

## Costumed

by  
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This would have to be the last time Oliver wore his Lion King costume. Guri was turning ten tomorrow, and at dinner he'd already said, Not that mouldy old thing again. Puberty wasn't supposed to begin till twelve or thirteen, but Oliver could still remember how embarrassing your parents suddenly became. After the party he'd dryclean the costume and fold it away in Anna's cedar chest, where he kept her grandmother's wedding gown, Guri's baby clothes, the lace-trimmed heirloom pillowcases she'd always laundered by hand, and all the costumes she'd sewn for Guri as well, the last one unfinished. Not for her the same costume for Halloween and Fasching, either. Each occasion was special; each day, a work of art. No one else he knew could spend an hour designing breakfast. He held up the papier-mâché headpiece to his face and regarded himself in the mirror: her masks had about as much in common with a ready-made-in-China one as her face, so vivacious and character-driven, with the way it had looked when he'd removed the pillow.

Oliver replaced the mask above Anna's sewing table and retreated a few steps to check that it hung straight, eased it into place, then bent and blew off the dust which had settled on her sewing machine since morning. Dust, he'd read, was mainly composed of dead skin sloughed from the living; he seemed to do a lot of shedding, just not the right sort. Tomorrow, he promised himself, tomorrow he'd carry the sewing machine out to Mirjam's car. He could sew on a button, mend a seam by hand, but Anna's machine was a temperamental dinosaur inherited from her mother, and if Guri ever showed the slightest inclination to take up anything which didn't involve pixels as a hobby, his aunt would gladly return it. You've got to start letting go, she'd told Oliver last week. And the week before. Tomorrow she'd bring Guri a brilliant gift that he, Oliver, would never have thought of, one of Andrei's luscious chocolate cakes, and enough energy to subdue an entire planet of rampaging rodents. She'd run her dad's restaurant very capably since his stroke, even adding a second star to its Michelin status, but her turnover in husbands threatened to rival her turnover in employees. Her latest divorce would soon be finalised. She had always been the beautiful sister.

He heard a cry from Guri's room. It had been several months since the last nightmare, and Oliver had been hoping they were gone for good. He swung round to face the mask. Leave him alone, he muttered. A week after the funeral, he'd buried it under the wedding gown, which had only made things worse; then encased it in bubble wrap, crated it and tried the storage cellar, which made things worse still. He was afraid to burn it. He gave the mask a pleading look, the same sort of look that Anna had found so endearing when they first met, then went to reassure Guri.

Oliver had arrived in Berlin on what later turned out to be the hottest day of the year, and one of the hottest on record. The stink in the U-Bahn, the sweat soaking his T-shirt, the jabbering his school German couldn't decode, the weirdness of the train reversing direction at Schwartzkopfstrasse—Jenny was right, what was he doing here? Never mind that he'd promised to go home for Christmas, that he couldn't afford to turn this job down. If the flat turned out to be unliveable, he'd get the next flight back. She'd smile that knowing smile of hers, but wouldn't say anything as crude as *I told you so*. She'd whip up a brilliant dinner to accompany her advice. She'd let him make love to her without any coaxing.

On top of it all, the lift in the station was out of order. He hefted his case up to street level, cursing his idiocy in refusing to be picked up from the airport. At the time he'd looked forward to a few days of quiet—the indulgence of wandering, nameless and faceless, in a city of strangers; sleeping when he wanted to sleep, reading the thrillers he'd picked from the

bestseller display after check-in, drinking beer rather than a Parker-sanctioned red, speaking to no one; *answerable* to no one.

According to Google maps, the flat was about fifteen minutes' walk from the station, maybe twenty. The paving was uneven in places, and he struggled to keep his case from tipping over on its wheels. Germans were supposed to be fanatic about cleanliness, but evidently this didn't extend to cleaning up after their dogs. Or much else, he thought in disgust at the sight of a mangled creature left to rot at the kerb—a squirrel whose head had been crushed. By a car, he hoped, not some teen punk with a brick.

He was desperate for a glass of cold water by the time he reached the building. Pick up the key from Anna Hirsch, the owner had written. She works from home, and her name's on the doorbell. Though there was nothing in the email to suggest it, Oliver wondered if she were a hooker. Sex worker, Jenny would have said, a touch acidly. They're legal in Germany.

Have you ever paid for sex? she'd asked him after *The Guardian* had published a feature written by a well-known activist. Of course not, he'd answered. Jenny's career in event management was beginning to take off, and no doubt she'd outgrow her leftwing politics eventually. In the meantime, he chose to agree that all prostitutes were victims, most of them trafficked.

Oliver rang the Hirsch woman's bell several times, waited, then rang some more. It wouldn't be the first time that an inexplicable hunch ended up disconcerting him. He dug out his phone to see if Martin, the owner, had mentioned anything about a signal—two shorts and a long, say. When the entry buzzer went off, he nearly missed his chance. Three floors up, she was waiting with an apology and a streak of what he first thought was blood on her cheek. Come in and I'll make you some iced tea, she said. My sister keeps telling me that I need to install a louder bell. When I'm working, the world retreats to a twilight zone.

—Or you do, he said. It's a risky, magical place.

She smiled, and he knew that Berlin had not been a mistake.

The following morning, he awoke to the smell of coffee. He slipped on his rumpled boxers and made his way to the kitchen. Hey, he said. You're up early. The window was open wide, admitting the hoarse grumble of a dustcart on its rounds, beast enough to remind him that Berlin, *his* Berlin—a phantasmagoria of *Cabaret* and *We Children from Bahnhof Zoo* and *The Lives of Others*, of Lonely Planet and expat blogs, of a fabulous welcome by an even more fabulous woman—might also be a Berlin that chewed up foreigners, devoured dreams, and excreted rotting garbage.

—There's a good bakery two blocks away. Care to fetch some rolls? I'll make fresh coffee, and we can eat on the balcony. It's a beautiful morning.

Her hair still loose, she was wearing baggy Thai trousers and a camisole which had obviously been chosen for his benefit. She rose from the table, and they met in an abundance of sunlight.

—Later, he said. Under the sun's tutelage, he was learning the secret colours of her skin.

Anna had made Simba's mask for a new stage production of the musical, giving Oliver the prototype when the director decided on an even larger version, one however without the reddish glint to its eyes and nostrils. The original was ferocious in a way that should have frightened a small child, but they often found Guri standing in front of it, talking with a solemnity other kids reserved for their teddy bears. He listened too, in pauses suggestive of a phone conversation. You fuss like a Jewish grandmother, Anna said to Oliver with a laugh. And he's already got one of those. Who fusses enough for three. Kids are natural copycats. It just shows how bright and observant he is. After Guri fell off the sewing table and split his chin, they moved the mask to the top shelf in their wardrobe till Simba

joined them at mealtimes, slept next to Guri's cot, and began running alongside Anna's bicycle to and from Kita. He's watching out for baddies, Guri explained. I'm going to be Lion King when I grow up.

I wanted to be a princess, Anna said. Stop worrying. They decided that hiding the mask was pointless, though Oliver wouldn't allow it to stay overnight in Guri's room. For several years it lived on the living room bookcase, where he could reach it whenever he needed. The costume was Anna's idea. The adult world can be a scary place, it'll help him feel safe.

—That's what parents are for.

—Tell that to my father.

At first feeling foolish, Oliver donned the costume a couple of times per week. Guri loved it, and they acted out long, rambling adventures together. Though Oliver had never been much of a natural storyteller, something about wearing the costume released an outpouring of tales, half-remembered myths, sendaks which he couldn't imagine originating in his own head. Nonsense, Anna said. Everyone starts out with a rich imagination. You've just learned to suppress yours somewhere along the way.

—I had a very happy childhood, he protested.

—Aside from all that praying.

—That's unfair! My mum goes to church, yes, but that doesn't make her a repressive Überbully.

—Unlike my father, you mean?

The one-sided conversations tapered off, the imaginary friend gradually disappeared except for the times when Simba was to blame for a broken vase or a wet bed or missing meatballs. He was *very* hungry, Guri said. He wanted to eat Frau Klein's dog, so I had to feed him. She likes her dog. She's always kissing him. The mask was returned to the hook above Anna's sewing machine, from which, king that he was, he could rule over the other masks and costumes which took their turn to be on display in her sunny workroom.

For his father's seventieth birthday, Oliver's mother and older brother Sean had planned the sort of family gathering which Jenny would have delighted in managing. Sean, who had made a pile of money in property development, booked an entire Sicilian hotel for the first weekend in October. It's not a handout, it's what big brothers do, Oliver said. Anyway, even as a kid he was generous. He'll be offended. And to tell you the truth, I think both of us could use a break. But Anna claimed that she couldn't get away, not with the ballet premiere only ten days later. Take Guri, he'll have a great time with his cousins. At the last moment he came down with an earache, and despite his wails of protest, they couldn't risk a punctured eardrum. And a feverish child would only spoil the weekend for everyone. Do you want me to stay? Oliver asked. My parents will understand. No, of course not, Anna said. She laughed. How else will I hear about the gloriously vaingory details of Sean's latest coup?

When Oliver returned, feeling guilty that he'd had such a good time on his own, Anna looked wan.

—What did you expect? she snapped. I didn't get much sleep.

That night she surprised him by removing the book from his hands and setting it on the bedside cabinet. It had been a while since they'd had sex, she always worked hard but in the run-up to a new production the hours became inhuman, and of course Guri kept them both on the go. He knew it was unfair to Anna to compare her with Charlotte, Sean's wife, who had even more energy than Sean, himself once described by a primary teacher as 'enterprisingly hyperactive'. If you could afford a nanny and housekeeper, plus a gardener several times per week, it was easy to keep up with three kids, a law practice, church activities like Sunday school and choir, *and* the pro bono work she did for a couple of foundations. Her wicked sense of humour had taught him a thing or two about do-gooders, and he'd saved up her latest

anecdote—an asylum seeker from the Congo who contended he was being persecuted for having only one testicle—to temper Anna’s dislike. Don’t be such a racist, he’d said in jest last summer (Charlotte was of Jamaican descent). You don’t understand Jews if you believe that of us, she’d said. Her attitude towards ‘die Türken’ in Berlin, and Muslims altogether, didn’t count, evidently.

—Aren’t you too tired? he asked.

—I may not be your family’s answer to Superwoman, but I’m not dead yet either.

At Christmas, they spent a week with Oliver’s parents. Though there was no snow, everything else could not have been more traditional—the swags of evergreens, the tree with its mix of antique ornaments and handmade decorations proudly toted home from school over the years, the Christmas cards, the mince pies, the carol service and nativity play and local panto, the whispers behind closed doors. It’s fine, Anna said. An authentic encounter with the natives. Oliver’s mother, Claire, would soon be getting a new hip, so Charlotte and Oliver pitched in with the nearly non-stop meal preparation while Anna went on long walks with Oliver’s dad, who as a retired civil engineer became ‘snappish’, as he put it, if confined indoors. Anna said it was boredom. He and your mum don’t seem to have much to talk about, do they? Forty years is an awfully long time to spend together.

—Forty-three, actually.

With presents to consider, Alex, the eldest boy, didn’t have to be asked twice to help clear the dinner table two days before Christmas. Afterwards Sean and Oliver settled down with Guri and the twins for a game of Snakes and Ladders, their old board held together with sticky tape, Charlotte and Claire went back to pouring over the family albums, some photos dating back three-quarters of a century, and Simon, Oliver’s dad, sat by the fire, ostensibly reading a biography. Alex had disappeared with a muttered excuse which fooled no one, except maybe Guri. When Anna went upstairs to wrap up the life-size puppets she’d made for the twins, each puppet a replica of the other twin but with a playful twist—scaly rainbow wings for Richard, a bright blue tail with a concealed, golden eye at its tip for William—Charlotte exchanged a glance with Claire, then suggested that Guri spend the summer with them in the country. You don’t want him becoming too German now, do you, was the sentiment all round, though Oliver wasn’t sure who’d first voiced it; or even if it had been voiced as such. Guri squealed when Charlotte mentioned their new pony. Later that evening, Sean took Oliver aside and told him that he’d just made a sizable donation to the school which Alex was attending. Berlin is a great city, Sean said, but you’re nearing forty. How about coming home? Good schools are always looking for good teachers. And then there’s this business of Guri’s imaginary friend. Charlotte thinks Guri needs to get away from Anna’s artsy-fartsy crowd, Mum too. He needs a decent, down-to-earth school. And he ought to be going to Sunday school by now too.

—We’re not into ghosts or dodgy miracles or superstition, Oliver said.

—Just bloody-mindedness?

Three months later, he was given the choice of relocation to Dubai or redundancy. English teachers were a cheap commodity, as fungible as a dollar bill. Sean renewed his offer to help with a teaching post, then with unusual forbearance—only the faintest of sighs—proposed to install him in one of his own offices, but working for your brother took sibling rivalry to a whole new level, and in any case Anna wasn’t prepared to leave Berlin right now. Maybe in a few years, she said. Neither of them was extravagant, and the severance package as well as their savings, though modest, would give him a chance to decide whether he wanted to spend the rest of his working life explaining to indifferent adolescents the difference between *who* and *whom*, the way to pronounce *thwart* without sounding like a YouTube Kabarettist. His German now proficient, he already translated the odd website or

leaflet when asked, so he could let a couple of people know that he had time for longer projects. Other than that, he had no idea what he'd be good at. Everyone can learn to be competent, Anna said. What is it you dream about? Apparently he was supposed to dream about something.

Alone with a text to translate, he found himself reading more and more online—or what passed for reading. As the weeks went by, checking out his favourite cookery blogs ended up being the most productive part of the morning, and their meals began to outperform their frequent pre-Guri evenings out, when within walking distance you could eat great immigrant food—Turkish, Vietnamese, Thai, Indian—for less than the cost of the ingredients. While Guri's preschool buddies knew their VW Golf from their Opel Corsa, Guri was learning to distinguish between basil and oregano, crème brûlée and crème caramel, and Anna even suggested that Oliver train as a chef. Mirjam would help him get started.

—Work for your sister? Sorry, not on.

*not on your life*

Mirjam tried to convince them to enrol Guri in school straightaway, but despite her tenacity they decided to give it another year. A brother or sister might be good for him, might help with his dreaminess. We should wait till things are more settled, Anna said. As Guri's sixth birthday approached, the prospect of a baby still got mentioned, but Anna had accepted a new commission—a film project this time, some futuristic epic based on an improbable literary bestseller whose author was practically family, Daniel, the son of her mother's oldest friend—and she had plunged straight in, meeting with the screenwriters, the director, Daniel himself quite often, reading and researching and sketching with a passion that supplanted any desire for sex. They only made love maybe once a month, maybe twice, but Oliver began sending off his CV to all the international schools, the private boarding schools, the language schools—to anyone, in short, who might need an English teacher.

Afternoons, Oliver took Guri to the playground, and for his birthday dressed up in the costume and led the kids on a treasure hunt through the park while Anna and Mirjam set out the food at home. Despite her workload, Anna had made the time to create a stunning birthday cake—this year, Rafiki anointing newborn Simba on Pride Rock—sew each child a different hand puppet—Lion King characters—and decorate the living room like a scene from the musical. It was only after Guri woke from a bad dream later that night that they learned about the dead squirrel he'd found next to the treasure chest. Simba doesn't eat squirrels, Guri said.

Oliver had already been cooking dinner, now he usually gave Guri his bath, read him a story, tucked him into bed. Daniel is strict about his routine, Anna said, he writes during the day, teaches a graduate workshop twice a week, evenings are the only chance we get to work together. Three days short of her thirty-fourth birthday, cramps awoke her. Oliver stripped off the bloodstained bedding while she rang her gynaecologist. A miscarriage, it turned out, about eleven weeks. Why didn't you tell me? Oliver asked.

She shrugged it off, worked even harder. Eventually Mirjam rang to ask why no one ever saw them any more. She listened to him botching an excuse, his German in freefall—her silences could be put to good use in Guantanamo—then pitched up the next morning while they were still in bed. As apology for waking them so early, she handed him a fresh slab of swordfish. In other circumstances he'd have laughed, and after a stony look from under those biblical eyebrows, she'd have laughed right along with him. Women who laugh at themselves could be forgiven their wicked good looks; even their sisters forgave them.

—I thought Michel does the fish market rounds, Oliver said dryly.

—Shut up and go put the kettle on, Mirjam said.

She pushed past him and marched into their bedroom. Jewish families don't dispute quietly—nor rationally, he often thought, and went to start Guri's porridge. It's OK, he said when Guri came in clutching his pyjama bottoms. Simba made the bed wet. It's OK, soldier, Oliver repeated, scooping him up in a fierce hug. Though Guri was too young to understand

what ‘miscarriage’ meant, the raised voices meant Something Bad. At breakfast Anna and Mirjam chattered to each other, and to Guri, as though a good row were as invigorating as a brisk morning shower and pot of strong coffee. They ignored Oliver. They were pointedly polite about it.

You had no right to tell her, Anna said after Mirjam left, taking Guri with her to see the new twin panther cubs at the zoo, the snow leopard; *real* lions.

—It’s my business what I tell my sister, Anna said.

—I won’t have it, Anna said.

—This passive-aggressive crap has got to stop, Anna said.

She told him that she’d be out till late, first at a bunch of meetings and after lunch holed up in the Lipperheide Costume Library. Oliver was tired and had no energy for bickering, but he had a translation to finish. Then finish it this morning, she said. You can’t expect Mirjam to look after Guri the whole day.

Anna was exacting, he knew, but historical research made no sense for a story set in a bleakly dystopian future. She greeted his suggestion of khaki boiler suits with an impassive look which Guri, at six, already used to great effect when it came to brussels sprouts. Then what about sexy jumpsuits colour-coded for rank? he asked, struggling to keep the tone light. Before the thankfully debilitating stroke, her father had collected lurid science fiction pulps, masses and masses of them, which Mirjam had not yet convinced their mother to discard. Maybe he’s still wanking off, Anna said. Left-handed. As in *only hand left*. Despite their derision, everyone used to scour the internet for items to add to his collection when a gift fell due, less for his sake than his wife’s.

—You know, like on your dad’s ‘covers-up’.

—That stopped being funny about the time they began to market Viagra.

He spent the next hour angrily descaling the shower with a sharp knife, toothbrush, and pickling vinegar, whose fumes brought tears to his eyes. When he finally sat down at his laptop, the tangled sentences that idiot of a sociology professor was hoping to inflict on the reading public wouldn’t unsnarl in English, no matter how much Oliver combed and clipped and styled. Fuck this, he muttered. Pretentious moron needs a bloody barber, not a translator. For a radical buzz cut. He rose from his desk, headed for the kitchen to make a mug of tea. Malt whiskey, he discovered, vastly improves the taste of Lapsang Souchong.

—Why are you wearing that costume? Mirjam asked when he opened the door a while later.

Guri rushed unwittingly to his rescue. I saw them feeding the lions! And the sealions. And we dopted a baby cheetah. And . . .

His morning bubbled out, then he ran off to stow his trophies in his room—a new book, an explorer kit with binoculars, torch and compass, a wildlife conservation sweatshirt and matching cap. One thing you had to say for Mirjam, she wasn’t stingy. Stubborn, arrogant, far too hungry and overdriven, but never stingy.

—You’re usual work outfit? She smiled as though her pastry chef had brandished a tantalising new confection for her to taste.

—Just checking that it still fits. I’ve gained a bit of weight lately.

Mirjam eyed his midriff, then told him to turn round. If he’d been in his street clothes, he’d have been reluctant to submit to her gaze. But he felt giddy and a touch reckless in the costume. His work had finally gone well and he’d finished the translation, checked it over twice, and sent it off in time to prepare a marinade for tonight’s spareribs.

—Anna always did have badass taste in men.

She moved closer. In the high-end restaurant trade, a woman who makes it to the top likes to *be* on top.

—Guri's all tired out, and he's already had lunch. He could probably use a nap. Me too, frankly.

She took out her iPhone.

It was Anna who'd fished the costume out of the black wheelie bin in the courtyard after work. It lay in a heap on the kitchen table, smelling of rubbish—of the sour crap people left of their lives. You're losing it, she told Oliver. He refused to give her an explanation, mostly because he didn't have one—or at least not one which wouldn't have her running to her sister. What was he supposed to say? That wearing the costume, he'd been able to translate at speed? That wearing the costume, he was a different person?

In the morning Guri had tripped and scraped his knees on the pavement in front of his preschool. Simba's cross, Guri said, he stayed at home. After the wounded-warrior ritual, Oliver stopped for an espresso at a nearby cafe, a reward for having finished his latest translation, sixty pages of project description for an aid organisation. Boring stuff, but it paid the bills. While he drank, he scrolled through his emails. 'There must be something wrong with your PDF software,' his client had written. 'The text you've submitted is gibberish. Please send us a usable file immediately. Your contract specifies the penalty for delays.' Disbelieving, angry at her tone, Oliver had gulped down the rest of his espresso and quickly cycled home. He opened first the PDF file, then his original Word document. The words were English but totally garbled, as if someone had cut up a long vocabulary list, dropped the pieces into a paper bin, and plucked out scraps at random. In panic he opened the copy on his backup drive and discovered that he was going to have to redo the entire translation. By not meeting his deadline, he would forfeit a sizeable chunk of money—and should word spread, his reputation for reliability. He paced the length of the flat, telling himself that he'd manage, that the text was now familiar, that he'd work all day, and through the night if necessary, would have it ready by the time that damned woman was reading tomorrow's emails. He could hear her impatience. The longer she clicked her scarlet fingernails against her coffee mug, the more agitated he became. Finally he'd snatched up a scissors from his desk and shook it at the mask. Why the fuck are you doing this to me? he cried. He rushed to the bedroom for the costume.

Anna showed him the ugly tear. Look what you've done.

—I'll wash it by hand.

—And wreck it even more than you already have? I'll mend it after supper and you can take it to the drycleaners in the morning.

The gash on his forearm stung when he slathered it again with an antiseptic cream, and though a throbbing three inches long and reddened at the edges, it was not deep enough to need stitches. Oliver bandaged it neatly, then popped a couple of painkillers from the blister pack, locked the medicine cupboard, and drew on a long-sleeved sweatshirt before going to the kitchen to fill a flask with coffee for the long night ahead. He was only a quarter way through the sabotaged translation.

Anna's family, what was left of it, passed on their emigration stories in languages as diverse as Hebrew and Spanish and Brooklynese, but her grandmother, who had escaped on the Kindertransport to England, met her future husband while studying mathematics at Cambridge. He was German and they agreed on the sort of compromise which would set the tone for their marriage: he would convert to Judaism and they'd settle in Germany, her return marked by an enduring if cordial contempt for her neighbours. She spoke English to her children and their children, paid for their exchange years abroad and, when she could prevail, English boarding schools for the brightest of them. She refused to answer to 'Oma'. At thirteen or fourteen, Anna, who was a favourite, began to ask about her grandmother's parents, about the brother and cousins, the mishpokhe who didn't survive. Why don't you talk

about them, Grandma? Do you know how they died? Her grandmother was silent for so long that Anna became frightened her father would hear of her stupid prying, and even more frightened when she saw tears in her grandmother's eyes. She had never seen her grandmother weep.

—When you're older, Anna, you'll understand that even if you speak a thousand languages, some things are beyond words.

But just before Anna left for St Martin's, her grandmother handed her a disc labelled 'Family Archive' and a grey metal file box. It's all in here, she said. I don't intend to talk about any of it, and you must promise me not to share it with anyone else, not even your sister—*especially* not your sister, for whom the concept of discretion is as alien as tinned peas—till I'm dead.

—You're not ill, are you? Anna asked in alarm.

—Homesickness is like a herpes infection. Latent most of the time, but lifelong.

Anna thought about this for a moment. Then why did you come back to Germany? Why didn't you just stay in England? Did Grandpa force you?

Her grandmother smiled then. Of course not. It's a shame he died before you could get to know him properly. He was a good man, a decent man. Your mother should have... no, never mind, that's for another time. You may not remember, but he used to call you his fierce little lion.

—I do remember. I've always thought it was because of my hair. Horribly bushy and tangled, and I'd roar when Mum brushed it.

—It wasn't just your hair, though it was lighter then, almost tawny, and your grandfather didn't want to see it cut any more than you did, despite the daily fight with the hairbrush. Quiet men love women of character, women with the temerity to stand and fight—even, if necessary, with themselves.

—You slept with my *sister*? Anna said.

—What are you talking about?

—Mirjam said—

—You can't be serious! Your sister has disliked me from Day One. She'll do or say anything to break us up. And anything, for her, is either about sex or food. In that order.

Mirjam was a man-eater. Her rampage was bound to end when someone shot her, cooked her, and fed her to her own patrons; or she became so wrinkled and stringy that only a Tsavo lion would go near her. Until then, Oliver would rather sleep with an entire pride of hellcats. Anyway, he didn't do adultery—except in his fantasy, and that didn't count, did it?

After the translation debacle, Oliver redoubled his attempts to find a teaching job. There was one interview, a number of outright rejections, and about as many applications binned or deleted without the courtesy of a response. Courtesy was a Fremdwort in Germany. At the interview he listened incredulously to the offer—€7,50 an hour, not even cleaner's wages—rose from his chair, told the fucker what he could do with his fucking language school, and slammed out. Fired with indignation, he headed for Mirjam's restaurant but had cooled down somewhat by the time he got there. He was left to wait in her office—to simmer, damn her, like a stockpot shoved onto a back burner. When she came in wearing pink crocs and a chef's apron, carrying a tray, and smiling as though coffee and a bit of pastry could make good her treachery, he cut off her greeting with a furious outburst.

—You bloody Germans! Nazis, every last one of you!

She regarded him with astonishment, his horror of rude language, and rudeness altogether, practically a family joke. Instead of reminding him of the obvious, she set the tray down and laid a hand on his forearm. It's about time you stopped acting so repressed, she



said. Now tell me what's the matter. He shook off her arm and took a turn about the office, knocking over a stack of catalogues from a chair.

—Why did you run to Anna with such a vicious lie? Jealousy, spite, sheer nastiness, what?

She watched him kick the catalogues out of his way and her expression changed, but something untoward must have happened to provoke such uncharacteristic behaviour. From here she couldn't smell anything on his breath, and the moment had passed to kiss him. He'd probably bite.

—You can tell me exactly what lie you mean, or I can leave you alone to drink some coffee and think about how you're acting. Or, she thought to herself, I can get Michel and Andrei to escort him out the back door if it sounds like he's rampaging in here.

—You really are a cunt, aren't you.

—Right, that's it. Now sit down before I fetch a couple of my lads. Did you hear me? I said, sit down!

He sat then, sinking into one of the chairs by her desk, holding his head in his hands, defeated, spent. She collected the catalogues and stacked them neatly on top of her father's wooden file cabinet that she'd kept when remodelling, apparently a pre-war salvage; a survivor of sorts. There were few enough of those.

She poured them mugs of coffee, stirring three teaspoons of sugar into Oliver's. Here, drink this, she said. He looked up and she saw that his eyes had filled with tears.

—Why? he asked. I love Anna. We have a good relationship. We have a beautiful child. Why did you have to do this to us?

Gentle, caring men attracted her. Problem was, they inevitably became pathetic. She resolved to spend more time with Guri. It was a lot easier to avoid curdling a Hollandaise than fix it afterwards. These Prenzlauer Berg parents—how often she itched to slap some sense into them! Just last week she'd had to explain to a five-year-old that no, you don't prance from table to table, snatching titbits from every plate you can reach with your grubby little digits, rudimentary as in *rude*, while your mummy and daddy look on indulgently. Her father may have been a mean bastard, but along with decent behaviour she'd learned to expect—*demand*—the same from others, whether prince or no-name brat. Her father's version of parenting had made her tough. Made both of his kids tough. They were survivors.

—Anna would never act this way, Oliver said.

—Anna is a *costume* designer, Mirjam said with a touch of irritation. There's a reason why she's so good at it.

—Is that it? You think she's outdone you somehow? He indicated the plate of pastries, which he hadn't touched. Anna would love to be able to cook like you. You've made this restaurant famous. *You*, not your father.

There it was again. Fathers. Always the bloody fathers. For years Anna had believed that if she put on a costume, theirs wouldn't see her. In her teens, it had been makeup and outlandish fleamarket tat. At least Oliver was a decent father—in some ways, even a great father. On good days, Anna probably didn't regret her choice.

An inner sigh, a glance at the clock, a final mouthful of coffee. She was the older—the tougher—sister after all. Her father had never apologised in his life. After taking over the restaurant, she'd taught herself when to look steely, when conciliatory; when rueful.

—Oliver, listen, we both know how impetuous I can be. Seducing you was bad enough, but confessing was self-serving and hurtful. It won't happen again.

He stared at her.

—What? she finally asked.

—Is this some sort of twisted game? I would never cheat on Anna.

It was her turn to stare.

Oliver attended the lavish party for the cast and crew after the film premiere, listened to fulsome praise of Anna's talents, drank. When he tired of the truth, he started telling ever wilder tales of his occupation, and though he wasn't particularly good at accents, no one seemed to disbelieve his 'lion whisperer from the Transvaal' claim. Anna later told him that the intense, green-eyed actor starring in her new project had grown up on a matrilineal Sebacean colony 600 light years from Earth. Or maybe it was 6000 light years. The ensuing row touched on his drinking, her refusal to time a so-called soft-boiled egg, his drinking, her strands of hair in the shower, in the kitchen sink, in the *spaghetti sauce* for godsake, his drinking, her behaviour at these pretentious bashes, his drinking, her know-it-all family, his drinking, her lying batshit sister, who was FUCKING UNFIT to look after Guri, his drinking—and finally, on his earnings, or lack thereof.

—Don't you dare, she said. If you think I won't call the police and have you charged, just try me. His rage, as it turned out, made for good sex.

The next morning, her half-finished mug of green tea still lukewarm, Anna rushed off to another of her meetings. She'd already begun work on the film, a British-German-French coproduction about time-travelling rebels. I've got heaps of ideas, she'd said. Daniel was the scriptwriter, and there was talk of a possible TV series to follow. Oliver collected the mug, for once barely registering the watermark ring left on the coffee table. He switched on early-morning TV, a treat Guri greeted with the enthusiasm of a geek whose favourite SF writer had just sent him an advance reading copy of his latest doorstopper.

—Daniel has a TV in the playroom, Guri said. Mama lets me watch sometimes while they're working.

—Daniel has kids? Mama never said.

—The playroom's for *me*. It's humongous. *Humongous*, Guri repeated, relishing his newest word. Lots of Lego and books and a wooden train and curtains that Mama made. And a cool fold-down for sleeping and watching TV.

—Futon, Oliver corrected automatically, his mind elsewhere. To an observer he would have seemed bemused by the incomprehensible animated antics on TV—as incomprehensible, in fact, as a lot of science fiction would have been to him. He continued to stare at the screen, sipping Anna's tea till a mouthful of scuzzy, bitter dregs made him gag and he went to the kitchen for a decent cup of coffee. Then he rang his brother.

While Guri sat in front of his muesli, Oliver booked a last-minute flight online with Anna's credit card, entered an out-of-office message and set his email to autoreply, and jotted down a list of stuff to pack, something he still liked to do in pencil.

—Papa, can I have toast with Nutella?

—Eat your breakfast, Oliver said without looking up from his laptop.

Guri picked out the raisins, then mushed the banana slices with his spoon, one after another, tickled yet by degrees antsy that his dad wasn't stopping him, wasn't even scolding. Mama didn't make him eat mushy bananas, though peas were worse. Grandma didn't believe in muesli. Germans are fruitcakes, she'd said. Then she laughed. No, not that kind.

—Stop fiddling, Simba told him. This isn't a good time to bug your dad.

Oliver hadn't planned to spend Easter with his family but he needed to get out of Berlin and Guri hadn't seen his cousins in more than a year. Anna would raise her usual objections, but in the end would allow that, yes, he was right, she could really use a week on her own for the new project. Still, he decided it was best to text her after they'd landed.

When Oliver came down to breakfast on the last Saturday in April, Charlotte had already packed an enormous picnic lunch and even Alex, who had reached the nonchalant stage of teenagery, did not have to be coerced—or bribed—into spending the day with the younger boys. Licking the grease from his fingertips, he was relishing their uneasy awe till his mum told him to sit down or quit pilfering the bacon, and quit scaring them with tales of

passageways into other worlds and evil mages and kids lost forever. He's always been fascinated by mazes, Charlotte told Oliver as they watched him swagger out to her 4X4 with the heavy coolbox on one shoulder. Typical laddish behaviour. Oliver would do anything to spare Guri his own adolescence—one long pissing contest, with prefects (and pimples). German kids were different—maybe not so polite, but plenty independent (though there were still pimples). He liked that about German kids. He like that about Germany. It showed you could change things.

—Let's do it already, Alex said after the car had been loaded.

Oliver finished his coffee, then went with Guri to brush his teeth and fetch his red pullover, the closest thing to a high-vis jacket he could wear without being teased. A couple of reflective vests for the kids hung in the mudroom, but Charlotte already thought Oliver far too over-protective and she was blind to Alex's mean streak. You can't even talk proper English, he told Guri whenever a German word slipped into his conversation. Alex was taking German at school. His accent was atrocious, but he was clever and it rankled that another kid could correct him; a younger kid, a *cousin*. A maze would give him the opportunity to get back at Guri.

It was a bright, breezy day and Charlotte kept Guri and the twins from squabbling with a new audiobook, her window open to muffle—and chill—any heated backseat grumbling, then with her iPad on which she'd loaded an adventure game featuring a labyrinth planet and all manner of booby traps, aliens, laser swords, and time warps. Though Alex had his own iPhone out, he couldn't resist 'helping' so that there was no need for a time-out, only a short break at a layby before lunch. Oliver took off his jersey and stretched in the glorious sunlight while Charlotte poured them coffee from the flask. How sleek you've become since coming home, she said. Like a pet jaguar who's escaped captivity. Tugging his shirt down, he flushed and turned to watch the boys prodding at a clutch of wild teasel almost as tall as Alex—admittedly not the tallest of lads—the dry, spiny heads too proud to lie down and rot. They'll make a lovely arrangement, but mind the prickly stems, Charlotte called out. Alex retreated to a tangle of alder and hawthorn already in leaf, shades of green so luminous that they soon leach from memory. Oblivious to beauty he would one day, twenty years from now, on a spring morning as bright as this one, witness in a last desperate act of atonement, he tore aside the delicate foliage, scabbled under a low-hanging limb, and returned with a dead branch.

—More coffee? Charlotte asked. Oliver nodded and she brought over the flask. It was a small miracle that after several hours the coffee could still smell so earthy and rich, much like Charlotte herself. Bending his head to the steam, he inhaled like a smoker trying to quit.

—Why don't you come with me to church tomorrow? Charlotte asked.

Having heard this before, he'd worked out a noncommittal answer that wouldn't offend her. She gave him a wry smile, then set the flask on the ground between them and went back to watching the boys. After a short while, she took his arm and pointed towards a red squirrel running along the branch of an oak tree a small distance away.

—What's it doing with a mouse? Oliver asked. I thought squirrels were vegetarians.

—They're opportunists. Survival is a tough game. But look up there at the drey—the nest. She's carrying one of her kittens. We must have alarmed her, and she's moving them to safety.

He glanced sideways at Charlotte, her expression abstracted despite the precision of her answer, her hair ruffling in the light breeze. She would surprise more than one vexatious litigant who only saw the girl next door, wholesome and guileless, not exactly obtuse but no Mensa candidate either, her success the result of race, gender, a fortuitous marriage. She was the girl you took home to Mum. She was the girl who attested to your firm's diversity. She was the girl who'd look gorgeous in a Jason Wu gown. She was, in fact, a masterful poker player.

In profile, she made you want to stare. And then to tuck a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear. The handle in his right hand felt too small for his fingers, making for an awkward grip, and to steady his hold, Oliver cupped his left round the other side of the mug and took a punishing gulp of coffee, scalding his tongue. Like his dad, Alex was not the sort to let himself be unsettled by his own feelings. A crop of pimples? He'd post pictures of himself in leather and naked flesh, turning acne into a brazen (and undoubtedly viral) fashion statement. Shame was a foreign country. Even now, so many years later, Oliver could remember the scalding humiliation, the rejection, the concealment that had been school. Back then, he'd envied Sean. But you grew up. You didn't need to be afraid of challenging your nephew.

—Alex, what are you boys doing?

Crouched alongside Alex, whose back was turned to the adults, the smaller boys were absorbed by his handiwork with the stick. The traffic was sparse this morning, so the sudden assault from a radio startled Oliver, and he spun round to see a car, red it had to be, already disappearing into the bend as though it had never been. Indoors, a loud bass clubs your thoughts into submission, but here, despite the volume, only a truculent arsehole would think, Cut his throat, someone ought. In the time it would take to think any thought at all, the howl dwindled to inconsequence, wavering between presence and absence, between stranded chord and wind, then it too was gone. The boys had not looked up.

Oliver exchanged a glance with Charlotte, who spread her hands in a tolerant what-do-you-expect gesture, but he was uneasy and moved forward till he could see what Alex was prodding. Guri noticed his approach first.

—Papa, look, its head is gone.

Oliver's gut clenched as he took in the grey squirrel, its neck cleanly severed. Except for a scant splatter on a nearby clump of grass, there wasn't any blood. It hadn't rained since last week and the rest of the body was intact—no rot or stench, no maggots, and if there had been flies, the boys' interest had driven them away. Interloper be damned! The squirrel had been *decapitated*, something only a human could have done. He glanced round. The head was nowhere in sight.

—We should bury it, he said. There, near the patch of dandelions. He remembered how much young children liked the sunny faces.

—With what? Alex asked. A plastic spoon? Glancing at his acolytes, he shrugged in a show of indifference. Oliver felt a surge of anger, but Guri and the twins, not yet furtive with shame, had gone back to studying the squirrel, less impressed by Alex's posturing than he hoped, or simply used to it. When do we start to look/not look at an acid-attack victim, her face a rubbery mask of the Halloween within? There's no monster under the bed, every parent tells his child, but every child knows better.

Alex tossed the stick aside, told the little kids to get a move on, and loped towards the car. Richard and William ran after him, in a hurry to keep up with their big brother, but Guri rose slowly, knitting his brows in imitation of Oliver himself, a mannerism Anna used to tease him about—'your Yahweh look'. Whenever Guri frowned, she smoothed the creases away with her fingertips, ending with a tweak of his nose and a smile, but to Oliver she made her displeasure felt. Lately it had become his 'ayatollah look'. For godsake, do you expect me to subject myself to Botox? he'd finally asked. More and more he didn't understand what she wanted. If he kept stuff to himself, she complained. If he let his feelings show, she complained.

He held out his hand. Come on, Guri, everyone's waiting for us.

—Something will eat it.

—You know that animals need to eat.

Guri's lower lip began to tremble. It would have been simplest to scoop him up, with the promise of a treat later on. And later on, when they were alone, talk to him about cruelty,

about killing for food and killing for fun. Guri had seen the lions feeding at the zoo. He watched the news with them. Eight months ago, Anna had been furious when a well-meaning nurse had told him that Uroma had gone to sleep. Make him afraid of death, she'd fumed, you make him afraid to live.

—What's happened to the squirrel's head?

—I don't know, Guri. Sometimes people do things we can't understand.

—It wasn't people.

Oliver rummaged in his pocket for a tissue. You had to ask yourself if such monsters were people, but of course that's not what Guri meant.

—Here, blow your nose. It'll be OK. I'm sure it happened so fast that the squirrel didn't feel anything.

Guri took the tissue but wiped his nose on his sleeve, which Oliver decided, for once, to ignore. He watched Guri tear the tissue into small pieces, dropping them one by one over the squirrel's body, though most of them drifted away onto the grass. For someone who would one day run a successful political campaign, Alex had yet to learn that shouting impatiently was not the best way to elicit cooperation. We'll be right there, Oliver replied with only the slightest edge to his voice. (A teacher who lost his temper soon lost his job.) Spring had begun early, one of those balmy childhood springs you carried with you for ever, and quite a few dandelions had already gone to seed. When he was growing up, his mother had paid them one pence for each plant they dug up. Those long, stubborn roots! Despite his mother's determination to eradicate the dandelions, they always came back, whole colonies of them. Alex shouted again, then at a word from Charlotte clambered into the car, slamming the door. A bit of weeding would do the boy good.

Oliver finished off his coffee without hurrying, then set his mug down and picked two dandelions with seedheads, passing one to Guri. Blow, he told his son, and together they blew till the magic did its work.

—When are we going home? Guri asked.

—Don't you want to see the maze? It's really something. I know it's a long drive, but we'll be home for dinner.

—Aren't there any mazes at home? We could go with Mama.

Oliver glanced back over his shoulder. Charlotte beckoned and he held up a finger, mouthing, one minute. Then he crouched to be at eye level with Guri.

—People can have more than one home.

—I guess. Guri looked down at the squirrel, his right hand plucking at the fabric of his jeans, an irritating habit which made Oliver feel like a bad parent. He took his son's hand, squeezed it gently, exactly as a good father would do, and waited till Guri spoke. Yeah, I guess. But at *home* home Simba keeps the monsters away.

Though Oliver asked him about it several times over the next few days, Guri couldn't explain how he'd known to navigate the maze without a single wrong turn. The yew walls were high and deep and dense, as good maze walls should be, but the appeal of the maze wasn't just in its devilish complexity, the oddity of its tunnels, underground culs-de-sac and drawbridges, the most oddball of them a clanking, cast-iron steampunk extravaganza, in the walkways which passed over (and occasionally through) a water course—one waterfall shifted direction erratically, so that even dashing over the rough stones was likely to mean a brief shower—but in the freeflow of its hedges, rounded and asymmetrical and nowhere alike. Wizardry, Oliver thought. You felt as though the walls weren't kept in check by human hand but surged and billowed, plunged and surged again, contriving to engulf you.

Within the maze voices carried in deceptive ways, and more than once Oliver expected to meet Alex beyond the next junction, only to come upon another visitor, or an empty stretch of disembodied murmurs. Most people seemed inclined to speak quietly, secretively even: not

Alex, going it alone, whose peevish voice they caught from time to time. Where are you now? he kept calling out to his mother-and-brothers. Or, Uncle Oliver, don't let Guri get lost. This is no maze for a little kid. Alex had left his iPhone in the car, disdainful of relying on a crutch. Afterwards in the café, they could all see how much it irked Alex that Guri and Oliver had finished first, and Oliver was careful not to reveal Guri's uncanny talent.

Nor to reveal his talent for scaring his dad. Just before they climbed the Escherian staircase in the centre of the maze, Guri had skipped ahead into a dark, leafy chamber and Oliver, only steps behind, could no longer see him. He caught the sweetish smell of something rotting as his eyes adjusted to the dimness. And then he took it in: his son was gone—gone! Impossible, there was no other exit but the way they'd come. Guri, he called. Guri, where are you?

He swallowed, then swivelled slowly, his eyes picking out shadowy threats. Could there be a hidden exit? A trapdoor for a molester or child trafficker who had already knocked Guri out? He shouted several times more before realising that it was he himself who was acting like a child in a supermarket, mother suddenly out of sight, a child who'd panicked at being abandoned. He'd never see his home again! Closing his eyes, he talked sternly to himself. There were security cameras everywhere. There was only one way out of the maze. There were other people, plenty of them with kids (and phones).

—Papa, Guri said, come on.

Startled, Oliver turned, found Guri at his side, and grabbed him by the arm, just managing not to shake him (or not too hard). Where have you been? he yelled.

—We have to go this way. Guri pointed towards a section of the undulating yew ceiling where it dipped to its lowest point. In the greenish, murky light, they could have been in an underwater cave with walls uneven enough to scrape their hands, but Oliver still couldn't see an opening.

—I asked you where you've been. Though no longer yelling, he meant to have an answer. Guri, who had absolutely no reason to quail before either of his parents, fingered his jeans again and said nothing.

—Well?

—I went home to see Simba, Guri whispered, avoiding his dad's eyes.

It was not like Guri to lie, though Anna maintained what small kids did was not really lying. Oliver wasn't quite so sure.

—You know what we've told you about telling stories.

—But I did go. His eyes were filling with tears. I *did*. I asked him to bring Mama here.

A draught slipped across the back of Oliver's neck, and he caught another whiff of overripe fruit. Anna usually bought too many bananas, a good third of which turned black and mushy and filled the kitchen with their smell before he got round to throwing them away. There was only so much banana bread he could bake, he kept telling her. At least don't buy the pricey organic ones if you're bent on wasting them.

Picnic remains, he told himself. Some kid who, as soon as he got a chance, tossed away the disgusting healthy bits of his mum's packed lunch. Exactly what Guri will do ten years on.

—Guri, you know Mama has to work.

Guri nodded, blinking back tears, and Oliver felt ashamed of his earlier anger, ashamed too of what amounted to subterfuge; or if not subterfuge, distraction when his son so obviously needed to be told—and deal with—the truth. Tonight, he promised himself. Tonight I'll talk with him.

—I *know* that, Guri said. She could sleep here at night. Simba is faster than an airplane. Faster than a Jedi starfighter, even.

Just when does a child's magical thinking become delusional?

—But Simba said he can't, Guri continued.

Despite himself, Oliver was curious. Why not? he asked.

—Home is stronger magic.

Oliver stared at his son. Kids hear things and repeat them, but Guri had spoken in a voice far removed from childhood, a voice with the weight and take of a drumbeat meant to carry across a vast, arid, lonely veld. Small and tearful though he was, it wasn't Guri who was lost. There was something majestic in his attempt to summon his mother, and for the first time, Oliver had a glimpse of the lion his son would become. In Prenzlauer Berg, where everyone was a creative, and almost everyone recreated himself, it was easy to forget three thousand years of history. Guri was the ultimate fantasist. Guri was a Jew.

—We'll ring Mama tonight, even if she's at work, and you can talk as long as you want. But for now, let's show everyone what a good team we make.

He turned to leave the way they'd come, but Guri tugged on his hand and again pointed towards the rear of the chamber. Oliver ought to have been surprised, but his supply of surprise had run out. With Guri in the lead, he moved towards an unmistakable opening in the yew, behind which rose an oddly angled staircase a la Escher. Impossible to have missed it before. There must be a concealed door triggered by a proximity sensor, a timer, maybe remote controls from a surveillance room—whatever suitable gizmo the maze's designers had come up with.

They encountered no wentelteefjes, but on ledges along the stairs they passed what at first seemed like a series of mounted animals till you noticed the chimerical anomalies—a red-horned horned bill with tiny hands at his wingtips, a hyena whose back legs were scaled like a cobra, a mandrill with delicate human ears, a lion whose roaring mouth revealed a forked tongue; a Janus-headed squirrel.

On Monday morning, Oliver and Guri flew back to Berlin. Oliver had resolved to make things work. It's OK to be scared, Charlotte had told him. The truth is, we're all strangers. Since Anna was often working long hours on set, he went to collect Guri from preschool, generally around five but earlier if a headache put an end to his translating for the day. It was the sort of mild spring which brought a brisk trade to the döner stands, seasonal gelato parlours, and street markets, to the tiny pavement cafés where the stuffing escaped from faded, mismatched cushions on mismatched chairs and the cakes were homemade. When the sun shone, no one seemed to be in a hurry, and you could practically smell the dark, dense pungency of unfiltered Gauloises, hear the clink of the old men's boules, squint at the yachts and sailboats which did not race across the Spree.

Unless it was raining, the two of them would stop for an ice cream and an hour in the park, where an ongoing campaign against the evil Sith conscripted all the local kids—boys, in fact, though it wasn't PC to say so, and a squadron of girls would often interrupt their own games to watch for a while from the sidelines and even on occasion, the feistiest of them, try futilely to join in. Oliver, meanwhile, tried not to wonder how the mums in headscarves would look if dressed like Anna. The squirrels had grown used to people, and for about a fortnight after their return, Guri insisted on packing a daily supply of unshelled peanuts in his snack box, which he would place around the base of 'squirrel trees'—chestnut and oak—in what Oliver came to recognise as a fixed pattern. Each time Guri set down a peanut, he chanted something under his breath, a word or two impossible to make out, but when Oliver moved closer, Guri would stop. Finally Oliver questioned him about it, his voice as casual as he could make it. I don't know, Guri said. You have to ask Simba.

Oliver decided to give it another week before telling Anna. Later, after her death, it became another of those things you find it hard to talk about—maybe because it was so trivial in comparison with what followed; maybe because Guri would inevitably look at you the way he did now, in disbelief at adult stupidity; maybe because, quite simply, you were afraid of what he'd say.

—I want to be fair, Anna told him, but surely you see that joint custody is out of the question. What if you take it into your head to run off with him again?

—A visit to my brother isn't running off!

She regarded him coolly, and it took all of his self-control not to snatch up the pile of sketches on the kitchen table and tear them into a set of jigsaw puzzles for that bloody playroom. He didn't move, but the effort not to move, the rigid cage of his anger, alerted her to the significance of his gaze, and her eyes darkened.

—Guri is very imaginative, she said.

—So? How is that possibly relevant?

—He needs a stable role model, not someone who believes his own lies.

Someone like Daniel, Simba whispered.

Then he did lunge, knocking over the vase of roses he'd bought her less than an hour ago—two dozen creamy white roses, tender and flawless. An extravagance that should not have been stripped of thorns. With a cry, she sprang forward to rescue her drawings, slipped in the pooling water, fell. She landed face down, half twisted to the side, her arms bearing her weight, and there she remained for long enough to scare him. Anna? he said. She sat up and flexed her left wrist, supporting it with her other hand. They stared at each other. The room filled with silence as the roaring in his head subsided and he began to weep.

—Please, he said. Don't do this. I love you.

She got to her feet slowly, and he saw that, mask stripped away, she looked pale and tired, the skin under her eyes resigned to shadows. It struck him that she'd lost weight. He righted the vase and blotted up the water with a tea towel while she wadded up several of her drawings, exposing a sheet he hadn't seen.

—Why are you drawing squirrels?

—It's for the film.

—They're like no squirrels I've ever seen.

—Think biopunk. An army of rodents who've turned on humans. We're the exiles now. Payback for what we've done to the planet.

—No space travel then? No escape to another world?

—This is the only home we get.

By the time he finished sorting out the roses, she'd left the room. He found her in front of her sewing machine, clutching a set of fresh bed linen and looking up at the mask. Her hair hung loose, its living presence one yank away from exposing the antelope tenderness of her throat. But no, he wouldn't think about that. He wouldn't think about Simba. His mother would have suggested a bit of dignified prayer—with their upbringing, it had always surprised him that Sean would choose such a churchly wife, one who, unlike her husband, didn't see the parish as a version of Facebook—but he had no intention of kissing divine arse. He'd promise to see a shrink, a therapist, a couples counsellor, whatever. He'd drink only coffee and coke—herbal tea, if she insisted. He'd talk about things, he'd show her that he could change, and she wouldn't leave.

That night, after Guri was asleep, she told him that she'd soon be needing a wig. Will you be able to do what most people can't—or won't? she asked. Wordlessly he stared at her, wordlessly reached for her hair, the fierce, defiant tangle of it framed by a treasured pillowcase which had already survived three generations of indomitable women. He knew then that she'd put something of her own spirit into the costume. Not the best fit, but he'd wear it and it would have to do. She didn't leave his life—their life—till five months later.

Later still, years later while sorting through some shoe boxes full of kids' stuff Guri will have left behind in his wardrobe—yoyos in different sizes, a couple of Nintendo games, a harmonica, stickers, a pristine set of oil pastels (a gift from Mirjam, Oliver will recall), Lego



pieces, half-empty packets of chewing gum, a watch—he'll find the wooden animals Guri carved for a school project, a dozen fantastical creatures which would have enchanted Anna; and an object wrapped in a linen kitchen towel which Oliver will first mistake for the detached head from one of Guri's old plush toys. On closer examination, he'll realise that it's a squirrel's head, desiccated, somewhat shrunken, its eyes open and its grey fur still intact. Inexplicably, it won't have decomposed.