

The Australians.

It was the tail end of the summer, and I watched as the Australians completed a series of increasingly elaborate dives from a rope swing into the lake. It was marvellous to see them clamber up the tree one-by-one, rope in hand, with a fearlessness that could easily be mistaken for stupidity. Each of them had their own speciality – forward flip, backward summersault, bomb – which was performed to jeers or cheers depending on its execution. My favourite was named ‘the salmon’. To get it right, it was necessary to simultaneously keep your body rigid and twist your hips as you fell to replicate the twitchy out-of-water movements of freshly caught fish. I thought back to myself at age 13, knees bent and arms at my sides, poised but never quite ready to attempt a backflip. My gymnastic instructor’s advice: “If you overthink it you’ll land on your head!” Now, over a decade older, I wouldn’t jump unless my boyfriend waited for me in the water lest I failed to resurface.

Occasionally, Germans took turns climbing along the slanted tree trunk, and I joined in goading them from the banks, chanting, “Weiter, weiter!” After much reassurance, they complied, but with an uncertainty that lessened them in our eyes. Their bodies too, lithe and smooth, looked ridiculous next to the doughy, ink mottled flesh of the Australians. How to explain it? Even the intruders’ swimming shorts appeared prissy in comparison to the Australians, who had simply stripped off their jeans and were swimming in boxers – no matter that now the cotton garments were heavy with lake water and bunched unflatteringly at the crotch.

Plastic bags full of food sat just beyond the dirt track that encircled the lake. The other girl and I had brought humus, grapes, olives and marinated peppers; the boys provided pre-packaged slabs of red meat. Nobody had remembered to buy bread. As the sun went behind the clouds everyone dried themselves with somebody else’s towel and started to pick at the snacks. Grapes were thrown and caught in exaggeratedly open mouths. As a group, their

conversational patterns were still hard to follow; anything I said seemed to hang in the air and disrupt the flow of statements that were met with a “Right-O” or “Yeah, nah” by the others. But the way they spoke was endlessly fascinating to me: the slang, the gleeful vulgarity. Without exception, sentences went up at the end; an inflection that I picked up and never truly got rid of.

Meanwhile, one of the guys attempted to light the disposable barbecue, but the flame repeatedly failed to ignite the charcoal, until eventually the starter sheet burned away completely. They began to dig a hole instead. Branches were gathered, lighter fluid was squirted, and soon a fire crackled from within the pit. A discussion had taken off about the best way to cook the steaks when a voice from the path called out, “Seid ihr dumm?” *Are you stupid?* I turned around to see an older woman on a stationary bike, one foot on the floor, the other still on a pedal. “Es gibt trockene Blätter! Ihr werdet den ganzen Wald in Brand setzen!” *There are dry leaves! You’ll set the whole forest alight!*

Whereas in England it’s possible to run a red light and quietly get yourself killed, in Germany there’s always someone around to chastise you when you’re doing something idiotic. I tried to placate the woman: “Alles gut; ist schon ok,” but she carried on berating us. I didn’t know what to do. I was one of only two German speakers in the group and the other, who was often called upon to translate the ire of disgruntled neighbours or field questions from police officers, didn’t seem interested in engaging with her. I turned back to the barbeque, but I could still feel the woman’s eyes on me. Ignoring her gave me the same feeling of anxiety as when someone trains a laser pen on your body from a window as you’re walking down the street. In other words, I felt marked. This lady had clearly spotted that I was an interloper and was honing in on me to cruelly exploit my need to follow the rules. Although she eventually left, I knew others would be along soon enough. Plus, I was worried she might call the police.

I tried to pick them off one by one: to the German speaker I said, "It's not fair that it's you and me," I pointed at him and then at myself in a way that I hoped was ingratiating, "who will have to deal with this". I made eyes at the other girlfriend, but she was contentedly licking humus from her fingers. My boyfriend ignored me. Everyone looked faintly embarrassed, not of being caught doing something they shouldn't, but of me.

I absented myself from the situation by going back into the lake, walking in a way that I hoped would make me look like I just fancied a dip and not that it was unbearable for me to disregard the orders of a part-time forest vigilante. It was cold in the water. After a while my Australian came in after me. "Why are you crying in here," he said, his tone gentle. "Stop being a sook and come and sit with everyone else."

I was not crying, so I objected to the accusation. I knew that I was being a sook, but I detested the look on his face, one that was new, but that with time would become familiar. It was a look that suggested my education and my two-parent household was a horrible blight on my ability to live in the moment. It was a look that told me that he knew I thought that I was better than he was, and it was a look that pre-empted his friend saying I was "too normal" for him when we eventually broke up.

I was about to respond when we were both distracted by an inflatable boat sailing past that had a small pug dog as a passenger. He looked on his guard, like he might start barking at the water at any moment to protect his human companions. When the boat had travelled far enough away that we could no longer hear the voices of its drunken inhabitants, my boyfriend put his fingers to his mouth to make his signature high whistle. Immediately the pug jerked his head around to look at us. The Australian looked at me, his eyes wide, our conversation apparently forgotten and said gleefully, "I got him!"