

Testing The Coffin

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KI generierte Inhalte:

Ausschließlich der Klappentext wurde mithilfe von KI erstellt und dann mehrfach vom Autor bearbeitet.

I would like to thank my editor Kari Brabander for her support and consultation, Anja Burtcher for her book design and ongoing friendship and my family, who have supported me in all kind of ways throughout my life.

This book is dedicated to Alexandra Apolenová, who is my partner, source of inspiration and all the other words I'll rather whisper in her ear.

Book I

Chapter 1

Isabel Jacobs was working as a barkeeper when I visited the Adler. Her father started a rather successful tech company in the early 2000s, and the family had gotten used to having money. In the summers, Isabel would spend her holidays on her grandparent's farm not far from Dunkirk. There she would feed the pigs, sleep in hay, and plant vegetables. It was a strong contrast to life in the city, where her family lived in a large penthouse in the best neighborhood in Brussels. In high school, she had trouble fitting in, for which she blamed her parents and their wealth. All doors would have been open to her, but she chose a career path that her parents disagreed with. At the age of 24, after finishing culinary school, she decided to hit the road and work in hotels and restaurants all over Europe. She had traveled through the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Austria, and France, which makes the fact that we met each other again at the Adler, of all places, even more fantastic.

The first time I saw her was at an art gallery in Bern where she was working for a catering company. I was there to write a report and ended up talking with her for a while after the official event ended. We didn't see each other again after that but stayed briefly in contact over the phone. She was used to long shifts, tired feet, and being bad-mouthed by alcoholic chefs, but she had made friends in all of the places she had worked because she knew the value of loyalty. If you'd met her then, you would have never guessed that she was as well-traveled and wealthy as she was, and, I don't know how, but she kept that Flemish hinterland mentality close to her heart. A certain naïveté sat on her tongue, followed by a sense of camaraderie and care. Qualities that are looked for in friends but often exploited by lovers.

I arrived at the hotel, an old traditional three-story house built from rocks to last forever, a day earlier because my day hadn't gone as planned. The train was delayed for one and a half hours because the

wind had caused a problem with the power network. I would have taken my mother's car, but I knew the rain would have made it impossible to drive up the steep gravel road that went up to the lake. The receptionist led me through the dark and cold tiled hallway to my room, opened up the door, and left without finishing the welcoming sentence she had been trained to say. It was a tiny, dark room with a small bed, and the furniture was heavy, made from thick wood, and used a lot of space. The frame of the wardrobe was bulky with fine little carvings in it. When Mark gave me the assignment for the interview, I asked him to reserve a room with a double bed, which he either forgot or ignored, so I took off my backpack and my wet jacket, dried my hair with the towel in the bathroom, and went back to the reception. The girl sat behind a round desk underneath a stuffed eagle and was working on her nails.

"Excuse me," I said calmly. "I told my boss to get me a room with a double bed, did he not mention it?"

"He didn't, no."

"And you can't give me another room with a double bed?"

"Not tonight, but I'll try to change the booking, so you can change on one of the following days."

"It's not possible for tomorrow?"

"I'll let you know sir."

I didn't believe her, but I didn't want to make a scene either, so I decided to give it a rest. It had been a long day, and I couldn't stop thinking about what that guy up at the lake had told me, so I sat at the bar next to the entrance, and that's where Isabel was working. She wore the same uniform, a white shirt and black pants, as the receptionist had, but it looked more natural on Isabel. She had her long blonde hair tied up, the same slim firm figure, and thin-framed glasses, which she put back in place with her finger every other minute. She smiled with her thin lips and greeted me with a heartfelt hug. She finished cleaning the bar and we sat down with a beer to catch up. I was excited to hear what she'd been up too. The

receptionist sat at her desk and sometimes looked over, so we put our heads together like kids, and talked quietly because Isabel didn't want her to listen.

The Adler was the only place where Isabel wasn't liked by everyone and how much so became clear to me when she then tried to talk to the receptionist about my room. The permanent staff at the hotel, she later told me, consisted of six people who were all born in the same village or nearby. Mostly, they were young teenagers with little life experience and no ambition. They all grew up together as neighbors or knew each other from attending school. It was a tight community, and it didn't take much for them to form a unified opinion about people. The receptionist snapped at Isabel that there was nothing she could do, so we gave it a rest eventually.

Aloof from the city spread many villages like this one. They were heavily frequented by ski tourists through the winter season, but the months after that belonged to the locals, and soon they would raise up the maypoles. People usually break out in happiness and dance to the marching beat of the brass band as the sun slowly gains power and exchanges the spring breeze with the summer heat.

They drink beer from big wooden barrels, eat pork sausages with sweet mustard and watch the young girls in their traditional dresses dance around the maypoles which they had decorated with flowers and colorful silk before they christened them. I had seen my fair share of red and white checkered blankets, maypoles, and wooden carvings and was not interested in seeing them again any time soon.

After finishing our beers, Isabel told me that she needed to get some sleep, so we said goodnight and went to our rooms. She was living on the floor above me. It was quiet, except for the crackling old bedframe and some solitary raindrops slithering from the blinds down on the windowsill. I looked up the artist I was supposed to interview on my

phone. Another art magazine had already published an article about him. “Jan Pircher captures our nature, the inner beast, and beauty in the most untamed part of Austria.”

He also inherited a massive amount of money from his wealthy father, owner of a successful ski-lift company, who was responsible for destroying that untamed nature his son loved so much. His most famous painting contained three green dots and a smartphone glued on the canvas.

I was not looking forward to this interview. The interval of the raindrops increased steadily and within seconds it was pouring. I opened up the window, checked the time on my watch, and lit a cigarette. I had always believed in spring, and as I watched the ashes extinguish in the puddle of rainwater that had formed on the windowsill, I realized that belief alone just wasn’t enough. But then again, it had been a long day, and I was tired. My phone rang. The painter had to cancel the interview due to the weather.

I closed the window and crawled under the thick blanket just to stare at the ceiling. The wood kept on crackling, the rain kept on falling, and I kept turning from left to right and right and back again. Sleeping was impossible.

I dressed up again and wandered down to step outside for a bit. The rain was heavy and not inviting, but I hoped that the cold air would cool me down and distract me well enough. As I stepped outside, I realized that I wasn’t alone.

“Hello again,” I heard Isabel saying.

“I didn’t know you smoked.”

“Can I borrow your lighter?” Isabel asked.

The fire didn’t come right away.

“You need to press longer, it’s almost empty.” Smoke wandered between us. I loved the smell.

“Thanks, I also never thought I would start someday,” Isabel said.

“I’m trying to stop, like everyone, I guess.”

“Is it really that hard? I can’t imagine it is.”

“There’s that last one, and the problem is, the last one is the best you ever had.”

“My friend, she gave me one at a bad moment.”

“And are you still having a bad moment?” I asked her.

“It’s this place, it’s time for me to leave, I think. And now with this storm and nothing to do...”

“The receptionist was weird, right?”

“I hate her,” she said quietly. “She’s always mean to me.”

“You seem upset, is everyone here treading you like this?”

“It’s just because of this guy who works here. We were dating and then a friend whom I met when I was working in a hotel in France arrived. She’s this crazy, beautiful, charismatic girl, so he made a move on her, and we broke up, yada yada. I don’t know what’s going to happen now.”

“You’ll get over it.” I lit another cigarette.

“Can I maybe have another one as well?” she reached out her hand, and I gave her the cigarette. “I don’t want her to start dating him.”

“She isn’t your friend if she would do that, no?”

“We don’t know each other that well.”

“What makes you think she would do something like that?”

“I don’t even think she would do it to be mean, you know? But she is just very alive, if that makes sense.”

“Must be nice,” I mumbled. “To feel very alive.”

“I don’t know, I think it’s good to have some order. Anyway, I’ll try to get some sleep.”

She pressed her cigarette into the ashtray and stepped inside. I finished mine as well and went back to my room, hoping that sleep would find me this time. It continued to rain all night.

In the morning the hotel was cold and sinister.

The receptionist greeted me at the breakfast buffet and presented their locally sourced food. Unlike me, she must have slept well, because she was so excited to explain everything to me that her voice

increased in pitch, which I thought was funny. I collected slices of various kinds of cheeses, scrambled eggs, a cup of coffee, some bread, and one of these little packages with marmalade.

Train tracks, I thought, often lead through tunnels, mountainsides, and slopes in this area, which can cause a lot of problems in weather like this. Dirt and rocks get loose and trigger off muddy avalanches or cause flooding. I checked my phone to confirm my apprehensions. I wasn't going anywhere; all trains were canceled. The receptionist approached me.

"Is everything okay sir?"

"I'll need to stay for another night due to the weather. Can I please get the room with the double bed?"

"My co-worker will take over from now on. I'll let her know. You'll be able to move your things after lunch is served."

"Is there anything to do during the day?"

"It's a great area for hiking, but I'm afraid it won't be possible today due to the weather, but we have a bigger bar downstairs in the wine cellar, and there is also a pool table."

"Looks like I'm the only guest here."

"I'm afraid so, we had some reservations for today but they canceled due to the..."

"Due to the weather, I know."

"Yes, I'm sorry, maybe you can charm Charlotte into playing a round."

"I'll try my best."

She smiled with hollow eyes and took off. A woman stepped in, and I wondered if it was another guest. She greeted the receptionist and looked over. I caught her glance for a moment. Her skin was tanned, her eyes were deep and dark brown. I could tell she was not from here. They talked a bit and laughed. The girl was talking with lots of gestures. She then hung her black jacket on the rack behind the front desk and left through the door behind the counter. Not a guest, I thought.

The receptionist came back over because she realized that she had forgotten to take my plate and I went back to my room. Something was hitting my window producing a dull sound, maybe tree branches or something else carried by the wind but I didn't bother to get up from bed. I listened to "Lonesome Town," by Ricky Nelson and wondered what I could do to feel very alive in this bleak hotel.

A stash of newspapers was laying on the desk and I checked if there was something interesting. A magazine on cooking, one with celebrity gossip, a local paper with a picture of Jan Pircher on the front page, and a travel magazine. I chose the travel magazine and read an article about the five best cities to live in. Number one was Vienna, too close for me, numbers two and three were in Switzerland – too expensive, number four was Copenhagen, not the kind of landscape I was into, and number five was Lisbon. That sparked my interest. I had never seen the ocean and the cold rainy weather outside made me crave the sun. Someday, I would go to Lisbon, I thought. On the last pages were job adverts, but there was nothing that would make me feel very alive either, so I decided to get lunch. The receptionist was not sitting under the eagle, but a bloke was waiting for me in the dining hall. Most of the chairs were still stacked in the corner, and only 4 tables were made, the others were naked. They put out silverware for four people on each table like I had some ghostly company with me. Every noise I made echoed through the large room.

"Hello sir, my name is Manuel and I'll be your server today. What can I bring you?"

"Nice to meet you, Manuel, can you bring me red wine and soda, please?" I really didn't like how he was calling me sir, but I didn't want to say something.

"Of course, we offer merlot or Bordeaux-claret.

Something to eat as well, sir?"

"I'll take the vegetable lasagna and the merlot please."

"Good choice."

I looked at the oil paintings on the wall and listened to the heavy raindrops pounding at the windows, just to be interrupted by the rasping sound of the FM radio in the kitchen as Manuel opened up the door to place my order. The red wine was good. I always ordered the first glass of wine with a soda, so I can turn it into a spritzer in case I got served cheap wine, but this one was all right, so I ordered a whiskey and a slice of lemon, so the soda was put to good use. It was probably too early to start drinking but I was dead bored. After I was finished with the very mediocre meal, Manuel came to take away the plates.

“Tell me, Manuel, do you like to play billiards?”

“No sir, not much, why?”

“I’m stuck here and I need a partner.”

“Charlotte likes to play,” he mumbled.

“How can I find her?”

“She’s preparing the rooms, so maybe you’ll run into her in the hallways, but she usually hangs out with Isabel at the bar in the evening.”

“And how is Charlotte?”

“She plays very well.”

That wasn’t what I meant, but I didn’t feel like he wanted to understand me.

“Thanks, please bring me another glass of wine.”

“Of course sir.”

The next glass went down easy, and Manuel asked if he should bring me a refill, but I felt the alcohol in my head enough, so I declined.

“Very well sir,” he answered.

“Please don’t call me sir.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, it just feels weird to me, you know? I’m only 25. How old are you?”

“I’m 27.”

“Thank you, Manuel, just put it on my bill, the company I’m working

for will pay for it.”

“What are you here for, if I may ask?”

“I’m a journalist, I was supposed to interview Jan Pircher, maybe you’ve met him.”

“I know him, yes.”

“How so?”

“He often drinks at the bar.”

“Why would he come here?”

“Either for the owner’s wine collection or to look at the girls, probably both”

“The more I find out about him, the less I like him”

“He’s all right, but I don’t like his paintings, to be honest”

“Me neither,” I said.

“What was the interview about?”

“His paintings.”

Chapter 2

A new receptionist, also a local, led me down the dreaded hallway, up a flight of stairs, and to the upper floor. I liked my new room, again there was a similar wardrobe but much more space and, most importantly, a bigger bed. She stopped at the doorframe and went over the house rules with me.

“The girl from the last shift explained everything,” I said.

“And yet she saw you smoking out of your window yesterday.”

“I must not have heard that one.”

“You could have triggered the fire alarm. Please step out of the building next time.”

“I will.” I tried to be charming.

Her face stayed serious. “I’m glad to hear that.”

A second face appeared in the doorframe. It was Isabel.

“Julia, someone is on the phone downstairs. I ran out of answers for them, can you go and deal with it?”

“Yes okay. If you need something, just let Isabel know, and she will inform me, goodbye.”

“Bye.”

“Is this the right room now?” Isabel smiled.

“Looks like it, yes.”

“So how long are you going to stay here?” she asked.

“Just until the rain stops. I came here to interview some artist, but he canceled.”

“It should get better tomorrow, according to the news.”

“I hope so. Do you know him? His name is Jan Pircher.”

Isabel chuckled, “He sometimes drinks at the bar in the wine cellar. He smells funny, like rubbing alcohol, you know?”

“He’s wealthy. Does this wine cellar offer whiskey?”

“It certainly does. I’m working there tonight.”

“I’ll come down, it’s not like there is anything else to do anyway, I heard there is a pool table?”

“There is, but I don’t like playing.”

“The waiter said that some girl called Charlotte would play for sure.”

“She likes it, yes, and I think she will like you as well.”

“Then I’ll see you at eight for a whiskey.”

“Sounds good, I’m in the mood for a drink. I was afraid you would spend the night in front of this typewriter of yours or reading that book over there.” She pointed to the book I just had put on the nightstand. The book was the libretto of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, I had picked it up after I attended an exhibition about the legend. I was so intrigued by the story that I wanted to see the opera, but it wasn’t playing, so I bought the libretto.

The typewriter was a gift from my grandmother. She worked in the post office for most of her life and that typewriter was her only retirement gift. She was a strong woman with a big heart who lost her husband soon after the war when he was beaten to death over an open position as a mechanic. The guy who killed him spread rumors that Grandpa had been involved with the communists, and that’s how they got into an argument. My grandfather was only eighteen at the time and my grandmother had just gotten pregnant with my mother. The killing was ruled as an accident and the guy got the job. My grandmother had to raise and finance the child by herself. It’s a sad story yet her gratitude for the most simple things in life was contagious at times. When I was a child, her visits were always important to me. Sometimes, she snatched things nobody had picked up from the post office and gave them to me as a present. I got a couple of books and some toys like that. She would also take that *Hermes Baby* with her and teach me how to type. Her first rule was to keep things clean and look after them, but her second rule was to use the things we had, otherwise it was not acquired with the right intentions. I always understood it as another way of showing gratitude, and by using the typewriter as intended, I felt like I was showing my gratitude to her.

I slowly looked up from the typewriter and answered.

“Don’t worry, I only read after work, it helps to clear my mind.”

“Aha, and what do you when do you don’t work?”

“I drink at bars and play billiards.”

“Yeah, you’re just like I remember. Charlotte will definitely like you.”

My phone rang, Isabel left me a smile and stepped out of the room. It was Mark, my boss, who was calling.

“Hi, the rain huh?”

“Yeah, I can’t leave this place, I have to stay another night.”

“We’ll compensate you for that.”

“Glad to hear that. The painter canceled.”

“That’s why I’m calling, he’s currently in Milan, I want you to go there.”

“What is he doing in Milan when he knows he has an interview here.”

“Don’t ask me, can you be in Milan by the end of the week?”

“Mark, listen, I’m not sure about my position anymore. I feel like this doesn’t make sense, he isn’t even good, did you see how and what he paints?”

“But you can do it?”

“I don’t know Mark...”

“Milan is a great city, have you been there?”

He wasn’t listening, he just wanted an answer. “No.”

“You’ll love it. I’ll send you the details, thanks, and don’t forget 3000 words at least, bye!”

And with that, he hung up.

People like Mark and Stefan Fritz couldn’t be trusted. When I was interviewing for the job, they told me all about creative freedom and a bunch of other crap, but in the end, I ended up writing about the same mind-numbing trash as everybody else. I knew I wouldn’t get a great job right away since I had never studied journalism, but there wasn’t a message, a moral ground, or anything of value at all, it was just

content and attractive headlines. Mark and Stefan were driving expensive BMWs, while I didn't even make enough money to buy a car.

I realized that I was already hungry again and went back down to the dining room. Manuel had left, and the whole place was empty, no dessert for me, I thought.

I took a glimpse through the little round window in the kitchen door and saw one of the cooks cleaning the floor, moving his hips to the beat of the radio music. The open wine bottle was still standing on the corner of the table. I slowly opened up the door, and checked if he had heard me, but he had not, and so I quickly grabbed the bottle. I peeked through the bull's-eye again, but the bloke was still mopping so I hid the bottle under my Barbour and made my way back to the room. The adrenaline was still pumping through my veins. I had never stolen something before, and I didn't understand what drove me to it. I kept on touching the bottle through the jacket to make sure that it had really happened and started laughing out loud. As I made my way up the stairs, the brown-haired girl I had seen earlier appeared out of one room and we gave each other a scare. I took a step back, and with that we both heard the wine creating a splash.

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to scare you." I stuttered.

She started to smile. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am, thank you. I'm on the way to my room, it's right there."

"And you're taking that bottle with you?"

I couldn't look her in the eyes, but there was nowhere else to look.

"I'll pay for it later, it was just, there was no one there..."

"It's okay, it's okay." She started to laugh, and I got even more nervous.

"I'm not going to tell anybody, but only if you share some with me. I'm Charlotte, by the way."

I paused.

“It’s been raining for two days. I’m stuck here and I’m starting to go crazy, do you want to drink or what?” She said.

I was going crazy too, so what the hell, I thought and nodded.

I followed her eyes into my room. They were filled with kindness and excitement as we entered. On her nose was a small mark reviling that a piercing once sat there. Her fingernails were painted black, and she wore a thin silver necklace.

“I never liked this one; the big walnut tree steals away most of the light.”

“It’s better than the one I had yesterday.”

Charlotte took off her apron and placed it over the chair. “The one with the smaller bed? Right?”

“Yeah, I needed more space.”

“Space for what?” she asked.

“Good question.”

She looked at my things, she was observing, trying to get to know me. Her hands touched the book on the nightstand, slowly caressing the cover.

“I don’t read much,” she said.

“Don’t worry, me neither.”

“I thought you’re a writer, aren’t you?”

“I’m a journalist. I’d like to write books, but I don’t think I’m a good enough writer.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t go out much.”

“I thought writers usually don’t go out much, where and when else would they write?”

“You’ve got to experience things in order to write about them.”

Charlotte looked up from the nightstand. “What kind of things?”

I failed to come up with an answer. Honesty, of all things, was hard to get right. Being able to be fully and entirely true with myself was one of the things that kept me from writing well. How could I face my

fears if losing my face doing so was a reasonable possibility?
Charlotte realized that I was trapped in quicksand and threw me a lifeline.

“What about the wine Mr. Writer?”

I smiled, “it’s a merlot. I had it for lunch, it’s a good one.”

“Isabel likes that one too. I prefer chardonnay, to be honest.”

“Should I go downstairs and steal one?”

“You met Isabel?” She asked.

“Yeah, we met two years in Switzerland actually. I didn’t know she was working here.”

“Sounds romantic.” Charlotte grinned and proceeded to sit on the bed.

“What do you think of her?”

I wasn’t sure what she wanted to hear. “She’s alright, is she not?”

“Oh, I couldn’t tell.”

“But you know what kind of wine she likes?”

“And much more, but who am I to judge?”

Smart, I thought. I took off my shoes and my Barbour and sat on the bed, took a big sip of the wine, and handed it to her.

She looked me dead in the eyes. “Isabel is a sweetheart, the best friend I ever had, don’t mess with her!”

“I didn’t plan to.”

“Now, how long are you staying here,” she asked.

“Until tomorrow, if the trains are driving again. I need to be in Milan by the end of the week. I’m interviewing Jan Pircher.”

“Shut up! That guy sits here all the time, smelling like turpentine or whatever the fuck it is.”

“Isabel mentioned your aversion.”

“Aversion,” she replied with a comedic, thick French accent and took a big sip of the wine. The room went silent.

I counted eight raindrops splashing on the sheet metal.

She stared at the white wall opposite us. I inspected the book cover; it had looked a lot finer with her hand on it.

I had not even noticed the walnut tree outside.

“You’re not French.”

She laughed, shook her head and looked at me.

“Actually I am.”

“You don’t sound French.”

I could tell she was enjoying herself.

“You have an interesting way of flirting. Does it ever work?”

“Rarely.”

“My father is a Frenchman, and my mother is from the Czech Republic”

“How did they meet?”

“My grandfather immigrated to France from Algeria in the ‘40s. My dad grew up in Paris, he is actually the only member of our family who speaks proper French, and he met my mother when she was there on vacation. They stayed in Paris until the late ‘90s but decided to leave when the bombings happened because my mother was pregnant with me. They moved to Bratislava, and I lived there until I was fifteen, then we moved to Prague. But now things are a bit complicated. What about you?”

“I’m from the West of Austria, not too far from here. Never had much time to travel or anything like that. I’d like to see cities like Paris and Prague.”

“So you can write about them?”

“Experience them.”

“You’re a journalist, you can already visit and write about those places.”

“Do you know the Fritz Magazine?”

“I haven’t heard of it.”

“See.”

Charlotte got quiet.

“The bottle is almost gone,” I said.

“What a shame, that means I have to leave.”

She got out of bed, straightened her uniform, wiped off the red wine stains on her lips, and made her way to the door.

“I’ll see you later at the bar?” I asked.

“Maybe, yeah.”

“I heard you would maybe play billiards with me.”

“We’ll see.”

“Don’t forget your apron. Nice to meet you Charlotte.”

“It’s actually Šarlota, but never say that to me, it’s Charlotte for you.”

“Okay Charlotte, the femme de ménage from Paris, see you soon.”

She had sparked my interest, and I felt energized, boyish even. That brief conversation was enough to question everything and embrace anything. I was treading new waters with the chance of drowning, but that damned smile of hers had worked so well I didn’t even realize that I was navigating her claws right into me. I thought about how curious this day had unfolded, and I wondered if it had anything to do with destiny. It was hard to believe in such things after what had happened to my mother, but one could never know what these kinds of things were good for in the end. In the end, we all would know, and if not so, it wouldn’t matter anymore.

I swallowed the last drops of the merlot, and it felt like a kiss, like a certain act of liberty.

Chapter 3

The first time I felt that way, liberated, was in 2006 when my grandmother took me fishing on the lake for the first time. It was a tradition that we went fishing together every now and then, but this time, we were fishing on a boat. Richard, my grandmother's friend who owned the Nici was a proud man. Grandma and I were impressed, not only by his imposing stature but also by his knowledge of fishing and nature. He was confident and different from the men in my family. The lake was quite large but small enough to see from one coast to the other, not sharply, but one could see it. A river ran through the mountain chain, into the lake, and out on the other side where they had built a damn. Otherwise, the green crystal water was surrounded by an untamed forest.

I was excited to go on that trip and my happiness grew even bigger when my father failed to prevent it. He felt my grades at school had not been good enough, so he insisted that my grandmother would change her mind. She wasn't a confrontational person, and it was probably the only time I saw her lose her temper, and my father was so surprised by her lashing out that he was lost for words, took off, and spent the rest of the day drinking in the garage. He was a pitiful and weak man, a slave to his complexes and his failed marriage. He had lost control over his life and was feeding off other people's misery. Misery he usually brought upon them.

The feeling of the stern breeze on my cheeks and the golden reflections of the sun in the water were an unbelievable, even fantastic contrast to the bleak perception I had of what life could be. It felt good to be outside, and I wanted more of it, possess it within me, and feed off it, and I feed off it still. This freedom, and the sun on my closed eyelids, and the wind through my stretched-out fingers, and the kindness of Grandmother, who was sitting behind me, and who felt it

too, and would later talk about it, and shed a tear, when it was too late for her to do anything else but remember.

Richard was determined to catch a pike. He told us that it was easy to catch them at a riverbank, where they usually rested, but to catch one in open waters was quite difficult. The trick was to find a swarm of Coregonus, a small whitefish, or trout because one could be sure that a pike wouldn't be far from those. Richard also insisted on using live bait, which is why we were catching trout in the first place. Our timing had not been right, and the pikes were probably already fed and hiding in the shadows of the reeds near the shore. Richard gave us some tips on how to operate the fishing rod and we ended up catching some zander as well.

We grilled in the garden underneath Richards's house. It sat on the foot of a mountain, and we could watch the sun go down into the bloodred waters of the lake. The house was big and modern, with wide glass windows and a wooden exterior. Richard showed me the ladder that went up to the flat roof behind the house, and from up there we could even see the little fishing clubhouse on the other side.

The garden was simple, Richard had built a small pavilion and the fireplace we sat around. Grandmother suggested some improvements to which he listened with a smile on his face. I listened to the crackling of the fire and the distant sounds of the mallards as I watched my marshmallow melt. Richard handed me my first-ever beer. "Drink up son, you earned it," he said to me.

Chapter 4

After dinner, I went down to the wine cellar. Turns out, it wasn't much of a wine cellar at all. There was a small bar and it lacked in character. Some wine bottles were stacked on a wooden shelf next to the counter and the pool table was illuminated by a green lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Isabel was cleaning tumblers when she looked up and smiled at me. She had her hair tied up and the sleeves of her shirt rolled back.

"How's it going?"

"As you can see, we just doubled the number of guests from zero to one, and I heard a second is coming soon."

"Charlotte?"

"Yes, she's getting dressed. How are you?"

"The rain finally stopped, so I'm free and ready for a drink. Whiskey with soda please."

"Yeah, I saw, you must be happy. How was dinner?"

"Manuel served me Gulasch with potatoes. I hate potatoes. I didn't complain, of course. Manuel already seems to dislike me."

"Don't worry about Manuel, he is the brother of a certain asshole ex-boyfriend of mine."

"What happened?"

"Pour me one of those too, looks nice."

"You've never had whiskey soda?"

"My father drinks whiskey," she sighed. "I wanted to leave the hotel but then I met David, he's the busboy, and he wanted me to stay here with him, so I did. But after I agreed to stay, he started to lose interest in me. He's dating some girl from around here now, but I think he's cheating on her as well."

"He cheated on you?"

"He tried to at least."

"Sounds like he has some growing up to do."

"Big time. Can we maybe not mention any of this to Charlotte?"

“Sure, why?”

“Do you remember our conversation outside? When we were smoking at the entrance.”

“Of course.”

“I was talking about her, but everything is good, I should trust her,” she sighed.

“She told me that you’re the best friend she ever had.”

“You met her?”

“Yeah, earlier today.”

“And she said that?”

I tried to come across as earnest. “Those exact words.”

“Now I feel stupid.” She blushed.

“Do you spend a lot of time together?”

“Off and on, I mean we see each other all the time at work, but sometimes she doesn’t leave her room for days.”

“What’s she doing there?”

“I don’t know, watching the same old French movie over and over again. She’s hard to read, kind of jumpy.”

“How do you mean that?”

“Well, one week she spends most of her time in her room or roaming around the mountain, but then, the next week, she wants to go out with me every evening and drinks a lot and talks to everyone.”

“That’s the Charlotte I met.”

“She has some family problems I think.”

“And will you two stay here?”

“No way, Charlotte and I are making plans already.”

She poured us another whiskey.

“Did somebody say my name?” I turned around and saw Charlotte approaching us.

She wore a beige wool sweater, boots, black tight jeans, and a black beret. It looked good on her and she knew it. The beige highlighted her deep brown eyes, and the beret prevented them from being hidden behind her bangs.

She looked stunning and I had trouble looking anywhere else.

“What are you drinking?”

“Something terrible called whiskey soda,” Isabel answered.

“Good, pour me one.”

Isabel handed me a glass, and Charlotte watched me preparing the drink and took it out of my hands.

“So what did you two do today?” Isabel asked.

“Just talked,” I replied.

“We had a swell time together, didn’t we?” Charlotte asked with a smile on her face.

“Where did you dig up that word?”

“It’s swell, isn’t it?” She laughed and took a pack of cigarettes out of her jeans pocket.

“You can’t smoke here, I got scolded earlier.”

“What happened?” Charlotte mumbled with the cigarette on her lips.

“Julia caught him,” Isabel intervened.

“Pff, damn Julia, what does she know?” Charlotte gave back.

The evening went on and the whiskey kept coming. Earlier, Charlotte had insisted on choosing the music, and so I watched her dancing to *69 année érotique* by Serge Gainsbourg. Isabel ensured that we had enough ice cubes. Charlotte waved at me and posed on the pool table. I followed my invitation and danced with her underneath the warm light. It was thrilling. She knew how to move elegantly, and, usually, the women who do are aware of their attraction. It’s admirable to watch someone who radiates confidence, and it was even more spectacular to watch her beauty blossom under that light.

“You dance very well,” I said.

“I can’t say the same for you,” she laughed.

“I’m a little rusty maybe.”

“Do you need a break?” she asked.

“I think you need one,” I poked back.

“You’re right.”

And with that, she sat back down and lit another cigarette.

Isabel operated the laptop that was connected to the stereo.

She played *How Blue Can You Get* by B.B. King.

“My father played this often,” she added. “B.B. King could change guitar strings during a song, while he was singing.”

“I can’t even sing,” I said.

“I can sing,” Charlotte answered, being snappy about it. “I sing very well.”

“You mean very swell,” I said. Isabel poured us another drink. “So where do you want to go?” I asked them.

“I don’t know yet,” Charlotte answered dismissively. “Maybe Paris or maybe Prague, but I don’t really want to.”

“You’re going with her?” I asked.

“If I find a job,” Isabel answered.

Charlotte checked her face in the mirror behind the bar and replied while still looking at herself. “My parents divorced last year. Mother lives in Prague and my father is in Paris. They both want me to live with them, it’s a mess.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“I never want to get married,” she answered.

“Just because it didn’t work out for your parents, doesn’t mean it won’t work out for you.”

“I’d like to get married,” Isabel said.

“I’d rather have fun than be stuck in some boring marriage. I think marriage is poison for the soul. You don’t need a man Isabel,”

Charlotte said.

“I’d like to have kids one day,” she answered.

“I’d like to have another drink.”

Isabel didn’t hear her; she was filling up the dishwasher.

I prepared the pool table.

“Do you want to play?” I asked her.

“No, I don’t”

“But you just watched me preparing the table, why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t remember asking you to.” She smiled and turned around, giving Isabel another sign to refill our glasses, this time she noticed.

“So, when are you going to Milan?” Isabel asked.

“Tomorrow, and what about you? Are you working?”

“It’s so boring here,” Charlotte answered.

“You should come with me,” I said.

“Yeah right,” Isabel said with the full intention of being sarcastic.

Charlotte turned to her. “You know what, why not Jacobs?”

“Yeah, why not Jacobs?” I followed.

“Milan it is,” She said and put her hands up in a resigning manner. We all cheered.

Isabel took out her phone and we all posed for a photo. I didn’t take them seriously because I was sure it was just the whiskey talking, but the idea of traveling with them was entertaining. It had gotten late, and Isabel started to close down the bar, so Charlotte and I said goodnight and went upstairs. I felt good next to her. She smiled in a fine way and she kept me laughing. All of a sudden, she pulled out a bottle of Chardonnay from the back of her sweater.

“Isabel would have not let me take it, so I had to hide it. Are you in the mood for another round?”

I said yes and led her into my room.

She sat on the bed, and I turned on some music from my portable speaker. I chose *Easy Living* by Paul Desmond. It was my grandmother’s favorite album. She used to listen to it in her study all the time.

“So, we’re going to Milan,” she said playfully.

“But I have to work there, you know, the interview.”

“I’m sure we’ll find something to do.”

“I should quit my job as well, I hate it.”

“Then quit it and travel. Didn’t you want to see the world and write?”

Charlotte looked at her reflection in the window.

“That’s what I want to do, but I’ve never had the time to even think about it.”

“Look me in the eyes,” Charlotte insisted. “Live your life, and then write your book, otherwise, you carry around that typewriter for nothing.”

She had not only a point but no idea how much truth that sentence held. Charlotte seemed like she was always honest with herself in a way, but I knew that just believing in the truth wasn’t enough.

I looked at Charlotte and handed her the bottle. “Drink up, you deserve it.”

After finishing the bottle, Charlotte went to the bathroom. I should have been nervous, but I had gotten too drunk and the room was spinning. I slowly made my way out of bed and opened the window in order to sober up on the fresh air. I heard her washing her hands. She would come out of the bathroom any minute. I tried to breathe in as much fresh air as possible, but it didn’t work as quickly as I had hoped. The room started spinning yet again, and I was holding onto the window frame to support myself. Charlotte came back out and sat on the bed. I used my chance and went to the bathroom to take a shower. The cold water helped. Every drop that touched my head and ran down my back seemed to sober me up. I was staring at my feet and watched the water swirling down the drain and disappearing. I had lost complete track of time and when I stepped out of the bathroom Charlotte had already left. I sat on the side of the bed and spotted a lipstick mark on the pillow. I knew I had missed my chance. Paul Desmond was still playing. I lay on the other side of the mattress

and kept that pillow next to me. I imagined her head resting there with those excited, shining eyes. My hands wandered up and down her imaginary body, and I imagined the kiss I had stolen from us.

Chapter 5

I had to leave the hotel early in the morning in order to catch my train without seeing Charlotte and Isabel again. I left a piece of paper with my phone number that I had typed out with my Hermes Baby, so Charlotte could reach me in case she had been serious. The rain had stopped but the clouds were still hanging deep, and the gloomy weather reflected my disillusioned, hungover, and empty body. The last two days had felt like a dream and the courage I had felt the evening before was blown away by the cold, windy reality I was trapped in. The train ride took two hours, through a lot of tunnels and thick forest.

Innsbruck was as busy as ever and the city didn't pay attention to my depression. I went to a small bar that was on the second floor of an old house; it was almost empty because it was too early for the students to drink. They didn't know yet that one could drink at any hour of the day. I ordered a white Russian and searched for a corner where I could have my peace. I looked around and noticed the nice old orange walls and the heavy dark red curtains made from velvet.

I watched the vinyl player behind the bar making its rounds as it played *What's the Rush* by Johnny Hodges and Gerry Mulligan. My phone was on the table ready to receive a call from Charlotte or Isabel. The waiter brought me a sandwich and another white Russian. After I finished my meal, I looked at the photo we took at the bar. We looked happy, and the photo captured a moment in which it all made sense. Things are so earnest and pure when the sky gets dark and the drinks start flying. The shame of Charlotte's quiet disappearance set in, and I felt dragged through the mud. I paid for my lunch and made my way to the train station. I would have to change in Verona and would arrive in Milan at 8:00 p.m. On the train, I checked the email Mark had sent me regarding my stay. I wasn't going to stay in a hotel, but in a flat one of his friends owned and usually rented out to tourists. I listened

to Nina Simone's *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* which reminded me of Charlotte.

My Bluetooth headphones ran out of power as the train was crossing Bozen. I grabbed the phone out of my jeans pocket to turn off the music when I saw that I had gotten a new message.

Send us your address, we will arrive in Milan on Sunday, the owners want us to finish the week, otherwise, there will be no pay. See you on Sunday?

xoxo Isabel and Charlotte

*Piazzale Carlo Archinto 1
Milano
20159 Italy
looking forward*

A fog lifted from my mind. I could not believe that they actually wrote me, and I stared at the message for a couple of minutes.

I must have looked like the receptionist in the hotel: mouth and eyes wide open, frozen. After the excitement settled, I realized I had to make some arrangements to make things happen. I checked the photos of the flat we were supposed to stay in. There was a double bed and a couch. Mark hadn't written in his mail how long the flat would be free, so I gave him a call.

"Hey, Mr. Italy, what can I do you for?"

"Hi Mark, how long can I stay in that flat of yours?"

"Adriano said it's free until Thursday the week after, you like it there? You want to stay for a bit?"

"I haven't arrived yet, I'm on my way. So, I can stay in the flat until then? It would help me with writing the article, you know, capture the essence of the city and that guy."

"Jan Pircher."

"Exactly."

“Stay there bro, as long that article is coming together, okay?”

“Okay, thanks Mark.”

“Stay fresh! Enjoy Milano!”

I didn't understand how Mark felt comfortable talking to me with all these hip words I didn't use. It was part of a culture I didn't feel related to. I wasn't his brother, and I didn't know how to stay fresh, but he had a wonderful ignorance about him, which was as obnoxious as it was admirable.

The town I grew up in was quite small, and everybody knew my family. They knew that my mother wasn't well, and that my brother was an outsider and a troublemaker, so the kids at school avoided me naturally. It had always been like that, so I never really knew what I was missing. I had always liked reading and roaming through forests with my grandmother. I didn't watch the movies the other kids knew because my parents didn't give me much pocket money. I didn't know what was playing on TV because my mom spent most of her time in front of it. Grandmother watched old movies with me at her house, and we listened to Chopin and Liszt on her old vinyl player.

I would watch the other kids and I wanted to fit in, but I was too different. They didn't like me, and I didn't like them much either. I didn't like the way they treated each other and how distracted they were by their phones and mp3 players. They would spend their whole afternoon at someone's house and watch TV, just like my mother. I wanted to be anything but my mother, and anywhere else but home. So I spent my afternoons outside or in the little room in my Grandmother's house that used to be my mom's.

I did enjoy hiking in the mountains. I liked the sudden change in the landscape, the divergent growing flowers, and even the grass felt different, rough, and sturdy when going through it with my fingers. Richard once showed me where to find chamois with their fine horns and black-and-white colored faces, and we watched them jump from rock to rock and run through the gravel with much confident speed. We'd see golden eagles hovering over the mountain tops, and he'd teach me to spot the difference between the female and males one. The females were much larger, but it was hard to tell because they flew so high there was nothing I could use for scale. They all were big and majestic, but far, and I felt safe with Richard because Grandmother trusted him. And we'd hear marmots in the distance spreading the news of our arrival through the mountain slope.

On one first of May, I must've been around twelve, I was trying out my brother's skateboard he had left when my father came home from

the celebration and scolded me for not being there. He was drunk and called me a queer sissy and dragged me to the old town square where the maypole stood. I was too scared to speak up to him and followed, and as soon as we got there, he sat on a beer bench and continued to drink with his friends. The other kids had seen him shouting at me and picked me up, took me behind a bush, and beat me up, just for the fun of it. It was three of them; one held me from behind and restrained my arms, and the other two took turns on punching me in my gut until I sank to the ground. They left me laying there, and when I could stand up again, I ran to my grandmother's house. She took me up to my room and put me to bed with some chocolate. Richard later knocked on the door and sat next to me on the bed. He told me stories from his travels and showed me pictures and promised to take me on another boat trip soon. He was calm and made me feel better, and after he left the room I knew I wanted to become a big, and strong man too; a man who would travel and see the world, and would not be beaten up by anyone.