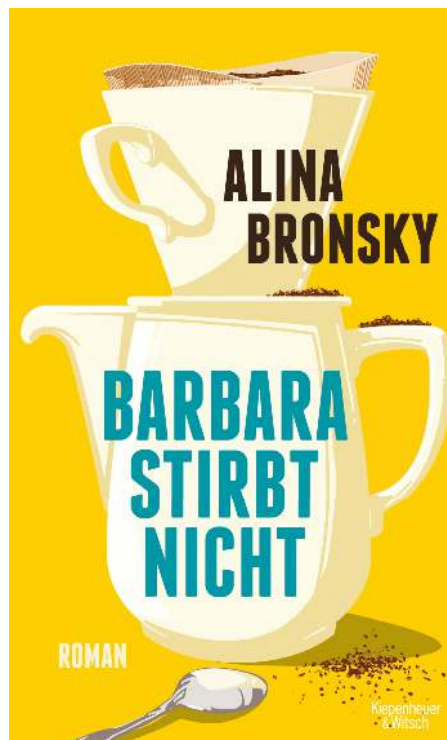


BARBARA ISN'T DYING

by **Alina Bronsky**

Sample Translation by Tim Mohr



Novel

256 pages

Publication date: September 2021

World rights with Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

Iris Brandt (ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de)

Aleksandra Erakovic (aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de)

When Herr Schmidt woke up early Friday and missed the smell of coffee, he thought at first Barbara might have died in her sleep. It was an absurd idea – Barbara was as healthy as a horse – but even more absurd, though, was the possibility that she could have overslept. She never overslept. But when he turned over in bed and saw that the other half of the bed was empty, it seemed to him that the most likely explanation was that Barbara had keeled over dead on her way to the kitchen.

Herr Schmidt sat up and shoved his feet into his slippers. His nostrils flared longingly, missing the familiar aroma. Whatever happened to Barbara: if she had managed to put on the coffee beforehand, the smell would have wafted up the stairs and reached the bedroom. Aromas can't be contained. Herr Schmidt headed off, hoping she hadn't fallen down the stairs. Though presumably the noise would have awoken him. Or perhaps not: Barbara was a quiet woman, always had been.

He didn't get far. An unfamiliar obstruction loomed before the half-open bathroom door. Herr Schmidt drew closer, recognized Barbara's foot, and then the rest of her. She lay on the tile, looking at him out of one eye while the other slowly, and not completely, opened.

"Walter," she said. "Give me your hand."

Herr Schmidt leaned over her and tried to pull her up. Barbara groaned and pushed him away, which, given the demand to help her, seemed truly illogical. She turned onto her side, braced herself with her hands and fought despairingly against gravity. Herr Schmidt grabbed her under her arms and lifted her up. He threw her arm around his neck, took her slowly back toward the bed, and then hoisted her surprisingly heavy body onto the mattress. Her feet were still in her felt slippers, he removed them and placed them one next to the other on the bedside carpet.

"The coffee," Barbara whispered.

"It's fine," said Herr Schmidt. "I don't need it right now."

"But I do," said Barbara.

This was surprising. Herr Schmidt went slowly down the stairs and looked around the kitchen. The kitchen was Barbara's realm, the surfaces gleamed. For their golden anniversary he'd given her a kitchen update, a collective gift to make up for all the anniversaries and birthdays he'd not given her anything, and for all the future ones when he also wouldn't give her anything. The coffee machine stood next to the stove, the plug was removed from the wall for purposes of safety and saving energy.

Herr Schmidt plugged it back in. He tentatively opened a cabinet, and then the next one. He had never made coffee, something his daughter Karin and her best friend Mai laughed about during their visits.

"Papa, you really don't know where the coffee is?"

"I don't meddle in Barbara's business just as she doesn't mix in mine."

"And if she isn't here? Or can't do it?"

"Why wouldn't she be here?"

"You can't be serious, Papa. You don't even know where the milk is."

This, of course, was a ridiculous insinuation. He knew milk belonged in the fridge, even if the white-colored garbage sold as as milk these days could sit out in the sun for weeks without spoiling. Real milk belonged in the fridge.

Herr Schmidt opened all the cabinets and then sat back down, looking first at the left-hand cabinet and then the right-hand cabinet, rice, oats, cream of wheat, polenta, what the hell was all of this stuff?

His next idea was to call Karin and ask how to make coffee. As a woman she had to know that sort of thing. On the other hand, she would immediately suspect something was wrong. She'd ask questions and make a fuss. This in turn wouldn't please Barbara, who surely didn't want any excitement. Herr Schmidt closed his eyes, demoralized by his need for coffee.

Coffee was always ready when he entered the kitchen in the morning. The table was made, two plates, butter, basket of rolls. He would sit down, Barbara would pour him a cup and add just the right amount of milk. He didn't even know the exact ratio. When they went out to dinner, which they actually never did, she also put in the cream for him.

His eyes lit on the shelf of cookbooks. There were too many, nobody could possibly need all of them. German cuisine, another on German cuisine, French, Italian, vegetarian, Baking with Love, Baking for Christmas, advanced breadmaking. Herr Schmidt leafed through a couple of them, no help at all.

Suddenly he had an inspired idea. The can with the coffee jumped into his field of vision, he'd seen it a thousand times without realizing it. The coffee filters were right next to the can. Herr Schmidt put a filter in the plastic housing, filled it to the rim with the blackish-brown grounds, realized that ready-to-drink coffee was predicated on water, carried the machine to the faucet and tilted it slightly: some of the ground coffee spilled out. Once the rear reservoir portion of the machine had filled with water, Herr Schmidt put the device back and turned it on. The resulting gurgle assured him he'd succeeded.

He slowly went upstairs to look in on Barbara in bed. It wasn't her style to lay around on the bathroom floor in the morning, but she didn't say anything more about it and kept her eyes closed. You don't have to discuss everything.

In the kitchen, the transparent pot was already half-full of oily, black liquid. Herr Schmidt tasted it and spat it out. He thinned the brew with tap water and added milk. His thirst was too strong, he drank the cup in one go, ignoring the resultant heartburn. Barbara, though, was picky when it came to food and drink, he couldn't pass this stuff on her.

He drained another cup and thought it over.

Grocery shopping was Barbara's thing, though sometimes she gave him a short shopping list if he was going to be out with the dog anyway. For the most part it consisted of picking up four bread rolls, two pretzel rolls, two poppy rolls and two wholegrain rolls at the bakery. That was the week's purchase, as Barbara froze things and then thawed them one by one for breakfast each day. The bakery smelled of coffee at all times of the day, and in the corner of the shop a coffee machine wheezed. Herr Schmidt had always wondered what poor souls bought coffee here.

He headed off without Helmut, despite how much he wagged his tail and panted at his leash. Helmut's reproachful look followed Herr Schmidt

through the glazed glass door to the next street corner. Without the dog it took less than the usual eleven minutes to the bakery.

Coffee cost an outrageous 2,80 euros. Herr Schmidt wasn't stingy, on the contrary he believed that when it came to foodstuffs, quality had its price. The chubby gum-chewing clerk threw questions in his face that he cleverly dismissed with "Just the coffee." He didn't see why he should pay extra for milk when they had better milk at home. But he did buy a few rolls. He carried the paper bag down the street. Because he didn't want to spill anything, he was markedly slower on the way back. Mendel from the neighboring building stood at his kitchen window staring and smiling. Herr Schmidt ignored him. At home, he poured the bakery coffee into a clean cup, added milk, tasted it. It was cold.

Barbara was still lying in bed. She opened her eyes as he approached her side of the bed, where he otherwise never went. For a moment the perspective surprised him, he saw his own messy side of the bed, the indentation of the back of his head on the pillow. It still wasn't clear whether Barbara would manage to make the bed today. He handed her the coffee. She sat up on her elbows, tried it, and smiled a crooked smile.

"What?" asked Herr Schmidt. Only then did he notice a cut across her temple. He must have missed it before. It was already scabbed over, and he saw dried blood in her hair.

"Do you want to wash up?"

"Am I dirty?"

"Yes."

He found a pale blue washcloth in the bathroom and wetted it. Barbara wiped her mouth and the wrong side of her face.

"I'm a bit weak," she said.

"I can tell." He didn't want to sound cranky. He hadn't had any breakfast yet, and had already walked as much as he normally would all day.

On the way to the kitchen again, Herr Schmidt walked past the phone that stood on a little side table in the hall, next to it a note with Karin's number

and the list of numbers for the urgent care doctor, the family doctor, and the woman minister. Sebastian's number was in fourth position, despite the fact that he lived nearby, though unlike Karin he had a family.

Herr Schmidt didn't normally eat *Fleischwurst* for breakfast, but he had no choice on this particular morning. He cut himself a thick slice. Of all the kitchen utensils, Herr Schmidt was handiest with the knife. He cut the pretzel roll, they were his favorite. The butter from the fridge proved hard, normally Barbara put it out as soon as she got up so it was waiting at the table at the right temperature. Herr Schmidt positioned a few yellow rectangles next to each other on the two halves of roll and then smeared some currant jam on top. Then he climbed the stairs yet again, nearly forgetting the plate. Barbara lay on her back, eyes closed, the damaged side of her face didn't look good. Herr Schmidt placed the plate on her stomach. She opened her eyes.

"I'm not myself today, Walter."

"You need to eat."

"Maybe later."

He reached with his hand and scratched the blood from her ear with the nail of his pointer finger. She didn't flinch. The *Fleischwurst* hadn't sat well, it was too early for it, he needed his bread roll first. If Barbara didn't eat hers, perhaps he could just take a bite of hers.

The butter was too thick, gave the jam a fatty aftertaste that filled his entire mouth, but the fresh pretzel roll made up for it. He ate the entire half, gallantly gulping down the butter clumps.

"Walter."

He jumped, like he'd been caught.

"I haven't cooked."

As if this wouldn't have occurred to him on his own. "It's still early yet."

"Have a look in the freezer. Take out the soup with meatballs."

He patted Barbara's blanket reassuringly, needed to say something nice to her, as baleful as she looked.

“That’s my favorite.”

“You have to warm it up first, you know.”

Apparently she took him for an idiot.

“You have to eat, too, Barbara. I’ll bring you another roll.”

“Maybe later.” She closed her eyes again.

The chest freezer was full, of course. Barbara had bought it ten years before, when she said she no longer wanted to can everything, she wanted to freeze things, too. They had the garden, after all, and Karin had long since moved out by then. Sebastian didn’t visit often either and all he ever took home with him was a jar of marmalade and even that he took with an expression as if he were doing Herr Schmidt a personal favor. Eleven jars from this year stood on the shelf and seven from the year before, Herr Schmidt didn’t bother to keep count of the older ones.

Barbara had cooked too much of late, but maybe they just ate less. What was left, she froze so she could take a break now and then. Though actually she cooked every day regardless. One single time, four years ago, she went hiking with a friend, without Herr Schmidt, and had left a list behind detailing which container he was supposed to defrost when. Herr Schmidt hadn’t been opposed to the trip, but still remembered the helpless rage that seized him when he opened the freezer and pulled out an ice-covered vessel that hurt his fingers, the contents of which he was supposed to defrost and warm up according to precise instructions. In silent protest he hadn’t followed Barbara’s guidelines, and instead of goulash had eaten stuffed cabbage, assuming it would not go unnoticed, would perhaps even annoy her. But when she returned, radiant, in a great mood, and tanned, she hadn’t said a thing about it.

He opened the top of the chest freezer. The containers were carefully labeled with the dish and date. The soup with meatballs was on top, his fingertips hurt to the touch again. Herr Schmidt felt a brief flash of anger, though not as strong as the last time, more of a pin prick.

Barbara was never sick. In the first decade of their marriage he could barely believe it, because as a girl she hadn’t looked very healthy, thin, blonde

hair, pale face. He had his doubts back then, because a sickly wife would have been just too much. But her outer appearance was deceptive, because inside she was made of steel. When she was pregnant with the children, she hadn't put her feet up a single time during the day, and two hours before giving birth she'd cleaned the kitchen. When she was home with the newborns, she started cooking again immediately. Once she had injured her wrist and cooked lefthanded, with thick bandages on the right. If things dropped off a bit as a result, Herr Schmidt didn't say anything.

Herr Schmidt filled the sink with hot water and submerged the container of frozen soup with meatballs. Helmut sat in front of his bowl and looked up at Herr Schmidt. Herr Schmidt looked back. Helmut whimpered and covered his mouth with his paws.

Barbara held her hands in front of her eyes when Herr Schmidt opened the curtains. "The dog," he said, trying not to look directly at her face, because it still wasn't totally cleaned up.

"Oh," said Barbara, even propping herself up a bit. Her paleness stood out even more as she suddenly flushed in spots. "His ground meat is in the plastic bag in the refrigerator, you have to brown it."

"What do you mean, brown it?"

"Put it in the little pan, no oil, it's non-stick. Then add oats and a potato."

"But why brown it?"

"So he won't get sick."

"He's a dog. Dogs eat garbage."

"You know how his stomach is."

Herr Schmidt didn't know. "He doesn't eat canned food?"

"God forbid, Walter."

"You need to eat, too."

"Maybe later." She had closed her eyes again.

Helmut swatted him with his tail when Herr Schmidt entered the kitchen again.

“All right, all right.”

Herr Schmidt opened the fridge. It was well organized, eggs and milk on the door, butter dish outside. In a bowl covered with clingwrap were potatoes, cooked skin-on, from the day before. On a plastic container was a note that said, “For Helmut.” Did Barbara always do this, or did she have a feeling yesterday that she was going to fall today? Herr Schmidt took off the lid, sniffed. Helmut jumped around.

“Calm down!” shouted Herr Schmidt, to drown out the rumbling of his own stomach as much as anything else. He turned on the stove – child’s play – put a pan on the burner, dumped in the contents of the plastic container. Nothing happened at first. Herr Schmidt sat down, picked up yesterday’s newspaper. He’d forgotten today’s in the newspaper box because of Barbara. He read the lead piece again, it was something about Britain. Something smelled burnt, the pan was steaming. Herr Schmidt got up and grabbed it from the stove. Even though part of the ground meat was burnt and the rest was raw, it smelled good. Helmut howled.

“Calm down!” Herr Schmidt put the pan back on the burner and began to stir it until all of the meat first lost its color and then browned. Before he shook it into the bowl, he put a bit on a plate and salted it.

“Careful, it’s hot!” shouted Herr Schmidt as Helmut hurled himself at the meat. The dog didn’t listen, let a few crumbs fall and then licked them up immediately. The bowl was empty in seconds flat.

“Boy, are you stupid,” said Herr Schmidt. “What are you going to do all day if you finish eating so quickly? Wait for dinner? You need to take it easy.”

Helmut wagged his tail.

Herr Schmidt’s gaze fell on the bowl of the potatoes. Barbara had mentioned them and said something about oats.

“You want potatoes?” He reached his hand out and showed Helmut a spud. “Look, from yesterday.”

Helmut turned away.

“Have it your way.” Herr Schmidt cut the potatoes, cold and with the skin on, as they were, onto meat on his plate, wondered if he should sprinkle oats on top, decided against it. He tried it and added more salt.

“You have it good with Barbara,” he said when he was done. “She spoils you. And what’s on the menu for tonight?”

Helmut didn’t seem to know, either.

The day went by quickly. Herr Schmidt took Helmut out and then looked in again on Barbara, who still didn’t want to eat anything. He considered calling Karin, but determined to wait on that until tomorrow. He checked to make sure all was in order in the garden, but there was not a lot to do, the blue and yellow crocuses looked feeble, the narcissuses had spread but weren’t blooming yet. The pear tree stood there bare, the few buds shut tight. It was still too cold for the tomato and pepper seedlings. Barbara had planted them in yoghurt containers in the sunroom, there were too many again.

Herr Schmidt solved a crossword puzzle and five sudokus, which were laughably easy, went out with Helmut, this time into the woods. It was still bearable on a workday, there was plenty of air and space. On weekends, on the other hand, everyone went to the woods, and Barbara seemed to know every single one of them and needed to discuss something urgent with every second one.

Herr Schmidt hadn’t taken even twenty steps before he was overtaken by a fat woman in a tracksuit, who swung ski poles around as she walked. When she was a good two meters ahead, she suddenly turned around, first looked at Helmut, then abruptly at Herr Schmidt.

“Walterrr!” she shouted with a heavy accent that caused Herr Schmidt bodily pain. The “r” rolled like an avalanche of rubble crashing down a mountain to engulf Herr Schmidt’s peace of mind. “Where is Barrbarra, Walterrr?”

He didn't know this woman. Or perhaps he did? He felt as if he'd been caught out.

"She's relaxing," he eventually said.

"Is she underrr the weatherrr?"

Finally he realized this was Natalja, Barbara went belly-dancing with her, or whatever nonsense it was she did in her free time. Natalja sure had a belly. Suddenly it occurred to him that Barbara probably spoke Russian with Natalja when they met up, taking advantage of the fact that he wasn't there. He had been very strict with Barbara and her speech early on, and when he heard Natalja just now, he had to pat himself on the back retroactively. Unthinkable that Barbara might still talk like that today.

"How long have you lived in Germany?" he asked.

The fat woman looked skyward. "Let's count. Ten, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-four. Twenty-four years! Next year will be my silver anniversary with Germany." She beamed at him. "So what's the story with Barrbarrra?"

"I don't know."

"Has she run off?" She found this funny. "Is she not going today?"

"Where?"

"The class."

"No, she won't be coming today."

"I'll call herrr."

"Best not."

"Did you kill her?" She looked serious for a split second before she laughed her horrible laugh again.

"No," said Herr Schmidt.

"That's good." She scratched Helmut on the top of his head, and Herr Schmidt got annoyed that the German shepherd, which women were normally scared of, tolerated it. Barbara had coddled the dog too much. "Say hello to Barrbarrra." Then off she went swinging her ski poles.

By evening, the meatball soup had thawed in the sink, in fact it was room temperature. Herr Schmidt shared it with Helmut. When they were finished (Helmut much more quickly, though Herr Schmidt didn't dawdle, either), Barbara occurred to him again. He hadn't been in the bedroom for hours. Barbara was asleep, the light was on in the bathroom. Apparently she'd gone to the bathroom at some point, Herr Schmidt realized hopefully. He turned off the light, sat down in front of the TV, and watched a western while Helmut lay at his feet and cringed at every gunshot. "It's just the TV," said Herr Schmidt, and Helmut twitched the tips of his gray-brown ears attentively. Herr Schmidt enjoyed watching the movie without Barbara's commentary, she considered movies with shootouts too brutal and only understood half of what went on anyway. He watched a second western, which came on right after the first, then went to bed.

Herr Schmidt had nightmares – about Sebastian. Once again he saw before his eyes the disappointed, slightly disgusted face of his son, and again didn't understand what the cause of it could be. Herr Schmidt sat up in bed. He had the feeling he'd heard Sebastian's unhappy voice. He turned to the side, reached his hand out into emptiness. At first he was happy. It was typical for the other side of the bed to be empty when he woke up, and then the scent of coffee would waft up from below. But it was still dark out, and then he heard footsteps. Something slow and plodding was dragging itself from the bathroom into the bedroom. A hunched shadow formed in the doorframe and headed toward the bed. An old woman, like a witch out of a children's book, her nightgown glowing in the moonlight.

"Barbara?"

"Who else."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her legs up onto the mattress with a sigh.

"What's going on with you?" His voice trembled all of a sudden.

"Nothing. I'm tired."

“Well, it is nighttime.”

He didn't like her. This wasn't the Barbara he knew. He reached out his hand and touched her face. She jerked back, startled, but he was able to briefly feel her with his fingertips. Her skin was disagreeably cold and clammy.

“You're not going to die on me, are you, Barbara?”

She said nothing.

“You're still young!” he said, it was meant to sound stern but had a pleading undertone.

Now she laughed, which reminded him of the woman in the woods.

“Really,” he insisted. “You're younger than I am.”

“So?”

“I ran into that fat woman in the woods. Your friend. The Russian. She asked about you.”

“And you?”

“What about me? Nothing. She thought I'd murdered you.”

Barbara smiled, and Herr Schmidt felt a tension, that he hadn't even noticed, release.

“That fatty will die before you, the way she jiggles around.”

“She's twenty years younger than I am.”

“You're more attractive.”

“Ridiculous.” Barbara had laid her head back down onto the pillow, though now Herr Schmidt was wide awake.

“You going back to sleep? You slept all day.” He tugged at the sleeve of her nightgown.

“I'm exhausted somehow.”

He would have liked to demand that she just knock it off with the exhaustion. She had slept enough. But Barbara was stubborn even as a young woman, and that hadn't gotten any better with age.

“She speaks such poor German, your friend.”

“It's just an accent. I have one, too.”

“Yours isn’t so bad. You don’t even hear it. Imagine where we’d be if I hadn’t been so strict.”

She didn’t reply.

“We’d be Russians, Barbara. And our children would be Russians. You could stick your German passport to your forehead – it wouldn’t help.”

“Get a hold of yourself.” She turned onto her other side.

His mood, which hadn’t been particularly good before, was now irrevocably shot. Even at night Barbara could exasperate him so, even when she was so weak that he needed to worry she might not be as healthy as she had always looked, after he had nurtured her in the early years and kept at her about her speech so that other people would also treat her nicely. Without good German you were lost. She was a good student, at some stage she even suggested *he* was using certain words wrong because he didn’t read as much as she did. She wanted to fight with him over proper German. She. With him. Despite himself he felt his lips curl into a smile.

“I need something sweet, Barbara.”

“Look in the drawer,” she mumbled without turning back to him.

“Which one?”

“Jesus, Walter. In the kitchen, right under the utensils.”

Which meant he had to go back down to the kitchen yet again. No peace even in the night. He went barefoot, because in the dark he couldn’t locate his slippers. On the stairs he put on the light, didn’t want to fall as well and smash his skull, too. What a pair they’d make then, he and Barbara.

Helmut seemed happy to see him, and wagged his tail, but Herr Schmidt waved him away. “It’s still nighttime, can’t you tell?”

Helmut trotted back to his dog basket.

He had never opened this drawer. It was the secret drawer Barbara had created because he wasn’t supposed to eat too many sweets on account of his stomach. Though he wasn’t fat, just a normal man with a stout midsection. She gave him his ration when he wanted something sweet, and he tolerated it. Now he felt like a little kid secretly taking a spoonful of grandma’s marmalade. The

drawer was full of packets of chocolate and cookies. He took the bar that was on top and carried it to the bedroom, lay down in bed, crinkled it open.

“You want a piece, too, Barbara?”

She pretended to be asleep.

“You need to eat something.” He placed the first square of chocolate on his tongue. It was milk chocolate, his favorite. Not dark chocolate, chocolate with pepper or ginger or some other difficult to chew crap that Barbara liked. “Can you remember when you were new here and we’d just been married, had no money, and you sprinkled sugar on bread rolls and flicked a little water over the top and that was cake for us.”

Barbara didn’t answer. Herr Schmidt ate the entire bar, folded the paper into a small square and put it on the nightstand. It had been too much chocolate, now he had an unsavory aftertaste in his mouth. Barbara would scold him in the morning if she noticed. He shoved the paper under his pillow so he could quickly dispose of it in the morning, before she made the bed.

-0-

Herr Schmidt slept in the next morning, which wasn’t surprising as he had been up and about all night, after all. Helmut howled downstairs in the kitchen. Barbara didn’t stir. He checked: she was breathing.

This time he didn’t even bother trying to make coffee. He put Helmut’s leash on and went straight to the bakery. He’d never been there so late in the day before. The display case was nearly empty, but he’d bought rolls yesterday. He ordered two coffees, black, and paid the unbelievable sum of 5.60 euros in coins.

“Too expensive,” he said when the fat clerk handed him two plastic cups. “Why so expensive?”

“I don’t set the prices,” she said.

“Who buys something like this?”

“You, for one.”

“Only because my wife can’t make it herself at the moment.”

The girl behind the counter looked at him from beneath giant lashes that reminded him of hairy caterpillars. “What’s wrong with her?”

As if it was anything to her.

“If I only knew,” said Herr Schmidt, ashamed by his own garrulousness. “Lying in bed, won’t get up.”

“She’s probably depressed.”

Herr Schmidt thought it over. “Don’t know. She fell over in the bathroom yesterday.”

“Maybe it’s a circulatory issue. She should have a coffee.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Despite himself Herr Schmidt told the tale of trying to make coffee the day before. The girl with the caterpillars on her face listened, occasionally shifting her chewing gum from one cheek to the other.

“It’s not hard,” she said. “You put in one teaspoon per cup plus one for the pot. My grannie always used to put in a grain of salt, too.”

“Why?”

“Everything tastes better with salt.”

Herr Schmidt remembered the meat intended for Helmut that he had salted. “Does this coffee have salt in it?” He gestured at the two cups.

“Nah. I just push a button and the machine does everything.”

“For lazybones,” scowled Herr Schmidt.

“Exactly.”

The coffee in the cups was going to get cold, he couldn’t waste the entire day.

He took Barbara the coffee, transferred into a proper cup, together with a roll with jam, even though she hadn’t asked for one. Barbara took the cup.

“It’s cold,” said Herr Schmidt.

“No problem. It tastes good.” She took a sip and put down the cup.

“You have to eat something!”

“Later.”

Not later. Now.” He took the roll with jam from the plate and tried to put in her hand, but she wouldn’t take it. Then he held it to her lips. “Open your mouth!”

“You’re nuts, Walter.”

“Open up. You know what happens to people who don’t eat?”

She wanted to protest – she always had to fight with him – but at that moment he stuck the roll into her mouth. She bit off a piece and began to chew.

“I’m going to call Karin,” said Herr Schmidt.

“Leave her be. She’s busy.”

“Maybe she can talk some sense into you.”

“I’m just a little weak. I’ll get up soon.”

“That’s what you said yesterday.”

-0-

The next day was a Sunday. Herr Schmidt had no idea where Saturday had gone, all those tough hours he usually spent waiting for Barbara to come home from exercising, from meeting friends, even when she talked on the phone. Sometimes he tried to dissuade her, but since he’d been retired, his word seemed to count for less. In the past he’d been able to point to the bill in order to get her to talk on the phone less, but these days it didn’t seem to cost anything to talk on the phone, which meant that everyone prattled to each other incessantly, took their devices shopping, to the gym, and even to the woods, where they jabbered on about some crap or other even while walking. At times like that Herr Schmidt wished for a cane that he could use to knock the babble-devices out of their hands so they wouldn’t torture him any longer. But he still didn’t need a cane, he was still just fine on his own two feet.

Barbara’s lying-around-in-bed wasn’t good for him. Even things he had seemingly grown accustomed to now irritated him. On Sunday the baker was closed. But Herr Schmidt saw this only as he stood in front of the storefront. Normally, closed shops provided him satisfaction: it had been normal in the

past for shops not to be open around the clock, people just had to adapt. But when you hadn't yet had a coffee, it was less than ideal to be standing in front of a locked bakery door.

Herr Schmidt went back home, fed Helmut with the veal goulash he'd thawed the day before, and then pensively took up a position in front of the coffee machine. The fat girl's granny must have known how to make coffee. He spoke the recipe aloud, ladled two spoons of coffee in the filter and one more for the pot, salted it, poured in water, and pushed the button. It was child's play.

The coffee had an intense aftertaste, which wasn't banished by the milk, either. He took Barbara a cup. She sipped it cautiously. "It's hot today. And salty, if you ask me."

He had expected a bit more gratitude.

"The other coffee, the previous few days, was from the bakery. 2.80 per cup."

"This is from the can in the kitchen, right?" she asked. "It's decaf and a bit stale. Usually I grind it fresh. The beans are in the bag in the refrigerator."

"You do what to it?"

"Grind it. With the coffee mill."

Herr Schmidt remembered the horrible daily rattle that always sent Helmut fleeing. Barbara handed him the empty cup. She didn't touch the bread roll.

He was unhappy that she took everything for granted. On the way to the kitchen he stopped at the telephone, picked up the handset, and dialed the number. He could have sworn that he dialed Karin, but Sebastian annoyed voice said, "Schmidt."

"Father here," said Herr Schmidt, surprised.

Sebastian didn't say anything for quite some time. Herr Schmidt listened as something at the other end of the line was loudly moved, as if Sebastian were rearranging the furniture while talking on the phone. Herr Schmidt gave in first.

"Where are you?"

“At the office.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“I know.”

“I can call you on your normal phone.”

“This is my normal phone.”

“It must cost a fortune.”

“Quit it.”

Herr Schmidt could practically see Sebastian gritting his teeth and forcing out the sentences.

“Everything okay with you guys?” Sebastian finally asked.

Herr Schmidt took a breath. “It’s still cool outside,” he began, but Sebastian interrupted him.

“I can see for myself what the weather is like. Has something happened? Where is mama?”

I killed her,” said Herr Schmidt.

“What?”

“Joking. She’s tired, lying in bed.”

“Mama’s in bed?”

Sebastian’s agitation provided Herr Schmidt with hard-won satisfaction. It confirmed that he had been through something unimaginable in the last few days.

“Is she breathing?”

“Of course she’s breathing,” said Herr Schmidt, annoyed. “She even talks.”

“Thank god. Put her on the phone.”

“Can’t, she’s in the bedroom.”

“I brought you that cordless phone.”

“I’m in the hallway, on the normal phone.”

“Father, you drive me crazy.”

Although he would have preferred to have heard a friendly word from Sebastian, he was secretly pleased at this. Any emotional release was better than indifference.

“You hang up, and I’ll call you back on mama’s mobile. Then you can take it to her.”

“She’s asleep.”

“God damn it!” shouted Sebastian, and Herr Schmidt jumped, startled, causing him to drop the phone. This was an indisputable advantage of normal telephones: it didn’t drop to the floor, instead it hung from the cord and swung gently back and forth. Sebastian’s voice was no longer audible. Herr Schmidt waited a few moments, then hung up.

The phone rang immediately. Herr Schmidt answered: “I’m still on the same phone.”

“What?” It wasn’t Sebastian, but Karin. “What’s going on over there? What’s the story with mama?”

“How do you know about it?”

“How do you think?”

“Why would he call you rather than just coming over? He has a car, for god’s sake.”

“You already know.”

“No, I don’t,” said Herr Schmidt, who was gradually finding all of his too much. “I didn’t kill your mother.”

Karin exhaled loudly. “I already heard. That’s good news.”

“Yeah. Bye.”

“Papa! Wait a minute.”

Karin’s voice was like honey – they had good honey from a beekeeper in the pantry, he was hungry again – and he felt like a fly stuck in it. He gave up any resistance and told her everything that had happened in the last three days, these three days without breakfast and a proper lunch.

“I just made coffee,” Herr Schmidt ended his report.

“What?”

“With the coffee machine.”

“Okay,” said Karin after a pause. “And how was it?”

“How should it have been. Salty.”

“Okay,” said Karin. “Is mama able to talk?”

“Yes. She thought it was salty, too.”

“Okay. Hasn’t she gotten up at all?”

“She went to the bathroom overnight. Didn’t fall over this time.”

“Fall over?! Did she hurt herself?”

“She had blood on her head, but she’s cleaned up. She washed it off.

Don’t get excited.”

Karin was silent.

“Karin? Are you still there?”

“Yes. I’m googling the train connections. Shit, why does this have to happen now, of all times. I’m going to call Sebastian again.”

“Don’t call him,” said Herr Schmidt, who now felt a bit ashamed that he had already called Sebastian and been screamed at by him.

“Something’s wrong. I don’t understand what is going on. Call a doctor immediately.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“Call the emergency doctor.”

“It’s not an emergency. She drank my coffee.”

Karin groaned. Herr Schmidt suddenly remembered that as a little girl she sometimes stole candies from the kitchen.

“Calm down,” he told her, as if she were Helmut. “You don’t need to come over.”

“But there’s something wrong with it all.”

“We have food in the freezer.”

“That I believe.”

“We could surely live off it for a year. Stay in Berlin.”

He heard her simultaneously laughing and sniffing.

“Papa, you have to promise me that tomorrow you’ll call a doctor.”

“I’ll call Maschke. I’ll go over and fetch him.”

“It’s enough if you call. He’ll come over. Promise me.”

“Yes, yes,” he mumbled.

Herr Schmidt heard the relief in Karin’s voice. “And are you still friends with Mai?” he asked before hanging up. He had struggled with this name for years, but it didn’t help. No idea what the parents had been thinking.

Karin paused. “Yes,” she said. “Make sure mama drinks enough, okay?”

When they finally hung up, Herr Schmidt was bathed in sweat and had to lay down. He went into the bedroom and stretched out next to Barbara – she had it easy, the third day in bed already. She lay on her back, Herr Schmidt turned to her, saw her sharp profile, her nose pointing at the ceiling. He got a cold chill.

“Barbara!” He shook her shoulder. “Are you there?”

She turned her head in his direction. “What?”

He sat up, leaned over her. Her face had changed, her skin was pale, nearly translucent, dark shadows beneath her eyes, as if she hadn’t slept enough.

“You have to eat!”

“Maybe later.”

“No! Not later.” He shook her shoulder again, perhaps too hard: her head wobbled back and forth. He took his hand away again. “You’re not going to starve on me. The freezer is full, what do you want to have? Everything’s in there.”

“I know. It’ll be enough for a long time.”

“Goulash? *Maultaschen*?”

“Wait a minute.”

He waited. Her face was concentrating, as if she were listening to her insides. Herr Schmidt remembered that she actually cooked fresh daily only because she herself didn’t like all the defrosted stuff. She just couldn’t throw out all the leftovers. What did she like? She had told him a few times in recent

years. He wracked his brain. The name of the foreign stuff evaded him, but he kept thinking. “I can go get you that curry. Or sushi.”

“Wait.” She sat up, propped herself on her elbows. “Can you make me a potato?”

“A potato?”

“Yes. Simply, with butter and salt.”

“How do you do that?”

“Oh, Walter. In water, in a pot.”

He didn’t like the way she explained things to him. When she clarified something for Henry, their grandchild, she smiled while doing so. Now she seemed annoyed, despite the fact that she wanted something from him, so she needn’t be so condescending.

“Where are the potatoes, anyway?”

“In the pantry. In a basket. You don’t have to peel it.”

He felt his entire body bristling. Barbara’s explanation belittled him.

Even the advice of the fat girl at the bakery was more easy to accept.

“How hot should the water be? What temperature?”

“Oh, Walter.”

“How long should it stay in?”

“Until it’s done.”

He began to boil inside himself. “How will I know it’s done?”

“Stick a fork in it.”

He had never noticed how imprecisely she formulated things. If she had looked as robust as usual, he would have been upset. But the bout of panic as she’d lain in the bathroom had left its mark, like a wave that crashed over him and then receded. Deep inside he was still wet and freezing.

“I’ll make you the god damn potato.”

He boiled all nine of them to make it worthwhile. Scrubbed them beforehand with the brush, because dirt still clung to them. Where did Barbara get such filthy potatoes, their own were long gone, they’d eaten them all winter. Barbara had invariably brought out the last of the homegrown potatoes, no

matter how wizened and soft they'd gotten, all of the pinkish white sprout-dotted peels were thrown in the compost. He'd probably be able to shovel magnificent tubers out of there by late summer.

The potatoes took forever. Herr Schmidt set the timer, sat down at the kitchen table, and watched the stove. Just bringing the water to a boil took a few minutes. He took a piece of paper and wrote *coffee* on it in large letters, jotted down the amount per cup, the salt, and then in parenthesis: *doesn't take long*. The ground meat that he'd sautéed for Helmut had also been more than palatable, and for that, too, he jotted down the ingredients. The defrosted dishes didn't count. How long the potatoes took would soon be apparent. He watched the pot. Now and then he stuck a fork into a potato. At the end the spuds were full of holes, the peels hung down. Herr Schmidt placed a potato on the prepositioned plate, cut a large pat of butter. At this rate the butter wasn't going to last long.

Barbara placed a pillow behind her and took the plate on her lap. Steam rose from the potato, the butter had melted into a golden puddle.

"Salt?" she asked.

The salt was still in the kitchen.

"It's fine, stay here."

And he did, after all he wasn't a servant. But as she dunked a piece of potato in the butter, he couldn't hold out any longer, down the stairs, up the stairs.

"Why the whole package? Where's our salt shaker?"

"Are you never satisfied?"

It seemed to taste good to her. She savored each bite, he watched her, spellbound.

"Like the old days," she said. "When I was little. Do you remember?"

Herr Schmidt wanted to say that they hadn't known each other when she was little, but nodded instead.

"You want some, too?"

He nodded again, took the fork from her hand and put it in his mouth, squashing the hot, buttery morsel of potato with his tongue.

He wanted to give the fork back to Barbara, but she waved it away.

“Already finished? Doesn’t it taste good?”

“Yes, it does. But I’m already full.”

Again he felt the trembling, the lurking panic.

“You haven’t eaten for days, look at yourself!”

“I have enough fat on me, I can last a few days.”

“No you can’t. You’re getting thinner and thinner.”

“Walter, why are you shouting?”

“I’m not shouting!” he yelled. “You have to eat. We’re all starving.”

He paused. Barbara squinted and reached out for the fork.

“That’s it,” said Herr Schmidt as she shoved small bites of the potato into her mouth. “Soak up the butter. You can get that last bite down.”

“I can’t eat anymore. It’s normal, Walter, to eat less when you’re sick.”

“Are you sick? And you don’t say anything?”

Herr Schmidt suddenly saw an old woman in his mind, she had snow-white hair, pressed her lips together and held a spoon up to his mouth. *Food makes you strong. You must always eat, Walter.* He was sick, lying feverish in bed, perhaps he had measles or scarlet fever, the old woman seemed to know, though, that he would live as long as he munched.

Herr Schmidt sat down in front of the television, in the bright daylight, as if he were unemployed. He had forgotten to take off his outdoor shoes, and he put his feet, just as they were, up on the leather stool he’d shoved over. Nothing but crap on TV, some people or other were fighting, on a talk show came a face that Herr Schmidt found in some familiar way off-putting, so he immediately changed the channel. Now he had to watch as a not-so-young-anymore couple pressed up against each other. The least objectionable program showed a plump man in an apron, peeling potatoes. Herr Schmidt got caught up and followed the deft movements of his short fingers on the screen. The man

was talking about something that had nothing to do with his current task, it was about New York in the Seventies. Herr Schmidt turned off the sound and watched as a snake-like strip came loose from the potato and fell into the sink, next spud, next strip. The peel transformed into a perfect, razor-thin, nearly translucent spiral, it was thrilling.

“Barbara, look at this!” shouted Herr Schmidt, as if she could hear him.

END OF SAMPLE