost three times as much there as in a normal shop. But if you say: I'm not doing it any more, no, I won't let myself be sent all over the place and hassled by alerts from the app and almost run over at every crossroads, I won't let myself be barked at by dogs and shoved off my bike by teenagers, then someone else will do it. Someone is desperate enough. The company measures Nuri's data, all of it. His speed and how long he spends with each customer, how many orders he fulfils; then he gets mails comparing his stats with the other riders'. Supposedly, the top ten get a bonus. No one has ever heard of a rider who has.

Nuri, carrying a bag of fruit smoothies, presses a buzzer, and no one answers. He's about to lose his nerve. If he waits too long, he gets an automated monitoring call from a robotic voice. He's sweating beneath the neon-green helmet and the square box on his back; he would like to throw them both on the ground.

The intercom crackles, and he hears: 'Fifth floor, lift's broken.'

Nuri drops the bag of smoothies, right there in front of the white-painted wooden front door.

'Come fetch your shit yourself!' he shouts, turns, and swings himself onto his bike. Instead of accepting another job, he rides to the dispatch centre. Pedals so fast he can feel his lungs; they hammer right up to his throat. Even though his brain knows better, his heart wishes that his mother were standing there, his father too, both of them; they would apologise and say he should come home, it's no good without him, but of course they have no idea that he works here.

He is all alone in the world.

There's no one in the dispatch centre; they're all using Sunday to get as many rides as possible. Nuri's mobile vibrates; he ignores it. How do you explain that this informational asymmetry is stressful? How do you say: they know how often I go for a shit, but I don't even have a way of contacting them?

He takes a water bottle from the rucksack he had stuffed in the locker, finishes it. He leans against the wall with the poster. There are five golden rules printed on it; Nuri had to learn them off by heart, like a kid in primary school: the customer is always right, punctuality is the starting point, not the aim; friendliness costs nothing; it's a privilege to be a service provider; as a team, we can do anything. He pinches the slightly rippled bottom edge and calmly rips a broad strip from the middle, all the way to the top. He folds the strip up smaller and smaller, sticks it in his water bottle, shakes it absently.

It's only when he hears voices that he realises he has fallen asleep. He sees Mrisu and Kay squatting on the floor opposite him. Nuri's body aches. He swallows several times; the bad taste doesn't go away. A glance at his watch tells him he's missed the best slots, but he doesn't get annoyed. He wouldn't have had the strength to make use of them, and in any case the plan for today was to get

some sleep at last. In his bed, at home. Instead he fell asleep on the cold tiles, propped up against the wall with the ruined poster. There are no chairs and no tables. They're not meant to hang out here.

Kay hands him a half-full bottle of cola; Nuri takes a grateful swig, and, at Kay's nod, a second. They are holding their phones and talking in their language, which combines syllables differently and denies Nuri access. A box of pizza lies between them. Sometimes the riders are given something for free, because the restaurant got the order wrong or no one came to pick up. Mrisu gestures to Nuri to take some and smiles briefly, not so much with his mouth, more with his eyes. He has bloody scratches on his forehead; perhaps he fell over. Nuri doesn't say was that an accident, or you ought to claim for that, do you need help. He knows what happens if one of them is injured during working hours.

Nothing.

The lumpy white cheese clogs his throat; Nuri struggles not to choke. He hasn't eaten anything since breakfast, and then he was still sitting next to her at the table, she was still mending the worn-out clothes. It feels as if it was weeks ago, not hours; as if he has been drifting away for so much longer, on a splintered board, out of control.

The app is their boss; there is no supervisor or person in charge, this would be another position that would have to be paid. They log on, log off, deliver the orders until their time runs out and their energy with it. Nuri's coccyx hurts; so does his back. Mrisu pushes a second slice towards him. No one says a word.

'Sex?' asks Nuri, pointing to the smartphones in the two men's hands as they put their heads together and continue talking; they must be swiping on Tinder or Grindr, arranging a date for after their showers.

Kay shakes his head.

'Work,' says Mrisu, tapping his screen.

Nuri gobbles down the second slice of pizza. He should have put it all in a bank account, of course. It was stupid to keep the cash in his room, very stupid, but it felt more real to him than abstract numbers in an online bank. He doesn't want to spend the money that's left; it's his cushion. He hasn't fallen through all the social safety nets, not yet. Still, he doesn't know where he's going to go tonight. A room in a shared apartment costs six hundred and fifty a month, a studio flat even more, and he hasn't saved enough to pay a deposit of three months' rent. He went to two viewings, full of optimism; they showed him the apartment and the cleaning rota in the kitchen, where he drank weak herbal tea and answered questions. Afterwards, his whole body felt hot, as if his skin had been crying. It was obvious to him that he couldn't live with students, that he didn't belong in their world, and no one from the flatshares ever called him back. He was ashamed of having nurtured any hope.

'Where do you live?' he asks, interrupting the incomprehensible language.

A hostel would be possible. He has seen online that you can get a bed in a twelve-person dormitory on the outskirts of town from twenty euros. Better than nothing, to begin with.

Kay looks up. He has long black hair that falls to his shoulders, a skin tone like Nuri's mother's.

'Live ... where do you ... sleep?' asks Nuri, more quietly now. He doesn't know what he's doing. They're hardly going to invite him to come with them.

'Work,' says Mrsu again, and then they show him the app they've got open.

After military service, Nuri went to Jesolo for a few days with Valentin and two others. They took a room in a rundown hotel; Valentin complained about the lack of comfort and claimed it had looked better on the website. The others didn't care, they just wanted to bake in the sun and spent most of the time drunk.

Nuri ordered 'acqua minerale senza gas' and calculated very carefully, because he had to get by on twenty euros a day. The others talked about holidays with their parents, sandcastles and irritating younger sisters. Nuri stood on the beach at the water's edge and watched the waves lap over his feet. His heart folded outwards and stretched itself over his skin. He was by the sea for the very first time.

[pp. 121–137]

ELIN

Her grandmother's house is huge. Elin spots a swimming pool and pool house in the garden. She pictures two girls growing up here together. Playing tag among the white sheets on the washing line, plastic watering cans in hand; she pictures strawberry-stained faces and secret whispers in a summer-warm bedroom.

And then? What was it that separated them?

The police let the women go after just a short time. Elin couldn't answer any of the questions as to why and what for; an irritated officer took her details and advised her to go home. 'Let's all go to mine now,' said Iris, 'and then we'll see.' Elin went along with the other women; she was also curious. She doesn't know what will happen next. But she's not going to face her mother right now, that's for sure.

As the women enter the house together, Elin slips in through the door with the group. They have just crossed the threshold when her grandmother puts her arms around her.

'Elin,' says Iris, in a tone that places something soft in the hollow between neck and shoulder that will remain there for a long time.

Some of the women are Iris's age, others considerably younger, one as young as Elin. She is tall, with long black hair, a denim jacket and a wide belt. Her forearms and hands are bandaged. Elin wants to ask her what she's called, but doesn't dare. She keeps an ear out, hoping that one of the others will speak to the tall woman and say her name.

They improvise a dinner of pasta, toast, cheese and preserved cherries that Iris fetches from the cellar. The many visitors haven't made her panicky; in fact, none of the women seem stressed, rather surrounded by a heavy, grey exhaustion. They don't talk much; they have a tacit understanding that Elin finds fascinating. As if they've had a lot of time to prepare for this situation. But most of them don't even have a change of clothes with them, which indicates to Elin that there must indeed be a certain spontaneity to it all. How different the women are, and yet attuned to each other. One hand passes to another, as if they were a single entity with many hands, as if they had already done this a thousand times before, put water on to boil, fetched plates from the cupboard, opened the fridge, filled glasses, washed cutlery, put butter on the table. And they have. In other kitchens; that's the only difference.

The peaceful atmosphere makes Elin restless; she wants to shout let's start a revolution; she wants to whisper let's stick together. Shouldn't another, bigger initiative follow on from such a beginning? Is this the ultimate feminist strike her mother has often invoked in theory? Elin feels hot waves on her skin just thinking about it.

So many women.

So many.

The breath that comes out of their mouths when they whisper, the skin on their elbows that would feel rough beneath Elin's fingers, the bruises on their shins where they've bumped into the corners of beds, the soft hairs at their temples.

Elin can't swallow anything, because it's so beautiful and so scary. The young woman with the bandaged arms has little twigs caught in her hair on the back of her head; Elin keeps looking over at her. When she finally catches her name, her heart is briefly flooded with heat. Charlie. She's called Charlie.

If someone could see into this house now, see this random collection of women, these haggard faces, it would be clear: it's true. Utter exhaustion is the norm. And it takes the weighed-down shoulders of the other women for Elin to admit to herself for the first time that it's true of her, too. That she feels powerless, impotent. Inconceivably tired. She could never tell her mother I can't go on. Because Alma has internalised the idea that women who are not happy have only themselves to blame, has based her whole life on it.

Again, Elin feels the yearning flare up inside her, clearer this time than ever before: for her life to change. Preferably right now.

‘What are we going to do next?’ she asks, casting the question into the warmth, the comfortable silence after the food and the clearing away.

‘I don’t want to do anything else,’ answers Iris, and some of the others nod. She observes her hands, stretches out her fingers, looks at the lines and furrows, the wrinkles and veins on the backs of her hands, and Elin suspects that everything her grandmother has done, year after year, has had to do, is documented in these traces on her skin.

‘But if we don’t explain ourselves, the world won’t understand what the problem is,’ Elin protests.

Iris raises her eyes.

‘The world knows exactly what the problem is,’ she replies.

‘We don’t want to have to keep on saying that women are people, too,’ Charlie adds, and her joining the conversation fills Elin with a nervous watchfulness, while at the same time she has to resist the impulse to move closer to Charlie, much closer. She hardly dares look her in the eye.

‘We don’t want to fight for our rights any more,’ says the next woman, ‘because how awful is that? The fact that we fundamentally have no rights, unless we expend an incredible amount of energy and time to snatch a tiny scrap of equality, which they take from us again at the first opportunity. We’re completely broken. We give up.’

Elin would automatically have contradicted her, but in the women’s words and faces she senses a finality she cannot argue with. And she senses relief. That at last it's been said out loud. Charlie’s gaze is soft and intense; I see you, this gaze whispers, I recognise you, and that frightens Elin to her core. Everything in her stands still: it is impossible for her to turn away from Charlie.

‘Let’s go to sleep,’ murmurs Iris, and Elin wonders what sort of person she is. Was she a good mother? Or did she do something that gave her younger daughter no choice but to break with her? ‘She chose him, every single day,’ Alma had explained to her once, meaning her father. ‘It would absolutely have been possible for her to lead a different life.’ Elin searches Iris’s face with hungry eyes, her shoulders, her hands, her slender body. What sort of life would that have been?

As the women collect blankets, mattresses, pillows, Elin realises that she needs a moment alone. To take a breath and process what has happened. To wrap her arms around her body and squeeze tightly, without anyone seeing. She leaves the living area and enters the smallest bedroom at the end of the corridor. How many adults will fit in a double bed like this? Will the woman be lying next to her touch her accidentally? How is she supposed to fall asleep so close to someone else?

She turns around, but no one has followed her; they have sensed her need and want to give her space, out of respect. She hears quiet laughter from the living room; water rushes above her head.

She hesitates, goes back out into the corridor, suddenly missing the women's proximity; she wants to slip under one of the blankets, into a clump of women, next to Charlie, who will surely have taken off the denim jacket, or perhaps needs help with it, because of her bandages; Elin could ask if she might pick the little twigs out of her hair. Then she hears a key in the front door, runs to the empty bedroom and hides there. It must be her grandfather coming home.

She listens to his noisy footsteps and quiet cursing. Where has he been, what does he look like, what sort of man is he? She has Googled the practice he heads, to get a look at him, but the photo on the website must be twenty years old. Elin didn't quite manage to shut the door, and she doesn't want to draw attention to herself. Carefully she sits down on the bed, turns off the light.

'You were arrested!' she hears, accompanied by a bang; her grandfather has probably slammed his fist on the table. Iris's answer is too quiet; Elin hears the accusations and the reproaches, but not how her grandmother justifies herself. Was Alma right? Does Iris represent the classic image of the acquiescent, dependent woman? In the few conversations they'd had about her grandmother, Alma had railed against her as conservative, because Iris had just had children, taken care of the household and supported her husband, without ever realising her own dreams.

'You can't blame her for the system that wants exactly that from us women,' Elin had replied. 'It was her decision, too,' Alma had answered, and Elin could not dissuade her mother from individualising certain problems.

Elin had never made any effort to contact Iris herself. It was more comfortable that way. And easier in general to oppose Alma with words alone. There was enough going on in her life already, and in those rare moments when she thought about her grandmother, she was insecure and defiant. Persuaded herself that Iris wanted nothing to do with her granddaughter, anyway. Because there was just this tremendous silence.

Elin slowly lets herself sink down again. What would her mother do in this situation? No doubt about it: she would crash into the kitchen and yell back, confront her father, and the longer Elin lies motionless on the bed, the more her body dissolves into the mattress, has no contours, no border underneath it.

'You're still my employee!' she hears her grandfather say. 'And what are people supposed to think, hm? They gossip already as it is. And then you go and pack my house full of strange women!' Incredible: Grandpa doesn't seem to care that they can hear him.

'We'll go to the practice tomorrow morning at seven, same as every Monday, and when we get back your weird friends will be gone, is that clear?'

What had her mother been thinking, sending Elin into this situation? To the people she'd kept her away from all her life? Why didn't she come herself?

'And in the meantime, you'll wash and iron me a shirt,' he says. 'You can't just stop doing what you've done all your life; what would become of us then?'

Alma had told Elin once that Iris and Peter had met as students; they've been married for more than fifty years, but what does that actually mean, what kind of insurance is that supposed to be? It only takes a moment to pick up a kitchen knife. Elin has the lavender scent of the bed linen in her nostrils and wonders whether this was once Alma's room, the one where she is now merging with the mattress. Whether her mother lay awake here as a girl, on the same spot, so close to the kitchen wall, unable to fall asleep because of the argument and the gaps in it, fingernails gouging her palms. She knows so little about Alma's life; all she knows is what it is now.

The sudden silence makes Elin leap up. She hurries over, because the argument has come to a halt like a whimper being stifled. She is bracing herself to scan the floor for traces, for an injured grandmother, but she stops in the doorway. Iris is standing in the kitchen surrounded by Charlie and the other women. The grandfather is gone. They didn't stay in the living room, behind the wall, faces buried in blankets, thinking this is none of our business. They got up and came and stood behind Iris. Silently, and this is impressive: that these women got a man to leave the room, in his own house, without saying a single word.

Elin takes two steps back, observing the women, who are inclining their heads towards each other and towards Iris; it is not an embrace, but something like it. What is going on here? Elin looks at the open door at the other end of the corridor, behind it the flickering of the blinds, the darkness, the mattress; then she looks back at the entwining in the kitchen, like an invitation for which Elin has no words. Something is shifting, and it is not happening in the framework or under the conditions she expected.

She brings with her the whole feminist package, her mother's influence plus the knowledge she has acquired, the complete set of terminology, campaign slogans, strategies; she has been reading about it for years. But none of it can be applied to what is happening here. She presses herself against the wall, reaches for the phone in her trouser pocket, opens the app, sways back and forth in the half-dark on cold toes, pulse racing; she swipes right to match, swipes right, swipes right.

NURI

He doesn't care who he chats with, the main thing is to get a response. He doesn't even really look at the photos. What he needs is a connection. The fact that someone else is still awake and looking at a

little glowing device, at squares with letters on them, will help. When a match pops up, he can feel the hardness of the skin on his cheeks. As if the face of a mummy were stretched across his skull. The chat window opens, and without thinking he types the truth: i can't sleep it's too dark and they're breathing so loud

He returns to the photos to go on swiping; not much longer, soon it'll be morning; not much longer and he will have survived this night, the panic will subside or be easier to hide in the light of day. He'll ask Pedro did you have nice dreams and hope he says yes, even if it's a lie.

Nuri was fourteen when he had his first kiss, and it was a long time before there was a second. The girl was called Melina; she was the twin sister of a friend he would hang out with in the playground, drinking cans of beer. There was hardly anywhere on the estate for them to be; the playground had somewhere to sit, and there was something ridiculous about it, because they had grown out of it long ago. It was important to treat the swings and slides with contempt, to stub cigarettes out on them or spit on them. They threw bang snaps at people and filmed their reactions; they put the videos online but got hardly any likes. Melina probably kissed him out of boredom, or it could have been a dare. He had thought too much during the kiss itself, and even more afterwards. Whether he had kissed too sloppily, too fast, too sluggishly, whether his mouth had not been open wide enough, and whether Melina had laughed about him with her friends. He imagined her imitating him – and then he twisted his tongue around – and got so hung up on the idea that he was never able to talk to her again. Melina avoided him, too, after that.

He observes a nonchalance in other men, especially Valentin. The way they move in the world, even when they know that someone's looking at them. They never have to forge a path. They stride along it, as if they have every right to do so.

He kicks the musty blanket off his legs. Pedro is snoring above him, probably dreaming of nothing.

Nuri's second kiss was one year ago, and it was just fooling around. Nothing to get excited about. It wasn't even Nuri himself who lost the bet, but Thomas with the incredibly thick eyelashes and the very short fingernails. The others conferred amongst themselves, and it was no surprise to Nuri that they considered a kiss between men a suitable punishment. But why with him? Is it something he gives off, something they sensed without being able to put their finger on it? All he knows is that the second kiss of his life was a communal joke, a source of laughter, that Thomas would never voluntarily have pressed his lips to Nuri's: and yet. They were soft, those lips, and Nuri would like to believe the kiss was gentler and longer than it needed to be. Thomas had immediately wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and Nuri had followed suit; the laughter saved them from having to say anything.

Where shall we meet?

Nuri's thumb pauses above the phone screen. Then he taps the message; it's from the woman he matched with earlier. She's two years older than him, and in the photo her eyes are so green that he wonders if there's a filter on it. He stares at the sentence, the question that has exploded in front of him in the night like a bang snap in the playground; he only wanted to chat. He wasn't thinking of an actual meeting.

He exhales loudly and falls back on the saggy mattress. The phone display goes dark. He could ignore the bang snap, the way some of the people they filmed did; he could turn around and close his eyes, with a bit of luck he could even go back to sleep. Wait. If he doesn't make a decision, nothing can happen to him.

In his mind's eye he suddenly sees his mother rubbing cream into his father's shoulders, and he remembers the smell. Sharp and medicinal, to relax the tense muscles; a daily procedure, conducted every evening in silence, and although it was a form of touch, it was distant, a false intimacy. Tired, heavy movements. All the same, Nuri had wished, watching them, that they were his shoulders his mother was stroking, even if the stinky ointment would have brought tears to his eyes.

Once, in the playground, he had pressed his palm down on a protruding nail so that his mama would have to stick a plaster on it. She had dabbed schnapps on it with a handkerchief; it had burned like hell, but she held his hand tight as she did it. And stroked his head soothingly afterwards.

The air around him has a consistency he could cut into slices. Hastily, Nuri sits up.

in the park by the roses, he writes, and forwards a link to Google Maps.

When he sees the answer, he gropes for his shoes in the darkness.

I'll be there in 20 minutes.

Valentin wasn't there for the kiss with Thomas; there's that, at least. Nuri has wondered whether Valentin would have gone along with it and shouted *snog! snog!*, or whether he would have stood in front of Nuri and said leave him alone. Either would have been humiliating. His chats with Valentin consisted of memes and emojis, with days of silence in between, and Nuri wonders whether that's the way it is with men, that they would like to deepen their friendships with each other and trust each other with things, but instead they just slap each other on the back, grin and nod to each other, analogue and virtually. Instead of opening a sex app and madly matching with women, he could have sent Valentin a message. He could have written *are you awake or I have a pain in the left side of my chest, if I go on like this I won't make it to old age, or help me.*

She is leaning against the park gate, and when she peels herself away and walks towards him an irrational delight bubbles through his body. Nuri gets off his bicycle; it must be obvious to her now that she's taller than him, that he doesn't fulfil even the basic criteria of manliness, but what he sees in her eyes is not disappointment. It's relief. Immediately, Nuri feels ashamed. She's meeting a stranger at three o'clock in the morning, and she's a woman, of course she's relieved that he doesn't appear threatening. In an unconscious gesture he lowers his head and turns his right palm upwards, the palm that had needed the plaster, the touch-me-at-least-for-a-moment palm, to show her: *I won't hurt you*. When he bends down to lock the bicycle, she touches his shoulder; for a moment Nuri closes his eyes.

'Are you really called Elin, like your profile?' he asks, straightening up. She nods; he tells her his own name.

'Four letters,' she says, and they smile at each other, because something in common is always a start.

'The park isn't locked,' she says, pointing to the iron gate, a dark blot in the glow from the streetlamp, and Nuri likes her hair. Likes her long, tall physique; she comes across as gangly and somehow unstable; he likes her voice, too. Scratchy, as if she's been singing in a concert for hours and laughing overexcitedly.

He would have no hesitation about bawling a song out into the night with her.

The scent of the roses seems to him unpleasantly sweet, rotten, like fruit that's gone brown in the sun. Perhaps it's because the daytime scents that superimpose themselves on everything are absent. They close the park gate behind them.

The shadows behind the creaking bushes send adrenaline coursing through his blood. If animals had approached him, smaller and larger ones, would they have perceived him as someone harmless, or as an intruder? Uncomfortable as the filthy bunk bed was, he is grateful for it now.

'If I had to spend the night here,' he says, 'I'd be scared until dawn and beyond.'

Elin walks close beside him; her silver hair is illuminated from behind.

'I was at my grandparents' house,' she says. 'There are a lot of women there right now. I feel unsure of myself around women.'

He turns to her; he would like to whisper thank you.

Thank you for responding with honesty to my offer of being honest.

Thank you for being here.

They've left the roses behind; it smells metallic and damp now, as in places that don't get enough light. His body is on high alert, watchful and ready to react. He doesn't know whether it's because of the scurrying sounds in the shadows or because of Elin.

'I think that sometimes, when people walk through the night together, it's the start of something.' She speaks quietly and thoughtfully, which makes him wonder whether he's clever enough for her. She's bound to have an exciting job and an education and crystalline certainty.

The silence between them is not unpleasant; he doesn't have to frantically search for empty words to fill it, it is plump and tasty and warm. And this is all it takes for everything to seem like fate to him.

'We're more honest in the dark,' says Elin. 'We talk to each other differently; we open up, even though we can't see anything; the night is a different realm, where feelings are displaced. Maybe there are lots of people who've said the most important things they had to say while others were asleep.'

'Why are you unsure of yourself around women?' asks Nuri.

'The language I have is for men. I learned what men want, how they tick, and it's wonderfully simple. I don't have much to do with women, there aren't many of them in my life, but when they are there I don't know how to deal with them, how to talk to them, and I have the feeling they look at things so much more closely. That scares me. Do you know what that's like, when you long for something and fear it at the same time?'

Nuri's legs are hurting, and his arms, and his shoulders above all. He was only in the factory for three hours; his body will pay for it for three days. He nods.

'What would be the most important thing that you would have to say?' he asks, and sees the end of the park ahead of them. Does she expect him to take her with him, to his home? How do you say *I can't*, how do you say *I don't have one*?

'Good question.' He can hear in her voice that she is smiling; then she falls silent.

'Something happened to me, and I don't know whether it was violence,' she says. 'It felt like it, but it was my own fault. Or not. That's the question, and I don't have an answer.'

She hesitates. Nuri senses that she wants to say more, so he walks slowly, deliberately, waiting. He's good at that, waiting for people to speak; he's been practising all his life.

'I don't know whether I'm pregnant. Whether, inside me ... whether ... in my body, you know. In my own body, and I have no idea.'

She doesn't have to say that she hasn't told anyone this yet: he understands.

'And you?' asks Elin, just as Nuri is about to reach for her hand, because it feels to him like the only thing that would be close to dancing.

Here are her fingers and his; there is not much night air between them. When he looks at her, when he sees her half-lit nose and the curve of her lips, her slender neck, the geometric cut of her hair near her ear lobes, the world seems less dark to him. A thread, tied in seconds, connects her to him and him to her; it glitters in the lamplight or is invisible.

'I want to learn to talk,' he says. 'I want to speak about my feelings ... but I don't know how ... I just don't want to be like my father.'

He breathes in, because in spite of everything he feels as if he is betraying his father, the father who knows the vertiginous weightlessness of this hour because he worked nights, in a warehouse, a cellar, a bus, the father who sat dully in front of the television having ointment rubbed into his shoulders, mouth closed not just for lack of words, but also so no cry of pain came out.

'I love him very much,' he says, and is surprised that the night has drawn from him words he had never even thought. 'And I resent him for not letting himself be loved. That I have this love for him and don't know what to do with it. It feels like pity.'

And now it is Elin who takes his hand. They have reached the gate at the far end.

Can this be enough, walking once across a park and taking each other's hand; can this be enough to be the start of something? And why not. Stories start every day, and above all every night.

'Have you ever had sex in a park?' asks Elin, with the smoke that sleeps in her voice, and Nuri feels her skin on his, feels her nearness, her presence, like an imprint on his entire body, as if she were lying on top of him, not moving, and because she is a little taller she would cover him completely.

It ought to frighten him, like all the other times; that would only be logical.

Instead, he is filled with calm.

'I've never had sex at all,' he answers quietly, but at this time of night you can't be so quiet in this deserted place as not to be heard.

Elin doesn't let go of his hand.

'Do you think we can still find something to eat?' she asks, and he hopes his fingers aren't squeezing too hard, or lying too limply in her hand; he hopes the contact feels as right for her as it does for him.