

Kat Hausler

Kitty

It was one of those rare Berlin skyscrapers, although that makes it sound too elegant. It was a big residential tower on a big road in Lichtenberg. The neighborhood was fairly safe and mostly deserted. The building was cheap, recently renovated and had an elevator, of course. There were twenty stories, which was eighteen more than any building in Hemnissen, the village where Anna and Mila had grown up.

The property manager, a heavysset man whose sweat was always running from his bald head into his furry mustache, made a point of how hesitant he was to rent to people their age, but offered them the apartment anyway. Somehow, the flood of investors, students, artists and immigrants washing into Berlin had overlooked this location, headed for pre-wars in Neukölln or Friedrichshain or places Anna and Mila weren't hip enough to know about.

They'd been neighbors and best friends their whole lives, so it had been clear when Mila, a scrawny ginger to whom people always attributed old-fashioned characteristics like "moxie" and "grit," decided to study in Berlin, that Anna would, too. Mila was studying International Relations at Humboldt. Curvy, blonde Anna, who had always thrown, run and done just about everything there was to do like a girl, was going to the Technical University for Mechanical Engineering. She hadn't known what she wanted to do but knew

that engineers always made good money. Mila helped her out by telling friends, family and strangers that Anna had always been good with tools until it seemed true.

The apartment was affordable compared to other ones they'd seen, but still too expensive for just the two of them, and too big. They put up ads for the other bedrooms and turned up an Italian foreign-exchange student named Maria who listened to the worst German folk music but was chatty enough to help fill the sterile, white rooms of the apartment that was just like all the ones on the fourteen floors below and the five above it. The other room went to Cemil, a short but very handsome film student who was always talking about having been born in Berlin even though his parents had moved to Bavaria before he started talking.

Cemil and Anna fell in love, Mila hung up posters that were dwarfed by the expansive white walls, and they all ate dinner together most nights. Maria bought a collection of board games at the flea market, and everyone passed the first semester.

It wasn't a house where neighbors knew each other, or at least not for the residents of that apartment. They rarely even saw their neighbors, although there were names on the mailboxes and doorbells, lights in the windows and occasional footsteps, clanks, muffled conversations, sneezes and cries.

"This is not the kind of building for student parties," the property manager had told them at the viewing, and again when they signed the lease with Mila's parents as guarantors. Mila had bristled and sulked, but Anna, as always, had said what was needed: "We're not the kind of students who *have* parties."

Mila had joked about it later when they were interviewing roommates, and again after Maria and Cemil moved in and they celebrated their awkward little housewarming party with a couple classmates. But it was true: She and Anna had never been lonely or unpopular, but they'd never been the most sociable,

either. Even Mila's wildness was a sort of optical illusion created by her juxtaposition with soft, accommodating Anna.

Still, they'd known everyone in Hemnissen, or been known by everyone anyway; only old people had to remember who everyone was and have seen them as babies. Mila would never have admitted and Anna didn't want to be the first to say what Maria said one night at dinner when the laptop speakers went on standby and cut off the music.

"It's sort of lonely in this house."

Everyone laughed, Cemil squeezed Anna's hand under the table and Mila made a toast to loneliness, but no one got up to put the music back on, and then it was quiet, quiet enough to hear their neighbor's voice and shuffling footsteps overhead. He must've been somewhat deaf to talk so loud. Anna had heard him plenty of times, but never heard anyone respond. He wasn't as annoying as the neighbor on the other side whose hobby seemed to be moving furniture at odd hours, or the ones below with an apparently endless supply of small, crying children and things to argue about, though never loud enough for Anna to call the police. If anything, she felt sorry for the upstairs neighbor, whom she pictured as a lonely old man in a worn sweatsuit and slippers.

"Oh, him," Mila said, trying to ease the awkwardness of the long silence by pretending they'd all been listening to the neighbor.

"I always wonder who he's talking to," Cemil said. "You hear him a lot, don't you, Babe?"

Everyone looked at Anna.

"I try to ignore him," she said, and then, when that wasn't enough, "I don't think there *is* anyone else."

"Like he's crazy?" Mila asked.

“He sounds harmless,” Maria said. “I wonder if we’ve seen him before.”

“We barely ever see anyone,” Anna said, and she was glad that Maria had already said that about the loneliness, because otherwise she might have to now. Everyone was silent again, but they were all looking up at the ceiling, as if that were the best way to hear through it.

“Dinner’s ready, Kitty,” the man’s muffled voice said. “Come and get it!”

They couldn’t hear anything else moving above them, but the man had a heavy tread that would’ve drowned out most other people, let alone a small animal. Besides, it would be too sad to believe he didn’t even have a pet to talk to.

Anna pictured his kitchen to herself, the nearly empty refrigerator, sparse dishes and paper bag filled with cat food. The fickle cat that wouldn’t come when it was called, wouldn’t eat its dinner, would never respond no matter how much or how loudly the man spoke. Listening now, she realized she’d often heard that coaxing tone of voice, maybe even made out the word “kitty” without thinking anything of it. And here we all are together, she thought with something like guilt.

“At least he’s got the cat,” Mila said.

Anna looked at Cemil, who sighed and said, “Maybe we should introduce ourselves. He must be so lonely.” The word “here” trailed silently after his words, as if the man and his cat would’ve been much happier somewhere else. In another, smaller building, where the man met neighbors in the elevator or the hall.

“But we can’t,” Mila said. “After all this time. I mean, if we can hear him this clearly, don’t you think he knows how long we’ve been here? Especially someone that lonely with nothing else to think about.”

Silence fell again, maybe because of how harsh Mila's words would sound if the old man had overheard them.

"You're right," Maria said finally. "Think how much worse it would be for him to think we're sitting here feeling sorry for him."

"And what would he have to say to people our age, anyway?" Mila added.

"Still," Anna said. "There must be something..."

Cemil stroked the goosebumps that had appeared on her arm. It was easier to change the subject once they'd left the table, and Mila did, but they all knew they weren't really done with it.

When they were playing *Sorry* and listening to one of Maria's kitschy CDs a few nights later, they heard him talking, and Anna got up to turn down the music.

"But it wasn't *my* fault, Kitty," the man was saying. Anna tried to imagine what he thought the cat was accusing him of. Had he moved its favorite cushion, bought the wrong brand of food? "Anyway, how was your day?"

It was silent overhead; the man wasn't just mumbling to himself, but holding a conversation.

"That's so sad," Mila said, enjoying herself, "he actually acts like it's going to tell him."

It was Cemil's turn, but he didn't move his piece right away. "Don't you think...?" He hesitated. "Maybe someone his own age?"

"Sure," Mila said, "let me just look through my old lady contacts."

“I did see one old lady at the mailboxes,” Maria said. “But she was... how shall I say? A grouch. One of those people who corrects you if you say ‘Hello’ instead of ‘Good day.’ I think she was asking if I was the one who left the front door unlocked, but I could barely hear her.”

“I think he’s better off with his cat,” Mila said, but even she didn’t sound convinced.

A few days later, Maria came home beaming with a copy of the tabloid she insisted she only read to practice her German. “I’ve got it,” she said. Mila was at the grocery store, but Maria spread the paper out on the table to show everyone else. It was open to the personal ads. “Look how old all these people are,” Maria said. “There’s plenty of people he could meet.”

“So, what?” Cemil asked. “We take the paper up and underline the ones he should call?”

“No, I don’t think he’d go along with that,” she said. “I thought we’d, you know, give him a hand.”

“You mean write an ad for him?” Anna asked.

“I was thinking answer one for him, but that’s even better. Then he has more choice.”

“I didn’t mean... I mean, what about his privacy? You can’t just give out somebody’s address.”

“The newspaper will handle it,” Maria said, brushing away this trivial objection with one hand.

“Besides, you people are obsessed with privacy. What’s privacy to not being alone for the rest of your life? We can read his name off the doorbell.”

They heard a key in the door and Anna got up to help Mila with the groceries.

“So much for *our* privacy,” Mila said. “I heard everything.”

“And?” Anna asked.

“I’ll write it, of course.”

The ad was more expensive than they expected, but they split it four ways, and, as Mila kept saying, “You can’t put a price on doing the right thing.” Anna couldn’t be sure whether she really thought they were doing the right thing, or just wanted to write the ad for the fun of it. But her exams were harder than everyone else’s, even if she didn’t dare say so, and she was happy to leave everything to Mila so she could study in her room.

The day before her exam, Anna spent all day looking over her notes with her headphones on, interrupted only by Cemil coming in to bring her a cup of tea. I wish *I’d* studied film, she thought between equations, though of course she had no one but herself to blame for her major. Still, she felt like she had a good grasp on the material by the time she came out to dinner. Mila and Maria had made lasagna and couldn’t wait to tell her the news.

“One at a time,” she said.

“I saw his mailbox on the way to class this morning,” Maria said. “It was bursting with mail! So many women want to meet him.”

“I didn’t want to distract you,” Cemil said, watching Anna’s face to see what she thought of the news.

“It was a very poetic ad,” Mila simpered. “Anyway, when we went to the grocery store, we checked again and the mailbox was empty. He must’ve spent all day reading the letters. I mean, obviously we were out for a while, but listen, do you hear him talking to the cat?”

Anna listened and did not. But she wasn’t sure if the silence was as promising as Mila thought. To her, there was something ominous about it. Was the old man offended? He must at least be confused. Was

he contacting the women to see if it was some kind of mistake? Did he suspect his neighbors? Maybe he was sick or something had happened to him.

But just as Maria was setting the pan on the table and Mila was bringing the dishes, they heard the man talking in a low, wheedling voice. Well, low for him. Once all the dishes were in place, they could hear him saying, "...told you a thousand times I don't know anything about it. I'd say I'm sorry if I'd *done* anything. Well, fine, be that way. If you think I'm..."

"I suppose the cat's jealous," Mila said, and everyone but Anna laughed.

"Don't worry," Cemil said. "He just needs time to get used to the idea. He's been alone with that cat for so long. You'll see. He'll be happier in a few days."

"Speaking of happier," Mila said, turning to Maria, "I think I saw that grouchy old woman you mentioned. She has curly white hair and glasses on a chain? Anyway she looked *really* mad today. Like she might slap me if I spoke to her. I guess somebody left the door unlocked again? I couldn't hear what she was mumbling but it sounded nasty. Maybe someone else needs a little company?"

"Such a shame we couldn't bring the two of them together," Maria said. "They live right in the same house."

"No, our old man deserves better," Cemil said. "Think about how nice he is to his cat."

Anna returned from her exam the next evening exhausted but content; she was sure she'd done well. Mila had texted asking her to pick up some snacks for a movie night and she bought more than she intended, like she always did when she went to the store hungry. She was struggling to get her keys from the bottom of her purse when a small, withered hand tapped her on the arm, causing her to shriek.

“I’m sorry,” she stammered to the little old woman behind her. “I didn’t see you. I had my exam today and my mind was somewhere else.” She realized as she spoke that the woman opening the door for her had curly white hair and thick round glasses on a beaded chain. But she didn’t seem grouchy at all; rather, the little blue eyes behind her thick lenses were swollen and red, as if she’d been crying. Maybe it was just a sign of age, though. Anna didn’t want the woman to think she was staring so she stopped to adjust the position of her bags, hoping the woman would go ahead to the elevator.

“What is it you study? Don’t see too many young people around here,” the woman said. She had a soft, pleasant voice that reminded Anna of her grandmother. It was nice to tell this old woman about the exam as they walked down the hall toward the elevator.

“Shall I hold the door while you get your mail?” the woman asked.

Now Anna was sure she could hear it in the woman’s voice—she’d been crying. Her voice all but broke on the word mail, though she was quick to clear her throat. Still, it wasn’t Anna’s place to ask. “No, thanks,” she said. “I’ve got enough to carry. Besides, we never get any mail.”

“Wish I could say the same,” the woman murmured so quietly Anna only just heard her and wasn’t sure she should respond.

In the elevator, the woman pushed sixteen and looked at Anna.

“That’s me, too,” Anna said, and then regretted it. Of course the old woman knew who lived on her floor. She’d probably been in the house a hundred times as long as they had. “I like to walk down a flight for the exercise,” she lied.

“So you’re on fifteen?” the woman asked. “I suppose I’ve seen a couple of your girlfriends around.”

“Yes, there are four of us,” Anna said, afraid the old woman wouldn’t approve of her living with her boyfriend, though of course this was the city and not Hemnissen, where old ladies gossiped about that kind of thing. The elevator stopped at the sixteenth floor and the woman let her out first.

“Have a nice evening,” Anna said over her shoulder, heading for the stairwell. But the woman had been so friendly, not at all like her friends described, and when Anna saw her turning toward the door of the apartment above theirs, she said, “Excuse me, so you know...” She almost said “our old man,” but was able to stop herself in time. “...the man with the cat?”

The woman gave her a cold look, as if she thought she was being made fun of, and Anna saw the key in her hand. “We don’t have any pets,” the woman said.

Just then, the door opened from the inside and a loud voice called out, “*There* you are, Kitty. I’ve been keeping dinner warm all this time.”

Though the woman’s voice was almost as soft as before, Anna could hear her from the stairwell as she said, “Oh, I thought you’d be dining with one of your pen pals,” before slamming the door.