

**Sudabeh Mohafez**

**brennt**

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burning

i know the pieces fit

'cause i watched them tumble down

*schism*

tool

Later I'll know that there was a deflagration before the fire, but I don't know that word yet, I just hear the sound that signifies it, *whoof!*, that is – definitely *whoof!* That's what woke me up.

And, says the fireman, the young one with the scratches on his face, it's a miracle. He says that. Says me surviving is a miracle, and the cats too, because they also survived. And that the miracle is a direct result of the deflagration, he says that too: If you hadn't heard it, then you wouldn't have woken up... And I hear the dot dot dot as clearly as the *whoof!* in the night – because he doesn't want to say the word, you see. The young fireman with the scratches on his face doesn't want to say *dead*.

I'd be dead now, you see, I'd be finished, I'd be a corpse, or the charred remains of a corpse, if it wasn't for the deflagration that Frau Pietzsch unintentionally caused when she intentionally lit the petrol-drenched wooden walls, if it hadn't woken me up. The young fireman with the scratches on his face says all that, but he doesn't say it until four or five hours later, just before a bird signals it's morning, when there's just cold, black smoke gushing from the house, and a stench of charcoal and chemicals, when four of the five fire engines have left Wilski Street, now cordoned off, when the officials from the special investigations arson branch, there's a branch of the special investigations department that's dedicated to arson cases, you see, when the officials from the special investigations arson branch, yellow plastic hardhats on their heads, have searched the area for clues. Then the young fireman with the scratches on his face will say the bit with the dot dot dot, but right now it's still velvety dark in the apartment, and outside too. There's just this rustling – no, hissing. Something hisses, rustles through my apartment. Outside my apartment?

I sit up in bed, perfectly focussed and ramrod straight and I'm not dreaming at all, I'm wide awake, even though I usually find it quite hard to surface, so my transition from asleep to awake is gradual, and I register, like a sensor, like a signal detection device, I register that the cats are staring spellbound at the wall. Legs digging into the pillow, into the pillow next to mine, ears pricked up, they stare spellbound at the wall that separates the head of the bed from the hall, from the stairwell, from outside. I jump up with a start, run towards the hissing, which gets louder with every step, louder and louder. Through the swing door, the old, white swing door, then into the studio, and left into the hallway: the hissing is coming from the stairwell.

Open the door to my apartment, and close it straight away. My apartment door is burning through, that's a surface area of two metres by ninety centimetres, standing at right angles to the floor, and now, because I've opened the door, it makes an acute angle into my apartment, blazing. The wooden wall to the left is on fire, and the floor in front of my door, and in actual fact I'm thinking at this moment. At this moment when I wrench the door open and immediately slam it shut again I think about water, about a blanket to put out the fire. I think about protection. But, moments after I've slammed the door – a ring of lights. There, at the point where the door rests in its frame, flames are suddenly pushing through. The oil-based paint melts, stinks, bubbles.

When something's on fire you phone the fire brigade – remember this. Dial 112. Speak to the man who answers at the other end. I speak very calmly: there's a fire, I say. 56 Wilski Street, near Krumme Lanke underground station. He asks my name. Mané, I begin, then there's a roar behind me and I drop the receiver. The rustling is inside now, the hissing too. Pull on my trousers, at lightning speed. The t-shirt I slept in, old, baggy, blue and white-striped, leave it on, pull a jacket over it. No kind of feeling at all, just get dressed, look around. There's no longer a border between outside and inside.

I snatch up, yes, exactly, I snatch up the cat. He's very quiet. He's four and a half months old. He's getting to know the world, I think, and press him to my chest, and he presses his claws through the t-shirt into my skin. Clawlets isn't a word. If it were a word I'd have to say that he presses his clawlets into my skin. He's desperate not to fall. I can't explain to him that what he's doing isn't really helpful, that it makes the situation just that bit more complicated for me, so I command the skin above my breast not to make a fuss while I look for the other cat, the girl, while I call her. At long last I hear her.

She's on the other side of the hissing, that means: we're separated, and I think: she's going to die, so I command my brain to only think helpful thoughts. The cat pressed against my

chest is wheezing, then he cries out and I cough. I call the cat again, the one that's going to be burnt alive. That's her future at this moment – being burnt alive. Or suffocating first, and then burning. She calls back, meows, wails, the hissing makes her panic.

I grope around on the grand piano for the key to my apartment, a useless move, pointless, mechanical, I drop it like I did the receiver before, and with my free hand, I stuff my wallet in my trouser pocket. My ID. You need your ID if you're dealing with the police. The fire brigade aren't the only ones who come when something's on fire.

I can't stop coughing. In the middle of the studio, I'm standing in the middle of the hissing and I can't move a muscle, I can only stand, and look around, and listen. Around me, the studio crackles, rustles. I shut my eyes. Don't think. Don't think of anything. Keep my eyes closed so I don't see the musical instruments, not one of them, not the mixer either, or the computers, neither the Apple nor the old Atari. Keep my eyes closed tight. The cat at my chest cries out. Open my eyes to look at him. He's stretching his head towards the balcony off the bedroom. Look in that direction, follow his gaze. Clever cat-idea: we should go out there. But I keep standing and I can't move a muscle, and the soundproofing on the walls is melting, sweating out acrid smoke, and suddenly I hear her again, high-pitched cat cries from far-off. My legs suddenly move of their own accord – stride, run, out of the studio into the bedroom. Cat clawlets deep in the skin over my breast, but he's stopped crying out.

It's very hot. The ficus tree by my bed is spewing like a sparkler. The wooden wall between the bed and the outside, gone. There's spitting coming from the very last remnants of damp in the ancient floor tiles, in the door frames – it's an old, listed house with wooden walls backing onto the corridor, it still has plaster made of clay and straw in some places. Then the beams split. When I open the door to the balcony I hear the windowpanes in the kitchen and the bathroom shatter, and the cat crying out on the other side of the hissing.

My apartment is on fire. I say it quietly, it's almost a murmur, but I speak precisely, extremely accurately: my apartment is on fire. I rush onto the balcony, pull the door closed from outside, look back in through the window, and in actual fact I'm thinking at this moment – about what this sentence means, that is. What does “my apartment is on fire” mean? And what does “my apartment” mean?

The cat is quiet now. He's tensed, and pressed close to me, but he's drawn his claws out of my flesh, and even though you're not supposed to, because of oxygenation, you see, I've left the balcony door ajar. The kitchen windows have shattered anyway, the wooden walls have burned away, there's no door to my apartment any more – it really doesn't matter if the balcony door is ajar or not. I call the other cat, I can hear her. She's still alive, and now the fire brigade has arrived. Fourteen minutes have gone by since Frau Pietzsch's unintended *whoof!* woke me up, that's what I read later in the transcripts and I'll think that that was quick – that the fire brigade turned up quickly. And also that that was reassuring. Is reassuring.

The flute. It seems I really have brought it out with me. Under my left hand the cat breathes, flat against my chest. In my right, I'm holding the flute. It was lying on the grand piano, next to my wallet and the keys. I decide again not to think about the musical instruments, any of them, and I look around.

To the left and to the right of the balcony aluminium ladders are leaning against the bricks, the rust-red, listed bricks. They're getting the people from the top floor – they're leaning far out of the windows, otherwise they wouldn't be able to breathe, they would have suffocated long ago, died horribly, miserably, because of the smoke, which you can see, by the way, from

my balcony, from the street, and definitely from further away. Above the people from the top floor, leaning far out the windows, a stream of smoke rolls incessantly upward, a dark black one – yes, exactly, dark black. From my window too: a stream of smoke, just a sparse one, just a light, thin one, because the fire is blazing here, and I ask myself if smoke makes a sound.

Later I'll learn another technical term, no, I'll know what the term feels like, because I've heard it before, of course, read it, said it. I'll know what the term "seat of fire" feels like when it describes my apartment door and the wooden wall next to it and the floor in front of it – ten litres of petrol on old, listed wood, you see, that's why there's more smoke upstairs than in my apartment. Because my door is the seat of the fire, in other words because the fire is still satisfying its hunger on my apartment, because it hasn't really kicked in upstairs yet, it's just sending its smoke up there, its by-product. It sends everything it hasn't devoured upstairs in thick, thickest plumes, as an advance guard, if you like, and that's why the people from the top floor, who don't have balconies, are leaning as far as they can out the window, and that's also why the fire brigade will come and get them first.

Yılmaz, my neighbour, is with his kids, who live with his ex-wife, and who he only sees at weekends and sometimes in the holidays. He's gone with them to the Eifel Region for some hiking, so he's not here at 56 Wilski Street with his life in danger. Vroni and her boyfriend, who live on the ground floor next to the shoemaker's workshop, just climbed out of the window with their children onto the grass in front of the house, so their lives are not in danger either. Only the lives of the people in the attic apartments are. Only them and the cat, but she doesn't count, even though I say "my cat." I call it out to the firemen under the balcony, but with the rustling and hissing and the shouted orders, and now the hoses, fat hoses and the blue flashing lights, so many, they're never-ending, and the engines. The men don't hear me.

Upstairs, Frau Naumann is climbing onto the ladder in her heels, and it looks like the fireman is hugging her. But he's standing a couple of rungs below her and just holding his arms around her, like a wide, circular cage, he's not actually touching her. He's protecting her. Protecting her from falling, and I think about protection for the second time that night, and I also think that I'd like to kiss that fireman.

I think that quite seriously, in actual fact. I think: I'd like to kiss that fireman because he's holding his arms like a circular cage around Frau Naumann, who's standing on the ladder with her heels, and her skintight jeans, and her bleach-blonde perm, and her plum-coloured puffa jacket, and who's now climbing down the ladder with him, at her, at Frau Naumann's pace. That's why I'd like to kiss that fireman.

And I think that I need to learn to think very differently, that love is totally different to what I thought it was before now, that is, from now on I know exactly what it feels like. It feels like this. Like how I feel when I see the fireman with his arms around Frau Naumann, like that, exactly like that, so she doesn't fall, for that reason, and so that she doesn't feel too scared – you see, even when it gets really bad you can try to stop the fear rising up a little, and that's love.

Because he's not rushing her, and he's not dragging her, and he's not yelling at her, or saying "Faster! Faster!" Nor does he say: Come on, hurry up now, there are still two people up there! He just moves his foot to the next rung when Frau Naumann moves hers, and it looks almost like they're dancing, and I wonder if I should ask him his name when he comes past me, so I'll be able to find him later and kiss him. But then a panel in the balcony door cracks open. My apartment is on fire, I whisper, and, in actual fact, right then, at that moment, I stop thinking about what that means.

While Herr Manteufel and Frau Menzel are also climbing down the ladder I hear a noise behind me and scream, and turn around, spin around, in one fluid movement, and take half a step backwards at the same time, with my back to the hissing behind the windows. There, where only shouted orders are allowed, and the crackling of walkie-talkies and the scraping of big, dirty white hoses over the dirt and the cobblestones and the grass, from the direction of the street, that is, I hear a voice.

I hear it almost directly in my ear, as if someone were chanting an incantation. And because there's not allowed to be a voice behind me, only shouted orders and crackling and hoses and maybe also silent, dancing lights – blue flashing lights, that is, mirrored in the panes of the studio windows, because the studio windows don't shatter for another two minutes – because that's all that is allowed behind me I scream and clutch the cat more tightly, and turn in one fluid movement and look towards the street, where, between the buildings on the other side of the road, and the fire engines and ambulances and police cars, easily fifty or so people have gathered in the meantime. They're looking. They're looking at the house, pointing at it, they have their arms around each other, they're taking photos, phoning people, even though it's the middle of the night, twenty-three minutes past four, that is, and suddenly – the fireman, the one I'd like to kiss later.

He's standing between me and the balcony door. I look at him, and suddenly realise that the man on the ladder is one of his colleagues. I'm supposed to climb over the parapet, the wide stone parapet, and onto the ladder where he's waiting. I realise that now, because the fireman, the one I'd like to kiss later, has appeared beside me. And so I say "no."

I say it quietly, but quite clearly, and, so that they both fully understand what I'm saying, I shake my head. I'll only leave the balcony, I say, when you get my cat – and because he thinks I've forgotten that I'm holding my cat in my arms, the fireman I'd like to kiss later points at him. I look at the fireman, annoyed. I say: No, no, the girl. The one here is a boy! They exchange looks, then they both start speaking at the same time. A cat, they say, and the one standing on the ladder gets his walkie-talkie and says it again, and the one I'd like to kiss later tilts his head and smiles, and says that they're looking for my cat, and asks if I'd consider climbing over to his colleague on the ladder now, and I think about whether I'll consider it. Actually I'd prefer it if it was him standing there because I know that he doesn't rush anyone and he doesn't hold onto anyone, and you get down safely if you dance down the ladder with him – but then it kicks in, a voice of reason:

She shouldn't make such a fuss. Silent and steely and angry inside me, deep inside my head, where voices of reason dwell: She really shouldn't make such a fuss! So I perch on the parapet, the wide stone parapet, so that I can slide my legs over. But they're not going to allow that. They want me to give them the flute and the cat, and now I've really had enough. No! I say, and shake my head again.

They're very friendly and very calm, and the hissing is getting louder and louder behind me, and later I'll know that it all took just two minutes, before the windowpanes in the studio shattered, that is. It seems that it's this shattering that finally convinces me, because at that moment I give the flute to the fireman who I'd like to kiss later, and explain to him that on no account should he hold it by the keys, and I show him where he should hold it, by its neck, that is, between the mouthpiece and the topmost key, he can hold it there, and he nods, and doesn't hold it by the keys, he holds it exactly where I showed him to hold it, and I think that he doesn't really

come across as clumsy at all. Then he helps me over the parapet, and I'm allowed to keep hold of the cat.

He's so quiet that I wonder if I've crushed him to death. So I bend my head until my lips brush the tips of his tiny ears, and whisper his name: Sandman, I whisper, and hold my breath. Softly, but quite audibly, he meows back, and while we're climbing down the ladder, not with the fireman who I'd like to kiss later, but with his colleague, the tears run down my cheeks because I know that I haven't crushed Sandman to death.

This fireman isn't as good a dancer as the one I'd like to kiss later. He's got my upper right arm firmly in his grasp. I look quickly up into the smoke above us, and suddenly I know that it really does make a sound – a muffled, gentle, scarcely audible capturing of space. That's exactly how smoke sounds, and suddenly I also know that death won't ever stop hissing. Strange, I think, because I was always convinced that death was something silent, noiseless, something like smoke, only the other way around – you see, I thought death was a muffled, gentle, scarcely audible dissolving of space and dissolving of time. But I was wrong. Death rustles and hisses. It will never stop, I think again. And that serves you right, says a woman's voice.

I flinch, look around. The fireman clutches my arm even tighter, and as he does so I think about Hjartan for the first time in a long while. But I shake my head and he disappears from my thoughts. I cling to the ladder with one hand, because I'm clutching my cat, the one that's still alive, to me with the other, and I'm making sure I don't squeeze too tightly, so he stays alive, and someone says: there are different forms of death, they don't all hiss.

What? I ask, and turn to look at the fireman, because it was a deep voice, a pleasant, deep voice speaking. You've nearly made it, he says, looks up at me, and smiles. Just two more rungs, then you've made it, he says, and in actual fact I still don't suspect anything yet. With my next step I'm standing on the ground, just like he said, on mud, on trampled grass. He pushes me towards a police van, finally lets go of my arm, and I stand and look.

To my left, the house *cowers*. Like a spitting, choking thing, choking on smoke, that is, someone's beaten it to death, someone, anyone – almost beaten it to death, because it's still coughing, giving out a death rattle, and I let my gaze travel over the people in the van, and look up at the roof again and turn around and ask if they've been into all the apartments. The fireman nods: Of course, he says, why? Frau Pietzsch, I answer, cough, point at the roof, cough again. She's missing, I say, she's not here anywhere, you see, and she's not sitting in the van. Which apartment? His voice sounds tight. Upstairs on the left, says Vroni from the van behind me, because I'm coughing again. Upstairs, under the roof, the left entrance, I say, but he's already slammed the door shut and run off, and I look through the van window. He's shouting something that I can't understand, disappears behind the house with six or seven other men, where it leads into the stairwell. I hug my cat tighter, hug him carefully. And there's a cat on the first floor on the left, I whisper, and I turn around because the window is steaming up with my breath.

The inside of the van is a space of mingling smells, of sweat and alcohol and Lenor fabric softener and sleep and greasy hair and fear, and I zip up my jacket and push my hand under Sandman, so he has a nest, a hiding place, and I walk down the narrow centre aisle between my neighbours' knees, and sit down in the only seat that's still free – at the back, next to Herr Manteuffel – and keep holding my hand under the cat-nest, even when I'm sitting down. A light, warm, live weight in the palm of my left hand.

Frau Pietzsch isn't in the house, says the fireman, opening the van door half an hour later. He has scratches on his face, they're bleeding, he's holding something in his arms, something

dark, covered with extinguishing foam. Does this cat belong to any of you? he wants to know. And I want to say “Yes” and raise my hand. She’s mine, I want to say, that’s why I open my mouth, but – nothing. The air chokes up in my throat, like a pillar made of compact, mottled grey granite, and I hear Herr Manteuffel speak up. Isn’t that your cat? he asks, looking at me. But I’m trapped between inside and out, and I think that I’m about to choke on a granite pillar and that that’s absolutely impossible and can’t be real, and then a loud, whistling squeak comes from my throat, and the fireman with the scratches on his face wants to get into the van to hand me my cat, but she hisses loudly and just jumps straight through the mingling smells and lands half on my lap and half on her hidden brother, who makes no sound.

Sticky, wet cat-fur under my hand. What’s her name? asks the fireman, who’s standing next to me now, and although my cat’s name is really Joplin, I say “Death”, and I’m not surprised at all, not by Joplin’s new name, nor that I’m suddenly able to breathe, and so, speak again. Instead I just look at the fireman and nod, and say again: my cat’s name is Death.

But she disappeared long ago in any case, she crawled in under my jacket to Sandman straight away, you see. The two of them make some noises, move around, then they fall silent, and my hand is under them, and my jacket hides them. Death, says the fireman, smiling, and tilts his head to one side, and Herr Mantteufel sighs, and Jessica, who’s five, Jessica says: How sweet! And points at the tip of Sandman’s tail which is peeping out from under my bulging jacket, and Mike, who’s three, and Jessica’s brother, is sleeping, leaning against his mother with his thumb in his mouth, and the fireman with the scratches on his face goes away and leaves the door open, and when I can’t see him any more, I think that I’m about to stop breathing again or I’m going to burst or just collapse in a heap, and I stand up, both hands under my jacket, and get out of the van and breathe smoky air, breathe standing tall – that means with a straight spine, and with my chin raised slightly skywards.

I only know that the red’s there, I can’t see it because it’s still night but I know that the dark stripes on the tape are red. Red and white diagonally-striped barrier tape, behind it: people. The woman from the health food shop: dressing gown, trainers, next to her the man from the health food shop: dressing gown, slippers. He’s got the dachshund with him on a lead. They live above the shop, and they’re standing there with a lot of other people. Eighty? A hundred by now? What’s a hundred people?

The house is just smouldering now, but more and more people and blue flashing lights are moving around, dark-fields between them, filled with the scarcely audible rustling of lime trees, suddenly the heavy, sweet perfume of lime blossoms is hanging in the night air, you see. Breathe in, I think, breathe out, breathe in, and I close my eyes and cough. It’s the beginning of October, I think. There’s no blossom on the lime trees, I think, and later I’ll know that it’s a form of poisoning from smoke inhalation, that there are different forms, you see, Jessica has one, Mike has one, Vroni and Harald, we all have one. Frau Pietzsch is the only one not suffering from smoke inhalation. And Yılmaz, it couldn’t harm him either, because he’s gone hiking in the Eifel Region with his kids. Lime trees don’t flower in October, I think, so they can’t give off their fragrance in October either. Remind myself of reality, the red and white diagonally-framed reality, but there it is distinctly, the heavy, sweet smell of lime tree blossoms, and suddenly, without warning, the hand.

It pushes me in the direction of the van. I shake my head. It smells of Lenor-sleep there, I whisper to the hand on my shoulder, and I’m something that can be turned around and pushed. You don’t mean any harm, I explain to the man attached to the hand. Who doesn’t mean any

harm? he wants to know, and he relaxes his grip. You, I say, nodding in his direction. Me? he takes his hand away. Exactly, I say. His voice is now hard and sharp-edged: I don't mean any harm at all! I know, I say and nod again.

That hand again, it's pushing. I resist, shake my head again, but: You really should get back in the van, we need to ask you some questions anyway. I pull my shoulder away from the hand. Where's the fireman? I ask. I'm the fireman, he explains. No, I say, and look around. Yes, he says, and puts his hand on my other shoulder and pushes again, and I resist again, and duck away from his hand again, and look for the fireman I want to kiss later, and I can't find him amongst all the men in bulky fluorescent orange, and I should have asked him what his name was.

What's your name? I ask. Please get back in the van now, he says. But what's your name? I ask. What's my name got to do with anything? He sounds impatient, and I look at him – I'm surprised at his intelligent question, you see. It really doesn't have anything to do with anything, I say, and nod, I don't want to kiss you anyway.

Sorry? The hand disappears, his eyes widen, and I – leave. Where are you going? He follows me. To breathe, I say. You're going to breathe. I nod. I breathe, walk up and down. Sandman meows. I put my free hand into the bag that my jacket has become, stroke. Silence again, straight away. You can breathe in the van too, says the man. I examine his face. He's really stupid.

It's amazing, I think, how soon you're able to tell cats' voices apart, that is, it's not so much the pitch of their voices, it's the tone. Sandman has a demanding tone, Death, a musical tone. That meowing just then, I think, was quite clearly a demanding sort of meowing, and I walk up and down, and now the hand's gone, and the man it belongs to is gone, and I walk up and down, carrying my cats in a bag on my stomach, and I don't leave the red and white diagonally-stripped frame, and I look for the fireman I want to kiss later. I search for him with my eyes, but I can't find him, I can only see firemen and more firemen. They surge to and fro, I think. They're like waves, like a sea, these numerous, orange-clad security men. A sea of rescuers, that calls out and runs and sweats and carries, a sea of firemen, that reels up and aligns hoses, that turns the big taps fitted horizontally on the fire engines, and presses the flashing buttons, that carries tools to and fro, and transmits radio messages, and talks with policemen and with the men from the Agency for Technical Relief, and points out areas of the house with arms raised and hands outstretched, that wears helmets, shiny white helmets, and shiny yellow ones, striped now and again with blue light, swimming in darkness the rest of the time, and, on the other side of the red and white diagonally-stripped frame, ninety people now, a hundred and twenty, and behind them, a few lights shining in the windows, no, behind the windowpanes – intact lights behind intact panes of glass.

A little boy sticks his head out a window above the health food shop, and calls sleepily and not at all frightened, for his mother, and the health food shop woman calls something back, and goes inside with her husband and her dachshund, and I look for the fireman I want to kiss later, and hold a light, doubled live weight in my left hand and sit down on a bollard at the edge of the grassy area in front of the house, a boundary bollard that's inside the red and white diagonally-stripped frame, I sit down because I'm feeling light-headed and hot. Hot in a scratchy, unpleasant way, as if something is igniting inside me – something is igniting in my throat, that is, like a seat of fire maybe, and I think that I can't remember how long it's been since I had such a savage, ravaging thirst, and someone says:

I remember sugary-sweet iced tea in summer, litres of it from the fridge on Bjarnarstigur. And though I flinch when I hear the street name, the voice sounds like it's reclining relaxed in an armchair when it speaks it, and though I look around, there's no-one to be seen, just like before on the ladder there was no-one to be seen, and suddenly I begin to see, suddenly I think that it's the same voice, the same cold, hard voice as before, bodiless, faceless, and that it's talking about those same days that it was talking about before, and only now, when I think all of that and my gaze rests on the blind, staring holes where windows used to be, where nothing's reflected any more, not the blue lights, not the moon, not the leaves of the lime trees, only now do I finally realise that there's something very wrong about this voice.

But before I can really think about it, I finally see him, and jump up, and feel tiny cat claws on my stomach, and walk, no, run over, and when I plunge into the sea of bustling rescuers, the fireman, the one I want to kiss – he's vanished again.

So I stand. I stand in the sea of firemen, and I'm a rock – the sea surges, opens up, closes again around me, and I immerse myself to the depths of my gaze, that means: I immerse myself with my eyes only, and I can't find him, and no-one brushes against me, they give me a wide berth, veering to the right and veering to the left, depending on where they're coming from and where they're going, purposeful, all of them. They're still carrying hoses and axes and ropes, and they're bringing one of the ladders in and leaving the other ones standing and taking off their safety gloves and wiping their faces with their sleeves and looking up at the roof. It worries them. Smoke and soot are the only things left, but the roof really seems to worry them, and I stand and breathe and immerse myself – to the depths of my gaze, that is, and in vain – in the sea to find the fireman I want to kiss later, and the fragrance of the lime trees pervades October, and floats over the red and white diagonally-striped frame, smelling like honey, and so, like summer breakfasts on the terrace, and someone says:

It's best when the egg yolk is still a bit runny, but the egg white is firm, then a little blob of butter on each teaspoonful of egg, with a piece of well-done toast to chase it down with, and I know exactly who likes his egg like this, and I ignore what I'm hearing, concentrate on other sounds, on shouting, from close by, from far away, on the gentle breeze that's sprung up, on the humming of engines. I immerse myself, and while I'm immersing myself I look around again for the body that belongs to the voice, but all I can see is firemen with walkie-talkies and hoses, and slowly, so it seems to me, the night sky is getting lighter, that is, behind the grey, burnt-out house the black sky is turning charcoal.

I'll walk with you for a bit, says someone. I'll walk with you for a bit if you'd like, and this time it's a deep voice again, but I ignore it because these voices are confusing me and because I hope that maybe they'll stop talking about Bjarnarstigur and about summer breakfasts I didn't ever want to think about again. If I ignore them, if I just don't pay any attention to them, I think, then maybe they'll stop. But they're not interested in that, and someone says again: I'll walk with you for a bit. Maybe over there? And points with an orange, safety-jacket sleeve not in the direction of the van, and not in the direction of the house, but in the direction I've just come from, in the direction of the bollard I sat on to breathe and to look, and he only points, and doesn't push, and doesn't turn me around, and has a body.

The fireman is standing next to me. He's the fourth – no, the third, so not the one I'd like to kiss later, and not the one I climbed down the ladder from the balcony with either, or the one who made me into an object to be turned around and pushed. It's the fireman with the scratches

on his face, the one who brought me back my cat. Frau Pietzsch isn't in the house, he'd said, holding my cat in his arms.

Frau Pietzsch didn't burn to death in the fire, she didn't suffocate either, in all likelihood she's in good health, and she's definitely alive, I say, and look at him. He nods: she wasn't here last night, he answers. She's not suffering from smoke inhalation either, I say. He nods again, smiles: that goes without saying. Then the third fireman points an outstretched arm at the bollard, the one I jumped up from before. I'll walk with you for a bit, he says. If you want, he says, and my hand – like an autumn leaf, floating upwards, like a weightless, pale autumn leaf floating in a breeze, that doesn't belong to me. My hand, the free one, the one that's not holding any cats under my jacket, my right hand places itself on the third fireman's arm.

I look at him. I lean my head against his chest. I only come up to his shoulders, and I lean my head against his chest, and leave my hand on his arm, and he leaves my hand on his arm and he leaves my head where it is too, and he says: nothing at all, he just puts his other arm around my shoulders, and we're a rock that the sea surges around, and the sea parts around us, to the right and to the left, and no-one brushes against us, and I feel his breath on my face, and my face is wet, and we're a rock that the sea surges around, and we're a rock that moves through the sea, and that knows exactly where it's going – that is, not towards the van and not towards the house, but towards the bollard at the very edge of the red and white diagonally-stripped frame – and I really don't understand how it's possible to walk, if you're a rock that's entwined like this, but we can. We're a rock that can do that, and we get to the bollard and sit down on the trampled grass. I lean against the bollard, and the third fireman sits very straight next to me, and I've got my hand against now, and he's got his arm again, and – we sit in silence.

What's your name? I ask after we've said nothing for a while. Rieger, he says, Bartek Rieger, and I laugh. Bartek Rieger, did you know that you're a rock? He smiles, then he looks at the grass between his outstretched legs, and he's not smiling any more, he looks serious now, and he says, still looking at the grass: sometimes I'm a rock, and sometimes I'm not a rock.

There was a deflagration, wasn't there? he asks, and I look at him, I look at him from side-on. A deflagration, he says again, and nods. Gas, he says. Vapours, you know? We found cans of petrol, he says, behind the house. Whoever did this did it with petrol. Did? My voice, like reeds stirring. Someone poured petrol on the door, he says quietly. You mean, I begin, and he nods. Has anyone threatened you? he asks, and me, with raised eyebrows: Do you mean that the fire wasn't an accident? No, he says quietly, I'm sorry, that's out of the question. And I think that I didn't know how slowly you can think, but now I know – that is, you can think so slowly that it feels as if time is standing still.

What's a deflagration? I ask. Flammable liquids, he explains, let off vapours, gaseous mixtures. Bartek Rieger talks like a friendly teacher. If, for example, you pour petrol on a wooden door, then hold a match to it, it causes a muffled bang, a small explosion. It's the gases that are set alight, that burn. When there's so little petrol you don't get a loud noise.

It goes *whoof!* doesn't it? I whisper. He smiles, nods. It's a miracle, he says, that you and the cats, he breaks off, says nothing for a while. There must have been a deflagration, he says finally, and I nod when he says that, because I remember the noise. It woke you up, he says. It sounds like a question, but it isn't one. You were asleep, right? I nod: It sounded like *whoof!* It woke me up.

It's a miracle, he says again, and I look over at him. That you survived, he says, and looks at the grass between his legs again, you and the cats, it's verging on a miracle, he says. The wall between the bed and the hall outside, it was just an old door that had been wallpapered over, he explains, and I nod again. It must have burnt through straight away, and with the smoke coming from it... If it wasn't for the deflagration, he says, if you hadn't heard it, well you wouldn't have woken up...

And I hear the dot dot dot as clearly as the *whoof!* a couple of hours ago – because he doesn't want to say the word, you see. The young fireman with the scratches on his face doesn't want to say *dead*.

But I want to say it, and I say it. If it hadn't woken me up, I say, then I'd be dead now, I'd be finished, I'd be a corpse, or the charred remains of a corpse, and he nods, and hugs me tightly with the hand that's lying on my shoulder, and with the arm that's around my neck. I was supposed to just ask you a couple of questions. I shouldn't have...

You like dot dot dots, Bartek Rieger, I say, and he smiles uncertainly, and I jab three little dots sitting next to each other into the air in front of us, I jab them into the air with my forefinger, and now he understands and says that some things aren't so easy to say.

But you have to say them, I explain, it's important. Important? he asks. I nod: So that you don't lose sight of reality. And he hugs me to him again, and I close my eyes, but I open them again straight away, because the hissing gets unbearably loud when I close them, and I say, with my eyes open, very slowly, so slowly, that is, that time nearly stands still, I say: Someone deliberately poured petrol on my apartment door and set it alight.

So it would seem, he says quietly, and I shake my head, confused, and look at him. You're still bleeding, Bartek Rieger. He wipes the scratches on his face with his hand.

What's her name, the other one? he wants to know, pointing at my stomach. Sandman, I answer, and because of the scratches on his face – by way of an apology, that is – I say: He's a he, he's just four months old, and I close my eyes and fill my ears with hissing, and lean my head on Bartek Rieger's arm. Sandman? he asks. Sandman and Death? It's more of a murmur, an amused, questioning murmur: Like Gaiman's Death and Sandman? And the shelf with all the comic books, behind the armchair, goes up in smoke, smoulders, crumbles into ash, but I think that I'll go to sleep now; I'll rest in Bartek Rieger's smiling murmur, and fall into a deep, sound, dreamless sleep. And right at that moment someone calls across the small square in front of the house and through the charcoal ends of the night and through the lime tree fragrance, calls out his name, loud and clear. Rieger! someone calls, and I sit up with a start: the third fireman is here to work.

He gets up and waves in the direction of one of the fire engines. Where's the girl? the other man wants to know. I'll be back in two minutes, says Bartek Rieger quietly, and I think that sometimes he's a rock and sometimes he isn't a rock, and I listen to see what's going on in my jacket, but: no sound coming from there at all, just a light pressure at regular intervals on my thigh – two small sets of lungs filling and emptying and filling and emptying.

The woman's voice is suddenly back again, as if it had never left. Things like this, it says, don't happen by chance. They always happen for a reason. You bring things like this on yourself, it says, and though I can't see the woman I know that she's standing somewhere near me, looking down on me. She lives her life in fear – the voice speaks sharply, sounds unforgiving. In fear, it says, which is quite natural really. The wrong people got hurt, she knows that full well, it says, and now I'm gasping quietly for breath, and my throat is constricted. She's the one who should

have died, concludes the woman's voice, you bring on bad things like this with the fear that you carry in your heart, and when it says that I don't yet know that from now on I'll be hearing the voice often, almost constantly, I don't even know that she has a name, I just hunch my shoulders and lower my head as she gives her verdict, and wait. I wait for her to stop. But she doesn't stop; she carries on, unmoved, in her razor voice: There's no such thing as chance, she says, and that certainly didn't happen by chance. And I know there and then that she's about to talk about Hjartan.

She's guilty, she states calmly, and I know that she means me, and I can't think of any way of defending myself, and I think that she's right, and though I try to stop myself, I'm gasping for air again. But then someone says: You're making it very easy for yourself, Pia, and it seems to be the other voice, the deeper voice, the one that said to me on the ladder that not all forms of death hiss and roar. You're making it too easy for yourself, it says again. Pia just snorts softly. Believe me, Lars, she says, I'm not making it easy for myself. Things like that don't happen by chance. There's no such thing as chance, not in this case, not in any other case.

Then it's silent for a moment. Long enough for two terrifying thoughts. These two, I think, having this conversation, have names, so they really exist, and they're talking about Iceland. That means, firstly, that they know things that no-one else knows, and it means, secondly, that I've got reason to be afraid of what they're talking about.

I know that there's no such thing as chance, says Lars. It almost sounds as if he's laughing softly as he says it. But, he says, I'm sure it didn't happen quite the way you're making it out right now. Things aren't always what they seem to be at first glance, he says, and I relax a little and ask myself, surprised, why he's coming to my defence. You really shouldn't make it so easy for yourself, Pia, or so hard for everyone else, he says again, and I finally let out my breath. I had been holding my breath without realising, and at that moment, when Lars says what he says, I let out a long, forceful breath, and let my shoulders fall, and see the house in front of me, looking the way it does now, and I remember exactly how it looked a couple of hours ago, and –

Sorry, says Bartek Rieger, it took a bit longer after all. He sits down next to me again, and stretches out his legs, and I look at him closely. Do you believe in chance, Bartek Rieger? Since you believe in miracles, I say, do you also believe in chance? He seems to be thinking about it, and he looks at the house while he thinks, and because he does that, because he looks at the house, I know what he's thinking straight away. Yes, he says, and keeps looking at the house, yes, I believe in chance. Is that a white lie, Bartek Rieger? I ask, and he laughs, and I'm amazed at how clearly you can make out the light brown of his eyes, even though it's still dark. It's not a white lie, he says, and anyway we can't get into this fascinating discussion right now, because you have to talk to the police. Yet another white lie? I ask, but he shakes his head. It's because of the site inspection, he explains, and because they need to ask you some questions, and he points straight ahead – two men are coming up to us.