

# Rowohlt Verlag – Highlights

## Frankfurt Book Fair 2012

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Andreas Stichmann

### The Glowing

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fiction

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Rupert's search leads him from provincial Germany to Iran, and from there to the Caspian Sea. It is the search for Ana, who worked on the till at the petrol station, who wore a t-shirt with a skull and crossbones on the front. Whose Persian father never managed to find a foothold the country in which he lives in exile. Rupert's exhausting, arduous journey winds its way through the desert, punctuated with bizarre encounters. His only companion is Robert, who, like him, is an orphan. Robert the schizophrenic, who likes watching birds and invents a new form of chess. And who has not the slightest understanding of the world. At least, that's how it was before there was Ana. Before they ran off together, to start a life together. Before Ana disappeared.

Andreas Stichmann's accomplished debut novel is about love, sex and parallel dimensions. And about the search for a girl. Or is it really the search for a tenuous but credible reality, a sense of home, of belonging, of safety from the fear borne from within one's own dreams and thoughts?

*The Glowing* heralds a new voice in European literature. Unicorns and hunters, dervishes and ex-generals, Russian petty criminals, opium-smoking art film makers, and geriatric orange farmers... This artfully constructed narrative is filled with characters that "burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles..." (Jack Kerouac)

Andreas Stichmann was born in 1983, and has spent time in both Iran and South Africa. He was a 2006 finalist in the Open Mike literature competition, hosted in Berlin. A collection of stories, *Jackie in Silber*, was published in 2008 to widespread acclaim. He has since received numerous literary awards. He lives in Hamburg.

- Recommended by New Books in German (Goethe Institute)



## **The Great Helper**

### **1**

The huge field of runways. Seen from inside the Iran Air plane. Waiting for takeoff. From the window seat, which Robert lets me have even though it's his first time flying too. The toy cars driving around between the aircraft out there. The acceleration, the primal energies being burned now: the aircraft is rolling. Mankind's great dream made of cables and wires, and us sitting in it even though we didn't help rivet it together. And the way the earth drops away under us, and the landscape slides slantwise into the window.

It's crazy, but this is exactly how it has to be. It's what Ana would do: just try it, even if it seems preposterous. In the wilderness a moment ago, and now we're in the sky, on our way to find her, somewhere down there, below these deep yellow masses of light. We have exactly six days and five hours. It's a last-minute fare; the return flight is part of the deal.

I stop blinking. I try to go a minute without blinking. It's a calming technique. It probably looks stupid, but it works: the shapes and colours blur outside the porthole — then when I start to blink again, I have the feeling I can see much more clearly than before. A clearing effect; a calm eye that I'm cultivating here. With Ana's hooded sweatshirt in my lap, still smelling a little of her.

Robert sends me his thin smile, that look that's supposed to indicate something between the words, although there's nothing there because we're not talking. With a show of nonchalance, he pokes here and there on the touch-screen in the back of the seat in front of him, and examines with amazement the entertainment console nested in the armrest like an electronic chick. Wraps himself in the wool blanket, takes off his sandals, adjusts his position in his seat. As if he wanted to show me what a relaxed traveller he is. Yet he's obviously nervous: the way he scratches his neck, already red from his allergies; the way he fidgets with the buttons of his sweat-soaked linen shirt. He casually mentions that he hasn't got his medication in his carry-on luggage, although he should be taking it now. I tell him I can't think about things like that now, and he should concentrate on the job we have to do in the next six days. After all, he came along to help.

Then he's silent. Just sits there and looks as if he were still back in the wilderness. In his mother's herb garden, or in his wicker chair in the front yard. He seems to be waging an internal struggle against the realisation that he's leaving home for the first time — at 500 miles per hour, flying.

Robert's finger finds the button and his seat tips back, but it meets with opposition from behind, and jerks forward again. Then he laboriously gets out his travel reading and stacks it on his table: several books about Persian mysticism. Only to pack them up again after a while just as laboriously, and then to busy himself with the Iran Air socks and the duty-free brochure instead, as if he were trying to infect me with his fidgeting.

But I'm sitting here calmly. I turn to look out the window. I'm sitting here with a calm brain.

In front of me on my little table: my neck wallet. Containing the address and phone number of Abolfazl Merizadi, which I found in the clothes Ana left behind. He said on the phone he wants to try to get in touch with Ana's mother, or at least with go-betweens: Ana's mother is a communist, living in the underground, and has no address. We should just come over, he said. He had no word from Ana, he didn't really know her, but we would track her down, all right. His family is acquainted with hers, at a few removes.

In that surprisingly good English of his. So clear and so friendly.

Outside: crystal-clear cityscapes, inexpressibly far down below the clouds. A stone cracked open to reveal the sparkling treasures of the earth. Carpets of light meandering into the mountains, running through the valleys, bridging the rivers. I tell myself there's an essence, a sense to the earth's surface shimmering down there. There are tracks to be read on it, and paths to be found; perhaps you could take a wrong turn, but only to come back again and then follow the right trail. And Ana will see it this way someday; from somewhere we'll look back on this trip — she'll say: You really did it. You got me out of there, you rescued me.

There's an action film on the screens. Robert is reading.

Imam Khomeini Airport, Tehran. The air is a smoggy boiling gruel of colours; my sweat is dripping into my eyes. Outside the terminal, dogs roam, messages crawl and blink on LED strips above the souvenir shops; beyond them loud rhythms boom out of a taxi. A couple of drivers are sitting on the guard rails and barbecuing, while others over by the doors of the terminal scream angrily for business. Suddenly a tall man with a pale green uniform, sunglasses and a machine gun is standing near us, apparently looking for something, then he disappears again behind the taxis.

Robert has gone ahead and is looking around, rather too conspicuously, standing out like a thin white stick, while beside him a broad-shouldered young man stands, excitedly holding up a piece of cardboard with our names on it. He keeps lowering it again, as if he didn't quite feel comfortable drawing attention to himself, and looks repeatedly at his watch. To him we probably look much like the other passengers now coming out through the revolving door with wheeled suitcases and faces worn out from sitting.

He's wearing a fleece sweater that's too big for him with *Hard&Heavy* printed on it, but he looks remarkably good-natured and soft.

'Abolfazl Merizadi?' I ask.

'IS THAT YOU?' cries Abolfazl Merizadi.

His voice is much deeper and stronger than it sounded over the telephone. He hugs us one after the other as if we'd known each other all our lives. Slightly embarrassed, I free myself from the strange wood smell of his sweater.

'Call me Abu! I've been looking forward to your coming!'

We tear through the desert landscape in his beat-up car: dry riverbeds fly past, flat ruins. Now and then we see people by the roadside with wheelbarrows and children carrying plastic sacks on their backs. Abu advises me not to lean against the rear door, because otherwise I'll fall out onto the road, so I sit up rigidly. A giant stone fist emerges in the distance, apparently a political monument, but it changes as we come closer: it's only a cellphone advertisement. A giant stone fist raising a giant stone cellphone skyward. And the next moment it's gone again, we turn and shoot away again, everything is brown and blurry in the twilight, only the headlights of the cars shine bright. Abu smiles at me in the rear-view mirror. I notice that he has lots of little wrinkles

around his eyes, although he must be only around twenty.

It is odd that I haven't heard from my girlfriend in three weeks, he says, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's run into trouble with the police. After all, they don't arrest Western tourists for no reason, even if it is a dictatorship.

'Or is she a communist too?'

'Not really, she's just looking for her mother.'

'I have some pictures of Ana's mother together with my mother! I'll show them to you later! But first get settled in. I'm so glad you're here!'

Two hills slide apart and Tehran slips out of the fog. Slimy yellow and flat, and loud. The traffic lights blink orange, as if they were there to urge the traffic on. We pass a family on a moped and a car with no doors, and at the next intersection a man suddenly jumps out of a car screaming and chases two children carrying an iron bar, who disappear with it between the cars — the nonstop horn-honking swells only slightly. Abu steers with one hand and examines me in the rear-view mirror while he steps on the gas, through a tight curve, then past a palace, up a darker street, between garages and pastures where scattered sheep are grazing. When I look out the rear window, I spot the soldier from the airport again, the guy with the light green uniform and the sunglasses, as if we were in a low-budget movie. A green car, he's sitting close behind his steering wheel — and then he takes off his sunglasses, doesn't avoid my gaze at all.

Abu says that's all right, it's quite possible that they set an observer on us — if we just act like normal tourists he'll go away after a while.

'It's nothing to do with you personally!'

Then Abu brakes, jumps out and puts stone slabs behind the tires because otherwise the car will roll backwards down the street. The green car drives by slowly. In front of us is a row of about fifty identical clay-coloured rectangles. Each with a blue wooden door and a little blue window.

3

We're sitting on a big burgundy carpet. In the one-room house. Surrounded by cracked clay walls and kitschy little paintings with lions and eagles in them. One corner is a cooking alcove, divided

off by a clay wall decorated with plastic flowers and paper garlands. Behind it, pots are steaming: Abu and his mother started cooking as soon as we arrived. There's a huge flat-screen TV, and above it a photo on the wall of Abu's brother in a military uniform. There's an outhouse in the yard, which I need to use, but I don't dare. I feel as if we were somehow intruding without permission, as if we hadn't asked someone we should have asked. Abu's father, maybe. Who is silently shoving nuts into his moustache.

He faces us cross-legged, his black eyes glued to us, saying nothing. Only his moustache moves now and then. I'm completely soaked with sweat, although all I'm wearing is an undershirt and a pair of the airy, colourful house trousers that Abu gave us. And his father sits there, wiry and exotic, his gaze alternating between me and his bare feet.

I say, 'Hello?'

No answer from him.

Robert stands up and goes over to the kitchen alcove to help Abu and his mother, but apparently that's inappropriate; the mother pushes him away, laughing. She's about as big as Abu, only a little more plump and round, a chirpy bird with a pink head scarf and long dishwashing gloves. But so inordinately friendly that it makes me suspicious — as if it were a great thing to have two young Germans sitting here in need of help.

Little laughs spill out of the kitchen alcove as Robert sits down again. He looks at Abu's father, then at the father's feet, and when I look at him, he sips at his tea glass and pushes the sugar bowl full of rock candy towards me. Evidently he's still making an effort to look relaxed, but the tension is all over his face, and his allergy is getting worse — those white pimples on his neck. I'd better not remind him of what Ana told us back then, in the fields in front of the house: that you need to be suspicious of everyone in Tehran, that there are informers everywhere. Robert is the kind of person who sees informers and starts to panic even when there aren't any. At least he used to be, before he had his medication.

'It's nice here', he says now.

Abu's father's eyes are blank.

All right, then. I get the presents for our hosts out of the plastic bag: the refrigerator magnet shaped like a map of Germany, the national football jersey, the German landmarks card game, the eau de cologne, the picture book of Germany, which I slide over to the father. And the father

does become a little more animated; his eyebrows go up as he leafs through the book: Neuschwanstein Castle, the Lüneburg Heath, Hohenzollern Castle, the lakes of Mecklenburg. And also plenty of sausages and forests, a fat woman in front of a half-timbered cottage. He puts his finger on the woman and looks at us — and suddenly it hits me that he's bashful. The father is just shy, nothing more. Just a reticent person.

'Mother?' he asks.

We shake our heads. Apparently he thinks the woman in the book could be our mother. Abu comes out of the kitchen alcove and exchanges a few rapid, prickly words with him.

'My father wants to meet your mother first, before we talk about everything else!'

'How?' says Robert.

'On Skype!'

He goes to the giant screen and fiddles with it. He plugs in different cables, adjusts a little camera, and logs in to an Internet account, while his father stands the photo of Abu's brother on the rug. Apparently they're going to gather the whole family together. Abu's mother is already joining us.

It takes us a long time to explain that my mother is dead and that my foster mother, Robert's mother, doesn't know how to work these things. Abu doesn't want to believe we're not real brothers. He says we look so much alike. And he says it would be a real pleasure to meet *our* mother now.

'We're not brothers, and we don't have Skype,' says Robert. 'The best I can do is show you a picture of my mother.'

He takes it out. I know the one; he always carries it in his belt pouch: Frances in the wicker chair in front of her hippie house. A little like a postcard: a bale of hay on the left, a flowering shrub on the right, Frances in the middle with her linen clothes — rather younger and not easily discernible, so she looks somewhat friendly. And he takes out another photo: the two of us as children in the rape fields in front of the barn, with serious looks on our faces in the yellow glow.

Abu's parents look at the photos for a while, nod and say yes, that house and Robert's mother are very pretty, but now they would rather skype. They simply can't believe it: Germans who don't have Skype. Someone in the family must have Skype, one of our cousins or nephews or uncles.

'There's no one but us and my mother,' says Robert.

An unpleasant silence begins.

Abu looks almost offended as he unplugs the cables again.

Only gradually does his friendliness return. He says, of course it's all right, he can understand if we feel it's too soon for that; maybe we can try skyping tomorrow or the next day.

Tea. Tea with dinner and after dinner more tea. On the plates in front of us bones gleam in the airless heat. Each of us has a chicken with sauce and rice in his belly. Much too much, because Mother Merizadi kept serving us more, but it doesn't seem to have tired her at all. She's still chatting away cheerfully in Persian as if it were the only language in the world.

Abu translates that *of course* she remembers Ana's mother, that Ana's mother was the wildest girl in the neighbourhood, and always played football with the boys, back when they lived by the Caspian Sea. But they lost touch almost twenty years ago — when Ana's father fled with her to Germany.

'The last time my mother saw her was here in Tehran, in the bazaar,' says Abu. 'We should start the search there tomorrow! There is also a photo of a baby that could be Ana. It came from my boss's fabric shop. Not far from here.'

Abu's mother nods, sits down cross-legged quite nimbly, and takes from a box a bunch of photos that show her with Ana's mother: as pretty young girls in front of a horse; with a big group of girls on a picnic blanket.

Abu hands me the baby picture: a happy face peering out of a heap of brilliantly coloured fabrics. Hard to tell if that's really Ana. But he says his boss is the man for us to see in any case — he's got influence, connections, he knows his way around. His name's Nassir, but it would be better for us to call him *Nassir Khan*. That means roughly: Great Helper.

4

Morse code signals over the city. Tell me what happened. Guide my steps in your direction.

Looking out over the streets from the flat roof of the Merizadis' house.

But of course there are no signals, or at least none that make any sense. Instead, the mosaic of nocturnal gardens, the myriad coloured light bulbs and twinkling lights, an artificial daylight over the whole neighbourhood.

Along the edge of the flat roof a pheasant walks as if in a trance, hops down, and continues walking atop a clay wall. The courtyards form a clay-brown chessboard full of satellite dishes and clotheslines. Scattered children also balancing on walls, following the pheasant in a line, and spraying it with hair spray, or at least that's what it looks like to me.

No moon.

Instead, Ana's voice in my head.

*Imagine if all you could see of someone was their ORGANS, if everyone walked around as just INTESTINES for example. That would be so funny! Just a chain of intestines floating through the air over the sidewalk. Do you think you'd like me if I was just a talking INTESTINE, if the rest of my body disappeared?*

I don't know what made me think of that now. I see a chain of little intestines floating along the top of the wall — all in a row, following the pheasant guts.

*Did you know there are policemen in Iran who collect GIRLS' THUMBS? Well, if I fly back to see my mother someday, I'm definitely going to buy a taser or something. Or else you'll protect me, but first you'll have to go to the GYM. Or do you think you can take on thumb-collecting policemen? Yeab, right!*

She just said it without thinking. Probably without any notion of how dangerous it is or isn't, of how her mother lives here at all.

On the other side of the roof stands Robert, smiling at me, a thin garden hose in his hand. He's in swimming trunks and performing his ablutions, the meditative ritual that I always liked watching him do as a child. He never showers, I don't know why: he washes each part of his body separately, as if he were taking inventory. It probably calms him. He soaps his right leg with great concentration and rinses it off, then his other leg, his stomach, his arms. His body is very finely shaped, as if an obsessed sculptor had gone too far, making the statue much finer than a real body can be. When he has finished, he dries himself thoroughly and puts on his clothes. He looks up for a moment, as if looking for his home planet. Then he gives me a gentle nod and climbs back down.

Perfectly naturally. Under this Tehran sky.

Which doesn't really exist, though, because it's only inside Ana's head — she once got completely obsessed with that idea anyway, after she'd read some paperback philosophy book.

*Did you know that that's the only completely AIRTIGHT philosophy there is? Obviously everything only ever exists inside ME. I'm a SOLIPSIST. No one has ever yet found an argument against it. Because it's TRUE.*

*You're always going around in your own brain — in mine I mean, because you don't EXIST otherwise.*

But then, where are you now, I think. How can you be so absent in your own mind.

There's a little wooden shed next to me. In it are two cardboard boxes with more photos. Abu said at one time his father wanted to be a photographer, and he took pictures of everyone and everything. He told me to see if I could find anything else in here.

There are tons of them, my arms disappear up to my elbows. A slowly fermenting archive. I try to go through them systematically, to discover whatever connections there might be. There are remarkably few pictures of individuals; usually a whole gang crowds into the frame: aunts, uncles, nephews and cousins. I find about twenty copies of the same wedding photo of Abu's parents. They're standing side by side with extremely strained smiles, a stiff pose that could be the cover photo of an arranged marriage. But what I'm looking for are faces that appear beside Ana or her parents — other people who Abu would recognise, and who we could ask about her.

I see: Mother Merizadi with Abu in her arms. With a more contented smile this time. A group of about thirty women with loud headscarves in a meadow, one of the few colour photos — perhaps Ana's mother is even there, it's difficult to make out the faces. A blurry puzzle, decades of family. Now and then a close-up of half of someone's foot.

Voices coming up from the street. I step out of the shed and have a look: extended families, again, a sea of people. Groups barbecuing, a few tea and fruit juice stands, a festival mood in the first cool breeze after the heat of the day. The street seems to consist entirely of clans melting into one another, everyone calling back and forth. A soporific tapestry of voices hangs in the air.

But why aren't you hearing this now, I think, why aren't the two of us down there too. As a young married couple perhaps, as part of these clans. Why am I standing here alone with this sound in my head, if it's all just in your head.

'Do you love her?' asks a voice in the dark, later.

We're lying on thin mattresses, the whole family in the same room. The mother is snoring; the father is lying silently beside her; Robert, in the corner, is whistling softly through his nose. Only Abu has woken up, and I'm still awake anyway, at least with half my brain. It's cooler now, far off the traffic is rumbling, now and then the yellow flowered curtain in front of the window glows

with the light of a passing car.

‘Do you really love her?’ Abu whispers. ‘Have you loved many in Germany?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I have heard that in Germany you can love many, and have a lot of fun, because you just split up when it’s not fun anymore. I mean, you can have new relationships, as often as you want. Isn’t it true?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are you engaged? Have you kissed her? Me, I have only kissed a woman once. I was visiting at her house, and we were playing badminton, and then we both reached for the shuttlecock, and then I just kissed her. And the next day I sent my mother to her house, and her father said I had to do my military service before I could marry her, and then I went to the army for two years. But what happened when I came back? She was already married. *Love is a losing game*, I always say.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t you know that song by Amy Winehouse? Anyway, now I’m through with Iranian women. I want a Canadian or an Englishwoman or even one from New Zealand. I want to emigrate and have children who are New Zealanders, or Germans. Do you know any Canadian women? What do you think, in what country can you have the most fun?’

He looks at me. It’s dark, but I can feel him looking at me.

‘Amy Winehouse was my second love’s favourite singer. I even touched her tits. But now she’s married too. How can you be happy here?’

‘Tits?’

‘What?’

‘I know the song, anyway.’

And I’m about to ask him whether it’s actually realistic for him to think of emigrating to New Zealand, but I don’t get the chance because he suddenly starts handing me his pillows.

‘Your bed is too hard!’

In a moment his mother is awake, and she hands me a pillow too.

‘I’m comfortable,’ I say.

‘You’re *un*comfortable?’ says Abu.

And suddenly two more pillows appear and another blanket, and Abu stands up and insists that we swap mattresses.

‘Mine is much softer! Mine is really too soft for me. It gives me a backache!’

And Robert wakes up and gives me a pillow, and Abu’s mother passes me another blanket, so that I end up lying here with three blankets and eight pillows.

‘We’ll find her,’ Abu tells me.

5

We plunge into the dark part of the bazaar. The next day. Into the sweaty fish smell of the tunnel city. I woke up Abu and Robert after I’d been out walking for an hour at dawn; I’d bought a map of the city at a little stand, but it’s no use at all because it looks more like a child’s sketch than a real map. Abu says there are too many streets in Tehran for anyone to draw an exact map of them, especially since the streets are constantly disappearing and new ones springing up. The sketch I got is at best the skeleton of a cripple — that’s what his boss at the fabric shop once said: Tehran is like a giant cripple. An insane cripple! And his boss knows Tehran, Abu says.

*Ultra City* is written in chalk on a sign outside a barber shop — and beyond it the damp tunnels slope steeply downward, past caves where little men sit beside mountains of rubber hoses, beside mountains of shoes and screws and pots. To the right, curved daggers hang on the wall; to the left the passage leads into a stifled chirping: brightly coloured birds sit in ornate cages, some of them half dead. Every time I discover a fabric shop, Abu veers down a different passage, and then there are fabrics there too, and also blossoms, dried lizards, soaps and candles.

Through an archway with crumbling floral stuccowork we come to a fountain where haggard older men are washing, and Robert immediately stops, because these men are washing themselves just as conscientiously as he does. He stands there looking as if he had just discovered members of his own species.

‘I read about that!’ he says. ‘They’re performing the ablutions before prayer! Wudu.’

I have to pull him by the shirt to stop him from going over and washing with them. Abu is standing in front of his boss’s shop, between two stone lions’ faces. The blinking sign over the entrance reads, in sizzling letters, *Irrational*. At least, that’s what I see. The name of the shop is *Iran National*.

I see endless amounts of cloth. Gold and green and fluorescent, rolled and stacked. I see a whole wall of nuances of grey — dove and petrol and iron, and also saffron and ochre and all the brown tones in the world; trunks full of tassels and sequins. Interspersed with a number of gold-framed mirrors that make it all bigger still. The same chaos that surrounds the baby in the picture. In the middle of it all sits the boss in his leather armchair, wearing a black suit, his hands folded across his stomach — expecting us apparently, with those calm black eyes under shaggy brows. Several cellphones are on the table in front of him, a smug smile inhabits his face as we approach. Abu said he speaks fluent French, Turkish and Russian. And of course English.

‘Sit,’ says Nassir Khan.

We sit down on cushions between the big mirrors, and his servant gives us doogh, a kind of salty milk, which I force down in small sips, while the servant returns to his place among the shelves. He almost fades into the wall. And Nassir Khan examines us from above, from his executive armchair, demands with a brusque gesture the photo of Ana’s mother, which Abu hands him. He tells me to explain what I know about her: her name is Simin, she’s a self-assured and good-looking woman, assistant to some director who’s persecuted by the government, she’s a communist and active in the resistance.

I say, ‘What would be the best place to look for her?’

‘Aha!’

He reaches for his doogh and sucks it in through the side of his mouth, nodding slowly, as if one of us had just deduced something. Postcards and photos hang on the wall behind him: Nassir Khan with two young women in front of the Eiffel Tower, Nassir Khan with a pith helmet in front of the Pyramids, quite the man of the world. And yet his expression looks as though he were wearing a pair of those joke glasses with a nose and giant eyebrows attached, and it’s not clear whether that look in his eyes is supposed to be self-parody — or the opposite. He exudes a hint of aftershave and instils confidence, and then comes that dopey look and takes it away again.

Robert fumbles around with his money pouch, searching for one of those Germany refrigerator magnets, but doesn’t find it. Which is probably a good thing.

Nassir Khan puts the photo of Ana’s mother in his jacket pocket.

I try again. ‘Do you know Ana’s mother?’

He repeats his answer: ‘Aha!’

Then he leans his head back and emits a silent laugh, holds this position, only his Adam's apple moving.

I have the elegance of a farm boy.

I say, 'Excuse me?'

'You look a little like a farm boy, my young friend!'

And he laughs again in that silent way, shakes his head in amusement and says something in Persian. Abu translates: his boss says I look like a farm boy who's too short, because I'm wearing this plaid shirt and old jeans, which he certainly finds chic and elegant — if I want to look like a farm boy, that is.

'Is that a joke?'

'No joke,' says Abu. 'He knows about fashion.'

I say that in any case I'm not a farm boy, and try to return Nassir Khan's gaze, to communicate to him that he should take me seriously. I'm sitting here relatively self-assured and firm. With a firm, steady eye. I hope.

'He was a general in the war, okay?' says Abu. 'He got five bullets in his belly and he's still alive! And now he knows everybody and has twelve shops spread all over the city. He'll help anyone, if they're on the right side.'

'That's right,' says Nassir Khan.

'And where is the right side?'

'Where the honest men are,' says Abu. 'It's not about politics. You just have to be on the right side. Inside.'

He smiles; he seems to be proud of this boss, and I realise that to him this is all an adventure, some excitement for a change, some German is looking for his girlfriend, and he's helping him — while his boss's face bodes something quite different. Nassir Khan sticks a plastic toothpick in his mouth and chews on it, eyes me, rocking his head, first deadly serious, and then amused again. Once he has analysed the whole situation to his apparent satisfaction.

'Will you help me?'

'We're going to have a little party together, my friend.'

Midnight. I don't have a good feeling about this. Abu's mother sent us off with all kinds of horror stories: drunk girls who run away from parties and then get hauled in front of the police chief, who locks them away for weeks. After which their lives are over. Or you run away from the police and get shot at from behind, and then bleed to death in a back alley. As long as we stick with Nassir Khan, nothing can happen to us, Abu said, but nevertheless there was no way we could persuade him to come along.

'What floor is it on?' Robert asks.

'Secret,' says Nassir Khan.

We're clattering straight upward in the cage of this elevator on the outside of a building. Somewhere in northwest Tehran. Nassir Khan moves his toothpick around in his mouth, looking over our heads from his height of six feet, offering an ambiguous, superior expression. From time to time I think I see envy or resentment in his face too, because we're probably spoiled brats in his eyes — still I stand up very straight in this white shirt that Abu gave me, with two big flames on the front.

Nassir Khan was a gifted student before the war, Abu told us, one who could have become a scholar — now however, after losing a son in the war, he wants nothing to do with scholars and clerics. But deep down he's still a kind of scholar somehow, and one with a heart, too. His continual irony is only an act.

Robert suddenly twitches — because of all the banging and rattling; the cabin jerks to a stop and seems to pull itself off its rails before it gets going again. Far below us lie the shimmering streets, unreal and dark and tangled, as if we were imagining them. Above us everything is a deep black.

What about, Robert asks, what does Nassir Khan think about communism, and is Tehran really an insane cripple.

Now it's my turn to twitch — but Nassir Khan answers calmly. Communism is not so much his field, but some of his acquaintances are interested in it, and Tehran is by no means a cripple, Abu must have misunderstood. Tehran is a bride, a dancing bride with a thousand gold rings. And in Nassir Khan's opinion, and as an old legend tells, all the great cities are figures like that: dancing brides and children and cripples, sitting and standing giants, warriors and amazons who will one day set upon each other. And at the end of that war of the cities, Tehran will still dance,

just as Tehran has always danced, throughout the ages.

Because Tehran is a filthy whore.

And with that he picks something out of a tooth and flicks the toothpick away. The elevator brakes and locks into place.

A squeaking steel door opens before us.

7

It's a roomy, red-lit apartment full of velvet, perfume and the aroma of popcorn. Abu said something about women in the resistance who work as prostitutes to earn money and milk powerful men for information at the same time. I try to gauge the women in the room, but they don't look much like members of the resistance, as far as I can tell. Some have bandages on their noses, probably from cosmetic surgery, which is supposed to be cheap and popular here. Absurd, abysmally excessive make-up; marzipan faces. Their tiny dresses are candy-coloured and go with the bright pattern of the wallpaper; little numbered signs stand in front of them on the cocktail tables.

An older woman in a yellow evening dress air-kisses Nassir Khan's cheeks and winks at us. Her hair is sprayed into a trembling tower. Headscarves seem to be nonexistent. At the bar: men in expensive-looking suits. One has a salmon-coloured turban on his head.

It's as if this were a documentary film Ana wanted to make about her mother. That was her plan, at least: a splashy, suspenseful documentary about her mother's life in Tehran. And I can see her right in front of me, with no inhibitions about talking to anybody, pumping everyone, with no trace of caution, as always when she gets obsessed with something.

'This way,' says Nassir Khan. 'Follow me.'

He marches across the room and says something to the men at the bar, who bow slightly in answer. Two of them immediately stand up and offer us their bar stools. Then he gestures to us to sit down, calls out to the woman behind the bar, and disappears behind a curtain made of strings of plastic beads. I read: Marlboro Country, Good Old Tennessee Whiskey, Puma, Tide, Luden's — the wall of mirror tiles behind the bar is decorated with brand names on little metal signs. Between them I see the young women at the cocktail tables fixing their make-up. They tug

at their dresses and bat their eyes at us, their hairdos sitting on their heads like brooding hens.

Robert wiggles back and forth on his stool, already drenched in sweat again — and still wearing his stupid fisherman's hat.

'This place is bogus,' he says.

'What do you mean?'

'Just bogus. The people are bogus.'

'Get a grip,' I say. 'Nobody's bogus here. What matters is how you act yourself.'

And then I begin to sweat too. Really, he's acting exactly the way you shouldn't: his whole upper body is tense, he's turning his head back and forth, fidgeting with his legs — and that seems to be making him even more scared. What you have to do, of course, is the opposite: pluck up your courage. You have to develop a feeling for what's going on around you — because what goes on around you depends on what's going on inside you.

It's a simple rule.

Robert's mother once loaned me a book about it, *Suggestion and Autosuggestion*, and we've talked about it many times — but he refuses to understand.

'If you keep fidgeting like you're scared, you'll just get even more scared, and then you're going to start seeing ghosts again. It all starts in your head,' I say. 'Try to sit straight and hold still, otherwise I'm going to start getting fidgety too.'

'CHEERS!'

The barmaid is suddenly standing in front of us and puts two rainbow-coloured creations on the bar. Round-bellied glasses full of tutti-frutti liqueurs, each with a straw, a slice of orange and a paper parasol. In the mirror behind her, all eyes are now fixed on us, all faces serious except for the young women in their frozen smiling poses. And it *is* frightening — I have no idea what is going on in all these heads. But that makes it all the more important, I tell myself, for me to turn around and face them. And I look as easily as I can at Nassir Khan, who is pointing his ringed finger at me.

And I even stand up, in my shirt of flames.

Hoop earrings float past. Orange-glossed lips. Then suddenly I see someone with a flat hand drum, wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt, in all seriousness — wearing it a little too aggressively to be a real communist maybe, but I can't judge; all kinds of people seem to meet here. Nassir Khan

comes over to me at one point and says he wants to talk to a few people, and I should just enjoy the place, which after all is a particularly *Western* place. In that kind of self-loathing tone that he had before, talking about Tehran.

I lean as casually as possible on a tapestry that shows a forest of blue trees.

Compose myself here. I even stop blinking for ten seconds.

When I turn around to look at Robert, he moves his eyebrows and indicates a red carnation in a thin glass behind the bar. The symbol of the Communist Party, which Ana once showed us on a brochure, although this one is missing the strand of barbed wire. Robert seems to be trying to say something specific with the faces he's making, pointing at me and at the carnation; but then Nassir Khan is back and takes me gently by the hand. As if I were a woman he was asking to dance.

I follow him through a doorway to a dark dance floor where couples move slowly under a plastic chandelier. The men look as big as gorillas compared to the girls. One of them pushes his girl forward as if offering her to Nassir Khan; Nassir Khan puts his arm around me and pats my head. Seems to be making fun of me to some extent. Although his expression is quite friendly.

'See anything you like?' he says.

'I'm not interested in these girls,' I say. 'Have you found out anything?'

'Be patient! A little small talk first.'

He looks around, narrows his eyebrows and nods, as if sympathising with my refusal: as if the girls here were of mediocre quality. He probably thinks it's absurd, or just can't understand, that I've really come to look for my girlfriend, and I ought to explain it to him, but something tells me I should remain passive for now; dealing with this man requires a certain reserve. Otherwise I'm likely to get on his bad side.

When a waitress approaches to offer us a shot of liquor, he hands me a glass and holds his aloft.

'SANTÉ! Do you know what that means, "santé"?'

'Cheers?'

'Yes, of course, but do people still say that? Haven't people been saying, for a long time now, "FUCK"?'

'Fuck?'

‘Yes, fuck. Or am I wrong? Here people often use the word “FUCK”. I thought it came over here from Europe. The man over there, for instance, with the gorgeous tuxedo, is a Turk, and what does he say? “FUCK.” And that man there is from Pakistan, and so he likes to say “Fuck”. Everyone who is internationally successful says “FUCK”. They’re all quite happy with it.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Serious? Why should I be serious? Ask me rather what my favourite cocktail is called. A little game. Can you guess?’

‘Fuck?’

‘Very good! An excellent guess! And now you should dance a little with these Persian monkeys here, to this beautiful pop music. That’s what we like in this country. At the height of our seven-thousand-year-old culture.’

‘Can’t you help me now?’

‘A little patience! What’s the magic word tonight?’

‘Fuck.’

‘Very good! An excellent guess!’

And with that he moves on.

I follow him. With confident strides.

Beyond the room with the dance floor is a quiet, cool, smaller room. After a while, doors surface out of the darkness. Decrepit, cracked wood. As if this room weren’t part of the same apartment. It smells like lentil soup or stew, musty and stale. Nassir Khan moves in the shadows and a dim lamp lights under a greenish shade. Then he turns around and winks at me.

‘I’m afraid she’s not very intelligent,’ he says. ‘She considers herself a director and actress, but really she only acted once in a commercial.’

‘Who?’

‘The young lady who has the contact you’re looking for. If you’re sure you can’t be tempted by any of the girls here. I’d get you a good price, cheaper than in Europe.’

‘Thank you, not right now.’

He puts his chin on his chest and looks at me while I try to look upright and sincere. I even try a little friendly smile. Then he takes a key out of his pocket, looks around once more, and unlocks a narrow steel door.

‘I wish you a pleasant time in there. You’ll like it.’

It’s a sparsely furnished bedroom. And pretty dark. Nassir Khan closes the door behind me and goes away down the hall. A yellow globe is glowing on the bedside table. The bedclothes are rumpled. Outside the window, a slight glimmer of the city is visible, very vague and blurry. To the side a steel door stands open, leading to a dark room.

‘Hello?’

Nothing.

I order myself to breathe deeply and assume an upright posture before I go on.

Autosuggestion: you’re doing everything perfectly right, you’re proceeding logically, deliberately, systematically. Through the next room. Through a dark hallway. Through two steel doors with big padlocks hanging on them. Above the third door I discover the symbol again, this time very clear, printed on a white cloth: a blood-red carnation and barbed wire. Hope and struggle. Strictly outlawed, but still on the offensive.

And while I’m unsure whether I should really just keep going like this, it gets lighter ahead, there seems to be a room like a bathroom — with Chinese parasols on the walls. I open the door a little wider and find myself in the twitching light of innumerable candles. In the middle of the room is a folding screen that throws a twitching shadow. Something behind it is splashing.

I step to the side carefully, and suddenly I’m standing in front of her. She smiles at me. As if we’d arranged to meet here.

A bathtub. Dozens of perfume bottles on shelves. I look away because she’s naked, because she has just finished drying off and is getting dressed. Something clatters: it’s her high-heeled shoes, I see from the corner of my eye. She has at least ten pairs there, and she tries one on, walks a step, then does something with a shoehorn; evidently they’re all too tight, falling in a confused heap: blood red, rose red, burgundy, crimson. And when I dare to look right at her again, she is standing there in a bright red dress, tying a big pink bow around her stomach. And her face could be the face of Ana’s mother — but she’s a little too young.

I hold Ana’s baby picture towards her. She gives it only a brief glance and goes to the sink, smiling, to put a plastic butterfly in her hair. The mirror reflects a proud look with a familiar,

curious sparkle. Maybe Ana's cousin or a half-sister, I think — I hold the photo towards her again, but she turns away, bites her lower lip, takes something from a shelf and clacks back and forth in her high heels.

'Germany?' she says.

'Do you know Simin?' I ask.

She puts half of something sticky in my hand and nimbly bites off a piece. Something like honey that instantly turns to liquid. I smear it in my mouth as she finally takes the photo from me, smiling ambiguously. And leaves.

I follow her shadow through two open steel doors before I notice that the doors behind me have fallen shut. But instead of turning back, I quickly open the next door: an empty hallway.

A bare light bulb swaying in the draft.

Ruhollah Khomeini hangs on the wall as an oil painting, with that severe, religious look, incongruously — maybe as a joke.

What gradually takes shape in the dark is a concrete stairwell. A chilly, giants' world of a stairwell. The only light comes from the windows high up under the roof, hazy moonlight that makes everything look gray-and-blue striped — there are bars on the windows. It looks as though someone had skimped on everything in this part of the building; the steps going down are covered with cardboard boxes and boards; the hallway on the floor above me is full of trash, deserted. The red woman must have gone downward.

As I reach the next landing, feeling my way in the near-darkness, and see eyes, they give me a fright, because they are little eyes, innocent children's eyes. There are two pairs, and they are only visible very briefly, because a light goes on and off again down below. Then I can't see or hear them anymore; maybe they've disappeared through one of the doors, which are more rudimentary gaps in the concrete than front doors to apartments.

From one of the gaps come voices.

Two people arguing.

I step over rubble, and when I'm just past the gap, a bearded man in a beige robe comes out and says something to me, clutches his head and goes upstairs, angry. The woman inside goes on

cursing alone. This is probably some kind of housing project, I think, and these are poor people who have been housed here.

On the next floor I see children again. They stand there looking up at me with their fists wrapped around the banisters. All silent. About ten girls and two or three boys. But the way they look, I wish I hadn't seen them: with little bows and dresses that don't fit on this dirty floor. On the far right is a boy with eyes ages old in his thin face.

They draw back as I carefully advance. Seem to be afraid of me.

Then the light below goes off and on again, and I see: no more children, but bullet holes in the wall, paint chipped off the banisters, more rubble on the floor, almost to the ceiling, so that I can't go on.

When I come back past the apartment with the cursing voice, there are more voices in it — aggressive male voices moving in my direction. I light my cigarette lighter and see a bald man with shining eyes. He's sitting on a plastic chair in front of the apartment and is looking at me as if he'd been watching me the whole time, as if he's been waiting for me. Behind him the other men come out, and the shine disappears from the first man's eyes as if he needed these big, dull eyes he's got for whatever is starting now. I run back.

In the apartment, my heart pumping, everything looks a little different. Suddenly it doesn't seem like a brothel, more like a stuffy bar, looking only slightly illicit — compared to the other floors anyway, it almost inspires confidence. Under the plastic chandelier couples are dancing close together; they're kissing in the shadows.

I open a fur-covered door. Inside, the party is in full swing: vanilla perfume wafts over me. The atmosphere of a school dance. The women lean their heads back, the men push their chests out and snap their fingers to the music. The barmaid is the wildest dancer; she twitches her rotating hips as if she were trying to shake her ass off.

Robert is standing at the bar with the cocktail that he's not drinking. He looks constipated, which doesn't surprise me: this room is just about the exact opposite of his world. He's taken off his fisherman's hat, but still doesn't look like he belongs here. Beside him, Nassir Khan, who apparently wanted to play a joke on me, because next to him is the red woman and they've both

got a satisfied smile as if they'd just been waiting for me to come back.

But as I come closer, I realize that the situation is now relaxed — that I reacted exactly right in exercising restraint. That Nassir Khan needed to play this little game, it's just his way, and I did the right thing in playing along. Because now he gives me a look that's definitely conciliatory, says something about a telephone number that his red friend has written down for me, the number of a man who's in contact with Ana's mother.

I take the piece of paper. And Nassir Khan puts on a knowing look.

Although *I'm* the one who's entitled to a knowing look here, I think. The one who sized up the situation correctly. Who acted on logic *and* instinct. And I attempt a smile, and this time I manage it, I can feel it — and the red woman pronounces the Persian name that's written next to the phone number: Tyhrkrdn.

Which means, roughly: Dark Path.