



Antonia Michaelis (Author)

Der Märchenerzähler

The Storyteller

Young Adult/ All Age Fiction | Recommended age: 14+ | Pages: 448

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Drug dealer, beloved boyfriend, murderer?

Anna and Abel: madly in love, mad with doubt

Abel Tannatek is a misfit, a truant and a drug dealer. Against her better judgement, Anna falls desperately in love with him because she sees the other Abel: the gentle, sad boy who takes care of his sister and tells Anna a story that touches her soul. But the fine line between reality and fantasy gradually becomes blurred. What if the story isn't a story but awful reality? What if Anna's worst fears are confirmed?

- Fast-moving thriller and touching love story – unputdownable!
- Impressive and inspired: a completely new Antonia Michaelis
- Filled with variety: thrilling, every day and fairy-tale passages in rapid succession to muster all their courage and all their cleverness to free their sister.

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Synopsis:

Anna and Abel

couldn't be more different. They are both 17, in their last year of school, but while Anna lives in a nice old town house, her father a doctor, her mother a literature professor at university – Abel comes from the part of town where the big cage-like blocks leftover from socialism still stand, full of people without work, without money, without future.

Only a year ago he has turned up at Anna's school to graduate from there. And he doesn't fit in. Nobody actually bothers to remember his first name, he's just the guy that hangs around outside during lunchtime, smoking and talking to no one. And he's the school-yard-dealer who you buy your party drugs from – which everyone seems to know but Anna, who only finds out at the beginning of the book.

She's a bit afraid of him, but then she discovers an old children's doll in a classroom and finds out that this belongs to Abel or actually to his little sister, 6 year old Micha, whom he is taking care of.

When he isn't listening to white noise on his old walk man (good to keep the world away from you) it's old Cohen-songs, the same songs Anna knew from childhood on for her mother loves them ... songs that are part of the atmosphere of the book.

Anna starts getting curious, she follows him and witnesses how he tells Micha a follow-up fairy-tale: a story about a little queen named Micha who has recently lost her home, an island that disappeared into the sea, and now has to reach the mainland in her little boat. Like the little prince meeting different people on different planets she meets different people on islands she passes.

Only later will Anna understand how true this fairy tale is in which every thing and person stand for a thing or person in the real world, it's a riddle and a solution to a crime ...

Though the meaning of the sinking island is soon clear to her: Abels and Michas mother has disappeared without a trace a few weeks ago. Now they don't get their hands on her unemployment pay. And they have another, bigger problem: Michas father turns up and tries to get his hands on her – in a most literal sense. Michas and Abels mother has thrown him out of the flat when Micha was still a baby and he is known for having an unhealthy liking for little kids.

Abel isn't 18 yet so he won't be able to keep Micha if anyone finds out their mother will not come back. This is the mainland in his fairy tale: his 18th birthday ... will the little queen reach it before something horrible happens?

When Anna gets to know Abel and Micha better she understands that it has always been Abel who took care of his little sister, their too-young mother living in her own world of disappointment and alcohol. This little girl is the center of his life, he tries to make her childhood a nice one – to make it different from his own.

Despite everyone warning her off Anna falls in love with Abel. Trying to help, trying to understand why it is that some people have jobs and an education and money and some don't. Why some people spend their nights selling drugs in pubs to earn money to feed their little sister.

Together with little Micha Anna listens to the ongoing fairy tale in which a black ship full of bad guys turns up and chases the little queen in her boat. One of those bad guys is definitely Michas father. Like all bad guys in fairy tales, he is killed – in this case by the dog of the little queen. Who bears an uncanny likeness to Abel.

And then Michas father is found dead in the real world, shot in the neck. Not much later, the social worker trying to take Micha away from her brother is found the same way - while another bad guy in the fairy tale is bitten to death by the little queen's dog.

Is Anna in love with a murderer?

She doesn't want to believe this and of course there are other suspects ... for example the boy at school who is madly in love with Anna and would do anything to get rid of Abel. Or Michas and Abels mother, who might not have disappeared so entirely after all.

And there is still something Anna doesn't know about Abel, something to do with his own unhappy childhood ... if she listens to Abels fairy tale well enough, she will find the truth – but does she want to?

Warning for publishers: This is NOT a book for children but for people from 14 or 16 onwards. We have the whole lot in there: murder, drugs, rape, prostitution ... the second warning is to the amount of kleenex you'll need at the end. Maybe have the box ready.

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Sample Translation:

Ballad For The Young

My child I know you're not a child
but I still see you running wild
between those blooming trees
your sparkling dreams, your silver laugh
your questions for the stars above
are just my memories.

And in your eyes the ocean
and in your eyes the sea
the waters frozen over
with your longing to be free.

Yesterday when you'd awoken
the world seemed incredibly old
this is the age you are broken
or turned into gold.

You had to kill this child, I know,
to break the arrows and the bow
to shed your skin and change
the trees are flowering no more
there's blood upon the white tiled floor
this place is dark and strange.

I see you standing in the storm
holding the curse of youth
each of you with your story
each of you with your truth.

Some words will never be spoken
some stories never be told
this is the age you are broken
or turned into gold.

I didn't say the world was good
I hope by now you understood
why I could never lie
I didn't promise you a thing
don't ask my wintervoices for spring
just spread your wings and fly.

Though in the hidden garden
down by the green green lane
the plant of love grows next to
the tree of hate and pain.

So take my tears as a token
they'll keep you warm in the cold
this is the age you are broken
or turn into gold

You've lived too long among us
to leave without a trace
you've lived too short to understand
a thing about this place.

Some of you just sit there smokin'
and some are already sold
this is the age you are broken
or turned into gold.

This is the age you are broken or turned into gold.

English translation

by Antonia Michaelis

At first

Blood.

There's blood everywhere. On his hands, on her hands, on his shirt, his face, on the tiles, smeared in streaks, on the small round carpet, it is soaked, dark, almost black, the carpet used to be blue, it never will be blue again.

The blood is red. He is kneeling in blood. He hadn't known it is that red, that light red: big, fallen, burst drops of blood like poppies. They are beautiful, as beautiful as a spring day on a sunny meadow, out there by the woods... spring is far away. The tiles are cold and white, as white as snow, and it is winter.

It will be winter forever.

Silly thought, why should it be winter forever?

He's got to do something. Something against the blood. An ocean of blood, a red, endless ocean, crimson waves, carmine froth, splashing colour. All these words in his head!

How long has he been kneeling here, with the words in his head? The red is starting to dry, it is forming edges, losing a little of its beauty, the poppies are wilting, yellowing, like the words on paper –

he closes his eyes. Get a grip on yourself. One thought after the other. What must be done? What first? What is most important?

It's most important that nobody finds this out.

Towels. He needs towels. And water. A rag. The splashes on the wall are hard to get rid of, in the gaps between the tiles the stains will stick forever. Will anybody realize? Soap. There's dried blood under his fingernails, too. A brush. He scrubs his hands until the skin is red, a different red, a warm living red, bright with pain.

She is not looking at him. She's turned her gaze away, but she always did turn away, that's the way she lived – with her eyes turned away. He throws the used towels into the dark, greedy mouth of the washing machine.

She's just sitting there, leaning against the wall, refusing to speak to him.

He kneels down in front of her again, on the clean floor, takes her hands in his. Whispers a question, a single word: "Where?"

And he reads the answer in those cold hands:

Do you remember? The woods? It was spring, and under the beeches the small white flowers were blooming all over... we were walking hand in hand and you asked me about the name of those small white flowers ... I didn't know ... The woods. The woods were the only place we had to ourselves, just for us, and the time back then was the only time we had together, just the two of us, do you remember, do you remember, do you remember -

"I do", he whispers. "I remember. The woods. Anemones. I know what they're called now. Anemones ..."

He lifts her up in his arms like a child. She's heavy and light at the same time. His heart is beating in the rhythm of fear while he is carrying her outside, into the night. Hold onto me so I don't drop you. Hold on, will you? Why won't you help me? Help me, just this one time!

The cold is enveloping him like an icy gown, he smells the coming frost in the air. The ground hasn't frozen yet. He's lucky. A strange thought, being lucky this February night. The woods aren't far. They are too far. He looks around. There is no one. No one knows and nobody will recall what happens tonight.

And in the woods there are no small white flowers blooming. The floor is one wet mud-brown swamp and the grey beeches are bare, standing there with not a single leaf. He can't really see them properly though, it's too dark. Just dark enough. There aren't any street lights here. The earth is giving way reluctantly, the spade is blunt. He's swearing silently. She still doesn't look at him. She's sitting, propped against one of the trees and seems to be elsewhere in her thoughts. And suddenly anger wells up in him.

He kneels in front of her the third time this night, he shakes her, tries to pull her up, make her stand on her feet, he wants to shout at her, and he does, but only in his head, silently, his mouth opened wide.

You're the most selfish, most thoughtless person I've ever known! What you have done is unforgivable. You know what's gonna happen, don't you? You knew it all along. But you didn't think about it, of course not, all you thought of was yourself and that small pitiful world of yours. You found a solution for yourself though not a solution for me, for us, you didn't think about it for a second ... and then he's crying, crying like a child, his head on her shoulder.

She strokes his hair, her touch light as the breeze. But no, it's only a branch.

Anna

The day Anna found the doll was the first really cold day of the winter.

A blue day, high and clear like a glass dome over the town. On the bike, on her way to school, she thought she would ride to the seaside at noon and look whether the sea was frozen at the edges. It would freeze, if not today then in a few days.

The ice always came in February.

And she breathed the cold air with a kind of childish anticipation, pushing the scarf out of her face, slipping the woollen hat off her dark hair and got drunk with the cold until she felt dizzy.

She wondered in which of the many boxes in the basement her skates were, and whether it would snow, and whether her skis were also waiting somewhere in the basement. And whether she could persuade Gitta to get out the old sledge, the one with the red band. Probably, she thought, Gitta would feel to old, my God, she'd say, you wanna make a complete fool of yourself? You'll take your school leaving exam this summer, dear child. Anna smiled as she parked her bike outside school. Gitta had always called her 'dear child' even though she was only half a year older. But she did all the things one did when one was grown-up or believed to be grown-up, all the things Anna would never do. She spent the Friday evenings in the disco. She had been driving to school on her moped for two years and would exchange it with a motorbike as soon as she had the money.

She wore only black, she wore thongs, she slept with the boys – dear child, we're eighteen, have been old enough for a long, long while, you should slowly start wondering about yourself – she was leaning against the school wall talking to Hennes and smoking.

Anna went and stood with them and watched the clouds her warm breath was drawing in the air go.

"So", Hennes said, smiling, "looks as if you've started smoking after all, have you?"

She shook her head. "Don't have time for it."

“Better for you”, Gitta said friendly and put her arm around Anna’s slender shoulders. “You start once, you can’t stop it. That’s hell, dear child, remember that. You just stay with your clouds of warm air.”

“No, seriously.” Anna laughed. “I wouldn’t know when I’d find the time to smoke. There’s so many other things to do.”

Hennes nodded. “School, ey?”

“Well”, said Anna, “that too.” And she knew Hennes didn’t get what she meant, but she didn’t care. She wasn’t able to explain to him that she had to go to the beach to check whether the sea had started to freeze. And that she had thought about Gitta’s sledge with the red band. He wouldn’t have understood anyway. Gitta would make a show of not wanting to get the sledge out but she would, finally. Gitta did understand. And when no one was watching she’d go slay riding with Anna and behave like a five year old, she’d done it last winter ... and all the winters before.

And Hennes and the other people at school would sit at home learning for the next exam.

“Time’s up”, said Hennes and glanced at his watch. “We should get going.” He stubbed out his cigarette on the wall and blew the red hair from his forehead. Golden, Anna thought, red-gold. And she thought that Hennes probably practised blowing hair from his forehead every morning, in front of the mirror. Hennes was perfect, Hennes was tall, he was slender, athletic, clever, he’d spent the Christmas holidays snowboarding, somewhere in Greenland ... no, probably Norway. He had a “von” of nobility in his second name that he left out when signing, a fact that made him even more perfect. There were definitely reasons for Gitta to stand with him at the wall and smoke. Gitta was falling in love with somebody else all the time – and every third time with Hennes.

Anna could not stand his mouth; this slightly ironic smile he gave the world in which he lived. Like now. Right now.

“Should we tell our Polish dry goods trader?”, he asked and nodded in the direction of the bike stands, where a figure in a green military jacket was leaning, ducked, the black knitted hat pulled low into his face, the plugs of an old walkman in his ears. The cigarette in his hand had almost burnt down, and Anna wondered whether he didn’t notice. And whether he couldn’t have come over here to smoke with Gitta and Hennes.

“Tannatek!”, Hennes called. “Eight o’clock. You coming in with us?”

“Forget about it”, said Gitta. “He ain’t hearin you. Livin in his own world. Let’s go.”

She hurried to keep up with Hennes’ long steps up the stairs to the glass front door, they were in the same French intensive class, but Anna held her back.

“Listen... probably it’s a silly question”, she began, “but...”

“There’s only silly questions”, Gitta answered good-naturedly.

“Please”, Anna said seriously, “explain the dry goods trader to me.”

Gitta glanced at the figure with the black woollen hat. `Him? Nobody can explain him to you`, she said. `Half the junior college is wondering why he came in the eleventh grade. Isn't he in your literature class?`

`Explain the word to me`, Anna insisted. `Why does everyone call him that? The Polish dry goods trader? I never thought about it, but just now I started.`

`Dear child.` Gitta sighed. `I really gotta go. Mrs Siederstädt doesn't like people coming to her class late. And if you strain that clever little head of yours, you'll guess what our Polish friend sells. I'll give you a hint: it's not roses.`

`Dope`, Anna said and realized how ridiculous the word sounded when said by her. `Are you sure?`

`My goodness, the whole school knows that`, Gitta replied. `Anna. Of course I am sure.` At the door she turned round and winked. `He's become more expensive lately`, she said. Then she waved and disappeared through the glass doors.

And Anna stayed outside alone and felt stupid. She wanted to think of the old sledge with the red band again, but instead she thought the word `soap bubble`. I live, she thought, in a soap bubble. The whole school knows things I don't know. But maybe I don't want to know them. And yes, I will ride out to the seaside, all alone, without Gitta. And I am fed up with her calling me `dear child`, because in contrast to her I know what I want, and it's much more childish to walk around in black clothes and imagine that makes you look smarter.

And then, after the sixth lesson, after an absolutely deadly biology-lesson, she found the doll.

Later she often wondered what would have happened had she not found it. Nothing, probably. Everything would have stayed as it was, stayed the same forever, Anna living inside her soap bubble, a beautiful and somehow stubborn soap-bubble – but can anything stay as it was when you're nearly eighteen? Of course not.

The older pupils had their own room, a ragged little room with two old used tables, a lot of too-small wooden chairs, and old sofas and an even older coffee machine that usually didn't work. Anna was the first to come into the room at the beginning of lunch break, she'd promised to wait for Bertil who wanted to copy some work sheet, something about the literature class. Bertil was your typical work-sheet-looser, he constantly had his mind on other things and his unbecomingly thick glasses didn't really help him find things better. Anna thought that he probably lived inside his own soap-bubble, but his was fogged up from the inside like his glasses.

She'd never found the dolls if she hadn't been waiting for Bertil.

She'd never found the doll if she hadn't taken nearly all her stuff out of her backpack to search for the work sheet, and if the pencil hadn't rolled under the sofa in the process, and if -

She bent down to retrieve the pencil.

And there the doll was lying.

It was lying near the wall, lost between dust and chewing gum wrappers. Anna tried to push the sofa from the wall. It was too heavy. Beneath its old cushions it must be made of stone, a marble sofa, a sofa full of black holes of indefinite weight. She lay down on the floor, stretched out her arm – got a grip on the doll and pulled it out from under the sofa. And for a moment she was alone with the doll, before the others came.

She held it on her lap, sitting in the dust in front of the sofa, and looked at it, and it was as if the doll was looking back. She was about as big as Anna's hand, light, made of fabric. Her face between the dark braids was stitched on: a red mouth, a tiny nose, blue eyes. She was wearing a short dress with a flowery pattern – blue flowers on white ground. The rim of the dress was a little ragged as if someone had cut a piece from it to make it shorter or use it for some other purpose. She also had trousers on, made of an old piece of jeans by somebody who wasn't good at making doll's clothes. The colours of her short dress were so pale the flowers had nearly vanished, a disappearing garden, eaten up by time. The stitched eyes were worn as if they had already seen too much, they looked tired and a little afraid. Anna brushed the dust out of the doll's hair with her fingers.

"Where do you come from?", she whispered. "What are you doing in this room? What child has lost you here?"

She was still sitting on the floor when the first group of people came rushing in, and for a moment she had the strange feeling that she had to save the doll from their looks. Of course that was nonsense. She got up and held her up. "Does anybody know who's this is?", she asked, so loudly that the doll seemed to start at the sound of her voice. "I found it under the sofa. Has anybody lost it there?"

"Sure", Tim said. "Hey, that's my favourite doll, man, I been searching for it for days!"

"No, stupid, that's mine!" Hannes giggled. "I'm taking her to bed with me every night! Can't sleep without her!"

"I see", Nicole nodded, "well, there's people who do it with dogs, why not with children's dolls ..."

"Lemme see, maybe it's mine", Jörg said, taking the doll from Anna. "Ah, no, mine had pink panties. Look, this one doesn't have any panties at all ... very unseemly."

"Give it to me!", someone shouted, and then the doll was flying through the air and Anna stood there looking on, watching them throw her around and she laughed about it, and something inside her hurt. She clenched her fists, but she didn't say anything. It was as if she were six and this was her doll, and once more she saw the fear in the worn blue eyes before her.

"Stop it!", she finally shouted. "Stop it! Now! She belongs to some child and you can't ... what if she breaks ... she surely belongs to someone! You're behaving like you're all in first grade!"

"That's the stress before the final exams, makes you childish like anything", Tom said apologetically. But he didn't let go of the doll. "Why don't you go ahead and catch her?", he asked and really sounded like he was six. Anna didn't catch the doll when he threw it again. Bertil did.

Bertil with his too-thick glasses. He gave it back to Anna without saying a word. She gave him the sheet he'd wanted to copy in silence. And the others forgot about the doll.

“The cleaning woman”, Bertil said, before he left. “Maybe the cleaning woman has a child ... it’s possible, isn’t it.”

“Possible”, Anna said, smiling. “Thanks.”

But when he had turned to go she thought that she shouldn’t have smiled at him. He had these begging puppy dog-eyes behind his glasses when he looked at her and she knew exactly what their expression meant.

When all the others had left - to their afternoon courses, to the bakery, to town - when the junior college room was once more empty and quiet, Anna was still sitting on the sofa, alone, with the doll on her knees. Outside, the day was still blue. The hoarfrost in the trees was glittering like silver. Yes, surely the ocean was freezing.

She looked at the row of trees outside the window which covered the entire wall, she saw the branches wave, heavy with ice crystals - and then her gaze was caught by a figure sitting on the heating at the glass wall. It made her jump. She hadn’t noticed the figure before.

It was Tannatek, the Polish dry goods trader, and he was looking at her. He must have come with the others and been sitting there since. Anna swallowed. He was still wearing the black woollen hat, even indoors, just like in the literature class, where he had not said a word, as always. Under his open military parka she could see the ‘Böhse Onkelz’ - logo on his black pullover. His eyes were blue. (Remark for Susan: The ‘Böhse Onkelz’ are a rather right-wing band, popular with youths in North-East-Germany)

Anna knew nothing about him, only that he had come after the tenth grade, a newcomer from a junior high school in a different part of town. At the moment she could not even think of his Christian name. She was all alone with him. It was very quiet. And suddenly she was afraid. Her hands gripped the doll.

He cleared his throat. And then he said something Anna had not expected. He said: ‘Be careful with her.’

‘What?’, Anna asked, taken aback.

‘You are holding her too tightly. Be careful with her’, Tannatek repeated.

Anna let go of the doll. She fell on the floor. Tannatek shook his head. Then he got up, came over to Anna - she sat there all stiff, turned to stone, frozen - and he bent over to take the doll.

‘It was me’, he said. ‘I lost her. Understand?’

‘No’, Anna said honestly.

‘Of course not.’ He looked at the doll for a moment; he was holding it - her - like a living being. Finally, he carefully laid her into his rucksack. Then he went and sat on the heating again, fetched a single cigarette out of the bag - obviously remembered, that he was not allowed to smoke here, shrugged and put the cigarette back.

‘Well’, said Anna, her voice still sounding much too timid. She got up from the sofa. ‘Well, if the doll is really yours... then I guess everything’s fine. Then I can go now, can’t I. No more courses for me anyway, not today.’

Tannatek nodded. But Anna didn’t go. She stood in the middle of the room as if something kept her there, some invisible bond, and this was one of the moments she couldn’t explain later on – not to herself and not to anyone else. What happened just happened.

She stood there until he had to say something, and he said: “Thank you.”

“Thank you for what?”, she asked. She wanted an explanation. Some kind of explanation.

‘Thank you for finding her’, he said and inclined his head towards his rucksack from which the hand of the doll seemed to be waving at her.

‘Well, hm, oh’, said Anna. “I...’ she tried to produce a laugh, a small, insignificant laugh which you need to rescue a dialogue in danger of drying up before it even starts.

‘You look as if you were planning to rob a bank’, she said, and when he looked at her uncomprehendingly: ‘With the hat, I mean.’

‘It’s cold.’

‘In here?’, Anna asked, and found a smile beside the insignificant laugh although she wasn’t sure it looked convincing.

He was still looking at her. And then, he took off the black woollen hat, very slowly, like a ritual. His hair was blond and in a mess. Anna had forgotten that it was blond. He had been wearing the hat for a while – a week? Two? Time and again he came to school with a thug’s three-millimeter-haircut, but now his hair almost covered his ears.

‘The doll, I thought... I thought she belongs to a small girl...’, Anna began.

He nodded. ‘She does belong to a small girl.’ And suddenly he was the one to smile. ‘What did you think? That she’s mine?’

The moment he smiled Anna remembered his first name. Abel. Abel Tannatek. She had seen it on some list, last year.

‘Well, whose is she?’, Anna inquired, great inquisitor Anna Leemann, she thought, who is asking too many questions, persistent and nosy.

‘I’ve got a sister’, said Abel. ‘She is six.’

‘And why...’ Why are you carrying her doll around with you? Why do you loose her under the junior college sofa?, great inquisitor Anna Leemann longed to ask. But then, she let it be. Great inquisitors aren’t especially nice.

‘Micha’, said Abel. ‘Her name is Micha. She will be glad to have her dolly back.’

He glanced at his watch, got up and slung the rucksack over his shoulder.

‘I should get going.’

‘Yeah ... me too, actually’, Anna said quickly. Side by side they stepped out into the blue, cold day, and Abel said: ‘I suppose you don’t mind if I put my hat back on again?’

The hoarfrost on the trees was glittering so brightly now, one had to half close one’s eyes, and the puddles on the schoolyard reflected the sun - gleaming, glaring.

Everything had become brighter, almost dangerously bright.

Next to the bicycle stand a chatting, giggling group of fifth graders was standing. Anna watched Abel unlock his bike. She still had so many questions, she had to ask them now, quickly, before this dialogue ended, before Abel Tannatek turned back into the anonymous, ducked figure with the earplugs, into the Polish dry goods trader, whom others had supplied with a nickname like with a sterile protective cover.

‘Why didn’t you say the doll belongs to your sister when they were throwing it around?’, she asked. ‘Why did you wait until the others had left?’

He pushed the bike backwards, out of the tangle of other bicycles. He was almost gone, almost not where Anna was anymore. Almost back in his own world. ‘They would not have understood’, he said. ‘And it’s nobody’s business.’ Me inclusive, Anna thought. Abel took the ancient walkman out of the pocket of his old military jacket and disentangled the cables. Wait!, Anna longed to call.

‘Do you really listen to the Onkelz?’, she asked and nodded in the direction of his pullover. Under the not quite closed jacket one could see the white writing on it.

It was then that he smiled again. ‘How old do you think I am? Twelve?’

“But ... the sweater ...”

“Inherited”, he said. “It’s warm. That’s what matters.”

He gave her one earplug. ‘White noise’, he said.

Anna heard nothing but a loud rustle. White noise, the sound a radio without reception produces.

‘It helps keep the others away’, said Abel, took the earplug off her and got on his bike. ‘In case one wants to think.’

And then he drove away, and Anna stood there, and everything had changed.

White noise.

She didn’t ask Gitta for the old sledge with the red band. She drove out to the sea alone, later, when it was already getting dark. The twilight at the seaside was the best place to get her

thoughts in order, to spread them out in the sand like a piece of cloth and unfold and refold them again.

It wasn't even a proper seashore. It was only a flat bay, no more than a few meters deep at some places between the shore and the isle of Rügen. When it really did freeze you could walk over to the island in a few hours.

Anna stood at the empty beach of the little village Eldena for a long time, looking out over the water which was getting a skin of ice. It was so smooth now, it almost looked like the wooden floor at home, waxed and polished by time. The house Anna and her parents lived in was old, its rooms with the high ceilings breathing the past. It stood in a nice part of town between other old houses, grey and derelict in times of socialism, restored, renovated, decorated after 1990. Weird, today she had seen the house differently. As if she hadn't walked under its high ceilings alone but with Abel Tannatek at her side.

She had seen the huge book shelves with his eyes, the comfortable arm chairs, the uncovered ancient wood beams in the kitchen, the art work on the walls, black and white, modern. The fire place in the living room, the wintry twigs in the vase on the big table. Everything was beautiful, beautiful like a picture, untouchable and unreal in its beauty.

She went up the wide wooden staircase in the middle of the living room with Abel by her side, up to her room where the music stand was waiting for her next to the window. She tried to shake Abel Tannatek out of her head, his black hat, his old military parka, the inherited pullover, the ragged doll. She weighed the flute in her hand. Even the flute was beautiful.

"I will study music", she said aloud. "Maybe. Even that is a thought too beautiful ... too ..." But she didn't know, too what. And the silver notes of the flute sounded wrong that day.

She caught herself trying to get a different kind of sound out of the flute, a tuneless and disharmonious sound, something violently scratching and unruly:

white noise.

The flute seemed to be wriggling out of her hands, it didn't understand what Anna wanted it to do. Outside, the afternoon had started to cover the garden with its dark blue dress, that backyard-garden in which she had sat with Gitta for such long hours last summer. They had laughed a lot. When she opened the window now, she heard the sparrows in the dried branches and tendrils of the honeysuckle that climbed the wall next to Anna's room. In summer it would blossom again, making the air heavy and melancholic with its sweet smell ... in summer, in a million years.

On this day a single rose was in full winter bloom on the rose bush. It was so single that it looked unbearably kitschy and Anna had to suppress the wish to go out and cut it down. Today she didn't feel like looking at roses.

The air above the water was of a deep dark blue now. Somewhere a fishing boat hung between water and sky. Anna crushed the thin layer of ice with the tip of her boot and heard the little crack it made and the gurgling of the water underneath. "He didn't live in such a house", she whispered. "I know that for sure. I don't know how somebody like that lives. Differently."

And then she stepped into the water until it came in through her boot, until the wetness and the cold reached her skin. "I don't know anything!", she shouted at the sea. "Nothing at all!"

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About what?, asked the sea.

“About the world outside the soap bubble!”, Anna shouted. “I want to – I want - “ She put her hands up, woollen red-blue patterned glove-hands, helplessly, and let them drop again.

And the sea laughed at her, but it wasn't a friendly laugh. It was making fun of her. Do you think you could get to know somebody like Tannatek?, the sea asked. Think of the three-millimeter-hair cut. Are you sure you're not getting involved with a Nazi? Not everybody who has a little sister is a nice guy. What is a nice guy, by the way? How do you define that? And does he even have a little sister? Maybe -

“Oh, be quiet, will you”, Anna said to the sea and turned to walk back over the cold sand.

To her left, there was a big forest behind the beach, heavy and black. In spring there would be anemones blooming between the high green leaved beeches, but till then it was a long, long time.

2.

Abel

“Do you think you could get to know somebody like Tannatek?”, Gitta asked. “Think of the three-millimeter hair cut ...” She pulled up her legs up on the couch, and Anna thought of the time they had used this very couch as a trampoline, when they had still been children. The couch was placed in front of a wall made entirely of glass, and behind it somewhere lay the beach. You couldn't see it, you couldn't see the water from here, half the estate was between the house and the sea. The house itself was part of the estate, it was a geometric cube, somehow modern but of the failed kind of modernity.

The garden was too tidy. Gitta had explained to her that she was almost sure her mother was sterilizing the leaves of the box hedge when nobody was watching.

Gitta didn't really get along well with her mother. She was working as a surgeon at the hospital just as Anna's father had once, but he, too, hadn't gotten along with Gitta's mother and had run away into the less tidy and nicer rooms of a private surgery.

“Anna?”, Gitta said. “What're you thinkin about?”

“I was thinking ... about our parents”, Anna said. “And that they are all doctors or whatever.”

“Whatever”, Gitta repeated, making a depreciative noise through her nose and put out a forbidden cigarette on her saucer. “Exactly. What's that gotta do with Tannatek?”

“Nothing.” Anna sighed. “Everything. I was just wondering what his parents are working as. Where he comes from. Where he lives.”

“One of those concrete tower blocks between here and the city. The seaside district. I always thought it was such an ironic name ... I see him driving there every day.” She bent forward and looked at Anna very closely. Her eyes were blue. Like Abel’s, Anna thought, but still different. How many shades of blue were there in this world? In theory it must be an indefinite number ... “Why d’you wanna know all this stuff?”, Gitta asked with a certain lurking tone to her voice.

“Just ... so.” Anna shrugged.

“Oh, just so, I see”, Gitta said. “I’ll tell you something, dear child. You’re in love. No need to turn red like that, happens to everyone. But you’ve chosen the wrong guy. Don’t make yourself unhappy. With someone like Tannatek all you can have is a relationship based on fuckin and you’d probably catch something nasty, too. That’s nothing for you.”

“Shut up!”, Anna said, realizing an uncontrollable anger in her voice. “We’re not talking about relationships, and about ... about that ... even less. Maybe my world is not as limited as yours and even if you can’t imagine it I sometimes do think about things apart from how I get the next guy laid.”

“The next one?”, Gitta asked, grinning. “Who was the first? I miss something?”

“It’s impossible to talk with someone like you”, Anna said and got up, but Gitta pulled her back down onto the too tidily placed leather chair, a rectangular armchair made of leather that was probably easy to sterilize – and that, Anna thought, knowing she was being mean, was probably of some use in a life like Gitta’s.

“Hey, Anna”, Gitta said. “Stay cool. Wasn’t meant that way, see? I just don’t wanna see you makin yourself unhappy. I like you, understand? Can’t you fall in love with someone else?”

“I am not in love”, Anna said. “So you can just safe yourself the trouble and stop trying to persuade me I am.” She looked out of the huge window over the estate with all its much-too-modern houses. If she narrowed her eyes as far as she could, she might be able to render the houses invisible and see the sea behind them. It was a question of sheer determination. And maybe, if she tried really hard, she could find out some things about Abel Tannatek. Without Gitta. Why hadn’t she just kept her mouth shut? Why did she have to tell Gitta that she’d talked to Abel? Because it had been three days since she did, that was why, she thought. Because they hadn’t exchanged a single word since then. The soap bubble had closed around Anna again and the cold wall of silence had closed around Abel. Inside the soap bubble, though, something was left behind. A gleaming little spark of light. Curiosity.

“Listen, dear child”, Gitta said and lit a fresh cigarette. Did her life consist of cigarettes? She made Anna nervous fiddling with them, lighting them, putting them out all the time. “I know that you’re cleverer than me. All those good grades you get, the music ... you’re thinking about things other people don’t think about. And of course it’s absolutely stupid that I call you dear child. I know all this. But this one time you should really listen to me. Forget Tannatek. See, this doll ... why does he run around with a child’s doll? Little sister, ey? Well, I dunno. Maybe he got a little sister, who knows. I’d have looked at that doll a bit more closely though. Like – what’d he say? You should be careful with it? Don’t you ever read any crime novels? I know you’re reading books! I mean, it’s none of my business where he gets the stuff he sells, but once he said something and I think he’s got pretty good contacts to Poland. Somehow he’s gotta bring the stuff over?”

“You’re saying that ... in this doll ...”

Gitta shrugged. “I’m not saying anything. I’m just thinking aloud. God, we’re all glad he’s there, our Polish dry goods trader. He still has the best prizes ... don’t look at me like that, I’m no junky or nothing. Not everybody who likes beer is an alcoholic, is he? I’d just not believe everything our dry goods trader is telling you. He’s also just saving his skin he is, ain’t we all?”

“What do you mean?”

Gitta laughed. “Dunno. Sounded good though, didn’t it? Like philosophy. Anyway, that story about the doll and the little sister, that’s really touching. And the white noise ... maybe he’s a bit on the weird side, our Polish friend. But maybe he’s invented all that to impress you. You’re good at school. He’s in literature class with you. You could help him. He seems to be determined to pass the final exams – for whatever reason. So he’s invented something to get you interested.”

“Sure”, Anna said. “He’s just trying to get me interested. By not talking to me. Congratulations for your logic, Gitta.”

“But – it does make sense!”, Gitta lit up the umpteenth cigarette, gesturing with it. “He lets you suffer in your lo ... in your curiosity for a while, and then ...”

“Stop waving that cigarette around”, Anna said and got up, this time without letting Gitta pull her back. “You’re gonna set your parents’ living room furniture on fire.”

“I’d love to”, Gitta replied. “Unfortunately it doesn’t burn very well.”

She had to try. She would try. If Abel only talked to people whom he sold stuff to in the school yard, she’d buy something. The thought was daring and new and she needed two more days to pluck up the courage.

Two days in which she watched Abel during literature courses while he never said a word. He was also sitting in the same biology course as her, and in maths. Silently. Sometimes he fell asleep during the first lesson. She wondered what he did during the nights. She wondered if she wanted to know.

It was Friday when she finally decided to take the next step. Tannatek was leaning near the bike stands as always, at the very end, where only few bicycles were standing. His hands were dug deep into his pockets, the ear plugs of his walkman in his ears, the zip of his military parka closed right up to his chin. Everything about him was freezing, his whole figure was a statue of the February cold. He didn’t smoke, just stood there staring at nothing.

The school yard was nearly empty. On Fridays most people were in a hurry to get home. Two guys from eleventh grade came over and spoke to Tannatek and Anna stopped dead in her tracks – standing in the middle of the yard, stupidly, while she was waiting. She felt herself loose heart, already. She thought she saw Tannatek give something to one of the boys, but she wasn’t sure, there were too many jacket sleeves and rucksack parts in the way to see properly. She hoped he would say: “Me? They say I am selling dope? Crap!” And the whole thing would turn out to be just another Gitta-story.

The boys left, Tannatek turned and watched them leave, and somehow Anna's feet carried her over to him.

"Abel", she said.

He started and looked at her, in the first instant there was nothing but surprise in his eyes. No one ever called him by his first name. The surprise crept back behind the blueness of his gaze, he narrowed that blue and watched her, waiting, asking: What do you want? He was a good lot taller than her, and his broad shoulders and bent back made her think of the dogs people kept out there at the seaside district, people living in those concrete tower blocks. Some of them had old German runes burned into the leather of their collars ... suddenly she was afraid of Tannatek again, and the name "Abel" slipped out of her head, made itself small and crept into a crevice of her brain to disappear out of sight. Ridiculous. Gitta had been right. Anna had dreamt up a different Tannatek, from a distance.

"Anna?", he asked.

"Yes", she said. "I ... I wanted ... I wanted to ask you ... ask ..." Now she had to go through with it. Damn. All the words in her head had been smashed – by a broad shouldered, threatening figure. She took a deep breath. "There's gonna be a party at Gitta's place", she said – a white lie. "And we need something to ... celebrate. What exactly do you have?"

"When?", he asked. "When do you need something?"

Sure, it didn't work like this. Stupid child, she thought, of course he wasn't carrying around the stuff by the kilo, it was a thing of demand and delivery. He was reading her thoughts. "Actually ...", he began, "wait. Maybe I got something for you. Now."

He looked around, reached into the pocket of the parka and took a small plastic bag out. She leaned forward, expecting some sort of powder, she didn't know much about these things, she had tried Google, but Google Drugs wasn't invented yet, a fault that Google would certainly realize soon ... he took something out of the milky white plastic bag with his thumb and forefinger. A blister strip. Anna saw that there were still a couple of blisters in the bag, ... full of pills. The ones he was holding out to her now were round and white.

"You said it's for celebrating?", he asked, his voice low. "Like ... staying awake, dancing, having a good time?"

Anna nodded. Tannatek nodded, too. "Twenty", he said.

She took a twenty-Euro-note out of her purse and put the blister strip away quickly. There were ten tablets. The price didn't seem high to her.

"You know how to use that stuff?", Tannatek asked, and it was obvious what he thought.

"I don't", Anna answered. "Gitta does."

He nodded once more, put the money away and grabbed the ear plugs of the old walkman.

"White noise?", Anna asked, but by now she didn't even want to start a conversation any more, she only asked so she could tell herself later that she hadn't been too scared to ask. Her heart

was running away inside her chest. The only thing she wanted was to run away, far away from the school yard, from Tannatek, the fighting dog, from the white tablets in her pocket, far, far away. She longed for the cool silver of the flute in her hands. For a melody. Not white noise, a real melody.

She didn't expect Tannatek to give her one of his hopelessly ancient ear plugs again. But he did just that. The whole project I-try-to-understand-the-Polish-dry-goods-trader-thereby-turning-into-a-better-person suddenly made her nauseous.

What was dropping from the earplug into her head was not white noise. It was a melody. Just as if someone had heard Anna's wish. "It's not always white noise", Tannatek said. The melody was as old as the walkman, no, a lot older. Suzanne. Anna knew the words by heart since she'd been small.

She gave the ear plug back, perplexed.

"Cohen? You're listening to Cohen? My mother does."

"Yeah", he said. "as did mine. I don't even know how she came to listening to him. She can't have understood a word. She didn't understand English. And she was too young for this kind of music."

"Was?", Anna asked. The air had grown colder, just now, about five degrees. "Has she ... died?"

"Died?" His voice was hard. "No. Just disappeared. She's been gone for two weeks now. It doesn't make much of a difference anyway. I don't think she'll come back. Micha ... Micha thinks she will. My sister, she ..." He stopped, lifting his gaze from the ground, and looked at her. "Have I lost my mind? Why am I telling you all this?"

"Because I asked?"

"It's too cold", he said and pulled up the collar of his parka. She stood there while he unlocked his bike. It was just like when they had first talked to each other – words in the ice cold air between bicycle stands, stolen words, somehow homeless, between worlds. Later it would always be possible to explain one hadn't said anything.

"Doesn't anybody else ask?", Anna said.

He shook his head, freed the bike. "Who? There is no one."

"There are a lot of people", Anna said. "Everywhere." She made a wide gesture with her arm, including the empty school yard, the concrete block that was the school, the trees, the world. But there was no one. Abel was right. There were only the two of them, Anna and him, only they two under the endless icy sky. It was strangely unsettling. The world would end in five minutes. Nonsense.

He'd managed to disentangle the bike. He pulled the black woollen hat down over his ears. nodded – a Good Bye-nod maybe, or just a nod for himself, a nod saying: yes, see, there is no one. Then he rode away.

Ridiculous – to follow someone through the outskirts of Greifswald on a bicycle on a Friday afternoon. Not very inconspicuous either. But Abel didn't glance back once. The February-wind was too cold to turn around if you were on a bicycle. She crossed the Wolgaster Street behind him, that big straight street leading out of town to the south east, between the seaside districts's concrete blocks to the right and what the concrete block district calls "beautiful woods" to the left. The DDR had been quite ironic when naming city districts. The street linked the city with the beach of Eldena and the sterile housing estate where Gitta lived and yes, it did lead on to the woods behind that, where the high beeches were standing in the winter wind, it lead on and on and on, along the coast, to the nothingness of the flat landscape.

Abel didn't follow the street that far. He just crossed it, driving on between the concrete blocks, passing a pasture full of frozen grass, cowless and empty. Behind the pasture were more concrete blocks, one of them with blue window frames, an attempt at making it more inviting. An elementary school. Next to it a one storey building had ducked down as if trying to hide from the cold, or from the world, or both; the gym, probably. It looked as if it should long have been torn down, a socialistic concrete turtle, painted with pale multicoloured figures from the outside, it looked very new and very much out of place. On one corner of the building someone had painted a black swastika and someone else had crossed it out later. You could see it non the less.

Anna stood behind a ragged February bush and tried to become invisible. For a moment she thought that maybe this school was part of Abel's clientele: Dingdong – the Polish dry good trader is here! Maybe there were also older pupils here. The skeleton of a bicycle was chained to a lamppost, beside her, someone had stolen all the rest like flesh from bones. Anna watched Abel walk across the empty school yard and wondered whether there was a maximum of desolation. Or whether it just grew and grew, into the infinite, desolation with a hundred faces, desolation of a hundred different kinds, like the colour blue she had been thinking about.

And then something strange happened. The desolation broke.

Abel started running. Somebody was running towards him, somebody who had been waiting in the shadows of the left school entrance. Somebody small in a worn pink down jacket. They flew towards each other, the small and the tall figure, arms outstretched – their feet didn't seem to touch the ground any more – and now they met in the middle. The tall figure lifted the small one up, spun it around through the winter air, once, twice, thrice, in a whirl of light children's laughter.

"It's true", Anna whispered behind her bush. "Gitta, it is true. He does have a sister. Micha."

Abel had put the pink child down and Anna ducked down, for now he turned and walked back to his bicycle. He didn't see her. He was talking to Micha. He was laughing. He lifted her up again and placed her on his bike's carrier, said something else and got on the bike himself. Anna didn't understand any of his words, but his voice was different than at school. Somebody had lit a fire between the sentences, a bright sparkling flame. Maybe, she thought, it was a different language he was speaking now. Polish. If Polish burned so bright she would learn it. Don't fool yourself, Anna, Gitta said inside her head. You'd probably learn Northeastmanchurian if it helped you talk to Tannatek. And Anna replied angrily: His name is Abel, but then she remembered that Gitta wasn't there and that she'd better duck down a bit deeper behind her February bush if she didn't want to be seen by Abel and Micha. They didn't see her. Abel drove by without looking left or right, and Anna heard him say:

“They got meatballs Königsberg style today, it was on the plan. You know, the ones in the white sauce with capers.”

“Meatballs Königsberg”, a high children’s voice repeated. “I like meatballs. We could make a journey to Königsberg one day, couldn’t we?”

“One day”, Abel replied. “But now we’re on a journey to the students’ canteen and ...”

And then they were gone and Anna didn’t understand what they said any more. But she understood that it was not a different language that had lit the light between Abel’s sentences, neither Polish nor Northeastmanchurian, it was a child in a pink down jacket, a child with a turquoise schoolbag and two blond stringy braids, a child which clung to his back with gloveless little hands, red from the cold.

To the commons. We’re on a journey to the students’ canteen.

The university’s canteen was in the city, at the beginning of the pedestrian area, Anna had been there with Gitta. They also had a cafeteria with cheep cake, and Gitta was in love with some or other student from time to time. Anna didn’t follow Abel. She took the path along the Ryck, the little river running parallel to the Wolgaster street. There was a broad strip of houses and gardens between the street and the river so you couldn’t see from one to the other. She drove as fast as she could, for probably the way along the Ryck with all its bends was longer. The gravel here clung together in mean little icy chunks. The thin tires of her bicycle were loosing their grip on the frozen puddles, the wind was blowing in her face, coming from town, her nose hurt with the cold – and inside her something was singing. Never had the sky been so high and blue, never had the branches of the trees at the riverside been so golden. Never had the growing layer of ice on the water been gleaming with such brightness. She didn’t know if all this was only her ambition to find out something nobody else knew about. The happiness of nearly having found out.

In front of the students’ canteen was a chaos of people and bicycles, conversations and calls, weekend-plans and dates. For a moment Anna was afraid she wouldn’t find Abel in this chaos. But then she saw something pink in the crowd, a pink figure slipping inside through the revolving door, and a little later she was on her way up the broad staircase to the first floor where they dished out the food. Halfway up she stopped and took her scarf from her backpack, tied it around her head and felt absolutely ridiculous. What am I? A stalker? She took one of the orange plastic trays from the stack and stood in the line of students. It was an odd thought that she’d soon be one of them anyway. After her au-pair-time in England. Not that she’d come back here to study, the world was too big to stay in the town you were born in, it was waiting for Anna out there, a world of unlimited possibilities. Abel and Micha had already reached the counter. Anna squeezed past the other students, put something indefinable on her plate which might have consisted of potatoes – with the same probability as it might have been run-over dog – and hurried up to get to the counter, too.

She saw Abel put a plastic card back into his purse, white with light blue print on it. All students seemed to have those cards. “Excuse me”, she said to the girl behind her, “do I need that card, too?”

“You can only pay that way”, the girl replied. “You new? They sell the cards downstairs in the cafeteria, you just gotta show them your student ID. It’s five Euros deposit, and you can load it with money by putting it in the machine near the stairs and ...”

“Wait”, Anna said. “What if I don’t have a student ID?”

The girl shrugged. “Well, they’re quite serious about that. Then you gotta pay the full price. You’d better go and find your ID.”

Anna nodded. She wondered where Abel had found his student ID.

Even the full price for the run-over dog wasn’t especially high. And then Anna was standing behind the counter with her tray, lost, searching for a pink down jacket.

She wasn’t the only one to crane her neck and look for someone, a lot of people seemed to be occupied that way. The pink jacket had disappeared, there wasn’t a child with thin blond braids anywhere. Suddenly Anna felt an onset of panic; she had lost them forever, she thought, she’d never find them ... she’d never talk to Abel Tannatek again, because it was stupid to buy pills she’d throw away later. She’d go to England as an au-pair and never find out why he was the way he was and who that other Abel was, the one who lifted a child up into the air, she would never -

“There’s still some free tables in the other room”, somebody next to her said to somebody else, and two trays were carried past her, out the door. Anna followed. There was a second dining room, you had to cross the corridor, where another staircase led down to the right. And on the left, behind a glass wall, right in the middle of the second room, there was a pink jacket. The floor was wet with the traces of winterboots. Anna balanced her tray through the tables extremely carefully – it wasn’t that she was worried for the run-over dog, that was beyond saving anyway – but if she slipped and fell down between the tables, with tray and dog and all, that would really draw everybody’s attention to her. The pink jacket was hanging over a chair, and there, at a small table, Abel and Micha were seated. Anna was lucky, Abel was sitting with his back to her. She sat down at the table next to them, her own back turned to Abel.

“What is that?”, a student next to her asked and contemplated her plate with suspicion.

“Dead dog”, Anna said, and he laughed and wanted to start a conversation with her – where was she from, somewhere abroad? Because of the headscarf? And was it her first semester, and did she live in the Fleischmann-street where most students lived and ...

“But you said you’d tell me a story today”, a child’s voice behind her said. “You said so. You haven’t told me any stories for ... for a hundred years. Since Mama’s gone travelling.”

“I had to think”, Abel said.

“You dreaming?”, the student asked. Anna looked at him. It was a handsome student, Gitta would have been interested. But Anna wasn’t. She didn’t want to talk to him, not now. She didn’t want Abel to hear her voice. “I’m ... I’m a little ill”, she whispered. “I ... can’t talk much, see. My throat, you know ... why don’t you just go ahead and tell me something?”

“Tell you something? What about?”, he asked, only too happy to oblige. “I haven’t been here for long, I was hoping you could tell me something about this town, I’m from Munich, they sent me here because I didn’t get a place at any other university, as soon as I get one, I’ll be gone ...”

Anna started eating the dead dog which was indeed made of potatoes (dead potatoes), nodded from time to time and tried to just shove the student out of her brain. She tried to switch to another channel, the Abel-and-Micha-channel. For a while there was nothing but white noise in her head, the white noise between the channels, and then – then it worked. She didn't hear the student any more. She didn't hear the noise in the room, people eating, laughing, chatting. She heard Abel. Only Abel.

This was the moment in which everything turned inside out. In which the story began that Anna would take part in. Of course it had begun earlier on, with the doll, with the walkman's old earplugs, with the little girl on that hopelessly grey school yard. With the wish to understand how many persons Abel Tannatek was. Anna closed her eyes for a second and fell out of the real world. She fell into the beginning of a fairy tale. Because the Abel that was sitting here, in the students' canteen, only a few inches away, between orange plastic trays and humming first-semester-talk, in front of a small girl with blond braids ... this Abel was a story teller.

The fairy tale into which Anna fell was as bright and full of light as the moment in which he'd been spinning Micha around in his arms. But behind his words she heard an ancient darkness lurking in the shadows, the darkness of all fairy tales, the other side.

Only later, much later, too late would Anna understand that this fairy tale was a deadly one.

3.

Micha

"Tell me about the island", Micha said. "Tell me what it looks like."

"I've told you that a hundred times." Abel laughed. "You know exactly what the island looks like."

"I forgot. The last story is so long ago! Thousand years! Positive! You told that when Mama was still there. Where's she now?"

"I don't know, and I've told you that a hundred times, too. The note she left only said that she had to go on a journey. Suddenly. And that she loves you."

"And you? Didn't she love you, too?"

"The island", Abel said, "is made of nothing but rocks. Or should I say, it was? The island was made of nothing but rocks, it was the tiniest island anyone can imagine, and it lay far, far out at sea. On the island lived a single person, a very small person, too – and because her favourite place were the cliffs, the very top of the cliffs, where she could look out over the sea – because of that they called her the cliff queen. Or actually it was only she who called herself that, for there was no one else.

The birds had told her about other islands. They had also told her about the mainland. The mainland, the birds said, was an unimaginably huge island over which you could wander for

weeks on end without ever reaching the shore on the other side. That was something the little cliff queen couldn't picture. To walk around her own island only took three hours, then you'd be where you started. And so the mainland remained a far away, unreal dream for the little queen. In the evening she told herself stories about it: about the houses on the mainland that had a thousand rooms each and about the stores in which you could get everything you longed for, you only had to lift things down from the shelves. But actually the cliff queen didn't need a thousand rooms, nor did she need stores full of shelves. She was happy on her tiny island. The castle in which she lived had exactly one room and in this room there was nothing but a bed. For the play room of the little queen were the green meadows of the island, and her bathroom was the sea.

Every morning she bound her pale blond hair into two thin braids, put on her pink down jacket and ran out into the wind. Her doll Mrs. Margaret lived in the pocket of her down jacket, her doll with the flower-patterned dress, whom she could tell everything. And in the middle of the island in a garden of apple- and pear-trees a white mare was grazing all day long. On the horse's back the little queen raced over the island when she felt like it, quicker than the storm, and she laughed out loud when the mane of the white mare was fluttering in the breeze and her shawl was carried away by the wind. The mare's shawl of course. The cliff queen didn't need a shawl, she had a collar made of artificial fur on her pink jacket, but she had knitted a shawl for the white mare. She had learned to knit at school."

"But there ain't anyone living on the island! Did you forget that? How can there be a school I go to?"

"Surely there must have been a school", Abel said. "There was exactly one teacher, that was the cliff queen herself, and one headmistress, that was also the cliff queen, and one single pupil, that was the cliff queen, too. So she had taught herself how to knit, and for the shawl of the mare – it was green – she had given herself the best mark possible. And - "

"That's a lot of nonsense!" Micha giggled.

"Well, who is the cliff queen, you or me?", Abel asked. "It isn't my fault if you're giving marks to yourself! By the way, it was always summer on the island. The little queen was never cold.

When she was hungry, she plucked the apples and pears from the trees, or she fetched her butterfly net and climbed up to the top of one of the cliffs to catch a flying fish, which she fried over a fire. She owned a field of wheat to make flower with, and sometimes she made apple cake for herself and Mrs Margaret. The cake was decorated with the island's flowers – blue forget-me-nots, violet bell flowers and red-and-yellow snapdragons ..."

"And these tiny white flowers which grow in the woods?", Micha asked. "What's their name – amenones? Were they there, too?"

"No", Abel said. "And now we finally gotta start with the story. But – Micha? Do you remember all those other stories about the little cliff queen I told you? The story about the empress made of froth and the one about the melancholic dragon? The story about the sunken east wind and the giggling whirlwind?"

"Sure, I remember. I remember every word. The cliff queen has always managed to make the stories end well, hasn't she? She always did what had to be done."

“Yes”, Abel answered. “She did. But this story is different. I don’t know if she’ll manage this time. I don’t know what will happen to her. This story is ... dangerous. Do you still want to hear it?”

“Course”, Micha said. “I’m brave. You know that. I’ve been brave with that dragon . It didn’t eat me although first it wanted to and I solved all its problems and when it flew away it was happy and ...”

“Okay ... if you want to listen, I will tell you the story. It will take some time.”

“How long? As long as a movie? As long as reading a book?”

“To be exact ... till Wednesday the thirteenth of March. If everything turns out all right, that is.” He cleared his throat, because all story tellers clear their throats when their stories become interesting, and began: “One night the little queen awoke in her bed and felt that something was happening outside. Something big and meaningful. She lay in her bed motionless – it was a canopy bed, the canopy being the night sky itself for there was a big hole in the ceiling above the bed. Usually the little queen saw the stars when she awoke at night. This night, the sky was empty. The stars had run away, and she felt a pang of fear in her heart. She felt a different kind of fear than with the melancholic dragon or the empress made of froth. And all of a sudden, she understood that her adventures up to now had been nothing but a game. But this – whatever it was – was serious.

She owned two dresses – one nightdress and one daydress – and that being so she was the person with the most dresses on the island. Now she put the red daydress over the blue nightdress, because if something important happens it’s better to wear warm clothes. In the end she put the down jacket on, too, with Mrs. Margaret sleeping in one of its pockets. Then she pulled up the collar of artificial fur and stepped out into the night. It was very quiet. Not a single bird was singing. Not a single cricket chirping. Not a single branch rustling its leaves. Even the wind had died down. The little queen walked to her pasture, and there the white mare stood and looked as if she had been expecting her. Later she didn’t know how she could see the white Mare in the starless darkness, but see her she did. If you have known somebody all your life, you can also see him in the dark. The mare laid her head against the neck of the little queen as if trying to console herself.

“Do you feel what’s going on?”, she asked. “Do you feel how afraid the trees are? They’re going to die. Tonight. And I’m going to die with them. I will never see you again.”

“But why?”, the little queen exclaimed. “Why should that be so?”

In that moment a tremble rolled through the island and the little queen held onto the white mare so as not to lose her balance. The ground trembled a second time, a dark gargling noise came from the depth of the earth, a dangerous rumble -

“Take good care of yourself”, the mare said. “Should you meet a man with a blond moustache who is wearing your name, turn around and run. You got that?”

The little queen shook her head. “How can a man be wearing my name?”

A third earthquake made the ground shake and the first trees fell.

“It is the island”, the mare said. “Run, my little queen. Run to the highest cliff, run quick. The island is sinking.”

“The island is ... sinking?”, asked the little queen. “How can an island sink?”

But the mare just inclined her head, silently.

“I ... I will run to the highest cliff”, the little queen said. “But what about you? Aren’t you coming with me?”

“Run, my little queen”, the mare repeated. “Run quick.”

So the little queen ran. She ran as quick as her bare feet would carry her, she ran like the wind, like the storm, like a hurricane. Mrs Margaret woke up and looked out of her pocket fearfully. When the little queen reached the highest cliff and started climbing up it, the night was torn open and a light came crushing through. The light pulled her from her feet, she kept climbing on her hands and knees, higher and higher onto the bare rocky cliff, and when she had arrived at the top, she turned and saw that the light came from the island. It rose from the middle of the island like a column of fire and she covered her face with her hands. All around her the other cliffs broke, one after the other, she heard their pieces fall into the sea. Her heart was paralysed with fear. Finally, after an eternity, the earth stopped to quiver, and the little queen dared to look up again.

The island had disappeared. Only a few cliffs were sticking out of the sea. In the sky, though, there hung the memory of the light that had risen from the middle of the island like a nightmare of a flame. In that light the little queen saw the sea. And the sea was red with blood.

It was made of crimson waves, carmine froth, splashing colour. They were beautiful, like poppies on a day in spring ... spring was far away. The little queen realized that she was shivering. And in that instant she understood that winter had come.”

Anna heard a chair scratching over the floor, being drawn back. She blinked. The room was nearly empty. Two women in striped coats were wiping down the tables with wet clothes and threw angry looks at those who hadn’t left yet. The student wasn’t sitting at Anna’s table any longer. When had he left? Had she said Good Bye to him?

“And then?”, she heard Micha ask. “What happened then?”

“Then it was time to go”, Abel replied, “you can see they want to close. Is there any space left in your tummy for a chocolate milk or an ice cream?”

“Oh, yes”, Micha said. “I can feel the empty space right here, see ... there’s actually space for ice cream and chocolate milk.”

“You gotta decide for one of them”, Abel said, and Anna heard him smile. “Let’s go down to the cafeteria, shall we?”

Anna got up in a hurry so she could leave the room before the couple and not let Abel see her face. She put the orange tray with the barely touched potato-dog onto the conveyor belt, where

it was sucked into a hole in the wall on two moving rubber strips. Gitta's mother would have liked the tray and the rubber strips, they were probably easy to sterilize.

Anna pulled the head scarf tighter. Then she remembered that it wasn't her sitting on the edge of a cliff in soaking wet clothes but somebody else, and for the umpteenth time this day she felt extremely stupid.

She reached the base of the stairs without being seen or recognized, Abel and Micha took their time, the cafeteria was crowded with people. Anna almost felt how she was becoming invisible in the crowd, she dissolved, she became an anonymous part of a mass of students and occupied herself with studying the party-leaflets lying on the window sill. And then she heard Micha's high children's voice behind her. She let it pass and followed it, between the glass shelves with pieces of cake and sandwiches, she suddenly was too close to the voice and its owner and hid behind the complicated procedure of getting coffee out of a machine without flooding the whole place. Somehow she ended up standing at the counter behind Micha and her pink down jacket. Micha tiptoed, pushed a slightly sauce-smearred strand of hair out of her face and said: "I think I'd like to have hot chocolate. But if you have vanilla ice cream together with hot chocolate I'd take that."

The woman behind the counter straightened her white-and-blue-striped apron and stared at her blankly. "Pardon?"

"Well, maybe there is something like vanilla ice cream plus hot chocolate for less money, see? Like they have at Mc Donald's. They do coffee and a hot dog there for just one Euro and fifty."

"We're not Mc Donald's", the aproned woman said. "And we definitely don't do hot dogs here. So you had better decide what you want young lady, you're not the only one waiting in this line." The tone of her voice was at least as cold as ice but it didn't taste of vanilla. It tasted of scrubbing powder and a white-and-blue-aproned disappointment in life. Around the woman's mouth were wrinkles consisting of bitterness in which Anna read: You! All of you! You don't know nothing about nothing. You're eating and drinking and wasting your parents' money. Upper class youths, haven't worked a darn day in your educated little lives. Bah. Nobody's ever given me anything for free.

But it isn't our fault, Anna wanted to reply. Whose fault is it? Please, can you explain that to me? I want to understand, understand so many things ...

The aproned woman put a white cafeteria-cup with pale hot chocolate onto Micha's tray. Obviously she'd decided for the chocolate. Micha nodded, stretched out her arm for the straws on the side of the counter, straws surely not meant for hot chocolate – a grass-thin, bright coloured kind that they seemed to have only here – and took two, a green and a blue one. "Well, young lady, I'd say one is enough", the aproned woman said as if those were her personal very own straws and she had to take special care of them. In reality there were inflationary many straws, Micha could have taken a dozen and nobody would even have realized. The aproned woman now tried to retrieve one of the straws from Micha's grip, but Micha held onto both of them: the fight was in the air above the counter, just above the tray with the cup. Anna shut her eyes and heard the cup fall. She opened her eyes again. The floor was covered with hot chocolate and the broken pieces of the cup.

Micha just stood there, both straws in her hand, looking at the aproned woman with big blue eyes full of horror. The people in the line were shuffling her feet.

The aproned woman lifted her hands. "I don't believe it!", she exclaimed. "How clumsy can a child be? Young lady, that cup – you're going to pay for that cup. Now look what you've done, all those pieces, what a mess! And I'm the one who has to clean it all up. You hurry up and pay that cup now and leave or we won't get on with anything here. The hot chocolate and the cup, that's two Euro fifty, the cup is one fifty."

When she said that, a light rain began to fall from the horrified blue eyes. A small fist – the one without straws – was held out and in it lay a single Euro-coin. "I only got this", Micha's voice said from out of the rain.

"Don't tell me you're here all by yourself!" Now the aproned woman was nearly shouting. "There must be an adult somewhere who can pay this!"

"No", Micha said, bravely fighting against her tears. "Nobody has to pay for me. I'm all alone. On the cliff. All alone."

"God, will you leave her alone! She's a kid! Just a kid! Don't you have kids?"

Anna looked around for the person who'd said this and realized that it was herself. Damn. She'd sworn she wouldn't interfere, she wouldn't draw anybody's attention to herself, she wouldn't give up her invisibility ...

"I do have children, as a matter of fact", the aproned woman said. "Two, if you must know. But they know how to behave."

"Oh, sure", Anna said, bitterly, and now she had started she couldn't stop. "And they never broke a single cup in their lives and they never wanted two straws and you, you're unfailing yourself of course, you never drop anything, do you, and this cup, madam, is worth twenty cents at most."

She saw that now it wasn't only the aproned woman who was staring at her but Micha as well, both with open mouths. She was swimming on a wave of anger, and it felt good although she had an inkling that she'd be sorry in about three seconds. "I pay that chocolate and my coffee and another, fresh chocolate", she said. "And if you're so kind to give me a dustpan and a brush we can clean up the mess on the floor all by ourselves. And next time you can spare a minute you should go and ask if they do evening courses for friendliness at the adult education centre."

"You don't have to shout at me like that", the aproned woman said offended while taking Anna's money. "I didn't do anything, me."

Anna looked around, looked at the faces of the students in the line, impatient students with coffee-trays and tired eyes. And suddenly her outbreak embarrassed her. But at that moment the two guys behind her started laughing simultaneously, laughing in a good way, and indeed both of them reached for the brush at the same time trying to help her. "You're absolutely right", one of them said. "These people are just impossible ... there's another piece of the cup over there ..."

"What're you studying?", the other one asked. "Haven't seen you around yet."

"Gardening, third semester", Anna murmured, and a strange thought popped up in her head: I'm collecting male students. Gitta'd be surprised.

When she got up to put the pieces of the cup into the waste basket, someone took the dustpan from her. It wasn't one of the students. It was someone with a green military parka.

"Abel?", she asked, sounding as surprised as possible. She looked from Abel to Micha who stood next to him with her fresh cup of hot chocolate and a broad grin – and back to Abel. "What a small world. Are you ... is this ... your sister?"

One of the students placed her coffee tray in her hands. "Better you take this and go now", he said. "Otherwise our friend at the counter will lose it totally." And Anna smiled a thank you to him and was suddenly surrounded by too many people. Now I'm stuck with one of these students, she thought, and Abel will leave, and maybe it's better like this – but Abel didn't leave.

"You'll get the money back", he said. "Thanks. I didn't see what happened exactly ..."

"Oh, some stupid story about straws", Anna answered. "Forget about the money. Then you are ... Micha?"

Micha nodded.

"Is your doll well?", Anna asked politely. "She had got lost at our school. Underneath a sofa. I found her, accidentally."

"Mrs. Margaret", Micha said. "Yes, I think she's fine. She's at home, one's not allowed to bring dolls to school, and anyway she always wants too much dessert when we're in the students' canteen. Can I keep my Euro then, for ice cream?"

"Sure", Anna said.

"No way." Abel shook his head. "You'll give that Euro to Anna. Now." And to Anna he said. "Take it. We're against anti-authoritarian education here."

"What?", Anna asked, confused, and then they both followed Micha who'd worked the small wonder of discovering an empty table. And Abel asked: "Why are you wearing a headscarf?"

"Oh, that, ah, well", Anna said and took it down. "That is ... on the one hand ... a replacement of a lost cap and .. on the other hand ... a long story. But tell me one thing, did you see Gitta round here? She's a quarter of an hour late already ..."

Abel looked around. Of course he hadn't seen Gitta and he wouldn't see her because Gitta had never planned to come to the cafeteria this afternoon. "Hm, guess I'll have to keep waiting for a while", Anna said. "Does Micha have enough straws for her hot chocolate now?"

"Five. I'll tell her, that one shouldn't ..."

"Tell her that she can bend them when they're warm", Anna said quickly. "It's possible to make curls with them like with hair. To make figures, too. But I guess she knows that already." With those words she sat down on a free chair – at the table next to the one Micha had found. Even though there would still have been enough space for her at the empty table.

She took a yellow paperback from her backpack, Faust II, one of the things they had to have read before the final exams. When she opened the small thin pages with the tiny letters on them she thought about a small island out in a blood-red sea. She didn't plan to read Faust II. No one had ever planned to do that. She listened to the conversation at the table behind her, just as she'd done before, upstairs. At some point, Anna thought, her ears would turn around all by themselves, slowly, further and further, until they grew on to the back of her head. And what would that look like?

"Go on"; Micha said. "I will make a cliff with this straw. The island reappeared the next day, didn't it? And the mare was still there and everything, or?"

"No. The little cliff queen sat on her cliff for a long time, shivering in the cold. When dusk broke, the sea was blue once more. But the sun that rose over the sea that day was a cold winter sun and it didn't make the little queen warm.

"Mrs. Margaret", she said. "Maybe we will die." Mrs Margaret didn't say anything. She always listened and never said anything. "I don't know how it feels to die", the little queen went on. Nobody has ever explained death to me. Not the birds and not the white mare either. I think they were afraid to talk about it ..." At that moment the water next to the cliff stirred. The little cliff queen got frightened. A dark round head emerged from the waves, a head with whiskers and glittering sea eyes.

"Who are you?", the little queen asked. "Are you death?"

"No", the something in the sea said and laughed a deep bass laugh. "Death is much bigger than me. I am the sea lion. Or let's say, I am a sea lion. The others swam away so long ago that I don't remember if there were others."

"What is a sea lion?", the little cliff queen asked and leaned forward as to see the sea lion better.

"A sea lion is something that knows the depths", the sea lion answered. "Something that can swim for miles on end without getting tired. Something that comes from the sea and always goes back to the sea. But all these descriptions are useless for there are a lot of creatures who can swim many miles on end without getting tired. What a sea lion really is, a sea lion can never know. The others, they can learn it, but not himself. You can learn it, maybe, if you stay with me."

"But I can't swim miles on end!", the little queen sighed. "I will drown."

"You don't have to swim", said the sea lion. "You own a ship. It's been lying in the water waiting for you since you were born, it lay hidden between some rocks of the island and I have been watching over it. But even I couldn't do anything against what happened tonight. I couldn't save the apple trees and I couldn't save the mare. Nor the castle with the one single room. I saved only the ship. I pushed it away from the edge of the cliff with my nose so it wouldn't be destroyed by the falling rocks. I will show you how to catch the breeze in its white sails. You must trust me, though. We have to reach the mainland before winter comes. On the mainland you will be safe."

"Safe from what?", asked the little queen.

The sea lion didn't answer. He swam out to sea a little, around the next cliff, and then he pushed the ship out from there with his flippers. The ship was green like the summer meadows on the

sunken island had been. Its three white sails were white like the bed covers of the sunken canopy bed, and the rudder was yellow like the pears on the sunken pear trees.

“Come on board”, the sea lion said.

So the little queen stood up and jumped over onto the ship’s deck. The planks were of a golden brown like the floor planks of the sunken castle. From the water, the sea lion told her how to work the lines and the wheel, and the white sails gathered the wind, and the ship sailed away.

The little queen stood at the stern with Mrs. Margaret in her arms and watched the last cliffs of the island disappear.

“I’ll never see my island again”, she whispered. “I’ll never lie in the canopy bed and watch the stars again. I’ll never ride on the white mare through a field of summer flowers again...”

“There will be other summer flowers on the mainland”, said the sea lion. “Flowers more beautiful than the ones on your island. There will be other white mares.”

“But none of them will be my white mare”, the little queen said.

She wanted to cry but then she discovered another ship hovering at the horizon. A ship a lot bigger than hers. And suddenly she shivered, even though her down jacket had dried by now. The big ship was all black as if it had been cut from carton. It had black sails and a black hull, black lines and a black cabin.

“Those are the hunters”, the sea lion said. “They hunt by day and by night, in the rain and the storm. Don’t turn to look at them too often, little queen.”

“What is it they want?”, the little queen whispered. “What are they after?”

“They are after you”, the sea lion replied. “There is something you should know. Your heart, little queen ... it’s not like the heart everybody else has. It is a diamond. Pure and white and big and valuably like no other diamond. Could one pluck this diamond from your breast, it would shine as bright as the sun.”

“But it’s not possible to pluck it from my breast, is it?”, the little queen asked.

“No”, the sea lion said. “Not as long as you are alive.”