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Erzähl mir von der Liebe
(Tell Me about Love)

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It's like this, says Hannah: you have to taste love. You kiss a guy. Make out. He sticks his tongue in your mouth and you know instantly if it's right or wrong. He tastes sweet. Or he makes you want to puke. That's how it is.

There's a party. The party's in a house, and the house is at the end of the street. It's huge and painted pale green with white frames around the windows. From a distance, it almost looks like a palace. It looks as if a king were holding a ball to find a bride for his son. At the very top is a roof garden with palm trees leaning far over the wrought-iron railings, hugged tightly by creepers and ivy. Cars park outside the house, in two rows because there's far too little space and everyone wants to get a parking spot. People

shout at each other impatiently, and an attendant waves them on. He signals with regret:
No more space here, all full up.

The sun's just going down. It's the end of August. The last nice days are dripping onto the city, but soon autumn will be upon Berlin, with its hazy grey days, its rain and falling leaves. Autumn is hard to bear in this city. You can feel the decay, as if it were pointing out how transitory your own life is. Mercilessly, more every year, and every time the summer ends the wind blows a little of it towards you. You can smell it. I raise my head to the summer breeze and smell the cool days and the rain to come.

We thread our way between cars with their engines running, past women in evening dresses and men in tail coats, through the gates and up the broad staircase.

Inside are huge mountains of fruit. All through the entrance hall, it's piled up on long tables: bananas, mangos, grapes, more than a hundred people could eat on one day – much more – and on top of it are naked women. Fat naked women. So fat they could hide watermelons under their breasts. Or ten kilos of strawberries. A bunch of bananas on either side. Whatever you like. They look bored, popping a grape in their mouths from time to time, as if they'd grown tired of all this excess.

"They'd probably rather be at McDonald's," whispers Kennedy as we walk in through the swing door. A short black man in uniform holds it open for us and bows.

"So would I," I say, and I mean it.

There are lots of models here. All the agencies have sent them. They come in little groups, like swarms of birds of paradise. They flutter in and settle in the best spots. Only the highest tree will do; they want to be seen. They preen their feathers, so shiny and shimmering you can hardly look. We're here too.

Us. Hannah, Kennedy and me.

We're under no illusions – we know why we're here. We're the girls the agencies send to Berlin. Not Paris or Milan, for the fashion. Because there are important magazines there, fashion shows, designers. In Berlin there are parties. Who comes to Berlin? The girls who are too old for couture. And *old* is relative. We're the added bonus for the men who can afford us. They book us because we're beautiful and it looks good to have beautiful girls standing around at parties. When I was younger I thought these parties were our big chance. You get invited and you're excited because Christian Lacroix is supposed to be there. Or Karl Lagerfeld. Then you stand there and smile until your face freezes into a mask. You wait for someone to come along and offer you a job. A proper job.

Usually, none of the VIPs turn up, and all that happens is that you get drunk and sway home at four in the morning. If you're lucky, alone.

We stroll past the naked women. Balkan pop comes droning out of the speakers. The guy throwing the party is from Bulgaria. His name's Yunes – he's supposed to be a producer. I met him at my agency once. A small, bald man with a mouth full of gold teeth. Maybe he's not a producer, but he's got money. So much money that he can fit out a huge green house in the leafy suburbs with naked women, books models for parties and always has several bodyguards in tow.

"Go along," said Babic, my booker, "he pays well and Vivienne Westwood's supposed to be going."

Forget it, I felt like saying.

I shoved the printout of Yunes' address in my pocket instead. A girl has to pay the rent. "Why the long face?" says Hannah next to me. "We're here to have fun."

Hannah's a couple of years older than Kennedy and me. Maybe twenty-eight or twenty-nine. She doesn't tell anyone her real age. Kennedy and I tried to get it out of her once.

"Come on," Kennedy said, "just tell us how old you really are. Look, I'm twenty-three. What's wrong with that? Everyone's younger than me. You can't change it anyway."

But Hannah's stubborn; she wouldn't budge. She picked up an old *Vogue* and ignored us, and we sat there and waited and watched her turning one page after another.

"Forget it," she growled at some point. "I don't have to tell you guys anything."

The agency took Hannah off the market last year and put her back in the race this year with a new biography. According to her comp card, she's twenty-one. She's doing tests again. Going to a thousand castings. All over again from the beginning, just to get another chance at making it big – big money and a big career.

"Do you still believe it?" I asked her once. I didn't want to say what I really think. The agencies know perfectly well that these girls don't stand a proper chance any more, but they still make money out of them. You can still put them in third-class catalogues. The agencies make good money out of these girls' hopes.

Hannah just gave me an evil look. I could guess what that meant.

I look up at the naked women enthroned high above our heads. The fruit beneath their thighs starts slipping at the slightest movement. Like a landslide after a flood. Plums roll out from under their butt cheeks, strawberries from beneath their shaved genitals. Lots of people are standing there gazing up at them unashamedly. Amusing themselves at their

expense. A young guy with a press pass puts one of the strawberries in his mouth, and the people standing around him laugh and do the same. Most of the women can laugh; they're young and slim with small, firm breasts and no wrinkles. They're wearing Gucci and Prada and holding tiny clutches under their arms. Their eyes look pitying. "How can anyone be so fat?" one of them says to her partner. "I'd kill myself if I was that fat."

I'd kill myself if I had to do a job like that, I think.

If it gets that bad I'll give it up, I swear, if I get that low I'll be out of here.

But until then it's time to have fun. If you're not having fun in this business, something's going wrong.

"I know," I say to Hannah and grimace, "always happy, always smiling, never complain and always look gorgeous..."

The house is on several floors. Curved staircases lead from one to the next. There are red roses scattered on the carpets. Too romantic to be true. Thousands of roses on the floor, carelessly trampled by the guests.

"Kitsch," says Hannah, kicking one away. "This Yunes has too much money. I'd know much better what to spend it on."

I pick up a flower and fasten it in the strapless neckline of my dress.

"He'd better ask you in future then," I say.

I've been in Berlin for four weeks. The agency pays for an apartment. That sounds good at first, but most of the apartments are battered and run down from all the models who've stayed in them. Nobody ever repaints or cleans the windows. You find leftover comp cards and tiny pairs of panties under the bed. Sometimes there's mould in the bathroom or landlords who try to touch you up.

When I arrived here four weeks ago I dragged my suitcase up to the fifth floor. Put the key in the lock and opened the door. It was silent inside and I stood on the threshold for a moment, looking in at the place that was to be my home for the next few weeks. In my mind, I ticked off the many apartments I had turned my back on. Tiny, stuffy rooms you had to share with five other girls. Flats in the suburbs with factories opposite, where you had to breathe in the poisonous fumes day after day. Flats that our agencies rented on the cheap and charged us almost everything we earned for.

This one wasn't much better. But it was quiet, and the ceilings were high. And you could see right across Berlin from the windows.

"Aren't you coming in?" someone asked.

It was Hannah. She poked her head around the bathroom door.

She looked very young at first glance – fragile, with long, delicate limbs. She told me later that she only kept her weight by living on low-fat natural yoghurt and apples. Up to then, I'd thought stories like that were bad modelling myths, going round in the business to make you feel guilty: *I only eat rice... And I only eat cotton wool.*

I left my suitcase in the hall.

"Who else lives here?" I asked, suspicious.

It didn't look like there was a guy who wanted to touch us up. Not necessarily. More like an old spinster had lived here. With 1950s furniture, shabby and dusty. Outside the bathroom was a basket of old magazines. I pulled out a women's magazine.

"1988," I said.

Hannah smiled at me. She was in the middle of waxing her legs, smoothing cold wax strips onto her skin. She had one leg up on the edge of the bath, concentrating. Her other leg was bright red and covered in dots, as if she had measles or some other painful illness.

"Hurts like shit," she said, as if she had to apologise, and looked at the magazine in my hand.

"Oh that... Trainer lives here. He's harmless. He inherited the flat from his granny and gets us girls in to pay the mortgage."

She pulled the wax strip off her leg with a jerk. "Shit," she said. "Shit, shit, shit!"

There's a buffet set up on the first floor. We gladly forsake the naked women for food, climbing the curved staircase along with other guests. The buffet's the most important place at a party for us girls. Even if you don't feel like dancing and making small talk, at least at the end of the night you've eaten well.

Kennedy grabs a plate. She's always hungry. Really hungry.

You can go to kebab shops with Kennedy. She orders doner kebab with all the trimmings and falafel, and the Turkish guys behind the counter look at her suspiciously. Too thin to wolf down a whole kebab. Watching Kennedy eat is fun. As disciplined as she is about

everything else, she can be just as excessive about her food. She bolts it down and spills it and then she goes back for second helpings.

"I'm lucky I'm so tall," she often says, "my weight spreads out much better."

That's an understatement. Kennedy's just as thin as Hannah and me and all the other models. She speaks perfect German with a slight, very charming accent.

"You could go to university," I often tell her, because she's clever. Clever and beautiful.

"Yes," she says, "I will one day."

When she's got enough money. When she's sent enough home to feed her family. She has a mother and two sisters and a father who drinks too much. And she has a boyfriend she hasn't seen for a year now. Since she's been here in Germany.

"There's a problem with my visa," she says.

She's scared she won't be allowed back in to work if she leaves Europe. And she's not wrong. The story about her visa came before her, even before she arrived in our shabby little apartment.

"We're getting another girl," Hannah had said, a day before Kennedy moved in.

We weren't keen on a new girl. We had it good there. Trainer left us in peace – he didn't want to go out and drink wine with us. He didn't feel us up when we passed him in the hall at night. A new girl would mess everything up. And one of us would have to share a room with her. That was probably the worst thing.

Peter Lindbergh had had an option for Kennedy.

Option. A word that meant everything for us: hope. Waiting. Disappointment.

"And then they wouldn't let her in the country," said Hannah, grinning, "Pretty tough shit, huh?"

I grinned too and felt bad about it. But why should she have it better than us?

Kennedy piles her plate high. Hannah takes a couple of melon slices because there aren't any apples, and I stand next to them, my head full of Bucovina Club.

There are hundreds of girls here. Girls who have no idea yet, waiting for Vivienne Westwood to show up. Some of them look like they're not even sixteen. Their faces are the faces of children brought straight here from a birthday party with cake and candles and clowns. Their parents are at home, the sound of their voices still ringing in their ears. They blow out the candles and sweep up confetti.

It's all cool and exciting for these girls, they gather in whispering groups on the low leather seats.

“Have you seen Yunes yet?” one of them asks behind me. “He’s supposed to be a producer.”

I roll my eyes, mentally.

“He’s cool,” says another one, “my booker says he’ll introduce me.”

They’re torn along by the stream of people, more and more coming in and pouncing on the nibbles, the air shimmering, and Kennedy, Hannah and I are pushed up against each other. Kennedy balances her plate.

“Sorry,” she says, smiling as her balsamic dressing drips onto my dress.

I couldn’t wait either to get away from the farm, all that mud and boredom. Our woods are often shrouded in fog. Sometimes for days. For weeks. The fog rises from the river and clings onto the branches. Whenever you go outside the moisture goes right through you. Millions of droplets wet your face and hair.

It was autumn when I left. I had wellies over my sheer tights. I waded through the mud in them, across the yard to the taxi. The taxi driver refused to get out of the car. He left the engine and the windscreen wipers running. He wiped away the drops of fog and waited for me to put my luggage in the trunk. When I turned around I saw my mother at the window. Her hazy face behind the glass. Hazy before I’d even left.

My father was taking the ewes out. I heard them bleating and his voice calling brief commands to the dogs.

Get yourself out of here, I thought, making myself harder than I really felt.

I got in the taxi and pulled off the boots. Put them down neatly outside the car door. My mother would come and fetch them later on.

We find a space in the lounge, on one of the thousands of couches. We have to make ourselves skinny to fit, but that’s no problem. We’re used to it. I squeeze in between Kennedy and a guy with a glass of vodka and Red Bull balanced on his knees. He’s wearing a black suit and a white shirt, looking strangely dressed up and uncomfortable. As if he’d rather be in jeans but didn’t quite dare to do what he wanted. He looks as if he wished he could disappear from his own first communion party.

“This is Levi,” Kennedy introduces him formally, “I know him from Sofia. We’re with the same agency there.”

“Levi, this is Leni.”

We shake hands rather awkwardly, stiff because we’re not used to shaking hands. You kiss. You hug. But you don’t shake hands. Levi nods at me and Hannah laughs.

“Levi and Leni,” she says, “well, what a coincidence.”

“Shut up,” I tell her, “eat your melon and shut up.”

I like Hannah, and that's saying something. You don't usually like the other girls. You live with them, go to castings together, and you share a packet of spaghetti for dinner. That's about it. There are too many barriers. The language, the place where you come from, the place you want to go. You don't share secrets and you don't trust each other. There's always suspicion between you. And why should you get close if you're only going to be in contact for such a short time before you part ways again, bright little balls bounced off to somewhere else in the world by our agencies.

The other girls often come across as superficial. You can't talk to them about anything except your agency, your work and where you're going next. You get bored because everything's the same, the same way you get bored when you look in the same mirror year after year, always seeing the same face. Ageless, smooth and polished, like a stone you fish out of the sea between all the other similar ones.

But I like Hannah. Her gruff personality that doesn't match her elfin-like appearance at all. Her vocabulary, consisting mainly of *shit*, *arse* and *fuck*. I like it when she sits in the tiny kitchen with us, eating her low-fat yoghurt and her apple and then downing a beer in one. She belches.

“Shit,” she says then, “shit, that's good.”

Intrigued? For more information contact us:

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