

Rowohlt Verlag

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WHITE SUMMER

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PROLOGUE

The house is the last at the end of the road. It sits alone on the hill, concealed behind pine trees and the heavy iron gate. For months on end it waits, windows shuttered, holding its breath.

Then: the turn of a key, the door opens.

The house feels soles on its tiles, the weight of footsteps in the grain and gravel of its veins. It recognises her by her walk, just like it recognises each of its inhabitants by their steps.

The house knows her because it was the setting for her first, wobbly steps, a witness when she splashed bathwater on its floors and built foam mountains in its tubs. When she slid down its banisters, the undulations of her laughter vibrating in its plaster. When she pressed kisses against the steamed-up panes of the shower cubicle, leaving behind the impression of her lips. Her growth was captured on the house's skin, marked on its doorframes. Her story was its story.

But now something has changed.

The house feels her hesitation as she pauses on the threshold to the garden.

He's already here, it whispers.

He's waiting for you.

DAY ONE

Everything is the same, everything is different. Things that are the same: the garden behind the house, how it slopes gently downhill, the pool a fluorescent blue in the darkness, the scent of chlorine and rosemary. Things that are different: Her.

It's been three months, a small eternity, since Alma last saw him. In three months, you can master basic Spanish. In three months, hair grows three centimetres. In three months, you can fall out of love.

Now he's standing there by the edge of the pool. He's lit by the floodlights in the water, and as the wind ruffles the surface, the movement is reflected on his face. He lights a cigarette in the darkness, and for a moment, as he cups his hands around the lighter, it looks as though he's holding the flame in his hand.

Her heart is everywhere: in her ears, her chest, her fingertips.

She has pictured this moment over and over: seeing him again for the first time. She had big plans – to be distant, to let her face turn to stone, to let him feel how she has felt for the last 91 days. But now she wants to throw her arms around him. She wants to run away, she wants to crawl into him, scream at him, where were you.

Five metres, four. The closer she gets, the clearer his silhouette becomes. She smells the smoke that's rising in swathes from the cigarette and forming a cloud around his head. *News Tabac*, hand-rolled.

There he stands, her person, who she knows better than anyone else. So much knowledge, gathered over the years. Alma has looked beneath the floorboards and roofbeams of his mind. She knows him. Not only in moments, but in patterns. She knows when the tapping of his foot is anxiety and when it's excitement. She can predict when he'll stand up in the afternoon and stretch out his arm to make a cup of tea. She knows that he'll wind the teabag label around the handle of the cup, that he always tries to drink before the tea has cooled down, pressing his lips together, *Merde, chaud*.

What is she supposed to do with all this knowledge? She's filled with it.

Three metres, two.

Théo looks up, and their gazes meet, holding a question. His dark locks have given way to a buzz cut. The new haircut hardens his features, giving him an edge.

“Hey”, he says.

“Hey”, she says.

Her gaze wanders to his hair, and he runs his hand over his head.

“Do your parents know you’re here?” he asks eventually. “You”, not “we”, as though she were alone in France, as though he were somewhere else, not really there. And as though it were important, for some reason, to inform her parents.

“They know.”

“Okay. Good, that’s good.” He looks away and stares into the water, as though it holds the solution, a conversation topic, something. The cigarette glimmers as he takes a drag and lowers it again, impatiently flicking the ashes from the tip.

“And, well – did they ask any questions?”

“I told them I don’t feel like explaining what we’re doing here,” she says.

“So what are we doing?”

“We’re in France, just like every summer.”

The hint of a smile on his lips. It’s infectious, because they both know this summer isn’t like all the others, but what are they supposed to do, when so much has happened and words aren’t enough?

Alma closes her eyes. She feels every centimetre between her and Théo, the distance is physical, the lack of embrace a jolt. He squats down and slowly presses the cigarette into the crystal ashtray on the ground, a glimmer, then grey ashes.

They have one last summer to make everything okay, right?

They still have time.

DAY TWO

In Alma's mind, Tuesday is a pale blue, October plum-coloured, and twelve noon crimson red. Summer has always been orange for her – humming and lush, warm leather, teeth biting into peach skin, the sun pushing its way through eyelids. The brink of something.

This summer has a different colour. White, perhaps, the absence of colour. Not the calm, gentle white of clouds or paper, but a light so bright it makes the shadows between the days disappear, a shimmering heat that rests over everything. A contour-blurring white.

White.

The tiles on the wall are white. They differ in sizes; a few are square-shaped, some are long rectangles. A restless pattern, a rhythmic error. They are painted in pastel shades, flowers and intertwined tendrils.

A thin crack traverses the ceiling plaster like a bolt of lightning. Even when Alma stretches out, making herself as long as possible, she can barely touch the end of the bath tub with her toes.

Submersion, being sucked under. The world can't follow her underwater, can it? Her toes hurt, her fingers tingle. She lets one bubble after the other drift upwards. Her pale legs, hip bones, arms are distorted beneath the water. Then she breaks through the surface, and her body pulls air into her lungs.

When she arrived yesterday, she saw his holdall by the front entrance. In it: pullovers, cotton shorts, shirts. In everything: his scent, deeply anchored in the fibres. Is it possible to be jealous of clothes? After all, they were closer to him than Alma.

As well as the holdall, he had brought clay with him, grey clumps wrapped in plastic. And the cutting wire, the metal spatula, the dirty sponges. He put the bag down on the kitchen table and stared at his utensils.

“I think it's better if I do it over there.”

“Why?”

“So I don't make too much mess here.”

She had accepted the excuse. So, he was sleeping in the pool house.

What's he doing right now? she wonders. He's not far away, just through the tiles, the plaster and the thick brick walls, across the garden. He'll be sitting on the small stool for sure, elbows dripping, pulling streaks in the clay. Grey that turns to beige that turns to white.

He has never slept there before. Every summer, they squeezed into the narrow bed in Alma's room, his steady breath on her neck as he turned in his sleep and she followed his form; two dancers with closed eyes who knew each other's choreography inside out.

She hugs her knee, presses it so tightly against her closed eyes that she can feel the bones of her skull, and silvery patterns dance before her eyelids. Her tears feel hot on her cheeks. They make paths, drip down into the water.

All her life, she was praised for the fact that she never cried. Not as a child, when she stumbled over and cut her chin open on the edge of the coffee table. Not when she was the only one in her class who didn't get a speaking role in the school play. Not as a teenager, when the guys in her year said she had a body like a plank of wood.

With shrivelled fingers she pulls out the plug and watches as the water circles around her, becomes a spinning top, and disappears down the drain. Her knees jut out of the water like mountain crests until she's completely exposed.

When she steps out of the tub, the floor feels cool and slippery. She doesn't dry herself off. Damp footsteps follow her through the bathroom and hallway into her bedroom. In one movement she opens both windows and sits down naked on the bed. Water runs slowly out of her hair down her back, vertebra by vertebra, leaving behind goosebumps and then dark spots on the blanket.

She pulls out her notebook, opens the first page, and writes:

Pros:

- Understands me better than anyone else
- Saw something in me before I saw it in myself
- Good heart, funny, smart
- Best sex of my life
- Already invested four years in the relationship

– Maybe no one but him could love me

Cons:

– Never properly free in my 20s

– Fear of getting hurt first

– How to have a future together?

– But how to have a future without him?

She winds her hair at the nape of her neck until the strands loosen and fall down her back. She closes the notebook, puts it in the drawer of the bedside table and shuts the window.

She'll paint. It is summer, after all, and she hasn't picked up a paintbrush in months. Is she even an artist if she's not painting? Shouldn't it feel as though someone had wrenched a rib out of her body?

How long will she have this kind of time, the slow mornings and endless afternoons? In a way, being twenty-six feels like August, and August feels like a Sunday afternoon – the feeling of freedom just before it fades.

Another twelve or thirteen summers before time runs out to have children – should she even want to, and who ever really knows if they do. Another twelve or thirteen summers, that means about eight hundred more days of summer, eight hundred more days when the temperature will climb over 25 degrees, when she has no serious commitments. The number seems so small that she feels afraid she might accidentally waste all these days.

Every July and August, while she's still living the summer, she looks at it through the lens of memory: seeing herself dive through a wave in some sea, or laying in some meadow and rolling a cigarette, or pressing a glass filled with ice cubes and cola against her brow. And then she thinks: if her life were a coming-of-age film, this summer certainly wouldn't be the opening shot – the credits would have been rolling long ago.

In front of the window, a figure runs across the garden. Théo, in grey jogging bottoms with dark flecks, a black t-shirt. They've only seen one another in passing today:

“Thanks for doing the shopping,” he'd said.

“No problem,” she'd replied.

He moves across the garden like a magpie with its wings outstretched, ready to take flight at any moment.

She knows this look. She knows it from all their walks through forests and cities, all the hours she had to wait because he'd spotted something. The most absurd things capture his attention: a broken-off tree bough, an oddly-shaped piece of cardboard jutting out of a recycling bin, a mattress that somebody had placed outside their front door and tied with string into a slouched position. What is it that happens inside his mind when inspiration strikes?

Théo steps into one of the flowerbeds directly beneath her window and kneels down. He seems to be searching for something in the soil. She can see the back of his neck, the pale skin shimmering through his short hair, fresh and untouched by the sun.

People say that hair holds memories.

Was that what he was thinking when he shaved it off?

An act of emancipation?

From her?

He stands up and studies something in his hand, which she can't make out from up here. He keeps turning it this way and that, stroking his thumb over it.

What if they break up? What if you can only love one person this much in your life? Perhaps she's empty, now she's given everything to him, and everyone that follows will find themselves staring into an empty tank. She wonders whether that's love or just fear.

It has to work. It has to work. It has to work. If she thinks the words often enough, maybe she can force them to come true. She didn't spend her twenties with one person only to realise now that it wasn't enough after all. She won't allow it to simply fall apart.

*

The summer she met Théo, her grandfather had just died and she had dyed her hair pink. She can still vividly remember the smell when she came into the house: of decay and lilies.

The entrance hall full of flowers, open white lips and red tongues. While her mother rolled suitcases across the tiled floor, Alma gathered the pollen dust from the dark mahogany dresser with her fingers. A muffled coughing behind the closed door. When her grandfather died a few days later, her fingertips were still stained orange.

His reading room was now his bedroom. The bed looked too new, too much like metal and hospitals, too little like a French country house, and stuck out like a sore thumb among the furniture which had been carefully curated over many years.

“If I really must die, then I want it to be with a view of the garden,” her grandfather had said several weeks before on the phone.

The palliative nurses cared for him around the clock. The other staff cooked, maintained the garden, and aired the rooms to disperse the stench of bed confinement and bad breath.

Her grandfather stayed the same even while he was dying – as strict as he had always been.

“A judge doesn’t stop being a judge just because he has cancer,” he’d said to Alma’s mother when he told her about the diagnosis.

He had spent almost his entire life away from his homeland; he studied in Munich, met his wife, had children, started a law firm. With all the money he made, he later bought the house in France in order to spend more time back home. Since Alma was little, they had spent every summer there.

Then, ten years ago, he had moved back to the land of his childhood for good with Alma’s grandmother. And before they could properly start to enjoy their life there, she had died, swiftly and unexpectedly.

After her death, the family’s visits became scarcer. They used to be every summer – but afterwards: first one year was skipped, then excuse piled upon excuse.

It had been Alma's grandmother who held the family together, who softened her husband's severity. Whenever he rebuked someone at the dinner table for imprecise wording, she laughed and said: "That's just how he is, my walking statute book."

The last time Alma had visited, five years ago, her grandfather was still sitting at his desk. Shirt, glasses on his nose, files around him as though he had never retired. Old friends called with questions about drawing up their wills, neighbours brought contracts to him for checking. He acted as though it were an inconvenience, scored hard strokes into the paper with his fountain pen, grumbled over sloppy clauses – but then he would get to work, with visible satisfaction at being needed.

And now she was back here again. Because apparently he didn't have long left. Because the metastases were no longer just in his lungs, but in his hips and brain too. Because the doctor had said it would be good for her grandfather to have his family around him. It was August, she had her Bachelors behind her, and her Masters didn't start until October. She could stay.

She did a lot of reading and drawing, took care of the weekly shop, posted letters. When that made her feel depressed, she reminded herself that she hadn't had any plans for the summer anyway, and that made her feel even more depressed.

On day three, she felt like she could no longer breathe properly. The smell of the lilies was giving her a headache; she held her breath whenever she had to walk through the hallway.

"Can't we get rid of the flowers?" she asked her parents over breakfast.

Her mother gave her a sharp glance.

"They're for your grandfather."

But he isn't even dead yet, thought Alma.

Instead of worry, she felt a dry, sharp rage which pounced upon trivialities: the humming sound the fridge made, her mother's overly polite tone. It was a rage that kept her body alert and her hands occupied – she washed up in scolding-hot water, organised papers by the pile, wrote lists, as if something had to happen. And then she felt ashamed, and searched for the soft spot where it was supposed to hurt, but found only edges.

In the supermarket, she bought the hair dye. *Teinture cheveux*. The colours: Rosé, Cotton Candy, Pink Crush. She died her hair strand by strand, from blonde to bubble-gum pink.

Her grandfather looked small laying there in bed, still fierce and determined not to let death win. His hands were mottled, sprinkled with dark dots and streaked with violet veins. The humming of the ECG machine echoed in the high-ceilinged room.

On his nightstand were bottles of pills, a bowl of soup, a framed picture of her grandmother, a glass of water.

“What have you done to your hair?”

The pink hadn’t distributed itself evenly; the tips were pink, her crown still blonde. Her grandfather’s small, narrowed eyes wandered over her hair.

“I dyed it.”

“I can see that. But why?”

“I just fancied a change.”

He didn’t respond, and looked out of the window across the grounds.

“Isn’t change a good thing?” she asked.

“I believe it’s good to stick with things.”

“Then you won’t be dying your hair pink, I presume,” Alma retorted, but her grandfather had already closed his eyes.

He died four days later. The nurses dismantled the machines. The bedding was washed. The ventilator machine was rolled out, crackling pill packets were thrown in the rubbish.

From the foot of the stairs, Alma watched a man lift her grandfather onto a stretcher and cover him almost tenderly with a blanket. His skin looked waxy, stretching tautly over his cheekbones. She saw the silhouette of his prominent nose beneath the sheet as they pushed him past her out of the front door.

Her mother wouldn't stop crying. She stood on the veranda with red-ringed eyes and a mottled chest and drank white wine in large gulps. And then there was her father, who didn't display any emotion and smoked secretly in the garden.

Alma waited for the grief, but it didn't come. Its absence left behind an opening, without contour or direction. She couldn't picture her life. When she thought of her future back then, it was as though she were trying to focus her eyes on a painting, but it blurred every time.

What's it like, to think back with hindsight on the first moment? When the universe shifted a little, making space for a new constellation: Alma and Théo.

Her father was waiting for her in the car, the engine already running. He typed the address into the satnav, and Maroon 5 sang on the radio about how sweet love is. Her mother climbed into the passenger seat, silencing the song with the press of a button.

On the drive, her father drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Alma studied the back of his head, the curve of his outer ear, the nape of his neck in the starched shirt, and in the side-view mirror, his thinning dark hair.

They went through the list. Orators, their appointment time in the church, catering for the funeral feast. What a horrible term, thought Alma, funeral feast.

Following her grandfather's death, her parents had both become more irritable. Her mother's grief expressed itself in a hectic productivity. Carole had begun to reorganise the house, to rearrange furniture. She plucked shirts from wardrobes, gutted cupboards of their contents, moved vases from one bureau to another.

“Why is no one helping me, by the way?”

Alma's father seemed unmoved. Just like Alma, he was back here for the first time in years, and for an unexpectedly long stay (“who would've thought the old man would hang on this long”, she'd heard him say in the garden, on the phone to his work colleague. “No, of course I'm just joking”). He had packed a suitcase for a few days at most. Then: homeworking from the kitchen table, because the world doesn't stand still. His sympathy slowly dried up, leaving impatience in its wake.

Alma only knew her father to be impatient; and her mother distant. Love, for Alma, was tied to conditions. She had to earn it, work harder, be smarter than everyone else, bring home the best school reports. Her mother left her in peace – her father didn't.

Shortly before she moved out, on a Friday evening, unfamiliar coats in the cloakroom, he had called her downstairs. When she looked around, seeing flushed cheeks and smeared lipstick, he said: "This is Alma. She just got into LMU."

Smiles, nodding, a glass of water, then back upstairs.

And from the corridor, Alma heard them talking about her. She paused, barefoot on the stone steps.

"The selection process there is brutal. She did pretty well to get in."

Voices heavy with wine, tongues leaden in mouths.

"But let's see whether she really follows it through. She's always starting and stopping things. Tennis, swimming."

When Alma was drunk and talking to people, she enjoyed telling them that having a parent who didn't really like her had given her character. That she was happy about it, because otherwise she might have become boring and ordinary.

The next morning, slapping herself on the forehead, she was so embarrassed by these moments that she wouldn't get out of bed, instead searching Instagram stories on her phone for signs that no one wanted anything to do with her anymore. Because nothing was more embarrassing than pitying yourself, but at the same time pretending you didn't care.

They parked the car on the road and opened the gate to the property. The stones jutted out of the earth like crooked teeth, ivory-coloured, chalk-white.

Her mother went ahead, with the purposeful gait that Alma knew only from ballerinas: her toes turned slightly outwards, back straight, arms swinging with precision. She wore a pale-blue blouse, and her blonde hair fell down her back in soft waves.

"We did make an appointment, didn't we?" she asked, turning around to them. Her father nodded and laid a hand on her shoulder. His smile disappeared as soon as she turned away again.

Ivy covered the walls of the workshop and seemed to be the only thing holding it together. Inside, the sun struggled to penetrate the dusty windows, the scant light was heavy. The space was large, lined with workbenches, shelves and machines. There was a table covered with chisels, some as small as a toothpick, others large and bulky. Alongside them, a hammer, a measuring tape, a mug. Cables hung from the ceiling like spiderwebs, and the room smelt of minerals, sand and intensely of turpentine. She didn't have to look at her mother to know that this disorder made her nervous, that she was itching to leave.

Her father called: "Hello?" and peered into an adjoining room.

There was movement. Behind a beaded curtain, a man was sitting on a stool. The glasses nestled half way down his nose were, like all the surfaces here, covered with dust; his dark brown hair was flecked with silver strands. With his long legs and calm gaze, as though he were staring deeply into a river, he reminded Alma of a bird, perhaps a heron.

Her father rapped on the door frame.

The man stood up abruptly and came out of the room. He was holding a book in his hand, one finger between the pages as though he planned to keep reading momentarily. A black tomcat with a white chest slunk around his legs. The man spoke German with a strong French accent. He said he would fetch his son. *Il parle mieux allemand.*

She remembers that Théo looked as though nature had been unable to make up her mind where he was concerned. She had given him both hard and soft features: a Roman nose, full upper lips, sharp canines and long lashes. He had the same dark hair as his father, except shorter and curly.

"Théo," he introduced himself, and Alma repeated Théo silently in her head, tasting the letters, letting her tongue press against the roof of her mouth before finally forming a little "o".

His movements were those of a person who's the first to start dancing at a party while everyone else is still clutching their drinks; like someone who sits laughing in the back row at school and still gets good grades, with irony in every step, every bop, every grin.

She remembers that when Théo switched from German to French his voice became soft and warm, but the melody stayed the same. Sometimes he looked up at the ceiling when he couldn't find a word, as though it were written on the crossbeam and he would be able to make it out if only he looked closely enough.

Strange, how selectively one observes these moments. Alma remembers nothing but Théo, not the gravestone they picked out, nor the inscription or font, nor what her parents said. She watched him lift the stones off the shelves, his shoulder blades tensing under his ribbed T-shirt. She watched him tuck his dark locks behind his ears and brush his fingers across the stone.

Grès, calcaire, basalte, granit. Sandstone, chalk stone, basalt, granite.

Over the next few days, she kept thinking about his hands: coated with white dust, his fingers long and slender. They seemed too elegant to shape gravestones. She pictured them weaving yarn, kneading dough, conducting an orchestra.

The silence of the cemetery was different to the concentrated silence during a card game, or the expectant silence of a cinema auditorium. It wasn't charged; there was no held breath. The silence here was empty.

Besides her parents, a handful of people from the neighbourhood and a few relatives had come to the funeral. As she cast her gaze over the group in front of the church, she spotted Inès, and a warmth spread through her belly. Her cousin was wearing a black shift dress and barely any make-up. Her face looked naked without the red lipstick she usually wore. Inès fell back as the group entered the church, put her arm around Alma and kissed her on the cheek.

"All those people who lived off his money, and not even half the church is full," she whispered into Alma's ear.

Inès was the only one who had ever contradicted her grandfather, and when conversation turned to politics over summer dinners, her mother Suzanne often laid down her cutlery, looked nervously at Inès and hurriedly said things like: "Apparently it's going to rain tomorrow, at long last!"

In her absence, Alma's aunt enjoyed describing her daughter as *political*, as though that were everything a person needed to know about her. "You never know when you're going to say the wrong thing with her."

Inès, by contrast, always knew how to say the right thing. Every summer, she had slept in the room next to hers in the house. Alma had slipped into Inès bed during the night countless times, and they had spent entire days together in the pool, falling asleep under the same scratchy blanket on the couch while the grown-ups talked late into the night.

The funeral orator spoke about how her grandfather had been revered for his tireless dedication, and about the determination with which he had built up his fortune from humble beginnings. Everything was always about his money – even after his death.

And now there he lay, her grandfather, in a wooden box, surrounded by worms and dirt. Did the people here know that during the last weeks of his life he had pissed his pants multiple times a day; that a nurse had needed to wipe spit from the corner of his mouth? That she had hummed a song to him in French and shown him more tenderness than the rest of them put together?

Most of the funeral guests took off soon after the ceremony; no one stayed any longer than necessary. During the subsequent meal, the green beans and pork medallions went cold on the catering trays, conversations ebbed away.

Alma and Inès stood next to the stairs in the hallway, both with a wine glass in their hand, silent. At least Alma could use being sad as an excuse today. It had never bothered her when people found her unapproachable. Unapproachable, introverted – they were all just labels made by people who never took the effort to really look.

People said goodbye, cheeks were kissed, and Alma wondered how many colours she would have to mix together in order to paint Théo. His hair: carmine red, ochre and ultramarine, to get the right shade of brown.

She closed her eyes.

Perhaps a little sienna for warmth.

*

It's you.

Those were the first words he had said to her. Simple. A statement. A recognition.

The tablecloth fluttered in the wind, and Alma grabbed a sugar bowl from the neighbouring table to weigh it down. She had drunk two coffees and piled one cup inside the other. Her hands were shaking from all the caffeine, but she didn't want to go home just yet. Another coffee, please, another glass of water, a sandwich with fries.

On the chairs to her left and right stood the shopping bags from the supermarket. She had offered to take over the weekly shop from Carole in order to flee the silence of the house. Any time she saw her mother sitting in the kitchen, Alma acted as though she were on her way out.

“Where are you off to?”

Just into town, just into the garden, just to her room. Her mother's pain was too great; she couldn't take it away from her. So she went instead. Every morning, she swam twenty lengths, until her muscles burned, wrinkles appeared on the tips of her fingers, and the chlorine left a greenish tinge in her pink hair.

In one of the bags, the butter was slowly melting in the evening sun. The Sudoku book lay in front of her. Her sketches clambered from the margin towards the numbers. The man she was drawing was sitting diagonally opposite her, eating a quiche. After every bite, he put down his fork, leaned back in his chair, chewed, savoured. Next to him lay his hat, a packet of cigarettes.

It's you.

She recognised his hands on the table, his bare arm, his shoulder, his neck, his smile. She hadn't seen him approaching. He spoke to her in German, but the melody of his sentence was French, the consonants soft.

C'est toi.

“Hi”, she said.

Concealed behind her sunglasses, she could let her eyes wander across him. He was wearing a pale blue shirt, linen shorts and scuffed leather sandals. He had pushed his sunglasses up onto his head, and the indentations were still visible on the sides of his nose.

“We know each other—”

“From your visit. I’m sorry about your grandfather.”

Impatient, he couldn’t let her complete her thoughts.

“There’s no need,” she answered.

He cocked his head to one side, laughed in confusion. Heat rose in her cheeks.

“That sounded wrong. I just meant... He wasn’t a particularly nice person. He loved his work, and perhaps my grandma too, but nothing really besides that.”

“That sounds like quite a sensible life, if you ask me.”

His gaze drifted to her drawing.

“Not bad.” He tapped his fingers on it, tilted his head so he could see it properly.

“Hang on. Is that —”

He suddenly turned to look at the man.

“No!”

“What?” she asked, sitting upright. “Do you know him?”

“No. But you drew his nose so much bigger than it actually is. You can’t let him see that, he’ll develop a complex. Wait—”

Without asking whether he could sit down, he pulled out the chair next to her and took the pencil from her hand. On page 14 of the Sudoku book, he drew the man again. His lines were thicker than hers, his contours softer. He didn’t draw on the white margin, but instead over the lines and numbers; he needed more space.

The man Théo drew looked different. Alma had sketched his wrinkles, the fleck of sauce on his mouth, his wedding ring.

Théo’s perspective was narrower, he only painted the man’s face, the bushy eyebrows, the laughter lines. Théo’s drawing was more fluid, more impulsive. When he drew, it seemed like he began a line without knowing where it would end.

“Mine looks much more like him,” said Alma. She knew she was lying, that she found his a more fitting portrait, and she wished she had seen the man like that.

Théo waved his hand dismissively, as though painting a person with precision were of no great importance.

“I think that when we draw something, we choose what we want to see, don’t we? Selective perception and so on. You wanted to see the fleck of sauce. And the lines on his forehead. And his crumpled shirt.”

“I’m not sure what that says about me.”

“Perhaps that you look more closely than most people. Okay, if I had to guess, I’d say that details are important to you.”

“Maybe. What else?”

He leaned back, studying her.

“You’re good at maths. Which of course contrasts with your artistic talent.”

“I majored in maths and art,” she said, laughing against her will. He ran his fingers over the page, tracing her pencil lines.

“You press too hard with the pencil, so you’re obviously determined.”

His gaze wandered over her.

“And – you’re a bit pessimistic.”

“Realistic, I would say.”

“That’s what all pessimists say.”

His grin was broad. He made no effort to hide his teeth, even though a few of them were crooked – radical self-confidence.

“Anyway, mine looks more like him,” he said.

“No it doesn’t.”

“Shall we ask him?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. With two swift movements, he tore out both pages. In just a few steps, he was by the man’s side. The man laid his newspaper aside in confusion, put down his glasses and looked up.

What was he saying? Théo stood there gesticulating in his thin shirt. His curls bobbed with every movement, and from time to time he brushed them impatiently behind his ears. He and the man leaned over the drawings together. When he pointed at one of the pictures, Théo shook his head as though he were deeply disappointed. They both laughed and shook hands. When he came back to her table, Théo raised his hands as though he were surrendering.

“He didn’t even need that long to decide. Despite the fact I tried so hard to persuade him to choose mine.”

Théo pulled the chair out again and sat down opposite her.

“I’m your student,” he said.

“Okay. The first rule is: never harass the model.” She took the drawing out of his hand.

“Of course.” He rolled his eyes as though that were obvious. “Understood. What else?”

She ran her finger over his drawing.

“You’re too quick. For me, drawing someone means spending time getting to know them.”

“Even though it’s only one-sided? After all, until just a moment ago the man didn’t realise you’d gotten to know him.”

“Especially then. I was watching him for twenty minutes at least.”

“Time isn’t a measure of quality.”

He was tapping his foot, his gaze was alert.

“How is it possible that you work with the slowest material on earth, and yet you’re so impatient?”

“When I’m working with stone, I’m not impatient. When we’re sitting here and I’m drawing an old man while you sit opposite me – yes, then I want to get it done quickly.”

He looked at her for a long time. Neither of them looked away.

“Can I ask you something, Alma?”

“Of course.”

“Can you draw me sometime?”

She couldn't help but laugh, and he joined in.

“Why are you laughing?”

“I don't know. It's just... Funny.”

“It's not at all. All my life, I've been the artist. More or less. I do sculptures alongside the work with my dad, and of course the sketches for them. But I want to be the muse for once. I want to know how it feels.”

She shook her head again, and now that she'd started, she couldn't stop laughing.

“Why not?” He leaned forwards, resting his head on his hands. His eyelashes were thick and black, as though he were wearing mascara. Alma wanted to brush her fingers over them, to feel whether they were soft or bristly.

“No idea. I know I can draw, don't get me wrong. But mostly I don't want anyone to see them. Then I would have to deal with their reaction, even if it's good. And I just don't want to do that. I don't want to share my pictures, not with anyone.”

“I understand. Then I genuinely got lucky today, that I was allowed to see your drawing.”

He grinned, his smile traversed his whole face, casting tiny creases around his eyes.

“Listen: you draw me – and I won't look at it afterwards, okay? Then I can live out my fantasy, and you don't have to worry.”

“Okay,” she said.

DAY TWO

The sunrise looks like a sunburnt shoulder, pink around the edges, red in the middle. Raw, painful.

Once again, he has barely slept. There are no shutters here, just thin white curtains, through which the first rays of sunlight easily push their way. They feel like spotlights on him.

He has to keep his hands busy – what else is all the pain good for?

Taking a knife from the drawer, he opens one of the plastic packages. The clay feels cold, and only warms once water is added, becoming supple like liquid silk. He slowly lets the water run through his fingers onto the block of clay, feels it relent beneath his hands.

Théo has been thinking a lot about running since he arrived here. Less about actually doing it, and more about the action itself. His body feels so unfamiliar that he's no longer even sure what that's like – to simply let it function. He thinks about relay races at school, about the times he was caught graffiti-ing and ran away from the police, with burning calves and stabbing pains in his ribs.

The pool house is clean and white, its roof covered with dark tiles, making it look like a small version of the big house. Before, they used to sleep here from time to time, he and Alma, and it had felt like a little adventure. They went swimming at night, laid down in the grass to smoke, then fled here from the mosquitoes, entangling their bitten legs on the couch. Their bodies hot from the sun, hair brittle from the chlorine.

He has good memories of this large room with its two curved windows, the jute rug and numerous cupboards. Now everything is covered with dust sheets, to protect the furniture from the clay. The table and the couch can only be distinguished by their silhouettes. A bowl rests on the floor, the water in it murky and loamy.

The clay follows his fingers, the colour shifting from steel to a creamy grey. The form comes, and he doesn't know where from. His fingers give the direction, and he follows, curious as to what they will show him.

Hands have always fascinated him. Old, young, blotched, smooth, freckled, pale, dark, cracked, covered with veins. The mountains and valleys of the knuckles, the rivers and paths

of the palms. Their emotions: a fist, rage. An outstretched finger, sometimes warning, sometimes showing the way. Palms turned upwards – pleading, begging, searching for help.

The hand he is forming today is more complicated. It digs its fingers into a surface, trying to grasp hold of it but slipping away.

Had Alma believed his excuse that he could work better over here? The idea of being so close to her again – the sight of her in the morning, her bare legs crossed on the couch – it was too much. Proximity feels risky here.

The clay on his hands dries white. When he stretches them and makes a fist, it flakes off. The joints in his thumbs hurt. It's a good pain. It reminds him that he's doing something.

She'll still be asleep at this hour. With his eyes closed, he pictures her body, her hair fanned out on the pillow, hands folded beneath her cheek, one leg bent, the other stretched out. Just like she always sleeps. The fine blonde hairs on her thighs, the thin film of sweat on the nape of her neck. Without a protective shield, or a single frown on her brow. Soft.

*

She came the evening after their encounter in the café, a large bag slung over one shoulder. Her pale blue shirt with white pinstripes was rolled up around her elbows, her trousers were multiple sizes too large.

He led her to the back of the workshop. Statues stared at her through blind eyes from the shelves. Their facial features took on a sharp, demonic edge.

In the back room he had built up a set, positioned two standing lamps on each side, their shades turned in such a way that they pointed towards a chair that stood on a white cloth. There was a candle in the corner, its wax slowly dripping down onto the surface of the table.

"I see I'm dealing with a professional here," she said, her mouth suggesting a smile as she studied his work.

She invited him to sit down. A shiver ran through his body as she arranged his legs on the chair and asked him softly: "Can you hold that pose for a long time?"

As she positioned his head, her hands on either side of his face, he wanted to reach out for them and kiss her palms.

“Look toward me,” she said as she disappeared behind the canvas.

With her, the workshop took on a different presence, as though every object had been shifted by a few centimetres, or a knife point of black had been mixed into a colour.

Everything became more intense.

Her gaze on him was physical, it made his breath shallower, his heart beat fiercely against his ribs.

He enjoyed having a reason to look at her. It was appropriating, for sure, how she took something from him and made it her own. But he had the feeling she was revealing more of herself than the other way round. They stayed in silence for a while, and it was pleasant, he didn't feel the usual compulsion to fill it.

He had always liked people most in these most vulnerable of moments. Shortly after waking up, their hair tussled, eyes tired. In moments when they sang off key, danced out of step, began to clap too soon. He loved the seconds of painful silence, the “oops”, the glossing over of things, the few moments when they were really genuine. When he watched Alma drawing, it felt a bit like that. As though he were witnessing a scene that he had no right to be seeing.

During her preliminary sketch, she stood almost motionless, then her movements became larger, faster, more erratic. The process was bodily, almost like she was wrestling. What was she seeing? He wanted to creep inside her head, take a look around, see through her grey eyes. At times she vanished entirely behind the canvas. Then: an elbow, a few strands of pink hair, her eyes, sharp and serious. Her cheeks were flushed, her neckline covered with blotches, her head tilted to the side. She sounded interested when she told him to tell her something.

“What, though?” He couldn't help but laugh. “I can tell you all kinds of things.”

She looked at him and thought for a moment.

“Tell me about your father.”

“My father?”

“Yes. Are you two close?”

She pressed the paintbrush into the old cloth, the oil staining through the material as dark blots.

“I would say so, yes. Arthur... I don’t know whether it’s possible to like him immediately, when you first meet him.”

“I liked him,” contradicted the voice behind the canvas.

“I just mean – he’s quiet and sometimes needs a long time before he talks. Sometimes people begin to talk over the silence, but he’s just getting his words ready. Words are important to him, I think. Finding the right ones. But when he does talk, it’s like a waterfall. Usually it’s about one of two things: art or flowers. So at heart he’s a snob, captured in the body of a poor stonemason.”

A laugh from behind the canvas.

“How long has he been working as stonemason?”

“His father died when he was seventeen, so he had to take over the shop. Since then, he’s never really gotten away from here.”

A pulling sensation behind his navel. He turned his gaze away from her, studied his hands.

“Can’t your mum lure him away from time to time?”

“That would be tricky. She packed her bags and left fifteen years ago.”

Alma put down the paintbrush and looked at him. The tips of her fingers were covered with white paint.

“I barely remember her, so I don’t think it’s any great loss. Don’t look at me like that.”

A laugh escaped him, and it sounded as nervous as he felt. He didn’t want to talk about his mother. It wasn’t that he got angry when he thought of her; but it made him sad, lethargic, and he knew the thought of her was like an annoying tune he wouldn’t be able to get out of his head for days on end.

“I’m sorry, Théo.”

His name from her mouth echoed in his head. From her it sounded melodic, gentle, the “T” soft.

“Things are fine the way they are. She was a seamstress, which I actually think is really cool. And long before she fell pregnant with me, she wanted to work in fashion, and then realised that the small village my father had brought her to wasn’t Paris, there weren’t many catwalks and so on. I wasn’t really planned, you know. But the thing is – I can’t blame her for leaving.”

“I understand,” she said, and he felt that she meant it.

“Have you ever had that? The urge to leave?”

Alma had begun to paint again, with swift movements.

“That’s not an option,” he said.

“That’s not an answer,” she said.

Silence fell.

“What would you do, if you left?”

Her voice was an outstretched hand. He took his time with the answer, kneading the joint of his thumb, which was sore from work, and said: “I think I’d move to a city that’s loud and dirty, where you can go to the cinema any time of the day or night. Then I would rent myself a small studio, one where I’d also live, of course, and inhale poisonous fumes at night until I eventually die at the age of sixty from an unexplained lung disease. And until then I’d do sculptures, and from time to time someone would stumble across my studio and buy one, and I’d be able to pay my rent for another month.”

She smiled and nodded, as though she could picture his life like that.

“Why don’t you study art?”

“I don’t know whether I want to. Because – maybe I’m prejudiced, but I feel like, at those schools, it’s still all: “Art is a struggle, art is suffering.” That you have to cut off your ear or drink yourself to death in order to be a good artist. For me, art has always been the salvation, never the torment.”

He breathed in, drummed his fingers against his jeans.

Alma took a step back, studied the picture and tilted her head to the side. It was hard to discern whether or not she liked what she saw. Then she gathered up her brushes and immersed them in solvent.

“And what’s the deep-rooted trauma you’re processing in your pictures?” he asked.

She washed the brushes out in a glass and answered with a laugh: “Oh, the usual: absent father, distant mother, narcissistic grandfather.”

“Wow, then you got the Holy Trinity of family trauma.”

“Absolutely. But that’s not the focus right now. Today, you’re the muse. Can I trust you and leave the picture here?”

She looked at him with raised eyebrows as she lined the paintbrushes up alongside one another.

“I won’t look at it, I promise.”

“Good.” Her teeth glinted in the candlelight. One heartbeat, two. Was it too soon to kiss her? Then the moment was gone.

When he thinks back to that evening, he sees the flickering of the candle and how forbidding it made her look: Persephone in his workshop, her face all arcs, curved brows and round eyes.