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Im Stein - *Bricks and Mortar*

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Eins, Zwei, Drei

I

(Girl, Girl, Girl/Waiting for a star to fall)

When the evening comes I stand by the window. I push the slats of the blind apart with my fingers and look at the evening sky behind the buildings on the other side of the road. It still gets dark early. The year's not even a month old, and already it feels long and hard. Mind you, there's not much work at the moment. We all complain in January. I still want to catch one last sight of the sun and the last ray of light. I leave for work at eight in the morning; it's still not really light then. Everything's better in the summer. I bet everyone says that, but on the other hand, in summer I think of holidays and I often don't feel like working. And I think things go best in the winter, if you leave January out of it. Mind you, lots of us probably see that differently. I think it's a shame the flat doesn't have a balcony. I could sit out there in the summer and sunbathe, better than the stupid tanning salon, and in winter I could stand out there before sunset and have a smoke and watch the sky, watch it turning red. I like to look at the moon on clear nights. It always reminds me of that song. My mother used to sing it to me before I went to sleep. *The moon has risen*. When I hear it now, and that doesn't happen often, I don't know when I hear it at all, so... I can't really describe it. Sometimes I sing it in my head. Magda always used to say: 'I'm getting feelings,' when she meant she was feeling sad. But it's actually rubbish, that thing about the seasons. Summer or winter, autumn or

spring, the phone always rings. Just not as often in January. When I was a child I used to think, when I was very little though, that there was a fifth season. And once I asked my mother if the year starts on the first of January every year and if New Year's Eve is always one day before that. And if it ever snows in June. She laughed and hugged me; that's why I haven't forgotten it. Just like the song. I've often thought about the white mist in the song, before I go to sleep. When I have a child one day, I'll sing a different song to my child. One that's not so sad. I'm more of a cheerful person. 'Alert and lively,' they wrote in my school report. They always had these assessments by the teachers. And Magda always used to say: 'Don't get so hyper, girl, you're as fluttery as a bird.' She'd say so many funny things, and sometimes they were fitting and sometimes they weren't at all, and I miss that. She's in Hannover now. She sends me cards sometimes, and she always remembers my birthday. She always used to say letters and cards are more personal than text messages. She sends me these really cheesy postcards, puppies, giant hearts, roses with glitter on, and sometimes cards with music. I still write her emails and texts though. My mother's the only one I send postcards to. The last one on New Year's Eve. That was for Christmas too. We don't see much of each other any more, but my New Year's resolution is to go and visit her more often. Because she doesn't like coming here to me, to the city.

The winter's cold this year, colder than it's been for ages. And I could hardly get to work in December; I had to leave the car at home. The whole city was buried in snow and they could hardly keep up with the snowploughs. I dread to think of my gas bill, because I usually leave the heating on all day at home so it's nice and warm when I get back from work. I often slept here in December, and I even stay the odd night now. Because I don't want to go out in the snow. I used to go sledging every day when it snowed, when I was little. And sometimes my mother put me on the sledge and pulled me along when we went shopping. That was back in Jena. We have big hills there for sledging and skiing. I've never been into skiing though. I was really crap at it. My friends used to laugh at me, all the girls, and the boys even more. But I was good at sledging. I used to go hurtling down the steepest slopes, and even the boys had respect. It's actually a good thing that the winters are getting so cold again. It's the climate. But it could all be different next year. When I have a child I want to put it on a sledge and pull it along too when we go shopping. I don't really mind if it's a boy or a girl. Mind you, maybe I'd like a girl better. I think you'll be able to choose, in the future. Decide for yourself if you have a boy or a girl. Maybe there'll be a pill you can take. But that's probably a long way off. Mind you, some things suddenly go really quickly, what with technology and progress. And actually it's rubbish. It'd probably all turn out the same, compared to now. I know I wanted to

have a boy, before I left Jena. That was back with Bert. I can't understand why I left him now. I thought, I have to get out of here, God knows why they call it Jena Paradise, but he wanted to say there, he had it all planned out. Because his father had this chemist's shop and he studied pharmacy especially. There's a lot of money in pharmacies. People are always getting sick. At every time of year. Especially now. And when they've invented those boy-or-girl pills they'll make even more money. They can even cure AIDS now, pretty much. I still don't like to think about it though. I've never met anyone with AIDS. People talk a lot of crap about it sometimes. We all go for our check-ups regularly. Even though we don't have to any more, not by law. It used to be different. But people think and talk a whole load of crap when it comes to that and when it comes to us. And I stand at the window and push the slats of the blind apart with my fingers and look out at the buildings on the other side of the road, with the sky turning red behind them now and the night coming up. Four thirty and the phone's only rung four times, and the door only twice. For me, I mean.

Because Jenny's been here since twelve and she stays till twelve. Twelve hours; that'd be too much for me. Ten hours is the highest I get. After that things start getting too hard on me. That makes me laugh; it could be one of Magda's. Although it's a bit of a stupid joke, not funny at all when I think about it. But now I'm getting feelings, thinking about her. Yeah, yeah, the highest I get. Don't go getting sentimental now. Because we were pretty close really, and everything came easier, work and everything. It's OK with Jenny. She only comes four times a week, but she works Saturdays and Sundays and that's when I'm off. My weekend's really sacred to me. Like my ass. (That again!) Now I can light one up at last. I make sure I don't smoke too much, you see. One cigarette an hour. Or I try, at least. The most I get through is fifteen a day, and that's alright, I reckon. Jenny smokes like a chimney and she's constantly spraying her air freshener around. Spring Lavender fragrance. I can't stand it. We don't do a lot of talking. Sometimes we sit together in the lounge when we're waiting. I'd say we get along as colleagues. She's a totally different type to me. Twenty kilos more than me, I bet, heading for motherly territory, but there's enough men into that, believe it or not. And I wouldn't say she isn't pretty. No, Jenny's pretty, alright. In the face, and I don't mean that in a bad way. She's just womanly, and I mean *that* as a compliment. And we get on well enough, each to his own, that's what I say. You'll only have a good time if you feel like a guest. I haven't seen Magda for a long time, and I often wonder how things are going for her in Hannover. It's all calm there, the godfather and the angels have everything under control. And the girls have plenty of trade, I've heard. You hear all sorts of things. Since the angels have been here too. I don't have anything to do with them though. I just hear a lot. I've been

with the boss's firm for eight years now. I always say 'boss' and 'firm'. Or sometimes I say 'the old man', because that's what some people call him. Out of respect. I think he gets on fine with them, with the angels, I mean, because the guy who's top angel here used to be a friend of his, they say, or at least they used to get on OK, divided the city up between them, but I don't know exactly. There's girls who know a hundred per cent what's up, who get all the gossip, although it's usually less than fifty, per cent I mean, of the truth, but when I get home from work and sit by the radiator I don't want to hear any more about all that shit. I read somewhere the other day that the lawyer of the godfather from Hannover City, who's apparently the big boss of all the angels, that he's also Schröder's lawyer, the ex-chancellor. I'd like a lawyer like that myself. And what does it matter if he works for the angels? Everybody's doing business. Or they all want to, at least. Russian deals, Gazprom, girls and stocks and shares. The big money. Now I'm thinking too much about it again, but that's the way it is at work, when I'm waiting. And watching the day disappear. And the lights of the cars and the streetlamps between the slats of the blind. Chasing across the walls, together with the shadows. It makes me go all funny; I get feelings and I zip my Adidas jacket up to my neck. I'm really fond of this jacket. I've had it for years now; I bought it back in Berlin. It's got red stripes on the sleeves, and you don't get them very often. I voted for Schröder in ninety-eight. That was my first election. That was back in Jena too. I have to put some moisturiser on my legs. The air's too dry. The radiator's turned up to five. And minus ten outside. At least. I'm getting dandruff again as well. Haven't had it for ages. But I use this natural shampoo, with nettles, that gets rid of it. It's better for my hair. All the chemical stuff is too aggressive for me. I tried it for a while, Head 'n' Shoulders and all that, but that made it even worse. That stuff stings my pussy like fire. Not that I rubbed Head 'n' Shoulders in down there, I don't have dandruff there, mind you, there's girls who have permanent dry skin down there, but it gets everywhere when you rinse it off in the shower. Showering and dry skin is a problem anyway, because you take so many showers. And with your pussy, because you're always shaving. But that's just part of the job. I got the natural shampoo from Jenny. She has these creams as well that she recommended for dry skin. There's this natural store at the station, I go there a lot now. It's really better for me, although I wouldn't buy perfume and deodorant there, mind you. I keep on going to the Douglas store for that. Even though they use embryos. *Come in and find out.* Pretty stupid slogan.

I need another cigarette now. Number eight today, I've been counting. I'm really trying to cut down. But I can't manage to stop altogether. All the girls I know from work smoke. Well, ninety. Per cent, I mean. Sometimes I think about why that is. When I'm waiting, when I'm

standing by the window, even when I'm *right in the middle of it*. 'Girl, you're a fucking liar and a lying fucker,' Magda would say now, not that funny really either, but we still laugh at that kind of crap, but really, what can you do when the stupid thoughts go dancing round your head as if it was Mardi Gras up there. We don't really have a proper carnival here, not like other places, although a few idiots hold their little parades. But it's better and cheaper than coke or speed or that fibreglass mix. Krystal. With a C. Smoking, I mean. Cheaper. But it's no good anyway, because it eats you up in the long run. Coke, I mean. C, and whatever. I tried it all, back in Berlin. Pretty dumb. *Come in and find out*. But it wasn't all bad. I can't be doing with all that victim crap. Because it was a great time, a wild time. Oh, the poor girl! That all fits in with their image. Their tabloid image. What I always say is: Oh, the poor guys. I do understand it, though, to be honest. That they come to me. And it's fine that way. And now it's Mardi Gras in my head again. Real carnival parades. Because I've been waiting for two hours and keep staring at the telephone, when I'm not standing by the window that is. It's pitch dark outside now. Magda and I, we only used to have one phone. It worked fine. We were more than colleagues. Now I sometimes hear Jenny's mobile in the other room. She can tell it's January too, I think. Everyone can tell the difference. Not just us girls. My favourite taxi driver always says, actually he's only said it two or three times: 'January's hibernation time. Taxis, DAX, nocturnal services.' 'Nocturnal services' means me. Even though most of my work is during the day. He doesn't mean it in a bad way. Because no one has any money in the New Year, he says. He's a lovely guy. Used to work in a big printing press here in the city before eighty-nine. Talks about it a lot. In his mid-fifties. Married for almost thirty years. And two children. Always talks a lot. That's fine. I like listening. Although I'm not so sure about the DAX. I've never been into it and I never will. I know a few girls who swore by it. Three or four girls, and they bought and sold and gambled on stocks and shares like there was no tomorrow. A right little share club. But that was an exception. I wasn't in on it because I always say, after work I don't want to hear anything more about work. Mind you, it's not that easy, of course. It was different with Magda, but I'm trying to give it up, all this talking about her and thinking about her. Because it is how it is now, and that's fine, because, and this is what my mother used to say when things weren't going well and she was sad about something: 'Things are just the way things are, now aren't they.'

(...)

(Bumm Bumm/Boom Boom)

You're flat on your back on the street. And you thought the nineties were over.

And they nearly are over, you wonder for a moment what year is it exactly, you know it, you do know it, all year long you've been getting up and going to sleep, getting up and going to sleep and running your business and there wasn't much sleep... but you can't put your finger on it, you feel your head on the asphalt, as if it had sprung a leak when it hit the ground, is it raining? You're flat on your back between the cars and you can see the tyres and the wheels, the light refracts and bounces off from an alloy wheel right in front of you, streetlamps, headlamps, night, and you try to make out your face, nineteen ninety-nine.

No, nothing's over. The violent days were long, but long ago as well, almost not true any more, the years of calm, your head on the asphalt, the city's quiet on a Sunday, and the rain is red, the car is red, right next to you. You came alone, although everyone said, 'Don't go on your own!' but you had to go alone, the nineties are almost over, all we want is to do business, you went to sleep for a bit and got up, and it was almost evening by then. You had time to drink a coffee and stand outside in the dark garden for a while, it's getting dark early again now, you wanted to walk down to the lake but the phone rang. No, it didn't ring, you'd put it on silent and you saw it flashing through the window of the veranda. The display flashed and flashed in the charger like a miniature lighthouse. No, you hear it ringing, you never put it on silent, that must have been somewhere else, you've got a whole house full of telephones and none of them is on silent, the phone in your jacket pocket buzzes. You turn onto your side and try to reach into your pocket. It's hard, although your arms are fine. The phone buzzes and buzzes, and you feel your heartbeat, and then it stops, and you take a deep breath and breathe out, take a deep breath, breathe out the fear, no one else is coming now, no, no one else is coming, he was alone, just like you, and you saw him walk away, he just turned around and left. Did he say anything? What did he say to you before? You can't put your finger on it. 'This is from...' No, no names, never names, you might as well start with that now, they'll ask you, good thing they can still ask you, but they can ask you till their fucking tongues dry out, you breathe out the fear and look at your legs, which you can't feel any more. Edo, you bastard, I'm gonna... No, stop it, the nineties are... But you know you have to do something, you know you have to do it, all over again, and you thought... you thought too much, much too much and too little, you went alone. Never go alone, always take a man with you, always keep a man close. Watch your back, but he didn't come from behind, he came right at you, we want to do business, that's all there is to it, all we want is to do

business. Edo, you bastard... Did he give the name, did he send regards? You can't put your finger on it, you'll find out, you'll find out more than that, but how long can you stay lying here? If only the rain would stop, the nights are getting cool now, but it's not raining, is it? Now you've got your phone out of your pocket, your hands are trembling, it's pathetic, did you take something before you left to keep you calm or perk you up? No, you never take anything, hardly ever, not when you want to talk business. Just a little chat, on a Sunday in the quiet city, and then you drop the phone when you switch it to vibrate, you bend over and pick it up, wipe it down, and there he is coming towards you, what a stupid place to meet, you can just see the old stadium's dark towers, a couple of hundred yards away, now the parked cars block your view, the battery leaps out, and now you feel the pain in your knee and further up your other leg, no, you didn't take anything, adrenalin, your heart's pumping the stuff around your system, you're getting tired but you have to stay perked up, you mustn't fall asleep, and you're tired, so tired, don't sleep, you know that, until they come for you, if only the right people come for you, but no, he was alone and he's gone, and you breathe out the fear and see the SIM card from your phone next to the battery on the asphalt. You see the tiny golden metal plates on the card. And something else flashes, something else golden, on the ground as well, a few yards away. A coin, you think, it looks like the pendant from a necklace, a talisman, the guardian angel of businessmen, Saint Michael, and you touch your chest, you're so glad you can stroke your chest, you're so glad that you've got tears in your eyes, your hands are trembling on you, and you're weeping, it's pathetic... if they saw you like this, and you reach for your chain, it used to be a little golden boxing glove, back when you were still fighting, kick-boxing, it's a few years back now, you were a real ace back then, they called you AK 47, like the machine gun, Arnold Kraushaar, Arnie Short and Curlies, that was at school, but you knew how to show them what for even then and you chased them right across the whole schoolyard, no more Arnie Short and Curlies, AK 47, you were pretty good at boxing too, even back at school, you even did a few amateur fights, kick-boxing wasn't around till after eighty-nine, the legs, the feet, the kicks, you were better at that than just with your fists, you trained every day, you wiped out the best lads in the ring with your kicks, you look at your legs, your pale trousers are black.

How long have you been lying here now? It can only be minutes, you know that. Time goes out of joint when you've got adrenalin in your system.

A taxi drives past, you want to call attention to yourself, you wave, but you're flat on your back right next to the cars and he can't see you. Pull yourself together! You try to get up, try to pull yourself up on the car with both arms, try to grab the door handle, grab it, boy, where's

your strength, for fuck's sake, but your arms are weak and soft, rubber, you think, only with a rubber, girls, how often do I have to tell you that, they can put as much money down as they like, what use is it to you if you get yourselves the clap and the fucking plague, have you never heard of AIDS, Jesus, how stupid can you get! It doesn't matter if he's a regular, you get it? Jesus, girl, I'm only thinking of *you* here! You know you have to wait, breathe deeply, keep breathing deeply, if only you could feel your legs, you have to wait until your strength comes back, you want to shout... Help! Someone call the cops, but what use are the cops to you, what you need is a doctor, right now. How stupid can you get, in the middle of the night, like in some cheap gangster movie, you've got careless, the years of calm have made you careless, why didn't you listen to Alex, 'I'll come with you,' he kept saying on the phone, only an hour ago, out in the garden. 'No,' you said and you looked out at the lake behind the trees, your best man, you smile, you remember Alex putting on one of his shows in the ring last week, 'Cover up, Alexander!' you wanted to call out, but you bit your tongue because you know how he likes putting on a show in the ring, seen too many Muhammad Ali videos, or what was that boxer called again, the one he admires so much, a black American, they call him 'the King', Jackson..., Jones, Jones Junior or something like that, he dangles his arms, Alex says, makes a fool of his opponents, sticks out his chin only to pull it back at the last moment when the punch comes, but Alexander the Great is no king, more like a duke or something like that, because he takes a lot of punches, staggered around uncovered in front of his opponent, and you're not sure if that's part of Alexander's show or if he's just about to go K.O., but then in the third and final round he did knock him over, he really let loose towards the end as usual, 'second wind,' he always says, 'le deuxième souffle', he's always showing off, that crazy guy, just because he speaks a bit of French, and you're still smiling and wishing he was here, and your face is all stiff, you must look terrible, but no one can see you, why aren't there any fucking pedestrians at this time of night, no one out any more, what kind of a crappy city is this, maybe it's the rain, they'd rather stay warm and dry, Sunday evening in front of the TV... Don't go crazy on me now, it's not raining, it's not raining at all, it hasn't rained all week, even though the sky was dark today, clouds gathered by noon, for fuck's sake, what's happened to your nose, your sixth, seventh, eighth sense, without that you wouldn't be where you are now... on the street, you think, in the dirt, and you laugh, and your teeth are chattering on you, you've got the shivers, and you know that's not a good sign. You were always the gangster as a kid, the Red Indian, the pirate, and you're flat on your back on the grass behind the house and looking up at the sky and you hear the others yelling, hear the caps firing, bang! bang! bang! and you think maybe dying might be easy. You always

wondered if there are people who don't die, demigods like you'd read about, you used to read a lot back then but you've forgotten so much now, you were a better reader than most of your friends even in the first year, Heracles, but didn't he bite the dust in the end, after all his trials? And Thor, he was the Norseman with the magical hammer, wasn't he, a god? A demigod? Or just a man after all...? Didn't they have to keep eating the fruits from that tree so that they lived for all time? Did you really believe that when you were a kid? Once, you went to the Botanical Gardens and looked at the exotic plants and trees, just before they closed for the day, you took your little backpack along especially, camping knapsack it was called, was it red or blue? Everyone had one of those backpacks, one of those camping knapsacks, they only came in two colours, and on school trips and outings there were the reds and the blues. You probably had red, you think, what a joke, fate, destiny, sometimes you believe in that kind of thing, even though you've given up on the gods.

You stuffed your backpack, how old were you then, nine, ten? You tore off figs, prickly pears, pomegranates, guavas, and whatever they were all called, trampled across the barriers into the beds, the branches and leaves in your face, that looks good, and that! And those rock-hard bulbs with a foreign name you couldn't even read properly... And then the fear.

The janitor or some kind of guard spoke to you as you wanted to leave, 'I have to give a presentation in Biology, exotic plants, bromeliads,' you said, you'd read it in an encyclopaedia, how crazy that the word comes to you now. You stuttered, and that burning and stinging down your body, all the way down to your balls, you'll never forget that because it kept coming back later, decades later, decades... How long that sounds, it's almost thirty years ago now, and back then you didn't have the strength to find it stimulating, to let it goad you on... 'You'll have to come earlier then,' the guy said, an old man, the guardian of the trees of life. 'You'll have to come earlier, that's when our students are here, they can tell you lots of useful things to make sure your presentation's really good.' The old man won't stop talking, and he's standing right up in front of you, and behind you the leaves and the branches, and he spits as he talks and has such sour breath that you feel like turning away, and you feel the fruits and bulbs on your back through the fabric. The old man strokes your hair, his fingers as hard and calloused as the long tubers you felt and then tore off just before. 'Come after school tomorrow, when's your presentation... our students will be here then...'

You never went back to the Botanical Gardens, and the old man's fingers were still on your head long after you got home.

In your bedroom, you chopped up your booty with your penknife. It took such a long time and the blade was far too blunt. You went into the kitchen and fetched a large breadknife, the very

sharp one, and then you bolted it all down you, because you wanted to live as long as Thor and Heracles. You shat and heaved it all out, the gods couldn't have done better, even the next day, so bad you couldn't go to school, and once you were better your mother gave you a beating, and she never did that, with a slipper, and she cried and bawled: 'Don't you ever scare me like that again, boy!'

You're flat on your back and you hear the caps firing, bang! bang! bang! And you look up at the sky, the stars... Alex'll end up breaking rocks if it goes badly, the asphalt's cold underneath you, it was so good lying on the grass back then, will the lawyers be able to help him? Your lawyers are the best in the city, and not only in the city, how often have they got you out of a fix, how often have they got your people out of trouble and your girls, Beatriz not long ago, when that girl was hanging up half-dead in Lady Kira's wardrobe, but Alex had to go and cock things up again, you've always told him: 'If you're not careful they'll take you away, and I need you here.'

And this time it's going to be hard to get him out of trouble, you know that, even if he refuses to realise it. Maybe that's why you didn't want him to come with you, tonight, and once you're back on your feet you'll make sure he doesn't have to spend too long away. He's no king in the boxing ring but he's pretty good, no, you haven't been seeing stars, the clouds are still drifting across the night sky, and even if they weren't there you never see stars here, not even out at your place by the lake do you see the stars the way you see them in the countryside, in the mountains, when it all gets too much for you here. He's no king in the boxing ring, although he's pretty good, a count, perhaps, but on the streets... like you used to be... How often have you told him recently: 'The best way to win a fight is to avoid it.'

You'd never have said something like that, in the old days... AK 47. What days they were. Is this what you get in return for all the violence, the destiny you sometimes still believe in? Rubbish, no! You wouldn't be where you are now without all that, without the fights, without your fists, forget the street and the dirt you're lying in right now, you're at the top, you hear, at the top! And you want to get even further and higher, and that's why you have to get out of here and hit back and smooth everything out! And you shout and you're surprised at how high and thin your voice sounds. Forget your pride and scream! Scream for help. And then you try and put your phone back together, but the fucking battery's slid under the car. Why did you leave your other phone at home? You'd never have gone out into the night with only one phone in the old days... But in the old days a mobile phone was the size of a brick, you should have smashed a brick on his skull, over and over, until he lay on the ground in the dirt,

and the asphalt would have gone dark underneath him, and you'd have taken the brick with you and thrown it in the river over there from the bridge.

Someone must hear you, you're shouting so loudly, maybe someone's already called the cops long ago, back when it happened, it was certainly loud enough. And you remember you're wearing a watch, you raise your arm slightly so your sleeve slips down, and you look at your Breitling & Söhne, you used to have a Rolex in the old days, you've only been lying here ten minutes at the most, and you're not surprised, because you know that time... as if the fruits from back then were still taking effect, differently than you thought... you burst into the bar, Alex and the others alongside you, no cap guns now, and you beat and you punch, with fists and baseball bats, and the crashing and the splintering and the screaming, men leaping aside and getting caught anyway, men ducking and hiding under tables and getting caught anyway, the bigmouth who tries to run up the stairs and gets caught anyway, and then you feel the old man's hands again, brushing so slowly over your head.

A child died, over there by the bridge, a few weeks ago. You read about it in the paper. A children's rowing club, they got too close to the weir in their boats, and two boats got caught in the current and went over the little waterfall. They managed to rescue the other children from the two boats. One child's still in a coma. The boy didn't turn up for days. Miles and miles away. The current. You were over at the tram depot that day, keeping an eye on the girls. And you wondered what the helicopter was doing by the river. It circled over the bridge for a while before it landed. You stood by the window, the girls behind you, and the shrill screeches of the trams, and your sixth, seventh, eighth sense told you that where it was landing, there was death. And now you're not far from there... Your boy must never go rowing on the river.

You're glad he's not in the city right now. You sent him away to a school, outside the city. You watch the crowds drifting. You feel cool air blowing over from the river. You see the old stadium's dark towers. A car drives slowly along the opposite lane. It drives on towards the traffic lights, flashing amber.

The only way to win a fight is to avoid it. It was the Bielefelder who told you that back then. But that's rubbish, Bielefelder! you think. Now you can see it's rubbish, Bielefelder. But if Alex had listened to it he wouldn't have to break rocks. You're dizzy, and all you can feel is your head and you move it to and fro on the tarmac. You hear sirens. They're coming, you think, they're coming at last.

The Bielefelder wanted to open up a big place here back then, early nineties, an Eros centre, fifty rooms or more, and his people did it in the end. You used to get together a lot at that

time. You and your people overran a few things back then. Up and up and ever onwards, Thor with his hammer, you wanted to do business, good business, and you invested in it. Invested fists and cash and a lot more besides. He was a good man, the Bielefelder. Old-school, like they used to say over in the West, back then. But he got pulled into the war, here in the city, where no one knew the old school, the Bielefelder, back then.

Your friend Hans the Hatchet, hadn't he started out as a slaughterer or a butcher or something? He used to say: 'The pig's been slaughtered, and now everyone wants his few pounds of flesh!'

He came to you, the Bielefelder, because he knew he had to strike a bargain with your crew. Didn't he really impress you back then? A tall guy, grey hair, the best threads, and broad shoulders underneath the best threads, Davidoff Filter, and he had a slight limp, but with dignity, and a stick to go with it, with a silver knob, a lion's head, the lion and the man both at least sixty. He knew how to get you on his side. Promised you good money if you didn't disrupt his business, and your people could take care of security, and if you know someone who wants to put a roof over his girls' heads, first choice, if you want, and his good name, good contacts, and a few people with money behind him... Old-school, and you started realising what that means.

And now you lick your tongue over your lips, your tongue that's numb now, and you feel the cold sweat wetting your face, so that's the rain, the clouds up there are perfectly calm, and you wonder why the guy didn't wipe you out, and you hear the sirens right nearby. And then you crawl a few yards, more like inches, and bang! bang! bang! you're back on the grass behind the house, how soft it is, and you tell yourself that dying's just a load of shit, and you look up at the sky, where the sun and the stars and no moon and the planets, your grandfather once showed you Mars, glowing reddish somewhere just above the horizon... And black all of a sudden, so black that fear rips your balls apart.

A thin tube in your arm. Two ambulance men. Then a sheet. The sirens distant, as if a second ambulance were driving alongside them, wailing. The vehicle swerves. Screeching brakes? The ambulance men busy doing something. You're still here. Back again. Then dark again. The sirens now loud, now quiet. You're still here. Not under the sheet, please. Not over my head, please. You don't want to go under the sheet and you try to shake yourself, the sheet slips off, you raise your head a little and see your legs, your trousers are cut open, you see your flesh, dark red and white and in shreds and nearly black. Where did it start? Your eyelids flicker, the light like a stroboscope. Up on the coast. You wish you were by the seaside. That bar. What was it called again... The name of a bird. Pelican... A white swan on the sign

above the door. Gold pussy. And all the cash she raked in. That really impressed you. Gold pussy and the others, and all working for themselves, the biggest hook-up bar in the GDR, seamen from all over the world and dollars like it was L.A. A place like this, and a percentage for me, one day. You hear Gold pussy laughing, and she disappears with three small Filipinos. Short time, that's what they called it, three in a row for a hundred dollars, that was worth two thousand marks at the black-market exchange rate, standing up and not even a bed, what a business, you thought and you drank your beer, Gold pussy, Suitcase Handle and the others, and you'll give them beds, Mr Manager, one day. You sit at the bar and laugh and believe in destiny. They say something to you, touch your shoulders and press you back gently onto the stretcher as the ambulance speeds on, and you toss to and fro, you have to understand it all, the sheet, and then you start to calm down, why should they put the sheet over your head? All down your body to your balls, you feel how fast the ambulance is speeding. Everything's wet, and they're busy doing something, and you want to say something, but your mouth is so dry you can't say anything. Water, you want to say. Water. You wish you were by the seaside.

The blood, what did all the blood remind you of? You've seen plenty of blood, especially in the early nineties. You wonder if the Bielefelder's ever bumped anyone off, he's been in the business for forty years, he was in Hamburg for a while, he said. Violence is bad for business, he used to say, but there's something in his eyes, and your sixth, seventh and... you had to start by building up your business, and the blood, you know it was all necessary... you weren't where you are now. You raise your hands a little, hold them to the light of the ceiling lamp, it's good, you think, that the light's on all night. You're still weak, you've lost a lot of what you're thinking about the whole time. It was a good thing they didn't come for you any later. You've only spoken to Alex on the phone briefly, no visitors allowed yet. 'Those fucking Yugosl!' What did he say? Didn't Claudia call? And your son? The tablets and the stuff dripping into your arm are confusing you, you slept for over twenty hours, you feel the punctures in your arms from the transfusions. They've given you plenty, new stuff, unused, and it'll make you strong. Did Alex name names, do they know if Edo sent him? You try to piece it all together in your head, but you still can't put your finger on it properly, you know you need time, and then you'll find the answers. That guy, the father of the girl back then, he threatened to kill you, even though you had nothing to do with all that. No, you'd never get involved in disgusting shit like... But that idiot went to where you were. To the top. But you're not quite there yet, maybe this'll be the last step, a sign from destiny, which you still believe in sometimes. Why did he wait so long? It must have been ninety-three. And he came

four years later. No, you had nothing to do with it. But you knew about it, everybody knew about it. And then he showed up and came to you, because he thought... What did he think, that idiot? 'If you had your dirty fingers mixed up in it I'll kill you!' They dragged him outside, a short man, five foot three, an ex-jockey, an ex-drinker, as you found out later. 'You hear me, pimp! I'll kill you!' 'Shall we...?' 'No. Let him go. If he comes back again, don't let him in. No more than that. Just don't let him in.' You heard him yelling as they dragged him out. 'I'll kill you! I'll knife you!'

You asked around. Then you knew where his daughter was. She was eighteen then, so fourteen in nineteen ninety-three, and everyone knew about it. About her and the others. You're cold, and you put your hands under the sheet. You could have smashed the place to pieces, like you smashed other places up. Did you want to get at the papers even then? Public prosecutors, judges and cops and rich bastards who were into little girls. You drove around the streets on your own in the evening, asked a few other girls about her. Most of them didn't know you. You had nothing to do with that shit. Drug victims. Junkies. You don't work with girls like that. The Bielefelder was right about that, 'Drugged-up girls mess up your business.' A bit of coke or whatever never did anyone any harm, in moderation, in moderation... but that... You felt sick when you saw all that messed-up flesh. Dark red and white and in shreds and nearly black.

And then she was standing on a corner, right outside a flower shop that sold drinks and newspapers as well, the girls you'd asked about her wanted to push their way into your BMW, rubbed up against the door, leaned over the bonnet, and you could have heaved, although if it weren't for the needle you could give them a room in one of your properties, rehab for whores, that might be an idea, but if they didn't have their addictions they'd probably be doing something else, selling flowers and beer and newspapers, what a combination! And most of them had the clap or syphilis or maybe even AIDS, they do it without condoms, otherwise all the dirty buggers driving past slowly in their cars, their eyes as big as five-mark coins, would come to your girls.

You spotted her right away, your seventh, eighth sense... looks a bit like her father, and you'll never forget his face screaming like that. And then she's sitting next to you, just as small and thin as her father, short, messy hair, spots on her forehead and on her face, encrusted with makeup, a miniskirt the length of a belt, a T-shirt you can see her scant breasts and nipples through, as if she were still thirteen, like back then, but you knew neither her nor the others, you had nothing to do with it, and she tells you all the things she does, and for how much, and it's really not much, and you wonder if she did the same when she was thirteen or

if she was clean then, when those dirty bastards fucked her, you remember you could get hold of heroin on every street corner in ninety-two, you wonder whether the papers and the films are worth you keeping your mouth shut back then, wonder whether maybe everything might have turned out the way it is now either way, but you know the whole thing must have broken her, back then. She fumbles at you, and you say, 'Stop it,' and you give her money and tell her to go, and you know what she'll do with the cash, and you think you have to come back but perhaps you won't come back. You watch her trotting down the street, past the shop, towards the station. You gave her a hell of a lot of money, how amazed she looked, her eyes as big as... but dull and red. Perhaps she'll be clever and jump on some train, there are night trains to Paris and Copenhagen, but you know better, at the station, at night.

You've got a single room, and everything's white and clean, an art print on the wall, flowers, and you remember the beeping of the emergency room, intensive care, the same quiet, even beeping from all the beds, now and then and then a groan, snoring loud, snoring low. The council of nine, you think, the knights of the round table, you think as you're already half-asleep and elsewhere, you're gone and back again, gone and back again, the council of nine is meeting again soon, and by then you'll have to be fit and show them you can smooth it all out, alone if need be, you and Alex and your people. A beeping sound, drawn out and never-ending, and you touch your chest and feel the even thudding and hear the even beeping, the long tone turns into a whistling, a shrill whistling in your ears, in one of your ears, you're almost deaf in the other since a kick in the ring ruptured your ear drum, and then the gun that the guy who can hardly walk now fired next to your ear, the knights of the round table, you loved reading that as a kid, King Arthur and Perceval, who went looking for the Holy Grail until he went crazy, Sir Galahad and his friends, and you hear the doctors' feet clattering while you're still half-elsewhere, the pages rustling, the swords clashing, and you at the head of the table in a golden helmet, but how does that work with a round table, you hear coughing, a dull expulsion of air that sounds almost like a roar, life, someone here wants to live, and then you hear the gurgling inhalation of air. The doctors and nurses speak quietly to each other, the even beeping around you, and your good old sense can't tell you if that was death or if life's still going on.

Your eyelids flicker, the light like a stroboscope, and you see shadows around your bed. What's the time? You feel for your Breitling but it's gone. Your legs are stiff, as if made of wood, you turn your head and see the print of flowers like a dark splash of paint on the opposite wall. You wish it were daytime, but then the sunlight would spill into the room.

You open your eyes and you're not alone. There's a woman sitting there, on the chair by the wall, right under the flower print. She's black, her skin, and black curly hair and a pale pink dress. You don't understand straight away because it's not possible. You work with a couple of African women, it used to be the Vietnamese to begin with, now it's the Africans, but why has this woman of all people come to visit you? And didn't they tell you, no visitors for one or two days? But perhaps she sneaked in unnoticed. There's always one man in a car down outside the entrance, Alex took care of that, and the cops are keeping an eye out too. But only the best girls work for you. You get yourself half-upright, turn around to her. She's sitting there, looking at you and not moving. Her face as if cut from black rock. 'Arnie,' she says, and her lips barely move. 'Mary,' you say, and she goes on speaking, and that sounds strange in this little room, which still seemed so large not long ago. Something's not right, you think, what's she doing here? And what she says is wrong. You want to turn away, and now the sheet over your face might be a good thing, but she's here. And when you thought of all the blood at some point, just now or yesterday or hours ago, she was here then too. 'We did everything we could back then,' you say. And it's true, even. You got hold of him, a few weeks later, and if the cops hadn't stuck their oar in he'd be flat on his back somewhere outside of the city by now, and in a few years the grass would grow especially green there... (No, that was just your first flush of anger back then, she was one of your girls, on your premises, and your shoulders and your neck and your chest ached as if you'd been pumping iron, all night long and all day long, but you'd probably only have broken a few of his bones.) 'He loved me,' she says.

'Maybe,' you say and you try to stay cool, but the blood and Mary creep into your head, there's a plaster on your forehead, on the spot where you hit the street, days ago, hours ago, at some point. The guy was young, in his early twenties or so, nineteen, as you later found out. 'You should have come sooner,' she says, and you don't understand that and you don't want to understand it, because *she's* the one who's come. The sheet underneath you is wet. 'You shouldn't be here,' you say. And the shadows you saw through your eyelids not long ago are back again, and you shake your head because there's a hand in your hair, she's standing by your bed now, and you pull the sheet up under your nose and feel your warm breath on your face. The way she's looking at you, you can't stand it, there's suddenly so much you can't stand, and the room's full of people now, their breathing, their sounds, their smells, they're muttering and whispering. 'I'm flat on my back outside of the city,' you hear, and you know where she is, in the moor, but you only know it vaguely, you've got nothing else to do with it. 'And my work, at the court, how's it going without me?' You hear it and you pull the sheet up

to the plaster on your forehead. Because you know if you get up and limp across the room between them all and open the table drawer, there's a tiny person flat on their back in there, laughing broadly at you. Leave me alone, you think, and perhaps you whisper it too, go away, Mary, you brought all this with you!

You stand in front of her and look at the huge wound in her neck, like a black grin from ear to ear. 'There's this guy, Arnie, he keeps coming back, he scares me.'

'A regular, girl, you treat him right, make eyes at him, and if there's any problems, just call me.'

Your phone rings. You look in your pockets, no ringing, just buzzing and vibrating, you've put it on silent. It falls down, the battery leaps out, where's the SIM card? And you roll onto your side. There's something flashing and glinting next to you. You reach for it. A bullet casing. The sirens go quiet. The ground underneath you is wet. You turn again. Over there a traffic light is flashing, amber. Cool air from the river. You tremble. The old stadium's towers. So dark.