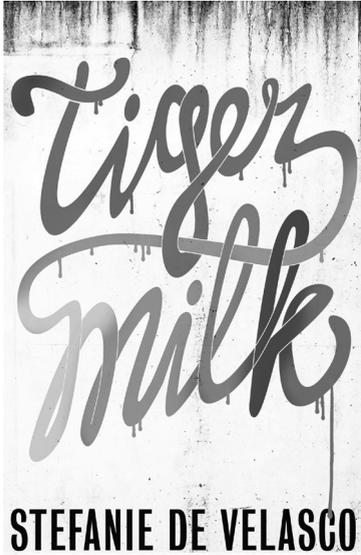


Tiger milk

STEFANIE DE VELASCO





An explosive literary debut, tender and funny, shocking and tragic, about two fourteen-year-old girls on the loose during a long, hot summer in Berlin.

'Nails the tone of an untethered, feral generation.'

Die Welt

'A novel of rebellion, love, death, and an extraordinary friendship.'

Bucher

Nini and Jameelah are fourteen. They don't want to grow up. But they do want to lose their virginity.

As the long summer holidays stretch out before them, Berlin becomes their playground. The days all merge into one: swimming, smoking, shoplifting, and hanging out with friends from their estate. At night they descend on the red light district, impersonating the prostitutes there in order to practise for their first time, giggling to each other, tipsy on the Tiger Milk – their homemade cocktail – they've been sipping all day.

But then, one night, Nini and Jameelah witness a devastating crime that threatens to ruin everything...

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UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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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 sidewalk 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 tooth marks in it. I was still holding on to 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,

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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 pants, 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

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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

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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 color.

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.

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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 gray 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

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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.

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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, bakery, optician; clothing store, office supplies, sandwich shop; more clothes, bed linens, 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

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potato chips. Further down there's nothing but peep shows, porn theaters, 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 licorice. 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 licorice 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 curb 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 sidewalk 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-rim glasses. He looks kind of sweet though and I can't imagine he could possibly be waiting across the street because of us.

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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 then?

I'm Stella Stardust, says Jameelah, and this is my friend Sophia Saturn. I'll bet you have one of those apartments with wooden floors and stucco molding 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 pants 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 night stands 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.

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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 wood floor in her stockings and stops in front of me.

Hey, she whispers, Sophia Saturn.

She smiles, nods at the silk scarves hanging from the rungs of the cast iron bedframe, 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

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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 took off 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 partway 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 lets it drip out all over his 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 undress 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 flavor 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

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bed and lay it around the guy so that only his cock is showing, like during surgery, when everything is covered with that green fabric except the spot where they are going to operate, which is all red. The guy lays there completely still, as if we've given him anesthesia.

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 practice, 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 flavor 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 razorblade, 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 cartons on the wall and everything, and they practice almost every day because there's also a music room at the private school they go to, but maybe they don't practice 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 practice 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.

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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-smearred 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 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 sneakers which he throws into the laundry 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 colored paper

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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 color 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

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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.

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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.

Mama lays on the sofa basically all the time. Most of the time her eyes are closed, but when I come home she sometimes opens them and asks, where were you. When she opens her eyes she always looks horribly tired, like she's just arrived from some faraway place and only flopped down on the sofa here in our living room by blind luck. I don't think she's really looking for an answer to her question. Me on the other hand, I'd love to know where she was, where she always goes behind her shuttered eyelids, all those hours she spends alone on the sofa. Mama's sofa is like a remote island she lives on. And even though that island is in the middle of our living room, a thick haze obscures it from view. You can't dock on Mama's island.

Lately Jessi's been lying on the sofa with Mama more and more often, she lies next to her with her head buried in her breasts, motionless, like she's in a coma. Maybe Mama's disease is contagious, though Mama isn't even really sick, I just always think she is because that's how it looks. I know that Jessi drinks. Out in the hall above the goodie cabinet, where all the sweets are stored, is a glass-front cabinet. Jessi gets into that and drinks the Eier liqueur. I bet if Mama knew she would slap Jessi in the face. I only know because last week when I was in the kitchen I heard the click of the glass-front cabinet. You can open the goodie cabinet silently, but the glass-front cabinet has a magnetic catch that clicks, that's how I heard it. And also you can see the remnants of Eier liqueur stuck to all of Mama's JOY glasses. Jessi drinks the liqueur out of the dusty glasses and then just puts them right back on the shelf in the cabinet, like nothing ever happened. Then she lies in her bed like she's dead. Her room reeks of alcohol, like alcohol and little girls, like the gym when the fifth graders have been in there right before us.

Once a week I sit down with Mama on the sofa and brush her hair. Rainer went out of his way to buy an expensive brush for

that at Spinnrad, all organic materials, just like Mama said it should be. Sometimes Mama cries when I brush her hair but I act as if I don't notice, I think it's better that way. Jameelah's mother says you can wake someone who's asleep but someone who's only pretending to sleep you can never get to wake up.

When I look out the window in my room I see the playground where I played as a child. We've lived here forever, just like Nico, who lives directly across the courtyard from us, on the same floor. I learned how to walk and how to ride a bike on the sidewalk in front of our place. Once I roller skated on the sandy path that leads from the playground out to the street where Jameelah lives. Jameelah was coming the other way, also on roller skates, the same kind as mine, only in red. I traded her my blue left skate for her red left skate and we roller skated until the ball bearings were clogged with sand. Then we climbed the old oak trees and tied pieces of yarn onto the branches. One oak belonged to each of us. Actually, no, that's not true, Amir's tree was the one linden tree right in the middle of the oaks. Nico was allowed to climb in my tree and I was allowed to climb in Jameelah's, but nobody was allowed up Amir's linden tree except Amir. The trees all had names but we all forget them except for Amir. I haven't climbed my tree for ages but Amir says the yarn is still hanging from his. Over the years the bark has grown over the yarn, but the ends of the strands are still visible, which is proof that we didn't just dream the whole thing up, at least that's what Amir says.

When I go to Jameelah's I always cross the playground. The playground's pretty big and right in the middle of it is a huge sandbox. Somebody drew an invisible line through the middle of the playground and the German and Russian kids never go on the slide and the Arab and Bosnian kids never go on the swings. Back when Jameelah and I roller skated around the playground there wasn't yet an invisible line.

Amir lives in the same building as Jameelah, right behind the

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playground, down the path and out to the side of the building that faces the street. In front of the door to the building I see Dragan standing around. He's smoking. Well, actually, smoking doesn't really describe it. He's sucking on his cigarette like he's trying to hurt it, and every now and then he spits violently on the sidewalk with a loud splat. A dark pool of spit has formed at his feet. The name Dragan says it all. It sounds evil, like dragon or Dracula. I mean, there's a lot of Serbs named Dragan but maybe Tarik is right, maybe all Serbs are evil, I have no idea, but this one is for sure. I slink toward the door to the building, trying not to draw attention. I push the doorbell for Amir's apartment.

You, says Dragan but I don't acknowledge him, man, why doesn't the stupid door buzz open.

Turn around when I'm talking to you, girl.

What is it, I say.

Dragan flicks the butt of his finished cigarette into the pool of spit and it sizzles as it sinks in and he smiles and spits again. I feel sick. And Jasna is in love with this guy, disgusting.

Are you going up to Amir and Tarik's place, he asks.

I nod.

Tell Jasna that I'll wait down here for her no matter how long it takes, I'll wait for her.

How romantic, I think as the door finally buzzes open.

The door to Amir's apartment is open and inside it smells like coffee and dirty diapers, just like it always does.

Hello, I call wondering whether I should take off my shoes. In the entry hall is a folding drying rack hung with men's underwear that must be Tarik's.

Hello, I say again then I walk into the living room and find Tarik and his mother sitting there. She never says *Guten Tag*, she just nods and smiles. Maybe because she can't speak a word of German, seriously not a single word. Jameelah says you can't even borrow an onion or an egg from her because she doesn't know the words onion and egg.

Hello, kiddo, says Tarik.

If I had a big brother I'd want him to look just like Tarik. He should have the same dark blue eyes, the same strong shoulders. I used to have a serious crush on Tarik. I'd listen to the lambada all day and imagine dancing with Tarik. In my daydreams he was bare-chested and wearing just a ripped up pair of jeans. I told Jameelah about it once and she just about died laughing and said Tarik couldn't dance the lambada because he has only one leg because he lost the lower half of his left one during the war, as a kid. It's true that he limps a little but I still can't believe that he's missing part of his leg, I mean, when he stands around he always looks so solidly planted, with his legs spread confidently.

Tarik can be really funny, no matter what Jameelah says. Just because she doesn't get it sure as hell doesn't mean he's not funny. He does a great MC Hammer impression, for instance. Maybe he doesn't do it in front of Jameelah because he knows she thinks he's an idiot, that only makes sense. But he can also be really strict, which I actually think is good. On the back of Tarik's jacket it says *Teddy Dragon*, which kind of sums it up perfectly. I think he tries to look out for me, for Jameelah, for Jasna and for Amir, all of us. Of course Jameelah hates the idea that he looks out for us.

I don't need anybody to look out for me, she says, Teddy Dragon, what the hell is that supposed to mean, have you ever stopped to think what a teddy dragon would look like?

Jameelah says Tarik was only ever useful when he was still reading *Bravo* magazine and Amir could steal copies of it for us, and that was a long time ago, about as long as the bark has been growing over the yarn in those trees.

Amir comes down the hall holding Selma in his arms, she's crying and Amir's face looks funny too, like maybe he got smacked again. Loud music is coming out of Jasna's room.

We want to go to the planet, you want to come, I ask, but Amir isn't listening.

Jasna, he says tapping his finger on his forehead, she's gone crazy.

What's up, I ask.

Dragan bought her a bikini and she wants to go with him to

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the pool, he says banging his fist on the door to Jasna's room.

Turn the music off, he yells, we're all going to get in trouble otherwise.

The door flies open.

Get out of the way you dwarf, says Jasna, shoving Amir aside.

Hey, girl, she says to me coming right up close, her breath smells like Slivovitz. She dances off in the direction of the bathroom. She's not wearing anything except a bright yellow bikini. There's no question that it's cool, along the hips and neckline it's covered with bling and it sparkles as Jasna moves. Her impossibly long hair hangs down to the top of her impossibly long legs and it looks great no matter what Amir says.

Tarik hops up, walks over to Jasna, and grabs her by the arm.

Let go of me, shouts Jasna as the bling sparkles, let go of me, you cripple, and as she says the word cripple Tarik loosens his grip.

Jasna rips herself free of Tarik, runs into the bathroom, and slams the door shut behind her.

Selma cries and squirms in Amir's arms.

Come out here, shouts Tarik banging hard on the door, but Jasna just curses, she curses in Bosnian and the curses fill the hallway. Amir looks at me as if to ask for help.

Come with me, I whisper dragging him out into the staircase.

What's going on?

Amir sinks wearily onto a step.

Selma's crying is getting louder and louder.

Give her to me, I say putting Selma in my lap.

Last night, says Amir, after I'd already fallen asleep, Jasna and Tarik had a fight, it woke me up. She told him that she wants to marry Dragan.

Bullshit.

It's true, Amir says, she even has a ring, a real engagement ring, that he gave her.

Really?

Really.

The fight was so horrible that Tarik locked her in the living room but this morning she was gone, she'd broken the front door

and gone to Dragan's place.

Then what?

I took Selma into my room, she was crying because Jasna wasn't there. At some point later in the morning Jasna came back and said she was moving out, she was going to marry him, can you imagine?

Seriously?

I'm serious. She says he's really smart and all that, but you know he never even finished middle school. The worst part is that we can't go anywhere since she got together with Dragan. They'll never invite us to a wedding, you know. But Jasna doesn't give a shit, she's already packed her things and I know for sure that if she leaves she'll never come back and when I say never I mean never, and now I'll have to look after her all the time, Amir says motioning to Selma, and it has to happen now, right when summer vacation is about to start. I'm not a girl!

Big tears roll down his cheeks and Selma starts to cry again.

Dragan, I say, you remember when he used to throw rocks down at us from the parking garage when we were little? One time I was bleeding all over the place.

He killed his dog, says Amir, he gave it so much Slivovitz that it went into a coma. That's the type of guy he is.

I know, I say.

Amir snuffles.

Do you have cigarettes, he asks.

We sit next to each other for a while, smoking. Nobody says a word.

Are you coming to the planet?

Amir shakes his head.

I'll call you again later, I say.

I still don't have a phone.

Still?

No, Jasna sold her old one on ebay for three euros, Amir says tapping his finger on his forehead, three euros, it cost more than that to mail it, can you imagine. The point was not to give it to me, and really, as far as I'm concerned she can leave and never come back.

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Here, I say handing the pouch of tobacco to Amir, you can keep it.

Thanks, says Amir and Selma calms down again too.

Where were you, says Jameelah when I go upstairs and ring at her door.

I was at Amir's, I say, wanted to see if he was coming.

Noura comes toward me in the hallway in her nurse's uniform and kisses me on the cheek.

My little one, she says, you want to eat something?

What's going on down there, asks Jameelah.

Dragan, I say, he proposed to Jasna and she wants to move out now. That's why she's fighting so badly with Tarik. She came out of her room wearing nothing but a bikini and went dancing through the apartment.

Jameelah laughs out loud.

It's not funny, says Noura, they were screaming at each other all night, do you think that's a good sign? I'm so tired, I couldn't sleep at all. I have to go to work but some people just don't seem to care, they think only of themselves.

Amir says neither of them talks to him anymore because of the whole thing and Tarik looked really sad.

Tarik, says Jameelah, he's just jealous.

Jealous about what?

Jealous of Jasna. Because he can't dance with his fucked-up leg. Because he doesn't have anyone to give a bikini to because he's just everybody's big brother. Teddy Dragon will never find anyone, that ugly troll.

Stop, I say, that's mean. Tarik isn't a troll.

He is so, says Jameelah.

Enough, says Noura, you two shouldn't get involved, I'm telling you I don't want either of you to get involved, got it?

But Amir is our friend, says Jameelah.

I know, but there are things even friends can't help with and it's best not to get involved in something like that.

I'm not getting involved anyway, says Jameelah, I'm just giving

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my opinion.

I don't want you to give your opinion either, says Noura, I want you to stop talking about it, she says as she glares at us like our teacher, Frau Struck.

Fine, says Jameelah.

We have to stay for detention again. During ethics class, Jameelah kept making comments the whole time. It was about Christmas, and whether Jesus was really born on December 24. Jameelah said that there was no way sheep would be standing around outside a manger in the middle of winter like it says in the Bible.

In Bethlehem everyone goes skiing, Jameelah said, and to be honest if I were God or the Messiah I would be totally insulted if my birthday was celebrated on a completely different day than the actual date of my birth.

Frau Struck had replied that Jameelah shouldn't speak to her in that tone and she shouldn't carry on about such things.

I disagree, Jameelah said, it's not *verboten*, but that's when Struck went off.

Why are we talking about Christmas right before summer break anyway, I asked at some point, but that was a mistake because Struck said we should both be quiet or else we'd be kicked out of class and said she had no desire to discuss the matter further. Struck hates it when anyone tries to discuss anything with her.

We were quiet for the rest of the class, we thought up good O-words, poke instead of puke, shot instead of shit, coke instead of cake, and we also played city-country-AIDS. Frau Struck realized what we'd been up to when she collected all of our notebooks.

Detention, she said then, detention for both of you.

Detention meant going to Tiergarten and gathering leaves with leaf-miner moth cocoons on them. We have to gather chestnut leaves because those are the ones the moths use. The pupae bite into the leaves like little pit bulls and then spawn like crazy when they come out. This year they've arrived early, so to keep the plague from getting any worse we have to gather leaves. Nobody

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seems to care that there's no point, that the whole city is full of the moths, and that it just gets worse every year, with more moths and more damaged trees.

It's just an arbitrary task, Rainer always says, they have to make you do something.

They're a bit like us foreigners, says Jameelah, you just can't get rid of them.

What Frau Struck doesn't get is that we actually like to go to Tiergarten. There's a boy there I like. He's a gardener and he sits in front of the shed where we have to go to get the trash bags and rakes we use to gather leaves. He always smiles so sweetly at us when we show up, once again, and sometimes he smells of Weleda lotion, which I like.

So what did you guys do today, he asks.

Nothing, says Jameelah, we were just playing city-country-AIDS.

City-country-AIDS? What's that?

It's the same as city-country-river, only we use diseases instead of rivers. We don't know the names of too many rivers, you know.

It's nice and cool in the park. We walk around the lawn barefoot and collect leaves while trying to come up with more normal words that you're not allowed to say.

UFO, says Jameelah.

UFO doesn't count, I say.

Why not, says Jameelah, UFO is a normal word but you can't say it too loud or believe in it or else everyone thinks you're crazy.

Yeah but saying something and believing in it are two different things, I say.

Not at all, says Jameelah, words only exist because people believe in them, otherwise the word wouldn't have been thought up, UFO is like the word God, the only reason we have the word God is because people believe in it.

Bullshit, I say.

Really, says Jameelah, do you think you would know the word leaf-miner moth if there was no such thing? Admit it, it's just too deep a concept for you.

No it isn't, I say.

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They come from the Balkans by the way, says Jameelah, just like Amir.

Who does?

The leaf-miner moths, Jameelah says holding up the bag full of leaves, they emigrated just like Amir.

No way.

It's true, I read it the other day in the free paper on the U-bahn.

All the things Jameelah knows. Sometimes it can be really annoying because it makes it difficult to say it's bullshit when she says, for instance, all that stuff about belief and the existence of a words. You can never tell someone they're wrong when they think they know everything, especially when they actually do know everything.

We head to the outdoor pool. I love it there. I love everything about it, the smell of the chlorine you get as soon as you walk in the gate, the suntanned boys, the noise of the splashing water, the way the girls shriek when the boys do cannonballs, I even like the moldy showers and the way little twigs and pebbles press into my back through the towel. But the thing I liked the most is the food. Sometimes I think I would go to the pool for the food alone.

As we're walking across the lawn, Jameelah suddenly stops.

Back there, she whispers digging her fingernails into my shoulder, Lukas is lying there all by himself.

I smile.

Come on, I say taking her by the hand. As slick and cool as possible we stroll on across the lawn.

Hi, says Jameelah when we stop next to Lukas, and her shadow falls across his face.

As if he's just woken from a deep sleep Lukas suddenly sits up and yanks the white earbuds out of his ears. Strange that he even has an iPod, I think, considering that he learned how to count using dried peach pits at that crazy school of his. Laura told me that, and also that they hang tapestries in the corners so the kids don't see right-angles and that instead of learning vocabulary words they build pizza ovens.

Hi, says Lukas and when he sees Jameelah smiling at him he smiles back.

I look at his earbuds again, which have dropped into his lap. They're almost as white as his skin. Hopefully he's put on a lot of sunscreen, I think, but then again people like Lukas are always conscientious about putting on sunscreen because they know when things are dangerous, whether it's to do with the sun or just life in general. So people like Lukas rarely get burned by the sun or anything else in life.

I see Amir farther back on the lawn, he's walking toward us and waving. Jameelah lays her towel down next to Lukas.

I have an Aladdin towel, Jameelah has a Coca-Cola towel, and Amir has no towel. It doesn't matter, though, because I almost never go in the water and Amir just uses mine. I'm afraid of the water. Laura, Kathi, and the others from the planet sometimes laugh at me for it, but Jameelah and Amir understand even though they aren't afraid of the water. Jameelah and Amir are afraid of firecrackers, but I never laugh at them for it. That's how it is with friends. Which is also why I always get something for them at the snack kiosk with the money Mama gives me, she gives me money whenever I say I'm going to the pool. I walk over to the kiosk and buy a bulette for myself, a pair of chicken sausages for Jameelah, and french fries and *Kinder* chocolates for all of us to share.

Last year there was a stabbing at the pool, so this summer it's crawling with security. I think it's good because now people are afraid to steal things. But it's not really as dangerous a place as it sounds.

What are you doing, I say watching Amir take alternating bites of fries and chocolate.

It tastes good, he says, try it.

No way.

Seriously, Amir says, it tastes kind of like meat, but sweet.

Steak and *Kinder* pie, says Jameelah.

I laugh.

If you barbecue beefy sweets for too long, says Jameelah, you get *cinder* chocolates.

Jameelah jumps up.

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And if something goes wrong and your yard goes up in flames you'll be left with a *cindergarten*.

Lukas laughs out loud. We lay around on our towels and continue to crunch words and then Laura, Kathi, and Anna-Lena show up. Once again Anna-Lena looks like she's been freshly laundered on the gentle cycle.

Hey, she says to me, your sister is getting off with some guy back by the changing rooms, the brother of that girl Mareike Mael.

Oh God, says Laura, that's the girl with the see-through bikini. Anna-Lena nods.

Got to be at least sixteen years old.

The see-through bikini?

No her brother, says Anna-Lena giggling, but maybe the bikini too by the looks of it.

Kathi and Laura giggle too and I turn bright red.

I'd love to have something cool to say right now but nothing pops into my head, which always happens in moments like this. Instead I watch as Anna-Lena lays down a huge flower-pattern towel next to Laura. I realize immediately she's got her period, she doesn't even take off her shorts, that's how scared she is it might leak out. What's the point of her even coming to the pool if she's so worried. She reeks of flowery perfume, and now this towel. What kind of idiotic parents does she have, I wonder, buying her perfume like that and expensive shampoo and a towel like that, I mean, Anna-Lena, who would call their kid that, what a perverse way to welcome someone to the world, as if that's necessary, such a long name, as if children haven't been produced since the dawn of time, all sorts of things like that rush through my head but of course I can't say any of that or they would all think I'd completely lost my chador.

Come on, says Jameelah taking my hand, let's go over to the diving platforms.

Nico and Tobi come through the gate and head across the lawn toward the others. Nico is wasted, you can tell from across the yard. I sit down on the warm stone tiles next to the pool and watch as Jameelah climbs the steps to the ten-meter platform.

With her arms stretched wide she lifts herself up and down on the balls of her feet.

Can someone put on Carmina Burana, she yells, I'm going to do a double Rittberger.

The security guards look at her blankly. Jameelah springs head first into the air, arms and legs fluttering like rags. The way she hangs in the air, just like on TV, when people were jumping out of that tower in America, it scares the shit out of me, and I'm relieved when she finally hits the water with a splash. I watch her swim beneath the surface until she reaches the edge of the pool by me.

So how was I, she asks grinning as she climbs out of the water. Her right thigh is bright red.

It looked pretty dangerous, I say.

Above, on the diving platform, Amir stands staring down into the depths.

Don't look down, yells Jameelah.

Amir stares into the water as if there's some sort of beast waiting below to eat him, until finally the pool superintendent says something to him and points at the people waiting behind him.

Oh no, says Jameelah as Amir steps aside and the waiting kids push past him and splash one after the next into the pool below. Amir goes back out to the edge of the platform.

That's not how you do it, says Jameelah, you have to just jump, you can't think about it or you'll never do it.

A couple of boys start jeering him.

Loser, loser!

I look up at Amir, who looks much smaller up there, smaller than he really is, he looks down at the water, up at the sky where his father apparently is, then down at the water again, but then he turns around and climbs gingerly back down the steps.

The boys start jeering him again.

Chickenshit, says Jameelah smiling when Amir makes it down to us.

Cut it out, he says.

What, she says, it's not a crime to be chickenshit.

You don't know anything, says Amir, you're a girl, you don't

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have balls that can burst on impact.

Burst on impact, says Jameelah laughing out loud, who told you that bullshit?

It's not bullshit, Tarik told me.

Tarik talks shit.

Oh, fuck off, says Amir.

You fuck off, says Jameelah.

Cut it out, I say, who wants a popsicle?

Eating sweets together always helps end a fight.

I run into Nico at the snack kiosk. He has a currywurst and fries in one hand and at least four ice cream bars in the other and under his arm is a giant bag of chips. His eyes are hidden behind sunglasses.

You got the munchies, I ask smiling, but Nico just smiles back and kisses me on the cheek.

Always, he says.

His kiss is just right, warm and a little bit moist.

They're sold out of popsicles so I buy snow-cones, and as we cross the lawn I keep an eye out for Jessi in case she's standing around somewhere hooking up, but I don't see her. Instead I see Jasna and Dragan lying down kissing. Jasna is wearing the bright yellow bikini and she has her long legs wrapped around Dragan, he's running his hand up and down her thigh, it's almost like in a porn film the way they're going at it as if the rest of the world doesn't exist but then suddenly Dragan sits up and looks over at me.

What are you looking at, he yells.

I'm not looking at anything, I say.

Look somewhere else, got it?

Shut up, says Nico, and Dragan actually shuts up.

Tobi and Nadja have spread out their towels next to ours. Jameelah sits down at the foot of Lukas's towel and has him spread sunscreen on her back. A victorious smile spreads across her face and she makes a V with her fingers. Anna-Lena, Laura, Kathi, Tobi, and Nadja play Taboo, Anna-Lena brought it, I don't

feel like playing Taboo with Anna-Lena so I start to squeeze blackheads on Nico's back, it's fun.

That's disgusting, says Anna-Lena, cut it out or I'll have a herpes outbreak.

You get outbreaks from everything, says Lukas, you even get it when people talk about spiders.

Spiders are totally disgusting, says Anna-Lena.

What a load of shit, says Jameelah, spiders are the protectors of sleep.

Exactly, says Amir, they crawl into the corners hunting evil. It's the only reason people are able to sleep in peace.

That sounds beautiful, says Lukas, so poetic.

Hunting evil, says Anna-Lena looking at Amir with her best just-bit-into-a-lemon face, what's that supposed to mean? Sounds like something out of the Middle Ages, she says.

Shut your trap, says Jameelah.

Right, says Amir, watch what you say.

I'll say what I want, says Anna-Lena to Jameelah, and by the way your tampon string is hanging out of your panties.

Impossible, Jameelah answers all slick and cool.

Joking, says Anna-Lena even though it wasn't funny.

Stop it, says Lukas, rolling toward Jameelah and whispering something in her ear.

The one from the animal, asks Jameelah laughing.

Lukas nods.

What about an animal, asks Nico, looking at me, but I shrug my shoulders and look at Lukas and the way he wraps his arms around his knees and listens to Jameelah. He really looks like Bambi sitting on that green towel with his dark eyes, a Bambi who learned how to count using dried peach pits and a towel as green as the forest Bambi runs into when someone's chasing him. I could never fall for someone like that, I think to myself, but such a green home I'd like to have, a home I could run to when somebody was chasing me. But I don't have one and neither does Jameelah, we just have the trees in the playground, and we can't even remember the names of those. Nico doesn't have a forest home either though he sure has a lot of grass, and whenever he

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rolls a joint I'm the first one he passes it to. I look up at the cloudless sky, close my eyes, and fly away. The sun burns. Everything smells like french fries and sunscreen.

The boy in the purple swimsuit, yells the pool superintendent, dive in from the side of the pool again and you get a lifetime ban.

Life vests squeak against wet baby fat and a baby cries somewhere in the distance.

Where did you hurt yourself, asks someone.

On the wee wee, says a child crying more loudly.

Wasps buzz by, Jameelah laughs, Lukas laughs, Nico laughs.

Shit, mutters Amir suddenly.

A shadow falls across my face. I open my eyes and see Tarik standing in front of me with Jasna in her yellow bikini next to him. Her hair is wet from swimming and glistens like the bling on the bikini. Tarik is holding Jasna by the arm but she's not struggling against him, she's just standing there next to him with a slight grin on her face acting like she doesn't care.

Tarik shoos Amir off the towel.

Get up and give it to me.

Amir tosses him my towel.

This is Nini's towel, says Jameelah, standing up.

Jasna laughs.

When my fiancé sees I'm gone, he's going to kill him, says Jasna nodding at Tarik, he's going to kill him sooner or later anyway if he doesn't leave me alone.

Shame on you, says Tarik.

Shame on you, Jasna says and then she spits in his face, making me wince. Anna-Lena stares at Jasna with her mouth open.

Let's go in the water, says Kathi to Laura.

Tarik throws Amir his clothes.

Come on, get dressed, I'll wait for you out front.

Amir dresses hurriedly.

Just like I said, I hear Anna-Lena say, like the Middle Ages.

Should we come, asks Jameelah.

Amir shakes his head.

No, he says, squeeze some more pimples, then he grabs his backpack, which has nothing but notebooks and pens and *fussball*

cards in it since he's still wearing his wet bathing suit under his jeans. He walks slowly across the lawn toward the exit, the green grass looks suddenly yellow and Amir like a thirsty wanderer staggering across the desert.

A blonde guy in a purple bathing suit sprints past us in the direction of the exit. It's Dragan.

It's insanely hot in the S-bahn. Jameelah and I practically doze off as we suck on our monster slushies. It's so hot that it makes your skin look as if you have a rash.

Man, Anna-Lena today, I say.

Jameelah rolls her eyes.

I guarantee that shit about Jessi was a lie, she says.

Not to mention the tampon string, I say, that was just sad.

She actually said the word *panties*, she says, I mean, I just don't get it, who would ever say *panties*? We're not living in some Enid Blyton book.

True, I say, though I have no idea who Enid Blyton is and again I wonder how Jameelah knows this kind of stuff. She always remembers names and all sorts of trivia, like the whole thing with the leaf-miner moths, that they come from the Balkans. It so German of her, and I want to tell her that, but I'm too hot to bother.

Seriously, says Jameelah, if I'm Stella Stardust and you are Sophia Saturna, then Anna-Lena is Frieda Giga. Frieda Giga, the most frigid cow in the world.

We should ask Amir, I say.

I'd rather not, says Jameelah scratching her upper arm, shit, I got bitten by a mosquito.

Where'd you get that weird scar, I ask pointing at her arm.

I told you before.

No you didn't.

I did so.

Did not.

Really? They're from immunizations I got when I was little, says Jameelah. They shoot it into your arm with this thing that's

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like a gun, and it leaves a scar. It's not like here, not like the shot they give you for measles or whatever.

Where'd you get that one, she asks pointing at a scar on my neck.

That's from a time I choked on a *wurst* casing and had to get a tracheotomy. My parents were still together then, they didn't understand what was wrong when I started running around the table like a madman. The EMT who responded cut a hole so I could breath. Then I went in an ambulance to the children's hospital. I got to stay overnight. My father left soon after that. I know because when he told us he was leaving I still had the bandages on my neck.

I was in the children's hospital once too, remember, because of this, Jameelah says and lifts her foot and points to a narrow scar on her ankle, I was in the bathtub, leaning my foot on that thing that holds the soap. It broke off and cut open my leg. It bled really bad and they had to give me stitches. The doctor who stitched it up was so nice. I was really sad when I had to go home again.

Me too, I say, I didn't want to leave, I was jealous of the kids who got to live there, even though they were really sick, you know, I didn't care, somehow I thought they had it good there despite that.

Going to the outdoor pool always makes you incredibly tired. We shuffle from the train station to the playground. Like two exhausted pilgrims we let ourselves fall to the ground in the sandbox and bury our feet in the cool sand. The sand sticks to our bare arms and legs like in a magazine photo. I close my eyes but Jameelah says, don't fall asleep, it's not allowed and I shake my head and reach for her hand and we lie there next to each other and let life float by because we have so much time, because the clock has only just struck fourteen minutes past birth, meaning we have nearly another fifty to go, and that's a long time.

Jameelah suddenly stands up.

What is it?

Do you hear that, she asks.

What?

Somebody's crying.

Stefanie de Velasco

I try hard to listen but still don't hear anything.

Seriously, it's coming from the top of the slide, up there in the play fort.

We cross the sandbox, go past our trees, and over to the play fort. Now I can hear it too, someone is quietly sobbing.

Hello, says Jameelah, is someone up there?

Two henna-tattoo covered hands slowly come over the wall of the play fort and then a crying face appears. With her legs pulled up to her chest Jasna is sitting in the fort surrounded by cigarette butts and blue mascara is running down her cheeks in long streaks.

Are you okay, asks Jameelah.

Stupid question, I think to myself.

Do you guys have cigarettes, asks Jasna.

Of course, says Jameelah pulling her tobacco out of her pants pocket.

I don't know how, says Jasna smiling sheepishly and pointing to the loose tobacco, I don't know how to roll them.

No problem, says Jameelah, I'll do it.

My fiancé always has real cigarettes. I only smoke real cigarettes, that's why I don't know how to roll them.

Where is he, I ask.

He'll be here any minute, we arranged it. I just don't want Tarik to find me. I waited until he had to go to the bathroom and then I ran out.

What an asshole, says Jameelah, at the pool today.

I swear, says Jasna, if he doesn't leave me alone there's going to be real trouble, but I don't want that. Tarik's my brother after all. Without your family you're nothing.

Without your family you're nothing, what an insane sentence, I think to myself, and it's not even true. Everyone always says it but only because other people are always saying it and that certainly doesn't make it so. With her long fingers Jasna reaches for the lit cigarette Jameelah holds out to her and she smokes it in a series of deep tokes, kind of like Dragan. Did she pick it up from him, I wonder, and why do people always become so similar when they're together.

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Tarik's just jealous that you're engaged, says Jameelah.

Are you guys really engaged, I ask.

Yeah, says Jasna.

Show us the ring.

Jasna shoves the cigarette into the corner of her mouth, pulls up her right sleeve, and sticks out her henna tattooed hand. I stare at the ring like an idiot, dumbstruck, like when you run into someone you haven't seen in ages. It's narrow, made of gold, with three stones in the middle, two little white ones on either side of a big green one.

Is it real, asks Jameelah.

Jasna nods.

Where'd you get it, I ask.

What do you mean, Dragan gave it to me.

I mean where did Dragan get it?

It's from his mother, and she got it from her mother, it's a family heirloom.

My ass it's a family heirloom, I say grabbing her hand.

What are you doing, says Jasna and yanks her hand away.

That's not his ring, I say, he stole it.

Stole it, what are you talking about? Watch what you say.

That ring never belonged to anyone in Dragan's family, he stole it.

Jameelah looks at me with a questioning look on her face but then Jasna's phone rings.

I'm on the way, she says making a kissing sound and then hanging up.

You can't leave now, I say.

Jasna laughs.

Why?

Because of the ring, it doesn't belong to you!

What's all this shit you're talking, says Jasna, standing up. She flicks the cigarette into the sand, jumps down from the slide, and walks off toward the U-bahn station.

What was that all about, asks Jameelah.

Leave me alone, I say, I need to think.

Think about what?

Stefanie de Velasco

My mother. Her engagement ring. That was it, that ring on Jasna's finger.

I thought your father took it.

Obviously not, because if he had then Dragan couldn't have put it on Jasna. He stole it, plain and simple.

Jameelah looks at me skeptically.

You're crazy. How is he supposed to have gotten it?

I have no idea, but that was the ring.

Are you sure?

Pretty sure.

Pretty sure isn't enough.

Whose side are you on anyway, I say.

Nobody's side. What's wrong with you?

The Sorbs shot off Tarik's leg.

What does that have to do with the ring?

Nothing. But I can understand why Tarik doesn't want Jasna with someone like that.

Serbs, Sorbs, nice O-language switch, says Jameelah.

Fuck O-language, I say, I want the ring back.

Just because that poor Sorb bastard makes too many spit puddles doesn't mean he stole any engagement ring, says Jameelah.

Hello that poor Sorb bastard is the same guy who threw rocks at our heads, in case you forgot.

Nah.

It's true.

You and your childhood memories, says Jameelah looking at me distrustfully, but listen it's too hot out to fight.