

Translated excerpt

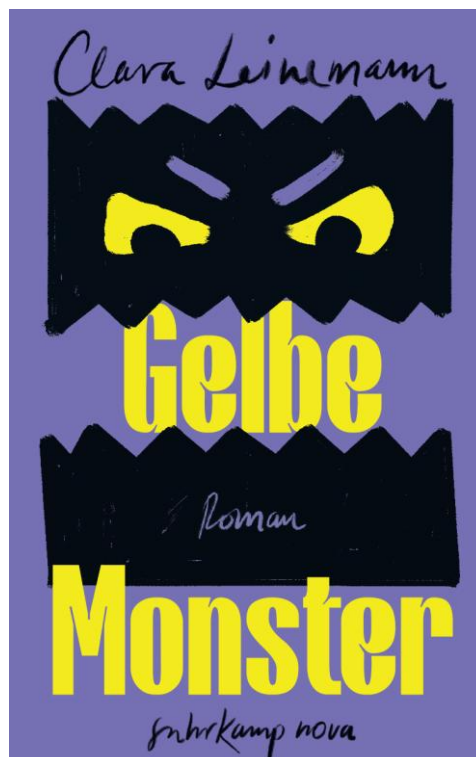
Clara Leinemann
Gelbe Monster

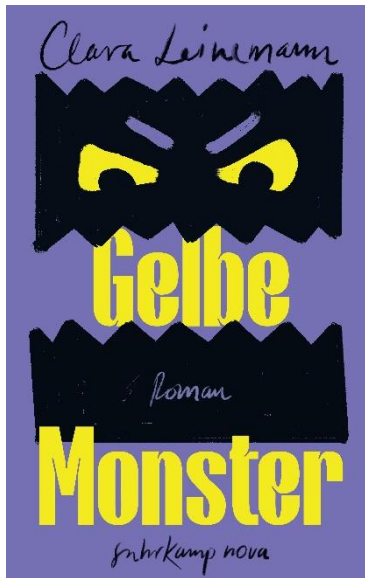
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Yellow Monsters

Translated by Daniela Atmadjian





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Yellow Monsters

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It's like trying to describe a dream, thinks Charlie, just before she starts to speak; the order of events is unclear, and maybe it's a little too revealing.

Charlie googles *bad person*. The internet says: a bad person can be recognized by a lack of empathy, manipulative behaviour, a reluctance to take responsibility for their actions, and a lack of moral values. The internet warns: a lack of moral principles can be an indicator that a person is narcissistic, which is the worst character trait of them all. You should keep your distance from such people, it says.

Charlie scrolls up and down the page, hardly able to move her fingers because of the plaster cast on her hand. She shuts the laptop. She stands in front of the mirror in Ella's hallway and dips a blending sponge into Ella's makeup.

"I'm so sorry", she whispers to herself in the mirror, while slowly covering the bruises on her face – a universe of mottled lilac– with her uninjured hand. She looks herself in the eyes, the right one still slightly swollen, which makes her look dopier than usual. "I can't—" she whispers, "I'm just so sorry. I'm so—" and she starts to cry, her tears tracing wet tracks in her fresh makeup. The whites of her eyes turn red, she places her hand in front of her mouth, and the blood rushes to her head. When she cries, wrinkles form on her forehead, it looks like shit. She stops.

Her face hurts. She wipes the tears away carefully. The pain moves from the outside to the inside of her head, and from there, directly into her chest. Everything is just so bad. Breathe in, breathe out, the redness dissipates from her face. She starts dabbing with the sponge again.

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The train is silent. Charlie is sitting in a four-seater by the window, tapping her finger on her knee. She tries to stop, only to start up again. Sitting across from her is a woman, she must be about twenty, maybe twenty-five years older than her. The woman is wearing an expensive blouse with a matching skirt, large bracelets, and her hair pinned up with a barrette — so elegant, refined. She has a magazine lying on her lap, narrow columns of small-print text, probably an academic journal of some kind, maybe medicine, or psychology. Maybe she's a therapist. The woman looks out the window; she seems to be thinking about something, her eyelids twitch, she swallows, then she turns the page. She looks so smart. She looks up for a moment; Charlie looks away and then back at her.

She's totally a therapist. Has her own practice; large, spacious, and bright. She has a big house with multiple rooms, an open-plan living room, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and various crystals and questionable sculptures sitting on the windowsill. She spends the summer sitting on the veranda with her husband in the south of France drinking wine. She has a good life, and Charlie could have one too. Right now is just an exception—they are actually quite similar, the therapist and her. They could strike up a conversation, talk animatedly, and at some point, the lady would say, you know, you remind me of myself when I was younger. They would then both miss their stops and the woman would invite Charlie over to her place. Charlie would look at her books, and the therapist's husband—older, but definitely still sexy—would flirt with Charlie a little, because he would also see in her a younger, maybe even a better version of his wife. Charlie opens her mouth, but doesn't know what to say. The therapist's finger follows along the lines of text as she reads; she is so concentrated, she loves her job.

“Fuck you, you fucker!” yells someone through the train car, and all the passengers sigh. A group of boys has just stood up; fourteen, maybe fifteen years old, each one

with an energy drink in hand. They reek of puberty, they are sweating, worked up, are doing pull-ups on the handrail, bickering over a single cigarette that the biggest of them—the one who already has a ginger moustache—is holding inexpertly between his fingers. He keeps putting in his mouth and looking around provocatively, but his blushing ears betray him.

Faces turn away, eyes close, headphones are adjusted, actions of acquiescence to the background noise. The therapist looks annoyed but continues reading. Charlie wants to say to her, yes, I know, we're both annoyed by this display of macho delinquency—you and me together, we know better, we hate—

“Can I help you?” asks the therapist. She looks Charlie right in the eyes. Charlie didn't even notice, and says, “this display of macho—” the rest stays lodged in her throat. The therapist looks at the boys and their pull-ups; shakes her head dismissively and says, “they're just teenagers.” She waves the conversation away with her hand and hunches back over her magazine. The hand, the finger, the one that runs over the text, is wrinkly and ugly. What an ugly hand, what a horrible outfit, what a bad therapist. Charlie's heart is pulsing in the swollen gash on her cheek.

For the rest of the trip, Charlie tries not to look at the bad therapist. The window is reflecting her own face back at her, wavy and distorted. Shouldn't she feel bad for her? Like, she can see that her face is all bruised, she can see her sad—no, desperate—attempt at covering her injuries with makeup. Didn't the therapist think that something bad must have happened to her? Shouldn't she try to help her, show some kind of solidarity? After all, Charlie is a woman with a black eye, that's at least worth a second look. Come on, like what is wrong with this therapist, how amoral, how narcissistic is she. She is a bad person.

Charlie's breathing gets shaky, her fingers are tapping uncontrollably, the teenagers yell things to each other about their mothers. The train arrives at the next station, the therapist packs her magazine in a tote bag and gets up.

She forces her way past Charlie, wanting to leave the four-seater. The train shakes slightly as it brakes, she has to hold on, and Charlie sticks out her leg a tiny bit, without looking, so that the woman trips over her foot and almost flies into the four-seater across from them. Charlie keeps looking forward, as if she hasn't noticed anything. The woman apologizes to the people that she half fell on top of

and steps out of the train. As she walks by the window, their eyes meet briefly. She gives Charlie the finger, something a therapist would never do. Charlie shakes her head in disappointment, the train drives on, she has to get off at the next station.

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“Zeyneb Yilmaz,” says the woman who is leading Charlie down the corridor, “we spoke on the phone.” She opens the door to an office and motions for Charlie go in. The office is long and narrow, with filing cabinets on both sides and a desk by the window; everything looks a little shabby. These kinds of organizations never receive enough funding, Ella had said to her, and Charlie can see what she meant when she looks at the water stains above the old, wobbly desk. Ms. Yilmaz, on the other hand, does not look shabby at all, she looks cool and hip, like a person who enjoys life. She sits down at the desk and motions towards the seat in front of her. “Take a seat,” she says, and Charlie sits down, trying to look as small, vulnerable, and innocent as she can, which isn’t even a lie That’s what she is. Ms. Yilmaz looks at her. She has short hair and big, unlined eyes, her expression open, friendly, interested, as if she were opening a menu.

Charlie lowers her eyes, she is ashamed of her face, she always has been, but now it’s even worse, and all the makeup—people can see all of that, they can pity her for it, or condemn her. But which one does she even want? She doesn’t know anymore. Does she want pity, condemnation, or both?

“So, you want to take part in our anti-aggression program,” begins Ms. Yilmaz and places her forearms on the desk, “because you became violent in your relationship?”

She looks professional, her desk is organized, a few neat folders, a telephone, a mug. A pencil holder. An expensive laptop. Charlie would like to be Ms. Yilmaz.

“Umm,” Charlie holds up her injured arm with her good one. “Yes. The relationship is now over. I think”.

On the organization’s website, *Counselling Against Violence*, Charlie found various programs. Ella had done the research before and told her where she had to click. “And now here,” she said, pointing to the tab, “here is the phone number. When you

call them, they want you to be clear about why you want to take part in the program. You have to express remorse, do you think you can manage that?"

Charlie called the number and said that she had been violent. She said she regretted it, and Ella stood beside her like a helicopter parent, nodding, while Charlie turned away so she could roll her eyes. "Yes, yes," she said flatly into the phone, "I want to change."

Now, sitting across from Ms. Yilmaz's gentle gaze, Charlie is sure that she will be understood. Ms. Yilmaz is not like Ella; Ms. Yilmaz can see nuances.

"I," she whispers, and for the millionth time today, her eyes well up with tears. She is the most wretched person on earth, no wonder her partner left her. The tears are flowing now, "I think I'm crazy."

Ms. Yilmaz smiles understandingly and passes her a tissue. "We don't use that term here," she says softly, "but could you tell me why you think that?"

Charlie leans forward, she can't breathe, her nose is running, she is trying to hold back tears, she covers her face, wants to say something, but can only gasp for air. Her suitcase in Ella's apartment. Ella's probing gaze, looking at her as if she were a stranger. As if Charlie were some unpredictable animal. Her entire body is burning. The whole time, a hole gapes in front of Charlie's eyes, a massive, black abyss—

"I," she manages, her voice slipping out of her without her control, her neck so swollen that even speaking hurts, "I just can't stop."

Valentin's neck, Valentin's chest, his hands, his fingers, his fingertips, his laugh, the creases in his face, on his eyelids, the birthmark on his eyebrow, that nose, that mouth, that stubble, his earlobes, slightly reddish in colour, their fine hairs against the sun, his squinting, the way he pulls the blanket over them, the warm feeling of his body, he is gone, what is she now, without—

Charlie smacks her fist against her forehead. She hears Ms. Yilmaz's voice, "try to lean back against the chair." Charlie can't, hides behind her hands, shakes her head.

"You don't even need to look at me," says Ms. Yilmaz, "just lean back," she repeats. So Charlie leans back, her gaze directed down onto the tabletop. "And maybe try to look around a bit, in your head, you could count a few objects that you see around you."

Desk, thinks Charlie, folder, laptop, book, book, book, plant, window, she breathes in, looks at Ms. Yilmaz, “I’m sorry.”

Ms. Yilmaz smiles again and says, “here, all feelings are welcome.”

Once Charlie had calmed down, Ms. Yilmaz asked her what she couldn’t stop, and Charlie explained through her still welling-up tears and the pain in her cheekbone that she could not stop loving Valentin, her ex-boyfriend, even though he treated her so badly. She nudges her bandaged hand forward an inch. Ms. Yilmaz looks at it and then asks if the relationship is over for good. Charlie shrugs her shoulders, “I mean, when is a relationship ever really over,” she says, “like, there is still *a relationship* between us.”

Ms. Yilmaz’s facial expression says: ah, that’s the story you’re telling yourself right now, and Charlie tries to answer with her own facial expression that says, do you have a problem with that. But Ms. Yilmaz doesn’t see it. She is noting something down.

“What do you do for work?”

“I’m a PhD student.”

“In which field?”

“Mathematics.”

Ms. Yilmaz raises her eyebrows. People always do that when Charlie says mathematics. They always wait a second or two to make sure it wasn’t a joke.

“You’re working on your dissertation?”

Charlie nods.

“What’s the topic?”

Now Charlie raises her eyebrows. Nobody ever asks her that. “Graph theory,” she says and sits up straight, “vertices and edges.”

“You work from home?”

“Mostly, yeah.”

“Has your living situation been affected by your break-up?”

Charlie falters. A chair crashing into a yellow wall. She blinks. “Umm,” she continues, “yeah, I guess. My girlfriend Ella, I mean, she’s been my best friend since we were kids, she wants me to live with her, until... until I’m well again. Until I’m feeling better again.”

“So then you also have a person that you can trust close to you?”

Charlie shrugs. Ella is there, but she's been avoiding Charlie. The only thing that she said to her in the last few days was: "When is your first appointment?"

"Yes, I do."

Ms. Yilmaz makes a note.

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Ella said that walking is good for the psyche, every day if possible. So, after the appointment, Charlie doesn't go straight home but walks home from the metro station in big loops. Slowly, pushing the cold winter air ahead of her in clouds of condensation, she walks a pretzel around Ella's building. The streets are mostly empty – someone stumbles out of a bar, someone walks around the corner, Valentin? Charlie observes him, that gait, no, not him. She wipes her face, trying to loosen her jaw and cheeks, breathes in and out, tries to look pretty, pretty and pensive, just in case she does happen to run into Valentin.

On Venloerstrasse, she buys herself a beer from Ulf at the convenience store. It's a small shop, where he sells his goods through a window. Ulf recognizes Charlie and gives her a tired smile. "Cold today," he says, and she nods, opening her beer and tossing the cap with a rattle in the little container. She waves goodbye to him as if they were buddies, but he is looking at his phone, which is playing a muted video.

It's been dark since late in the afternoon, the pavement lit up by streetlamps and shop windows, lights spilling from bars and kebab joints. Charlie gets moving slowly, she doesn't want to leave the street so fast – the metro station, the trashy music club, the balloon shop, Korean BBQ, and on the other side of the street, the ugliest building façade in the world: grey and grimy, old, drafty windows, water pooling under every window sill, as if the rooms behind them were overflowing, as if the windows were crying. The walls have got to be covered in mould. Ella would be outraged.

Whenever you were walking through the city with Ella and she wasn't in the best mood, she would start pointing at buildings and get into a lather about every construction mistake: everything is crap, everyone is trying to cut costs, the construction industry is going down the drain. This much concrete, that much CO₂.

Usually, Charlie found it annoying when Ella started one of her rants, but now Charlie would be happy to go along with her, at least Ella would be talking to her.

She drinks her beer, keeps walking, she's going to make another loop, another pretzel, and walk past one more time later on. Behind all the windows of the ugly façade, lights are on.

Ms. Yilmaz explained to her that the program consists of twenty-five two-hour sessions. They would speak about different forms of violence, about power and control, about signals, cycles of violence, behaviour within conflicts, emotional regulation, female role models, self-image within relationships, parenthood, fear, humility, and emancipation. An important part that she could already start preparing for is the reconstruction of her actions. Each participant would take over one of the sessions, in which they would retrace their actions step by step.

Charlie begins to cry at the thought of how she will soon be sitting among hardened criminals that have all just about beaten their partners or children to death, while she—she grabs a used tissue from her bag, dabs carefully at her swollen eye. It hurts. She's cries even more, what has she even done?

Her nose is running, her head is pounding, she should go to bed.

An older man walks in her direction and looks at her briefly, he must be able to see that she's crying, even in the dark. Her face must be bright red and all crusty. She draws in a quick fluttering breath, soon he will help her, he will ask her what's wrong. But then the man looks away, walks by her, looking at the ground. Charlie turns around and throws the scrunched-up tissue at him, it sails through the air and slide down his winter jacket. He doesn't even notice it.

She sniffs. All she'd done was fall in love. Is that supposed to be a crime or something?

Charlie met Valentin through a funny coincidence. Later, she would ask herself, how would the story have played out if the conditions of their first encounter had been simpler. If she had simply met him as a friend of a friend of a friend at a party. Maybe there would have been less pressure to make a love story out of it.

By the time she hit puberty, Charlie couldn't help but come to the conclusion that both her personality and her appearance were fundamentally wrong. Since then, she had made multiple attempts to change and to become a better person. She wanted to be Shakira, she wanted to be Helene from 9B, or the main character of a show that all the seniors in high school were watching, an untameable, beautiful teenage-girl *fatale* with a glorified drug problem.

Things went on like this during university: Charlie wanted to be like nearly every other woman she saw, just not like herself. Her self was lazy, ugly, and couldn't even get around to returning the recyclable bottles so that she could get her deposit back.

On one of those days, when she was already doing her master's, she was torturing herself and dreaming of being someone else; a clean, organized woman who had a morning routine and drank matcha. For that to happen, though, her fundamental chaos had to be eliminated: she tidied up, actually returned the bottles, and pumped up her bike tires.

But then – right when she wanted to take the bike for a small test drive with the pumped-up tires, she realized that the bike lock was rusted shut. Both her roommates shuffled out one after the other to help her, but both failed to open the lock after multiple attempts. “You need bolt cutters,” mumbled one of them from under his hood, “you can borrow them from the hardware store.”

And since in every fibre of her being Charlie was now a better person, she tackled the task immediately. She borrowed a bolt cutter, cracked open the lock, immediately bought herself a new one, as well as particularly good bike lights, and biked from then on through the spring and then the summer, to the lake, the math institute, to Ella's place, and was happy about her new, better self. She handed in her homework on time and studied for her exams to the point of exhaustion, she felt great, until one morning, while rummaging in her jacket pocket, a coin fell onto the floor and rolled into a corner of her room that Charlie rarely paid much attention to. And as she followed the coin, behind an old shoe box, she discovered the bolt

cutters that she had borrowed from the hardware store many weeks ago and never brought back. Right then, Charlie realized—not for the first time, but with a clarity that made it feel like it might have been—how old patterns that had supposedly been shed can easily suck you back in.

Forgetting to bring back something you’ve borrowed on time is like a clogged toilet or an unaddressed conflict—taking care of the problem is so unpleasant that you keep on putting it off, which only makes it worse and worse.

Charlie placed the bolt cutters in a prominent place in her room, on the table, and every time she looked at them, they served as a reminder of what she hadn’t yet achieved: becoming a better person.

It wasn’t until, one night in a bar, Ella introduced her to her friend Valeria—a tall, gorgeous woman who studies art and has already had solo exhibitions in Porto and Milan—that she once again felt the urge to be different. More like Valeria, someone who just went ahead and did things, which led her to finally pack the bolt cutters in her bag the very next day. She would take them, back, goddamit. Late that afternoon, she rode over to Ella’s, and at a traffic light, she got a message from Ella asking Charlie to bring some cigarette filters. And so it happened that Charlie found herself standing on this very Saturday afternoon at 4:13 pm, at this very convenience store, where at this very moment, a tall, far too beautiful man with striking eyebrows walked in, making everything around him glow, and asked the shop attendant in a gentle voice if there was any chance—any chance at all—that had a pair of bolt cutters, because he needed to break open his bike lock.

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He grabbed the bolt cutter with such a gentle but firm hand, and it took Charlie’s breath away.

She tried to assume a pose that was at once casual and attractive, but only wobbled awkwardly about and couldn’t figure out what to do with her arms. He placed the bolt cutters around his bike lock and squeezed. A noise escaped from his mouth; an exhale combined with a slight grunt, and Charlie had to look away, otherwise she might have uncontrollably placed her hand on the nape of his neck.

He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen, in his short Adidas training shorts and his white t-shirt. He wore a thin silver chain around his neck whose links sparkled against his tanned skin as they caught the sunlight, and—

“Man, this thing’s stubborn,” he said and stood up.

“Give me a go,” said Charlie a little too quickly, “I’ve had practice.” She pushed past him and felt the presence of his body very strongly on her whole right side as she grabbed the bolt cutters with astounding, unprecedented confidence, placed it around the lock and, with a force that surprised even her, caused the lock to break. With the pride of someone who has thrown something at a garbage bin and it just happens to go in, she passed him the broken lock, and he looked at her with admiration, the kind of admiration men often look at Ella with, but not at Charlie, and she looked back, and for a moment, she heard the sea roar. And that’s how it was.

He had lost his keys, including the one for his bike lock, while on holiday in Budapest, he explained to her. “Ah, is that why you are so tanned?” Charlie asked, and was immediately embarrassed by the question. Valentin grinned and shook his head and said, “no, that vacation was last year. I just never really manage to get things done straight away.”

And she said, “oh my god, me neither.”

Ella would understand, Charlie decided, and she cancelled on her, something had come up, something important, life changing.

She and he, Valentin—who also never managed to get things done straight away—grabbed a beer and went for a walk. They had locked their bikes together with Charlie’s new lock and were now free to do as they pleased. She asked him if he also had phases where he wanted to change everything about himself, to become a better person, and Valentin looked at her in amazement and shook his head.

“This is just the way I am,” he smiled with his eyes, and Charlie looked at him; he had green eyes, like her, and their eyes locked and she admired him for his self-assurance.

Being in his presence felt like visiting a drugstore. She felt cleaner, more organized, calmer, it was as if she needed only him and her life would become simpler, she would be a different type of woman, clever and funny, with moisturized legs. She felt beautiful.

Valentin told her he was studying literature, that he wanted to become a writer, and for some reason that didn't give Charlie the ick.

He told her that he worked in a bookshop and Charlie told him that she worked in a cinema—so they were both in the business of selling visions, he remarked. What a wonderfully witty observation, thought Charlie, and she imagined herself sitting at a double desk with Valentin in a sun-drenched apartment full of plants. They would drink coffee and be witty together, do intelligent things at their desks and go out for dinner with their mutual friends in the evenings. Valentin would get along well with Ella, but Charlie would not for a single moment—not even in the slightest—get the feeling that he found her attractive. They would go on vacation together, and she would accompany him on his book tours, and people would say, wow, what a great, beautiful couple.

“So you're studying film?” asked Valentin. Charlie shook her head and said, “No, math. I'm doing my master's.”

“Like to be a teacher?”

No, she said, math math, and he looked at her in amazement, and she looked at the ground and hoped that he wouldn't try to act as if he knew anything about math. But he didn't try anything of the sort and only said, “wow, impressive.”

After quite some time, they arrived back at their bikes and he looked at Charlie's hand, in which she was holding the key—the key to the lock around both their bikes—and Charlie didn't want to open it, she wanted their bikes to stay like that forever.

“What are you going to do with that, with math?” he asked. His eyes sparkled brightly in the sunlight. They held each other's gaze longer than necessary.

“First I'll get my PhD.”

“Will you move away for that?”

“I don't know.”

He looked off to the side a little, and then back in her eyes. “I hope not.”

A sharp jolt shot into Charlie's uterus. She grinned.

“Can I have your number?” he asked. A jump, handspring, jump, somersault, pirouette, landing, arms up, head high, the audience claps, the judges

nod approvingly. She typed her number into his phone, and when she gave it back to him, their fingers touched, and it was magical.

[...]

Valentin picked Charlie up by car, and since Charlie had grown up in a big city and never spent much time in cars, she somehow felt particularly grown up when she got in next to him and he placed his hand on her thigh. On the backseat was a basket with bread, wine, and fruit. Charlie would have liked nothing better than to open the non-existent convertible roof and wrap a silk scarf around her head.

On the highway, Valentin wanted to listen to German rap. Charlie was disappointed by the choice of music, which has hardly fit for purpose, and sat there sulking.

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Valentin's mother, Heike, had a thin, creased mouth from which her lipstick seemed to be crumbling. "Hi," she said loudly, hamming it up, "hi, it's a pleasure to meet you." She first hugged Valentin and then Charlie and immediately turned around, and they followed her into the kitchen.

"You two can start setting the table." She pointed to the kitchen cabinets, went into the living room, and through the opened door, Charlie saw a gigantic wall of books and a grand piano with numerous framed photographs standing on top of it. Valentin grabbed the tableware and placed it on the kitchen table. Charlie began to set the plates when Heike came back into the kitchen and laughed, "ah, did you want to eat in here?" she asked, and Charlie stopped what she was doing. Valentin turned around from the kitchen cabinet and looked at the plates, "ah, right," he said, and then to Charlie, "we usually eat in the dining room."

"The cake is already waiting there," said Heike, and Charlie apologized and went to collect the plates, but Heike said, "no, no," and made a reassuring gesture with her hands, somehow looking panicked or as if she were about to cry. "If you

two would rather eat in here, then I'll just bring the cake over, we doesn't always have to do the same thing."

She disappeared back into the living room and from there into the next room, which must have been the dining room. Charlie looked at Valentin and he said, "it's okay, we'll just eat in here." Charlie placed the cups around the table, while Valentin put a filter in the coffee machine.

"So, tell me," Heike started cutting the cake. "How's it going in the bookshop, Valentin?"

Valentin started to tell her about it, but Heike immediately cut him off and asked Charlie, "Would you like a big piece of cake or just a small one? I can never manage so much myself."

Charlie didn't know what the right answer was, so she looked at the piece of cake that Heike had just picked up on the cake slicer, and said "that piece is just right," even though it actually looked like too much for her. Heike placed it on Charlie's plate and turned to Valentin.

"About the same for me," he said and also got a piece.

"I'm sure the female clientele at the bookshop are fond of you," said Heike and gave Charlie a wink, who was feeling more uncomfortable by the minute. She imaged waifish literature students hanging around the shelves of the bookshop all day peering over at Valentin, texting each other: omg, he smiled at me today.

Valentin thought for a moment, his mouth full, swallowed, and then said: "they can't get enough of me. Especially the older ones. They sometimes come by and bring me chocolate or cookies."

"Really," laughed Charlie, relieved, Heike smiled wryly. Valentin said, "they really don't care if I sell them books, they just want someone to talk to, and they want to sometimes touch my arm—one of them even pats me on the butt sometimes."

Heike raised her eyebrows, Charlie grinned.

"And you," Heike turned to Charlie, "you're studying mathematics?"

Charlie sat up straight.

"I'm doing my PhD."

"In mathematics?"

"Yes."

Heike pointed her fork at Valentin, “She’s doing her PhD.”

“I know,” he said, “how cool is that?”

“And what do you want to do with that, go into IT, or ... something like that?”

“Actually, I’d like to stay in academia.”

“Excellent.”

Heike nodded and looked at her plate. Charlie looked over to Valentin who was grinning contentedly. Heike looked up again and was about to say something when the coffee machine interrupted her with a sputter.

“So, you like it here?” asked Heike over the bluster, “sitting right next to the coffee machine? I don’t get it.”

Charlie poked at her cake.

“If you can’t finish it,” said Heike and pointed the tip of her fork at Charlie’s plate, “it’s no problem at all, we can put the plate in the fridge for you for later. Next time, you can just take a smaller piece.” Charlie nodded and thanked her, because she didn’t know what else to do.

In the afternoon, she crept through the house, the wooden floorboards creaking beneath her feet. In the living room she inspected the grand piano. The keyboard lid was open, sheet music sat open on the rack, a French title above the notes.

She looked at the photos that decked the piano, photos of Heike and her two sons, and of other relatives. One photo showed a boy of about fifteen, with braces, short hair, a swirl above the right side of his forehead. He grinned into the camera, which was directed at him from a slightly elevated angle, his skin, young and beardless, thin and drawn tight as though it might split.

“That’s not him,” came Heike’s voice from behind. She leaned against the living room door. “Valentin never wanted photos to be taken of him when he was a teenager. It was impossible to drag him in front of a camera. That’s Gereon, he was always the more worldly one.”

She opened the drawer and took out a pile of photos, leafed through them, and passed one to Charlie. “There he is. He must have been about thirteen or fourteen here.”

Charlie looked at the photo, a skinny boy in shorts and a slightly too tight t-shirt sat on a garden swing. The upholstery of the swing was a floral yellow and

green, his face in the shade. He had his legs propped up and a book splayed on his thighs, in which he was engrossed, his face looked so serious and concentrated that he didn't even notice he was being photographed.

"Why isn't it on the piano?" asked Charlie, and Heike shrugged her shoulders. "He didn't want it there," she gestured towards the photo, as if it offered an explanation. "He just doesn't want it there."

Charlie nodded and wanted to give the photo back, but Heike brushed it away. "Keep it, I have so many."

At dinner, Heike talked about Gereon and his start-up, how well it's going, that he now even has clients in Korea, Japan, and the US, and that he always brings something back from his business trips. That Gereon visits her once a month, while the last time that Valentin visited was at Christmas. "And yet," she said, "one could be forgiven for thinkinh that you aren't as busy as your brother and would have more time for visits. But I'm sure you're very busy with your novel?"

Charlie observed Valentin, he looked tired and tried to laugh and said, "I'm certainly working on it."

"But you haven't found a publisher yet?"

"No."

"And Valeria couldn't help you out there? She was pretty successful."

"Valerie gave me a few contacts," said Valentin, Charlie raised her head.

"When?" she asked, but Heike butted in, "I just don't want you to be disappointed later, when nothing comes of it, that's all."

Valentin chewed on his food and looked at his plate. Charlie looked at him and then his mother and then back again. They had similar eyes, big, round, green. They had a similar hair structure, a similar way of holding a fork.

Heike turned to Charlie, "Do you often do the washing up at his place?"

Valentin leaned back exasperated, looked at his mother annoyed, but said nothing.

"I'm just saying," Heike raised her hand, "come on now, that's what Valeria used to always get annoyed about, darling, that she had to do so much for you."

Valentin pursed his lips and took a deep breath in and out. Charlie reached for his knee under the table, but he jerked it away.

“I mean,” started Charlie, and Heike nodded at her encouragingly. Charlie’s hesitation seemed to give her pleasure, as if it was all a game that Heike could not be beaten at. Charlie leaned forward slightly.

“He does a lot, actually, he sometimes cooks, he’s got a lot of friends, and it’s important for him to be there for them,” she said and sat up straighter, because she’d had a good idea, “and he reads a lot about feminism and thinks about gender roles and everything. And really, I don’t wash the dishes that much, I really don’t.”

“She looked over at Valentin lovingly, but he just looked at his plate.

Heike nodded slowly. “Well, would you look at that,” she said in Valentin’s direction. “Isn’t that interesting. You’ve sure got this one wrapped neatly around your little finger.”

Valentin just sat there frozen, only his pupils were moving from left to right, as if he were reading a single sentence that was hanging in the air only for him. He dragged his hand over his face, shook his head, his whole upper body, and then said, “Should I mow the lawn tomorrow?”

Heike continued to eat undisturbed. “Of course you should.”

The rest of the evening, they chatted about the latest movies coming out in the cinema, about the garden, the dog that recently died, and about whether or not Heike would get a new one. Heike drank a whole lot of wine, Charlie and Valentin held back. Valentin thawed out slightly and at one point, he and his mother had a good laugh about a joke that Charlie didn’t understand at all.

Later, in his childhood bedroom, the two of them sat glued to the screen, watching a Netflix show. Charlie held Valentin in her arms, his head resting against her breast, and she stroked his hair with her free hand, stroked his temples gently with her fingers, his forehead, those eyebrows that she loved so much.

She loved him, and she felt so sorry for him, it must be so hard for him to be here, it must be so painful to have been subjected to so much rejection, to have been put down so often, and she was sure that all his mother’s rejection must have moulded him into a delicate being, despite his looks. She pulled him in closer and his hand crept up to her upper arm and closed around it. He needed her. Exactly. He needed it, to be loved, he had a bit of catching up to do, Charlie understood this now. She kissed him on the head, kissed his temples, stroked them with her lips. “I’ve got you,” she whispered, and Valentin nodded and squeezed her arm. It was

time, she could feel it, they'd been together for half a year, actually it had been time long ago, there had been so many moments in which they'd both felt it and yet both postponed the declaration. But now, here, sitting so profanely in front of a Netflix show, almost unromantic, it was perfect, the most perfect, human, simple, and real moment in a real relationship, so she said, "I love you, Valentin."

At that same moment, in the show, a fight between two sisters broke out. They yelled at each other about the fact that one of them never understood the other and so on. They screamed from inside the laptop, while Valentin didn't say a word. She looked down at him, saw that his eyes were open, she saw his gorgeous lashes, he was watching the show, listening, and his hand didn't squeeze her arm. He simply lay there. Charlie waited one second, ten seconds, one minute. One of the sisters turned on her heel and slammed the door shut behind her, the other one remained slumped on the sofa and began to sob. Charlie stared at Valentin's temples. She didn't say anything. In the show, the setting changed, a car wash, a conversation, a barking dog, something had gone wrong. Long zoom shots on shaken faces. The episode was over. Valentin raised his head. "Another episode?" he asked. Charlie nodded silently.

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On the way back, Valentin rapped along to his shitty gangster rap and Charlie stared ahead at the highway, fuming. Valentin suddenly seemed unbearably idiotic to her, like a little boy. His free hand was aping hip hop gestures in the air rather than resting on her thigh. He wasn't looking at her, it was as if she wasn't even there.

But he knew something was off. He knew what she had said yesterday and that he hadn't said anything in response. He couldn't be oblivious to the whole thing.

"Meet me on the street, follow me down the hole, white rabbit," rapped Valentin as they drove along the highway. That was it.

Charlie slammed the dashboard, cutting off the blaring music mid-beat. The silence filled the car, as if they had just driven into a river.

Valentin said nothing. He just kept looking straight ahead, rapping the next verses of the song quietly, changing lanes.

“You have got to be kidding me,” she said as calmly as she could, yet still felt unbelievably ridiculous. She didn’t want to be the type of girlfriend that said things like you have got to be kidding me.

He said nothing.

“Hello,” she jerked her head forward, leaning over onto his side. She stared at him. His body pulled away from her, his eyes glued to the road.

“What,” he said coldly, and Charlie’s eyes welled up with tears. She pulled away, leaned forward, looked at her ugly, bony thighs, her silly dress. She wiped the tears away, she felt the wound Valentin had opened within her growing, as if someone were ripping it further and further apart with their bare hands. Any moment now, he would surely say that he was sorry, he must have realized that he had hurt her, that she was wiping tears from her eyes at this very moment. Surely he could see things from her perspective; how silly, how ridiculous she must have felt, with her “I love you” left hanging in the air like that, at his mother’s house. Who would do something like that? He would apologize soon. Soon he would put his hand on her thigh. His right hand let go of the steering wheel and moved in her direction, but it stopped halfway, it stopped in front of the stereo. He turned the music back on, the beat engulfed her, and he nodded along, smiling. In that moment, Charlie was overcome by a kind of disgust that she had never felt before. Her hands cramped up, her jaw tensed, she wanted to hit him in the face, she wanted to take his head and squeeze it against the driver’s seat window. She wanted him to never, ever, ever do something like that to her again, she wanted him to be afraid of her. She slammed the speakers off again. She grabbed Valentin’s arm and pinched his bicep as hard as she could. Valentin pulled his shoulder away, shook her off, and said, “I love you too,” without looking at her.

Charlie stared at him, her heart thumping. He had said it. He kept his eyes on the road, rapping away. A few minutes passed before she said, “okay”. Then she took out her phone to write Ella.

He said he loves me!

Luzie shows the others a video on her phone before the session. In the clip, a woman is running after a man with a chainsaw, and a voiceover comments on the way that female perpetrators of violence are portrayed in cinema and in *the media*. Irma leans over Luzie's shoulder and says, "that's so messed up, isn't it?"

Charlie gets closer hesitantly. She notices Ms. Yilmaz's gaze following the group with a hint of pride. Charlie says that in other films it's pretty much the same. Female characters that become violent are either completely crazy, "i.e.: *hysterical*", says Charlie, quoting Ella now, "or sexy and dangerous."

"I like that actually," chimes in Luzie.

"Or sexy and almost supernatural, like in *Basic Instinct*. There she's a psychologist, which makes her super dangerous," adds Charlie. The whole group, even Mr. Hausner, turns to Ms. Yilmaz, who waves her hand dismissively. "I'm not supernatural." Irma gestures towards Luzie's phone and says, "This is all part of the patriarchy."

She is convinced that without the patriarchy, they would have no need to resort to violence. Luzie tilts her head sceptically.

"It's true!" says Irma. "The things we do, the things we did and are now supposed to learn not to do anymore, are a form of rebellion. Revenge! For everything that has been done to us and to women more generally! I only ever resorted to violence when it was about demanding respect! I wanted Georg to see that he can't interrupt me, that he has to respect me as a person, that he shouldn't see me as a *woman*, but as a *person*. The only thing I wanted was respect," she said and raised her hands as if she were surrounded by the police.

Natalia shakes her head and laughs; Amy leans forward from her side of the table so that she can see Irma better. "The patriarchy doesn't even exist anymore," she says.

Ms. Yilmaz starts to cough and turns away. Irma gestures towards all the members of the group. "Every one of us," she says passionately, "is a feminist goddess of vengeance, and we ought to be a little proud of that. We will still be seen as criminals, but when the matriarchy takes over, we will be treated like queens." Charlie imagines them sitting in the seminar room, all wearing Uma Thurman's yellow leather outfit from *Kill Bill*, armed to the teeth and being lectured on what a rage scale is.

“Alright, let’s get started,” says Ms. Yilmaz over the giggling, “I think it might be a little more complicated than that, Ms. Geiser,” she says in Irma’s direction. “And today we’re going to take a closer look at that. We want to think a bit about the life mottos that we all live by, and by that I don’t mean mantras like *all’s well that ends well*, but rather principles that we have internalized since childhood, that we maybe took from our guardian or teacher along the way. One example could be something like: *you can’t do it*.”

Mr. Hausner stands up, that was his queue, he has a stack of papers in his hands, “for that, we have a brief questionai-”

Someone knocks on the door. When the door is closed, you need a key to get in. Mr. Hausner walks towards the door and opens it. In the doorframe stands Fenja, the weird participant with countless chains around her neck, it must be difficult to walk through the world with all that extra weight hanging from you. That’s probably why she’s late. Mr. Hausner lowers the questionnaires and exchanges a glance with Ms. Yilmaz.

“Sorry,” says Fenja quickly. “The train.”

“We’ve spoken about this, Ms. Tanaka,” says Ms. Yilmaz seriously.

“I know, I know,” says Fenja, her voice quiet, as if she were trying to make this public conversation a little more private.

“I’m afraid I have to ask you to leave,” whispers Mr. Hausner. “It’s too late for you to take part in this session. We will have to note it down as an unexcused absence. That is really not a big issue, you are allowed to have two unexcused absences. You really need to get used to coming on time—”

“I’m literally two minutes late,” Fenja’s voice sounds hoarse. She tries to shove past Mr. Hausner, but he stands in her way.

“I know,” says Ms. Yilmaz, “but in the past it was ten, fifteen, and twenty minutes. We’re going to stick to the rules this time and next time you come on time, okay?”

Fenja’s gaze rushes around the room; everyone tries to pretend to be busy with something else. Amy even begins to hum.

“I’m sorry, but I need you leave,” Mr. Hausner murmurs, “next week you can participate as usual.” Fenja looks him in the eyes defiantly as he closes the door in front of her. She doesn’t move a muscle. The door locks with a click. For a moment, it’s quiet. Everyone is gathering themselves. Mr. Hausner once again picks

up his stack of papers; he is clearly rattled by the situation and takes a few deep breaths. “As I was saying, we have prepared a questionnaire for you to—” There is a sudden bang against the door. Once, twice. A pause, and then a third time.

Irma sighs. “Just let the poor girl in.”

Ms. Yilmaz throws her an admonishing look. Fenja’s muffled voice forces itself through the door from the outside. “I hate you all,” she screams, “I hate you all, you fuckers!”

There is another bang, and then another. Mr. Hausner sets the stack of papers aside on the seminar table and asks everyone to take a sheet. He opens the door and squeezes through, closing the door behind him. “Ms. Tanaka, we will have to call the police if you don’t stop, and I really do not want to do that,” they hear, and then they hear Fenja howl, while Mr. Hausner tries to calm her down saying, “I believe in you, we all believe in you.”

After the session, a few of the participants stay behind to talk about the incident, mouths open, eyes wide with concern. Charlie pushes past them quickly and heads for the train.