

## Snow

He stroked the strand of hair that had fallen across his face when he sneezed, tucking it behind his ear. Karl pushed his back firmly against the car seat and wiped a hand under his nose. A yellow sky pressed low against the land; freezing sleet had set in though it was only mid-October. Karl felt an urge to yawn, opening his mouth wide and taking a gleeful deep breath. He pulled back his lips and showed himself his teeth in the mirror. They'd recommended dental bleaching, saying it would double his turnover. People will swallow the biggest lies as long as they come out of a beautiful smile, the speaker had said at one of his training sessions, the words pearling sweetly from between his ivory teeth. That was what he wanted too, Karl Müller, he wanted to say: success comes from quality – platitudes, untruths rolled in a pearly shimmer, bleached lies.

The road wound up to the mountains in long, snaking curves, snowflakes beginning to whirl against the windscreen more and more thickly, the wipers barely managing to keep the view clear. To make matters worse, darkness had set in and the road was only sparsely lit, with the streetlamps few and far between. Every time Karl drove past a light he saw bare, black branches laden with scraps of snow. Then the lighting stopped entirely. Karl switched his headlamps fully on, but their beam was swallowed up almost completely by the snow.

The woman from the tourist information office had told him on the telephone that the hotel was a long way outside of the village. But if the long drive didn't put him off, she said, it was a friendly

family-run place in a quiet location surrounded by forest, which was why a lot of tourists booked in who enjoyed long undisturbed walks in the wilds of nature.

The road took him further and further uphill; Karl couldn't have said how long he'd been driving like this. It was as if he'd lost all sense of space and time hours ago. The car's engine sounded muffled, only occasionally roaring when the slope after a curve began all too steeply; then the gears kicked in again and the car worked its way slowly up the hill.

Then suddenly there was a fork in the road. Karl pulled in and switched on the light inside the car to look at the map. But there was no road marked on the map, only the motorway exit into the village. Karl got out of the car, immediately caught up in a snarling wind. He leaned against a steep wall of slate that offered him some protection, forming a slight overhang at that point. Icicles as thick as his arm grew out of the stone. Karl tried to make out which road would most likely take him up to the hotel, but he could barely see through the still dense flurries of snow. He got back into the car, switched on the engine and decided to take potluck. Just then he saw two figures emerging from the darkness, swathed in hoods, moving slowly through the raging white. Karl rolled the window down, stuck a hand out of the car and called out to them: 'Excuse me! Which is the way to the hotel...?!' His mouth instantly filled with snow. But the figures barely raised their eyes, only huddling closer together, and one of them pointed an arm in one direction. And then they were out of sight in the darkness swirled through with snow, so quickly that Karl had little time to call out his thanks at their backs.

The road the two hikers had showed him led higher up the hill on a broad, gradual slope. The snowfall had subdued slightly now, and Karl switched off the windscreen wipers. Soon he saw a tenebrous amber light shimmering through the black branches of the trees, and as he approached it the vague shape of a building was outlined. That must be the hotel, and now Karl made out the sign: Vacancies! Only a single car was parked outside, and he could tell by the registration plates that it didn't belong to the hotel. Karl parked directly alongside it, picked up his coat and briefcase from the passenger seat, fetched his bag out of the boot and walked over to the entrance.

He had to ring the bell; the door was locked. It was a while before anyone opened up. A tall, thin girl in a grey sweater received Karl, her breasts clearly outlined under the wool. She wore her thick hair in two tight plaits, protruding slightly to the left and right of her head.

As Karl stepped into the hall he was welcomed by a pleasant warmth and brightness. 'Did you have a good journey?' the girl asked him, and at first Karl wanted to tell her how he hadn't known which road to take, but then he just nodded. The girl accompanied him to the reception desk, asked him to wait a moment and went away. From the back, a tall, heavy-set man came shuffling over in slippers a little later. By the cut of his chin, Karl could tell he must be the girl's father, and he remembered the woman in the tourist information office talking about the 'family atmosphere' when she'd given him the hotel's name. The hotelier stepped behind the desk, took a pen out of a holder and looked up at Karl. 'How can I help you?' he said, and Karl told him his name. The hotelier opened a thick book, ran his index finger down one page, stopped at one point and pushed the

book over to Karl for him to sign. Then the man took a key from a hook and handed it across the counter to Karl. 'Second floor,' he said, 'on the right just after the glass door at the start of the corridor.' He propped his elbows on the counter, placed his head on his hands and waited until Karl had gone.

Karl climbed a narrow wooden staircase to the second floor. There was a strong smell of wet wool. He turned off into a corridor. His room was the first in the hallway, as the hotelier had described it, a small, cosy room in rustic style. There was a vase of fresh flowers on a little table by the window. Karl put his bag and his briefcase down next to the bed, hung his coat in the wardrobe, took off his shoes and threw himself onto the mattress, which bounced slightly. He folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes for a moment. There was a knock at the door. Karl jumped as if he'd been caught doing something illicit. 'Come in!' he called, and the girl who had opened the front door to him entered the room. 'When would you like your breakfast in the morning, Mr. Müller?' she asked, shrugging her shoulders forward bashfully to hide her breasts, which were too large for her slim body. He felt a sudden urge to tug at her plaits, quite hard like he'd done as a boy until the girls started crying. He could only just stop himself, putting his hands on his knees instead, and said simply: 'Half past seven would be fine, thanks.'

When Karl went down to the restaurant for dinner he was the only guest. The young girl was standing behind the bar, polishing glasses with a cloth. Karl sat down at a corner table, rested his fists on the top and stretched his legs out. The girl came over and handed him a menu. 'I'll have a beer please!' said Karl, and the

girl went back to the bar. A short, buxom woman in an apron came into the room, joining the girl behind the bar and exchanging a few words with her. The woman nodded in Karl's direction, whereupon the girl placed the full beer glass on a tray and came over to him. She put the glass down in front of him, standing there hesitantly for a while, pressing the empty tray against her chest like a shield. Her eyes were lowered. Karl thought at first she was waiting to take his order, and he hurried to read the menu. But then the girl pulled out one of the chairs and sat down at his table. 'My mother asked how you like the room,' she said in a low voice. Karl noticed the woman looking over at them. 'Very nice! It's a lovely room!' he answered the girl, sending a nod over to her mother. 'So tell me,' Karl started again, 'isn't it very lonely up here in the winter when there aren't any guests?' and he tried to catch the girl's eye. Sometimes it was lonely, the girl told him, saying that he was there now, and now she looked him right in the eye. 'Yes, I'm here now,' Karl replied, and he caught her eyes, which weren't pretty at all, rather yellow as if she suffered from some kind of liver disease.

The father had come into the restaurant too now, saying a few words to his wife and then coming over to Karl's table. 'Have you made your mind up, Mr. Müller?' Karl had quite forgotten to choose something to eat during his conversation with the girl. Now he flicked hastily through the menu, choosing a dish almost at random. He broken out in an embarrassed sweat, picking up his beer glass and drinking in large gulps. The man positioned himself behind the bar, took the cloth his daughter had dropped and polished the glasses in her place, keeping a sharp eye on Karl's table. Karl fiddled nervously at the paper brim around the stem of his glass.

‘The flora and fauna here are very varied...’ the girl suddenly began, sitting up straight and pushing her large bosom to the fore. ‘In winter, though, many of the animals hibernate from the cold in dens or piles of leaves... the dormouse, for example... that makes it particularly hard for birds of prey to find food, for the buzzards and the kites...’ and then she listed all the animals she could think of. Like a trained poodle, thought Karl, and stared at the girl’s breasts, smelling the slight scent of onions emanating from her armpits.

‘Shall I let down my hair?’ the girl asked now, already reaching for one of her plaits, pulling off the hair band and unwinding the braids by running her fingers through them. She did the same on the other side of her head, and then she shook herself so that her hair spread evenly, colourless and dull.

The woman brought a salad plate, setting it down in front of Karl. He didn’t actually like salad but he poked his fork at it in embarrassment and shoved the lettuce leaves between his lips with such vigour that the dressing ran out of the corners of his mouth. The girl sat there in silence now, playing with the ring on her left hand. Karl nodded at the ring as he chewed, asking if she was engaged already. ‘Yes,’ said the girl hastily, ‘I’m engaged. My fiancé is the forester up here. That’s why I know all about the animals, my fiancé explained it all to me, and sometimes he takes me along to his hunter’s hide and we watch the deer, and in winter we fill their feeding mangers with horse chestnuts and maize or with straw...’

The woman came back with his main course, silencing her daughter with a glance. ‘Enjoy your meal!’ she said, standing by the table for a while and smoothing her hands over her apron. ‘You must be very hungry,’ said the girl once her mother had

gone, and she looked at Karl as he ate as quickly as he always did. Karl felt heartburn coming on but he ate ever more hastily, wanting to leave the restaurant, the quiet girl next to him, the parents constantly looking over at him. His whole neck was aching with the tension of it. Karl had hardly swallowed his last mouthful before he stood up, and the girl along with him. Karl saw the mother making a brusque gesture, as if ordering her daughter to keep him there. But Karl just opened his mouth and yawned, saying how tired he was already, the good hearty food and another long drive tomorrow, and then he dashed out into the hall as if he feared someone might chase after him to get him back, perhaps for a dance or a game of cards.

Back in his room, Karl noticed he really was very tired. He gave his face a brief wash and meant to look through his papers for the next day again, but his eyes were literally falling closed on him. So he turned off the light and crawled deep into the bed. He hadn't been lying there for two minutes when he suddenly heard footsteps in the corridor. Perhaps one of the other guests...? he wondered. But the footsteps halted outside his door. Karl held his breath. He was wide awake again now. Silence. Silence. Then the footsteps moved away, slowly, quietly, as if on tiptoe, walked towards the stairs and down them, the wood creaking, until Karl could no longer hear them.

The next morning, Karl awoke between sweat-soaked sheets. He had hardly slept a wink. He had tossed to and fro on the mattress; there had been a knocking in the wall behind the radiator all night long, like metal against metal, a constant pounding, a rhythm like the rhythm of a heartbeat, the hotel's own heartbeat, and the pipes

were a web of veins, vessels crisscrossing the brickwork, and blood flowed in them as thick as honey. To make matters worse there was the permanent creaking of wood, the thuds of snow falling off the roof, the flush of a toilet. Karl had fallen asleep for brief moments, and then he'd seen the girl with her plaits leaning over him with her heavy breasts, up close to his face. Then he'd woken with a start, thinking he'd heard steps in the corridor again. But there was nothing, only the constant knocking in the wall. After one of these dreams he'd got up and opened the skylight wide so that the icy air cut into the room like a scythe, and the snow outside the window looked like alabaster.

Karl didn't eat breakfast, merely glugging down a cup of coffee the hotelier's wife gave him, standing up. The girl was nowhere to be seen. He had left a small tip for her on the bedside table, certain she would have to see to the room any minute, and it was her who had put the flowers in his room last night. He paid his bill at reception and left the hotel.

The clouds had parted, the snow glistening under a deep blue sky. A layer of white covered Karl's car too, the other one still parked next to it, and he gave the windows a cursory wipe with his sleeve. Karl opened the driver's door, threw his bag onto the back seat and sat down in the car. He laid his briefcase on his lap and took out the lists he had fallen asleep over the night before. Then he sorted the medication samples he wanted to hand out later in the doctors' surgeries in the village. It was work that he loved. Everything in the surgeries was so lovely and pristine, so white and hygienic. Even the women at the reception desks. They welcomed him with squeaky clean smiles once he'd introduced

himself: ‘Karl Müller, we spoke on the phone!’ Then his voice uttered words, and the words were air set in motion by his mouth, breath that was air and moisture. So that the women felt a slight shiver when he spoke; he saw it, he felt it when they watched him from behind as he strode through the surgery. In their white clothing, they were like jugs of fresh milk to him, virginal, hygienic, pure, too pure for his hands, which were always dirty; and their clothing was like the petals of a lily, embracing them in their absolute innocence.

Sometimes, when he was sitting at his desk in the office and his fingers had got all greasy from flicking through the papers, when they swelled up from the constant pounding at the computer keyboard, he couldn’t help running to the washroom to clean his hands, thoroughly, down to the tiniest pore. By now a whispering pursued him, a muttering all along the corridor, and they made gestures behind his back, tapping at their heads, which he felt hot on the back of his neck. There was no need for him to turn around and look. On days like that the dirt was lodged so deep in his skin that water and soap weren’t enough to get his hands clean. Then he took the nailbrush and scrubbed so long and hard, so hard that his skin grew chapped and sore, and afterwards not a single grain could have hidden in the tiniest crack.

Karl took a hasty glance at the medicines and then put everything back, the briefcase on the passenger seat. But when he tried to leave the engine wouldn’t start, not even after several attempts. It was the cold, Karl knew, a cold reflected a thousand times over in the snow crystals throwing back the sunlight, so bright that he screwed up his eyes, blinded, pain setting into his eye sockets already. Karl flapped the sun visor down, sighing, in the end getting out of the car and going back to the hotel.

As usual, the hotelier had his elbows propped on the reception desk, his head in his hands, his entire body filling the area behind it. He looked at Karl as if he'd been expecting him. 'My car...' he began, 'it won't start. Perhaps you could call me a taxi...?' 'Yes of course, sir,' the hotelier interrupted. He removed himself from the desk and moved off towards the back. There, he picked up the telephone and dialled a number. Karl saw him speaking and then he saw that the woman was in the entry to the kitchen, watching her husband. The hotelier put the phone down, winking at his wife, and came back to the front. 'It won't take long,' he said to Karl, and leant down over the reception desk again, pressing his thick arms against the wood. The woman had disappeared into the back room now. Karl nodded his thanks at the man and went outside again to see to his car again while he waited.

The sunlight was shimmering even more brightly on the freshly fallen snow. The sun was high in the sky now. Karl was annoyed that he'd left his sunglasses on the sideboard at home. He couldn't open the frozen bonnet so he got back into his car, closing his eyes against the blinding brightness. When he next looked at the clock about half an hour had passed. Karl realised now that the markings at the edge of the road must be entirely buried under the blanket of snow, that they couldn't be seen at all any more. But taxis must come up to the hotel often enough, he thought to himself, they'll be used to snow at this altitude, and if they have the right equipment... But when the taxi still hadn't arrived after another half hour and Karl started freezing on his cold seat, he decided to go back to the hotel and ask again.

He wasn't surprised that the shutters had been let down in front of the windows, what with the blinding sunlight, but the front door was locked and Karl rang the bell several times without anyone opening. He pounded at the wood with his knuckles, he shouted, then he pounded his fist against the door. But no one reacted. Karl walked around the building to where the terrace door was. Yet the blinds had been let down here too, although everything was in the shade, and the back door was just as locked as the one at the front. Perhaps the family were having their lunch break, thought Karl, perhaps they're having a little lie down. And he decided to get back in the car and wait. But he soon left his car again and stamped about a little in the ankle-deep snow to warm up. It was coming up for half past eleven and the taxi still hadn't come. Nor did the break seem to come to an end; nobody opened the door, the blinds remained closed. Only the sun had crossed its zenith and was now slowly sinking towards the peak of the hill. Karl walked back to the hotel again, called and knocked, this time kicking the door and punching the shutters. Then he realised there was nothing for it but to walk down to the village before dusk set in.

But he had hardly made progress in the snow, which soon came up to his knees, than his shoes were wet, his socks and feet icy. He wanted to find a mechanic in the village and get the car towed down. Why hadn't he asked that straight away; the landlord must have had a phone number?! Karl tried to reach directory enquiries on his mobile phone, but there was no reception. He walked through a forest of black skeleton trees, and soon he came to a clearing where the snow lay even deeper. Then there was a wind

as well, making his face feel numb with cold. He didn't even notice the mucus running from his nose. Karl felt his strength waning when he suddenly came to a steep wall of rock, the icicles still hanging as thick as his arm but now shimmering silvery in the moonlight. Karl fell to his knees with joy. Now he knew he was on the right path. At the end of the rock cliff was the place where he had asked the hikers the way yesterday. All he had to do was keep right from there on and he'd get to the village. He set off, striding hastily through the crackling white. For a moment he had the feeling he was being watched, and he looked around for a hunting hide where the girl might be sitting with her fiancé the forester, watching him through binoculars. The pain in his eye sockets pounded ever harder; it felt as if the pounding of the radiator were continuing inside his head, metal sounding against metal. The lower the sun sank, the colder it got. Blue shadows were lying across the land. Karl pressed tightly against the rock as he walked. He had walked perhaps a mile when he saw the end of the wall. Now he tried to run, slipped over but dragged himself up again. Right, he thought, you just have to keep right and you'll soon be down there, you'll soon be sitting in a warm restaurant with a steaming mug of grog. But after keeping right for a while he noticed that the path had started climbing again. Had he made a mistake? Was it the wrong direction after all? Had he pulled over at a different spot along the rock yesterday? Karl made out something like a shelter in the distance now, walking towards it without knowing what he wanted there. But something pulled him in, something that didn't belong there, and soon he realised what he had seen, if only vaguely. There was something wrapped in clothes in the shelter, squatting on the ground there. And when Karl had come close enough he saw the two hikers he had asked

the way of the day before. Their faces pale and waxy, they sat leaned closely against one another as if sleeping, the woman's head resting on the man's shoulder. Ice crystals sealed their eyelids. Karl knelt down next to the man, and as if it might do any good he gripped him by his collar and gave him a hefty shake. Something fell out of the man's pocket, a metallic object; Karl picked it up and held a car key in his hand. He remembered the car still parked outside the hotel alongside his own one, and then he remembered the hotelier winking to his wife earlier after he'd finished his phone call.

Karl put the car key back in the hiker's pocket and stood up. He folded his collar up to his ears, shoved his hands deep into his pockets and pressed his arms to his body. Then he went on his way through the woods. And the cold moonlight was already flooding across the broad, pale landscape in which Karl vanished. As fleeting as a shadow.