

Book Title

“What I’m not sure I want”

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«Und es handelt sich darum, alles zu leben.»

“And it is a matter of living everything.”

— Rainer Maria Rilke.

Letters to a Young Poet, July 16, 1903

What I'm not sure I want

Milton Chanes

Prologue

The first time someone asked Claire what she wanted, she thought she had misunderstood the question. Not because it had been asked in German, since she had spoken the language for years. Fluently enough, in fact, to argue over a rental agreement, complain to a waiter who had charged her twice for a bottle of water, or understand the jokes Berliners made about Bavarians. Even so, her accent still surfaced in certain consonants, and some of her r's retained an unmistakably French softness she had never made much effort to correct.

—Was möchtest du?

Claire understood perfectly.

The problem was finding an answer.

She was sitting on the edge of a worn sofa, in a room where the music from the floor below reached them as a soft vibration she could feel against her back. She had left her coat in the cloakroom, the cameras on her phone were covered with two black stickers and, opposite her, a woman waited without impatience.

Claire pressed her lips together and let out the little *tss* she had made since childhood whenever she needed to buy herself a few seconds. Her mother did the same, and Antoine used to say it was a very French way of arguing before deciding whether it was worth using words.

—I don't know —she finally replied in German.

The woman barely smiled.

—That's an answer too.

Claire lowered her gaze to her hands. For eleven years, she had made a living asking questions, and she had learned to recognize quickly when someone was trying to avoid answering. She also knew every polite way of doing the same thing herself. *We'll see. Maybe. I don't mind. Whatever you want. I don't have a preference. Nothing in particular.*

She had used those expressions so many times that some of them had stopped sounding like evasive answers.

The woman was still waiting.

—You don't know whether you want to do it, or you don't know what you want to do?

Claire looked up.

The second question was considerably worse.

Across the hallway, someone laughed and a door closed. Two men walked past speaking German, one of them barefoot and holding a beer, without paying any attention to them.

Claire had gone there as a journalist. She had spent weeks investigating Berlin's nightlife, talking to organizers, reading rules about consent and filling pages with other people's experiences. She had turned other people's intimacy into notes with the ease of someone who had been doing the same thing for too long.

That she knew how to do.

What she did not know was what to do when the question was about her.

—I don't know what I want to do —she said.

This time she spoke more slowly, and her French accent became more noticeable, as it always did when she needed to be certain of every word.

The woman nodded.

—Then don't do anything yet.

She stood up and walked away down the hallway without trying to persuade her of anything.

Claire felt relief first and, almost immediately afterward, something far more uncomfortable.

Disappointment.

She stared at the place where the woman had disappeared and realized that part of her had expected something more to happen. Perhaps for the other person to decide, to insist a little, or to make unnecessary the question Claire had spent her entire life avoiding.

Being desired was simple; desiring required something else.

She rested her elbows on her knees while the bass continued vibrating beneath her feet. She had not brought her notebook, although a sentence appeared in her mind anyway.

Not knowing whether I want something doesn't mean I don't want it.

The second came a few seconds later.

But it doesn't mean I do, either.

Claire closed her eyes.

For thirty-two years, she had learned to recognize with considerable precision what other people expected of her, and she had come to confuse that ability with knowing what she wanted.

Berlin would take nine months to teach her the difference.

I

The observer

1

A frenchwoman in Berlin

The apartment had a lamp that Claire had not hung and that had been sitting on the living-room floor for six weeks, next to the socket, its cable carefully coiled and the shade resting on its side, so that the light rose toward the ceiling and left the walls in a half-darkness that had made her uncomfortable at first and had now become part of the apartment.

The lamp belonged to the flat, just like the ironing board, the fourteen wire hangers in the wardrobe and a poster from a 2016 exhibition that was still attached to the hallway wall with four small balls of adhesive putty. The Italian woman who had sublet the apartment to her before leaving for Utrecht to do a doctorate had assured her that everything worked and, after handing over the keys, had developed an extraordinary ability not to answer messages.

Hanging it would have required a drill, a stepladder and perhaps twenty minutes of work. Claire already knew three people she could have asked for help, but every time she thought about doing so, she ended up telling herself there was no urgency. She had learned to read by that light, to put on her makeup while leaning slightly toward it and to cross the living room without tripping over the cable, so after six weeks the lamp had stopped being a problem and become a postponed decision.

Claire was good at living with postponed decisions as long as no one called them decisions.

She still counted her time in Berlin in weeks because saying a month and a half seemed to grant the city a permanence she was not yet willing to acknowledge. She had arrived at the end of August with two suitcases, a nine-month contract and enough German to go about almost her entire life without switching languages, though not enough to forget she was a foreigner whenever someone spoke too quickly, used a regional word or expected an answer she had not had time to prepare.

Her German was good, but certain sounds still carried fairly obvious traces of France. Some of her r's had a softness she had never made much effort to correct, and there were vowels that, after so many years, still came from a slightly different place than they did for Germans. Sometimes a single

sentence was enough for a waiter to switch to English, and that irritated her enough to make her stubbornly continue in German, even when the conversation became unnecessarily complicated.

Other people simply smiled when they recognized the accent and asked which part of France she was from.

Lyon, she would answer, and almost always the same question about Paris came next.

She had lived there for eleven years, and the city had attached itself to her in a way different from her accent, less audible and considerably harder to explain.

The flat was on the top floor of a building in Neukölln whose kitchen overlooked a courtyard, and that courtyard, through a narrow passage between buildings, opened onto another one. In the second courtyard, a bicycle with no front wheel had been chained to a pipe since before Claire arrived. In the mornings there were children, a radio and conversations in at least three languages, while at night the building became surprisingly quiet, except on Fridays, when someone in the stairwell played music until three in the morning at a volume loud enough to hear the bass and low enough that no one considered it necessary to complain.

In Paris, someone would have called the police at a quarter past one. In Berlin, apparently, the people in the building had reached some informal agreement about the

things one was expected to tolerate from others, and no one had remembered to give her a copy.

She had arrived at the end of August and, in the folder on her phone where she kept important documents, there were the contract, the *Anmeldung* she had obtained after an appointment at seven forty in the morning in Wedding, her health insurance and a photograph of the electricity meter that the Italian woman had asked her to take before disappearing digitally.

For the moment, her Berlin life could be summed up quite well by those four files, two suitcases still only half unpacked and a lamp waiting on the floor.

Of what she had left behind in Paris, she kept no document.

It had lasted four years and ended in March, although Claire rarely thought of those four years as a complete relationship. She thought of Antoine, the apartment, dinners with friends, holidays arranged months in advance and Sunday mornings buying food for the week. She remembered the habit of knowing who was going to cook before either of them asked, the shared passwords for streaming platforms and the almost perfect way they had developed of getting into bed together without waking the other when one of them came home later.

She could not remember the exact moment when all those things had begun to feel like someone else's life.

Nor did she know who had left whom, although any of her friends would have said that Antoine had left her because he was the one who packed his things first.

Claire had never argued with that version.

She found it convenient.

* * *

On Tuesday she arrived at the office at nine twenty and found Marion staring at a folder containing two hundred photographs as if someone had just told her about a death.

The magazine had four people in Berlin and a real editorial office in Paris. The German office occupied the second floor of a building in Mitte, above a travel agency called Ostwind that looked as though it had not sold a ticket in years, and consisted of three desks placed too close together, a printer that only reacted after receiving a sharp blow to its left side and a large window facing a beige façade behind which stood a crane that Claire had yet to see move.

They spoke English in the office, although Claire could work perfectly well in German with Piet and Jonas, and Marion understood considerably more than she admitted. English had prevailed because it was the only language in which all of them

were willing to make mistakes without turning the mistake into something personal.

Marion was from Nantes, Piet had grown up between Hamburg and the Netherlands, and Jonas, the twenty-three-year-old intern, spoke German so quickly and swallowed so many words that Claire had to pay attention even when he was merely explaining where he had saved a file.

That morning Marion had to submit a piece about a biennial and still had not organized the photographs. She announced this three times in less than an hour, speaking mainly to her screen, and after the third time Claire looked up.

—I can help you with the photos, if you want.

Marion turned toward her with an expression of excessive gratitude.

—Really?

Claire pressed her lips together and let out a small *tss*, accompanied by that slight movement of the shoulders that in France could mean a dozen different things.

—Of course. I don't have anything urgent.

It was a lie, although it belonged to a category of lies that Claire did not really consider lies. She had two corrections pending and a cultural listings page she had to finish by Thursday, but she could complete both later, and Marion's

folder was clearly a disaster. There were two hundred photographs with camera-generated filenames, no properly organized credits, no captions and no reliable indication of the room in which they had been taken.

An hour and forty minutes later, Claire had renamed the files, identified the works, corrected three surnames, sorted the photographs by room and written captions that, in some cases, she thought were considerably better than the paragraphs of the article they were meant to accompany.

Marion told her she was an angel and appeared ten minutes later with a coffee from the place downstairs.

—You didn't have to.

—I know.

Claire accepted it and drank it.

That was, with minor variations, the mechanism by which she got people to like her. She did not do it deliberately, at least not in any way she recognized as deliberate. She simply noticed quickly when something was missing and tended to fill the gap before anyone asked her to. She remembered birthdays, arrived on time, answered emails other people left aging for days and could tell that someone needed help long before that person was willing to admit it.

In Paris they had called her *celle qui arrange tout* for years, the one who fixes everything, and Claire had always considered it a rather flattering description.

In her first professional evaluation, when she was twenty-four, a boss had written that she was an excellent colleague and very easy to have around.

She had kept that sentence for eight years as one of the best compliments she had ever received.

Sylvie's email arrived at eleven forty.

Sylvie Moreau ran the culture section from Paris and wrote emails exactly as she spoke, in a hurry, almost always in lowercase and with the impression that she was already thinking about the next conversation before finishing the current one. She had never spent more than four consecutive days in Berlin, although she spoke about the city with the confidence of someone convinced she knew it because she had eaten dinner three times in Kreuzberg and once failed to get into Berghain.

Claire read the entire message and then went back to the beginning.

hi claire, hope berlin isn't killing you.

i have an idea for the february issue and i think you're the person for it. something about the nightlife there, but for real, not the usual piece. sex-positive clubs, fetish parties, saunas, whatever you have. berlin's secret nightlife, the places where the rules disappear. working title, obviously.

*i don't want a tourist guide or some scandalized piece.
i want something intelligent, with people in it, and i want it to
be clear you've actually been there. 6,000 words, deadline
mid-january.*

will you take it? kiss

Claire read the last four words again.

She looked out of the window at the beige façade and the motionless crane while noticing a slight acceleration in her pulse that she immediately tried to classify. It could have been curiosity, discomfort or simply her second coffee of the morning, although the fact that she felt the need to find an explanation caught her attention for a few seconds.

She started to reply.

She wrote that the subject seemed difficult to do well, but deleted the sentence because it sounded like a warning. Then she wrote that she did not know anyone in that world and deleted that too because it sounded like an excuse before she had even accepted the assignment.

She tried an immediate yes, read it and felt there was something excessively compliant about those three letters.

She made that small sound with her mouth again, this time at herself, and ended up writing that perfect, she would get started and send an approach the following week.

It took her eleven minutes to send eighteen words.

During those eleven minutes she had calculated the tone, the deadlines, Sylvie's expectations and the amount of work she could take on without failing to keep up with everything else. She had also decided how much enthusiasm it was appropriate to show and had corrected one sentence twice so that it would not sound uncertain.

She had not asked herself whether she wanted to do it.

Sylvie replied four minutes later.

knew you'd say yes.

Claire kept the email open for a few seconds longer than necessary and then closed it.

At two they ate around the table by the window, combining Marion's three food containers with Jonas's salad, and Claire told them about the assignment in the tone she used when talking about unusual jobs, halfway between complaint and a satisfaction she preferred not to show too openly.

Piet put his fork down in the container.

—Sex clubs?

—Sex-positive —Claire corrected him—. Fetish parties too and, apparently, some kind of sauna. I still don't know exactly where to start.

—And how are you planning to do it?

Claire had thought about that during the morning and the answer came easily.

—Interviews. Organizers, people who go regularly, someone from security or the door, maybe people who work in those spaces. Then I want to understand why all of this exists here and not in the same way in Paris, because there has to be something about the city's history, rents, industrial spaces, legislation, nightlife culture. If I can organize that part properly, the rest should follow.

Piet nodded.

—Sounds good.

—Sounds like it could go very badly.

—That too.

Marion, who was laying out pages with her back to them, joined in without turning around.

—I think it's fascinating and I would never in my life go inside one.

Claire smiled.

—I already have a title.

Jonas had spent much of the conversation with his headphones resting around his neck and his eyes on his phone. Barely lifting his head, he said something in the same tone he might have used to announce the name of a subway station.

—I go sometimes.

Claire stopped with her fork halfway to her mouth.

—Where?

—A couple of places. Not every week. Depends who's DJing.

—Oh.

It was a small reaction, probably imperceptible to the others, although something happened inside Claire with considerably more force than she would have expected.

For six weeks she had mentally classified Jonas as the intern. Nice, a little slow with email, incapable of finishing a cultural listings page without leaving two typos in it, and the owner of an inexplicable collection of grey hoodies that all seemed to be the same one. In a single sentence, he had acquired an entire nightlife about which Claire knew nothing.

She was not surprised that he went to those places, nor was she shocked. What appeared first, before she could even correct it, was a far less reasonable discomfort.

He hadn't told me.

The sentence seemed absurd the moment she heard it inside her own head. Jonas had no reason to tell her what he did at night, and yet, for a second, Claire had felt that the information had been kept from her, as though the intern's

private life were among the things one was supposed to share after six weeks of working at the same table.

She recovered her professional voice with the speed of an old habit.

—And what's it like?

Jonas shrugged as he turned his attention back to his phone.

—Fine. Normal.

The word hung there for a few seconds.

Normal.

Claire knew that it was exactly the kind of word a journalist ought to pursue because it meant something different to every person, but she did not ask.

Jonas was the one who spoke again.

—I can tell you where, if you want. Though you'll have to go yourself, obviously. Asking doesn't tell you much.

—I'll go.

—Okay.

There was no challenge in his voice and no kind of insinuation, and Jonas probably forgot the conversation before he had finished eating. Claire, on the other hand, spent much

of the afternoon returning to that sentence and looking for a meaning it probably did not have.

At six, while finishing Thursday's cultural listings, she realized that Jonas had not challenged her to anything.

She had done that all by herself.

* * *

She left the office at a quarter to seven. It was that kind of October cold that did not yet force you to bring out the heavy coat but made people walk with their necks slightly tucked in and their hands in their pockets. Berlin was beginning to take on the appearance it would keep for the months ahead, with a low sky that seemed to drain the colors before winter had actually arrived.

On the U8, between Alexanderplatz and Kottbusser Tor, a man played an entire song on an accordion. No one looked up, and Claire did not either until the man began walking through the carriage with a paper cup.

She gave him a coin while looking at his hands.

She had been doing that since long before she came to Berlin. During interviews she tended to look at hands first and faces afterward, because faces had learned too many things and

hands considerably fewer. Hands revealed work, age, anxiety, a sleepless night, the habit of smoking or the habit of biting one's nails. Once she had spent forty minutes interviewing a fairly well-known actor who explained with complete serenity how little he cared about the premiere of a film while tearing the skin around his thumb apart with his teeth.

Claire had quoted his serenity in the article.

She got off at Hermannplatz and walked to the language school, located on the first floor above an internet and phone shop that still sold international calling cards even though Claire did not know anyone who had bought one in the past ten years.

The class began at seven thirty and was taught by Frau Riedel, a woman of about sixty whose patience seemed to come from another era. Claire did not need an elementary German course, but she had decided to enroll in order to correct some mistakes that had stuck with her after years of learning the language in a rather unsystematic way, first with teachers, then with colleagues and finally simply by living.

Frau Riedel insisted that speaking a language well was not only about being able to ask for things, argue or solve problems. It was also about understanding why two grammatically correct sentences could say completely different things.

That afternoon they were working on precisely that.

On the board she wrote *ich möchte* and, a few centimeters below it, *ich will*.

—Both can express desire —she explained—, but they are not the same. *Ich will* is direct. It can be strong, even abrupt depending on the context. *Ich möchte* introduces distance, politeness, possibility.

Claire wrote down both constructions even though she knew them perfectly well.

Frau Riedel then asked everyone to complete a sentence with something they wanted.

Rodrigo, a thirty-four-year-old Brazilian who worked as a cook, said he wanted to bring his sister over from São Paulo. Frau Riedel corrected a preposition without interrupting the meaning of the sentence.

Soo-jin, a Korean architect and by far the best student in the class, said she wanted an apartment with more light.

The Polish boy whose name Claire still confused with another student's said he wanted his boss to pay him for his overtime. The class laughed and Frau Riedel did too, although afterward she wrote *fordern* in one corner of the board and explained that perhaps to demand would be a more useful verb in that case.

The two Italians who always sat together wanted to spend Christmas in Munich.

When her turn came, Claire said without thinking much about it

—Ich möchte einen Kaffee.

Rodrigo laughed.

—That's what you said last week.

—And the week before that —Soo-jin added without looking up from her notebook.

Claire made a small gesture with her mouth and looked at Frau Riedel, expecting her to move on to the next student, but the teacher remained still.

—Something else.

—Coffee seems like a perfectly reasonable option to me.

Frau Riedel smiled.

—Something you really want.

Claire knew every word in that sentence.

There was no problem with grammar or vocabulary, not even one of those awkward seconds when a foreign language forces you to construct the sentence first in your own language. She could have answered in French and the result would have been exactly the same.

She opened her mouth and closed it again.

Water moved through the pipes in the radiator and, from the internet and phone shop downstairs, the muffled sound of the automatic door occasionally drifted upward. Claire had the notebook in front of her with the verbs copied into columns and the pen resting between her fingers.

She thought of things.

A bigger apartment. A promotion. Travel. For her mother to be well. An excellent article. To sleep better. Improve her German. Buy the Christmas flight before the price went up again.

They were all reasonable answers and some were even true, but none of them came with that feeling she assumed a person was supposed to have when they said they wanted something.

—Ich möchte eine größere Wohnung —she finally said.

I'd like a bigger apartment.

The sentence was correct.

Frau Riedel nodded and moved on to the next exercise.

Claire wrote it in her notebook without knowing why it bothered her so much.

At the end of class, as the others began putting their things away, Frau Riedel explained the use of *doch*. It was not the first time Claire had heard the word, of course, and she even

used it quite naturally, but she had never stopped to think about everything it could contain.

—There are different uses, but this one is important. If someone says *du willst nicht kommen*, you don't simply answer *ja*. You say *doch*. The other person is saying that you don't want to come, and *doch* contradicts that statement.

Frau Riedel searched for a way to phrase it for a few seconds and finally switched to English so everyone could follow.

—It's a small word that means the other person is wrong about what you want.

Claire wrote *doch* in the margin and drew a box around it.

She had known the word for years.

That night it seemed new.

As she walked down the stairs toward the internet and phone shop, she found herself thinking that it was curious that a language had needed a specific word to contradict someone who claimed to know what you wanted.

Outside, she wrapped her scarf around her neck and started walking home.

At the supermarket on her street she bought a bottle of red wine, sliced bread, eggs, a can of tomatoes and an energy-saving light bulb she did not need. She paid twelve euros sixty

and, while putting everything into her bag, mentally calculated the month's expenses, a calculation she knew by heart and repeated three or four times a day for no real reason, like someone running their tongue over a tooth they know perfectly well is still there.

Rent, insurance, transport pass, language school, phone, food and the Christmas flight she still had not bought, whose price seemed to rise every time she checked it.

On her way out she passed the bakery on the corner, which was already closed. The shutter was halfway down and a boy was mopping the floor under a light that was too white. Through the half-open door came a mixture of burnt sugar and bleach that Claire found strangely pleasant.

Months later she would recognize that smell many times, almost always in the early hours of the morning and on her way home for reasons she could not yet have imagined that night.

When she entered the flat, she left the groceries in the kitchen but did not take off her coat.

She sat down on the living-room floor beside the lamp.

The sofa was a little over a meter away and reasonably comfortable, although over the past few weeks Claire had developed the habit of sitting on the rug, inside that cone of

light rising from below and slightly distorting the room's shadows.

She opened her laptop and began searching.

At first she did it without any method, as always happened when a subject did not yet have a structure. She found articles from British newspapers, blog posts written five years earlier, forums with designs that looked as though they came from 2009, club websites where the rules took up more space than the photographs and videos of women in their early twenties explaining what to wear so that a Berlin doorman would not decide to ruin your night.

She opened fourteen tabs and closed thirteen.

On one of the pages she spent several minutes reading the rules for a party that described with extraordinary precision things Claire would never have imagined required instructions.

No photographs.

No staring.

No touching without asking.

A yes had to be a yes.

Silence was not a yes.

She stared at that last sentence for a while.

She scrolled back up a page. In one of the photographs, all that could really be seen was a bare back and a hand

hovering a few centimetres from the skin. Claire held the image for a moment longer than necessary.

Then she went back to the rules.

After forty minutes she closed the computer with the precise feeling of having accumulated information without having actually begun to work.

She then took out the black softcover notebook she had bought at a stationery shop on Sonnenallee after losing two voice notes while changing phones. It still had almost two hundred blank pages left and, whenever she opened it to work, her handwriting changed slightly, as though she too were adopting a professional version of herself. It became smaller, straighter and neater.

On the first available page she wrote eleven questions.

The first asked how the person had found their way into that world and the second how they would describe it to an outsider. Then came the rules, misunderstandings, discomfort, trust, work, family and the possibility that it might be considered a community. The final two asked what the person had learned about themselves and what advice they would give someone who wanted to enter for the first time.

Claire read them from top to bottom.

They were good questions.

They were arranged from least to most intimate, as she had been taught when she started working. First you had to allow the interviewee to get used to hearing themselves speak, then guide them toward the subject and only then move closer to the areas where an answer might cost something. The last question should allow the conversation to end with a sentence that had the shape of a conclusion.

Any of her former bosses would have approved of that list.

Claire read the tenth one again.

What have you learned about yourself?

She thought it was particularly good.

She closed the notebook.

Her mother called at ten twenty, late enough for Claire to look at the screen twice before answering.

—Did I wake you?

—Mum, it's ten twenty.

There was a brief pause at the other end.

—Oh, right. The time difference. I always get mixed up.
How are you?

—Fine. I've been given a long feature for February.

—That's good. What about?

Claire looked up at the ceiling. There was some surprisingly beautiful plaster moulding and a thin crack that began beside the ceiling lamp, the one that was actually hung and worked perfectly even though she hardly ever switched it on.

—Berlin nightlife.

—You'll like that. You've always liked music.

Claire smiled.

—Yes.

—And are you meeting people?

—Yes, quite a few.

Her mother took a moment to answer.

—That's important. A city can become very hard when you're alone, even if it's beautiful.

—I'm not alone, Mum.

That was not exactly what her mother had said, but Claire found it easier to answer that.

They spoke for fourteen minutes. Her mother told her that part of the roof of the house in Bron needed repairing and that a neighbor Claire could not identify was going to have hip surgery. Then she asked her twice whether she was eating properly and once whether she was still so thin.

Claire said she was eating perfectly well.

Before they hung up came the usual sentence.

—And if you're not happy there, you come back. You don't have to prove anything to anyone.

—I know.

—There's nothing wrong with that.

—I know, Mum.

—All right.

—All right.

There was that strange second in which neither of them wanted to be the first to hang up, and eventually her mother said she would call her on Sunday.

Claire placed the phone face down on her knee.

She had not lied about anything specific. She knew people, she had colleagues, she went to German class twice a week and had had dinner with several people since arriving. Marion had invited her to a birthday party the following Saturday and Piet had told her that whenever she wanted, she could come to dinner with him and his wife.

It was all true.

Even so, she had managed to build, out of true facts, a version of her life that did not much resemble the woman who

was still sitting on the living-room floor in her coat at half past ten at night.

That skill was not new either.

Before going to bed, she opened the notebook again.

The eleven questions were still there, lined up with an almost reassuring neatness. There was plenty of space underneath and Claire rested the tip of the pen on the paper while trying to think whether anything was missing.

She wrote the number twelve.

Then she remained with the pen motionless long enough for the ink to form a small black dot beside the number.

She could not find the question.

She closed the notebook and wrapped the elastic band around the cover.

When she switched off the lamp on the floor, the living room went completely dark for a moment and Claire had to wait for her eyes to adjust before standing up. She went to the bedroom without turning on another light and brushed her teeth with the door open to make use of the light coming in from the street.

The large suitcase was still open at the foot of the bed.

Inside were the winter clothes she had brought from Paris, perfectly folded except for the sweaters she had spent six weeks taking out one by one. Whenever she needed one, she took it out, wore it and, after washing it, folded it again and put it back into the same suitcase instead of placing it in the wardrobe.

She did not do it consciously.

She simply had not yet found enough of a reason to unpack it completely.

Claire got into bed and turned off the light.

Somewhere in the building someone dragged a chair and then there was a brief laugh, muffled by two floors and several walls.

She thought about Sylvie's email, about Jonas saying that asking did not tell you much and about the word she had boxed in that evening.

Doch.

Then she thought about the question Frau Riedel had asked her in front of the whole class and the bigger apartment she had chosen because she needed to answer something.

She closed her eyes.

The next morning she would not remember thinking anything else.

2

Five places she would never visit

Claire was good at research and, if she had to choose the single skill on which she had built her eleven-year career, she probably would have chosen that one.

She knew how to arrive at a meeting knowing the name of the woman who had been handling the accounts for seventeen years, find the 2011 municipal report no one had cited since it was published and discover, among forty pages of irrelevant data, the figure that forced you to ask a different question. She liked research in an almost physical way, perhaps because gathering information still belonged to that part of the job where nothing could really go wrong. As long as you were reading, sorting, underlining and opening tabs, you had not yet misunderstood anyone, asked a stupid question or written a sentence you might regret later.

So she did what she always did when she still did not understand a subject. She opened a new document, named it BERLIN_NIGHT_notes and started reading.

Three days later, the first problem appeared.

It was not a lack of information, but exactly the opposite. There was so much of it that Claire began to suspect much of it existed to avoid saying something, and the more she read, the more clearly she saw that almost everything published could be divided into two broad families that were not much use to her.

The first was promotional and consisted of the parties' own websites, black-and-white photographs in which a complete body almost never appeared and texts written in solemn English where expressions such as *safe space*, *exploration*, *radical inclusivity* and *no judgement* appeared again and again. Some pages looked as though they had been designed by a contemporary art gallery and others proudly preserved an early-2000s aesthetic, but almost all of them spoke with that slightly religious gravity communities acquire when they need to explain to outsiders that what they do is not exactly what it seems.

The second family was larger and far more predictable. Weekend features in which the journalist queued up, described the doorman, caught sight of a few naked bodies, and went home convinced they had understood Berlin.

Claire read seven articles built that way and, by the time she finished the seventh, she was convinced she could write the eighth without leaving her apartment.

One of them, published in a French weekly she respected quite a lot, claimed that Berlin was the city where the body finally forgot shame. She thought the sentence was so bad that she copied it into her notebook to make sure she never wrote it by accident.

After five days of reading, she found the gap.

There were rules, photographs, manifestos, stories about bouncers, prices, addresses, political reflections and enough descriptions of bodies to fill an entire second feature. What she could barely find was anyone explaining what it actually felt like to be there without boasting about it and without apologizing, as though the experience did not need to become immediately a declaration of freedom, a provocation or a confession.

That interested her.

For a few weeks she was convinced she had found the article.

The specific vocabulary of that world came afterward.

Claire understood the German on the pages without much difficulty, but she began coming across terms whose literal meaning she knew and whose use within that context was different, as well as English words Berliners seemed to

have adopted without feeling any need to translate them. She opened a page at the back of the notebook and began collecting them, not so much because she needed a dictionary as because she wanted to know exactly what each one meant when someone used it there.

Playroom. Darkroom. Dress code. Awareness. FLINTA. Sex-positive. Consent.

She had to look up FLINTA. She discovered that it was an acronym used to refer to women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender people, and that it appeared at some parties to define spaces or establish who could access certain areas.

Awareness interested her more because she knew the word and yet had not understood its function. It did not simply mean being alert or conscious. It could refer to a team of identifiable people whose job was to intervene when someone felt uncomfortable, violated or simply unsafe.

Something similar happened with *consent*.

The word appeared again and again, but rarely as an abstract principle. It was written as concrete instructions that sometimes sounded almost domestic. Ask before touching. Wait for an answer. If you are not sure, ask again. Silence is not a yes. If the answer is no, move on.

That was what made her stop.

Claire had her glass of wine on the floor and the laptop resting on her legs when she read the same instructions several times. There was nothing particularly revolutionary about them and yet she felt a slight pressure beneath her sternum that she could not connect to anything.

She copied the sentences into the notebook.

Underneath, in slightly smaller handwriting, she wrote two questions about where people learned those things and why anyone had to explain them.

The next morning she crossed them out with a single line.

Claire had two ways of crossing things out. When something was no longer useful, she covered it until it became illegible. When she wanted to pretend she was removing a sentence while keeping the possibility of reading it again, she drew a single clean line through it.

Those two questions received the second kind of crossing-out.

On Thursday she wrote to Hélène Vasseur.

Hélène was French, forty-seven years old, had lived in Berlin for twelve years and worked in film production. Claire had met her at a welcome dinner in September that she had attended because someone invited her and declining the invitation seemed more complicated than accepting. They had talked for about twenty minutes, long enough for Claire to like

Hélène enormously, although afterward she had never contacted her again.

Writing spontaneously to people she liked was one of those things she always thought she would do another day.

The message was nine lines long and three of them contained some form of apology for writing to her.

Hélène replied forty minutes later with an audio message eleven minutes and twenty-two seconds long.

Claire listened to it once while making coffee and a second time with the notebook open. Hélène's voice came with traffic, footsteps and the clicking of a pedestrian crossing signal in the background, and she spoke with the speed of someone walking while thinking, correcting and contradicting herself without stopping.

—First, forget almost everything you've read, because ninety percent of it is written by people who went once. Although I haven't been in four years, so technically I'm also someone who went once, only several times.

Claire smiled and kept listening.

Hélène told her to bring cash because many places did not accept cards and the nearest ATM could become the most depressing place in Europe at four in the morning. She told her that the cloakroom was usually compulsory, that it cost a

whether he's bored, whether he wants to stay or whether he's acting like an idiot. You have a pretty obvious tendency to take care of people and I've only had dinner with you once, so imagine how obvious it must be.

Claire paused the audio.

She went back a few seconds and listened to that part again.

You have a pretty obvious tendency to take care of people.

She made a small *tss* with her tongue against her teeth and resumed playback.

Hélène moved on to clothes and told her to wear closed, comfortable shoes because she might be standing for hours, and not to try to look especially pretty.

—I know you from one dinner and I already know what you're going to do. You're going to think you need to look elegant because you don't know what else to do when you don't know the rules. Well, no. Don't try to look pretty, Claire. Trying to look pretty there is probably the worst way you can dress.

Claire took notes without deciding whether it bothered her that a woman she had seen for twenty minutes had described her so accurately.

The audio continued with a long silence in which only Hélène's footsteps could be heard, and then her voice changed slightly.

—And then there's one thing nobody is going to explain properly. The first time, you probably won't see much of anything. You're going to think it looks like a municipal swimming pool in the dark with the music too loud, and you'll spend two hours wondering where that thing all the articles promise actually is. Then, at some point in the early hours, you'll turn your head in a corridor and suddenly understand where you are. I don't know how to explain it any better. It's considerably more boring and considerably stranger than you imagine, and both things are true at the same time.

There was another pause.

—You're going to go and look, aren't you?

There was no irony in her voice. Hélène asked it with the same naturalness with which she might have asked whether Claire planned to take the metro.

Then she added that they should have dinner sometime and that she was very happy to have another Frenchwoman nearby.

Claire transcribed the entire audio.

It took her a little over an hour and she organized the notes into two columns, one for material that could be published and another for things Hélène had said as a friend or

that simply did not belong in the article. It was a method Claire had learned from an editor during her early years and had not needed to use in a long time.

At the bottom of the second column she wrote the sentence about going to look and, after thinking about it for a moment, added that it had not really been a question.

She could not explain why that distinction seemed important.

On Friday, when she returned from the bathroom at the office, she found a Post-it stuck to the edge of her keyboard.

There were two names written in surprisingly rounded handwriting for someone like Jonas and, next to the first, an arrow ending in the word Lichtenberg.

Claire picked up the note.

—Is this for me?

Jonas pulled one of his headphones away from his ear.

—Yes.

—Thanks.

—No problem.

Claire looked at the names again.

—Can I say you sent me?

It took Jonas a second to understand the question.

—To whom?

—I don't know. The people at the door, for example.

He laughed, not exactly at Claire but at the idea.

—No. You don't go there on anyone's behalf. You just go.

He put the headphone back on and, before returning his attention to the screen, added something.

—And don't say I told you about it.

—Why? Could it get you into some kind of trouble?

—It's not a secret. I just don't want to become anyone's guide. It's a place, not a religion.

Claire stuck the Post-it on the page opposite the glossary and spent the rest of the morning slightly irritated, although she could not have said whether she was annoyed with Jonas, with herself or with the fact that he seemed incapable of giving the matter the importance she had been building up around it for a week.

* * *

The following Thursday, in German class, Frau Riedel was working with verbs whose meaning changed considerably

depending on the context and eventually wrote *anfassen* on the board.

Claire knew the verb perfectly well. To touch, grab, put your hands on something or someone, depending on the sentence. What made her look up was that underneath it, Frau Riedel wrote a construction Claire had been coming across on different pages for the past week.

Fragt, bevor ihr jemanden anfasst.

Ask before touching someone.

One of the Italians tried to translate it and turned the sentence into something like asking before picking a person up, which caused several people to laugh. Frau Riedel was about to correct him when Claire gave the right version.

The teacher looked at her.

—Very good. That construction doesn't usually come that quickly.

Claire realized that she already had the answer prepared and did not want to give it.

—I've seen it written several times lately.

—Then you've been reading properly.

Frau Riedel continued with the exercise.

That night, while doing her homework, Claire thought that in barely a week certain German words she had known for years had begun to acquire new meanings. She knew how to say that someone should ask before touching, how to ask for a camera to be covered, how to explain that she did not want something that night and how to recognize a space reserved for certain people.

The curious thing was that she still did not know how to complete *ich möchte* with an answer she had not chosen out of convenience.

The first of the five places came from Jonas's Post-it.

DER HOF occupied a former factory in Lichtenberg, with an inner courtyard, a hall devoted mainly to techno and a programme that alternated conventional nights with sex-positive events. The door policy seemed less strict than at other clubs, there was no particularly complicated dress code and admission cost twenty euros.

The website consisted almost entirely of a single black page with the programme in Helvetica. At the bottom were the rules in German, written in a much smaller font than the DJs' names.

No photographs. No racism. No sexism. No homophobia. No transphobia. Ask before touching.

Claire read the last sentence several times, even though she already knew it.

She liked the fact that it was written with the same naturalness with which other establishments indicated where the toilets were.

She found the second place on her own after an hour and a half of following accounts and hashtags on Instagram.

KABINETT was a monthly travelling fetish party with no permanent venue, a strict dress code and a waiting-list system. The photographs they posted were of much higher quality than Claire had expected and, according to the account itself, everyone who appeared in them had explicitly authorized their publication.

One image held her attention considerably longer than the others.

It showed a woman of perhaps sixty-five, with very short white hair, reading glasses hanging from her neck and a black harness over her body. She was laughing with her head thrown back, as though someone outside the frame had just said something genuinely funny.

Claire enlarged the photograph.

It was not the leather that made her keep looking.

It was the glasses.

There was something about the combination that did not fit the image she had unconsciously constructed of who

belonged in places like that. The glasses seemed too domestic, too normal, as though the woman had been reading the newspaper twenty minutes earlier and could go back to doing so when she got home.

Claire closed the photograph and, a few seconds later, opened it again.

The second time, it took her longer to close it. She was not looking for any detail that might be useful for the article, and admitting that to herself caused a small but immediate discomfort.

The third place appeared by accident.

While looking for another address, she found the website for NEPTUN, a mixed sauna in Schöneberg that had been open since 1978. The page looked as though it had not been updated since 2004 and had a blue gradient background, an animated drop of water and prices displayed in a table showing fourteen euros for both women and men.

The house rules had eleven points.

The first required everyone to shower.

Nothing on that page promised exploration, freedom, bodily revolution or any of the expressions Claire had spent days reading. It promised showers, lockers, opening hours, cleanliness and a sauna that had been open for almost half a century.

That was precisely why she added it to the list.

The fourth was the one she found hardest to look at without making a slight grimace, and it took her a couple of days to admit that her reaction contained information about herself and not necessarily about the place.

SALÓN ROSSI was a couples' club located in a basement in Charlottenburg. The photographs showed burgundy carpeting, dark leather sofas, a buffet and décor that looked as though it had been chosen by someone who had decided in 1998 what luxury meant and had never reconsidered it.

The website included a booking form and a table of prices.

Couples paid sixty euros. Women attending alone entered for free. Men on their own paid ninety and could only attend with an advance reservation.

Claire read it again.

Then she copied the prices into her notebook.

Those three figures explained something about the economics of heterosexual desire with extraordinary efficiency. Who was scarce, who was plentiful and who was needed in order for everyone else to be willing to pay.

Beside them she wrote that this could become an entire paragraph in the article.

It still did not occur to her to wonder what entering for free would mean.

The fifth place had no name.

It had only a street and a number.

The address appeared three times over the course of five days and always indirectly, as though the people writing it assumed that anyone who needed to understand it already knew what was there. She found it once in a forum from 2019, when someone asked about private parties and received that address as the only reply. The second time it appeared in the archived bio of an account that no longer existed. The third time it was included in a list of addresses on a blog about industrial architecture, although that seemed to be a coincidence.

She found no website, photographs, opening hours, prices or associated name.

She looked up the address on the map.

It was in Wedding, in the north of the city, on a street with a car repair shop, a Turkish hairdresser and residential buildings similar to thousands of other buildings in Berlin.

On Sunday afternoon Claire took the U6 to see it.

During the forty-minute journey she explained to herself several times that this was fieldwork. If an address appeared in three different sources and might become part of a feature, the least a journalist should do was check that it existed. The explanation was perfectly reasonable and, precisely because of that, Claire had no need to look for another one.

She arrived at around half past four, when the October light was beginning to turn yellowish and flat, making the façades look like photographs taken several decades earlier.

The address belonged to a five-storey building with a grey façade and a glass entrance door reinforced with metal mesh. There were six doorbells. From the street she could see a corridor leading to the inner courtyard and, at the far end, a yellow container beside a rolled-up carpet someone had left leaning against the wall.

Inside the entrance were two children's bicycles.

Claire checked the number again.

That was it.

She stood on the pavement for several minutes looking at a door behind which absolutely nothing was happening. It was Sunday afternoon, children lived there and there were probably people making coffee, doing laundry or thinking about what to cook that evening.

A woman came out of the building pushing a shopping trolley and held the door for a few seconds when she saw Claire.

—Wollen Sie rein?

Claire shook her head too quickly.

—Danke, nein.

The woman looked at her for barely a second, shrugged and continued down the street.

Claire remained still for a few more seconds and then started walking toward the station, her face warm.

Somewhere between Seestraße and Leopoldplatz she ended up laughing to herself.

She had crossed half the city to stand in front of an entrance because three strangers on the internet had written down the same address. She thought that if she ever told anyone about the scene, she would have to improve it slightly so that she did not sound completely idiotic.

What she did not think about then was that the building had done absolutely nothing to appear mysterious.

She had brought the mystery with her.

That night she sat on the living-room floor beside the lamp again and opened the working document. She already had more than twenty pages of notes organized by subject, with

links, opening hours, screenshots, prices and comments she could locate within seconds.

The list, however, she decided to write by hand.

She opened the notebook to an odd-numbered page and wrote down the five places, leaving enough space between them. Beneath each name she noted the address and, on the right, added what she still needed to know.

DER HOF was in Lichtenberg. Former factory, techno, sex-positive, twenty euros and no particularly strict dress code. It was the most accessible place and it probably made sense to start there.

KABINETT had no permanent venue. Monthly fetish party, waiting list and strict dress rules. She would have to try contacting them through Instagram.

NEPTUN was in Schöneberg, opened during the day and had been running since 1978. Claire wrote that this might be where the part nobody talked about could be found.

SALÓN ROSSI was in Charlottenburg. Basement, couples, women free, men ninety euros. Beside the price she wrote again that the entire article might be contained there.

For the fifth entry there was no name to write, so she put Wedding, the street and the number. Then she added that there was no website, no photographs and no reliable information, and left the rest blank.

When she finished, she looked at the page while trying to decide what title to give it.

The sentence had been circling in her mind for several days and it was not hers. Marion had said it at the office while laying out pages, without even taking her eyes off the screen.

I think it's fascinating and I would never in my life go inside one.

Claire wrote at the top

FIVE PLACES SHE WOULD NEVER VISIT

It amused her.

Underneath she wrote the date, October 19, and, as she always did when closing the first phase of research, wrote down the work plan. She needed at least five interviews, two with people who organized events, two with people who attended regularly and one with someone who worked the door. She would try making the first contacts through Instagram and Hélène, wanted to have the main interviews completed during the first week of November and planned to keep December for writing.

The plan was reasonable, professional and perfectly achievable.

It did not include entering any of the five places.

Claire did not perceive this as an omission, much less as fear, because it simply was not part of the method she had in

mind. She had written about prisons without spending a night inside one, about a strike without working in the factory and about a very public divorce without needing to divorce anyone. Journalists asked people who knew the experience, checked the facts and then wrote.

That was how the profession had worked for eleven years.

That was why the title of the page was funny.

Five places she would never visit.

A joke can only be completely funny when the person making it is certain they are talking about something that will never have to happen to them.

That same night she sent five initial messages. Four were written with her usual precision and the fifth, sent through Instagram, she rewrote six times before deciding that the second version was better than all the others.

Sylvie replied on Monday around noon.

She told Claire that the approach was very good, that everything seemed much more organized than she had expected at that stage and that there was only one thing still missing.

The smell.

She had five places, four prices, historical context, rules, vocabulary and the beginnings of a thesis, but nothing Sylvie could actually see, hear or feel while reading. She did not need Claire to solve the problem yet, only to keep it in mind.

Claire read the email three times.

She thought it was fair, which was probably the reaction she least wanted to have.

She saved the document, closed the laptop and remained with her back against the radiator while looking at the notebook page.

Five places she would never visit.

During the previous few days she had spoken to H  l  ne, read rules, studied photographs and travelled forty minutes by subway to stand in front of a door without going inside. She knew how much a sauna cost, what clothes some parties recommended, who paid ninety euros to enter a basement in Charlottenburg and what an awareness team did when someone crossed a boundary.

But she did not know what any of those places smelled like.

Nor did she know whether the music made the floor vibrate, whether people spoke more loudly than usual, whether it was too hot, whether her hands would sweat as she handed over the money at the door or whether, once inside, everything would turn out to be disappointingly ordinary.

No one could tell her those things exactly as she herself would experience them.

Claire left the notebook open on her legs and read the title again.

She did not decide to go inside that night, although months later she would remember the moment as though she had.

What happened was much smaller.

For the first time since Sylvie had given her the assignment, Claire understood that there was a question she had not needed to ask herself until then.

And she still did not know what her answer would be.

3

You can't write what you don't know

Of the five messages Claire had sent on Sunday night, four received no reply.

Der Hof did not answer. Neither did Kabinett, not through Instagram or the contact form, and for three days Claire checked several times to see whether the message appeared as sent, as though the lack of response might be due to a technical failure rather than the fact that no one was particularly interested in talking to a French journalist.

Neptun replied two weeks later with a brief sentence in German that Claire understood without needing to translate it.

Wir geben keine Interviews. Sie sind aber willkommen.

They did not give interviews, but she was welcome.

Salón Rossi was even more efficient and simply sent her a PDF with the prices.

The response produced a mixture of irritation and respect. Claire was used to institutions protecting themselves behind press departments, spokespeople and emails that began by thanking her for her interest and ended without answering a single question. Here, on the other hand, no one seemed to feel any obligation to explain themselves to her.

So she did what she had always done when an institutional door refused to open and looked for the people who walked through it.

She posted in a Facebook group for women living in Berlin with more than twelve thousand members, where, within the space of a few hours, one could find a recommendation for an English-speaking gynecologist, someone giving away a sofa, three arguments about rent and a woman asking whether it was normal for her German boyfriend not to send her a message for two days.

Claire wrote a short post. She explained that she was a French journalist preparing a feature for a cultural magazine about Berlin's sex-positive spaces. She was looking for women who frequented them and guaranteed anonymity. She added that she was not interested in voyeurism, a sentence she reread twice before posting because it struck her as exactly the kind of

thing someone writes when they are afraid of sounding voyeuristic.

She received two replies.

The first arrived that same evening and was fourteen hundred words long.

The woman was thirty-eight, had studied sociology, worked at a foundation and wrote with a precision Claire immediately recognized as useful material. She talked about late capitalism, forms of ownership, the body understood as the last uncolonized territory and the difference between sexual freedom and sexual availability. She quoted two female authors Claire had read and ended by suggesting a one-hour call.

Claire replied in less than five minutes.

The second response appeared the following day.

ok. thursday can't. tuesday 5.30 at baruch, weserstraße?

It was signed *nike_88*.

Claire accepted that meeting too, although over the following days she thought considerably more about the woman who had written fourteen hundred words than about the stranger who had barely used twelve. The first promised theory, context, concepts and sentences that could sustain a page. The second seemed to promise half an hour over coffee with someone who might not have much to say.

Claire did not realize then how much that preference said about her.

Two days before November, she walked from Hermannplatz to Weserstraße. Neukölln already had that damp, orange appearance it could keep for half the year, with leaves stuck to the asphalt, wet bicycles leaning against lampposts and checked blankets piled over the chairs on café terraces for customers who still refused to accept that summer was over.

Baruch was a small café with six tables, lots of plants and an espresso machine that looked as though it had cost more than all the furniture combined. Claire arrived twelve minutes early, chose a table with her back against the wall, as she always did, ordered a coffee and took out her notebook.

She reviewed the eleven questions she had prepared.

They still seemed good.

She knew the first three by heart and had thought of two possible directions for each depending on what the interviewee answered. That way of preparing reassured her because it reduced the possibility of silence and turned a conversation with a stranger into something resembling a structure.

Throughout the walk she had thought of *nike_88* as Nike and, without meaning to, had also constructed an image. Mid-twenties, short hair, perhaps a visible tattoo and that

slightly defiant confidence Claire associated with people who seemed to have decided early who they were.

At five thirty-four, a woman came in wearing a navy fleece with the logo of a transport company embroidered on the chest. She carried a bicycle helmet in one hand, her cheeks were red from the cold and beneath the fleece Claire could see a T-shirt from a 2019 fun run.

She looked around the café once and immediately found Claire, who was the only person sitting alone.

—Claire?

—Yes.

—Jo. Well, Johanna, but nobody calls me that.

She placed the helmet beside the leg of the table and started taking off the fleece.

—Sorry I'm late. My boss has a special talent for needing something at five to five.

—It's fine.

—I'm going to get hot chocolate. Do you want anything?

Claire shook her head and watched Jo walk over to the counter.

The part of her brain that never stopped working immediately began sorting information. Twenty-six years old, probably had not grown up in Berlin, the jacket was work

clothing rather than an aesthetic choice, she had arrived by bicycle at the end of October and, from the way she spoke to the waitress, seemed to know the neighborhood well.

Almost all of those deductions would turn out to be correct.

None of them would be particularly useful.

When Jo returned with a large mug of hot chocolate, Claire explained the framework of the interview. The feature would appear in a French cultural magazine, Jo could use her real name, a false name or no name at all, and she could change her mind about that even after the interview. Claire asked whether she minded being recorded and whether she could take notes.

Jo looked at the notebook.

—Why would I mind?

Claire placed the phone between them, started the recording and opened the page with the questions.

—How did you get into this scene?

Jo needed a few seconds to remember.

—My roommate took me.

Claire waited.

Jo drank some chocolate.

—And what was it like?

—We went.

—Yes, I mean the first time.

—Oh. It was in 2021, when things reopened. We'd been shut inside for months and we were sick of our apartment.

Claire wrote down the year.

—How would you describe it to someone who's never been to a place like that?

Jo raised her eyebrows slightly.

—Who?

—Anyone outside that scene. My readers, for example.

The other woman shrugged.

—I don't know. It's a club. There's music, you can fuck if you want to and people are usually pretty nice.

Claire wrote the sentence down and, almost by reflex, added a note in parentheses to remind herself to rephrase the question because Jo did not seem to have understood what she was looking for.

—Maybe I can ask it another way. What's the difference between a place like that and a normal nightclub?

Jo did not need to think about it.

—In a normal nightclub, people grab your ass without asking.

Claire looked up.

That was a quote.

She felt that small surge of satisfaction that came when a conversation suddenly produced a sentence capable of carrying several lines of the article on its own.

She wrote it down in full.

—And there they don't?

—There they ask you.

Claire found herself thinking about the pause that must come after a question like that. Those few seconds when the other person still did not know whether they were going to be allowed to touch you. The thought caused a brief physical awareness in her, difficult to place. She lowered her eyes to the notebook.

—Always?

—Almost always. If someone doesn't ask, you tell them and usually that's the end of it. If they keep going, you go to awareness and that person can end up getting thrown out. It happened to me once and it worked pretty well.

—It worked well?

Jo smiled because she noticed the contradiction.

—The situation was shit, obviously, but the way they dealt with it worked. It was efficient.

Claire underlined *efficient* twice.

She liked the word because it was not the one she had expected.

—What would you say are the main rules?

Jo began counting on her fingers.

—No photos, ask before touching, don't stand there staring at people who are doing something. Either you join in or you keep walking, but standing right in front of them watching is really uncomfortable. Shower first if you're going to a sauna and I suppose don't behave like an asshole, although that one should apply everywhere.

—And what do you think outsiders misunderstand?

—That they're places for sex.

Claire stopped writing for a moment.

—Aren't they?

Jo laughed.

—Yes, of course they are, but that's like saying a swimming pool is a place for water. It's true, there's water, but it doesn't explain why you go.

Claire smiled too.

—So why do you go?

—A lot of the time, to dance. Some nights I don't do anything else. Sometimes I end up eating pizza at six in the morning with three people whose names I don't remember and that's been the best part of the whole night.

Claire wrote down *swimming pool* and *water* and, as Jo kept talking, she noticed something beginning to shift in the interview.

It was not going badly.

Claire wrote down *pool* and *water* and, as Jo kept talking, she noticed that something was beginning to shift in the interview.

It wasn't going badly.

After barely eleven minutes, she already had several usable lines, but she was beginning to suspect that the problem lay in her questions. They all assumed that Jo had stepped into a separate world. Jo, on the other hand, spoke about a place she went to dance on some nights and perhaps did not return to for another three months.

Claire looked at the next question.

—Have you ever felt uncomfortable?

—Of course. Lots of times.

—For example?

Jo pushed a strand of hair away from her face.

—When you arrive and don't know anyone, for example. You spend two hours standing there wondering what you're doing there, thinking the whole thing is stupid and you'd be better off at home. It still happens to me sometimes.

—I thought you were going to say something a bit more...

Claire left the sentence unfinished.

—More what?

—More serious.

Jo considered it seriously.

—Yes, that too. The annoying guy I told you about before. But that can happen in any bar. The difference was that here they threw him out.

Claire wrote the sentence down, although she already knew she probably would not use it.

There were five questions left and she was beginning to suspect that none of them was going to work, but she asked them anyway because they were written in the notebook and she had spent eleven years finishing the lists she started.

—Do they know at work?

—No.

—Do you prefer to keep it separate?

Jo wrapped both hands around the mug.

—I work at a transport company in Schöneweide with fourteen fifty-year-old men. It's not a secret, I just don't see why I should tell them where I dance on weekends.

Claire nodded.

—And your family?

—My sister does. My mother doesn't.

—Because you think she wouldn't understand?

—Because I haven't told her.

The answer came so cleanly that it took Claire a second to realize she had once again added a meaning Jo had not put there.

She moved on to the next question.

—Would you say there's a community?

This time Jo did not answer immediately.

She frowned slightly and seemed to look for a way of replying that did not completely reject the question.

—I don't know if community is the word.

—What would you call it?

—People.

Claire waited for more.

—Right, but I suppose there are connections, shared codes, people who know each other.

—Sure, like anywhere four thousand people go. There are people I like and others who are unbearable. There's a man who thinks he's Foucault and at five in the morning he starts explaining consent to you in the kitchen until everyone finds an excuse to leave.

Claire laughed.

Jo did too.

—Is that a community? I don't know. It would be like asking whether everyone who goes to the gym belongs to a community.

Claire wrote only two words.

It's people.

She added nothing else.

She reached the second-to-last question.

—What would you say you've learned about yourself since you started going?

Jo laughed.

It was not a loud laugh or a mocking one, but a brief, involuntary reaction that seemed to surprise even her. She covered her mouth with her hand and apologized immediately.

—Sorry. I’m not laughing at you.

Claire felt heat rise to her face.

—It’s fine. What was funny?

Jo put the mug down on its saucer.

—I just don’t know how to say it without sounding horrible.

—Say it however it comes out.

The other woman hesitated for barely a moment.

—You’ve never been inside one, have you?

Claire did not answer immediately.

—No.

Jo nodded slowly.

—Right. You can tell.

There was no superiority in her expression and she did not seem particularly pleased to have discovered anything. She said it the same way she might have told Claire that a label was sticking out of her shirt.

Then she drank some more chocolate.

Claire kept staring at the notebook.

Later, when she listened to the recording at home, she would discover that the silence had lasted four seconds. At the time, it felt considerably longer.

In front of her was the final question.

What would you say to someone who wants to go in for the first time?

For forty minutes she had been asking a twenty-six-year-old woman who worked in logistics to explain what it felt like to do something Claire later wanted to describe in the first person plural, as though asking the questions correctly could substitute for experience.

It was not a complete or particularly elegant revelation.

It was more like realizing that she had buttoned her shirt incorrectly and that everyone else had probably noticed before she did.

—Sorry —Jo said again—. That sounded awful.

Claire closed the notebook, leaving one finger between the pages.

—No. It sounded pretty good.

The interview ended there.

The conversation began a few seconds later.

It lasted almost another forty minutes and was much better than anything Claire had prepared.

Jo told her that she was from Cottbus and had moved to Berlin when she was nineteen. Her former roommate, the one who had first taken her to a party, now had a child and hardly ever went out. In summer there was a party beside a lake north of the city that a lot of people reached by regional train with their bicycles and coolers, and for Jo that packed train at eleven in the morning on a Saturday in July was one of her favorite places in Germany.

She also told Claire that the first time she had gone to a sex-positive club, she spent almost three hours leaning against the bar without speaking to anyone.

—I thought I'd made a complete mistake coming. Then I went home and cried a little on the U-Bahn.

Claire felt her hand reaching for the notebook before she consciously decided to do it.

—Why did you cry?

Jo shrugged again.

—I don't know. I wasn't sad.

Claire opened the notebook.

—Can I use that?

She heard herself ask the question and felt the slight discomfort of having returned so quickly to her work.

Jo did not seem to care.

—Yes, of course.

—I can change your name.

—Whatever you want.

—And your job too, if you prefer.

Jo frowned.

—Why would you change my job?

—For anonymity.

—Oh. Well, if necessary.

She put the fleece back on and picked up the helmet from the floor.

—Seriously, Claire, it's really no big deal.

The sentence could have referred to the job, the clubs or the interview and Claire did not ask which of the three.

Jo stood beside the table for a few seconds.

—If you do end up going, try to make it a Thursday. There are too many tourists on Saturdays.

Then she left the café with the helmet under her arm.

Claire stayed until the woman behind the counter began clearing the tables.

She had fifty-two minutes of recording, six pages of notes and more than enough material to justify the afternoon. The sentence about grabbing someone's ass could open a paragraph, the swimming-pool comparison was excellent and the man who thought he was Foucault would probably survive any edit.

Objectively, it had been a very good interview.

Claire opened the notebook to the page with the eleven questions.

She read them once.

Then she began crossing them out.

She left the first three because they were simple enough and because, she thought with an irony that did not yet amuse her, the first three were not to blame for anything. From the fourth to the eleventh, she drew a double line through each one, the kind of crossing-out she used when something should never appear again.

When she finished, she stared at the page.

She was not embarrassed that she had asked bad questions. She had asked worse ones and would do so again.

The unpleasant feeling in her stomach came from somewhere else.

For years she had thought that a good interview consisted of getting someone to say something true.

For the first time she wondered how many of her questions were actually designed to obtain something that sounded true and could be printed neatly on a page.

What have you learned about yourself?

The sentence suddenly seemed almost obscene.

No one could answer that in forty seconds while a journalist waited with her pen ready. Or perhaps they could, but Claire was beginning to suspect that the answer that arrived in forty seconds was usually the one both of them needed in order to finish the job.

Under the crossed-out questions she wrote the date.

October 29.

Then she copied Jo's sentence.

You've never been inside one, have you? You can tell.

She stared at those words for a few seconds and added that Jo had not been trying to hurt her, which somehow made things worse because it meant it had not been a reproach.

It had been an observation.

When she left Baruch it was seven twenty and her German class was a nine-minute walk away.

For the first time since enrolling, she decided not to go.

She wrote to Frau Riedel that she was not feeling well, put her phone away and felt a small, unexpected pleasure in sending a lie that had no consequences for anyone.

The following Wednesday she spoke to the woman who had written fourteen hundred words.

Her name was Ulrike, she was thirty-eight, worked as a researcher at a foundation and spoke impeccable English. The call lasted one hour and four minutes and, for almost all of that time, Claire wrote without stopping.

Ulrike had a conceptual framework for every aspect of the subject.

She distinguished between permission and desire and explained why very explicit rules could produce more freedom than the absence of rules. She used traffic as an example and Claire thought the comparison was so good that it would probably survive the edit intact. Ulrike also had a theory about why that culture had flourished in Berlin rather than Munich, combining low land prices after reunification, empty industrial spaces, the city's political history and a certain Protestant hostility toward ostentation.

She called all of it *the field*.

Claire filled eleven pages.

When the conversation ended, she had that physical euphoria an especially good interview gave her. She stood up, made coffee and remained in the kitchen for a few minutes while rereading the first pages.

Ten minutes later, the euphoria had begun to fade.

Everything was well explained.

Too well.

Every sentence could have come from an essay, a lecture or a sociology book. There were brilliant ideas, clear concepts and connections Claire would never have constructed on her own, but there was no hour of the night, no smell, no sweaty back, no person waiting outside a bathroom, no particular song, no fear, no shame and none of the small things that turned an explanation into an experience.

There was a field.

Almost at the end of the interview, when they were already saying goodbye, Claire had asked a question that was not on her list.

—And how often do you go?

Ulrike gave a small laugh.

—I haven't been in two years. Maybe two and a half. I suppose that phase passed, although I still think about all of it a lot.

Claire drew a circle around that last sentence.

I still think about all of it a lot.

That was when she understood why the conversation with Jo had irritated her so much.

Jo was inside it and seemed barely interested in building a theory around it.

Ulrike had been outside it for years and could explain everything.

Claire looked at her eleven pages of notes and felt a very precise discomfort as she recognized which side she was on.

That night she sat on the floor beside the lamp again.

She opened the laptop and wrote to Sylvie.

She explained that an approach based solely on interviews was not going to work. The people who knew how to conceptualize those spaces produced exactly the kind of text that already existed, while the people who experienced them as part of everyday life were not necessarily interested in turning every experience into a theory. If she wanted to write something that was not the eighth feature about Berlin's nocturnal freedom, she needed to be there.

See.

Listen.

Wait in a queue.

Understand what happened after several hours.

Know whether the cloakrooms smelled damp, whether the floor stuck beneath her shoes, whether the music made conversation impossible, whether a person could be alone without anyone questioning them and whether a rule written on a website worked the same way when there were bodies in front of you.

She needed to go inside all five places.

Claire wrote the email very carefully and reread it twice before sending it.

It was an impeccable professional argument.

It was also true.

At no point did she mention Jo.

She did not write that a twenty-six-year-old woman had told her *you can tell* while finishing a hot chocolate, or that the sentence had been bothering her for several days far more than she was willing to admit. Nor did she write that she had walked home with a childish fury she could not direct at anyone because Jo had done nothing wrong.

Sylvie replied eleven minutes later from her phone.

She thought it was a good idea and asked Claire to be careful.

That was all.

And so, with a perfectly professional argument, a carefully written email and the approval of an editor in Paris, it was established that Claire would go inside.

Der Hof opened on Thursdays and Saturdays.

Claire checked the calendar.

Hélène had recommended starting on a Thursday because there would be fewer people, it would be easier and everything would be less intense.

Claire knew that made sense.

Even so, she chose Saturday.

The first door

Claire took forty minutes to get dressed and got practically everything wrong.

She could not blame H  l  ne for a lack of instructions. She had told her clearly enough not to try to look especially elegant, to choose closed, comfortable shoes and to remember that she would probably spend many hours on her feet. Claire had written down every piece of advice and, when she opened the wardrobe at half past ten on the night of Saturday, November 2, she fully intended to follow it.

The problem appeared when she tried to decide what a woman who was not trying to look pretty was supposed to look like.

She put on jeans and a black T-shirt, looked at herself in the hallway mirror and had the impression she was dressed to go to the supermarket. Then she tried on a pair of combat boots she had bought in September and felt disguised as someone who knew exactly where she was going. She changed

again, left two pairs of trousers and three T-shirts on the bed and ended up doing what she always did when she did not know the rules of a place very well.

She chose clothes that could not be questioned.

Well-cut black trousers, an ivory silk shirt, her long grey coat and low-heeled ankle boots that were comfortable as long as no one expected her to spend six hours standing in them on a concrete floor. Before leaving, she added a pair of small gold hoop earrings that had belonged to her grandmother.

She looked at herself in the apartment's only mirror, which was still leaning against the hallway wall and tilted backward, so that if Claire stood too close it cut off her head.

She stepped back until she could see herself completely.

She looked understated, discreet and elegant. She also looked exactly like a woman going to an opening.

Hélène had warned her about that.

Claire made a small *tss* with her mouth, took off the earrings, put them back on and decided that changing anything else would only make her late.

Before entering the subway she withdrew a hundred euros from an ATM.

She almost went back home while she was still in the entrance hall.

She did not, but stood there for a few seconds with one hand on the building door and the keys in the other, thinking that she could go upstairs again, take off the shirt, pour herself some wine and write to Sylvie on Monday saying that she had decided to start somewhere else.

The excuse would have been easy to construct.

It was Saturday. Hélène had recommended a Thursday. She could investigate Neptun first, which was open during the day, or arrange one more interview and postpone the fieldwork for a week. None of those decisions would have looked like fear from the outside.

Claire closed the door behind her.

The second time she almost turned back was in Lichtenberg, at twelve forty at night, when she saw the entrance from the opposite pavement.

She had arrived too early.

She knew perfectly well that this would happen. Hélène had been explicit about the timing and had told her that there probably would not be much going on before two, but Claire had spent eleven years arriving early for everything and that night she had discovered that staying at home waiting could be much more uncomfortable than arriving an hour ahead of time.

The former factory stood at the end of an unremarkable street. On one side were apartment blocks probably built in the sixties and, on the other, an empty lot surrounded by a metal

fence, a used-clothing container and a sign advertising apartments that did not yet exist. A birch tree grew near the corner and farther along stood a long wall behind which Der Hof was located.

From where Claire stood, it looked like neither a factory nor a club. There was an open gate, a gravel courtyard and, at the far end, a metal door illuminated by a single bulb. Two people were standing near the entrance.

What unsettled her most was the silence.

She had imagined she would hear the music from halfway down the street, but the building seemed to swallow it completely. Only when the door opened for a few seconds did a distant thump of bass escape, disappearing again as soon as it closed.

Claire stayed in the area for almost fifty minutes.

She went into the Späti on the corner and bought a bottle of water she did not want because she needed a reason to keep walking around. She tried to sit on a bench, but the metal was too cold, so she remained standing and began counting people as though it were part of a perfectly reasonable research method.

Fourteen people went in during the first half hour.

She watched their clothes because they gave her something concrete to focus on. Two women wore puffer

jackets and heavy trainers. A man of about fifty arrived in a work jacket. A couple argued in Italian as they walked toward the gate. Three people shared a small flask in the courtyard before hiding it behind a metal container.

No one seemed dressed for the fantasy Claire had constructed over the previous weeks.

There was no black leather apart from the occasional jacket. No impossible heels or bodies prepared to be photographed. Most people seemed to have chosen their clothes with November in mind before sex.

Claire looked down at her silk shirt.

At one twenty she finally crossed the street. There were six people in the queue.

Ahead of her were two women of about twenty-five speaking German and, behind her, a man on his own who spent the entire time looking at his phone with the screen brightness almost at its lowest setting.

Claire mentally reviewed all the recommendations she had collected over the previous weeks. Do not talk too much. Have the money ready. Do not argue if the bouncer says no. Do not try to explain who you are or why you deserve to get in. Put the phone away and accept that, if they reject you, you simply have to leave.

She had rehearsed several possibilities in front of the mirror.

None of them included the man who was actually at the door.

He was around sixty and thin, wearing a wool hat, glasses and a padded coat that looked as though it had survived several winters. He sat on a small bench beside the entrance with the calm of someone who might have been watching the door of an apartment building.

He looked at the two women ahead of Claire, gave a small nod and let them in.

When it was her turn, he looked at her for longer.

It could not have been more than four seconds, although that was enough time for Claire to convince herself that he was going to reject her, decide that he probably had good reason to do so and discover, with some displeasure, that part of her would feel relieved if he did because then she could go home without having been the one to make the decision.

The man looked at her face, then at her clothes and finally back into her eyes.

—Allein?

Claire understood the question perfectly.

—Ja. Allein.

Her French accent emerged more clearly than she would have liked.

The man held out his hand.

—Zwanzig.

Claire gave him twenty euros.

He put the note away, looked for change and, while counting some coins, asked in English whether it was her first time.

—Yes.

The man raised his head toward the courtyard.

—Yasmin!

Claire had not anticipated that part.

Yasmin appeared holding a mug of tea. She looked just over thirty and wore a red sweatshirt, a yellow lanyard around her neck and a laminated card that read *AWARENESS*. She had the slightly distracted expression of someone who had just been pulled away from another conversation.

—English?

Claire could have asked for German, but chose English because she did not want that night to contain an additional difficulty she did not need.

—Yes.

Yasmin leaned against the wall and explained that it would take less than a minute. No photographs. Both cameras

on the phone would be covered and removing the stickers meant leaving the venue, regardless of the reason. Then she explained that any physical contact had to be asked for and that, if anyone did something that made Claire uncomfortable, she could find her or anyone wearing the same identification.

—You don't need to have a good reason —she said in English, and Claire heard the sentence in her own language a few seconds later—. You don't even have to explain what happened. If something doesn't feel right for you, that's enough.

Claire nodded.

The third rule was different.

In the rooms upstairs, when people were doing something, she could participate or keep walking. What she could not do was stand there watching.

Yasmin shrugged slightly as she explained it. It was not a moral issue, she said, but a way of preventing someone from turning other people into a spectacle.

Claire felt the sentence settle somewhere she could not yet identify.

Finally, Yasmin recommended drinking water and pointed toward the bar, where it was free.

The conversation seemed to be over when, before stepping away from the wall, she asked with no particular significance

—What's your name?

Claire answered before she had time to think.

—Juliette.

She heard the name only after she had said it.

There had been no calculation, no search for a false identity and none of that instant when a person consciously decides to lie. The word had appeared whole and the first thing Claire felt was not guilt, but a slight physical relaxation in her chest.

Yasmin held out her hand.

—I'm Yasmin. Welcome, Juliette.

Her hand was cold and she wore a thick silver ring on her thumb.

Claire continued along the corridor trying to work out where the name had come from. She had no friends called Juliette, no cousins, schoolmates or recent characters who might explain it. Perhaps she had heard it somewhere that week and forgotten.

That explanation was possible.

It did not feel sufficient.

A young man sitting behind a small table asked for her phone. He turned it over, placed a black sticker over the rear camera, did the same to the front one and pressed both down with his thumb.

—Nicht abmachen.

—Mach ich nicht.

He glanced up briefly, perhaps surprised by the more natural reply from the foreigner he had assumed was standing in front of him, and handed the phone back.

Claire looked at the two small black circles covering the cameras.

The thought appeared immediately.

They had just covered her lens.

For a few seconds she felt something close to professional discomfort, as though someone had taken away a tool she had not even intended to use. Then she thought it was a good sentence for the article.

The cloakroom was a wooden counter with a curtain behind it. A woman with blue hair took Claire's coat without paying much attention to her, charged two euros and handed her a round green plastic token with the number 118.

Claire took two steps, found a pen in her bag and wrote the number on the back of her left hand.

She did it out of habit. For years she had written down hotel rooms, licence plates, names, figures and any piece of information there was a chance she might forget.

Months later she would understand just how much that gesture had given her away.

She put the notebook in the inside pocket of the jacket she was still wearing and continued down the corridor.

The sound appeared suddenly over the last few metres, like entering water and discovering that its temperature was different from what you had imagined.

The hall was high, with exposed metal beams and red lighting so dim that Claire needed almost a minute before she began to distinguish the bodies. There were around two hundred people, perhaps a few more, and most of them were dancing. A bar with a short queue stretched along the left side and, at the far end, an iron staircase led to an upper floor.

The air was much warmer than she had expected. It smelled of sweat, but not the stale sweat of a crowded train carriage in August. There was also dry ice, beer, traces of perfume that appeared and disappeared as people passed nearby and a chemical undertone that vaguely reminded Claire of chlorine.

She stood by the wall for a few seconds, trying to let her eyes adjust to the darkness.

Then she realized she was overdressed.

Not because everyone else was naked. There were T-shirts, loose trousers, trainers, harnesses, work overalls, sportswear and garments Claire would not have known how to name. Two men were dancing in their underwear, one woman wore a mesh dress with Adidas trainers and another looked as though she had come straight from a construction site in blue overalls.

Claire was wearing a silk shirt.

In a room where bodies appeared with the same naturalness as bare arms in summer, she looked dressed for a drink after an opening in Paris.

She waited for people to look at her, but they did not.

She crossed the room convinced that someone would let their eyes rest on her, if only to assess how obvious her mistake was. She passed groups of people, crossed part of the dance floor and reached a radiator beside the bar without anyone appearing to notice anything unusual.

That unsettled her far more than she would have liked to admit. She had spent forty minutes deciding how to present herself to people who were not interested in looking at her.

She leaned against the radiator. It was probably around half past one.

During the following hour almost nothing happened that Claire had imagined.

People danced.

At first it seemed like a kind of waiting room, as though everyone were waiting for the night to actually begin, but then she understood that they were not waiting for anything. Hundreds of people danced with a concentration Claire associated more with a ceremony than a nightclub, many with their eyes closed and barely interacting with anyone around them.

That was when she saw the woman, whom she noticed because she had occupied practically the same square metre for a long time.

She must have been over sixty and was dancing a few metres from the radiator, wearing loose fabric trousers with her torso bare. Her eyes were closed, her grey hair was stuck to her forehead with sweat and there was an old scar beneath one rib.

Claire watched her for several minutes.

At first she thought it was the woman's age that interested her. She had seen dozens of photographs over the previous weeks and, despite everything she had read, she still carried the idea that places like that belonged mainly to young bodies.

But that was not it.

The woman's breasts had fallen with age, her stomach was soft and her skin folded as she turned. Nothing was hidden

and, at the same time, Claire began to have the impression that the woman was showing absolutely nothing.

She was not dancing for anyone.

Sweat ran down her sternum and gathered beneath her breast before continuing downward. She moved with her eyes closed, without seeking anyone's gaze and without checking whether anyone was watching her. No one seemed to care, and neither did she.

Claire felt a change she could not quite define.

She moved slightly away from the radiator and realized she was holding her back too straight, as though she had been maintaining a posture ever since she entered. Then she noticed her own feet and discovered that they were burning inside her ankle boots.

After that she felt the dampness behind her knees and the domestic warmth of the radiator against the backs of her thighs, a temperature that had been there for a long time without her noticing it. The silk shirt had stuck to her back.

When she breathed, she felt the rub of her bra and the movement of the fabric over her chest with unexpected precision. The heat in the hall had made her nipples hard beneath the shirt and Claire glanced down for a moment, almost by reflex, to see how noticeable it was.

The fabric was thick enough.

She looked back at the woman.

Something warm appeared lower down, first as a slight pressure in her abdomen and then as an unmistakable sensation that made her shift her weight from one leg to the other.

Claire pressed her lips together.

She did not understand what was happening because she did not desire the woman. She could recognize that without difficulty. She did not want to approach her, touch her or have the woman touch her.

And yet her body had reacted.

It took her a few seconds to understand what part of the scene was affecting her.

She did not want the woman. She wanted something from her.

She wanted to know what it felt like to inhabit her own body that way, without checking how it looked from the outside. She wanted to close her eyes for twenty minutes without wondering what to do with her arms, whether the shirt was appropriate or whether anyone had noticed she was wearing the wrong shoes.

The thought was so unexpected that Claire felt her eyes fill with tears, which immediately irritated her, so she looked away.

When she opened the notebook again several hours later, the woman would be reduced to a professional note about someone around sixty-five who had danced alone for twenty minutes and might serve as a detail with which to open a section of the article.

She would write nothing about her own body.

Before that happened, Claire walked through the building twice.

She climbed the metal staircase and found a corridor with several doors. Two were open and led into rooms with sofas where people were talking as they would at any party. Another looked like a storage room full of crates of drinks and the last was closed.

She went back downstairs, followed a side corridor and ended up in the courtyard outside.

It was brutally cold compared with the hall.

Around fifteen people were smoking, several of them in T-shirts, as though four degrees in November were a minor detail.

Claire crossed her arms over her chest.

A few metres away, a woman and a man of around forty were speaking German beside a metal container. She wore blue

work overalls open to the waist with a white T-shirt underneath, while he had on loose trousers and no shirt.

Claire caught a few words and needed several seconds to realize they were talking about a washing machine that would not spin.

Everything was beginning to feel bewilderingly ordinary.

Without thinking too much about it, she did what she knew how to do.

—Entschuldigung. Kommt ihr oft hierher?

They both looked at her without surprise.

The woman replied that they came about twice a month.

Claire continued in German and asked whether the place had changed much over the past few years.

The woman thought for a moment. There were more young people now, she said, and prices had gone up. Then she looked at her companion and remarked that at least the music had improved.

The man agreed.

Claire listened to her own voice as she asked another question and immediately recognized the professional cadence. Her tone had dropped half a register, her sentences were more

orderly and she was already thinking of a follow-up before the other person had finished.

The woman tilted her head.

—Where are you from?

—France. I moved here recently.

The answer was true and yet Claire felt as though she had just lied.

Not because she had falsified any fact, but because she had chosen a truth that covered up the real question. The woman did not want to know which country she had been born in. She wanted to know who the stranger was who had spent the past several minutes interviewing them in a courtyard at two in the morning.

The woman put out her cigarette.

—Welcome.

Then she asked whether Claire wanted to dance with them.

Claire felt the answer immediately multiply inside her head.

She could say she was tired, that she did not dance very well, that she was waiting for someone, that maybe she would

later or that she had to keep walking around because she was working.

All of those exits were available and none of them was necessary.

—No, thank you.

The woman nodded.

—Okay.

She touched the man lightly on the arm and they both went back inside.

Claire remained alone beside the container, her heart beating faster in a way that did not correspond to what had just happened.

She had said no, without explaining and without apologizing.

The other woman had not been offended, had not asked why and had not tried to persuade her. Four seconds later she was already walking toward the dance floor and had probably forgotten the conversation.

Claire kept her hands tucked under her arms to hold on to some warmth and was surprised by the relief.

She had spent years constructing polite ways of saying no so that the other person would not feel rejected. That night

she had just discovered that a no could take two words and that, at least there, no one seemed to consider it an attack.

Much later she would understand that this had been one of the important things about the night. At that moment she went back inside because she was cold.

At around two forty, on her way back from the bathroom, she passed a half-open door she had seen several times without paying much attention to it.

This time she looked inside.

There was a red lamp, an upholstered bench and four people. Two were having sex. A third sat nearby with their eyes on the ceiling and the bored expression of someone waiting for a train. The fourth was asleep with their mouth open and their head resting against the wall.

Claire watched the scene for perhaps three seconds.

Then she kept walking.

She had expected that moment to be different. That when she finally found what she had gone there looking for, some combination of surprise, excitement, rejection or fear would appear.

Almost nothing did.

The sensation she had felt an hour earlier while watching an older woman dance with her eyes closed had been much more intense than watching two strangers have sex.

That did unsettle her.

She returned to the radiator and took out her notebook.

She wrote standing up, pressing it against the wall.

She noted the twenty euros for admission, the two euros for the cloakroom and the system of stickers over the phone cameras. She described the bouncer, around sixty, wearing a wool hat and glasses, and added that he did not resemble the image the articles created of Berlin bouncers.

Then she summarized Yasmin's instructions.

No photos.

Ask before touching.

Participate or keep walking, but do not stand there watching.

Drink water.

She stopped at the third one because it seemed like the best material she had found all night.

In a conventional club, she thought, watching had no consequences. You could settle at the edge of the dance floor and spend hours assessing bodies, clothes, movements and possibilities without anyone requiring anything in return.

There, looking had a rule too.

Claire kept writing.

She estimated the temperature in the hall at between twenty-six and twenty-seven degrees and the courtyard at around four. She noted that most people were dancing and that practically none of the features she had read had devoted any space to that detail. She described the mixture of clothes, the woman in the mesh dress and trainers, the work overalls and the puffer jackets.

She added a German expression she had heard many times throughout the night.

Alles gut?

She had known it for years, naturally, but there it seemed to work differently. Sometimes it was a greeting and at other times it was a real question that expected a real answer.

Farther down the page she noted a scene she had seen beside a sofa. A woman had asked a man whether she could sit where his jacket was. He had said no because he was waiting for someone and she had simply replied that it was fine before walking away.

Claire wrote that nothing had happened afterward.

No one had been offended.

Finally she recorded the red room and the four people.

Two having sex, one waiting and another asleep.

Underneath, she wrote in capital letters that she felt nothing.

She closed the notebook and leaned her back against the radiator again.

She had gone in alone, passed through the door, paid, explored the building and gathered enough material to justify the trip. No one had touched her, no one had forced her to do anything and the mythology she had spent weeks constructing was beginning to seem disproportionate beside the reality.

There was a building that was difficult to heat, hundreds of people dancing, beer, free water and rules for coexistence that were clearer than those in many supposedly normal places. In one small room people were having sex and Claire was still exactly where she had been.

The conclusion was reassuring. It had been easy.

What she did not include in that assessment was the woman in her sixties, the silk clinging to her chest or the seconds during which she had needed to press her legs together because her body had reacted to something she still did not know how to explain.

That stayed out of the notebook and, because it stayed out of the notebook, Claire was able to convince herself for a while that it had not been part of the night either.

Her feet hurt and her mouth was dry. She checked the time and saw that it was a quarter past three.

She decided to stop by the bar, drink a glass of water and then ask for her coat so she could go home.

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