

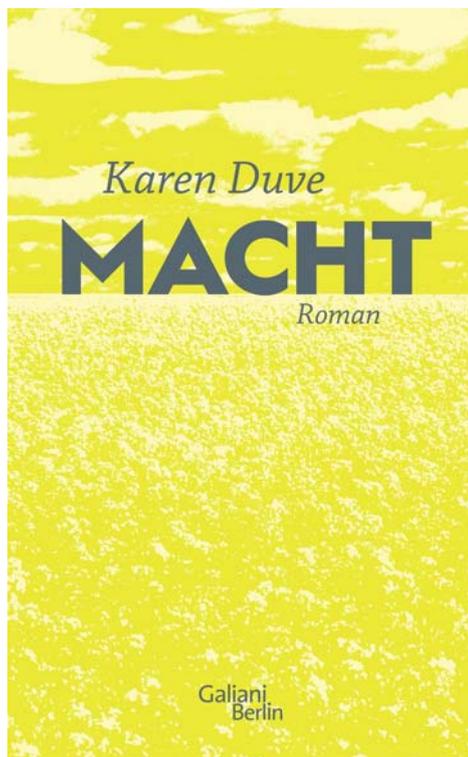
Sample Translation (pp.7-42)

POWER

by Karen Duve

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Step 1: Seize the victim and spirit her away.

Step 2: Isolate the victim and make her totally dependent on you for survival.

Step 3: Dominate the victim and encourage her to seek your recognition and approval.

Step 4: Instruct the victim and re-educate her to think and act in terms of your ideology.

Step 5: Seduce the victim and provide her with a new sexual value system.

(“Brainwashing: How to Fold, Spindle and Mutilate the Human Mind in Five Easy Steps”, an article in the men’s magazine OUI, June 1976”, quoted in *Perfect Victim*, Christine McGuire and Carla Norton, New York, 1988)

“Handling women and underlings is extremely difficult.” (Confucius)

1

I've just been installing the telephone I found in the attic, a simple, pale grey phone with a dial and no technological extras – no standby mode, no screen, no integrated copier with a printer cartridge that can be changed only with the help of an illustrated manual, and above all no answerphone. Nothing but a large, old-fashioned receiver on a sturdy stand. Anyone armed with an ordinary screwdriver can open it up and repair it.

But when my phone rings now, it's not the easily recycled prime specimen of durability that linked my parents to the outside world in the 60s, of course it's the elegant, flat, slightly concave Ego-Smart in my trouser pocket, that curse of mankind forcing us to be available everywhere, all the time, if we still want to communicate with some other place. And the way it echoes the same old ring-tone as my parents' phone is pure mockery.

I'm afraid it may be someone from the local Homeland League. I rashly agreed to lend a hand with the Rural District Council operation to clear away the killer rapeseed that's overrunning everything. But the face on the display – the physiognomy of a bird of prey, jowls under its stubbly chin and a retreating hairline, while what hair the caller still has is going grey – is one that I know from somewhere else, only I just can't place it right away.

“Hi, Basti!” shouts the face. “It's that time again! Are you coming?”

Hardly anyone gives a name on the phone these days. The more boring the caller is, the surer he seems that his ugly mug will have left an indelible impression on you. I sham the image over to the 80-inch communicator screen above the sideboard, hoping that at least the man's name will fade in, but no luck.

“It's me – Norbert! Hey, don't you remember me ? Norbert Lanschick! Don't you know who I am?”

“Why . . . yes, of course . . . you were . . .”

I leave long pauses between the words, hoping that Norbert Lanschick will fill them in.

“Ohlstedt High School! The class of 1981, the year of our school-leaving exam! Does the penny drop now?”

It does: Norbert – Nobbi – Lanschick, thin as a rake at the time, a picture of misery, the girls used to call “Biafra!” after him. Above average grades in physics, below average to zero in sports, also rather childlike, never had a girlfriend. These days he’s a marathon runner, a lawyer, drives a BMW, husband, father, still as boring as ever, still skinny, now going bald. Every five years he organizes a class reunion at the Ehrlich Restaurant, to make those who knew him in his pitiful youth aware of the amazing change in him. Of course it doesn’t work. You can’t pretend to your former classmates, any more than you can pretend to your brothers and sisters. Even though Biafra Lanschick always brings his extremely attractive wife along, that doesn’t make anyone forget how, doing apparatus work in the gym, he wrapped the incredibly long, thin legs sticking out of his PE shorts round the asymmetric bars, hanging between them for ages head downwards like some peculiar insect, trying and trying to push himself up with those arms like asparagus spears, but only slipping back down to the floor bit by bit.

“And there was I thinking you’d packed it in . . .” I tell him. Because the last reunion was cancelled. I suppose his career had taken a turn for the worse. But now he was back! What’s he going to bring along this time, to drop it at our feet like a well-trained Labrador, I wondered, a new wife, a new car?

“I couldn’t make it last time,” says Lanschick, with a tremor in his voice. “My business partner died. It hit me really hard. We ran the practice together for over thirty years, think of that! I spent more time with him than with my wife. Now I have to do everything on my own.”

The vulture face on the communicator screen, blown up to four times life-size, tries to suppress a self-satisfied grin. Skin like dried semolina. He’s looking old – old, old, old. How could he let himself go like that?

“But this time I’m organizing a reunion again. If I don’t do it, no one will. Do you realize that this one will be our class’s fiftieth anniversary? So you can’t back out. Want me to book you a hotel room?”

“No, I don’t need a hotel room,” I say. “I’m living in Wellingstedt again.”

“Where? Wellingstedt? You’ve never gone home to your parents, have you?”
Lanschick laughs; it’s like a goat bleating. “Since when?”

“Since four years ago,” I say. “And my parents are dead. I’m living in their house, that’s all.”

When things around me started falling apart, when my wife left me, taking the kids, when it was obvious that global warming had already passed every point of no return, and even state-imposed feminism wasn’t going to make any difference now; when my favourite bar burned down, and my eyes got so bad that I could read the paper only if I held it at arm’s length, not that that mattered, because the last serious print newspaper wasn’t publishing any more; when first my mother and then my father died soon after one other, out of sheer obstinacy, and my siblings were saying we ought to hand over the house where we’d grown up to an incredible sleazeball of an estate agent – then I sold everything that would fetch cash, took out a loan, bought out my brother, had laser treatment on my eyes and re-grew my hair, packed my toothbrush and a few pairs of underpants in an Adidas bag, and moved back to where I’d spent the happiest days of my life.

“Well, it’s not a bad situation,” conceded Lanschick graciously. “I once thought of moving there myself.”

These days, Wellingstedt is considered a prime residential area for young families earning good money, and show-offs like Lanschick. Low crime rate, only two hostels for asylum-seekers – who have integrated very well – green woodlands and a brown river winding its way through the terminal moraine landscape, and only twenty kilometres from Hamburg city centre. In the late 1950s, tradesmen and office workers built houses here on plots of land that a rather improvident farmer had let them have at an amazingly low price. Among these people were my parents, who toiled away after working hours to build their own place, mixing concrete and wheeling up bricks by the barrow-load. After the access roads had been paved, people who were better off arrived, to have their spacious flat-roofed bungalows erected right beside our little brick houses with hipped roofs and coloured glass blocks. And we, the children of electricians and sales reps for detergent companies, went to high school with the kids of bank managers and the directors of insurance companies as if that were natural, we paddled boats on the River Alster with them, and played sea-fighting games in which much-mended inflatable dinghies fended off canoes made of Canadian cedar. Later, under the government of a Socialist/Liberal

coalition, we took our school-leaving exam together as if that, too, were the most natural thing in the world. A window of social justice had briefly opened in time, a historical anomaly never known before and probably never to be seen again.

At the time toads, kingfishers and otters lived here, and even now, with a little luck, you can still see a sparrow or a rabbit. Of course Wellingstedt has changed a lot. The conifers planted in gardens in the sixties have grown so tall that the plots of land now resemble Böcklin's Isle of the Dead. In addition, the place is gradually but inevitably becoming the habitat of the rich. Estate agents wait to pounce on the last of the little houses where members of the original population are still muddling through, and when one of those old houses does fall vacant they tear it down and built a big Tuscan-style villa instead, on a plot much too small for it, because for some reason or another a Tuscan-style villa can have two storeys without breaching the building regulations that really stipulate only single-storey houses in Wellingstedt.

"The building itself is worth nothing," said the agent whom my brother had brought in at the time, hoping to get a price for our parents' house that would benefit him. "In fact the opposite, you'll have to set out from the value of the plot minus demolition costs. But it's still worth a good 500 thousand euros in cash – Northern euros, of course."

The price of building sites went through the roof. And so the knitting-wool shop and the barn that used to be on my way to school disappeared long ago. The rather grubby riding stables have now given way to a sports hotel, and the strawberry fields, where decades back in the past I used to pick sandy little fruits warm from the sun and put them into a punnet, were turned into a twenty-seven-holes golf course. A breeder of koi carp has set up in the neighbouring village, where they also have a starred restaurant and two interior design outfits. My past is dissolving like a sugar lump in the rain.

"Has your wife moved there too?" asks Lanschick's gigantic face. "I mean, she has to be in Berlin, right? She can't keep shuttling back and forth. How do you two manage it?"

I don't answer that question. I'll just let him stew in his own juice and wait for it to occur to him of his own accord.

"Oh God," says Lanschick, "God, how *stupid* of me! Do forgive me, I'd simply forgotten. What a clumsy idiot I am! Has there been any news recently? Any kind of clue, I mean? I'm so sorry, I really am terribly sorry."

“That’s okay,” I say. “It’s more than two years ago now. And we weren’t together any more. The divorce had gone through some time ago.”

Lanschick goes on telling himself what a fool he is several times, and can’t stop apologizing.

“Never mind,” I say, trying to cut all this short. “Tell me who’s coming to the reunion. Have many people accepted? Will Bernie and Rolf be there?”

“Yes, both of them. They always come.”

“And how about the women? Are Kiki Vollert and Elisabeth Westphal coming?” I ask as casually as possible. Elisabeth Westphal is the woman I’ve never had. Elisabeth Westphal is the reason why I go to these class reunions. I spent half my teenage years pining for her. To this day I still miss her. Even if missing her has become such a habit by now that, in general, I hardly notice it. Until I’m reminded all of a sudden by a melancholy song, or the sight of a woman who laughs or moves the way Elli used to in the old days.

“I’m not that far down the list yet. I’m only on the letter ‘L’. But Birgit Lammert has accepted,” replies Lanschick.

“Fine,” I say. “Great.”

I give him my landline number.

“Call me only at that number from now on. In a few weeks’ time I’ll be cancelling my subscription to this mobile.” I say “mobile” on purpose, although not even the really old senior citizens use the word these days.

“You can’t be serious,” says Lanschick. “How’s anyone going to get in touch with you? I couldn’t find your email address just now, but luckily Holger Hasselblatt had your cell-phone number.”

“I’ve had my email address deleted too,” I say. “In three or four months’ time I’ll be throwing out my computer, and after that I won’t use any technology that was invented after 1980. If you want to reach me there’s always the landline. Or you can write me a letter, or just drop in. It’s the same old address, Number 12 Redderstieg.”

“This is crazy,” says Lanschick. “You can’t do a thing like that!”

He sounds indignant, but at the same time he also sounds impressed.

“Yes, I can,” I say. “And don’t get any idea of sending me letters by one of those cheap firms that pay their staff 4 Westos an hour. If you send me anything use the proper postal service, or I won’t take delivery.”

Lanschick won't believe me; he thinks I'm kidding him, and when he realizes that I'm perfectly serious he says I'm probably just going through a phase, because everything's getting on top of me right now.

"It happens to all of us," he says.

But it's not a phase, it's self-defence. And if I'm not much mistaken, in social systems all over the world self-defence is generally acknowledged to be an exceptional situation justifying actions not otherwise condoned. If it's "them or us", anything goes. Sometimes you have to expect your fellow men to make heavy weather of it, if you're not to be a slave obeying a tyrant in the form of a mechanical dictatorship. And sometimes you have to destroy a woman if you don't want her destroying you.

And no, none of the neighbours have noticed anything.

2

I'm taking the children back to their grandmother. And about time, too. Over the weekend they've left their sticky little fingerprints all over the house. The coloured varnish on the 1950s sideboard, where I incautiously put the hologram games away, is so dull and greasy that from a distance it looks positively coated. A covered wagon train with peculiar characters on board is ploughing its way across the turf. The wagons are driven by green, yellow and red lumps of rubbery stuff with potato noses, cowboy hats, and pistol holsters slung around their non-existent hips. According to the children they're supposed to represent vitamins or some other sort of nutrients – Sheriff Fatty, Vitaminity Jane, the Mineral Kid.

We've taken the bikes because the weather is so fine. Fine, did I say? As hot as hell the whole time! Not a day when the temperature's below 35 degrees, yesterday it was 37, one day last week it even rose to 41 degrees, and they say it's going to get even hotter. For the last eight weeks the sky has been picture-postcard blue, without a drop of rain. The leaves on the trees are furled, the gorse bushes bend under a burden of dust, and the grass on the meadows looks the way it would in late summer, brown, dried up, rustling. And this is only April. What will it be like when it really is summer? Only the killer rapeseed thrives with or without water, spreading its heavy, sweet smell through the air. It flowers in all the gardens and even on the footpaths, it flowers in the meadows, in the woods, in the sun, in the shade, behind the dustbins, absolutely everywhere – except on the golf course, where they've hired two assistant gardeners especially to pull out rapeseed plants. The whole countryside around here is bright yellow. If just for a moment you forget what a disgusting, genetically modified pest it really is – flowering four times a year and growing again faster than you can pull it up, resistant to every known weed killer, getting on just fine with every

kind of soil and almost every climate – if you forget all that, it really is strikingly beautiful. That's if you don't happen to think that biodiversity matters.

My son Racke is riding in front of me on his bingo-bike, swerving wildly. He wears a checked red shirt and a greasy pair of short lederhosen with a white horn heart where the front meets the braces holding them up – the kind of thing I wore at his age – and his brown, rather podgy legs are pedalling away like pistons. When he turns his head to look at me, the airstream catches the back of his head and makes his fine, fair hair stand up vertically. The sunglasses with the drop-shaped pilot's lenses slip down to the tip of his nose.

“Look at me,” he screeches, flashing a white if rudimentary set of teeth (his permanent teeth are just coming in), and swerves so sharply that the sprung frame of the bike is compressed as far as it will go, and the red pennant fitted to the tip of a flexible rod on the carrier almost touches the road.

“Terrific,” I shout back, “and now please look where you're going!”

A hot wind passes over my temples, the budgies are twittering in the trees, and the rapeseed beetles patter against our sunglasses. I feel like one of those great whales now on the point of extinction, ploughing its way through a yellow sea with its calf.

My daughter is riding a few metres behind us. Binya-Bathsheba is sulking. She sulks just about all the time. She isn't particularly pretty anyway; her face is rather round, and wears a constant resentful pout – this is her second sulk of the day. The first was when she stopped talking to me after I had taken the pROJEctas away from her and Racke and locked them up, which meant that the pair of them had to spend a whole afternoon without their 3-D friends. I might have been able to put up with Racke's Destroyer, the modified version for ages 7 to 10. So the projection is only 1.50 metres tall, a robot with a crocodile head, a loincloth in the Ancient Egyptian style and a gigantic sledgehammer, always croaking, “I wanna be your friend!” or suggesting, “Let's make whoopee!” It emphasizes the word “whoopee”. If my son Racke gives it the starting signal by saying, slowly and clearly, “Yes, let's make whoopee!” the metal lizard marches over to the nearest household item and hits it with the hammer, whereupon the pROJEcta's loudspeaker simulates, with remarkable accuracy, the noise that would be made if a real sledgehammer and not a projection were doing the appropriate damage – a sharp tinkling for glass, a muted clink for broken china, a crashing and splintering for the coffee table. Even for the Destroyer you need strong nerves, but at least it has stopped Racke mumbling,

because the orders have to be very clearly spoken. What really got me down was my daughter Binya-Bathsheba's lisping, rainbow-coloured unicorn. The Unicorn is about the size of a pony, has eyelashes twenty centimetres long, and it sprawled on my sofa, batting its eyelids and having its say about everything, because the speech programme in its pROJecta reacts to certain key words. "I am Shangri-La, the last living unicorn," it said in its husky telephone-sex voice. "Come into the forest where the butterflies sing with me, and become part of the Great Whole." Or, "Life is a river, build a boat so that you don't get wet."

It said the bit about the boat while TV was showing a special news flash about the tidal wave that washed the tourist bus off the dam in the Tyrol, flattening two villages further down the valley, because several million cubic metres of rubble and ice had broken away from a thawing glacier to slide into the reservoir. When I confiscated the kids' pROJectas, Racke flung himself on the floor and bellowed until he was blue in the face. Binya sat on a chair with her arms folded and her legs crossed, but the wrong way round, with her tearstained face against the back of the chair, hissing, "Fascist!" and then compressing her lips. It's something that has always bothered me about children: their low frustration threshold, their inability to adjust the amount of pain and rage they feel to the cause of it. At the least provocation, they run right through the whole gamut of feelings. So how loud are they going to bawl when they really have a good reason for it? How are they going to step up their anger when the thawing permafrost of the Arctic tundras and seas has offloaded billions of tons of methane into the atmosphere, and there's nowhere left on this damn planet that isn't blazing hot, or totally flooded, or suffering from drought or such fierce, stormy winds that you have to cling to the nearest lamp-post? Half an hour later Racke and Binya were as placid as Zen monks again, and playing with Lego.

Now Binya is sulking because Racke and I aren't wearing cycling helmets, in spite of the fifteen-minute lecture on the dangers of road traffic that she had given us in a self-satisfied and opinionated tone of voice, probably after hearing it at school a week ago. "It's the law," she said, coming out with her penultimate trump card, and when Racke and I just made faces she brought up the big guns. "And Mama wants us to wear our helmets!"

Quite correct. My wife had once even threatened not to let me see the kids any more if I went on systematically undermining their upbringing.

“Go on, then,” I told my daughter. “Put that stupid plastic bowl on your head, no one’s stopping you. Just don’t get on your brother’s nerves and mine by carrying on about it. What’s more, in case you haven’t noticed, your mother isn’t around any more, and as long as she’s not here, what I say goes!”

Maybe that was rather harsh – after all, she’s only ten – but the law making cycle helmets compulsory is the most contemptible piece of legislation passed in the last few years. To my mind, it demonstrates all that is ridiculous and over-protective about our present government: those petty notions of security, as if there was still any security on such a wreck of a planet. Hey, we’re sorry we still don’t know how to stop temperatures rising and the ocean currents slowing down, which means that the human race is going to perish miserably in five to ten years’ time at the most, so don’t raise your hopes, but until the final disaster do not on any account forget to wear your cycle helmets, on pain of a hefty fine.

Yes, I know, there were already cycle helmets before women seized all the power for themselves – with the support of useful idiots like me – but they weren’t compulsory yet. Or at least not for adults. I mean, look at all those attractive young women ministers, some of them genuinely young, at least five piercings in each ear and three in the nose, and their forearms tattooed up to and over the elbows, as if in between knocking off work and going home they still had to capture a few merchant vessels for reasons of sheer nonconformism. And what do they really do? They spoil the last bit of fun we have, they grudge us the wind and the sun in our hair, they insist on a highway code forcing adult human beings to debase themselves by wearing garishly coloured plastic bowls.

I’m not saying that our parents did everything right, but at least they weren’t tattooed like pirates, and all the same they took a far more casual attitude to their children and road traffic. My father, for instance, often shut us kids in the boot of the car for fun – usually in summer, when we were coming back from bathing in the Kupferteich lake, and he didn’t want us mucking up his Opel Rekord with our sandy feet and wet bathing trunks. He used to stop now and then on the way home, get out of the car, knock on the lid of the boot and tell us to guess where we were. And my parents thought it perfectly natural, when we went away on holiday, for the smallest child to travel on the rear shelf of the car, and no customs officer or policeman ever objected. These days my parents would have lost custody of us for that, and the case would be in all the evening news bulletins.

Suddenly I hear a stifled shriek behind me. When I turn round, Binya's bike is lying in the grass, and she herself is rolling on the ground in a black, buzzing cloud of insects. Rapeseed beetles! Unfortunately my daughter is wearing not only her yellow helmet but also a white blouse, which means that she attracts the undivided attention of those little black pests. I jump off my bike, tear off my shirt, use it to brush most of the beetles off Binya's face, and hold the fabric tightly over her lips so that she can breathe without getting a mouthful of beetles. But Binya doesn't understand what I'm trying to do, she snatches the shirt away, hits out, and screams and howls in the middle of that inferno of insects. I have to grab her arms with one hand so that I can use the other to take off her helmet and unbutton her blouse, holding my breath all the time because now I'm inside the cloud of beetles myself. The disgusting creatures are already attacking my torso, swarming up and down my arms. It's a good thing my hair is shoulder-length and gives me a little protection. Racke has brought his child's bike to a halt near us, at a suitable distance, and is also howling, with fear or perhaps just sympathy. Finally I have Binya's blouse and helmet in my hand, I shove them both into the bicycle bag along with about a million rapeseed beetles, and zip it up. Gradually the other beetles lose interest in us and buzz off into the nearest garden. As I said, Binya's face isn't the prettiest ever seen, and now it's also swollen and bitten by a thousand miniature mouths equipped with micrometric jaws.

"Good heavens, what does the child look like?" cries Granny Gerda hysterically the moment we arrive, although the swelling of Binya's face has gone down again now, and it isn't half as red as my bare back, where blisters of second-degree sunburn are coming up. Binya is wearing my blue shirt like a dress over her jeans, with a tensioning strap from the carrier of my bike as a belt. And she's obviously not feeling too bad, because she goes straight to the communicator in the living room to check her emails. Racke is burrowing about in his backpack for the pROJEctA, and resurrects the Destroyer in the corridor of Gerda's house. I hand Gerda the cycle helmet with the crumpled white blouse inside it.

"White!" I say. "Didn't you stop to think? You might just as well have smeared my daughter with honey and pushed her into an anthill. The rapeseed beetles almost ate her alive."

"You didn't say you'd be bringing them back on their bikes," Gerda begins in a quarrelsome tone, but then she swallows the rest of it. We argued vehemently about

the children for a long time after it turned out that Christine wasn't going to come back in any hurry, and of course I was given custody of them. There was no reason why they shouldn't live with me. If they now spend most of their time with their grandmother, it depends entirely on my goodwill. I can take them back any time I like. Now that that's been cleared up, it's much easier to get on with Gerda.

The old girl isn't really much older than me, but she looks it. I don't know why she's so keen to be a granny figure now, and is content with the appearance and physical fitness of a fifty-year-old. These days it's mainly women of ninety who look fifty. Yet Gerda was one of the first to go through the rejuvenation process, when it was still really dangerous, and there was an over 80 per cent probability of developing cancer within the next five years. She still has the watery eyes, always running, that were the result of her treatment, and the bulging lymph nodes that stand out on her throat. But she doesn't have cancer yet, at least as far as I know. I suspect her slightly of using her old granny look to remind me of my own old age lurking behind the youthful façade. It upset her when her daughter married a man twenty years older, and she has never come to terms with it.

"I wanna be your friend," croaks the Destroyer, opening and closing its crocodile jaws. It waddles along the corridor and stops beside Gerda.

"Granny, you have to answer!" calls Racke.

"Fine. Thanks a lot. I want to be your friend, too. I'm sure we'll be the best of friends," says Granny Gerda. The Destroyer grunts, satisfied.

"Let's make whoopee!" shouts Racke, and the Destroyer looks at Granny Gerda and me for a moment undecidedly. Then, luckily, it remembers that it is running the modified programme for kids of seven to ten, and it turns away and smashes its sledgehammer into the mirror on the wall, with a tinkle of broken glass.

"I have to talk to you," Gerda tells me. I can see what an effort it is for her to sound friendly.

"Oh, please," I say. "Don't start on about the points again."

"But I can't manage without them," cries Gerda. "Do the sums. I have to drive Binya to her riding lesson twice a week, and Racke to football twice a week and his piano lesson once a week. And when the hurricanes begin again I'll have to drive them to school as well. That means filling the tank at least three times. And Racke said how he'd love to eat Königsberg meat dumplings again. The children are

growing, but the few coupons I have aren't even enough to get them their milk every day."

"I've told you often enough that children don't need any dairy produce at all."

I have, too, and if she wants to throw away her CO₂-points on yoghurts made by methods entailing cruelty to animals, then that's her business. Nothing to do with me.

Now she loses control of herself.

"But those are the children's points. And the children are living with me. It's not right for you to keep the children's quota for yourself. How am I supposed to feed three people on a single person's quota?"

"What are you trying to say? That I'm eating the children's meat quota myself and driving with their petrol quota? They get their share when they're with me. Ask them what we had for lunch today. Go on, ask them. I can tell you: beef goulash at 70 euros and five points a kilo – I could have filled the tank of my own car for that."

"But the children have been to see you only twice this month. I've had them all the rest of the time. It simply isn't fair . . ."

"Well, if they're getting too much for you, they're welcome to come back and live with me."

Gerda collapses. "Please," she says. "Please. We're so terribly short of points. Racke's always having to ask his friends' parents to give him a lift to football, and they're beginning to grumble that I never take my . . ."

I was intending to give her a quota all along. I'm not a monster. But I always wait until she's come off her high horse. I've been manipulated long enough by women and their silly arguments. I have a right to enjoy the last few years before the world ends in peace. Gerda will get Binya's CO₂-quota; I've used hardly any of it. I move it into her account with the Ego-Smart, and let her watch.

"Thank you," says Gerda, and she's as tame as you could wish again.

"Thanks, that's a tremendous help. Many, many thanks."

You see? It works.

3

Back home, the first thing I did was go down to the cellar to keep Christine company, talk to her a bit, help her to pass the time. I'm aware that it can't be particularly comfortable to be all alone for 48 hours in a locked room without any windows, and she misses no opportunity to rub that in. So I clear the canned food off the cellar shelves, the peas and root vegetables and sliced peaches for tarts, I push the shelving aside, unscrew the sheet of plywood with my 1970s Black & Decker, remove it from the wall, and tap in the combination of numbers to open the steel door. And *voilà*, there I am in my own little secret comfort zone, my protected area. Eight by four metres, plus a wet room divided off by a curtain, the classic size for a prepper room. Enough room for an old-fashioned French brass bed, a small yellow Ikea seating corner including an occasional table, and an Ikea kitchen island unit. There's a smell of freshly baked biscuits in the air, a smell I love. Christine is standing by the cooker in a pink and white checked apron, holding the baking sheet with pink and white oven gloves. Four months ago she had a phase when she let herself go shockingly, but I made a few things clear to her, and now her lips are painted a delicate pastel shade that matches her nail lacquer, and her eyebrows are plucked to an arched shape that gives her eyes a questioning and intelligent expression. Under the apron she is wearing a pale blue flowered dress, and her blonde hair falls to her shoulders and then swings out in a lovely natural curve. She smiles at me. But I know she isn't to be trusted, so first I close the steel door, and while Christine puts the baking sheet down on the cooker – she's been baking crisp, dark little cookies topped with walnut halves, my favorites – I bend over the keypad so that she can't see the combination of numbers that I tap in. Then I make her go over to the wall, where I've fitted three metal rings with snap hooks to the masonry, one at knee height, one at shoulder height, one above head height, and I hook the chain fastened to Christine's collar as tightly as possible to the middle ring. I know all this sounds terrible, a chain and collar, it makes you think right away of the Inquisition or an S & M studio, but I'm

not a pervert, only a man with a man's perfectly normal needs. I'd happily dispense with the mediaeval clink of chains, but that's just not possible with a woman like Christine. In the two years that she's been living down here, she's made eleven attempts to injure me seriously. She unscrewed a chair leg and tried hitting me over the head with it; she tried throwing hot water in my face; she stabbed me in the back with the handle of a wooden spoon that she'd nibbled to a sharp point with her teeth; and once she even tore the power cable out of the cooker and lured me close to it, on the pretext that the cooker wasn't working, so could I see what was wrong with it? In between times, she's always put up a convincing pretence of having changed her mind, of giving up at last, resigning herself to the situation and being ready to cooperate. Every time, she's kept that going for weeks, months, until I was lulled into a sense of security, I almost trusted her, and then at the first little careless slip on my part – wham! – she would strike again. So maybe you can see why, every time I visit, I fix her to the wall first, frisk her for weapons, and then give the room a thorough inspection to see if there's a chair leg loose, a cable sticking out of the wall, or any other change to make me suspicious. After she'd terrorized me for six months like that, I made an investment in the shape of the security lock with the secret numerical code and built it in, although I'm not very good at DIY stuff. But if you really want something, you suddenly discover undreamed-of abilities in yourself. When I check the room, I do it systematically, with concentration, and in silence. Christine herself isn't allowed to speak to me while I do it. Only then do I let her have the full length of the chain again, so that she can move freely around two-thirds of the room, and only then do I say hello.

“Hello, Christine.”

And she bows her head and says, without looking at me, “My master,” as I've taught her to do, and there's no suppressed fury in her voice, at most a touch of irony.

I introduced that mode of address about four weeks after bringing her down here. I remember that, at the time, it sounded to me rather silly. But whenever she called me by my name, when she said “Sebastian” to me, it brought back umpteen memories of situations when she had done it before. “Sebastian, you don't seriously mean it, do you?” Or when she separated from me – *she left me!* – and claimed the apartment for herself as if that could be taken for granted: “Sebastian, do you really want to take the children's home away from them? Do you want Binya to have to change schools? Don't you remember how long it took Racke to get used to

kindergarten? Whatever we've done to each other, the children shouldn't have to suffer for it. Can we agree on that, Sebastian?"

In the end, it was only to be expected that she would steal the apartment. After all, she'd run the place on her own for all our years together, deciding how we'd furnish it and what colour to paint it – she made all the decisions, with her pastel-hued feminine taste that couldn't bear to see an empty surface without putting some stupid wooden bowl on it and filling it with polished semi-precious stones, or the decorative dried bark of some kind of African plant. And when I agreed about the apartment, what did she say? Did she thank me? No such thing! She thought that on my salary I'd have had difficulty in affording the rent on my own anyway. Only in retrospect did I realize how badly that woman demoralized me. Even the way she says "Sebastian" is enough to send me into a mood of deep depression, on the point of becoming the man she used to know again, the man she could so easily manipulate.

When I first suggested that from now on she should address me as "My master", Christine bit her lower lip and looked past me.

"What's the matter?" I said. "It's only a formality. You used to say 'Herr Meier' to 'Herr Meier', and that really means 'Master Meier', but you didn't regard him as your master. So it can't be so difficult for you to call your real master 'my master'. Fundamentally, it just means that you're describing the power relationships in this room."

"Sounds a bit like the *Thousand and One Nights*, don't you think?" said Christine.

Oh, I love her for saying such things, even when she has a chain round her neck. She's a brave little terrier. There's no avoiding the chain, but otherwise I'm trying to make it as comfortable as possible down here for her.

Christine takes off her apron, and we sit down side by side on the yellow sofa. I put my arm on the back of the sofa behind her. The plate of cookies is on the occasional table in front of us, and the walnuts on top of them look like the brains of mice. There's a yellow-striped jug of lemonade beside them – Limburg Cathedral ceramics. My mother used to have the same kind of jug, with pink stripes instead, but I could only find the yellow one. At first I had it upstairs in my own kitchen, but after a while the wrong colour bothered me so much that I moved it down to Christine's room. And it goes really well with the seating corner here.

We talk, and I tell Christine what the weather is like outside – the same as for weeks now, she ought to be glad to be nice and cool underground here – and how Racke’s grade for dance and gymnastics was the symbol for “Sunny with some cloud”, while Binya got “Excellent” for Chinese, and I tell her about the glacier slipping into the reservoir. We both wonder why no one foresaw it and set about evacuating the two villages, and that brings us to the latest political, geological, and climatic developments, and it’s really nice, nicer than it’s been for ages.

It’s almost like back when we had only just met on the Democracy Committee, and were beginning to fall in love while we spent nights on end with the others, making plans to reconstruct the state without giving up the principles of democracy. I take a cookie off the plate, eat the walnut on top and put the rest of the cookie back. And while Christine gets worked up about the fact that the possibility of cooling the climate by manufacturing artificial clouds is still being so half-heartedly put into practice – “It should be the absolute priority, have they *really* not realized that yet?” – I let my arm slip down to her shoulder, take a strand of her hair and wind it around my fingers.

“I still think you’re beautiful,” I say, and it’s the truth. I give her a third of my daily ephebo dose. After all, I can’t let her moulder away down here. She’s 48, but with the ephs she looks in her mid-thirties, while with my double dose I can pass for my late thirties. No one would suspect that I’m really twenty years older.

It’s odd to think that without the medicaments, Christine would look as old as her mother. She smiles at me, and we stand up together and go over to the bed. Because of the chain she wears only clothes that do up with buttons, in the case of this dress down the front of it. I unbutton it as far as her waist and reach under the fabric, letting my hands wander over her warm skin and the stylish black and red panties that I ordered from a mail order firm for her. That smooth young skin feels good, and I try imagining what it would feel like if I gave Christine the full ephebo dose for a month or so. I push the dress down over her hips, and take my own clothes off.

“When are you finally going to let the hair on your chest grow back?” asks Christine. “No men still shave their chests these days.”

“I suppose you’re in a position to know,” I say.

We lie down in bed, and I hold her body close. She kisses my throat and strokes my chest.

“It’s ten years since people stopped shaving their chests. I’d like to know what it would look like if you let your hair grow.”

“Silly,” I say, “it would look plain silly. An island of hair here and there, and a circle of bristles round each nipple. You don’t want to look at that.”

We sleep together, it’s the loving, routine, practised sex of an old married couple with young bodies. Afterwards Christine lies in the crook of my arm and tugs and tickles the chest hair that I don’t have. It makes me feel quite sentimental.

“Just like the old days,” I say.

But Christine can’t let well alone, she has to go and spoil the mood again. She suddenly sits up and pushes my arm off her hip as if it were a domestic pet getting too pushy.

“Look at me ,” she says. “It is *not* like the old days! Nothing’s the same as the old days! I’m on a chain in here. That’s not normal. You must surely realize that what you’re doing is sick?”

Here we go again. Christine can never manage to pull herself together for more than a few days. We’ve had this conversation a hundred times before, and we’re getting better and better at it. That’s to say, *I* am getting better at it, my arguments are more polished every time. Christine really just keeps saying the same old thing: she says that it’s sick, that *I* am sick.

“There are a great many countries where men lock their wives up,” I patiently reply, “and it’s perfectly acceptable in their societies, in fact it’s positively expected. Why would I go against my own male needs just because I’ve had the bad luck to be born in this tiny window of time, in a place where women were allowed, in all seriousness, to take over the business of government? Only a few years ago things would have looked totally different. In most countries they still do. Or else they’ve gone back to that again. Men have been dominating women for thousands of years. And they’d be doing the same for the next thousand years if the human race was going to last that long. What’s going on now in Europe and North America, the feminization of cultures, and the way you females are allowed to have a finger in every pie, is a short-term historical aberration. A slip-up in the history of mankind. Islam is going to sweep away these pathetically tolerant, gay-orientated democracies that are so bad at making decisions. And if the Muslims don’t do it, the Chinese will. Or anyway, they’d do it if they still had time and the whole planet wasn’t going down the drain. Societies governed by women are fated to fall.”

She lets me finish what I'm saying, as I have taught her to do – something that would once have been unthinkable. She always used to keep interrupting, she had to contradict everything I said. But now I can go on as long as I like, she gives me all the time in the world, and if necessary waits for several minutes to make sure I've finished before she replies.

“Women aren't chained up in any country in the world,” says Christine. “Even in Saudi Arabia they can walk around the streets freely.”

“Yes, but only because there's nowhere they could run to. They have no option but to go home. If I could be sure you'd come back to me, I'd let you go shopping, too. But while I can't, you ought to be grateful to me for doing the shopping for you.”

To which she says, “No one is allowed to keep his wife on a chain, not in any culture, it's a crime everywhere. It's sick!”

“I doubt that,” I say very calmly, “but even if it may be seen as a crime in some cultures, that doesn't make it sick, not by a long way.”

“Yes, it is. It's sick, sick, sick!”

She squeezes two tears out of her eyes, by way of moral blackmail.

“Nonsense,” I say and although she is so worked up I am still patient, I reply courteously and with composure. “Just think of that ring of white slavers that was busted when you lot thought you had finally succeeded in putting an end to the wicked, wicked business of prostitution. They kept their girls chained up all day long. But as far as I remember, none of the lads was found to be mentally disturbed and sent to a psychiatric hospital. They all ended up in jail. And don't tell me that those men chained the girls up just because of the money – they thought it was a lot of fun. So why didn't the judges think of saying those men were sick, when you believe that keeping a woman in chains is an idea that can come only from a sick mind? I'll tell you: because any judge can imagine what fun it would be to do the same. Because judges themselves secretly dream of possessing so much power. You see, for a man it's delightful to dominate a woman entirely. And above all, it's entirely normal – it's a healthy masculine need.”

“It's not, and you know that yourself, Sebastian. What's more, it was a woman judge who passed sentence on the ring of pimps. And you aren't seriously going to claim that . . .”

“Shut up,” I say. “You must stop wanting to have the last word all the

time. And don't call me Sebastian!"

I don't demand slavish obedience – as anyone has just been able to see, I'll even put up with a good many impertinent remarks – but my name is absolutely taboo.

"Oh, sorry, Master," she replies, raising her hands, wiggling her fingers in a silly way, and emphasizing the word "Master" in an affected tone of voice. "I quite forgot: if I say the forbidden name you might turn back into the poor little squirt you really are, and then you won't be able to feature here as a great guy and a woman-tamer."

I look at her coldly. There she is, sitting beside me, naked, locked up, chained, at my mercy. She really is in the shit right up to her neck, but she still thinks she can make waves. I really could get furious now. I could do heaven knows what to her. But I keep my cool. Without a word, I get out of bed and grab her. She flinches away, puts her hands in front of her face, a reflex action. I don't have any intention of hitting her. I simply take hold of the chain very close to her neck and drag her by it over to the wall and the snap hooks. She tries to defend herself, to kick me and hit out at me with her fists. I'm as naked as she is, so I'm more vulnerable than usual. But her attempts are touchingly feeble. I only need to give a good strong jerk to the chain, and she immediately loses her balance and stumbles along beside me like a good girl. I pull the chain through the middle hook again until it's only a metre long, so that Christine can neither sit down nor go anywhere, she just has to stand there with her back to the wall. It feels good to see her like that. Her shrill arrogance, always telling me what's wrong with me, is the worse for wear now. She sobs, she keeps on sobbing while I go back to the bed, get dressed, do up my shoes, go over to the kitchen island unit, open its drawer, and look for a cable tie.

"Don't do it," she sobs as I fasten her hands behind her back with the cable tie. Without shoes on, there's only a pathetic one metre sixty-nine of her hanging from the chain. How small she is! She stands there, slumped, her shoulders bowed, her lips quivering. Well, she should have thought better of it earlier. I turn down the heating and leave without a word.

[END OF SAMPLE]