

Not every day

Novel

By

Markus Vinzent

Part I: No

*Not every day call the best of days
Who longs to return to the joys, where
Friends once loved him, where people
Paused with favor over the youth
(Friedrich Hölderlin)*

Chapter 1 Anika

Anika and Feeny

Anika glanced at her calendar: Friday, February 12, 1988. She had kept the afternoon free—no meetings, no students to coach, no department politics to navigate. Just a single note scribbled in neat, almost hopeful handwriting: Visit Feeny Achner, Sendlinger Vorstadt. An oasis carved out of obligation and necessity, where she could breathe without pretense, a stolen afternoon from a life usually dictated by timetables and responsibilities.

Feeny, a “fashion artist” (whatever that meant in Munich’s perpetual gray), had invited her after a brief, inspirational phone call. Anika had seen the photos—portraits of Feeny as both model and creator. The images had clung to her mind: compelling, unapologetic, defiant in their soft purity. Anika wanted models, not just photographers, to have the spotlight in her next exhibition. She wanted the flesh and the spirit behind the lens. She wanted—what exactly? Recognition? Revelation? Something that felt dangerously close to desire? She wasn’t sure. The boundary between art and life blurred whenever she thought about it. And attracted her, so she went.

The photos were everywhere. Black-and-white nudes mostly, hung along the narrow hallway and the two cluttered rooms that passed for a salon. Feeny, barefoot, ethereal, wearing a sheer voile top that barely brushed the top of her hips, floated from image to image, explaining each pose, what it had meant to her, what it might mean to someone like Anika—someone who looked at art for research, for a living and sometimes forgot she was made of the same trembling flesh. Anika struggled to decide where her eyes ought to land: on the frozen, posed images lining the walls or on the warm, breathing apparition beside her—two gentle impressions pressing through the gauze, the faint outline of her ribs breathing life into the gossamer veil she wore.

“Here,” Feeny said, brushing the air like a painter, “a study with a dress I designed myself—the very one I’m wearing today, ‘nur für Dich’—just for you.” She said it with an easy, earnest ‘Dich,’ the familiar form, as if Anika were an old lover, or maybe a sister in conspiracy, someone whose skin she had the right to touch without ceremony.

Feeny spun down the hallway, her long legs slicing the space like a catwalk model, each step fluid, deliberate, hypnotic. Anika watched—how could she not? Feeny moved like a song you hadn’t heard yet but somehow already loved, a rhythm you didn’t know was missing until it hit your heart, stopped the beats and entered your bloodstream. She turned, walked back, eyes locked on Anika’s, something electric and undeniable sparking between them—something that made the air shimmer and the world shrink.

“Would you like to see my massage room?” Feeny asked, low and thrilling, already taking Anika’s wrist in her hand, a gesture at once casual and possessive. “I’d like to spoil you a little.”

“What kind of massage?” Anika asked, her voice cracking slightly, barely trusting herself to hear the answer.

“All kinds,” Feeny smiled, her mouth curving with a slow, private pleasure. “Medical, sensual, body-to-body...” She let the words hang in the charged air. “If you’d like, even with a happy ending. Ever had a tantra massage?”

Before Anika could answer—could summon the polite refusal she knew was expected—Feeny was already leading her into a small changing room, disappearing for a moment to “get things ready.”

Anika stood there, blinking. Was this insane? Was it reckless? Was it a door she’d spent her whole life pretending not to see?

Why not, she thought suddenly, fiercely. Why the hell not.

She stripped, the fabric sliding from her skin with a whisper, showered quickly, feeling the water melt away layers of hesitation, and lay down on the wide mat, waiting for her—naked, vulnerable, only a towel covering her back, alive in a way she hadn’t felt since her girlhood.

Feeny returned like a breeze, her hands warm and sure, and the first touch was almost a shock. She started at Anika’s shoulders, kneading deep into the muscles, pushing out the stress, the overthinking, the whole absurd burden of her carefully constructed life. The safe scaffolding she had built over years, the armor of academia, the careful politeness—Feeny brushed it all away like dust.

As Feeny’s hands moved—stronger, deeper—she talked in a voice like velvet about the week she’d had: trouble with the massage salon, shadowy men lingering outside bakeries, threats muttered through milk-glass doors. Stories that should have alarmed Anika but instead washed over her, distant thunder to the storm gathering under Feeny’s touch.

Anika tried to listen—she did—but her body kept pulling her under, a tide of sensation. She caught scraps: “dirtbags from the Bad Angels,” “protection money,” “chasing me home.” But the words blurred as Feeny’s palms moved lower, stroking the curve of her spine, pressing into the hollow just above her hips, gliding with an intimacy that felt less professional than devotional.

Feeny wasn’t a delicate thing. She was steel wrapped in silk, tenderness laced with a quiet, ferocious strength, a living contradiction that made Anika feel both small and indestructible.

And now she was on top of her, straddling Anika’s thighs, her weight a grounding force. Her breasts, smooth with sensitive tops under thin fabric, brushed lightly against Anika’s back as she worked. The massage gave way to something else—something as old as time, as shocking as the first time you realize the world is willing to love you back in ways you never dared imagine. Skin to skin, heartbeat to heartbeat, without words or categories.

Feeny asked for nothing. She simply moved, her body a silent offering, her hair brushing Anika’s bare shoulders, her breath a soft, urgent rhythm. And Anika—Anika let go. Of everything. Of names, of roles, of the thin, brittle scaffolding she had mistaken for a life. She floated, she flew, she fell inward and outward at once, lost in the warm, uncharted universe of Feeny’s touch.

Later, when words returned to the world, they lay together on the mat, fingertips grazing flushed skin, giggling with a giddy, almost tearful disbelief.

“Can I visit you again?” Anika asked, her voice new, as though she were speaking for the first time.

“Anytime,” Feeny whispered, brushing a stray hair from Anika’s forehead. “Today’s session was on the house. Trial run.”

A million obligations crashed back into Anika’s mind—Bruno, the trip to Tenerife, the piles of exams to grade, the sterile meetings to attend. Yet none of it seemed quite real compared

to the residual heat of Feeny's skin against hers, the phantom pressure of her hands, her mouth, the electric memory of her.

She would visit again. She knew it the way you know the feel of your own heartbeat in the dark—steady, certain, undeniable.

And even as she dressed and was about to step back into the frozen Munich afternoon, she had lodged the hidden, secret heat of Feeny's touch, kept it somewhere just beneath her breastbone. A place no exam, no professorial scowl, no conference paper could ever reach. She had crossed a line she hadn't even known was there, and the world, for better or worse, would never look quite the same.

Feeny had not always lived in this fluid, shimmering world of silk and defiance. Once, not so long ago, she had been a student like any other, working night shifts in a drab Munich asylum center. Four nights a week, eleven to seven, the gray hours when the city slept and dreams turned brittle. She had taken the job for the usual reasons—money, of course—but also for something deeper: a restless hunger for contact, for otherness, for the colors and textures and smells of lives stitched far away from her own tidy German childhood.

She would leave her night post and head straight to the college, bleary-eyed but driven, the first hour spent cocooned in the library's dusty hush before slipping into lectures. Afternoons were given over to sleep, the luxury of dreams often interrupted by the mechanical hum of the city beyond her window.

Life in the dormitory, sharing a cramped twin room with another girl, had been bearable at first—more than bearable, even pleasant. Joint nights out, the occasional binge drinks. But over time, the itch for solitude grew unbearable. Feeny dreamed of her own space, her own walls, her own silence. And dreaming wasn't enough. She needed cash.

The flyer had been small, almost apologetic: "Masseuse Wanted—Training Provided, Flexible Hours." A few tear-off slips at the bottom. No logo, no address, just a number. The kind of offer most students walked past without a second glance.

Feeny had called it.

At first, the work had unsettled her. The hours fit perfectly around her night shifts and classes, but there was something off-kilter about the salon. All women on staff. Mostly male clients. Massages that blurred into something else, something whispered about but never spoken aloud. The first clients assigned to her were women—women who wanted not just touch but something more intimate, something gentler, hungrier. Feeny had learned quickly, her colleagues smoothing her rough edges, guiding her hands.

The money was better. The work no riskier than the asylum center's drunken fights and night terrors. In truth, it was less dangerous—and far more rewarding.

And so she stayed. And so she learned.

And somewhere along the way, Feeny had stopped apologizing—for her hands, for her gaze, for the simple fact of her own vivid, shameless aliveness.

"You're gorgeous," Anika whispered, almost shyly. "I love your fingertips. I love the softness and the roughness in you. You've stolen me from myself—and yes, please, even if I don't know yet when we'll see each other again. Right now, with the semester ending, I'm swamped. I have to grade exams, read a stack of final theses, and handle endless administrative work for the professor under whom I'll be starting my doctorate."

Before she could finish speaking, Anika's mind had already skipped ahead, flipping open her calendar like a punishing hand: an unrelenting parade of obligations, reminders of the other life she was supposed to be living. There was the vacation she had booked months ago, almost out of duty—a few days with Bruno on Tenerife. It was supposed to be a gift, a renewal. But even those days were now hemmed in by deadlines, shadows from the semester that refused to die. And afterward, the real gauntlet: a university-sponsored excursion across Germany and Poland, visiting the battlefields and cemeteries and memorials of memory and guilt. She would be one of the assistants, corralling students from one monument to the next, all under the watchful eye of her department head.

Art history was her domain—specifically, the tangled, aching landscape of the twentieth century, where beauty and horror had learned to coexist. Her institute, predictably, was ruled by two professors, both men, both cut from the same old cloth. One of them was a recent import from the United States, supposedly brought in to “modernize” things, to shake up traditions so calcified you could smell the dust. And yet the smell lingered.

At lectures, the front rows were always claimed by a battalion of elderly men—white-haired, serious, hungry for attention. They were the first to raise their hands, to deliver what they called questions, but what were really long, thinly disguised speeches. The younger students rarely dared to interrupt. They sat curled inward, shrinking. In her own seminars, Anika tried to mix the voices deliberately: a student here, a grayhead there, then another young voice. She wanted to create balance, to pry open the room just a little. But the older men grew impatient with her, uncomfortable with a woman who smiled too often and wore her hair loose and golden instead of tight and gray.

She knew how they saw her. Young. Decorative. Not serious enough to be a threat. But she also knew what they didn't see: the Cambridge years tucked into her spine, the English she wielded like a blade when necessary, the students from five continents who filled her seminars because they recognized something in her—a space to breathe.

She didn't insist on titles, either. No Frau Doktor. No Frau Professor. Her students addressed her with the easy “du,” and she welcomed it.

Much to Bruno's dismay.

Bruno, who was several years older and already an assistant at the university's Department of Ethics, was a Catholic priest who fiercely believed in “academic distance.” He said students should know their place, respect the hierarchy and feel the weight of tradition on their shoulders.

Anika hated it but loved him.

It reminded her too much of her own early days, standing humiliated outside professors' offices, waiting hours just for the chance to be seen—and then, when she was finally called in, being appraised less for her ideas than for the length of her legs.

She remembered the worst moment clearly: The great, aging professor behind his massive desk in a wood-paneled room, heavy with the smell of old paper and polished failure.

No invitation to sit.

Just a slow, absentminded gaze—more a weighing than a greeting.

He hadn't asked her about her studies, about her research, about her dreams. He had commented, perhaps even kindly, on her appearance. And when she explained—stammering—that she couldn't join the summer excursion because she needed to work, and that she wasn't a

full major in art history but only a minor, he had dismissed her with a wave of the hand, passing her off to his secretary without another glance, except for watching her legs, when she left his office.

Cambridge had been different.

At Cambridge, she had not only been seen. She had been listened to. There, she had been treated not as a pretty distraction but as a mind, a voice, a being. There, no one needed reminding that students were the future, not an interruption.

She understood Bruno's position intellectually. She even respected the logic behind it. But her heart—her heart recoiled.

Feeny, sitting beside her now on the edge of the bed, silent and patient, was part of that difference. A breathing proof that intimacy could be generous, not transactional. That you could touch without owning, and be touched without being reduced.

"What about in six to eight weeks?" Anika said, hearing the uncertainty even as she said it.

"Whenever you want," Feeny answered easily, her voice a balm. "Honestly, I'm in the same boat. I've got final exams coming up, seminar papers to write, and I need to design and produce my own fashion pieces for my bachelor's project. Could I call you sometimes? If I have some art history questions?" Feeny asked, almost shyly.

"eCertainly," Anika said, feeling a rush of warmth. "Always. You have my number."

Yet even as she spoke, Anika felt the old hesitation creeping back in. She was conscious that Feeny was still a student—albeit at a different school—and although Feeny was clearly an adult, capable of choosing her own life, the dynamic between them made Anika uneasy. She wasn't just a woman anymore. She was an academic now. She carried responsibilities, visible and invisible.

When Feeny first called her to ask a technical question about modernist fashion trends, Anika had taken the opportunity to raise the unspoken barrier: She warned her, gently, about how sensitive her professional situation was. Feeny had listened with that intuitive empathy that seemed sewn into her skin. She assured Anika she understood that discretion wasn't just a courtesy but a craft she had long since mastered. She had added, almost laughing, that Anika needn't worry—not about Feeny, not about scandal. After all, she said, some of Anika's esteemed colleagues, even high up the university hierarchy, had once been discreet clients at the massage salon where she had first learned her trade.

"You're helping me more than you know," Feeny had said. "Your advice, your support—it's helping me move forward. I'm independent now. I left the salon behind. It's tough starting out. But it's mine."

Still, even with Feeny's reassurances, Anika's mind gnawed at the edges of the relationship. Should she have kept her distance? Wasn't she herself trapped in the same endless hypocrisy she despised in her colleagues—those same men who groped for power under the guise of mentorship?

She thought of Bruno, of their late-night arguments about ethics and intimacy. He had called such work—massage, companionship—degrading. He believed it stripped women of agency, gave men dominance they didn't deserve. Anika had fought back fiercely, pointing out the quieter, more poisonous abuses of power that festered even inside the university's polished

halls. The professor who measured female students' thighs with his eyes. The dean who "mentored" only women under thirty. The jokes at faculty parties that made her skin crawl.

With Feeny, it was different. It had to be. She had asked her directly: How do you see this?

Feeny's answer had been simple and fierce. She would not be defined by men or women, by traditions or expectations. She would not be anyone's object. Not for fashion, not for lust, not for pity. She told Anika that working at the asylum shelter had often been far more dangerous than any massage parlor. There, when violence flared between the residents, when blood was spilled over an insult or a drunken glance, the police came late, if they came at all. And yet Feeny had carved out respect there, too. She wore what she wanted—thin silk blouses without a bra, tight skirts, fishnet stockings—because it was her right, her expression, her armor.

"Absolutely the men look at me," Feeny said once, laughing. "But they respect me too. And the women—they're wary at first. Jealous sometimes. But the longer I stay, the more trust grows between us. It's not about the clothes. It's about how you walk into a room. It's about how much of yourself you're willing to own."

Anika pictured it: Feeny standing calmly between two drunken men at each other's throats, her tiny frame somehow commanding the room by sheer force of will. She admired her. Admired the intelligence, the nerve, the ability to hold her ground without flinching.

She thought about her own life—so carefully constructed, so painfully managed. The stiff conferences. The lectures where she could never wear what she wanted, could never laugh too loudly, could never forget for a second that she was on display. Her back ached from it. Literally. Some nights, the tension settled between her shoulder blades like a weight she couldn't shrug off.

Even her body was not her own, not fully. Even her pleasure came with footnotes and permissions. Even her relationships were negotiated compromises, a series of quiet surrenders she had never consciously agreed to.

And yet here she was, in Feeny's apartment, barefoot, wearing nothing but the robe Feeny had pressed into her hands, the pins from a half-finished dress still scattered across the floor.

When Feeny asked if she would try on the new red satin dress—the one stitched and pinned by her own hands—Anika hesitated only a moment.

"Careful," Feeny warned with a grin. "There are still pins along the hem."

With a little gasp of laughter, Anika slid the dress over her body.

Feeny watched her, breathing almost imperceptibly, her eyes wide with something tender, something ravenous.

This was no ordinary fitting.

Perhaps it was because she had dreamt up this dress in the restless dark of so many nights—then sketched it with the stubborn precision of longing, stitched it together with the patience only obsession allows, and now, at last, saw it worn for the first time, there in front of her, real and radiant.

But perhaps, too, it was something else. Something quieter, more dangerous. Perhaps it was because, unlike with her other clients—those predictable women and men with their tidy needs and tidy lives—she was, against her better judgment, starting to see Anika in a different light.

Feeny moved closer, adjusting the fabric around Anika's hips, smoothing the seams along her ribs, tugging here, pinning there. Her fingers grazed Anika's skin with a reverence that made her knees weak. She circled behind her, brushing Anika's hair aside to adjust the shoulders, and Anika felt the faintest kiss of Feeny's breath against the nape of her neck.

They moved together without thinking, without speaking, turning and drifting and pressing closer, their bodies remembering things their mouths dared not say. The dress fell away as hands found skin, as mouths found mouths, as the bed pulled them down together like a tide too strong to resist.

Time dissolved. Music, rhythm, the spinning of the earth itself—all of it melted away.

When they finally surfaced, Anika lay sprawled among scattered fabrics and pins, her skin flushed, her pulse still racing in some secret place between her ribs. Around her, Feeny's world bloomed: unfinished skirts draped over chairs, bolts of fabric leaning precariously against the walls, hand-drawn sketches pinned like dreams to every surface. It was a kingdom stitched together out of stubbornness, hunger, and grace.

Anika's eyes lingered on the clothes. She imagined wearing them. Not just putting them on, but becoming them—letting the fierce colors and shameless shapes wrap around her until she could no longer be mistaken for the careful thing the university wanted her to be.

"Do you design for men too?" she asked, her voice still hoarse from everything they hadn't said aloud.

Feeny laughed, a warm, low sound that vibrated against Anika's bare shoulder.

"I do, indeed," she said. "Though it's not my favorite. Women are easier. Men's clothes—truly interesting men's clothes—are harder. More dangerous, in a way. You have to trick them into daring."

Anika smiled, the idea already taking root. "I'm seeing someone," she said, carefully neutral. "I want to surprise him. Something bold. Something playful. Maybe even something that makes him... a little uncomfortable."

Feeny raised an eyebrow, delighted. "You want to challenge him?"

"Yes," Anika said, surprising herself with the certainty in her voice. "I want to see him unsettled. I want to see what he's made of."

They chose a design together: a baroque, ruched shirt, open at the chest, no buttons, meant to be worn like a dare. Paired with tight, black trousers, it would make any man look like a matador, a poet, or a fool—depending on whether he dared to inhabit the skin Feeny had stitched for him.

In the mirror, Anika caught her own reflection: mussed hair, flushed cheeks, the red satin dress slipping down one shoulder. She looked—for once—like someone who had made her own choices, not someone merely responding to expectations.

Bruno accepted the gift with a mixture of amusement and discomfort. He wore it, though, to Anika's quiet astonishment. Wore it out to dinner, even. Played the role she had cast him in, laughing nervously but going along with it.

It was a victory of sorts.

But it was hollow, too.

Because when the cameras came out—his precious, inevitable cameras—he remained the photographer, not the photographed. He posed her: by the edge of a cliff, laughing into the sun; on a hiking trail, jacket slipping from one shoulder; even in the dark of their rented room,

naked but for the jewelry he had insisted she keep on, shooting angles that made her feel less like a woman and more like a prop.

She remembered posing obediently for him, smiling, arching her back the way he liked, letting herself be captured.

She remembered feeling, secretly, deeply, profoundly... cheap.

Not like she had felt with Feeny. Not alive. Not seen.

Bruno had always claimed to value freedom. It was part of his self-image, part of the careful myth he built around himself: the enlightened academic, the liberal man, the partner who “allowed” Anika her independence, who took pride in not being jealous, not being possessive.

Later, when Anika thought back to the walls she had built around herself, she remembered a walk she had taken with Feeny after a long, luxurious massage session. It had been Feeny’s idea, tossed out lightly, as if she were asking about the weather:

“Do you want to take Hassia for a walk with me?”

Anika, a little startled, had laughed and said: “Why not? Then I don’t have to leave you just yet.”

Feeny had snapped the leash onto the ecstatic dog, who barked and bounced and lunged between them, tail whipping like a metronome set to joy.

They had barely stepped out the door when Feeny, teasing, asked, “Is it okay if I link my arm through yours?”

Anika hesitated. What if they ran into one of her students? Or, worse, one of her colleagues?

But Feeny was standing there, open and waiting, offering not demands but closeness, simple and straightforward. And Anika wanted that closeness more than she feared the consequences.

She inclined her head. Feeny slipped her arm around Anika’s back with the same sure, grounding grip she used during their massages, her hand pressing warmly into Anika’s spine as if to say: You’re safe. I have you.

Anika relaxed—at first mechanically, then genuinely—as they moved in step. Feeny tightened her hold slightly, sensing her uncertainty without a word, inviting Anika to wrap her own arm around her waist in return.

For a few minutes, Anika allowed herself to lean into her, feeling protected, feeling claimed—not as an object, but as something cherished. It was a feeling she had known rarely, even in her closest relationships.

They must have looked like lovers. Because suddenly, from across the street, a voice rang out:

“Hey, Anika!”

Two of her colleagues stood there, flanked by a group of students, all watching, curious. Anika’s body reacted before her mind could catch up. She jerked her hand away from Feeny’s waist, heart hammering, shame crashing over her in a hot, silent wave. Feeny kept her hand at Anika’s side, steady, refusing to recoil.

When the group had moved on, Feeny turned to her with a soft, rueful smile.

“I’m sorry,” she said gently. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“You didn’t,” Anika said quickly, still breathless. “I was just... startled. You know how it is. Hassia saved us anyway—with his jumping around, I don’t think anyone noticed much else.”

Feeny smiled, but there was sadness behind it.

“I know you have to be careful,” she said. “Even in a big city like Munich, it’s smaller than you think. Smaller than any village.”

Anika gave a slight nod, flooded with gratitude for Feeny’s tenderness, for her refusal to shame her further, for her patient understanding—an understanding she had not found inside her own institution, or at least not often.

But later, in the quiet of her own apartment, Anika was haunted by her reaction. Why had she pulled away? Why, when faced with a glimpse of her real life, her real desires, had she retracted like a child caught stealing candy?

It wasn’t the age difference. It wasn’t even Feeny herself. It was the heavy architecture of the life she had spent years constructing—the career, the respectability, the cautious love—and now it trapped her just as surely as any iron gate. Wasn’t her own question—the simple, reflexive recoil—already proof of how imprisoned she had become?

Feeny had encouraged her, gently, to be honest with Bruno. Not because she demanded it. But because she believed—believed fiercely—that secrecy corroded whatever it touched.

And Anika had tried.

She had told Bruno about Feeny. Not every detail. Not the full weight of it. But enough: that she had met someone. That it was complicated. That it didn’t erase what she felt for him, but it also wasn’t something she could deny.

Bruno, to his credit, had handled it with grace. A flash of jealousy, yes—he was human after all—but also a kind of strained acceptance. He saw the trust she placed in him, and he honored it, or at least tried to.

Bruno accepted her freedoms. He welcomed them, even. Because they meant he could take his own. He traveled without guilt, stayed gone for weeks, was together with other women without confessions, without consequences. Anika never demanded explanations. She smiled. She cared for him. She gave him freedom the way a bird gives a hawk the sky: because fighting wasn’t hers. And in return, Bruno occasionally shared things—half-confessions, couched in jokes—about his adventures. Always expecting understanding. Always receiving it. Anika was his safe harbor. His uncomplaining witness.

And Feeny—Feeny was the fence she had never known she needed.

Vacation in Crete

For Bruno, Anika would have endured almost any conversation. Even after more than ten years of knowing each other, their bond had only deepened. They were close—but not so close that they dissolved into each other, not so entangled that being a couple was the whole story. Bruno gave her the closeness she needed, the landing strip, the occasional anchor she could fall back on when the work, with all its travel and risk, began to loom too large, or the simple brutal logistics of life grew too heavy to shoulder alone.

And yet, he was a man she didn’t believe loved her because he needed her. No, he loved her simply because he did.

He lived his own life, full and separate. And she had the quiet, unsettling sense that he would go on living it even if one day she didn't return from one of her trips. He would grieve her, but he would go on living.

He loved her. Period.

No reason.

Without any why.

No despite.

No explanation.

He could be romantic in small, real ways—waiting for her at the airport when she returned from some distant city, listening first to her stories without rushing to unspool his own. When they found weekends together, he was the one who planned them: a long mountain hike ending with a rustic dinner at an ecological guesthouse; a night of chess and whispered conversations under thick quilts; an evening listening to young writers battle a skeptical crowd at a smoky café; a jazz night in a basement bar at the city's ragged edges.

She was allowed to arrive exhausted, collapse against him, say little, fall asleep on his shoulder after a few minutes of television. Other times, when desire struck, she could be wild, ravenous, and he would meet her, match her, with the same rough glee. He never pushed. He never demanded. He waited—patient, solid—until she chose him, again and again.

And yet, the beginning had not been without its tests. Their first vacation together—Crete, 1991—had been one of them. Bruno had known about Feeny. He knew Anika's history, knew that Feeny was more than just a masseuse, more than just a friend. He had accepted, even respected, the way Anika's attachment to Feeny had grown beyond the simple roles they had once played. He listened when Anika spoke of her—her voice softer, more careful than usual—and he made no claim to be threatened.

No, what was harder for Bruno was appearing in public, mingling with others. He preferred their bubble—just the two of them, no audience. Anika loved that closeness, craved it at times, but she also needed the larger circle: the gatherings, the messy, chaotic dinners with friends, the living proof that love could stretch and still survive. Bruno was uneasy with crowds. He told her so. And so she had devised a compromise: a small vacation with Feeny and her partner René, a delicate experiment in balancing intimacy and independence.

When Anika first proposed it, Feeny had been confused. Professional boundaries had always been sacred to her. Even after three, almost four years of regular visits, Feeny had kept a polite, clear distance from her clients—even those, like Anika, who tugged at something deeper. She could listen, comfort, even care—but she knew the limit. Money drew a line, and she honored it.

Anika, however, was different. Not the only regular female client, but the only one who felt... necessary. Essential, somehow. Still, Feeny hesitated. Was it wise to blur the line now? She didn't ask René for advice. The salon, the business, the slow empire of her own making—that was hers alone, separate from their partnership. Smaller than René's ventures, perhaps. Less celebrated. But hers. Built with her own hands, funding the slow growth of her fashion work, allowing her small luxuries: a dinner out, a gift now and then for René.

Why had Anika invited her? And with Bruno? Did Anika really want to bring her lover and her client and herself all into the same sunlit frame?

In the end, Feeny said yes.

Because it was Anika. Because something inside her ached to see where the story might go.

The trip began with a kind of comic asymmetry.

Bruno and René had flown out together from Frankfurt, while Anika and Feeny had booked a later flight from Munich, arriving an hour behind them in Heraklion.

The day before departure, Anika had still managed to squeeze in one last visit to Feeny's studio—a session that, like so many before, had pulled her out of her sandy world of seminars and papers and theory, and returned her to herself, raw and vivid and alive. Bruno was away on business, but when she called him, breathless with half-truths, he had agreed without a single question.

At Heraklion Airport, it was no surprise to find Bruno waiting inside the terminal, looking crisply solemn despite the chaos around him, while René lounged outside the building in a battered white jeep that looked about as roadworthy as a soapbox. The vehicle was far too small for the two massive suitcases the women hauled behind them.

In the end, they crammed one suitcase onto the backseat, leaving Anika no choice but to squeeze into the front beside René, while Feeny clambered laughingly onto Bruno's lap.

The ride was a kind of madness.

At first, they hugged the coastline, the sun slicing over the water, the air still heavy with salt and jet fuel. But soon the road curled away from the sea and climbed into the mountains, twisting through rock and scrub in tight, harrowing loops.

Inside the jeep, things grew wilder.

René fumbled between Anika's legs—not lasciviously, not yet—but drunkenly, groping for the whiskey bottle that had slipped under her seat.

He found it and drank straight from the neck as he drove.

Anika weighed her options: Jump from the moving car? Wrench the bottle away? Or simply accept the chaos and take a pull herself?

She chose the third.

When the bottle passed to her, she drank deeply. Feeny, giggling, followed suit.

There's nothing more ridiculous, Anika thought, than watching men get silly drunk while you're still stone-cold sober. Better to join them.

And so the bottle circulated, the jeep hurtled onward, and Anika found herself loosening: opening her legs wider, laughing too loud, letting the hot summer air whip her hair and shirt and skin into something fevered and free.

René wasn't concentrating much on the road anymore. The whiskey made him exuberant, reckless. Feeny and Bruno laughed uproariously in the backseat, their voices blurring together into nonsense.

The road narrowed, curled tighter around the mountain's hips. Ahead, nothing but hairpin curves and sudden plunges.

And still, somehow, impossibly, it felt right. The four of them, tossed together in this rickety machine, drunk on whiskey and sun and the terrifying certainty that something wild was happening, something they couldn't stop even if they wanted to.

Anika stripped off her sweater and camisole, keeping only a loose t-shirt. She kicked off her jeans and slipped into a tiny bathing suit, the move both practical and wickedly theatrical. René whistled softly but said nothing, his eyes flicking to the road just long enough

to keep them alive. Anika leaned into him with quiet intent—hands on his leg, his arm, her grip moving up to his shoulder—not just to steady herself through the jolts and swerves, but to press herself into his awareness, to remind him of presence, of body, of her. And René, stirred more by instinct than thought, was suddenly alert again—alive to the moment, and to her.

The bottle kept circling.

The laughter got louder.

Somewhere, far below, the dark blue Aegean gleamed like a promise.

Time blurred. Space melted. Crete unspooled around them, rough and golden, demanding nothing but surrender.

When night finally fell—soft and deep as velvet—they reached the outskirts of Sitia. Their destination was supposed to be a guesthouse tucked in the hills.

But René, wild with drink and bravado, jerked the wheel hard left instead, hurtling the jeep onto the soft, forgiving sands of an empty beach.

The vehicle lurched to a stop under a cypress tree, breathing heavily like a tired horse.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Anika tore off her shirt and ran, bare-chested, laughing into the night.

Bruno barely had time to register what was happening before Feeny peeled off her clothes too—first her blouse, then her skirt fluttering to the sand like a discarded flag. She sprinted after Anika, laughing, the dark swallowing their shapes until only their voices remained, bright as bells against the rising wind.

For a second, Bruno hesitated. He was, perhaps, the only one left sober enough to worry: about the rocks jutting out from the shore, about the sharpness of unseen dangers hidden under the water.

But it was too late for caution. And what was caution worth, when the people you loved were already vanishing joyously into the sea?

He stripped off his own clothes in a flurry, boots and shirt and jeans tumbling onto the sand, and hurled himself toward the waves.

René had already disappeared into the dark surf after the women, whooping like a child. Bruno caught a flash of Feeny's pale shoulder, the quick silver of Anika's laughter, and then the chill of the water took him, shocking and invigorating at once.

The Aegean wasn't cold, not truly—just fresh enough to wake every nerve in his skin. He gasped, sucked in the salt and the night, and pushed forward.

Somewhere ahead, Feeny turned back, catching sight of him. She stretched out her hand and pulled him toward her, both of them laughing, half-sinking under the small crash of a wave. She clung to him, wrapped her arms around his neck, her bare breasts pressing against his chest with a boldness that surprised him.

And he—god help him—held her back just as fiercely.

The ocean rocked them together, a push and pull stronger than alcohol, stronger than doubt.

He kissed her—because what else could he do? Because her mouth was there, open, salt-sweet and hungry. Because the night demanded it, and the sea gave permission.

They broke apart, breathless, only to find Anika and René not far away, tangling and untangling themselves in the dark water. For a moment, all four of them floated there—separate, together, anonymous in the vast blackness.

There were no names. No promises. No rules.

Just bodies—warm and laughing and free—crashing against the waves and against each other in the dark, endless night.

Eventually, the chill drove them back to shore.

They stumbled out of the waves, dripping and breathless, clutching their discarded clothes to their chests, shivering under the sudden vastness of the night sky.

The sand clung to wet skin. Every step was clumsy, graceless, full of laughter and slipping hands and half-hearted attempts at modesty.

René collapsed first, sprawling on the damp beach like a felled giant, still clutching the whiskey bottle in one hand like a trophy. Feeny dropped beside him, tugging Bruno down with her, their bodies knocking together, easy, unembarrassed.

Anika stood for a moment apart, clutching her loose t-shirt to her chest, her hair plastered to her forehead, her eyes wide and shining.

She looked at them—at Bruno, at Feeny, at René—and for a moment felt the ache of distance, even amid the reckless intimacy.

She had wanted this. Had orchestrated it, even. A chance to blur the lines, to test whether the walls between love and friendship, loyalty and desire, could be more porous than she had ever dared believe.

And yet... standing there, half-naked, half-drunk, heart hammering against her ribs, she wasn't sure she had crossed into freedom or simply floated into another kind of trap.

Morning came harsh and brilliant.

The sun cracked open the sky with merciless heat, and the world that had seemed so infinite in the dark shrank back into sharper, more unforgiving outlines.

The evening had ended abruptly—or at least that's how it felt in memory, like a reel had been ripped from the projector mid-scene.

When Bruno woke up, tangled in bed and in Feeny's arms, he had the vague, sinking feeling that they hadn't arrived where they were supposed to. Not the location. Not the apartment they'd planned for.

As it turned out, over breakfast, they discovered they had ended up in a different vacation rental altogether. But at least all four of them were in the same place—and their Jeep, by some miracle, was parked in decent shape under the olive trees in the yard.

The door must have been unlocked when they arrived, and clearly they'd found empty beds—rooms to collapse in. What became immediately obvious, however, was that the house was far from unoccupied. There were already other guests having breakfast out on the terrace.

Their cheerful, now slightly crumpled quartet was not the only group inside what was clearly a house divided into multiple holiday flats.

Bruno rubbed his eyes. Feeny still breathed softly beside him. Across the room, Anika lay curled up against René on the couch, fast asleep. Bruno tried to reconstruct the night, to trace how they had ended up here—but his memory wouldn't cooperate.

What finally woke him was the smell: fresh-baked bread. Real bread. And then voices—happy ones. He looked up and saw figures outside the window chatting and eating in the morning sun.

Feeny stirred beside him, reached for Bruno and blinked herself awake, a wide, lazy smile on her lips. She ran her fingers through his curls, trailing them gently across his cheek. Bruno, still weary from the night's punishing journey, leaned into her warmth and let himself sink.

"Do you know where we could get coffee?"

"No idea. But looks like people are eating out there—I'll go check."

He rolled off the unfamiliar sofa, peeked out the window, and called to the people outside in English—he thought he'd caught a few English words floating in the air:

"Do you think we can get a coffee around here?"

"Just join us," came the answer.

With a loving brush of his hand, he slipped away from Feeny and stepped quietly outside.

A few minutes later he returned, balancing four mugs of strong-smelling Greek coffee. He placed them by the couch and at the bedside, kissed Anika—just as she blinked her heavy eyelids open—and stepped out again.

Soon he was back with four plates and warm, fragrant pita bread. He knew Anika well enough by now to guess that the smell of coffee and bread would pull her from sleep.

And sure enough, she opened her eyes, blinking into the sunlight, her face crumpled but smiling with quiet optimism.

"Thank you. You're so sweet," she murmured.

René, on the other hand, didn't seem like coffee or conversation would be enough to rouse him.

Anika sat up in bed, pushed aside the sheet that had been covering her—by now the morning sun had warmed the room fully. Naked and unbothered, she raised her coffee cup and toasted Feeny and Bruno.

"What a ride. And what a landscape!"

Bruno had been about to say, "Happy we made it safely," but the women's buoyant mood swept him up instead. He suggested they go to the beach right after breakfast—to look at the place where, during the night, they must've tested their guardian angels.

René began to stir, groping for his glasses, blinking as he took in the scene around him. He looked relieved to see his three companions and appeared to be slowly sorting the world back into place.

Anika, beside him, was happy to see Bruno enjoying himself in this strange little circle. Still holding her coffee, she handed the cup to René and thanked him for the night drive.

He smiled at her closeness, then looked over at Feeny, still curled on the sofa across from him with Bruno, who by now was halfway dressed, holding a mug of coffee in one hand and half a piece of bread in the other.

"You're all up early," René said. "Thanks for the coffee. That's real Greek stuff—strong enough to wake the dead."

Bruno handed him a plate with olives, sliced tomatoes, and sheep's cheese he'd gathered from the terrace.

He liked the idea—heading down to the beach in the daylight, to see where they’d thrown themselves into the sea the night before to cool off. But once they were standing there, sober and exposed to the bright, clear morning, they were shaken. Startled, even. It was a wonder they’d survived it without a scratch. Fate watches over the drunk, René thought.

Later that afternoon, they finally located the rental they had actually booked—a beach hut more than an apartment, but with just enough space for four people. Each couple had their own quarters, and there was a small shared kitchen in the middle with a rustic wooden table. The hut sat a few hundred meters up from the beach, nestled in a hilly grove of olive trees.

Night fell quickly. Both couples retreated to their spaces. Anika and Bruno lay close, worn out—not just from the previous day, but from the evening and the long night that had followed. Sleep, however, was elusive. A steady banging and groaning interrupted them. They looked at each other, puzzled. From outside came a clattering, a rattling, a rising creak that swelled to a crescendo—and then again. Over and over, as if it would never end.

The next morning, over coffee and peals of laughter, the four of them shared their night’s experiences. Each couple had secretly marveled at the apparent stamina of the other, jealous and sleepless, wondering how the hell they’d managed such endurance. It wasn’t until they put their heads together that they realized: it wasn’t the others at all. It was the stormy wind rolling in from the sea, battering the shutters, groaning through the wooden frame of the hut—while four exhausted souls lay awake, imagining the passion of others and quietly lamenting their own stillness.

For Anika and Bruno, this was their first real stretch of time together. In recent years, their schedules had been so consumed by work that a shared vacation had remained a hypothetical indulgence. Now, after breakfast, Feeny and René—who clearly knew each other well—headed to the beach with towels slung over their shoulders. Anika looked over at Bruno.

“Would you mind if I took the morning for myself?”

Bruno seemed to agree, not begrudgingly, but with a kind of quiet relief. The idea that Anika wanted time apart aligned perfectly with his own unspoken need: that the two weeks they had carved out for this trip wouldn’t have to be spent entirely together, and certainly not always at the beach.

He had cleared the time for the trip, yes. But in the back of his mind, always, was the pressure of his habilitation thesis—the keystone of his academic ambitions, the gateway to professorship. He’d told himself he’d set it aside for this vacation. That he’d let his mind breathe. But now Anika’s request felt like liberation.

Was she granting him that freedom deliberately? Had she sensed the pressure and offered him this space to ease it? Or was it, more simply, what she needed?

He would only learn later that Anika became unsettled—even unbearable—when she felt cornered. When she didn’t have room to move, or time that was hers alone.

Bruno unpacked, set up his workspace at the kitchen table, and opened his laptop. Meanwhile, Anika unpacked as well. Her clothes were rolled, not folded—neatly, efficiently, wrinkle-free. She chose a thong, a short skirt, and a loose T-shirt cut wide at the arms, letting the sea breeze drift freely through.

She gave Bruno a strong hug, pressed her chest against his.

“See you later—I love you.”

Bruno was surprised by the declaration—especially since it came as she was walking away, on the very first morning of what was supposed to be their first true vacation together.

It felt like a preview of what being together might mean: not clinging, but trusting space. He watched her walk through the olive grove, confident, self-possessed, until she disappeared among the trees.

Should he follow her? Had she wanted him to? Had that “I love you” been an invitation to ignore the words and chase her? He almost did—almost sprang up to catch her, laugh with her, hold her.

Maybe that was exactly the kind of affection she’d wanted him to show.

But something stopped him. His own need for space, perhaps. The quiet gift she’d given him. Or the respect he had for her independence.

Was she the kind of partner who didn’t define herself through him—but instead knew how to live as herself, and allowed him the same?

So far, he had only known relationships that demanded exclusivity. That couldn’t accommodate the reality of his life, or his obsession with his work.

Anika seemed different. And already, she challenged him. He had blocked off these two weeks for her—a full commitment, something rare. And she, on the very first morning, had upended that premise.

Almost annoyed, and slightly dulled by the early sun, Bruno opened his laptop. He pulled out the few books he’d brought and began reading the text he’d last touched before he closed the laptop at home, proud—naively proud—to be taking it on vacation with him.

Unlike usual, it took him quite some time to settle into his thoughts. To begin again deciphering the Greek texts, to write his commentary on the thinking and ethics of the Christian Neoplatonist Apollinarius and his connection to the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart. But he couldn’t concentrate.

He kept hearing the moaning of the shutters, kept glancing outside, half-expecting someone—anyone—to poke their head in. But nothing. Only crickets chirping from the olive grove, the late-summer wind rustling faintly, the distant barking of dogs. The door remained closed.

No René. No Feeny. No Anika.

Out of restlessness, Bruno brewed himself a cup of green tea—the kind he always used back home to ceremonially ease into work. It usually helped. That soft, grassy scent, the heat on his hands. Today it didn’t.

Instead, he kept seeing Anika in that outfit. Her form, the movement of her body, her walk, her certainty. Her nearness the night before. And even more: the way she had left—without a backward glance.

It was already afternoon when Bruno finally found his rhythm. Crete and the world receded, and he lost himself in the dense, tangled thickets of late antiquity, Neoplatonism, stoic strands, and slowly began to carve a path through them.

That was when the kitchen door flew open.

And there she stood—Anika—radiant, already peeling off her T-shirt, wriggling into her bikini.

“Coming to the beach? Sorry, it got later than I’d planned.”

Bruno looked up. He hadn't even noticed the sun already far past its zenith, beginning its descent. He felt abruptly torn out of something—though not deeply enough, as he sensed from Anika's reaction. She saw it in his face, in his delayed response, the way his attention lagged behind her presence.

And then, just when he felt his own failure at being present—she surprised him. Touched him.

"Bruno, I'm sorry for barging in like that—if you need a few more minutes, take them. I'm heading to the beach to meet Feeny and René. Come when it suits you."

She spun lightly on her heel, gave him a warm look—and was gone. As quickly as she'd appeared.

Bruno sat in silence. Stunned by himself. By how unready he'd been. How flat his reaction had landed. He'd behaved like a stage extra who had missed his tiny cue—without protest from the director, and no second take.

And yet, somewhere inside him, he sensed the scene would pass him by completely if he didn't step into it—step into himself.

He'd never shut the laptop so quickly. For the first time, he didn't even bother to save his work. It suddenly felt meaningless. He pulled on his swim trunks, grabbed a towel, and left in search of the others on the beach.

What he hadn't seen—what Anika hadn't shown—was that she had been looking back. More than once. She had tried to play it cool, not let it show that she was waiting for him. But she missed him. The morning had gone as she wanted—time to herself, space to breathe—but it only made her hunger for him sharper.

She felt drawn to him—because she sensed he hadn't just reluctantly allowed her the space she'd asked for, but had truly sunk into his own world. His passion. His work.

That tension—between absence and longing—had already gripped her the moment she stepped into the doorway and saw that he hadn't even noticed.

She had tried to catch his attention. She had dressed that way for him—not for the old men hunched over tables in the cafés. She had wanted him to know what he was missing. That's why she'd chosen the skimpiest outfit in her suitcase.

And yet, on the way through the town, she'd enjoyed the looks—more than she expected. They were different from what she'd experienced in Rome, where the bus driver had made a remark about her legs and her skirt before handing her a ticket. Her friend, staying in Rome for a language course, had noticed the exchange and later told her not to be shocked. "It's normal," she'd said. "In fact, Italian women complain if the drivers don't comment."

Still, Anika had found it disturbing.

Crete was different. There was respect here. People greeted her in Greek—men and women alike. She couldn't respond, but she acknowledged silently with a smile.

By the harbor, she found a café where the locals sat—not tourists. She figured, rightly, it must have the best coffee in town.

They served her a glass with a golden rim and a thick, black liquid—unfiltered, stronger than espresso, with a layer of dark silt settling slowly at the bottom. They gave her plenty of sugar and a small bowl with goat cheese and olives.

An older man stood, gave her his table, and joined the others at the next one. They all sat at a proper distance, smoking, speaking little. Playing Portes—not Tavli, not backgammon

exactly, but something fiercer. Even at this early hour, the air between them pulsed with intensity.

Anika still had a mild headache from the wild ride through the Cretan mountains, even after the two nights. She couldn't recall all of it. Only that it had grown more and more euphoric.

She and René—whom she only knew through Feeny—had become a sort of team. A philosopher and entertainer, yes. But something more. Somewhere between whiskey and hairpin curves, they had ended up discussing Nikos Kazantzakis.

René thought him too entangled in orthodoxy. Anika admired him—this fiercely criticized, now iconic Greek writer. His atheism spoke directly to her.

At the café table, she opened her laptop, located a power outlet—successfully, without question—and got to work.

She was writing her dissertation, which examined the lives and works of artists who had emigrated during the Nazi era. Since the earliest days of her studies, she had been fascinated by the interplay between Western and non-Western contemporary art, and by the question of how Western modernism had influenced other regions—particularly in Britain—and how exile, especially of the avant-garde, had reverberated through Africa and Asia. Equally, she was interested in how the encounters on those continents had, in turn, altered the very shape of artistic thought in the West—especially in America and, after the war, in Germany.

She had long understood that people could change clothes more quickly than eating habits—but did the same hold true for habits of thought, for aesthetic needs?

What kinds of buildings did people want to live in? What kind of art did they want on their walls—what kind of beauty did they want to wrestle with? And how would women shape that beauty? How would they represent themselves?

These questions felt even more urgent in patriarchal societies—which, in her view, included most of Europe and even more strongly many of the societies into which these female artists had emigrated. Here, conceptions of gender—especially idealized ones—played a central, and often unquestioned, role.

She wasn't surprised to find, for instance, hotels in Tenerife—her beloved Canary Island—built with Indian architectural flourishes, catering specifically to Indian guests. These hotels offered at least one Indian main course every day.

Food, she had come to believe, lingered in the soul far longer than fashion. Even generations later, long after family ties and traditions had frayed, people clung to the foods—and especially the spices—of their childhoods. They returned again and again to familiar restaurants, paid high prices in specialty shops, all for the memory of taste. For the grounding power of smell.

Clothing, on the other hand, was far more disposable. The sarouel, the gandoura, the headscarf—they were folded away, replaced by skirts and blouses, suits and ties. But no one wanted to give up the Moroccan tagine, the Egyptian mulukhiyah, the shawarma. Even in Munich offices, where everyone dressed alike, the dishes served at family dinners remained a form of rootedness.

What made aesthetics—especially culinary experience—so transversal, she had discussed with Feeny. She asked her: Is it because love and connection pass through the stomach? Because food, unlike clothing, doesn't hang limply on a hanger at night but remained part of the self?

And yet, Feeny insisted, it is appearance—always appearance—that functioned as the magnet for projection. The spark of desire. A person's look can draw attention immediately, while the scent of food and the subtle memory of taste work more slowly, more secretly—reaching only the initiated.

These were the kinds of questions they exchanged and pondered upon.

Her thoughts were still spinning outward and inward, discontented with her outline.

Distance, she told herself. She needed to step back. Far from the university. To watch people. To understand what mattered to them—and, more importantly, why.

Here in the café, Portes seemed to matter more than anything else.

Women, at least within these four walls, seemed entirely absent. Or perhaps that absence was itself a presence—a presence she now, unwittingly, embodied. Maybe she had been looking in the wrong direction. Maybe the question wasn't about the visible representations of women—icons on public altars—but about their invisibility.

Maybe the real subject was absence, and the symbolic clutter that replaced it: men's football, military parades, guns—phallic, mechanical, absurd. Cannons, tanks. Men's games, where women appeared only to cheer from the sidelines.

And perhaps even those drinks, the chain-smoking—phallic rituals in their own right—were poor substitutions for moisture, warmth, for the sensual danger of engaging with the feminine directly. Or perhaps it was all just routine. Habit.

The men around her looked unkempt, or at indifferent to their appearance. The waiter—perhaps the owner's son—wore jeans, branded but clearly knockoff. It was enough to distinguish him from the older men and the few local teenagers who had wandered in.

There were no other women working in the café. No other tourists this early in the morning either, and the few she spotted sat at shaded tables outside.

She was the only woman inside.

The daylight outside was too harsh for her laptop screen, which was why she had chosen the interior. The men, too, seemed to prefer the dimness, likely for the same reason—or simply to avoid the heat.

Although her entrance had raised a few surprised glances, she was left alone. She could work in peace. Even the young waiter approached only when her glass of coffee was nearly empty. And even then, he avoided her gaze, fumbling politely for his German and looking just past her shoulder.

By the time Bruno arrived at the beach with his towel, he threw himself straight into the waves. Feeny followed with a shout, then Anika and René, and soon the four of them were tumbling through the surf, laughing, wild with joy.

They joked about their mountain journey—no one could quite remember the details anymore. They all marveled that they'd made it down those narrow, winding roads in one piece.

Back on the sand, René asked Anika what she'd been working on at the café. She told them about her research—her exile artists—and about one woman in particular who fascinated her. A gifted Jewish artist who had fled via Britain to Kenya. She didn't yet know enough to tell the whole story, but the trail was promising.

Bruno, no doubt, was used to these moments turning into lectures—moments that revealed just how deeply Anika burned for her work.

After another dip in the water, they retreated beneath their two umbrellas.

Anika pulled a heavy, pale red book from her bag—Kazantzakis’s *Odyssey*, in German translation—and began reading aloud. Bruno followed along in his own deep red copy, in Modern Greek.

Unimaginable: thirty-three thousand three hundred and thirty-three hexameters. Kazantzakis had created something bottomless.

Anika didn’t intend to read much—just a few selections from the behemoth. But here, on the beach of his homeland, the music of his language seemed to reach further back into history, and deeper into the present.

Greece, caught between modernity and the past, between youth and tradition, between secularism and religion. Between Europe and the world.

Even the Turkish neighbor haunted the twentieth-century Greek imagination—despite the fact that Crete lay closer to Africa than to Cyprus. The division of Cyprus, and its enduring tensions, echoed in the anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic undertones Kazantzakis confronted in his work.

In his *Odyssey*, what began as a return became a metaphysical journey—an exploration of the spiritual chasms within the human condition, where the gods became metaphors for the unknowable abyss.

Shake the stories off

Bruno ran his hand through his hair and looked across the table, his voice cautious but curious.

“Why do you work on female writers and artists who had to emigrate during the Nazi period?”

Anika paused, visibly weighing the space between them before answering. “After I had written my doctoral thesis on the writer Irina Kaun, I was relieved at first to leave behind the gloom of Berlin in the 1920s—the surveillance, her escape from the Nazis to the Netherlands, her return with the help of an SS officer, her years living underground in Cologne. I wanted to move on to something else. But certain stories wouldn’t let me go. And, to be honest, it was coincidence that led me into the new subject of exiled artists. Until it wasn’t coincidence anymore. Until it got personal.”

Bruno leaned forward slightly. “What do you mean by that?”

“The professor I started my dissertation with was not just an art historian but also a literary scholar, someone deeply interested in political history. He loved crossing disciplines. He was fascinated by how existential crises shape identity, especially through migration. I must’ve told him about my family once, maybe after a seminar, over coffee. He liked to take students for coffee, talk casually, revisit big questions. I told him about my own unresolved relationship to the Nazi past. Something I’d never fully articulated before. That probably provoked him to suggest I should write about it—about what I carry with me, what my upbringing gave me, and what it weighed me down with. He told me: the best research starts with personal urgency. That hit me. He said it might be the only way to really create distance—by going through it, intellectually, emotionally.”

She exhaled, almost apologetically. “At first, I didn’t want to. I wasn’t sure if I should burden my academic path with something that private.”

Bruno reached for the wine bottle, a Châteauneuf-du-Pape he'd ordered to mark the evening. He poured for both of them, more out of discomfort than celebration. He had wanted this dinner to be romantic. It had been days since they returned from Crete. And he still felt guilty—guilty for having made her bend around his work, guilty for giving less than she had given him.

"You didn't upset me," Anika said, reading his face. "You asked what's been sitting with me for years. Maybe longer. It's something that will probably follow me even beyond the habilitation—if I ever finish it. I was born into a family from Kassel, deeply shaped by Protestantism, and yet tied to the darkest sides of German history. I had no idea what kind of family I was born into. I didn't know who my parents really were. As a child, as a teenager, no one said a word."

Bruno wanted to stop her, gently, but he also didn't. He had invited her to a quiet, elegant French restaurant in Munich for a night of wine and warmth, not a descent into political trauma. And yet—something about the way she spoke pulled him in. He had his own ancestral shadows. And somehow, his confession had opened the door for hers. No pink romance here, but something deeper, darker—and oddly more intimate.

"So how did you find out? If not as a teenager?"

"I should have known as a girl. As a teen, certainly," she said, picking up her glass of red wine and sighing. "Let's toast first. Bruno, I want you to know I love you."

The glasses clinked, awkwardly. They were too full to ring properly. That would change. They drank. They watched each other sip. And Anika continued.

"My mother's family is from Bremen. Religious Pietists. They considered the Lutherans far too lax, even in a place as liberal as Bremen. Then my mother met this older man, a Reformed Protestant and soldier who didn't return from Russian captivity until 1949. He could've been her father. But she used to say, back then, it was hard for a young girl to find a man. The young ones were dead. Missing. Or never returned. She said those who survived were older, often deeply marked. I accepted that, until I realized something didn't fit. She told me she fell in love with him before the war even began."

Just then, the appetizer arrived. Apples cut and carved like honeycombs, stuffed with liver pâté, glazed in warm honey. They looked like beehives on the plate.

Bruno sliced his, offered her a bite on the tip of his spoon, brushed her arm with his fingers. She leaned forward, took it on her tongue, let him taste it from her lips.

"Your trust in telling me this moves me," Bruno said softly.

"Thank you. You're the first I've told this fully."

"Only as much as you want," he reassured her.

"I was the only girl among three older brothers. The youngest of them nine years older. I was a surprise. My mother often said she hadn't planned for me, couldn't afford me, didn't want another child. She had enough to manage with the boys and the finances."

Bruno asked, "But wasn't she happy to have a daughter at last?"

"You'd think so. But I always sensed she resented me. My father, remember, the old man, doted on me. Too much. It made me uncomfortable. Nothing ever happened, not explicitly. But I had dreams. Heavy ones. A gray film over childhood memories."

Bruno said nothing.

“My parents must have known,” she continued, locking eyes with him now, her voice more firm. “My middle brother—he used to read me bedtime stories. Not because they asked him to, but because they didn’t care. They wanted to be alone, to watch TV. And he would come. He would come into my bed, touch me, rub himself against me. He said it was our secret. Just part of the story. One night, my father walked in. It had gone too long. He saw us. He told my brother to go to his room. That was it. No questions. No anger. Nothing.”

Bruno felt cold.

“They all knew. My mother too. She felt my fear. She saw it. But she never asked. Never protected me.”

“You never told anyone?”

“Who would I tell? My parents? My brothers who adored him? The golden boy? I didn’t even understand it myself for years. Not fully. Not until after school, when I was invited on a ski trip. All three brothers, I was told. I agreed. It was a chance to do something fun, something I couldn’t afford alone. But once we were in the car, he told me the others weren’t coming. Just him and me.”

She paused. Bruno didn’t breathe.

“We got to the guesthouse. Separate beds. I told myself it was fine. I was an adult now. He was older. Maybe it had all been in my head. But then, I came out of the bathroom and he was sitting on the bed. Masturbating. He asked me if I wanted to put my mouth on him. I froze. I didn’t scream. I didn’t move. I didn’t even ask him why. I just stood there. And got through the night. And the trip. Somehow.”

Bruno, pale, finally asked, “You know that was criminal. Did you ever think of going to the police?”

“Bruno, I come from Kassel. Everyone knows everyone. My father was a respected teacher, historian, city councilman. He wrote for the local paper. He was a civic symbol. And I was his daughter. I would have destroyed all of it. I would have destroyed myself.”

She paused. Drank.

“So I ran. I stopped seeing my brother. I kept my distance. That was my strategy.”

She looked at him now with apology. “I didn’t mean to ruin our date. I just wanted to tell you a story about my father. Another one. No less complicated. No less tragic.”

“Oh God,” Bruno thought. “Another terrible story. What has she been through?”

“Yes,” Anika said. “I didn’t mean to go on about my brothers. I meant to tell you about him. About my father. That’s what brought me to my research.”

At least, Bruno thought, she seemed composed enough now to continue.

“He wasn’t a gentle soul, my father, but he had something grandfatherly about him. And he was extremely well-read. He had a doctorate—something that deeply impressed me—and in the family he was seen as the wise one. Back then, I thought he knew everything, had traveled the world, and gathered tremendous experience. He’d gone to the prestigious Wilhelm Gymnasium and completed his Abitur before the war. Then he studied in those legendary intellectual cities: Marburg, Berlin, Göttingen. He once told me, quite humbly, that he’d studied German literature, his great passion, along with history, a bit of philosophy, and theology on the side. He needed it all, he said, because his heart belonged to medieval studies. And I have to say, he truly was a gifted historian of the Middle Ages. Even if he didn’t always know how to deal with me otherwise—I’ll never forget those hikes and long walks he took me on, guiding

me through the Roman and especially Germanic ruins around Kassel, delivering little lectures on local history. Later, when I was a bit older, he even brought me along to his Heimatverein, where he gave regular slide lectures. I mostly knew him sitting at his desk after returning from school in the afternoons, where he taught history, German, and religion.”

“What was his dissertation about?” Bruno asked, cutting in with real curiosity.

“I don’t remember the exact title anymore—he must’ve told me several times—but I do remember it was on Meister Eckhart. That stuck with me, partly because my oldest brother is named Eckhart, and partly because you’d already told me something about him.”

Bruno’s eyes lit up. Anika must have noticed, because she smiled warmly at him.

“How did you get into Eckhart?” she asked.

“That’s a little story of its own,” Bruno replied. “He didn’t come up once during my studies of philosophy, ethics, or theology. But at the end of my time at university, there was this broadcast course on religion. You could sign up, follow the lectures by radio, and tutor a study group. I applied and got the job. It was a good way to earn some money and gain teaching experience.”

Anika smirked a little. She seemed to have parked the trauma, at least for now. They clinked glasses again. The Chateaubriand had arrived—bloody, of course—and Anika thought she’d never eaten such tender meat. She felt a little overwhelmed. She’d been especially surprised at how Bruno had handled the wine order at the beginning of the evening. When the overly stiff waiter had asked for their wine preference, Bruno didn’t name a specific label. He simply said, “A dry French red, please.” The waiter returned with two glasses and asked Bruno to taste. Bruno took a sip from the first, chewed a bit of baguette, tried the second, smelled both again, and then made his choice. Slightly challenging, the waiter asked if he could guess where the wine came from. Bruno answered without hesitation, “I’d say the first is from somewhere near Châteauneuf-du-Pape.” That was the one he picked. When the bottle arrived, that’s exactly what it said.

It wasn’t the last time Bruno would impress her, even if he never seemed to do so on purpose. It all came naturally to him. It wasn’t about showing off—it was about a private love for the thing itself, a quiet fire. And she loved that. Just like he really listened when she spoke. Not only remembered what she’d said but asked about it again, admitted when he didn’t understand something, wanted to know who she really was. She valued that. She wasn’t nosy either, but she wanted to know who she was sitting across from. So she nudged him on.

“Go on.”

“I’d done okay in my studies, had a decent diploma, and I got accepted to lead this group. About 20 people. We met monthly to discuss the lectures. I also got access to all the teaching materials—questions, answers, all of it. And I learned that the best way to learn something is to teach it. That’s where I really got my start in religious studies. Most of the group passed the final exam with excellent grades. That was a good feeling. But you’d asked me about Eckhart. One of the later units was titled ‘Religion and Mysticism.’ That was my first real encounter with mystical thinkers. Names I’d never heard before in my formal education: John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, Friedrich Hölderlin, Sri Aurobindo, Jean Gebser, Edith Stein—and the oldest of them all, Meister Eckhart. After the final exam, the group decided to keep meeting. That worked out well for me, since I’d entered the diocesan training program for future priests in Speyer, and the adult education center even paid my travel expenses and gave me a

teaching contract. Over the next two years, we read Eckhart's texts once a month, discussed them. Then we moved on to Gebser, then Sri Aurobindo, then Edith Stein. So you see, my real education in mysticism happened outside my formal education. Or maybe I should say: it happened alongside it. The habilitation I'm writing now follows the path of ethics from late antiquity to Eckhart."

Anika smiled.

"I think I've been doing something similar," she said. "I learned a lot from my professors, but even more from my fellow students, and mostly from what I explored on my own. That's why this evening excites me so much—talking with you about things I don't yet know. And the fact that you have this intellectual connection to my father—it's weirdly touching. But tell me—what made you and your study group stick with Eckhart? To be honest, I've grown more suspicious of him over time. Isn't there a link, directly or indirectly, between his teachings and Nazi ideology?"

Bruno wasn't surprised. He was well aware of how Eckhart had been co-opted by National Socialist discourse. He himself had used the most common translation of Eckhart's writings—edited and published after the war by the famous scholar Josef Quint.

"That brings a bit more family history into our relationship," Bruno said, smiling grimly. "When I told my father—he was a librarian at Saarland University—about the reading group, he nearly had a fit. 'Eckhart? So you're probably using Quint's translation?' 'Yes,' I said, 'it's the most accurate version available.' 'Accurate, maybe,' my father replied, 'but the man behind it was a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi, a brown sock. Even after the war, he remained one of the brown shadows at our university. He joined the NSDAP before the war, was part of several Nazi groups, even a supporting member of the SS. He didn't just use Eckhart to pursue scholarship—he used him as ideological fuel. And he wasn't alone. Alfred Rosenberg, the regime's chief ideologue, opened his infamous book *The Myth of the 20th Century* with a quote from Eckhart. Quint worked under that banner. After the war, he carried on as though the Holocaust hadn't happened, as though fascism hadn't plunged the world into darkness. There were some objections when he tried to reenter academia—but in the end, he was 'cleared' and resumed teaching. That's how he ended up at Saarland University, where the Eckhart Institute was also relocated. I was a junior librarian at the time. I had to deal with him constantly. A bitter, brown ghost in the stacks. Eventually, he got a call to Cologne, and I was relieved.'"

Anika listened closely.

"I was shocked," Bruno said, "when I heard my father call someone a 'brown sock.' He was normally quiet, never emotional, never insulting. But with Quint, something ran deep."

"I'm glad you told me," Anika said. "Because I've got my own set of family stories. But honestly, I feel guilty. I didn't want to drag you into my darkness—or into the darker corners of your own. Can we, just for tonight, shake the stories off and enjoy the fact that we found each other?"

Bruno exhaled. He would've loved to go deeper still. But he also felt seen. She had noticed the care he'd taken—the restaurant, the taxi from the station, the hotel where they'd changed for dinner, and the idea of ending the night in a bar.

Anika pressed a finger gently to his lips, opened her own—and the story folded in on itself.

Light and Shadow over Anika

Anika sank back into the lounge chair, eyes narrowed against the shimmering sea. Bruno lay beside her, sun-glossed and half-dozing, his oiled skin catching both wind and light. But Anika's mind was far from him. It was Feeny she was thinking about. She scrolled through the gallery on her phone, flicking back through the years—2010, 2000, 1995, 1991, 1988—until she found what she was looking for: Feeny in the sand, the two of them laughing, foam lapping at their legs. A group selfie under the sunshade, all four of them caught in a sun-salted joy.

She remembered first meeting Feeny by chance, at a photo exhibit opening at the university's art history department. Feeny had just started her studies in Munich—nineteen, maybe. Anika had been twenty-seven then, a doctoral assistant standing beside her colleague Pauline. The exhibition's title was etched into her memory: "Nightshades," starkly printed in white over a black-and-white poster featuring the blurred outline of a nude. The photographs had been taken by the university's own photographers.

Anika hadn't gone to the event for the art alone. A friend of hers—an assistant at the contemporary art chair—had mentioned the show, knowing her interest in aesthetics and contemporary photography. But it wasn't just about theory. Art was the axis of her life, her research, her passion. She loved smoky beer tents and baroque taverns, history and philosophy, and the wild conversations those settings enabled. The art world touched everything she valued.

When the waitress approached—"Señora, can I get you and your husband something to drink?"—Anika blinked and surfaced from her thoughts.

"A mojito, please," she said, then turned to Bruno. "You too? Have you heard: my husband?"

"Who would have thought", he stated with a smile, not fully awake.

"Make that two," Anika told her. "And could we get some olives and nuts?"

"Undoubtedly," said the server in flawless German before gliding away.

Bruno admired her. He liked how Spanish women didn't dance around what they wanted. Even at the airport, he'd noticed it.

But Anika had already drifted back into memory, returning to the university that night. The exhibit. The photographs. Feeny.

Back then, she'd gone with Bruno. They met in the foyer, had a flute of Sekt together, and wandered through the exhibition. Anika had mostly focused on the models' clothing choices, while Bruno and Pauline—ever the theorists—debated the philosophical undercurrents in the blurred, soft-exposed photographs. They raved about Lyotard and fragmentation. One photograph held them particularly long: a model frozen mid-movement, her outline both sharp and ghostlike. Bruno, more attuned to the flesh beside him than the image, turned to the young woman standing alone nearby and asked, "Is this you?"

She smiled, half-amused, half-proud. "These images play with form and rupture," she said. "But I promise—I'm more than just a shadow line." And she smiled at him.

Was it her confidence? Her gaze? Or the electric way she held herself that stirred Anika into motion?

Pauline was still theorizing. Bruno hesitated. But the girl, sensing her moment had passed, bowed slightly and drifted on.

Anika followed her. She couldn't remember what they talked about, only that at some point, the lady handed her a business card: Feeny Achner. That had been it—until, years later,

Anika found the card in a drawer while clearing her desk. Curious, she'd called. Feeny remembered her immediately. And when Anika mentioned an upcoming exhibition—"Nude Photography in Bavaria"—Feeny had jumped at the invitation. She also mentioned she now ran a body-to-body massage studio where her latest work hung. Anika was intrigued.

Now, by the sea, the memory came alive again. The lines of Feeny's body reassembled in the foam. Her legs—endless. Her torso—taut. Her gaze—undeniable. The photographer had captured something elemental, a collision of muscle and shadow. She was all presence. No pretense. She hadn't cared that Anika was staff, possibly even a professor. She was just... herself. Unapologetically so.

"Your drinks," the server said gently, placing the mojitos and snacks between them. Bruno stirred, thanked her, and leaned back again.

"Muchas gracias," Anika murmured, not touching her glass. She was still with Feeny—her walk, her defiance, her immediate now-ness.

Bruno slept. Anika stretched, gazing across the Atlantic, trying to lose herself in the horizon. But Feeny kept returning. The curve of her, the freedom. Anika tried to pull away from the memories—but the intimacy, the physicality, the friendship—they were too rich, too woven into who she was.

Bruno never asked much about her. And that was part of the problem. He listened. Always listened. Too well. He rarely challenged. Was it fear? Was it a kind of respect that became passivity?

Their relationship had begun at an academic ethics congress in Paris. An evening panel on postcolonialism and art history had brought them together. At the dinner afterward, they were seated side-by-side at "Le Train Bleu," a restaurant frozen in Belle Époque splendor. The ceilings, the murals, the ghosts of travelers past—it was all women in hats and men in cream suits, women turning their backs to the men, women holding the gaze of other women. One woman in the painting—standing at the center of the circle of men—paid no attention to any of the shadowy figures around her. Or perhaps she went beyond them, toward the younger lady in the back, dressed in a nearly transparent white blouse, holding a pair of opera glasses, looking out at something—or nothing—like a character on stage.

Anika's eyes drifted upward to the ceiling, where another brazen pose revealed itself. Yet emotionally, she still lingered below the table. From what looked like a round glass eye in the ceiling, her gaze traveled up into the painted heavens. Around this eye sat and stood people, staring down into its abyss. The men looked busy, hunched over, seated, eyes fixed skyward, while at the center of the painting were two women. One was a refined young lady in a white gown with a sweeping train, the only figure whose dress billowed out over the edge of the painted skylight and into the restaurant itself. The gown bared both shoulders and plunged down her back, and to emphasize this nakedness, the second woman offered her a dark brown fur to drape over the exposed skin.

Bruno followed Anika's eyes but couldn't grasp what she found so mesmerizing in the paintings. Instead, he found himself mesmerized by Anika. She wore slim-fitting pants printed with African patterns, and he wondered—not without some irony—how she could wear something so exotically coded at a conference where she had just spoken passionately against postcolonial exploitation and for the right of women to reclaim their cultural identities. But in that moment, theory faded. What caught his attention were the narrow, high, fire-red heels

peeking out from beneath the fabric, and the red-and-black top that hugged her upper body—high-necked, unlike the women in the mural, but made of such fine silk that, when she turned her head and the golden lights caught her from behind, the contours of her skin showed through like a secret exposed in candlelight.

She must have felt it—the brush of his foot under the table. Bruno would later say he sensed her movement first, hesitant, exploratory, and then responded just as gently. Anika believed it had been his doing. A small, harmless disagreement, one they would later laugh about. Even as the dinner table circled through talk of materiality, art, and ethical implications, something else passed between them. A second conversation. One of glances and half-smiles, of questions implied and never asked.

The others around the table were locked into postcolonial critique. Anika, however, was slowly drifting toward the man beside her. And he—more and more—seemed willing to let himself be drawn. Still playing the role of the attentive scholar, still nodding in rhythm with the table’s logic, but visibly pulled elsewhere. Toward her. That tension—that lovely, barely contained tension—only deepened her desire to cross the line.

Beneath the table, knees touched. And again. Feet, too. Signals passed between them that had little to do with postcolonialism.

Their hotel rooms, it turned out, were on the same floor. When Anika stuck the key in her door, she looked over her shoulder: “Want to join me for a glass of wine?”

The room was small. Velvet walls. A bed that creaked with too much meaning. She asked, “White or red?”

“White,” Bruno said, not quite meeting her eyes.

“Chablis,” she said. “Usually for fish, but tonight... why not?” She poured, gestured for him to sit. He did.

“Cheers,” she said. “To meeting.”

They talked. About ethics. About exile. About what it meant to speak for those who had no one. About art as a political act. Bruno leaned in. She did too. The wine went untouched. Their mouths found each other. It wasn’t perfect. He was too careful. Too afraid of being heard. But it had begun.

The next morning, she resumed where they’d left off. No room for sleep, no room for distance.

Now, years later, she raised her mojito glass on this last day of their Tenerife vacation. “Are you alright?” she asked him. She could feel it—he was heavy.

Bruno hesitated. “It’s about you, Anika. And Feeny.”

She tensed.

“She wrote me three days ago,” Anika said quietly. “They suspect ovarian cancer.”

The words hit hard. Bruno remembered Feeny—vaguely. Their vacation together. The laughter. Since then, distance. Life. Work. But now this?

“What does that mean?” he asked gently. “How are you doing with it?”

“She’s waiting for a proper scan. Her GP sent her to a radiologist. That’s all I know.”

He reached for her hand but didn’t close around it.

“She’s in the UK,” Anika continued. “And I worry. The NHS... it’s in crisis. She still comes to Munich for work, but she’s based there now, with her family.”

Bruno seemed to understand. His new job—his appointment to auxiliary bishopric—suddenly felt distant, irrelevant. He had wanted to start fresh. But now...

“Should I wait to book our next trip?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Anika said. “Maybe wait. But for now—let’s not let this email end our holiday. We’ve still got a day. And for her, she doesn’t even know for sure.”

“You’re right,” he said, though the weight didn’t lift. “You’re right.”

They toasted again. Mojito against mojito. Glass against shadow. Hope against what might come next.

Bruno only half understood what was running through Anika’s mind, her heart, her stomach. And she, in turn, felt guilty for having clouded his last day of vacation with the news.

She hadn’t even planned to tell him. But the words had pressed up from within. Maybe because his quietness, his slight distance, mirrored her own. She didn’t want pity, but she also didn’t want to feel alone in it. And Bruno—he had a way of receiving her truths without blinking.

Anika looked at him as he leaned back in the sun, pretending, perhaps, to be asleep again. His sunglasses had returned to his face, the mirrored lenses disguising any hint of doubt or fear. But she knew him well enough to know: he was taking it in, all of it. Her words, her tone, the tremor behind the calm.

She reached out and touched his arm.

“I’ll keep you posted. About everything.”

Bruno gave a nod, just slightly. “Naturally.”

And for a while, they said nothing. They just listened—to the waves, to the murmur of other guests, to the hum of their own thoughts. Above them, a plane sliced the sky.

Tomorrow, they would fly in opposite directions—Frankfurt, London, Munich. The small, ordinary catastrophe of their relation.