

Schöffling & Co.

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1.

Hello, my name is Jolanda Jellerich. Did my father die here this morning?

No, I can't say it like that. Start the car, drive carefully off the ferry, over the bumpy threshold between land and sea, and have another think. The seagulls cry as if they know the answer. But they aren't speaking clearly enough. I don't understand a word. Their dazzling white contrasts with the bright blue sea. As if they've been brought in by the tourist office.

We hope to welcome you back soon to the Isle of the Blessed, says the sign on the ferry terminal.

Hello, my father died this morning on this ward, and my mother has asked me to check if he's really dead. His name is Pax Jellerich.

That won't work either. Even the little green tree – the Wunderbaum, they call it – hanging from the rear-view mirror shakes its branches disapprovingly. Or perhaps it's just shocked to hear that its owner won't ever be coming back. Poor little tree, you've spent years battling the smell of his pipe, and now you're out of a job. Though the combination of tree smell and pipe smoke will probably never leave this car.

I hope it'll never leave.

Did I say that? Or was it someone else? The Wunderbaum? It hangs there and spins round, looking all innocent. It spins wildly, endlessly on its own axis. All the while giving off its hideous tree smell.

It's got the word *Spring* printed at the bottom.

But you won't ever come close to the real spring outside, little tree. Spring sprawls through the windscreen, it prances and dances around with its deep green banks, its bright green trees and soft green grass.

Hooting.

Screeching.

In the rear-view mirror I see a man raise his hand and point his index finger at me, then tap his forehead. He seems to be moving his hand extra slowly, as if teaching me the meaning of the gesture, as if I've never been on the receiving end of it before. Sorry to disappoint, good sir: in the eleven months since I passed my test, more people have called me crazy than in the eighteen years before that.

Hello, my name is Jolanda Jellerich. My father died this morning and I've come to collect his things.

Bingo. That's exactly what I'll say. And if the nurse answers: 'What do you mean, died? He's full of life and on his drip in room 342! Or at least as full of life as he can be just now, you understand,' then I can go back home and tell Constanze that Pax is alive. Constanze, who's lying on the sofa, refusing to believe it. Even though she was the one who took the call from the hospital this morning, even though she herself told me that Pax had died at 3:23. She spoke quietly, her voice firm, calm.

And then, a quarter of an hour later: 'Jolanda, I think I misunderstood them on the phone. I don't think he's dead at all. Can you call them and ask if he really has died?' It wasn't easy to pull myself back out of the trance that I had fallen into on hearing the news. I lifted up the top of my scalp, reached into my skull and turned my brain towards Constanze. She didn't actually look crazy, just very pale, but very calm too. And briefly, very briefly, I thought perhaps it wasn't such a crazy idea that she had misunderstood, that I would find Pax in his bed, still connected to the drip and the machines. Alive. 'The best thing would be for you to go straight to the hospital, Jolanda, that's the easiest way.' Constanze, ever the voice of reason. 'If you leave now, you can catch the next ferry.'

I could have said: 'But you spoke to the hospital yourself!' I could have said: 'How am I meant to ask if he's really dead? How do you imagine that conversation going, Mama?'
Before 3:23, those sentences would have made sense.

Instead, I picked up my coat – the white one with the red dots, the most cheerful coat I own – got into the car, and set off.

Park, turn off the engine, take out the key.

Get out of the car.

Getting out of the car is hard. Ideally, I would jump out in one swift movement to stop me from hesitating and just sitting here. The Wunderbaum should come too. It's too big for my coat pocket, the tip sticks out. I hope I won't lose it along the way.

Open the door, get out, shut the door behind me.

Made it.

Something pulls me back.

My coat is stuck in the door. Come on!

It rips.

I'm free.

You're not free yet, come on, first tell me how old you are. One, two ... nineteen.

Pax is fifty-three.

Pax was fifty-three.

No: Pax lived to be fifty-three.

Across the car park, past the flowerbeds and through the revolving glass door.

I don't recognise it, any of it.

The right floor, the right corridor, the right room: I would be able to find it all in my sleep. Maybe I'm too wide awake. Is that the right gum tree? Is that the right vending machine? No, up close they look just as foreign to me as the grey rubber floor and the red door frames. Or just as familiar. So familiar there's nothing left for me to recognise.

The cold damp feeling on my back is sweat. I hope no one can see it.

'... help you?'

A man dressed in green. Green like the gum tree and the Wunderbaum and the bloody spring. He looks at me tiredly over his face mask.

... because my love is a hunter.

'... you all right?'

... that's why I love everything that is green...

He should let go of my shoulder.

... because my love is a ...

'... need help?'

Half of his words get lost in his white face mask. He takes off the mask and throws it into the bin along with the rest of his words.

Pity.

I have to say something too.

But what?

What if I fish the face mask out of the bin? If I unfold it and ... *can-I-are-do-you?*

‘Sorry? Are you in the right place?’

He doesn’t recognise his own missing words. Face mask back in the bin. ‘Yes, definitely in the right place. Completely. No one’s more in the right place than me.’

... green, green, green ...

He doesn’t let go of my shoulder. His watch ticks in my ear.

Say something. Say something. One sentence that will release him.

‘I don’t need any help.’

He lets go at last. He sets off again at last. Runs off. Everyone is always running here. Their rubber shoes squeak on the rubber floor. They must measure themselves by their squeaks. Anyone who doesn’t squeak is moving too slowly.

I have to sit down, just for a moment. There’s a plastic chair between the gum tree and the vending machine. Dirty white. Like outside the Winter ice cream café. We went there the day Pax first came out of the hospital with his bald baby head. Although I’d sat on those white chairs outside the ice cream café countless times before, I suddenly felt as though they were the plastic chairs from the hospital. Of course they weren’t. But for us, those white plastic chairs had lost their innocence. Or for me, at least. I don’t know what the others were thinking then. We talked about the ice cream menu as though our lives depended on it. Pax eventually ordered an iced chocolate drink and some spaghetti ice cream. With a shot of Waldmeister to finish.

... green, green, green ...

The vending machine hums warm air into my face.

... all my ...

It blows the bloody song out of my head. Thank you, dear vending machine. Do you like it when I stroke your metal skin? It vibrates beneath my palm.

‘Hello, Jolanda!’

The wheelchair-and-walker gang. On their way up to the roof terrace.

‘Hello Jolanda, good morning!’

What’s that one called with the blue dressing gown and the slippers, the one waving at me? His drip bag contains saline. I like the ones with saline drips. It’s so much more appetising than plasma.

Stop stroking the vending machine.

And wave.

And wave.

And wave!

Oh no, he’s coming over to me. He pushes the drip stand in front of him as though it were an extension of his own body. He smiles. ‘Will we be seeing you in a bit? Are you two coming up? Or are you having another portrait session? Is it my turn at last? Haven’t you got your sketchbook with you?’

So many questions.

In his dressing gown pocket I can see the outline of a cigarette packet. It fits perfectly. As though dressing gown pockets had been designed just for cigarette packets. Or the other way around.

‘Well, we’re going up now anyway, time for my breakfast ciggie!’

He pats his dressing gown pocket with his non-drip hand.

He’s right, I always wanted to draw that – how they all smoke out on the roof terrace, in jogging bottoms and dressing gowns. How they light their cigarettes, how they tap off the ash, inhale, blow smoke rings, stub out the butts. The few actions left to them from the non-hospital-world, which are being done out there in exactly the same way as in here. The

smokers celebrate these actions, they draw them out, witnessing the everyday nature of each other's movements. From the roof terrace you can see the mudflats of the Wadden Sea, but the smokers always sit with their backs to the view.

The saline man walks off, waving. He's in a hurry. He's about to be left behind by the walker gang. They're already getting into the lift.

Only Pax managed occasionally to get the smokers to face the mudflats. He'd gesture towards the water with his pipe. There was often no water to be seen, just a black stretch of mud. 'The wreck of the Jolande is somewhere out there in the sand. It'll come up soon. Soon! And I'm going to find it.' His pipe smoke rose as if trying to show them where to look. The smokers didn't think Pax was crazy. I could tell his excitement rubbed off on them. I wouldn't have been surprised if one day, instead of going up to the roof terrace, the walker gang had gone out onto the mudflats, led by Pax, the Pied Piper, with a tobacco pipe in his mouth instead of a flute.

But in the end, he went out onto the mudflats alone.

The saline man lifts his drip stand over the threshold into the lift.

'No, we're not coming today, my father died at 3:23!'

I shouldn't shout like that.

The man can't hear me any more. The doors close.

I'm going to go home now and just say I asked and that Pax really is dead. I should have done that from the start, I've no idea why I came here at all. Somehow, I must have failed to see that Constanze has gone temporarily mad. I hope it's temporary.

The vending machine starts to vibrate even more intensely, then there's a jolt. A woman takes a green bottle from the tray.

Bluna.

You can only get Bluna from the vending machine one floor down from the ward where Pax is. I'm sure about that; after all, I took him a bottle of Bluna every time I came to visit. I don't even know if he particularly likes Bluna. But I wanted him to laugh and repeat the familiar catchphrase: *Aren't we all a bit Bluna?*

The vending machine is free.

Plop.

The plastic chair tears itself away from my behind at last; thank you, plastic chair, for your understanding. The code for Bluna is 05. For two euros you get first a jolt and then a green bottle.

Pay for the jolt of the machine with the clang of a coin: that sounds like something Pax would say.

And if Constanze is right? What if the bit about dying was a misunderstanding after all?

Time to go upstairs.

It only feels as though there's no air.

The red 3. This is his floor.

And his corridor: 3.4.

And his room: 3.4.2.

And his bed: 3.4.2.1

The door is closed. My left hand grips the tree in my coat pocket, my right hand holds the Bluna bottle. One of my hands must let go before I can knock. But which one?

The door opens.

'Hello, Frau Jellerich!'

The nurse quickly pulls the door shut behind her and stands in front of it. Like a child who has just been up to no good. She rests her hand on my shoulder, very gently. So gently

that I can only feel it because I know her hand is there. So gently, as if my shoulder cannot be trusted. As if it were not solid enough for a hand to rest on it.

‘Hello, my name is Jolanda Jellerich. My father...’

Is there any sound coming out? Are my lips moving? The nurse nods and disappears into the glass box where all visitors have to register. Maybe the rushing in my ears will go away if I puff up my cheeks and try to put blow hard against my eardrums.

She returns with Pax’s small checked suitcase.

‘We kept this for you.’

What to do with the air now? Inside. Just let it out inside. And swallow.

Swallowing is hard.

She places the suitcase at my feet. She holds her right hand out, palm flat as though she were balancing a tray on it. But there’s no tray. Instead, there are two crooked wire arms; two pieces of thick glass, covered in smudges; a silver bridge, with padded green pieces where the glasses sat on Pax’s nose.

She thrusts her hand towards me.

Don’t flinch.

With her free hand, she points at the glasses. As though she were holding out his nose or one of his ears or an eyeball, as a memento – and then: my deepest condolences. See you.

I don’t need your sympathy.

Perhaps I said that.

‘Do you want to see him again?’

Which is it: see you, or see him?

‘We’ve already prepared him for visitors and put him in a private room. His neighbour on the ward is on his way out.’ She gestures towards the door.

On his way out.

‘Has my father already gone?’

‘I’m afraid so, yes. Died at 3:23.’

Bluna on the floor, glasses in my hand. Carefully, the bridge between my thumb and forefinger. One of the arms folds out.

‘If you want to say goodbye, I can take you to him.’

I promised Pax I’d draw him one more time after he died.

In my coat pocket, my left hand squeezes the Wunderbaum. Release the clamped fingers, one by one.

Grip the suitcase handle.

And run.