

Anne Freytag
Out of Black Water
608 Pages

ISBN 978-3-423-23019-3

Sample Translation by Catherine Venner

DAY 1

AM KUPFERGRABEN BERLIN, 9:53 PM

Her eyes go blank. Then they are but empty and blue, like glass spheres through which nobody looks out any more. Her hand lies dead in mine; her gaze drifts into eternity, past me towards an indeterminate nothingness. Particles of dirt float in the water, and around her face her hair swirls like blonde flames. I want to look away, but I can't. My chest is growing tighter; it feels as if my ribs are breaking. It won't be long now until I am no more.

A murky green surrounds me. An airless shroud that is slowly killing me. I'm stuck; clouds of blood billow around my knee, the car door is dented and my leg is jammed.

I look up through the windscreen into the blurred light. Bright, round and oval shaped specks shimmer in the darkness. Not far away, a few metres perhaps. My muscles twitch as if firing one final time. I'm no longer cold. It's a faint feeling, without fear, already half on the other side. As if I were holding on to life with one hand and the rest of me had already let go. I sense that the thread, which is still holding me here, is about to snap any moment now.

The fog in my mind clears. I'm floating just below consciousness and between two worlds; just about alive and still holding her hand. There is no film rolling in my head, just a few fragments from my life. Memories that are bidding farewell. They come and go. I think of everything one last time, and then of nothing more. My head empties, just as my lungs have emptied. Only her final words remain, "You can't trust anyone. They're all involved."

The greeny-black water pulsates. The reflex to breathe sits in my airways. It's stronger than my reason. I let the water into my mouth. It tastes final; of metal and blood, and it penetrates further and further into my throat. "Do it," says a voice inside my head. "Do it now!"

One final time, I behold the dead face of my mother. I look at her and she looks right through me.

Then I breathe in. And I don't die.

TWO AND A HALF HOURS LATER

"You can't trust anyone. They're all involved."

I open my eyes and there's nothing but blackness. More black than I have ever seen before. A strange, spaceless feeling, like a universe without stars. The air is dank; it smells of spilled water and rubber. I hear myself breathing, ragged and shallow. Otherwise there is nothing; no sound, just an empty silence.

I'm prostrate on my back and my shoulder blades are digging into a hard surface – stone or perhaps even

metal. I try to move, but it's not possible. I grope blindly around me. Everything is wet and cold. The narrowness bears down on me, my mouth is dry and it's too dark, too black. I want to sit up, but I can't. My breath hits against something directly in front of my face. I feel around me and touch the smooth material; it's thick, with a barely yielding surface. I notice water and that I'm lying in a puddle, wearing soaked clothes. My fingers slip, again and again. I grope around for an opening, a way out, a zip, anything. But there's neither an opening nor air, just walls. Walls everywhere, flexible and impermeable, closed on all sides. It feels like I'm suffocating. Blood rushes in my ears. The air is stale and has been breathed in too often. The blackness pulsates in front of my eyes and I'm enclosed in an impenetrable skin of wet cold. The damp eats into my body, deeper and deeper right down to the bones.

My chest is tight and my lungs are heaving. I wriggle, maybe I'm screaming, and I strike out. Unable to think, I kick and slip. My muscles tense, twitching as if my body had been struck by a bolt of electricity. Once again, I try to sit up but I can't. It's as if I'm lying on a slaughtering block. My mouth and my throat are dry. I see shimmering stars and it feels like a claw is being thrust down my throat into my windpipe and squeezing it harder and harder.

I can't breathe. Dark blue fragments, vague memories, weightlessness, dirty water, water everywhere, a green-grey depth swallowing me and the face of my mother.

Then there's some ribbing under my fingertips.

A zip!

I stiffen, look with open eyes into the nothingness, force myself to concentrate and frantically search for the clasp but I can't find it. It's the inside part of the zip: small, smooth and not intended to be opened. I'm hyperventilating, choking and retching. Finally, I find the fastener and claw at it with my fingernails; one of them tearing all the way down to the nail bed. My hands are cold but I don't let go and eventually manage to open the zip a tiny bit. I don't think about where I am, I don't think about dying or death, I just think about the zip. I force a finger through the small hole and hear myself panting and screaming. Everything is spinning.

Then a beam of light. Like a slap in the face. Like a glimmer of hope. A brief rustling, just a few centimetres and hands fighting through the much too narrow opening – my hands. They grab at the rubber-like material, then pull the zip down in one movement.

SOFIE, BORACAY, PHILIPPINES, AT THE SAME TIME

The sand is not sand-coloured but white. Like sugar under a vast sky. Sofie had never seen such clear seawater. It's as clear as tap water. She looks around. The sun is just rising and the beach is almost empty. It - the vastness, the colours and the water - appears to be theirs alone. The sea washes around the rugged cliffs with the statue of the Virgin Mary and the palm trees. They look like a small black island off the shore. Behind them, the ocean gleams. It's a blue that reminds Sofie of Maja. Of her eyes; of this blend blue and turquoise.

In the distance, a cock crows. Sofie had not known that there were so many cocks in the Philippines. The sound doesn't go with the view, but she has grown used to it. To the crowing from 4 o'clock in the morning, the stench of petrol and sewage, the potholes in the bumpy dirt tracks, the tricycles and the midday heat. She loves it here. The little hotel right next to the sea, the good food and the massages for 3 euro per hour. Sofie never wants to leave. She wants to ring Maja and tell her to pack her things and come straight away. And then they will stay there forever. Maja, Theo and her, in a small hut somewhere on the beach. Just the crowing of the cocks and the lapping of the waves. And then, Maja could fall in love with a Filipino or a Japanese man. And they will live happily ever after.

Sofie smiles and looks at the sky. It is so blue that it

almost appears black. She closes her eyes and digs her feet deeper into the sand. The sunlight shines through her eyelids making them seem red, and its rays warm her skin. In the hotel bar behind her, a song by Jack Johnson starts playing: "Seasick Dream". The song is as light as the wind; it strokes over the waves like a giant hand over a smooth bed sheet.

"Do you want to come into the water with me?"

Sofie opens her eyes and looks at Theo's face. It's unbelievable how brown he has already become. She is still almost as pale as when they arrived a week ago. Theo stands up and reaches his hand towards her. Sofie is about to take it, when her mobile phone starts vibrating on the plastic table between their sun loungers.

She glances at the display.

"It's my dad," she says. "I'll catch up with you."

"Say hi." Theo kisses her on the mouth. His lips are cool and taste of mango. If they stayed here forever, they would often taste of mango. Sofie watches him leave. He fits in well here. In her paradise.

Yes, she is happy ... Then she answers the phone.

MAJA

White tiled walls and flagged flooring: a bare room with neon strip lights but little illumination. I breathe in greedily; too fast and too shallow, making myself cough. My focus swims in and out, and my breath is coming from all sides and echoing against the walls. I use my arms to support myself on the metal bench where I'm sitting. I look around but my sight is blurred; a teary haze and hot trails down my face. My heart hammers as if it were a foreign body; a deep dull feeling spreading through me, louder than usual. My hands are a watery blue and bloated. The zip has ripped my skin and my index finger is bleeding. The nail is torn and protruding.

I glance around the room. Sharp lines and edges, as if the world has become harder. More real. It is cool, maybe a few degrees above zero and my wet clothes make it even colder. My breath condenses. Milky and semi-transparent, it hangs in the damp air. There is no sound except for the chattering of my teeth. I look around. Postmortem tables on wheels, metal cupboards and bodies under white sheets and in bags. A human fridge.

For a few seconds I sit without moving amidst the dead and the silence. Then, frozen stiff and shivering, I clamber out of the body bag. I get caught and almost fall off the table. My feet are ice-cold. No shoes. I'm barefoot. They touch the floor; it's rough and dry. My feet are damp and have a grey-blue tinge. It's a floor of the type that can be hosed down and has a large drain in the centre.

I don't notice the envelope at first; it's almost the same colour as the tiles. It must have fallen off the table. I bend down to pick it up: recycled paper, no window and the flap hasn't been sealed.

I pull out a single sheet of paper.

Certificate of death is written at the very top. Underneath is my name: Maja Fria Kohlbeck. My address and my date of birth. Last attending physician: Dr. Volker Hauck. Time of death: today, 10:47 pm. Identified by: Prof. Robert Stein. Robert was the one who identified me? He was here? I try to imagine it, but I can't. Him standing next to my dead body and nodding. Transfer to Prof. Dr. Greifland at the request of Prof. Stein. Followed by an address: Kolmarer Straße 4, 10405 Berlin.

Collection: tomorrow, 7:45 am.

Cause of death: unknown.

MAJA, A SHORT TIME LATER

A sound makes me look up. The light in the corridor has gone on; a bright line shines under the door, forming a rectangle on the floor. I don't move and remain standing next to the metal table, lurking like a cornered animal that's ready to strike. My heart beats faster, pumping adrenaline around my body and suddenly, I'm painfully awake.

Without making a sound, I approach the door and look through the small window into the corridor, but there's nothing to see, just light. I hear footsteps and voices. They're coming closer, heels on tiles and squeaky rubber soles. I glance at the telephone on the wall, but it's too late. I've no time left to make the call. Besides, the only mobile number I know by heart is Sofie's – and she's in the Philippines.

“Yes, I've also heard that,” says the deep voice of a man. “When will she be transferred to Moabit?”

They'll be here any minute now. Just a few more steps. I can smell them, yes, almost taste them.

“She won't. She'll be taken somewhere else,” a woman answers. “Came from the top. No idea why.”

I hear keys jangling, searching for the right one, and the steps stop. The man asks something but I'm not listening. I'm looking for an escape route and notice a second door on the other side of the room. On it is a long green sticker that says “emergency exit”.

I stuff my death certificate back into the envelope and shove it into my trouser pocket. And then I run. My

feet hit the tiles; a squelch and I wonder whether opening the door is going to set off an alarm – never mind, it doesn't matter. I push it open. There's no alarm, but a voice behind me, "Stop!"

Damn it! The door closes. The floor is slippery and I almost skid as I run. I continue through the empty corridor. Grey-blue tiles on the wall and patterned tiles on the floor. Doors branch off to the right and left, wide ones with safety glass windows. Signs guide me through a labyrinth of corridors. It's a hospital. One that I have never been to. Old walls and not a soul about. Just me. And those who are following me.

"Stop!"

On one of the doors at the end of the corridor is the sign for the staircase. I push against it and sprint up the stairs. One floor, and then another. The steps are getting closer; they're catching up.

I reach the ground floor, see an exit sign and follow it. There are nurses, doctors and beds being pushed through the corridors. I dodge past them. The sight of the intricate scrolls on the tiles makes me dizzy. Everything begins to spin. I reach out as if doing so would stop the walls moving. I slow down and the light hurts my eyes, like needles being poked into my brain. Maybe it's a mistake to run away, maybe I should just stop and explain. But I can't explain it, none of it. Neither what happened nor why I'm not dead. My mother's warning comes to mind. "You can't trust anyone. They're all involved." And so I run further – just away, it doesn't matter where.

A woman behind me shouts, "Stop her!" But nobody stops me. Everything happens too fast. The world stops spinning and becomes piercingly sharp, sharper than ever before. At the end of the corridor I see the exit: heavy wooden doors that open for me. My legs are burning, a leaden weakness is spreading in me and I can hardly breathe. I hear as the man calls, "Just stop!" The soles of his trainers squeak on the floor.

The sound is close.

They will catch me soon.

MAJA, A SHORT TIME LATER

I go faster and career blindly through the streets trying to get my bearings. It's dark and I can't read the signs quickly enough. I run past them, turn off and recognise Rosenthaler Straße, even without the sign. I'm racing like a greyhound after a rabbit, like a machine on autopilot. Nothing left of the weakness and dizziness; just escape, legs that are running and a heart that is beating far too calmly. I have never been more concentrated or more awake. "You can't trust anyone. They're all involved." My naked feet land on the tarmac. It's rough and gritty with plenty of sharp bits. What was she talking about? Who is involved in what? I avoid the passers-by, both their bodies and their glances. It's late, perhaps already night. 10:47 pm flashes in my mind. That's when I died. Cause of death: unknown. I don't know how long I was in the body bag. Minutes? Hours? Longer? I look over my shoulder. The man is still there, further back but still too close. As I look ahead again, I collide with a woman. I stumble, but catch myself. She shouts something at me. I don't hear it and continue to run, scanning the ground in front of me. There are shards of glass everywhere; some smaller, some bigger. I try to avoid them but see one too late and know that I'll tread on it with full force. The

glass bores deep into my heel. It throbs and bleeds but I don't feel the pain; the adrenaline is delaying that for later.

To the right of me, two men stumble out of a bar. One of them pushes the other. They're fighting, shouting at each other and it smells of alcohol. I get off the pavement and run a stretch on the road. A taxi driver honks at me. I see Rosenthaler Platz come closer; its illuminated sign for the underground, cars and traffic lights. The guy is still following me. I feel his presence like a shadow. There is no doubt: he won't give up.

I continue running; past the entrance to the underground and Café Oberholz. The pavement is full of revellers and smokers. I push past them. They're entranced, staring at a TV, maybe a football match. The lights change to red and I look left and right. A tram arrives, final destination "Am Kupfergraben". The street name gives me a strange jolt. Then I see it: the M1 tram heading to Schillerstraße in Niederschönhausen is still at the tram stop. Its doors are already starting to close. I run towards it without thinking and with my heart beating rhythmically against my ribs. And then I jump. No earth beneath my feet, just wind against my face. I feel the denim sticking to my legs and the damp t-shirt on my stomach. My eyes are focussed on the doors. The gap between them becomes smaller and they brush my shoulders. *Don't open again* I think. *Don't open again*. My feet touch the ground and I slip, bumping into a huge suitcase and a pole. I catch myself and immediately turn towards the doors. They're closed.

The man reaches the tram; he is outside and I am inside. I see his face through the dusty windows. It's red with pearls of sweat shining on his forehead. He stares at me, directly into my eyes. It's a look that says he doesn't believe what he's seeing.

Then the tram moves away and we lose sight of each other.

SOFIE

"Are you still there?"

She's still there. But she can't speak. It's as if this one sentence has paralysed her. Like a poison that works so slowly that the victim doesn't even notice their own death.

"Darling?"

Her father's voice is soft and far away. Everything is far away: the sea, Theo, herself.

"If you want to come home, I can arrange it."

Home, thinks Sofie, and she no longer knows where that is.

"Tell me what I can do," says her father.

But he can't do anything. Never before has she seen him so powerless, never in her whole life. But in this case, he is.

“When is the funeral?” asks Sofie and her voice sounds so strange that it may as well belong to someone else.

Her father swallows. She hears it. “That hasn’t been finalised yet. We have to wait for the postmortem.”

“The postmortem,” she asks weakly.

“The cause of the accident is unknown. That is the usual procedure.”

“Will there also be a postmortem carried out on Maja?” Sofie’s voice breaks off like a thin branch.

“Yes,” says her father. Nothing else.

She nods slowly. The images in her head are horrific. Sofie doesn’t want to see them, but they don’t go away. The pathology department of a clinic, the blue-tinged light, Maja lying naked on a metal slab and a forensic pathologist sawing open her chest.

“Where are you right now?”

Sofie is glad of the brief distraction from these images.

“On Boracay.”

“Shall I have you picked up from there?”

Sofie cannot answer. She doesn’t know. She doesn’t know anything. Her body feels like anaesthetised gums. She doesn’t understand what has happened. That it has happened. She heard the words exactly, both times, but they haven’t got through.

Maja is dead.

But she can’t be dead. Sofie had talked to her the day before yesterday. About what, she no longer knows. How can she no longer know that? It was only two days ago.

“Should I send someone, darling?” her father asks calmly.

“I have to talk with Theo,” she answers.

“OK. I’m flying to Israel late afternoon tomorrow. But you can always contact Verena. Day or night.”

“OK.”

“You’ll call, won’t you?”

“OK,” she says again. Then she hangs up.

MAJA

The tram jerks along the road. I slump into one of the free seats. My hair is wet and reddish-black trails dot the floor. Blood and dirt. They lead from the doors to my heel. It still doesn't hurt. But it won't be much longer. The in-tram display changes and announces the next station: Zionskirchplatz. Next to it is the time: 1:13 am.

I briefly shut my eyes. 1:13 am. I just want to go home but it's far away and I'm tired. Besides, I don't have a key. And Sofie isn't home, so I wouldn't get into the flat. And I don't have any money. Daniel's flat is less than five minutes from here, and he almost never goes out. And he has our spare key. I could have a shower and treat my cut at his. Sleep there.

For a moment, I think that I can't stand up. And I also don't want to stand up. I would just like to stay sitting here forever. Exactly here. All the strength that I had before has been used up. I am but a small leftover of myself and just about capable of breathing and sitting.

All the same, I do it and force myself on to my feet. As my heel touches the floor, the pain erupts like an electric shock into my leg. The tram stops and the doors open. I get off, and then standing at the tram stop, I look around. There are many faces but his is not one of them. He didn't follow me.

I sluggishly cross the street and limp down the path. As I walk, I try to reconstruct what has happened over the last few hours and make the individual parts into a whole. But there are gaps. Open questions without answers. I know who I am and when I was born, and I don't just know that because it was on my death certificate. I also know where I was this afternoon – and that I didn't do what I had originally intended. Just like the previous two times.

And that's precisely where it goes blank. What happened in between has gone. It's as if I'm looking through a fogged window. Dark blue fragments. Shapes. *Cause of death: unknown*. What has happened?

A couple of metres ahead of me, people are blocking the pavement. They're standing there, watching a TV. And something about this situation isn't right. The strange silence. The tension. The mood doesn't say football. No beer and no shouting, just stiff bodies and mute expressions. A couple of them look shocked, others are in disbelief. Nobody is talking.

I stop, using my hand to support myself against the wall of the building next to me to take the weight off my feet.

Then I see what they are seeing.

And a part of my memory returns.