

Translated excerpt

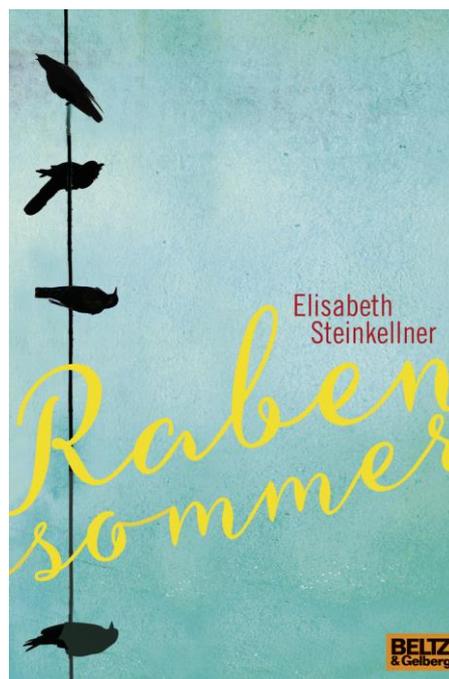
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Rabensommer

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Raven Summer

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One from the newspaper, two from the Internet. Three ads, three apartments. That's doable in an afternoon. I've got a map of the city and all the apartment managers' addresses and telephone numbers. Only Niels is missing. This morning he suddenly flaked out on me. The alarm clock rang at seven and Niels just rolled over in bed and muttered: "Would you mind going alone?" Me: "What's up with that? Yeah, I mind!" But he didn't say another word. At first I was like, huh? And then furious. So furious I grabbed my books from his window sill, packed them in my bag and left his room without saying a word. That meant I'm moving out. Right on the spot. Of course, Niels figured that one out and sent me the first message five minutes later. From then on in twenty minute intervals. *Sorry* and *I love you* and blah, blah, blah.

I'm leaning against a low ledge outside the front door of a large apartment house. The first one on my list. I've counted thirty-four doorbells. The apartment is on the second floor. Pre-war building, facing the courtyard, one room, extra kitchen, toilet and shower, hardwood floors, gas central heating, three years maximum. Sounds good. And the price is right, too. But where's the landlady? It's hot and there's no shade anywhere in sight where I could escape to. It would be nice to sit. I take a seat on the steps outside the front door and watch the people passing. Try to catch snippets of conversation that drift over and imagine who they are. What type of work they do, where they live, how old they are. It distracts me from waiting, at least a little. For a second, I wish I'd have taken my father up on his offer to go with me. "I can handle it alone," I said to him, "and anyway Niels is coming with me." Except that now Niels didn't come. And the landlady still isn't there.

There's a bakery a few doors down. I dragged myself over there, but hesitated before going in. What if the landlady comes right when I leave? But I go

inside anyway and order a coffee. I stroll back to my steps with the paper cup in hand. Every two minutes, I take my phone out of my pocket and check the time. Thirty minutes after the time we had set to meet, I call the landlady. She answers the phone, I ask her if she is running late and she says: “Oh, yeah, the apartment. It’s taken. “What do you mean taken?” I ask, but she says: “Sorry,” and hangs up. For the second time today, I’m like, huh? Did I miss something? Was I supposed to read some kind of guide like Apartment Hunting for Dummies? Or is that how things work?

I’m sitting on the steps, drinking my lukewarm coffee, watching the people pass me by, but I don’t really see them. Suddenly, I feel very lonesome and very naive. I keep sitting there even though the cup is empty. Eventually, my phone rings, I take it out of my pocket, reject Niels’ call, get up, and walk to the tram. Apartment number two is located in an upscale area, whatever that means. I don’t know any of the neighborhoods in this city, but August has two older brothers who both live here, which is sort of why he knows. Snobby area, August had said and wondered why the rent is so cheap.

There’s lots of green, that’s the first thing you notice. When I arrive at the correct apartment house, a small group of people is standing in front, and my keen presence of mind tells me we’re all here to see the same apartment. I hadn’t expected that either, a group showing. I thought it was just for me alone. That feeling of being naive comes back immediately, but there’s no time for it to spread because the landlord is trotting over, a guy with snapping heels, black jacket and a glitzy watch. It was hate at first sight.

His apartment is a whole different story: it’s full of charming nooks and crannies, stucco ceilings, French doors and surprisingly it even has a small balcony that could fit a small bistro table and a chair. I already see myself leaning against the balcony railing, a cigarette in one hand, a newspaper in the other, a towel

wound like a turban around my damp, freshly washed hair, very French, très chic, très casual, très student. I think the apartment is great and I want it, just like the rest of the apartment-hunters.

Two young men, Africans, turned to the landlord right away and declared they wanted the apartment and could sign a contract immediately. The guy grunted contemptuously, “Well, why doesn’t that surprise me.” He calls everybody over and says a few words about the apartment and then wants to know who we all are, what we do, and so on. A woman in a headscarf is standing with her 6ish-year-old son. She asks if she can get the info in English, the landlord says in German: “If you don’t speak German, how could you read the ad?” To another mother with her baby in a sling, he says: “The apartment isn’t right for you, there’s no elevator.” The woman wants to respond, but the landlord has turned to a group of three young men and asks what they are studying. All three of them say, “Music.” “What instruments?” he asks. “Piano,” “voice” and “guitar,” they say. “That’s loud,” he says. Then it’s my turn and I say I want to study architecture. (I don’t have a clue how I came up with that.) He doesn’t bother asking the two Africans anything. He makes me want to puke. He collects our telephone numbers and says he’ll contact us. Show’s over.

We leave the dream apartment and slowly trickle, one by one, down the four flights of stairs. An odd collective. Everybody wants the apartment, so in a sense, we could see each other as competitors, but it seems our mutual loathing of the guy has united us. Nonetheless, we don’t say a word to each other and as soon as we step outside the building, everybody walks in opposite directions without saying good-bye. I feel queasy. I hadn’t imagined things could get even worse.

I discover a bench, sit down, pull my legs up, and rest my forehead on my knees. Ten deep breaths and everything will be okay. My aunt once gave me that tip. “Take ten deep breaths, she said, “it helps in any situation.” My phone rings

before I finish the ten rounds. Niels, I assume, and am so bent out of shape after all the experiences of the last few hours, that I forgot I was still mad at him. But it's August. "Niels told me you aren't answering your phone," he explains. It bugs me that August is interfering, so I just grunt, "hmm." "Anyway, I'm in the city, too," he says after a long pause, "Wanna meet?" "What?" I shouted upset, "You're here? Since when? And why are you only telling me this now?" "Chill," he laughs and that gets me even madder. "I'm at a friend's, want to come over?" He tells me the address but I don't really listen or write it down. "I'll think about it," I say coolly, I still have another house to look at." "Okay," says August in a good mood, "then come by afterwards." I hate him and hang up.

Ten seconds later the phone rings again, the number isn't saved in my contacts, no idea who's calling. I answer and it's the landlord. He tells me he has chosen me to rent the apartment. I feel as if I was ambushed, I'd expected a decision next day at the earliest, and now I'm battling with my conscience because I know it would be really lame to rent an apartment from a racist. I stammer something like, I need to think about it, I'll call you back, but he says: "Got it, if you're not sure, I'll give the apartment to somebody else." Then he hangs up. I hate the whole world.

I finally force myself to think clearly and make a list in my head. The biggest ass is definitely the landlord. Second place is tied by Niels and August, ex aequo. But then that's the entire list. I want to call Ronja, but I'm too out of it to explain everything. I give the ten breaths another go, and try to persuade myself the method works.

Actually, I have absolutely no desire to look at another place. I think I've had enough for today. Also, the next appointment isn't for another three hours and I don't know what to do with myself in the meantime. I dig out the slip of paper about the third apartment. I had made the appointment by e-mail, but there's also a

telephone number. And a name: Esra. I call and say, unfortunately, something's come up and I have to drive home earlier than expected. Esra says, "If you still have a bit of time, you could stop by now, it's no problem. Luckily, I got home early." I hesitate a second and say, "Really, it's okay? Great, thank you," and pinch myself in the thigh, because I'm mad at myself for not daring to stick with the lie and go home as planned.

Half an hour later I'm standing in Esra's apartment. Esra's apartment is nice. Esra is nice. Esra is more than nice, she is super nice. It smells of coffee she brewed in a small silver espresso pot. "I only have the one-cup size," she says, and makes my coffee first and then one for herself. After five minutes in Esra's apartment, I wish she will choose me to take over her apartment, after fifteen I wish she would be my very best friend in this city.

She shows me the apartment in no time. "Bedroom, living room, office, bathroom and kitchen," says Esra and grins because it's all just a single room. Kitchenette, shower and sink are separated from the bed, couch and table by a large bookshelf. The apartment is on the top floor, the kitchen window is small, the bedroom window is large, close to the sky, I like this feeling. "The toilet is in the corridor," says Esra, "but that's not bad, believe me. Did you know that around the beginning of the 20th century, they first started building toilets inside apartments and people were against it? They thought toilets in the corridor were a lot cooler." She makes me laugh, and suddenly I also think having a toilet in the corridor is totally cool.

Esra is eight years older than me, but I immediately feel close to her anyway. She is moving into her boyfriend's place, and she told the landlady she would be happy to find her a new tenant. I don't need any time to think it over, I know I want the apartment. "Okay," says Esra, "the owner is an elderly lady who lives here in the house, we can go down to her afterwards and you can sign

everything.” I nod and I’m happy. Esra offers, “The kitchen will stay here and I can leave you the couch if you want.” I do. I wrap my hands around the coffee mug and the bad mood vanishes into thin air. I think I’ve made my peace with this city and its residents.

I ask Esra about the university, pubs, cafés, parks and any other nice places she knows of. She takes a piece of paper and begins writing down everything she can think of. She starts doodling curlicues and patterns on the paper while thinking, and it looks like a work of art by the time she’s finished. I already know I’ll hang that list where I can see and admire it as often as possible.

The doorbell rings, and Esra says, “Oh it’s Karim.” And so I meet her brother, drink another coffee and after two hours, I feel like I’ve found something like a new family.

I write Niels a message that I am renting an apartment as of August 1st. And when he calls ten seconds later, I even answer and bask in his apologies and declarations of love. And since I’m in high spirits, I even call August and tell him I’ll stop by. Twenty minutes later, I’m standing outside the address August gave me on the phone, it’s on the *Vogelsangasse*. The gate is unlocked, I slip into the cool interior of the house. I walk up to the first floor, search for door 4, and find it ajar. I knock lightly and step inside. Everything is quiet. I shout “Hello,” but nobody comes to meet me, there’s no music anywhere, no voices. I slip off my sandals, take a few more steps and look inside the nearest room, the open door is inviting. Workroom. Desk, chair, several stacks of books on the floor, a withered palm, large pictures on the walls, one with a man playing saxophone, another with a female nude, and something abstract on the other. When I shift my weight, the floor creaks under my feet, and it startles me, it feels as if I was caught in the act. I quickly take a few steps back, and end up in the hallway again. I shout one more time, “Hello.”

Behind the next door, I find a small, messy kitchen, behind it another bedroom with a disheveled bed. August is in the living room, sleeping on the couch. I walk over to him, grab him by the shoulder and shake him a little. He murmurs something, then opens his eyes and says: “Oh, Juli, you’re here.” He sits up, points to the bottle of red wine on the coffee table and asks: “Want some?” The whole scene feels a little strange, but I nod yes for some wine, because I’m in a special mood and I want to toast to my new apartment. He pours us wine in two used glasses on the table, and I have no idea whose apartment I am sitting in or whose glass I’m drinking from.

“Where’s your friend?” I ask, and August says, “He had to get away, he’ll be back tomorrow,” I raise my eyebrows inquisitively. “I’ve got his keys,” says August, but I’m thinking that’s not really much of an explanation. “And who is he,” I insist, “How do you know him?” “He’s a friend of my brother’s,” he says, “I’ve been coming here a lot lately.” “Oh,” I say, and assume that’s probably why he’s been disappearing so often these last few weeks.

August gets up and walks to the stereo, I look around. There are lots of pictures on the white walls here, too, a bunch of wooden crates with records on the floor, a large string instrument in the corner. “Is that a cello?” I ask, and August says: “No, it’s a double bass. Rabe is a musician.” “Rabe?” I ask, and August says: “Yeah, Rabe, that’s his name.” It occurs to me that his street *Vogelsangasse* [Birdsong Street] fits perfectly.

The needle on the record makes a light crackling noise. Then I hear a flute or something. The amplifiers are huge, and every note sounds as if an entire orchestra is sitting right next to me on the sofa. “What’s that?” I ask. “Edvard Grieg, Peer Gynt,” says August as naturally as if classical music had always been his passion. It makes me laugh. “You’re nuts, when did you start listening to that stuff?” “Just wait, that’s really cool,” he says. “I got an apartment,” I say. He:

“Congratulations!” Then we toast and drink! I sink into the soft couch and just listen to this Peer Gynt, whoever that is. The windows are wide open, the entire *Vogelsanggasse* can probably hear. It will be a balmy evening, I think, and I’m looking forward to all the balmy evenings that I will spend here in this city. I take a closer look at the room we’re sitting in - high ceilings, large windows, no curtains, sparsely furnished, charming disorder - and imagine myself in my new apartment, sitting and smoking, the window open, but higher up than it is here, closer to the sky.

August also kicks back, we’re just sitting there and staring and that’s all we need, it’s easy with August. Every so often, the soft sound of the leather couch creaks whenever one of us reaches for our glass. We sit for a while, a long while, no idea how long, while the shadows outside grow longer.

At some point, August rolls a joint, he takes the grass out of a plastic bag lying on the coffee table. “What kind of guy is Rabe” I ask, “does he let just anybody come here and help themselves to all his stuff? Red wine, grass, record collection, help yourself, take whatever you want, make yourself right at home?” I notice my tone sounds aggressive and it startles me. August looks at me surprised, he also noticed. Then he grins wryly and says, “Rabe is just cool.” Emphatically. And after a pause even more emphatically: “And I’m not just anybody.” Something begins to churn inside of me. “I’ve been coming here a lot lately,” he says, not looking up. He lets the sentence to take effect as he rolls the paper filled with tobacco and grass between his fingers adeptly, licks the edge with the tip of his tongue and seals it. Then he looks me straight in the eye. It’s churning like crazy, and I ought to know by now what's going on here. But I don’t want to. Not now. I look away. “Rabe turned twenty-eight yesterday, we celebrated a little, that’s the reason for the expensive wine and the grass,” August continues. Okay, I think, okay, okay. He wants me to know. But then at least I want to hear it point blank

and I won't be satisfied with a vague hint. "Come on, tell me, what up with this Rabe," I push him, and without intending it, my voice sounds a little too sharp again. August sticks the joint between his lips, strikes a match, the tip of the paper burns, he takes a drag, it crackles, my phone rings. I don't move. It's ringing, ringing, and then it stops. I suddenly notice the music has stopped too, probably for quite a while now and I hadn't even noticed. "Well, you know," says August, "we're ... together." "You and Rabe?" I ask, and the question comes out too hastily and a tad too loud. The blood rushes through my veins. "Yes," says August and has this wry grin on his lips. I want to look at him, hold his gaze, but I can't manage to do it. Instead I look at my empty glass and reach for it anyway. Press the pause button for a second, I need to make sense out of this: Did August ever mention he was together with somebody? Can't remember. I always knew he slept in strange beds sometimes, which I admittedly had believed were girls' beds, even though I never really knew for sure. Like so much in August's life that I never knew about. Because a part of him was always elusive and August was never one to brag about his nocturnal adventures the next day. But together with somebody, no, he was never together with somebody. Hit play again. I'm still holding the empty glass in my hand, put it back down again, I'm obviously totally out of it. My phone rings again, I fish it out of my bag, get up and walk into the hallway.

My mother wants to know how the apartment hunt went. I give her the short version, I can hardly concentrate on my words and my tongue is heavy. She is genuinely happy for me, and I kind of feel bad for getting rid of her so quickly. Tell her I'm taking the next train, but I'm going straight to Niels and will come home tomorrow, and I hope my mother doesn't realize that I'm totally out of it.

Then I go to the bathroom, because I can't think of anything better to do. I sit, lay my head on my knees, try to think clearly. I want to make sense out of what I have just heard. Want to understand why I would have preferred not to have

heard it. I suddenly recall the tingling feeling that came over me, when I saw August lying asleep on the couch, his T-shirt hiked up so that his navel was showing. There was this butterfly feeling in my stomach, I think, and I'm about to put two and two together. But then I stop thinking because my head is spinning.

At some point, I hear August's footsteps in the hall and some noises from the next room, kitchen cupboards opening and closing, a dull thud from the refrigerator door shutting, faucet on, water rushing, faucet off. A few seconds later a faint knock on the bathroom door. No idea how long I sat there. Must have been quite a long time if August thought he needed to knock. I drag myself to my feet, unlock the door and open it. August is standing there, we look at each other, sweetly, trusting. And then we hug. Pretty firmly, pretty long, it just happens, and I finally stop asking myself what it's all about. Somehow August understands better how I am feeling right now than I do, and I'm glad that at least one of us is on top of things.

He takes me by the hand, leads me into the kitchen, pulls out a chair and pushes me gently onto it. He puts a glass of milk in front of me. I feel like a little girl. August sits across from me with a glass of milk too. "Totally awesome, this moment," he says, and I'm grateful. Considering how confused we *both* are, and how we don't really have a clue how life is supposed to work, and don't know what's in store for us. And happy that he finally starts talking on his own and that I don't have to ask him again. "The thing with Rabe has been going on for a few weeks," he says. I nod, staring at the milk. He hesitates, is silent. Finally: "Oh, Juli, no idea how to describe it, it's so different than usual. It's like a whole new life. More real. One that has left all the kid stuff behind." I notice that my hands are shaking. "So we're just kid stuff for you," I interrupt him. He looks at me, I can't figure out the meaning of his gaze, "No," he says calmly. And after a while, once again. "No," He puts his head in his hands, closes his eyes, rubs his face. He

apparently doesn't quite know how to explain it. I think I understand anyway. He continues talking anyway: "I can come and go whenever I want. I can get up in the morning and walk to the stove naked and make coffee. There are no parents in the bedroom next door, nobody you have to hide noises from. Everything is so natural with Rabe. So grown up." "Right, I get it," I say, and realize it still sounds hostile. August looks at me a bit at a loss. Probably doesn't understand why I can't just be happy for him. I am, in a way. And it means a lot to me that he trusts me and is so open with me. But there is something else that puts a damper on it. I remember how we looked at each other the other day at the river. And the sizzle. And now I have to wonder if I was just making it all up. And August had never felt the same as I had. Whether it had actually ever happened, all those moments of being secretly attracted, all the side glances you suddenly sense and realizing who is doing the looking. And then you look, look at each other, maybe three seconds, but those three seconds are a lifetime, a different life you could be leading. That we could lead, August and I, if I weren't together with Niels.

"Are you in love with Rabe?" I ask, and August seems pensive. "Yes," he says. I nod, somehow apathetically, I think. "Do you want some more milk?" says August, and I nod again, or maybe I still am.