

...and then  
TONGA



...and then

TONGA

A love in the South Seas

Katharina Faleovalu

## Impressum

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Pangaimotu, Island of Vava'u, Kingdom of Tonga, Polynesien

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For Mom



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1993 Cologne, Germany. Barbarossasquare. BAUHAUS high-rise.

I hurry up the stairs and know that I'm going to be late because of the traffic jam on the Severinsbridge...where to now, to the right or to the left? That's all I need, being late on the first day makes the right impression. A reception area, a sleep-deprived person is tinkling angrily over her shoulder in my direction.

"The Olivetti course for desk-top publishing! Where should I go?" I grumble at her.

The person extends an arm with a pointed index finger: "That way, room 45." And hisses pointedly right after: "But you're too late!"

I take the handle in my hand and take a deep breath. I knead a smile on my face. I've been eagerly awaiting this course for four months.

I knock briefly, open the door and step into the already slightly stuffy room. The seminar leader swallows the rest of her sentence, all eyes of the 25 course participants turn to me, clutching my handbag I briefly introduce myself by name and...

"We still have one seat available here, at the back. At the window, yes please, sit with the lady, she doesn't have a partner on the PC yet!"

Starting a course and not being able to choose or look at the partner you'll be sharing a PC with for nine months is inconvenient, but it's my fault. I walk across the room to my assigned seat.

My PC partner is a tall, slim, slightly masculine-looking woman my age with quick, cheerful eyes, short hair and sympathetic, strong hands. She's wearing jeans and a sweater with a shirt underneath.

She smiles at me and, as the lecturer continues with her introduction, she whispers to me: "Sit on my left, I'm left-handed, we have to share the mouse, so we won't get in each other's way as much."

"My name is Angelika," she then whispers, "I'm a typesetter."

She comes from the printing industry, just like me, what an incredible coincidence! We will speak the same language.

I look into her open face and whisper: "And my name is Katharina-maseltov, and I'm a book-layouter!"

"Ha!" Angelika blurts out, "Then we're going to have a lot of fun here!"

## THE HINT

Lunch break. "Katharina...? Come on, let's walk up and down the Ring a bit, it's spring weather, stretch our legs a bit."

We leave the BAUHAUS building on Barbarossasquare and walk slowly up the Cologne Ring, enjoying the sun. Soon the course will be over and we'll be able to go looking for work again.

"Tell me..." Angelika begins thoughtfully. And falls silent.

"What? What's wrong?" I follow up.

"Well, we get on well, and I thought...if one of us wants to go on vacation...we don't have anyone permanent...and I could imagine that we'd get on well together, so what do you think, if we both have time and some money again? Should we do that sometime? Just like that, somewhere? Together?" she says to the front and to her shoes.

I'm perplexed at first. But I like the idea.

"Yes, we should, that's a nice idea, yes. But where to? I'm afraid we'll hardly find a place that we won't burn to the ground!" I laugh at her. "Let's have a look now, it doesn't cost anything to dream. Let's go to Gleumes, they have books and maps of every place in the world, let's get inspired!"

Eager to go on vacation, we pull one book after another from the shelves, illustrated books, travelogues, travel guides. Package tours are an abomination to us, as are resorts and hotels. India? Too hot, and probably lots of purple dungarees from university and the alternative corner of the southern part of the city. The Mediterranean falls through the sieve due to the increasing chav factor. China? Because of the food, but less linguistically productive, we will hardly understand the locals. What's left? Everything where you can muddle through with English. USA? For God's sake, we have enough dumbasses and fanatics to visit here. Oh no. Russia? No way with English.

"Angelika! I give up, I don't know, it all doesn't fit somehow. I don't want to go somewhere where it's like here and I just find some countries boring, we want to see something new. That's going to be a problem, my dear!"

Nothing fits, no country name ignites a spark. We put all the books back on the shelves.

"Great, the world isn't big enough for us, we have something to complain about in everything." I grumble and look around.

There is a large wooden globe in a corner at the end of the salesroom.

"Over there now, but a bit lively!" I shout to Angelika and point at the globe. "Ah!" says Angelika, standing by the globe and staring at it, "And now?"

"And now," I announce with a raised index finger, "we will let a higher power decide where we should travel. You turn the globe and I close my eyes and wherever I tap..."

Angelika looks at me blankly: "But that shortens the decision-making process considerably."

I look back blankly: "Quiet now. You turn. I'll give you the finger."

She turns the globe, I kneel in front of it, close my eyes and wait for the globe to spin out.

I stipple.

I open my eyes and Angelika kneels down next to me. "And...?" I ask. "Wait a minute," she mumbles, "somehow you ended up in the middle of the sea, but that's a long way from here!"

Now I see it too, my finger is stuck in the middle of a huge blue area.

"That's that, we're hardly going to do a boat trip there... wait a minute," Angelika grabs my stippling finger, "maybe there's something underneath?"

I slowly turn the tip of my finger to the side and sure enough, a tiny brown spot appears, flanked by a few fly-legged letters.

"What does it say? Can you read that? Wait...it says TONGA. Where are we anyway? Oh God, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, in the South Seas? What is TONGA?"

Nelson Mandela becomes president of South Africa, O.J. Simpson is impeached. It is 1994.

## TO TONGA? FOR REAL?

Almost five years later. Cologne. Summer. Cologne-South freeway junction. The obligatory evening rush hour traffic jam. I'm coming from Bonn, from my work as a multimedia expert and translator at an institute of the university hospitals on the Venusberg, I'm tired and just want to go home, open all the doors and windows and finally sit in the cool garden and enjoy a bit of sunshine. Stroking the cat, plucking in the flower beds, listening to the peepers.

My eyes are burning, my right shoulder is stinging, my stomach is cramping, the concentrated screen work is making me stiff. It's hot in my little Twingo, the sun is setting very slowly right in front of me at the end of the metal snake on the horizon. I light a cigarette, my mouth is furry, I try to stretch a little, loosen the belt of my jeans, I'm stuck. All the cars come to a standstill. I look at the other cars. There is only one person in each one. Thousands of cars, one person in each, coming home from work. How completely absurd, abstruse, unreal, bizarre. Everyone is looking ahead, everyone just wants to get out of here. No one is smiling. SWR3 Radio spreads obsessive good humor and the latest news about Monica Lewinsky and American embassies in Africa that are being blown up one by one. In Oklahoma, a lunatic has bombed an office building to rubble.

I've had enough. "Enough!" I shout at the radio and turn it off with a grimace. It stinks of exhaust fumes and hot tar and rubber, my ashtray is overflowing and I'm thirsty.

I dig my cell phone out of my handbag, I'm one of the few people who has one. The beasts are overpriced and clunky and one unit costs almost 2 Mark, not to mention the horrendous basic charge. They go under the name "Yuppy bones".

Angelika had given it to me for my 42nd birthday. And laughed wistfully: "Do you think we'll ever make it to Tonga? Either you don't have a vacation or I don't...and all our friends continue to make fun of us because of this crazy idea, we just shouldn't have told anyone! Every time I call Jörg, he bleats at me, 'Still not in Tonga? Well, don't worry, it was a nice running joke. But I'm getting sick of it!'"

Me neither.

"Mom...? I'm stuck in traffic again. I have to talk to someone or I'll go crazy!"

My mother laughs heartily: "Yes, child, go on then! You wanted to stay in Cologne! Then you'll just have to put up with it."

She is amused: "Do you remember my traffic jams? Year after year from Venusberg here to Siegburg and Sankt Augustin, remember? Don't be so grumpy, you've got a nice apartment, a great job and you'll be home soon. YOU have no reason to complain!"

"Yes, I do," I interject, squirming, "Yes, it could hardly be better. I know!"

"So call me when you've arrived and changed and have a moment's peace. And another thing...be glad you don't have a man at home who wants to be cooked for now!" she lovingly brushes me off.

My mother has a way of quickly putting me back on track, choking off superfluous chatter and turning massive annoyances into minor ailments. She's right, as she almost always is.

I have made my life as a single person quite comfortable, no man disturbs my circles in the apartment. In a big city, you can elegantly avoid relationship-killing shoals. So-called "relationships": Yes; living together: No.

And getting married is completely out of the question, I'm not going to do that to myself in my life.

I crawl into the Frechen exit at a snail's pace, sweating, now only a few hundred meters on the bottleneck of Aachener Street in the direction of Weiden and I can breathe a sigh of relief. Past the shopping center, past cooling green spaces and flowering gardens, into the underground car park and into my beloved apartment.

I pull up the shutters on the patio door, the windows in the large living room with bay window and in the bedroom, open all the doors and windows, all facing south towards the garden. Warm, spicy air and mild rays of sunshine flood my apartment. My cat wakes up in a huff and greets me like a sheep with a plaintive "Mow!", stretches, brushes around my legs and hops into the large garden as if she's been poked. She inspects each blade of grass individually, as if it hadn't been there yesterday. She begins her "inspection tour".

What a happy cat; what a difference from when I first got her. She had been badly treated by the previous owner, was only allowed to eat once a day and had been forced to sit in one place on the sofa and only look decorative. She was not allowed to move freely. She had been powdered daily with greasy talcum powder and then the powder was vacuumed out of

her fur with a loud vacuum cleaner. I was told this by the owner, who was proud that the cat looked so "well-groomed" and was well-behaved.

All because she had been born a Persian cat. When her coat color changed, the owners wanted to get rid of her because she was "no longer worth anything". The first thing I did was to cut her long sticky hair down to 1 cm.

She found out that she could clean herself cat-style. And was allowed to eat whenever she wanted. And get up and walk around. She could hardly believe it at first and at the slightest movement I made, she scurried back into the corner of her sofa and looked at me in fear.

And because she looked so grim, she was given the name Bruno.

Out of the shoes, the silk blouse and the matching jeans and into my patch jeans and sleeveless T-shirt. That's better! Barefoot, slippers on and I make a little dinner, crispbread and boiled ham, with a giant cup of Earl Grey. Just outside, out onto the breezy terrace. I loll in my garden chair, my legs rest on the table, I spread my toes.

Light, air, sun, summer.

I eat my crispbread slowly and squint into the trees, 13-metre-high robinia trees, through whose feathery, bright leaves rays of sunlight fall from time to time, a squirrel scurries in the crown and the birdsongs never gets boring. Behind the hedge, children are playing, shrieking and laughing, somewhere a weak-chested lawnmower rattles. Bruno sits in my flower border under the Tearing Heart, squinting and twitching his head as he watches a fluttering butterfly.

I close my eyes and just want to enjoy it. At last I have what I had hoped for for many years: an interesting and varied job, finally one without bullying and resentment, a good salary, a nice apartment with a garden. Health. I'm completely satisfied, no big worries, I'm happy. With my eyes closed, I review my life once again:

The road had been long and rocky after my father's death, I was just 11 years old. My childhood was very sheltered, as was my youth. Not that I was spoiled with material things. Mom and Dad were poor and very young when I was born. I never lacked love and understanding, basic trust. Mom cooked pigs' trotters so that we had gravy to go with the potatoes; it always tasted good, there was always enough. Dad could treat himself to a bottle of beer on Fridays. Oranges and apples were rare because they were expensive.

I never missed anything.

A capital that allows you to manage for a lifetime.

But Dad died in 1966 when I was 11.

He had become the managing director of several ironworks. We lived in Saarland, in a large house with a garden and pool. I roamed the fields, petted cows, built mud dams in the rain, harvested hazelnuts, and roamed the forest with my dog 🐶Tessi, romping with my playmates in the haystack. Bicycle races, dead frogs in my lederhosen pockets, climbing cherry trees, putting my bare feet in warm cow patties, and washing them clean in the stream. Childhood happiness.

In 1966, Commander McLane in RAUMPATROUILLE swirled out of a bathtub spout into space in his spaceship Orion. The groundbreaking ceremony for the World Trade Center was held, the Vietnam War was in full swing, and Captain Kirk took over the bridge of the Enterprise.

No one had ever set foot on the moon.

But then Dad died.

My mother had to go back to work, so we moved from Saarland to Siegburg in the Rhineland. Mom rents a small attic apartment; she works from 6 a.m. until very late at night. My despair, grief, and helplessness seem boundless; there's no one I can talk to. I'm so alone. We can no longer care for my best friend, my dog 🐶Tessi, so we're giving her to relatives with a garden. They take care of her more or less. I have nightmares, wake up screaming in the night, and fall out of bed.

I feel like I'm locked in the small apartment: no fields, no trees, no cows. I'm suffocating. I have to find my way around on my own. In the morning, Mom is already gone when I get up. I make myself breakfast, get dressed, lock the apartment, and trudge to the bus, halfway across town.

I'm a latchkey kid now. I have to go to a convent school as a semi-boarder; I should at least have lunch and homework supervision. I come home late in the afternoon, unlock the apartment, and am alone again with myself and my instability. I can't find any stability; everything is floating. Often, Mom and I wouldn't see each other for days; she left the house before me and came home when I was already asleep.

Suddenly, I am no longer a child, I am a teenager, my hormones are raging, I am becoming a woman. I am sitting on a merry-go-round, spinning faster every day.

I had to deal with the enormous problems of being an “unbeliever” because I was Protestant in a Catholic nun school. Since then, I have had a deep aversion to anything that bears the word “Christian,” and especially “Catholic,” on its banner. For me, this word has the taste of “bigoted, hypocritical, false, greedy, unjust, and inhuman.”

The long school holidays are no cause for joy for my mother; she doesn't have any vacation, so what will happen to me? I would be unsupervised for weeks. My mother knows how much I love animals, especially horses, and she knows how much I suffer in the city without a garden. She has a suggestion: "There's a riding and driving school in Elmshorn. You would learn everything about horses there, but you would also have to pitch in, including mucking out the stables. You would stay there for the holidays and be looked after.

You could also get your riding badge or a carriage driving licence, it's entirely up to you. You would have to get up at six in the morning and do your stable duties, and then you wouldn't be free until five in the afternoon."

It's a dream come true for me. I'm thrilled. Along with many other horse lovers my age, I sleep in bunk beds in simple six-bed rooms above the stables and muck out the stables in the morning and evening. Vaulting, dressage, jumping, day trips. In the afternoons, theory, horse diseases, saddle care, how to harness a horse to a carriage, how to steer a two-horse carriage on the road, terminology, legal aspects.

I pass my basic riding badge and obtain my carriage driving license for road traffic. I'm a little proud. I spend two summer vacations in Elmshorn. I promise myself that one day I'll own a horse. I love the smell of horses, their velvety warm nostrils, and their big, gentle eyes.

Back in Siegburg, lonely everyday life returns.

The market square in Siegburg with its benches is a meeting place for young people. I start skipping school, looking for friends and company. It's the Hippie era. Long hair, fur coats. Rebellion. Cheap red wine, parties in dark basements, garages, warehouses. My clique rides around Siegburg on Kreidler mopeds with me on the back. I have a “boyfriend.”

Mom is worried. My grades are poor. She asks me if I want to continue like this. I am honest and say “No!” We discuss it. Her suggestion: leave Siegburg, leave the area. How about a boarding school? A new start? And where? Nearby or far away? “Far away, Mom, please far away!”



I move to the youth village in Versmold, northern Germany. I feel better. My boarding school friend gives me my first Neil Young LP and I am completely enthralled. For less than 10 Mark you could get concert tickets for Jethro Tull, Ten Years After, Deep Purple. The Rolling Stones charged 15 Mark. I went anyway. Many weekends we roared off to Amsterdam in his VW bus. I was still far from feeling stable. After two years, I failed to achieve my goal and flunked my middle school exams.

I had to repeat a year. Mom was furious. And she cried.

I had to go back to the Rhineland. I didn't want to go to school anymore.

"Fine," said Mom, "then we'll look for a job for you, because if you don't go to school, you have to work."

I didn't care about anything. I had bitterly disappointed Mom.

Painful shame. Helplessness.

She takes me to Siegburg, saying I could start by introducing myself somewhere. We walk up to the market square.

"Here," she says, pointing to a large shoe store where I like to buy my shoes, "we're going to go in and ask if you can start as a shoe saleswoman. Maybe you'll get lucky."

"Mom...!"

I understand. Finally. I have become a reckless oaf.

I hug her in the middle of the street and cry. "No, I want to go to school. I want to learn."

In Bonn I want to catch up on my secondary education. The journey to school is long, almost two hours there and two back. Shopping, cooking, homework, household chores. I pass my secondary school leaving certificate. I move on.

The gymnasium in Sieglar accepts me. The principal says, "You realize you'll have to repeat a grade? Your knowledge is very patchy. Do you still want to do it? Do you want to work hard and get your Abitur and the diploma for university?"

I do. And I repeat another grade and keep going. Giving up is not an option. I want that diploma.

Mom is offered a new job with more responsibility. She becomes the receptionist at a university hospital clinic. Her working hours are more regular, and we have more time for each other.

Finally, we have a family life again.

We move to Sankt Augustin into a spacious detached house with a garden. The house is covered in ivy, birds nest inside. I build a small pond, frogs move in. We have apples and peaches in the garden. The years pass. We were happy, had no major worries; a garden, a cat. A terrace. We often sit in the living room until the early hours of the morning on weekends, talking, catching up on many years.

In the evenings, I go to Siegburg, to Zamamphas, the trendy pub. People meet, have known each other for many years, chat, flirt.

I meet an African man. We are both cautious. Tentative.

A Nigerian, not a nationality with a good reputation. And yet we talk. My mother likes him. He only speaks English, and my school English is "adequate," which means it's not adequate. I struggle, and so does he. There's a spark. He's a pilot, five years older than me, on a training course in Rotterdam, only in Siegburg because a friend invited him. He has to go back to Rotterdam.

I travel to Rotterdam every weekend.

He has to go back to Nigeria.

I fly to Nigeria. 1975, 1976, 1978. Cultures and worldviews collide with a crash. He fought in the Biafran War; he is Ibo, the wounds are not healing. We live through a military coup. We drink too much. We feel too deeply, too intensely. We argue. Reconciliation. He will visit me later in Cologne, I will visit him in England for further training. The distance between us is too great. Our paths are separated by continents. The future is not meant for us.

People are beasts. The fecal stench of the cesspool of open racism bubbles up and bursts forth in stinking bubbles. Friends turn away, relatives tear each other apart with their foul mouths.

We will not lose sight of each other for decades. We will call and E-Mail each other.

Regret; every time.

In 1977, I graduate from the gymnasium and want to study. Veterinary medicine, my dream, is blocked by the numerus clausus; I am not a straight-A student.

In order to live up to my motto "...always good for a surprise!" in this case as well, I decide at short notice to study African languages, Ethnology, and English. My mother wasn't particularly enthusiastic and muttered something about it being a "useless profession." But the more information I gathered, the more certain I became that this was exactly what I wanted to study. I

wanted to know why and how other people see, organize, and evaluate the world. Studying this subject gave me the opportunity to reanalyze and reorganize my own cultural values.

My mom no longer has to pay for my living expenses; I receive a small pension from my father while I'm studying at university, which is enough to cover the basics. I'm learning how to manage money. For "extras" I clean houses, work as a night watchman, kitchen assistant, and waitress.

There were only four students in our Swahili language course, one of whom was a professor emeritus from Tanzania.

I moved out of my mother's house and into the student village of Hürth-Efferen. I took my old rust-red VW Beetle with its leaky sunroof, perpetual heating, and regular neck showers with me. I also took my aquarium. And my determination and a healthy dose of restlessness, curiosity, and zest for action. I was entering a new world.

In my first semester, I went to the largest cinema on Cologne's Ring road once a week and watched with enthusiasm as Luke Skywalker liberated the universe from a galactic asthmatic in the first "Star Wars" movie. The cinema was always packed. I couldn't get enough of the special effects.

I got my first taste of politics, took part in demonstrations against the deployment of Pershing missiles, started a "village newspaper" with the ASTA as sponsor, and organized the first elections in the student village. I was hard to keep quiet and was known as a colorful character.

The "Rocky Horror Picture Show" captivated me, and every weekend we dragged water pistols, toilet paper, rice, and ourselves—in costume, of course!—to the cinema in the Unicenter. I think I was the only student at the university who dared to submit a seminar paper on this film in English studies under the topic "Contemporary English Film."

Along with the finished seminar paper, I gave the professor a movie ticket, because he had to see the film. He was an unremarkable "average guy," always in a suit, a bit stiff. I wisely gave him a ticket for one of the poorly attended afternoon screenings. When I got my seminar paper back from his office with a round "B," he looked at me with a smile and an almost conspiratorial expression: "You're not studying to be a teacher, are you...?" I blurted out, "Good heavens, no!" "No!" he replied, almost cockily, wishing me good luck, especially with the paperwork, because no English student had ever studied for a Magister degree before, and I should point this out to

the faculty's administration, otherwise there could be problems with my exams. Thanks to his advice, there were no problems. But the administration broke out in a slight sweat.

One afternoon, during one of his seminars: I'm sitting in my washed-out jeans between gabardine pants and lace-up shoes, little suits and pumps. And little leather bags that hold PARKER pens. I'm surrounded by aspiring teachers who already have their grants, long vacations, and fat pensions within reach. My oversized flannel lumberjack shirt matches the bright red roller skates attached to my discreetly crossed legs. I brought them back from New York, they're the latest craze.

The lecture is about literature and politics, and the professor would like to have a discussion. I look at him and turn my head very slowly from side to side.

This isn't going to work, I think he didn't notice. Suddenly, he turns bright red, gasps for air, leans forward combatively with a lunge and spits at the pumps and lace-up shoes: "When I see you sitting there with your fucking civil servant mentality, it makes me want to throw up!"

I sit there stunned and need a moment to comprehend what just happened. Before I can really grasp it, he defaces himself again, smiles politely, and rustles his papers. "Now let's continue with the text, shall we?"

That won't be my last seminar with him.

After passing my midterm exam, I flew to New York with a fellow student. We saved up a little for it, looked for a cheap flight, and got a return ticket for 500 Mark. We didn't notice that it was decidedly too cheap. The flight didn't depart from Germany, but from Holland. Still, no alarm bells rang for us. We pick up the tickets at the airport, standing at the front of a line of people who are just as young and not particularly well-off. Worn backpacks, sneakers. We get our tickets. Suddenly, there's commotion. The last third of the line starts to complain, a small uproar. There are no more tickets, the low-cost airline is overbooked. We duck down, clutching our tickets, and hurry to check in with our backpacks. We shift from one foot to the other. We made it. Let's just get on the plane.

Once in New York, we take the subway to Manhattan, where we want to find a place to stay, right in the middle of it all. If we were to get a hotel room, our budget would be exhausted after three days. We are a little lost, wandering through the streets, asking around. We are told that the YMCA would be ideal, very inexpensive, perfect for backpackers, centrally located

on 42nd Street. Of course, it's not comfortable, but it's full of people from all over the world. That sounds good. We check in. Petra takes a room with a bed for \$3 a night, I want to live in luxury, so I take one with a worn sink and rusty taps, and a flickering black-and-white TV that's on its last leg. I have to pay \$5 for it. The building is swarming with rats and stinks terribly. Never mind, we're only there to sleep anyway. When we turn on the light, cockroaches scurry into the cracks in the walls and under the bed. If Mom knew!

We roam Manhattan. Manhattan at night from the Empire State Building. We eat cheaply in Chinatown. Greenwich Village. Feeding our eyes in temples of consumerism. Sitting in the YMCA with hopeful musicians in the common room, meeting people. Then we accept invitations from Petra's relatives, we lurch our way to Chicago on the AMTRAK, climb the Sears Tower. We sleep in the guest room and eat with the family. We feel at home. Then it's time to go back to New York. The money is running out, I quickly buy a pair of roller skates, the departure date is set. With the pitiful remains of 20 USD in our pockets, we arrive at the airport and go to our counter.

There we recognize our fellow passengers from Holland, but somehow the group is restless, arguing, gesticulating. We are told that our cheap airline has gone bankrupt and the tickets are worthless. We have to buy a normal ticket if we want to get back to Germany. That's hardly possible with \$20 for two people, and we look stupid. We don't have any credit cards. We huddle in a corner and wait. Some people have enough money and buy tickets. But the rest of us are just as broke as we are. The staff tries to help, asking various airlines for assistance, including Pakistan Air and others. They all decline with thanks. We all discuss what to do. One person in the group has a connection to government agencies in Germany, and long phone calls follow. Germans stranded abroad, no money, airline bankrupt. Hours pass, we are hungry and thirsty. We throw our last money at a hamburger stand, at least we won't be hungry. Then the good news: Lufthansa will fly us to Frankfurt the next day, at their expense. We all spend the night in the airport in a ticket hall.

The Lufthansa staff is less than enthusiastic when a horde of unwashed, hungry long-haired people storms the plane. They make us feel very unwelcome. As long as we get food and don't get beaten up, we don't really care. When we arrive in Frankfurt, I fish a few German coins out of my jeans

and call my mother to come and pick us up. She finds us asleep in the arrivals hall, draped over our backpacks. She drags us to a restaurant: "Eat, children, eat, and tell me everything in the car!"

The 1980s had begun, and the first poppers, conformist career people with their dad's Porsche, were venturing out into public.

I whizzed through the hallowed halls of academia on roller skates. I dyed my hip-length hair henna red and painted my Beetle in bright colors.

I loved Cologne and its pubs, the openness, the gay and lesbian scene. The student village with its parties and people from all corners of the world. Here you could breathe. And drink the best beer in the world. And I have never in my life shared so many packs of Miracoli spaghetti for 1.99 Mark, "one serving," with others, and they with me!

I met Boris, an atypical business student who lives with his partner Michael in a small apartment under the roof. We both love to roam Cologne's nightlife. We gossip about everything and everyone. We hang out at TIMP, Stiefelknecht, and loud discos. Early in the morning, we stumble up the stairs to the attic, cackling, and I sleep off my hangover on the sofa. The next day, while Boris and I storm into the kitchen in search of coffee and greasy food, clinging to the table with a monster hangover, Michael sits opposite us, silently reprimanding us with glowing eyes. He rustles indignantly with the Handelsblatt newspaper and looks at us disparagingly: "These spendthrifts throw good money away on drinking binges, lead unproductive, dissolute lives, are loud at night, smell of cigarette smoke, and eat the hair off my head!" is written across his forehead. He's right. Michael later becomes the financial controller of a large textile company; he was able to turn his obsession into a career. Not everyone can do that without ending up in prison.

Then I got my Magister degree. I slacked off a lot at university. A little too much. But at least I wasn't a burden on my Mom. I don't want to be a Dr phil. and decide that my academic career ends here. So now what? It was enough for me to complete the Latinum in three months without a break; I didn't have the strength for the Grand Latinum.

I wanted to "do something," something new. I wanted a normal job, not like when I was studying, working for a few bucks an hour as a restaurant kitchen assistant, night watchwoman, cleaning lady, and hamburger cook to fulfill a few special wishes. Mom had to advise me; I was undecided.

Mom knew what to do: "There's a medical publishing house in Bavaria that's urgently looking for someone. But that would mean starting at the bottom with people who want to see if you can work properly. Do you think you could do that? Take a look around, maybe you'll find publishing interesting!"

Two days later, I was in Gräfelfing, and three hours later I had my first employment contract.

My starting salary was 2,400 Mark. I was blissful. My mother sold me her reliable VW Golf and bought herself a BMW again.

I'm "doing well," Mom is relieved. We did it together. Before I move to Fürstenfeldbruck, I go to see the brand-new Terminator 2 at the cinema.

I was put in the publishing house's sales department and spent my first three months reading order postcards, slumped in a dim, half-open cubicle in front of a tiny, thick-glassed, flickering mini-screen on which lizard-green letters flickered in frozen pea-green table frames. Enter the name of the customer, their address, what they want, how many copies. From quarter to eight in the morning until quarter to five in the afternoon. Half an hour break at lunchtime. Three or four cups of coffee. Everyone looked at me suspiciously ("She's from the north, isn't she?"), I was plagued by back pain, and I was harassed by jaded superiors: "Well, working here isn't as nice as studying!"

Without friends or acquaintances, I lived in a furnished room under the roof. I bought my first washing machine. I sit in front of the glass eye and watch it wash as if it were a thriller. Then another apartment, unfurnished, but with large windows and a balcony. All the shops closed at six o'clock. Every evening I stand in a dreary, long traffic jam in front of a narrow underpass. A bottleneck that will torture all commuters for years to come.

On Saturdays, I had to go to IKEA to buy at least a few pieces of furniture, far out in the industrial area. IKEA opened at 9 a.m. and closed at 2 p.m. I wasn't the only one who wanted to go there. Twice I was stuck in traffic for so long that I simply turned around because it was already 2 p.m.

The grocery stores closed at noon on Saturdays, which was my only chance to stock up on food for the coming week. I was exhausted. I was hungry and my fridge was empty. I slept on an old foam mattress pad until further notice.

Every morning I had to get up at 5:30 a.m. I had to leave the house by 6:30 a.m. at the latest, shoveling snow off the car at minus 25 degrees

Celsius if necessary, chopping ice, defrosting door locks, wrapping my thick Palestinian scarf tightly around my head and nose, the icy wind cutting into my lungs like a knife. Fürstenfeldbruck is a cold place, and the winters are long. I prayed that the battery would hold out.

I often didn't get home until 7 in the evening. Hungry and alone. I need 8 hours of sleep, so I had to be in bed by 10 at the latest. Even in summer, when it was still light outside, the birds were singing, and you could hear laughter from the barbecues.

That left me just over two hours a day for housework, dinner, and the news on TV. And phone calls. My phone bill was 600 Mark. Mom's too.

I'm so lonely.

Bruno, the disturbed Persian cat, comes to me. We make each other's lives a little easier.

On my small TV, I see people rebelling in East Germany in 1989; the Wall is falling. I watch them streaming into the West. The country is bankrupt. I'm no economic expert, but I can imagine that the Federal Republic of Germany, West-Germany, will bleed dry if all these people have to be provided for. I have no relatives "over there," so I can't be happy. I have no connection to the people of East Germany. Ordinary people here in the West will have to finance all this, and that includes me. I am furious.

Back to the beginning of my first job.

After three months of servitude with red button eyes in a Bavarian cubicle for newbies, the publishing house management decides to transfer me (for good behavior?) to a department with easy access to daylight. I am to replace a book and magazine producer who is leaving soon and be trained by her. She is almost 60 and has her own way of doing things. I often have to bite my tongue. After two months, the publishing house management entrusts me with my own project. After five months, I take over all the projects of the retiree and am greeted with hatred by my roommate, who is the same age as me and sits across from me with her head thrown back: "It took me five years to get my first project here! The publishing house management thinks that just because she's from university, she can do it better. We'll see about that...! You'll never manage all that. I'll be keeping an eye on you, we don't want a whole print run to be scrapped because of your mistakes, do we?"

And all this in pitifully embellished Bavarian.



Paper is still being typeset, manuscripts are piling up on my desk, X-rays, slides, photos, typewritten manuscript pages. On layout days, I sink into mountains of snippets of cut-out paper galley proofs, on the backs of which I have to apply sticky wax so that I can insert the outsourced texts into my layout. It's hectic: proofreading, the advertising department, the print shop, shipping, the typesetting studio—everything has to run smoothly.

I love this work.

After a while, the publishing director calls me. Why am I not working overtime? I don't understand quickly enough. They explain to me that all the producers here constantly work long hours because they have so much work...aha, I think, that's how you earn yourself a nice long vacation. I play a little dumb. Have there been any complaints? Have I missed something? "No," they reply, "quite the contrary." I see my wheat blossoming. I ask for another project to work on. I also want a substantial pay raise. And I get both. My responsibilities are expanded to include editorial work and translations: proofreading English manuscripts. Still no overtime.

My colleagues don't like that. I don't like my colleagues.

I stoically did my work every day and went home tired. After two years, my gastritis was so bad that I developed very painful stomach bleeding and was diagnosed with an incipient intestinal ulcer. "Go back to the Rhineland," my doctor advised me, looking at me with concern, "you'll never get well here. Because you can't be happy here."

I had learned my trade and was fully trained. This publishing house couldn't offer me any further career prospects. I had heard about computers being used for layout and printing for the first time. This publishing house was going to miss the boat. I didn't want to miss it. I put together an application folder and sent it to every publishing house in or near the Rhineland that had advertised a vacancy in the newspaper. I saved up three weeks of vacation for the planned interviews and scheduled two to three interviews per day. I accepted every offer for an interview, even if I already knew that the publishing house or the position wasn't really an option. I didn't have much experience with job interviews and certainly had a lot to learn.

With a light heart, I drove to Sankt Augustin to see my mother again during this time and also to make my trips from there. Something was happening in my life, and I could finally look ahead with hope again.

However, the interviews I had were sobering. The spectrum of companies I applied to ranged from large publishing houses to alternative practitioners to small publishers in single-family homes.

I met interviewers who didn't know what tasks they should assign me; in other words, they had placed a job ad without having a concept for the position they were offering.

Advertising agencies that asked every applicant to submit a fully developed advertising campaign (for a job they were trying to land, of course) with the promise that the applicant would then “be considered for the open position.” This was, alongside the alternative practitioner in the Eifel region with a larger-than-life oil painting of his guru on the wall, who revealed to me a few days after we had verbally agreed on the contract that his “wife thought the salary was too high and had cut it by a thousand Mark – would that be OK?” the most insolent thing I have ever been confronted with.

A publishing house demanded that I check the recipes in their upcoming magazine for cookability and taste. I was speechless.

The mindset of these people disgusted me. Why did they think they could treat people who were offering their knowledge on the job market in such a condescending, disrespectful, and indecent manner? Of course, I knew: childish power games of all kinds, mixed with a strong dash of “bad manners” and seasoned with a pinch of unscrupulousness.

I didn't encounter a single female HR manager during these interviews.

I was told outright that I couldn't be hired based on my skills: “You're completely overqualified!” and that I wouldn't be hired because I would only stay for a short time before moving on to find a job more suited to my qualifications.

Had anyone even bothered to read my portfolio thoroughly beforehand? Did they only notice this when I showed up for the interview?

A software giant handed me a contract that had already been signed and asked me to sign it quickly. On the way back home, I was stuck in traffic and read through the thick contract. I couldn't believe my eyes. The only thing missing was clauses about public flogging and imprisonment on bread and water.

Finally, however, I found a small publishing house in the Eifel region that best suited my expectations and made a good impression. They were already

working on computers, but only at the DOS level, word processing. No internet. No layout programs.

I manage and organize medical seminars and business trips. It's hectic, but it's fun.

I moved nearby into a large apartment, only a 10-minute walk from work. At lunchtime, I would quickly cycle home, relax a little, and pet Bruno. What a huge difference from Bavaria. My stomach recovered, and my soul was almost back in balance.

I put the Neil Young LPs that had often comforted me during my long period of loneliness away in the back of the closet. A phone call from Bavaria with my Mom: "Are you listening to that eunuch again? He whines and moans so terribly...can't you listen to something else? What do you see in him?"

Now I was more in the mood for booming, cheerful music.

I met up with old friends and acquaintances, was back home, and no longer felt lonely and unwanted. Boris and I resumed our nocturnal debauchery, meeting every few weeks, Michael rolling his eyes more and more and throwing himself defensively in front of the refrigerator door, armed with a freshly printed Handelsblatt. The man is tough. And yet he loses every time.

The working atmosphere became more relaxed, but after a while the work processes seemed confused and half-baked. I got the impression that they were experimenting blindly in all directions, groping in the fog. We were part of a group of companies belonging to a well-known large publishing house, so I thought mismanagement was unlikely. Maybe I just couldn't see the goal?

But my gut feeling was right. The large publishing group in southern Germany, to which this publishing house apparently still belonged, had already split from my employer some time ago due to various disagreements. The human resources department of the parent company in southern Germany informed me that they had only been notified of my hiring at a late stage and that, due to a lack of approved budget for my position, my dismissal was unavoidable. They apologized. Incidentally, my publishing house was also bankrupt.

I had been coldly taken advantage of.

My mother was devastated; she suffered more than I did. I had become unemployed.

I sued for a good severance package and, feeling slightly anxious, went for the first time to my trusted employment advisor in Siegburg, who listened patiently to my story.

"Yes... there are a lot of losers out there...!" was his only comment.

And then: "Your work as a producer and layouter is slowly being converted to computers, I have something for you here in Cologne where you could learn computer-based publishing. It's called desktop publishing, and it's the future of your profession. We have a large budget for training, but the course doesn't start for four months and then lasts almost a year. Full-time, of course. It's tough, there are strict admission requirements, but you'd get in without any problems. If you want, I can register you right away. I'll give you the details about the money you'll receive during that time, and you won't need to come back until you've completed the course. Even if you've found a job by then, we'll still have some paperwork to do.

So, what do you think?"

I was hooked. This was the ideal way to increase my chances of finding a job.

Two weeks later, I asked a distant friend from my youth village days to go with me to a computer store and recommend a computer. I had hardly ever seen a "real" PC and had no idea what you could do with one. I just knew I had to buy one. Computers were very expensive; I spent almost 9,000 Mark in one fell swoop. Computer courses were extremely rare.

The computer priest (disguised as a salesman) to the computer novice: "...and you'll never fill up this huge 350-megabyte hard drive! As a special treat, we have a 17-inch monitor from MIRO, top of the line, for 2,800 Mark, and also a network card with a data throughput of 9600 baud, so you can fax and use this new Internet. And a good graphics card with 526 kilobytes of memory, so you can edit photos; the latest cards already have 2 MB, but they're really expensive. Wouldn't that be something for you? And here's a single-speed CD-ROM drive, only 370 Mark, the latest model, and there are already a few programs available on CD! And with the latest CPU with 55 megahertz, you'll have a really fast machine."

I had no idea what he was talking about. They handed me two floppy disks and a "DOS 3 manual"; my friend gave me 11 floppy disks with "Windows 3" scribbled on them and said something like, "...you have to install these!" I had to do WHAT?

I gave up my nice big apartment and moved back into my old room on the first floor of my Mom's house in Sankt Augustin. I had to budget my money carefully. I didn't know how long I would be without a steady job.

Bruno came with me.

Before the course, I sat at my new PC day after day and night after night, trying to teach myself DOS 3 and Windows, after I had figured out what "installation" meant.

I wanted to use the time wisely, not sit around doing nothing. I wanted to learn how to use the computer and overcome the initial hurdles. The former was pretty hopeless at first: no sooner had I successfully installed Windows than I crashed it again under DOS with a wrong command. The "initial hurdles" piled up into insurmountable mountains.

I learned what I was NOT allowed to do and began to dismantle the mountains stone by stone. No internet could help (it didn't exist yet), and none of my friends had a computer. The mistakes I made back then are burned deep into my memory.

More and more, the computer did what I wanted it to do, and my self-confidence grew. I still treasure the 5-cm-thick DOS manual that I had to wade through like incomprehensible Chinese characters.

My Mom was horrified by my determination; she hardly saw me anymore, I just sat in front of the monitor and always answered her calls with "Yeah, I'm coming! Just a minute, just let me finish this..."

I was fascinated by computers, by their possibilities, their logic, the spirit in the machine that sometimes had to be outwitted with intuition. This was to remain my passion.

After four long months, the course in Cologne finally began. I was in high spirits, excited and cheerful; finally, things were moving forward, finally I was learning something new. On the first day, I promptly got stuck in a huge traffic jam on Cologne's Severinsbridge.

And an hour later, I met Angelika.

Enough of the flashbacks. It's over. Finally over.

I open my eyes again, shift my weight in the garden chair and breathe deeply the evening-moist garden air.

The crispbread is gone, the rest of the tea has gone cold, the children playing behind the hedge are being called home and the lawnmower has stopped. Bruno wanders bored along the hedge, always on the lookout for

something she can sniff thoroughly. Bright blue forget-me-nots bloom around the birdbath.

The phone rings.

It's Angelika. She hesitates a little and tries to tell me something. "What's going on? Trouble with the girls again?"

Yes, she has.

"Come over to my place, leave your sleeping bag there, I've got everything here; your favorite soffi is waiting. Take a break and lay low. You know you can always come over. Oh...and bring some cold Kölsch and cigarettes!"

She can always come to my place to stay and collect her thoughts.

She lives downtown, and after less than an hour she's at my place in the green belt. Through the hedge, I see her parking her car and nervously pulling out our survival kit of Kölsch and cigarettes. She wriggles through the hedge and visibly breathes a sigh of relief. It's cool here, and we have plenty of light and air.

It's Friday evening, and I don't need to worry about the headache I'll probably have tomorrow.

We sit down at the patio table, open two Kölsch beers, and start with a little small talk. I take a closer look at her. She looks tired, almost exhausted. And pale. She's four years younger than me.

When I looked in the mirror in the bathroom earlier, I looked tired too. And a little tense. I didn't like that. My age? Not really. But what else? I quickly push away the thoughts that are slowly creeping up my back. Oh well, what the heck. Everything's fine.

"So, kid, how's it going?" The obligatory question.

"Work is normal," I report, "can't complain. Good to be busy and always something new. It's about time...!"

After training at Olivetti, I found jobs at various publishing houses in the Cologne area, most of which were characterized by mismanagement and bullying. I don't stay long at any of them. I earn good money and build up savings. Mom is now retired. For her 70th birthday, I treat us both to a trip to the island of Fuerteventura of the Canary Islands of Spain, rent a large villa, and we enjoy the togetherness, the sun, the peace and quiet. Years ago, she once mentioned that my current name was not the one she had wanted for me. However, she had regretfully bowed to my father's wishes. All the women in her family had always had double names; hers is Anna-

Johanna, one sister is called Emma-Dorothea, another Anna-Elise. She would have loved to have me christened Anna-Katharina. On her birthday, I surprised her with an official document confirming my name change to Anna-Katharina. Mom wipes away a tear; I beam. Hug.

“Do you remember that endless drama with the publishing house and that bunch of old men?”

“Oh God, yes!” Angelika leans back and laughs, “at Ebertsquare, right?”

I nod. “The one with the 1960s interior. They were rehearsing the quantum leap. With a woman and a computer...”

We both remember it vividly and rant about entrenched hierarchies and an obviously widespread misogyny in the boardroom. Bullying colleagues also get their comeuppance.

“And this time?” she asks, “I get the impression that things are going really well for you at work for the first time, I mean your colleagues and so on...”

“For the first time, yes,” I confirm. “No bullying, no resentment, no slimy bosses with ego problems. I feel comfortable and can just do my job. Just do the work. It's public service, the salaries are predetermined. My colleagues aren't backstabbers and the boss is dedicated to his science, the atmosphere is completely different. Better.”

She looks at me thoughtfully.

“When I worked at Ebertsquare, you had already given up on publishing and concentrated on studying business administration,” I reflect, “although I don't normally like business people, but I'll take you as a forced career changer, that weakens it and gives you a few bonus points!”

I get a kick under the table.

“Are you serious?” she grumbles, then fumbles a few sheets of paper out of her bag. “Here, I have something I wanted to bring you last week. Your papers that you left with me as your financial advisor...the status for the last few months...”

I playfully ruffle my hair and sway back and forth like a woman in mourning. “...are worthless now and I'll be reduced to begging...” I complete her sentence whimpering.

“Nonsense! Look here...” She pushes papers covered with columns of numbers across the table and looks at me expectantly. “Well, isn't that great?”

"Young lady," I remark, "first of all, I don't have my reading glasses on, and secondly, I just want to know if I got the money and, above all, how much?"

Angelika mumbles. "It's multiplied like rabbits. You wouldn't believe it. The total as of yesterday is... just a moment..."

She tells me. In my mind's eye, I can see the subtle diamond bracelet I've always wanted, sparkling. With a white gold setting.

"Yes, lovely...uh, and another Kölsch, please!" She laughs, and so do I. At least financially, we don't need to worry at the moment; she has also invested her money profitably.

The internet is booming; the DAX is at an all-time high.

She looks for the next Kölsch in the fridge.

"I just can't believe you have this kitchen," she calls from inside, rummaging around in the fridge, "it's so posh! I never would have thought you'd buy something like this!

And a ceramic hob, I can't believe it! But it fits, somehow. All that's missing is some designer studded flooring, preferably in red..."

"Leave me alone!" I shout back, "I liked it, and that's that! It's my first real kitchen of my own. All the other apartments I've lived in had junk in them, or I dragged my old childhood furniture with me. Just let me enjoy this! And what do you mean, 'it kind of fits'?"

She sneers. "White, everything's white! Even the sink!"

"The bright red fittings! That'll tear it out again!" I justify myself with a laugh, lean back and take a sip. "And don't give me any of that posh stuff. Who drives a BMW? Huh? Not me, that's for sure! And don't even get me started on your seat heating system, it's so..."

"Not that again! But when we were freezing last time, you..." she wants to interject, threatening me with the bottle.

"Shush! Stop it now. Come on, sit down!" We're both a little tipsy.

I light a candle and we start discussing a few private matters. Angelika is trying to build a relationship and keep the usual early stages of jealousy, power games, and other things within tolerable limits. In any case, she is head over heels in love. And suffering accordingly.

I'm not in a serious relationship, so I can't complain.

A dull suspicion creeps over me that I would like to do just that.



After a few more beers, cheese sandwiches, and bags of nachos, we agree: all women are ditzy, devious bitches, and all men are dull animals. For each of us, the world is back in order for now.

"We should go on a pub crawl again," she says, raising her glass, "draft Kölsch is delicious, and we could go watch the ghost train again."

"Yep," I agree, squinting as I try to grab the last nacho from the bag, "it's been a while since we've been out."

We look out into the dark garden, our thoughts wandering aimlessly.

"Or fly to Tonga!" she suddenly blurts out into the darkness.

How did she come up with Tonga right now?

"The South Seas! Come on! That's completely ridiculous. Just because of that stupid globe thing at Gleumes'?"

My feet and hands are cold. A cold drop is about to form on my nose.

Silence.

"It's always warm there, lots of sun and lots of sea."

She nods.

"Something different from gray and gray and all the gray people here..."

She nods.

"We're not normal, talking about such nonsense!" I protest weakly once more.

"We're not," she agrees, nodding somewhat heavily, "we're not sane. Or not normal? What's normal?"

"We should go to bed," I say, stifling the fruitless discussion that is brewing and blowing out the candle, "it's getting late again."

Angelika snuggles into the green sofa, and I stagger into my warm waterbed. We are both happy that we have become such good friends.

Bruno curls up on my pillow. Her fur smells of summer and hay.

Light. Sun. Sea.

## TO TONGA. FOR REAL.

1999. Many months later. I'm sitting at my desk in my office, working on my computer, when my boss, the professor at the institute, bursts in.

"You still have a lot of vacation time left, over six weeks. You should take it by the middle of the year, otherwise it will expire. We can plan our projects in advance so there won't be any rush. So, think about when you'll be away and for how long, and then we'll sit down together. Have a nice day!"

I'm taken aback. Six weeks of vacation, what am I supposed to do with all that time? And I don't enjoy vacationing alone at all.

I look at my tropical Ficus Benjamini, which, with its cracked branches, puny green leaves, and many fallen leaves on the dusty potting soil, greedily stretches toward the dull winter sun beyond the large window. A dusty spider web hangs from a sickly twig, swaying gently in the rising dry air from the heating.

Light. Sun. Sea.

I reach for the phone.

"Angelika...? Yes, tell me... how's your vacation looking, how much time do you have left? Five weeks, good. And enough money in your account? Why 'funny question'? Listen: I have to take my vacation, and if you have time too, then... shall we finally go to Tonga? It's about time! We can't think of anything better to do."

Silence on the other end, then a burst of laughter: "Really? You're crazy! The flight alone must cost a fortune, Tonga is on the other side of the world, you can't fly any further than that from here! And we don't know anything about Tonga."

"That can be arranged. So, you have time? Good. I'll check how much a flight costs; I have fast internet here. The limit is 4,000 Mark for the flight, is that okay? Yes... I'll do it... I'll call you right back!"

I went online and quickly made two phone calls to travel agencies.

"Yes, listen. The whole trip will cost 2,400 Mark, but it's chicken farm class, not first class. We can afford that, can't we?"

A moment's thought on the other end, the line buzzes.

"You gather all the websites and information. I could go away for longer in May, could you?"

Me too.

"It's a deal. Let's do it!"

"But we need exact information about the flight and where to go in Tonga, because there's more than just one island. I've got a bit of downtime here, and you don't have internet, so shall I take a look?"

"Yes, Kathrin, you do that, I'm busy here. You can print everything out and I'll come over and we'll look at it. How's the timing? How about May-June? I mean, because of possible bookings and stuff and to give the child a name."

"Sounds good, but I'll check with the boss to see if it conflicts with anything and then I'll see how I can finish the projects beforehand. But it should work out, I'll be in touch! Let's stick with Friday, we'll meet at my place."

Friday. I have a thick folder with printouts about Tonga, accommodation, the islands, the weather.

"God is with the stupid, Angelika! If we fly in May, hurricane season will be over. I didn't even know they had those there. Besides, it's still the preseason, so we'll get a lot cheaper. There are apparently three island groups, one near the main island of Tongatapu with the capital, then Ha'apai in the middle. But it's all very sandy there, flat and not much going on, hardly any accommodation, so I don't think that's really an option for us. Then up north is the Vava'u group, which is different from the other islands, very hilly, much warmer and more humid because it's closer to the equator. The main island is described as "flat as a pancake" with a typical third-world small town. We're not going to do that to ourselves. I don't want to stay there. I might as well go to Cologne-Kalk in the summer, it's cheaper. But we're arriving by plane, and we should remember that it's going to be a hellishly long flight. Listen, I've got a route here. We'd fly like this: Cologne, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Apia in Samoa, Nuku'alofa in Tonga.

That's 13 hours crammed into a chicken coop just to get to Los Angeles, I'm not getting on the next plane straight away! I figured, if we're flying halfway around the world, we might as well treat ourselves to a few days in L.A., look around, stretch our legs, spend some money, annoy Americans, which we love to do anyway, and then move on. The question now is: after the long flights, should we do some sightseeing in Tonga and just chill out at a resort for a day or three? Aha, thanks for agreeing, I already have something in mind. It costs 200 Mark a day, food extra, a small resort on a private island outside the capital. The 200 would be for a traditional house

right on the beach, the trick with this one is that it's called a honeymoon house because the bed is in the attic and has a great view of the sea and big windows...Yeah, thanks, I'll do that, OK... Then I thought, once we've hung out enough, we'll fly north to Vava'u, which is supposed to be 'rustic' and very scenic. It says here 'not very touristy', so more to our taste. There's a kind of hotel called Hilltop that offers a small apartment with a kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms for 50 Mark a day. We can eat out in the town, which is called Neiafu. It's small, but so what. Yeah... OK, I'll go for three weeks at Hilltop, and then two days at the resort on the way back? Great! I'll book everything. Call Jörg and tell him he's been outdone!"

## EN ROUTE

April, 1999

We have gathered our friends for a small farewell party at the Brauhaus on Rudolfsquare. We are in high spirits and excited about the upcoming trip. At the long table, we chat, toast, smoke, eat heartily, and everyone feels at ease.

“You did it!” Jörg calls out to us, raising his Kölsch glass. “Have a great time!” It's going to be a long night.

In Frankfurt, we finally board the plane, with a thirteen-hour flight ahead of us. We booked a simple rental car through AVIS at the L.A. airport because we want to be mobile. I booked a maisonette apartment at the Ramada on Sunset Boulevard online; the world is going to hell in a handbasket, 500 USD per night.

The plane is packed, and we have a bad feeling about this. We don't have to wait long. Although we booked Air New Zealand, we are being flown to L.A. by Star Alliance member Lufthansa. Lufthansa is one of the airlines I would never book voluntarily; it's an open secret that the service, and many other things, leave a lot to be desired.

I'm getting grumpy.

Children are screaming, everything is too cramped, we are served sticky rolls and hundreds of ingredients wrapped in cellophane and silver foil, such as butter and jam, on a plastic tray, the coffee sloshes around and is only lukewarm anyway, and the flight attendants are grumpy and irritable. The air is cold and so dry that I think my blood is going to start flowing out of the cracked skin on my nose and around my eyes at any moment. After five hours, my cramped legs start to ache, my knees hurt as if they were clamped in a vice, and even the compression stockings are of little help. I get out into the aisle and pump my veins. Why do I have to pay for this torture? I vent my frustration, hissing at Angelika: “Is this Monty Python LIVE or what?” “Calm down,” she murmurs, “calm down. Think of something nice... just calm down!”

The flight is unpleasant. It's too cold, the food is awful, the movies are old, and the music in the headphones is enough to make you want to run away. The seats get tighter by the hour, our legs hurt, and our bottoms rebel against sitting for so long on the worn-out old seats. The mood plummets.