

ALINA BRONSKY

BROKEN GLASS PARK

"Sascha Naimann truly is a heroine for our time . . .

Her story, told with wit and flair, will grab you as it grabbed me."

—Alicia Erian, author of the *New York Times* notable book *Towelhead*

"A riveting debut...

Sascha's hunger for life
shines through
her relentless fight
to leave behind
a painful childhood."

—*Publishers Weekly*


Europa
editions



Sometimes I think I'm the only one in our neighborhood with any worthwhile dreams. I have two, and there's no reason to be ashamed of either one. I want to kill Vadim. And I want to write a book about my mother. I already have a title: *The Story of an Idiotic Redheaded Woman Who Would Still Be Alive If Only She Had Listened to Her Smart Oldest Daughter*. Or maybe that's more of a subtitle. But I have plenty of time to figure it out because I haven't started writing yet.

Most of the people who live around here don't have any dreams at all. I've asked. And the dreams of the ones who do have them are so pathetic that if I were in their shoes I'd rather not have any.

Anna's dream, for instance, is to marry rich. Her dream man would be a judge in his mid-thirties, and, fingers crossed, not too terribly ugly.

Anna is seventeen, same as I am, and she says she'd get married immediately if a guy like that came along. That way she could finally move out of the Emerald and into the judge's penthouse apartment. Nobody but me knows that Anna sometimes takes the tram downtown and wanders a dozen times around the courthouse in the hope that her judge will finally come out and discover her, give her a red rose, take her out for ice cream, and then invite her back to his penthouse.

She says you'll never get lucky if you don't fight for it; if you don't fight, the moment will just pass you by.

"Do you have any idea what Emerald means, you stupid

cow?" I ask her. "It's the most elegant way to cut a diamond, and a fine gemstone itself. That's got to be appealing to you. You'll never live in another Emerald if you move out of this place."

"You just made that up. They would never in a million years have named this heap of concrete after a diamond cut," says Anna. "And by the way, when you know too much, you get old and wrinkled faster." That's a Russian saying.

As Anna's judge could take a while, for now she's sleeping with Valentin, who has a third-rate dream of his own. He wants a brand-new, snow-white Mercedes. First he'll have to get his driver's license. Which costs a lot. That's why he delivers advertising brochures door to door before school. Since the money to be made at that is barely a trickle, Valentin also cleans the house of an old married couple twice a week. The couple lives on the other side of town. He got the job through his mother, who cleans the place next door. Nobody can know he's a housecleaner—if the guys at school found out, they'd never let him live it down, and Anna would split up with him.

Valentin usually has a look on his face as if someone just shoved a cactus down his pants. I think it's because he realizes that even if he eventually gets enough money together to take driver's ed classes and get his license, it would take another two lifetimes of cleaning houses to buy a white Mercedes. And then maybe in his third lifetime he'd be able to hop in and actually take a spin.

Peter the Great, on the other hand, dreams of a natural blonde with dark eyes. He was with Anna before. She has brown eyes but she's not natural—not natural blond, anyway. Now he's with another girl, one from his class at school. But it's less convenient, as she lives downtown rather than here in the Emerald. Since they got together, he complains he spends half his life on the tram. But while he's on it, he keeps his eyes peeled for other blondes.

He was never interested in me—my hair's too dark.

My name is Sascha Naimann. I'm not a guy, even though everyone in this country seems to think so when they hear my name. I've given up counting how often I've had to explain it to people. Sascha is a short form of Alexander *and* Alexandra. I'm an Alexandra. But my name is Sascha—that's what my mother always called me, and that's what I want to be called. When people address me as Alexandra, I don't even react. That used to happen a lot more when I was new in school. These days it only happens when there's a new teacher.

Sometimes I think I don't ever want to meet any new people because I'm sick of having to explain everything from scratch. Why my name is Sascha and how long I've lived in Germany and how come I speak German so well—ten times better than all the other Russian Germans put together.

I know German because my head is filled with a gray matter shaped like a big walnut. Macroscopically it has lots of ridges and microscopically loads of synapses. I probably have a few million more than Anna—definitely. Besides German, I also know physics, chemistry, English, French, and Latin. If I ever get a B on an assignment, the teacher comes over to me and apologizes.

I'm particularly good at math. When we came to Germany seven years ago, math was the only subject I could handle right away, in the fifth grade. Truth be told, I could have solved the eighth grade assignments. Back in Russia I was in a special math school.

In Germany I couldn't speak a word at first, but the numbers were the same. I always solved the equations first, and always correctly. I was the only one in class who had any idea what algebra and geometry were. My classmates acted as if they were diseases.

My mother laughed about it and said she found me a little scary. I was always scary in her eyes, though, because I thought

much more logically than she did. She wasn't stupid, but she was too sentimental. She read at least one thick novel per week, played piano and guitar, knew a million songs, and was good at languages. Learned German real fast, for instance—and before that was able to communicate with people in passable English.

Math, physics, chemistry—she was no good at them. Just as she was no good at recognizing when it was time to show a man the door. These are all abilities I must have gotten from my father. All I know about him is that he had multiple doctorates and an unpleasant personality. “You got that, too,” my mother used to say. “And the degrees will no doubt come at some point.”

I'm the only one from our community who goes to the Alfred Delp school. It's a private Catholic school, and to this day I have no idea why they accepted me back then—pretty much illiterate, never baptized, looking completely out of step in a pink wool sweater my grandmother had knitted. Being led by the hand by a mother only able to speak broken English—very loudly, with a ridiculous accent—and who wore her flaming red hair down. In her other hand was a liter of milk in a plastic bag from a discount grocery store.

Along with my mother, hundreds of German Catholic architects, doctors, and lawyers had applied for spots at the school for their kids. All people who practically had *GENEROUS DONOR* written across their foreheads in big letters.

You see, at the Alfred Delp school there's no tuition, but “donations are welcome.” And Mrs. Weimars, the school secretary who peered over the top of her glasses to size up my mother, me, and the plastic bag, must have quickly come to a realistic assessment of my mother's liquidity (as those of us at such elite schools call it).

Actually, after I started attending the school, my mother did give twenty euros the first year and twenty-two the next—

which was all she could afford. She couldn't really afford those amounts, to be honest, but my mother was a fundamentally giving person. “There's nothing I hate more than a leech” was one of her favorite sentences. “It's a quality you hate only in yourself,” I would always answer. “Try hating it in others—like Vadim, for instance.”

In retrospect, I think they accepted me at the school to try to create a little diversity. A lot of doctors, lawyers, and architects got rejection notices for their kids. In the end there were five sections of fifth graders, each one crammed full, and in mine, 5C, I was the only one with an “immigrant background.” In 5A was a kid with an American father, and in 5B another with a French mother. In all my years there I've never seen a single black kid or anyone who looked even vaguely Middle Eastern. So in my class I was the heavyweight when it came to diversity.

On the first day of school my classmates stared at me as if I had just climbed out of a UFO. They asked me questions I couldn't understand at first. Soon I could have answered them, but by then they all thought I was standoffish. It took a while for them to learn otherwise.

Considering most of them had never seen a foreigner up close before, they were all pretty nice to me. One of the first sentences I was able to understand was a compliment about my sweater. Probably out of pity. A little later, when I had learned to talk, count, and write papers and was the only one who put commas in the right places, everyone acted like they were happy for me. And maybe it was sincere.

My mother was always saying I should have friends from school over to our place. But she only said that because she was clueless. She was always inviting friends over. Twice I'd been over to the homes of girls from my class—Melanie and Carla—and I couldn't possibly imagine having them over.

I'm not sure what threw me more: the neatness of Melanie's

room, the scent of the polished furniture—the type of furniture I thought existed only in catalogues or Anna’s fantasies—the fact that they sat around an oval dining room table for lunch instead of in the kitchen, or her horse-pattern sheets. I’d never seen such colorful sheets before. At home we had white or light-blue checked sheets, all of which were old and faded. How you could possibly fall asleep with your eyes flitting around looking at all those horses?

Melanie’s mother, by the way, was originally from Hungary. That came as a complete surprise—for one thing because Melanie had never mentioned it, and for another because she looked more stereotypically German than any other girl in our entire school. She was exactly what foreigners picture when they think of a young German girl—particularly foreigners who form that image from afar, having never been to Germany. She had freshly cropped, always-neat, chin-length blond hair, blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and a crisply ironed jean jacket. She smelled of soap and spoke in a chirpy voice using sentences of mostly monosyllabic words, words that popped out of her mouth like peas. If I hadn’t have seen her in the flesh myself, I would never have believed someone like her actually existed.

Her mom, on the other hand, spoke with an accent—though I didn’t notice it the first time I went over there. Back then my own accent screeched as distractingly as a rusty bicycle. During lunch she stared at me with pity when she thought I wasn’t looking. She asked me questions about the town where I had grown up, the weather there, my old school, and my mother.

I told her that my mother had studied art history, that back home she had acted in a theater group that kept getting banned, that she wanted to find a little company here to join. Melanie’s mother took a sip of water and segued into a different line of questioning: wasn’t life in our housing project dan-

gerous? I told her it was a lot cleaner and nicer than where I’d lived back there. I always referred to Russia that way—“back there.”

Melanie nibbled on her cheese-filled puff pastry and corrected her mother whenever she made a grammatical error. She also told her mother that they’d done a poll in class about what people wanted for their birthdays and seven students had said they wanted new stereos.

“So what?” said her mother, looking at Melanie through narrowed eyes.

“Don’t you understand what that means?” said Melanie, opening her blue eyes wide. “A *new* stereo. Meaning they already *have* one. And I still don’t have one.”

“But you do have one in your room,” I said. I couldn’t talk very well, but I talked a lot.

“That’s just an old system my cousin was getting rid of,” Melanie said. “It doesn’t have any of the features a stereo has to have these days.”

After lunch we went back into her spotless room. She turned on the stereo. I found a stack of old teen magazines and started reading them. Melanie spun herself around on her desk chair and chatted on the phone with another friend. Considering we didn’t have anything to say to each other, we made good use of the time. That evening Melanie’s mother drove me home. When we got there she looked around, unsettled, and insisted on taking me to the door to make sure I got home to my mother.

But my mother wasn’t home. I had a key.

“You should come over again,” said Melanie’s mother, patting my cheek.

“Thanks,” I said, thinking to myself, Not until there’s a new stack of magazines.

After that I looked at our apartment in a different light.

I pictured spotless Melanie in her pressed jean jacket taking

the elevator with me. I pictured the way she would look around, fidgeting, like her mother. The way the scent of her soap would fight with the smell of urine in the hallway—and lose. I pictured her coming through the door of our apartment, catching sight of the couch we'd found discarded by a dumpster and the little table in front of it that would collapse if you even looked at it too hard. Books on the floor. The little TV and stack of videocassettes—even back then nobody had VHS tapes anymore. The cabinet with no door. My stepfather's socks drying on the radiator. My brother's sweatpants draped over a chair. We had five chairs, each one different because we'd found them separately, each left out on the street the night before a heavy garbage pickup.

We always ate in the kitchen, except when we had guests over for a party—in which case we had to clear out the main room to be able to fit extra chairs borrowed from neighbors. Our kitchen table was usually covered with jars of jam, letters, postcards, half-empty bottles, and old newspapers. We had twenty plates; none matched any of the others. My mother had bought them all individually at the flea market.

We didn't have a dishwasher back then, and sometimes all twenty plates would stack up in the sink before my mother washed them up. Sometimes I did it, but not very often. And never when Vadim told me to—the same Vadim who left the frying pan crusted with the remains of his fried eggs. Though when his foul mouth started muttering my mother's name menacingly, I cleaned up real fast.

I hate men.

Anna says good men do exist. Nice, friendly men who cook and help clean up and who earn money. Men who want to have children and give gifts and plan vacations. Who wear clean clothes, don't drink, and even look halfway decent. Where on earth are they, I ask. She says they're out there—if not in our

town then in Frankfurt. But she doesn't know any personally, unless you count people she's seen on TV.

That's why I always repeat the words my mother used to say: I don't need a man.

Of course, though she always said that, she never stuck to it. Ever since I decided to kill Vadim, I've felt a lot better. I also promised Anton, my nine-year-old little brother, that I'd do it. And I think he feels better now, too. When I told him, he opened his eyes wide and asked, breathless, "How are you going to do it?"

I acted as if I had everything under control. "There's a thousand ways I could do it," I told him. "I could poison him, suffocate him, strangle him, stab him, push him off a balcony, run him over in a car."

"You don't have a car," said my brother Anton—and he was right.

"I can't get at him at the moment anyway," I said. "You know he's still in prison. He'll be there for years."

"Is that how long it's going to take?" said Anton.

"Yeah," I said, "but it's better that way—I'll have plenty of time to plan it out. It's not that easy to kill somebody when you've never done it before, you know."

"It'll be easier the second time around," said Anton like an expert.

"I just want to pull it off this one time," I said. "I don't want to make a hobby out of it."

I was relieved that Anton also thought it was a good idea. Vadim is his father, after all. But the little guy hates him just as much as I do. Maybe even more. He had already been a basket case beforehand, because unlike me he was always afraid of Vadim.

These days Anton's still in bad shape, showing no signs of improvement, and I sometimes ask myself whether all the therapy will do any good at all. He stutters, can't concentrate in

school, wets his bed, and starts to shake whenever someone raises their voice. All this despite the fact that he claims not to remember anything. I always tell him: count yourself lucky if that's the case. I'm happy I can't remember anything, either—even though I was there.

I can discuss one of my dreams with Anton. But not the other one. Because anytime the word “mama” is mentioned in his vicinity, he freezes and just sits there dead still like a statue—as if he's just been kissed by the Snow Queen. My mother often read us the fairytale of the Snow Queen. She loved Hans Christian Andersen, loved that story in particular. Whenever somebody was mean, she would say they probably had a piece of the mirror in their eye or heart—she meant the mirror from the Snow Queen, the one the evil troll shattered. That's just how she was.

To shield him, I smack anyone who says the word “mama” in front of Anton. Not adults, obviously—I just shout at them. It always works. It's the least I can do for my little brother. Well, that and not chasing him out when he comes crying to my room at night, crawls into bed next to me, and then is so frightened when the alarm goes off in the morning that he pisses on my leg.

I sometimes worry what it will be like after I've fulfilled my first dream and Vadim is dead.

When I was younger, I thought I wanted to be famous, just like everybody else on the planet. I didn't have anything against the idea of having a well-known mother, either, who smiled from the cover of every magazine and was the talk of the town. But then when we did become known, I could have shot them all—all the photographers and cameramen and the reporters with their microphones and little notepads, filming the entrance to our building and knocking on our neighbors' doors to ask how loud it had been that night. Who screamed, who cried, who ran, and whether Vadim had really said

“There's blood in there, don't go in,” and “It's over, get out of here.”

Only when one of us emerged—me or Anton, since Alissa still had to be carried then—would they shut their mouths, shuffle to the sides of the hallway to clear a path for us, and watch us pass out of the corners of their eyes.

I had hoped they would try to talk to me or Anton, because then I would have felt justified in knocking the cameras out of their hands or the teeth out of their skulls. But they wisely steered clear of me—there must have been a toxic cloud hanging over me, like Chernobyl. Then again I figured it was probably for the best that they didn't ask me questions and that I didn't react because my mother was always opposed to violence. And she knew exactly what violence felt like.

The next day she was in all the papers. Her first name and the first initial of her last name—as is the journalistic tradition here—along with her age and a photo. It was a picture she'd had taken with her theater group, a nice picture, her hair red, her face less covered with makeup than usual, a black sweater. Back in those days she'd been a star.

Are you happy now? I asked the picture. Didn't I warn you? How could you let this happen? Why did you marry that asshole? Why did he get to come with you to Germany? Why in the hell did you let him into the apartment that night?

Why? For god's sake why?

You were always a stupid, stupid, stupid woman, I said to her. But how could you do this to me—how could you possibly have been so dumb?

Later I apologized to her. Obviously it wasn't her who had done this to me. She had just acted the way she always did—she couldn't help it. She was, after all, an art history student and an artist to boot. She was of an archetype that doesn't really exist anymore—a bit more cosmopolitan, a bit more skilled, a bit more refined. And I'll explain that in my book so everyone

knows it. I don't want her to be famous only because she died such a horrid death.

Right from the beginning, I read all the newspaper reports. I would always run down to the newsstand and buy copies of all the papers they sold there. The first few days we weren't at home—the department of family services put us up in an apartment owned by the city. But after two days I told them we couldn't take it anymore. The apartment was completely free of dust, of books, of life. And there was a plastic plant. I said the little kids wanted to go home. It was most important for Alissa. She wasn't even two years old.

We were permitted to go home, where everything was oddly clean in a way it had never been before. We were looked after around the clock by several indistinguishable women with short hair and hyphenated names, and one man with long hair—who also had a hyphenated name.

I can barely remember those days. I just know I talked non-stop about how we had done things *before* and how we needed to keep doing them that way now. How they shouldn't buy any food other than the things we were already used to. Then one day there was organic butter on the table, and I just had a complete breakdown.

I can still remember the look one of the women gave me as I fell screaming to the floor. There was relief in that look. They had been droning on for days about how I didn't need to keep it all inside. How I could give my feelings free rein. Vent. I needed to, in fact.

But I didn't listen to them.

And then suddenly Maria arrived. Cousin twice-removed, with three overstuffed suitcases brought from Novosibirsk. A chance for the *traumatized children* to form a *family* again.

Vadin's cousin, by the way.

I had agreed to her coming—after the experience in the family services-owned apartment, I had an allergic reaction to

the idea of entering any kind of institutional facility. And foster parents weren't exactly lined up around the block to take in three emotionally fucked up urchins of Russian origin. Or to move into the apartment where the half-orphans were huddled in the freshly vacuumed corners like frightened rabbits. The apartment with the door that had recently had more pictures snapped of it than Heidi Klum.

So Maria it was.

Maria is in her mid-thirties but looks fifty. She used to work in a factory cafeteria in Novosibirsk. Maria has calloused hands as big as shovels, with nails painted red. She has short hair, dyed blond and permed, thick legs with varicose veins—though you can't see them under the wool stockings she wears. She's got a dozen floral-print dresses, an ass so wide you could land a helicopter on it, perfume so sickly-sweet it makes you sneeze, a big mouth ringed with red lipstick, chipmunk cheeks, and little eyes.

Kind eyes. In fact, she's nice in general, Maria.

Alissa took to her immediately—boom, just like that. Maria this, Maria that. Mascha, mine, ma-ma-ma-Mama. I wasn't upset with her about it—she's just a little kid.

She immediately took up residence in Maria's boundless lap. She wanted to stay there for days on end. It made Maria nervous because she had a hard time cooking with a two-year-old clinging to her. As if any of us wanted to eat. Anton and I didn't eat for days. At some point he basically collapsed—and I piled on.

I told him that if he didn't eat he'd be put in the hospital. And if that happened Maria would be deemed an unfit guardian and sent back to Novosibirsk. And then we'd be stuck in an orphanage or split up and sent out to foster homes alone.

He ate after that. I sat with him and watched him steadily chewing, his big, round eyes fixed on the white wall. Maria

kept refilling his plate. Anton threw up twice after eating so I told Maria to stick to smaller portions, but to feed him frequently throughout the day. And not to give him such rich food. And to make sure he drank a lot.

Maria was a good cook. She still is. Much better than my mom. Maria knows how to make borscht and other complicated soups. The apartment always smells like food. She makes homemade stocks from chicken or beef, with vegetables and bundles of soup greens. She makes perfectly shaped meatballs and crepes as thin as cold cuts. She discovered sweetened condensed milk at the Russian grocery store around the corner—a delicacy more prized than caviar during Soviet times—and drenches stacks of crepes in it. She makes homemade pickles and black currant jam.

We're doing well, I tell my mother. We're being fattened up nicely. I wish you could taste it all. You were always intrigued by anything tasty, interesting-looking, or out of the ordinary.

In the newspaper article, Maria was described as "the only living relative willing to look after the three children left behind."

We weren't left behind, I grumbled. And Maria didn't sacrifice some priceless existence for our sake: when you work in a cafeteria in Novosibirsk and you're asked if you'd like to move to Germany to make soup for a few kids, you've hit the lottery.

Particularly since Maria had only briefly been married once when she was young. Maybe twice. She had no kids and no pets—as far as she was concerned there was nothing to tie her to her studio apartment and the cafeteria. That's turned out not to be true. I could have told her so. Back in Novosibirsk she could blather to everyone—and she did. Here she's pretty much damned to silence.

After almost two years here, Maria's German is limited to

about twenty words, things like bus, potato, butter, trash, boil, wash, and fuck you—for the dark-haired teenagers who sometimes whistle and make vulgar gestures at her as she walks past them. Occasionally she tries to group her vocabulary into sentences. That usually doesn't go too well.

When she's shopping anywhere but the Russian grocery store, she has to point to whatever she wants and then write out the number she needs. She always carries a little notepad with her for exactly that purpose. Every time she comes back from the discount market she's bathed in sweat. When she's spoken to on the street, she whimpers and she gets red blotches on her face. I tried for two weeks to help her master the sentence "I only speak Russian." She carries it around on a slip of paper in her wallet, transcribed phonetically into Cyrillic letters.

We're visited regularly by the hyphenated names from the department of family services. Maria freaks out every time, and I have to spend a long time before and after their visits convincing her she is doing a good job and that she won't have to go back to her job in the cafeteria.

Because as unhappy as she is here in the Emerald, you couldn't get her to go back to Novosibirsk—not even by force. She does dream of one day returning there, but later, with a thin waist and fancy makeup, with a suitcase full of nice clothes, and preferably accompanied by a German husband and a perfectly groomed mustache. He should also be kind and rich and speak Russian—because German, Maria says, is tougher than Chinese. As if she knows.

When I do my homework, she sometimes sighs behind me, muttering, "Studying is important, studying is good. I never used to study, always worked. Even as a little kid. And look at me now. Where did all that drudgery get me?"

"Read something, dumpling," I say. "It doesn't have to be *War and Peace* right off the bat. Try a mystery."

"I'm always so tired in the evening, sunshine," she says. "I forget what I've just read and have to keep starting over. It just takes too much effort."

So every day she reads the latest sheet of her page-a-day calendar—one for Russian Orthodox housewives—with a recipe on it, maybe a diet tip, and once in a while a joke, and that suffices. It makes me roll my eyes, but I make sure she doesn't see me. After all, she can't help the fact that she got too few synapses and that she lost two-thirds of the ones she did get working at the cafeteria.

I just worry a little about Alissa. At the moment Maria has a slight intellectual edge over my not quite four-year-old sister, but that won't be the case for long. I have made reading books aloud a mandatory part of Maria's schedule. After the first time she read a picture book to Alissa, she said, amazed, "I never knew such interesting books existed."

She has nothing but love for Alissa. So much so that she was against sending her off to kindergarten at the age of three. She pictured nothing but illnesses and deep-frozen foods. I had to threaten to get the family services department involved to break down Maria's resistance to the idea of kindergarten. She constantly cuddles and pats my sister and can barely keep herself from sputtering the pathetic phrase I've strictly banned from our household: "My poor little orphan." When Alissa's not sitting in her lap, she's standing on a footstool in the kitchen watching meatballs sizzle. She already knows a lot of recipes by heart. Recently she explained to me what fresh cilantro looks like and how it smells. "It makes you want to puke," she said.

Maria's fear of being shipped back to Novosibirsk has a lot to do with Alissa, too. Separating the two of them would not only break my sister's heart but Maria's as well. "When little Ally is all grown up, only then will I feel comfortable leaving," she says. "I want to raise her and make sure she's happy and healthy (my poor little orphan)."

Other times Maria says she'll feel comfortable leaving only once Alissa has found a decent man to marry.

"You're not a servant," I say. "And besides, it's possible she won't find a decent man to marry until she's in her late thirties—if she's lucky."

"Okay, then when she gets her diploma," she says. "That will be a happy day for me, too."

For her "diploma" is a magic term—like "capital gains tax" or "paracetamol."

She would die for Alissa. That's not to say she has anything against Anton. She tries to cuddle him, too, but Anton won't let anyone touch him. He just keeps retreating until his back is against the wall. And at that point Maria realizes she should let go of him. A few months ago I watched as he told Maria about his day at school. She sat at the kitchen table with her chin in her hand shaking her head in amazement.

Maria's afraid of me and that has its advantages.

From her perspective, there are plenty of reasons to be in awe of me. Not only can I speak Latin and French—which are about as relevant to her life as speaking Martian—but I can also speak—and this is something much more concrete—the language in this damn country. I explain the lay of the land to her and take her shopping, where an interpreter comes in very handy. I know how to fill out all the paperwork to apply for welfare and for children's benefits. I'm usually around when workers from the family services department are scheduled to visit. I always offer her the highest praise. When I have to translate a question for her, I always start thinking up the answer to it immediately.

Maria is paralyzed with fear anytime she has to deal with officialdom. Faced with anyone who gives off even a whiff of government authority, she feels as insignificant as an ant. She's even deferential to machines that dispense tickets for the public transportation system. And whenever a plainclothes ticket

controller comes through the bus and announces a ticket check, she rushes to rip hers out of her purse so quickly that she sends her lipstick and tampons flying around the nearby seats, an awkward smile plastered on her face all the while.

"Take it easy," I say, if I happen to be there when it happens. Then I crawl around on the floor to collect her things as Maria sits there frozen, the fake smile still on her face after the ticket controller has walked past her.

"I would never have guessed he was a ticket controller," she says, amazed. "With long hair and an earring—like a member of the Beatles. I can't believe the way they are allowed to dress. What did he have hanging from his ears?"

"An MP3 player," I explain.

"A what?"

"For music."

"You're going to be just like your mother," she says one time during an incident like this.

"What did you say?"

She puts her hand over her mouth. She starts to shake, her bloated body quivering beneath her flower-print blouse, terror in her eyes, tears starting to drip down her cheeks—or is it sweat?

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, nothing," she says. "Nothing."

I lift my hand. I'm not sure what I'm about to do. My fingers curl into a fist. But there's no more sense in hitting Maria than in taking a whip to pudding. So I slam my fist against the window.

Nobody turns around. Not even the bus driver, despite the fact that normally they shout at anyone who so much as touches a seat with their foot.

The window doesn't break, but it hurts my fist and I let out a howl.

Suddenly my face is buried in Maria's chest and I can barely

breathe. She wraps me up with both arms and also manages to rub my head and back. Her hands feel big and warm.

I close my eyes.

"It's okay," she says as my lungs fill with her perfume. "Everything's going to be fine. Everything is all right. Don't cry, my precious. You're my strong little girl."

"Shut your mouth," I shout, but it comes out as a groan. Maria stops talking.

We get out of the bus downtown to exchange the watch Maria bought two days ago for five euros. It had stopped after one day.

After that I buy a bus ticket for Maria for the return trip and wait as she gets into the bus.

I don't get on with her. Instead I hop on a tram with no ticket—I'm not afraid of the ticket controllers—and go to visit Ingrid and Hans.

It pains me to see their house. I could never tell them why—and wouldn't want to. It's a beautiful two-story house surrounded by a garden that's gone to seed, which would be reason enough to like it.

But what makes visiting them difficult is the fact that my mother loved this house and its garden. She visited it many times, and once, when Ingrid and Hans went to a spa for a month, she and Harry house-sat here together. Actually all of us moved in here for those four weeks—my mother, me, Anton, and Alissa. And Harry, who beamed during those weeks in a way he never did otherwise. We were all his guests, sort of, and hosting us made him proud.

Of course, it wasn't really his home anymore. Finally, in his early thirties he had managed to move out of his parents' place. Must have been about a year and a half before he met my mother. After he left home he lived in a studio apartment in a student neighborhood—a fourth-floor walkup. I went there twice. It was a nice little place.

Both times I visited were a bit stressful, though, because Harry was ashamed of the place and spent the whole time apologizing for everything—for the fact that his kitchen was messy and because he had run out of coffee, for the pair of underpants lying on the floor. He seemed particularly bothered about the underpants on the floor. I told him a thousand times I didn't care, that I was used to much worse. But his embarrassment didn't subside for the rest of the time I was there. It didn't help that my mother couldn't stop laughing.

She sat on a chair and laughed at everything: Harry scrambling to scoop up his underpants and shove them into a drawer only to have paperwork fly out of the drawer, me tripping over his sneakers, Harry knocking over bottles as he tried to find cookies in the kitchen. I didn't think she should laugh so loudly—it just made poor Harry blush, leaving him even more embarrassed. I even told her that—in Russian—but she just brushed me off and said I didn't know anything. As Harry ran around, she followed him with her gaze, and there was tenderness and affection in her look.

Harry didn't speak to her at all during that visit. He was too busy trying to make sure I was happy, despite the fact that I didn't need anything. He looked intently at my face, searching for any sign of an emotion that might spell trouble for him, and occasionally turned to my mother to give her a look or a shy smile.

I sat on his couch, drank rose hip tea—which I can't stand—and nibbled on stale cookies, trying as best I could to seem comfortable so he would settle down. At some point he finally did. He stopped running around and sat down next to me. He told me about his studies and whatever job he was doing then—which, it goes without saying, wasn't going well.

He was exactly as my mother had described. A little difficult to be around at first because he was so unsure of himself. But as he gained confidence, he was kind and thoughtful.

"So?" my mother asked as we were winding our way down the stairs toward the door of his building.

"He's definitely okay," I said. "You can bring him over to our place."

"He's a prince among men," she said. She hadn't worried at all about what I would think of him. Unlike him, she was usually sure of herself.

"I could never go to bed with a guy like that," I said gruffly to counter the uncharacteristically warm feeling the meeting had left me with. A lover who got on well with his new girlfriend's kids was not part of the usual drill. "He's kind of frantic."

"I don't think he'd be into you either," said my mother, with a bit of venom.

"Do you find him at all handsome?" I asked.

My mother huffed.

"Tell him he should do something else with his hair," I grumbled.

"Tell him yourself," she muttered. "Tell him exactly how he should do it."

"Then he'll be insulted. And he wouldn't listen to me anyway."

"You're wrong there."

And she was right.

He never moved in with us because our place was too small. But he slept there regularly. His toothbrush stayed in the bathroom and his slippers under the coat rack in the hall. He kept his robe in my mother's closet. And I had no qualms about using the hair gel he did in fact buy on my advice and stored in our bathroom.

He looked really cute once he stopped parting his hair. Light brown hair sticking up, funny eyes, a bashful grin. Alissa loved him, as did Anton—Anton most of all, in fact. A man who practically lived here, helped with the dishes, never shouted,

held hands with mom and played memory games with the kids, a man who listened, buttered our bread for us, and happily stepped in as a babysitter if anything ever came up.

And yet still not a man Anna would go for.

Because he was a loser—and that's just an objective fact. He was one because he felt like one. He had studied literature for twelve years and was still no closer to finishing his degree. He bounced from job to job because he wasn't cutthroat enough to succeed at anything. He'd lived too long with his parents—even by local standards. He mumbled. And whenever he was nervous or unsure of himself—which was almost all the time—he talked so hurriedly and unclearly that you always had to ask him to repeat whatever he said. Which would in turn startle him and he'd start to stutter.

When I was younger, I would never have believed a German man like this existed. So meek, so helpless. Never thinking of himself. Broke but still generous. Instead of a driver's license a rickety girl's bike. In his checkered shirt and bowl cut—until he met me, that is.

My mother's great love.

I never asked either of them, but I am sure she was Harry's first. At most his second. He was seven years younger than she was and would have been more inexperienced even if he'd lived two hundred years. What sane woman would take up with someone who was the very embodiment of helplessness? My mother. Nobody else would. I could certainly never imagine myself with someone like that.

But I could understand what my mother liked about him.

He was the exact opposite of Vadim, who left two and a half nervous wrecks behind when he finally moved out. My mother, Anton, and little Alissa. I was not a nervous wreck. I was a simmering cauldron of hatred. Once he was gone, my mother popped a bottle of champagne and she and I clinked glasses—her hand was shaking and she had tears in her eyes.

"I'm lucky," she said. "I've got a chance to really do some living now." And she did start living, and she bumped into Harry. She met him in the offices of the little local paper in which her column on Russian-Germans appeared. She would write pieces on things like the fact that you could get Russian-language books at the local library, or that there was story time there every Thursday, or that there were cheap gymnastics classes available somewhere. She approached the column with real devotion. She liked helping those who were less knowledgeable or less capable than she was. She ran our phone number in the paper for anyone who had questions—and the phone rang a lot.

My mother was very proud of that job. Next to each of her columns was a small photo of her, and she could never get used to seeing her name and face in print. The fact that the paper had a circulation of five thousand and was filled for the most part with ads for plumbers and beer gardens didn't bother her. She sat and worked on her articles for hours, agonizing over each phrase, only to have me proofread everything and change it all around again.

Harry was freelancing for the paper too. It was his latest job. He had just failed miserably as a waiter. The paper paid about ten cents a line and nobody who thought anything of themselves would write for that rate. Before Harry and my mother showed up, the only writers had been officers of sports clubs who wrote up pieces on things like their clubs' end-of-season banquets—they would have paid to have their stuff published.

I'm thinking about all of this as I ring the bell at Ingrid and Hans's front gate. It takes a while before the door opens and Ingrid steps out into the yard, squinting and unsure, blinded by the sun.

"Sascha?" she says when she finally hits upon the idea of using her hand to shield her eyes and is able to see me. "What a pleasant surprise. Come in, my child."

I walk across the moss-covered cobblestones that lead from the gate to the door. I had told her I was coming a week ago. Ingrid must have forgotten—but she's always home anyway.

She wraps her arms around me and holds me close for a long time—until my back starts to hurt. She's short and I have to stoop.

When she lets go, I can see in her face that she's trying to suppress sobs. She's not able to. I don't look away. I'm feeling tired and indifferent. I don't cry, either. I'm not sure why Ingrid does.

"This is going to make Hans happy," she whispers. "How nice of you to come see us again."

She quickly puts on a pot of coffee and sets the table in the living room. It's become routine for me to eat in the living room. There's almost nothing that can shock me these days. Ingrid has discreetly wiped the tears away with a cloth handkerchief—as if she could hide something like that from me—and returns upbeat, almost cheerful. She fumbles awkwardly with the coffee cups and they clink against one another, and all the while she smiles at me with Harry's smile. I think she's even humming a melody.

The smell of the coffee fills the air.

"Hans, Hans," she calls, a little louder than necessary. "Can you look to see whether we have any cake in the freezer? The one with the crumb topping? Or the cheesecake?"

"Please don't go to any trouble," I mutter, but she doesn't pay any attention. Which is fine.

"Sugar, cream," she says, setting down the jar of sugar and a creamer on the table. She puts them right in front of me, as if I'm the only one who will be having anything. "How are your little sister and brother, my child? How's their health?"

"Anton's never healthy," I say, regretting it immediately as I see the look on her face darken. Her question wasn't just small talk. Her gloominess had been lifted for a moment by my visit,

but it disturbs deeply her to hear about an unhealthy child. When someone hurts, Ingrid hurts with them. She can't watch the news without crying.

"Nothing serious," I say. "Just nerves—just psychological." "Psychological," she repeats. "That's the most serious of all, my child."

I don't contradict her. But that stuff has never been an issue for me. A Russian children's poem comes to mind: "My nerves are made of steel, no, actually I don't have any at all." It's like it was written about me. I don't have any.

I wonder whether I should tell Ingrid that I want to kill Vadim. Maybe it'll cheer her up the way it did me and Anton. Hans comes through the door.

He's friendly as he greets me, but seems emotionally distant. He holds my hand in his for a long time. I've stood up from my chair to greet him and it has apparently surprised him. He's a bit unsteady on his feet, though he's not really that old. Not even sixty, I don't think. He's become grizzled. The skin of his face hangs in flabby folds.

He tries to put on a smile, but what he musters is more of a horrible grimace. It pains me to look at him. I would like to tell him he doesn't need to smile on my account, but I can't think of how to say it.

We have coffee and a crumb cake Ingrid has thawed in the microwave. For the first fifteen minutes Ingrid talks nonstop. It's all a bit muddled: geraniums, the neighbors, water pipes, a broken vacuum cleaner. I nod throughout. Then she stops. We sit there silently. The clock ticks. It seems quite natural to me.

Hans has a faraway look on his face, Ingrid stirs her coffee, and I look at the photos on the walls. I'm already pretty familiar with them. All shots of Harry, or nearly all, at least. Harry as a boy, with matted blond hair and freckles. Harry with a wiener dog. Harry in a sun hat, sitting in the passenger seat of an antique car. Harry building a sand castle. Harry with his

book bag. Harry with a young Ingrid and Harry with a young Hans. In a tender hug with his mom, looking serious standing stiffly next to his father.

Harry as a child, but never with friends. Or girlfriends. In a lounge chair, in the woods, on a bike. A portrait of a somewhat older Harry. White teeth and freckles. A good photo.

How can something like that happen, I think to myself. Harry had loving parents, a sheltered childhood in a prosperous country, a dog, a house with a garden. This house, where I am sitting right now. And yet Harry was unhappy, because he was never any good at anything. What did his parents do wrong—were they just too nice to him?

If I had grown up here, I would be a completely different person, I think. I wouldn't be so combative and I probably wouldn't be so obsessed about my grades in school—especially in subjects I'm not interested in, like medieval history. I would have been born to succeed, and I wouldn't have to bust my ass all the time just trying to prove to everyone that I'm a somebody.

At the Alfred Delp School they wouldn't risk snickering about me behind my back or scrutinizing my no-name sneakers out of the corners of their eyes. I would be somebody. Even if I wore the exact same shoes I do now—it just wouldn't matter.

I'd be easygoing, fearless, and nonchalant.

Okay, I'm like that now, too. But then I'd be confident, too.

To my right, at the farthest end of the wall, is a photo I haven't seen before. I can't quite make it out. I squint. Ingrid and Hans don't notice—they've probably forgotten I'm here.

I push my chair back and stand up. I walk over to the picture and about halfway there I recognize it and stop abruptly.

It's a photo I took. With Harry's new digital camera. At our place, on the balcony. It's the only picture on the wall with a few people in it besides Harry—all of three people, all together with

Harry. My mother, around whose shoulder he has one of his arms. Alissa, who is balanced on his right knee and my mother's left. And Anton, who is sitting next to Harry, squeezed up against him on the narrow bench.

It's pretty stupid to stand in the middle of a room and stare at a wall. I must have been standing here like this for quite a while. Ingrid and Harry have come to and turn their heads toward me.

"What happened, my child," asks Ingrid, unsettled. "What is it? What are you looking at? Why are you crying?"

There is no sense in telling her I'm not crying.

Ingrid squints, too, and peers in the direction I'm staring. Then she realizes what I'm looking at.

"You're sad because you're not there? Not in the picture? Is that it?"

Ingrid gets up and hurries over to me, but then stops and stands just behind me, unsure of herself.

I shake my head and head back to the table. Ingrid follows me.

"We didn't find any shots of you on his camera," says Hans.

They're the first words I've heard out of his mouth today.

"There were only a couple of pictures on it—it was brand new."

I know. I showed Harry how it worked.

"Give us a picture of you, my child. We meant to ask you for one anyway."

I shake my head again.

"Why not? Do you have any nice big ones? I'll buy a pretty frame for it."

I jump up, excuse myself, and run to the bathroom. I know where everything is in this house. From the bathroom window I can look out at the lush garden, rustling in the breeze. All the way at the back is an apple tree. The apples on it always ripen early and seem to glow milky white from the inside. I can hear

Ingrid and Hans's flustered voices from the living room. I bite my lip for a few minutes, then flush the toilet and give my hands a good wash.

"I'll wrap up some cake for you to take home, okay?" says Ingrid.

I don't tell her that Maria bakes a cake every other day and that I can't stand cake.

I clear my throat and say, "That would be nice."

"But you'll stay for a bit longer, won't you, my child? I know it must be boring for you here. We don't want to keep you."

"Unfortunately I've got to get going."

"You could do your homework here sometime."

I look at Ingrid, stunned. Her suggestion doesn't make any sense to me.

"We've got lots of books, and Hans could help you," she says. "He knows a lot."

Hans isn't listening. If he were, he would have contradicted her.

I stifle a grin and thank them for having me.

When Ingrid goes into the kitchen to get some tin foil, I decide to try a little shock therapy.

"Hans," I say quietly, "you know what, Hans? I'm going to kill him."

Hans looks at me.

"I'm going to kill Vadim."

"Vadim?" he says, struggling to repeat after me.

"Yes, Vadim. The murderer. I'm going to murder the murderer."

He looks at me.

"Just like in the Old Testament. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Justice."

"Vadim who?" Hans asks, his voice a bit hoarse.

"There's no way you could have forgotten Vadim, Hans. I'm going to avenge them. My mother and Harry."

Hans looks at me. I can't read his facial expression at all. He's just completely blank. He doesn't say a word.

I want to smack myself. What got into you, you stupid cow, I think.

If my words even registered with Hans, he still won't believe them. I wonder what he will think when he hears I've actually pulled it off? Will he come back to life, if just for a second? Will he feel a sense of satisfaction? Something even approaching happiness? Will his eyes light up? Will Ingrid's?

She comes back in and slides a silvery package into my hand.

"Don't crush it—that's the cake," she says earnestly.

"Thanks," I say. "I'll call you again soon."

I start to turn the door handle and feel Ingrid's hand on mine. Her touch is cold and fleeting. I open my fist and find a 50 euro bill that wasn't there before.

"Please take it, child. We have no use for our money anyway. Buy something for the little ones. You have such a good heart."

I stick the bill into my jeans pocket. Ingrid looks almost happy. I bet she's wondering now whether I would have accepted more. I was expecting her to do this since I didn't turn down the money last time. Right before that last time, Ingrid told me how sad it was not to have anyone to give gifts to.

"If you ever need anything . . ." Ingrid says.

"I'll holler," I say as I hop out onto the walkway before Ingrid can think to hug me goodbye.

In the tram I press my forehead to the window. I shouldn't fool myself—there's no way Ingrid and Hans are going to be excited about my plan. They're not like Anton.

They're going to be appalled. Horrified. They are nice and naïve. They can never understand why unemployment is so high or why some people take drugs and others leave their

newborn babies in dumpsters. They'll be just as mystified at the fact that the girl they used to slip money and cake to could kill another human being. Or rather, an inhuman being.

They'd probably be hurt if I stepped on a dog's paw in their presence. They consider the fact that their son will never return some kind of inexplicable, nightmarish misunderstanding. That's why ever since it happened they've been operating in a dreamlike haze. At first they seemed to be counting on waking up one day and finding everything back the way it had always been. Then at some point they resigned themselves to the fact that there was no way out of this nightmare.

But since they don't read the papers anymore and don't talk to anybody, maybe they wouldn't even find out I'd killed him. If they're even still alive then.

Don't know whether you can even say they are alive now. Anyway, I'm not ready to do it yet. Logistically speaking.

I have a bunch of books on criminology at home. But so far they haven't inspired the perfect plan yet. Sometimes I imagine breaking a bottle over Vadim's head. But I'm pretty sure that wouldn't kill him—it would just get his blood all over me. And that's not enough. Not for me. No way.

Then I think of a heavy object—an iron or a dumbbell. In old mysteries they always talk about candlesticks, and we have one of those at home that would do the trick. From the flea market.

That could work. Here's the scenario: Vadim comes to visit, to see Alissa and Anton. As usual—like he always used to before—he brings chocolate. "I'll make us some tea," I say helpfully, "and you can tell us about prison." Vadim sits down at the table with his back to me, waiting for his tea. That was something he always used to do, too. He always sat and waited for things—a plate of pickled herring, a pen, a clean shirt.

I hate men. All of them except Anton.
Then the moment would come. Finally. Yes.

The spot where Vadim had just a moment before had a head would be reduced to nothing more than a bloody mush. A bit of a shame that it would drip on our table and floor. Maybe I'll put down a tarp. I'm not sure whether I'll say anything as I do it: "This is for my mother and Harry," for instance. Or, "Drop dead." But hang on, this isn't a soap opera I'm planning here. I just want to get it done. No need to sing a song or recite a poem.

And by the way, that's not how it's going to go. Anton and Alissa can't be there. Especially not Anton. Once is enough. I'll tell Vadim that the kids are on their way home and will be right there. That he should have a seat so I can bring him a cup of tea.

His kids. That's what they used to be. Now they're mine. Shooting him would also work. But I have to be realistic. The chances of me getting hold of a gun are slim. Though it would be appropriate. Vadim had a pistol for years. Anna says guns are just a way to compensate for a small cock. It's the best line I've ever heard come out of her mouth.

Back in the army, a hundred years ago, Vadim was supposed to have been a pretty good shot. He loved to talk about it whenever he couldn't understand something he got in the mail from the authorities, or when he couldn't find any clean socks, or when my mother went out at night without him, ignoring his tantrum. At those moments he would talk about the army and his face would get all pensive. "Back in the army," he would say, "we skewered the bastards on the bayonets of our AK-47s."

Anton shivered and didn't ask what Vadim meant by that. In the final stretch, before Vadim moved out, Anton often shook with fear in his presence. And never opened his mouth. Sometimes I thought he had completely lost the ability to speak. It didn't surprise me at all that his teacher kept asking our mother to come in for parent-teacher conferences to dis-

cuss the fact that Anton “refused to participate”—as she put it in the letters she sent home—in class discussions.

If he hadn’t continued to show “good effort” in his written work—even “very good” sometimes—the teacher would probably have just tolerated a student who sat pale and silently in the back row, barely distinguishable from the wall. But she was a young teacher, and still cared about her students. She wanted to find out why when this kid in her class was spoken to he would just clamp his mouth shut and refuse eye contact as adamantly as he refused to speak. So she tormented Anton with unusually determined efforts to engage with him, and my mother with invitations to come in to talk about the problem.

The first one was actually a *parents-teacher* conference. Both of Anton’s parents went. Vadim let my mother tie his tie for him, but he kept swatting her hands away impatiently. My mother wasn’t as good at tying a tie as Anton was at his written school work.

A steady stream of comments came from Vadim, too. Like, “I keep asking myself if maybe they switched the arms and legs when they were putting you together.” And, “Quit yanking me all around, you idiot.” And, “Why can’t you just tie the fucking thing?” And, “You are the most useless woman I’ve ever met.” And, “Get it done—how many years am I supposed to wait around while you figure it out?”

Through all of this I was doing my homework at the kitchen table. Actually I wasn’t doing my homework because I was sitting there in a helpless rage, my fist clenched around my pen. I wasn’t upset at Vadim but at my mother—a situation I found myself in a lot back then.

If someone did that to me, I’d pull the stupid tie until his throat started to rattle. Then I’d go into the kitchen and put the kettle on. And before he had a chance to loosen the noose and catch his breath, I’d go back in and pour boiling water

over his head. That’s the bare minimum someone who talked to me that way could reckon with.

And what do you do, I thought, scrawling angry, jagged lines across my binder. You don’t say a thing. You let yourself get pushed away and smile, lost in your own thoughts. You go back to helping him if he asks you to, and you even keep helping him when he viciously insults you. With the patience of an angel, you let yourself get walked all over—you, of all people. You, a person who takes such pride in being courteous to everyone around you.

It pains me that you almost always remain civil. And I know it’s not because you’re afraid of him. You don’t even see him anymore, you don’t hear him. You couldn’t care less about him—and for that you feel bad. Despite what he’s like.

You don’t take him seriously at all. You let him rage and scream at you and tell you you’re not allowed to do things—things you’ll obviously do anyway. You let him blather on about things he doesn’t have a clue about, which is pretty much everything except his glory days back in the army and the exact mechanical workings of our toilet.

You don’t react when he spews his hateful tirades about the fucking Germans, who can’t manage their own country, the fucking Americans, who try to worm their way into everything like members of the biggest cult in the world, the fucking Italians, who talk so damn fast. About the Russian mobsters who turn their backs on their own country and about the Russian morons who don’t. About the fucking job placement office, which is never able to find the right job for such a world-class professional like Vadim. And about his piece-of-shit boss who dared to make a stupid comment—just too stupid for Vadim to take, too stupid for him to be able to stay on the job, making that piece of shit the only boss he’s ever had here, and for only a short time at that.

And first and foremost, over and over, about fucking

women. About the German women, who wear the ugliest clothes on earth, don't shave their legs, and have the gall to earn more in a month than Vadim has in his entire life. And French women, sluts every one—even the way they talk sounds slutty, as if they all just want to be laid down and nailed. Turkish women, so disgustingly fat beneath the tents they wear, pumping out a new baby every year, drinking tea with their husbands' other wives, and speaking German worse than Vadim himself.

And about the Russian women, stupid and ugly, with vulgar taste in clothing, who think they can talk and laugh around Vadim with their backs to him, as if he weren't even there. Of all people, they are best equipped to understand and appreciate Vadim's unique qualities but—damn them!—they simply refuse to do so.

And then there's this one here, the one he took pity on and married despite the fact that she had an insufferable, illegitimate freak of a daughter on her hip. The one he generously gave two more kids—kids who didn't fucking appreciate him nearly enough. Instead of listening to him ramble on for hours, they pored through pointless books by moronic writers. Instead of polishing Vadim's shoes, the girls teach his son how to play chess. Instead of cooking, they cackle on the telephone with their friends. Whenever Vadim's on his deathbed with the flu, they make tea with lemon for him, sure, but they sing as they do. As if it's all fun and games.

She acts in plays and gets applause. Her picture appears in the paper. People approach her on the street. The phone is constantly ringing. Always for her, only her. Nobody ever wants to talk to Vadim. And if they do, it's only about one thing: "your wife this," "your Marina that."

She shouldn't think as a result that she's somehow better than him. Under no circumstances should she ever be permitted to think she married an old, useless sack of shit, which is

how he sometimes feels about himself as he sits in front of the television morning, noon, and night, watching all those idiots who just waste Vadim's valuable time—and get paid to do it.

To make sure she never thinks that way, she can't be told often enough who she really is: a useless wife who can't run the household or make decent money running around at what she calls a job but that doesn't seem fit to be called work at all.

An uncaring mother who doesn't iron her kids' T-shirts, who has nothing against her kids making a mess doing arts and crafts or playing, who doesn't care whether their hair is neatly cut—especially the one who is supposed to be a man. I should pull your hair right out myself, I'm sure everyone makes fun of you at school.

A chaotic woman whose bureau is always messy and who can't manage to have meals ready on time. No wonder the children are so directionless. They think they're allowed to do whatever they want. Like yelling and screaming inside the apartment when Vadim is trying to watch TV.

And a whore who can get herself off with a vibrator as if it were the real deal. Who goes out to the movies at night without her husband, who dyes her hair and wears it down. Who dresses as if she had a nice figure—maybe the Turks are onto something after all with their full-body curtains.

You let him say all of this, you let him show all his disgust, I think bitterly, and the most you ever do is shrug your shoulders. Your most extreme facial expression is nothing more than a look of bottomless sorrow. Instead of thinking how to save yourself, you think about how to save *him* before he goes over the edge. You're worried he'll start to drink. You just don't understand that his survival instinct is stronger than yours.

You raise your voice only when he turns from you to the children. That's his biggest weapon. He knows that's the only way he can really hurt you. And that's the only time you will

strike back. When he's shouting at Anton, he knows your broken-voiced threat to divorce him is serious. So usually he does that only at home. Anton is about as capable of defending himself as the little lemon tree on the windowsill. And he makes just as frail an impression as it does.

I'm not sure the extent of the daily hell Anton experiences—Vadim holds back when I'm around and Anton never talks about it. The most common word I use around Vadim is "police." And even though he always laughs, I can see the fear and doubt in his eyes.

But he also knows I don't want to hurt you. It's a perennial woman's mistake: I don't want to cause you pain, so I allow you to be killed. I never do go to the police—in part because Vadim always pulls himself together around me, but mostly because I know you would never approve of it except in the most dire situation.

You hope everything will somehow work out. One time you tell me you dream of him leaving on his own after he falls in love with someone new. Otherwise, you feel like you'd be kicking someone when he's down. If somebody is on the ground, you can't kick them. Just another one of the many noble but hollow rules you live by. When you tell me this, I have to laugh, long and sinister, until I start to cry. I'll never forget the look on your face at that moment.

You'll never know why for years I left my room only once I was fully clothed, never in pajamas or a bathrobe. Or why I locked the door to my room at night, and why only now can I wear short sleeves or anything else remotely revealing. You always called me "buttoned up," even "prudish." You accepted it as my own peculiarity, and I never let on that there was something else behind it. I thought it would hurt you, that you wouldn't be able to take it, that you would snap from the guilt and horror.

Which means I enabled you to remain blind to him.

Among the happiest moments of my life with Vadim were the victories I scored on the battlefield, little personal victories that affected only me. The look on his face when I kicked him—I could see the debate raging in his hate-filled eyes as he weighed whether to keep it up or to hit me back. Because that might leave clues I might not stay quiet about. I could see his fear as I sat at the kitchen table slowly turning the bread knife in my fingers and staring at him. And I could feel him slowly pull his knee away from mine under the table.

But maybe I'm lying to myself, and the victory was really his. His triumph that I never left my laundry or any personal items in the bathroom and that I kept everything locked in my room. That I steered clear of him, meaning I spent almost all of my time at home in my room. And that I never said a word about any of it to my mother.

I feel so horribly guilty thinking that maybe my silence was the railroad switch that sent the train onto the wrong track, headed for death.

He who shoots gets shot, I think. How simple and just. It warms my heart.

I still have a lot to read, I think. Read and study and think. He mustn't stand a chance. No way to defend himself and no way to live through it.

These are nice thoughts, but they're taxing. I should spend some time on the other plan.

I sit down that same night at the computer. I sit there for a long time, at least an hour. It's harder than I thought it would be. It'll probably be easier to strangle Vadim.

All the scenes I want to write down seem to have vanished. Every syllable I try to capture seems banal. Warm hands and lullabies and dirty jokes and coffee by the liter—none of it hits the mark. All I can see is her face in my mind, and I begin to type just to avoid staring like Anton.

"Red hair," I write. "Dyed with henna as long as I can

remember. What color was her hair before that? Probably some shade of brown. She once told me she found her first gray hair early. By the time she was thirty she had skeins of gray hair. She had the type of life that makes people prematurely gray. With the henna, her gray hair became streaks of light orange. Her eyes were light brown and big. Her mouth was big, too, and, like her eyes, was usually wide open. She talked and laughed a lot. Even when she read, she talked. She would always show up in front of me with a book in her hand and say, 'Should I read a passage to you? Here's an incredible paragraph.' I would answer, 'I'm doing my homework,' or, 'I'm trying to read something of my own.' She read the passage anyway, and I never understood what was so great about it. I never really listened because it annoyed me and I was happier lost in my own thoughts."

I read through it again. I don't cry.
I go to bed early.

In the morning I put on my sneakers with my eyes still closed. Maria is snoring loudly in her bed, and when I go to close her door so she doesn't wake up the children, I see little Alissa next to her, half buried by Maria's overflowing hips. Alissa's in a hand-made floral nightgown. Memories of a pink sweater shoot through my head and I decide I need to do something about organizing the clothes.

Maria listens to me.

I run three times around the Emerald and then head off. I'm dragging. I haven't run in a long time and wouldn't have today if I hadn't woken up with a sick, tense feeling. I try to run away from this feeling but just end up with stitches in my sides. So I shove my hands under my ribs and stand there wheezing in front of the newsstand.

I've had a subscription to the local paper for the past year. I need to. If the Emerald were being torn down, for instance, Maria would probably only realize when they carried her out

of the apartment in her chair. And anyway, reading the paper often pays off for school.

I look at the headlines of the dailies, more out of a sense of duty than out of real interest.

I wonder to myself who in this area buys these. Sometimes I feel like the only literate person in the entire Emerald. The rest of them carry half-empty bottles around in the pockets of their track pants, wrap smoked fish in bright-colored papers with headlines like "Who does the severed head belong to?" or "Government covers up evidence of another UFO landing," and look suspiciously at anyone who uses German to speak to them. "Can't he speak normal?" they ask.

On this morning, my heart suddenly freezes—just for a second—then it kicks on again and jumps into my throat and flutters there like a bird in distress. I gasp for breath and try to swallow in order to get my heart back down where it belongs.

As I do this, I move closer so I can read a box in which one of the big Frankfurt papers highlights the main stories of the day. Under "local" I read: "A visit with the double-murderer Vadim E.: 'remorse is tearing my heart apart.'"

His heart, my heart, I think. Maybe it would be a good idea to tear that organ right out of his chest and impale it on a spear for all to see. Actually I get queasy easily. I don't like to watch when Maria guts a chicken and explains how you have to cut the oil gland off the back of the bird and how the part with the eggs is the ovaries. And how if you hold a severed chicken foot and pull the tendon in the front, the claws will make a fist—what's so disgusting about that, sweetie?

But for this one thing, I could get past any hang-ups.

My running pants don't have any pockets. No pockets on the jacket either. Otherwise I wouldn't have my keys dangling from my neck, jangling like a cowbell.

I have to read what's in the paper right this second. In the

amount of time it would take me to go upstairs and get money, the world could end. Five times.

I look over at one of the Emerald's second-floor windows. Normally there'd be a bald head sticking out of it, with an unlit, saliva-soaked cigarette stuck in the corner of its mouth.

There's nobody in the window. It's still really early, and any sensible person who has to be awake at this hour is making a cup of coffee right about now. Or a second cup.

All I can think is how glad I am Ingrid and Hans don't see me grab the paper, roll it up, and tuck it under my jacket.

On the staircase I open it up again and flip through it looking for the article about the woes of the aging Vadim E.

The first thing that catches my eye is the byline—Susanne Mahler. She's the writer. Only after that do I see the grotesque face. The sight of it makes me feel faint.

I lean my head against the dirty green wall. A little higher up on the wall is a scribbled drawing, a detailed image of two men copulating. My head leans against the caption: "Death to all faggots." I take a few deep breaths. Then I look at the paper again.

He hasn't changed. The same mustache, the same dark eyes, the same hulking brow and deep creases running from the sides of his nose to the corners of his mouth. The ugliest face I've ever seen, made even worse by the pitiful expression he's put on for the photo. The corners of his mouth hang sadly, his eyes plead, his curly hair is sticking up all crazy. Poor Vadim. He barks, but he doesn't bite—unless someone is so mean as to bait him. Then he'll snap at you, of course, but it's your own fault for getting him worked up. As long as you know how to behave around him, he's a sweetheart.

Everything goes black again. This time I have to take deliberate breaths for much longer before the darkness starts to dissipate.

He probably weaseled his way in with my mother with that pitiful grimace, I think to myself. Playing to her empathetic

soul. She petted anyone who looked up at her like that. Dogs, too—and not one of them ever bit her.

But she sure as hell got suckered by Vadim. How could she have been so stupid? Couldn't she see what a monster he was right away?

"He used to be different," my mother said to me once. "Not so angry and so weak. You know yourself how bad it's gotten since he began spending all day in front of the TV, barely understanding a word."

"I know exactly what he was like before, too. And it wasn't any better."

"That's not fair."

"And what about him? Is he fair?"

"He's having a hard time, you can see that yourself."

Be careful of people who feel weak, I think. Because it's possible that one day they'll want to feel strong and you'll never recover from it. Maybe that's a thought to add to my file, the one I'm going to call "Marina." The stuff I wrote last night I deleted immediately afterwards.

I can't get over the feeling that Susanne Mahler wants to pet Vadim E. a little.

I have to read the piece a dozen times. And even then I don't really understand it. Individual sentences stick out in my head and mix with others. *I still love her. I wish I could tell her. I'm writing her a letter. It's already 20 pages long, but the most important thing hasn't been said yet. I'm ashamed to face my children. I'm also terribly sorry about the young man who also had to die.*

The only thing that's yours is a prison cell, I mutter. In a million years, I would never believe you said all of that on your own. Maybe Susanne Mahler took an interpreter with her who did as creative a job of translating as I do for Maria?

I've become a completely different person. Even my German is improving.

Susanne Mahler seems touched by it all. She looked at Vadim's sketches—his attempts to hang onto the image of his wife's transcendent beauty. His ex-wife, to be more precise. Whom he unfortunately killed—which perhaps he shouldn't have done.

The drawings are primitive but heartfelt and expressive, according to Susanne Mahler.

My whole body is shaking with rage.

Vadim would be happy to show the letter he wrote to his wife to anybody who is interested. Susanne Mahler had held the handwritten pages in her hand; unfortunately she can't read Russian.

The script is erratic, inconsistent, agitated.

Vadim has many more years to continue writing. I start to laugh. Vadim is writing about my mother. We're rivals.

It would be better if instead he'd just kill himself. Or maybe not. I still hope to accomplish something in life.

I fold the paper, roll it up, and head upstairs. I carefully open the door and take off my shoes. For a second I think I see a ghost. But it's only Maria in her flowing nightgown, made from the same fabric as Alissa's.

Maria sews, too. Have I mentioned that?

She jumps when our eyes meet.

"Did you fall?" she asks and squints intently at my face. Her own face is swollen and pale like bread dough. Her cheeks quiver when she moves. She has pink and blue curlers in her hair.

A dream woman.

"Good morning," I say, and walk past her to the bathroom. I won't say a word to her about it. She's never mentioned Vadim in front of me. It's wise of her. I know they barely saw each other. She visited us once, at most, while we were still in Moscow. I don't know what she thinks of him and I don't want to know.

I've never asked her what she thinks of my plan. It's never occurred to me. I want to believe that she might sigh but that she wouldn't say anything—and that she'd help me clean up the mess before the children got home.

She would understand that more blood wouldn't be helpful for their development.

I also want to be sure that when it comes to bringing up the children, she'll stick to my handbook while I'm in prison. Where perhaps Susanne Mahler will visit me and report: *Sascha N. seems very much at peace. "I would do it all again," she told this reporter, "if I hadn't already succeeded in poisoning Vadim . . ."*

I update and expand my educational handbook regularly. As of now, it consists of the following:

1. Your mother was the best ever, and she lives on in you.
2. The idea that Vadim is your father is a big misunderstanding. Sascha believes that you are not his children but rather the children of the pilot who lived one floor down—a wonderful and handsome man. That's why you are so good-looking.
3. Read everything you can get your hands on. That's what your mother did.
4. Learn everything you want to know, and then learn some more. Don't worry if something doesn't go well. You are capable of so much.
5. Even if Maria likes to tell you the opposite, it doesn't matter what other people think of you. Wear whatever you feel like, dye your hair blue if you think it looks nice. Act however you want, too.
6. Sing a lot.
7. Watch out for people who feel weak. They may want to feel strong one day and you might not survive that moment.
8. Don't put any credence in worst-case scenarios like the one in the previous entry, even if Maria constantly predicts the

end of the world is right around the corner. Be courageous and crazy and explore every wonderland you come across—just like Alice in the English fairytale, after whom your mother named Alissa.

9. Think about your older sister Sascha once in a while. But don't visit her in prison—it's not good for the psyche.

10. You are not poor little orphans, because your mother is immortal. Maria knows that, too.

And then I realize I don't know anything about what Maria knows or doesn't know.

I skip out of school two hours early one day because I just can't take it anymore. I've felt for days as if I were wandering around in a thick, gray fog. I recognize the world around me, but it's lost all color. I just don't feel like looking any closer.

I don't hear things around me—or to put it more accurately, I'm not listening, and the voices around me are blurred into a tangled rush of noise. The only thing I react to are children's shrieks. I always turn to look to make sure it's not Anton or Alissa. At home I spend most of my time lying in bed.

I've blown two exams—history and math. In both cases, the teachers came up to me after the class and said they wouldn't count the exams toward my midterm grade. I didn't understand what they were talking about at first because I hadn't even opened the test booklet in either case.

I didn't look at the teachers. I can't stand those eyes. Another set of eyes examining me with worry and sympathy. Following me when I leave. I don't want that.

I want to be invisible. But my mother wouldn't have liked that. She always said you should be able to see, hear, and smell people.

I'm sure everyone would happily smell a little less of people than they have to smell of Vadim, I always answered. Is he allergic to water?

Once when I was a little kid I was bored in school and just got up and walked out of class, my mother told me.

I'm not bored now. But I leave two hours early because I'm afraid of just turning to stone in my chair. Unlike Anton, I don't have an older sister to drag me back into the land of the living.

I am the older sister.

I ride the tram toward home in a fog. My sneakers dangle from my backpack, tied together by the laces. The rolled-up newspaper is stuck in the side pocket.

The heater is going underneath my seat. I can't bring myself to switch seats.

But I'm roasting, so I manage to do something else: pull out the paper and open it. I always carry the entire paper around rather than just pulling out the local section. Just how I do it. The pages are frayed and falling apart.

I look at Vadim's picture several times a day. It has an unbearable allure that I just can't resist. And it's the only thing that cuts through the fog. It reminds me of everything I have ahead of me, and it reminds me that dreaming about it isn't enough.

Stupid, brainless, blind duck, I think. Haven't you ever heard that every newspaper has a masthead? And do you not know what all's on the masthead?

The address, among other things.

I get out of the tram at the next stop and hop on the other one—the one going in the opposite direction. I go as far as the main train station. I buy a ticket at one of the machines there and settle into a seat on the sinking commuter rail line to Frankfurt.

It'll have to work without a map.

It works fine. At the main station in Frankfurt there's a map on the wall. I find the right street. My name's not Maria and I can read a map, no problem. It's just three measly stops away on the subway.

11: Alina Bronsky, *Scherbenpark*: Global Ghetto Girl

Barbara Menzel

IT HAS BECOME A MAINSTAY of globalization theory that local and global are not mutually exclusive categories. Global forces produce locally infected culture, which does not exist outside of networks of transnational exchange. Within this dialectic of the nexus between global and local, literature has retained a privileged status. Literature's dependence on language situates it as integral to national culture, especially in the case of Germany, which historically has defined itself as a *Kulturnation* (cultural nation). Yet national literature nonetheless responds to, incorporates, and partakes in global networks of production and circulation of culture. Thus, when Alina Bronsky's *Scherbenpark* (2008; *Broken Glass Park*, 2010) tells the story of its main character Sascha Naimann, a teenage immigrant girl in the Russian ghetto of an unnamed German city, the text circulates within the boundaries of German-language literature but simultaneously echoes and engages with global impulses.¹ *Scherbenpark* refracts and revises Germanness through a literary account of contemporary migration from Russia to Germany reliant on a binational model of chronological temporality and geography organized around nation-states and participates in a discourse that centers on the figure of the girl as a global phenomenon. The pseudonym "Alina Bronsky" names an emerging, yet successful, author whose novel can be explicated comprehensively only in a multilayered and multidimensional framework of transnational and intermedial intertextuality.

Scherbenpark tells the story of seventeen-year-old Sascha Naimann, who lives in a high-rise populated by Russian immigrants on the outskirts of a German city. Two years prior to the time of the novel's action, Vadim — her mother's second husband and father of Sascha's younger siblings Anton and Alissa — had shot and killed her mother and her German boyfriend. Sascha's mother had filed for divorce when Vadim had hit Sascha in the face with a belt while trying to beat Anton. The children continue to live in the apartment where their private horror took place with the help of Vadim's cousin Maria from Novosibirsk. Sascha fantasizes about killing Vadim. When she sees a newspaper article sympathetically describing

Vadim's life in jail, she seeks out the article's author, Susanne Mahler at the newspaper. Her boss, Volker Trebur, apologizes for her and offers Sascha help. Sascha requests that he take her to his home, where she meets his sixteen-year-old son Felix, with whom she has sex, even though she has feelings for his father. Later, Volker makes sexual advances toward Sascha but then apologizes. While Volker and Felix are on vacation, Sascha meets a young man, also named Volker, who turns out to be a right-wing extremist. After she has sex with him in the park, she takes him to a group of young Russians, led by her nemesis and neighbor Peter, who beat him up, and then she skates around town in a self-destructive daze. When the newspaper subsequently reveals that Vadim has committed suicide in jail, Sascha takes out her frustration in a fight with her neighbors, which leaves her unconscious and hospitalized. Volker and Felix take her home and visit Maria, Anton, and Alissa. Sascha steals away from the ensuing harmonious moment to travel to Prague.

The novel evinces national, binational, and transnational dimensions, including migration from Russia to Germany, the reimagination of Europe, and the global explosion of girl culture. *Scherbenpark* partakes in a current global phenomenon of literature and cinema by and about girls that validate their experience and perspective, often, but not always, associated with the ghetto as a result of migration. Since the modern ghetto appears as a space of male criminality, the figure of the global ghetto girl appropriates signifiers of masculinity. This commodified and reified figure circulates in transnational media networks, intervening into national discourses and in that process changing gender configurations. The contemporary global presence of the figure of the girl speaks to an important shift away from the singularity of the male as a paradigmatic figure to negotiate socio-historical shifts, such as transnational migration, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, and the new global world order.²

The increased digital and electronic communication that has accompanied globalization produces an intermedial exchange. Films and books about self-confident and independent girls from around the world circulate in transnational networks that cut across different media: girls produce and are produced by zines and blogs, music and videos, literature and film. Books collect blogs by girls, such as Riverbend's *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (2005) or are written as e-mail exchanges, such as Rajaa Asanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2008), both part of the phenomenon of recent global blockbusters that center on the figure of the girl.³ Thus, my discussion of *Scherbenpark* offers a close reading of the novel in the context of national and global literature and film that bespeak the recent phenomenon of the "global ghetto girl."

The protagonist, Sascha, signals a reconfiguration of national literature both in terms of gender, youth, and an ethnic understanding of "Germanness." It is particularly the works produced in what Leslie

Adelson has termed “the literature of migration” that show a “preponderance of interventions into and beyond national archives of twentieth-century German culture.”⁴ National literature signals high culture, whereas global cultural production names popular entertainment for consumption. *Scherbenpark* follows conventions of the ghetto discourse, echoes chick lit, and dialogues with transnational migration narratives. Yet, despite its proximity to popular genres and media, it differs substantially from the highly gendered genre conventions that dominate the current entertainment market, such as chick lit, chick flicks, or the male-dominated ghetto film. The book’s ironic and irreverent style captures the attempts of the first-person-narrator Sascha to ward off trauma instead of working through it, and to access codes of masculinity to cover over her vulnerability.⁵ The novel advances a disillusioned, postfeminist, minoritarian suspicion of institutions and their apparent alternative, the ethnic minority group that constitutes itself in a defensive relationship to the host country, often reproducing particularly traditional and patriarchal structures. *Scherbenpark*’s textual construction of its main character Sascha Naimann and her brash narrative of a violent and traumatic life in the Russian immigrant ghetto functions in a set of interrelated contexts that account for the local articulation of global changes in representation of gender and genre, produced, I argue by shifts in intersecting transnational and national cultural markets.

The Global Girl

The subject of the girl emerged in global film and literature during the 1990s, and continued to be commodified and circulated in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Cinematic examples include Niki Caro’s *Whale Rider* (2002) from New Zealand, Maria Meggen’s *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), and Jason Reitman’s *Junio* (2007) from the United States.⁶ This trend’s Western European equivalents from France and the United Kingdom focus on second-generation immigrant girls portraying young North Africans in France, as in Faïza Guène’s *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* (2004), and South Asians in Britain as in Guninder Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002).⁷

These contemporary literary and cinematic productions have their roots in anarchic forms of rebellious girl culture. Rebecca Munford sees “girl culture” as an “eclectic and politically grounded phenomenon,” “far more” so than the dominant media acknowledges.⁸ Ednie Kaeh Garrison defines “girl power” as a “young feminist (sub)cultural movement that combines feminist consciousness and punk aesthetics, politics and style.”⁹ This post-second-wave-feminism girl culture articulates itself across the different media of zines, music, magazines, film, web-based projects,

blogs, home videos, and literature. This contemporary “global girl” echoes its predecessor, “the modern girl,” a global phenomenon that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s in cities around the world.¹⁰ The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group argues that “the Modern Girl was distinguished from other female figures and representations by her continual incorporation of local elements with those drawn from elsewhere,” which they entitle “multidirectional citation.”¹¹ The particular interface between popular forms of culture and serious social concerns connects the global modern girl to its new incarnation.

Scherbenpark captures the global girl’s existence in a postfeminist world, in which young women are sexually liberated but the political issues of second-wave feminism, such as domestic violence and the division of labor, have neither been eradicated nor resolved. Angela McRobbie proposes that “postfeminism actively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account in order to suggest that equality is achieved.”¹² Sascha, for example, incorporates the qualities that define post-second-wave-feminism girls as an independent, out-spoken, and pro-sex young woman. Typical for a postfeminist world, female collectivity does not offer Sascha solidarity in her confrontations with German cultural institutions, nor guide her through the painful process of maturation, nor assist her healing from her personal and familial trauma. For Sascha, these are solitary processes.¹³ At the same time, the novel accords domestic violence, the mobilizing topic of the second women’s movement, a central place in the novel’s narrative at the root of Sascha’s trauma.

Scherbenpark portrays the generation of the daughter instead of the mother. By portraying continuing domestic violence against women, the novel also points to the limits of the success of feminism and the uneven access women have to its promised achievements. At the core of Sascha’s trauma lies Vadim’s murder of her mother and the violence against his children. Sascha contrasts with the seemingly successful Susanne Mahler, who works at the newspaper and cares less for the female victim than for advancing her career with a story about the perpetrator. For Sascha, neither a political ideology of feminist liberation nor of social integration can provide an avenue out of her psychological, material, and social entrapment.

The Global Ghetto

The ghetto is *en vogue* — all around the world. *Scherbenpark*’s “ghetto” as an imaginary spatial construction is both locally specific — reflecting Russian immigration to Germany after 1989 — and circulating globally as a commodified global signifier for marginality that simultaneously exceeds its local and specific meaning. The imaginary site of the ghetto reflects the

complex spatial interplay between local specificity and global address, and between deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Ghettos as spatialized constructions appear increasingly with a double function, invoking specific locales but circulating globally precisely because they are excluded from the imaginary space of the nation. Neill Blomkamp's South African film *District 9* (2009), a science fiction film about the discrimination against aliens that takes place in a ghetto reminiscent of the townships outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, is a case in point.¹⁴

Cinematic and literary depictions of the urban ghetto as a result of migration center on the authentic social experience of communal destitution, in instances to be overcome by a singular hero. In the 1990s, African-American cinematic depictions of the postindustrial, criminal urban ghetto produced what critic Jacquie Jones labeled "the new ghetto aesthetic," which took place in the "contemporary urban ghetto."¹⁵ Those films denied substantial roles for female characters.¹⁶ Jones argues that films such as Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991) and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) responded to a "marketability" of accounts of criminal young black men.¹⁷ Ghetto literature and film have undergone a process of commodification similar to the successful popular novels about girls in global circulation, exemplified by Fernando Menelles's Brazilian film *City of God* (2002) and Pierre Morel's French *Banlieue 13* (2004).¹⁸ Recent ghetto films indicate the increasing commodification of the ghetto-film genre, in which the space of the ghetto is reduced to a backdrop for genre cinema: action in *Banlieue 13* and science fiction in *District 9*. The signifier of the ghetto is dislodged from its origin and emptied out of meaning. Men inhabit and dominate the limited spatial territory of the ghetto in spectacles of masculine action, from chases through the urban landscape in *Banlieue 13* to shoot-outs in *City of God* and *District 9*. Based on the dialectic relationship between global and local, German films — such as Fath Akin's *Kurz und schmerzlos* (1998; released to English-speaking audiences as *Short Sharp Shock*), Lars Becker's *Kanak Attack* (2000), and Detlev Buck's *Knallhart* (2006) — rewrite the ghetto film conventions in the context of Turkish migration to Germany.¹⁹

The few films that emphasize young women in the ghetto illustrate the attempts to appropriate the genre for women, while undoing its strong reliance on fetishized masculinity. Ghetto films centered on girls symptomatically reproduce ghetto films' thorough inscription of the associations of femininity with domesticity and masculinity with violence. For example, in successful films centered on girls in Latino barrios — for example, Allison Andres's *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) and Patricia Cardoso's *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) — the choices for young women vacillate between sexuality linked to pregnancy, portrayed in the former, or labor and higher education, celebrated in the latter.²⁰ In Germany, Bettina Blümner's *Prinzessinnenbad* (Pool of princesses, 2008) reflects this trend of girl-

centered ghetto narratives by following the life of three teenage girls in Berlin's Kreuzberg, the neighborhood most emblematic of migratory populations in Germany.²¹ *Prinzessinnenbad* emphasizes the authentic look at the ghettoized ethnic neighborhood through the convention of the long-term documentary. This genre straddles the ethnographic gaze inscribed by those with access to the means of cultural production and its attempt to lend a voice to its subjects whose life stories the film portrays.

Coming-of-Age in the Imagined Community

Scherbenpark's force derives from the global presence of the girl, a figure endowed with dynamic rebellion against tradition and convention, particularly as they are expressed as prohibitions for young women. In the complex interconnection between global and local, and national and transnational, the dynamics of globalization enable a rewriting of the relationship of gender and nation in the context of German literature. Globally, minority literature has intervened in the form of coming-of-age narratives portraying a process of maturation in tandem with questions of assimilation, especially in relationship to young women. The identity-formation of developing subjectivity functions as an allegory for emergent ethnic writing, when an imaginary coming of age metaphorizes writing oneself into nationhood.²²

Coming-of-age novels often include sexual awakening, and *Scherbenpark* depicts a protagonist undergoing a maturation process, something that in German national literature has traditionally centered on paradigmatic male characters that embody the nation. Traditionally, the model protagonist for a coming-of-age novel or *Bildungsroman* is male, from Wilhelm Meister and Anton Reiser to Demian, Hans Castorp, and Felix Krull, reflecting the historical difference in access to education, travel, inheritance, and the public sphere between men and women. However, as Birte Giesler points out in her discussion of the relationship of gender and the *Bildungsroman*, scholarship throughout the twentieth century has contested the literary history's account of the genre's paradigmatic male characteristic.²³ The global presence of girls productively intervenes into national discourses about gendered genre conventions.

Benedict Anderson, in his foundational *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, emphasizes the "central importance of print-capitalism" for the imagined community of the nation.²⁴ He focuses on the genre of the novel centered on the figure of the "solitary hero," the focal point of the "national imagination."²⁵ Anderson does not reflect critically on his description of the male-gendered hero as the projection site for the imagined community of the nation. The

maleness of the characters that Anderson invokes to buttress his argument about the centrality of the novel for the project of the imagined community is not coincidental but integral to the ability of those figures to model national consciousness in print culture. In one of Anderson's examples, the novel's hero is "a young man who belongs to the collective body of readers" and thus can embody the particular nation's "imagined community."²⁶ Anderson suggests that "the imagined community is confirmed by the doubleness of our reading about our young man reading," in this case, the newspapers.²⁷ This literary configuration creates "calendrical coincidence . . . which provides the essential connection — the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time," a feature Anderson interprets as essential to imagining the nation.²⁸

In *Scherbenpark*, newspapers, journalists, and print news also feature centrally, intersecting with Sascha's life and motivating important plot lines. But here, the newspaper does not validate or mirror the main character; in contrast, Sascha repeatedly experiences news as traumatic, officially inscribing her subaltern status as a young immigrant woman in Germany. To highlight this difference, it is worth noting that Sascha does not read the newspaper to remain informed about national news. Instead, the news interferes with her life, doubling the original attack and emphasizing her disenfranchised position in the public sphere, which turns the killing of her mother into an object of an exploitative gaze.

When Sascha, the young, female, solitary heroine who embodies a differently imagined community of Germany, is revictimized by national news, she confronts the source of her psychic injury by searching out the author of the article, Susanne Mahler. In contrast to Anderson's ideal model of the newspaper as neutral source for information and of the reader as uncontested identification figure, the encounter between Sascha and Susanne illustrates the contestation and negotiation that produces and reflects narratives that shape imagined communities. Susanne combines the privileged access of the German-born intellectual with female subordination as Volker's intern.²⁹

In *Scherbenpark*, media functions in a complicated web around Sascha. Her mother worked for a small newspaper with ads, where she met her German boyfriend:

And she [Sascha's mother] did start living, and she bumped into Harry. She met him in the offices of the little local paper in which her column on Russian-Germans appeared . . .
My mother was very proud of that job. (33)

The "little local paper" at which Sascha's mother worked and published her bilingual column provided her with a forum to express her creativity and gave her limited access to the public sphere. *Scherbenpark* covers a range of media in a complex field, more decentralized and differentiated

than Anderson maps it out. As diverse members of the imagined community, the differently situated characters have unequal access to the public sphere.

Talking Back: Local Girl, Global Music

Scherbenpark consciously engages with a global ghetto discourse by recirculating the ghetto aesthetic of recycling and participating in the African-American tradition of "call and response." Sascha talks back to famous U.S. hip-hop artist Eminem, outdoing his song with her own hyperbolic promise of violence, mimicking the convention of battling rap. Sascha confronts the globally commodified text from the perspective of a girl in Germany claiming the tradition because of her own liminal status as an outsider. The icon of the hard rapper, an appropriation of an African-American art form, embodies the global circulation of ghetto culture. Eminem's song "I'm sorry, Mama," presents a sarcastic apology to his mother, which Bronsky contrasts to Sascha's aggressive promise of revenge on Vadim. The text contrasts the gender configuration of the son's address of his mother with the stepdaughter's fantasmatic confrontation with her stepfather in a bilingual exchange:³⁰

I'm sorry, Mama, says Eminem.
You'll be sorry, Vadim, says Sascha.
I never meant to hurt you.
I'm really going to hurt you.
I never meant to make you cry.
I promise I will make you cry.
But tonight I'm cleaning out my closet.
What are you cleaning out, Marshall? Your cabinet?
I'm cleaning mine out, too — my cabinet of poisons. (157–58)

The address of the abusive stepparent enters into a competitive dialogue of globally circulating ghetto culture and its localized response, in which the genders are crisscrossed. Bronsky appropriates the masculinist discourse with the voice and the body of a girl and self-reflexively points to the performative aspect of ghetto discourse, despite its proclaimed authenticity. Here the character Sascha, whose name performs masculinity, "calls out" Eminem by his bourgeois first name Marshall, undermining his claim to authentic ghetto-credibility. The text performs a double function, simultaneously participating in the tradition of battle rap, in which two hip-hop artists outdo each other with hyperbolic and sometimes insulting word play and verbal prowess, and at the same time undoing the assumed claim to authenticity associated with ghetto aesthetics. Improvisation is integral to battle rap, which is also called "freestyle," of

which Eminem's *8 Mile* is an example. Bronsky's literary depiction of Sascha's freestyling captures this tradition but also constitutes a gap to the visceral and affective immediate presence of rap, even though the text continues the cadence of rap, retaining its rhythm to reflect its roots in spoken word, returning the commodified and circulating text to its original dialogic exchange.

While Bronsky stages the imaginary verbal competition between Eminem and Sascha, which defines rap culture, the address of Sascha's threat is Vadim. The reference to a "poison cabinet" appropriates the posture of violent revenge with the poetic invocation of feminine means. The intertextual references resignify the trope of violent revenge in a text about a young girl dealing with death as a result of interpersonal violence, a staple of ghetto narratives. Ghetto films such as *Boyz n the Hood* portray retributive violence in an excessive visual display. *Scherbenpark* inserts a female and local voice into the global discourse, emphasizing the fantasy of violent retribution as a vehicle of psychological survival that is neither meant to be acted out nor to be political program.

Music is one of the intermedial references that function in Sascha's world but also situate the novel in a global network of cultural exchange. While Eminem's rap partakes in global commodified ghetto culture, a reference to the Russian postpunk band Nautilus Pompilius functions in a binational framework as melancholic attachment to the lost homeland via the loss of the mother.³¹ Through these different cultural musical inscriptions, which make use of the songs' original texts, the novel aligns the mother with the melancholy for the past and the lost homeland, refracted through the access to music that is mobile in global networks.

Sascha's encounter with the music of the band Nautilus Pompilius is staged in conjunction with her repeated psychological injuries.³² One day Sascha picks up her younger sister Alissa from her friend Katja, Peter's little sister. Peter opens the door, and Sascha and Peter engage in their usual aggressive exchange before Peter reveals that his mother will not allow Katja to visit Alissa in their apartment because it was the site of the murder. He distances himself from his mother's position, which opens a window into the possibility of him as a sympathetic character, once situated in the domestic setting. However, his remarks deeply hurt Sascha, who violently mourns the loss of her mother and ruthlessly defends her younger siblings. Just as Sascha registers the different psychic injuries, she hears the band's song "I Want to Be With You" coming out of Peter's apartment:

I know the song.
The drunken doctor
Told you
That you
No longer exist.

*The fire department says
Your house
Has burned down.*

...
The song hits me like a punch in the gut.
There's no way Peter really listens to the music of this long-forgotten Russian goth band. My mother liked them . . .

How is it possible, I wonder, that here — in an apartment that reeks of coal, that's scrubbed spic and span, a place where every piece of furniture is draped with a dolly, where there are plastic flowers in vases on the windowsills, where the walls are covered with the type of horrible pictures of pink children that you can get three-for-ten-bucks at the supermarket — that here of all places, this music is played?

*In a strange room
With a white ceiling
A right to hope
And a belief
In love.*

I stare at the checkered curtains.
We never had curtains. My mother hated them . . . She always wanted to have the windows open. The sun should come in. (143–44)

Scherbenpark's account of Sascha's interior narrative seamlessly shifts between her observations and the song, creating a fluid relationship between her own subjectivity and the enigmatic text, which turns catastrophe into poetry. The second stanza announces the more hopeful topics of love and hope. The song's positive note, emerging out of the catastrophe portrayed in the song and the strange places that it evokes, links to Sascha's mother, who is also tied to space and sun, foreshadowing Sascha's later departure. It is incomprehensible to her that Peter has the same taste in songs as her mother because it questions the world as she has configured it in order to cope with the death of her mother. Her mother's indiscriminate love for different forms of music — which included a sentimental attachment to the new wave, postpunk band Nautilus Pompilius from their homeland — becomes tainted if the enemy Peter listens to it.

The Active Female Body and the Masculine Pose

Sascha's irony functions to ward off her psychological injury, capturing the complex positions that young women have to negotiate in defining their roles in a web of desires and social expectations of femininity that implies vulnerability. But the irreverent tone, intended to cover over Sascha's vulnerability, paradoxically reveals her pain. For example, when Sascha sees the newspaper's headline about Vadim, she describes her reaction as follows:

On this morning, my heart suddenly freezes — just for a second — then it kicks on again and jumps into my throat and flutters there like a bird in distress. I gasp for breath and try to swallow in order to get my heart back down where it belongs. (49)

The novel performs a warding off of emotions that distances the voice of the narrator from the traditional femininity integral to chick lit, but also points to the gap between the narrator's femaleness and access to formations of masculinity. Sascha Naimann has a name like a man but is a girl: "My name is Sascha Naimann. I'm not a guy, even though everyone in this country seems to think so when they hear my name" (13).

While Germans cannot read her gender correctly because of a linguistic mistranslation, *Scherbenpark* also deconstructs masculinity by ironically reflecting on the self-stylization of the "cool pose" of ghetto masculinity.³³ Sascha describes Peter: "The Marlon Brando of Our Russian Ghetto. Long black eyelashes that give his face a feminine note. Which is probably why he lifts weights so obsessively" (140).³⁴ By pointing to the cinematic and historic construction of the young, male rebel in global circulation, such as James Dean and Marlon Brando, the text deconstructs the notion of authentic masculinity, which appears as mediated poses. In contrast to Sascha's ironic gaze at Peter, the text does not offer a description of Sascha's body, substituting instead dynamic movement, when she runs or skates.

Related to ghetto discourse's emphasis on the body, Sascha copes with trauma through physical action and verbal jousting. Reflection and memory, associated with working through a traumatic past, appear as privileges she cannot afford in her fierce dedication to her survival. Traditional ghetto narratives center on the male body as the vehicle of self-assertion in the absence of access to institutional or material resources,³⁵ which finds expression in the oral tradition of hip-hop and the recycling in contemporary rap. *Scherbenpark's* fashioning of the female body as a vehicle of aggressive acting out in relation to a traumatic past differs strongly from the German memory discourse that privileges working through as an internalized process. Sascha does not take pleasure in physical activities, but engages in them to flee what haunts her, an attempt that the text ironizes:

I run three times around the Emerald and then head off. I'm dragging. I haven't run in a long time and wouldn't have today if I hadn't woken up with a sick, tense feeling. I try to run away from this feeling but just end up with stitches in my sides. (48)

But the physical activity throws her back onto her body and its banal physical existence when all she can achieve is a mild form of exhaustion because she is out of shape.

The emphasis on the active body when Sascha runs, roller-skates, and bikes, extends to her ability to fight verbally and with her fists. Her relationship with Vadim is a "battlefield" (47) in which she is victorious. At the heart of *Scherbenpark*, like in other ghetto texts, lies violence, both individual and structural. This includes, in addition to rough language, fighting. Sascha has to fight for herself because patriarchal protection can neither be found in the violent immigrant, nor in the emasculated but privileged liberal German. The depiction of the male characters approximates stereotypes of violent, drunk immigrants from the East in contrast to emasculated liberals in the West. The reproduction of outdated discriminatory representation of masculinity to carve out a space for a popular account of liberated minority femaleness is reminiscent of the scandal that surrounded the ground-breaking, now feminist classic, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), a book that was accused of reifying the myth of the black rapist in order to stage the development of a black feminist subjectivity.³⁶

The novel portrays Sascha's necessity to fight physically for survival but also the limitations of her ability to do so. When Sascha is running through her neighborhood, she encounters Peter and his group of friends who are mad because Sascha is not afraid of them:

"Girls like you need to be smacked around," he says, breathing heavily. "And ones like your mother. It's fucked up that you're not scared of anything. I think we need to change that." . . .

I ram my elbows into his ribs, rip myself free, jump to the side, and bend down. I had already seen it gleaming — an empty brown beer bottle. I grab it and brandish it above my head . . .

He puts out his arms. I slash at his face with the bottle.

But I've misjudged it.

The bottle doesn't break. It's still whole. And it flies out of my hand, slipping between my sweaty fingers. I've barely hurt Peter at all. He just grunts, puts his hand up to his face, and then lunges at me. I'm thrown back by the weight of his body and my head hits the wall.

That's when I begin to scream. At first I don't know myself what I am screaming. It's a word. A name.

I am screaming for Volker. (151–52)

For girls, the possibility of appropriating signs of masculinity is ultimately limited. Yes, access to femininity does not guarantee survival through protection, neither as a realistic strategy, nor as a fantasy offered to girls. Sascha screams for Volker but he is not there to rescue her. The contemporary possibility of appropriating attributes formerly deemed to be masculine defines contemporary global girl culture as a result of second-wave feminism, and differentiates it from chic lit. Important texts such as Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002), Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*, and Lucia Puenzo's *XXY* (2007) negotiate girls' attempts to access and integrate notions of masculinity.³⁷

In contrast to chick lit, Sascha negotiates her femaleness not in the framework of sex or heterosexual gender, but in relationship to the memory of her mother. She is unable to embrace heterosexual femininity because her mother and Maria represent victimization — the former of violence, and the latter of domesticity. But she cannot identify with masculinity, either. While Vadim embodied destructive violence, she slowly comprehends that Volker inhabits an unreflected heterosexual male privilege when she realizes that Volker also knew her mother and had an affair with Susanne Mahler.

Closure and Departure

The space of the ghetto includes spatial restriction, and thus Sascha's maturation coincides with her departure from their apartment, the scene of violence. After she has returned from the hospital, Volker, Felix, Maria, Anton, Alyssa, and Sascha sit around in their living room and have a good time, and their happiness enables Sascha to leave. The novel's concluding two paragraphs are peaceful but refuse a traditional happy ending. In the novel's penultimate section, Sascha first addresses her dead mother without naming her: "Hello, you, and you, too, Harry, I say" (218), but lists her name Marina a little later for the first time in the novel (220). Sascha apologizes for not having taken the photo of her mother into the hospital with her and that she has not thought about her in the hospital, except once when she was happy that her mother did not have to watch her. The novel's depiction of warding off trauma not only refers to the violence that centrally shapes the narrative events, but also Sascha's mourning the loss of her mother. *Scherbenpark* does not end in a stereotypical romantic happy ending but in Sascha's coming to terms with the loss of her mother, which allows her to mature.

Thinking about her mother's journeys as a young person, Sascha decides to travel to Prague.³⁸ She leaves Volker and his son behind with Maria and her siblings: "There's nothing left for me to do here. I feel as if they will all be all right now even without me" (219). Once Volker and Felix are in her apartment, she does not have to carry the responsibility for her siblings anymore. Volker and Felix fulfill their important function not as romantic interests for her but as substitute caretakers for her family, reversing gender stereotypes. Once they are present, she can leave:

It would be an exaggeration to say I'm in a good mood. But something is singing inside me — and the words aren't Eminem's. In the foyer I stumble over my rollerblades — and then over Anton's. I can't imagine ever putting those things on again. I put on my sneakers and listen to the voices wafting in from the living room as I tie the laces.

...
I throw my backpack over my shoulder, turn my baseball cap backwards, and head out into the sun. (221)

The positive open end continues Sascha's process of moving, not haunted by the past and looking forward into the future. She travels east, following in the footsteps of her mother. This departure is enabled by Volker and Felix's visit to the space of the ghetto, instead of a forced assimilation by Sascha into Germany.

The departure of the hero at the end of ghetto narratives constitutes a staple genre convention. But in contrast to the heroes of *City of God* and *Boyz n the Hood*, who are the sole survivors of the ills of the Brazilian favela and American inner-city, and who disavow their affective relationship to the social networks left behind, Sascha's departure is enabled by her coming to terms with her care for her family. *Scherbenpark* participates in the global circulation of literature about girls and narrative conventions of ghetto aesthetics. However, while the text relies on formulaic conventions, which enable the genre's popular success, it also moves beyond a simplistic reproduction of genre traditions. The simultaneous appropriation and rewriting of popular textual conventions enables the text to straddle the global with the local and intervene in transnational and national discourses about gender and immigration. *Scherbenpark* endows the literary figure of the global ghetto girl with a forceful subjectivity that appropriates popular textual conventions to open up traditional depictions of gender, and thus subtly change the literary depiction of historical change at the points where the local and the global meet.

Notes

- 1 Alina Bronsky, *Scherbenpark* (Cologne: Klepener & Wisch, 2008); quotations are taken from the English translation, Alina Bronsky, *Broken Glass Park*, trans. Tim Mohr (New York: Europa Editions, 2010). According to the German publisher's webpage, the translation rights have also been sold to Italy and Poland: www.kiwi-verlag.de/476-0-current-news-on-our-titles.htm (accessed 1 August 2010). While this reflects the global appeal of the novel, there is also a particularly local national appeal, expressed in the many school invitations and the stage version at the Junges Deutsches Theater at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, in the fall of 2010. Here, the authenticity of Russian migration is reintroduced when German youth of Russian background act with professional actors on stage. See www.deutsches-theater.de/junges_dt/minnachen/scherbenpark/ (accessed 1 August 2010).
- 2 See, for example, Anke S. Biendarra's essay "Terézia Mora, *Alle Tage*: Transnational Traumas" in this volume, which discusses a novel that could also be

read as part of an "Eastern turn," and that is organized around a male character named Abel.

³ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh: A Novel* (London: Penguin, 2008); Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005).

⁴ Leslie Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 5 and 12.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of an example of a ghetto narrative that foregrounds masculinity, see Frauke Matthes's contribution to this volume, "Clemens Meyer, *Als wir träumten*: Fighting 'Like a Man' in Leipzig's East."

⁶ Niki Caro, dir., *White Rider* (2002); Maria Meggeni, dir., *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995); Jason Reitman, dir., *June* (2007).

⁷ Faiza Guène, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, trans. Sarah Adams (Orlando: Harvest, 2004); Gurinder Chadha, dir., *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002).

⁸ Rebecca Munford, "Wake Up and Smell the Lipploss: Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power," in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 142–53; here, 143.

⁹ Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U. S. Feminism — Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 141–70; here, 142.

¹⁰ In German literary history, this is particularly associated with Weimar Republic author Irmgard Keun, whose books include *Kind aller Länder* (1938), *Nach Mitternacht* (1937), *Das Mädchen, mit dem die Kinder nicht verkehren dürfen* (1936), *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932), and *Gilgi — Eine von uns* (1931).

¹¹ The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priit Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tami E. Barlow), "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation," in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 1–24; here, 4.

¹² Angela McRobbie, "Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. by Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3–14; here, 4.

¹³ Sascha's solitary existence contrasts to the male bond described by Matthes in Meyer's *Als wir träumten*.

¹⁴ Neill Blomkamp, dir., *District 9* (2009).

¹⁵ Jacque Jones, "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," *Wide Angle* 13:3–4 (1991): 32–43; here, 32.

¹⁶ The domination of visual culture in the global circulation of this genre has its effect also on the style of writing, analyzed as cinematic by Matthes in her discussion of Meyer's *Als wir träumten*.

¹⁷ Mario Van Peebles, dir., *New Jack City* (1991); John Singleton, dir., *Boyz n the Hood* (1991).

¹⁸ Fernando Merielles, dir., *City of God* (2002); Pierre Morel, dir., *Banlieue 13* (2004).

¹⁹ Faith Akin, dir., *Short Sharp Shock* (1998); Lars Becker, dir., *Kanak Attack* (2000); Detlev Buck, dir., *Knallhart* (2006). See also Barbara Mennel, "Bruce Lee in Kreuzberg and Scarface in Altona: Transnational Auteurism and Ghettoecriticism in Thomas Arslan's *Brothers and Sisters* and Faith Akin's *Short Sharp Shock*," *New German Critique* 87 (2002): 133–56.

²⁰ Allison Andres, dir., *Mi Vida Loca* (1993); Patricia Cardoso, dir., *Real Women Have Curves* (2002).

²¹ Bettina Blümmert, dir., *Prinzessinnenbad* (2008). See also Jaimey Fisher, "Kreuzberg as Relational Place: Respatializing the 'Ghetto' in Bettina Blümmert's *Prinzessinnenbad* [Pool of princesses, 2007]," in *Spatial Turns: Space, Place, and Mobility in German Literary and Visual Culture*, ed. Jaimey Fisher and Barbara Mennel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 421–46.

²² This section is influenced by a discussion with Kenneth Kidd, specialist of children's and young adult literature. Important feminist texts about Latina girls growing up in the United States include Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Plume, 1991); Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1993). Taking a different theoretical approach, the comparison between Turkish-German and Chicana literature as bilingual and bicultural is central to Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001).

²³ Birte Giesler, "Julchen Grünthal — ein Bildungsroman," particularly the section entitled "Bildungsroman und Geschlecht," in *Literaturprünge: Das erzählerische Werk von Friederike Helene Unger* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 210–29. I thank Birte Giesler on her feedback on an earlier and shorter version of this paper as a talk.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 18.

²⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 30.

²⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 30.

²⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 30.

²⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 31.

²⁹ Interestingly, according to Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, the main characters of chick lit are often single women in their twenties and thirties balancing demanding careers and personal relationships and who are often employed in the media industry and publishing. Thus, one could read Susanne Mahler as a typical character for chick lit, and Sascha as constructed in contrast to her. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, "Introduction," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–13; here, 3.

³⁰ In the German original, Eminem's song text is in English and italicized, while Sascha's response in German and the narrative voice is non-italicized. The English

translation retains the italics but cannot retain the bilingual quality of the original German:

I'm sorry, Mama, sagt Eminem.
 Dir wird es leid tun, Vadim, sagt Sascha.
I never meant to hurt you.
 Und wie ich dir wehtun will.
I never meant to make you cry.
 Doch, du wirst heulen, versprochen.
But tonight I'm cleanin' out my closet.
 Was machst du da sauber, Marshall? Deinen Schrank?
 Und ich sortiere meinen — den Giftschrack.
 Bronsky, *Scherbenpark*, 201.

³¹ I thank Ingrid Klecspies for sharing her insight on Nautilus Pompilius. The song, one of the most famous ones by the band, is originally in Russian, and its text appears in *Scherbenpark* in German and in *Broken Glass Park* in English. Reading the loss of the Russian mother would be another entry into a reading along the lines of a binational emphasis in the context of the “Eastern turn” of German literature, as outlined by Biendarra in the opening of her essay in this volume.

³² *Scherbenpark* does not include either of the titles of the two songs in its text.

³³ See Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Touchstone, 1993).

³⁴ This presents an intriguing parallel to Marthes’s reading of the main characters of *Als wir träumten* as affirming their masculinity to ward off social emasculation, which could otherwise be read as feminization. Sascha’s inner voice repeatedly uncovers those kinds of psycho-social mechanism.

³⁵ See also Marthes’s article in this volume.

³⁶ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Orlando: Harvest, 2003).

³⁷ Lucia Puenzo, dir., *XXY* (2007). These three films offer different narrative trajectories about the motivations for girls to desire masculinity and the ways in which their access to masculinity enables or disables self-actualization. A comparative discussion goes beyond the scope of this article. What is important to me here is to point out that contemporary texts represent the investment in the possibility that masculinity is available to girls at all.

³⁸ Her desire to travel to Prague because she wants “to go someplace” where she does not “understand everything around” her “for a change” (220) also creates a parallel to Abel’s loss of all languages except to say “that’s good” in “the local language” in Mora’s *Alle Tage*. See Biendarra’s article in this volume.

12: Karen Duve, *Taxi: Of Alpha Males, Apes, Altenberg, and Driving in the City*

Heike Bartel

Taxi (2008), by THE HAMBURG-BORN AUTHOR Karen Duve, tells the story of Alex, a young female taxi driver in Hamburg during the six years of her work for the taxi company Mergolan before the novel ends in a car crash. The simple plot might suggest that almost nothing happens in this text, which deals with the protagonist’s various encounters with passengers inside the taxi and with (mostly) men outside the taxi and features a surprise ending. However, *Taxi* is more than a drive-through: it is an accomplished literary portrayal of the individual in a postmodern cityscape. Drawing on cultural theories analyzing how people engage with the city and its inhabitants, this essay will explore Duve’s images of taxi driving as a metaphor for postmodern life.¹

Taxi (2008) is not only the story of a female taxi driver in Hamburg, it is also a literary tour through Duve’s recent work. *Taxi* features unusual characters from her previous books: the dwarf Pedit from the fairy-tale parody *Die entführte Prinzessin: Von Drachen, Liebe und anderen Ungeheuern* (The kidnapped princess: Of dragons, love, and other monsters, 2005), who is smitten with the chambermaid Rosamonde. She, in turn, is tall and good-looking like the female protagonist in *Taxi*, and like her has to overcome inner and outer obstacles before she finally realizes her love for a smaller man. *Taxi* also features characters resembling the mean taxi drivers from the children’s book *Weihnachten mit Thomas Müller* (Christmas with Thomas Müller, 2003) who brutally kick a poor lost teddy bear, who cannot pay his fare home, out of a taxi and into the freezing night; and, finally, a chimpanzee that seems to have jumped right out of Duve and Thies Völker’s *Lexikon der berühmten Tiere* (Encyclopedia of famous animals, 1997) and into Alex’s taxi.

These three perhaps lesser-known works already highlight the wide array of literary genres Duve engages with and draws upon in *Taxi*. It is characteristic for her writing that none of these three books stays within the traditional boundaries of fairytales, encyclopedias, or children’s story, respectively, but treat their templates with irony: Pedit laments his unre-