

Polina Borodina

theborodina.com

theborodina@gmail.com

Berlin Syndrome

CHARACTERS:

NORA

MARKUS

LENA

SABINA

TIM

SHT. WEBER

HOAH

HAMMAD

Thanks to Arthur and Max for carrying the writing desk! Turns out, I didn't need it.

1. She Died From

The living room is hazy from smoke. The balcony door keeps slamming against the wall with each gust of wind. Fairy lights are lazily taped to the walls, and from the chandelier hang paper origami... vaginas. Markus, Lena, Sabina, and Nora are sitting in a circle: some on a worn-out green couch, others on pillows on the floor.

MARKUS: Alright! Let's play "My Biggest Problem"!

NORA: Like I don't have enough problems? Now we've got "the biggest one" too?

MARKUS: Let me explain: you light up a shot of absinthe, and while it's burning, you tell us your biggest problem. Then, you blow it out and drink. Got it?

LENA: Anything for a shot of absinthe!

NORA: I'm starting to understand why it's banned in some countries.

SABINA: In ours, alcohol is totally banned. It's easier to list what's actually allowed.

NORA: And they don't even put wormwood in it anymore, just anise.

LENA: Ugh... the world's gone completely nuts.

MARKUS: You're killing the vibe! This is real absinthe! Green! What more do you want?! Okay, let's start. Nora, you go first.

NORA: Can I go last? I've got primophobia.

Everyone looks at Nora with curiosity.

NORA: Fear of being first. I even changed my last name when I was a kid so I wouldn't be first in the attendance register.

MARKUS: You can't change your last name at that age without your parents' permission. And I know your parents, babe.

NORA: Busted! I just don't want to go first.

MARKUS: Sabina?

SABINA: Just remember, this was *your* idea...

Markus pours her a shot of absinthe and lights it up. Sabina blows out the flame and downs it.

SABINA: My sister performed without her hijab in Tehran... and she disappeared about a month ago. I think she was killed.

Everyone goes silent, looking at Sabina. Sabina stares at the absinthe and takes another shot.

NORA: Sabina, I...

LENA: I'm so sorry.

MARKUS: Okay, this was a dumb idea... Let's rewind.

SABINA: So I just spilled my guts for nothing? No way. *(To Lena)* Your turn.

Lena grabs the shot glass, Markus lights it. Lena stares at the flame.

LENA: My boyfriend got sentenced... but I don't know for how long. The trial in Gomel was closed. Article 368 — insulting the President of Belarus. He stopped replying to my letters recently.

NORA: Can anyone explain why we're playing this game?

MARKUS: Fine, since it was my idea...

NORA: Go ahead, surprise us!

Markus takes the shot, lights it himself, staring at the flame.

MARKUS: My mom got eaten by a shark in the Red Sea. On vacation. It was two years ago. I still can't swim. *(Takes a shot)* Not even in a lake.

NORA: You told me she died of a heart attack.

LENA: I thought sharks only ate Russians...

NORA: Lena!

NORA: Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me sooner?

MARKUS: I actually got her the vacation as a birthday gift.

LENA *(in Russian)*: Pizdets...

NORA: So it's my turn now?

EVERYONE *(in unison)*: Yes.

Markus lights up another shot and places it in front of Nora. She drinks it all at once, forgetting to blow it out.

NORA: AHHH!

Nora grabs her throat.

LENA: Looks like she's burned her throat. *(To Markus)* Should we call an ambulance, or just give her more absinthe?

MARKUS: I told you to blow it out!

NORA: AHHH!

LENA: Congrats, now she's got one more "biggest problem". *(To Markus)* What are you waiting for? Get her some water!

Markus brings a glass of water, and Lena starts Googling something on her phone. Markus hands Nora the water, and she downs it. Everyone looks at Nora with a mixture of guilt and concern.

SABINA: Just lie down.

MARKUS: I think she's trying to say something.

Nora continues to make muffled noises.

LENA: I think so too.

MARKUS: I know!

Markus grabs a piece of paper and a pen and hands it to Nora.

LENA *(in Russian)*: Not a WG¹, this is a freakin' circus.

Nora scribbles something on the paper and passes it to Markus. He looks at the messy writing.

MARKUS *(reading)*: MBP... *(asks the others)* What's MBP? Some kind of code?

LENA: "My Blue Pussy", I guess.

SABINA: MBP means "My Biggest Problem," Markus!

MARKUS: Oh! Right! So... *(pauses)* Her biggest problem is...

¹ shared apartment in Germany

LENA: Just read it!

MARKUS (*reading*): "I can't fall in love".

Everyone stares at Nora.

2. My Country Prefers

Nora's room. Nora and Markus are lying side by side on the bed. Nora is scrolling through Tinder, Markus peeking over her shoulder.

MARKUS: Promise me you won't go on dates with West Germans.

NORA: Are you out of your mind? That's xenophobia!

MARKUS: I'm from Leipzig, so technically, it's not.

NORA: This is exactly it!! You're judging people based on where they live! Hello!

MARKUS: First of all, not based on where they live, but where they were born. And second... they had different childhoods! Carefree and rich. They didn't have an PIKO train set or a toy dump truck with a shovel.

NORA: Markus, I didn't have a PIKO train set either!

MARKUS: That's not the point... It's about the principle.

NORA: You're showing your age with all this talk about toy trains.

MARKUS: Look, this one's cute.

NORA: He's too... smooth.

MARKUS: You need someone with BPD?

NORA: With what?

MARKUS: Borderline Personality Disorder.

NORA: In this city, they give it to you along with your Anmeldung².

MARKUS: True... (*looking at the screen*) No, the Iranian guy's not for you, he's got PTSD.

NORA: Look, here's a cute guy.

MARKUS: He's Ukrainian.

² Anmeldung is the registration of your residential address in Germany.

NORA: So what?

MARKUS: He's got PTSD too.

NORA: And I don't have PTSD?

MARKUS: Exactly! You'll get attached to him, try to save him, and he'll make your life hell.

NORA: Thanks for the forecast.

MARKUS: Plus, you'll never understand him because, thank God, no one has attacked your country.

NORA: My country prefers to attack first...

MARKUS: That was a long time ago, everyone's forgotten. But here — it's a fresh wound.

NORA: Markus, I don't get it! IT guys and West Germans aren't interesting enough for you, but refugees and artists — they all have issues? What are you suggesting?

MARKUS: The Goldilocks zone.

Nora stares at Markus.

NORA: Are you comparing men to chairs?

MARKUS: Why chairs?

NORA: Because when Goldilocks went into the bears' house, it was the chairs she didn't like!

MARKUS: No point in arguing, you're the philologist here.

NORA: That story about some woman barging into a stranger's house and finding everything unsuitable — chairs, beds, porridge — always bothered me!

MARKUS: I rented out my apartment on Airbnb once, and all the guests were like that! One guy complained the toilet handle wasn't ergonomic. He probably expected it to mold to the shape of his hand.

NORA: At least they were paying, Goldilocks just waltzed in uninvited...

MARKUS: On the other hand, don't men evaluate women like chairs? Why can't you play the same game?

NORA: Look, here's a Russian guy, what do you think?

On the screen, a man is holding a transparent plastic bag with a can of beer inside, standing in front of a store called "Russia."

MARKUS: Jesus Christ!

NORA: Okay, I'm deleting this app. What am I supposed to tell my kids? "Your dad and I fell in love at first swipe?" That's so boring!

MARKUS: Just don't have kids, problem solved! They're polluting the planet anyway.

Nora keeps swiping through profiles.

MARKUS: Look at this one! A nurse. Means he's seen a bit of life.

NORA: This feels familiar...

MARKUS: And he's a feminist. Go for it! Even if it doesn't work out — at least you'll unblock yourself.

NORA: Unblock?

MARKUS: For God's sake, Nora, don't you speak "woman"?

Nora swipes right on the guy.

NORA: Congratulations, we matched.

MARKUS: Told you! A totally problem-free guy, just watch.

NORA: Otto was problem-free too, until...

MARKUS: I don't want to hear that name again, Nora. Look at his eyebrows! They're just like my Daniel's! Go on, message him.

Nora finally swipes right on the guy.

NORA: What do you think? Why did he do it?

MARKUS: I don't know, honey.

Markus hugs Nora.

3. Too Good For

Outside a Späti³, NORA and TIM are walking, each holding a bottle of beer. They walk a few steps apart, in silence.

TIM: Last week, I saved a dog. The vet clinic was packed. She had pulmonary edema. I drained the fluid, she started breathing again. She survived.

NORA: Amazing.

They continue walking silently.

TIM: If you're not interested, we can talk about something else.

NORA: No, why? It's really interesting. It's just that being around you makes me feel... What's the word? Worthless?

TIM: What do you do for a living?

NORA: I'm an editor at a publishing house.

TIM: Wow, that's awesome!

NORA: It's just a regular office job.

TIM: Who would we be without literature? Biological artifacts?

NORA: Last week, I was editing a novel by a guy from Myanmar about the Muslim genocide carried out by Buddhists...

TIM: I thought Buddhists were the good guys.

NORA: So did I.

They stop at a crosswalk.

TIM: You know, when I was a kid and found out turtles were carnivorous, I was devastated.

NORA: Are you a vegetarian?

TIM: Yeah.

NORA: Amazing.

TIM: It's really not that big of a deal...

³ late-night store

NORA: Alright, Tim, tell me about your dark side.

They cross the street, heading towards a park.

TIM: What do you mean?

NORA: What's the worst thing you've ever done?

Tim thinks for a moment.

TIM: Umm... last week, I borrowed my neighbor's BVG⁴ pass without asking when I lost mine.

NORA: Amazing.

TIM: What's wrong?

NORA: Nothing. It's fine.

TIM: No, I can tell something's off.

NORA: You wouldn't understand.

TIM: Try me. I'm smart.

NORA: You wouldn't get it. You've never stolen food from a supermarket, cheated on your fiancé on your wedding day, or gotten drunk in a mosque.

TIM: Have you stolen?

NORA: No.

TIM: Cheated on your fiancé?

NORA: Also no. And I only got drunk once — outside a Protestant church. But I've edited plenty of books where people do that stuff. I'm good at absorbing other people's experiences.

TIM: Got it.

They walk in silence.

NORA: My husband left me for a Ukrainian refugee.

TIM: I'm sorry.

⁴ Public transport company in Berlin.

NORA: We took her in to help. It was my idea. He didn't want to. And then...

TIM: That must've been hard... Do you still talk to him?

NORA *(laughing)*: God, Tim, that's just a story from a novel! And you fell for it!

TIM: Ugh, well, that's... some sense of humor you've got!

NORA: It's a good plot, I'll give you that. The author is very talented — she's from Kharkiv. *(Sighs)*.

TIM: You're probably burnt out — editing all these heavy stories.

NORA: I don't know... maybe.

TIM: Sorry if I crossed a line with that question.

NORA: A line? *(She places her empty beer bottle on a parked car.)* Look, Tim. You're way too good for a second date, sorry. Just an angel. I'll never live up to that.

TIM: I've killed people.

Nora laughs.

NORA: What novel is that from?

TIM: It's not from a novel.

Nora's laughter fades as she looks at Tim's serious face. He pulls out his phone, enters a passcode, then a second pattern lock, removes his glasses for face ID, and finally shows something to Nora. She peers over his shoulder at the screen, confused.

NORA: Who's that?

TIM: That's me.

NORA: What are you doing in this?

TIM: Can't you tell?

NORA: Are you shooting at good people or bad people?

TIM: Just people. The important thing is, it hits people.

They stand in silence.

NORA: That's awful.

TIM: In Germany, the group I fought with is considered a terrorist organization.

NORA: So... you're a terrorist?

TIM: Yeah, I guess so.

Nora kisses Tim.

NORA: I've never kissed a terrorist before.

4. I Heard They Tried

In the kitchen, MARCUS is chopping vegetables. NORA stands next to him, sneakily stealing pieces of veggies as he chops.

NORA: Technically, he's like Siegfried.

MARCUS: Whaaat?

NORA: You know, fighting a dragon. Well, *fought* a dragon.

MARCUS: What the hell kind of dragon, Nora? He went to Syria to fight! He's out of his mind!

NORA: You're missing the key detail here!

MARCUS: Oh, the key detail, huh?

NORA: Yes, key detail! He went to Syria to fight ISIS! To protect women and children!

MARCUS: Just promise me you're not planning to go over there.

NORA: Do I look like I've lost my mind?

MARCUS: I'm not so sure anymore.

NORA: But somebody's gotta save the world from ISIS, right? I mean, it does say something about his mental state, though...

MARCUS: Finally, you're seeing the light.

NORA: Do you know why that organization is considered a terrorist group in Germany?

MARCUS: Because they fire rockets at people?

NORA: No, Marcus. Because they're Kurds. And we're friends with Turkey. And Turkey hates the Kurds — they torture, kill, and deport them.

MARCUS: And the Kurds are all innocent saints? I heard they tried to bomb Hagia Sophia.

NORA: No one's completely good, Marcus! How are you, at your age, still not getting this?

MARCUS: Look, I don't care about the Kurds or not-Kurds. What I care about is *you*.

MARCUS: So, what, are you telling me you're in love?

5. Nothing At All

Back to NORA and TIM. NORA kisses TIM. He looks at her with wide, stunned eyes.

TIM: So? Did you feel anything?

NORA: No, nothing.

TIM: What, nothing at all?

NORA: Nothing at all.

TIM: Well, I did. Should we try again?

TIM leans in for another kiss, but NORA pulls away.

NORA: Nah. Sorry.

Nora runs off from darkness into the darkness.

6. You Should've Just

In the kitchen, NORA and MARCUS are sitting at the table. NORA picks out tomatoes from a salad, while MARCUS sits frozen, holding a fork.

MARCUS: So, did you fall in love or not?

NORA: Haven't you been reading my Twitter?

MARCUS: Did you actually tweet about it? I hope you left out any, uh, spicy details.

NORA: What details? That his tongue is rough, like a cat's?

MARCUS: That he fought in Syria, for God's sake!

NORA: I wrote exactly what happened.

MARCUS: The last thing you need is trouble with the authorities, Nora.

NORA: I didn't go to Syria, did I?

MARCUS: Lena says in Russia, they jailed two girls just for writing a play about terrorism! Think about that — for a *play*!

NORA: Thankfully, we're not in Russia.

MARCUS: You never know if you're in Russia or not — it's expanding pretty quickly.

NORA: And I didn't write a play. It was just a post.

MARCUS: Damn it, Nora! Are you seriously telling me you fell in love with *him*?

NORA: No. Why aren't you eating?

MARCUS: Thank God!

Marcus finally starts eating.

NORA: What do you mean? Isn't that what you wanted?

MARCUS: After he told you he sat in trenches in Syria...

NORA: There were no trenches — just desert.

MARCUS: Doesn't matter! You should've just walked away immediately! Immediately! And instead, you kissed him.

NORA: But we're trying to make me *feel* something, right? I'm trying, Marcus!

MARCUS: You'll fall for someone else, Nora. A normal person.

They eat in silence. SABINA enters, wearing a raincoat.

SABINA: They showed her on TV. She's alive.

MARCUS: My dear!

SABINA: They're torturing her. I know it.

NORA: Sit down, eat something.

SABINA sits down at the table. MARCUS grabs another plate and serves her some salad.

SABINA smiles blissfully and starts eating. NORA's phone rings. She answers it.

VOICE: Frau Liebermann...

NORA: Yes... Who is this?

VOICE: Criminal police, Sergeant Weber.

NORA: Sergeant Weber?

VOICE: We have some important information for you. Can you come by on Thursday, at noon?

NORA: I can.

SABINA pauses her eating. NORA puts her phone down on the table. Everyone is now looking at her. There's a long silence before her phone chimes again.

NORA *(with a forced smile)*: New match!

She shows the screen to MARCUS and SABINA.

NORA: What do you think?

7. And Each One Is

NORA is sitting across from NOAH, a chessboard between them.

NOAH: That's a bad move. Your queen's about to take your pawn, and then you'll put your knight in danger.

NORA: Uh-huh. I'm trying to make a smart move. It's hard. Like in life.

NOAH: Your time's up.

NORA: Can we play without time limit?

NOAH: The whole point is to play with the time limit.

NORA: I already play with it every day. Get to work on time, pay the bills on time, answer emails on time.

NOAH: That starts to feel like torture.

NORA: This was your idea. You knew I didn't know how to play.

NOAH: People usually drink on dates to hide behind something. I play chess. I think it's a better way to handle stress.

NORA: I see. I've made my move.

NOAH: I see. You're in check.

NORA: Great. I'm thrilled.

NOAH: That's unsportsmanlike behavior.

NORA: Do you always criticize women you barely know this easily?

NOAH: That's a gift from my mom. She had three kids, so she could always compare each one to the other two, unfavorably. I grew up and act like her. Which is why my relationships don't work out.

NORA: I respect honesty. You've got something.

NOAH: By the way, checkmate.

NORA: Finally, it's over!

NORA pushes the board away from her, and NOAH starts meticulously resetting the pieces.

NOAH: I forgot to mention, I don't sleep with women I lose to.

NORA: Good to know. Do you lose to anyone?

NOAH: No.

NORA: Got it.

They sit in silence.

NORA: Do you play chess often?

NOAH: Monday to Sunday, 5 PM to midnight. *(Pause)*. It's my club.

NORA *(looking around)*: No days off?

NOAH: I don't need days off from chess. Days off are only for people.

NOAH's phone alarm goes off.

NOAH: The club's closing. Come on, help me pack up.

NORA and NOAH start gathering the cardboard chessboards, pieces, and clocks from the tables. NOAH packs everything into a massive backpack.

NORA: You know, I've got a game I need to win too.

NOAH: What game?

NORA: I want to fall in love, but I can't.

NOAH: You can take a scientific approach to everything.

NORA: What do you mean?

NOAH: Let's fast-forward to the interesting part.

NORA: Can you control...

Before NORA finishes her sentence, NOAH snaps his fingers, and suddenly they're on the floor of an empty apartment, surrounded by chess clocks.

NORA: ...time?

NORA looks around and notices that each clock shows a different time.

NORA: I feel like there are as many versions of me as there are clocks. And each one is stuck in its own hour...

NOAH checks something on his phone.

NOAH: Which one of them is talking to me right now?

NORA (*whispering*): May 14th, 2022. 6 pm.

NOAH: What happened on May 14th 6 pm?

NORA: You mentioned a scientific approach. I'm ready.

NOAH (*deeply absorbed in his phone*): ChatGPT says that falling in love is a combination of interest, something in common, and physical contact.

NORA: Do you run everything through ChatGPT?

NOAH (*pressing a button on one of the chess clocks*): I once lived under a fake name for a whole year.

NORA: There's something to that.

The clocks chime.

NOAH (*pressing the clock button again*): I think anyone who voluntarily moved to Berlin is crazy.

NORA: Okay, we've got something in common. But what about people who were born here, like me?

The clocks chime again.

NOAH: No comment. *(presses the clock button)* Now I'm going to lick your knee. Physical contact.

NOAH licks NORA's knee.

NOAH: Did it work?

The clocks chime again.

NORA: It tickles!

NOAH: And that's all?

NORA: No one's touched me in almost two years.

NOAH: And?

NORA *(looking herself over from head to toe):* And that's all.

NOAH: But we followed the instructions...

NORA: Maybe the instructions lie?

NOAH: Then we must have missed something.

NORA: Should I go?

NOAH *(jumping up suddenly):* Pain!

NORA: What's pain got to do with it?

NOAH: Touching someone else's pain is mesmerizing. I read it in an article...

NORA: And what...

NOAH *(interrupting):* My mother hasn't called me in ten years. Whenever I'm in a place where people don't play chess, I feel like the most useless person in the world. I'm scared of emotional intimacy because everyone leaves me, and I've never left anyone.

NORA: Do you also aim to win in the competition of pain?

NOAH: I don't know. *(Thinks for a moment.)* Yes.

NORA: Then you win. I have good friends. A good job. A comfortable life. I don't want to talk about pain.

NOAH: Maybe that's why nothing works?

NORA: I don't know.

They sit in silence.

NOAH: Then maybe it won't work out after all. You're right. You should go, I won't be offended.

They sit in silence again.

NORA: Can I stay for a bit? I want to be around someone... alive.

Silence.

NOAH: Did you just break up with someone?

NORA: I really should go.

NOAH: Do you want to talk to him through me?

NORA: What?

NOAH: Transference. You haven't heard of it?

NORA: No.

NOAH: It's when you deal with trauma caused by one person by working through it with someone else.

NORA: And you end up infecting everyone around you, like with the flu?

NOAH: You can even do it with people who've passed away.

NORA: Wow. Well, maybe next time. For sure.

NOAH: Will you write to me?

NORA: To you, or someone else through you?

NOAH: Doesn't matter! My expectations are low.

NORA: Can I ask you something?

NOAH: Of course!

NORA: Do you want to live?

NOAH: What do you mean? How can someone not want to live? I don't get it.

NORA: Forget it. *(Pause)* Sorry, Noah, you're not my chessman.

8. You Don't Understand What

It's night. NORA quietly enters the apartment, trying not to make any noise. The kitchen door is open, and LENA is sitting at the table under the light of candles, peeling potatoes and piling them into a shiny metal bowl. The bowl is already full, but she keeps peeling.

NORA: Are we celebrating some kind of potato festival?

LENA stays silent, continuing to peel. NORA opens the fridge, grabs a bottle of wine, and sets it on the table.

LENA: Do you think it's Christian to wish death on someone who's already in prison?

NORA: You can't wish death on anyone. Not even yourself.

LENA: Can you imagine, Pasha has a mistress. And she's been writing to him in prison, too. I mean, she *used* to write to him.

NORA: That's quite the plot twist.

LENA: What? And then she decided to write to *me*... "We're practically "rodnye", she said. Can you believe that?

NORA: "Rodnye"?

LENA: I don't even know how to translate it. People who are, well... like a family.

NORA: Relatives?

LENA: No, that's something else. Relatives are the ones you sit around the same table with, enduring jokes that make your stomach hurt.

NORA: And "rodnye"?

LENA: Rodnye are the people you can share mutual silence with.

NORA pours wine for herself and LENA.

NORA: So, why all the potatoes?

LENA: It calms me down. My mom always peeled potatoes in a crisis.

NORA (*taking a sip*): Well, now you could cheat on him. And it wouldn't even count as betrayal. You don't have to be alone in exile. Silver linings.

LENA: I could've done that before. But the truth is, I don't want anyone but Pasha. He's the bravest, the strongest, and the funniest. You understand? Berlin men, compared to Pasha, are like Disney cartoons compared to a documentary.

NORA: You haven't seen him in two years. Maybe he's changed?

LENA: People don't change at their core.

NORA: I don't think everyone even *has* a core. Do I have a core?

LENA: All this mindfulness trainings, attempts to reprogram your personality, ayahuasca trips, meditation, kinky parties —it's all just sex toys for the frigid European life.

NORA: Life happens in Berlin too, Lena. And so do men.

LENA: I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that I still feel like everything here is... fake. Beautiful, smooth, polished, fake.

NORA: And what's real? The prison cell where your Pasha sleeps? Is that real? And where's the future? You're lost in time, Lena. (*Pauses*). Just like me.

LENA: What should I write to her so she understands that he and I are forever, and what they have is just a fling?

NORA: Why do you always think that forever is wherever you are?

LENA: Why these questions now? (*switches to Russian*) У тебя муж не сидел, он сам ёбу дал, по своей воле... Пашка бы так никогда со мной не поступил! Вы, немцы, очень странные! Живёте в окружении эмигрантов, но ничего не понимаете! Не понимаете, что в мире происходит! Не понимаете, что такое настоящая любовь! Не понимаете, что такое настоящий ад! Не понимаете, что значит жизнь отдать за свои принципы! *Your husband didn't go to jail. He left on his own accord. Pasha would never have done that to me! You Germans are so strange! You live surrounded by immigrants, but you understand nothing! You don't understand what's happening in the world! You don't understand what real love is! You don't understand what real hell is! You don't understand what it means to give your life for your principles!*

NORA: I don't understand. I don't understand that language, Lena.

LENA (*in Russian*): Я об этом тебе и говорю! *That's what I'm telling you!*

LENA leaves the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

9. Why would I

NORA is sitting in an investigator's office. She's at a large desk that looks like a stationery shop counter: staplers, folders, papers, clips, pens, sticky notes — everything is there. On the other side of the desk sits WEBER. He places a document in front of her. She signs it without reading. They sit in silence for a moment.

NORA: So, someone killed him, right?

WEBER pulls out a transparent zip-lock bag from the drawer. Inside, there's a thick notebook that looks like a journal.

NORA: I knew someone killed him.

The investigator stays silent.

NORA: Do you think I killed him? Because I think that. I think about it every day since May 14th, 2022. What I didn't do, what I didn't say, what I didn't notice...

WEBER looks at her.

WEBER: We don't think so. I don't think so.

NORA: A person can't just — go and...

WEBER: Statistically, Frau Liebermann, 400 people do it each year in this city. That's about one and a half people per day.

NORA: Maybe those people have real reasons. *Real* ones. My flatmate, Lena, loves that word — *real*. There are plenty of real reasons to... to do it, Sergeant Weber. War, dictatorship, chauvinism, natural disasters, incurable diseases...

WEBER: We found something. His mother found it, actually. Under inheritance law, this belongs to you.

WEBER clicks something on his computer, and the printer spits out some papers. He hands them to NORA. She signs them without looking. He presses something again, and the printer whirs, printing more papers. She signs those too. Then he finally takes the transparent bag from the drawer, ready to hand it over, but the printer spits out two more sheets.

NORA: Can you imagine, Herr Weber, if the Greens come to power and ban all these papers of yours?

WEBER: That's impossible, Frau Liebermann. This country runs on paper.

NORA signs the last papers. WEBER finally hands her the bag.

WEBER: Your husband's diary.

NORA opens the bag and pulls out the notebook.

WEBER: Remember, you have the right to free psychological counseling.

NORA: I'm fine.

NORA looks closely at the investigator, then tucks the notebook into her red backpack.

NORA: When was the last time you fell in love, Sergeant Weber?

WEBER: I've been married for 20 years. Why would I fall in love? I never have. My therapist says I have alexithymia — an inability to recognize emotions. But I think she's lying to avoid making me feel like I'm missing something important in life. I don't worry about it too much, Frau Liebermann, because love, as you rightly pointed out, brings suffering. And there's already plenty of that in life. Your case is a good example. Did I answer your question?

NORA: Yes.

NORA gets up and heads to the door.

WEBER: You're not guilty of anything, Frau Liebermann.

NORA pauses for a moment but leaves without turning back.

10. I Don't Know How To

NORA watches as MARCUS pulls clothes off the rack and packs them into a huge suitcase.

NORA holds a thick black journal that looks like a book, watching Marcus.

NORA: You never even wear that shirt...

MARCUS doesn't respond and keeps packing.

NORA: You could've told me earlier...

MARCUS: I've been trying to tell you all week... But you've been so down, and I couldn't find the right moment.

NORA: We've dreamed of living together since college! Eating breakfast together, lying under the same blanket listening to German pop songs, sharing each other's clothes...

MARCUS: And then you got married. *(Pauses)* I'm sorry. *(Pauses again)* Relationships can't just stay in one place. They have to evolve.

NORA: They *are* evolving... in time!

MARCUS: It's not just about time. Daniel and I have been together for a year now. I'm a grown man. I've got gray in my beard. I want a family.

NORA: You don't have a beard.

MARCUS: Sometimes I think you have no connection to literature at all, Nora. It's a metaphor! Anyway... relationships need to evolve on their own... their own...

NORA: You can't even put it into words!

MARCUS: Because you're not letting me finish!

NORA: Fine, I'll just sit here silently and watch as you pack your stuff to leave me.

MARCUS: You're not a little girl, Nora. You can't just be left or forgotten.

NORA: I moved here because of you! I'm living like a teenager in my almost 40s, waiting in line to take a shower...

MARCUS: You moved here so you wouldn't sit in naked solitude in that empty apartment where everything reminds you of — you know what. Of who.

NORA: And here I sit, what, in fully clothed solitude?

MARCUS: It's been two years, Nora! It's time to stand up and live! Life can't stop forever!

NORA: Actually, Marcus, life *does* stop every day for thousands of people! War, natural disasters, epidemics, losing loved ones...

MARCUS: What epidemics, Nora?

NORA: COVID, bird flu, yellow fever, monkeypox!

MARCUS: Stop using other people's pain as an excuse for your own problems!

NORA: What? *I'm* using other people's pain?

MARCUS: What else are you doing? You haven't even gone to therapy!

NORA: Do you know how overloaded therapists are right now? Refugees, immigrants, cancer patients...

MARCUS snaps his fingers in front of NORA's face.

MARCUS: You forgot to mention the victims of global warming!

NORA: I'm trying to talk to you seriously! *(Whispering)* And yes, by the way, wildfires and floods are a direct result of global...

MARCUS *(interrupting)*: Explain to me how your suffering helps refugees?

NORA: I'm with them... in the same field of suffering.

MARCUS: Fantastic! I'd like to leave that field of suffering, if you don't mind...

NORA: You're just a self-obsessed egoist with a low level of empathy.

MARCUS freezes, holding a pair of pants.

MARCUS: You know, I'm starting to understand Otto...

NORA goes silent, biting the skin on her wrist.

MARCUS: I'm sorry!

NORA remains silent.

MARCUS: That's not what I meant!

NORA is still silent.

MARCUS: I said something stupid, I often say stupid things. I'm sorry!

NORA: No, you meant exactly that.

MARCUS: No, really, I didn't. I just have a mouth, you know.

NORA: Everyone has a mouth.

MARCUS: Mine's especially big. And I lied about the shark.

NORA: What shark?

MARCUS: My mother wasn't eaten by a shark. I was mad at her because she left me and my dad, then met another guy and named her second son Marcus too. Minus Marcus, plus

Marcus equals Marcus. Very convenient. Anyway, when she died, I was so angry that I made up the shark story. And besides, everyone else had these dramatic stories...

NORA: We've been friends for twenty years, and you never told me about your brother. What kind of friend am I if you can't tell me anything?

MARCUS: Oh my God, Nora! You've got nothing to do with this!

They both fall silent.

NORA: Don't leave, please! I don't know how to be alone!

MARCUS: I have my own life, Nora.

NORA: Live it here. I'll keep an eye on it.

MARCUS: Nora, the world is big. There are eight billion people in it. You'll find your person. Maybe it'll even happen naturally. Without apps.

NORA: I've forgotten what naked men look like, Marcus.

MARCUS: Go to Teufelssee, you'll remember. You used to swim there every summer.

NORA: Is this all because of me? Is it because I hoard all the mugs in my room?

MARCUS: Not everything in life is about you, Nora!

NORA goes silent.

NORA *(after a long pause)*: Otto doesn't think so.

MARCUS: What?

11. Welcome To

Grunewald, Teufelssee. A nudist beach by the lake. NORA, in a blue dress and with a red backpack, walks past naked people lying on the grass, some on their backs, some on their stomachs. They're in pairs, alone, hairy, smooth, young, old. She walks past the only dressed person—a man in a black suit and shirt, sitting under a tree with a laptop. She passes him, stops, then turns back. She hesitates before approaching him, takes out a beach towel from her backpack, spreads it on the grass, and lies down. She takes off her dress and is now completely naked.

NORA *(to the man in the suit, nodding at her backpack)*: Could you watch this for me?

The man nods without lifting his head. Naked, NORA enters the lake, then quickly comes back out of the water. She pulls a thin notebook from her backpack and starts reading. The man steals glances at her from behind his laptop, struggling to decide whether to speak.

HAMMAD: May I ask what you're reading?

NORA (*looks up*): Schopenhauer.

HAMMAD (*trying hard to maintain eye contact, but his gaze keeps drifting downward*): Some contemporary author?

NORA: Something like that. (*She reads a passage aloud.*) Nora believes life is interesting. She finds everything fascinating — her crazy writers, her friends, the old lady next door who collects teddy bears on her balcony, her friends' kids, new sports, laws of physics, the life of animals... I'm an anesthesiologist. I know that the most sincere smile is the smile of a person drifting into sleep from anesthesia. For a few short moments, they forget about themselves, their past, present, and future. I collect those smiles.

NORA places the open notebook face down on the grass.

HAMMAD: What's your name?

NORA: Nora.

HAMMAD: Like the character in the novel?

NORA: Yes, funny coincidence...

HAMMAD: Nice to meet you. I'm Hammad. In Pashto, we don't use the word "tassaduq" — coincidence, accident. We say "ettefaq" — a harmonious interaction.

NORA: Pashto?

HAMMAD: I'm from Pakistan. A friend told me that to understand Berlin, I had to come here. So, I came.

NORA: And?

HAMMAD (*still trying to maintain eye contact but his gaze involuntarily travels lower*): It's... impressive.

NORA: Tell me about harmonious interaction. My interactions always end... What's the opposite of harmonious?

HAMMAD: Chaotic? Conflictual?

NORA: Exactly. All my interactions end in conflict. Unresolvable conflicts. So, how is coincidence different from harmonious interaction?

HAMMAD: Coincidence is what it *seems* to be.

NORA: Interesting.

HAMMAD: Things only *appear* to be coincidences, externally disconnected and random events. But in reality, all coincidences reflect patterns, predetermined by the Creator.

NORA: Do you believe that?

HAMMAD: I don't know. In the Quran, even the name of God is almost always written in the same place in a line. You could draw a straight line through it.

NORA: But there are exceptions?

HAMMAD: Sometimes it's a little to the right or left.

NORA: So divine harmony has glitches?

HAMMAD: That's so that those without enough faith think it's just a coincidence, a "tassaduq."

NORA: And what do *you* believe in?

HAMMAD: That the world is full of harmonious interactions. I don't know anyone in this city. I arrived three days ago. In my country, you can be hanged for this...

NORA: For what?

HAMMAD glances at the naked people around them.

HAMMAD: For insulting the Prophet Muhammad with your nudity, they hang you. For same-sex relationships, they hang you. For a Christian woman touching a jug of water from which a Muslim drinks, they hang her. For remarrying too soon after divorce, they hang you. For marrying too soon after being widowed — they hang you.

NORA: ...I get it. I see the pattern. *(Pauses)* Doesn't sound very... harmonious.

HAMMAD: You were the one who came up to me first. It couldn't be just a coincidence. I can tell — you're special.

NORA: I'm just normal. Are you going for a swim?

HAMMAD: I'll go.

HAMMAD stands up in his suit.

NORA: You're going to swim in your suit?

HAMMAD: Yes.

NORA: No, that won't do. Take off the suit. Take off everything. This isn't Islamabad. This is Berlin. Free body culture, ever heard of it?

HAMMAD: Could you turn around for a moment?

NORA turns around as HAMMAD undresses down to his wristwatch.

HAMMAD: You go first, I'll follow.

NORA enters the water, and HAMMAD follows. They swim together.

HAMMAD: Allah, it's freezing!

NORA: Keep moving! Don't stop!

HAMMAD: It's warming up! *(Pause)*. It's warm! *(Pause)*. I can't believe it! I'm swimming... in a lake... naked... with a girl...

It starts raining.

HAMMAD *(shouting)*: In the rain!

NORA: Welcome to Berlin! Spread out like a starfish, like this.

NORA floats on her back, arms and legs stretched out on the water's surface. HAMMAD copies her.

NORA: Freedom is better than Allah, isn't it?

HAMMAD: Freedom *is* Allah.

They float in silence.

NORA: And how do people swim in Pakistan?

HAMMAD: Fully clothed. With camels.

NORA *(pointing at the sky)*: Look, a rainbow!

They float in silence.

HAMMAD: I love you, Nora!

NORA: Whaat?

HAMMAD (*shouting*): I love you!

NORA: You're confusing love with freedom, Hammad!

HAMMAD: You're my destiny, Nora. This is true "ettefaq"! I was almost killed in Islamabad. I worked for the government, at the national bank. I had everything. I had a house. A job. Money. Glasses. A watch. A camel. I had a camel! I went to protest for Imran because he plays cricket. People were lighting fires, tearing down street signs, throwing rocks. Imran's our prime minister. A bad man can't play cricket, Nora. You're my destiny!

NORA: You play cricket because the British Empire taught you to, Hammad! That's the mindset of a victim! A victim of colonialism!

HAMMAD: It's destiny! The rainbow, the rain, this lake, and you — it's "ettefaq"!

NORA: No, Hammad, it's "tassaduq"! The world is made of coincidences! People sentenced to death for their religion or for protesting — that's "tassaduq"! They could've sentenced you! People dying in wars — that's "tassaduq"! People born in dictatorships — that's "tassaduq"! Women killed by their husbands — that's "tassaduq"! People jailed for their beliefs — that's "tassaduq"! It's all millions of unfair coincidences and accidents, and there's no harmony in it!

HAMMAD: You just don't understand yet. But you will soon, Nora. We'll have lots of children. That's "ettefaq"!

NORA swims hard toward the shore.

HAMMAD: Nora, where are you going? Wait!

HAMMAD swims after NORA, but she swims faster. She reaches the shore and gets out of the water.

NORA: (*shouting from the shore*): It's all "tassaduq"! The only time it's "ettefaq" is when someone takes their own life!

Naked, NORA grabs the journal and runs deep into the forest.

12. The Best Day To

Grunewald. Nora, naked, sits under a tree reading Otto's diary.

NORA: *(reading aloud)*:

"In our ICU, we have a small DVD library for patients. There are shelves with movies, and anyone can bring something from home to add to the collection. Patients watch these while waiting for serious operations with life-threatening risks. Today, someone brought a sequel to a Bruce Willis action movie. Nothing too special, except for the cover, where the title is written in bold red letters: 'A Good Day to Die.' At first, I wanted to find who brought it and start a scandal, but then I thought, maybe there's something to it... There are good days to die, and bad ones. It's always better to leave at the right time.

I've saved many lives. But I lost one, and it was my fault. Two liters of blood lost, we couldn't attach the catheter to the vein. The man died on the table. Heart failure. It was a scheduled operation, nothing urgent. We kept transfusing him, and he kept losing it. I scheduled him for the evening, picked the wrong medication, underestimated the risks. It was a bad day to die. He was only forty-two, had a wife and a dog. I drank for three days after that. We anesthesiologists are hardened people, but that one hit me hard.

Nora kept circling around, trying to comfort me, but it just pissed me off. You can't wrap yourself in a blanket of calm; you'll just keep killing patients that way. You have to go through it. You have to live through everything. She meant well, of course, she just didn't get it. She doesn't understand a lot of things. In books, she understands everything, but in real life? Not so much. The protocol for emergency situations clearly states that you have to bring the person back to reality, explain what happened, not hide anything or talk too much. Like in cases of acute blood loss – to survive, you need to stay conscious.

But it feels like I'm not conscious anymore. I've seen so many deaths that people don't stir any emotion in me. Nora runs around with refugees, volunteers at the Hauptbahnhof, brings someone home, and I feel... nothing. Complete sedation. Not the kind where you experience lightness from the pleasant loss of the past and the stopping of thoughts while still able to breathe on your own. No, it's total anesthesia, where you need to be hooked up to ventilation. Everyone's getting shaken up by their intense emotions, and I'm just... empty.

Sometimes I think back to the days when I wasn't empty. I replay how I met Nora. I was walking through Mauerpark on a Sunday, wading through the crowd at the flea market when I suddenly saw this girl trying on a pink dress in front of a mirror. It was cold, October, and she's standing there, trying to zip it up at the back. She turns around, sees me, and asks for help. I felt a little tickle inside from how easily she let a stranger, me, touch her body. I don't know how to ask for help myself.

I think I'm making her life miserable. She drags me on hikes, to exhibitions, introduces me to new people, dances in the middle of the street, sings in the car, cries after reading the news.

And I just drag along behind her with a nasty rattle, like a tin can. My existence is bearable only when I don't notice it.

Maybe it would be better if I didn't exist at all? I wouldn't want her to remember me as a boring man with a bloated face, drinking schnapps after every surgery. Maybe my death will entertain her, since I can't do it anymore myself?"

Nora screams under the tree.

13. I'm Not Surprised By

Nora walks into Marcus's completely empty room, sits on the floor. Her legs are bruised and scratched. She sits in silence for a while. There's a knock on the door. Lena walks in.

LENA: Can I come in?

NORA: You already did.

LENA: Listen, there's something...

NORA: Go on.

LENA: I'm going back to Minsk.

NORA: I see.

LENA: Aren't you going to ask why?

NORA: Why?

LENA: Vika and I are going to look for Pashka.

NORA: Vika?

LENA: Yeah, his girlfriend.

NORA: You're on the same team now?

LENA: I suggested we meet. She lives in Warsaw. We decided to meet halfway, in Poznań. Did you know Saint Paul is the patron of Poznań? We decided with Vika that it's a sign.

NORA: Cool.

LENA: And, you know... I don't know how to explain it. I... I think I've fallen in love.

NORA: I'm not surprised by anything anymore. With who?

LENA: With Vika.

NORA: Great, now you don't need a guy.

LENA: We're going to Minsk to rescue Pashka.

NORA: How do you plan to rescue him from prison?

LENA: We want him to be exchanged for a spy who's in Poland. It was Vika's idea! She's really smart!

NORA: Is your Vika an agent by any chance?

LENA: What agent?

NORA: A regular one.

LENA: Vika? What! No! How could you even think that? Vika?! No way! *(Pause)*. That's just nonsense!

Silence.

LENA: Are you upset because I fell in love before you did?

The sound of a door opening, cheerful voices — a man's and a woman's.

NORA: Do we have guests?

LENA: That's Sabina's boyfriend, Arif. Don't you know?

NORA: Nope.

LENA: He's been staying with us for three days now, didn't you notice?

NORA: Nope.

LENA: Well, that's how it is. Anyway, I'm going to pack my things.

NORA: She'll probably leave soon too.

LENA: Who?

NORA: Sabina. *(Pause.)* And I'll be left alone.

LENA: Maybe it's for the best? I call this period the "in-between men" phase. I haven't had one of those for a long time. You know how great it is. I'm always so creative during these

periods, so energized. So many projects, friends, girlfriends, dancing, ambitions. Don't try to skip it, live through it.

NORA: Okay.

LENA: I'm off. I've got two buses and one train tomorrow.

NORA: Be careful out there, okay?

LENA: What are you reading? (*Looking closer.*) And why do you have bruises on your legs?

NORA: I fell off my bike.

Lena kisses Nora on the forehead. Nora stays motionless. Lena leaves. Nora stares at one spot on the wall. She pulls out her phone and types into Google: "painless way to die."

14. It's Not What You

Grunewald, the day before. Naked, with the diary under her arm, Nora tries to find her way to the S-Bahn. Suddenly, she sees a man's corpse hanging from a tree. He hangs with his back turned, head lowered.

NORA: Otto! Otto?

Nora circles around the tree — the man turns out to be a mannequin with a pillow for a head and button eyes. A sign hangs on it: "Lieber tot als Sklave. Kapitalismus abschaffen!"⁵

NORA: Damn activists! Damn performers! I hate this city! I hate you, Otto!

Nora climbs the tree, scratching her legs against the bark, pulls the dummy down, and starts beating it. Passersby stare, surprised. A young man stops, watching Nora with interest. A girl comes up and starts filming her on her phone. More and more people arrive, clapping for Nora.

NORA: This isn't what you think! This isn't a performance!

The crowd applauds.

NORA: Go home!

Someone shouts, "Bravo!"

NORA: Not everything in this city is a performance, got it?

⁵ *Better dead than a slave. Abolish capitalism!"*

Someone shouts, "Genius!" Nora drops the dummy, gestures to a young man in the crowd for his jacket. Under applause, he gives her his jacket. Nora puts it on and runs away.

15. For Those Who...

Pregnant Nora, with a cup of tea, sits in front of an audience.

NORA: "It's not the end yet." That's the first thing I say to the people who come here.

Nora smiles and scans the faces.

Hi, I'm Nora. And I can do this.

Nora sets the cup of tea on her belly, and it balances perfectly. Everyone laughs.

This is a support group for those whose loved ones left this world by their own choice. For those whose loved ones disappeared into thin air. For those whose loved ones made a decision that led to their death. For those whose loved ones became unrecognizable. For those whose loved ones stopped being close. For those who no longer have loved ones. For those who... I could go on forever. *(She sips from her cup.)* Here, we learn to accept other people's decisions. To accept circumstances. To accept our anger. To accept loss.

Silence.

Do you know anything about the Berlin Syndrome? No? *(She looks around the audience.)* There's the Jerusalem Syndrome — that's when people arrive in Jerusalem, wrap themselves in bedsheets, and go to the center of the city to preach. There's the Paris Syndrome — when you first come to the most beautiful city in the world, and everyone's rude to you, it's constantly raining, and you start thinking it's all a conspiracy against you. There's the Stockholm Syndrome — everyone probably knows that one... And then there's the Berlin Syndrome — that's when... *(Pause.)* You know, I want to hear your guesses first. What do you think the Berlin Syndrome is?

THE END

August, 2024