

BAS   
TEI   
LÜBBE 

**Katharina Seck**  
**WE NEVER SAW IT COMING**

Sample Translation by Catherine Venner



**Literary Fiction**

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## Exposé

Sophisticated novel for adult readers of “The Rage, That Remains” (Mareike Fallwickl) combined with the tense narrative style of “Thirteen Reasons Why” (Jay Asher).

### **WERE YOU ALSO PART OF THE HATE GAMES?**

What do you do if your daughter takes her own life for no obvious reason? When you don't know how to express your grief, when the last memory of the most important person to you is a smile and you cannot explain the suicide?

In her inability to process the loss of her daughter, Jenny starts looking for answers and discovers a trail of violence on the internet that is invisible and insidious. It's a trail of digital violence. A trail that soon asks the question: how is it possible for hate to get so out of control and for cyber bullying to develop into a complete hate community?

*Alternatingly told from two moving perspectives with additional anonymous accounts, this novel addresses cyber bullying, the battle with haters and the question: am I a perpetrator myself?*

*Unsparring, direct and emotional.*

### **Concept**

#### **ADA**

Sometimes a second can change your whole life: a party, a meeting, eye contact with a stranger. A stranger, who is initially nice and charming but then becomes pushy and who Ada's friends have to fend off to give her space. A party, a meeting, eye contact with a stranger - already forgotten the next morning.

But this night triggers an avalanche. Although she does not know it yet, Ada left an impression. An impression on the rejected stranger that leads him to anger. He can't let her get away with it. He wants her to pay for his humiliation. And his weapons are social media and thousands of anonymous people.

It starts seemingly harmlessly: with anonymous messages and insults, with fake profiles and cat fishing, with hacking attempts and planned attacks by virtual mobs while Ada streams video games on her small Twitch account. Slowly the hate becomes established and cements itself in the young people, who enjoy ganging up on individuals live in front of the screen.

Ada's strong façade against the hate begins to crumble and she seeks help. She reports it, collects evidence, makes statements and prints out hate comments. But nobody feels responsible, not the police, nor the social worker at the school. Nobody knows how to deal with what is brewing on the internet. Too much effort, too many profiles, and the hate is all too anonymous.

And then, at some point, the hacking attempts are successful. While Ada livestreams, her data is hacked and her reaction is broadcast. Ada's private photos and videos are no longer just in her cloud, but everywhere and everyone can see them. Everyone can see *all* of her, all her intimate, private and secret data. And people corrupt it all into something dark, vilify her, bombard her channels and her inboxes until Ada believes that the internet cannot have enough room for so much hate.

One morning the hashtag #adaxxxgame trends on Twitter, and Ada cannot go on. The whole world is against her and that's too much, she can't stand it. The internet doesn't forget, so how can she get rid of all the ugliness that is now clinging to her, when anyone can find it with just one click?

No, all her calls for help were met with silence, and Ada no longer sees any way out.

### **THE ANONYMITY**

In short chapters interspersed throughout the novel, we see Ada's fate from the other side – from the point of view of the (anonymous) people, for example pupils, students, or her circle of friends, who observe the approaching hate on the internet or add fuel to it. What moves a person to hate a stranger on the internet, to bully them or even to wish they were dead?

Are they channelling their own problems and using the victim as a vent? Is it boredom? Is it a pack effect? And how do they deal with it when they see the ultimate consequence of their actions – a suicide? And above all: could we also be this person?

### **JENNY**

*Sometimes a second can change your whole life:* a moment ago her life was as she always dreamed it would be, and in the next moment everything is different. In the next moment, she knows her daughter Ada has taken her own life.

It is as if Jenny is paralysed by grief. Above all the question that tortures her again and again and makes it impossible for her to deal with her loss is the why. Why did her daughter decide to take her own life? Why did she herself not notice that behind the apparently happy façade of the 18-year-old there was a pain so strong that she did not see any other way out? Everything always ends in the same question: why?

While her husband, Dominik, wraps his sorrow in silence, Jenny cannot be silent, cannot do nothing. And so she starts digging. She starts digging and lands in a swamp and with every move, she sinks deeper into the quagmire of the internet. Jenny, who had never used social media, creates accounts on Twitch, TikTok, and Instagram, anywhere her daughter was in order to be close to her and find answers.

She gradually uncovers what her daughter went through over the past months – and she'd been oblivious to it all. It was as if Ada had a second life that she made her way through without Jenny or any parental support. A digital life that had become mixed up with real life. Jenny also speaks to Ada's friends and almost as an aside she hears about that party night, after which everything started. The stranger who started the avalanche, which at some point he himself could no longer hold back.

Jenny and Ada's friends succeed in discovering the identity of the stranger from the party and report him to the police providing all the collected information. However, the expected relief, which Jenny so fervently hoped for, does not set in. She realises that ultimately the question of guilt has not been resolved and the why is still not answered.

Many are to blame for Ada's death. Everyone who joined in. Everyone who did not help, who did not jump into the breach, who were silent or who

spread hate. Everyone, who hides themselves and their blows behind anonymity. All the institutions and authorities that capitulated in the face of digital violence.

Many are to blame for Ada's death. And if we are not careful and do not pay attention to what we like, share and comment, then we too could also be to blame.

### **Biography of the characters**

**Ada Wagner (18)** is a high school pupil. She is fun loving and in her free time she streams video games on her Twitch channel – until she becomes a victim of digital violence and after many unheard attempts to seek help and the inactivity of the authorities, she sees no way out apart from suicide.

**Jennifer (Jenny) Wagner (39)** is Ada's mother. She tries to discover why her daughter took her own life and for the first time in her life takes a closer look at social media.

**Dominik Wagner (42)** is Ada's father and Jenny's husband. He works as a lawyer and in his grief focuses on holding accountable the authorities who abandoned his daughter.

## Sample Translation

In memory of  
all victims of bullying and (digital) violence.  
Unforgotten, what has been done to you.  
Unforgotten, what may never happen again.

## ADA

Darkness has long since fallen as Ada leaves her desk and flops onto her bed. She's tired and her head is full of heavy thoughts. Everything feels like chewing gum; sticky and spongy. She can't concentrate. Not on the book on her bedside table, nor on the series on the tablet beside her. Her attention span is too short. Anything that takes more than ten minutes feels leaden and exhausting. Even lessons at school. Forty-five minutes of torture trying to concentrate.

The only thing she can manage is playing on her smartphone. Always the same routine. Unlock, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter (she still can't bring herself to call the platform "X") and then check her emails. Even if she'd just done it all five minutes ago. Even if there's nothing new. But there might be. Something of interest in this virtual abyss.

Next to Ada, text books pile up on the bed. Reading for her advanced German course and the Latin dictionary for a translation, a book as heavy as her heart. So much work for the weekend, yet Ada can't focus. She can't do anything but stare at her phone.

Kim: When are you coming?

Ada: Soon. Still have to finish the translation, can't be bothered.

She doesn't want to translate at all. Nor does she want to go to Kim's. She doesn't know if she can bear it today; her best friend is always wired, always just a bit too loud. And Ada is never quite enough of anything, at least that's how it feels. Recent months have turned her into a copy of the full, the complete Ada. One that still functions, on the outside but that's it. Anything else is a tug of war. A fight for every effort. She'd already switched to battery save

mode a long time ago. And really, Kim should know that. Really, her best friend should know Ada just wants to curl up in a ball.

Ada lifts her head and looks over to the corner of her room where her gaming area is set up. A white desk, a giant chair that feels like a cocoon, and LED fairy lights that glow in time with the PC housing and the keyboard. Microphone, headphones, two monitors; everything you'd expect from a decent set up. That's where everything started, her existence on the internet, and that's where everything got out of control. How can somewhere be heaven and hell at the same time Ada wonders. How can you be surrounded by so many people and at the same time be as lonely, as if you'd been abandoned in the desert on your own?

Both monitors are still on. One has Twitch open, the other shows her start browser with the Google search page. Ada is someone, who always has to look something up. She mainly googles hardware reviews for her gaming PC. But also technical tricks for her stream, or the habits of rare animals or news from the scene she's part of. Announcements about new games she can play, stuff like that. You can look up any and every crap on Google, just not how to get your life back on track, you can't find that anywhere. She's countless messages on her phone. A flood that just won't end.

Suddenly Ada feels as if the room is shrinking around her. Like a chain being pulled around her chest. Wrapped around once then tightened, so she can no longer breathe. She has to get out, before the room implodes, taking her with it. Outside, everything is better. There she will be free and can breathe in the air. Inhale the night. The darkness outside will merge with her own, ally to ally.

The humming of her computer becomes quieter. The room is dim as the LED strips no longer flicker. They'd gone into sleep mode with the monitor and the rest of the PC: the colours now vanished, from her room and also from Ada's thoughts. She jumps up, grabbing her rucksack. The rucksack is her alibi. It reinforces the, *Hi, I'm just going out, over to Kim's. See you in the morning*, that she calls to her parents sitting on the living room sofa and watching a series. They've no way of knowing there's nothing in the rucksack other than the stuff she's being hauling around with her the whole school year.

For a fraction of a second, Ada wishes her parents suspected something. Weren't sitting glued to the sofa, thinking everything was cool. What a paradox: she could also just open her mouth and talk. But Ada's lips are sealed.



There's so many voices in her head saying she mustn't tell, not under any circumstance. That Ada mustn't burden these two people who dote on her beyond all measure. Ada doesn't know why she can't do it: tell them everything. Show her weakness and with it the ugliness of recent months. She somehow feels she has to go through it alone.

I'm strong she has been telling herself since the wave gained momentum.

I'm strong she has been telling herself since the wave crashed over her.  
And yet not so strong.

She pulls herself together and waves again. Her parents don't see it; their eyes fixated on the TV. Look closer, she wants to scream, but she can't. The seal is still there.

Ada's hand feels as if it is cast from bronze; heavy and clunky. Then she leaves her home. As the door closes behind her, the cool night hugs Ada and her tortured soul. *Well done*, the night whispers soft as silk, praise for her silence towards her parents.

And Ada stands tall. Straightening her back, as if in the presence of an invisible enemy against whom she needs to show strength. You can't catch me she wants to tell him but her words sound like a lie in her ears. And an invisible enemy IS there, all the time, for months. He has dissected her with a scalpel, bit by bit and worked his way to her open heart.

Now Ada can't carry on, and as the night seductively whispers to her, she suddenly knows where she will go.

## JENNY

Jenny runs. It's early. Still cool. And gloomy. The darkness only slowly dissipating from the housing estate. She jogs past the terraced houses and checks her pulse. It's fast, too fast. She slows down, allowing herself to take a breath switching to a fast walk instead of pounding the street. A glance over her shoulder, a habitual, universal glance that every woman, young or at her age, knows and uses to assure herself no-one is following her. Then Jenny looks over to the houses. Through the windows. Here and there, some people are already up and have switched on their lights. Allowing a peek inside. Like a camera panning, unexpected and sudden, and only lasting a second. A still image of another family, another kitchen table around which they sit: mother, father, children, or mother and children, or father and children, or just couples without children, or old people who maybe have children but have long since lost them to the world.

Jenny hopes these people behind the windows lead good lives. Just like her. Just like her small family, consisting of Ada, Dominik and her. Ada, her only daughter, who puts a worldly-wise face on it because that's what you do at the age of eighteen, who wants to be grown up and knows everything, but still decks the table, takes out the rubbish and tidies her room. We're through the worst of it, Jenny hopes as her trainers crunch beneath her with every step. Autumn leaves shattering under her weight.

And then there's Dominik, her partner since school, who isn't a macho-arsehole but one of the few men who doesn't just throw himself on the sofa on an evening and never lifts a finger. Who helps out and sees the chores, which he and they all create in the house. Who doesn't just help out in his own home but recognises himself as being part of it, and doesn't need to be pushed to do the chores like a second child.

She knows it's different for many women. Sees it among her friends. Sees the exhaustion lurking in laundry baskets, shopping bags and lunch boxes. Sees it behind the glass panes of these unknown houses.

Jenny is happy her life is different, yet at the same time has a guilty conscience. She's been lucky. Over the years, she hasn't been completely ground down, caught between being a mother and her job, and she's managed

to not fully dissolve into both, mother and confectionist, but also keep a piece of herself. She is here. She can jog, run, power herself out, drive herself forward, feel free and young in these precious moments.

The wind rustles in the old oaks as she turns into her street. She's just a hundred meters from her home, which perfectly blends in with the rest of the estate. Her side of the house inconspicuously connects to the other half. They share the semi with the Hauptmann family. Each with their own half, an arrangement that's occasionally stressful. Holger Hauptman is pernickety. He is a stickler for all the neighbourhood rules, whether they make sense or not, whether they are binding or just unwritten. And he demands that of others too. Sometimes loudly, sometimes with silent accusing looks. His wife Anna has long since given up on him and lets him do as he likes. Before, she'd tried to stop him, rebelled against him, first with her voice, then with facial expressions. But now there's nothing, just resignation. He's squashed her spirit with the correctly mown law and the trimmed, almost grey, garden where not a single flower is permitted to survive and there's no place for her own individual design. With the traditional roles into which he's forced her. With the newspaper that he reads at mealtimes, while she serves up his favourite food. They're both already on the pension. He could help her out. He would have the time. But he is one of these men, who believe that a couple of decades in a job are worth more than care work. He thinks he's earned the right to be served, even if he doesn't say so out loud. He clings to the outdated role division that makes his life comfortable.

Jenny rings her doorbell. Dominik's at home, and he's up. She sees the light in the kitchen is on and decides against fumbling around for her own key in her pocket. She'd only taken her key this morning, no mobile phone. Every gram of weight that doesn't jog with her makes her feel lighter, faster and more graceful. She feels better now. Her muscles are warm, the tendons stretched. Jenny is indomitable.

Dominik opens the door and she slips past him and the scent of sleep mingled with the clinging residue of his familiar aftershave. He looks tired even though it's the weekend. He often looks tired, no matter how long he sleeps.

"You could have slept in," she says.

"I know," he says absent mindedly. A sizzling noise comes from the kitchen. Presumably scrambled eggs, Dominik's favourite breakfast.

Jenny raises her eyebrow questioningly. They're so attuned to each other they need no words. After over twenty years of marriage, it's just how it is. Comfortable and easy, sparing work and words. However, it can also be dangerous. If you know every facial movement of your partner and how to interpret them, there's no longer anything new to discover.

That's the point where everything often falls apart.

"I couldn't. The law firm ..." He doesn't need to continue; he sees her disapproval in how the corners of her mouth twitch.

"Roger promised not to call on a weekend anymore. And you promised not to answer." Jenny throws her keys a little too forcefully onto the dresser in the hall and pulls her trainers off.

Dominik shrugs his shoulders. His wavy brown hair falls over his forehead. Jenny considers getting into it with him, but leaves it. When *Steiner Lawyers* are in the house, there's no point in trying to get through to Dominik. The law firm changes her husband into a different version of himself, one that is distanced and detached. As if he's pulling on his suit but an invisible one and at the same time donning this layer of coldness, he needs to be able to do his job well.

"Roger will say anything but his prayers. Let's eat breakfast instead of thinking about him."

"Sure, I'll just jump in the shower."

The sweat is clinging to her skin, and if she doesn't wash it off quickly enough, she'll no longer feel free and indomitable, but rather dirty and smelly. She doesn't want it to get that far, for then the feeling of success and happiness will be gone.

She goes upstairs, grabs a few clothes from the wardrobe. Jeans, a grey wool pullover, underwear, also grey. Sometimes that's how it is over the years, when you get older, have children and sink into the daily routine. You feel grey, as if time is not just sucking the life out of you, but also the colour. Even if you wear the most garish clothes, it happens. Just that then you feel like you're pretending.

She quickly showers, while the smell of scrambled eggs wafts through the not quite closed door. The scent of ground coffee beans mixes with it. The walls of the house are so thin that not just every sound and word but also smells seep through the cracks. Sometimes even those from the Hauptmann family, who have their own smells, like every house and every flat with its

inhabitants. Then Holger's pungent aftershave and the smell of freshly printed newspaper, from which he reads aloud to his wife and questions everything written in it, creeps into their house. Sometimes, not even the crossword is safe from his aspersions, Jenny sometimes thinks bitterly. During the years of the pandemic, Holger came into conflict with the rules for the first time in his life. He'd been sucked in by the rat catchers with conspiracy theories. At some stage, he'd made peace with the alleged reasonableness of a perfectly kept lawn mown everyday to an exact length with a robotic mower, but not with obeying the measures to help protect groups at risk.

Since then, Dominik and Jenny have avoided their neighbours more than before. However, the smells can't just be cast off. They're stubbornly entrenched in the walls.

She passes a closed door. On impulse, she stops and briefly touches the handle. Presses it down, without opening the door. She does it just because, and imagines Ada lying on the other side, angry that Jenny is waking her up for breakfast.

But today, Ada isn't on the other side, nor is she angry. She went straight to her best friend Kim's yesterday and stayed over there. These days, Ada is more often at Kim's than before, that's when she isn't sitting in front of her computer, streaming. And although Jenny knows she has to allow it and she has to let go, she finds it hard. Maybe that's why she runs as if she is being chased by the devil himself. Maybe it's better to run around the block three times to avoid running to Kim's house and dragging Ada home. Not because she doesn't trust her daughter, but Jenny doesn't trust the world.

Sometimes, all she wants to do is wrap Ada in cotton wool. For in contrast to Holger, Jenny doesn't call into question everything the media reports. Doesn't call into question the pandemic, the climate crisis and global warming, nor all the processes that may endanger the future of her daughter. She just calls herself into question far too often that she didn't think about such things earlier, even though they also had their place in the media coverage back then. Earlier as in before she brought a child into the world that doesn't care much for children. Which destroys their future, their environment and the air they breathe.

Jenny knows that she can't protect Ada from it. But the urge is still there. The urge is so deeply rooted, that she'll never get rid of it. Will never outrun it.

She goes downstairs. Dominik has decked the table for breakfast. Coffee, warmed up bread buns, jam and a soft-boiled egg for her. Everything exactly how she likes it, like always.

His thoughts are still with Roger, she can tell just by looking at him. But he's making an effort not to let it show so evidently. No work at the weekend, that's one of the few rules they unfailingly observe. This rule is the foundation of the family. And it has shaken often enough over all the years that Dominik has worked at the law firm.

Jenny takes a gulp of coffee and before it even reaches her stomach, she feels unsettled. As if she had already drunk five cups and the caffeine is racing to her heart and causing her hands to shake.

She is as unsettled as if she hadn't been running, not yet chased the wind. It's only on the inside that she's churned up, for her body is very heavy and soft, a body after sport, after done work. The heaviness must have transferred itself to her thoughts. She should be enjoying the breakfast with her husband, the twosomeness, the alone time. But she can't. There's something inside her that twists and turns, that wants to eat its way out, through her airways and her heart. And she can't get a handle on this something.

"Jenny?"

Dominik's voice is like an anchor. It was the first thing she fell in love with, his voice, back then all those years ago. And the years have done nothing to reduce the charm of his voice, they've allowed it to develop even more. It's dark and smoky, yet still somehow soft. It can be decisive and strong, it has that *I'll sort it* tone and at the same time, it can whisper to her in the darkness of the night so that her heart splinters. He has a voice that makes you believe everything it says and confide everything to it.

Maybe that's why he's so successful as a lawyer. He can coax truth out of people, who don't actually want to tell it.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought," she says and pokes the spoon around in the jam without loading any on her half bread bun. He's opened the blueberry jam. That's the type that she likes the least. But somehow, she still hasn't told him that, not in twenty years of marriage.

"And where exactly?"

At the closed door, Jenny thinks but doesn't say it out loud. And with this unsettled feeling, she's not really going to say it out loud. Instead, she spreads jam on her bun and bites into it.

"I was just thinking what I need to get at the shops later," she lies between two bites.

"I could do that. You hate going shopping on Saturdays," says Dominik dryly and pushes the milk towards to her. She had actually sipped her coffee without realising it was still black.

He's right. She hates shopping. Above all at the weekend, when masses of people trudge through the aisles. In general, she doesn't like it when lots of people come together. Maybe that's why she became a confectionist. In this job, she's frequently alone. She can be creative and keep reinventing herself, but she's generally on her own.

"Good," she agrees. The few gulps of coffee and two bites of bun have settled in her stomach like lumps of lead. "Ada's coming back today, isn't she? Or is she staying another night with Kim?"

"She promised she would show her face around here later." Dominik twists his mouth into a wonky smile. "That doesn't mean that before then, she won't ring us three times and send fifty WhatsApp messages to persuade us to let her stay another night."

Not that Ada isn't allowed to, she's an adult. But the three of them are trying to respect each other. With talking and listening. With rituals. One film evening each week, that's their deal. And it works quite well.

Jenny has not yet checked her mobile phone, she pulls it out and deactivates the screen lock. Two new messages, one from her sister, Karla, and another from her best friend. The messages are inconsequential.

"Hmm," she says dryly. "No message so far. Maybe the Saturday night film is more popular than we thought."

Dominik raises his eyebrow. "Ada picked *The Addam's Family* for today. Maybe we should really be hoping she stays at Kim's."

"Is it making you feel nostalgic?" she teases him.

"Not really." He smiles at her, and Roger's silent presence slowly lifts.

The door bell rings. Jenny pauses and automatically looks at the clock. Quarter past eight, too early for the postman, also too early for Ada, who at the weekend sleeps until ten or eleven o'clock and will have certainly been awake or out with Kim until late last night.

“Is that someone from the law firm?” she asks a little too sharply. Dominik is hurt by her indirect accusation, she can see that as he shakes his head. And she regrets it immediately, ultimately it could be anyone at the door. It could even be Holger, annoyed she dared shower before eight o’clock on a weekend. The sound of water running through the pipe in the party wall often bothers him.

Jenny gets ahead of her husband, as he stands up and goes to the front door. The upheaval within her is now pounding louder, almost spitefully somehow. *I told you so*, it whispers to her, *but you didn’t want to listen. I told you something was in the air.*

She puts her hand on the door handle, just like she did upstairs earlier. And it’s as if she’s being struck by lightning.

Sometimes you know a fraction of a second before that the next time you breathe in, the next time you blink, the next time you make a sound, everything will be different. You know that the moment will destroy your world.

And you cling to *now*. You hold fast to the moment that you are in right now and cling to it with all your might, while the next moment is racing towards you as destructive as an asteroid.

That’s exactly how it feels as Jenny opens the door. In front of her stand two police officers in uniform, one man and one woman. Behind them, another woman in plain clothes. A pastor, the thought flashes through Jenny’s head. She knows what it means, when police officers come to your door, and she wants to get back the moment before with all her might.

But nothing has been said yet.

Her life is still a well-trodden path, which runs in one direction and doesn’t suddenly stop or turn back.

The world is still unchanged.

Yet there is something just hanging in the air, something that might be but is not yet real.

She doesn’t want to lose the now.

But Jenny has no chance against the wheels of time, they continue to turn and rip the moment out of her hands.

“Are you Jennifer Wagner?” the young female officer asks her. How often has she trotted off the words that Jenny is now expecting?



“Yes,” she hears herself answer as if from a distance. For a fraction of a second, something ugly in her spreads. *Please let it be my father-in-law, he’s already old, has already lived his life.* At supersonic speed she runs through all the people she would be ready to sacrifice to protect someone else.

Dominik appears from behind her and places his hand on her shoulder. But his touch is no longer an anchor, just an additional weight seeking to push her down into the ground.

“What’s going on?” he wants to know, and Jenny would like to scream and push him away. He’s asked this question, and now the police officer is going to answer.

Now, the asteroid is here.

And it strikes.

**[END OF SAMPLE]**