

Translated excerpt

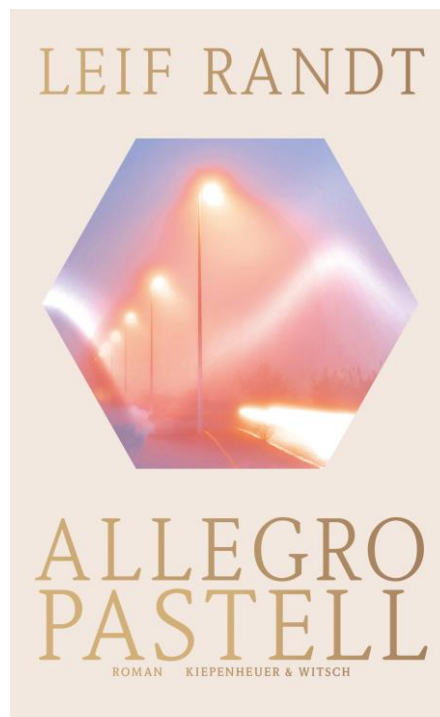
Leif Randt
Allegro Pastell

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Phase One

I

Maundy Thursday, 29 March 2018. The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof was flooded with mild evening sunlight, and the passengers waiting on platform 9 cast long shadows. At 18:30, Tanja Arnheim arrived on the 375 express from Berlin, punctual to the minute. When Jerome Daimler, who was holding a paper bag of fresh pastries, saw her get off from somewhere near the restaurant car, he wondered for a moment whether he should walk up the platform to meet her, but then decided it looked better if he just stayed where he was. Tanja's straight hair was waxed flat against her head and tucked behind her ears. She was wearing headphones and wheeling her small suitcase straight towards Jerome without seeing him. Jerome couldn't help but smile, and when Tanja finally spotted him among the milling passengers, she beamed as well, which was always something of a revelation for Jerome; you might assume Tanja Arnheim was someone whose expression never changed. And then, suddenly: lively, shining eyes, straight teeth. Tanja took off her headphones, and they kissed.

"How's it going – are you hungry?" That was a question Jerome didn't really have to ask; Tanja was usually hungry, and after a four-hour train journey she was sure to be.

"I ate in the restaurant car. The ravioli was actually okay."

They kissed again.

“Do you want to go straight home? Or shall we get a drink somewhere around here?” Jerome winked. And Tanja winked, too.

“Let’s have a drink at home.”

They walked hand in hand towards the U4. In the past, it had been a rare thing for Jerome to hold a girlfriend’s hand as they walked through crowds. But with Tanja, he no longer thought twice about it. A small queue had formed in front of a stall selling freshly squeezed fruit juices, and there were still customers visiting the enormous paper shop next to the Burger King to buy glossy magazines.

On her last visit, Tanja had told him that she thought it was much more fun to send short videos and photos from the periphery than from the capital city, which everyone had seen. She often took fast trains across Germany, Austria and Switzerland for work, and she tried to make at least one long-distance trip a year as well. She thought a lot of people wasted their potential by not leaving their own little worlds often enough. Jerome had agreed with her.

In the busy U-Bahn carriage they sat side by side and kissed with their eyes closed. Jerome was infatuated with the role of the blissfully happy heterosexual partner. One moment he was turning the eastbound U4 into his own personal movie set, and the next he forgot his surroundings completely. During a pause in the kissing, he placed his right arm around Tanja’s comparatively broad shoulders with an extravagant gesture, and gave her a gentle smile. He realised that he didn’t have full control over his facial expressions, and took that as a good sign. Jerome liked the thought that, if he could see himself from the outside, here on the U4, he might find himself unbearable. Liking a thought that would unsettle other people was typical of the new Jerome, who now drew a

playful line between an inner personality that only he himself could know, and an outer personality assembled from qualities that other people attributed to him. He could recognise his outer personality in photos and in the mirror, where he automatically saw himself through other people's eyes, through their assumptions and associations. His inner personality was something he felt most strongly when he closed his eyes once a day to pretend he was meditating. In the past eleven months, he hadn't once achieved a state he would have described as *classically meditative* – he had no interest in emptying his mind – but he still found his attempts at meditation worthwhile. He believed that the voice that spoke within him then, which reminded him of his laptop's read-aloud function, was the voice of his inner personality. Since Jerome had come to know this voice, he'd almost stopped worrying about how other people saw him, and so there was nothing to stop him from occasionally sporting conspicuous accessories, like the orange Oakleys from 1999 that he'd worn the Friday evening before last.

Jerome was surprised to see that comparatively few passengers in the U4 were looking at their phones. A teenage girl was staring at Tanja. She was noticeably well made-up. "*Do you think she follows you on Insta?*" Jerome whispered. Tanja had developed a sure sense for the attention of strangers. "*She just likes my shoes,*" she said. Since Tanja's short novel *NovoPanopticon* had been published three and a half years ago, the odd person here and there who was interested in art had started to recognise her face. Her book was about four male friends who have a meaningful virtual reality experience in the dormitory of a disused rural school – and so, among other things, she had been invited onto Markus Lanz's talk show as an expert in VR. Tanja had accepted the

misunderstanding with thanks, but once she was on the show, she'd pointed out that she only knew as much about VR as anyone else who had looked up the term. This was either coquettish and arrogant or refreshingly honest, depending on who you asked. Liam, the main character in Tanja's miniature novel, creates a mindfulness VR, through which his friends increasingly manage to control their addiction to sexual validation – at least until a jealous ex-boyfriend hacks the system and starts playing the protagonists off against one another. Jerome had laughed a great deal as he was reading it. He had only read the numerous critiques of the book once he'd got to know Tanja personally. It seemed that a lot of different people had found a lot of different things in *NovoPanopticon*. A few fans even went so far as to say that reading it had changed their lives. And those who didn't like the book seemed weirdly proud of not liking it; a distaste for something that had been meaningful to other people gave them an obscure sense of superiority. Two women had written essays criticising the fact that Tanja was a woman writing about men. And there was an article by a junior professor which said that Tanja Arnheim, whose facial features were repeatedly described as *striking*, was a kind of icon for gay academics between the ages of twenty and forty-five.

Jerome had parked his one-year-old rented Tesla at the Kruppstraße U-Bahn station, not far from the Hessen Center – an indoor shopping mall on the outskirts of the city, which held countless, largely positive childhood memories for Jerome. He had often gone for Chinese food there with his mother at the start of the school holidays, though the Chinese restaurant was now a thing of the past. Jerome thought he'd last had lunch in the dimly-lit restaurant with the aquarium in 2004. It

was a place from another age, and yet Jerome's memories of it were very much alive. During Tanja's last visit, they had wandered through the Hessen Center together, and he'd talked to her about how much the mall had changed, and the extent to which these changes reflected a transformation of consumer behaviour in general. In the 1990s, a visit to a suburban shopping centre still had a certain attraction even for well-off city-dwellers, which meant that the Hessen Center was able to house more upmarket boutiques, as well as restaurants you wanted to spend more than half an hour in. In the course of his monologue, Jerome had uttered the words *crispy sweet-and-sour duck* in a way that suggested a kind of burning nostalgia, and as he was speaking, it occurred to him that he sometimes told Tanja things that weren't necessarily of any interest to her. Tanja had replied that this was precisely what she liked about him. So few people, she said, dared to talk about genuine memories, since by their nature those stories were short on punchlines – and she thought this was part of a structural problem that was closely tied to the global economy. “*But my boyfriend Jerome Daimler is evidently immune to problems of this sort,*” she said in the Hessen Center, smiling at Jerome. Jerome felt a warm sensation in his belly and kissed Tanja on the lips.

Jerome had never felt immune at any point in his life. He had always been preoccupied with the world around him. But in the Noughties, when he was in his early to mid-twenties, other people's concerns had begun to weigh even heavier on him. When he used to see a mother arguing with her child, he would first consider how he would react as a child, and shortly thereafter, what arguments he would make as a mother. He'd found considering both these things debilitating. But now Jerome didn't think about anything when he saw a mother and child

arguing. He had the confidence to distance himself from these situations, though without sacrificing empathy – quite the reverse: he now found it easier to understand other people's troubles, he was fairer and kinder, but he no longer suffered along with them. Jerome always reminded himself of this improvement in his general attitude towards life when he was on the point of getting nostalgic. Nostalgia was just a sad reflex that sprang from a lack of ideas – his mother had told him something along these lines, in English, a little over ten years ago.

Jerome would have liked to know how many Teslas were on the roads in the Rhine-Main area, but he'd never attempted to research it – he wasn't quite that keen to know. He had already been given a customer loyalty discount at Jenny Köhler's Electric Rental, a new institution on the Hanauer Landstraße, although this was only the third time he'd rented a car there. Coloured pennants in the American style fluttered above its car park, and the company was staffed exclusively by young women in loose, sometimes oil-smeared uniforms. From the Tesla's rear-view mirror hung a green air-freshener tree, printed with the loops and flourishes of Jenny Köhler's signature. Jerome didn't even consider moving the air freshener from his field of vision. He liked using things exactly as they were presented to him. In the same way, he'd always been a fan of subletting furnished rooms, and of restaurants whose menus consisted of just a few regularly changing dishes. For a long time, he'd misconstrued this attitude as modesty, but it was rooted in a longing for order and structure, which to some degree had also sparked his interest in design. Jerome believed the drive to design was closely tied to the compulsion to put things in order. And when everything was already specified and therefore couldn't be put in order, it came as a

huge relief. Jerome was able to trace most of his characteristics back to his own biography – even as a child, he had liked to line his toys up on the rug – but he wasn't a fan of classic psychological approaches in general. The facts of his life were easy to state: Jerome Daimler, freelance web designer, born in November 1982 in the Holy Spirit Hospital, Frankfurt am Main, grew up a few kilometres away in Maintal, studied in Düsseldorf and The Hague, got his first job in Offenbach, now once again resident in Maintal.

They didn't hit any traffic during the short journey along the A66. The Tesla's grey and white interior smelled the way new cars always used to. Tanja connected her phone to the stereo via Bluetooth, and played her Spotify playlist of the week, which, as so often, Jerome liked more than he thought he would. *"Good song,"* he said of one melancholy number. *"That's Bladee."* Tanja checked. *"Yes. The track's called 'Numb/Beverly Hills'."*

In the passenger seat, Tanja was now reading the Wikipedia entry on Bladee and looking at pictures of him. *"Swedish, born 1994. Most of the photos of him are well-staged, and a few really aren't. Seems like a nice guy."* Jerome had mentioned to Tanja before that music by younger artists generally did more for him than stuff by people who were his own age or older. *"I'm glad it's staying light so much later again now,"* said Tanja. Jerome knew that she didn't say this kind of thing just to fill a gap in conversation, but because she was genuinely relieved. Her readiness to share the most ordinary thoughts was something that Jerome really liked about her.

Strangers sometimes assumed that she was under some kind of psychological strain, probably because she didn't smile very much. But

Jerome knew that Tanja was usually able to find something to be happy about. He couldn't believe there were many people with a more positive outlook than Tanja. Her younger sister Sarah, by contrast, who was studying screenwriting in Potsdam, suffered from depression. Tanja had once told him that people born in 1988 were particularly susceptible to mental illnesses; apparently no cohort from any other year in the eighties and nineties was prescribed antidepressants more frequently. But in the Arnheim family it was Tanja, born in 1988, who was usually fine, while Sarah, born in 1992, would be at acute risk of suicide if she stopped taking her medication. Tanja once described this as a statistical curiosity, and at first Jerome didn't know what to say. Later, he said: *"You can't help the fact that Sarah is sad."*

A lot of the buildings in Maintal looked like they had been designed by primary school children: symmetrical triangles sitting on top of rendered facades, with married couples inside bringing up children. Most of the little town's houses, even those with weathered, brownish roof tiles, must have been built in the last four to six decades – this was a new world. All the same, nothing about it felt new, and Jerome found that fact oppressive and charming at the same time. Maintal was not about emergence or regeneration; it seemed mostly to be about being left in peace, and this was a desire with which Jerome could fully empathise, even if it wasn't right at the top of his list.

He parked the hire car in the driveway of his parents' house, a bungalow with a basement floor built in 1978, an unusual style in Maintal. The anthracite-coloured walls and the flat roof stood out from the crowd. From the age of 29, Jerome had begun to feel a kind of kinship with this building on the edge of the Hartig nature reserve. It suited him now.

The fact that he still thought of it as his parents' house he attributed above all to his basic modesty, though shame certainly also played a part in it. In purely formal terms, the bungalow was now his, even though he had neither designed nor paid for it. Jerome's father had moved back to Frankfurt, to a small flat with a view of the Iron Bridge, and his mother, who had been born and grew up in Cambridge, had spent the past three years living in Lisbon, where Jerome had been to visit her five times. Originally, both parents had planned to sell the bungalow they had bought together, and which they now regarded as a kind of *mid-life misunderstanding*. When Jerome's father asked him whether he might like to move into it himself, it had been a kind of rhetorical question, but on Christmas Day 2016, Jerome had suddenly said, "*Actually, why not?*"

Tanja and Jerome liked to talk about the night they first met. Both thought it rather unusual to begin a relationship with a one-night stand, which is what the drunken episode at Fleming's Hotel on Eschenheimer Tor had felt like at first. The first screening of the online series of *NovoPanopticon*, filmed on a Samsung Galaxy S7, had taken place in Frankfurt, in Bar AMP, opposite the big Euro symbol on Willy Brandt Platz. There were more men than women in the audience, and in late summer 2017 a few of those men were still sporting meticulously groomed full beards and wearing dark clothes. Jerome, who had never had a beard, was sitting in the back row, and took an immediate liking to Tanja, though he didn't raise his hand during the Q&A. It was only after the screening, when Tanja was standing by the DJ booth drinking a mineral water with the evening's presenter – a lecturer at HfG Offenbach whom Jerome knew through friends – that he went and

spoke to her. He said he'd liked the presentation of the four-part miniseries, without being too effusive.

The two of them had stayed in AMP until the bar closed, and then went on to Terminus Klause, where they started kissing, and after two large ciders with sparkling water, they decided not to avoid this awkward first night, but to see it through with a degree of coolness. They hailed a taxi and went to Tanja's hotel. The sex in the surprisingly stuffy room was not particularly good, but they sensed it might be good eventually; it had promise, Jerome thought, and so ultimately it *was* good sex.

Tanja washed her hair the following morning after just four hours' sleep, in a glass shower cubicle that (true to the Fleming's quirky style) was situated in the middle of the room and printed with a half-transparent Fleming's logo. Jerome stayed sitting respectfully on the edge of the bed with his back to her the whole time, looking at his phone. That evening she texted him from Munich: "*Seems like there's no one in the whole of Bavaria to get wasted with*". And Jerome wrote that dinner with his father had been surprisingly harmonious. His lack of sleep had ensured that he was more patient than usual. Jerome didn't have to think too hard about what he was writing to Tanja; it felt normal to send her several messages one after another, and yet it was still exciting, which made him suspect that this was the start of something new.

The last time Tanja visited Maintal, they had slept together the minute they got back to the house. As darkness fell, they'd driven to Tegut, and then fried some soy steaks. Secretly, Tanja might have been assuming that this sequence of events would be repeated and become a kind of tradition, but this time Jerome had already done the shopping.

“Espresso or something alcoholic?” he asked, and then they had an espresso followed by several glasses of the second cheapest sparkling wine on offer in Tegut. They sat arm in arm on Jerome’s anthracite coloured sofa in south Hesse.

At no point did Jerome feel that this image was very “them”, and nor did he feel like he was sitting on his own sofa in his own house, but he still felt good. *“It’s supposed to rain tomorrow,”* Tanja said, looking at her phone. She sounded surprised. Jerome, too, had automatically assumed that they were expecting an unusually warm and sunny Good Friday. Generally speaking, the weather was bombastically fine when he spent time with Tanja. She asked if they could do a bit of work on her website at some point during the day. The second time they met – a date that began outside the Wurst-Basar concession in Hamburg station and continued in a pub at the station’s southern entrance, where they both subsequently missed their last train home – they had agreed that Jerome would build her a website – *tanja-arnheim.space* – and at the same time, that from now on they would officially be a couple. Tanja’s homepage, designed and built by Jerome Daimler, had inevitably become a symbol of commitment. *“Maybe instead of working on the page tomorrow, we could go to the Schirn art gallery and then to the cinema,”* Jerome suggested. Tanja agreed at once. *“Yes, that’s a better idea.”* Jerome knew that she was secretly scared of her website. Which colours, shapes and gestures could express who she was in Spring 2018 – these basic questions made her feel quite stressed. Jerome had therefore long since decided to build the website on his own and present Tanja with a finished design on 30 April, the day of her thirtieth birthday. A labour of love, as in ages past, he thought: a first homepage of her own. Jerome was working flat out on it.

“Are any of the characters from the Panopticon going to feature in your new book? Have you posed a question for it to answer? Is there something like a central theme?” When the first bottle of cava was empty, Jerome felt a little like he was interviewing his girlfriend, and he suspected that she liked it: his interest was genuine, he was asking both as a partner and a fan. As he went into the kitchen and took some clean glasses out of the cupboard, which he filled with ice cubes, cranberry juice and Sky vodka, he could hear Tanja saying: *“I don’t think you should ever define your theme too precisely.”* And after a little pause: *“The characters are similar, but they’re still new. They seem more religious to me.”*

In *NovoPanopticon* the all-male characters were emotionally unstable, their behaviour was occasionally obsessive and there were a few hints about their parents. The change of focus from psychology to religion seemed like a sensible move to Jerome. It struck him as somehow freer. Because while people often seemed entirely at the mercy of their own psyche, religiousness was something you might be able to shape for yourself. Jerome had chosen not to participate in confirmation classes at the age of thirteen, but to this day he still paid his church taxes. On Christmas Eve 2017, when his mother came to visit him in Maintal, the two of them had gone to the Christmas service. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision to attend the ceremony, simply because it was something Jerome and his mother had never done before at Christmas. When they walked into the church, the only seats left were up on the balcony, on the left-hand side. From there they could look out over the packed nave. Jerome sent Tanja a short video, and Tanja, who was at her parents’ in Kiel, replied immediately: *“Pretty church.”* Jerome was

surprised by how relaxed the congregation seemed at this service – the reason being that, until then, he had only ever set foot in a church for funerals. Five of them in total: his two grandmothers, Greta and Mary; the father of his friend Mark from primary school; Judith, a fellow student in Düsseldorf; and his godfather, Falk. After attending three of these five funerals, Jerome had decided to leave the church: the Christian ritual hadn't comforted him, but made him feel alienated every time. Ultimately, it must have been his father's comment that the church also did a lot for society more generally that stopped him from actually leaving.

And now, with a cranberry-coloured glass in his hand, Jerome said: *“During the service, a young girl did a flute solo, and she played one wrong note after another. It was laughable, really. But instead of laughing, the entire congregation was embarrassed for her. Everyone was sympathetic. I think that was when I understood the Protestant religion: listening attentively to a mediocre piece of flute music, hoping no one messes up, and then being sympathetic when the schoolgirl hasn't practised enough, because you suspect the failure will stay with her a long time. That's Protestantism.”*

Tanja grinned. *“You've been taking aim at your own background a lot recently.”* She was just making a statement, but all the same Jerome felt attacked.

“Yes, sorry... you're right. I talk about it too much.”

“Jerome, baby,” Tanja reached for the baggy sleeve of his shirt, *“I didn't mean it as a criticism. It's cute when you tell me things more than once.”*

When Jerome closed his eyes to kiss Tanja, he felt dizzy. *“Are you feeling dizzy too?”* he asked. *“Totally,”* Tanja laughed. *“What about nauseous?”* *“No.”* *“Me neither.”*

After that they had rather solemn sex on the sofa, spurred on by the conviction that they were now doing something unquestionably good for their minds and bodies. At one moment Jerome even believed that their act was helping to improve the energy of the whole planet. He moved with unusual awkwardness, and Tanja pushed herself against him in a rhythm that seemed new to him. Once he had come and then, shortly afterwards, she had, his thoughts about energy made him laugh. Jerome’s first impulse was to tell Tanja about his energy theory straight away, but then he thought that you didn’t have to talk everything to death immediately. He would simply continue to observe their sex and planet earth. Tanja kissed his left temple, then she laughed, too. They got up from the sofa together and, seven paces away, lay down feeling slightly dazed on Jerome’s 1.4-metre-wide mattress. They slept back to back.

2

The week after Easter was warm and sunny. It was Tuesday evening when Tanja got back to her two-room apartment, from the balcony of which she could look out at the Hasenheide park. If she’d had the same depressive tendencies as her sister Sarah, Tanja might have found the mood on the street oppressive. In big cities, the first warm days of the year had such potential for social anxiety; in Berlin, it was all about having a good time in the most public and fashionable way possible. Tanja thought that, even when they’d been in the city for years, a lot of

people who'd moved here found it hard to accept that, despite the warmth of the sun, they would rather be working in the shade than sitting outside a corner shop drinking Sekt, which seemed to be the new thing. Tanja, too, had taken a while to recognise that in the long term, it wasn't enough for her to hang around outside and be liked. What she really wanted was to produce work that even the harshest audience would enjoy. The fact that this work was writing wasn't so important; it might just as well have been clothes or video art, Tanja sometimes thought. But in truth, all she had ever done was write, it came easily to her, and it went better when she was doing it regularly.

In retrospect, Tanja thought it was good that she and Jerome had argued late on Good Friday about *Call Me by Your Name*. The argument showed that they were both still developing their own thoughts and perspectives, and didn't depend on each other for their opinions. They had sat in a couples' seat, the ones without a central arm rest, at the Metropolis cinema on Eschenheimer Tor, sometimes arm in arm, and yet they had seen very different things in *Call Me by Your Name*. Jerome had let himself get caught up in the obvious beauty of the on-screen world – like most of the other people who had told Tanja about the film, which told the story of a homoerotic summer romance between a teenager and a doctoral student in 1980s Italy. But Tanja felt detached from it. She found *Call Me by Your Name* horribly vain. The chemistry between the two main characters hadn't left her completely cold, but the film's implicit message seemed to be that you could only build happiness, tolerance and humanity on a foundation of wealth and elite education – and that bothered her. On the way back in the Tesla, Jerome said that perhaps it was all just too painfully close to home for her, as the pretty daughter of well-to-do academic parents, and that she at least

had to acknowledge the film's stylistic perfection, and Tanja raised her voice. Please could Jerome just accept that the film hadn't really done anything for her. And when Jerome started to respond, Tanja said: "*Shut up now, Jerome.*" They didn't speak again the rest of the way home.

Tanja could be sharp-tongued on occasion. Her mother and sister knew that best of all. But apart from her ex-boyfriend Max, very few people outside her family would have imagined she had a choleric side. Tanja Arnheim was sometimes regarded as other-worldly, lethargic or arrogant, but never aggressive.

Not bearing grudges was an important part of Jerome's self-image, and so they made up quickly. As Jerome was unlocking the door to the bungalow, Tanja broke the silence – "*Jerome, I'm sorry*" – and he paused for a moment, looked her in the eye, and then submitted to a fierce hug.

On 5 April, it almost smelled like summer already. After eight and a half hours sleep, Tanja was sitting in the Hasenheide drinking a sugar-free Red Bull, not far from the still-unfinished Hindu temple, which had been covered in scaffolding for months. The spire was the only part of the temple that had so far been painted in bright colours. Tanja liked the idea that in her neighbourhood, there might one day be representative buildings for all the different religions. Everything she knew about Hinduism she had learned in the ninth grade of her selective school in Kiel: that from reincarnation to reincarnation you could rise and fall through the various castes and life forms, and that there were a lot of gods that were represented as human-animal hybrids. It seemed like quite a nice religion. Maybe one day Hinduism would become an

option, not necessarily for Tanja, who didn't even like yoga, but possibly for someone she knew.

Amelie had texted to say that she was hungover and wanted to go for food at City Chicken on Sonnenallee, but Tanja had only just had breakfast at home. There was no question of just offering to go with her: Amelie, who was over 1.80m tall and not exactly skeletal, wouldn't countenance eating in the presence of another person if that person wasn't also eating. Tanja and Amelie had learned even to like each other's more annoying qualities. There was always the possibility of friction between them, but it never escalated. Amelie frequently used the term *therapied out* when she was talking about herself: in the space of eight years, three different therapists had attested that she'd made progress. Tanja knew that Amelie was still under some psychological strain, but at least she now seemed to know what was causing the strain, and maybe that was a lot, in itself. Tanja and Amelie met up every two or three weeks at around one o'clock on a Sunday, drank Negronis and then went to a daytime disco. When they went out, they talked a lot, and their attention was fully focused on each other, so other clubbers hardly ever approached them. A kind of protective space formed around them, and in this space Tanja and Amelie often had a really good time.

Amelie stopped off at the Hasenheide on her way to City Chicken. She was wearing a dark-coloured dress; it suited her, it looked timeless and laid-back. She wasn't one to follow the latest fashions, and her trainers were the only things she wore that usually looked brand new. Amelie had been out to Heiners Bar the night before, and then to the newly-renovated Bäreneck. To Tanja's ears, that just sounded like banging headaches and unnecessarily existential conversations. It wasn't like Amelie to be out late drinking on a weeknight; Tanja asked what the

occasion had been, and Amelie said: *“Oh, you know, just Janis.”* Amelie had introduced Tanja to Janis, who had a striking tattoo on his forearm, in January at a party put on by *Trade*. Tanja found tattoos on women even more unbearable than they were on men, unless they covered the whole body. Tanja approved of someone deciding to become a *fully tattooed person* like Justin Bieber, but not someone just wanting a tattoo. On matters of style, Tanja would have liked to be more tolerant, but she couldn't help how she felt.

Amelie told her that she'd slept with Janis twice in the week before Easter. She couldn't completely deny she had a crush on him. But last night in Bäreneck, Janis had confessed that he'd fancied Tanja for a long time. Amelie quoted Janis, making her voice slightly lower: *“I thought I would keep it to myself, but it's on my mind all the time now... and otherwise, at some point it might go nuclear.”* Amelie emphasised that he really had used the word *nuclear*, at 4:30am in Bäreneck. She had been shocked and angry and, for a minute, speechless. *“Then I told him you can't stand tattoos and you're in a committed relationship. I think he quite quickly regretted having said anything. He apologised, but I was already out of there.”* As she spoke, her eyes filled with tears. Tanja was sitting beside her on the grass, the empty can of sugar-free Red Bull in her hand, trying to think of something to say that wasn't either meaningless or hurtful. Tanja knew that Janis took a woman home practically every time he went clubbing, he was wiry and reasonably tall, he had a pleasant voice, straight teeth, and as far as Tanja knew, he was writing a doctoral thesis on a feminist topic. She also wouldn't be surprised if, beneath his understated clothes, he was a *fully tattooed person*. He was probably also a fan of *NovoPanopticon*. Tanja really wanted to change the subject, but then she said: *“Give him*

a few days. After all, it's easy for you. He needs to behave. He's the one with the problem. Try to relax." Amelie nodded, looking very sad. *"I'm going to go and get some food,"* she said. *"You do that,"* said Tanja. They stood up and hugged. Tanja wanted to ask if they were still going to the Cocktail d'Amore party at the weekend as planned, but it didn't seem like the right moment. Amelie had already walked a few steps when she turned around. *"I'll be in touch about Cocktail d'Amore."* And Tanja said: *"Cool."*

Tanja and Jerome hadn't agreed any policies on information. They told each other whatever they felt like saying, mostly in long instant messages, and less frequently over email. The personal, loosely-written email that you fired off without having read it back was perhaps Tanja's favourite form of writing. But since 2015, when the last of her friends had finally switched to smartphones, email had been increasingly pushed out by less carefully formulated speech bubbles on various messaging services. That made Tanja value the fact that she had found a worthy email correspondent in Jerome all the more. His longer missives, which he wrote about once a week, felt like an attempt to compensate for the diary that he'd never kept, and they were always entertaining. He often told her stories about friends she had never met – so in theory he could simply have made these characters up, but she trusted him, and she was sure he trusted her, too. In their emails they told each other the truth, though they didn't tell each other everything. For the time being, Tanja would keep quiet about the reasons for Amelie's man trouble.

At the weekend, Jerome sent her a selfie he'd taken while he was out for a run. It showed him in a white headband, with a backdrop of windmills and a cloudless sky. Below the image, he wrote: "300% joy". Tanja liked the message. The photo was vain and not vain at the same time, since Jerome's sweating, slightly red face looked older than usual, but he'd also chosen a flattering angle – offset low down to the left, emphasising his strong jaw – and his expression was goofy in a good way. You could see that running gave Jerome pleasure, and even people much older than he was could look attractive when they were radiating joy.

Sitting at her desk, Tanja looked at Jerome for a second not as the man she slept with and talked with about almost everything, but as a man from Hesse in his mid-thirties, who took cheerful selfies while exercising. She then thought, for comparison, about the men she'd encountered during her trial membership of the Holmes Place gym on Hermannplatz. A lot of them had been good looking, some in an aristocratic way, which had something to do with the high monthly fees charged by Holmes Place. Jerome would have stood out there in a positive way, as a man whose vanity was refreshingly different. He liked his own appearance, that was true, but he wasn't trying to fulfil some fitness norm. Tanja had ultimately decided not to become a member of Holmes Place. Instead, in May 2017, she had rediscovered badminton, a game she'd played at school in Kiel, and in which she was able to exercise a degree of aggression without the sport becoming at all dangerous.

Dear Tanja, has Amelie spoken to you? Could you please tell her I'm sorry? And ask her to call me? She's blocked my number. Janis.

Tanja wasn't sure how he'd got her number. It very likely wasn't from Amelie, but possibly from her ex-boyfriend Max; Max was always happy to pass on her details, to prove that Tanja's privacy no longer meant anything to him. Tanja had never blocked a number in her life, nor had she deleted emails or texts that said hurtful things, and she had never found ways to get her own back either, she'd never felt the need to draw a pathetic line under something. She was proud of that. Instead of responding to Janis straight away, she wrote a message to Amelie, which in retrospect was not a clever thing to do. Amelie claimed she hadn't blocked Janis's number at all. There followed a call from Amelie, which Tanja termed hysterical, although she had firmly resolved to stop talking about "hysteria" in relation to women, because it always felt a bit cheap. Her success as an author, however, made her think that the words that came to her spontaneously were usually the right words. Tanja believed her choice of words was sound in this case, too. Amelie was very hurt by the accusation of hysteria.

In the queue for the Cocktail d'Amore party, Tanja was wearing badminton shoes made by Argento, Decathlon's own-brand. She was 100% sure she was the only person in the queue – which on this early Sunday afternoon was made up of around 400 people – who was wearing badminton shoes. They were a luminous reddish-orange, and it looked like you would sweat more in them than in comparable trainers from more well-known brands, but in fact the opposite was true. Tanja was also wearing grey linen trousers and a grey man's shirt, with a sports bra underneath in case she wanted to take off the shirt on the dancefloor. The fully-bare-torso look that was popular at this kind of Berlin rave, even among women, was something she would have found

out of character. But a sports bra and badminton shoes suited her down to the ground. The majority of people around her in the queue were men with dark, buzz-cut hair, not many were wearing make-up. Tanja had worked gel into her own hair until it lay flat against her head and had a slick sheen. When she had been standing there for forty minutes, the doorman asked her if she'd been here before, by which he meant Cocktail d'Amore and not the Griessmühle club. Tanja replied, "*Yes, three or four months ago,*" – though she knew very well it had been three months – and looked the man in the eye with a neutral expression. He hesitated for a moment, then let her proceed to the body search and pay the 15-Euro entry fee. She bought a Diet Coke at the first bar she came to, so that she could take the rest of the pill she had been keeping in a transparent baggie in her sports sock. The piece of pill, which had been nibbled on six weeks previously and kept in the fridge ever since, was burgundy, with the logo of the clothing firm North Face printed on it. According to the *saferparty.ch* website, the whole pill had contained a total of 155mg MDMA, so the remaining half should be precisely enough for Tanja's afternoon high. There were good reasons for not taking Ecstasy very often. Tanja liked the effect more than that of any other drug, but since she turned 27, she had become more sensitive to the after-effects, and now chose to deal with these only four to six times a year. She would probably have to reduce this frequency even further in future. For today, she had told Jerome – who was planning to undertake a similar experiment with ketamine in Offenbach today – that they should take notes on their trips. Since they had been together, they had shared most of their drug experiences, at least on a message level. Tanja didn't even go into the toilets to take it, and afterwards she texted:

“Taken at the bar at 14:14. Pleasantly numb. Long-range heating soon.”

Outside, unlike the Cocktail d’Amore parties that took place in high summer, there was no music playing, but men in varying states of undress had gone out to sit in the sun and have sex with varying degrees of obviousness. Tanja’s theory was that the second half of the 2010s in Berlin could be remembered as the period when sex parties made the leap into the mainstream. The number of people who went to parties where blowjobs were given in plain sight wasn’t exactly small. There were thousands of them at these events every weekend. Tanja couldn’t claim to be a fan of this development, but in general she thought it was a good thing that there was an increasing number of places where people could act on their desire for public sex, though she did also assume that a high percentage of clubbers had absolutely no wish to strip naked in front of countless strangers.

On the way to the toilet, she bumped into her sister. Sarah’s pupils were very enlarged and her forehead was damp with sweat; she approached Tanja accompanied by two guys wearing black vests and silver chains around their necks, probably fellow students at the film school. A hug and a kiss on the cheek was nothing unusual between the sisters, Tanja knew that, but she also felt a special surge of affection from Sarah. Sarah hastily introduced the guys – Tim and Jakob – and from the way they greeted Tanja, with a strangely formal handshake, she surmised that these boys already knew she was Sarah’s successful elder sister. Tanja and Sarah agreed to meet up at the outdoor bar at 3pm at the latest, to drink still mineral water together. In the toilet queue, Tanja wondered whether she was seriously worried that her depressive sister

was taking drugs, and if so, then what kind of a double standard that was. The interaction between antidepressants and Molly was not ideal, as far as Tanja knew, but on the other hand she was no neurologist. When it came down to it, her unease was really just based on the term *reuptake inhibitor*, which she associated with antidepressants. Tanja looked at her phone. Jerome had sent only an emoji wearing sunglasses, which she found a little disappointing. She considered using her time in the queue to find out more about drug interactions, but she was nearly at her data limit and there wasn't much signal in Griessmühle. They certainly didn't yet live in the age that many people claimed they were already living in. Tanja read some of the texts she'd received in the past few days. Most of them pleased her. Actually, all the people she communicated with had developed a confident tone in their messages. Even her mother was now able to send texts with some degree of detail, and increasingly to leave out a formal address – *Dear Daughter*. Tanja was proud of her mum, who worked as a therapist in Kiel, just as her mum was proud of her. Tanja's father, a Hanseatic internist, was also proud of her – according to her mother – but entirely incapable of showing it. Tanja was moved by the thought of her father. He couldn't help it; he was just less articulate than the other Arnheims. That didn't make him a lesser person, though. Tanja decided to give her dad a call in the next few days, and now she was really looking forward to the faltering start of that conversation. In *NovoPanopticon*, Tanja had her central character Liam say: “*You can either become very like your parents, or get mentally ill. And only if your parents are mentally ill might you manage to do both.*” Although Tanja had already defended this statement in three separate interviews, the insight now felt fresh again. Maybe Sarah had always fought too hard against her role models,

maybe that was where the whole problem lay. But was it a problem at all? It was quite warm in the corridor outside the toilets. By the time the door in front of Tanja opened and a mixed group of five emerged – two women, three men – she was feeling really good. She nodded broad-mindedly to all five of them and then turned back to look at the men and women who were lining up behind her. For a moment Tanja contemplated asking whether anyone wanted to go ahead of her – she wasn't desperate – but then it occurred to her firstly that this question would be entirely bizarre when she'd just spent ten minutes waiting, and secondly that she was already pretty high. Not having eaten much for breakfast was paying off; the half a North Face was taking effect quicker than she'd anticipated. Tanja entered the toilet cubicle as if being washed in by a wave of bubble bath, and closed the door. She carefully laid tissues all round the toilet seat and sat down. She took her time, she couldn't help but smile, she closed her eyes as she urinated, it was lovely.

Text to Jerome: *"Just saw Sarah, she's high. Pleasantly cotton-woolish walking around in the toilet fumes. Far too many men. Miss you."* And just a few minutes later: *"Miss U 🍷 Miss U 🍷 Miss U ☹️ ..."* Jerome wrote back that his plan to meet up with Bruno and Julian had not come off because Julian's daughter was ill, so instead of walking along the riverside in Offenbach on ketamine, he was sitting at home with the sun coming through the windows, programming. He still wanted to read the updates on her trip, though, even if they did make him a little envious. Tanja wrote that he should at least drink some cider while he was working *"in solidarity with your drugged-up girlfriend not far from the Sonnenallee S-Bahn station."* Jerome responded: *"You only use the*

word solidarity when you're on xtc. But when you are, you use it every time 😊"

Tanja stood sweating on the dancefloor; looking at her phone, she saw the word *solidarity* in front of her and knew that Jerome was right. She loved him, yes, she really loved him, and she wanted to text that to him now, but then she decided to save it. Their situations were too different. She was feeling the bass; he was looking out at the nature reserve. And for Jerome, ecstasy was a nostalgic thing. He'd often told Tanja about his *E-phase* between 2009 and 2012, a time he'd left behind him but would always remember, like the summer of 2001, when he'd just got his driving license and drove to France for a camping trip on the Atlantic coast with some close friends.

In Griessmühle, things went the way they usually did when Tanja was staring at her phone on the dancefloor: people told her with looks and gestures that she should be living in the moment, and put her mobile away – but these people didn't understand. They had no idea that for Tanja, this was the most beautiful moment: high, and looking at the gateway to the world in her hand, communicating with the people she liked best in the way she was best at. It was fantastic to own a phone, it was fantastic to have people you loved in your life. Tanja was wearing her shirt tied round her waist, and dancing in her sports bra. She put her arms in the air, closed her eyes. She kept a tight grip on her phone the whole time.

"Sarah, I'm high!" This simple statement brought a beaming smile to her sister's face. *"How are you doing? Want to do a shot with me?"* Sarah didn't reply, seemed a little hesitant, but Tanja had already ordered vodka shots for them both. She had been intending not to drink

during the party, but the idea of the vodka's slightly burning aftertaste filled her with such a pleasant anticipation that it would simply have been wrong to deny herself the experience. Sarah was only 1 metre 69, four centimetres shorter than Tanja, but that afternoon you could hardly tell: Sarah was wearing heels, and Tanja had her flat Artengo badminton shoes on. And so the sisters stood facing one another and clinked their vodka glasses, flooded with a warmth that reminded Tanja of the magical moment when she had tried ecstasy for the first time. She was even tempted to believe that the trip she was currently on felt just as good as that first one, but that probably wasn't true.

"I've got a new therapist now," Sarah said. "He's my own age, and half Indian. He's quite nice." *"How often do you meet?"* *"Twice a week... It's a lot cooler than group therapy."* *"Definitely!"* said Tanja loudly. At that moment, she was a thousand percent convinced that group therapy was nonsense. Sarah already knew her elder sister's opinion on this and said that, actually, this wasn't the time to talk about the progress she was making in therapy, while Tanja thought that in the medium term, it would never again be so easy to discuss this kind of thing. Their last mutual high had been four years previously, just before *NovoPanopticon* had come out, and before Sarah had started her screenwriting degree at the Babelsberg film school. That evening, at Club Golem in Hamburg, off their heads on Molly, they'd talked about their parents and both agreed they should have divorced fifteen years ago, and probably hadn't because of Tanja and Sarah – and then, before they went back to the dancefloor, the sisters said they hoped their parents had at least been happy to some degree. This time, a comparable moment of truth and intimacy escaped them. Sarah had been at Griessmühle since five in the morning and was starting to get tired,

while Tanja was just peaking and might even consider buying another pill from someone. Sarah left the club at half past four. After that, someone came up to Tanja every twenty minutes and asked how long she'd been there or whether she wanted to snort something, to which Tanja answered truthfully, and declined. Despite being in the best of moods, her responses were mostly monosyllabic, and then she went back to dancing with her eyes closed or writing messages to Jerome. When Janis suddenly appeared in front of her at around 10pm, wearing a white t-shirt with a Vetements logo on the chest (which Tanja disapproved of), she was less monosyllabic. She could remember having a really interesting conversation with Janis in OHM once about *Good Time* by the Safdie Brothers, a film that Tanja thought was the best of 2017. Janis had liked it as well, and recommended the directors' previous film, though when Tanja watched it, she liked this one much less. At Cocktail d'Amore, Janis seemed shy and very concerned about Amelie. *"It's funny, of course, seeing you here. I really messed things up with Amelie..."* His hair was longer than it had been in January, and he'd combed it into a centre parting, which looked at once absurd and attractive. Tanja tried not to let on that she knew he had a crush on her. She was standing in front of Janis, high and wearing a sports bra, and quite enjoying the whole situation. *"Amelie is really into you,"* she said, *"just treat her carefully – I don't think all is lost yet."* Janis looked more alert and more sober than most people in the club. *"I hope you're right,"* he said, looking Tanja in the eye. When she glanced at his shirt again, he said: *"Don't worry, it cost ten euros. It's a silk-screen fake from Brandenburg."* He didn't smile as he said it. Tanja felt she'd been caught out. *"What have you taken?"* Janis asked. *"E"*, said Tanja. Janis smiled. *"It suits you. You're more open than usual. Almost warm."*

These words clearly overstepped the mark. “*So what have you taken?*” Tanja asked.

“*Nothing. You want a top-up?*” Tanja did, but she shook her head. “*I’m going to let this one wear off and then go home.*” Janis nodded. “*Sounds good. Have a nice evening.*” Then he disappeared towards the toilets.

Tanja got the final message from Jerome at 1:14am. As he was going to bed, he texted her: “*Enjoy, baby. I’m off to dream about you now.*” In the taxi at 2:15, Tanja still felt blissful. She studied at her face in the rear-view mirror and saw that she looked better than her sister did under the influence of drugs. Maybe she was more careful about the dose, or she simply benefited from not having a metabolic disorder or depression like Sarah did. In the back seat of the taxi, Tanja was sure that she was lucky in a lot of ways. At home she would have no trouble falling asleep from honest physical exhaustion; she wouldn’t dream about anything, and when she woke up, she would launch herself into a pleasant, unplanned Monday. She would probably go for some fast food, make some phone calls, send some texts. “*Good night?*” the taxi driver asked her. “*Yeah, really good,*” said Tanja, and gave him a two-euro tip as she got out. She would feel weary and demotivated on Tuesday at the earliest, and probably again on Wednesday. Tanja decided to take a positive attitude towards this state as well.