

First, we hug. We prove to each other that we memorized the names on the Tinder profiles, say: *Rosa! Great to see you* and *Thanks for having me, Eric*. I demonstratively wipe my shoes on the welcome mat an extra time because my coat is wet and my fingers must have been cold to the touch. Quickly, before the door has fallen all the way shut, he studies me. He is polite about it, subtle. Eventually he settles for my hair, tufts of which are visible from underneath the rim of my beanie. He says: "I love the color you've gone for. It suits you really well." I am disappointed he didn't go for the pants.

A colorful assortment of bomber jackets and parkas line one side of the long hallway: this place used to be a school, Eric tells me, as he takes my coat. He doesn't hang it up next to the others, but instead folds it over his arm on our way to his studio. Apparently his room was the old German classroom; peeking over the edge of an IKEA closet in scratched-up white a scissor with eyes tells me to *Geh sorgsam mit dem Schulmaterial um*. He does not know why he has kept the posters. I decide I don't want old posters peeking out from behind my future furniture, but it's a charming detail for a hook-up story.

Eric sets us both tea. A single bed with striped bed sheets in one corner, a kitchenette in the other. An oven and a stove, but the kind that you light with a match. A fridge, mold like a smudge of paint on one corner and splashed up the side. Magnets, some too old to be his. He passes me the tea. Against the other wall, next to the closet, I notice an armchair.

"Psychology, huh?" - "Yeah, psychology."  
"Are you close with them?" - "We call every other weekend. Usually."  
"Your third picture..." - "Don't ask. I can't explain."

Baked potato with a side of ketchup. I ask him if he has mayonnaise and he says I'll have to bring my own next time if that's something I feel strongly about. He shakes his head while muttering 'Dutch people, I swear', because of the 'next time' thing. It's my turn to talk about my interests so I introduce him to the phonology of Proto-Turkic. He doesn't care, but I didn't expect him to. As long as he's listening.

"I've never met a linguist before." - "You still haven't."  
"So you can make a good coffee?" - "I can make a latte with a little bear on it."  
"And so what was it about him..." - "You don't want to know."

After dessert, the taste of Merlot and the smell of cigarette smoke. The wide-open window, the damp air and a thousand different pitter-patters: metal, cobblestone, brick. Car lights flood into a pattern of droplets on the window. Outside, tires crunch down on the streets.

He is propped up on both elbows, which means it won't be much longer. He squints with each puff of smoke and blows it up at the ceiling, lower lip angled inwards, blowing down from the top lip. He has done everything right, and yet. And yet.

My eyes drift again to the armchair, bathing in the golden light of a sagging arc lamp.

"The armchair," I ask, "was it yours to begin with?"

"Probably not." We both look at it. The sloping armrests, the roll of fabric as if the sides had been peeled back and pinned into place. This kind of pattern is called paisley, though I'm not sure why I know that. The *botes* are gold-and-yellow: falling-stars or comets perhaps,

against the red background of a dying star. The golden light, the raging comets, the dying star, and my heart sinks warm and content into my belly.

“I can show you if you want.” He says it with the intonation of someone who is finishing up a statement. I say, “sure”, and when he gets up I decide not to follow. The camera he pulls out is rectangular, the size of a perfume box. The texture is that of the inside of the doors of my parent’s old car: plastic, covered in tiny lumps like sand grains. The reddish-brown leather case. He does not pull out any pictures. Instead, he watches me.

“Whatever you’re comfortable with,” he says.

Headlights on the surface of my Merlot. I want to live forever. I want to drink sunlight. To spend Rapture with a cigarette between my index and middle finger, at just the right angle. The chilly air and unknown faces. Small disappointments, even smaller delights.

I say: “Everything.”

He opens the closet, obscuring the scissor with eyes. Inside, a corduroy jacket sprawled across slumped hoodies and inside-out sweatpants. Socks drool out from drawers. A light brown vest and black snow boots. “Yes,” he says, “though we sold our horses when I was twelve.” We put me in the vest and put my hair up. There are no mirrors, but in the reflection on the window I am swept up in stars. “More.”

He opens another drawer. I watch it shortly, absently. It has been a while but... My doubt is gray and cold and descends like rain or salt on the tingle in my palms. I feel the moment slipping away, flashes of color and small bursts of starlight leaking out from the bottom of a gray-washed studio that suddenly occupies my entire mind. He is right. It is the only way.

I sit still on the armchair as he straps me in. I can move my mouth freely. I can still speak. The leather is smooth against my skin, the clasps cold. The gentle pressure of the metal details between my brows and forehead are like needle pricks around which all energy gathers and breathes.

When he asks: “Ready?”, I say: “Now.”