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Opening Extract from...

Tiger Milk

Written by Stefanie de Velasco

Translated by Tim Mohr

Published by Head of Zeus

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Tiger Milk

STEFANIE DE VELASCO

Translated by Tim Mohr

HEAD of ZEUS



Stefanie de Velasco lives and works in Berlin. In 2011, she received the Literature Prize Prenzlauer Berg for the first chapters of *Tiger Milk* and was shortlisted for the Aspekte Literature Prize for Best Debut 2013. This is her first novel.

Tim Mohr has translated such authors as Alina Bronsky, Charlotte Roche, and Wolfgang Herrndorf. His own writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Daily Beast*, and *Playboy*. Prior to starting his writing career he made his living as a club DJ in Berlin.

In a cool and airy mead
There turns the wind a wheel;
My beloved she did leave,
Who lived there in that field.

She pledged her love forever
Gave me a ring therewith;
She broke her pledge asunder,
My ring did split in half.

When I hear that wheel still turn,
I don't know what to do,
Death is that for which I yearn,
Then quiet would it be too.

Joseph von Eichendorff

I wouldn't have even noticed it if Mama hadn't run into Frau Stanitzek on the street. I know it was Frau Stanitzek because she already owned the convenience store in the building where Jameelah lives now. I can still remember how they stood around talking and laughing forever, and then they talked some more and then came more laughter. I wasn't paying attention to them, I was bored and I remember I was holding onto the baby carriage to brace myself because the pavement was so icy.

Jessi was lying in the carriage, she was still a baby then, an accident. Mama had cried when she found out she was pregnant again. She was sitting in her room, on the corner of the bed, the corner of the same bed she used to share with Papa. Rainer was sitting next to her and then he took her in his arms and suddenly they both began to cheer up. I remember that I watched all of this through a slit in the doorway and that I had to pee really bad. The pregnancy test was still sitting next to the bathroom sink, it was one of the cheap paper ones and the ends were curled up like a dried-out slice of cheese on a sandwich put out for display at the bakery.

And then I saw it. It was lying in the snow, it was green, and it was steaming. Someone must have just spat it out. It looked like a little balled-up lump of pizza dough, about the right size for my Barbie doll to make a pizza out of, except it was green

and it had teeth marks in it. I was still holding onto the baby carriage, I had mittens on and they were connected by a cord that ran up each sleeve of my jacket and across my back. My Barbie was stuffed into one of the mittens. And as Mama and Frau Stanitzek chatted away, the upper body of my Barbie crept out of the mitten and bent down. With an outstretched arm she speared the gum and then stuck it into my mouth. It was still a tiny bit sweet, and it tasted like Waldmeister syrup with a hint of cigarettes. Later, when I was eleven and took a drag on a cigarette for the first time, I immediately thought of that piece of gum and then today, again, I had to think of that piece of gum, the way it was just lying there in the snow, and the taste of it, because today for the first time I put a condom on using just my mouth. An old hooker's trick says Jameelah, guys love it. I'm only explaining all of this because I think I had a childhood memory for the first time today, and you can only remember something as a childhood memory once you're no longer a child. Jameelah says she can't remember anything from her childhood. Then maybe you're still a child, I said to her. Then she thought of something, she remembered how she found two bunnies in a dumpster once, how they weren't quite dead but almost, it was one summer in Iraq when I was still little, and my cousin killed them with a tennis racket but other than that I don't have any memories, Jameelah says, which is probably for the best, I don't want to grow up anyway, at least not really, not all the way, just enough so that I can get into all the clubs and so guys don't think they're going to get thrown in jail if they fuck me.

The two of us, me and Jameelah, we really are grown up now. Which is why we buy striped thigh-high stockings with our

pocket money. When you start to buy your own clothes, you're grown up. After school we lock ourselves in the girls' bathroom and take off our trousers, underneath are the stockings. Our t-shirts hang down just enough to cover our asses, and the stockings come up to the top of our thighs, it drives guys crazy. I always get milk from the cafeteria during our lunch break, I have a calcium deficiency, you can tell by the white flecks on my fingernails. At the discount supermarket we've bought cheap Mariacron brandy, maracuja juice, and a wide-mouth plastic container of chocolate Müller milk. The cashiers don't usually care that we're not eighteen. We dump the chocolate milk down the toilet, chocolate milk is for children. We drink Tiger Milk and this is how you make it. Pour a little of the school cafeteria milk, a lot of maracuja juice, and a decent slug of brandy into the Müller jar. Jameelah stirs it with her fingers, she has really long fingers and wears lots of rings, all of them stolen. She doesn't steal just rings, she swipes perfume, nail polish, basically anything that doesn't have one of those things on it that sets off the alarm when you leave a shop.

We take turns drinking from the Müller jar while we ride the U-bahn toward Kurfürstenstrasse. As we cross the city on the elevated steel rails, the train rocks us back and forth and Jameelah starts making up stories again. Just imagine, she says, looking at me with her huge dark eyes, picture it in your mind. It sounds like *once upon a time*. . . but it's not once upon a time, it's more like this is how it could be. I close my eyes and everything starts to spin a little. I imagine the train is a flying carpet and now, any second, Jameelah will start to tell some story or other.

Just imagine that when you're seventeen or whatever, when your breasts have stopped growing, just imagine, that for a few days

each month they filled up with Tiger Milk. How crazy would that be? I mean, how crazy would guys go over that?

Shut up, Jameelah, you're the one who's crazy.

Jameelah giggles loudly.

No, seriously, think about it, the same way you get breasts and you start to get your period, what if you got Tiger Milk once a month?

TMS?

Tiger Milk Syndrome. Miger Silk Tyndrome.

Jameelah loves switching letters around. Word-crunching, she calls it. She makes lust out of list and sex out of Beck's. Put a six-pack of sex on your shopping lust. We also talk in our own O-language. Forget saying someone took a hit off a pipe, they take a hot off a pope.

You know, I always used to think that being a teenager just meant you were old enough to drink tea, what about you?

Jameelah laughs and shakes her head and her long earrings jangle.

What's the Arabic word for teenager?

No idea, says Jameelah, who cares? What do you think about the idea of getting Tiger Milk for a few days a month as a gift from nature, a gift from god, from some god of sex, as, you know, a celebration of ovulation.

You're wasted. And I don't know. Every month for your whole life? Wouldn't that end up being a pain in the ass?

Jameelah squints her eyes and thinks it over for a second. Okay, she says, how about only until you have a kid? Only up to then, right, that's the way nature planned it, because by then you'd have a husband anyway.

I nod and Jameelah looks at me conspiratorially.

In that case, she says, you can never have kids, because then it would stop.

Nobody in Germany has kids anymore anyway. I saw it in a magazine.

They do in Iraq.

But you're not in Iraq.

Yeah, but I might be soon, in three months.

What? Why?

I don't know, my mother got a letter from the immigration department.

She gets stuff from them all the time.

Yeah, but this was different.

What do you mean?

It was a different colour.

For some reason this makes me laugh.

What, like a pink slip, I say.

Jameelah glares at me.

It's not funny. They might deport us or something.

Deport you? Why?

Jameelah looks at the floor and fidgets with the Müller jar, squeezing the plastic sides and making them loudly pop back out.

No idea. But my mother's worried.

They can't just kick you out.

You have no idea how it works, says Jameelah, it can happen just like that.

You don't even know any Arabic, I say.

That's not true. I can understand it. But even if I didn't, it doesn't make any difference to them. They don't care.

So, what now?

We just have to wait now, says Jameelah, they'll send us notice one way or the other sometime in the next three months. Though my mother wanted to try to get us naturalized.

Naturalized? You mean become actual German citizens?

Exactly.

Is that difficult?

Pretty difficult, yeah. You have to fill out all kinds of paperwork and take a test. If you pass the test you get a real German passport instead of the stupid residency card we have now, and then we wouldn't have to constantly run around to all these government offices anymore, we wouldn't have to get our residency permits extended all the time. Man, if that ever happens, if I ever become a German citizen, I'll throw a huge party.

Sounds good to me, I say.

Yeah, says Jameelah, but it won't be just any old party. I'll throw a potato party.

A what?

A potato party. Orkhan and Tayfun did the same thing, like in that one movie, you know, where the guy serves nothing but things made out of potatoes.

I look out the window of the subway car and think, three months. I don't want to think about it, I don't want to think what it would be like if Jameelah wasn't around anymore so I grab her hand and hold it tight.

Things are always changing, even if you don't want them to, says Jameelah.

No, I say, everything will stay the same if we want it to. When you're grown up, you can keep things the way you want. You decide everything as an adult, that's the good part of being grown up. And anyway, three months, do you know what that means?

Jameelah shakes her head.

Three months means we have the whole summer in front of us.

I have a pebble in my shoe. I kind of like it when I have a pebble in my shoe. It's like someone's there, like someone's accompanying

me through the world. I can play with it if I get bored, roll it around with my big toe, round and round like a circus horse being paraded around the ring. I don't know why, but when I have a pebble in my shoe I never feel like I'm alone.

Jameelah and I put our feet up on the seat bench opposite us. The pebble tumbles down toward my heel and diamond-shaped clumps of dirt fall from the soles of our Chucks onto the seat. The dirt is from Tiergarten, sometimes as part of detention we have to go to the park and do stuff. Jameelah kicks her shoes against each other and the dirt rains down on the seat. She smiles and takes a big gulp of Tiger Milk.

Leave some for me, I say.

We still have the bottle, she says, kicking her backpack. Dangling from the zipper is the luggage tag I gave her back in elementary school, the one with the cartoon mouse. The mouse used to be white but it's grey now, that's how long me and Jameelah have been best friends. On the front of the backpack, handwritten with a sharpie it says *Love you my angel, from Anna-Lena*. Anna-Lena is full of it. It's a load of shit that she loves Jameelah. And a load of shit that Jameelah's an angel.

Some old man, typical senior citizen, walks past us.

Get your feet down, he says.

We're getting out at the next station anyway you old Nazi, says Jameelah.

The old idiot stands there with his mouth open. Jameelah chugs the rest of the Tiger Milk and drops the container on the floor. At the station we get out and sit down on a bench to mix another round in an empty soda bottle I have in my bag.

Crazy, says Jameelah as she pours brandy into the bottle, there are some words with magical power in Germany. When you say one of them the world comes to a complete halt. Nazi. The world just stops and stares at you.

More like words that are cursed, I say. The old bastard felt insulted. You know how it is with the word Nazi.

Yeah, okay, that's true, Nazi is a bad example, but if you think about it there really are words that make people stare at you, whether they feel personally insulted or not. I mean, forget the old guy, imagine what would happen if I just said Nazi out loud, not even at anyone. Everyone would stare. Or Jew. You can't say Jew. Even though it's really just a normal word.

That's another bad example.

Jameelah puckers her lips, thinking it over.

True, true. But you know what I mean, like. . . I can't think of a good one right now.

The last few drops of school milk trickle into the soda bottle with the brandy.

Vagina, I say.

What?

Vagina's one of those words, I say.

Jameelah looks at me blankly for a second.

Vagina, vagina, she shouts, exactly, that's what I mean! It's just a normal word.

No reason to shout, I say.

What, you, too? You said it first, she shouts, that's exactly what I mean, you can't say it, you just can't say it.

She jumps up and the mouse on the tag on her backpack swings around like it's gone crazy.

New game, says Jameelah and the millions of bracelets she's wearing jangle in my face, let's try to think of all the totally normal words in the world that you're not allowed to say.

Only if you come up with the next one, I say.

She thinks.

Nazi, Jew, vagina, it's not that easy to think of another one.

Jameelah grabs a pouch of loose tobacco out of her backpack and starts to roll herself a cigarette. She tries to sprinkle the tobacco out smoothly and evenly on the rolling paper, precision work she's doing. Neither of us says anything for a while, maybe because we both know what's coming and we both know we could still reconsider it. But I don't want to reconsider it. And anyway, it was Jameelah's idea originally.

We're going to do it again aren't we, I ask.

Jameelah doesn't react, she just sits there calmly, rolling her cigarette.

Come on, I say.

Jameelah licks the edge of the rolling paper and shoves the finished cigarette in her mouth and then looks at me.

You think we should, she says, pulling her Zippo out of her backpack.

I think we should. It was a good laugh last time.

More like crass, that's what it was last time, crass. Or cross.

Yeah, it was cross. But it was fun, too, right?

Her dark eyes bore into me. She takes a drag on her cigarette and blows the smoke out the side of her mouth. I grab the cigarette from her and take a drag.

Why else did we dress like this?

Jameelah cracks a smile.

Fine, she says, you wouldn't have it any other way.

Give me a break, you sound like our teacher.

I hand the cigarette back to her.

But today I get to put the condom on, Jameelah says, the red one.

We hop down the stairs of the subway station together, two steps at a time, down to Kurfürstenstrasse.

* * *

There's a lot happening on the street, as always. People are racing from one shop to the next. It seems like everyone on Kurfürstenstrasse has a bit of tuna salad or ketchup stuck to the corner of their mouth. That's because every third storefront is a place to get cheap food. I counted one time. Department store, optician, bakery; clothing store, office supplies, sandwich shop; more clothes, bed linen, fish and chips. On and on. The further down the street you go the cheaper the places get, that's where the mobile phone stores and ninety-nine-cent shops are and loads of Turkish bridal shops and nail salons. Just beyond the discount baby store is where you start to see the women standing around.

I'm hungry. You have any money?

No, really, none.

With our last few cents we buy a packet of Yum Yum ramen noodles at a ninety-nine-cent shop and then stroll on down the street all slick and cool, crunching away on the dry noodles like potato chips. Further down there's nothing but peep shows, porn theatres, and kebab shops. There are lots of women standing around down here, but none of them are wearing striped stockings, they're in shiny leggings or leather skirts that lace up the side.

Tasty. That's what Jameelah said last time. The laces look just like strands of black liquorice. I'm not so sure I think that's funny.

Sometimes there are girls the same age as us standing here. Today one of them looks familiar to me but I can't place her. She's wearing one of the skirts with the liquorice laces, striped tights, and a tank-top with spaghetti straps. She's holding a leash that's dangling in the gutter, soaking up water from a puddle, and on the other end of the leash is a huge black dog. The dog has on a red handkerchief instead of a collar and its mouth is hanging open. I'm pretty sure that if it could talk it would hit us up for spare change. The girl is sitting on the kerb rummaging through her army rucksack and she looks up at us suspiciously.

She has dark makeup around her eyes and her dyed-black hair is parted in the middle and her arms are covered with scabs. I'm letting the last few Yum Yum noodle crumbs dissolve in my mouth when Jameelah grabs me by the t-shirt. A car comes around the corner and the girl with black hair quickly jumps up and pulls her dog out of the street. The driver leans out the window and grins at us, his face is all red. Jameelah gives him the finger, but the girl runs after the car and together with her dog jumps into the backseat.

Shit, I think looking at the ground. The pavement is dotted with old pieces of gum.

Give me the tobacco.

Jameelah reaches into her jacket pocket and then walks over and leans against the wall of the nearby building, she tucks one knee up and props her foot against the wall behind her. I crack a smile. Now we really do look just like all the other girls around here. Jameelah winks at me and nods at a guy across the street who's leaning against a signpost and looking across at us. He's tall and thin, wearing skinny jeans and a pair of those idiotic-looking horn-rimmed glasses. He looks kind of sweet though and I can't imagine he could possibly be waiting across the street because of us.

I shake my head at Jameelah.

I'll bet you, says Jameelah, I'll bet you he comes over here.

She waves at him and I see his eyebrows arch. He hesitates for a second and then crosses the street with an awkward grin on his face.

Him, I ask.

Jameelah nods without taking her eyes off the guy.

Watch this, she whispers.

* * *

As the guy gets closer I start to feel a little strange. But that's normal, you always feel a little strange at first, it happens every time, it's just part of the whole thing. Jameelah takes my hand and we saunter toward him.

Hey, says Jameelah.

The guy looks us up and down and grins.

What are you staring at, says Jameelah.

I'm not staring, he says.

He's pretty old, he must be thirty. He looked younger from far away because of his clothes. He's barely got any hair left, with just a bit of fluff above each ear.

Our last two classes of the day were cancelled, says Jameelah.

Aha, he says, so what are you up to then?

I'm Stella Stardust, says Jameelah, and this is my friend Sophia Saturna. I'll bet you have one of those apartments with wooden floors and stucco moulding and all that stuff, right? And tons of old vinyl? You definitely look like the type of person who collects records.

No vinyl but a lot of CDs, the guy answers, shoving his hand into his jeans pocket, do you know what CDs are?

Nah, we're walking talking MP3 players you know, at night we plug giant thumb drives into our ports, kind of like in the Matrix, you know? We keep them on our nightstands right next to our kiddie cassettes and the music is downloaded automatically onto our internal hard drives along with everything else, like our homework assignments, telephone numbers, French vocabulary lists, everything.

The guy looks at Jameelah and laughs out loud.

What's so funny about that, says Jameelah, barely able to keep from laughing herself.

Shaking his head, he stares at her like he's watching the climactic scene of the most interesting movie ever. For a second

I think he might actually believe Jameelah's bullshit. Belief is wanting things to be true that you know are impossible. And this guy is one of those people, the type of guy who wants to believe everything because he spends all day taking care of boring shit, emailing and crunching numbers and sucking up to clients, yeah, he probably has to meet with clients constantly and once in a while when he's running back and forth to the copier he stops and asks himself why he bothers with it all. He'd much rather lose himself in our lies.

What do I have to do to see these ports, he says folding his arms across his chest.

It'll cost a hundred euros, I say.

Jameelah winks at me and her eyes guide my gaze to her left hand. She forms a circle with her pointer finger and thumb.

I actually never do this kind of thing, he says as we climb into the backseat of his car which is parked at a nearby garage.

We never do this kind of thing either, Jameelah says giggling. She picks up a pile of glossy magazines on the seat and tosses them into my lap.

Are you rich, I ask.

He laughs.

No, not really, he says adjusting his rearview window so he can see us.

There's no such thing as not really. Are you rich or not?

I don't talk about money, he says trying to sound all slick and cool.

Jameelah looks at me and rolls her eyes.

What an idiot, she whispers.

The apartment is incredible, exactly the way we imagined it would be, gigantic, full of beautiful furniture, kind of like what

you see at Ikea except more expensive, and there's not a speck of dust anywhere. He must have a cleaning lady I think to myself.

Do you guys want ice cream, he asks.

I don't like ice cream, I say, though it's a lie.

Right, we don't like ice cream, says Jameelah opening her rucksack, where's the kitchen anyway, she asks, and do you have any milk?

There's a tall CD rack next to the bed. The guy really does still buy CDs. From the far corner of the place I hear the sound of utensils clanging. Jameelah and the guy are in the kitchen. Then Jameelah slides across the wooden floor in her stockings and stops in front of me.

Hey, she whispers, Sophia Saturna.

She smiles, nods at the silk scarves hanging from the rungs of the cast iron bed frame, and looks at me inquisitively. I nod and push play on the CD player and the music is decent so I turn up the volume. Jameelah slides back toward the kitchen, balancing herself like a newborn foal taking its first steps across the pasture. I have to laugh because I know that couldn't be farther from the truth. All of a sudden the apartment goes dark. A disco ball hanging from the ceiling starts to spin and tiny flecks of light dance on the walls. The guy must have taken off his t-shirt in the kitchen because his upper body is naked when he reappears. The tiny points of light spin across his skin and it reminds me of Friday nights at the ice skating rink. There's no hair on his chest, I bet he shaves it. He holds out a glass for me and smiles. He looks like a nice guy somehow, but that just makes me feel kind of sorry for him.

Jameelah takes off her top, hops onto the bed, and starts jumping up and down on the mattress. I toss my t-shirt on top of Jameelah's things and join her. Our heads bob up and down as we jump. The guy stands in front of us and takes cautious

sips from his glass of Tiger Milk.

Come on up, Jameelah shouts, the air's much nicer up here.

He gingerly tests the mattress with his big feet and I notice that his second toe is longer than his big toe. He says something but the music is so loud that I can't understand it. I grab his hand so he doesn't fall over and as I do I ask myself whether the length of your second toe plays a role in keeping your balance. Mama had said something once about people with long second toes, I can't remember what it was, but it was something bad, something like people with long second toes die young, that wasn't it but it was something like that. Mama often says things that sound wrong. Mama says that back when Papa left he took her engagement ring, the one with the green gemstone in the middle, it was real, she says, it belonged to his mother, she says that every time she starts going on about the ring, it was real, she says, and Papa took it to give to his new girlfriend, and then she starts to cry and says that you just don't do that, and the way she says it makes it sound as if the fact that the ring is gone, that Papa took it with him, is much worse than anything else about Papa leaving.

We jump around on the bed to the deafening music. The guy pulls me close.

You have such beautiful hair, so blonde, he shouts in my ear so loud that it hurts.

He tries to grab my hair as it flies around and I kiss him and he grabs my ass. Jameelah drops to her knees and pulls the guy down with her and opens his belt and pulls down his jeans and he's wearing boxers and they get pulled part way down with the jeans but it looks kind of nice, even the bulge where his hard-on is sticking out. Jameelah takes a big swig of Tiger Milk and dribbled it all over the guy's chest. She leans over him and starts to slurp up the milk from his body and he wraps his long legs

around her and I take two of the silk scarves and tie his hands to the bed frame. We take turns kissing him and take off the rest of our things until we're naked except for our stockings. Jameelah ties his feet to the other end of the bed, her stockings are rolled most of the way down, I don't know why and I want to pull them up for her but she does the opposite and takes them all the way off. She's hidden the condom somewhere inside, and when she finds it she rips open the package. The condom's bright red and I wonder what flavour it is, must taste like something red, I think, maybe strawberry or cherry, but then Jameelah puts it in her mouth tip first and things get serious. We take the big white sheet that's crumpled at the bottom of the bed and lay it around the guy so that only his cock, which is all red, is showing, like during surgery, when everything is covered with that green fabric except the spot where they are going to operate. The guy lays there completely still, as if we've given him anaesthesia.

Jameelah says you can learn something from these guys, just like when you study medicine. First you cut up a frog, then corpses, and only at the end do you get to work on real, living people. That's how you learn something. We need to practise, for later on, for real life, at some point we'll need to know how it all works. We need to know everything so nobody can ever mess with us.

It's still the middle of the day, meaning it's a little too early to go to the planet, but going home now would be weird so we head toward Wilmersdorfer Strasse U-bahn station and wander through the pedestrian zone, into the mall, and then downstairs to the supermarket. We grab all kinds of stuff, Yum Yum noodles, marble cake, Pixy Stix, tubes of sweet Milchmädchen condensed milk, and butter rum flavour Riesen, which Nico likes so much. We pay with Jameelah's fifty euro bill and then walk over to the planet.

The planet is a big ugly concrete ball right next to the mall at Wilmersdorfer station. There are a bunch of smaller planets or moons around the big one, all of them made out of concrete too. In summer, when it's hot, foamy yellow water sometimes shoots out of the small planets, but most of the time the whole thing is dry. I have no idea who decided to put it here. I guess it's supposed to be art but it just looks like shit. I think they wanted mothers to sit around the planet with their kids and eat ice cream and splash around in the fountain or whatever. But you never see mothers and children at the planet, only alcoholics and crazy people and us.

Nico says the city didn't build it for mothers at all, he says it's for us so that we have a place to meet after school and on weekends. There's a phone booth next the planet. It's an old yellow

dinosaur and I've never seen anyone go in to use it except for Nico when he's smoking up. But it's actually in the perfect spot. It's covered from top to bottom with writing. We leave each other messages on it about when we're going to meet or where a party or concert is. It may be old fashioned but it's cheaper than calling or texting and everyone who comes to the planet checks the phone booth for messages anyway and luckily for us the city cleans it as soon as every inch is covered with ink.

Kathi and Laura are sitting at the planet. Kathi is fussing around with Laura's bangs with a razor blade, just like earlier today at school during the twenty minute morning break, when we were down in the basement in the bike storage area, where we always smoke, she was working on Laura's hair too. She wants her bangs to be straight, perfectly straight, but to run at an angle from left to right and it's not so easy to cut them at an angle and make the line perfectly straight.

So what's going on today besides hair cutting, asks Jameelah.

S-bahn party I think, says Kathi, Nico was just here and said something about it.

Where is he anyway, I ask.

Under the railway bridge. You guys have anything to drink?

Jameelah pulls out the bottle of Tiger Milk and the bag of butter rum Riesen from her rucksack. Viovic are next to the phone booth. Viovic are always in the same outfit, all in black, with the same hair, dyed black and cropped at the chin, and when it rains they have the same black umbrellas, which is why we just call them Viovic, like it's just a single entity, even though that's not true, there are two of them, they're twins. The only time you can tell them apart is when they are on stage, because Viktoria plays bass and Violetta plays guitar. Their band is called Viovic and they're crap, everyone says so, not just me. I don't understand why they are so bad since they have a rehearsal space

in their parents' basement, with egg boxes on the wall and everything, and they practise almost every day because there's also a music room at the private school they go to, but maybe they don't practise as much as they say they do.

Nini, Viktoria calls, do you have a sharpie?

I shake my head.

I do, says Kathi and tosses it over to Viktoria.

Violetta scrawls something on the phone booth.

You guys coming to the S-bahn party?

Viktoria and Violetta shake their heads.

We're going to Rotor, they say.

I wonder to myself whether they practise saying everything simultaneously like that, it's almost creepy.

Here comes Nadja, says Laura with her mouth full. She points toward the S-bahn tracks.

She looks awful, whispers Kathi.

She was already looking bad at school earlier, says Jameelah.

Hey, have you guys seen Tobi, asks Nadja as she walks up.

Is everything okay with you, asks Kathi.

Got my period, where's Tobi?

He's with the others under the railway bridge.

I look in the butter rum bag. Only one left.

This one's for Nico.

We run past the entrance of the U-bahn station and cross Stuttgarter Platz toward the raised S-bahn tracks. Apollo and Aslagon are squatting next to the underpass. It looks like Apollo is drawing something on the ground with his wooden sword. His Viking helmet is tossed to the side, lying in the dirt. Apollo believes he's a Viking and Aslagon thinks all humans are divided between bird people and lizard people. I'm a bird person and so

is Jameelah, he says, but he himself is a lizard person, just like the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Apollo and Aslagon only hang out with us at the planet during the summer because they spend winters in the Auguste Viktoria mental hospital.

What's that supposed to be, asks Jameelah.

It's Naglfar, says Apollo, the ship that has to be built out of human fingernails before the end of the world can finally come.

And that's why you two can't pass, says Aslagon, peering at us with his kohl-smeared eyes.

Why not?

Anyone who wishes to pass beneath the railway bridge must have their nails cut by Apollo, he says, so we can build the ship and bring on the apocalypse.

Why would you even want to bring on the apocalypse, asks Jameelah.

Yeah, says Nadja, maybe we don't want the world to end.

God's earth is rotten, says Apollo as he gestures at us with a rusty set of nail clippers.

Nadja rolls her eyes.

Fuck it, she says, taking the clippers and snipping one nail from each of us.

The walls of the underpass are covered with spray paint from floor to ceiling. The crappy graffiti is Tobi's. Tobi tags his stuff *animaux*, which means animals in French. But for a graffiti tag *animaux* is too long, Nico explained it to me. It's the last two letters that make it too long, you need to spray quickly and then get the hell out of there. Maybe that's why Tobi gets caught all the time and maybe that's why you see the tag *anima* all over the city.

The good stuff is Nico's. *Sad* is his tag, written in English.

Sometimes he writes *Sadist*. He writes it in soft funny-looking letters, like clouds. It's comforting when I'm riding the bus around town and see a *Sad* Nico has tagged on some random wall. It's like the sensation I get when I have a pebble in my shoe, in that moment when I see one of Nico's *Sad* tags I'm not alone.

At the far end of the railway underpass, Tobi and Nico are standing around smoking. Nico's leaning against the wall. He's big. Everything about him is big actually, his hands, his blue eyes, his mouth, and his feet, which are always in the same pair of trainers which he throws into the washing machine just as often as he washes his clothing and hangs to dry along with the clothes. Even his shaved head is big and really the only small thing about him is the kiddie lunchbox he always carries around. It's plastic, with bright stripes and on the side of it a clock that doesn't work because it's out of batteries. I used to have one just like it from when Nico and I were kids. We were at the carnival one day and the lunchboxes were on display on the top shelf of a raffle ticket booth. Nico and I wanted them so bad, one for each of us, but both of our mothers just wanted to keep moving. We began to cry and Nico's father started buying raffle tickets, more tickets than anybody else. Nico's mother cursed at him and the man at the booth laughed as he handed Nico's father one ticket after the next, pulling them out of the clear wrappers like meal worms and shoving them at Nico's father until he had enough points for two of the lunchboxes.

So that's how we're going to spend our money, Nico's mother had said to his father pointing to the slips of coloured paper littering the ground, but she was just in a bad mood because Nico's father was drunk and so were my Mama and Papa but she couldn't drink because she was pregnant with Pepi then.

I don't think it's right either, my Mama had said to my Papa, say something, she said, but Papa just rolled his eyes.

Nico has carried that thing around with him ever since. He used to carry his matchbox cars back and forth to the playground in it but these days he keeps his pot in it and uses the smooth plastic face of the clock to blend the pot with tobacco. He even takes the lunchbox to Schulze-Sievert, where he's doing his apprenticeship. Everybody jokes about Nico and his lunchbox, but he doesn't care, he laughs right along with them. His lunchbox is his lunchbox. Mine got destroyed the same summer I got it. Dragan threw it against the wall of a car park after I told him the clock on it was shockproof.

Hey, says Nico, so did you let Aslagon cut your nails?

I nod.

Poor guy, says Jameelah as she reaches for the joint.

What do you mean?

I mean seriously, she says, *God's earth is rotten* has got to be the saddest sentence I've heard in ages.

Nico spits on the ground.

Yeah, maybe it is sad, he says, looking up at the sky. Sad but true.

All of a sudden there's a commotion at the planet. A bunch of skaters are riding around the fountain, shouting and clapping as they fall down and hop back up and their boards smack loudly against the concrete. It looks like the diagram Herr Wittner shows us in physics class, with the planet as the nucleus of an atom and the skaters whizzing around the nucleus like electrons, everything is made out of atoms, says Herr Wittner, the whole universe.

It starts to drizzle. We sit down next to the fountain. Just for a laugh, Kathi and Laura start asking people for spare change. The nearly empty container of Tiger Milk sits between me and

Jameelah. I wrap my arms around my knees as the summer rain falls around us and soaks into the parched concrete, giving off that unique smell.

I'm pretty wasted, I whisper.

Jameelah nods.

Me too, she says, I was already completely wasted at that guy's place, she says and then she reaches into her shoe, pulls out my fifty euro note, and hands it to me.

It was a good fucking laugh today, eh?

Yeah, I say, stashing the money, but it was fucking cross, too.

I look up at the sky, which presses down on us with that eerie yellow colour it gets before a big storm, like it's trying to scare us.

Look, I say, it really looks like the apocalypse is coming.

I guess the ship must be finished, says Jameelah.

That was quick.

Yeah. Maybe God's earth really is rotten. Maybe there really is a God and maybe his earth really is rotten. I'd believe it.

Wait, why? I thought you said it was the saddest thing you'd ever heard?

Yeah, but sad things are usually true, says Jameelah, Nico's right about that.

She closes her eyes, opens her mouth, and catches the raindrops on her tongue. Beyond the S-bahn tracks there's a flash of lightning, then we hear the thunder and a few seconds later the rain starts to pour down as hard as in a rainforest. Laura and Kathi come running over and grab their backpacks, which are on the ground next to ours.

Fucking global warming, shouts Laura and we all hold hands and run for cover shrieking but by the time we reach an awning we're all soaking wet. Jameelah puts her hand on my shoulder and braces herself as she pulls down the wet stockings that are

clinging to her legs. Her hand is warm and I close my eyes and listen to the rain, the way it falls out of the sky, the way it plunks into the gathering puddles, the way it drips from the awning and soaks into my shoe and joins the pebble. I'm tired and drunk, I think, and I still have to go shopping, bread, Leberwurst, noodles, ketchup, but then Jameelah's long nails dig into my shoulder. I open my eyes and am about to complain when I see him. He's coming toward us. His dark hair is all wet and drops of rain hang from his long eyelashes, and beneath the lashes his dark Bambi eyes and pale face, so pale it looks like he's suffering from some elegant disease. It's Lukas. In his right hand he has a bottle of wine and a tattered book is sticking out of his jacket pocket, which is just one of the million things Jameelah loves about him. I can't understand why anyone would read so much, I don't see what's so great about it, I think it's somehow abnormal.

Hello, he says, staring at Jameelah as she stands there barefoot with her wet stockings in her hand. I crack a smile and think to myself, either he thinks she's incredible or he thinks she's disgusting, but that's how it always is with Jameelah. As if in slow motion she stuffs the stockings into her backpack, gently, purposefully, every movement carefully considered, like a hunter trying to position herself without scaring off a wild animal. She slips back into her red Chucks and smiles.

I have to tell you something, she says looking at Lukas, I dreamed about you, I dreamt that you captured some kind of mythical beast, it was see-through with two heads. It was like a cross between a dragon and a kangaroo but it lived in the water and could purr like a cat.

Lukas laughs.

You should write that down, he says, that's really poetic imagery.

I already did, says Jameelah.

He is really good looking somehow, at least when he's listening to Jameelah tell him something, though maybe we all look nice when she is telling us something. Lukas wants to say something but two hands come from behind him and cover his Bambi eyes. The hands belong to Anna-Lena, Anna-Lena whose hair is always freshly washed – only freshly washed hair moves like Anna-Lena's.

There you are, she says and kisses Lukas on the cheek. Anna-Lena who always smells like flowery perfume and writes *Love you my angel* on everybody's rucksack but doesn't really mean it. You can't say I love you if you don't actually mean it, that's against the rules.

Behind her come Nico, Nadja, and Tobi.

S-bahn party, shouts Nico throwing his hands up and starting to run across the plaza toward the station. I can hear the beer bottles clinking against each other in his backpack. We run after him toward the S-bahn. As Lukas plays around with Anna-Lena a few steps ahead of us, Jameelah stares at him as if she's in a trance.

She loves him, Jameelah whispers.

Yeah, I whisper back, but he's her cousin.

So, says Jameelah, it's not illegal.

Still, you just don't do that, I say taking her hand, which is ice cold.

The creature in my dream, says Jameelah, he captured it for me, he showed it to me, and then he kissed me, he captured it for me and not for her.

I know, I say.

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