“Selbstbildnis mit Geschirrtuch”

A short story from Terézia Mora’s

Die Liebe unter Aliens

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Self-portrait with Dishtowel

The Swiss teacher lent me a bike. Somebody gave it to him for safekeeping, or even as a gift, but he refuses to ride it where stupidity and malice vie with speed and tight spaces. On city streets, in other words. Stupidity and malice, speed and tight spaces. He came up with that phrase, he’s very proud of it. He repeats it in French, then again in Italian. Not that he’s trying to teach me, he just gets a kick out of it. So, what other languages do I speak? Polish. He makes a bit of a face. That being said, he’s a good soul. I smile at him. The problem with the Swiss bike is that it’s a non-standard model, I have to be careful not to get any flat tires, replacement tubes are impossible to find here. I tell him I will guard it with my life.

And I really do: more than anything else, it has made my life here so much easier. Now that I have the bike I’m always happy in the morning, and often at night. I found a path down by the river, it’s probably intended as a footpath but at the hours I ride I have yet to see anyone out walking. The river is fifteen feet lower than the road and the current is slow, the traffic above is loud but the river below is quiet. To get there from the road, you have to carry the bike down 36 steps and drag it back up at the end, but it’s worth it to me.

My first day on the bike was the first day I felt euphoric here.

Before that, the last time I felt euphoric was when Felix called me his girlfriend. Before that was my first day in Berlin. Before that was when I finished eighth grade, and then one summer evening before
that when I was about seven. My parents and I were walking around our city, though most people were already asleep, when suddenly the shadow of a garden appeared on a façade in front of us, cast there by a streetlight. It was the shadow of a secret garden hidden from view of the street, and as we passed we became part of it, though we looked like giants. I was as big as an apple tree. I stood still and whispered: Oh, can’t it stay like this forever?

Five moments of euphoria? Felix asks, lifting one corner of his mouth.

So far! I reply defiantly. (What about you? How many can you say you’ve had? Better not to ask. For starters, you already know the answer, so there’s no point in hearing it, and anyway, that kind of question only leads to arguments. The man is incapable of laughter, but he can get even more humorless than he already is.)

One of us is sullen, the other is jumpy: that would be me. Loud, sudden events strike me to the core, and this is not a new development. When I was a child, I always knew there were dogs behind every gate on our street, and I knew they would bark when I walked by, but it still startled me every time. The way I ran down the street with my sandals flapping loudly, they should have been scared of me. Do you have to run like that? My mother and grandmother would ask, or they would say: proper women don’t run like that. When was I ever a proper woman? At this point, I doubt I’ll ever become one.

My first day on the bike, the thrill of it was just picking up steam when I had another scare. Homeless people live under the bridges by the river. That’s probably why
no one walks down here. Plus it was dark under the first bridge I passed on my route, the cobblestones were strewn with dirt and something white was glittering in the dirt. What if they’re shards of glass, I wondered, and started panicking about my bike. Then I saw the man sitting on his mattress with his back against the wall. A man with long black hair and a beard, the whites of his eyes showing. That does it, I thought. I can’t ride down here anymore. The mattress, the man, the shards of glass, it’s all too much. It’s dangerous, not to mention indecent. Riding your bike through someone else’s bedroom. Two bridges later, I couldn’t stop thinking about that as I rode through someone else’s home. Here, it was bright and tidy. There seemed to be three people living here, two men and one woman. Why doesn’t the fourth man live with them? One of them must be dangerous, ill or impossible to live with, but is it the first man, dwelling in the damp and dark with the glass shards, or these three here?

When I came up the steps with my bike at the other end and there was a traffic cop standing right there on the sidewalk, I nearly fainted. My knees were shaking as I carried the bike upright, though I was dying to let go, to let myself fall backwards, bike and all, down the stairs. Worst-case scenario: I would survive with a broken spine, my skull on the edge of a step, and the policeman’s face would swoop in, sardonic, triumphant: well, you had it coming. But then he saw me and didn’t do anything. I guess it’s not against the rules to carry your bike up the steps from the riverside walkway. Still, I had a hard time crossing the street after that, and my knees wouldn’t stop shaking until I was at work.

Stupid and malicious, that’s what Felix says too. That’s what you’re up against.
Stupid and malicious behavior. Maybe it’s only ever a small minority who choose to be that way or aren’t capable of anything else, but that’s all it takes to bring disaster on the rest, their victims. All the same, when people fall on hard times and start panicking, they tend to change, their strength proves powerless against the stupidity and malice inside of us all, and when people are pushed to such extremes, they don’t go back to normal overnight. Yet goodness, like happiness, wilts in an instant. Felix doesn’t think much of people, and he doesn’t make much of places. He only leaves the apartment when he has to, which is almost never. After all, he’s got me. We more or less live off what I earn cleaning. Aside from the Swiss teacher we have one other friend here, whose name happens to be Edel, he got me my first three keys. Now I have seven. I’ve never even met most of my clients. When I arrive there’s some money on the table weighed down by an ashtray, a cup, a stone. The agreement is 5 euros per hour. That way I earn 100 euros a week. The largest apartment I clean has 4 rooms, the smallest has 2. There are two apartments with children, two with single people, two with married couples, and the seventh is some kind of vacation home or guesthouse. This is where I’m called most often, whenever someone leaves, and it’s my favorite place to be.

My least favorite are the houses with families. All those reminders of children and marriage.

On my way back, the homeless people weren’t there (cleaning does the trick, after four or six hours you feel centered enough to ride under the bridges on the way back), and it turned out the shards under the dark bridge weren’t glass after all, they were actually thin plastic. The man with the black beard wasn’t there the next morning either,
he didn’t turn up until the day after that, and when I realized this came as a relief (he’s still out there, he came back), there was no doubt about it: I had grown accustomed to him and to the entire ordeal of riding under the bridges.

Now that I have the bike, I’m not so afraid of the underpass leading to our complex. The underpass is short but pitch black, and needless to say, it reeks of urine. I am glad I don’t have to go through it on foot anymore. Just before I got the bike, it started to smell like fish too, but it was a constant stench, not as if a fish were actually rott ing and drying out down there. I rush through it holding my breath. It’s like plunging into a dark cavern every time I go home. Take a breath first, it’s tempting to close your eyes but that would be too dangerous. The underpass is curved, you have to look for the light at the other end and turn towards it. Even with your eyes open, there is a brief moment of total darkness, and every time I ask myself: when the light comes back, on the other side, will everything be like it was before, will I be able to breathe again and see what I usually see? What I usually see is a housing complex made up of six-story apartment blocks scrawled with graffiti, in varying stages of disrepair. Designed for simple people, workers and students. Between the buildings, there’s enough room for a patch of lawn, but no one takes care of it. The grass grows high, the bordering hedges run rampant, trash gets caught in them, yet nothing tarnishes the beauty of the trees. Willows, poplars, crabapples, seen from above and below. We live on the top floor, I’ve never been to the other floors, normally I take the elevator even though the lights have been broken since we moved in. In my former life, I would never have taken an elevator without lights, but there are no elevators where I come from anyway. The other tenants in the building keep to themselves as much as we do.
Sometimes you hear voices and music, but they’re always muffled, never through open windows, and sometimes you can smell food. But usually it’s so quiet we seem to be the only ones here, and all you can smell is stone. The smell of stone steps. Once I saw an African man in the hallway. I nodded at him, he nodded at me, then he turned his back to me and walked away.

By the time I get home, never mind the bike, never mind my happiness, I’m usually so tired that I end up fighting with Felix. It’s always the same story: did he even leave the apartment all day, and if not, what was he doing at home, why didn’t he do anything all day?

Sometimes he replies that he wasn’t doing nothing, he was painting, but most of the time he doesn’t say anything at all. If he doesn’t say anything, that means he probably didn’t paint either, not even vases or plates. We both used to paint them, now only he does. Not to lighten my workload, he just can’t stand it if the vases and plates aren’t all painted the same way. They’re not even based on a single pattern, we make unique pieces, but it shows if they don’t all have the same touch, and that bugs him. I miss painting. Once in a fit of despair I brought home a little wooden chest from the junkyard and painted that.

It’s still trash, he said. Kitsch and trash.

I know, I said. But there’s no better place to store the non-existent family jewelry.

He raised one corner of his mouth. (Ridicule? Appreciation? Better not to ask.)

Actually, there was another moment of euphoria involving the painted junk chest that I forgot to count. It was my birthday, and I was picking myself bunches of fragrant
white flowers from a shrub. The branches put up a fight, but I persevered, and in the end they were stripped of bark and I was standing with a bouquet of fragrant flowers in the pitch-black elevator. When I arrived home, I saw that Felix had also gone down and picked flowers: small, delicate daisies from the lawn. They looked pathetic next to my half bouquet, or rather my half bouquet looked absurd next to his daisies, and I was moved to tears. So he does love me after all. Then he gave me a ring he had woven out of copper wire (did he make a special trip for this wire, or was it something he already had?). For the family jewelry. That’s when I really started to cry. Later I ruined everything with my overblown praise for the ring by suggesting he could make jewelry on the side. At that, he set down his knife and fork next to the plate (roasted potatoes, carrots, egg) and pushed back his chair. This really set me off, so I said:

This is not the time or place to be a snob. The man who sells jewelry in front of the university is a Peruvian poet!

In response, he picked up his hat and left the apartment.

Rather than sitting at home alone waiting for him, bawling out of rage and concern in succession, I went out too. The bike is a godsend, it keeps you safe, you’re elevated and faster. The trouble is that you end up in unknown territory a bit too quickly. If there are lots of people around, that’s not a problem. I keep an ear out for anyone speaking Polish, if need be I can talk to them and they will help me. This time, though, I just kept riding until there was no one else around, only buildings with the occasional solitary lit window. The wall of a cemetery extended endlessly on one side, the neighboring street was overgrown with roots, the bike shuddered loudly. The streetlights were placed far apart, the dark and light areas each scared me in their own
way. In the light I was clearly visible, in the dark there was always a point like in the underpass where you’re suddenly surrounded by blackness and can’t help feeling scared. The Swiss bike doesn’t have lights. If I fell over the roots with a loud crash, would anyone be watching from the dark buildings, would anyone even step outside, to help me or merely to exploit my weakness?

I don’t know why I didn’t turn around, I just kept riding, as if any way I went would lead in a circle, at some point taking me back where I needed to go. I didn’t stop until I reached a large, brightly lit, abandoned intersection. There was a gas station at the edge of the fields. I walked obediently around three sides of the large intersection and left it the way I came. That was fine at first. Seeing the cemetery wall again was also fine (at first), but I still didn’t know if I would ever find my way back to the apartment where I lived with Felix. Or rather: I knew I would manage to find the apartment, sooner or later, maybe after torturous hours of wandering at night, but would Felix still be there? It’s true that I give him a hard time about never leaving the apartment, but when he does leave I’m afraid he’ll never come back. Not because he wouldn’t want to. No, I imagine him being swallowed up by the city, this beast of a city will come between us if we both move around. One of us has to stay put for the other to find. More than anything, he would have to want to be found. Both of us would have to want it. If he didn’t want to come back, if what he actually wanted was to disappear, it wouldn’t take that much effort. We could both stay in this city and never see each other again. How would I live without you? I’d find a way, of course, but still: how? Would he leave his paintings behind or take them with him? All he paints are self-portraits. One self-portrait after another. He wasn’t trying to make that his trademark, he just can’t
paint anything else. There could be money in painting portraits, but he’s never even painted me. That made him twist his mouth: the painter who uses his wife as a model, ideally in the nude. If he left the paintings behind, it would be a little easier to take. But if he snuck back to take them away, I would not survive the betrayal.

These are the kinds of idiotic thoughts I had while biking around the city, full of regret and self-loathing. Everything was my fault, everything was his fault, not to mention the external circumstances. Who’s to say though, there will always be difficulties.

Eventually I came to a lively district, but these neighborhoods all look so similar, I couldn’t be sure it was the same one I rode through when I left. The people here did look friendly, all of them young and happy, but something held me back from asking them what neighborhood this was. I just kept riding down familiar and unfamiliar streets until I saw Felix on the sidewalk. That was his coat, his hat. I rolled up to him, my heart pounding, and asked: Do you know the way home from here? He laughed. I could smell alcohol on him, so he had been drinking. Enough to be in a good mood. Of course he knew his way around perfectly, though he supposedly never goes out. (Better not to ask.) Maybe his sense of direction is just better than mine. Approaching the underpass, I let him climb onto the luggage carrier and we rode through laughing. Felix said: riding on a girl’s luggage carrier is almost as good as letting a girl ride on yours. In the darkened elevator I leaned into him, inhaling the scent of his hat, his coat, the alcohol. The stubble on his chin poked my forehead.

At home, we inspected the ring again. I asked him to put it back on my finger. He did. Are you going to make one like this for yourself? He said: When I have more wire.
I love you, I said. (I wouldn’t want to get by without you. Women have it easier. But without you, I wouldn’t even want to get by.)

You should give proper painting another shot, he said.

I bought a fish just to paint it. Neither of us like fish. Felix only likes bread, cottage cheese and beef stew, but I don’t know how to make a good beef stew. He’s getting thinner and thinner. When I met him, he was wearing a green hat; later I nicked it from him and wore it myself. I looked very chic wearing that green men’s hat. At some point it got lost. Felix also has a brown hat that he wears on the rare occasions he goes out. In the apartment, he wears all kinds of “goofy hats”, as he calls them. He paints himself wearing them. It has been ages since I did any painting myself.

I’m not that invested in the idea of being an artist anymore, but still, painting and cleaning are all I can do. To teach, you need a better command of the language, and my learning has slowed since I’ve had the bike. My commute is faster and I don’t overhear as much. What could I offer the Swiss teacher to convince him to teach me? His wife takes care of the housekeeping, and they hardly have any money themselves. He once tried to sell a painting he inherited from his father. He showed it to me to see if I thought it was valuable. It was a watercolor sketch, I didn’t know the painter, the painting itself wasn’t bad but nothing special either, and unfinished at that. I don’t know, I said. I suggested he ask Edel. He said he had already been to see him.

The next day, the Swiss teacher came up with a new idea: atmospheric cityscapes, the kind that are popular with tourists. He would buy small canvases for me, I would essentially paint postcards on them and we would sell them at the market. I can’t go sit at the market, I said. He would find someone to do that for us. That person would
get a percentage, the teacher would get a percentage and so would I. The idea didn’t seem half bad, though as luck would have it I didn’t end up painting a single cityscape. I got sick. First only my right shoulder hurt, then the pain migrated downwards. My right hip, my knee, my ankle, the joint of my big toe. On the left side it started lower and slowly spread upwards. By the end even my jaw hurt, maybe just because I was clenching my teeth so hard with all the pain. I took aspirin and chased it with vodka. One time, when I had a toothache, that worked wonders. It didn’t help this time though. My thumb joints started to hurt instead. I lay down against the floorboards, rocking back and forth to massage my stiff back, then lay down on the mattress to feel its softness.

I need a sleeping pill, I told Felix.

He played dumb, as if it wasn’t clear what I wanted from him. Would you please go down and buy me sleeping pills?

He said he couldn’t go to a pharmacy. I lost my temper. Why can’t he go to a pharmacy, is he crippled or something? Since when is a pharmacy a dangerous place? I wailed loudly. Someone pounded against our wall. This startled me so much that I forgot my own pain for a second. Finally, Felix got a beer and warmed it up for me.

You’re an angel, I said before falling asleep.

The pain improved for a while after that, particularly on the bike. But it seems to be returning now. I can feel it when I carry the bike down the steps, and even more so when I carry it up, which makes sense. I clench my teeth together, propping my shoulder against the wall to gain more traction, and let the bike roll slowly down the
steps. Some days I hardly suffer any symptoms. I ride to work, go through the motions, haul the bike down and back up. These days, Felix is often gone when I get home. The first time he disappeared, I completely freaked out. I felt totally helpless, running around the apartment and peeking out all the windows. I couldn’t bring myself to go out and look for him though. The height of my efforts was to venture out into the stairwell, wandering up and down the stairs listening closely, but I didn’t set foot in the actual hallways. I was extremely angry with myself. Why are you acting like this, what’s wrong with you, what’s the use of this paralyzed fear? Why do I never have any female friends, it’s been like this my whole goddamn life, why am I not capable of having female friends, it’s always been men, never women, it serves you right. There’s no one you can turn to. What about the Swiss teacher? You wouldn’t even recognize his wife and kid if you saw them on the street without him. Because that’s the kind of person you are.

When Felix came back I yelled at him as if he had committed some monstrosity. He took this with unprecedented calm, only saying that he had been to see the Edels. They were heading to Switzerland soon and would stay there for a while. We could housesit their apartment for the next three months, they would actually appreciate it, and we wouldn’t be stuck paying the rent here.

I screamed like a stuck pig, pounding myself on the forehead: 3 months? What’ll happen after that? Do you ever think things through?

His face darkened: Don’t talk to me like that.

Slowly and clearly, I said: We can’t give this place up. Who knows who we’ll be up against when we need a new place 3 months from now? What are the Edels thinking?
Do *they* ever think things through?

He replied, not quite slowly or clearly, but in a way I could understand: everyone knows there are lots of illegal immigrants living here. We can’t stay in one place for too long.

I don’t care, I said. I’m not going anywhere.

What’s gotten into you? Since when have you been so stupid? I’ve always been like this. Didn’t you know that?

That night was terrible. I ranted and raved, then got scared he would leave, but he stayed. He was very calm, he put up with me, and ultimately we made a compromise. We would keep the apartment, I would bike to work as usual, and he would head to the Edels’ apartment, paint there (Edel is an amateur who can afford materials) and come back at night. He promised me never to spend the night there. With this new arrangement he seems more cheerful, though his feet ache from the 40-minute walk there and back every day. Now I’m the one who’s always sullen. I was taught to put on a friendly face until it became a habit, look cheerful if you can, women are more attractive that way and other people are more inclined to trust you. But lately my face has become as sluggish as the rest of my body. As I ride along the river, which has grown increasingly colder, my face is frozen. There aren’t any homeless people under the bridges now. The man under the dark bridge with the shards disappeared first, then the others followed. A few things are still lying around. The mattresses. Where did they come from? Is that normal? Do they migrate somewhere else at the end of the summer? Or did they not leave of their own free will? Is their disappearance a sign of something worse, something spreading beyond our notice, attentive as we are?
By the time I reach the steps at the end of the footpath where I have to carry the bike again, I’ve forgotten about the homeless people, all I can think about is myself and the cop who’s almost always there. He’s somehow involved with controlling traffic on the bridge, there seems to be no other way to resolve the issue. He weaves in and out of traffic, intently focused. It’s not always the same officer, but I’ve never been able to make eye contact with any of them.

I’ve been spending more time than necessary in the apartments I clean: I wait until the sheets dry, iron them and make the beds. Then I sit in a chair and look at the pristine, tidy rooms or stare out the window. The truth is I’m waiting for someone to arrive, to cross paths accidentally. But no one ever comes. I go back home.

Of course, Felix is not there. He only ever refers to Edel’s apartment as “the studio” now. I don’t know why I find that so revolting. (I don’t say a word.) The other day I realized I don’t even know the address. At one point I did, I’ve actually been there, but I’ve forgotten entirely. I’ve gotten it mixed up with the apartments I clean. Or do I also clean the Edels’ apartment without realizing it? (Where does this confusion come from? Does it have something to do with the pain? Or am I losing my mind regardless?)

I don’t know what else to do with myself, so I turn to the plates. Real painting would be pushing it, that would be too much for me. Painting decorations is doable though. If I can still paint ornamental designs, I must not actually be crazy. I could give up the cleaning jobs and start painting plates again. It’s gotten so much colder
though. People are going out less. It’s nuts anyway. Cleaning under the table is a
blessing, and who wants a bunch of painted plates? Working in some kitchen could be an
option, but that’s tougher than cleaning. I’m too ugly to be a prostitute as it is.

Felix comes home and asks whether there’s anything to eat. Why, did you bring
something?

If I had, I wouldn’t need to ask.

No, I said, it didn’t cross my mind. I was painting. What were you painting?

Plates would be the right thing to say, but I don’t, I won’t subject myself to that.

Just think what the corner of his mouth would do. Instead I retort: What about you?

He doesn’t answer. If there’s nothing to eat, there’s nothing to eat. He doesn’t seem
to care anyway. He makes some tea. Resisting the temptation to pour it right down his
shirt, hot and black as it is, I cook something too. I make a broth using bouillon cubes
and toss in chunks of bread. Then I say: Mountain climbers in the Himalayas do this too.

He looks at me. His mouth doesn’t form a smile, but I can see it in his eyes. Mountain
climbers in the Himalayas? He asks.

Yes, I say, and it feels like the day we first met. I had just been telling someone how
to plow a field. He was watching me, amused. Two hours later, we were in bed together
at his place.

For a brief moment, this instant soup with scraps of stale white bread soaking in it
is heaven on earth. For a brief moment everything is all right, I feel warmth spreading
through me, my pain disappears.

Later that night it comes back, had to sooner or later, and it’s worse than ever. I lie
down on the mattress and whimper. I can’t even stand up to drink any of the soup,
which is too salty. What on earth is going on? Cooking smells and voices coming from somewhere in the building. Go down, look for the Africans, confide in them. They must know of some healer. I ask Felix whether he could do that. Would you go see the Africans for me?

His response: Do you have a fever?

He doesn’t put his hand on my forehead to check though. A few minutes later I hear him go out. I don’t suppose Felix is talking to the Africans, but maybe he’ll go to a pharmacy this time.

I fall asleep, I wake up. It’s gotten dark and I am on my own. It’s cold. The halls have been noisy all day. Maybe something is in the works. Maybe they’re pacing around, discussing something. Maybe I should join them. I could go out with the blanket over my shoulders, no one here would mind. Still half asleep, I limp out into the hallway. It’s warm underneath the blanket, but my feet are cold. I’m barefoot. The cold is bad for my joints. There’s no one in the stairwell, I’m alone with the cold air and the smell of stones. Felix must have bolted, waited until I fell asleep and headed to someone else’s place, a real apartment. Maybe he stopped along the way to have a drink. He spends our money on drinking instead of food or medicine. On drinking and paints, though he’s also happy to let me buy those. The Swiss teacher advised me to buy them from the hardware store, they’re cheaper there. Felix flashed me a murderous glare. Why don’t you paint with yourself if you want. He wanted me to leave him to his own devices, but maybe he left me to my own devices a long time ago. Is this the end of the road for me? The Edels already left the city. The Swiss teacher? I can’t call him. I want to go find him. A part of me knows that it’s the middle of the night and I can’t do
that. Even though I’m afraid, I return to the apartment and put on some shoes. First I throw the blanket off, but it’s so cold that I lift it again and place it around my shoulders. I don’t bother tying my shoes. How would I even manage?

As the door of the building closes behind me, I realize I don’t have my keys with me. Normally this would make me frantic, but not this time. I don’t feel anything, no fear, only pain. All I can think is: good thing I took the blanket with me at least. I won’t freeze if I’m forced to spend the night outside. I guess I’m actually losing my mind.

The lights over the door to our building don’t work either. I stand there in the dark, it’s a good feeling. There’s nothing to blind me, I can see the bushes around me clearly. They’re moving as if someone is behind them. No, it’s not just the wind. It smells like weed. I let the blanket fall a bit so my head is sticking out again. I can feel it dragging on the ground now. It’s going to get dirty. It smells like me and Felix, we always swap blankets while we’re sleeping.

Hey! I shout at the bushes. I’m in pain. You got something for me? Ich habe Schmerzen. Habt ihr was für mich? J’ai des douleurs, pouvez-vous m’aider? And finally even: Mam bóle. Czy macie coś dla mnie?

I have a high voice. A woman’s voice. I wonder what my silhouette looks like to them? Who knows, maybe they even recognized me. Maybe they pay more attention than I do.

Anyway, I don’t recognize them. It’s two young African men, that much I can see. One of them is very thin, with a narrow head, the other one has a round head and is more
stocky. They come out of the bushes and wave to me. I can’t do that. I can’t go into the bushes with them. Even if I weren’t afraid, my back has gotten so stiff that I can’t move an inch.

I start walking anyway. Stiffly, down each of the three steps. The blanket drags against the dirt path. A stirred dust smell. The men take a step back into the bushes, but not as far back as they were before. I’m still standing outside with my blanket. The stocky one passes me a joint.

The cigarette paper is moist, I draw his spit between my lips and suck in the smoke. I’m not able to smoke, it takes concentration: drawing in the smoke and then inhaling through your mouth a second later. I give the joint back to him.

Suffit? He asks, evidently surprised, but once he has the joint back he takes another pull.

I shake my head. Even that hurts. I’ll need to smoke a whole lot more. I could get pretty delirious and still feel the pain. I take the joint again and hold onto it. The stocky one rolls another. The tall one just watches impassively. The stocky one doesn’t say anything else, neither do I. We stand in the bushes and smoke. Later the stocky one takes another step back and points behind him in the bushes. There’s a tree trunk there. He wants me to sit there. I take a seat. It’s nice and soft with the blanket. The two of them sit on either side of me.

Comment tu t’appelles?

Felka.

I am Régis. This is... (unintelligible).

Régis lives in our building, on the fourth floor. The tall one doesn’t.
After that we don’t talk anymore. I smoke the joint, looking up at the stars through the bushes. Gradually it gets warmer. You can smell the trees. I feel happy. My head droops, I can’t help it, onto the tall one’s shoulder. It figures that I’d lean on the tall one’s shoulder, but he does nothing to stop me. On the other side Régis takes my hand, it’s sticking out of the blanket, the hand that was holding the joint, and starts massaging it. He tells me something my French is not good enough to understand. Evidently he’s looking for pressure points in my hand that are connected with the pain in my back. He finds a considerable number of them. When he presses the area between my thumb and index finger, the pain is so awful that I cry out. He stops immediately, but I can’t help myself. I start crying loudly and violently.

Felka? Felix’s distant voice. Felka?

I tear myself away from the two strangers and stumble howling through the bushes to escape. Felix?

Branches breaking, joined by the sound of my cries as I call: Felix? I think the two of them call out Sssssh! behind me. The tall one is not thrilled to have anything to do with me. I break through the bushes, though Felix’s voice was probably just a hallucination. My own howling is so loud that I wouldn’t be able to hear if he were calling me.

But there he is, standing on the dirt path leading to our front door. He’s holding a painting wrapped in newspaper under his arm.

We barely fit in the pitch-black elevator, with the painting and the blanket and me smelling of weed. My breath draws together the down inside the blanket.
Felix warms up a pillow filled with dried beans, something I knit a while ago, and lays it against my back. Then he gives me a massage, though he’s totally inept at it. He places the painting he did in the Edels’ apartment where I can see it. He was actually planning to leave it there for them as a gift, but then he brought it over to show me. Of course, it’s another self-portrait. In the painting, he’s wearing a dishtowel on his shoulder and a white cap on his head that looks like the lid of a pot.

It’s the best thing you’ve ever painted, I say, and burst into tears again.

It’s dark, I can’t see what he’s doing with the corner of his mouth. He brushes his hand against my hair.