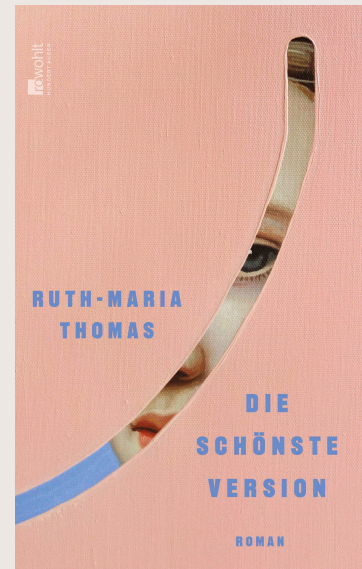


Ruth-Maria Thomas

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VERSION

Die schönste Version

- An exceptional and impactful debut on love, friendships, domestic violence, and power, set in the late 2000s.
- About the most beautiful things. And the most terrible things.
- Stylistically brilliant, light, and free.
- English sample translation available.



July 2024 · 272 pages

"Our autumn was a century summer well into November".

Jella loves Yannick very much. Yannick also loves Jella very much. They recognize each other. They do it differently. They do it right. Until it shifts. Now Jella lies in her old childhood bedroom "with a pounding neck and a distant feeling", wondering how things got this far, taking another close look at her upbringing in Lusatia. Small town and gravel pits, glitter and gloss. At friends who carried her through so much. And at that moment when Yannick's hands closed around her neck.

Die schönste Version is an introspection: Ruth-Maria Thomas writes about becoming a woman, being a woman, about bodies, desires, and deep abysses.

Ruth-Maria Thomas, born in 1993 and raised in Cottbus, worked as a social worker in youth services. She studied at the German Literature Institute in Leipzig and is a co-founder of the erotic literature magazine *Hot Topic!*. In 2022, she was a finalist in the Open Mike competition. Her writings, which have been featured in radio broadcasts and literary magazines, often explore the pitfalls of female socialization.

Ruth-Maria Thomas

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VERSION

English sample translation by Caroline Waight

I will be one of the glamourati, then whatever I do, it will be right – I'll never have to be careful again, I'll never have to weigh my words or think about my actions –

IRMGARD KEUN

The Artificial Silk Girl

I know what only the girls know /
Lies can buy eternity.

LANA DEL REY

Music to Watch Boys To

It was a Saturday night at Blue. A few out-of-towners had bought up the canteen by the city walls and turned it into an overly expensive club popular with students. There were long drinks and focaccias, and everything was so hip and organic it was almost unbearable. The place was rammed with undergrads celebrating the start of the summer break, full of champagne being poured over ice and music that put you in the mood for sex. Everywhere, standing or dancing, there were young, good-looking, vaguely sweaty people.

He was sat on a stool at the bar, observing the dancing bodies. All the walls at Blue were glass, and the evening sun shone through and doused the scene in a blood-red light. His face didn't immediately strike me as handsome. He had three-day-old stubble, the early signs of furrows on his forehead, and a pale birthmark across his left cheek. Curly brown hair, a bit too long. But those eyes.

I was fascinated by the way he watched. His eyes were steady and assured as they scanned the room. Those were eyes that had seen it all before. With his high forehead and an outfit that combined the unexpected (pleated trousers in some shiny fabric, white T-shirt with spatters of grey paint), he seemed oddly above it all, somehow majestic. Different.

I sat down next to him on an unoccupied stool, the black plastic seat sticking to my thighs. I wore a denim skirt, and crossed my legs so that people couldn't peer between them when I was sitting down.

He turned his head towards me, gave me a nod. I'm Yannick. Yannick asked me if I'd like a gin and tonic. I shrugged, said I was more of a white-wine girl. He asked if he could order me one anyway. I nodded. Sure. He didn't want to be one of those guys, he said, who decided what a woman ate or drank and ignored her actual wishes. I said, That's nice of you.

Summoning the bartender with an airy wave of his hand, he asked for a particular type of tonic water, Mediterranean something. The bartender shook his head.

Yannick pulled a face, almost a duck face, and I couldn't help but laugh. The bartender explained apologetically that in a place like this nobody attached much importance to the quality of the tonics.

Yannick laughed. Yeah, of course. It was just he'd been away too long. Then he winked at me. Nightmare, right? Now I'm one of those people who spends a couple of semesters studying in Munich and starts acting like, like –

Like one of the glamourati?

He stared at me, surprised.

Well put. Genuinely. Yeah. Yeah, nightmare – they start acting like they're, um, one of the 'glamourati' when they're back in the provinces.

A moment's hesitation, wanting to keep the compliment for myself, but the town was a small one and the danger of running into each other again too great. He could have googled the quotation.

It's not my word. Unfortunately. It's from a book.

Yannick's eyes widened still further, as though I was the first person he had met here who read books. Again, I laughed.

He smiled too. I don't know it, did you read it at school?

The pocket of my skirt vibrated – probably the girls, announcing they were going to be late. Whatever.

No, I work at the library. I read it there.

Mrs Matthis had given me the book when I finished *Light My Fire*. It was a bit of a slog to read, old-fashioned language and very roundabout, but the girl in the book had the same emotions, fears and dreams as the girl in my romance novels, even if she thought about them in these long, intricate sentences. It astonished me to think we were a hundred years apart yet just the same, really. I tried to explain this to Yannick, but it came out funny. I was rambling.

Oh, never mind.

With a flick of my hand, I whisked away tiny drops of sweat from my temples.

No, not never mind.

He touched my raised hand, plucked it out of the air and placed it on the bar.

I like what you're saying. This is the first good conversation I've had since I got back.

Right. What's the betting that's a lie?

He grinned.

The bartender cleared his throat. As though emerging from a trance, Yannick briefly shook his head, curls bobbing faintly.

We'll just have the two G&Ts, right ...?

Jella.

Jella. He voiced my name like a gift. I sent up a silent thanks to my mother, who had won the battle of wills with my father. His choice: Anke.

Cucumber or lemon? asked the barman, pouring gin from a bottle with a yellow label into glasses.

Cucumber, I was about to say – lemon gives me mouth ulcers.

But before I could reply, Yannick had ordered lemon. He said cucumber wouldn't go with this particular gin.

I didn't want to wreck things with my unappetising mouth-ulcer situation, so I thanked him.

Don't thank me yet, try it first, he said, taking the glass from the bartender and scrutinising me as I took a sip. It tasted multi-layered, bitter, sweet, sour, delicious. I smiled. It's good, I said, and he exhaled in relief.

Well. I guess in the end it doesn't matter which tonic or whatever's in it. Ultimately it all just tastes like booze.

Again, I had to laugh.

You're doing a lot of laughing. Am I a funny guy, or am I just spewing a load of crap? Without giving me a chance to reply, he went on. So what do you do, anyway, are you studying something to do with literature?

No, I'm studying something to do with numbers and buildings.

Huh, okay, interesting. And what drew you to that?

The place on my forefinger where he had touched my hand still felt a little warmer than the skin around it. This didn't seem like the moment to tell him about my family history, my dreams, wishes, ideas. To open up that can of worms.

Oh, you know ... the job prospects. People are always going to build.

Now it was his turn to laugh.

So I guess you've already got grand plans to turn this town into a diamond?

The gin and tonic was giving off waves of heat in my belly, the beat thudding softly from the speakers.

Bit less creative at the moment. Lots of stats. Maths.

He grimaced, and I shook my head.

I don't mind that. I have no problem with numbers. I find them reassuring, actually, they're so ... so constant.

It was gradually making me uncomfortable, talking so much about myself. I still hadn't asked him a single question. Yannick raised his glass to mine, and there was the soft clink of crystal. The slice of lemon bumped against my lip as I drank. I pleaded silently that I would remain ulcer free.

I'm really glad I met you, honestly. It's been a while since I met a woman like you. Cheers.

I gave a tiny start. The skin of my gluey thighs was prickling. Yannick took his hand – which had been so close to mine – off the bar.

Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you ... It's cool that you're doing that, it's interesting, I don't know a lot of women who ...

With a smile I took his hand and put it back. That wasn't why I'd jumped. It was because he'd called me a *woman*. Not girl or babe. I, Jella Nowak, was a woman.

He lived in a self-contained flat at his parents' place, he told me. Only for the time being. His grandfather hadn't been doing so well lately, so from time to time he'd play cards with the old man, give his grandmother a break. I thought that was sweet, although I didn't say so. The way he said it, with a little shrug of the shoulders, the corners of his mouth downturned.

He sat on the back of my bike while I rode, his hands clasped around my hips. I didn't know the way, so he directed me, and I cycled slowly and carefully, almost soberly. Yannick had drunk more than I had. As we moved further and further towards the outskirts, we introduced each other to the town from our separate perspectives: the way Yannick, for example, used to skip the last maths class on Fridays with his buddies Kolja and Mert, loitering in the gap in the city wall.

I told him the story of how Valentina and I once scooped coins out of the fountain – that one, just there – until an elderly man chased us away.

From that fountain over there? That's where he had his first date. The girl hadn't been the sharpest tool, unfortunately.

I bit my lip. Sorry, sister, I thought, feeling very glad that the quote had popped into my head when it had. He told me about his friends, with whom he used to spray graffiti. Some of it

still hadn't been painted over – had I seen the one right at the top of the old department store?
That was one of theirs.

I asked him if he'd gone to that graduation party a couple of years back where there was a dance battle, and the loser threw up all over her opponent's frilly dress. He laughed so hard he made the bike swerve. He said by then he was already in Munich, but he'd heard about that night. The girl who got puked on, the one in the dress, the redhead? That was his friend Kolja's little sister. We were quiet for a while, an easy silence, as though we were still half-remembering. All seemed to be hovering in the summer air. The town centre was behind us now, the scattered shops, the kebab places, the café, the market square, the fountain. We were cycling not towards the housing estates but towards the detached homes on the town's edges, where the tramlines didn't go.

When we reached one of the houses, Yannick said to stop. I leant my bike against a lamppost and surveyed the large semi-detached house with the green shutters and neatly mown lawn.

My parents live in the left one, my grandparents on the right.

That's some house, I said, thinking of my dad's flat.

Yannick laughed. Yep, typical middle-class dump.

Better than the estates.

You think? The furrows in his brow cast small shadows. Half my friends live on the estates. I feel like this place is way over the top, so much space for so few people. Four floors for four people. Who do they think they are?

And? I stroked the palms of my hands over the low box hedge. A few lone shoots were poking out, softer than the others.

What do they do? I asked, and Yannick said his grandparents were retired, but his dad, next door, was a head teacher and his mum worked for the local council. And they act like it, he added. I asked no more questions. He was already unlocking the door, and I had no desire to wake up his middle-class family.

That there were pictures hung amid the clutter.

That the clutter consisted of stacks of paper, unstretched canvases, easels, wooden boxes spilling over with tubes of paint, a toolbox in among it all, work trousers made by Engelbert Strauss.

That the room felt cramped to me, stuffed full as a donation bin at the side of the road.

That the kitchenette, meanwhile, was clean. Well organised.

That the bedclothes were blue and red and white, so I asked, Sorbian colours or Bayern Munich?

That he shook his head in disgust. Football was for proles, he said.

That I liked that.

That he didn't apologise for the clutter, which I found instantly appealing.

That most of the paintings were radiant with serenity and secrets, soft strokes – shadows – a flat-bottomed boat by the shore, black and white, a suggestion of waves – a delicate hand before a door, the fingers tense with indecision, unsure whether to knock or linger –

That there were a couple of watercolours, too, hanging from a line suspended across the room, interlacing patterns, lots of red.

That I felt his gaze on me while mine was on his paintings.

That Yannick got to his knees, undid the laces of my sneakers. That for a split second I thought, shit, I hope that deodorising spray did the job.

That Yannick kept his eyes on me as he slid off my shoes, placed them neatly side by side, took my hand and led me to the bed.

That we couldn't do it.

It often doesn't work the first time. He said very softly.

That I didn't mind, because instead we just lay close and naked, stroking one another with our fingers.

That we were the same height.

That the birthmark on his cheek had little offshoots all across his body, on his right upper arm, the left side of his chest, on the bone of his hip.

That I saw at once he didn't go to the gym: his muscles were built through daily life. Strong arms, broad shoulders, but nothing specifically trained. No belly. A little narrow at the waist, even. No chest hair. Feminine, I thought, and: beautiful, and: I'll probably never be able to

tell him so, not in those words. The streetlamps sent a faint glow through the curtains, bringing an underwater luminosity to our skin. The touch of his fingers was diligent, moving skin cell by skin cell.

What did you think when you saw my paintings?

That it was a high-wire act, his question, and not casual at all. His hand on my body: strained, still. That the watercolours made me think of menstrual blood in toilet bowls – this I did not tell him.

[...]

DAY ONE

The waiting area: a long corridor, doors that lead to irregularly numbered rooms. The floor: grey vinyl. The walls: panelled in wood. A fluorescent tube three feet long, buzzing on the ceiling. It fills the space with its glare, and although it's light outside, I feel like it's the middle of the night.

At the end of the corridor is a small window. Grimy, but you can still see the back of the old barracks. Then a door opens across from where I sit. Two uniformed police officers emerge, chatting and laughing as they stroll past me. I'm relieved that I don't yet have to enter one of these offices. That I don't yet have to speak. My hands are shaking. I shove them deep into the pockets of my jeans. The officers are trailing the smell of coffee and cigarettes. There's a brief and overwhelming urge to inhale smoke, to take just one tiny draw of mock release. I close my eyes. Hinges squeak. I jump.

A man with grizzled hair and a weary look steps out into the corridor. A summons like a sigh.

Jella Nowak?

I don't move. The man looks directly at me, and this time he raises his voice: Jella Nowak, domestic violence. Did you want to make a report?

I feel hot. My stomach clenches. My throat is sitting just above my stomach, and it's burning. My body is nothing but stomach and throat. Two throbbing dots that burn, that sting,

that tug, that have tugged, that have tugged me here to this police station. I owe it to this body, to these dots, to let them have their way, to let myself be pulled. To step up, now. To step up where he stepped in. Struck. Squeezed. The dignity of my stomach, the dignity of my throat. The dignity of my body, my whole self. The way he slammed his fist into my belly, the belly that contains my ovaries. The belly he had so often stroked to ease my period cramps. Kissing it sometimes, playful, saying: Sooner or later, all my sons and daughters will be in you. Punching in a rage, *smack*, a fist. As simple as that. Stupid whore! And hands around my throat. Around my breath. My breath – which draws the air into my lungs, which keeps me alive. That was where he put his hands, and squeezed.

I inhale too quickly, so quickly that my fingers hum and the ground bends and lifts. Now I am nothing but belly and throat.

Domestic violence. Jella Nowak?

I look into his face, the officer. I try to stand. My legs get tangled and I lurch towards him, tripping over my bag. He turns around, his back to me now, and I can see the edges of the sweatstains on his light blue shirt. I follow in his wake until he's sitting in his chair behind his desk, skimming the wooden surface with his hands, mumbling something about forgotten coffee, getting back to his feet, leaving the room. I am left alone inside his office. Here, too, the room is garish with fluorescent tubes.

The desk is covered in miniature objects. A tiny chimney sweep glued to a one-cent coin. Marzipan pigs in clear plastic wrappers. Picture frames, turned to face away from me. They must be of his little family – what else would you frame and put in an office? Pictures of his dog, maybe.

This place reminds me of all the other places I remember for their dreariness. The school sports hall on a Friday afternoon, the reek of sweaty, perfumed teenage bodies and two more miserable hours of leapfrog or skipping-ropes to go before the weekend. The classroom first thing in winter, seven-thirty, dark out, cold, my head still sleeping.

The policeman returns and sits down on his swivel chair, takes a sip of coffee, exhales loudly, sets down his mug. His eyes meet mine. He looks tired, as though he's slept too little and too poorly, worked too much and too long.

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing.

Please, sit down, he says, gesturing towards the chair on the other side of his desk. I nod rapidly and take a seat, bumping my knee against the table. Instantly there are tears welling in my eyes.

My knee has jugged the mug of coffee. The brown brew has sloshed over the rim, and is steering a course among the stacks of folders on the desk.

I'm so sorry, I say, I do apologise.

I can feel blotches of heat creeping up into my face. The whole thing is already a fiasco – I feel like turning on my heel. I wish I'd never come.

The policeman doesn't answer me. He's trying to move the folders out of harm's way, dabbing coffee off the wood with tissues.

Sorry. I say it again.

He throws the tissues into the bin.

Not to worry, he says, as he looks up and surveys me.

Right. Ready?

Not really, I think, and nod.

What happened?

I stammer.

My boyfriend. He. Uh, so my boyfriend just kind of lost it and he ...

The policeman exhales a second time. Probably realising that this is going to take longer than he thought. Tears are gathering in my eyes again. I glance down at my clasped hands. The knuckles are white.

Okay. Let's take this step by step, the officer says, almost gently, his fingers hovering above the keyboard.

What's your boyfriend's name?

My boyfriend. My boyfriend? After what's happened he can't be my boyfriend anymore, I think, there's just no way. He'll have to be my ex-boyfriend now, we'll be splitting up, we have to, you can't stay together after something like that. Can you? You can't, not if you have a shred of self-esteem left, not anymore.

I blink rapidly. Jella Nowak.

Not your name, we've already got that. He smiles at me. Your partner's name.

Yannick Brenner.

His index fingers find the letters on his computer keyboard. He's jabbing at the individual keys as though they've done him some sort of personal injustice. It takes a while. He asks another question, not looking up.

What happened when he lost it? If you could just ... He pauses, glances up at me. His left eyelid is drooping slightly. If you could try to take me through step by step what happened?

I don't want to. But of course, I want to. I'm here, aren't I? Here to do exactly that.

A mouse in a trap. For the second time today.

Yannick came into the kitchen when I was making a salad.

He interrupts me again, eyes still fixed on the keyboard.

You live together? Where do you live?

I give him the address. The clacking keys, so loud.

What happened when he came into the kitchen?

Now the policeman is looking me full in the face. His forefinger is tapping the desk. I stare at it. Following my gaze, he stops the tapping. I try to push the images away. I try to describe the things that happened as though I saw them on TV. The news at eight, come on, Jella, pretend like it didn't actually happen to you. I speak quickly, my voice almost a stranger's, distant.

And I tell him

how we had a fight,

how the talking turned to yelling,

how at some point Yannick lunged at me, screamed at me, punched me in the stomach.

How I backed away from him until I was standing by the window. Kitchen table to my right, wall to my left. Me in the corner, and him in front of me. No way out. I tell him how I realised I was at a dead end. Caught in a trap.

How Yannick put his hands around my throat and squeezed, and I – less air, less air. How afraid I – and how I thought, shit, this is it, shit, he's out of his mind, this isn't like normal, this time he's really lost control, his face so full of hatred, his hands so tight. This fight isn't like the others, this is the kind of fight that ends things, ends us, he's lost control and now, not even meaning to, he's just going to – this is how it ends, shit, I'm going to –

And here I falter, clutching at my throat. Panic rising, everywhere, starting in my fingertips, a frenzied fluttering that courses down my arms and clenches in my throat, races into the left side of my chest and catches there, a frantic hummingbird.

I can hear Yannick's voice again, the way he's hissing at me, those narrowed eyes. I can feel the droplets of his spit. Shut your stupid mouth, you little slut, I swear if you don't shut your fucking mouth –

It won't be much longer now –

the words shoot through my head, and the hummingbird beneath my left breast flutters so desperately that my breathing quickens, the tips of my fingers go numb again, my hands clasp even more tightly.

And then?

I stare confused into the policeman's eyes. They have a yellowish tinge. The transition from iris to white is pale.

Then? I ask in reply.

You were just saying that your partner put his hands around your throat and choked you. He is reading aloud from his own report, eyebrows raised.

What happened then?

I look at him. Yannick put his hands around my neck and choked me. Why is he asking for a 'then'? The hummingbird in my chest, the death of all my dignity. That is then, and then is now.

The officer tries to put on a kindly face, nods encouragement at me, then prompts me again to describe the *sequence of events*.

Everything in me is fighting this. I don't want it anymore, I don't want to say another word. How can it be that speech was once so easy?

Would you like a glass of water, Ms Nowak?

No. I would like this to be over. Hurriedly I try to explain how my right hand groped towards the kitchen table, found the pepper mill, the big one, heavy and ceramic, a gift from his parents.

For a millisecond it had crossed my mind that it was a shame about the peppercorns – lemon pepper, a very special variety for our very special life – but I don't tell the policeman that.

Instead, almost without taking a breath, I tell him how I hit Yannick over the head with it, how he let me go, how I bolted down the stairs and somehow made it to the door.

How I heard his footsteps echoing in the stairwell, his shrieks, I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you.

How I clung to the first woman I saw on the pavement outside.

I don't tell the policeman that I didn't hear the noise or the sound of passing cars.

I tell him, so quickly that the words are almost tripping over one another in their eagerness to reach the end – because there must be an end, the story must be at an end soon, done and dusted, that's all folks, the party's over –

how Yannick stopped when he saw me in the arms of the strange woman, a jogger.

I don't tell him I could smell her sports deodorant, that I could feel her bones through her damp polyester shirt.

How I didn't realise I was screaming for help until I clung to her.

How she shouted at Yannick to get the hell away from me or she'd call the police.

How Yannick's eyes widened – he was the one afraid now – how he ran off in the other direction, away from our flat, towards the park. I told the policeman those things.

That I thought he might run until he couldn't run anymore, and maybe then he'd be sorry.

The reassuring way the jogger spoke to me, the way I stammered as I tried to explain what had happened, but the sentences broke off. The way she took my hand, took me by the hand, held my hand, and helped me up the steps. Walking: a task.

Her words kept the rhythm of our tread on the stairs. It's all going to be fine. I'm here. It's all going to be fine. I'm here. It's all going to be fine.

The open door of my flat, my hesitation. Her face in mine, urgent: You're going to pack a bag with a change of clothes, your toothbrush and your ID. Then you're going to go to the police. I heard what he was screaming. He threatened you. That's a crime. You have to report him. What else did he do? Did he hit you?

The word *hit* just felt so out of place for me and Yannick. So wrong, like I was one of those women with a black eye and a split lip on the posters encouraging people to call the hotline if they needed help. But I don't tell the policeman that.

I tell him that I shook my head, that she was gripping my shoulders like she wanted to shake me. You were screaming for help! I admitted in a low voice that he'd choked me. Her hold on me tightened. Her eyes spoke volumes when she said, You can't just take that lying down. You have to report him. Her expression softened. Perhaps she knew what she was talking about.

Under her watchful eye, I packed my bag. When I was twelve years old I had my tonsils out, my first and only time in hospital. I didn't know what to expect – the surgery, the pain, how long it all would take. Something might go wrong, and I'd have to stay longer, so the things I took with me had to be carefully selected. They would be my only companions, my only home in the large and unfamiliar hospital.

I was packing the same way now.

But I didn't know what I was packing for. So I packed for the cool wind in the morning and for the sun that sometimes peeped out in the afternoon. I packed for the ever-colder autumn and the last warm days of summer.

As I put these things of mine into my gym bag, I felt calmer. They were my belongings, and nobody could take them from me. He could take the dignity of my throat, of my belly, of my whole self, but not

my lambswool socks

my cotton cardigan

my white flannel top

my favourite jeans

my 80-denier tights

my running leggings

my running jacket

my pink sports bra

my satin pyjama shirt

my little black dress, which I hadn't worn for years – a memory

my three light-blue pairs of knickers

my grid-paper notebook

I didn't know how long I'd be wherever I was going, and the jogger hadn't told me where that was. She'd simply ordered me to pack.

So I took three pairs of underwear, because three is a good number, all good things come in threes. Three pairs, like I was going for a long weekend away. That felt right. My toothbrush

and my make-up bag were in the bathroom, my wallet still in the shopping bag in the kitchen. The jogger went and got it for me when I asked her to.

Our footsteps echoed in the stairwell as we went back down. The woman who'd been looking after me drew me in for a hug. Her T-shirt was dry now. She asked me for my phone. I gave it to her, and she put in her number, gave it back to me.

She said, I need to go now, I'm sorry. Do you have anybody you can call? And, You can do this, alright?

I nodded, and didn't fully understand.

I didn't understand until she had set off down the street, didn't understand until she was out of sight, didn't understand until I was standing there alone with my bulging gym bag, the strap cutting into my shoulder. You can do this. She meant I could do it, not we: I, by myself, carrying my bag with my things, could go to the police alone. I was standing on the edge of the market square. I put one foot in front of the other.

I've lost the thread. The policeman is looking at me. He takes his hands off the keyboard. Folds them.

I shake off the memories, trying to be clear, to keep a clear head.

I can't be sure at what point I stopped speaking.

The officer tries to jog my memory.

You're saying your boyfriend came into the kitchen, and you had a fight. Is that correct?

I nod.

Then he put his hands around your throat and squeezed. Is that correct?

I nod.

And then you hit him over the head with a pepper mill. Is that also correct?

It sounds wrong. Like I meant to hit him. But I had to get him off me so he'd stop choking me. I should say so now, but I have no strength left. So I just nod.

He clears his throat. Is that compassion in his eyes?

It's properly dark outside now. I walk slowly down the street. Away from the police station.

Who can I call? Where can I go? Anna? Linh? I can picture the way Anna would look at me, with those huge eyes that have never seen anything worse than an episode of *Law & Order*.

Oh my God, she'd say. Oh my God. That's awful. And then maybe the tears would start running down her pink cheeks, but not a particle of blush would smudge, because Anna's cheeks are always fucking pink, she doesn't even need to put on make-up. Oh my God. She'd keep stammering the same thing. Then look helplessly at Linh.

And Linh would probably say nothing at first. She'd take my hand and look at me with a deeply worried face. So worried that I couldn't bear it. Because then I'd be a victim.

The streetlamps are shining a soft, friendly light on the first leaves fallen from the ginkgo trees. They are beautiful, still green, but already yellow at the tips. Each leaf is much the same shape as the next. I take a deep breath. I smell nothing, nothing but the cool night air. The tree is male.

A single female tree can stink up the whole street! Yannick told me so one autumn as I held my scarf over my face. He was pointing up. The street was full of the sweetish odour of decay, so strong it made me gag. Look, there it is, the one polluting everything. I followed Yannick's finger with my eyes. Small, orange balls were growing among the fan-shaped leaves. Their peel looked so delicate, as if it might burst open at the slightest touch. Unfortunately, it takes about twenty years to tell if a tree is female, and therefore fruit-producing. His face twisted in disgust, and he clapped his hand to his nose. They'll cut it down, he said, they always do. Nobody can stand it.

I stare at the ginkgo leaves. My denim jacket is too thin – underneath is gooseflesh. Like the old days, I think, like the old days, and I have Shelly's voice in my ear: I dress like a slut and then I'm cold. I haven't heard that voice in a long time. My fingers reach for my phone in my bag. I unlock it: one missed call from Yannick on the display. I scroll through my contacts. It rings three times, then he picks up. Yes? His voice concerned and a little surprised, as ever when I call. As though he's just waiting for something bad to happen.

Jella, what's wrong? Are you alright?

I do my best to sound blithe.

Dad, do you mind if I come home for a bit?

I have not succeeded in sounding blithe. I can hear him exhale, picture him sitting down slowly.

Ruth-Maria Thomas

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You can always come home. You don't have to ask.
A tiny gust of wind swirls gingko leaves into the air.
Where are you? I'll come and pick you up.