

Summer by Night

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*Your
dream summer
is now
available
at a knockdown
early-bird
price.*

MARKO

He was in a toyshop and bought something. Two soft toys. When he left, with the animals tucked under his arm, he realised that the animals were pretty big. A little cumbersome. Big soft toys bring pleasure though. The bigger the animal, the bigger the pleasure. He drove off. Got out.

He walks through the flickering summer now. The heat bounces off things. He tries to catch it, like a ball, and hurls it back at the grey house walls. He feels warm and cold, cold and warm. Fluffy fabric against his hands. He touches it with his fingertips.

It's noisy in the school playground. *Activity*, he thinks. The word buzzes around his head. Odd word. The soft toys feel too big. Getting in his way. He knew it. He walks past screeching children towards a narrow, long, white table. A row of tables with smiling women standing behind them. He puts down one of the animals, keeps hold of the other one.

‘Your teddy?’

The voice is coming from below. It grazes his hips. A high-pitched voice. He nods. Looks at the small boy.

‘Yes,’ he says.

He gives the boy the teddy and takes his hand. Something clicks into place. His hand in the boy’s hand and something more. Something else.

They walk. He talks. He tells the boy why they’re walking. The houses’ grey walls are on the other side now, back to front. Everything’s different, everything’s new. The walls are as grey as before, but the heat no longer bounces off him; it clings to him, envelopes him. The boy walks alongside him as if he were his son.

In the background people’s chatter fades away, the children’s screeching, the laughter.

His car is parked in a side street. He punches the boy on the temple before laying him on the back seat.

He gets in, starts the engine, drives off. Drives away. The grey walls get smaller.

Smaller and smaller, then disappear completely.

BEN

An open field. He’s standing on his own. Pausing, not moving. Alert. No one’s there, no one to be seen, no one to be heard. Nobody. He’s

all alone. Standing alone in the field. Hung over, though he didn't drink. Exhausted, relieved. Painfully so. He senses he's going to die. Some day, at a time that is still strange to him.

The mobile phone plays a tune he's often heard before without ever recognising it. It was on the phone when he bought it. In an electronics superstore. Bright lighting. People making their wishes come true. Without any pleasure, without any show of emotion.

‘Yes?’ he says.

‘Forget your day off,’ Christian says. ‘A child is missing. A boy.’

Ben says nothing. Christian's words ooze across the room. Gooey. Child, boy, missing.

‘Ben?’

‘Yes?’

‘Did you get that? Are you awake?’

‘Yes.’

He feels Svea touch his arm.

‘Shh, it's all right,’ he says. ‘It's Christian. Go back to sleep.’

‘Do you have to go?’

‘Yeah, in a minute. Go back to sleep.’

He pushes himself out of bed. He glances at Svea as he walks towards the door. And then he's standing in a different room, with sun outside the windows.

‘Ben?’ Christian asks.

‘Yeah. Sorry. I've left the bedroom. Svea's sleeping.’

‘Nap?’

‘Yeah. She got back from Korea yesterday and she’s a bit jetlagged. We had a quick lie-down.’

‘Oh, OK. Did you catch what I said?’

‘Yes. Where is it?’

‘Holunderweg 11. A primary school. They’re holding a jumble sale today. Wiesbaden-Biebrich. Talk to you later.’

Talk to you later, Ben thinks.

CHRISTIAN

Christian lets the smartphone slide into his pocket and observes the scene.

Women, children. A baffled caretaker. The caretaker looks as if he’s stepped out of a movie. A movie based on clichés. He’s wearing blue tradesman’s overalls and is portly and balding. Some of the women are chatting away to one another, others are standing quietly on the fringes, pensive but also upset.

A boy has vanished. Christian feels a stinging sensation behind his eyes. He shuts them, opens them. Uniformed colleagues are standing on the scene. He, Christian, is leading the operation. On his own for now, until Ben arrives. He must be on his way, but it’ll take him a little while longer to drive here.

From here to there. Coming out of his midday nap. From dreams to the vanishing spot.

Christian wonders about Ben’s dreams, if they were nice or not. A matter of perspective. The only dreamless time, he read somewhere, was usually during deep sleep at night. That might mean that when you dreamt you stayed in touch with reality. With life. Deep sleep, on the other hand, established contact with death.

In a minute, when he enters the scene, he’s going to need to be able to recite his text. Flawlessly.

He takes a few steps, carefully, and imagines being an investigator. In a missing person case. A possible kidnapping. There’s a stinging behind his eyes. Silent laughter quivers on his lips before retreating. He’s walking. He imagines being the lead investigator he is.

BEN

Ben crosses the summer. Drives straight through it. His speed is moderate, his thoughts swirl vaguely.

Afternoon. Shortly before four. The school building is flat and long. Light grey in the sunlight. Stalls on a green lawn. Brightly dressed people.

He gets out and spots Christian, rocking almost imperceptibly on his lanky legs as he listens to a squat man’s explanations. The man looks like a caretaker.

Ben approaches and begins to divine the man’s words. Then he hears them.

‘... didn’t notice a thing,’ the man says.

‘Ah, Ben,’ Christian says.

‘Hi,’ Ben says.

‘Mr Schäfer is the school caretaker. He didn’t notice anything. He doesn’t know how the boy could have disappeared.’

‘How old is the boy? What’s his name?’ Ben asks.

‘Five. Jannis. He was here with his mother and sister. Lea Meininger and her daughter. The daughter went to this school. They’re over there.’

Ben follows Christian’s gaze. A woman and a girl are standing under a tree in the shade. Both of them in white and pink. Matching. Mother and daughter. He wonders distractedly what colour the boy’s clothes were.

‘The whole thing started at half eleven. A typical summer jumble sale. Parents and teachers selling things for good causes. Suddenly, at about quarter to twelve, the boy, Jannis, was gone. People looked for him, including Mr Schäfer.’

Mr Schäfer the caretaker nods.

‘After searching for about an hour without any success, the police informed his mother.’

Ben waits.

‘It’s now about three hours since the boy disappeared. They’ve just launched a manhunt using a photo provided by his mother.’

Ben nods, and Christian hands him a photo. It shows Jannis standing with a staged smile in front of a small blackboard with the word ‘Dinosaur’ written on it in chalky white. A photographer had presumably taken the picture at kindergarten. Jannis is in the Dinosaur group. The thought flickers in front of Ben’s eyes for a few seconds as if it was part of the solution, as if it told a story explaining everything. From the first sentence to the last, with a happy ending.

‘Yes,’ he says.

‘Mark Lederer is in the car park over there. They might have some footage from the CCTV cameras.’

Ben turns and sees the multi-storey car park attached to a large shopping centre. The oval building is resting there in the sun like a silent colossus. Colourful advertising banners are stuck to the grey façade. *Burger King, New Yorker MaxiDaxi, CineMAX.*

‘It’s quite a way away but if we’re lucky the boy disappeared in that direction.’

Ben nods. *Lucky*, he thinks.

He sees the mother and the sister. Pink and white. A beautiful day. Selling things that give pleasure for a good cause. He’s already walking, stride after stride, towards them.

LEA

She only sees the man when he’s in front of them. Standing in front of them. She didn’t see him coming, no more than she saw Jannis going.

‘Mrs Meininger?’

She nods. She scans the eyes, the man’s face, his lips for the word that will bring Jannis back.

‘My name’s Neven, Ben Neven. I’m one of the investigators working . . .’

‘It’s about Jannis, my son.’

‘Mrs Meininger, can you please tell me again what happened. When did you last see Jannis? And where exactly?’

‘Jannis is gone.’

‘Mrs Meininger, can you please tell me again . . .’

‘We got here. I went inside to hand in our things for the jumble sale. It took less than a minute.’

Ben nods. He looks around. ‘In there, you mean.’ He points to the main entrance with the school’s name emblazoned above it in big letters.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘They collect the things in the first classroom on the right before taking them to the stalls.’

‘Right, I get it,’ Ben says. ‘And your son, Jannis, was . . .’

‘Was with me. With us.’ She looks at her daughter, who meets his eye.

‘My daughter Sarah,’ she says.

‘I took some things inside too,’ Sarah says. ‘Jannis was actually with us. He was even carrying something.’

‘Yes, that’s right. He had an old Playmobil ship. He’d been playing with it recently but then he said he wanted to take it to the jumble sale anyway so other children could have fun with it.’

Ben nods. He hears a rushing, right in his ears. Like the roar of the sea.

‘I thought he was there, that he was following us,’ says the daughter, Sarah.

Ben lets his eyes pause on her. ‘That ship . . .’ he murmurs.

‘He must have carried it inside and then run off somewhere. I don’t know,’ the mother says. ‘I’d stopped for a short chat with one of the teachers organising the jumble sale.’

‘OK. Who? Which teacher?’

‘Mrs Spahn. I think she’s inside. She has blonde hair. Fair hair. I mean, almost white.’

‘Aha. All right, thank you for now.’

He walks away.

Pink and white. Summer. A boy who wants to share his happiness. He enters the building and a pleasant coolness laps at him.

Inside the classroom he can’t see a woman with fair hair, but on a grey table, alongside other items, he immediately spots the same dark-brown pirate ship with a skull and crossbones flag flying from it that he had as a child.

*Space grey,
elegant glass top,
improved features,
new generation,
IP67
certified,
the newly integrated
A11 bionic processor with
64 byte providing
performance
for
high resolution
in 4 to 8 K.*

CHRISTIAN

Christian is standing in the shade. He feels good, sheltered, protected. The coolness seems to make a mockery of the overheated day waiting outside. The man sitting in front of the screen, watching the flickering pictures unfold, is bored. It's unusual.

People are often ill at ease during a police investigation. They get unwittingly caught up in a kind of role play, desperate to live up

to expectations. Or, in rare cases, *not* to live up to expectations. This car park attendant here seems above all annoyed. At himself? By life? By unexpected trouble?

Christian watches the spooling pictures and the time code at the bottom right of the screen. 11.32. 11.33. 11.34.

Just as the man leans back in his chair, Christian sees what his eyes have been searching for.

‘Stop,’ he says.

‘What?’

‘Stop! I want to see the freeze frame.’

‘Freeze frame,’ the attendant mutters.

The doubling impression returns while Christian is watching the two grey-black silhouettes. It occurs to him that this isn’t real. He isn’t really standing here looking at the grey picture. He feels absent, standing outside, watching himself and the car park attendant. Two strangers.

‘What now?’ the attendant asks.

‘Can you zoom in on the two of them, the boy and the man?’

‘Sure,’ the watchman says.

Christian peers at the two silhouettes on the screen. One big, one small. A man, a boy. The boy is holding something in his hand. Something big. A soft toy.

‘Well?’ the watchman mumbles.

‘I need a printout,’ Christian says.

‘OK,’ the watchman says.

Christian focuses on the image again. He’s completely intent now; the other picture, the false one in which nothing is really happening, has retreated like a tortoise into its shell. He tries to distinguish some facial features, sketch outlines in his thoughts. He can’t.

All he can really make out now, on closer inspection, is the soft toy. A big grey teddy bear.

BEN

He’s walking. Once again he has the feeling he’s crossing the summer. Slicing a path through it. It feels nice to be moving. The parking level rears up in front of him like a monster. A grey dinosaur, surrounded by a pale, colourful world.

Mark Lederer and two uniformed colleagues, a woman and a man, are standing by the lifts, at the payment machines. Two more officers in uniform comb the area, peering into the parked cars. The cars are sleeping. Dreamlessly.

‘Christian is downstairs with the attendant. They’re checking the CCTV footage,’ Mark Lederer says.

‘All right,’ Ben says. He walks into the lift and takes it down a floor. Getting out, he sees Christian standing in the small, brightly lit office, surrounded by shadow. Christian beckons to him. A man is sitting in front of the screen, breathing heavily.

‘We’ve got something,’ Christian says. ‘That might be the boy. But it might equally be a father and his son coming from the jumble sale.’

Ben nods. He screws up his eyes, opens them wide and tries to bring the blurred grey image into focus. ‘Any way of making it sharper? Or bigger?’

‘No, I’m afraid not,’ the car park attendant mumbles.

‘It’s the best we can do for now,’ Christian says.

‘OK.’ Ben moves closer. *Dinosaur group*, he thinks. A boy with a staged smile, behind which a genuine, open smile was waiting to find its way on to his lips.

‘That’s him,’ he says.

‘It is?’ Christian says.

Ben nods. They really do look like a father and son. Out and about together, taking their time. It must be from a camera covering an area outside the car park. They’re walking along the street. Ben sees Jannis in the grey, white, black summer; he can see his smile behind the pixels. A cryptic smile, one that still needs to be ‘unpacked’, from the right format, in the correct resolution, before it can unfold. After the photographer finally left.

‘That’s Jannis,’ Ben says. ‘And there’s a second teddy bear.’

‘What?’ Christian asks.

‘I saw one like it. Just now,’ Ben says. ‘Same kind of teddy. It’s lying on one of the outside tables at the jumble sale.’

SARAH

Cautiously, she moves closer. She stops. The police officers are back. They were at the multi-storey car park. Now they're standing in the classroom, in the shade. It's oddly cool in here.

She is standing in the doorway, unnoticed. The two policemen are standing with two others in white clothes by the tables with nice things lying on top of them. As soon as they arrived she found a few items she wanted to buy.

The giant teddy wasn't one of them, but the policemen seem especially interested in it. She didn't even spot it at first. It wasn't there when they got here. The policemen brought it in from outside, out of the sun, with gloves, even though it's summer. Carefully, as if it were fragile. Or had a wounded paw.

They confer as they look at the teddy. The people in white nod. Outside, other police officers are busy cordoning off the area. Everyone has been ordered to move out of the way and off the lawn. She doesn't know where her mum is. She doesn't know anything.

She's standing in a picture that feels all wrong. The room is too cool, the policemen too serious – apart from one, who sometimes looks as if he suddenly needs to laugh. The others don't notice this, but she can see it because she feels the same. Something's wrong with the man, and something's wrong with her too. Because she sometimes almost has to laugh, because sometimes she simply cannot believe it.

None of this can really be happening. None of this is right.

Any moment Jannis will come darting round the corner, laughing. She has been waiting for it to happen this whole time. Jannis laughs, Mum laughs and is angry but only briefly because Jannis is back. Jannis would love a teddy like that, Sarah has been thinking for the past few minutes. Why is the teddy here when Jannis is gone?

The teddy is lying on the table. The policemen are standing around it as if they're going to treat it. Operate on it. The police officers are surgeons, and the teddy bear is sick.

She doesn't like the teddy, but she doesn't know why. It's no disgrace to be sick.

BEN

When Ben looks up from the soft toy, he sees Sarah, the sister, standing in the classroom doorway.

He goes over to her, searching for words as he walks. He can't find any, and she says nothing as he stands in front of her.

‘Come on, let's go outside,’ he says eventually.

He goes first, and it feels good. Feels right. Facing the sun. The area outside, the green lawn, has now been cordoned off with red tape that flutters in the slack wind. The jumble sale visitors are standing at the edges of the scene, along the street, in silence. Some whisper to one another as if everything were confidential in such circumstances. Everything classified, secret.

A thought stirs, a feeling, a bright image he saw during the night.

‘Jannis sometimes runs away,’ she says. ‘A few metres, I mean. But then he comes back.’

He looks at her, searching for her gaze but then dodges her eyes as they meet his. He nods.

‘Is the teddy important?’ she asks.

The words hang in the air. He sees Christian standing a little way off now, on the margins, near the cordon, with a blonde woman. Fair hair. Probably Mrs Spahn, the teacher. The woman’s speaking, Christian’s listening.

‘Maybe,’ he says. ‘We don’t know yet.’

‘OK,’ Sarah says.

‘Can you tell me again please when exactly you last saw Jannis?’

‘When we got here. We handed in our things. Inside, in the room where the teddy is.’

‘Good. And Jannis . . .’

‘Ran out, I think, after he put down his ship. Mum was still talking to the teachers.’

‘And then you went out . . .’

‘Mum looked for Jannis, but he wasn’t there. We walked around once. Around the building. We asked people. Then it got . . . you know, strange.’

He nods. ‘Is it possible Jannis knew someone here. A man?’

‘What kind of man?’

‘Does he know people here? Were friends of yours here, maybe? Fathers or brothers of girls in your class?’

‘Well, there were lots of people we know. But we asked them all. None of them had seen Jannis.’

Out of the corner of his eye he sees Christian. He comes over to them.

‘Mrs Spahn saw Jannis run outside. After he put down his ship. She talked to his mother for a while.’

Ben nods. That part of the story at least seems to stack up.

‘The shot from the CCTV camera needs some work. At the moment it’s not possible to make out anything apart from outline and shadow.’

‘Did you see another teddy?’ Ben asks.

Sarah looks up. ‘Like the one inside?’

‘Yes.’

‘No. It was only there later. There was no teddy there when we got here. I would’ve noticed.’

‘Either there are more than one of them or the teddy, unlike Jannis, came back,’ Christian says.

Ben imagines a teddy that can walk, all on its own, as he walks across the green grass towards the red cordon with people standing behind it.

‘Sorry,’ he says. ‘Did any of you see a man with a teddy today? Or maybe two teddies?’

Silence.

‘Pretty large teddies. Oversized,’ Ben says.

‘I did.’

Ben looks for the face that goes with the voice.

‘Two teddies. The man was standing out in the street.’

Ben finds a young boy’s face. For a few moments he thinks it’s Jannis. ‘So you saw the man with the two teddies?’

‘That’s right. But I didn’t know if he belonged here.’

‘Belonged here?’

‘Yes, he looked as if he didn’t know if he belonged here. To the jumble sale, I mean.’

‘So he was kind of . . . hesitant.’

‘Yeah,’ the boy says.

‘Can you tell me what he looked like? How old was he?’

‘Don’t know. Young or old.’

Ben waits.

‘I mean, both somehow. He was like a kid, with those teddies. But sort of old too. Much older than a child. He also had . . . very little hair on his head.’

‘Had you ever seen him before? Near the school? Did he talk to anyone? Maybe he’s one of the kids’ dads?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No, he was all on his own.’

‘OK. Did you see him with Jannis? Do you know Jannis?’

‘No, but there wasn’t anyone with the man. The man was all on his own.’

Ben nods. Alone, he thinks. All on his own.

‘No, I mean, not all on his own, of course,’ the boy says.

‘What?’

‘He had the two teddy bears.’

MARKO

While the boy was unconscious, Marko laid him on the bed and tried out the things he’d ordered online on him.

The boy is still asleep. Unconscious, didn’t notice anything. That’s good, and it’s bad. The whole day isn’t going as planned. Askew.

He puts the boy in the bath. He switches the television on in the living room. His heart gives a little skip when he sees there’s a cartoon he likes.

He sits down in the armchair, watches the pictures and thinks that he’s tired and could fall asleep, like the boy. Maybe he could dream the same things.

*In a
digital world
my car
tells me
when
it's time
to set off.*

*The car they dreamed
of as children
has just been surpassed.*

*My car knows
my name,
my destinations.
Progress. Freedom.
The conquest of the
digital world.*

BEN

The afternoon is receding; evening is approaching. They are sitting in the shade of the meeting room, with warm evening sunlight slanting through the Venetian blinds.

Malvi, the department head, is the only one standing. Maybe because he's ready to leave, maybe because he'd like to lord it over the others. Maybe for other reasons.

Ben turns towards the wide-screen TV with the frozen CCTV image flickering on it. A man, a boy, a teddy bear.

‘That’s all?’ Malvi asks.

Christian gives a quick, dry laugh. He's sitting at the very end of the table, as always. ‘Superior,’ he mumbles.

‘What?’ Malvi asks.

‘You’re talking like a superior,’ Christian says. ‘And of course you are one.’

Malvi stares at Christian, Christian stares at Malvi. Neither backs down.

That’s all, Ben thinks. Man, boy, teddy bear.

‘I’m checking the distribution channels,’ Mark Lederer says. Quiet and withdrawn, as always. Ben leans forward a little to catch what he's saying. ‘I mean, where the company that makes the teddies delivers them to,’ Lederer says. ‘Which department stores or toyshops sell them. We’ll know by tomorrow at the latest. Will it get us anywhere fast? I don’t know.’

Malvi nods.

An image superimposes itself on the image Ben sees. His attention wavers. *Looking for a bear, he thinks. Tracing its path, following in its footsteps. But it was carried, leaving no tracks.*

‘What about the father?’ Malvi asks. He looks at Christian who made the phone call.

‘Does something in advertising,’ Christian says.

‘Uh-huh. Anything else?’

‘He’s in Berlin. Currently working on a job for a car manufacturer.’

‘Uh-huh,’ Malvi says.

‘Bears no resemblance to the man in the CCTV footage,’ Christian says.

‘OK.’

‘He’s on the way back. His plane lands in Frankfurt at half seven and I’ll be there.’

‘Good,’ Malvi says.

‘The family gives the impression of being intact,’ Christian says.

Ben lets these words reverberate. *The family gives the impression of being intact.*

‘The officers on the ground haven’t reported anything yet. We’ve got two helicopters with thermal imaging cameras over the woods near the school and they’ll fly until about eleven this evening,’ Ben says.

Malvi nods.

‘7,886 out of 8,234,’ Lederer murmurs, even more quietly than usual.

‘Yes?’ Malvi asks.

‘I’ve looked up the statistics for last year,’ Lederer says. ‘7,886 out of 8,234 children in the age group up to and including thirteen came back or were found. That’s a clearance rate of over ninety-five per cent.’

Silence.

‘The remaining five per cent is made up almost exclusively of perennial runaways and strays. Or children who’ve been taken away from their parents.’

Runaways. Strays, Ben thinks.

‘Odd term, that: *strays*,’ Lederer now adds. He looks down at the sheet of paper in front of him. ‘Overall, it should be noted that every day many children are reported missing, but the proportion of children whose whereabouts still haven’t been cleared up after a longer period is very low.’

Malvi clears his throat.

‘As for the remainder, it is to be feared that they were victims of a crime or an accident, find themselves in a hopeless situation or are no longer alive,’ Lederer reads.

‘Have you finished, Mr Lederer?’ Malvi asks.

Lederer nods. Ben watches him. He looks sad beyond belief. Because the statistics have offered him no certainty that Jannis is safe. Five per cent is too low. Ben wonders if Mark Lederer has

children. He doesn't know much about him, nothing in fact. A quiet, amiable man, that's all.

‘The technical department is busy getting the man's picture in focus. The CCTV image. We need it to be much sharper so we can use it for questioning or for the manhunt,’ Ben says.

He looks at Malvi and sees that his boss's eyes are on him. Malvi's eyes seek his.

‘Your case,’ Malvi says.

The words hang in the air as Malvi turns away from Ben, nods to everyone in the room and leaves. *My case*, Ben thinks. *My case, my case*. Malvi loves phrases like that, but this time it sounds different.

Because it's true.

My case, Ben thinks, closing his eyes for a few seconds.

Travel yourself

interesting

Relish your

experience

CHRISTIAN

Christian watches the people at the airport. All of them on their way somewhere or other, all in a hurry. Small people, tall people. Pretentious ones and modest. Loveable and peculiar.

He tries to catch people’s eyes. Counts. Makes calculations. Most of the children are laughing. Most of the adults are stone-faced. Two small children are crying. One of them is lying in a pram.

Most babies are wailing or silent.

Most adults are hunched over their smartphones.

Some people are very loud. Shrill laughter drifts over from the queue at the check-in counter of an Asian airline whose pink logo is very different from the others. Laughing women. Giggling. An Asian woman and a European woman are sharing a funny moment – a moment when everything is different.

‘Excuse me, Mr . . .’

He turns round, still dazzled by the pink of the Asian airline, and stares into the eyes of Mrs Meininger.

‘Mrs Meininger,’ he says.

‘You’re one of the policemen . . .’

‘I’m waiting for your husband,’ he says. ‘I’d like to have a quick talk with him. Christian Sandner. You spoke to my colleague, Mr Neven, this lunchtime.’ He offers her his hand and feels her skin. Soft and cool. *Christian Sandner*, he thinks. That’s me. ‘Nine letters, seven letters.’

She looks at him quizzically.

‘My name. My first name has nine letters, my surname seven.’

He’s a little surprised that he said it aloud. He usually only thinks it. When he imagines other people, he almost always thinks of the number of letters in their name. Nine and seven. He very rarely forgets to think of it.

Three and nine – Lea Meininger.

It’s a kind of tick. A kind of mantra. Is that the word? For a fleeting moment he thinks of Natalie. Natalie laughs after counting the letters. Natalie has never called it a mantra.

Where’s Sarah?

‘Where is your daughter?’ he asks.

‘She stayed at home,’ Mrs Meininger says. ‘She wanted . . .’

‘Oh yes, I understand,’ he says. He genuinely does.

‘She wanted to be there in case Jannis comes home. Or in case he . . . is found. In case he’s brought back.’

‘Yes.’

The arrival gate opens and closes, opens and closes. Christian catches people’s eyes, holds them, lets them go. He no longer knows what the father, Mrs Meininger’s husband, looks like; he has no likeness in his mind’s eye. He saw a photo that’s already in the investigation file, but the memory is gone. He tries to remember, to picture him, but nothing comes.

Six, he thinks. Jannis.

BEN

Ben drops in on Landmann before going home. He hasn’t been to Landmann’s place for a while. Now he heads to his house as if it were normal, the most normal thing in the world to visit Landmann. He didn’t get through to him by phone, but he’s sure he’ll be at home.

Landmann’s house lies there in the evening sun, swathed in golden light. Ben feels a twinge in his stomach as he gets out and walks towards the house, gravel crunching under his feet. In the background, at the back of the broad garden, the lake lies like a mirage, like a dark-blue carpet that has just been laid out. Just for him, for this one and only reason. So he can see it, the dark-blue lake. The dark-blue carpet.

Run to the jetty, take off, jump, dive in.

Stay under water.

‘Ben.’

Ben looks up.

‘How nice to see you,’ Landmann says. He’s standing in the frame of the front door.

‘That should be my line, actually,’ Ben says. He smiles. For the first time today he actually feels a smile. An unfamiliar, distant feeling that is suddenly very close, instinctively on his lips.

Landmann invites him inside with a welcoming gesture, and he follows him into the house. Shadows play on the walls, a game he doesn’t understand, and he likes that. It’s good not to understand the game; it’s good to know that Landmann would win the game. If he played, but Landmann doesn’t play, doesn’t solve puzzles, isn’t an investigator. Not any more.

‘Take a seat,’ he says, then goes over to the fridge, takes out a bottle of white wine and opens it.

How pretty, Ben thinks. The interplay of sunlight and shadow on the white walls. He sits down on the light-coloured sofa.

‘How are you?’ he asks.

‘Oh,’ Landmann says. ‘Fine.’

‘Happy to hear it.’

‘How about you? The three of you?’

That’s typical Landmann, thinking beyond Ben, including Svea and Marlene in his question.

Yes. How is he? How is Svea? How is Marlene?

‘I think Marlene’s doing really well,’ he says. ‘She’s managing well and has lots of friends. She enjoys her days.’ *Yeah, that’s right*, he thinks. He realises now that Landmann has asked. That’s nice

too. The thought that Marlene, his daughter, is doing fine. That she’s walking jauntily through life, lightheartedly, at least at the moment.

And Jannis is walking with a teddy bear. Holding the hand of an unknown man.

‘And Svea?’ Landmann asks.

‘Well too,’ Ben says. Although it’s the truth, he feels hollow and empty. He really does think that Svea is well. ‘She flies a lot. You know, that’s her job. She’s a purser now, which means she leads the crew. She was in Korea and is feeling a bit jetlagged, but otherwise she’s fine. I think the jetlag heading to Korea is worse than on the flight back, so nothing major.’

Landmann nods. Pauses. Watches him with a smile.

‘How about you?’

Ben says nothing. Landmann waits.

Nothing major, Ben thinks. ‘Hmm,’ he says.

‘Difficult case?’

That’s also typical of Landmann. Putting his finger on a sore spot. With a knowing smile. What does he know?

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘A child’s gone missing. A boy.’

Landmann says nothing. He shuts his eyes and opens them again.

‘Jannis,’ Ben says. ‘Five years old.’

‘What do you know?’ Landmann asks.

‘Too much and too little,’ Ben says.

Landmann waits.

‘We don’t know where he is or how he is. What we do know is that he’s probably been kidnapped. There are CCTV recordings that seem to confirm that suspicion.’

Landmann brings the glasses over and sets them down on the table. The white wine is slightly fizzy. Landmann sits down in the armchair opposite Ben.

‘Sorry to hear that,’ he says.

They sit there for a while, searching for words. At least, Ben is searching, but he also feels oddly light and removed. He isn’t really searching; he could almost doze off. Landman raises his glass.

‘To you,’ he says.

Does he really say that?

Ben lifts his glass. It’s heavy. It chinks and clinks as it collides softly with Landmann’s.

He feels like asking: Why to me? But he doesn’t.

‘I hope with all my heart that you find the child soon,’ Landmann says.

‘Can I sketch it out for you quickly? What happened?’

‘Sure.’

‘Well . . . A jumble sale. At a school. Outside, on the big lawn. Teachers, parents, pupils. Tables with items for sale. The Meiningers get there around noon. Mother, daughter and little Jannis. Shortly afterwards, when mother and daughter have taken their things into one of the classrooms, Jannis is gone.’

Landmann nods.

Ben closes his eyes. *The sun*, he thinks. *It's shining*.

‘The sun’s shining,’ he says, ‘when I get there. Do you know my colleague Christian?’

Landmann shakes his head.

‘He’s very odd, but I like him. I don’t think he takes anything particularly seriously. He isn’t capable of it.’

‘Aha?’ Landmann says.

‘Yes, he’s incapable. It’s as if he’s searching for . . . his centre.’

‘Hmm,’ Landmann says.

‘Do you understand?’

‘I think so, yes. Maybe. Sounds unusual.’

Evening sun, morning sun, Ben thinks. And the sun between them, around midday and afternoon. It was afternoon when he arrived at the school.

‘We’ve managed to secure footage from a CCTV camera. In a nearby multi-storey car park,’ he says.

‘What exactly do the pictures show?’

‘The boy. Jannis. No doubt about it. And an unknown man.’

Landmann waits. As if he knows there’s something missing.

‘And a teddy bear,’ Ben says.

‘A teddy bear?’

‘A big soft toy. The man obviously brought it with him. He had two of them, even. One stayed at the school. I assume that we’ll

recover valuable evidence. On the teddy. What we don't know, however, is whether they'll be of any immediate use.'

'No one saw the man? He didn't stand out?'

'No. The only one who saw him was a little boy. Jannis's age. He said the man was standing off to one side. Hesitating.'

Landmann screws up his eyes.

'He was alone. That's what the boy said. Alone with the two bears.'

'Alone. Together,' Landmann murmurs. He has a thousand-yard stare. Ben thinks about the fact that Landmann thinks in equations. Is thinking in equations now, at this very moment.

$x = y$.

Alone. Together.

Back when Landmann was still on active duty, his colleagues liked to call him the Mathematician. The Mathematician's already on the scene. The Mathematician will know what to do. After a point, this moniker was used more than Landmann's real name.

'A soft man. That's the first impression. Soft, kind,' Landmann says.

'What?'

'If no one noticed him despite the large bears. That means he merged with them, maybe even looked a bit like them?'

'Like the teddy bears?' Ben asks.

'Yes. You know what I mean. His appearance didn't stand out. Against the bears.'

Ben waits.

‘The bears were head-turners and yet no one looked properly. People glanced at the man, but no one took a second look. Because the man and the bears were one. There was no contradiction between them. Therefore the man must have gentle, maybe just especially ordinary, unremarkable features. Fluffy, maybe chubby in appearance, but not enough to stand out. Slightly on the heavy side. Casual, unremarkable clothes. Shirt and trousers. No one who looks at him senses even a hint of menace or aggression from him.’

Ben watches Landmann as these words quietly tumble out and into place like snowflakes, forming a soft layer on the floor.

‘How clearly does the CCTV footage show the man?’ Landmann asks.

‘Not very clearly, unfortunately. Slightly turned away.’

Landmann nods.

‘But what you’ve said matches the silhouette we saw on the video, pretty much,’ Ben says.

Landmann tilts his head. ‘The bear,’ he says.

‘Yes?’

‘Is the bear with the man or the boy?’

‘The boy has it. Holding it in his hand.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? Do you reckon that was what made the young boy go along? Because the man gave him the bear?’

‘Probably, yes.’

Equations, Ben thinks.

A bear, a ship.

‘He gave something away just before. A pirate ship. Playmobil.’

‘I know it,’ Landmann says instinctively.

$x = y$.

Bear. Pirate ship.

‘The boy trusted in goodness.’

Ben reflects on this.

‘But that’s understandable. As I said: the man didn’t represent any danger. No obvious danger,’ Landmann says.

Ben thinks of Svea. Of Marlene. Getting home soon. Having dinner. Asking them how they are. How things went for them on this sunny day.

‘That’s bad,’ Landmann says.

‘What?’

‘That’s bad,’ Landmann says. Abruptly he stands up.

Ben flinches. He tries to catch Landmann’s eye.

Landmann puts his hand on the back of his chair. As if he needed something to lean on. ‘That’s bad,’ he says again. ‘I don’t like it. It doesn’t fit. It shouldn’t be that way.’

‘What shouldn’t?’

‘That this man looks like a teddy bear.’