SLEEPLESS

ROMY HAUSMANN

Translated from the German by
Jamie Bulloch

Quercus

My angel,

I've written you dozens of letters and, now more than ever, regret never having sent a single one of them. I ought to have done. Definitely. You've every right to find out what really happened back then. To find out from me, in my own words, words I always believed to be inadequate. I don't know what you remember, or if hidden somewhere at the back of your mind there's still a fragment of our last meeting. I promised to catch the evil man. I tempted you with the sea, and you must have thought you could rely on me. That everything would turn out fine and that I would be the one to make sure it did.

All words are irrelevant now and I can only write this, perhaps my final letter, in my thoughts.

It's over, my angel.

Today I'm going to die.

Just like her.

He's won.

NADJA

A panic attack is like standing on the cliff edge. *Don't look down*, I tell myself as I put my head back and try to breathe. Above me, slate-grey clouds drift across the sky that's still the colour of lavender, but only just. I hear noises. It sounds like the staccato of rain drumming against a windowpane.

It's not rain, I realise. It's rocks crumbling beneath my feet. I try to take a step backwards but can't. I teeter, lose my balance and thrash about with my arms because I refuse to believe it's happening. Because every time I believe I've got a chance.

I haven't.

I fall and let out a silent scream.

The water . . .

I blink. Shelves of sweets wash towards me, a freezer glides closer as if carried on the waves. My body lies twisted on a stone floor. It's swaying. I feel seasick and gag on some bile. In the distance I hear voices and a flurry of activity. *What happened?* I want to ask – how stupid is that? I know exactly what happened. I fell from the cliffs, for the fourth time this month. It's Saturday, July 20. Four falls within twenty days. I ought to be thankful – I've had it worse. When I touch the area on my forehead that's throbbing

I feel a slight bump and a dampness. Blood. I must have hit my head. My circulation. My eyelids are fluttering like insect wings. Unconsciousness is trying to steal me away. I would cry for help if I hadn't already drowned. In the red water.

Don't worry, she's only sleeping.

I wake up.

The ground beneath me is firm again. I must have drifted ashore. Somebody pulls me up to a seated position and asks, 'Are you okay?'

I think I nod. Try to get my bearings. The shelves of sweets, the freezer. The shop of a small, slightly run-down petrol station on the A13. Unleaded at 1.51 euro per litre, diesel at 1.43. I had parked the Land Rover by one of the two pumps, got out and looked around shiftily, like a fugitive.

Nobody. No other vehicle that had followed me into the petrol station and none already there waiting for me. Relief. Through the shop window I had seen the cashier inquisitively craning his neck. So I did something normal, inconspicuous. I filled up the car, locked the doors and went to pay.

'I bet it's just her circulation,' I hear a man say. His face is merely a blur at first, but I suspect he's the cashier. I remember a red-and-blue checked, short-sleeved shirt and the barked laughter coming from beneath his nicotine-stained moustache when he made a joke as he handed me my change. 'An old girl like that is a real guzzler, eh?' He meant the Land Rover.

'Not surprising, it's sweltering today,' he now says, this time referring to me. The woman who just collapsed by his counter.

Another barking laugh, then he says, 'Annelies, go and get a bottle of water!'

My vision slowly starts to clear. I try to get to my feet, but it's a very clumsy attempt. 'Don't rush it!' Moustache man grabs my arm to support me. My right knee is shaking as if the joint had been removed and the void filled with jelly. 'Oh, you poor thing,' he says, fixing his eyes on my bleeding forehead. I open my mouth to tell him I'm okay. That I'm just a very sensitive, nervous individual, that apart from yesterday evening I haven't been behind the wheel of a car since I took my test, and that the drive here was sheer hell – every time the road narrowed spelled an accident, every car behind me meant I was being followed, and that it was probably just a matter of time before my anxiety peaked in a full-blown panic attack. Toppling over the cliff edge and plummeting straight into the red water.

From: Letter #9

The new therapist has recommended I should write down my dreams. I don't know what good that will do, especially as I keep on having the same one. It's always the salt marshes of Aigues-Mortes, again and again . . . Do you remember it at all, this image? Aigues-Mortes as it appeared on the June page of the calendar. Everything in the photo looked fake, as if it had been recoloured in the most disturbing way possible. An intensely white salt mound rising above blood-red water beneath a lavender sky. You asked me how water could be red. 'Looks like blood,' you thought. 'An entire lake full of blood.'

'No, no,' I said, and explained to you that this strange colour was the result of certain halophile bacteria, and that 'halophile' came from the Greek word for salt: 'halos'. What I didn't tell you was that 'Aigues-Mortes' in French means something like 'dead water'. I didn't want you to be afraid.

NADJA

I shut my mouth without having said anything. I want to allay moustache man's concerns with a smile. Of course it was just the – as he called it – *sweltering* heat that triggered my collapse. There's no reason to suspect me of anything.

My smile falters when, at that very moment, fear shoots through my body like an electric shock. On the floor in front of me is my handbag that I'd dropped and beside it, fanned out like the frayed ends of an old mop, is the blonde wig. I instinctively throw my hands up, touch my head and feel tightly bound hair – my own. Attentive moustache man bends down, hands me the wig and turns away politely when I put it on with trembling fingers. In the past I often imagined myself as a blonde and thus a completely different person. Now that the precisely trimmed, light-blonde fringe is hanging diagonally over my right eye I just feel incredibly stupid.

'Water!' A woman in a colourful flowery apron comes scuttling over from the fridge with a bottle. Her fat body shakes with her excited, rapid footsteps. I could weep. Instead of taking the bottle I ask for my handbag. I open it and rummage inside. Wallet, house keys, car keys, the piece of paper with the directions, mobile phone and chewing gum. Finally I find what I am looking for:

the foil pack with my pills. The cashier is watching me. Under his inquisitive gaze I scrap the idea of taking my medicine. I don't want him to think I'm ill, and in any case it wouldn't be a good idea to take something now. I need to be able to drive; I haven't got to my destination yet.

'Come on, have a sip at least!' the woman in the apron insists. She's still holding the bottle of water in one hand, while the other is stroking my cheek. When she moves her arms I can smell sweat and frying oil. 'She's deathly white, Herbert,' she says to the man.

'Maybe we ought to ring for an ambulance,' he replies.

'No, please don't,' I beg them.

Herbert and his wife Annelies. She reminds me of Aunt Evelyn, who I only ever remember in one of her various housecoats. With her hands perched on her wide hips and that expression on her otherwise cheerful, squashy face: *My God, child, what have you done this time?* Abandoning the water, they decide that I could do with a schnapps instead. Plum schnapps, home-made. Much better, apparently, than the industrial swill that Herbert sells in little bottles from his counter.

'I don't need an ambulance, I'm feeling better,' I assert, which must sound odd to the couple that run the petrol station as neither has mentioned the ambulance again.

All the same, Herbert says, 'Okay, as you like.'

They escort me into a room at the back of the shop, which smells of stale smoke. It's barely large enough to fit us all in, especially as almost half of the room is taken up by a desk. Behind it, sitting on a swivel chair, is a young boy. I reckon he's about six or seven. Thin, red-blond hair, narrow, pale face, pointed chin.

A delicate little creature struggling to thrive in the haze of nicotine. In front of the boy are drawing things: a pad of paper and a box of coloured pencils. He's completely absorbed in what he's doing and doesn't pay any attention to us until Annelies says, 'Up you get, Timmy. We need the chair for this poor woman.' The boy stands up without saying anything. He stares with his large, piercingly blue eyes. I sheepishly fiddle with my wig, then my T-shirt. I feel like a clown. Herbert wheels the chair around the desk and gestures to me to sit: 'Please.'

I sit down and turn to avoid Timmy's gaze. Which I fail to do. Now he steps forward, his eyes still staring at me. Her grandson, Annelies says, patting his head. They look after him while their daughter, Timmy's mother, completes her training at a plasticine factory in Zossen. I nod eagerly, even though I don't want to hear anything about their family. And I certainly don't want the boy to look at me as he's doing now. In his eyes I can see hundreds of broken promises. As well as death.

APRIL 2014

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Nelly Schütt loves films. She always has. Her parents ran an inn, the third generation in the family to do so, in the flat countryside of Mecklenburg. It was nothing special – four rooms, adequate food and a decent level of cleanliness. The guests who ended up here were either passing through or too stingy to fork out for a hotel. On the buckhorn coatrack behind the leaded glass door that led to the dining room hung the dreams of her mother – there was always enough space amongst the coats of the few guests. Sometimes Nelly heard her crying. Her father enjoyed his life as the innkeeper. The moment he finished washing the tankards he would sit at the head of the regulars' table and join in the rants about the depravity of city types. In her parents' film Nelly only ever appeared as an extra. Even as a small child she was always in the way. She ran between their legs at the most inopportune moments – *For heaven's sake, Nelly!* – causing beer and sticky brown sauce to rain down, slices of meat to land with a slap on the floor, and glass and crockery to smash. So for a while she was shifted from place to place like one of the little vases with

artificial roses or the salt and pepper shakers, until they finally found the perfect place for her behind reception, away from the kitchen and dining room. There she would sit with her grandfather, who dealt with the room bookings – on his knees when she was really small, then on her own chair. They used to pass the time with Grandfather's beloved old black-and-white films that played on an endless loop via a VHS recorder on a small television set. Nelly was a fast learner. Grandfather would say, '*The Woman in the Window*,' and she – six years of age – would reply as fast as a pistol shot, '1944, directed by Fritz Lang, starring Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett.' Grandfather would laugh and give her a caramel from the glass bowl on the reception counter, which first stuck to her teeth and then her gums.

In *The Woman in the Window*, university professor Richard (Edward G. Robinson) falls in love with a beautiful young woman whose portrait is exhibited in the window of an art gallery. Soon afterwards he meets the woman, Alice (Joan Bennett), in real life after visiting a gentlemen's club. Richard, whose wife and children are away visiting relatives, and who probably feels unappreciated, accompanies beautiful Alice back to her flat. They are having a drink when Alice's lover Claude suddenly appears and launches into a furious attack on Richard. Richard kills Claude in self-defence with a pair of scissors. Frenetically, he and Alice decide to cover up the murder, Richard promising to sort it all out.

Grandfather said, '*The Woman in the Window*,' and the fifteen-year-old Nelly replied, 'That Richard is such an idiot. How can someone make so many mistakes?'

Richard does indeed make lots of them. First he transports Claude's dead body on the back seat of his car, his plan being to

take the corpse to the woods and hide it there. But on the way he crosses a toll bridge, where his scattiness attracts the guard's attention – he actually drops the toll money, almost allowing the guard a glimpse of the body through the side window. In the woods Richard leaves tyre marks and footprints, and gets caught on barbed wire, ripping his suit and even injuring himself. A scrap of material and his blood – evidence that the police will find soon after discovering Claude's body. Then he won't stop blabbing to his best friend, who, as district attorney, is involved in the police investigation.

Her grandfather shrugged and said, 'Richard is a university professor, my girl. A perfectly normal chap who never intended to kill anyone and who's now in a panic. Not some hardened criminal who commits murder all the time and makes bodies disappear.'

Although Nelly thought Grandfather was right, for some inexplicable reason Richard made her cross. Just as everything else now made her cross. Life trapped in the village. Her mother who went around howling pointlessly. Her father and the regulars who bad-mouthed the city without ever having been there. Her own film, this sluggish, tedious, ineffectual drama. The guests who came and knew when they would leave. Were *able* to leave. And sometimes even her grandfather, who did nothing but waste his time on those stupid old films.

Grandfather didn't say '*The Woman in the Window*' anymore; he'd since died. Twenty-two-year-old Nelly could only think of his voice when she pressed the 'play' button on the video recorder. And she would sigh deeply. Because she missed her grandfather so much. Because sitting at reception without him was lonely. And because

of Richard. He was a good man. He'd somehow got himself mixed up in that mess with Alice and Claude. Now Nelly knew for herself what it was to get mixed up in something without intending to or harbouring any wicked intent. How she'd have loved to say this to the woman who'd driven up in her car this morning and come to reception. Not wanting a room, but to talk. Set something straight. And to warn Nelly.

The right phrases danced in Nelly's head. The explanations, the excuses, but also the things she could have offered in her defence. A counter-attack. Instead she said nothing, not a word. She remained as silent as a fish. Just nodded, felt ashamed and hoped that this woman would never, ever come back.

From: Letter #11

I measured the hallway with the rule that the previous tenant left on the kitchen windowsill when he moved out. I'd love to buy a carpet. My feet are always so freezing when I come out of the bedroom in the morning and go down the hallway to the bathroom. The tiles are so cold that they hurt the soles of my feet; the cold works its way into every bone, even if I've got two pairs of socks on. I made a note of the dimensions then scrunched up the piece of paper. No carpet. I think it's right if it hurts. In fact, it can't be painful enough.

I wonder how your life is. Have you got a large flat? Is it nicely furnished? I can count the items of furniture I own on the fingers of one hand. A table and chair in the kitchen, a bed, wardrobe, cupboard and television in the bedroom. The sitting room is empty; I always keep the door shut. Only sometimes, when I wake at night with a start, do I get up and go in. In my pyjamas I'll sit in the middle of the room on the bare parquet floor and breathe to counter the darkness. From time to time a car drives past outside, its headlights casting shapes on the ceiling. I see lots of things in these: butterflies, fish with stunted tail fins, lightning flashes, battleaxes or the miniature outline of Africa.

My therapist says I probably just need more time. But how much more? How do you become normal? I mean, I am trying. I've got a flat and a job. 'You should mix with people,' is what she also says, my therapist. 'You become normal by doing normal things.'

Normal . . . *I can't even buy a carpet.*

NADJA

Timmy is still gawping at me so I close my eyes. A story comes to mind, the story of the woman who could look through walls and doors, even through all the layers of a person right to their very core. One day a girl asked the woman to look through her, as she was desperate to know what she looked like beneath her skin, skeleton and the mass of blood vessels. I hear Timmy shuffling his feet impatiently as if he were able to read my mind and was urging me to tell him the rest of the story. My brother Janek was just like this too. The moment I started telling him something he would pester me with his constant refrain: 'What happened next?'

I blink and establish that Timmy's eyes are not looking through me anymore, but up into the air. He's squeezing his little hands in front of his tummy. Clearly he's uncomfortable in my presence. I want to say to him, 'Don't feel bad. Your being here makes me equally uncomfortable.'

Herbert and Annelies have left us alone to fetch the schnapps and the first aid box. The latter is a lie because the first aid box is hanging on the wood-panelled wall in here, beside a yellowed calendar featuring girls in bikinis, which is two years out of date.

Besides, I can hear them whispering on the other side of the closed office door. Annelies says there's something fishy going on. She asks Herbert if he noticed how nervous I was when I was rummaging through my handbag, and then there was the thing with the wig – all very strange. Herbert doesn't say anything in reply; I imagine him giving an apathetic shrug. But Annelies isn't going to let this go, it seems. She saw pills in my handbag, she says, possibly drugs that might explain my strange behaviour. 'Maybe she's dangerous.'

'So what are you going to do now? Ring the police?' Herbert sounds amused, which ought to come as a relief to me, but this time Annelies says nothing. Maybe she nodded. My breathing is fast and shallow. The police will want to see my papers. I'll claim I left them at home, but in the end a brief enquiry over the radio will establish without doubt that I'm not the owner of the Land Rover.

I feel sick. I shouldn't be here. I ought to be at home on a Saturday like any other. I ought to be cleaning my flat, inhaling the relaxing aroma of Ajax. Later I'd make myself go to the little grocery shop in Charlottenburg. Having paid for a cauliflower, grapefruit, apples and a bag of mirabelles, I would turn my head away and laugh at the owner's tiresome attempts to find out my name. I was the only regular, he once said, who he couldn't greet personally; now he simply invents new names for me on my weekly visits to the shop. Last Saturday I was Frau Schmidt, the week before Fräulein Wagner.

'Just leave it, Anne,' I hear Herbert say before the door opens and he comes back with a bottle of clear liquid. Annelies waddles behind him carrying a flannel, which she gives to me so I can

clean the wound on my forehead. Her gaze is penetrating; I can practically feel her sucking up every detail so that later she can give the most accurate possible description if necessary.

She was about 1.65 metres tall, Inspector. She was wearing one of those cheap wigs and a garish T-shirt with a parrot on it, which had neon green, thumbnail-sized rhinestones for eyes.

My wound smarting, I put the flannel down and thank Annelies. She nods and cuts a length of plaster from the first aid box. As she comes over to me I turn my head away and say, 'I'd rather not have a plaster, thank you. It's better if it's open to the air.' That's what Aunt Evelyn always said when we grazed our knees playing outside.

Annelies doesn't look convinced.

'But it might need stitches.'

I nod a little too forcefully. The pain continues to throb in my head.

'I'll go straight from here to the nearest emergency clinic and have it looked at.'

She cocks her head and studies me closely.

'For heaven's sake, calm down, Anne,' Herbert says, who's unscrewed the bottle of schnapps and is laughing. 'Can't you see she's fine?' He offers me the bottle and I take it. The plum schnapps bites my throat. I think of yesterday evening, the expensive bottle of Chardonnay with Laura. I was happy – I must be mad.

Annelies clicks her tongue.

'Well, I'm not happy about letting you drive off in this state—'

'Come off it,' Herbert interrupts. 'Just look at her; some of the colour has returned to her face.'

'You're no doctor,' his wife hisses. 'What if she's got concussion? We'd be done for failure to render assistance. Or just imagine we let her go and she causes an accident. We'd be partly responsible then.'

'Anne, please!' Herbert protests, making a hand gesture in my direction. Interpreting it correctly, I give him the bottle back; he smiles, then immediately puts it to his lips.

'Where are you from?' Annelies asks next.

'Berlin.'

'Berlin?' Herbert says, drawing out the word and looking in wonder, as if it were some enchanted city in an exotic country, far, far away. But Berlin is barely an hour from here, even for me who drove below the speed limit the whole way.

'And where are you heading?'

'The Spreewald,' I reply. 'A weekend trip.'

'I see,' Annelies says. 'The Spreewald. Nice place.'

'The Spreewald,' Herbert echoes after another large sip, sounding momentous. 'Do you know the history of how the Spreewald came about?'

I shake my head circumspectly.

'All I know is what Fontane said about the place. That it's like Venice 1,500 years ago when the first fishing families settled there.'

Herbert raises a bushy eyebrow, the right one.

'Fontane,' I tell him. 'The writer.'

There is silence apart from the hum of the ceiling fan.

'Well,' Herbert says, 'according to legend, the Spreewald was created by the devil himself. But by accident.' A schnapps-fuelled giggle quakes beneath his moustache. 'Supposedly he yoked two

hell-oxen to a plough to break up the riverbed of the Spree. But the beasts went right through it, running every which way like crazy. The plough made thousands of deep furrows, which eventually filled with water. And there you have it: the Spreewald with its intricate network of streams and canals.' He gives me a sly wink. 'Are you really sure you want to go there?'

'Herbert,' Annelies grumbles, reaching for the bottle that he's just about to bring to his lips again. 'That's enough. It's Saturday morning, not even half ten yet.'

Broad daylight – she's right. Another stupid move. I was all for waiting until it was dark, but Laura said we didn't have that much time. I can't help burping and taste the plum schnapps. Herbert takes it as a compliment and laughs again. I don't like the expression on Annelies's face.

'I think I'll be fine to drive now,' I say. 'I really do feel better. Thanks so much for your help.' Pointing to my forehead, I add with a smile, 'Don't worry, I'll get that looked at.'

Annelies shakes her head.

'No way, dear. You're staying right here.'

I'm suddenly standing on the cliff edge again. Below me lurks the water, and the rocks are crumbling. The wind drives grey clouds across the lavender sky as if they're being fast-tracked. I hear it whisper, the wind. It whispers: *You!* I put one foot backwards, but now Annelies is standing behind me, her arms outstretched, ready to give me a shove. *You're staying right here*, she repeats, and bursts into wicked laughter. I blink furiously, blink myself back into reality. I'm still sitting in the office of the petrol station. I have to get away from here, urgently.

But first Annelies insists I've got to eat something – apparently there are some fried potatoes left over from yesterday evening. She smiles; I retch. I can't help thinking that she's trying to distract me with her potatoes while secretly contacting the police. Who would come and question me. Who would come, question me and take me away. Who would lock me in a cell where there's no bed, just a bare, saggy mattress. Dirty concrete walls, a thin layer of grey cement dust and flakes of paint on the floor, with cement dust and paint under my fingernails too.

Something snaps inside me and I yell, 'Leave me in peace!'

Annelies flinches, while a frightened Timmy scurries behind Herbert's legs. I leap up from the chair and grab my handbag – time to get out. Out of the office, through the shop, out of the glass door, across the forecourt to the car. I slip behind the wheel, speed away and feel relieved for a moment. Until in the rear-view mirror I glimpse Annelies standing beneath the sign displaying the petrol prices, watching me. In one hand she has a piece of paper or a little notebook, in the other a pen. *The number plate*, I think, and smash my fist into the steering wheel.

What the hell have you done, my girl?

From: Letter #12

Anniversary.

So much blood, everywhere.

On the floor. On the rug. On the wall. It even sprayed on the ceiling.

The water is red. Dead water.

MAY 2014

Nelly Schütt had been feeling nervous for days. At least as nervous as Richard in *The Woman in the Window*, when he and Alice suddenly find themselves blackmailed. Claude has been shadowed by a man who's followed him several times to Alice's place and now rightly suspects that she has something to do with the murder. Particularly when this man, searching for evidence in Alice's flat, finds Claude's watch, which unequivocally links Alice to Claude. Scared and eager to avoid any future attempts at blackmail, Alice and Richard plan to kill him too. Alice will poison him. When this fails and all the evidence in the police investigation points towards Richard, he can no longer see any way out and he tries to kill himself by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.

Unlike Richard, Nelly would never give up, no matter how hopeless everything seemed at times. Falling in love wasn't a crime, as she kept telling herself whenever the phone rang and the woman who'd made a brief appearance at reception was on the line to remind her of their conversation. Nelly was to keep her hands off him, as she was destroying a family. Nelly was to keep her hands off him or she'd regret it. Nelly hung up, every time.

She guessed straightaway that Paul was married when he

booked a room at the inn not quite six months earlier. He was a friendly, charming man whose looks reminded her of Victor Mature (*Kiss of Death*, 1947, directed by Henry Hathaway), someone who at first glance looked too good to be true or single. From the guest registration form she learned that he was forty-one and came from Berlin. She gave him room four, as she thought it had the nicest curtains. Cream with a flowery pattern, unlike the three other rooms that had ochre corduroy curtains, which must have been there before Nelly was born.

Paul ate in the dining room, then after dinner she joined him as he was lighting a cigarette outside. She didn't know for sure what made her leave her place at reception and go out at this particular moment; it must have been some instinct. One that grew stronger and wilder the longer she chatted to Paul. He was on a business trip, he told her, from Berlin to Lübeck. He was married with one daughter, and he envied Nelly for living here – so wonderfully peaceful and idyllic. Life in Berlin was so exhausting sometimes, so completely crazy, like an out-of-control carousel. Nelly said she wouldn't be so averse to the occasional wild ride as there were times when she got really bored here. Paul replied that boredom had nothing to do with the place where you lived, but with the people around you.

Paul seemed to know what he was talking about; he gave the impression of being bored too. When he stayed at Nelly's parents' inn again on the way back, they kissed for the first time. It was exciting. He was no longer happy with his wife, he told Nelly later on in the bed of room four with its flowery curtains. She was so possessive, so controlling, so bossy. Nelly thought of Gene Tierney as Ellen Harland in *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945, directed by

John M. Stahl) – Paul's wife must be like that, a really vicious, mean creature. Only no longer quite as pretty as Gene Tierney, obviously not. Nelly imagined her as plain; she had to be unattractive. After all, there must be a reason why their sex life had fizzled out years ago, according to Paul. At least Gene Tierney, alias Ellen Harland, kills herself at the end of the film and her poor husband can be happy with his new love.

Nelly waited, waited in vain.

He was going to stay with his wife for a bit because of his daughter. He was going to stay with her for a bit because they hadn't yet paid off the mortgage. Then she lost her job, she suddenly fell ill, and in such circumstances of course he couldn't leave her now. Nelly had heard a lot over the past few months when she met Paul halfway in a hotel on the A24. When she lay in his arms in bed, her cheek pressed to his hot chest, or when they took a walk through the woods close to the hotel, her hand firmly in his. And she believed Paul, she refrained from hassling him.

Until that day when his wife turned up at the inn, looking perfectly healthy, terribly determined and, most strikingly, at least as pretty as Gene Tierney. Perhaps this was what disturbed Nelly most of all.

Now she wanted clarity. Paul had to decide. And he promised to sort everything out: this time he really would. That was almost a month ago.

Nelly decided to lend a hand.

From: Letter #13

My dreams are now black. That's probably down to the new pills. They allow me to sleep deeply and peacefully. But they're so strong and work so quickly – I mean, immediately – that the whole process of falling asleep is bypassed. You know, that phase where you're lying in bed and feel your body and thoughts growing heavier. Where you gently slide into sleep. I don't have that. One moment I'm wide awake and the next I simply pass out. Recently I made the mistake of taking my pills in the kitchen while I was sitting at the table, writing. I was writing to you. It wasn't until I woke up the following morning that I realised my face had smashed into the tabletop. The doctor established that it was just a simple fracture of the nasal bone, and it healed quickly. All the same I found it significant that my blood had dripped on this very part of the letter. Right on your name.

'But I told you quite clearly what the correct dosage is,' my therapist said at our next session. 'Half a tablet at the onset of a panic attack and a whole one if you can't sleep at night.' She looked at me with that strange expression. As if I'd deliberately ignored the dosage instructions. Perhaps she was right. My dreams may be black, but

the questions still remain, they refuse to fall silent. What were her feelings at the end? Was she scared?

I don't want to consider the possibility that she was scared. I'd rather imagine the pain sparking a firework in front of her. Colourful flashes and beautiful stars, as if she'd carelessly looked at the blazing sun. I want to persuade myself that she was happy in her final hours.

I can't.

NADJA

I blink; the world is dazzling, and in the heat, invisible fires are shimmering on the road. I flip down the sun visor. It was precisely twelve minutes ago that I made my hasty getaway from the petrol station. I feel cold – even though the heater is on full blast it makes no impression on me. The air inside the car is stuffy, stale and strangely sweet. As if over the years dust had caught in the air-con vents and is now burning. My eyes keep flitting to the rear-view mirror. The red Golf, which was behind me for several kilometres, has turned off. Now I'm being followed by a dark blue MPV, but not for long because I'm driving too slowly and it overtakes me. I reach for the mirror to adjust it by a few millimetres for the hundredth time, and in doing so catch a fleeting glimpse of myself: goggle eyes, and beneath them, dry, black lines where my mascara has run. To the left of my forehead is a laceration like a precise knife cut, three or four centimetres long. I note to my relief that it has already started to scab, so I don't need to see a doctor. When I concentrate back on the road, however, I decide to stop again at the next opportunity. I need some fresh air or I'll suffocate.

I drive until a sign indicates a turn-off to a car park. No café, no kiosk, no petrol pumps, not even one of those makeshift plastic

loos. Just a few parking bays and beyond them a dustbin and three tables, each with two benches fixed to them, on an arid, trampled-down meadow. I picture a lonely trucker sitting here, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth and a thermos of bland coffee out of a machine. Or a family. Mother, father, two children – a little boy and an older girl. Sitting there with Tupperware boxes full of apple slices and vegetable sticks, and the crackle of aluminium foil as they unwrap their lovingly made sandwiches. They're going on holiday to the coast. A soft voice asks, 'What's it like, breathing in salty air? Do the grains of salt make you cough?' To which another voice replies, 'There aren't any grains of salt, you silly billy. It's just air.' My mind switches back to the trucker; I'd rather think of him.

In truth I'm very glad that nobody else is stopping here. All the parking bays and picnic tables are empty. I drive the Land Rover to the end of the car park and get out. As if the fresh air had given them a secret order, my legs double up. With one hand I grab the handle of the driver's door for support, with the other I rub the back of my neck, where the seam of my T-shirt is already clammy with cold sweat. I need to calm down, compose myself, order my thoughts. I mustn't have any doubts or cave in, like my legs are trying to do. I have to be strong. Think of Laura. Remember that all this is happening for the best and that there's simply no other way. So I summon an image: Laura turning up shortly after work yesterday evening. Standing in the door to my office, swaying and pale, clutching the straps of her handbag. Laura, formerly Laura Brehme, used to be an assistant at the law firm where I work. Now she was Laura van Hoven, married to my boss. I hadn't seen her in years.

'Hey, Nadja.'

Her mouth formed a dreadfully fake smile, while mine merely opened silently as I sat behind my desk as if paralysed, trying to get over how she looked. The deathly white face. The tiny, sad eyes. The blonde hair kept back with a black Alice band and tied into a plait, making her face look flatter than usual and her head almost gigantic on her thin neck and slim body. I was immediately reminded of how I'd almost dyed my hair once, blonde like her, how I'd even made an appointment with the hairdresser, and how in the end only an acute panic attack had prevented me from going to the salon. At a stroke, the prospect of sitting for two hours or more in front of a mirror and having to put up with my face, not to mention the dreadful noises – whining hairdryers, rushing water, the cold clatter of scissors hurriedly being put down on the edge of a ceramic basin – had seemed impossible.

I'd always considered Laura to be the second most beautiful woman in the world. Now she just looked like a matchstick figure in a child's picture, a sad matchstick figure with yellow hair.

'Isn't Gero back yet? I've been trying to get hold of him all day, but he's not answering his mobile.'

It struck me that even after all these years I still hadn't got used to her calling the man who I knew as Herr van Hoven by his first name. Something about this hurt me. It wasn't a bad pain – it felt more like a scratch, like a needle scraping a sensitive area of skin – bearable but unpleasant. From somewhere deep inside me I dug out an overdue greeting and finally got up. We had a brief, stiff hug. That too used to be different.

'So, is he here?'

I shake my head. Herr van Hoven left yesterday for a two-day

conference of lawyers in Magdeburg and wouldn't be getting back till later. I was surprised that Laura was unaware of his schedule.

'According to the conference programme, the last talk ends at seven.' I lifted the sleeve of my blouse to check the time. 'So in about an hour.'

'Oh, right.'

'Can I help you at all?'

Her ghostly white face looked as if it were about to burst into tears.

'Is there something wrong with Vivi?' I asked, feeling my heartbeat accelerate. Vivi, the van Hovens' daughter, who'd just turned four. Laura gave me a look I found hard to bear.

'She's fine,' she answered coolly. 'She's with her grandparents.'

I smiled uneasily.

'Okay, that's nice.' Unable to think of anything else to say, I stared at my shoes. They urgently needed polishing.

I could hear Laura breathing.

'Could . . . could I have a coffee, perhaps? Would that be too much trouble?'

I hastily shook my head.

'No, not at all. Coming up.'

Coffee with Laura, like in the past. Although she hadn't explicitly asked me to join her, I would make use of the opportunity. Like a rain dance, I shifted about in front of the automatic coffee machine at the end of the corridor, as if my restlessness might remedy the inertia of the droning machine, from which brown liquid dribbled into the two cups.

'Hurry up!' I hissed at the machine. I was worried that Laura might change her mind and leave if it took any longer. I fetched

milk from the fridge, spilling some on the work surface when I filled up our cups. Instinctively I reached for the cloth in the sink to wipe it up, but then left it. Laura was waiting for me.

When I came back from the kitchenette, the connecting door between my office and Herr van Hoven's was open. Laura was sitting in his chair, gazing at the ceiling. I essayed a poor joke.

'Two coffees to stay, for Laura and Laura's friend.'

She gave a start and looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. She was surprised, shocked; these were a stranger's eyes gazing at me. Laura opened her mouth and her lips moved silently. I was about to ask her again what was wrong when she did come out with something. 'Thanks. But another time, perhaps.' Within seconds she'd leaped to her feet and rushed past me. I stayed where I was like an idiot, still holding the two coffee cups.

I put them down and caught up with her by the lifts.

'Laura, please talk to me!' *Insult me. Tell me where I can stick my coffee and that we haven't been friends for ages. Remind me what I did. But for God's sake, say something.*

And she did. She said it after collapsing into my arms. 'I've got a problem, Nadja.'

Now that problem is in my boot.