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REAL (Echt)

## Chapter 1

The first time in my life I had anything to do with the police was pretty much exactly four months ago. Until then, I hadn't even so much as stolen a packet of chewing-gum in my whole life. No punch-ups, no practical jokes on the phone, no cheating at school, nothing at all. The terms 'me' and 'getting up to something' were absolutely incompatible. I reckon I was just about the most respectable boy you could have found at Hamburg Main Station, and that's probably why I got such a shock when I was arrested for the first time. It was on a Friday afternoon, on Platform 13, by the steps.

As always at that time, the platform was chock-a-block with students and *Bundeswehr* soldiers, and apart from that a few of the trains were running late, so that there was a terrific amount of pushing and shoving. People were barging on all sides. All the time you had somebody's elbow in your ribs, and that was why I didn't even notice at first when somebody touched me from behind. A strong hand took hold of my arm, and its grip got firmer and firmer, until I was almost on my knees with the pain of it.

"You're coming with me, mate", a voice said. And then I was being dragged along the edge of the platform in such a way that I had no chance at all of putting up a fight.

My first thought was that it must be a kidnapping, and that was why I yelled really loudly and lashed out and kicked the kidnapper in the shins, but the bloke didn't loosen his grip at all. Instead, he reached into his jacket with his free hand and held up some bit of paper or other. "Make way, please, this is a police operation", he shouted, and then he hauled me up the escalator and through the concourse. A bit like Moses through the Red Sea. In front of us the crowd divided and behind us it flowed back together, and everyone looked at me as if I were some kind of biblical miracle.

Not one of them did as much as lift a finger to help me. And on my own I honestly had no chance whatsoever against that bloke.

He was at least a head taller than me and had twice as much muscle and ten times as much fat. Built like a brick shithouse, so there was no chance of my knocking him over. I stumbled along behind him, past the travel centre, out on to the forecourt, towards the Underground and back down again on the first escalator. At the bottom, there was an endless passage with white and orange tiling. We went past some ticket machines and one of those that do passport photos. Before another escalator which led down to the next level, there was a

grey iron door with no handle on the right-hand side.

Behind it there was a windowless office with lots of screens, on which you could see everything that was going on in the station. At that moment there were a handful of blokes in there, staring at the screens. All men, I think. I don't think there was a woman among them.

The walrus forced me down on to a chair which was standing in front of a totally overcrowded desk, and sat down himself on the other side of it. He folded his hands behind his head and leaned back with a satisfied air. His face was sort of reddish-violet on account of all the burst capillaries, and up top he had very thick black hair, which was obviously a wig, because you couldn't see a hairline at all. And his eyebrows weren't of the same deep black either, but more like grey-brown, I'd say. He looked at me without opening his mouth. That went on for at least a quarter of an hour. It was probably some kind of ploy of his to make me nervous, or get me to feel as if they'd seen through me.

To be honest, it worked pretty well, because the fact is I was cudgelling my brains the whole time to work out what it was he could possibly want from me. I hadn't done anything at all. Well, not consciously, anyway. And if I was being arrested in spite of that, the whole thing obviously spelled trouble.

"I want a lawyer", I said at some point, because I just couldn't stand the silence any longer, and because everybody always says that on TV, but the red-faced man just laughed as if I had just told a really good joke. And then – quite suddenly, from one moment to the next – he turned really bad-tempered.

"Where's your mobile?" he barked.

"I ... well ... I lost it at school two days ago", I stammered, though that wasn't the whole truth, because the fact was that the two biggest blockheads in my class had gone on chucking the thing back and forth in the loos until it ended up in a toilet bowl. Since then it had been drying at home on the radiator and wasn't working anymore.

"Sure", said the bloke, "lost it ... what a coincidence!", and then I had to empty all my pockets and the bloke ran his hands over my trousers and jacket, but he didn't find anything. Logically enough.

"Name?" he roared finally. "Age? Address? Parents?"

"Albert ...", I murmured.

"Don't take the piss, boy. Nobody's called Albert any more these days."

"I wish I was called something different too."

"Surname?"

"Cramer", I said.

"With a C or a K?"

"It depends", I said, because the fact is that officially my father's name is Kramer with a K, like his father and his father's father and all their kinfolk. But my mother thought Kramer somehow smacked of small grocery stores and provinciality and that Cramer would fit in better with her artist's profile, so she had the name changed immediately after the wedding.

Since then there have been two names on our doorbell. Kramer for my father. And Cramer for me. For the first few years, of course, the C was there for my mother too. But at some point she probably must have realised that the K was not the only provincial thing about my father. That's what I reckon. Now she's together with some important theatre person. Even if I do feel there's practically nothing less important than the theatre.

"Well, that's great, a family of intellectuals into the bargain", said the red-faced man and looked up at the ceiling. Then he stood up and steamrolled his way across the room to a monitor which was showing the entrance to a souvenir shop in the north hall. Two women seemed to be having a row in front of it. I looked round. None of the men were taking any notice of me. Strictly speaking I could have just slipped out and done a bunk. But unfortunately it was always the same with me: not enough courage to take even so much as an occasional risk. At some point the bloke came back to the desk. "You're in serious trouble, my friend", he said, pointing to the many monitors in the room. "We've been watching you for quite a while. We know what you're up to. And we know how you do it. The only thing we don't know yet is who else is involved. The people behind it all. Your bosses and accomplices."

"What accomplices?" I asked.

Then it went quiet again for a while. At some point he came out from behind his desk again, shoved a chair up next to mine and put his arm on my shoulder in a pally sort of way. "Now listen, my friend", he said, "I can understand you, you know, I mean, I can understand someone not wanting to betray his colleagues, and when I was your age I believed in honour and loyalty and all that rubbish. But shall I let you into a secret? Honour and loyalty are pretty much all the same to your colleagues. How many people do you think have sat here on this chair?"

Fifty? A hundred? I'll tell you. There've been more than a thousand of them! And there hasn't been a single one who wouldn't have grassed on his mates to save his own skin at the end of the day. They all buy their way out sooner or later when they're sitting on that chair. The big fish, and the little ones too. Thieves, dealers, fixers. No exceptions. So have a good think about whether or not you really don't know what I'm talking about here. As far as I can see you're not in all that deep yet. And that's why you're getting another chance here to get out of this business relatively unscathed."

"What business? I really don't know what you're on about", I said. The truth is that I would have told him anything if I'd only known what. I looked at him, and he looked at me, and at some point he traipsed back to his chair behind the desk.

"As you wish", he said, jerked his chair towards the desk and flicked the lamp on, and I thought oh, now he's going to do that dazzling trick with the lamp, when they shine it straight in your eyes so you can't concentrate anymore and give the whole game away, but the bloke simply opened a drawer and took out a pad and pencil.

"Age?", he asked, and I said "16", which was the truth, even if I had had to show them my school student's card the year before when I wanted to go and see the film 'Hangover'. And that had been released to age twelve.

"16 ... well, that's good news", said the bloke and laughed with a broad, triumphal grin, so that the rigid toupet slid forward like some helmet. "You know why that makes me happy? If you're 16, you're up for it, my friend. If you're 16, you're allowed to pay for the stupid things you've been up to."

"But I haven't done anything at all", I answered, and he said "Sure", and then he wanted to know where I and my parents lived. I gave him my father's address, and he flicked off the lamp and dragged me back out into the tiled passage, back to the escalator and up to the station forecourt. There were about ten police cars parked up there behind a barrier, and a few unmarked ones standing around as well. He shoved me on to the back seat of one of those silver-blue Astras, and then off we went, crawling through Hamburg. At each set of lights the people stared in and some of them even whispered to one another, so that in that car I really felt like a criminal who's been caught and is on his way straight to prison.

It didn't get any better until we gradually reached the district where we lived. The fact is that there are hardly any traffic lights there, because we live in one of those totally posh areas where the houses have folding shutters and bay windows and the trees in the gardens are at least 200 years old. From outside it

looks totally idyllic, and that's why there is an enormous number of people who walk down our street on Sundays in their quilted coats, enthusing about how romantic it all is.

Of course my mother used to see things rather differently. With a bit of luck you could hear her in the autumn, standing up to her knees in a pile of fallen leaves abusing our tree. It was an enormous beech. "You're a real pain in the neck", she would curse, "you incontinent woodhead, every year the same goddamn mess with these bloody leaves of yours! I'll be the end of you, I swear it. Next year it'll be off with your head, you can bet on that, you bastard!"

My mother could get really coarse when it was the tree she was on about. Year after year, it was an impressive performance. Out in the street the quilted strollers would often stop and try to look into our garden. But it wasn't quite as easy as that, because our hedge is some kind of conifer and doesn't shed its leaves.

I reckon that tree was also one of the reasons why my mother decided she'd had enough of my father at some point, because the fact is that he never did a stroke of work on it. "It's just nature, my love", he would murmur at moments like that, not noticing how my mother was boiling over inside, and then suddenly, six years ago, she was gone. It was at the end of September, before the first leaves had fallen.

After that my father sat at the window for about a month, staring up into the treetop, and then he went back to the mathematical equations with which he earns his money all day long. The fact is that he works from home as a mathematician for some statistical institute. Before that he was a professor at the university and there he extended some claim by Carl Friedrich Gauss, and that's probably why he wanted me to be named Carl Friedrich, but my mother wasn't having any of that. Finally they agreed on Albert, because Albert Einstein is a hero for my father too, and because my mother loves just about everything that Albert Camus ever thought or wrote. Unfortunately, when she called me, she always did so with a really ridiculous French accent: "Albeeeeer!" Even at the swimming-pool, during the few years in which she thought I was going to make a career for myself as a swimmer. My father, by the way, never believed that, because he thought my hands were too small and that it was therefore impossible from a purely physical point of view. But of course he wasn't going to cut much ice with my mother taking a view like that. She had no time for anyone who always analysed the world in terms of the natural sciences.

The policeman had no time either. Before my father had had a chance to protest at all, he had hauled me out of the car, through the garden, up the steps and into the house.

"I'm sorry to have to inform you that your son is involved in a whole series of criminal offences", he said.

"Knowing his character, I consider that unlikely", replied my father somewhat absent-mindedly and was about to turn and go back to work, but the walrus had already wriggled past him into the hallway with astonishing litheness and was now blocking his path.

"It goes without saying that I can also prove it to you", he said, and my father said "If you must. I'm busy really." And then they sat together round the kitchen table, and the policeman dug a whole stack of photos out of his briefcase. They were all freeze frames from the CCTV cameras at the station.

"Your son", said the fat man, placing one photo on the table after the other. "Here, d'you see, at 15.12, he's taking a photo with his mobile phone. And here he is, one minute later, sending a message. And then again four minutes later. Now have a really close look at that photo. It's difficult to make out, but there's someone extracting the wallet from the same person's pocket. Or here, three days later. Same trick. We can show you umpteen sequences like this. Your son is always involved. He scouts out the victims and informs his accomplices."

"What's all this about the station?" asked my father. "I must say I didn't know anything about this at all ... about you hanging around down there."

"I take photographs", I replied.

"I can see that. And what do you photograph?"

"Farewells", I said.

"Farewells? With a mobile phone?"

"I usually have my proper camera with me."

"I don't understand. What do you want with photos of people you don't know?"

"Dunno, they just interest me", I answered, because I didn't believe anyone would be able to understand anyway. I didn't really even understand myself properly. So what chance would adults have? Or worse still, police? No hope there at all.

The fact is that I don't think there is any moment more intense than a farewell. Well, I mean the kind of farewell you experience when you take your leave of a

person who means everything to you and where your heart misses a beat at the mere thought that there may come a time when he or she just isn't there any more. Well, in any case that's how I imagine it, because I myself have never had to say goodbye to anyone who meant anything to me. Except my mother perhaps, when she moved out, but that wasn't a real farewell, because it was obvious anyway that two hours further on at the latest she'd be sitting by the phone chattering on at me with those motherly feelings of hers.

In spite of that, it's completely obvious that what I'm saying is right. All you have to do to grasp that is go and stand at a station for half an hour. By their very nature, farewells are always deep, honest moments. Of course there are people who get blown over by their own joy when the occasion is not a farewell, but an arrival. But most of them are just wooden puppets and don't know what to do with their arms or where to look. And the most embarrassing situation of all is when they go to a load of trouble with banners and garlands and welcome-home T-shirts into the bargain. Pack of lies. I don't mean that the T-shirts are lies, or that the people aren't happy at all. I mean that they're just not in a position to show their feelings at all at that moment; they only behave like that because they think that's how you have to behave when you're happy. There's nothing genuine in their faces. The point is that that's different with the farewells. Farewells are very often perfect moments. And that's what photography is about, and that's why I go to the station so much.

"Nonsense", said the fat man, "utter bullshit. So why do you text your accomplices after each photo?"

"I don't text anyone", I replied. "I make notes on the motifs and sort the pictures."

"Of course", said the policeman, "that's what I'd say now too ..."

"Could I interrupt you for a moment?" said my father. "We don't want to be jumping to conclusions here. I do admit that what my son says sounds a bit eccentric. But it's not impossible, and after all we can settle whether or not he's telling the truth in a matter of minutes. If he really does collect farewells, there must be a collection somewhere that he can show us. Perhaps we should just have a look at it. Before we start talking about unproven accusations."

That, of course, was the worst conceivable case. No-one had ever been allowed to see my photos. They were my absolute secret. A good deal more personal even than my facebook account. In a way they contained everything that was me, and a hell of a lot would have to happen for me to allow anyone else to look at them. And I definitely didn't want my father sticking his nose in them, to say nothing of this policeman at all. So at the kitchen table I first

pretended not to have heard, but then my father went out without being asked and fetched the laptop from my room.

Together with the policeman, he clicked his way through the computer, but they didn't find a single photo on it. Well, they couldn't, because I always store photos on my two external hard discs, always in duplicate, one copy on each disc, so that the motifs never get lost. I'm really disciplined about that. Unlike the rest of my life, I'd say.

The search lasted about ten minutes altogether, in which I sat next to them without a word and the policeman's grin got broader and broader and my father seemed to shrink more and more. At some point I really felt sorry for him, because he didn't deserve to have that stupid bastard of a policeman exulting over him like that. The fact is I have to say that I do admire my father somehow, even if he does sometimes behave as if he's not of this world.

I don't mean by that that he fits the cliché of the absent-minded professor who can't cope, because he's not like that at all. My father is not absent-minded. He's not the kind of bloke who sets off to go shopping, only to notice half way there that he's still wearing his pyjamas or anything like that. My father copes with the practical aspects of life pretty well. But he looks at the world in such an 'unworldly-wise' way that I sometimes really do have my doubts.

For example, last time I travelled with him on the Underground. We'd got off the train and were coming up the steps at the *Rathausmarkt*, and in front of the entrance there were two blokes with shaven heads sitting in the street, about twentyish, and they'd stacked up a sort of rampart made of beer cans round where they were sitting. Like some sandcastle on the beach. At least 100 of them, and in front of it they'd put up a cardboard sign, with nothing on it except the word 'HUNGER'. In capital letters and fairly wobbly writing. Even a blind man would have realised that the two of them were completely drunk. But nevertheless my father put two euros in their bowl and gave them a friendly smile and said "More like thirst, my friends". But in doing so he bumped into the rampart, and it collapsed with a loud clatter.

One of the blokes levered himself up into a standing position with the aid of his elbows, reeled over to my father and punched him on the nose without a warning. My father slid head first back down the steps to the Underground.

Anyone else would have called the police at that point. Or at least cleared off without another word. But somehow my father can't understand that there are arseholes it's better to give a wide berth to, and wanted to clear up the 'misunderstanding', because he always believes in people's good sense. But then the drunk just said "Shut it, granddad!", and hit him on the nose a second

time.

That's what my father is like, and I just can't bear to see it when someone treats him badly. "The photos are on my external hard disc", I explained. I went and got the little silver box out of its hiding-place behind my curtain and connected it up to the laptop.

But the policeman just took a fleeting glance at it and said "That's confiscated", and then he grabbed the defunct mobile off the radiator as well. Then he said to me "I'll get you, my friend, you can be sure of that."

"I'm not your friend", I replied. "I'd rather practise French kissing with an orang-utan."

I reckon that was the beginning of our enmity.

## Chapter 2

Of course I didn't know about the enmity then. At that time I still thought that now everything would be as it had been before, because the police would see on my hard disc that I had been telling the truth, and then I would be able to carry on taking photographs at the station and no-one would take any notice of me. But that's not how it was when I went back there for the first time a few days later. Yet it wasn't the fault of that fat slob; it was down to me. And maybe down to the other people too.

The fact is that before I had somehow been invisible when I was taking photographs at the station. It was like magic. I would stand right in the middle of the crush, able to observe everything, but no-one would take any notice of me. A bit like in one of those absolutely idiotic films, in which some ridiculous angels have come down among us, and we can't see them, but they see everything and when they cross the street lorries charge right through them without doing them any harm. That was the kind of feeling I'd always had when I was taking photographs. But that magic was suddenly gone when I went back to the station for the first time after the arrest.

The people were looking at me. Or I imagined they were, which amounts to the same thing in the final analysis. Now I wasn't just an observer any more. I was one of them. And it was then that I noticed how stupid that is: getting up into the faces of people you don't know with the camera at intimate moments.

All of a sudden I couldn't do it any more, because I found myself watching myself, and if you do that you can't capture the perfect moment any more.

The problem is that a perfect photo somehow needs to be imperfect in order to be perfect. Otherwise, in fact, you could just stick two wonderful people in a perfect pose in front of a perfect backdrop and then photograph them in perfect light ... and you'd have the perfect picture. Just like that. But you don't. Because the fact is that then the moment is missing. I mean, the real life is missing somehow. You can't see a thing like that at first glance. Whether it's real or faked, and whether it speaks to you and whether it's telling you about a genuine, intense moment. That's what it's about.

And that is exactly what my photos were no longer doing. I mean, they had never really been perfect from a technical point of view, but now the problem was that I simply wasn't capturing the moment any more. No idea, I was either too early, or too late, or I was waiting for something that simply didn't happen.

There was some sort of connection missing. All I was doing now was stare at each scene like an idiot.

My first thought was that after the arrest people were suddenly recognising me, but of course that couldn't be the case, because there's a completely new set of people at the station every half hour at the latest. And that's particularly true of platforms 12 and 13, where the long-distance trains depart and there are no commuters. Then I thought it was my own fault, because before each photo I suddenly began to worry about what the others might be thinking of me, and if perhaps they were afraid that I might rob them afterwards or something like that. So I gave it a try with the ultra-long telephoto lens my mother had given me as a present. So that the people wouldn't notice that I was photographing them, but it didn't work, because then they were standing fifty yards away, and in those fifty yards there was always sure to be some idiot walking through the picture. So I positioned myself up on the steps leading down to the platform and tried photographing from there, but that was no good either, because pictures taken from above don't have the normal perspective and so somehow they look distant. Apart from that, the telephoto lens always zooms in on the background and foreshortens the distances, so that the picture you take doesn't end up with any kind of proper structure at all, because there's no proper foreground and no background, and somehow everything seems as important as everything else.

I have to admit that I was pretty desperate after the first few days. I'd already begun to think about whether or not I ought perhaps to start writing, which my mother had always wanted me to do, but then the perfect moment came along after all. Quite suddenly, right out of the blue.

It happened quite a while after I had finished taking photographs and re-stowed my telephoto lens. I was sitting somewhat at a loss on a bench on the platform. In front of me was the Intercity express from Munich. The passengers had all got off, and the platform itself was empty meanwhile too. At some point the train kicked and began to move again, and when the last carriage had gone past, there was this girl sitting on the same bench just one platform further along, as it were. I.e. directly opposite. She was about 17, I reckon, and so viciously beautiful that I didn't dare to look at her at all. That is, not for longer than a fraction of a second.

I should qualify that: in actual fact she wasn't really viciously beautiful after all, but she could have been if she'd wanted to. But she probably didn't. You could tell that by looking at her totally worn out T-shirt, which was from some supermarket. It said '*Real – alles drin*' on the front. Having said that it was already pretty faded. With it she was wearing grey tracksuit trousers, very baggy, and black steel-capped boots, on which she had painted white hearts, like a punk, except that punks don't paint hearts on their shoes. They paint

blobs or stars or the word 'anarchy'.

The girl was definitely not a punk because she didn't have pierced lips or a thousand safety pins in her ear or her head half-shaven. Instead, she'd knotted her hair up into a plait with one of those rubber rings from a preserving jar, but she'd done it so carelessly that loads of strands were hanging over her eyes. I reckon it was all the same to her what she looked like. She didn't have plucked eyebrows or make-up or stuff like that either, like the girls in my class. On the other hand she was tanned, but it wasn't that shitty gingerbread tan you see on those people who always go to the solarium. It was a tan like you have when you simply spend the day outdoors. She was sitting on the bench leaning forward slightly, and she'd shoved the palms of her hands beneath her thighs. Her pupils were almost black and she'd coloured the area around her eyes black too, so that she looked like an owl. And she was gazing at me the whole time.

Yet all the while there was some bloke lying next to her sleeping. He wasn't as tanned as her, in fact he was fairly pale, and he had a T-shirt on, thin and tight like the skin of a sausage, so that you could see his sixpack beneath it, rising and falling like the clappers. As if he'd just done a 400-metre sprint. But I have to admit he certainly had some pretty impressive muscles there, definitely a lot more athletic than mine, for example. His head was touching her thighs. But it wasn't as if it was in her lap, as it might have been with a couple, but rather as if she were just keeping an eye on him while he slept.

I have to say that was a strange feeling, being stared at like that by a girl. Especially when you're sitting there like an idiot yourself and haven't got anything to keep yourself occupied with. So I got my camera out and took a few pictures in her general direction. It didn't seem to bother her at all. She looked straight into the lens, without embarrassment, without pulling a face at all. Just sometimes she blew the strands of hair away from her eyes, but they always fell back down again. At some point the next Intercity came in on my platform and blocked the view. It had come from Frankfurt, and because that day Hamburg were playing against Frankfurt, thousands of fans in jackets like the one a Hell's Angel might wear squeezed their way out between the doors, an eagle on their back, roaring "Sieg!" again and again, and clapping their hands together three times between each roar.

Like Nazi Germany, I thought. Just not as well ordered in a military way. Although I have no idea at all how well ordered military Germany was back then.

Anyway, it was incredible to see just how many people could get into a single train. The platform was practically full, but even then more people were still

pouring out, and then the police came stomping in from the sides too, and surrounded the fans with their shields and batons, and after a while they had shoved the whole crowd out of the station.

The whole process may have taken half an hour. Then the Intercity went on its way again, and of course the bench was unoccupied now. No trace of the two of them. I looked round. The escalators leading to the platform. The glass-fronted lift. Up above, the gallery with the shops. It was as if they had disappeared into thin air. Maybe they had gone from the platform straight down to the Underground.

"Looking for somebody?" a voice asked suddenly in the nape of my neck. Then the girl climbed over the bench from behind and sat down next to me. So close that her leg was touching my knee. Although there was still several feet of room on the bench.

"I know you", said the girl after a while. "The fat policeman arrested you a few days ago."

"Yeah, but it was just a misunderstanding", I answered.

"Why? What did he want?"

"He thought I was part of a gang who rob people."

"Did he believe what you said?"

"I don't know. He said he'd be keeping an eye on me."

"In that case you'd better make sure you don't get seen with me", she said, laughing, and then she moved a bit further away and for a brief moment she put her hands down on the bench next to her, before shoving them under her legs again. She had really rough fingers. With scars and fat knuckles, the kind you get when you fight a lot. Hooligan's hands, I'd say, which had never seen a manicure in their life.

For a while we both looked straight ahead. Over there, where she'd sat before, even though there was nothing at all to be seen there now.

"You take photographs", she said finally. I nodded.

"What of?"

"Don't know ... well, to be honest ... I photograph farewells. Somehow ... people

who are parting. People when one of them's going away."

"That's sick", she said. "No kidding? Farewells? D'you earn money doing it or something like that?"

"No, why? Where'd you get that idea from?"

"Just a way of passing the time then?"

"I don't know. No! I don't do it just to pass the time. As a matter of fact it's what I like doing best."

"But farewells are the saddest thing in the world."

"True. But also the most beautiful, if you ask me." Then she turned sideways and looked at me, and I reckon that was the moment that transformed everything inside me. Even if I have no idea how to describe it. A bit like in that detergent ad that's on all over the TV at the moment. They show you a woman in colourful clothes, and you think, "OK, woman, colourful clothes, nothing special", but then someone says "Enough of these faded colours!" or some rubbish like that and, from inside as it were, the woman reaches into the TV screen and yanks away a veil of grey and it's not until then that you realise that the colours and everything else were really dull before, and that life is in fact much more radiant.

That's what it was like with her too. Except that 'more radiant' is the wrong expression. More like more intense. Darker. To be truthful, her face was like a lake in a storm, full of waves, and then it suddenly went glassy and the water was completely clear, so that you could see right down to the bottom, and then, down there, everything was coated with sorrow like a layer of algae. I mean, she wasn't crying or anything like that. She was just unbelievably sad.

She looked at me like that without moving and this time I didn't look away either, and her eyes weren't black after all, but blue; not as radiant as Megan Fox's, for example, but more like blue ink.

"You know what the very worst thing in life is?" she said finally.

"Death?" I asked.

"Even worse than death is when you can't say goodbye to someone."

"How d'you know that?"

"It's just what I think."

"No kidding? You think stuff like that?"

"Yeah, I do", she said, and then she fell silent and I couldn't think of anything else to say. At some point she said: "I reckon, if you can say goodbye to someone, it's like a surgeon sewing up the wound. And without the goodbye it simply never stops bleeding ... or the scar proliferates really badly and you stay stunted and ugly for the rest of your life."

"Well there's nothing stunted about you", I said, and thought I'd paid her a pretty smooth compliment there, but I was quite wrong. It was as if she had pulled the veil back up again.

"So how many farewells have you photographed so far?" she asked after quite a while.

"No idea", I answered. "Maybe about 300 gigabytes on my computer."

"And how long have you been doing it?"

"Two years, at least."

"Will you show me your pictures some time?"

"Sure", I said, although in fact it wasn't clear to me at all whether anyone ought to be allowed to see them.

"Right away?" she asked.

"As far as I'm concerned right away."

Then she reached for my hand and pulled me off the bench and we went over to the platform from which my suburban train departs.

### Chapter 3

Strictly speaking my father should have been utterly confused by my behaviour. I'd brought practically no-one home for ten years and just led a completely nerdish, underground sort of life, and then suddenly there I was, turning up first with this weird hippo of a policeman, and then, a few days later, with the prettiest owl in the universe. I would have been prepared to bet that his brain would start to race but he wouldn't say a word. At the very most, he would stammer "Hm ... hm" and then disappear off back to his formulae.

But that's not what happened at all. Instead, he pushed his glasses forwards to the tip of his nose and contemplated my guest over the rim from head to toe and then back up again.

"I am the father of this genius", he said, shaking her hand.

"Kati", said the girl.

"As in Katherina?"

"As in just-plain-Kati-from-the-day-I-was-born."

"Well, then, sit down, Kati", said my father, pointing to the table, and of course that was the very last thing I needed, my father wanting to make conversation with her, because a thing like that could only end in vicarious embarrassment.

And that's exactly how it went, because of course my father wanted to know all that stupid stuff parents always think is important although it doesn't actually tell you anything about the person at all: where you come from, what your parents do for a living, which school you go to and what marks you've been getting and so on.

In spite of it all, Kati went on talking nineteen to the dozen, and my father looked at her with that empathetic therapist's look I'd seen him put on before, because he had always looked at my mother like that too. With his head on one side, nodding all the time, though in reality he wasn't listening at all; the conversation was just cosmic background noise, while he spent the whole time thinking of other things. At least that's how I'd always imagined it was with him.

Having said that, I have to admit that my mother had shared the same suspicion on occasions, and sometimes asked him to repeat her last sentence, which he

was always able to do with absolute precision. But only the last sentence. As if he had a small intermediate memory fitted, in which he always filed one sentence, only for it to be overwritten by the one that followed. While the main computer occupied itself with the really important things. I reckon he's got two completely separate electrical circuits in his head. But he took an interest in Kati nonetheless.

The other way round I wasn't quite so sure, because most of what she said was definitely lies. For example, that her mother had a nail studio in Wandsbek, with pedicure and chiropody and stuff like that, but that she herself would prefer to do an apprenticeship as a hairdresser, because she definitely didn't feel like rasping fungally infested callous off old people's feet. That, she said, was why she had applied to become a trainee at a hairdresser's in the city centre.

"Loads of famous people go there", said Kati, "and it's really interesting, 'cause they always tell you everything when they're having their hair cut."

To be quite honest, no-one who's interested in haircuts walks about with a haircut like that. And caring about what celebrities said didn't suit Kati either.

On the other hand, working in a nail studio and being a hairdresser aren't exactly occupations you'd shout about, so of course it was possible that she wasn't lying, because it would be pretty stupid to invent stuff like that. I mean, if I had been in her place and had to think something up, I would have said a marine biologist or a model or an Olympic athlete, or something cool like that.

Anyway, the two of them talked for ages and I stood there superfluously like an umbrella stand in the corner, until finally we were able to go up to my room. Though I have to admit that I wasn't in all that much of a hurry to go up, because my room isn't anything to shout about either.

The fact is that in my room things still look as though they belong to a playgroup. That has to do with the fact that 'living' has never really meant anything much to me at all, and I'd never really made any changes in my room. The carpet with the roads drawn on it, on which I'd used to play with my Hot Wheels cars, was still in front of the bed. On the desk there was a half-finished Lego rocket which had been gathering dust for years, and next to it the two cuddly rabbits my mother had made when I was four. One of them was called Al. She'd embroidered the name on its dungarees. The other was called Bert. At the time my mother thought that was incredibly original. I myself hadn't actually noticed them for 12 years now. But when you look at a room with the eyes of a stranger, it goes without saying that a thing like that strikes you right away. Just like the letters-and-animals poster my parents had stuck up above the bed for my first day at school, because they were said to be of 'high educational value'

and make it easier to learn to read: 'A' for antelope, 'G' for giraffe and 'C' for cockatoo. Having said that, when I was a child I always thought the cockatoo was a parrot, which caused a bit of confusion. But only at the beginning, in my first year.

But the worst things in my room were the framed photos my mother had hung up on nails next to the door. Me with my flute at Christmas time like some frog with his cheeks puffed out. Or the one taken at the reading competition, which wasn't in fact such a terrible photo, it's just that the memory associated with it was fairly horrific, because I was sitting up there alone on the stage and must have stumbled over the word 'prophylaxis' at least five times, until about a hundred parents down there in the auditorium began to clap their hands rhythmically. It was probably supposed to encourage me. But instead of feeling encouraged, I went red like a tomato. Having said that, the picture in my room is black and white.

And then of course there's the photo taken at the Hamburg swimming championships, and that is simply the worst picture of me that exists anywhere at all: me, on the podium, my eyes screwed up against the sun, in a pair of really cretinous brief-type trunks, far too large, floating on my hips like some pouch and going all the way up to my belly button. And then, above the elastic, there's a chest so puny that you could have shoved me into someone's letter-box sideways. What a guy! Kati looked from me to the photo and back again. Luckily, my chest had changed a bit since then.

"I've got some cooler trunks now", I said. "D'you wanna see them? ... Maybe?"

"Not just now", she replied. "So where are the photos from the station?"

I connected up my back-up disc and then we clicked our way through the various albums, and at this point I really must put in a good word for myself, because my computer desktop really is always immaculate, which can't really be said for my real-life desk. On my real-life desk the bottom layers still originate from the same epoch as Al and Bert. But I'd given my computer a pretty neat architecture. Particularly as far as my photos were concerned. First they were sorted into weeks, and then the better ones were given a name and found their way into the 'passable' folder. At the moment there are about 300 in there. And a few even made it into the 'good' folder, and then there was the 'perfect' folder, in which I only very seldom filed a picture, when I was really intoxicated by a motif. But that status mostly only lasted a few days, until I came to view the photo in a more sober light and had to relegate it into the next folder down.

That's pretty much the way it goes with my favourite music. At the beginning I

always have it on an endless loop, but each time you hear it it detracts a little bit from the magic, and at some point all the feeling has gone out of it, and then you can't even understand what it was you ever saw in it. And that's what it's like with the photos. Except that I can't just write my photos off like that, because I'm the one who took them, and because they're like a window onto my dreams, and then if someone thinks the pictures are boring and inconsequential, he might as well just hit me in the face right away. That would be about the same.

That's why it's really not so easy for me to show my photos to anyone else. Not even the ones I took earlier, when I was 12 or 13, when perfect moments for me were still things like sunsets or clouds or lakes with a mirror gloss, and I hadn't yet had the idea of capturing the farewells at the station.

"Where do I have to press?" asked Kati and took the mouse out of my hand without giving me so much as a chance to protest. Then she clicked her way through my pictures. Although it's not really true to say 'clicked through', because it was rather as if she crawled into each individual one.

It was almost as if I wasn't there at all and she were sitting alone at my desk. She'd shoved one leg under her backside so as to be sitting a bit higher up, and her eyes were about ten centimetres from the screen, and she was biting her lip all the time, and sometimes she wrinkled her nose a bit too.

I'd honestly never seen anyone who could occupy themselves with a single photo for such a long time. As if she were a profiler or something like that, and as if there were some clues relating to a murder or whatever hidden in the pictures. Sometimes she even enlarged individual sections of the photos. And then she enlarged them even more, although there's no point in doing that at all, because the sections you blow up just end up being a load of square pixels.

At first, of course, I was quite flattered to see someone so obsessed with my photos. But I thought it was a bit strange too, because she seemed somehow to be taking the pictures even more seriously than I did myself, and because on one occasion she really did overreact. That was when she opened my current favourite. I'd taken it about six months earlier, and it was the last picture that had made it into my 'perfect' folder.

I'd taken it in the winter, quite a way out beyond the station hall. The wind had been chasing big snowflakes horizontally across the tracks and the narrow roof over the platform offered practically no shelter. In spite of that, the girl in the picture only had a pair of tights and a miniskirt on and a pair of flat pumps with holes in them, and a scanty sweatshirt jacket against the cold. One of those with a zip fastener, with 'Ham' on the one half and 'burg' on the other. I reckon.

But you couldn't see the 'Ham', because the girl's arms were wrapped round the boy's body. She'd buried her head in his shoulder. Her eyes were closed. And there was a subtle, contented Mona-Lisa smile around her mouth, as if she knew for sure that this was a boy who was always going to protect her, and that nothing would ever happen to her.

That is, the bloke in the picture wasn't really a boy at all any more, but rather a man with a broad back and really strong arms. At least five or ten years older than her. He'd put his arm round her shoulders, and his blue eyes were looking out somewhere into the distance, and he probably hadn't moved for quite a while, because there were already a few snowflakes that had got stuck in his eyebrows and lashes. Like a lighthouse that defies the icy surf and points the way into the safe haven. Hard and unbending and stronger than any breaker. Behind him, the station clock, slightly out of focus, said twenty to three. The storm had blown everything else away from the platform. There was nobody to be seen, no luggage, no litter. But the wind had piled up a little wedge of snow in front of each pillar.

When Kati saw that picture she more or less turned to stone. That is, 'turned to stone' isn't quite the right expression. It was rather as if she stiffened, on the one hand, but at the same time began to tremble, like an electric eel or something like that: unable to move, but totally wired up, and there was no way that could only be down to her being awed by my picture.

"Can I have this photo?" she asked, once she'd regained some of her composure.

"I don't give my pictures away", I replied. "No offence ... but it's just impossible ... I really don't do it, ever."

"Please", she said.

"What d'you need it for?"

"I just do", she said and looked at me with those dark, sad eyes, without saying anything further, and I didn't say anything else either, until at some point she stood up and slowly left the room. In the doorway she turned to me once more and said, "Please ... why not?", but I didn't back down from that "No". Although at some point I would have been prepared to. I think.

"Are we going to see each other tomorrow?" I asked cautiously.

"At four", she answered, "same bench, maybe. Don't know yet."