

OLD GIRLS

a novel by
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(abridged excerpt from »MILF«)

That first sip of wine. Something inside herself eases. She'd felt a sharp sensation all day. In her chest. In her hands and feet. Her thoughts. And yet, now. On the balcony in the evening sun. Everything goes soft. Undine takes another sip. And another. White wine from the corner store. Not even chilled. Quite sour. But it works. Undine feels the rays of sunlight on her skin. The pigeons are cooing in the tree in front of the building. That it's beautiful to be alive. She thinks. And even has to laugh. She laughs at Jenny, who steps out onto the balcony. Holding a bowl of ice.

Are you crazy? Jenny says. Get down from there right now! Instead of answering Undine downs her wine in a gulp. She holds her glass for Jenny.

Ice, please!

Jenny tilts her head, dropping two ice cubes into the glass. And there's Thao with the pizza. Of course she'd complained at first. When it became clear they weren't going anywhere.

Staying at home. Just because of a kid. A complete stranger of a kid has to sleep! Don't be an asshole. Thao just barely pulled herself together: All right, I'll go get pizza.

Now she puts the box on the table. Four Seasons XL. Just like back when.

I'm serious! Jenny says. Can you please get down from there? I don't want to scrape you off the sidewalk later on!

Undine laughs. She's doing a good job. The look. The voice. Mommy Jenny. Undine leans back slightly. Just to tease her friend. Takes her hands off the balustrade. Waves them in the air.

Not funny! Jenny frowns.

Oh, come on. Nothing can happen to me! Undine straightens up again. Starts rolling a cigarette. Jenny can't really think that. The balustrade is wide. She'd have to want to fall.

FREE FALL, Undine pictures the headline: A 37-YEAR-OLD GRAPHIC DESIGNER THREW HERSELF OFF A BALCONY IN PRENZLAUER BERG LAST NIGHT AFTER BEING FIRED. Nah. Undine lights her cigarette. If you're not really employed. Then you can't even be fired. And besides. Termination. It sounds so definitive. So final. Who knows what the future holds, Britta said. Maybe we'll have gigs for you again in the future. It doesn't look good at the moment. Since she woke up, Undine has been torturing herself. With Britta's bored face. During her presentations. All those moments. She should have known. All those moments when it was clear. Taking a merry-go-round ride with Undine. Faster and faster. The junior colleague was also on the merry-go-round. The one who was always sitting there when Undine came into the agency in the morning.

Behind her big screen. With her big glasses. Her big headphones. Everything about that little person was big. Even her self-confidence. How assured she always was while speaking in the meetings. How confidently she sat there when Undine left. The way from Britta's office to the door goes past her desk. Are you okay? Like a friendly rodent behind her glasses. Always going in circles. All day long. Are you okay are you okay, the monotonous soundtrack. But enough of that. Undine takes a sip of wine. She never meant to grow old with the Golden Sisters. A kick in the butt. Maybe it's a good thing. The universe has other plans for her. Undine holds her face up in the evening sun. Closes her eyes. Nothing can happen to her. She tells herself: who knows what the future holds. The insides of her eyelids glow red: The universe has others plans for me. The pigeons in the tree in front of the building. Undine feels their cooing all over her body. Who knows what the future holds. Undine takes a deep breath. There's nothing. The universe. Her eyes closed, Undine lifts her glass to her mouth. The universe coos. Humming and buzzing with possibilities. Graphic designers will always be needed. She just has to make an effort. Say hello at some agencies. Networking, no problem. Go door-to-door. Undine opens her eyes.

Looks at Thao. Who looks at Jenny. Jenny's talking on the phone. Says: Alright. Alright. Says: Don't worry. We're fine. Nods a couple more times and then puts the phone down on the table. They've arrived. Charlotte is in her room now, Jenny says, and Undine needs a moment. Charlotte. Room. Undine has to think for a very brief moment. Who's Charlotte

again? Jenny says Seymour is staying the night there, that he wants to talk to the doctors in the morning. And that's when Undine sees the child in front of her. In her arms. She's carried Kay from the sofa to the bed. Little pumpkin. Immediately her heart grows larger. Poor bunny. Your mom is fine. Your mom is going get better.

Seymour didn't want me to wake Kay, Jenny says. He'll call again in the morning.

Thao put's her hand on Jenny's shoulder. Golden sister.

Jenny presses her lips together.

I really didn't get that Charlotte was doing so badly, she mumbled.

Hey, don't beat yourself up about it, Thao says. Her hand slips from Jenny's shoulder, and they both look down at their plates. Here in this moment, on the balcony, there's nothing they can do for Charlotte. The child is sleeping. All they can do is eat their pizza. Undine's stomach makes itself known. Doesn't growl. Just mumbles. Undine puts her arm over her belly. Inconspicuously. As if she just wanted to hold her cigarette in the other direction. Feels the curve. Concave. Feels her rib cage. Undine takes a gulp of wine, and the murmuring stops. Suddenly her young colleague is back again. With her T-shirt. RIOTS NOT DIETS. For a moment, she feels an irrepressible need. To tell Jenny and Thao about her colleague. The one who wasn't let go. The one who's still sitting pretty. On her fat ass. Undine would never say that. Undine wouldn't ever say that. But she did notice it. Her little colleague's slightly plump behind. She also noticed: That her colleague didn't drink. Her colleague

doesn't drink alcohol, not even coffee. She drinks green tea. In ceramic cups. Undine's seen the pictures on her phone. She knows what her kitchen looks like, her bed and her girlfriend. Undine drinks a sip of wine. Cooing. An almost tender feeling for her colleague. She deserves the job. It's time for Undine. Off to new horizons. Into the unknown. She likes it after all, thinks it's good. The universe. If everything else fails. Ivo. He'd offered her a job. When they were sitting next to the harbor. That was. Seems like ages ago. But that was yesterday morning. The first of two consecutive all-nighters. Why don't you just work for me? He asked her. Undine as a bartender. Put the foxy lady in charge of the henhouse, they'd laughed. The vixen boss. An offer. Just an option. (...)

You bought two bottles, right? Undine hops down from the parapet. The look those two give her. Strict sisters.

In the freezer, Thao says.

Jenny's apartment is a familiar landscape in the dim light. The old desk. The sofa that she and Thao helped pick out. Undine's breath had caught for a moment when she saw the price. That's how expensive coziness can be. Years later, the edges are worn, the upholstery has a red wine stain or two. And yet, even if Jenny replaces it with a new sofa, it will always be Jenny's sofa. Just like her apartment is always Jenny's apartment, regardless the address. The colors, the light. No matter how the furniture is arranged, how the stacks of books and shelves are rearranged, which postcard is pinned to the wall now, which movie poster. Always that feeling of warmth, yes, of love.

Undine thinks she should have visited Jenny sooner. Much sooner. Right after Jenny told her she was pregnant. Just get on the train and come here. Yesterday she almost missed the train again. Fell asleep in Ivo's bed. And maybe she should knock that off as well. Stop going home with Ivo. Like a stray dog. Like a bitch in heat. A little bit of both. A stray and in heat. Undine has to giggle. Last night comes to surface again. Her young colleague certainly doesn't do anything like that. Crashing with two different guys within twenty-four hours. Oh man. Undine enters the kitchen, it's almost dark in here. She hears the cat purring, feels his fur against her bare legs. She opens the freezer, removes the white wine. The vixen in charge. Vixen and bitch, Undine's an entire petting zoo. Ivo wasn't familiar with the word. Vixen, that's a female fox. A grandma word. Undine immediately hears her shrill voice, sees the hand on the curtain. The neighbor walks by, outside, wearing a tight dress. If the old vixen thinks she can pull it off! Undine shoos her grandmother's voice out of her head. Gives the refrigerator door a shove. And as the door slams shut, she sees it. Between magnets and postcards: Jenny's baby. Sepia, 3D. Murky. Duck face and a snub nose. The little hand on the chin. Undine steps closer. She hadn't even had the idea. To ask Jenny. For a picture of the baby in her belly. Wine bottle in hand, Undine walks back into the dark living room, past the sofa.

When Undine steps out onto the balcony, Thao is lighting a candle. The friends have left Undine the piece of pizza with

artichoke. That's always the way they've split things. Undine sits down on the balcony again, plucks a piece of artichoke from the pizza and puts it in her mouth. Her stomach. It's no longer a murmur. More like a roar. Undine is hungry, all at once irrepressibly hungry. She takes a bite of the pizza, and then another. Jenny and Thao sit on the other side of the table, Undine sees their faces in the candlelight. So far away. Undine chews. The ultrasound picture on the fridge. A little girl. Mini-Jenny. Undine has to think of the plate. The collector's edition in her parents' house. They have no clue about art. But in the hallway, above the shoe rack, hung Klimt. The Three Ages. Undine loved the painting as a child. The golden shimmer. The flowers in the hair of the young woman with the baby in her arms. In the background the old woman. With a pointy belly and a hunchback. Her hand in front of her face. Every day the three women. When Undine took her shoes out of the closet. Put them on. When she returned home, taking off her shoes again. Every day, Undine asked herself. Why the old woman is so sad. And years later. In the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna. When she was standing in front of the original. *Le tre età della donna*. That's when it first occurred to her. The young woman in the picture looked like her mother. Like her mother in the old photos, the ones from the days before Undine's birth. When her mother was still soft. Her hair still long. She'd never felt closer to her mother than in that moment in the museum, in the din of the tourist groups. So close that she wrote her a postcard. On the front, the Klimt women. On the backside: *Dear Mom*. Maybe the postcard

never got there. Undine didn't ever ask. The next time she talked to her mother, the moment had disappeared in thin air. The feeling that the painting could show her anything about her mother. A sense. *Dear Mom*. That her mother had once been one of these women. The baby in her arms. Her eyes closed. Soft and gentle. Dreaming. Up in thin air. Her mother. When Undine comes to visit, she disappears into the kitchen. Prepares meals that Undine picks at. *Le tre età*. Three generations on a plate. Three generations under one roof. The old woman in the background. Far later, Undine thought to herself. That the old woman isn't sad at all. That she's holding her hand in front of her face because she's ashamed. Because she can't stand the sight. Which sight. Her own grandmother wasn't sad either. But she also didn't seem to be ashamed. She never did anything wrong. Accompanied Undine's childhood from the shadows. Behind curtains and doors. With a creaking soundtrack, commentary, and judgements, about everything and everyone: vixen. Hussy. Wastrel. A weight spreads within her anytime Undine thinks of the house. Undine lets the pizza crust fall to her plate, glides along the balustrade towards the wine bottle, which Jenny had placed on the table. She is thirsty. Fills up her glass. We need music, she thinks. We have to celebrate. The baby. That we have each other. That we moved away from the village. That we left the village behind. The confines, the weight, curtains. The creaky soundtrack.

Are you crazy! Jenny squealed. Looked from Thao to Undine, eyes wide: did you know that?

Know what? Jenny hands over the phone before Undine can

shake her head. A horse on the screen, a big bay. Next to it, Thao, dressed up in a vest and leather boots.

Thao bought a horse! Jenny squeaks.

Whaaat! For a moment, hot and cold, Undine's heart pounding in her ears, bought a horse, and Thao just grins, shrugging her shoulders: Yeah, well. It's always been a dream - what a horse like that must cost. Slight dizziness. A number flashes through Undine's mind. 1,083. The balance on her account. One more month of insurance. One more rent. And then. Yeah, wow, Undine says. And because it sounds too flat, she follows it up with yeah, congrats, higher and brighter: That's awesome, we have to celebrate it!

Three girls, their pony tails pointing to the left. They're arm in arm, grinning at me. And for a moment I don't know. Where am I. Who is that. Some random pony tails. A picture. Leaned against the bedside lamp. Like in a spotlight. That's a bed. A pillow. Now it dawns on me. Now I remember. Mom. A rustling. A brief shock. But it's just the cat. Next to me. It's gotten up. Yawns. Arches its back. And jumps from the bed. Looks back. Over its shoulder, like: Come on. So I follow it. Pussy-footing into the living room. There's a flickering light. Flickering there. Voices. The cat takes a seat. Sits in front of the balcony like it's a television. Undine up on the balustrade. Huge eyes. Curls all over the place. She looks beautiful. Like in dark water. As if the night were the sea, and Undine is about to swim away. Jenny and Thao are sitting on chairs. Sitting in front of empty

plates and talking.

I have to tell you something, Thao says.

Our ears perk up. I lean forward. And there. In the in the balcony glass door. Next to the cat. There's another face. Smear'd faced, smear'd eyes. *That's me*. Not a mermaid. *Never ever*. Regardless of whether mom sews on the shells. With such a face. *No good*. For Halloween at best. *Scary pumpkin*. They're already screeching. Jenny squeals, as if she'd been stung:

You can't be serious!

As if. *Nobody's fault*. No wonder that mom. Prefers to sleep. Instead of sewing shells onto me. No sense anyway. With such a face. With such a pumpkin as a kid. Don't cry. Blink. Blink. Like the cat. *There, there*. Like Dad. *Fucking Dad*. If it's not my fault. Why did he park me here? My whole body burns, my eyes burn. I want to go home. I blink. I close my eyes. Want to disappear. But then the flooring creaks. I open my eyes. Legs. Two knees in front of me.

Hey. What are you doing here?

The legs fold together, Undine's skirt appears in front of me, her shirt, her face. Hey. Hey, her breath smells sour. Her eyes huge and dark, maybe it's her eyes, not the night that's the dark sea. Maybe I'm the sea and Undine's eyes are diving in me. Her face is real close to mine, our noses are almost touching. Can I give you a hug?

I'd rather not. I'd rather just sit here. I'd like to just sit here and be invisible. But her face is so close. I nod. Undine lays her arms around my neck. Her hair tickles my nose. How thin she is. Her arms are twigs. Branches in the

wind. We're about to fall over. Then Undine lets go.

Music, she says, we need music!

And I'd rather. Too late. Undine is already pulling me up. Undine's plugged her telephone into Jenny's stereo, grabs both of my hands, and one moment later, yo! the music starts blaring. Blasting my ears. The cats jumps away and I'd rather. I want to disappear. But Undine, *I tell you what I want,* doesn't let go. Undine's bopping. And me. *What I really, really want.* No choice. Jenny and Thao are already there, too. Standing in the doorway. Undine lets go of my hands, spreads out her arms. *So tell me what you want what you really, really want?* And Thao and Jenny answer:

I wanna-ha

I wanna-ha

I wanna-ha

I wanna-ha

I wanna really, really, really

wanna zigazig aaaaah -

We're an animal.

We have many arms. And legs like arms. Without suction cups, but fingers and toes with colorful nails. We're an animal with many mouths, we snore and sign and purr. The moon in front of the window. In our dreams the girls with bare bellies, with short skirts, hopping the whole time. Jump on the tables, steal the glasses and hats off of old men, the feather boa belonging to the elegant lady. A twitching, a shaking, the girls glitter and sparkle, zigazig aaaaah. We

open our eyes. The sun. The sun. We close our eye immediately. And once more, this time another eye. Again and again until the sun no longer tickles. It's beating down and we're thirsty. We're hungry, we have to use the toilet. *Gotta go.* There's an eyelid twitching here, a lip there. Kisses on the pillow. Half of a kiss, eyelashes. A smile. How late is it, we grunt. Don't zigzag have aaaah-clue. We smack: Doesn't matter. We're an animal, one with fins, with waves and letters on our skin. An animal with strips and stripes, dots and splotches. We also have stubble. Eyebrow, beards on the belly. So many bellies that grumble and growl. Only one is moving. Pointed high, kicked from inside. A foot to the belly. Little foot. In the animal a little animal. Kicks us. Wants us to get up.
We're an animal, Mom.
Can you guess which one?

First the rushing sound. That's how it starts. Every morning. Then Jenny has to briefly contemplate the universe. Icy winds, infinite expanse. As if it weren't a baby, not squished organs. A dark universe inside her, not tightness. She moves the doppler over her belly. The baby seems to still be asleep. Don't panic. Jenny forces herself to laugh. She's familiar with it. The tense moment every morning. What if it stays still. That's exactly why the midwife advised against it. Getting one of those machines. Jenny wasn't supposed to drive herself crazy. Jenny wasn't supposed to ruin her pregnancy with unnecessary worries. There. There comes

the pony, galloping out of the darkness. The corners of Jenny's mouth relax, the smile spreads over her whole body. She moves the doppler to the left. Wild gallop. Gets louder and louder. Jenny pauses the device at the loudest point. Hello. Closes her eyes. Holds her face to the sun. Hello, little pony. We had a nice dance. Yesterday evening. You and I. Thao and Undine. Even Kay joined us. After a while. That was exactly what she needed. That's how Jenny had pictured it. All of them together, like back when. Different than before. Less lightness. But still. It'd also done Kay good. With all that weight. With all -

Jenny opens her eyes. The pony has stumbled. Her own heart pauses too. Don't panic. These things happen. The pony stumbles, then it continues running. Go, go. The doppler reads 140. Everything's fine. Undine hears Jenny laughing in the kitchen. She removes the doppler from her belly. The gallop goes silent. Bye, bye, little pony, till tomorrow morning. Jenny wipes the gel from her belly. Jenny rolls out of bed. It's getting harder and harder. From her knees onto her feet. Jenny stretches. She shakes her blanket. The pillows. They all slept in one bed. Even though there would have been the sofa. But Undine absolutely wanted to show Kay music videos. From the nineties. Spice Girls. Tic Tac Toe. Lucif-
electric.

Jenny's phone beeps. A message from Petra. Just one word, in caps: *LEONIE*. Jenny replied immediately: *No*. Her mother sends three or four suggestions daily. Jenny rejects all of them. Petra doesn't let herself get discouraged. She ignores how short her daughter is. Snippy, borderline mean. Jenny

knows that she has no right to be aggressive. Her mother had supported her from the beginning. Hadn't tried to convince her to give it a try with Jasper after all. Even though it'd have been an option. Jasper would have done the right thing. He would have supported her with everything. He'd assured her of that. And had looked at her with such sad eyes. The role of knight and man of honor didn't suit him.

Emily? Yet another message from Petra. Followed by a smiley with hearts eyes. Jenny sent her a thumbs down. The immediate answer: *we still have five weeks!* We. A light buzzing under her skull. Petra would be arriving next week. Bringing a cradle. Moving in with Jenny. Tears come to Jenny's eyes. Her mother's so annoying. Leonie. Emily. What kind of names? How could she ever let it go this far? We. A gradual development. From calls at exactly the right moment. Whenever Jenny had felt weak. Petra was there. Jenny takes a deep breath through her nose. No right. She knows. She has no right to be annoyed by her mother. Jenny wipes away the tears. No self-pity. No wallowing in self-pity in front of anyone here. Not Thao, not Undine. And certainly not Kay. Jenny takes a deep breath. She's still standing in front of the bed. Staring down at the white blanket. A glittery blue stripe, like a comet's trail. Jenny forces herself to smile. Thinks to herself she probably looks like her mother. Now. Brave. Optimistic. She walks to the window, opening it. Pure cooing and chirping in the tree. The sky is bright blue. Jenny! Undine calls from the kitchen. Come here, I have something for you!

What is it? Kay's big eyes look at Thao.

Thao sprinkles some of the brown liquid on the layer of butter, then puts the bottle aside. Maggi, she says, and takes a bite of toast. Don't you know it?

The child answers silently with a shake of the head. Had washed off the makeup this morning. Finally. Looking scary. Like a clown in a horror flick. In the first place. The day had actually started off really well. Kay had Thao make a sandwich with jam. And on the shelf next to the jar of jam. The bottle of Maggi. Hadn't been opened yet. Fresh from the store. Thao had twitched with joy. Tenderness and joy. Jenny was the best. She knew Thao so well.

A drop of that special something, Thao reads from the label. Since 1887!

That special something. The familiar taste. Salty. But somehow also sweet. When she and Huyen came home at noon. And her parents were at work. They often didn't feel like warming up the food their mother had prepared. That's when they had toast with Maggi.

Is that Vietnamese? Kay asks.

Aha. A child from a good family. Added flavors are probably frowned upon in Kay's home. Thao has to grin.

Nope, it's very German, she says. My parents couldn't find the spices they were used to cooking with when they came here. Soy sauce, fish sauce, things like that. So they used Maggi instead. And when, at some point, they could buy soy sauce at all the supermarkets, they'd gotten so used to Maggi that they kept on using it.

The kid nods. Thao wants to nod along now. Nod back. Make fun of Kay's considerate nodding. Just a little. There. Kay's gaze. The elephant ears peeking out from between the hair. Thao recognizes this face from somewhere. One beat. But of course. Kay's mother. Charlotte. Of course Thao knows her. She pictures her face. A couple years ago. At a party. Thao sees Charlotte clearly. That she only now recognizes the similarity. And that Jenny hadn't said anything! Kay isn't just anyone's kid. Some acquaintance's child. She's the child of Jenny's big crush. What a crush that was. Charlotte was Jenny's only topic for weeks. And she'd really wanted Thao to meet her. Which was the reason for the party. Thao didn't have a clue what to expect. An aethereal being. The way Jenny had raved about her. And then Charlotte was just. At first glance. One of those dirty blond, slightly awkward girls Jenny liked. Couldn't open her trap. Gave monosyllabic answers to Thao's questions. Grinned like there was no tomorrow. Again and again, that silence amidst the music and the voices of the other people at the party. That grinning silence again and again. And Thao. No patience. Back then even less than now. No patience with people who reject the principle of small talk. So boring. And fairly German. The rejection of everything ostensibly superficial. Although. Good small talk. It's as if you're dancing. It follows a choreography. But no, not with Charlotte. No day. No fun.

Do you speak Vietnamese? The kid's still looking at Thao. And somehow she feels as if she's been caught in the act. Not by the question. Something inside her was triggered by

the thought of Charlotte. Hot. The memory of the party. The memory of the feeling of being caught.

Just a little, Thao says. Unfortunately. My parents thought it was more important for me and my sister to learn German very well.

Something in the child's eyes lit up: My grandma actually comes from Poland. But my dad didn't learn any Polish either because she lived in the US.

Do you want to try it? Thao pushed the plate with the Maggi toast over the table. Now that she sees the similarity she can't believe it took her twenty-four hours. To recognize it. One face, both of them. The kid chewing with a Lady Liberty tiara in her hair. Charlotte at the party. Her slightly despondent look. Thao hadn't believed Charlotte. Thought she'd been making doe eyes. She'd wanted to protect Jenny from this woman. Protect her from getting her heart broken. Tastes good, Kay says. A little like tears.

Thao laughs: can't get any more dramatic.

Tears. Thao'd been certain Charlotte was the type to start bawling. The party was just about over and Thao had been on her way out. Then she'd seen Charlotte standing alone in the kitchen. And had decided to stay just a little longer. And actually. She actually hadn't played the game for a long time. It was a relic from her days as a student. The seminar on jurisprudence under National Socialism. Unjust Justice. Sometime in her third year. Had thrown her off balance. Of course they'd talked about the Holocaust in school. But it hadn't really sunk in for her. Then in her early twenties. At the university. She'd become truly fascinated. Had wanted

to know everything, understand everything. How only slight changes in the jurisprudence. There'd been a redistribution of power, people disenfranchised. She'd almost been addicted for a while. Addicted to the dates, facts, numbers. The process of extermination. The details. Always the feeling. That all too familiar feeling. That everyone else knew these details long ago. They were aware of the facts and figures. She was the only one who wasn't. She was the only one who hadn't paid enough attention at some point. And for a while. Surrounded by her stacks of books in the library. Thao had felt a certain sympathy. How terrible it must have been for her friends. Their grandparents Nazis. Statistically speaking, it had to be the majority of her classmates. She kept imagining the class picture from her elementary school. An elementary school in rural West Germany. The kids in two rows in the schoolyard. The back row standing on a bench. Statistically speaking, most of the children must. Have Nazis as grandparents. And that had to be terrible. To know. That grandma and grandpa cheered on Hitler. Supported the system. At the very least. Most of them had taken part. In the oppression. The persecution. The murder. Statistically speaking, it has to have been the case that most of the grandparents had taken part. Profited from the system in one way or another. But then. When Thao started. Talking about it with her friends. She quickly realized. Most of these friends didn't let the facts they'd been taught in school get too close to them. They didn't let it get personal. They knew facts and figures. Had concerned faces during conversations. But the horror. It didn't reach their families. At

least not like that. These families only knew of the horror as victims. Grandpa being a prisoner of war. Grandma being raped by the Russians. That was talked about. And Thao pictured all the nice and not so nice elderly people. From her childhood. From the village. Thao saw them standing at their garden fence. At the supermarket. Saw Undine's grandma. Who called Thao slanty-eyed till the day she died. Saw them standing at the window, half hidden by the curtain. They'd all been adults in the thirties. But when you ask their grandchildren. No Nazis. A product of their times at most. Only joined the party because. No other choice. Otherwise Grandpa would have lost his job. He only wore the uniform because he had to. But if it was somehow possible. They all helped the Jews at some point. Bingo. They didn't have anything against Jews. Bingo. On the contrary. Bingo. A long time. For a relatively long time. It'd been Thao's game. Bullshit bingo. In her circle of friends. At parties. Steering the conversation towards the grandparents. A choreography. And then strip away the small talk. And ask directly. More athletic than dancing. A leap, very directly. What did your family do during National Socialism? It's astonishing how similar the stories were. All of them part of the resistance in their heart of hearts. Bingo. Bingo. Bingo. And of course. There were also others. Jenny's parents. Petra and Georg. Good hippies, members of the '68 generation. Rebelled against their parents. Against the whole generation. Georg was even against his aristocratic title. Had the "von" removed from the family name. But the money. Old Prussian nobility, generations of sergeants and generals. The money

must have slipped through somehow. What kind of teacher can afford to retire in his mid-fifties. A teacher who inherits. Which is also where Jenny's apartment is from. As security. Precaution. Georg. He'd always reminded Thao of God when she was a kid. The gray beard. The big, friendly face. That's about how Thao had pictured God. That Georg had a certain similarity with Neudeck. Also played a part. Her parents' hero. A picture of him hung in the living room, framed. Rupert Neudeck, with a flower garland around his neck.

Stretching out his arms towards the camera. To greet the refugees. Bring them to safety. This sort of adoration. Her parents' gratitude. Had always embarrassed Thao. But when he died. Last year. The year before last? Rupert Neudeck. Her mother had cried on the phone. Her mother, who never cries normally. Thao had listened to the radio broadcast. The obituaries. He was called a fisher of men. Himself. A German who never wanted to be a coward again. That's how he'd described himself. Never again a coward. Those people also existed. No doubt about it. It's just that in all the rounds of bullshit bingo Thao had played. The word coward never came up. My grandparents were cowardly supporters of the system. Not a single time. My grandparents were fervent supporters of Hitler. Never.

Thao takes a slice of bread from the toaster. Spreads butter over it. Margarine would be even better. But Jenny didn't have that. Thao pours Maggi onto the toast. Takes a bite. Did her mother's grief somehow taste like Maggi? Sweet and salty. Somehow it's a good picture. Her gazes hits Kay's. The sun is shining in through the window. There they sit,

smiling at each other and chewing. What would it be like, to resemble your mother that much? Like Jenny does Petra. Or Kay does Charlotte. Thao and her mother, in contrast. The only thing Thao has in common with her mother is how rarely they cry. She is suspicious of tears. She feels manipulated. When people suddenly start crying in conversation. That was its own category in her game of bullshit bingo. Bawling. There weren't many. But a couple people she talked to burst into tears. When it came to their grandparents. Thao can think of two examples. Fellow students whose grandparents had been in the Waffen-SS. Couldn't talk about what grandpa had done. Or say if they'd even knew exactly. Could only cry. And for some reason. She was completely sure. That Charlotte was in this category. And of course. Thao could have simply asked Charlotte. If she was actually attracted to women. Are you even attracted to women? Asking for a friend who's getting her hopes up. That would have been too easy. Too direct. What had she started exactly? What had Thao started as her starting point? She was no longer able to say today. The details had gone blurry. But the way Charlotte stood there, alone in the kitchen. She can picture that very clearly. How she approaches her. She also remembers. How quickly Charlotte had answered. Her abrupt question. She'd only hesitated for a fraction of a second. Gave Thao a sideways glance. Then she'd named the Wehrmacht unit her grandfather had been in. Which mass shootings in Poland this unit had been involved in. With the grandmother it'd been harder to do the research. Because she didn't belong to any particular unit. Typical woman's biography. Claiming not

everything had been bad under Hitler. One of those. She'd insisted until her dying day. She'd defended her husband against any and all questions and accusations. Charlotte had conveyed this in a completely unsentimental and sober way. And her composed manner had taken Thao slightly by surprise. She'd expected something different. Dodging, one or two bingo hits. And the moment of surprise. Charlotte had used it. To turn the tables. The way she'd looked at Thao from the side. Thao feels flushed just thinking about it. And, Charlotte had said, how's the air up there? Which had irritated Thao even more. After all, Charlotte was more than a head taller than her. I mean on your high horse, Charlotte had said. I assume your grandparents are in the clear? And that's the grin Thao recognized. Kay had Charlotte's grin. Slightly crooked.

Can I also have another piece of toast like that? Kay asked. Well sure! Thao pushes Kay the package of toast, the butter. She'd like to tell the kid something about her mother. I knew your mother, the words fly through her head. But that sounds. That'd sound. As if Charlotte were dead. Maybe Kay isn't even thinking of her right now. Maybe this here is a light-headed moment. The splotches of sunlight on the kitchen table. The flavor enhancers. Kay generously drizzling the Maggi on her toast. If Thao's honest. Her first impulse. When Jenny told why Kay's here. Why Kay's mother had to go to the hospital. Thao had rolled her eyes mentally. Whenever she hears about person XY having depression. Supposed depression, that's the key word. That's what she thinks. If she's honest. She thinks: XY should pull herself

together. Everyone gets tired sometimes. In a bad mood sometimes. It's not like the sun shines out of her backside, either. But Charlotte. How confidently she'd replied. Not at all the whiny, dirty-blond, grinning girl. Thao no longer remembered how she'd answered. But she remembered the feeling. On her way home, alone. So shabby. All at once, her dumb game had become embarrassing. Unbelievably embarrassing. It no longer had anything to do with shock. The cold feeling around her heart, in the library back then. In her third year.

Hey! Undine is standing in the kitchen doorway. A green, cosmetic mask on her face. A black t-shirt in her hand. Her gaze falls on the chewing child, the bottle of Maggi on the table. Oh, a great moment in culinary history! She says. That's a foodie talking, Thao replies.

A female foodie, I insist! Undine makes a face and holds up the T-shirt. Four white letters. M-I-L-F. For Jenny! She says and winks.

Culinary. Great moments. Idiot.

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