

The Guardian

The Ground Beneath My Feet review – creepy phone calls dial up the fear

An executive's important business trip is threatened by unnerving family news in an eerie, elegant psychological drama



Who's there? ... Valerie Pachner in *The Ground Beneath My Feet*

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The creepy phone call that's coming from inside the house - a well-known scary-movie trope. The threat is more disturbingly intimate than you thought, or more disturbingly metaphorical. It's an idea touched on in this elegant and mysterious psychological drama from Austrian film-maker Marie Kreutzer. Her trajectory of fear is not angled as you might think, towards a supernatural revelation or a down-to-earth explanatory twist or even an enigmatically balanced ambiguity between the two. For much of the time, *The Ground Beneath My Feet* has the uncanny-realist feel of something like Olivier Assayas's *Personal Shopper* or Michael Haneke's *Hidden* with its moment-by-moment portrait of emotional breakdown in the face of an unexplained phenomenon, and there's something of Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* in its study of family dysfunction. But it seems to me different from all these: the transgressive threat approaches and recedes like thunder, leaving us with a study in loneliness.

The person beneath whose feet the ground is shifting and disappearing is Lola (Valerie Pachner), a young corporate executive whose habit is to answer her mobile curtly with her surname ("Wegenstein") as if always expecting a business call, nothing personal. Lola lives on her own in

Vienna, through whose avenues she goes running every morning. She is driven, focused, goal-oriented and excited by an imminent business trip to Rostock in Germany, where her consultancy firm is about to land a big commission. Lola is also looking forward to hotel-room assignments with her boss, Elise (Mavie Hörbiger), with whom she is having a passionate affair, made more dangerous by the fact that Elise is in a position to advance her career, or - perhaps - to impede it by capriciously advancing others on her team.

Something could yet ruin all this sleek sexual and professional gratification. Lola's elder sister, Conny (Pia Hierzegger), who has paranoid schizophrenia - like their late mother - attempts to take her own life and is taken to hospital. Lola must frantically deal with this situation without ever confessing to the other yuppies that she has this family problem, that she is human like everyone else. Then she gets phone calls, apparently from Conny in hospital, accusing Lola of abandoning her and saying the nurses are abusing her. But wait. Conny is not allowed phone calls. Who and where are these calls coming from?

Lola's new crisis takes this movie to some subtle yet sensational set pieces of fright. Trying to keep it all together as best she can, Lola visits her doctor and confesses that she herself might be experiencing hallucinations. The weary, concerned doctor asks her a series of questions, the most important being whether she has a family history of mental illness. Kreutzer has Lola give an evasive answer before cleverly keeping the camera on her for the crucial next few moments. What is she hearing now? Whose questions are these? Is this interview making things worse?



Family crisis ... The Ground Beneath My Feet

Kreutzer is very good at evoking the strangely dull, bland, identikit spaces of the mid-price business hotel, in which Lola is in her element. The film finds something inviting in the lobbies, the corridors with their tactfully subdued lighting, the bars and the restaurants in which various business meetings with tacky subtexts have to be negotiated. As Elise says to her, half accusingly, half teasingly: "You love hotels". And she does. Their very emptiness and impersonality are liberating, and they are, after all, where she can have the best sex. In a hotel, there is no reminder of home, or family, or any of the things that she finds painful.

And so the Conny situation, in all its pain and confusion, unfolds alongside an ugly confrontation in the office that reveals to Lola a toxic sort of sexual politics. Her importance in the team making this crucial presentation in Rostock seems to fluctuate, and she may or may not be justified in her suspicion that opening up to Elise about Conny will be a catastrophic mistake that would make her look weak and unreliable. Yet nothing is entirely clear, including the wisdom of Lola's growing conviction that she might be able to save Conny by bringing her home to live with her. When Lola gets into a lift, and gets one of her unearthly phone calls from Conny at the same moment that the lift breaks down between floors, it brings a shiver of fear, and also of sadness.

The Ground Beneath My Feet is available on digital platforms.

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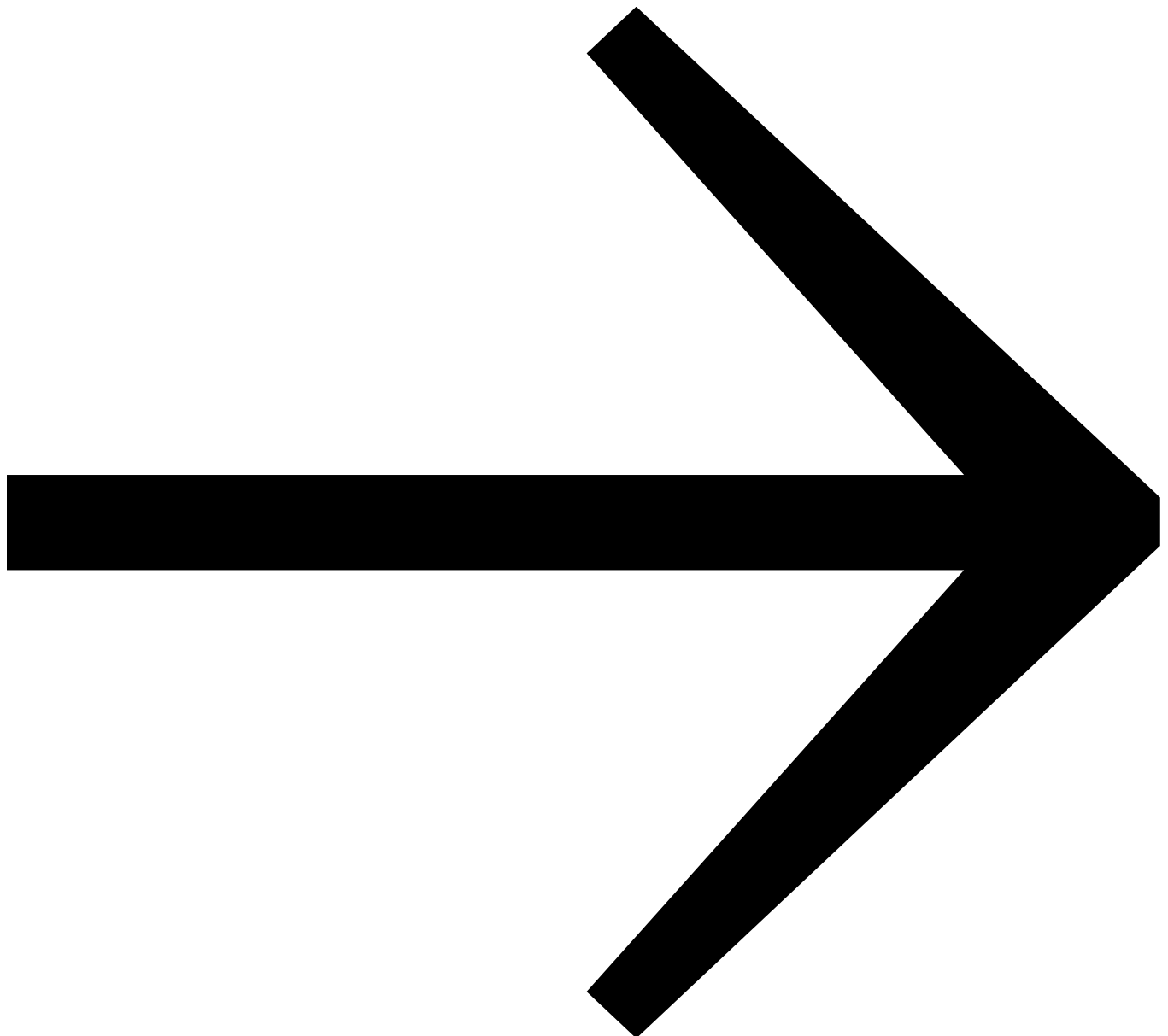
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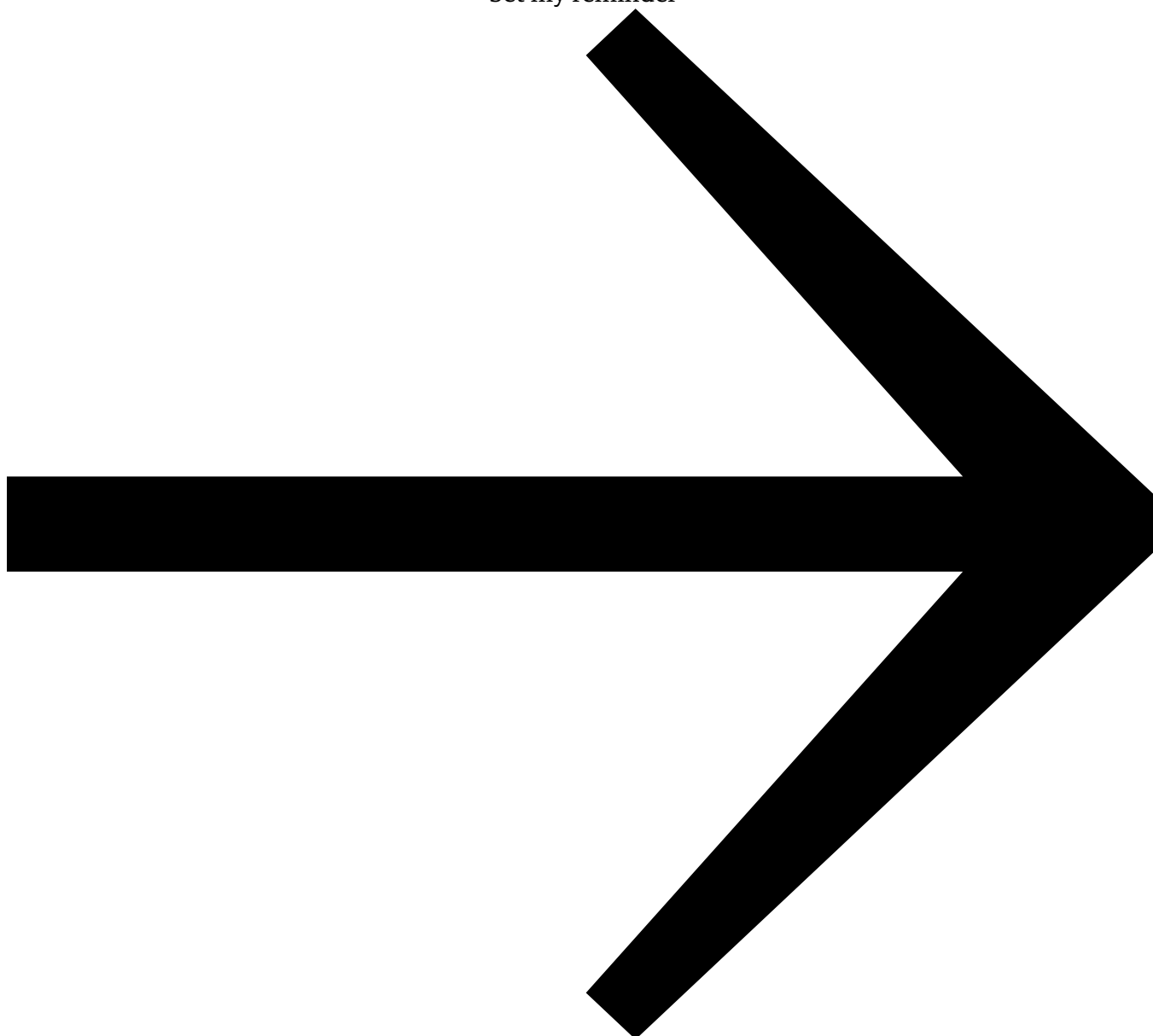


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