

Mirna Funk

Winternähe

Close to Winter

S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, 2015

Translation © Katy Derbyshire

PROLOGUE

Lola took a black eyeliner pencil out of her leather bag, leaned over the washbasin to get a better view of herself in the mirror, placed the tip of the pencil above her upper lip and coloured in the entire space of her philtrum. The result was a black rectangle a centimetre and a half high and a centimetre across, with a slight glimmer to it due to the glitter particles in the eyeliner. She washed her hands, dried them with rough, grey paper towels and went back to the courtroom. As Lola opened the door the judge was questioning the defendant, who called herself Karla Minogue on Facebook and Instagram rather than using her rather plain real name Manuela Müller, on the incident in the autumn of 2012. The co-defendant, Olaf Henninger, was slouched down on his black chair.

No one apart from Lola's lawyer David Frenkel noticed Lola entering the room. What happened in the few seconds until David realized what Lola had done would have looked really good in slow motion. David glanced at the door as Lola came in and smiled at her automatically, just as you automatically smile at people you like. Then he turned back to the judge, equally automatically. And although David was sitting with his back to Lola she could see the shock passing through his entire body. She could see him covering his face with his hands. And she could see he wasn't sure whether he should ever turn back to look at her. But David did turn around, and along with him all the other people in the courtroom. The court clerk, who was wearing a badly fitting dark blue skirt suit and sitting by the window to the right of the judge, turned around to Lola. The judge, who actually only consisted of a black robe and a small head, turned around to Lola. The two defendants

and their lawyer turned around to Lola. All of them stared at the black rectangle above her upper lip, which symbolized the *Führer* – the person featured more often than any other famous figure on the cover of *Spiegel* magazine, even though he's allegedly so despised.

Lola took a seat next to David. The judge shook his head and the counsel for the defence called out, 'Your honour, this is out of order. It has to be stopped!' As none of those present could control their feelings in any shape or form, the room vibrated very pleasantly. And it was precisely this vibration that meant Lola was genuinely pleased with the course of the trial for the first time, that morning in June 2013.

Then everything went terribly German and the judge beckoned David up to the bench and whispered in his ear. David went back to Lola and said quietly, 'I'm afraid you'll have to leave the courtroom, Lola. The judge feels disrespected. What on earth were you thinking? It really wasn't necessary. We'll talk later. I'll try my best here, okay? And then I'll call you as soon as the trial's over.' Lola briefly considered not whispering but shouting, but then she picked up her leather bag from the table, stood up very slowly – far too slowly, actually – and gave all those in the room one more stare. She looked Manuela Müller in the eye and Olaf Henninger too, their defence lawyer Schulze, the judge Dr Frank Schlapp and even the court clerk. Before she left the room she gave David a quick wave and did a secret Hitler salute at hip level.

On Turmstraße outside the entrance to the Criminal Court, Lola got a face full of summer snow. The plane trees had started blossoming late. She thought about calling Max, her closest girlfriend, but Max would only say, 'You must be crazy!'

BERLIN

1

It was all down to Manuela Müller and Olaf Henninger that the matter had gone to court. Manuela was a stark brunette who always spoke slightly too quickly and affectedly to be taken as seriously as she'd like. Manu worked as a sales girl at COS on Neue Schönhauser Straße and loved having lunch at *Dolores*. Olaf was Head of Sales at *What's next?*, a conference for new digital media, a skinny man in his late thirties who still did a line of coke three times a week.

The *What's next?* team and friends celebrated their tenth anniversary at length in the Berlin Congress Center on Alexanderplatz, but Lola had stayed in bed that evening. And when she woke up the morning after the party, Manuela Müller, for some reason a Facebook friend of hers, had tagged a photo of Lola. The photo showed Lola, or in fact it showed a selfie of Lola that had been hung up at the festivities without her permission, alongside other selfies of other big Instagram names. Lola's selfie was clearly visible hanging on the wall in the photo, but more importantly Olaf Henninger was visible, holding a black permanent marker and drawing a Hitler moustache above Lola's upper lip. Olaf Henninger was not only making an extremely self-satisfied face, but also presenting the world-famous Terry Richardson thumbs-up. It must have looked such fun that Manuela couldn't resist taking a photo, uploading it to Facebook and titling it 'Make-up by Olaf Henninger'. In a matter of minutes, the photo had seventy-four likes and forty-three comments. These forty-three comments varied in tone from 'So funny!' to 'Are you completely stupid?' – which meant something like 'What have I got to do with the Holocaust?' and 'We must never forget the Holocaust'.

Lola, meanwhile, was sitting in bed with her computer on her lap, feeling nothing. Then her phone buzzed and she saw that Manuela, aka Karla Minogue, had tagged her again. This time on Instagram. There too, it was the picture of Lola's selfie with Olaf's added Hitler moustache. And because Lola still didn't feel anything she took a few

screenshots. Especially: Manuela's and Olaf's profile pages, the posted pictures, the likes and the comments. By the time she'd done that the first messages began arriving on her phone, all of them about the photo. Even Lola's friends reacted in totally different ways. Some thought it was ironic and cool, while others, including her Jewish friends, asked whether Lola was okay about it. 'Why do you always go so over the top?' wrote Ari, and Rosa sent her a WhatsApp message: 'It's so not okay.'

It was 11:27 when Max called. In an unsettlingly neutral voice, she asked whether Lola and Manuela had planned the idea together. Lola hung up without answering, deleted the tags on Facebook and Instagram, dialled the number of the PR department at *What's next?* and shouted insults down the phone for three minutes. Then she called her friend, the musician Miri Eshkenazi, again yelling for most of the phone call, but nevertheless managed to note down the number of Miri's lawyer, David Frenkel.

Even though only fifteen minutes had gone by at most, Lola felt as exhausted as if it were two in the morning. She went into the bathroom, remembered that the hot water was turned off that day, turned on the tap nevertheless and took the first half-hour cold shower of her life.

After that, Lola felt nothing again. She printed out all the screenshots, dressed quickly, got on her bike and cycled through the wet leaf-covered streets to the police station on Brunnenstraße. There she met a surly police officer; once he'd seen the screenshots though, he not only called a detective immediately and explained the situation, but also became extremely friendly. Then Lola was handed a leaflet and asked to take a seat in the waiting room.

Three quarters of an hour later, a female officer came out of a stuffy office and asked Lola to come in. The room smelled of cold smoke. The yellowed old posters on the wall had ragged corners and a round pressboard table stood lonely on a brown linoleum floor. Lola spread the screenshots out on the table, but because the officer had never heard of either Facebook or Instagram Lola had to start by explaining them both to her. Plus the like, comment and tagging functions. That led to

the two of them bonding, as it seemed no one had ever taken the time to do explain social media to her before. Once the learning phase was completed, Lola pointed at various likes, comments, tags, profile pages and photos, and the policewoman had to say the correct word. It went extremely well and once Lola had the feeling the policewoman was now capable of dealing with Facebook and Instagram, she told her about Manuela Müller, who she only knew because she sometimes shopped at COS and because Manuela Müller had started an affair with Lola's ex-boyfriend five years ago and still felt guilty. Then she moved on to Olaf Henninger, who she also knew, but solely from the evenings he spent at the *Odessa Bar* doing coke, which Lola had politely rejected every time. The policewoman asked whether Lola was sure Olaf Henninger didn't have a crush on her and the Hitler moustache incident might not have happened because of an emotional rejection on her part. Once the officer had finished formulating the question, Lola explained at the top of her voice that she was Jewish and everyone knew it, that Manuela and Olaf knew it, and that she didn't give a shit whether Olaf had a crush on her and Manuela was brain dead, there was absolutely no way anyone could draw a Hitler moustache on a portrait of her at an event with over five thousand invited guests, all of them from Lola's extended professional circles. The policewoman went red and tried to calm Lola down, something not even Miri Eshkenazi had managed. So she simply claimed she had to make a phone call and made a hasty exit. She left Lola behind with her screaming fit, at the ugly brown pressboard table covered in screenshots. Having no one left to scream at, Lola sat and thought. She thought about Hannah, her grandmother who had always seen harbingers of a sequel to the Holocaust everywhere she looked, and she remembered rolling her eyes every time Hannah started in on her nonsense. 'I don't see any anti-Semitism,' Lola had always told her grandmother and anyone else who came up with that kind of rubbish. And she thought about the time it had suddenly come out that she was Jewish at school, and everyone had been terribly nice to her after that and she had been voted class representative three weeks later. She thought about her first boyfriend, another East German Jew with whom she'd only got together because everyone said it was such an incredible coincidence, what with his great-grandmother and her great-grandfather living together in

Shanghai in exile, but Lola had never loved him and had left him at some point because that kind of coincidence seemed absolutely unimportant to her. Apart from that she thought about how much her father Simon hated Germany and how that had always annoyed her so much that she couldn't take him seriously any more. She'd always regarded herself as a German. Always. She had been brought up as a Jew. By Hannah and by Gershom and of course by Simon. And then she suddenly remembered an experience that had happened more than six years ago, which she had barely registered as significant at the time.

It must have been 2005 or 2006; she couldn't remember exactly. She'd been at a bar on Schiffbauerdamm with friends and had met some rich girl from Grunewald, a friend of an acquaintance. At some point the girl followed her to the bathroom, and just as Lola was reapplying her lipstick at the mirror the girl crept up on her from behind and yelled, 'You stupid bitch with your Jewish hooked nose!'

Lola went straight over to her friends, knocked back a shot of vodka, ordered a vodka cranberry, looked around for the rich girl and tipped the contents into her face. The rich girl reacted by punching Lola on the Jewish hooked nose and ran to the doorman in tears. Lola had thrown a glass at her face, she claimed, and now she was badly injured. The doorman threw Lola out and kept guard on her outside the bar until the police arrived. The Grunewald girl filed a charge against Lola for grievous bodily harm and Lola was banned from the bar, unlike Little Miss Rich Girl. The charges were dropped several weeks later.

Lola had rested her head on the screenshots and her arms dangled lifelessly beside her body. She felt nauseous and dizzy. A door seemed to have opened that couldn't be closed any more, and behind it was a truth that Lola had ignored for far too long.

The policewoman entered the room, bringing the completed charge form. 'My dear Ms Wolf, I can inform you that this is not just a case of public defamation, but also a violation of § 86a. German law prohibits the use or dissemination of symbols that violate the constitution.' Lola expelled a deep breath. She took the piece of paper, put it in her bag along with the screenshots, and took the quickest route back to her

apartment.

She crawled into bed and managed the never-ending stream of reactions to the tagged photo. Late that afternoon, the director of *What's next?* called her back and apologized like no one had every apologized to her before. He assured her that the incident would have consequences, and he explained at length how embarrassed he was by Olaf Henninger's behaviour. In theory, Olaf Henninger ought to have been embarrassed himself, but neither he nor Manuela considered their behaviour inappropriate. And they weren't the only ones. Lola soon saw who was on the 'The Holocaust is so over' side and who was on the 'We must never forget what happened' side. When the first official response arrived to her lawyer's cease-and-desist letter, Lola was practically forced to read it thirty times in a row. Unlike the managing director of *What's next?*, Manuela and Olaf thought they were really funny. Their joint explanation of why they had drawn a Hitler moustache on Lola's portrait, taken a photo of it and uploaded it to Facebook and Instagram was so incredible that Lola could barely stand it. She called up Miri and read out the best line in the entire document: 'The decision to draw a Hitler moustache on your client's photo did not have a racist or anti-Semitic background, but was merely intended to document the grotesque character of the event.' Then Lola yelled down the phone again and assured Miri that she'd drag those two imbeciles to court whether David advised against it or not. David advised against it. From their very first meeting at which they'd discussed how to act, he had tried to convince Lola not to go to court. He wanted to prevent her sitting in front of a judge who was on the 'Holocaust is over' side and he wanted to spare her the tragedy of losing the trial in the end, and he suggested claiming for damages instead. But that wasn't enough for Lola. Lola couldn't close that door again, the one that had suddenly opened up at the police station on Brunnenstraße. Lola wanted justice.

TEL AVIV

Lola and Shlomo scuffled their feet along the sand. Vacation had started and the Tel Avivis were lying on their big towels and sitting on folding chairs they'd brought along, next to their cool boxes and their sound systems, looking out at the water, smoking joints and talking loudly about things Lola only moderately understood. Different music was playing every few yards. She heard Berlin Minimal and Rap. As they waded through the sand Shlomo stopped to say hi to friends. The guy with the long dreadlocks, who he introduced to Lola as Avi, sitting with a group of hippies. The rather attractive dark-haired woman who gave Shlomo a kiss on the lips and a pinch on the ass. Lola felt a little sick at that, and if Shlomo hadn't cleared up the situation instantly she would have toppled right over. Maayan was into women, not Shlomo. They knew each other through the *Breaking the Silence* events. She was another radical leftist.

Shlomo took the two by two-metre towel from Lola, opened it up with a vigorous shake and let it float gently down onto the hot sand. Lola stood on the green cotton and rolled her skirt over her hips until it fell down of its own accord. Shlomo lay on his back and Lola rested her head on his chest so she could see Jaffa and the sea. She reached out a cautious hand for his. Lola could hear Shlomo's heart beating. Firmly and at short intervals, his heart bumped against his ribcage and Lola's ear.

'Come on, tell me! How are you? I want to know everything,' Lola demanded, and Shlomo laughed.

'Have you heard about the abduction?' he replied, playing with her fingers.

'Of course I have!'

'Really? I wasn't sure what you've been doing these past few days. All I know is that you didn't get in touch with me. That's okay. But maybe you haven't been reading the news either.'

Shlomo spoke very slowly. He paused after every sentence; it was as if you could hear him thinking. His expression was serious, with only an occasional emphatic smile between two sentences when he expected agreement or emotional involvement.

‘I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.’

‘I believe you. Do you want to tell me what was up?’

‘Yes.’

□ ‘Go on, then!’

□ ‘I was in a strange mood when I landed. I was in a strange mood even before I landed. And before the flight. And the week before I left, too. For the past month, actually.’

‘Since I came back to Tel Aviv?’

□ ‘No, it’s got nothing to do with that.’

‘Alright. And now you’re not in a strange mood?’

‘I don’t know yet. Today’s an experiment. Do you think Hamas has the boys?’

□ ‘No one knows. Just because Bibi says so? There are lots of splinter groups in the West Bank.’

‘You mean it’s just an excuse?’

‘I mean no one knows anything at all. They’ve turned over half of the West Bank, and that was their plan. The IDF blows holes in houses if no one opens the door. They arrest random men if they think they’re Hamas members. Human rights violations en masse and everyone turns a blind eye. Will they find the boys that way? I don’t know. I don’t think so.’

‘You’re probably right.’

‘The boys being abducted is terrible. But what’s happening right now

in the West Bank is terrible too. No, what's been happening there for years.'

'But be honest, if Israel closes down the settlements and withdraws entirely from the West Bank, won't there be a second Gaza, Shlomo? That's exactly what would happen.'

'Israel has to stop patronizing the Palestinians. If they don't want to live in a democracy we have to accept that. All this 'We're better than you' is just disgusting.'

'So a dictatorship thirty kilometres from Tel Aviv, you mean?'

'Lola, they need their own state. Period.'

'I think the same. I just don't know how. How are they to have their own state when they don't know how a state works, because they've never had a state?'

'Just because we imported democracy from Europe doesn't mean we invented democracy in the Middle East. The creation of the state of Israel caused a need in them for their own state. No matter whether they had a state before or not. They want one now and we have to give them that state.'

'Okay, so we withdraw the settlers from the West Bank. And then what? Fatah gets ousted because no one likes Abu Mazen. He's seen as a pawn, not as the leader of the Palestinians. Hamas comes to power. And Hamas wants to liberate Jerusalem and kill all the Jews. That's no basis for a two-state solution. You must realize that!'

'Lola, I don't think you can assess what will happen if we withdraw from the West Bank. Not because you don't know enough about it, but because no one knows what will happen. We have to try it. We mustn't think in terms of dystopias, what we need is utopias. The West Bank is like a cancerous growth. Radiation therapy doesn't work. Maybe the operation won't work either, but we have to try it.'

'If I had cancer I wouldn't have radiation or chemo or an operation.'

‘What would you do?’

‘I’d get a loan from the bank. Maybe several at once, and then I’d be out of here. To some island in Asia or somewhere, rent a cabin, lie in the sun, eat, sleep, dream, take photos, think, eat, sleep, dream, take photos... and then die.’

‘Come on, let’s play matkot.’

□ ‘I don’t like balls.’

‘Why not?’

□ ‘They’re fast, unpredictable and they want to hit you. “Come on, catch me or I’ll hurt you!” They put pressure on you. There’s no other option.’

‘All they really want is for you to play with them, Lola. I’ll go get the racquets from Avi and we’ll just try it out, okay?’

‘This place is like a stage. There’s no need for half of Tel Aviv to know I can’t play matkot.’

‘Sometimes you lose before you begin. I won’t be too hard on you.’

‘I know you won’t.’

‘Hard was never my think and that won’t ever change.’

‘That’s a good thing. It shouldn’t change,’ Lola said in a strict tone, then rolled off of Shlomo’s chest onto the middle of the towel, gave him a shove in the loins and continued, ‘Go on, go get the racquets and the ball! I’m really good at badminton. Maybe that’ll help?’ And Shlomo shook his head without turning round.

Lola wondered who had invented matkot in the first place. The game was as important to Israelis as football was to the Germans. Who had made sure there was never any peace and quiet on the beach? You couldn’t even hear the waves over the sound of the ball hitting the paddle. Plop. And because everyone on the beach was always playing matkot there was a constant plopping. Hundreds of monotonous plops

had come in to her through the open windows and the balcony door. Sometimes Lola had counted them, eventually falling asleep. Someone in the same situation as her would be lying in bed and starting to count her and Shlomo's plops.

The *Kuli Alma* was not far from his apartment. Along the way, Shlomo had picked two white flowers from a bush, stuck one of them in Lola's hair and the other one behind his ear. In the bar's courtyard, a group were sitting around a low wooden table. A blonde woman waved Shlomo over and he and Lola walked down the stairs leading to the bar, not holding hands. Following a brief round of hellos, Shlomo's best friend Oded called to Lola to come and sit next to him.

'So you're Lola!'

'I guess so.'

'Great to meet you at last. Want some MD?'

'Nope.'

'What's up? Don't you like MD?'

'Nope.'

'Okay. Okay, but you don't mind if I take a little bit of MD, do you?'

'Sure, it's your birthday, right?'

'My birthday. Yeah!' Oded murmured, wetting his finger and dipping it in a small transparent bag containing crystalline crumbs that would catapult him into a state of total love. Shlomo had sat down between the blonde woman and a red-headed man and was holding an earnest conversation with them.

'So you met in a library in Berlin. That's pretty romantic to start with. I could really picture it when Shlomo told me. Him like by the shelves.'

You like by the shelves. You both reach for the same book. Then BAMM. Stars in your eyes. Hearts in your eyes.'

'That's about it.'

'Do you know how Shlomo and I met?'

'In the army, right?'

'Yeah, in the Golani Brigade. We wanted to be fighters. Real fighters. Die for Israel and all that.'

'Shlomo was in the Golanis?'

'Didn't he tell you?'

'Not really.'

'He was one of the best. We were stationed in the West Bank during the second Intifada.'

'I know.'

'He told you that? About the boy?'

'What do you mean exactly?'

'There'd be a bus exploding somewhere every week. There were more and more suicide bombings. We had to arrest hundreds of Hamas members. All from the West Bank. We blew up their homes if they didn't open up. And we bulldozed the houses of the suicide bombers that got identified.'

'That all started back then?'

'Yeah.'

'Okay.'

'There was more and more rioting. Teenagers threw stones and Molotov cocktails at us. For days. It was hard to get the situation under control. We reacted with rubber bullets. Shlomo was a forceful leader

for our troop. He was a fighter, like I said, not a pacifist like he is now. It was a hot April, much hotter than usual in April. It was nearly the end of our military service. Shlomo was even planning on signing up. Training as a pilot and all that. He would have made a great general, but he just hit the boy in a dumb way. It wasn't his fault. Really.'

'Hit him?'

'A rubber bullet hit his larynx and he suffocated.'

'And what happened then?'

'The next few days, Shlomo acted like it was just an accident. We advised him to go home but he didn't want to. He stayed and went out to the rioting with us every morning. Like nothing had happened. But one afternoon, don't ask me how many days after the accident, he flipped out. During an operation.'

'What does that mean?'

'We were trying to get a group of teenagers under control in Hebron, and Shlomo suddenly threw away his gun and took off his helmet. I remember seeing it from a distance and kind of waving. But Shlomo just carried on. He was standing in the middle of this field, with about two hundred rioters in front of us. He took off his bulletproof vest, his jacket, his trousers, his boxers. I sent twelve men forward to cover Shlomo and get him out of the firing line. In the end he was standing there naked. We didn't tell anyone, but we made sure he got home leave. They'd have put him in a psychiatric ward. He never came back to the army. And now he's the person he is.'

Lola watched Shlomo, deeply immersed in his discussion, reaching for his beer from the table. Putting the beer bottle to his lips and drinking. She watched Shlomo for so long that he noticed she was looking at him, and he winked at her and she winked back. And although Oded went on talking about the army and Shlomo, the way you just can't stop talking once MDMA kicks in, she wasn't listening to him any more. She'd found out everything. Then she took her camera out of her bag and took a photo of his right hand, which was just forming the word

rega – wait, listen! His thumb touched his first and middle fingers, while the ring finger and the little finger lay relaxed on the heel of his hand.

Shlomo, sleeping. Shlomo, looking confused after waking up in the morning. Shlomo, putting on his reading glasses and picking up the *Ha'aretz*. Shlomo, stirring milk in a saucepan. Shlomo, pulling on a T-shirt. The ring of hair around Shlomo's nipples. Shlomo, laughing very loudly. Shlomo, slicing bread. Shlomo's soft penis. Shlomo's hard penis. Shlomo's second toe, which was longer than his big toe. Shlomo's small ears. Shlomo's grey beard hair. Shlomo's strong upper arms. Shlomo's soft brown skin. Shlomo, getting worked up. Shlomo, saying Lola's name – Low-Lah. Shlomo, coming – in Lola's mouth. Shlomo, closing the door behind him.

Since Oded's birthday, Lola couldn't look at Shlomo as easily any more. She was reminded of the Art Spiegelman comic *Maus*, which had won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, 'My Father Bleeds History'. Shlomo bled history too. Every person bleeds their own past, and sometimes even the whole world's past. Every gesture, every action, every facial expression was part of that past. Shlomo's past. Lola fastidiously sucked up everything that seemed to make him who he was. Every pore on his body continued the story. That story of the Palestinian boy Shlomo had accidentally killed in the spring of 2001.

When Shlomo reacted with uncertainty because Lola had been staring at him for far too long again, she put the staring down to her photographic gaze and Shlomo believed her. He believed her because he didn't even suspect that she knew who he was, had known for a while now. Oded couldn't remember – anything. Neither what he'd said that evening nor what he'd done. If Shlomo told her at some point what she already knew, had known for a while now, she'd act just as surprised as in the moment when she'd entered his apartment for the first time even though she'd known it all along. And until then, she'd watch him. As often and intensely as possible. She'd take his photo, she'd capture moments and details that ultimately always revolved

around the same questions: How does a murderer sleep? How does a murderer look when he wakes up confused in the morning? How does a murderer put on his reading glasses and pick up the *Ha'aretz*? How does he stir milk in a saucepan? How does he pull on a T-shirt? What does the ring of hair around his nipples look like? How does a murderer laugh when he has to laugh very loudly? How does he slice bread? What does his penis look like soft and what does it look like hard? What does it look like when a murderer's second toe is longer than his big toe? What do his small ears and his grey beard hairs look like? What do a murderer's strong upper arms do to you? How does his soft brown skin feel? How does a murderer get worked up? How does he say Lola's name? Low-Lah? What's it like when a murderer comes – in Lola's mouth? And what's it like when he closes the door behind him?

Shlomo was a murderer, whether he'd caused the boy's death deliberately or not. He had extinguished a life. And that fact had changed his life for good. Lola's view of Shlomo was free from judgement. Her feelings for him hadn't changed since Oded's birthday. The opposite, in fact: There was a new dimension in him that made him more fragile.