



Nora Hoch

Let's Reclaim the Night

Original title: Wir holen uns die Nacht zurück

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304 pages

With illustrations by the author

Can you save someone who doesn't want to be saved?

Ilvy and Kaja. Two girls who grow up in the same building, but come from very different worlds. In childhood, they're almost as close as sisters. In puberty, they strike out together, discovering boys, parties and drugs. But as time goes on, cracks begin to appear. The things that fascinate and worry Ilvy in equal measure become the centre of Kaja's world. She's in danger of slipping ever further into addiction. Ilvy needs to figure out how to protect Kaja without losing herself.



Nora Hoch, born in Bochum in 1983, pursued degrees in Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Practice in Hildesheim, and now works as a dramatic advisor and drama teacher at GRIPS Theater in Berlin, where she leads one of the largest theater studies departments in Germany. Her debut novel 'The Saltwater Year' ('Das Salzwasserjahr') was nominated for the Oldenburg Children's and Youth Book Prize and the Protestant Book Prize.

'Let's Reclaim the Night will really stick with you. Nora Hoch writes not just about heavy topics like domestic violence and addiction, but also - sympathetically and authentically - about a close, long-lasting friendship as it is pushed to its limits.' *Münchener Merkur*

Sample Translation *Let’s Reclaim the Night*
By Alice Thornton

Part 1

If I were told to sum up my life by drawing a single image, one that shows the centre of my world, then I would definitely draw a window. A simple, glass pane surrounded by a white, lacquered wooden frame – and, just a few metres behind it, a second window, one not unlike the first. Two windows, face to face. And there, behind the glass of the second window, she is standing and waving: Kaja.

My Kaja.

1 Seaweed and the Stroboscope

We’re going faster and faster. I keep one hand on the shiny silver handlebars, the other outstretched to the side. My left arm long, my fingers spread wide. We race downhill. There’s a tingling in my stomach.

‘Let go!’ Kaja calls to me.

‘I can’t,’ I say. Out of the corner of my eye I see Kaja with both arms outstretched, like a pair of wings. The enormous Kaja Bird, speeding through the night.

‘Then take my hand,’ she calls. She’s smiling at me, making it look so easy. I want to catch that smile, I want to reach out for it and grab it, but my wheels keep wobbling. The wind rushes into my ears. The pedals up and down, constantly. Heartbeat, handlebars, brake, and lights all hammering in time.

The wheels spin by themselves. The evening passes.

It seems like the road is stretching out endlessly.

‘Come on, you can do it! I’ll be right next to you,’ Kaja shouts. And she does as she says, staying as close to me as she can. Everything’ll be alright, I try to reassure myself. Kaja leans back. One strap of her red top has slipped down, sunburn glowing on her shoulders after our day spent in the sun. Like an idyllic picture: the sun, a bike, trees, nature.

Kaja starts to sing *Dance Monkey*. The tune and fragments of the lyrics mingle with the wind and the whir of the dynamo.

Very slowly I release my fingers from the handle, lifting one up after the other.

‘Dance for me, dance for me, dance for me, ohhhh.’

I stretch out my right arm so that my fingertips touch Kaja’s, just for a moment.

One brief, magnificent moment.

'Woohoo!' Kaja's voice cuts through the breeze, then her fingers glide past. She is a fraction faster than me. We can't see the wind, but we feel it, hear it whistling around the houses, rustling the leaves and driving Kaja's hair backwards and up.

If it weren't for Kaja I certainly would miss most of the best moments in my life. They simply wouldn't have come about, or they would just pass me by. The same goes, though, for most of the worst moments.

I wouldn't say that I'm an anxious person as such. But I am definitely what people call *hesitant* – through and through. It's not that I want to be this way, it's just that I can't help taking a really long time to make decisions. Most of the time I'm so busy observing, weighing things up and overthinking, that by the time I've finally decided on what to do, hours have passed.

Kaja is quite different. And not just in this respect. Kaja always knows exactly what she wants and what she doesn't want. No matter the circumstances. She runs off, grabs what she wants, slams doors, she fights and kisses anyone, anywhere, whenever she wants. She doesn't think for long about whether this or that would be a good idea. She doesn't have to listen to the little voice inside herself to make sure that she is doing what she *really* wants. She just is sure. All hot or all cold. Black or white, yes or no.

Me, on the other hand, I'm always stuck in the Realm of the Maybe. And it's in moments like these that Kaja steps in, pulling me along with her to one side or the other. This might sound strange, but I really believe that Kaja's interventions are a good thing. It really is the only way that something significant can happen. Something intoxicatingly beautiful – or something painfully horrible. But at least that something is *real*. One of those puzzle pieces that make up life.

'We are heeeeeeeere!' Kaja calls into the night, closing her eyes and screeching like an owl as the path rushes under her. We continue racing up the road without slowing down. We only slow down just as we get to the club. My brakes screech, too, like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Sweaty shirts stick to waiting backs. It smells of people, of summer, of beer. We all sweat the same, in that queue outside the club. No matter how different we are. All as different as the next. But here, that doesn't matter. Age, gender, where you come from. Who cares? We're all waiting, sweating, swaying back and forth. Bumping into each other, drunk, not a care in the world, drifting back and forth like seaweed. When I close my eyes, the world is already starting to spin a little, and I only see how we're all the same, blind to the differences.

The sign above the big black entrance door reads *Queen Bee*. On both sides of the double door are the outlines of a geometric golden bee.

Behind us is a girl with a platinum blonde mullet who towers a head over her friends in her platforms. From above, she laughs at another girl with a fringe, a little way behind them. She laughs just loud enough for the girl in the back to hear.

The girl who is being laughed at, Fringe Girl, stands alone and tries in vain to hide behind her long fringe. Between strands of hair, she stares blankly into space. The more her shoulders pull her to the ground, the more Mullet Girl seems to grow. Her friends, who all look like bad copies of Mullet Girl, laugh along. But they fuss and squirm a little, as if they, at least, know it's wrong. But none of them says anything. Nobody dares contradict.

Kaja stands next to me. Very close. She presses the back of her hand into the back of mine. So that her index finger touches mine. We're not holding hands, though. The outside of Kaja's eternally warm hand is connected to the outside of my cold hand, one which always has bits of paint stuck to it. Paint on the cuticles and in the small folds of skin. As soon as we get into a crowd, the back of Kaja's hand makes contact with mine. We've been doing this since we were little. It's just something we do. And I like everything that belongs to us.

And what I like the most is feeling Kaja's power running through her skin, pulsing through her hand and into mine. I hear Kaja snort as she turns to Fringe Girl. Her eyes narrowing in anger, she straightens up a little. Yet her voice comes out kind, welcoming, as she calls to her: 'Hey! Come stand with us. There's a free space right here, next to me.'

Fringe Girl looks around, confused: 'Are you talking to me?'

Kaja nods. 'Of course! I wouldn't speak to *those* girls. Unless...'

She slowly steps towards the gaggle of girls. I move with her. Our hands and still pressed together. Kaja's confidence, her sense of security, her decisiveness all stick to her like ink. Thick, dark ink that stains me, too, when I'm standing so close to her. And all the obstacles in my mind are painted over by this ink. I call this her 'Kaja Boost'.

'What do you want?' asks one of the girls, recoiling from Kaja's glare like a frightened deer. 'We didn't even do anything. All she did was...' and points to the girl with the mullet.

'That's exactly the problem. You started this whole mess exactly by doing nothing.'

'Do you even know who you're talking to?' scoffs Mullet Girl.

Then Kaja stops laughing. A jolt goes through her body. A loud 'Boo!' suddenly springs forth into the night as she leaps towards the bitch. She lands so close to her that the girl falters, squints her eyes, and winces in shock. Kaja laughs. Loudly and crudely.

'You've lost it,' says Mullet Girl, but this time with a weaker voice.

Kaja beams. 'I have,' she says, happily, 'I definitely have...'

She puts her arm around Fringe Girl's shoulders as she heads back to our spot in the queue. The girl is feeling the benefits of the Kaja Boost, too, as she floats past the gaggle with her cheeks glowing red.

On this night, the summer unfolds before us with all its power, seeping into our

bones. A summer that is as invasive as the bouncers who pat us down as if we were trying to get onto a plane with the President rather than into a club. Searching backpacks. Unzipping bum bags. We wait in line, bobbing in place. We just don't want to wait any longer. Not one second. Kaja chews on her bottom lip. Out of the corner of my eye I can see her growing more and more agitated by the second. She nibbles at her cuticles. I have to look away before they start to bleed.

'Come on! Move forward!' she says, frustrated, but of course saying that doesn't speed anything up.

'I'm just as bored as you. We're all in the same boat, though,' I say.

Why do I say things like that? Why am I always trying to appease her? Even though I am at least as annoyed as she is. Even though I know I can't calm Kaja down, anyway. Not ever.

'Fuck patience,' grunts Kaja and pushes the pack of boys in front of us, pushing her shoulders as far forward as they can get.

'Hey, watch it,' says a guy in front of us who has just been jabbed in the back by her shoulder. He's as big as a basketball player. But when he's hit by Kaja's glare, all he can do is flinch, and he turns around again. Without a word.

I am not afraid of Kaja. But I can see the fear in other people's eyes. And I can also understand where it comes from. But me? Why should I ever be afraid of Kaja? We've been playing sisters for so long. In fact, we've long since convinced even *ourselves* of it.

A beer bottle smashes on the floor behind me. The queue is barely moving. I don't want to wait any longer. Kaja groans, then resolutely grabs my hand.

'Come on,' she whispers to me and Fringe Girl. She pushes her way forward with us through the crowd until there are only three people left in front of us. No one says anything. The only person who looks like they're going to kick up any kind of fuss is the guy standing right next to us. He looks down at us, irritated, but as soon as he opens his mouth to protest, Kaja kisses him.

'Thanks, it's so nice of you to let us go in front of you,' she says, turning back to me. The guy just stands there, dumbfounded and touching his lips. He can't even begin to comprehend what that was all about. He just goes red-cheeked and silent.

Kaja buries her face in my shoulder for a moment. Her long black hair falls in front of her eyes and tickles my skin.

'Sorry...' she whispers from behind the shiny curtain of hair.

'Oh, Kaja,' I sigh. But that's all I've got. It's hot, and to be honest, I am just grateful that the wait has been shortened.

Nobody asks to see our ID here. Our hands still show stamps from this place, stamped on just a few days ago. Kaja loves it here.

Inside it's cooler, even darker than the outside despite all the artificial lighting. Spotlights, disco balls, neon lights at the bar, lanterns and emergency lighting at the

exits. Black leather armchairs pressed against the dark green walls. I feel the bass in my stomach, in my throat.

'Thank you,' breathes Fringe Girl, and we nod to her, moving on without her. We scan the room. Scattered between students and tourists, people we know are all over.

Well, we know who most of them are, at least. What kinds of things people have to say about them. Some acquaintances, a few friends. In most of the clubs in this city you can roam anonymously in the masses of nameless faces – but not here. If you want to meet someone from our school, to go out with them without having to make any plans, then this is the place to be. And tonight, lots of us have come. One is tapping his feet, one is gyrating her hips, one is snapping her fingers. They all greet Kaja.

Since our final exams are in sight now, everyone has been getting together, pretending that we've all been friends for a long time. But this is definitely not the case. But now, just before we all finish, a big group has formed, one which includes even the social outcasts, those nobody ever even said hello to before in the hallways.

And at the table football area in the corner stand a group of boys who graduated last year. Kaan and his mates. Kaan is less lanky and tall than the others. In fact, he's quite a bit shorter and wirier, just a head taller than me. I like that. He stands there, all *Man in Black*. The Johnny Cash version, not the one from *Big Willie Style* with the sunglasses and shirt. All in black.

He nods at us. Only Kaan can nod like that. It makes my chest ache, it's so clear, so direct, it shoots across the room and hits me. We nod back. Kaja and I. In the same beat. And grin at him. Kaan's gaze, intentionally or not, drags us over to him and his friends.

Fleeting hugs, handshakes, the usual 'Hey, what's up?' that everyone asks without waiting for an answer. Kaja pulls me onwards. She wants to do her rounds of the place. Kaan turns back to the kicker. The ball rolls in from the side. Blue and red men do somersaults. A few boys hoot. Someone is winning, someone else is losing. Tall Guy is there too. He's picked up a Barbie blonde and is dragging her to a row of old cinema seats.

I might have to clarify the thing we do with nicknames.

Kaja comes up with her own nickname for every person that comes up a lot in our conversations. You know, something that describes that person better than their actual name.

People fit the names that Kaja gives them perfectly, and the name sticks to them like leggings. Tall Guy is obviously not actually called Tall Guy. The same goes for Kaan – his passport says Atanas, not Kaan. And his mate Andy is really called something like Christian. But for us they are just Tall Guy, Kaan and Andy. That's how it works with everyone else, too. If they are important enough to be given a nickname, that is. I'm the only one who intentionally hasn't been given a new name.

I'm always Ilvy. Ilvy, which means 'the little she-wolf'.

'It just fits you perfectly,' Kaja always says. 'You can't have another name. Not even for fun. You *are* my wolf. Full stop.'

And I like it like that.

Kaja sparkles here in the club. And people flock around her like moths, wanting their own share of her light. We have a beer, drinking two, then three, letting everything soften around the edges. Kaja tells stories, the others listen, laugh at her jokes.

But after a while Kaja gets restless. With me in tow, she goes back and forth, downing her fourth beer and I can see in her face that it's not enough for her, that she wants to fly, she wants an endorphin boost that no beer can provide. She stalks around the room. A Kaja Cat surveying her territory.

'I want to sit. I need to sit now. Wait, no, not sit. I need to go outside. That's it, *outside*. Come on.' She stands in front of me, begging me with her whole body.

'But we've only just got here! Plus, you wanted to...' I can't get any further. The music is so loud that I can feel it in my throat.

'Alright, then we'll stay. But I need another tequila.'

'Another one?' I stare into her glazed eyes.

'Three more, ten more, who even cares? Stop looking at me like you're my mum. I thought we were celebrating today.'

'We are!'

I want to hold her, but she's already moved on.

'Is it not finally the holidays? Is it not our last night together before you go back to your mum's? Yeah, so stop looking at me like that. I just want to have fun now.' With these words she heads over to the bar.

Sometimes I have this fear that everything will suddenly change and somehow everything will be broken. So broken that I won't be able to fix it. Like, I'm scared that Kaja will fall over and just not get up again, or that even if she does get up, her head, her thoughts, everything I love about her, will be gone. Irretrievably. Or something.

But then, when nothing bad happens for long enough, the fear goes away. But it comes and goes as it pleases. Just like Kaja.

Between these comings and goings, we actually live a pretty normal life. We carry on going to school, we carry on cycling up and down hills, Kaja carries on arguing with her parents, sleeping at mine whenever she can, where she has her own chair at our table and my mother Paula cooks for us. We carry on getting tests back, going on holidays, going to school as if on autopilot. Especially after going out the night before, we check in on each other constantly, talking to each other to keep from falling asleep, writing everything down to keep ourselves awake.

Kaja still does well in school. Weirdly, she does especially well on the days after we've been to a party. She'll be wide awake and hyper focused. If I'm struggling to keep up, she pushes her paper across the table right to the middle, where I can see it. As

always, I'm busy doodling as if my fingers are incapable of keeping still, while Kaja tells me stories while she plaits my hair. We watch TV for three, maybe four days. And then everything feels so normal that the fear can't persist any longer, it just slips away and disappears.

'Tequila!' Kaja shouts across the room and pushes her way through the dancing, trembling, sweating bodies to the bar.

I stay at the edge of the room and let my hips decide whether I stay there or drift onto the silver dance floor. The next song starts. This is a good one. A beat that drowns out all shame, all thought.

I forget my thirst and the people around me, take a step forward after only a few seconds and let my arms and legs follow the beat. With my eyes closed, I disappear into the music. Light and dark spots dance in front of my closed eyelids. I open my eyes again when the next song starts, and I notice that I'm standing in the middle of the dance floor. From here I can almost see the whole room.

I see Edward, who of course isn't actually called that and isn't actually a vampire, but who looks so much like a mysterious Edward that I always forget his real name. Maybe it starts with an M? I can't remember. He's brought his new boyfriend and they seem so smitten, dancing so well together that I'd like the spotlight to follow them and only them. I see the DJ, I see the bar, I see Tall Guy, I see some people from our school, I see Kaan again. Kaan doesn't see me. He only sees the three guys who are rooted in front of him. When did *they* show up?

One of them, with a bull's neck and a white Pitbull on his t-shirt, spits on the floor in front of Kaan. Next to him stand two others, one as tall as a giraffe with enormous glasses on, the other absurdly macho, small and hunched over. My feet start to carry me towards Kaan before my mind has the chance to process what I'm seeing. I'm tense down to my little toes. I come to a halt close to him. My pulse hammers louder in my ears than the bass from the speakers.

'What's your problem?' Andy asks, standing next to Kaan.

'He needs to fuck off!' Spits Bull Neck, clenching his jaw. I am hot with anger and fear. I want to do something, anything, but I don't know what.

'He should hop on his flying carpet and fuck off home. Back to where he came from,' adds Giraffe, half snorting with laughter, half grunting. He seems pleased with his own wit. He adjusts his glasses. I can't believe that anyone would utter such hackneyed, neo-Nazi shit in public. Here.

Kaan's lips become very thin and hardly any space is left between his eyebrows. 'Really? You want me to piss off back to Hagen? I'm fine, thanks. Too many fucking Nazis where I come from,' he says. Eyes like dark stones in a riverbed.

'Was that supposed to be funny? You think you're so funny?' asks Bull Neck. 'Are you the comedian here? What does that make me? The butt of your joke? Huh?' His

right hand has been clenched into a fist this whole time. 'That wasn't funny. No one's laughing. On the contrary, you prick. My gun's loaded and ready, you hear me? With blood, with honour, you understand?!'

His dumb minions laugh so hard their bellies shake. I can't help but think of a pack of hyenas. At least it's obvious how stupid they are, I think, even if that's hardly a consolation. That doesn't help anyone, sure, but the only thing worse than stupid racists are the educated, influential ones. All those right-wing judges, policemen, politicians and so on. That's the pinnacle of horror. I'd rather be confronted with idiots like these, any day. At least it can be blamed on their lack of brains and you can hope they'd be different if they were smarter.

The bass vibrates in my stomach.

Bull Neck keeps shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Like a boxer. Steps that show how much he'd like to lunge. To punch, over and over. He takes a step towards Kaan, but Kaan doesn't back away. Not a millimetre. Only the twitching of his right eyelid betrays his fear.

I'm not angry yet. I just want all this to stop. No, what I really want is for all of this to not have happened in the first place. Right now, all I want is to take Kaan in my arms, but of course I can't do that. Especially not here. But that's what I want. To hide Kaan behind huge arms, to close my eyes, and when I open them, I want it to all be over. Nothing more than a nightmare. One that you wake up from, relieved to find out it wasn't real at all. I just want it all to stop right now.

I tug on Kaan's sleeve and we both take a step back. 'What's all this? What happened?' I whisper.

Kaan looks at me reproachfully. 'What happened? What do you mean? Nazis just say what they're thinking, and nobody stops them. That just happens now, apparently. That's what happened,' he says. 'Do you really think I know him or something? Do you think I did something to provoke him?'

'No, Ilvy, come on. There's never a reason for that kind of thing,' Andy jumps in. 'More than 22,300 right-wing crimes happen a year in Germany, I'm just saying. There's not always something that has to happen beforehand to provoke it. Yeah, something happened, but only in that idiot's head.' Shaking his head, Andy downs his beer.

Bull Neck is getting more and more restless.

Kaan's gaze wanders to the Nazi idiots. Bull Neck's eyes are empty. I just can't understand how he can have so much hatred. A few people look over at us, trying to assess what's happening. Others deliberately avoid us, look away, give us a wide berth.

Kaan stands there as if wounded by this mass of blunt contempt surging towards him. It's like he's covered in scar tissue, cuts invisible now, but still deep. 'They get so angry just by *seeing* me. I've seen people like this before.'

Bull Neck heard that. 'I'm sure you have. We're always seeing people like *you*,' he spits. 'I see your kind everywhere. We can't bloody get away from you.'

Fists clench.

There is something like a smile on Kaan's face. 'The world is a colourful place, if you can't cope with that, you'd better stay at home. In bed, or something. Go hide away, bury yourself somewhere. There are lots of us, and we're not going anywhere.'

The fascist grunts angrily.

'What's got you so riled up?' a firm voice asks him from beside me. Kaja has placed herself right up in front of him. Her red top glows in the dark. She is a living warning signal, aloof and tense.

'The fact that he is even here is riling me up,' Bull Neck says, pointing at Kaan.

Kaja doesn't think twice. 'I see,' she says, and I can see an idea move across her face along with a snide grin.

'Did you see the sign at the entrance?' she asks. 'No? You *can* read though, can't you, you stupid, ugly idiot?'

She raises first her eyebrows, then both arms. Holding a beer bottle in each hand, Kaja circles her arms like rotor blades. All around. She swings her head back, squints her eyes and lets the bottles crash to the ground from high above with a lot of momentum. As she does this, she throws herself towards the table next to her, elbow first, clearing the table along with all the glasses and bottles standing there. A flash of red. A sharp scream, at the top of her lungs. Kaja lands on the floor amidst the shards and doesn't stop screaming until the security men have reached her.

Bull Neck has recoiled in fright, still unable to comprehend what has just happened. He stares at Kaja in bewilderment as the men in body armour besiege him.

'Did he hurt you?' Asks one of the security guards. 'Do you need an ambulance?' He looks worriedly at Kaja, who shakes her head with tears in her eyes, holding her bleeding elbow.

Bull Neck is now even more up for a fight.

'That *bitch*. She's faked this,' he says and pushes a security guard away from him. 'She's just looking for a fight, the left-wing bitch.'

He's trying to push his way through to Kaja, he wants to slap her around. He is an attack dog, frothing at the mouth. But this security guard doesn't like to be pushed. He likes it even less than women being beaten up in his club. *Terminator*-style, he rams Bull Neck into the wall. I hold out my hand to Kaja, help her up from the floor and pull her over to me. The other security guard has already pressed 'Call' and is now on the phone to the police. Bull Neck yells something unintelligible but is held back by his two lackeys. Now I know what those other two are there for: to minimise the damage.

One of the security guards keeps Bull Neck at a distance. An arm's length. The other runs through what Kaja read earlier on the sign. Code of conduct, house rules, that kind of thing: 'The organisers reserve the right to make use of their domiciliary rights and to deny access to the club to persons who have made sexist, racist, nationalist, anti-Semitic or other inhuman statements, or to exclude them from events.'

The bass drowns out the discussion that breaks out by the wall. You can no longer properly make out the filth that Bull Neck is spouting. A third security guard comes in from the entrance, along with the woman from the cash register, then two more bartenders. That finally shuts Bull Neck up, creating the kind of tense silence only provoked by the presence of such figures of authority.

As if rubbernecking on a motorway, we watch wordlessly as the fascists are finally pushed through the door. The people in the club reclaim the space. Streaming into the vacated area, dancing and drinking. The crunching of broken glass under their feet is lost in the roar of the bass.

Kaja brushes the broken glass and dust off her denim shorts. Kaan looks at her in irritation. 'What was all that psycho shit about?' he asks, eyebrows raised to his hairline.

'Would you rather have handled this on your own?' Kaja questions.

'Nah. I would rather not have to deal with this kind of racist shit at all. Neither alone nor with your weird *Kill Bill* arm thing.'

'But...' Kaja reaches out a limp arm but drops it before she can get near him. Maybe I'm the only one that saw that.

Andy shakes himself. 'Wow. What a mess. Are you okay?' He asks Kaan, worried. Kaan shakes his head. Andy keeps on talking. 'Let's calm you down, mate. I'll get you a shot to help you get over it and then it'll be alright.'

Andy goes to put his arm around Kaan's shoulder, but Kaan shrugs him off. 'Leave it,' he says, suddenly looking so tired.

This is the worst part. The fact that those racists have somehow won. For this evening, at least, because Kaan wants to leave. He can't relax in a place where he can and will be picked on so badly.

'I don't want him to go alone,' I hear myself saying, 'Please take a taxi, at least.'

I sound like a granny. I have goosebumps and feel like crying. What a world we live in where I have to be so scared for someone who goes to my school, who grew up on my street. I'm afraid that he might meet fascists on the night bus today who can see from a distance that he – not even him, maybe his grandfather or someone else – wasn't from here. And that for that reason alone they would want to hurt him, to beat him up, to drive him away. I'm afraid for someone who I don't think I should have to be afraid for, unless he's drunk, or running wild, or... or speeding down a mountainside on a motorbike with a blindfold on, or something like that. So why the fuck do I have to worry about a person being attacked by other people at three in the morning? Not even for something he's done, but for something he *is*. I shouldn't have to. I don't fucking want to.

My thoughts are still treading water as Kaan starts saying his goodbyes.

'Wait!' I say.

'For what?' asks Kaan. 'Do you want to come?'

'Uh...'

Kaan blushes so much that you can see it even in the semi-darkness. 'That sounded a bit... Well, that's not what I meant. I just thought you might want to go, too.' He searches for words.

I look back and forth between him and Kaja. 'I don't know. Kaja wants to stay...'

'Yeah, I'm sure she does... But I've gotta get out of here now,' says Kaan and turns towards the exit.

Kaja's hand reaches for mine. Very carefully, softly. 'Ilvy?'

'Yeah, Kaja?'

'Loos. Now. Please.'

I follow Kaja, looking behind me after Kaan.

My legs are still wobbly, my hands still shaking a little from the adrenaline rush. Kaja loosens her grip on my hand as she walks. Only her index finger still holds mine. I walk behind her, step by step. Fingertip on fingertip. Connected to Kaja like this, I grow a little every second. The ground becomes firmer again. With Kaja I feel taller. Bigger than myself. I feel my soft knees getting stronger and stronger with every step we take together.

Kaja pulls me into a cubicle and shuts the door behind us. A dozen graffitied slogans animate the white tiles. But today even the cheesy lyrics written out in sharpie can't make me laugh.

Concerned, Kaja looks at me. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine,' I say.

'You've gone really pale.'

'Yeah...'

Kaja looks down at her injured arm. She doesn't look like she's in pain at all, in fact there's a sort of contentment on her face. I don't understand.

'Why did you do that?' I inquire.

'Well, you saw those guys, didn't you? There's no use trying to reason with them. They're fascists. They would have finished Kaan off. Here. Tonight. And because there were three of them, I couldn't really do much. And they would have done much more damage to me than I did to them with my arm stunt.'

She pushes the hair off her forehead and looks up at me. 'Ilvy, if I don't do something about these kinds of things, the fear eats me up inside. You've got to do something. I've got to do something. It's just what came to me in the spur of the moment. Would you have had a better idea?'

'No. I didn't know what to do. I was shutting myself with fear.'

I'm always too slow in moments like that. I'm just not Kaja. Kaja who grins through the pain when she pulls up her jeans with her bloody hand. Hotpants with specks of blood on the front.

'Do you think I went too far?' asks Kaja, concerned. She moves closer to me and

looks me straight in the eyes, calmly. 'I don't care if the others think I went too far. I just want to know what you think.'

'Well, at least it worked,' I say. 'In a sense.'

'Yeah, it did, didn't it?' Kaja's grin grows. 'I was thinking of *Don Quixote*. Of the attack on the windmills and the giants. And then I just started moving. I think I made a good giant-windmill hybrid. At least it worked and I didn't break any bones. The scratches'll heal in a few days.'

Fists bang against the door to our cubicle.

'Occupied!' shouts Kaja, too loudly.

'I didn't think it was too far,' I reassure her. 'Maybe it was a bit Kaja Crazy. But it wasn't too far.'

She bows to me, as low as possible in this confined space, and I have to laugh. Despite it all, I'm so glad that Kaja isn't as timid and hesitant as most other people. Like me. I'm glad, at least, that I won't have to tell people for years to come that this was the night my friend got beaten up and that none of us did anything to stop it.

There's another bang and someone kicks the door.

'Not done yet!' Kaja yells. She looks at me conspiratorially.

I shake my head. She unbuckles her belt. It's a travel belt, one with one of those little zips on the inside. She takes out a small bag. It's MDMA, I think, though I don't know exactly. Either way, it's something that'll catapult her away from me. Higher and higher, more and more colourful.

'Do you want some now?' asks Kaja.

Irritated, I look at her. 'No, babe. I don't.' My cheeks get hot.

'Joking. I wasn't gonna give you any anyway.'

I hold her wrists tightly. 'Kaja, please...' I choke out. I don't want her to take anything, I don't want her to leave me here, alone, in this moment. I don't want her to fuck off into some artificial euphoria. 'Why do you want this now? Now, after everything that just...'

'That's exactly why, Ilvy. To move the evening forward. I like when things are nice, you know. I find stress stressful. Good feelings are good. It's that simple.'

'But they're not good feelings. They're just giving you a fake hormone rush.'

Kaja looks first at the transparent bag, then at me.

'All feelings are a fake hormone rush, aren't they? All of them.'

She unclasps her hands, puts her little finger first into the bag and then into her mouth. Then she pulls the belt back through her beltloops and opens the door.

'How much have you got left?' I ask.

'Not enough,' Kaja smiles.

I don't smile back. Not even a little bit. 'You've got to stop doing this every time, you know that,' I say.

'Yes. I know. You don't have to lecture me.'

I hate it when she talks to me like that. And Kaja recognises this in my look. She wraps her arms around me for a moment. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. But, well... I don't like it when you snap at me, either.'

'It's all right,' I say, without meaning it.

I'd love to take the little baggy off her and flush it down the toilet, but if I did that, she'd lose it. So instead I just look at her in silence, half hoping that she can tell what I'm thinking, half hoping that she can't.

We stand next to each other at the sink. In the mirror I watch two faces, each as familiar to me as the other.

Kaja and Ilvy. Ilvy and Kaja. Four dark brown eyes in the mirror. Glassy gaze. Large pupils. Grimy tiles in the background, on which someone has written with red sharpie: *I've got the right to live a happy life*. I think of Kaan again and how disgustingly unfair it all is.

I make a bet with my reflection in the mirror. I bet that you'll be at home and asleep within an hour. My face stares back at me from the mirror, betting the opposite. I bet that you won't be.

One of us will win the bet. Either the one in front of the mirror or the one in it.

'Come on,' says Kaja. 'Let's take back the night.'

She pulls me outside. Straight onto the dance floor.

I don't want to think anymore. Especially not about the hatred that flooded this room just moments ago. I only want to dance. To dissolve a little into the sound. Dancing with Kaja is always great. Dancing with Kaja means moving freely through space and sound, legs flying. And it also means staying connected with her with a band. With an elastic band, one as indestructible as it is invisible. So we dance with our arms in the air, our feet flying, our hair drenched in sweat. Around each other and across the dance floor. We dance till we're exhausted. We dance ourselves awake again. For hours. I see Kaja's jaw grinding, I feel how overheated she is when she touches me. And I see her blissful look when she smiles at me, one that says 'I'm soooo in touch with everything and everyone.' I just hate that she's on it again. It sucks. I'm so pissed at her. At this stuff and at her.

At least they're playing *Alle Farben*, our favourite DJ, now. The spotlights are dancing faster than I can. I'm spinning in circles. Spinning faster and faster until I feel sick. Really sick. Out of the corner of her eye, Kaja sees that something is wrong with me. She can always tell. Even when she's really out of it, she'll always know, somehow. It's as if she has a kind of special antenna that's always picking up on my feelings. She steps over, putting her arm around me. Acid rises in my throat.

'Do you wanna go?' She asks.

I nod. Air. I need fresh air. Now.

'No worries. It's really hot here. You'll feel better outside, I'm sure,' she says, holding the door open for me. She is radiant. Glowing. Not a trace of tiredness.

The night air hardly cools us down, but at least there's a bit of a breeze. I put my head between my legs and feel myself getting better by the second.

We leave the bikes behind. We set off in the direction of the river. When we can't agree on where to go, we always go to the Elbe.