JULI ZEH

DECOMPRESSION

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UNDERWATER, THINGS CAN GO WRONG IN AN INSTANT

Jola is a beautiful and privileged soap star who wants very much to be taken seriously; her partner Theo is a middle-aged author with writers' block. In an attempt to further her career, Jola is determined to land the lead role in a new film about underwater photographer and model Lotte Hass.

The couple travel to Lanzarote and hire diving instructor Sven, paying him a large sum for exclusive tuition. Diving calls for a cool head and, as a sinister love triangle develops, events rapidly get out of hand. But whose story do we trust – Sven's or Jola's?

Claustrophobic, smart and unrelentingly intense, this psychological thriller will leave you gasping for air.

About the Author

Juli Zeh was born in 1974 and lives in Brandenburg. She studied International Law, has worked with the UN in New York, and completed her studies in Creative Writing. Juli has won numerous awards, including the German Book Prize, the international Per Olov Enquist Award and the French Prix Cévennes for Best European Novel. One of Europe’s best young writers, her work has been translated into thirty languages.

Also by Juli Zeh

Eagles and Angels
Dark Matter
The Method

For Nelson

DECOMPRESSION

A Novel

Juli Zeh

Translated from the German by John Cullen

Harvill Secker
LONDON

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We discussed wind directions and sea swells and speculated about what kind of weather the rest of November would bring. Although the daytime temperature seldom dropped below sixty-eight degrees, the island had its seasons too; you just needed to pay closer attention. Then our conversation moved from meteorology to the European economic situation. Bernie, the Scot, argued in favor of controlled bankruptcy for Greece. Laura, who was from Switzerland, believed that smaller countries should get international support. I had no interest in politics. If I'd wanted to spend the whole day surfing the Internet for news, I wouldn't have had to leave the Federal Republic of Germany. Laura and Bernie agreed that Germany was the new economic policeman of Europe—powerful, but unloved. The two of them looked at me expectantly. Every German abroad is Angela Merkel's press spokesperson.

I said, "As far as we're concerned, the crisis has been over for a long time." Germans and Brits were going on vacations again. We were doing better, and some of us were even thriving.

We kept our cardboard signs wedged under our arms. The clients listed on Bernie's sign were the EVANS FAMILY and the NORRIS FAMILY. Laura's sign said ANNETTE, FRANK, BASTI, and SUSANNE. My sign bore only two names that day—THEODOR HAST and JOLANTHE AUGUSTA SOPHIE VON DER PAHLEN—but they went on so long that they barely fit. The signs had to be small enough that we could make them disappear under our jackets at a moment's notice. An island law designed to protect taxi drivers forbade us to pick up

clients at the airport. If we were caught doing so, the fine was three hundred euros. The taxi drivers stood just outside the glass doors of the arrivals terminal and kept an eye on us. Because of them, we usually greeted our baffled clients by hugging them like old friends. On the board above our heads, the display flipped: *20 minutes delayed.* Bernie raised his eyebrows in an unspoken question. We nodded.

"With much milk," I said.

"Lots of," Laura said.

Laura had been trying for years to teach me English, but I'd never even learned Spanish very well. Bernie didn't care about my bad English as long as he could understand what I meant. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his shorts and strolled over to the coffee stand. His five-day beard and swaying gait always made him look like a man walking on the deck of a ship.

We'd finished our coffee by the time the first passengers came out into the arrivals area. Some of Bernie's people immediately surrounded him. Five so far—he'd make good money. I pictured the two members of my group as an elegant older lady and a white-haired man, the latter pushing a cart piled high with an assortment of different-colored suitcases. That was the only way I could imagine a Theo and a Jolanthe. The deal we'd agreed on gave them exclusive rights to my services, at a price that could be paid only by people who already had a large part of their lives behind them.

It was always exciting to pick up new clients at the airport. You never knew who you were going to get, who had taken it into their head to give sport diving a try. Because Antje handled all the office work, I usually hadn't even spoken to clients by telephone when I met them for the first time. What would they look like? How old would they be? What preferences, occupations, life stories would they have? Being near the ocean was something like being

on a train; in a very short time, you came to know other people amazingly well. As I was in the habit of never judging anyone, I got along just fine with everybody.

The Air Berlin passengers came through the gate at the same time as passengers deplaning from a Madrid flight—shorter people, less warmly dressed, and not so pale. I'd had a lot of practice at guessing nationalities, and when it came to identifying Germans, I guessed right almost 100 percent of the time. A couple was coming my way. I glanced at them briefly, thought *father and daughter*, and kept looking past them for Theodor and Jolanthe. The couple stopped in front of me, but only when the woman pointed to the sign in my hand did I realize that my new clients had found me.

"I'm Jolante, but without an *H*," the woman said.

"Are you Herr Fiedler?" the man asked.

A taxi driver was observing us through the revolving door. I spread my arms and embraced Theodor Hast.

"I'm Sven," I said. "Welcome to the island."

Theodor tensed up while I kissed the air to the left and right of his face. A faint scent of lavender and red wine. Then I grabbed the woman. She was as yielding as a stuffed animal. For a moment I was afraid she'd fall to the floor as soon as I let her go.

"Wow," Theodor said. "What a greeting."

I'd explain the effusive welcome in the car. "I'm parked right outside," I said.

By then, Bernie had gathered his second family around him, and Laura was standing in the middle of a group of young Germans. They all fell silent and stared over at us. I looked back at them and shrugged. Antje would have laughed at me and pointed out, once again, that I was "slow on the uptake." Theodor and Jolante casually guided their wheeled suitcases toward the exit. He had on a tailored suit, but neither a dress shirt nor a tie; his open jacket revealed a light-colored T-shirt. She was wearing combat

boots and a sleeveless gray linen dress with a knee-length skirt. Her long black hair glistened on her back like crow feathers. She and Theodor bumped shoulders together, laughing about something. Then they stopped and turned around to me. And now I saw it too: They didn't come across as tourists. They looked more like models in a travel ad, and Jolante seemed somehow familiar. Half the people in the arrivals terminal were gaping at her. The words *magnificent specimen* crossed my mind.

"Well, have a great time," Laura said, her eyes on Frau von der Pahlen's legs.

"Canalla," Bernie said in Spanish, grinning and slapping me on the shoulder. *You rascal.* His new clients—two families—were all redheads. That meant sunburn and nervous children.

Outside in the parking area, I opened the side door of my Volkswagen van and invited my clients to get in, but they thought it would be more fun to sit in the front with me. The front seat had room for three; Theodor sat squashed in the middle. I was wearing shorts, and my bare leg looked uncouth next to his suit pants. When I put the van in gear, my hand brushed his left thigh. He kept his knees pressed together for the rest of the trip.

"We go by first names here," I said. "If that's all right with you."

"Theo."

"Jola."

We proffered hands. Theo's fingers, warm but limp, lay briefly in my own. Jola had a man's firm handshake, but her hand felt amazingly cold. She rolled the window partly down and stuck her nose into the wind. Her sunglasses made her look like an insect. A really cute insect, I must admit.

Arrecife was a concentration of various kinds of unpleasantness. Government offices, law courts, police stations, hotel complexes, hospitals. Antje used to say you didn't drive to Arrecife unless you had a problem. I had one on the day in question, but I didn't know it yet. I was just happy to be leaving the city. I stepped on the gas, turned onto the arterial road, and reached escape velocity. The landscape opened up: a couple of bearded palms standing beside the road, and everything beyond them black, all the way to the horizon. The island was no beauty, not in the classical sense. Looked at from an airplane, it resembled a gigantic granite quarry, with what seemed to be the remains of snow lying in the valleys between the brown-gray hills. During the final descent, the snowy patches revealed themselves as villages of white houses standing close together. A landscape without any vegetation is like a woman with nothing suitable to put on—they both have a hard time being admired. The island's lack of vanity was the precise reason why I'd fallen in love with it from the very start.

How was your flight, how's the weather in Germany?

How big is the island, how many people live here?

I chose the route through the wine-growing region. Innumerable funnel-shaped ditches, in each of which a vine found protection and fertile soil. That there were people who gouged out a one-yard-deep hole in the lapilli layer for every single plant, reinforced the borders of each ditch with a little stone wall, and thus perforated an area of twelve thousand acres like a Swiss cheese—that fact never ceased to fascinate me. In the distance the craters of the Timanfaya glowed red and yellow and purple and green from the lichen covering the volcanic rock. The only plant growing anywhere around us was a mushroom. I waited to see which of my companions would be the first to say, "Like being on the moon."

"Like being on the moon," said Jola.

“Sublime,” said Theo.

When Antje and I arrived in Lanzarote fourteen years ago, equipped with two backpacks and a plan to spend the largest-possible portion of our future on the island, though not necessarily together, she was the one who’d said, “Like being on the moon,” when she first saw the Timanfaya. I’d thought something along the lines of *Sublime* but hadn’t found the right word.

“If you like rubble,” Jola said.

“You have no feeling for the aesthetics of the austere,” Theo replied.

“And you’re just glad to be back on solid ground.”

Jola took off her boots and socks and cast a questioning glance in my direction before bracing her bare feet against the windshield. I nodded in approval. I always liked it when my clients relaxed as quickly as possible. They were *not* supposed to feel at home.

“So you don’t like to fly either?” I asked Theo.

He gave me a scathing look.

“He pretends to be asleep,” said Jola. She’d taken out her telephone and was tapping in a text message. “Like all men when they’re afraid.”

“I get drunk as fast as I can,” I said.

“Theo takes care of that before boarding.”

A cell phone chirped. Theo reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket, read the caller’s number, and answered.

“Do you go back to Germany often?” Jola asked me.

“Not if I can help it,” I said.

Jola’s cell phone chirped. She read the screen and poked Theo in the side. When she laughed, she curled up her nose like a little girl. Theo looked out the window.

“I like this landscape,” he said. “It leaves you in peace. It doesn’t require you to marvel at it and admire it all the time.”

I understood exactly what he meant.

“For the next two weeks, I’m only interested in what’s underwater,” Jola said. “The world above the surface can go to hell as far as I’m concerned.”

I understood that too.

We reached Tinajo, a small town of white houses with little oriental-looking towers rising from the corners of their flat roofs. At the bookstore, which looked as though it had been renovated and then closed, we turned off to the left. After a few hundred yards, the last of the well-tended front gardens were behind us. They were followed by terraced fields wrested from the rubble. Here and there a couple of zucchini lay on the black soil. A flat-topped shed with a German shepherd tied up on the roof in the blazing sun was the last sign of civilization. The road turned into a gravel track that was marked off by whitewashed stones and wound like a ribbon through the volcanic field. This was the stretch where most clients would begin to get excited. They’d cry out jokingly, “Where are you taking us?” and “We’re at the ends of the earth!”

Jola said, “Wow.”

Theo said, “Awesome.”

I abstained from historical and geological tourist tips. I said nothing about the volcanic eruptions that had buried a quarter of the island between 1730 and 1736. I held my tongue and left my clients to their astonishment. All around us was nothing but rocks in various bizarre shapes. The silence of the minerals. There wasn’t even a bird in sight. The wind shook the van as though it wanted to get in.

We rounded the last volcanic cone and suddenly the Atlantic was spread out before us, dark blue, flecked with white foam, and a bit implausible after so much rock. The breakers exploded against the cliffs and sent up high clouds of spray that rose and fell as though filmed in slow motion. The sky, gray-blue and white and windblown, was a continuation of the sea by other means.

“Oh man,” said Jola.

“Do you know the story about the two writers walking along a beach? One of them complains that all the good books have already been written. The other writer shouts, ‘Look!’ and points out to sea. ‘Here comes the last wave!’”

Jola laughed briefly, I not at all. The silence of the minerals always wins out. A few more minutes’ drive brought us to Lahora. The entrance was marked by an unfinished building, a concrete cube on a foundation of natural stone. The building’s empty window openings looked out over the sea. The gravel track now turned into a strip of slippery sand that climbed steeply up to the village, if *village* was the right word for a group of thirty uninhabited houses.

While I’m thinking about the best way to describe Lahora, it occurs to me that I’ve been using the past tense to talk about the island and everything on it. The first time I drove Theo and Jola to Lahora was barely three months ago. As usual, I hugged the cliff at the upper end of the village so my clients could enjoy the view. I explained that contrary to what you could read in many travel guides, Lahora was by no means an old fishing village. It was rather a collection of weekend houses built by wealthy Spaniards who already owned estates in Tinajo, handsome properties but utterly lacking in ocean views. The government of the island, I went on, had granted title to the building site, which lay in the middle of the biggest volcanic area, but hadn’t bothered to provide any infrastructure. Lahora had no building plan, I told them. No street names. No sewer system. All in all, except for Antje and me, Lahora didn’t have any inhabitants either. Lahora was a mixture of abandoned building site and ghost town, a variation on the blurry boundary between not-yet-finished and falling-into-ruin.

In fact, the Spaniards had long since given up tinkering around on their half-finished houses; instead they would sit on their driftwood-fenced roof terraces while the salty wind

gnawed the plaster off their walls. Wooden cable spools served as tables, stacked construction pallets as benches. Lahora was a terminus. A place where everything came to a halt. Furnished with objects that would have landed on the rubbish pile long ago if they were anywhere else. The ends of the earth.

We sat in the van and looked out over the flat roofs, with their accumulations of water tanks and solar panels and satellite dishes, and then down to the first row of houses, which practically stood in water at high tide. I promised my clients they'd find the place uniquely silent. The owners of the houses came, if at all, only on weekends.

I ended my little discourse by announcing two rules for their stay in Lahora: no swimming, and no going for walks. The little cove was a seething cauldron in any weather, I said, and the volcanic fields regularly broke headstrong hikers' bones. In Lahora you could sit around, look out over the sea, and contemplate the smaller islands to the north, which crouched like sleeping animals in the haze between the water and the sky. Besides, when all was said and done, they were here for diving. Every day we'd drive to the best diving spots the island offered, and if in addition they wanted to do a little sightseeing, then, as arranged, I'd be available to act as their chauffeur and guide.

They weren't listening to me. They seemed completely absorbed, holding hands and gazing at the village and the ocean. They didn't ask, as other clients did, why I'd settled in such a remote place. They didn't prattle on about former diving adventures. When Jola turned her face to me and took off her sunglasses, her eyes were moist—from the wind, I thought, the breeze blowing through the open window on her side.

"It's absolutely beautiful here," she said.

I shivered and turned the ignition key.

Today it seems to me as if that first meeting took place half an eternity ago, in another century or in an alien

universe. Although I can still see the Atlantic through my window as I write, the island's no longer in the present tense. I'm literally living out of suitcases. Down at the port in Arrecife, a container holding all my equipment is awaiting shipment to Thailand, where a German from Stuttgart wants to open a dive center on some palmy island with white beaches. A second container with my personal stuff is almost empty. When I was considering what I could use in Germany, hardly anything occurred to me. What would shorts, sandals, portholes from sunken ships, and a swordfish I caught and mounted myself be doing in the Ruhr? The only suitable place for all that is the past.

We coasted slowly down the dirt road and turned left at the touchingly hubristic little wall that divided the Atlantic from the dry land. My property constituted the end of the village. Standing at oblique angles and a stone's throw from each other on the edge of a large sandlot were the two houses: the two-story, generously roof-terraced "Residencia" where Antje and I lived, and the "Casa Raya," the somewhat smaller guesthouse. The area both houses occupied had been blasted into the black rock overlooking the sea. They stood raised up on natural stone foundations the sea spray couldn't hurt. I'd acquired the houses for a good price and renovated them lavishly, and Antje had worked real miracles in the gardens around them. She'd fought with the contractor for days on end about how much excavation would be required, she'd drawn up irrigation plans, she'd insisted on bringing in special soil. She'd conscientiously investigated wind load and sun angles and the direction of root spread. With the passage of the years, there had sprung up on the edge of the rocky wasteland an oasis it cost me a fortune to keep watered. Royal Poinciana, hibiscus, and oleander bloomed all year round. Masses of

bougainvillea threw their cascades of color over the walls, and above them two Norfolk Island pines stretched their thick-fingered needle leaves to the sky. The bloom of flowers on Lahora's outermost edge burned a bright hole in the bare surroundings.

"No, not possible," said Theo, shaking his head and laughing softly, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Jola had her sunglasses back on and remained silent.

There were clients who didn't care for Lahora, but everybody liked the Casa Raya. The house, a simple white cube with blue shutters on its windows, contained only a bedroom, a living room, a bathroom, and a cooking niche, but in spite of its small size, there was something majestic about the place. Under the steps that led up to the front door, the lava rocks were battered by the Atlantic, which seemed not so much raging as experienced; it's been throwing itself against them in the same way for a couple of million years. Every two minutes the water in the cove surged up and spewed skyward a huge fountain sixty feet high. It was incredible that such a drama had nothing, not the smallest thing, to do with us humans. After guests left the Casa, they'd go back to Germany and write us to say that the fabled roar of the surf had stayed in their ears for days. It was a sound that inhabited you.

Antje was already sitting on the Casa's steps, waiting for us. Todd, her cocker spaniel, was asleep on the hood of her white Citroën. The only dog in the universe that would voluntarily lie on hot sheet metal in blazing sunlight. This was his way of making sure Antje wouldn't drive away without him. Or so she believed. When she saw us coming, she jumped up and waved; her dress was a big, shiny spot. She owned an entire collection of vivid cotton dresses, each in a different pattern. She'd accessorize from a range of flip-flops in various matching colors. On this particular day, little green horses on a red background galloped over her body. When she extended her hand to Jola, it looked for a

few seconds as though someone had taken still shots of two different women in two different films and artfully spliced them together. Theo gazed at the ocean with his hands in his trouser pockets.

I set the luggage on the dusty ground. Antje raised her hand in thanks. We'd greeted each other rather scantily. I didn't like her to touch me in the presence of other people. Even though we'd lived together for many years, it always struck me as funny that we were a couple. In public, at any rate.

While I lugged the empty scuba tanks from the morning dive into the Residencia's garage, where the fill station was located, Antje showed our guests around their vacation home. Getting clients settled in was one of her responsibilities. In addition to the Casa Raya, she also managed a few holiday apartments in Puerto del Carmen for their owners. My diving students made up the majority of the guests. Antje did bookings, turned over keys, settled up, cleaned up, tended the garden, supervised workers. At the same time, she ran the business end of my diving school—took care of the office, updated the website, did all the paperwork required by the various diving organizations. It had taken her less than two years after our arrival to make herself indispensable. She even knew how to cope with the *mañana* mentality of the Spanish islanders.

I threw the used diving suits into the washing shed in the yard and went into the house. I was suddenly thirsty for an aperitif. Campari over ice. Ordinarily I drank only when I had to: in airplanes, at weddings, or on New Year's Eve. The Campari I wanted at the moment was somehow related to Jola and Theo. I could smell and taste it before I knew whether Antje had any on hand. I found a bottle in the refrigerator, poured myself a large glass, and listened with pleasure to the crackling ice cubes. Glass in hand, I stepped out onto the lower terrace. If you put your chair

right up against the railing, you could look across the sandlot and into the Casa's living room. Just then the curtains were opened. Antje's colorful dress was visible through the window. I could see Jola and Theo in the background, contemplating the cooking alcove. They were probably used to much better kitchen arrangements. Or maybe they were wondering how they could get anything to cook anyway, seeing that there wasn't so much as a chewing-gum machine in Lahora. On this, their first evening, Antje would invite them to dinner, and tomorrow after the morning dive, she'd take them shopping for supplies. That was what we always did with the guests who came to the Casa.

Across the way, Antje was explaining stove, microwave, and washing machine. Theo appeared to be listening, while Jola let herself drop onto the sofa. Her head bounced up and down in the window; she was probably testing the sofa for springiness. I was tempted to imagine Theo throwing her onto the dining table and pushing up her dress—but I deleted the image at once. Female clients were taboo. In my profession, your work clothes were a pair of swimming trunks.

JOLA’S DIARY, FIRST DAY

Saturday, November 12. Afternoon.

Incredible place. White facades and barred shutters. Blazing sun and black sand. Zorro might come around the corner at any minute, rushing to prevent a duel. The air tastes salty. I find it fabulous here, but since Theo likes it too, I naturally have to take the opposite side. The sublime aesthetics of the austere! All right, old man. Why not just give it a rest? The world doesn’t become any more beautiful because you dump your poetry on it. Not bigger either, or more important or better. All you do is crash into the world and bounce off. Like the sea hitting the rocks, your words burst into spray and flow back into you. If you had ten thousand years, maybe you’d be able to round off a little corner, but you won’t live that long. You least of all.

As for me, I’m keeping my mouth shut. I’m not talking about literature, I’m not talking about dying. We’re both making an effort. This is going to be a lovely vacation. I won’t provoke him, and he won’t let himself be provoked. Armistice.

Well, maybe vacation *isn’t the word. The real reason why I’m here is the part. The part I want. The part I need. Lotte’s my last chance. I tore her picture out of the book and pinned it to the wall over the bed. I could look at her and look at her. Charlotte Hass, Lotte Hass. The Girl on the Ocean Floor. She’s wearing a red swimsuit and old-fashioned diving equipment and holding on to part of a sunken vessel. Her eyes are heavily made-up behind her diving goggles, and her long hair is spread out like a water plant around her head. She’s so beautiful. And strong. A*

female warrior. Home and children weren't enough for her. She went looking for danger. Her diary's as thrilling as a crime novel. In the 1950s diving wasn't a sport, it was pioneer work. A test of courage for men, not for women. Lotte was the first girl who insisted on swimming with the fish. When Theo noticed the photograph over the bed, he bit his tongue.

Sven's a beamish boy. Only two years younger than Theo, but built differently. With webbed feet and gills behind his ears. He doesn't look at me. Doesn't even see me. Probably because I'm not a fish. Which is what he's supposed to turn me into. That's what he's being paid for, and he doesn't come cheap.

Sven comes with Antje, who's his—what? Assistant? Wife? Sister? Secretary? She introduced herself as "Sven's Antje," as though giving both her job title and her family status in one go. Sven, meanwhile, was staring into space. Antje apparently embarrasses him. She's a little thing but quite a looker, she talks a lot, and she smells like Nivea. Blond as a Swede. She stays out of the water. She made us aware of that right from the start. The water, she said, is Sven's "state of matter." I think she probably meant "element" or maybe "business." Something like that goes through the old man like a burning knife. If you can't talk right keep your trap shut, that's his motto. He can't stand to be around people he thinks sound like children. On the other hand, he seems quite happy to gaze upon Sven's Antje.

Lahora. The Spanish textbook in school had some strange sample sentences: My dogs are under the bed. I hear myself scream. Te llegó la hora—Your hour has come. *Not another soul for miles. No automobile except for Antje's, the car with the dog on the hood. Without a car, there's no getting out of here. In short, except for us, the place is deserted. The old man liked that right away: "Somebody ought to set a story here," he said. Go right ahead. Set a*

story. Write something instead of always just talking about writing something. I didn't say anything.

The old man let his eyes rest on Antje's Swedish bosom and listened to her attentively. Used toilet paper should be thrown not in the toilet but in the bucket next to the toilet, because otherwise the pipes get blocked. Electrical appliances are to be turned off whenever we leave the house. If we want warm showers, don't take one right after another. Don't drink from the taps. Don't put any garden furniture on any of the watering hoses. When we want to log on to the Internet, tell Sven so he can adjust the satellite dish. No swimming, and no going for walks—but we knew that already.

Then I stood in the garden for a long time and watched the sea playing with itself. All at once the old man was behind me with a glass of red wine in his hand. He put an arm around my shoulders, pulled me to him, and kissed the crown of my head. "Little Jola," he said, nothing more.

My eyes got damp. I held him tight. When he's in the mood, it can be a great thing to touch him. It's always this way: you travel thousands of miles to sleep less comfortably and understand yourself better.