

Jan Schomburg
Light and Sound
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Sample translation by Ruth Feuchtwanger

By the time we reach the main road, Boris can barely stand. He's hanging between Ana-Clara and me, his shirt wide open, his chest hairless under a scanty striped scarf slung once round his neck like a snide comment about the cold. At this time of day there's hardly any cars, and the last bus went three hours ago. I take turns with Ana-Clara, standing by the road with our thumbs out hoping to hitch a ride. We've left Boris passed out on the wooden bench in the bus shelter. The fourth car stops and I run to the bus shelter to wake him. When we walk out, I can see by the expression on the driver's face that for a split second he's having second thoughts about stopping, wondering if he should just drive off and be done with it.

Boris and Ana-Clara get in the back while I sit up front with the driver. As the car pulls back onto the road I hear Ana-Clara muttering something in Portuguese, eliciting a groan from Boris before he goes back to sleep.

We've been driving for a while, but it's obvious the guy is still furious he's not alone in the car with Ana Clara and me. He's driving fast and jerky. He's around the fifty mark, I guess. His short hair is pretty much all grey and he's sporting a patchy, scruffy beard that isn't quite designer stubble. I'm not sure why, but suddenly I'm convinced he must work in a textbook publishing house. He's got drooping features, like a sad bloodhound.

"Thanks for picking us up."

He briefly swivels his head round towards the back seat, where Boris has fallen into a restless sleep leaning against Ana-Clara, who meets the driver's eyes with an expression that's too blank to be challenging. I've never seen eyes as dead as hers. I wonder if she looks at Boris like that when they're alone. I hope not. The driver is gazing out at the tarmac again, but then he turns and stares at me for so long that I'm afraid he'll drive us right off the road. I smile to make up for Ana-Clara's rudeness.

"Mind if I switch the radio on?" I ask him.

He nods and I turn it on. The digital display says DLF. Some kind of piano concert.

"Doesn't bother you, does it?" I ask.

He shrugs.

We drive along the highway for a while without talking, the odd car passing in the oncoming lane. I can see the lights in the distance long before the cars themselves, their full beams lighting up the night until they spot us and dip them.

"We could go to my place," the textbook editor says at last. I turn and look at Ana-Clara, who responds with another empty stare. Of course she hasn't understood what he's said, her German is pretty much non-existent.

"I've got some wine," he adds.

I can feel his sidelong glance. He's trying to gauge how old I am, trying to work out if I'm old enough to drink, trying to work out if we're adults or still kids. We're at an age where it's hard to pigeonhole us.

"Sure," I hear myself say. "Why not?"

It's been three days since Boris and I picked Ana-Clara up at the airport.

“I can’t see her,” Boris says. The pale green frosted panes slide apart and a woman with a buggy walks out into the concourse. We get a brief glimpse of the arrivals hall. I can see three baggage carousels. Two are standing idle, the third has just clanked into life and there’s a big group of passengers standing around it craning their necks as the cases start to come through, but there’s no way of telling if it’s the luggage from the Lisbon flight yet.

“She’ll be here soon enough, stop fretting,” I say. The panels slide shut again and I find myself wondering whose brilliant idea it was to use frosted green panes for those doors. As if the process of picking up luggage was imbued with some kind of spurious intimacy. As if it needed to be handled with the utmost discretion. I turn and look at Boris and I can tell he’s noticed but he doesn’t let on; he keeps his eyes fixed on the green frosted glass doors. I can’t wait to see his face when Ana-Clara walks through them. Will he crack a smile then, I wonder.

Away behind Boris I spot a man dressed in black standing half-obscured by a billboard as though he’s not quite sure he wants to be seen. He looks a bit like how I imagine Boris looking in thirty-five years or so. He’s wearing pointed black patent leather shoes and holding a red rose in his hand, half-heartedly trying to conceal it. He keeps shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Even his hair is black—unnaturally so. From where we’re sitting it looks like a dye-job, or maybe even a toupee. But it’s hard to tell.

“Do sit down,” my mother says to Boris. My father nods in affirmation and indicates a black leather chair. Boris sends me a quizzical look, and I shrug in response. He shrugs back and takes the seat offered while I perch on the piano stool. He touches the leather of the chair’s arm, stroking it and nodding at my parents as if in ironic approval. My father puts down his newspaper and raises his hands in a half-apologetic make-yourself-at-home gesture. It’s the first time a boy I’ve brought home has ever talked to my parents for any length of time.

I follow the conversation from my piano stool. I can’t help feeling proud that my parents are taking Boris seriously, listening to his opinions with evident interest and laughing at his jokes. My mother keeps shooting me sidelong glances intended to express her approval. Her looks get on my nerves and the next time she does it I pull a face at her as if I have no idea what she’s looking at me for.

They’re talking about the youth of today, that old chestnut. My parents can’t understand why nobody bothers to protest any more in a world in which there are so many massive problems. Globalisation, the unfair distribution of wealth, surveillance, racism. There’s no plan for a better tomorrow, no visions, no trace of solidarity.

“Well, I guess we’ve never gone through anything truly terrible,” Boris says, “there’s no really binding trauma—apart from putting up with our parents, of course.” My mother and father both laugh on cue and turn to look at me, and though I don’t mean to, I can’t help but smile back.

Boris’s father is a development engineer with Siemens. He helped set up something Boris calls a “production plant for communications commodities” in Portugal, in a town called Evora. Boris changes his tone when he says “production plant for communications commodities”, his voice takes on a slightly disparaging inflection. He was four or five when his parents took him to Portugal.

“Communications commodities? What the hell are they when they’re at home?” I ask him. “Spy stuff or what?”

“Exactly that,” Boris replies. “Monitoring devices, pens with hidden cameras, bugs, all that kind of thing. But don’t go telling all your friends, Dad can get into all kinds of trouble if his cover is blown. It’s actually all top secret stuff.”

Later my father explains to me that communications technology has nothing to do with espionage, it's basically pretty much the same as IT and information transfer. "Information and communications technology—what we know as the IT industry—encompasses everything to do with the processing and transmission of information," he says. My father really does talk like a textbook sometimes.

Turns out the guy who picked us up isn't a textbook editor after all. He exports garage doors by road in the summer and by rail in the winter when the passes across the Urals are blocked.

"I've never heard of anything like that," I say.

Boris has passed out again, on a beige leather couch, totally oblivious to what's going on. Ana-Clara is sitting next to him on the edge of the couch, her face a mask of apathy and indifference. She hasn't touched the wine in front of her. To annoy her, I pick my glass up and saunter through the little attic apartment feigning interest in things I actually don't give a damn about. The garage door exporter has a little collection of tin cars.

"I never miss a deadline," he says, "I always deliver on time, no matter what. Never need to grease anyone's palm. Because I always deliver by the deadline. No matter what gets in the way, I always get it there. Once I had to send a garage door by airfreight. They'd made a blunder in the assembly process, something to do with the steering mechanism. The lorry had left by that point, so it wouldn't have got there in time. The airfreight was more expensive than the door by a long shot. The door cost three hundred and the airfreight cost two and a half thousand. Then there were import taxes and customs duties and whatnot. But I got it there. That's the main thing. Always on time, that's me."

"What's your name, anyway?" I ask him.

"They'd never heard anything like it in Russia," he says. After a short pause he adds, "Frank."

There's a black music system in the corner, covered in dust. I point to it. "You got any music here?"

"I have an early start tomorrow."

"Don't we all," I reply, flashing him a smile.

Last summer Boris and I went on a cycling holiday along the North Sea coast. We shared a tent for a week and we got on so well that I kept thinking it couldn't be for real. That's not the way friends behave, I thought. Boris can't not have noticed. Of course I knew he had a girlfriend in Portugal, but I couldn't really take that seriously. He never talked about her, and anyway they hadn't been together long. She was a classmate at his school in Portugal, but nothing went on between them at the time. They only got together at a beach party when he went back to Portugal for a visit in the autumn holidays. Something must have happened then, at some point, but Boris never showed me her photo or anything, and I'd practically forgotten all about her. On the last night of our holiday Boris and I were lying in the tent together, and suddenly our hands brushed together. That first touch was accidental, but then they touched again, and we started stroking each other's hands. I wasn't trembling at that point, but it felt like I was going to start any minute, and I was a bit embarrassed that Boris would notice, so I concentrated as hard as I could on not trembling. I think it worked too, though of course I'm not a hundred percent certain. Either way, at some point—I don't know how it happened—all of a sudden we were lying so close together I could feel his breath. It smelt very slightly of beer, but I didn't mind that at all. The tips of our noses touched and I almost jumped with the shock of it, but I pulled myself together. And then I thought if we don't kiss now, then I don't know...

I still don't understand how come we never kissed. Our lips were maybe three centimetres apart, if that, and all the time I was thinking kiss him, kiss him now...but I didn't. And Boris didn't kiss me either, and then at some point our noses weren't touching any more. I don't think I slept at all that night. I just lay there with my

eyes wide open, shaking my head imperceptibly every so often. It felt like I was looking down at myself, lying there, shaking my head to and fro, so gently. So close to the finish, then you mess it up...

If I can come to love Ana-Clara, if I can find some loveable quality in her, then I can keep loving Boris. But if I can't find anything in her, then surely I can't love Boris any more either. Simple as that, I tell myself.

But Ana-Clara is just plain irritating. What Boris sees in her is a complete mystery to me, though I'm really making a huge effort to like her. If she made the slightest bit of effort, she could win me over. But she obviously hasn't got the slightest inclination to make herself pleasant to me. You'd think it'd be important to her that Boris's best friend likes her. For my part, I really did make an effort, even beforehand. I did a bit of preparation, read some articles about Portugal so Ana-Clara wouldn't get the impression I'm not interested in her.

She doesn't speak a word of German and she doesn't even try. I just can't get my head round it. If you're in a foreign country, it's common courtesy to learn how to say please and thank you and hello and that sort of thing. It helps you get onside with the locals if they notice you're at least making a bit of an effort. Especially if you pick up the odd bit of slang or some quirky expression or other. I once knew this Hungarian who worked the cash till on a waterslide at Lake Balaton as a kid, and he could say things like "Hey Dad, look! A huge waterslide!" or "A ride on the slide, please," stuff that he'd picked up from the German tourists. But as for Ana-Clara, if you want to ask her something, Boris has to translate and she whispers her answer so softly that only he can hear it, or she doesn't bother answering at all and just gawks at him. I asked her once if you could still feel the effects of the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal, and she just stared back at him with that wide-eyed look of incomprehension.

"Ana-Clara's not that interested in politics," Boris says, and I can't help wondering if she's actually interested in anything at all.

This is going nowhere fast, I think to myself. Garage Door Man's thinking the same thing, I can tell. He's after something from Ana-Clara and keeps eyeing her up, but he knows there's no way he'll ever get anywhere with her and it's frustrating him. He's irritated by the presence of Boris, still flat out on the couch, and he's irritated by me too. I wonder what it's like being fifty. And I wonder how anyone could be interested in Ana-Clara's blank, vacant eyes.

"What d'you listen to?" I ask him

He shrugs. "Dunno. All kinds of stuff."

Reluctantly, he makes his way to the CD player and shoves in a CD. It's one of those stereos that's made to look expensive, but is in reality cheap. It looks like something you'd buy online or from a supermarket shelf. We wait for the music to kick in, and as we do I wonder if he took pleasure in his purchase, whether he felt euphoric when he'd finally put it all together, connected it and put it where he wanted it to go. Did he stand there looking at it with a feeling of satisfaction? It's a sad image, seeing him in my mind standing in front of his new stereo feeling nothing but a sense of vague disappointment. I can see him standing there looking at it and thinking what now? What's next...?

Something starts playing that sounds a bit like Dire Straits. The song sounds familiar, but I can't place it. If Ana-Clara wasn't getting on my nerves so much I wouldn't have had to start dancing to the stupid song.

Garage Door Man's bedroom looks like no one's ever slept in it. Maybe I should stop calling him Garage Door Man. He's Frank. That's his name. And it's not his fault that we're standing there, in front of his pristine bed, next to his nightstand which has nothing on it—no book, not bottle of water, no junk. Nothing. And there's

nothing in the rest of the room either. No discarded clothes, no t-shirt he might wear to sleep in. No shoes. “Do you actually live here?” I hear myself ask him as my glance wanders around the bedroom. When I look at him I realise I’ve offended or irritated him.

“I’m the orderly type, that’s all. I hate it when there’s stuff lying all over the place.”

I’m a bit worried that he’s about to kiss me. I can tell he’s working up the courage, bracing himself to do it. He’s probably feeling a bit pressured. After all, you don’t take a girl into your bedroom and then just let her walk out again, do you? You’re going to look like a bit of a loser. There’s things you’re expected to do in a situation like this. If you just keep standing around there for ages and nothing happens, what are you going to do? Go back to the safety of your living room and pretend nothing ever happened? You can try and convince yourself you weren’t after anything till the cows come home, but there’s no denying it’s a bit depressing all round.

I guess it all depends on how you grew up and what you’re used to some extent. No matter how unbiased you try to be, no matter how hard you try to shake off all the ingrained prejudices, there’s always something left over from your upbringing. Take my parents. They’re messy, they’re like, really messy. There’s always stuff lying around, but then once a week Natalja from the Ukraine comes round. Before she arrives, we all have to tidy up. And then my mother follows her around, helping her. She can’t bear to sit back and do nothing while someone else cleans up around her. My father says it’s absolutely ridiculous. After all, when he takes his car to the garage he doesn’t pitch in with the repairs either, does he? But my mother insists on making coffee and getting in expensive biscuits for Natalja, and having long chat with her before they finally start cleaning. It just makes the whole thing so much easier for mother if she makes out Natalja is just a friend who pops by every so often to give her a hand. My father’s got less of a problem with it, but every Christmas he puts on his Santa outfit and visits Natalja’s family with presents my mother’s bought. Still, I think it’s less to do with having a guilty conscience, I think my father just likes dressing up.

Anyway, when I start dancing with Frank in the living room, when I nestle up to him and can feel his hand on the small of my back, stroking it in circles, sliding a little bit lower with every downward movement like I’m not supposed to notice he’s about to touch my bottom, I glance over at Ana-Clara and I see something in her face that wasn’t there before. She keeps scratching at her ankle as she watches me and Frank dance, shooting the odd sidelong glance at Boris, who’s still fast asleep. I can tell she’s got no idea what’s going on or what she’s supposed to make of it. And then Frank’s hand comes to rest on my backside and it makes me think of the frog that doesn’t react when the water in the pan beneath it is slowly heated. By this point I’m getting a bit turned on, but I’m not sure if it’s because of the man who’s pressing his pelvis up against mine or the fact that Ana-Clara is there watching us.

It’s not the first time I’ve seen that look of curiosity on Ana-Clara’s face, something that’s usually conspicuously absent from her limited repertoire of facial expressions. It was the day before yesterday. My parents invited Boris and Ana-Clara round for dinner. Dad and I had put the middle section of the dining table into place to accommodate the extra seating, and the two of them are sat down at the corner.

“It must be awful for you, coming somewhere as cold as this,” my mother says to Ana-Clara. “Apparently it’s 24 degrees in Lisbon right now.” Boris translates my mother’s remark. Ana-Clara asks him something else in Portuguese, and I can’t understand why it is she keeps looking at him all the time, instead of at my mother, who she ought to be talking to. Boris laughs at Ana-Clara’s question, and I get the feeling his laughter’s directed at me, or my family, or against the food.

“Not hungry anymore,” Matthis says. He’s always had a problem with food, ever since I can remember. My

father lifts an eyebrow.

“Ana-Clara’s not that keen on Germany,” Boris says. “She reckons it’s always freezing. The cold and the grey light are getting to her. It makes her feel depressed.”

“I’m not going to argue with you today. Empty your plate and have done with it. We’ve got guests,” my father says to Matthis.

“But she hasn’t eaten up either,” Matthis objects. I look at Ana-Clara, who’s put down her knife and fork after two bites. She hasn’t even tasted the roast lamb. All she’s done is listlessly skewer a few beans on her fork, and she’s holding it in her hand in a way that’s kind of odd.

“Doesn’t she like the food? Should we maybe get her something else?” My mother asks Boris. Boris translates the question for Ana-Clara, who mutters something back in Portuguese.

“No, she likes it fine,” says Boris, “it’s just that she’s just not that hungry right now.”

“I always thought you had to be on your best behaviour when you’re a guest in someone’s house. Isn’t it rude not to eat your dinner?” Matthis asks.

“OK, that’s enough,” my father says.

“Or what? Will I have to go to bed without dinner?”

As my father slowly pushes his chair back, I realise Matthis has said something that’s impressed me for the first time ever. My father gets up and walks around the table, and our heads turn to follow him as if they were mechanically connected. Nobody has the faintest idea what’s going to happen next. My father stops behind Matthis, and for a minute I wonder if he even knows what he’s up to himself. As far as I know he hasn’t slapped Matthis for ages—maybe a clip round the ear when he was a kid or a harsh grip on the arm when he was really stressed out. Matthis just sits there looking confused, alarmed by my father’s sudden proximity. He can’t decide whether to turn around to look at my father or just stare ahead in defiance.

It’s like I can see everything happening at once. My mother’s nervous glances flicking back and forth between us, focusing on everyone’s reactions. My father’s sense of impotence as to how he’s going to extricate himself from this situation with his pride intact, the involuntary twitches of Matthis’ head, Boris’s raised eyebrows.

Then Ana-Clara, whose face is wearing an expression of interest for the first time since I met her; she’s still looking at my father when he offers a crooked grin as he tries to make out he never intended to slap Matthis in the first place, who for his part suddenly decides to finish his dinner after all.

Boris’s character is fundamentally different to Ana-Clara’s. They say that opposites attract, but I reckon that’s crap. The term after the summer holidays was already two weeks in when Dr Frei walked into class with him. Boris had this ironic smile set in place all the time as she introduced him in English and informed us he’d been living in Portugal for the past ten years. She told him to call her Dr Free because it was forbidden to speak German in English class.

He spent that first break sitting on the outside stairs on his own, and I remember being impressed that he didn’t seem at all put out by it. Up till then I’d always made sure I never ended up alone at break times. It’s always a problem if the others see you hanging around on your own. It makes them think you’re a loser with no friends, so nobody wants to have anything to do with you. They give you a wide berth and it turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy, because then you end up losing all the friends you might have had as well. So it’s better to hang out with Babette and Theresa and listen to their crap than to be sitting around on your own. At least that’s what I thought until Boris came along. He made it look cool, just sitting there on his own. Mind you, no one joined him that first break time, but it was obvious they were impressed because everyone kept squinting over at him and laughing a bit too hard, like they wanted him to hear them.

Still, sleeping with a fifty-year-old garage door exporter just to piss off Ana-Clara would be taking things a bit too far. For a second I consider it, because I get the feeling that Frank's really up for it, and I guess I wouldn't really mind that much. The thing is he smells a bit funny. I don't know what it is, but it reminds me of Natalja and the way our house smells whenever she's been around, and I can never work out whether the smell comes from the cleaning products or from Natalja herself.

Besides, I don't fancy the idea of Boris coming into the room when Garage Door Man is lying on top of me. I don't want him witnessing that. And he'd know—Boris, I mean—he'd see right through me. He'd know why I was doing it and it'd be so embarrassing that I'd have to stop, and Garage Door Man would think he was the problem when in reality it has fuck-all to do with him, and he might get aggressive—or worse still start crying.

It's a good thing Boris is here even if he's out for the count. If Boris wasn't there, if it was just me and Ana-Clara, I'd almost have to shag Garage Door Man. I wouldn't be able to back out of it, I think, though maybe that sounds a bit strange. As it is I'm asking myself just what it is she's doing, sitting there in the living room next to a semi-comatose Boris. Somehow I get the impression she's not about to wake him up either, and that seems even weirder. If I was in her shoes, in Portugal with my Portuguese boyfriend, and his best friend disappeared into the bedroom of a fifty year old garage door exporter who's got his hand glued to her backside, then I'm sure I'd wake my boyfriend up and ask him if we shouldn't intervene in some way. What goes on in Ana-Clara's head, if there's anything going on in there at all, is a mystery to me, a total mystery. She's just sitting there on the sofa, staring out into nothing.

His phone rings while he's on top of me, trying part my legs with his knee while rubbing his half-erect penis against my thigh through his trousers and pushing my dress up. I'm pretty relieved, I have to say. He stops in his tracks, let's go of me and looks at his watch, which is far too big for his wrist. He's got a woman's wrists, I think to myself as he props himself up and looks around as if he's just woken up from some dream or other. He's sweating a bit and his hairline is all damp.

That ringing phone changes something. I'm not sure if I realised that then or made it up later, like some weird retrospective memory. But when that phone rang, it's like the whole tone changed. Like someone turned a knob and suddenly made me realise that the bass had been off the whole time. I'm not wearing a watch, and I don't want to ask Garage Door Man what the time is, but I reckon it must be three, half past, something like that.

I reckon most people get the really bad news over the phone, unless they're there to witness it first-hand. Like with doctors, for instance, when their receptionist phones and tells you to come round, and you ask why and they just repeat that you'd best come round, and you just know there's something up with your test results.

Or when a family member calls and you can tell before they even say anything. You can tell by the sobs or the uncontrolled breathing that something really awful's happened. And maybe the person on the other end of the phone can't talk and all they do is start crying really hard, and at some point or other you hear something that sounds like "Uncle Manfred" and then you know that Uncle Manfred is dead or in a coma or paralysed from the neck down or something, but either way something really bad has happened.

When Garage Door Man hangs up, he's wearing a blank expression, or no expression at all. He doesn't look at me properly. His eyes just pass over me like I was a piece of furniture. The bed, or a cupboard or the bedside table or something.

"You'd better go now. All of you," he says, still looking at me as if I was some kind of object. He's making a huge effort to control the tremor in his voice, and he's failing miserably.

I'd pulled down my dress while he was on the phone because I already knew that something was up. Garage Door Man had guessed it too, I could tell by his expression when he went to answer the phone. Now I've got the feeling that I've deliberately brought chaos down on his life, and it seems totally inappropriate that I'm still lying on his bed, the weight of my body pressing down into the mattress. I'm putting creases into the duvet and maybe losing a few strands of hair that Frank will find long after I'm gone. "What's going on? Is there something wrong?" I ask him. I get off the bed, tightening my ponytail that has come loose while we were lying on the bed. Frank's already walking out of the bedroom, and I think he really does want us out as quickly as possible, because he repeats what he's just said. "You'd better go now. All of you."

The CD is still playing in the living room, the one that sounds like Dire Straits but isn't. Frank's just standing there waiting for me to do something, as if I were somehow responsible for Ana-Clara and Boris, like I was their chaperone or something, which I guess I am in a way, because Ana-Clara's not getting any of this because she doesn't speak German and Boris is still out of it because he drank too many of those stupid schnapps miniatures.

"What happen?" Ana-Clara asks in English, and the fact that she can't even manage a simple English past tense annoys me so much that I almost correct her. But then I think fuck it, who cares? Let her talk all wrong or just shut up, it's not my problem.

"I don't know," I reply in English. "We have to leave."

I shake Boris by the shoulder, but he's totally pissed and it takes ages for him to open his eyes and focus, and then suddenly he's wide-awake, almost hyper-active, staring at me wide-eyed as if I've caught him in the middle of some dream or other.

"What's up? Is it do or die now?"

"We have to get out of here. Come on, let's go!" I tell him, and when I turn round to look at Garage Door Man, I see he's still in the same place, like he's rooted to the spot, and the tears are streaming down his face. I help Boris up and he sways a little, but at least he can stand on his own without help.

We walk out into the corridor past Garage Door Man, and I wonder if we should be leaving him on his own like this. Maybe he needs help or something. When I hear Ana-Clara and Boris opening the apartment door and walking out, I've got a sudden urge to take Garag... to take Frank in my arms and hug him. Then I think that's probably a bit embarrassing, because I don't even really know him and I've got no idea what's happened anyway.

"Can we... should we ... is there anything we can do for you? Do you need anything? Or... do you want me to stay with you?"

Garage Door Man shakes his head and starts to cry even harder.

"It's best you leave now. Go on," is all he manages, and I think to myself that this is the third time he's said it, so we'd really better make ourselves scarce.

"Good luck," I say quietly, and as soon as I say it I have to fight off the urge to start crying myself.

Boris and Ana-Clara are waiting outside for me when I leave the house. I can't believe how light it is, I hadn't noticed it back in the flat. It's weird how you only notice some things when you actually pay attention to them. How loud the birds are, for instance. You never notice them normally, then suddenly you start listening and wonder how you ever missed it all that time, when they're suddenly almost too loud to bear.

"What's up with that guy? Who is he anyway?" Boris asks me. The fresh air seems to have sobered him up a bit.

“No idea,” I reply. “All I know is he exports garage doors to Russia over the Urals. By road in the summer, by rail in the winter. The trucks can’t get through then, because the snow’s blocked the...”

Boris sends me a frown. He’s probably deciding whether that’s enough information or not.

“Yeah, okay, okay,” he says at last. “Or not, as the case may be. Whatever. Who cares.” He looks around. We’re surrounded by concrete flatblocks. Nothing else as far as the eye can see. There’s not a soul around, it’s like some kind of concrete wasteland.

“Where the fuck are we? Miles from home, I presume you realise that much.”

I nod.

“Probably like five kilometres or some shit like that.”

I nod again.

Boris shakes his head in irritation, trying to work out how we’re going to get ourselves home. Then he suddenly stops shaking his head and starts grinning instead.

“What the hell. We’re young, we’ve got a pair of legs each and we’re wearing shoes. We don’t export garage doors and our beds are just down the end of the lane. Let’s get going.”

Boris takes Ana-Clara’s hand, says three words to her in Portuguese, and we set off. Boris’s country lane turns out to be a short cut through the fields that starts just beyond the flatblocks. You can sense the sun’s about to rise from the way the sky is brightening over the fields.

Then, as we’re walking along, Boris and Ana-Clara hand in hand with me next to them and the birds making an infernal racket and the rising sun edging the clouds with pink, all of a sudden I feel Ana-Clara slide her hand into mine. She doesn’t look at me and I have no idea why she’s doing it.

But then I think to myself that you don’t always have to understand everything that’s going on.

II

“Hallig Hooge? Oh come on off it, it’s a shithole! Can’t we go to Barcelona instead?”

I don’t really care one way or another where we go for our class trip, but Babette is clearly desperate to go to Barcelona for some reason. It’s obvious she gets a kick out of saying “shithole”, and she’s not the least bit diffident about it either. She says it loud and clear, enjoying the sound of it as the word trips off her tongue.

“Bloody Hallig Hooge—there’s nothing there! Nothing but sheepshit and dykes and mudflats and that sort of crap. There’s nothing there! It’s a complete and utter shithole.”

Mr Franke offers Babette a smug grin. We don’t always give him an easy time and maybe that’s way he’s adopted that condescending classroom manner of his. It’s funny at times—as long as it’s not directed at you.

“Babette, I can see the point you’re trying to make, but I feel I must point out that your standpoint is not entirely coherent in ontological terms.”

Mr Franke is the only teacher who strictly adheres to the new rule that we are to be formally addressed. The others seldom bother or they just keep forgetting about it. Babette fixes Franke with an expression of disgust, because she’s got a good idea of what’s coming...

“Let me put it in the simplest possible terms for you, Babette. Where there is something, there cannot be nothing. So if a place features sheep excrement, mudflats and dykes, then we have three factors that deny the validity of your contention of a void at this location.”

“If, on the other hand, you are able to argue conclusively that you can simultaneously find nothing and something at the location of Hallig Hooge, then I will gladly reconsider my decision.”

He gives Babette a challenging look, waiting for her conclusive argument. Except of course he’s not really

waiting, he's just pretending to, because he knows there won't be one.

"Ha-ha, very funny," is all she has to say for herself.

"Oh dear, what a shame," Franke says. "I'd have been interested in hearing your counter-argument."

"Very funny," Babette says again.

The class falls silent as Franke savours his petty victory. He's about to go on and give us the talk about how we'll need waterproofs and wellington boots at Hallig Hooge, and how much pocket money we'll need, and how we're going to go on a long hike across the mudflats, when Boris raises a hand. Franke gives him the floor with that gracious nod of his. Franke wears his white hair blow-dried and parted to the side, and it always bobs up and down when he nods.

'Would you mind if I took you up on that?' Boris asks him.

Franke's eyes narrow a little. The whole class turns to look at Boris, and even those among us who reckon Boris is an arrogant little shit are impressed with him for just speaking up like that. I look at him too, just like everyone else, and I'm praying to a God I don't believe in that he'll really stick it to Franke.

When we discovered Marcel and Timo's secret, at first we couldn't believe that none of us had cottoned on before. You'd never have thought such a thing, not even where Marcel was concerned. Later, when I'd pretty much forgotten all about it, Boris said that we were all at least partly to blame, the whole class.

"It's the group mentality. It's obvious, really. It sees what it wants and ignores the rest. If someone puts someone else through hell, then of course it has something to do with the whole group."

Timo's not mean or vicious or anything, he's just one of these people you can't be bothered to have anything to do with. I can't really put my finger on it, but whenever you find yourself standing next to him you just get this overpowering urge to be somewhere else. I try to suppress it sometimes, because I think to myself that he hasn't done anything wrong and it seems unfair to turn my back on him for no good reason. It must be awful for him, but he's still not easy to be around. It's like you have to force your body to do things it doesn't want to.

Sometimes I watch Timo surreptitiously at break times. I've got a vision of him in my head now, standing in the schoolyard on an overcast day wearing his dark green anorak. Everything else is constant movement. Kids running around randomly, a bunch of them clustered by the pingpong table under the sycamores, others walking around in little groups. And then there's Timo. Just standing there in his green anorak with his head down, like he's trying to make himself invisible so that no one sees him there all friendless and alone. Eventually he takes a few steps in one direction, then stands still as if he's changed his mind, then heads off in another direction. Even from this distance I can tell by his body language, the scuff of his shoes, he's trying to be casual, like he's just strolling towards a certain group, just ambling over to join them as if by chance. When he gets there, he stands at a slight remove, as though he knows from experience what'll happen. And sure enough it does. The little gap in the group slowly closes in a way that's hard to describe. It's not as if it's something a particular member of the group does actively or consciously, it just happens. Like some unwritten rule, or an unspoken natural law. Maybe rejection is better than simple non-participation. Maybe provoking any kind of reaction is better than just standing there alone. But Timo stays where he is, standing next to the group until the bell rings and he can go back to his desk like all the others without being so conscious of his loneliness.

People like Timo are often really good at something, some academic subject like maths or physics for instance. But Timo is crap at everything. Every single subject, including sport. It's a miracle he's never

actually failed. He's always managed to scrape through by the skin of his teeth.

"The question you and Babette were discussing, in essence, is whether or not something can be simultaneously present and absent at a specific location, am I right?"

"Well you're certainly not wrong, Boris," says Franke, and Boris looks at him and nods.

"Okay, so last year you taught us about Erwin Schrödinger's philosophical conundrum, if you remember, also known as Schrödinger's Cat. If I understood it correctly, Schrödinger deals with the distinction between quotidian experience, which teaches us certain things, and quantum mechanics, which comprises situations in which two mutually contradictory states can coexist. So if we think of Schrödinger's metaphorical box as standing on an island such as Hallig Hooge, we can go on to imagine that box containing an atomic nucleus that will trigger its disintegration within a specific time frame. When that box disintegrates, it will destroy Hallig Hooge and everything that's there—the dykes, the mudflats, the sheepshit, the whole shebang, yes? But until that box is destroyed, Hallig Hooge remains, both there and not there to anyone standing outside it. So from the perspective of this classroom, specifically from Babette's viewpoint, there is simultaneously something and nothing there. And only by travelling to Hallig Hooge can we verify its continuing actuality, which appears to be at odds with your own appreciation of ontology."

When Boris is done, he looks at Franke just as calm as you like, and I'm really impressed. Like a slow-motion tennis match, all heads turn towards Franke. Everyone wants to know how he's going to climb out of this particular hole.

Sure, to start with Boris's voice had an edge to it. It faltered a bit and you could tell he was a bit nervous, but then it firmed up. I wouldn't mind betting his pulse rate was up a bit too, because it wasn't just Franke who was staring at him. He had the whole class gawping at him too. But by the end of his little speech, he was the essence of cool, his voice calm and steady.

As for Franke, he just stands there looking at Boris. Then he looks out the window, and there's this weird silence, because nobody knows what's going to happen now. Then he looks back at Boris.

"Hmmm," is all he can muster. Then the bell rings, but nobody moves. No one jumps up and runs outside like they usually do.

Then Franke says "Hmmm" again, and there's another pause, and then we all get the feeling that he's not going to say anything else. There's nothing more to come. He starts packing up his stuff, and when we eventually go out into the corridor, we're left with an odd sense of dissatisfaction, a sense of unfulfilment, like when they cut the kiss scene from a romantic film. I keep thinking there has to be more than this. This can't be the end of it, surely.

After the break, Mrs Schnoor comes into the classroom wearing a serious expression, and at first we think something must have happened, or someone's done something and we need to have one of those class discussions, like after Marcel polished off half a bottle of vodka and they found him passed out on the stairs. Course, he was a bit unlucky that the headmaster —of all people—came up the stairs just then, because the headmaster hardly ever uses the stairs. In fact he rarely appears anywhere beyond the confines of his office. So they were pretty much duty-bound to kick up a stink about it, and we were all forced to sit through one of those ghastly two hour "interactive lessons" on the evils of drink and drugs and how our brains hadn't finished developing and we could get all sorts of drink and drugs-related psychoses and depression and how at worst we'd end up committing suicide.

But all Mrs Schnoor says is that we were going to do the Holocaust now. Of course she doesn't put it that way. She tells us we'll be looking at a dark chapter of German history and it won't be much fun but it's very important that we know about it so that nothing like that ever happens again.

Boris hasn't mentioned Ana-Clara since she left. I don't really know why. Whenever I ask him how she is he just says "fine".

Maybe he wants to spare me the gory details because he's twigged that I'm in love with him—although I sometimes wonder if I still am. Maybe I've got over it and just haven't noticed yet.

So now here I am in the basement of some semi-detached house at the party of someone neither of us knows. I think his name's Sebastian, but it might be Alexander or something like that. Either way, it's packed out and it's boiling hot, and there's far too many people wanting to play their own music on the stereo. I can't believe a basement can get this hot, everyone's hair is plastered down with sweat and there's only one barred window which we're not allowed to open because of the neighbours.

Upstairs two girls we don't know either have stripped naked and wrapped themselves in clingfilm. They've sprayed each other with blue dye and they're out on the veranda taking selfies. I only saw it from a distance and I've no idea why they've done it. Maybe it's a bet or something, but either way the girls look pretty crap because bits of their flesh are bulging out where the clingfilm has squashed and squeezed it in really weird ways.

"Yeah, maybe, but it's not like I think about it all the time. But you know, once you do start thinking about it—really seriously and honestly, I mean—there's not a lot to be said for it, but then quite honestly I can't think of any real reason against it either."

I think Boris sometimes enjoys being deliberately provocative, coming up with topics that really don't fit the situation. I like it too. It's like we turn things into something they're not. Like we turn normality into something that's completely opposite or at least something totally different.

We danced for a bit, then some idiot stuck his mobile into the MP3 slot and the system starts blaring out stuff that you just can't dance to, which is why me and Boris find ourselves standing at the edge of the crowd, leaning against the whitewashed basement wall. The wall is running with condensation like the room itself is sweating, but at least it's a bit cooler than the air surrounding us. And while we're standing there and almost everyone has given up dancing to the undanceable music, Boris started talking about the pros and cons of suicide from a philosophical perspective.

The music is deafening, so Boris has to put his lips to my ear to make himself heard, and I'm enjoying the way our sweaty cheeks are touching and I can feel his breath in my ear. Some guy bumps into us and our hair rubs together, making a sound like fine sandpaper, only less grating. I like that too, and I have to concentrate really hard to listen to what he's saying, and while he's talking I'm trying to make our cheeks rub together again as inconspicuously as possible.

"Suicide – what kind of word is that anyway?" he's saying. "Killing yourself. Self-murder. What's that all about? You can't be a murderer and a victim at the same time. You're making a choice to accept death freely because you've had enough. Instead of hanging around anxiously waiting for death to pick you up, you're making a conscious choice. It shows that as sentient beings we can triumph over nature. And is it really worth clinging to that pitiful spark of life anyway? Those few short years? It's ludicrous. Farcical! Christ, it's not as if anything earth-shattering's going to happen, is it? And anyway we're all going to die sooner or later. You can't really come up with a reason against it, can you, not if you're honest? That is unless you're afraid of death, or just happy to go on living."

The music stops abruptly because someone's finally had enough of it and pulled the plug on it. There's a loud buzzing noise because they've forgotten to turn down the volume. In the seconds before another phone gets plugged in the whole cellar vibrates nervously to the tense buzzing.

"Hey!" someone yells. Just outside the door a beer bottle shatters on the ground and two girls let out

hysterical screams.

“Come on, be honest! If you really think about it there’s no convincing reason, not if you really think about it” Then a new song kicks in. It’s been played before, but suddenly everyone is really into it. Some kids start shrieking and in the middle of the room others start pogo-ing up and down although it’s still only the intro and the song hasn’t even really begun. Boris is still intent on his topic and now he moves his cheek away from mine so he can look me in the face. He really wants an answer.

“Yes,” I say, “I can come up with a reason.”

I can tell Boris didn’t expect me to say that. He raises his eyebrows again in that way he does sometimes.

“Go on then,” he shouts over the music, “I’m all ears.”

I push my face into the space between his head and the cellar wall. One cheek is cold against the wall and the other is hot against Boris’s face. Boris’s cheek is a bit rough because he’s started shaving although his beard hasn’t really grown in yet. I’m a bit worried I’m going to sound stupid and Boris will laugh at me, but then I think what the hell, I’ve got to say something because my mouth is so close to his ear it’s almost touching.

“The light and the sound,” I tell him. I’m not sure if Boris has understood, if he actually heard me, because I didn’t say it as loud as I meant to.

But he’s understood all right. He pulls his head back so he can look me in the face and I try to do my best to stare him out. My words have stuck in his mind, and he doesn’t laugh at me. Instead he’s trying to work out how to respond. I can tell he’s actually about to say something, but then he changes his mind and just smiles and lifts his arms up, stretching them as high as he can until he’s nearly touching the low white basement ceiling. He spins on his own axis, pirouetting in this really weird way, like he’s a flamenco dancer with castanets in his hands or something. He offers me another grin, then elbows his way through the crowd of dancing people until he reaches the middle of the low room and starts jumping up and down with all the others, his arms still lifted high in the air, and I worry that he’ll crack his head against the basement ceiling.