

Kirsten Fuchs

Please contact:
Ms. Tatiana Jandt
Phone: +49 40 72 72 - 325
Fax: +49 40 72 72 - 319
E-Mail: tatiana.jandt@rowohlt.de

Kirsten Fuchs

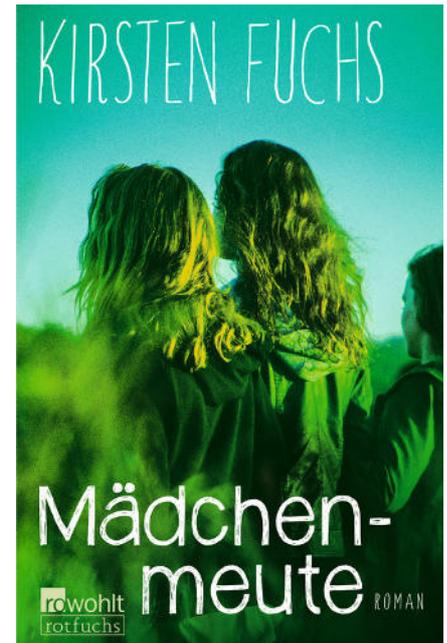
THE GIRL GANG

Rowohlt rotfuchs / Rowohlt.Berlin

fiction

January 2015/ 14+ / 464 pages

Charlotte Nowak, 15 and incredibly shy, reluctantly heads off to summer camp with seven other girls. When she gets there, she finds that things are very different to how she'd imagined. First, things start to go missing. And when their group leader completely loses her temper, the girls make their escape, stealing a dog catcher's van (dogs included) in the process. Literally heading for the hills, one of the girls knows of an old disused mine. The group decides to seek refuge there. Each summer day they spend there seems to heighten their sense of freedom and excitement even further. The girls spend their days trekking through the woods, their nights scavenging supermarket storage containers. Charly Nowak slowly realises that there is a lot more to her than her shyness. But when the gang stumbles across an extraordinary relic of the old Communist East Germany and the real world threatens to catch up with them, Charly has to prove her mettle and display both her newly found courage and her loyalty to her new friends.



- **A surprising and just wonderful story about growing up and friendship.**
- **Nominated for the German Youth Literature Prize in 2016!**
- **English sample translation available.**
- **Over 20,000 copies sold!**

«Kirsten Fuchs's novel tells of a time about which many novels have already been written [...]. But the way she goes about telling this supposedly well-trodden story is very surprising, thrilling and above all exceedingly funny.» *NDR KULTUR*

Kirsten Fuchs was born in 1977 in Karl-Marx-Stadt in the former GDR. Probably the best known and highly regarded woman in Berlin's spoken word scene, she won the Open Mike literature competition in 2003. Since then, she has become a renowned writer of books not only for young people. Her acclaimed debut novel, *The Titanic and Mister Berg*, was published in 2005. 2008 saw the publication of her book *Heal*. *The Girl Gang* is her third novel.

English sample translation by Bradley Schmidt

Part 1: *The Camp* (p.9-30)

It was the summer I stopped getting bright red in the face whenever I was supposed to string together more than three words. By the end I had a scar on my hand and had had my first kiss. I had even become a little famous. First things first.

It started with my mother holding an advertisement from the newspaper under my nose. A vacation fun survival camp. I was ready because my shoulder shrugging muscles were in great form at the time and even unbeaten in the flyweight division for fifteen-year-old girls.

My mother actually knew that even though shrugging my shoulder could mean “yes” and “no,” it usually meant “no”.

“The camp is in Bad Heiligen,” she read aloud from the ad. “That’s a popular lake resort. That painter was in Heiligen.”

“Sure, that painter!” I said.

Three weeks later, my mother handed me a registration form. Judging by her face, I should have thrown my arms around her neck, hugging her with a cry of joy: “Oh mommy, you’re just the best!” She’d watched too much TV, for real.

“You even have to fill out an application. I’m sure a lot of people want to go. Just think, they could pick you from all the applicants.”

For me it sounded like some guy with balloons jumps out of the bushes when someone steps in the remains of a pile of dog crap. With a sign: you’re the hundredth visitor to this dog crap.

“Or would you rather go to grandma’s?”

I shrug my shoulders. The most exciting thing about the village my grandma lives in is that sometimes a shed simply collapsed. The whole place was populated purely with old women whose husbands had died off. The only sight worth seeing was the pharmacist’s son. The widows hobbled over to him every single day.

I started to going moldy a few minutes after arriving and Grandma would ask if I had a different hair-do, at most. She wanted to talk about hair constantly. Probably because she had so little left. On her chin, for example.

Kirsten Fuchs

My mother and father always worked up a sweat in the garden. If I wanted out, I'd have to help. If I stayed inside, a shopping channel she liked to watch would be screaming at me even though she never ordered anything.

So why not go to a survival camp instead? My mom thought it'd be good for me. It turned out that, after all, but I'm sure she had a different kind of "good for me" in mind. The more days went by, the more I thought I'd rather to be with my grandma. The pharmacist's son was really cute. A sight for sore eyes, Grandma said. Maybe I could convince myself to fall in love with him, then at least I'd have been in love once.

There was even WiFi in the cafe next to the pharmacy. I could order up an ice cream and while it melted I could solve some "pro" level puzzle on Puzzle Zone. There you could even think up puzzles yourself and distribute points. Depending on who came up with the solution first. I was still just barely in the lead at the beginning of the summer.

Besides, I could take along a lot to read. I devoured adventure novels. And crime fiction. I started to hope that I wouldn't be picked by the camp. Why would I? It's not like I was a boy scout or anything.

Then a thick envelope arrived in the mail, too big to fit into the mailbox. The mail carrier even had to ring. Through the milky glass pane, I could see her standing outside and looking at the envelope. She was a girl from the neighboring town who had just finished her training period with the postal service this year.

"You've got mail," she said stiffly. We had been on first name basis just a year before.

There were three stickers on the envelope. The kind you could have addresses printed on. My address was on one of them. The second said: "Wild Girls". And on the third: "The woods don't want something from you. You want something from the woods." And it got even better inside the envelope: "Congratulations, you're going to have a fabulous summer!!!" Three exclamation points. This was followed by an explanation of why it'd be better to come without a mobile phone. At camp we were supposed to learn how to get our bearings. Completely without technology and internet. The aim was to strengthen our independent actions and thoughts, and experience nature. Below that was a small slip that could be cut off. I hereby authorize you to confiscate the mobile telephone dot dot dot from my daughter; in the case that she has one in her possession, blah-dee-blah... it will be confiscated for the duration of the camp. Legal guardian one and two.

Kirsten Fuchs

I was sure that my mother wouldn't do it. Send me into the woods without my phone. She laughed exaggeratedly, throwing her head back. Oh yeah, that sure would be an adjustment for me. Sometimes my mother acted as if she'd read something about teenagers and was confusing them with me just because we were the same age. As if I was constantly glued to my phone! I had two friends. One was our cat Sneezewhite, aka Sneezy. The other was Severine, who lived next door. Whenever we wanted anything we just stuck our heads out of our bedrooms and yelled over to the other. That's what we'd always done. That's the way it'd always be. Later we wanted to go to college together in Potsdam and share a little apartment. Then we wouldn't even have to stick our heads out the window.

The phone permission slip was to be sent in with the registration. To an address in Schluchnow. No clue about that. But it sounded as if just the people of Schluchnow knew about Schluchnow. There was all kinds of junk in the Wild Girls packet: a magnifying glass, a referee's whistle, a collapsible cup for brushing your teeth. Clevvy, the clever squirrel was plastered everywhere. It had a black bandana wrapped around its neck and two braids instead of pointy ears. The stuff looked like it was from my parents' childhood and had done a lap or two around the world in a shipping container in the meantime. The magnifying glass had a scratch, the collapsible cup kept on collapsing by itself and sand trickled out of the whistle. Was that supposed to be all survival-like? Made to seem extra old? Just like you singe the edges of a self-drawn treasure map with a lighter? Was this a camp for ten-year-olds?

I asked my mother what age had been listed in the ad. She dug out the clipping. It was tiny. Probably the cheapest ad you could place. There it said "14 and up". But now I was afraid that there might be eighteen or nineteen-year-old girls there, too. That was a completely different species. I always felt like a fruit fly in comparison.

The last thing I found in the envelope was a piece of paper. It was a list of what was needed and what wasn't. What wasn't needed, for example, was a flashlight, "will be provided by the camp". But what was needed was a sleeping bag, tick tweezers, a lighter, sturdy shoes (didn't have them. Had to buy them extra), rain gear (didn't have it either. We bought it cheap. Should have bought the expensive kind), a knife with a sheath or a pocket knife (didn't have one. I got it from Dad with the explicit instructions that it had saved his life three times and that it absolutely had to come back. Yeah, sure, I said), an analog watch (didn't have one. We bought it cheap. Even there

Kirsten Fuchs

we should have spent more money. The cheap one stopped two days in because it got wet. And that's when things just got started).

I had still been hoping someone would randomly kidnap me while my mother was driving me to the bus. The meeting point was the main bus station in Berlin. Departure: 9 p.m.

“Oh, how exciting,” my mother patted my leg. “That you’ll be arriving at night. That’s wonderful!”

“Nope, sure isn’t,” I said. My practical outdoor jacket rustled as I crossed my arms.

My mother wasn’t able to find a parking spot in the direct vicinity of the bus station, and that’s why none of the girls I was supposed to spend the next few weeks with saw me climb out of this unbelievable car. There was “Spick & Span – Nowak & Nowak” written across it. I hated the car because there were only two front seats. Behind the scrubbers and buckets clattering around in the back there was a tiny folding seat with a lap belt. Whenever the three of us were driving anywhere I had to be perched there and couldn’t even look out because the windows were plastered over with ads. “Nowak & Nowak & Nowak” would never, ever, ever be on the side of this car.

But I was sitting up front the day we went to camp. My adventure backpack was in back. I glanced at myself in the rearview mirror before getting out of the car.

“You look very nice,” my mother said. She had cut my dark blond hair to chin length the day before. That should distract from my oval facial form... it didn’t distract from my long nose, at any rate.

“Actually, you look a little like Princess Diana,” she said. I slammed the car door shut and clomped behind my mother in my new sturdy shoes. The camp bus was easy to find. “Wilderness for Wild Girls” was sprayed across side. The bus looked as if it wanted to be a big bus someday.

A man relieved me of my adventure backpack. The man was small and skinny and had a face like a prune. The bill of his formerly white baseball cap had been smoked yellow. The man was also smoking as he pushed my backpack into the bus. There were already tons of bags lying there. I glimpsed a weathered army rucksack, and a shiny purple one.

Then the bus driver slammed door shut. “Well, get in now!” he said with a broken voice.

Being the last person to climb in the bus was my favorite nightmare, right behind having to do a short presentation on the most important bodily changes in puberty. In front of the entire school, and whenever I want to say something, everyone yells “Strip!”, even the teachers.

Kirsten Fuchs

I had told my mother in advance that I wanted to be on time and that we should leave early enough. She always believes that she and the car have not aged. At home she still had to weave her wild mane into a braid. Half an hour! So that she now looked like Sneezywhite, when the despised fat tom cat showed up on the property. For real, I don't know what parents constantly have to complain about with kids. They don't do a thing.

"We're Charlotte Nowak," said my mother to the black-haired woman who stood at the front of the bus. I was still half outside.

"Hello, Mrs. Nowak. Hello, Charlotte, We've been waiting for you." The woman took a moment to wink, rattling her bracelets, pearls large as doll's eyes. She laughed as if she had a toothache. That LEGO-do was a wig, right? Except for the vest with something like a hundred pockets, she didn't look at all survival-like. She extended her hand to my mother. Her yellow nail polish probably glowed in the dark. That way she could find her way to the camp outhouse at night or blind the wild pigs. She was perfect scarecrow for wild pigs. And why did she look so tense? She said the man is Bruno, and pointed at the bus driver. Her name was Inga. The person to talk to. She'd take good care of me. How did I immediately know that it was a lie, while my mother wished me so, so, so much fun and hugged me in farewell?

Inside the minibus it smelled of cellar. There were lots of bags on the seats behind the driver. Bags with cat patterns. Fifteen of the same bag. All cinched tight. The cellar smell came from the bags.

I looked around the bus, clueless. A narrow aisle, two seats on either side, one, two, three, four rows.

There was a girl at each window seat. Up front, right behind the driver, there was one who was surely not even fourteen. She had light blond hair, a moon face, and button nose. If I'd sit next to her I might have to adopt her.

Behind her sat a girl with unkempt brown hair. She burned holes in the window with her stare. She saw underneath the 'break in case of emergency' hammer and looked like it was completely intentional. I immediately thought she was cool.

She looked at me briefly. Her eyes were ablaze.

She hissed: "That seat's not free. My quirk sits there."

That's how I got to know Bea. At first I thought of her as 'quirk girl'. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven of us. Made eight with me.

Kirsten Fuchs

I woke up when the bus stopped rocking me. Rubbing my eyes didn't help: outside was pitch black night. I could see trees in the headlights of the bus. A whole lot of trees. So woods.

Next to me, Mimiko woke up. She was from Rheinsberg. Her father was Japanese. Her mother was German. She was here because her parents thought Mimiko didn't get out enough. She had shown me her smartphone and then let it slip back into her jacket pocket. She had wIngad, I nodded.

The light was turned on inside the bus. "Alright! Everyone out!" The smoker voice croaked out of the loudspeakers above our heads. Then the bus driver coughed into the microphone. "Sorry" was what he said after he was finished hacking. "Here it is. We're here."

Everyone shifted in their seats. Heads turned to and fro. Whispers and yawns.

We got out, with me second to last. I was still able to see a pale moon shining underneath the tops of the tree. Half crescent. The light seemed very bright because it was very dark here. In the city a half-moon wouldn't have been much of a source of light. There every streetlight was a small moon. There was a very light drizzle, as if the tiny drops didn't even move, as if they were simply hanging in the air. It smelled so extremely like woods that I felt woozy. Otherwise I like being in the woods, but for me the woods was a place that was better in daytime. I sniffed at the damp air one last time. Some kind of crazy stink wafted around. And the smell of fire.

"Girls! Over here!" The woman called out. She stood in the cone of light given off by the bus headlights. Holding an umbrella. Just because of a couple drops. She could hardly form a fist around her umbrella handle without almost slicing open her artery with her long fingernails. One of the cat bags was slung over her shoulder. It clattered with every movement, together with the bracelets.

"Once again, for all of you: my name is Inga, your go-to person. A warm welcome. In my name and the name of the team, and ..." She laughed like a seal, "and of course Clevvy."

Mimiko barfed on the ground next to me.

Inga, the go-to person, after all, did not feel responsible for barf sounds. She just kept on talking: "Actually we wanted to sleep under the stars with you. True nature. Unfortunately, we haven't had much luck with the weather. That's why there's been a change of plans and we are spending the night at our base camp – short notice. I also only have the one umbrella. Too bad. But wild girls don't really need things like that. Right?"

The girls had pulled their hoods over their heads because it was drizzling harder and harder. Next to me Mimiko wiped her mouth with a tissue.

Kirsten Fuchs

Inga appeared to wait if we would call out something in agreement in unison. Maybe: “A clevvy girl doesn’t care about umbrellas. Yeah!”

Silence in the woods. At least from our side. From the real woods there were all kinds of sounds. Something was crawling on the ground, something hopping through the bushes, they flew up and fluttered through the branches.

Small critters gnawed crooked patterns into the greenery, even small ones tapped out short messages under the bark. Out of the pitch black woods came pitch black sounds rattling, making you believe in creatures that weren’t in field guides, and if they were listed, then in the chapter on ghosts. The strangest thing was a whistling in the trees. A high-pitched whistle, and a deep tone. This wasn’t good, I decided. Suddenly I saw figures crouching, clothed in black. They were probably bushes. Was there a car parked behind them? It was too rectangular for a bush, too big. Maybe that was a ping pong table.

There was a boom real close by. A girl squeaked. I jumped. The girl next to me was frightened by my fright, and next to her another girl was frightened by her fright. We had all squeaked in a different pitch. A chain reaction that sounded like a short song.

“That was probably just a falling branch. Don’t act like a bunch of chickens and stop clucking so much. The woods don’t want anything from you. You want something from the woods.

Remember that,” Inga said. “There’ll be a surprise for you later. But I don’t want to give too much away.”

Hallelujah, I thought, then the real group leader will probably come, an athletic woman, funny and cool. Without necklaces and bracelets and fingernails like murder tools.

I tried to get my bearings. There was a flat cabin around twenty yards beyond the bus. And more behind that. They all looked a little green in the moonlight, as if they had been pulled out of a lake and set out to dry here.

Inga gave us the task of retrieving the cat bags from the bus and then unloading the luggage.

There were also big, green faded kit bags next to our bags. Five of them. We put everything next to the bus, on the increasingly damp sand. Our steps pushed the wet sand underneath the dry sand.

Soon there were light footprints everywhere.

Soon all of them had been turned dark by the rain, then vanished.

Kirsten Fuchs

The bus driver walked between the cabins with his flashlight while we were getting our things from the bus. He whispered something to Inga when he returned. She didn't like the whispered message. She hissed excitedly. I couldn't understand much. Just what he said. "Don't get so worked up. Did you take your pill yet?" Upon which a zipper was yanked open. In the end I heard his voice croak: "I'll be back tomorrow."

I quickly turned my head when Inga arrived. She gave me a strange look. "What's up, Charlotte Nowak?" She turned to the others without waiting for an answer. "The luggage needs to be protected from the rain."

Everyone took their things. We formed a flock behind Inga, as if we had imprinted on this strange woman right after hatching. We were hardly a few yards from the bus when it honked just as hoarsely as its driver and drove into the woods. He took the headlights with him. I felt like barfing now too.

Something rustled, then lit up, and Inga's voice came from the direction of the light. "Come along! All of you!" She was probably wearing a headlamp.

That hollow whistle annoyed me. It wasn't an animal. It was as if the wind was flowing through a pipe. So nothing scary, I decided.

Behind the first row of seven cabins there was a free space. This is where the smell of fire increased. The smell of fire was also not scary, I decided. Only that stink was disgusting. A beaten down path led through the high grass, so narrow that no fox could slink through without getting its fur wet on the morning dew. We slunk behind Inga. The ground beneath our feet changed. My new, sturdy shoes no longer sank into the sand. Slabs of rock. Grass and young saplings in the cracks. Something clacked metallically. The rain became stronger, and the wind tested the durability of everything. There were three flagpoles jutting up next to the meeting point. Moonlight slipped down them. The wire cord used to pull up the flags was beaten against the pole by the wind. Mimiko whispered to me that she thought all of this was shitty. I whispered back that I also that it was shitty that, especially since I noticed my jacket wasn't waterproof. Behind us a girl also whispered that it was total shit.

Kirsten Fuchs

We had arrived at a cabin somewhat off to one side. It was three times as long as the other. Inga pulled a huge ring of keys from her cat bag and rattled through all of the keys. She opened the cabin and said that we should put the bags down so that we could fetch the kit bags.

I tried to always keep someone in front of me and behind me. This was completely easy because the other girls did exactly the same thing, meaning we all stayed together. Only Quirk Girl stomped around by herself. After all, her quirk was walking around with her.

Once everything was stowed away in the cabin Inga pointed to the cat bag. “Everyone grab an overnight package. Inside there is a small blanket, a useful towel, and three-part camping dish set with plate, bowl, cup – all of it from Clevvy, the smart, er, clever, you know what I mean. Follow me to the accommodations.” She had fallen out of a file cabinet or something. As warm-hearted as a frozen food product. She probably called bread ‘foundation for nourishing spread’ or something like that.

The really young girl was suddenly walking next to me. Everything about her dangled. She was in the phase that the kittens always were when we gave them away. They were still cute but were able to walk straight ahead. As suddenly as she had appeared next to me, just as suddenly we were walking arm in arm. So I had adopted her after all. Her long blond hair tickled my arm. In her kid’s voice she said her name was Antonia. I imagined she smelled of vanilla. Maybe she was a cookie in reality.

Inga led us to a veranda that was covered with a corrugated plastic roof. The rain drummed against the corrugated plastic – was that how you call it? Corrugated plastic? Whatever. Inga folded her umbrella and leaned it against the cabin wall, where it was still the next morning. “And now it’s exactly the right moment for the surprise.” She removed the clanking bag from her shoulder and had all of us reach in once. We pulled out Clevvy flashlights. They looked like how people used to imagine the future would be.

“At the moment they don’t contain any batteries. Too bad. But naturally we’ll provide some later.”

Exactly which ‘we’ was Inga referring to the whole time? Would the bus driver return?

“Well these are great, right?” Inga asked.

None of the girls said anything. Inga could have just as well passed out pine cones. If we had enough pine cones we could throw them around and would hit something. That was almost a flashlight.

Kirsten Fuchs

One flashlight was left in Inga's bag.

"Girls!" She called. "Someone's missing!"

Poor little Antonia started to cry.

One very pretty girl acted like she was spitting behind herself.

I would have liked to do something too. My neighbor's dog always scratched itself when it didn't know what to do.

"WHO'S MISSING?" Inga shrieked at us, as if one of those she was yelling at was missing. Then she immediately whispered: "Ok, girls, who's missing?" It happened so fast, as if someone had said "get lost, come here."

The missing girl could only be the quirk girl. I could picture her just strolling on home, humming. I'm sure she knew how to make a wolf howl.

"The one with the short hair," said a girl from the darkness.

Inga huffed, then she yelled so loud that the few leafy trees amongst all the pines rolled up their leaves and looked like they had needles too. "TABEA FRANK!"

Footsteps moved closer. "I was behind the bathrooms, taking care of something. The bathrooms happen to be locked but the way it stinks I didn't want to go in either."

Inga ran over to Quirk Girl, so her name was Tabea Frank, and tried to give her a hug. She pulled her headlight from her head and shone it in her face. She held her other hand over her heart: "I carry full responsibility for you. Girls, no monkey business, ok? We're in the middle of the woods. You can never, under any circumstances, just walk around alone. I promised your parents I'd look after you. That's what I promised, right? You all heard it. And I will do it too." She looked at us, one after another. Either she didn't really know how to look lovingly, or she really wanted to look like a ferret squeezed in a door. Then she turned off the ferret and said "everyone come along!" and started off.

"I want my suitcase." A girl stood in front of the cabin and wasn't moving. I looked at her silhouette in the darkness. She had a pointy nose and a pointy chin. "I want my things!"

"You say 'would like, please', Yvette," said Inga. "It's quiet time now, and you have your overnight packs. This is a survival camp. We're having an adventure here." With those words, Inga put the lamp back on her head and walked off.

What should you do when the only source of light walks off? We followed it. I immediately had Antonia clinging to my arm. We walked a little to the first cabin.

“Two girls per cabin. You and you,” Inga pointed at the girls and pushed them inside. We went to the next cabin. “You and you,” and Antonia disappeared from my arm.

Inga wouldn't end up in a cabin with us, would she? Most of all, please not with me. Or even worse: with one of the other girls, and I'd be alone. Then it'd be better to have three of us, including Inga. That reminded me of the either or game we always played at school. Would you rather betray your best friend or fight against a pit bull? Questions like that.

“You and you,” Inga said and pushed Yvette and Mimiko in a cabin. Me and Quirk Girl were left. Tabea Frank. I took a deep breath. Nothing could happen with her. Even if Inga came into the cabin.

“Sleep tight!” Inga said, shining her flashlight in our faces and slamming the door shut. Was she angry, or did she just want to be sure the door was really shut? Where was she going to sleep? She didn't seem to be afraid. The woods didn't want anything from her, after all. No one wanted anything from her. Although the bus driver had looked at her with a little yearning. We stood in the dark for a while till our eyes had gotten used to it. I felt my way forward.

“Tabea?” I whispered.

“Call me Bea!” she answered in a normal speaking voice.

I heard someone messing with the door. “What's that?” I whispered.

“It's me. The door won't open.” She became louder and louder. “She locked us in. She...”

“Surely not,” I whispered.

“Surely did. There's no door knob,” and all at once Quirk Girl didn't seem as cool. She rattled the lock. Then she turned on a light.

“You have a flashlight? On the list it said we didn't need one.”

“I on't ave a ight.” Bea had placed a small flashlight in her mouth and illuminated the lock on the door. She pulled a pocket knife from her pants, opened it, and started working at the lock. She quickly had the door open. The moonlight fell inside. Bea turned off the lamp, and put it away, along with the knife.

“Don't we just want to go to sleep?” I asked.

“You think you can sleep here alone tonight?”

“Maybe,” I whispered.

“Great, then that's we'll do. Maybe you can be alive tomorrow too.”

“Are you going away completely? I mean, are you coming back?”

“I'm going to go look after the others.”

In addition to the rain and the high-pitched whistle another sound could be heard. A roar. Water. Was there a waterfall close by? Maybe I should have already been able to hear it before. I could see the beds in the moonlight. Bunkbeds. I threw the cat bags up and climbed after it. You'd be safe up there, right? There was a blanket in the cat bag. Very thin. And tiny. For kids. Or was that a table cloth? It was some artificial polyester material. I draped the blanket over my shoulders, although I felt something hard and round on the corners. Snap buttons. I closed them and crossed my arms to warm myself.

Bea stood in the doorway the whole time.

How on earth did I get the idea that it was particularly safe with her? She just didn't have enough fear for safety.

"Can you close the door again?" I asked her.

"If you feel better that way..."

And with that, she disappeared.

The knife from my father was in my backpack. Well, it's safe there, I heard my father say. But I also gave you the pocket knife you can hang from your belt, my father continued to say in my head. I didn't answer.

Sure, I was afraid, but there was another feeling there. A restlessness.

When I began to think about a puzzle in Puzzle Zone, then I became very restless, as if I was locked up inside myself and my thoughts needed more space. As if they were bouncing off the inside of my skull.

When I was sitting up on my bunk bed in the dark, leaning on the dirty wall, and alone, while the rain was pounding on the roof and I had this restlessness. Something here was strange. The roof leaked. It was dripping on the floor, not far away. And I might not be alone after all. Something was scurrying along the wall. The longer the night lasted, the more I asked myself if there was actually anything here that wasn't strange.

I wrapped myself more tightly in the clevvy blanket. Even I was strange. Me, of all people. And the word strange was also strange and it became increasingly strange, the more I thought it.

Strangestrangestrangestrangestrangestrangestra...

"Hey! Hey, you!" A woodpecker of an index finger knocked on my kneecap. In the dawn light I was able to make out Bea, who was halfway up the ladder of the bunk bed. I must have been sitting up when I fell asleep, head bent over. A mixture of knees crossed and summersault. My

Kirsten Fuchs

neck was three vertebrae longer than the day before. I felt like a super hero, just because I'd survived the night. Sleep woman or something. She bravely slept in the most dangerous of places. "Inga is gone. And our bags too," Bea announced and jumped off the ladder. Boom.

My feeling of elation was also immediately gone. Who could care less about Inga, but the baggage? My favorite jacket! A tracksuit from my father. I had taken it from my parents' closet half a year earlier, without asking. A jacket from the volunteer fire department in Bernitz, where my father used to be. My pride and joy.

Bea went outside and left the door wide open. I saw that it was foggy. Night and day hesitated to tell each other goodbye.

A girl draped in a yellow blanket walked past the window, the tall, pretty one. She had a thick braid on her head that looked like a beautiful braided pastry. She was the one last night who had acted like she was spitting over her shoulder.

The bunk bed ladder squeaked as I climbed down. I stopped just outside the cabin and listened. There was that rushing sound – again and still there. A water spout or a urinating elephant. It stank like the latter. Or worse.

I heard girls' voices. Where had the pretty one gone? When I had walked around the cabin I was granted a surreal sight. I stood still. Yellow monks stood around a floating fire in the fog. In the fire I saw Bea, her upper body. All of this must be an optical illusion. A white pillar of smoke rose into the gray sky. As I came closer the strange image dissipated. The monks were girls in yellow Clevvy blankets. They had started a fire on one of the ping pong tables, surrounded by the tall grass, obscuring the base. The old ping pong table had become a stone raft, floating over a wild meadow. Bea stood on the other side of the fire, and I had seen her through the flames. The burning wood snapped.

Several of the girls jumped and laughed. There wasn't much left of their nocturnal fears.

"... at any rate, I now only have three horses," a girl was just ending a sentence. She was the one with the pointy nose and the pointy chin. She had purple hair.

"And your name is light house or what?" she asked me.

I didn't even understand what that meant. Light house? Then I went red.

Then when she said "oh, and you even glow!" everyone laughed.

"That's Charlotte," Antonia said and stood next to me. When the smallest speak up for the biggest, then the biggest are suddenly smaller than the smallest.

Kirsten Fuchs

Three horse girl looked from me over to Antonia: “You two look like you work in the elevator industry.”

The girls giggled. Several of them apologized but laughed anyway.

For a second I thought one of them was giggling very shrilly, but then it became clear to me that someone was screaming. Not far from here.

The scream became louder and shriller. Like something penetrating the ear and going straight to the fear center.

“Mimiko,” Bea said and ran off.

I looked around briefly. Didn’t see Mimiko. Without stopping to think, I ran after Bea. She was the only person here I would have trusted blindly. And because she ran off and because I ran off, everyone ran off. Around one cabin corner, then another. The fabric of Bea’s pants whistled breathlessly as she ran. I was behind her, and everyone else behind me. Over the meeting place, around another cabin, the tall wet grass whipping at my legs. Where did Bea know where we had to go? I wouldn’t have been able to locate the screams precisely. They sounded so far away. And not at all like a girl. More like a boy screaming like a girl. Like a bird screaming like a boy screaming like a girl. I ran and ran. The fog steamed everything gray in gray-white. Then nothing more could be heard.