

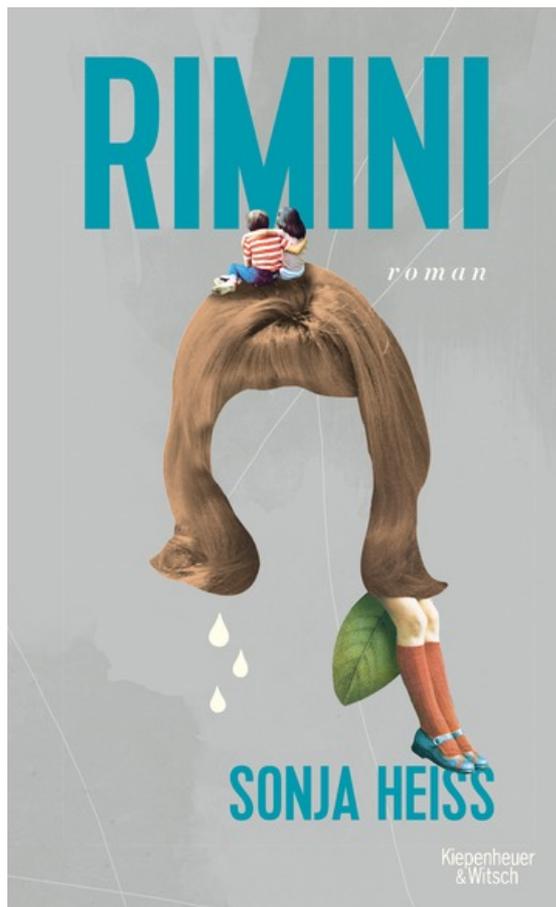
Sample Translation (pp. 11-31, 35-38, 72-85)

LOVE INTERRUPTION

by Sonja Heiss

Translated by Jamie Searle Romanelli

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The Author



Sonja Heiss (*1976, Munich) works as scriptwriter and film director. She studied at the film and television academy in Munich and has made three short films and two feature movies – her debut “Hotel Very Welcome” was presented at the Berlinale 2007 and “Hedi Schneider steckt fest” at the Berlinale 2015. Both have been screened at several International Festivals.

She has received many awards, among them the Prix Regards Neufs (Film Festival Visions du Réel 2002), First Steps Awards (2007), Prix Dialogue en Perspective (Berlinale 2007), Prix Cinédécouvertes (Brussels European Film Festival 2007), Newcomer Award (Birds Eye View London Film Festival 2008), Stipend Villa Aurora, L.A. (2011), Hessischer Filmpreis (2014).

Sonja Heiss has published a first book, a story collection by the title *Das Glück geht aus* in 2011. *Rimini* is her first novel.

40 Years, 3 Months and 8 Days

Dear Papa,

I miss you. There are so many things I'd like to do if you were still here.

1. Call you back.
2. Ask you how you are.
3. Play chess with you, because you loved it so much, but eventually there was no one left who wanted to play it with you.
4. Ask you questions, because you knew so many things that no one ever asked you about.
5. Tell you a joke.
6. Listen to you.
7. Go for a walk with you.
8. Travel with you, because you read books about every country in the world, but saw almost nothing of it.
9. Stroke my hand across your head.

With love,

Your daughter Masha

P.S. I'm sending you this letter as an email, because maybe then it might reach you. Remember how you always used to call out to me on my voicemail and how I explained that I couldn't hear you right then, that your voice was stored in some salt cave somewhere in Utah or Scandinavia in the form of millions of digits.

While I picture emails, on the other hand, as whirring around in the hemisphere, the air full of words, in a sense, and so the chance that my letter will reach you is higher than if it were a piece of paper.

I can't bring myself to imagine that you're able to look down on Earth, even if that would be a comforting thought. But you're not an angel, and I don't believe in angels anyway. You'd find it pretty absurd too, considering you always used to tell me that Jesus, even if his existence had been scientifically proven, was just a charismatic

guru. So there aren't any angels, but there is still you. In some form. You don't have a body anymore, sure. But you probably still have your glasses. I hope that made you laugh. Even though my jokes used to be better.

39 Years, 1 Month, 2 Days

1

The acidic Lufthansa coffee was still attacking his stomach lining, as was the craving for a cigarette his brain cells. The harsh glare of the neon strip lights on the ceiling of the sparsely-furnished hearing room burnt into his tired eyes, and Hans felt as though he was being choked by his pink *Van Laack* shirt collar. His hands, beneath the table, rested on either end of the *Scholting, von Giersberg, Grüben, Schulz & Altmann* pencil, his thumbs positioned in the middle. It snapped beautifully, now broken in two, which felt good and helped him, for the time being at least, to act as though he was still present. Hans' eyes flit, in panic, over the Formica table, he could have sworn he had brought a second pen with him, but there wasn't one there. He rummaged around in his briefcase. He had to break something else, and quickly. There must be another one of those fucking *Scholting, von Giersberg, Grüben, Schulz & Altmann* pencils somewhere. If he could just find it, then everything would be okay. He would make his peace with how miserably the hearing was going and he wouldn't flip out, no, he just had to find the second pencil.

Finally his fingers brushed against something long, cylindrical. But no, damn it, it was a metal ballpoint pen.

Plastic he could have managed. Plastic was not a problem." Dr. Armin, don't you wish to comment on the facts of the case which have just been presented?" asked the judge, interrupting his ruminations.

"What?"

The judge looked irritated.

"I'm looking for a pen," said Hans. He had forgotten his mandate, who was now looking at him in confusion, but he didn't notice that either.

"Could anyone here perhaps lend Dr. Armin a pen, so that he can re-join the hearing?" asked the judge, and one of the opposing lawyers handed Hans a biro.

Hans felt the pen in his hand. It wanted to be snapped, it wanted it more than anything. It had to be snapped. It was in his hand, after all. There was nothing Hans could do to stop it. Again and again, he told himself that it was completely idiotic to want to snap a pen. Especially as an adult. The fact that he had needed to do so as a

child was forgivable; after all, children sometimes follow inappropriate impulses. But the very essence of growing up meant getting inappropriate urges under control. On the other hand, he knew very well that he would feel better if he did it.

The sound it made as it snapped was louder than with the pencil, so Hans jiggled his chair to cover it. He was surprised when, a few moments later, the judge went on to determine a date for the ruling and brought the hearing to a close; after all, he hadn't yet taken a stance on all the opposition's arguments. Not that it would have made any difference, he told himself. In truth he was just glad that this charade was finally coming to a close.

He packed his files into his briefcase, and was just murmuring to his start-up millionaire that they still had two more levels of court to appeal to, when the opposing lawyer asked him for his pen back.

"Erm, do you perhaps have another one you could use? It's just that I need to make some notes on the way back."

"That one has sentimental value."

"Oh, right," Hans stared at the overwhelmingly high forehead set above rimless glasses and thought for a moment. He decided to act as though he was searching for the pen in his briefcase, then shook his head in a baffled way.

"But you can't have lost it, you didn't go anywhere."

"I know, how strange."

Hans rummaged again, but no, it was no use.

"How funny. It's just disappeared."

"In your suit pocket perhaps?" the lawyer suggested.

Hans shook his head. "How funny," he said again. "Would you like to have my Mont Blanc in exchange?"

"No, thank you. But perhaps you should just empty out your briefcase?"

"What, do you want to search me or something? All because of some cheap biro?"

"Excuse me? It's completely irrelevant what's missing. What matters is that it's my property."

Hans picked up his briefcase and turned it upside down. The contents flew down to the floor.

"But it's broken!" shrieked the lawyer, in slightly too feminine an octave. Judging by his deeply sorrowful expression, the biro must have been a very highly emotionally charged souvenir. Hans handed him the two halves of the broken pen, packed his

things back into his briefcase and went to the bathroom. He took the documents out of the file, laid them on top of the briefcase, then had a go at the item of office equipment. The obstinate tearing of the strong cardboard was a relief; there was no sport that even came close. He also relished biting into it until his teeth hurt; he had liked biting away his rage even as a child. He bit the adrenaline out of his body. Calm and an agreeable tiredness descended upon him like a warm, soft blanket. His breathing slowed down to a gentle flow. He disposed of the pieces of folder, put the sheets of paper back in the briefcase, straightened his hair in the mirror and left the bathroom thinking of his mandate, who he'd left standing there and who was now nowhere to be found.

Hans gazed out of the airplane window into the darkness and imagined it were purple. Yesterday his daughter had asked him why the sky was blue, and they had imagined that, without ozone in the atmosphere, it would perhaps be red, and violet at night. Lou had said that life with a red sky would be beautiful. Hans, on the other hand, had thought that humans would have long died out in that case. They would all have committed suicide.

How optimistic children were. Then again, he seemed to remember having looked into the future skeptically even as a six-year-old. Just like his father.

He ordered another small bottle of wine from the intensely smiley business class stewardess and wondered to himself why flight attendants didn't look like they used to. It was understandable, of course, that Lufthansa didn't fire their female employees as soon as they hit forty, but at the same time it was a shame. He suddenly realized that he hadn't thought about cigarettes for the last two minutes. A thought which prompted him, for the remainder of the flight, to think of nothing but smoking.

As he stepped out into the biting cold in front of Terminal Two at Munich Airport, he saw his pulse again. In the shape of a little knot the size of a pinhead, it stormed through the arteries on his lower arm. He fumbled frantically in his Tupperware box for a piece of celery and stuck it between his teeth. The alternative medical practitioner had said that the thought of smoking only lasted a few seconds, and that one had to overcome these seconds by biting into a piece of fruit or a raw vegetable. Hans, admittedly, had established that it only lasted a few seconds when he *didn't* think of smoking, and now realized that he was sucking on the strip of celery. He

quickly bit into it, chewed, spat the pulp back into the box and bought a pack of Gauloises. He took one deep drag, then threw the cigarette onto the floor and stared at it accusingly.

He drank a quick glass of Pomerol in the kitchen, then headed off towards the bedroom, already unbuttoning his shirt.

Ellen was lying there, relaxed and somewhat noble in the high bed. She was wearing her mud-coloured, plunging silk nightdress, which went well with her pine-green, cat-like eyes, powdery blonde hair and pale skin, and she was reading a book.

As he got undressed, she looked up and smiled at him. Finally, thought Hans, she's beginning to take notice again of what an attractive husband she has.

He quickly got in beneath the Icelandic eiderdown duvet, looked at her and stroked his hand along her upper arm towards her breast. The book slipped out of her hand and she plucked it up again from the weightless blanket.

"Hans, I'm reading."

"Mh-hm.">'

This wasn't the reaction he had expected, admittedly, but it was probably tactical. After all, they had had an argument that morning.

He waited for a moment and then began again, this time more purposefully, directly towards the breast, which was silhouetted against the thin material of her nightshirt and drawing his hand to it like a magnet. But Ellen turned away from him with a jerk.

"Can I please keep reading?"

"So why did you smile at me when I was getting undressed?"

"Because I like you and you looked cute."

"And you don't think that could be seen as an invitation?"

"Do I really have to be ready for a fuck every time I smile at you?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Ellen?"

"Well, that's how it is. I can't even smile at you unless I instantly want to fuck. I can't stand the pressure any more. If you'd just give it a rest I'd probably want to do it all the time."

"But the point is *when* you smile at me."

"So you mean I can't smile at you in the bedroom if I don't want to immediately get banged?"

"You smiled at me as I was taking off my boxers."

"I didn't even notice. I was looking at your face. Unlike you, I don't solely look at my spouse's sexual organs."

"I look at your face too."

"No, only when we're arguing, the rest of the time you stare at my ass or my breasts. You even talk to them instead of me."

She hadn't meant it to be funny, of course, but Hans couldn't help but grin. She had always had a strong sense of irony; it used to make him laugh all the time. And it still did, now and then. Sometimes even when they were arguing, like now.

He looked at her and thought to himself that he didn't understand what had happened to their relationship. Ellen was still beautiful, in that cool, almost aristocratic way of hers that had instantly drawn him to her. Even the color of her eyes had made him feel that, with her, he would be safe from a middle class existence, safe from a life like the one his parents had.

At the same time, though, she had been wild and open, with no trace of the strictness she had acquired since their children had come into the world. The kind of strictness he was powerless against. But maybe that was partly down to her job, which, as she said, demanded a kind of performance from her. She believed that she could never show even a flicker of uncertainty, and it seemed to him as though, without realizing it, she had carried this over into her private life. When it came to raising the children, for example, she was consistently sure of what was right and what was wrong. And even where he was concerned, she knew more about him than he did about himself. Every time she told him what his latest or indeed fundamental problem was, it hurt him to an extent that she would never have suspected, because he didn't reveal emotions of that kind.

But maybe they were just being worn down by the succession of oatmeal, toothbrushes, tellings-off, whole wheat products, flutes, minor insults, car repairs, children's hockey tournaments, sugar bans, inattentiveness, bad timing and unconvincing attempts at feigning interest in each other's lives. Perhaps, too, it was Ellen's devotion to the children, which left no room for her husband. Being a perfect mother was her primary purpose in life, and of course she had commandeered it and defined her entire life with it. Their day-to-day mood was dependent upon the mood and behavior of the children, the topics they spoke about had diminished and only changed according to the children's development. Dummy-weaning had been

replaced by spelling mistakes, the early-childhood movement course by musical instruments.

Ellen had given up on being a human being; she was a mother and a business journalist. Beyond that, she no longer existed. Just as he, reduced to being a legal guardian, a role he rarely convinced her in, no longer existed either.

Back when they used to spend nights in front of the TV, high on weed, immersed in home shopping programs and old crime series for hours on end, reducing each other to hysterical laughter with their commentaries, back when they had thrown wild parties in their first apartment together, they would never have been able to imagine that, one day, their life would look like this. On the other hand, this exact life was what he had always envisaged.

"You objectify me," said Ellen, and now it really wasn't funny any more.

"I desire you, that has nothing to do with objectification. You should be pleased about it, not annoyed. What wife and mother of two children is still desired by her husband nowadays? It's a sign of love."

"I manage to love you without constantly staring at your penis."

"Ellen, that's ridiculous. And besides, your breasts are very small. They don't exactly have a sex bomb kind of ... aesthetic, oh, never mind." Ellen was now looking at him intently.

Hans fell back onto his pillow and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Now don't start breathing in that affected manner."

"Oh, so now I'm even breathing wrong?! Well excuse me!"

As Hans got up and left the room, he felt Ellen turn her attention back to her novel and wondered to himself whether she even cared about his feelings anymore.

He went into the kitchen, poured himself another large glass of red wine and found himself thinking of cigarettes again instead of sex. He searched through all his suits, jackets and bags and eventually found a half empty packet of dried-out stubs in a sports bag he hadn't used in ages. He told himself it was okay to smoke from time to time when one was stressed, and that this was an exceptional situation. What's more, a life without sex and cigarettes had no point to it, and for that he allowed himself a second. Tomorrow he would quit again.

He stubbed out the cigarette and contemplated jerking off before going to sleep. But he was tired of doing that. There had, admittedly, been a long period when he had

enjoyed it, seeing it as more time-efficient and less complicated than real sex. But recently he had started preferring the real thing again.

Unfortunately, though, Ellen had now gotten used to not sleeping with him, and she seemed pretty content with that.

He took one last swallow and was ready, finally, to end the day. His thoughts became pleasantly hazy, and he felt something akin to contentment deep inside him. He let himself fall into the depths of the viscoelastic NASA foam mattress and sank, in a matter of seconds, into a softly luxuriant sleep.

A menacing buzzing sound awoke him from his shallow, alcohol-infused slumber. He woke Ellen and drew her attention to the sinister noise, but she showed no interest whatsoever. Hans, on the other hand, had already dragged himself out of the bed and was meandering through the room in a slight daze. He could feel his brain mass clashing against the roof of his skull, and wanted to lie down again, but this was an emergency. He searched the room for a weapon and quickly found one. Grabbing hold of the tennis racket, he staggered out of the bedroom.

The buzzing could be coming from a noise-dampened drill being used on the door lock by a burglar. But it was also possible that some electronic device had overheated and was about to set the house on fire, or perhaps already had. An equally alarming scenario, particularly in view of the fact that his father had often warned of how easily that could happen.

Almost without making a sound, he rolled from his heels to the balls of his feet across the heated synthetic resin floor, prepared for anything, and yet at the same time slowed down considerably by the Pomerol. He made his way towards the living room, for it seemed as though the buzzing was coming from the patio doors.

Suddenly he heard footsteps behind him. The most important thing now was to strike out of the blue. To act as though he hadn't noticed his pursuer and then attack without warning. He counted to three in his mind, then took a perfect half circle swing in order to follow it through as he turned. But the racket collided mid-swing against a soft yet simultaneously resistant obstacle. The sound of the impact was quiet and dull, followed by a high-pitched scream. It took Hans a moment to realize that he had almost knocked out his wife.

"Ellen, oh God! Fuck, oh God!"

"You idiot," she said softly, as the blood flowed in a thick strand out of the large, gaping wound on her forehead. Nonetheless, Hans was a little relieved. It had a lot of vitality after all, the word "idiot". So she was more or less ok. She hadn't lost consciousness, and there were no signs of spinal injury. Hans pulled off his T-shirt and pressed it against the cut.

"I'm sorry, Ellen."

"You're such a maniac. It hurts so much!"

"Can you move your arms and legs?"

"Yes," groaned Ellen.

"Good, very good. Here, squeeze my hand."

Ellen squeezed hard.

"Great, okay, I have to keep going, but afterwards I'll take another look at it."

"Keep going where?"

"I have to find them."

"What? Who?!"

"The burglars, who else?"

"Burglars don't hum," replied Ellen wearily.

"It wasn't a hum, it's a buzzing."

"Burglars don't buzz either. If they did, they might as well ring the bell or announce their arrival by phone beforehand."

"How would you know?"

"Logic. Oh Hans, it hurts so much."

"Sorry, but that's just your logic."

"You stink of booze."

"Not that again, not right now."

"Hans, it hurts so much." She was breathing fitfully, her lips formed into the shape of an O.

"Well, if you will creep up on me from behind..."

"What, so now it's my fault?"

"I don't have time to argue, I have to find out what's going on in our house."

Hans pressed the side of the T-shirt which wasn't yet saturated in blood onto Ellen's forehead and continued to make his way towards the patio doors, only to realize that he was moving away from the noise. So he slowly crept back out of the living room, holding the tennis racket in both hands as though he were waiting for his opponent's

serve. He paused and held his breath, the resulting stillness making the droning sound easier to follow.

The closer he got to the bathroom, the louder it became. But who was in his beautiful bathroom with the double washbasin made from natural stone?

He was reminded of the South African Paralympic athlete who had shot his girlfriend through the bathroom door. Perhaps he really had believed a burglar was in there.

And in this case, right now, there really was someone in the bathroom. And unlike the South African, Hans didn't have a gun but a neon green tennis racket. He held it intuitively in one hand again, his arm crooked slightly upwards. Then he stormed into the bathroom, looked around him and finally discovered the source of the buzzing noise. The electric toothbrush was on. It didn't seem logical for a burglar to have crept into the bathroom and turned on the toothbrush. So it was the toothbrush's fault. He threw it onto the floor, stamped on it and made his way back to Ellen, who was still lying in the living room, pressing the blood-saturated T-shirt to her forehead.

"So, did you immobilize your opponent?" she mumbled.

"Come on, I'm taking you to the hospital, that needs stitches."

Leo was asleep. Lou had her eyes wide open, still frozen in shock as they laid her on the backseat. Ellen explained to her that it looked much worse than it was, that they just had to get it sewn up, like a hole in a pair of socks, and then the bleeding would stop. The little one nodded.

Only once they had set off on their journey through the toneless night did it occur to Hans that he shouldn't be driving, a realization for which it was now too late.

But the even graver realization came on the drive home.

"So what are we going to tell your parents? Aside from the fact that we need to consider what the consequences of this will be for us, I mean?" asked Ellen.

"Fuck, my parents."

"Hans!"

"What?"

"You promised not to use that word in front of the children any more."

"They're asleep."

"Fine, but you could still practice using it less."

"But it really fucking sucks that my parents are coming."

"Yes, it's always strenuous. Them coming at Christmas is nothing new though, unfortunately. But what really sucks, in my opinion, is that you knocked me out and I now have a stitch on my forehead. Not the fact that they're coming."

"Yes, Ellen, I know."

"And it'll be hard to miss."

"What should we tell them? That you fell?"

Ellen didn't want to promise to lie to his parents, which was probably intended as some kind of disciplinary measure, he assumed.

An icy wind swept across the still gloomy station platform. Masha, not yet fully awake, blew warm air into her freezing hands as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Post something, she thought. Make some joke about the whole "going home for Christmas" business. She took her Sellotaped mobile phone out of her bag and took a selfie, gazing into the camera with a deliberately tired expression. But wait, it wasn't just the exaggeratedly sleepy look in her eyes. Her skin looked tired too. Shocked, she zoomed in on the picture. There were a great many more wrinkles than she saw in the mirror. Vertical branches had burrowed their way in amongst the already horrifying crow's feet. There were new lines, as they called them on the packaging of anti-aging creams, at the corners of her mouth. In her opinion, 'fissures' would be the more fitting definition. And in semi profile, an angle which usually suited her, the beginnings of a double chin could be seen. It's just the light and the early hour, she told herself. She would simply take another one, and then she would look like she always did. But that wasn't the case; even on the fourth photo, her skin still showed the same signs of ageing. She put her phone away and stared at the tracks, putting each of her small hands in turn, balled up into a fist, into her wonderfully warm mouth. After a while, she realized that she had her hand in her mouth, and saw this Masha as others would. A 39-year-old woman, with crow's feet beneath a childish woolly hat, who hadn't thought to bring her gloves and was shoving her hand into her mouth as a result.

This old little girl, waiting for the train to go see her big brother and Mama and Papa. Who wasn't capable of taking responsibility for a little person of her own, and so instead had bought herself a badly-behaved, scratching and biting cat, whose long, white fur clung to her dark blue woolen coat.

She had given just as little thought to the necessity of reserving a seat at Christmas, and so now, to top it all off, little Masha was sitting in the corridor outside the compartments with her knees tucked up. She felt as though everyone in the train was pitying her for being an old little child. She should *have* one, not be one. But she had never felt ready, she had been afraid of losing her figure and not getting any more roles, she had thought that the role of her life would come along at the very moment

she got pregnant, for it could come anytime. And beyond that she had shied away from making a decision that would change something forever. She had always avoided forever decisions.

But a child would be the only salvation from the Christmas depression. Then her parents would have to come to her, or maybe they wouldn't even spend Christmas together anymore. Never again would there be a Christmas fight, never again would they drunkenly stick post-it notes to their foreheads and guess that they were Adolf Hitler or Jesus. Even though that was kind of fun, if she was being honest. Her parents were funny, especially when they had been drinking. But then she would wake up the next morning in her brother's guest bed or in her childhood bedroom and cry. She could remember that late-morning feeling of the last ten Christmas days so well she felt as though she were re-living it now, in this moment. And she thought to herself that she never wanted to be this child again, not for one single second. It was over. Enough of childhood. It had lasted long enough.

The train stopped in Jena Paradies; Masha got out. She would catch the next train home, go visit Georg on the ward and tell him they had to change her life. He would like that, she thought.

She bought herself a beer from the station kiosk and was just going to find out the time of the next train when a strong, icy wind picked up. Two minutes later, heavy drops began to tumble down from the sky, transforming into ice as soon as they hit the ground.

[...]

"Oh, you poor thing," said Barbara as she saw Ellen, "what have you done to yourself?"

"I didn't do anything at all, it was Hans."

"Oh."

"With his tennis racket," Ellen continued, going on to depict the accident in a factual but, in Hans's opinion, not at all objective manner.

"But he didn't do it on purpose. So..." said Barbara. Ellen should have known that Hans's mother would come to his defense, no matter what he did. Even if he had knocked her down intentionally, she would have found an explanation for it.

"No, he was sure I was a burglar."

"So that's understandable, Ellen, it couldn't be helped. Don't you think, Alexander?" Alexander nodded, but didn't look entirely convinced by his son's innocence, which didn't surprise Hans in the slightest. Reassured for the time being about the course the conversation was taking, he headed off towards the bottle of wine. When his parents were visiting, it was permissible to open one even in the early afternoon. "Well, he could have waited another second, then he would have seen that I wasn't a burglar." Ellen added. "But unfortunately he'd been hitting the bottle again."

Hans froze on his way to get the corkscrew.

"Yes, Ellen, but when someone's afraid..."

Alexander didn't say a word; he was in a foul mood, because Masha wasn't there yet. And also because he would have preferred to be at home.

He didn't understand why modern houses always had to be so uncomfortable. It was impossible to work up any kind of Christmas spirit in here. His guess was that his son didn't even like minimalism, but had decorated his house like this because that's what people did in the circles he moved in. One almost didn't dare put a glass down on the table, and when you went to the toilet, you had to worry about setting in motion some technological chain reaction by simply pushing the wrong button. Although 'push' was the wrong word; everything in this house functioned with a gentle stroke or a soft tap. They probably even had devices that one could start up merely by looking at them, thought Alexander.

"It will heal well, I'm sure" said Barbara.

"Hopefully there won't be a big scar," said Ellen.

"Well, if there is just grow a fringe," countered Barbara, to which Ellen responded that while that was certainly a brilliant idea, fringes didn't suit her.

Ellen was simply incapable of being nice, thought Barbara. Even a word like "idea" sounded sharp coming out of her mouth. Ellen could sound condescending even saying words like "and, so, for, new, green". Barbara didn't understand why her son couldn't see it too. He was busy pouring his second glass of wine, at four in the afternoon. Perhaps that was his solution to his wife's needle-sharp tone.

Barbara retreated to the children's bedroom with Lou. She was an excellent playmate; she didn't get bored when the Smurfs had to say sentences dictated by her granddaughter, nor when she fed puppets with air for hours on end and swung them around the room. She had done that with her own children too. More than just being their mother, she had also been their friend, and she had fond memories of the afternoons she had spent with Hans and Masha in their rooms.

Hans helped Ellen to prepare the goose and the dumplings, but he sliced the garlic too finely and the onions not finely enough, added the wrong quantity of salt, kneaded badly and got in her way, so Ellen eventually expelled him from the kitchen. Barbara took over, but proved herself to be just as untalented as Hans in the role of assistant. She was, of course, the real cook, with decades more experience, so she took every opportunity to explain to Ellen how she could improve the way she was doing things. Hans, noticing the mood in the open-plan kitchen from the sofa, ultimately steered his mother away. That didn't please Ellen either, for now she had to do all the work by herself.

Masha still hadn't arrived, and Alexander was worrying, as he always did when one of them was travelling. It didn't matter where to. Accidents could happen anywhere, even in the home, he said. After all, one just had to look at Ellen. Alexander really did have a witty sense of humor. Even Ellen laughed. After the laughter was over, Alexander went back to worrying.

The children were whining; everything was very behind schedule and Ellen was insisting that the presents could only be opened after the meal.

"Let them open just one or two now, Ellen," said Barbara.

"No, we eat first."

"Oh come on, the poor things."

"I don't think they're at all hard up for having to eat a delicious roast dinner before they open their three hundred presents. Once they get started on the presents they won't want to stop. Then we'll never eat, believe me."

"Okay, fine. Whatever you think, Ellen. You know best."

When, finally, with two hours delay, they turned on the electric candles on the tree and the children ran towards the mountain of presents, an expression of melancholy descended upon the grandparents' faces. They were remembering the Christmases with their children when they were still young, which had been so much more beautiful than this one, at which they weren't even all present, here in front of this immense Christmas tree which had been tastefully decorated in three coordinating colors.

[...]

Hans was looking at the no-longer-white stucco ceiling again, but without really seeing it. It had recently occurred to him that he didn't take in his surroundings during his analysis sessions. Only at the beginning and end, when he glanced at the white Billy bookcase at the foot of the cognac-colored leather daybed he was lying on. Amongst the books -- an assortment of picture volumes and abstruse non-fiction titles -- stood a massive, colorfully glazed ceramic jug which someone must have brought back from a holiday to Greece in the 1990s. And now all the patients had to look at this monstrosity before and after talking about their difficult lives.

But right now he was looking at the ceiling, asking himself why she was always provoking him, and feeling annoyed that it was so effective.

He hadn't been her patient for long, and in any case he didn't really see himself as a patient. His problems weren't that serious, after all. He had improved during these two months, admittedly, and no longer found the analysis as awful as he had in the beginning, but a certain level of resistance was still there.

He straightened the baby blue felt pillow beneath his head and heard her clear her throat: a prompt for him to say something. He searched his brain for thoughts, but found nothing.

Dr. Mandel-Minkic's high yet well-tempered voice rang from behind into his impressively-sized ears, which no one in his family had besides him

"So was your mother there for you?"

"Yes, she was always there."

"I don't mean whether she was physically present, but whether she was there for you."

"Um, I'm not sure, but I think so. She loved me very much."

"But what about when you were worried about something when you were a child, for example...?"

"What kind of worries does one have as a child?"

"All kinds. Don't your children worry about anything?"

"I don't think so."

"Have you ever asked them?"

"Erm, well, not really."

"Perhaps you should sometime."

"I thought you only ask questions. That was quite clearly an instruction."

"Yes, you're right."

Analysis was psychological torture, he thought to himself. Twice a week, you go and see a stranger whose principal objective it is to make you realize how damaged you are, so that they can then induce feelings of guilt. The thought occurred to him, as it often did, to break this whole thing off, to tell Dr. Mandel-Minkic that she wasn't right about what she was doing, that Freud hadn't been right.

But why, then, did he have such a diluted memory of his childhood?

"So what kind of worries could I have had as a child?" he asked Dr. Mandel-Minkic, in the hope that a prompt from her would uncover memories in his brain which had perhaps merely been buried beneath a few layers of useless information.

"You could have had a fight with a school friend, for example, or you might have been afraid of a teacher. Or love sick."

"I wouldn't have discussed those kinds of things with my mother."

"Why not?"

"Because boys don't do that."

"So you're saying that boys don't speak to their mothers about their problems?"

"Probably not."

"I see."

Her "I see" irritated him. It was a judgement, as it so often was when she said "I see".

"Did you talk to your father about these things?"

Maybe even she had realized that her "I see" had been insensitive, and now she was trying to cover it up with a question.

"No, my father never spoke much about personal things, that wasn't his way. He didn't like problems."

"So, boys don't speak to their parents?"

His concentration as he searched for an answer was interrupted by the scribbling of her ballpoint pen, and he wondered to himself why she had never thought of getting herself a soft fineliner or gel rollerball, something which wouldn't

make such intrusive noises as her Parker ballpoint pen. She never wrote for long, but even that annoyed him, because it was obvious she was condensing important aspects of his life into short, cold sentences of psychologist speak. Right now she had probably noted something along the lines of: "Patient unaware of the lack of communication in his childhood."

"I imagine that most of your patients are probably unaware of whether their mothers were always there for them."

"Why are you comparing yourself to other patients?"

"That's what I think you're doing."

"Do you often compare yourself to other people?"

"I don't know. No ... or yes, perhaps, now and then."

"What do you usually think when you compare yourself to them?"

"Don't know. No idea."

"Are they doing better than you or worse?"

Hans thought for a moment about which people he compared himself to and in what way, and established that they were indeed doing better than him. Even Dr. Mandel-Minkic had a better life than he did, even if just for the fact that she was sitting back there next to her Ficus benjamina, while he was down here on the patient daybed.

"How are you feeling right now?"

"Okay."

"Okay. Really?"

"Yes, okay. I just said so."

"Am I also doing better than you?"

So she could read thoughts too.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because you didn't answer the previous question and I wanted to give a specific example in order to facilitate the answer for you."

"You don't need to give me specific examples, Dr. Mandel-Minkic, I'm perfectly capable of complex thought processes. I'm not a child, and I'm not your husband or life partner or whatever it is you have."

"See, now you're using the same tone with me that you use with your wife. Do you think that's constructive?"

"Could you please stop reprimanding me for just one minute?"

"I'm not, I asked you a question after identifying a parallel."

"So you say it's my fault if I have trouble with my surroundings, then call that "recognizing parallels and asking questions,". I'd define it more as "recognizing parallels and allocating blame."

"I didn't say it was your fault, but the fact that you're claiming I did is interesting, because it suggests you're feeling guilty."

"For some reason I know far too often what you're about to say."

"Like in a relationship, don't you think?"

"Of course, what else?"

"I mean, we are in a relationship with one another."

"Albeit not one that takes place on an equal footing."

"That's your perception, not mine. Is that how you feel with your wife and your partners, too? Are you inferior to them as well?"

"You know what, Dr. Mandel-Minkic? Go screw yourself."

"Mr Armin, let's pull ourselves together now shall we?"

"Please don't speak to me in that tone."

"Well, what tone am I supposed to use when you tell me to go screw ..."

"One that isn't patronizing. And without using the word "we"."

"That's what annoys you with your wife, isn't it? You think she's patronizing too, am I right?"

"Spot-on, Dr. Mandel-Minkic, a total bull's-eye. A brilliant assessment. But then it wasn't a particularly difficult one. Even my mother could have told you that."

The thing about Dr. Mandel-Minkic which annoyed him even more than Ellen was that she always stayed calm. If this woman were attacked one night, he thought to himself, she would even debate with her attacker over the trauma that lay beneath his criminal behavior.

"Maybe you provoke that in people, them talking to you in that way, is that possible?"

"If you say so."

"I'm not saying, I'm asking."

"Well, your goddamn questions are really pissing me off today."

"We won't make any progress if you persist with that tone."

"I thought I was supposed to always say how I'm feeling?"

"It's possible to say how you're feeling without insulting people, or are the two inextricably linked for you?"

Fear crept up through his stomach and all the way to his Adam's apple; the last thing he wanted to find out was that he was incapable of taking criticism and that he had a deep-seated victim mentality, because then the conclusion would be that others were responsible for his happiness. Just like with his mother. No, he definitely didn't want that.

"Isn't it unfair of Freud to pin everything on the parents? I mean, it's impossible to be perfect as a mother or father."

"We're not 'pinning' it on the parents. We're just trying to find out where your problems originate from. That doesn't mean we hold it against the parents if the causes do turn out to be rooted in childhood."

"So what kinds of things am I inflicting on my own children?"

"I don't know, you'll have to answer that yourself."

"Yes, but as an expert you must surely know what kind of damage they'll end up with as grown-ups, having had a father like me."

"Well, human beings aren't mathematically calculable. Why do you want to know, because it could reassure you?"

"Yes, perhaps."

"Or perhaps because you'd be able to pull yourself together then?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I'm not here to answer your questions. And in any case, it won't help you if I were to tell you that, statistically speaking, your daughter will marry a domineering man if you insult your wife in front of her another five times."

"That was a good one."

"Oh, you liked that?"

"Yes."

"That was similar to the way you talk, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was my kind of humor. Is that why you said it?"

"No."

"You should do it more often, make jokes like that."

"I'm your analyst, not your entertainment host. But I'm glad you're making jokes, it seems to help you sometimes."

"Couldn't you just let a joke be a joke for once without searching for a deeper meaning? I don't make jokes just because they help me. I make them because I'm funny."

"And why do you have this sense of humor?"

"Arghhh.'"

"Seriously, though, let's take a look behind this positive attribute for a moment. Perhaps then you'd be able to employ your humor in a different way, even utilize it against your aggression. You could, for example, try to take a step back sometimes, when you think you're about to snap, and attempt to see the situation as a joke. Then maybe you wouldn't smash your keyboard to pieces or insult the judge."

"Yes, good idea, but considering I've always had a sense of humor, I would have used that technique intuitively if it were possible for me to do so."

"Do you ever wonder why your first response is always to reject things?"

"And now you're acting as though this is something you want to discuss with me, even though in actual fact you're just making an accusation."

"No, I made an observation and now I'm trying to get to the bottom of the issue by asking you a question."

"Couldn't you try to rein in the psychologist speak just for once? After all, I'm not disputing the issues you present as facts just because I studied law."

"I disagree, that's something you often do."

"But that wasn't my point, I was talking about your use of language."

"That's just the way I speak. You should have gotten used to it by now."

It made him uncomfortable that he had lost his cool yet again. He shouldn't care in the slightest what Dr. Mandel-Minkic thought of him. She was his doctor, after all, in a manner of speaking. This was just about getting treatment for a problem, he told himself, feeling that strange, pathetic sensation again.

"Have you been intimate with your wife since we last spoke?"

"No. Unfortunately not. What makes you bring that up?"

"Well, you seem very irritable today."

"Hmm, yes, that's true. But it's an interesting way of putting it, 'been intimate'. So very uptight."

She laughed, and this made him laugh too.

"A little old-fashioned?"

"Yes, very. And it paints a strange image, this act of 'becoming intimate'. It sounds like intimate care."

She chuckled, then pulled herself together.

"So why haven't you?"

"She didn't want to."

"Did you try again in the same way?"

"Yes, I mean, the normal way."

"So maybe you should try replacing the normal with something special."

"Yes, but sex is part of a marriage. I can't go on a Caribbean cruise every time I want to sleep with my wife."

"It doesn't have to be a Caribbean cruise, but perhaps you could think of a present to lift the mood between the two of you, something to break up the daily routine a little."

"Like what?"

"Well, you'll have to figure that part out by yourself."

"Hm."

"So you're still really missing the physicality?"

"Yes, very much."

"That, of course, isn't exactly ideal when it comes to your aggression. But maybe you could take up tennis again in the interim?"

"I don't play tennis."

"So why do you have a tennis racket?"

Now she was reminding him of the stupid incident again.

"Because I used to play."

"So couldn't you take it up again?"

"Yes, of course, and I could also start making pottery. Why shouldn't I be able to take up tennis again?"

"You're suffering from the lack of physicality in your life. So was it always very important to you?"

"I think so, yes."

"Was it openly discussed when you were growing up?"

"No, not really."

"But you're open about it?"

"Yes, I think I have a laid-back approach to sex, but it took a while, that wasn't always the case."

"Well, not that laid-back. Let's just say you place a lot of importance on it."

"Isn't that normal?"

"Of course, but not everyone would start breaking pens if they go through a sexual rut in their marriage."

"So now you're pinning it on that, are you?"

"No, of course not."

"Because I have other problems too, you know. In actual fact, all I have is problems, now I come to think about it."

"Really?"

"I sometimes wonder whether I've only made wrong decisions in my life."

"Does it feel as though you have?"

"Today it does."

"Can you think of something that *is* going well in your life?"

"No, nothing."

"That was a very quick answer, I'd like you to take a little time to consider the question."

"Well, I have quite a lot of money."

"That's great!"

"But no time."

"And if you were to work in a smaller chambers, for example?"

"Dr. Mandel-Minkic, I've torn my ass open to get where I am today, and now I'm supposed to give it all up for emotional reasons?"

"You're not supposed to do anything, I'm just asking questions based upon your opinion that you've done everything wrong in your life, and as it turns out, that's not completely accurate as a statement of fact – it's much more a feeling than an objective assessment of your situation, don't you think?"

"Just because you tack on 'don't you think', it doesn't make your statement a question. Just so you know I notice things like that."

She laughed loudly, not a giggle, but instead an operetta-like tonal cascade of haughtiness, intended to provoke him, perhaps, or maybe she really did find him to be as stupid as her laugh suggested.

"What's that supposed to mean, Dr. Mandel-Minkic?"

"Are you angry?"

"No, it turns me on when you laugh at me."

"Mr Armin, for one thing I wasn't laughing at you, and for another an action prompts a reaction. Would you like to have a think about the action which preceded my reaction?"

" Dr. Mandel-Minkic, you're my analyst, you're not allowed to react emotionally; it's your goddamn job. You get eighty Euros an hour for remaining objective. Or did Freud write somewhere that an analyst should humiliate his patient from time to time?"

Now she really did seem lost for words, and all he could hear was her breathing. He wasn't in psychoanalysis just to get the piss taken out of him here too. He asked himself why people so rarely took him seriously, but reached no conclusion.

"How do you feel now?"

"You always ask that when you can't think of anything else to say. Have you ever noticed that?"

"Possibly, yes. Is that a problem for you?"

"Yes."

"You're still feeling angry, is that possible?"

"No, I'm completely zen, Dr. Mandel-Minkic."

"You see irony as an important tool for channeling your anger, could one say that?"

"Would you prefer I kick the crap out of your desk?"

"Is that what you feel like doing?"

"Well, yes, perhaps."

"So what's stopping you?"

"The fact that I'm not allowed to."

"But you've frequently broken things in the past. So why not now?"

"Because I know it's not good."

"But you knew that when you smashed in your monitor with the golf ball."

"That was my monitor, not yours. There's an important difference."

"And when you kicked in the toilet door at the chambers? That wasn't yours."

"Yes, but that was months ago."

"And with your wife?"

"Well, that had its consequences."

"So you see the analysis as a consequence? Perhaps even as a punishment?"

Yes, he thought to himself, but denied it.

"So what could be the deeper reason for why you don't completely lose control here, but you do elsewhere?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's because I had a good day today. I mean, I am able to control myself sometimes. Most of the time, of late. Can we please talk about something else now?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm not in the mood to keep talking about this."

"You know, it just occurred to me that you feel as though anger goes away if you don't talk about it. Like a child closing his eyes while playing hide and seek."

He thought back to how he used to get furious as a child when someone found him too quickly, and asked himself when exactly the rage inside him had subsided. It was at least twenty, maybe even twenty-five years ago, he estimated. He still had no idea why it had come back. And even though he had it halfway under control again now, he could still feel this silent tremor inside him.

He had once read that there was such a thing as silent earthquakes. In the space of a few weeks, entire landscapes would shift by a few centimetres, the sediment moving so slowly that no tremor was felt. This had only been discovered following the invention of GPS systems which were capable of measuring these shifts.

And without even being aware of it himself, he was waiting for the great quake, waiting for everything to come tumbling down.

[END OF SAMPLE]