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Euphoria

A Novel

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1 When it's too cold to lie down, at night, we remain standing. We stand close together, back to back to side to front. We turn slowly over the course of the night, so that each of us gets a turn in the middle, and from time to time each one of us has to be on the outside. When the sun comes up we look past each other, avoiding each other's gaze, and we can clearly see, out of the corner of our eye, that the others are also looking in some other direction. Each of us is looking somewhere else, each into our own distant nothingness, or everything, it doesn't matter, we don't look each other in the eye, that would be painful, a different and far greater pain than looking at the sun as it rises. Usually it's cloudy, and we continue to look past each other and feel relief at the receding cold and the increasing light and we stand huddled together, almost like before, on the underground, at rush hour.

2 Today we find a woman. She is covered by branches, by wet, rotting branches, probably not for warmth. We see her anyway. We see her accidentally: one of us is peeing on the bush next to her. It's a sparse bush, strange that only the lower third should have branches and leaves, and hair and hands. The one who was just peeing leaves his fly open and stands there for a while. He watches her in silence, we come closer because we can see from behind that he is looking at something. When we have formed a semicircle behind him, he kneels down and touches her hair, and she doesn't scream, she doesn't sob, doesn't flinch, she doesn't even close her eyes. She stares straight ahead, without saying a word, without seeing what is right in front of her, she is staring intently at a space that we cannot access. Her clothes or what is left of them are tattered and torn. Openings everywhere, giving access to the openings in her body. She starts breathing faster. We can see her white, delicate hands on the shoulders of the first one of us, when he is on top of her; we see her fingers, at first weirdly splayed out, then after a while buried in the fabric of the clothes covering the man on top of her; we see her head turned to the side, her eyes, which she has now closed after all, and then we hear her voice, a single note, again and again and again, and all of that makes it impossible not to think: you know you want this too.

When it's my turn, she doesn't even raise her arms, and I am only able to finish because I can remember her hands, her hands on the back of the three men before me, and I move faster, I close my eyes and imagine her fingers clutching at a strip of cloth because that's exactly what they want, what her fingers want, to hold on, that cloth, and then I finish it.

After me, it's Drygalski's turn, but he breaks it off, unsatisfied. She

isn't moving at all any more. Before we move on, Fürst bends down to her once more and asks her gently if she wants to come along. She doesn't respond. We all stand around helplessly beside her motionless body in the leaves. Then he rummages in his jacket pocket and pulls out a piece of bread, breaks off a corner and lays it on her stomach. On its way from the piece of bread back to his trouser pocket his hand briefly jerks in the direction of her head. Perhaps he wanted to stroke her cheek one last time. Or her hair.

3 The next day it's darker and a light drizzle sets in, growing imperceptibly denser and denser. It is as if it's not droplets of water that are falling on us and on the black tar and the gravel crunching beneath our feet, but rather fine, unbroken streams, like the trickle of thousands of leaky taps. The type of rain whose intensity you don't notice until you are soaked through, and you stop and look down at yourself and then up at the sky and shake your head in disbelief.

We get off the road. We walk through brown fields, traverse gentle hills, meadows and other open spaces, the use of which is unclear. Ahead of us is a gigantic, flat block. We walk towards it. It takes longer than we thought. It's further away than we thought. It is much, much bigger than we thought. The exterior walls are over ten metres tall and punctuated by sliding doors of rusty steel and broken glass. Chimneys. A former factory, perhaps. As we circle the bare, angular cube in search of a way in, the rain gets heavier and the sound of the drops on the building's roof is tinny and bright, it gets louder and less fragmentary and soon the building is transformed into one big resonance chamber, singing a single, high-pitched note.

We find a doorframe. The door is gone. We go in, one after the other, and oddly the sound of the rain on the roof is barely audible on the inside. We are in a big, empty hall. The floor is littered with broken glass, abandoned campfires, it smells of old oil, and there are stains left behind by various substances that have seeped into the concrete. The assembly pits reveal that this used to be a place for servicing cars or farming machines. Apart from the stains, the floor, the walls, and the roof on which the rain is falling, there is nothing here. We leave the building and walk on, through the dense rainfall, back to the forest.

4 In the last light we reach a village. Here too all the windows are shuttered, the doors bolted. We encounter no one and find no indication of the inhabitants' whereabouts. We go into a supermarket through the broken glass door. We walk up and down rows of empty and half-empty shelves. The floor is strewn with torn packaging, broken glass, dented aluminium and squashed cardboard boxes, and everything is blanketed in the inevitable, almost unbearable smell: the smell of all the things that were ever in a supermarket. Packaged soups, crisps, chocolate, cat food, drain cleaner, frozen lasagne, deodorant, beer, rotting meat. We find a pallet of water bottles and a couple of sticks of garlic bread still in their plastic packaging. With our bounty we withdraw into the warmest and safest room of the abandoned complex: the defrosted cold storage room. We eat, we drink, we sit in silence. It's a good silence, a kind of, See, it's not so bad, we can make it, we'll find a way. And we savour the cold garlic bread. The butter tastes really good when it's this hard, you really have to bite it in order to taste the intense flavour. After the exertion of the past few days, the fat is like a revelation. Having made sure we can't be locked in from the outside, we build a camp out of alternating layers of cardboard and plastic wrapping. We lie down side by side and then we cover ourselves with more layers of cardboard, resting our heads on wads of plastic, with the bottles of mineral water within reach. Our breathing doesn't just sound exhausted. It sounds peaceful.

5 A few weeks ago we were in the car. The Autobahn was mostly empty, and on either side the grey-green alpine upland was covered in a thin layer of frost. The hard shoulder was covered in gravel and the dirt of weeks past. Another age. And the radio was playing a song that we all claimed not to know and never to have heard before but now we were all roaring the chorus:

Euphoria!

Forever till the end of time

From now on, only you and I

We were flying up the Irschenberg—in actual fact we were driving, of course, but you always fly up the Irschenberg, never down it, the difference between coming and going is categorical. We were going fast, the noise of the revving engine sounded like courage and determination. To our right groaning lorries, creeping, crawling up the hill: pathetic beasts, fused with their drivers. A docile herd caught in the daily to and fro of the working week, which, to us, ever since we got in the car, had seemed as far away, as harmless and manageable as death.

There were five of us. Drygalski, Gruber, Fürst, Golde, and me. And we had packed eggs and milk, beer, mince, pasta, Nutella, everything except for bread, which we wanted to buy at the baker's in the valley, down in the village. We had left the city behind us, the suburb where we had grown up together, the Autobahn junctions, the carpet, furniture, and DIY stores, the industrial estates that were home to companies with metal detectors and security guards, and complicated English names, that had something to do with computers. Two in the front, three in the back. We were packed in tight. The ones in the back could have held hands if they had wanted to, but that would have been gay, and in any case, notwithstanding the euphoria we felt at our

communal forward motion, we also felt a certain distance to one another, after all, it would never be as much fun as it used to be, just more expensive each year, and really we were all getting too old for this stuff, and besides it now took us at least three days to recover from a decent bender.

On the crest of the Irschelberg, just as we saw the golden arches, one of us shouted McFlurry!, and another one of us laughed, though the driver just gave a tired smile and raced on, past the American fast food restaurant whose menu we had known off by heart before we had even learnt to play cards, if we ever even had, and then we drove steeply downhill, through the windscreen we saw the Inn valley spread out before us, dark green, empty and silent, all the way to the Alps shrouded in mist, dissected by six straight lines of red and white shimmering civilisation. The windscreen wipers squeaked.

6 The following morning we leave the village and take the highway that runs the length of the valley. It takes us around the next mountain, through the next valley, past the next mountain. We pass signs with the names of towns that are probably deserted now, and no sooner have we passed them than we've forgotten them again. We see pylons with no wires between them, abandoned petrol stations, supermarkets, holiday homes, vacancy signs, here and there the burnt-out wreck of a car.

We get to a lake. The opposite shore is out of sight; this one is full of charred sailboats, smashed furniture and bottles, empty packaging and articles of clothing. Bloated corpses. As if anything went away just because you throw it in the water. The only dissolution in sight is the way the gentle waves merge with the low-hanging grey clouds. We've quickly seen enough and turn away, towards the small town built here on the lakeshore, presumably because of the fantastic view, when it isn't foggy. We head for the promenade. We walk across the gravel, past the debris, to the street and up the steps to a hotel. We cross a terrace strewn with uprooted parasols, tables and chairs. We walk through the open double doors into the deserted dining hall. Under a mountain of dishes in the filthy kitchen we find an unopened bottle of condensed milk. The oily liquid leaves a film behind in our throats. The taste is irrelevant. We tell ourselves that it's filling.

At the other end of town, in a cluster of low-rise buildings, which, according to the adjacent sign, was once the industrial estate, we find an abandoned bowling alley. We walk down the steps, not knowing why, we just keep going. A dull grey falls on the lanes from the skylights overhead. There is no electricity. The bowling pins are gone, perhaps they're in the pinsetter, in any case we can't see them. After a few minutes' indecision, our eyes fall on the

heavy balls with the three holes lying next to the lanes, dusty and detached, and somehow completely normal. So we pick up one after the other and send them barrelling down the empty lanes into the darkness. We listen to them rolling along until they produce a dull thud in the inaccessible padded space behind the target that is no longer there.

7 In the grey light between the denuded trees the tarmac quickly starts to crack, pushed up by the roots, pushed down by heavy forestry machines. A few minutes later the road surface disintegrates completely, turns to gravel. The gravel thins out; the road becomes a path, the path becomes a track, and the track becomes ground. I wonder if it's just the road that is disappearing or if it's everything, and whether you couldn't see it as liberating not to have anything telling you which way to go, apart from the trees, wet and black, that emerge at regular intervals from the fog before disappearing behind us again. We avoid them. It is easy and advisable, but otherwise there is nothing to decide or to discuss about which direction we should go in. After a couple of hours we spot something to our right that doesn't belong here. It isn't dark, and it isn't sticking vertically up out of the ground, or lying flat on it, or leaning against one of the other vertical, dark, wooden pillars of this sylvan world order. It is lying there contorted and spastic, seemingly thrown there. The trees around it are strangely splintered, strangely because the jagged splinters that remain after a branch has broken off usually aren't as black and edgeless as the damp, soft bark. The thing has a round, heavily dented body and a long, thin tail with a fin or a flag at the end, and the thing is yellow, yellower than anything we've seen in weeks. We see the bent rotor blades, sticking out at crazy angles, like broken arms and legs. We see the dried blood from the pilot's body, which is hanging halfway out of the cockpit. We see the smashed glass of the fuselage, the circle of stars on the blue rectangle on the tailfin. And then we see the four large, black letters, at the back, on the side of the fuselage. And we find it hard to imagine that such people really existed, not too long ago, who would fly through the air observing the traffic conditions on the Autobahns in Bavaria and Tyrol. We search the wreckage for anything we can use, then we search the bodies. We find a first aid

kit, a toolbox, and a manual with international radio codes, but the radio is built-in and broken and none of us is technical enough to be able to get it out and repair it, so we leave the manual behind and move on. After an hour no one wants to carry the heavy toolbox anymore so we leave it in the woods, and two hours later we abandon the first aid kit as well, and we trudge on through our steaming breath and the drizzle and think about the two pilots' padded uniforms, and their boots and vests, and about how it's all soaked in blood and rain, and that the only thing from the crash site that we've still got is the hammer from the toolbox, and the one carrying that hammer is me.

8 Just a few weeks ago I was in the air. I was completing step fifty-seven of a clearly defined fifty-eight step workflow for the eight hundred and ninety-sixth time, five hundred of which were during my training, four hundred and fifty in the simulator, fifty in the real world, so to speak, somewhere in the Arizona desert, where, together with two instructors from a major German airline, in an otherwise empty Boeing 737, ten times a day, for five days straight, I took off, flew around in a circle, landed, took off, flew in a circle, landed, and so on.

I was flying direct from Mauritius to Frankfurt and I had a little over eleven hours to remind myself that this was the profession I had wanted ever since I knew what a profession was. I was a pilot. The plane was fully booked. There were two hundred and twenty-nine people on board, about whom I knew only two things for certain: they had taken off with me from Mauritius, and they wanted to land with me in Frankfurt. Unusually for me, I was trying to imagine the view from the open cockpit door, the view behind me, before take-off, before the first class curtains were drawn. I saw heads, each covering portions of the white antimacassars on the headrests. I saw hair. The hair was of all different colours: blond, black, white, grey, red or green or blue. Anyone could fly so long as they bought a ticket and had a passport. I saw ears. Big ears and small ears, hairy ears, round ears, wizened and stunted ears, sticky-out ears, and perfectly normal ears. I saw eyes. They were brown, green, black, blue, and they were not all looking straight ahead, in my direction, they were looking out the window, at the newspaper in front of them, they were staring in silence at the tray table, which was stowed for take-off. I couldn't see what they were wearing, but I knew they were wearing clothes of all conceivable colours and cuts, in all price ranges, in all styles and fabrics: jeans, suits, shorts, ribbed undershirts, viscose rayon underwear, cotton

socks, nylon stockings, leather shoes, rubber running shoes, Birkenstock sandals. I sipped my coffee. I tried to imagine two hundred and twenty-nine hearts. I could feel my own heart beating.

I glanced at the instrument panel and carried out step fifty-eight: the pilot switches to autopilot. We had reached cruising altitude.

9 We are standing by an artificial fishpond. The water looks green and blue and completely unnatural, and in the thick reeds on the shore you can see the traces of the farming machines they've pushed into the water. A tractor, a combine harvester, an animal transport, carrying cows or pigs or lambs—between the thick bars you can make out legs and heads there underwater, or bodies in any case, something, we don't know what, but I think: animals. It is an animal transport after all. The silence is broken by a splashing, quiet but distinct, and out of the corner of my eye I can see what has landed in the water, and then I hear Drygalski's voice: have you lost your mind?, he shouts, but Gruber just shrugs his shoulders.

The rest of us reach into our trouser pockets, and feel the familiar piece of plastic, with or without chrome plating, safely in our hands. Just knowing that it is there, with the hundreds of numbers, names, addresses, and appointments, the personalised ringtones, the photos, the movies. We are each carrying scale models of our lives in our pockets, and even if we will never be able to return to those lives it is reassuring to have something to remember it by, something we can touch and hold and look at. The displays are black. Gruber looks serious and methodical as he pulls the charger out of his pocket as well. He looks down; the plug is stuck. He uses both hands. Between his eyes a small, vertical crease appears. He is not angry, he is concentrating. Then, with a sudden jerk of his hand, the charging cable traces an elliptical trajectory through the air. Like a helicopter that is about to crash, I think. The rubber-coated wire orbits the two prongs and the converter, until the whole thing lands not far from where the phone disappeared below the surface just a few seconds before. Gruber looks satisfied. He is standing slightly hunched over, hands in his jacket pockets, his chin thrust forward, his shoulders sagging. Like someone who would

really like to be a little bit taller, just not right now. From the spot where his Samsung smartphone with SVoice and ChatOn and all that has vanished into the water, a series of concentric circles are spreading.

10 We walk through leaves. We walk on gravel. We walk on shiny tarmac, on broken glass, shreds of rubber, metal, leather, fabric, plastic. We walk on oil. We walk on water.

The puddles look like tar on the tarmac in the low evening sun. We are five different bodies, all with different legs, arms, brains, but our communal progress along this street, this meadow, this forest floor shot through with roots, connects us. It is a stable physical connection. We are soldered together like the electrons in an atom, by spin and gravitation. We are all going in the same direction.

For the most part, Golde walks in front. Precisely. Golde, who always used to say precisely when you agreed with him, with his broad nose and his no longer quite so close-cropped hair. His tall, heavy frame moves across the left-hand lane of the A12 with the same self-confidence as he used to skip the queue at the P1 club. Only occasionally, when a familiar name appears on a sign—Wörgl, St. Johann, Jochberg—he seems to flinch slightly, although his gait does not change in the slightest. He keeps walking like before, but if you know a person you can tell even from behind how they feel. A tiny movement, a glance at the sky, a sigh, something so inconspicuous and normal that you realise: of course he has no idea if we're on the right track either.

Kufstein, says Golde.

The pine trees beyond the crash barrier are oddly far apart. Usually it's a single green, blurry wall. We press on. How far apart the lane markings are. How raw the tarmac.

11 The cabin was on a steep slope. It was as remote as it was old. An alpine hut from the eighteenth century. The bathroom had been added at a later date. The living room like before, with a wood-burning stove for warmth. The snow lay heavy on the pitched roof and on the railing of the terrace that jutted far out into the void between the slope and the mountain opposite. We rounded the final bend in the road, huffing and puffing we approached. We had walked on foot, made the ascent, as they say in the mountains, even though the road wasn't steep; it was a snow-covered serpentine road, through forests and fields, only accessible to cars in the summer months. We thought we would probably drink a lot, get drunk that is, definitely, that's how it is when you get a group of men together, and so it's not a bad thing if we get a little exercise beforehand. The key was in the shed, a draughty affair full of tools and firewood, old skis and sleds with rusty runners. The wood was piled up to the roof, against the wall, chopped to size, dry and old, waiting to be transformed into ash and smoke. We brushed the snow off our boots and trousers and went inside. We groaningly deposited the boxes of supplies in the corridor, the backpacks full of beer a little closer to the boiler in the pantry, lest it freeze. We stood there in our thick coats and hats and scarves, stood there in a semicircle around the old stove and waited. We were still warm from the walk up, so at first we didn't notice how cold it was inside the cabin. Gruber lit the fire immediately. The room took a long time to warm up, but our sweat-soaked bodies quickly grew cold. Bloody freezing, one of us said. Gruber blew on the fire and put another log through the square bright opening. Once it was finally going, he closed the stove door, went into the pantry and switched on the electricity. When lit, the room looked warmer already. We put our boots, coats, hats, and scarves in the corridor. Shortly thereafter we swarmed out, our woolly-socked feet running up the slippery

wooden stairs. Men with big backpacks tripping each other up, holding onto each other, jostling each other, swearing, yelling. The beds were assigned, and such and such didn't want to share with so and so. Later we were sitting at the heavy dining table. In front of us: beer. No one said a word. Outside the window nothing but a gentle, boring grey, and I thought, perhaps a snow drift would be good, a wall of innumerable tiny reminders of nature's hostility to life. Of the possibility of closeness between people in a safe place.

12 *Galaxy*. The dome looks almost intact, not like a galaxy so much as a UFO, but the fact that this thing with its vaulted roof, the flat-roofed annexes, the car park, and the takeaway stands, used to be called *Galaxy* is impossible to miss: the skeletons of gigantic letters jut out from the roof into the surrounding area, visible from far away, charred, but still typographically sound. We don't know why we're going there. It seems obvious that if anything there will only be unpleasant things to see, in there, but a nightclub always exerts a strange pull, however rural and disproportionate and provincial it may be, and we know now that it isn't the peculiar and unique combination of smells—booze, energy drinks, beer, cigarettes, sweat and perfume—that creates that gravitational pull. This place only smells burnt. It's strange. You know instantly from the smell that something burnt here, even though this is not the usual burnt smell. We've never smelt anything like this, and still we know: there has been a fire here. The outer walls are intact. No windows on a club like this, of course, so we can't peer inside from out here. Instead we form an orderly queue, one after the other. Of course we move on after a moment's hesitation, but the brass stanchions beside us, that were once connected by ropes, the wooden fence behind them, the little spyhole in the heavy steel door—all of this still creates the impression of having to wait to be let in, for someone you don't know and can't see to decide that you are ready for the world on the other side of that door. The red carpet is black. The door has been barred from the outside: a bar stool has been wedged into the handles of both double doors. It is bent grotesquely out of shape, and the screws holding the door handles are loose, as if the doors had been pounded repeatedly with something heavy, or by many bodies together. I can feel the others behind me pushing. We want to get inside, and right now it's up to me. I can't open the door. My eyes scan the desolate forecourt. It's

surreally empty, surreally bright, surreally quiet. I picture the two thousand people who would have fit into this dome, the hard, monotonous beats coming out of the expensive, crystal clear speakers, the carefully carefree dancing of the provincial youth, finding the technical means to make up for the distance to the nearest city, with their subwoofers and their dancing and their fucking. I picture the beautiful bodies of the farmers' daughters, who stood to inherit the organic farm with an outbuilding for husband and child, and for whom happiness right then was some MDMA and a BMW and unprotected sex on the back seat. I picture the white skin of their faces, quivering in the lacerated light of the stroboscope, their lips and eyebrows pierced, just like their tongues, nipples and belly buttons, and for a split second I expect to see that which a moment later I never could have imagined, never would have thought possible, but am seeing all the same through the tiny window in the door, in the faint light of the cracked dome: hundreds of blackened bodies.

What do you see?

Nothing. Let's go.

13 That evening we sit huddled together. We don't make a fire, because we don't have any paper, but it's also not that cold, and in any case we're not really in the mood for fire.

Do you remember when we stole that fire extinguisher from the youth club, says Gruber.

We had been drinking Vodka Gorbatschow and orange juice in the car park, and then we got loud and silly and hyped up, and when we saw the huge bouncers and the even huger members of the local biker gang we got quiet and small again.

We behaved ourselves and kept our mouths shut and waited for them to check us and give us our stamps. We stood there in the queue with the adorably made up provincial girls, behind the wooden fences, and the girls had on figure-hugging outfits and their hair pulled back and a bit too much kohl around the eyes. And the bouncers wore bomber jackets and headsets and that street in Forstinning felt like Sunset Boulevard, and the youth club was the Viper Room, back then. And then we were inside and we rushed to the bar and ordered more screwdrivers, all except for Fürst, he wanted a coke, he was on antibiotics. And then we'd already run out of money, so we took our half-empty plastic cups out onto the dance floor and stood there, not daring to dance. In front of us the girls, behind us the fire extinguisher. We didn't notice it until Fürst pushed Drygalski into it. It didn't hurt, because our coats were heaped on top of it. And he just held on. To the fire extinguisher and the coats. And just for fun, just to show how strong and clever he was, he picked it up, with the coats, and wrapped the coats around it, and then he bent over, holding the fire extinguisher in both arms like a child, and then he shouted, I'm gonna throw up! I'm gonna throw up! Look out! Make way! And the girls stopped dancing and parted like the Red Sea, then the bouncers, who

parted the crowd outside, escorting us, professionally and seriously, out of the club, the one of us with the ball of coats who needed to throw up and his four-man team of chaperones, and we were still shouting, He's gonna throw up!, long after we'd made it outside, and then we ran into the car park laughing at the stupid bouncers and we ran and laughed and threw the fire extinguisher onto the tarmac, again and again, as hard as we could, from greater and greater heights. Finally Gruber climbed up on the shed for the rubbish bins, and we handed him the heavy metal cylinder, and he held it above his head like Moses with the Ten Commandments, and then the thing made amazingly little noise when it hit the ground, and it didn't even crack the smooth surface of the car park, and we came out of hiding and stood in a circle around the barely scratched fire extinguisher, and the excitement we had felt at our audacity and the anticipation at the foam quickly evaporated.

Do you still remember?

Yes we do.

14 The next day we search the charred ruins of a petrol station for paper. Because of the extreme heat of a petrol fire, the little scraps don't burn but rather dance around high up in the smoke, and they don't fall back to earth until the fire has gone out.

A frozen section is pretty impressive, Drygalski is saying. Twenty-five micrometres. Can you imagine how many slices you can get out of a mouse tumour?

I find a scrap of paper and try to undo the knot in the plastic bag hanging from my belt. I can't do it with one hand, so I put the paper in my mouth and give Drygalski a look.

It's crazy. You've got people lying there in the cancer ward waiting for someone like me to find the right mix ratio. Just lying there, waiting, wondering which will be finished sooner, my compound or their lives.

If they think it's taking too long the hospital will just order it from another lab, I say.

Yes, that's true, he says, turning a charred body over onto its back with his foot and checking to see if it's still got a wallet. In the cracked leather he finds the remains of a five euro note. Good. Unburnt paper.

15 Whenever we pass through scrubland, we hold the branches to one side for each other. We touch the hard, sharp, branches carefully until we find a handhold, and then we close our fingers around it, slowly, so we can pull back if we encounter thorns, and once our grip has closed around the branch, we push it ahead of ourselves, circling around its point of origin until the path is clear. Whoever is holding the branch remains standing until the others have gone past, and then he lets go. The branch snaps back into place, trying to grab hold of whoever was holding it, but by then we're no longer there.

16 In the twilight we see a kid. It is sitting a little away from the road, which isn't really a road so much as a path, and it is sitting upright and casually and introverted, facing the charred remains of a tent, which it is hitting at regular intervals with a rotten branch. We stop. Strangely, the form and circumstance of the child's body does not trigger any protective impulse in us, nor any emotion or warmth. We look at the kid, see the thin hair on the back of its head, the too-short neck, the short, soft limbs carrying out violent, senseless movements with great seriousness and concentration, as if it were some sort of scientific experiment involving hitting sheets of nylon repeatedly with a charred piece of wood. The kid still looks quite well fed. It will last another week at least, assuming it doesn't suddenly turn colder. Maybe the mother is just off fetching water or something. We leave it alone. As we start moving again the kid turns around and stares at us. I'm afraid it will start crying because I don't know what we would do to get it to stop. But it just sizes us up, one after the other, its face totally expressionless, then it turns to face the burnt-out collapsed tent and hits it with the charred stick again: smack, smack, smack. We move on. After a little while we find the parents, lying in the bushes with their skulls smashed open.

17 Gruber is doing push-ups. One, two. Then he stops.

Tired, eh, says Drygalski, and Gruber looks at him blankly, as if he had remarked on the Earth's gravitational pull today, or said how we weren't getting any younger, or oh, how time goes by.

Time goes by. I don't know how that happens. I have no idea how it works, what physical process it is that causes that tilt, that teetering and falling from soon into now and then and then and then.

Then Golde says: We have to go north. And what will we do there, I think. All you see are clouds and trees. For a moment all we hear is our breathing and wet snow falling from the trees.

Golde starts walking. He steps confidently into the muddy underground of roots and slush. We hesitate. His steps seem a little too quick, too determined. We aren't that convinced. He didn't even look up at the sky, probably he just wants to waste time until it clears up or gets dark, and his eyes didn't look into ours for very long, he wasn't trying to convince us, he just wants to convince himself, and in order to do that he has to walk on now. Of course we follow him. When he hears our steps behind him he relaxes, the tension in his shoulders melts away, and at some point he turns around.

Come on then.

The hint of a smile crosses his sunken cheeks and dry lips. He is glad we're following him. So am I.

We get to a level crossing. The boom is down and instinctively we stop. Drygalski takes his last cigarette out of the red box of

Gauloises and lights it. His heavy, powerful hands are resting on the red-and-white steel. With no cars or drivers who need to be able to see it from a distance, the boom seems excessively colourful. One by one we come and stand beside him. He smokes, we stand, the tracks gleam with rainwater. The smoke curls upwards, and intermittently it comes streaming out of Drygalski's nose and then dissipates to nothing. We rest. It's a good last cigarette. There's no hard decision, no goodbye, no one has died. We are just standing at a railway crossing. Drygalski smokes. We wait. When he's finished, we walk around the boom barrier. Even though I don't expect there to be any trains using these tracks anymore, I feel relieved when we're safely on the other side.

18 Fürst stops at a wooden cross at the edge of the road and looks at the candles full of rainwater. His brown hair is plastered in strands across his forehead, like ropes that have been cut.

I can't go on.

Then stay here.

One by one we walk past Fürst. Drygalski stops and stands next to him. He turns and looks at him. Fürst looks down at the ground. The rain runs down their foreheads and noses. With his right fist Drygalski wipes the water from his eyes. Then Fürst bends down and unties the laces on his heavy hiking boots. They are tightly knotted, and he has to pull hard to get them open, first the left one, then the right, and then he ties them again, first the left one, then the right, and meanwhile Drygalski stands there looking at him and when Fürst gets back up he nods and then Fürst nods too and wipes the brown strands of hair from his face. They move on.

19 Drygalski complains the least but we all know he's the one who is suffering the most. He always used to be the first to get annoyed when we were out together and the others couldn't decide where to go or what to eat or when, or whether to go at all. Drygalski used to be the fat one. Surprisingly, we never teased him about it. Even at the time I didn't quite understand why. Other fatsos we encountered weren't so lucky, at school or at the youth centre, but with him it was different, maybe because he'd always been there, one of us, and he'd always been fat, so his fatness wasn't a challenge to us anymore, we accepted his fatness like an annoying habit, and we had annoying habits of our own, and whenever he was the last to make it, wheezing and panting, through the doors of the U-Bahn that we'd had to hold open for him, whenever he couldn't get to the running pass or the striker from the other team got away from him, when he would stare at our girlfriends, stealthily and obviously, out of the corner of his eye, or else our chips, then we would talk about the weather.

20 We find an abandoned campfire at the edge of a clearing. We notice the trampled grass from a distance, see the dark black of the burnt branches, the grey of the ashes on the patchy snow and the slush and the dark green, soggy field. We can tell that Drygalski is getting nervous by the simple fact that he is controlling himself so much and showing the least emotions of all of us.

Do you think there's anything left?

Fürst can't control himself as well. He nervously chews his thin lips. No reply. We move closer. Then we are standing around the ashes and the blackened wood, breathing, not looking each other in the eye, just at the ashes, and we can see that there is nothing at this campsite other than ashes and blackened wood. Half-heartedly Drygalski kicks at a charred branch. Fine flakes fly around our knees.

21 Picking up stuff of the ground. Branches. Stones. Stones that are differently shaped than other stones and that you think for a moment might have some other function than being stones, when you examine their unexpected shape up close, when they are in your hand, when you've stood back up and the pain in your back from bending over all the time has subsided. And then you throw them away again and don't spare them a second thought. Here and there a plastic bag. Transparent sheaths for goods that are no longer available. Leaves.

22 Then Fürst breaks his ankle. There is no hole, no stone, nothing unpredictable, just a drainage ditch cut across a country road, and the ditch is lined with metal, and the metal is not so rusty and covered in mud that you could have overlooked it. The crack is no different from the hundreds of cracking steps we took in the woods, but this time it is accompanied by an additional short cry and then heavy breathing, and then we see him trying to put pressure on his foot again, his face contorted with pain, and then we see how he shakes his head, no, he can't do it, he hops along on one leg for a couple of metres, as if there were a bench somewhere, or an easy chair or a bed, as if he had almost made it, just a little further and you can rest and we'll bandage your foot, and you can stay in bed for a while and rest up, and then he can't hop on one leg any longer, we're weak and haven't eaten in a long time, and he falls forward onto his hands and knees. He freezes for a moment, and we can't tell if his back is quivering because his ankle hurts or because he's sobbing, and then he slowly sinks down onto that thick, wet grass, first his belly, then his chest, then his face.

He lies there for a couple of minutes, completely still. Gruber goes over to him, bends down, but Fürst just shakes his head. He cries out once more, when Drygalski carefully tries to touch his foot, presumably in order to see how badly he is hurt, but his scream is so full of rage and finality that we all understand. His foot is twisted at an unnatural angle, to one side, and it's obvious that you can't walk on a foot like that. The only thing you can do with a foot like that is lie down. We stand. We stare. We don't say anything.

Before we move on, we drag him to an oak by the side of the road. We lean him up against the tree, facing the misty peaks of the Wilder Kaiser or the Hahnenkamm or whatever mountain range it

is that is slowly coming into view. We turn his head in the direction he was looking when he failed to notice the drainage ditch that rendered his foot unusable, and later, once his features, which now are distorted in agony, have relaxed, he will see the very mountains that he saw when he was still in possession of two healthy legs and his only problem was a world come apart at the seams. Then we leave. We leave him sitting in the wet grass, and we hope that the night won't be so cold that he will die in the dark. But cold enough that not long after sunrise it will be over.