



**JOHN VON DÜFFEL**  
**DIE WÜTENDEN UND DIE SCHULDIGEN /**  
**THE ANGRY AND THE GUILTY**

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## 'MARIA

... really is a lovely name,' the rabbi welcomed her. She felt very uncomfortable violating the

quarantine rules and finding herself at his door again the very next day. But she had not been able to stick to the strict distancing rules when he knocked on her door yesterday to bring her a packet of coffee beans, which he had bought himself, and to invite her to try his favourite coffee speciality today. Her embarrassment was not lessened by the fact that he had also ordered her supplies to last her at least a week. Two bulging shopping bags of essentials were leaning against the wall inside the door. As was to be expected, she refused just as much as he firmly insisted that she take all of it. 'It's far too much for one old man alone,' he added with a mischievous grin.

'Alright,' Maria stopped resisting. 'What do I owe you?'

'Toilet paper,' he said, pointing to a plastic encased twelve-pack alongside the two bags. 'Let's say half. Supposedly it's the last pack left in the whole of Berlin.'

'I mean your expenses, how much ...' She smiled uncertainly.

The rabbi smiled back. 'We are not talking about money. I am in your debt.' Maria wanted to object to the word 'debt' in this context, but he raised his hands, still in the wide sleeves of his housecoat, as if to placate her. 'We'll discuss the rest while you try my coffee. Have you ever been up here? Feel free to have a look around...' He took two steps back and pointed to the living and dining room area, which was flooded with March sunshine, with one of his magic sleeves. There seemed to be no walls, only glass and a panoramic view of the city's rooftops.

But Maria remained outside the door. 'You really are the nicest neighbour ever to have lived up here since the loft conversion. Your washing machine meant well when it

introduced us to each other. I want to thank you for that.' She held out a plate of biscuits she had been hiding behind her back. 'I'm an anaesthetist, not a cook, and I hope they don't taste too much like Christmas cookies. It's my grandmother's recipe, the only thing I inherited from her, and kosher.'

While he thanked her with a small bow and accepted the plate, Maria could already picture the newspaper headline: 'German doctor poisons Israeli ambassador's rabbi with Covid 19 biscuits!' But more likely than infection with Covid 19 from the plate surface that she'd contaminated was the alternative headline: 'German doctor discriminates against Israeli ambassador's rabbi, dignitary treated like leper!' If she had to choose between a breach of hygiene regulations and anti-Semitic behaviour, she didn't have to think twice: she would rather be a bad doctor than a bad person.

'A higher power tells me that your grandmother's biscuits are going to go quite wonderfully with my coffee,' the rabbi said. 'If I am not mistaken, that's almond ...' He waved the plate at chin level, took a deep breath, and nodded in satisfaction. The biscuits had come straight out of the oven, meaning that according to current research, they were too hot to be a carrier for viruses.

'If you had a choice, rabbi,' Maria decided to ask him directly, 'between endangering someone's health and hurting his feelings, what would you do?'

The rabbi eyed her for a moment. 'That would depend. In the case of almond biscuits, I would think that health is secondary.'

Maria smiled briefly and sadly, then took a forced breath. 'I'm afraid I have a confession to make – late, but hopefully not too late ...'

'Confession?' The rabbi tilted his head and blinked like a doll that had been slapped on the back.

'I'm in quarantine because of a Covid case on our ward,' she continued. 'If it hadn't been for the flood in my bathroom, I would never have left my own four walls, that much I can say in my defence. But I shouldn't even be standing here.'

The rabbi made a face as if he were wondering why people always came to him with their strange worries and needs.

'By the way, it is purely a precautionary measure to protect against infection. I have no symptoms, no other contacts,' Maria continued to apologise. 'It's only if the health department were to check or the Charité were to do random checks on their employees, then ...'

'...then you had better come in as quickly as possible,' he finished her sentence.

Maria shook her head. 'It's not just about the factual risk of infection. As a doctor, I have to be a role model and keep to the rules. I just want to make it clear that the distance I keep has nothing to do with you. I am the problem.'

'What problem?'

'The leper, so to speak. In any case, you not only have the right to treat me accordingly, but also the duty, in a way.' Maria lowered her eyes. 'See you in a fortnight, hopefully in good health and with a clear conscience.' In her embarrassment, she gave a little curtsy, but dared not leave without him dismissing her.

'Don't you want to hear the opinion of an old rabbi at all?'

'Yes, yes, but ...' She noted that he was wearing felt slippers, without socks, showing blue-veined ankles. He didn't look like a traveller at all, but as if he hadn't left the flat in months.

'I've had a lot to do with lepers in my lifetime and still do,' he said softly, almost tenderly. 'If it was a matter of avoiding them, I wouldn't have become a rabbi and you probably wouldn't have become a doctor.'

'Leper' in the figurative sense ...'

'You're always a leper in a figurative sense, too.'

'I mean ...' she took a step back.

'You mean the distancing rules and contact restrictions.' The measures had an unpleasant ring coming from the rabbi's mouth. 'And I say: if you isolate yourself, you isolate others. Don't worry, Maria. If any inspectors come by, I will stand in front of you and ask the friendly German authorities if they really want to tell an old Jew how to survive in this country.'

She wanted to reply that she thought the regulations made perfect medical sense, but the rabbi was already leading the way down the hallway into the living and dining room area with all its windows for a tour. The entire penthouse looked like the perfect prototype of an Airbnb profile with roof balconies on both sides: a smaller one for breakfast facing east, a large one with a barbecue for sitting together in the evenings facing west. Maria was amazed. The flat was three times as big as hers, with two bedrooms and a study, a small guest wing and alternating skylights and studio windows that fanned out the sky time and again. An entire yuppie flat-sharing community could be blissfully happy here. It was just not at all a place for a rabbi.

Anyone looking in through the windows would have thought the old man in the threadbare housecoat and worn felt slippers was a ghost, left over from the time when the penthouse was a cobwebbed attic. Nothing indicated that he really lived here: no street shoes in the hallway, no dirty dishes in the sink, not even a torn newspaper between the club chairs. Even the debacle with the washing machine seemed like it had never happened. Apparently, the rabbi hadn't hesitated to call the bodyguard's miracle hotline and order a couple of crime scene cleaners.

'What about your suitcase? Has it been recovered? Have they delivered it yet?' She felt somehow disappointed because she wasn't seeing what she was looking for. But it was only when she looked at the antique two-armed candlestick that dominated the dining table that she realised what was actually missing: there was nothing Jewish in the whole flat.

'Excuse me, the kettle ...' The rabbi turned it off and continued to fiddle around in the open kitchen. 'What do you want to know?'

'Nothing, nothing,' Maria waved it away. She didn't dare to repeat the question about the suitcase. Instead, she watched the old man pour the boiling water into two thick-walled glasses and come shuffling back to the dining table with a tray in his hands. Maybe that's why he had his housecoat and slippers in his hand luggage, so that he could be home anywhere in the world in no time and disappear again just as quickly.

'Botz coffee,' he said. 'Also known as 'mud coffee'. Put half a spoonful of roasted ground coffee in the glass, add boiling water, milk, and sugar to taste. Then wait a while until the coffee settles to the bottom and the temperature is right. It's very simple. I hope I

don't sound too much like your grandmother.' With a sly grin, he placed the almond biscuits on the table.

'I can hardly remember her,' Maria said. 'Most of the memories have faded into anecdotes and vice versa.'

The rabbi took a biscuit, dipped it in his coffee and tasted it, but said nothing, just closed his eyes in silent enjoyment. Maria hesitated for a moment. Then she copied him.

It was not the first time she had sat and chatted with a clergyman. She had spent many evenings talking to Richard, often late into the night, father-in-law and daughter-in-law, the Protestant priest and the Polish Catholic. He had never tried to 'reform' her. When it came to religious topics – and at some point, the conversation almost inevitably turned to this – neither of them took the discussion particularly seriously, he, it seemed, even less than her. And every time, the suspicion would creep up on her that Richard basically didn't believe in God at all, neither in the Protestant nor in the Catholic sense, as if he had scar tissue where she had retained her childhood faith. Yet Richard was not a cynic. He believed in what he was doing. And she believed he did what he could as a pastor.

'And your family is from Warsaw?' the rabbi asked after she told him about Richard's digs at Polish Catholicism. 'Or what part of Poland are you from?'

'Somewhere near Gdansk, but where exactly ...' Maria shrugged her shoulders. 'My mother was born during the turmoil at the end of the war as the family fled. I only know Poland from the old stories.'

'You never went there to search for traces?' The rabbi swirled the remnants of his mud coffee a little before drinking it down.

'You can't really call them traces, at most burned bridges. When I wanted to know something about the past as a young girl, my mother always said: 'Our life is here.' If you can call that life. She worked constantly. That was the only way I knew her, she couldn't help it, she had to earn money, look after her mother, bring up her daughter, all without a husband. Her dream was always to become a doctor one day, but she remained a geriatric nurse until she died. In the end, some of the patients she took care of were younger than she was.'

'And then you fulfilled your mother's dream and studied medicine ...'

'It was my dream too, always. My mother just paid for it – with even more overtime.' Maria didn't mind being questioned by the rabbi. Somehow, she felt she could tell him everything. It felt a bit like confession without the repentance. 'I could really get used to your coffee, but I had better go now.'

'I'd be happy to make you another,' the rabbi said, 'I'm having one anyway.'

'Are you a coffee addict too?'

The rabbi smirked. 'Coffee is not an addictive drug, it's a way of thinking.'

'Aren't all drugs?' Maria chuckled, then became serious again. 'I have to go downstairs. All it takes is a check call on the landline. If I don't answer the phone at home, it raises questions. Would you like the last one, for my grandmother's sake?' She held out the plate with the remaining biscuit.

'If you'll keep me company for a while ...' He took an extra small bite as if he wanted to nibble on it forever.

'Then tell me why you're here.' So far, he had elegantly turned all her questions into counter-questions and played them back. 'So, what brings you to Berlin, lingering traces or broken bridges?'

'Burned bridges are also remaining traces, Maria'

She wasn't sure if he was just avoiding her or if it was his way of speaking in parables. 'And the ambassador? Is he a standing bridge or are you not allowed to talk about it?'

'More like the safety of the shore for a stranded man.' He blinked at her, then raised a hand against the white, over-bright light of the March sun. 'The stranded one is me. Actually, I wasn't going to Berlin at all, but to Hamburg and from there to New York by ship.'

'A cruise?'

'A passage, no return.' He stood up and went to the control unit in front of the window, where he pressed a few buttons. 'I'm sorry, but before we sit here facing each other with teary eyes ...' Blinds rolled down, shadow grilles lowered into the light-filled room. 'Six months ago, when I planned the crossing, there were no problems. Now there is nothing that is not a problem: the visa, the US borders that are closed to travellers from Europe, cruise ships bobbing in the harbours without anyone being allowed to disembark, quarantine in the worst sense. Is it better now or is it too dark?'

She waved the query through. From her point of view, it could be pitch black if that helped him to talk.

'It is the worst of all possible times to be following traces.' The rabbi returned to the table as a shadow, sat down and continued to nibble on the half biscuit he had left. 'Originally, I wanted to go last year, but I was in hospital for a while. And now that I'm out and well again, the world is sick.'

Maria didn't ask the question why again, he answered of his own accord. 'My grandparents made this journey as they fled, but not like your grandmother at the end of the war, but six months before the war began, in March 1939. Late, almost too late. My grandfather believed in Germany like a second religion, despite everything – defying everything. Politically, he had seen through the Nazis as Jew-haters from the start, he knew what they were. But he didn't reject them because Adolf Hitler was a fanatical anti-Semite like many other, but out of patriotism. For my grandfather, the Nazis were not real Germans. As a staunch supporter of the Centre Party, he saw himself as the centre of society and the Führer as a marginal phenomenon, just as the pendulum sometimes swings to the extreme and then swings back to the centre, to him. So he remained loyal to his homeland, for better or worse, until the Kristallnacht. Only then did he plan his escape across the Atlantic to the 'barbarians', by which he meant the Americans.'

The rabbi stopped speaking, creating a silence he was maybe unaware of, utterly lost in thought. Maria waited a while before asking if he had only come to say goodbye to Germany and to follow in his grandfather's footsteps.

'My grandparents left from Bremerhaven back then,' he replied, as if grateful for the question, 'on the 'Europe', one of the big passenger ships on the transatlantic route. Nowadays, only freighters sail from Bremerhaven. I am fully aware that it is not the same voyage, a completely different time and, in a way, a different ocean. Nevertheless, I am still hoping to gain something from it. Some people take a trip around the world in their old age, I'm taking a trip through time, or at least trying to. And who would have thought that the American immigration authorities would play along and select like they did back then ...'

He dwelt on his thoughts for a moment, then turned back to her. 'Have you ever been out on the open seas on a ship, on a real sea voyage?'

'I've certainly been really seasick before if that's what you mean.' Strictly speaking, she was answering a question with a counter-question, but the rabbi seemed to need encouragement. Sitting there as he was, he did indeed look like a stranded or shipwrecked man without a suitcase. 'My aunt once took me on a cruise. It was terrible. Which I'm sure wasn't just down to the cruise but also down to my aunt.' She laughed hesitantly, trying to keep things light. The rabbi stared into the darkness.

'She was the older sister and pretty much the opposite of my mother,' Maria continued, 'which you can tell from the fact that my aunt could afford cruises that my mother didn't even have time to dream of. In Yiddish, you would probably call her a 'shiksa', or what do you call a woman whose life plan is limited to getting rich through divorces? Not to speak ill of the dead, of course,' she added. 'But my aunt lived longer than anyone else.'

'Then I would call her a survivor,' said the rabbi.

'You are right, I am biased,' Maria now more or less confessed. 'My mother got nothing from her husband, only me. My aunt enriched herself with each separation and remained childless. Two sisters could hardly be more different.'

The rabbi dabbed a few microscopic almond biscuit crumbs from the empty plate. 'Won't you have another mud coffee? One last one?'

It was a request she couldn't refuse him. 'I'll help you,' Maria said, putting the glasses on the tray. 'Then I'll learn how to make your Botz coffee.'

'There is nothing for you to learn.' The rabbi gathered himself and followed her into the dark kitchen that was intersected by streaks of sunlight. He evidently didn't think it was necessary to pull up the blinds again or even turn on the light. Ground coffee and kettle were ready. Maria found her way around in the semi-darkness and worked under his supervision.

'Don't get me wrong. I felt sorry for my aunt too, certainly, especially since it was clear after her third marriage that there wasn't much more to come. In a strange way, we liked each other. I think she always saw me as the daughter she never had, and for me, she was the woman I was never allowed to be. In any case, my mother had vetoed my aunt's offer of funding of my studies but could not stop me from going on a cruise after my pre-med exams. So we set sail together, my aunt and I, also from Hamburg at the time. I got seasick before we even entered the North Sea.'

She washed the coffee grounds out of the glasses; the water was already boiling.

'What I didn't know was that the trip was less of a reward for my academic achievements than a tour to console her after her third break-up. I was supposed to cheer her up during the dull hours at sea and be the decoy for new acquaintances in the glamorous moments. Yes, my aunt was skilled at playing a sophisticated mix of grief and flirtation. She never presented herself as a divorced woman, but always as a widow, a merry widow at that.'

The rabbi was right. It was quite simple. Maria made the coffee as if she had been making it all her life. 'I hope that doesn't sound spiteful. Everything I blame her for, I must also blame myself for, after all, I was her accomplice in the little lies and role-playing, all the camouflage that goes with a cruise. I could also have said that I was not her cousin and definitely not her

little sister, when she made me older and herself a lot younger, depending on the judgement of the gentlemen in question. But for me it was a kind of carnival: not a world I would have wanted to live in, but a welcome change after three days of seasickness in the darkened cabin.'

'Maybe,' said the rabbi, grey with shadows, 'she was just trying to collect the debt of life.'

Maria was speechless for a moment. 'My aunt? The debt of life? What do you mean?'

But he said nothing more but went ahead with his coffee glass – past the dining table, as if he would never sit down in the same place twice, never eat from the same plate twice, on principle. Instead, he settled down in the club chair at the other end of the room and offered her the leather couch. They were now sitting almost as if in the glass panorama lounge of a cruiser. In front of them, the coffee steamed in countless fine droplets through the beams of daylight.

'If your mother was born at the end of the war, then your aunt was already alive when they fled and was – how old? – two or three...'

'Three and a half.'

'Then she had to run for her life.'

Maria considered it for a moment and nodded tentatively. They had never spoken about it.

'Perhaps it began to guide her at that moment; perhaps it had already taken possession of her even before that, before her flight: the most powerful feeling in the world, more powerful than love...' The rabbi paused for a moment, blowing and driving the steam like a small cloud before him into the invisible. 'I am speaking about the instinctive greed to survive.'

He took a breath and blew on his coffee once more. Maria watched the swirls and haze as they made their way through the broken light. It was as though they were sailing or swaying on the high seas.

'Greed and desire are often not easy to distinguish, just like survival and life. But greed is always first, and with it the belief of all the hungry that life owes them something, bread or happiness or wealth ...'

'Can life owe you something you have never possessed?'

'An outstanding debt is also a form of debt.'

The rabbi sipped from his glass and his features relaxed. There seemed to be so much left unsaid, yet he made no attempt to speak. She tried her coffee too, at the risk of burning her tongue. The second one tasted almost better than the first.

They drank silently in the dark, while Maria listened to her inner voice and checked to what extent everything the old man had said also applied to herself. She could feel her heart. It was beating so hard that she thought it could be heard in the silence. Normally she could tolerate coffee at any time of the day or night, but perhaps she had swallowed too much mud.

'Can I ask you one more question, Maria?' The rabbi put his glass down on the coffee table. 'Forgive my curiosity, but you've talked so much about the women in your family, where are the men?'

He was not the first to ask this question and she had not the slightest desire to answer. 'You'll have to ask the men who scarpered. None of us women missed them, except

perhaps my aunt, as spectators and paying audience. But on that point, I completely side with my mother and her conviction that we don't need a man, not for our happiness nor our unhappiness. To us, men are not an outstanding debt, if you like.' She spoke louder than necessary to drown out her racing heart. 'And from what I can tell, they weren't particularly helpful in surviving in the past.'

The rabbi seemed to be waiting for her to continue speaking. But Maria didn't want to embarrass herself any more. 'Do you have a family?' she tried a counter-question.

'Everyone has a family,' he said, looked at her unchanged.

For a moment, she returned his gaze, then she relented. 'All right, the story about the cruise is not over, and, yes, there are men in it. But if I bore you, you only have yourself to blame.' If she was going to tell him everything now, she would have liked to put her feet up and stretch out on the sofa, but instead she just removed her shoes unobtrusively. The flokati beneath her feet was fluffy and soft. 'Of course, the ideal consolation after a break-up for a woman in her prime is not a girlfriend, especially not a younger one, and certainly not one of her own relatives, but a new man. In my aunt's case, it would have been husband number four, so for her the cruise had the port of marriage as its destination. But it was a long journey, and the first thing to do was to find a suitable candidate among the wealthy older gentlemen on board. Do you really want to hear this, rabbi?'

He inclined his grey head; unfortunately that was a yes. Maria drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around her bent knees.

'I don't want to make fun of my aunt and her hunger for life or the 'happiness debt' she was trying to collect. She was a very attractive woman in her fifties at the time, with flamboyant hair and a striking figure. I soon lost track of her various on-board shadows; there were at least three. So I was alone a lot in our cabin and began to attend the lectures offered in the accompanying programme, especially on the days without shore excursions or even land in sight. To this day it is a mystery to me why my aunt had booked a trip to the Arctic Circle to cheer herself up, where after the Faroe Islands there is only grey, grey sea, grey sky and volcanic rock. Iceland, Spitzbergen, that's nothing but cooled lava, glaciers, ice and snow. But perhaps she wanted to go to the end of the world and see the northern lights on a whim. Or maybe it was her way of turning night into day by going where the sun didn't set, but only dipped briefly into the sea. Anyway, it was very bright and very dead. So I did what I was used to doing at university. I sat down in the auditorium and listened to every lecture on whatever subject. At the time, technology was still in its infancy, no PowerPoint, video or 3 D animations. These were old-school slide shows on geology, marine biology and the ecology of mosses and lichens. Did you know that a normal sapling needs three years in the cold and barrenness of the polar landscape to grow as much as it does here in three weeks, provided it is not trampled by a tourist's Moonboot? In any case, I soon belonged to the small group of interested people who eagerly awaited the lecturer and his slides – the lecturers, meaning there were two: an older, always slightly perspiring gentleman with a side parting combed over his bald forehead, the epitome of an adult education teacher, and a young marine biologist, who had just graduated from university and was on the tour for the first time. While the jokes of the one were as old as his jackets, the other had an almost divine seriousness to him and allowed himself to digress wildly and get carried away, from which only the pitfalls of the slide projector or the midday ring of the ship's bell could bring him back.'



'And you married him,' said the rabbi.

Maria looked at him in surprise. 'How did you know?'

'I don't know, I just suspect.'

At first, she hadn't wanted to tell him the story, now she felt cheated of the memory. 'Yes, it's the irony of fate that my aunt had gone off with me to find herself a husband and it was me who returned with my intended. Even if it wasn't forever.'

Her heart stopped racing. It was beating more slowly and softly.

The rabbi tilted his head towards her and almost whispered: 'Forgive me, I didn't mean to interrupt you, it's just that I understand you well, your love of divine seriousness and plants that need a lot of time.'

'Then you understand me better than I understand myself,' she said. 'At the time I believed we were meant for each other, the young lecturer and I. Today I think it was a coincidence. He was just as out of place on that trip as I was. Only unfortunately, two wrongs don't make a right.'

She didn't tell the whole truth and hoped very much the rabbi wouldn't notice. She hadn't been the only one on the trip who had been taken with the young scientist with the gentle voice. Most of the women among his predominantly female audience dreamed of him in one way or another and hung on his every word, and not just out of a thirst for knowledge. Maria was no exception. But that was the usual mix of romance and boredom: feelings that sprouted like plants that needed time – that only existed in the first place because there was time. When everyday life returned and with it the hectic pace, they were trampled flat.

She had fallen in love with Holger Thomann, a graduate marine biologist, not because of his passionate lectures or his clumsiness in handling the projector, the slides and the unpredictable remote control. The moment she began to take him and her feelings for him seriously had nothing to do with his role as a lecturer. It was the moment when she first saw him with a gun.

She never found out exactly how it came about that he was put on guard duty – whether the team needed reinforcements or whether he had to fill in for someone who was ill. Holger's explanation that he had always been a good shot, but as a conscientious objector had never been allowed to show it, had always seemed questionable to her. But what she would never forget was the sight of the polar bear the day before. She had taken a short walk on deck before breakfast, as she often did, and in the vague, uniform grey-white of the ice surfaces she had noticed a movement from the corner of her eye, white on white, so she wasn't sure. But almost at the same time, someone below the bridge shouted: 'Polar bear, polar bear, starboard!' And in the same second, she saw him on all fours, moving along the edge of the pack ice with astonishing agility and speed, given his mass. In no time at all, everyone who was already on their feet was standing at the railing, passengers in dressing gowns, with breakfast napkins, with or without having combed their hair, as well as crew members and stewards who handed out binoculars, assisted with photography or simply just stopped waiting tables. Everyone wanted to see the polar bear. The fact that the ship did not list and capsize was a testament to its stability. The polar bear, however, was not bothered by the attention he attracted, perhaps raising his head two or three times, and after trotting along parallel to the ship for a while, he finally disappeared behind a snow crest into the interior of the white desert.

The next morning's lecture was fuller than it had ever before or ever would be again on the trip. It was intended as a preparation for all those who wanted to visit the world's northernmost post office in Ny-Ålesund, as close to the North Pole as Hamburg is to Munich. But, of course, it was mainly about the polar bear we had seen and the likelihood of seeing it again at close range on the way ashore to the post office – an encounter that would be likely to involve being killed and then eaten, or vice versa. Science and Holger Thomann thus receded into the background. Instead, his older colleague let the voice of experience speak and painted the devil in polar bear skin on the wall. They were ferocious beasts, starved by the Arctic winter, full of rage and hatred for the civilisation that threatens them. Anyone who wanted to go ashore to lure them with scraps of food, especially meat and sausages, anyone who planned to move away from the group, out of sight of the polar bear guards and the range of their rifles, would be putting their life in grave danger. As a practised entertainer, he crowned his warnings with the horror story – based on a true incident or perhaps not – about the violent end of a retired teacher couple from Remscheid who had paid for their fascination with the fluffy furry animals with their almost complete dismemberment. Their remaining relatives in Remscheid received only a few sections of finger sporting wedding rings and some inedible bones. 'Polar bears are the largest and most dangerous land predators on the planet,' the senior lecturer impressed on his audience, which was spellbound in awe and shuddering, while Holger – by this point they were already on a first-name basis – had to stand there dumbfounded, condemned to silence, writhing in mental spasms.

As he left the auditorium, he was to say in her ear: 'The most dangerous land predator on the planet is man.'

Maria understood him or thought she did. Not only because he knew better and liked to share this knowledge with the ladies and the one gentleman in the room. Not only because of his agony in having to put up with the utter nonsense spouted by his garrulous frequent-travelling colleague, who ended his lecture with an appeal to all animal lovers in the room to just imagine what polar bears would do to human beings if they had the upper hand. It was, as far as Holger was concerned, something deeper, a deeper violation than that of his scientific integrity, a deeper outrage than that of all conservationists by normal empathic standards. But Maria could only guess how deep it really went in view of the fact that he set aside his reasons for not wanting to serve in the armed forces: Holger, the self-confessed pacifist, had himself placed as a control outpost behind the northernmost post office in the world at minus twenty-two degrees Celsius with a heavy bolt-action rifle.

'It was our love of animals more than plants that bonded us, especially our fascination with polar bears,' Maria said, emerging from her memories. 'Not to mention that we didn't have a choice because there was nothing green for miles around Spitzbergen, just scree-like, snow-veined hills, grey-brown lichen and withered moss. At that time, I believed that this would always unite us, the love for animals, the respect for creation. I never thought that love could also divide us and that in compassion there is a loneliness from which there is no way back.' She looked at the rabbi to see the effect of her words. If he understood her so well then perhaps he would understand this too. But he just remained in the same position, head towards her, as if he were listening. And yet she had remained silent for longer than she had in the presence of another human being for a long time.

'I don't mean to say we didn't feel sorry for the plants, the non-green and puny ones by the wayside when we went ashore in Ny-Ålesund, together with an all-trampling horde of a good one hundred and eighty thickly wrapped tourists in the ship's own down coats. We felt guilty and at the same time sympathised with every colourless blade of grass, every scrawny twig that had taken half an eternity to become what hit was and would take that long again to grow back after the brief invasion of the crusaders. Holger, my future and former husband, was assigned as a polar bear guard with binoculars and shotgun, but instead of taking up his post, he stopped at the edge of town in front of the kennel with the sled dogs, a makeshift boarding shed made of ship pallets and mesh wire. The huskies had burst into a mad howl when we arrived. I had not known that dogs could howl like that, in so many pitches and so loudly. The smell was also intense, to say the least. Most of the tourists hurried on by. Only Holger stayed put and waited until they quietened down. Did I already tell you that he was not allowed to have any pets as a child, not even a goldfish? His pastor father was against it, for religious reasons that, as far as I know, cannot be found in any world religion. Maybe that's why his love of animals was so childlike and unfulfilled. In any case, Holger stood in front of that cage like a little boy who wanted nothing so much as the dog he would never have, completely lost. Even though he had the gun, I felt I had to protect him.'

Again, she looked at the rabbi, expecting some sort of reaction. But she remained alone with her smile.

'The place itself was completely unsightly,' she continued, 'a few houses and huts, barracks and parabolic mirrors, research stations and living containers that had been set up by various companies from different countries in search of mineral resources in the wasteland. Everything was godforsaken and deserted, at least I couldn't see anyone who hadn't come off the ship and wanted to get back on. The inhabitants probably hid in their dwellings whenever the tourists came. A crowd of about a hundred with more or less identical postcards stood in front of the northernmost post office in the world, which was no bigger than a ski hut, and took the obligatory photos. It was the only thing to do except leave. There was no guided tour, not much to see or say. I followed my favourite lecturer to the other side of the post house, which looked like a film set from behind. Protective fences were set up within a radius of about two hundred metres, partly with barbed wire, partly with nets. Whether they could prevent a polar bear from attacking a crowd of tourists if it came to it was a matter of opinion. I stuck to Holger and his rifle. My aunt had not come along, taking advantage of the absence of some of her admirers to lavish particular attention on others. The polar bear guards stood on smaller or larger mounds, sometimes a hill of snow, sometimes a platform-like wooden construction, within sight of each other. Holger stood on a rather wobbly pile of rubble, I was next to him. We didn't talk, mainly because of the cold, but it was probably forbidden because it distracted or attracted the polar bears. Nothing happened for a long time. From the village and from the ship, a babble of voices blew on gusts of wind as if from another world. Avalanches of snow were coming off a nearby roof in beautiful irregularity, apparently someone was heating up the place inside. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who thought about the warm oven and how it would feel to sit close to it instead of standing out in the cold. Then Holger's neighbour three doors down gave us a signal. A couple of heavily drunk older gents in navy blue ships coats had chosen the backyard of the northernmost post office in the world to empty their bladders.'

One of them clearly felt this was too close to civilisation, he staggered on towards the protective fences to pee there. The guard next to us shouted 'stop!' and 'halt!' in several languages. But the man only hurried on even more. The others stumbled after him as if they wanted to hunt him down. They didn't get far. The snow quickly deepened and one by one they got stuck halfway to the fence and fell over. Four drunken men, completely defenceless, like round seals in the snow. Holger took the rifle from his shoulder, his right hand on the butt, his index finger near the trigger, determined to do whatever was necessary. But I could see in his eyes that he was following the group not with the alertness of a lookout, but with the gaze of a hunter on his prey, as if he were feverishly considering how long a polar bear or a polar bear family could live off these well-fed, alcoholic men and how many seals would be spared in return. I was thinking the same thing he was.'

Maria felt her heart begin to pound again, although it happened such a long time ago. Basically, when she talked about herself, she was no longer talking about the same person. But she was embarrassed and talked faster. 'After that, it was one after the other. At first the men were laughing their heads off, then they tried more and more desperately to get up out of the snow. One of them tumbled sideways into a large snowdrift. The next moment, a white cloud of the finest powder snow appeared, and a wild howl went up. Holger and the man next to him raised their guns. But it wasn't a polar bear that had been lurking there, nor an arctic fox with rabies, but a young husky who had escaped from the kennel and was howling and whining his way back to the pack, which immediately answered him with a many-voiced howling chorus. No shot was fired, no one had pulled the trigger hastily, neither Holger nor his neighbour, but they were not aiming at the same target. While the other man had the snow drift in his sights and continued to follow the running husky, Holger's barrel was still pointed at the other shooter for a split second longer. I assume he was ready to shoot the rifle out of his hand. But I'm sure if it had been to save a polar bear, he would have killed the man next to him. That night I slept with him for the first time.'