

Sample Translation

Die Dienstagsfrauen (The Tuesday Ladies) by Monika Peetz

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1

“Come on Tom, get a move on!” yelled Luc. “The customers will be here any minute.” The owner of Le Jardin was hounding his new waiter mercilessly through the restaurant. Instructions rained down on the young man at the rate of one a second.

“I said five glasses.”

“No, not the normal plates.”

“Where are the flowers?”

“Do I have to do *everything* myself?”

Tom had no idea what was going on. Who was it Luc was making such a fuss over? A glance at the reservations book shed little light on the situation.

“But we don’t even have a booking for the fireside table.”

Luc paused for a moment, as if this was the stupidest remark he had ever heard.

“Have you looked at the calendar?”

“Of course.”

“And?”

“It’s Tuesday.”

Luc raised his voice: “The first Tuesday in the month. Which means...”

“Is it some sort of French holiday?” Tom ventured, as if he was on a quiz show.

Luc let out a deep groan. Perhaps it had been a mistake to give an unemployed high-school dropout a chance. Tom’s only experience in the world of gastronomy stemmed from his earliest moments. He had been conceived by a hormonal idiot in the sports bar and kitchen at TSC Euskirchen’s home ground. Unfortunately, this idiot had been Luc. This was why he was hardly able say no when his ex left the wayward product of their affair on his doorstep. The helpless foundling was nineteen, and took entirely after his mother. Or so Luc thought.

“My most faithful customers have booked a table at eight o’clock. Like they’ve been doing on the first Tuesday of the month since I was still a waiter – that’s how long they’ve been coming here.” Luc’s agitation brought out his flat Cologne accent, clearly betraying the fact that he was no Frenchman, and “Luc” was just a stage name. But the proximity to the Institut Français was a good reason not to change the restaurant’s focus.

Tom still didn’t understand. “Yeah, so?”

Luc sighed again. At fifty-six, he was gradually starting to think about who would take over from him. But how would he get what was so special about these five ladies through his son’s thick head? They had been coming to his restaurant for fifteen years. Every Tuesday at first, then once a month.

It was a wet day, business was slow, and Luc was thinking about closing the restaurant when the five of them turned up at the door for the first time, soaked through and giggling. Five women who couldn’t have been more different: Caroline, the cool, athletic lawyer with her classical profile; Judith, pale, thin and translucent; Eva, the newly-qualified and capable doctor; Estelle, unmistakably a high society lady – and the youngest, Kiki, a sixth-form student as radiant as a bright butterfly.

It was Caroline who convinced Luc to open another few bottles. The eloquent lawyer was already the spokesperson for the group. Though it had originally been Judith’s idea to go for a drink together after their French class.

“I want to enjoy my evening off to the full,” she explained. Later, it emerged that Judith had lied to her then husband Kai, telling him that her employer required the French

course and was paying for it. She was relying on the fact that her pedantic husband would go to bed promptly at half past ten, and wouldn't notice that from now on, she would get back later every Tuesday. The French course marked the beginning of the end for their marriage. Judith told Kai some lie about an advanced course, and carried on meeting up with her friends. It took an age for the Tuesday ladies to give Judith enough courage to extricate herself from her unhappy marriage. Over the years, Luc had watched the nervous secretary become a woman who made her own way in the world, with the help of esotericism and wisdom from the Far East.

Luc had remained at the side of his Tuesday ladies through the years. He witnessed the gifted jurist Caroline become a notorious criminal defence lawyer, the passionate medic Eva pack in her career to start a family, and the student Kiki grow up. Everything changed in those fifteen years. Le Jardin blossomed from a well-kept secret into the place to be seen, and Luc from a waiter into the owner. Only Estelle, the professional wife and the oldest of the Tuesday ladies, remained true to form. It was still important to her that people were aware of her conspicuous wealth, her second home in St. Moritz and her good golf handicap. Luc suspected she had been born in a Chanel suit.

"The five ladies who were here recently." The penny had finally dropped for Tom. He was beaming all over his face. "Is the little one coming as well? The one with the long legs and the short skirt."

"Kiki? You stay well away from Kiki," Luc warned him.

"But she looks nice."

Luc knew better. Kiki was not nice. Kiki was magnificent. Joyous, wild, full of energy, chronically cheerful and always falling in love. "Chastity gives you spots," she claimed. She wanted to learn French because she had been Interrailing after she finished school, and had sworn undying love for a certain Matthieu from Rouen. She hoped it would take their relationship to a new level if they could actually have a conversation.

Unfortunately, after just four hours of Beginners French, she discovered that Matthieu liked to talk mostly about his ex-girlfriend. She allowed herself to be comforted by Nick. And Michael. Kiki dreamt of a steady relationship, but loved the sex more than the men involved.

"The good thing about being single is that you can concentrate completely on your career," she told herself. Well, she was single, but the right career still eluded her. Her current job as a creative in the renowned Thalberg design studio had not brought with it the breakthrough she longed for. Kiki was part of the design team that did the groundwork for Johannes Thalberg. He was the creative head and father-figure of the company, and designed furniture, lamps, lounge and kitchen accessories, and from time to time complete interiors for shops and hotels. But Kiki still hadn't really managed to make her mark in the group. Still, she believed in the power of tomorrow. Every day was a new opportunity.

"Ok, tell me about her," the young waiter insisted.

There were a lot of stories Luc could have told, and not only the ones about Kiki's men. The five women couldn't even begin to know how much of their lives Luc had heard about. He was an attentive eavesdropper, and even knew about their traditional holiday together. No wonder: after all, the Tuesday ladies regularly retold the anecdotes from their annual trips, which just as regularly led to great outbursts of mirth.

The first time they went away, it had been to prepare for their French exam in the solitude of the mountains near Cologne. The Tuesday ladies' week of communal revision had been a great success; the exam, less so. Kiki and Estelle didn't even show up for it. At that point, Kiki was more concerned with French body-language, and Estelle had discovered that

a holiday home in France was out, and the Algarve was in. So why carry on learning French? Eva, the junior doctor, was so agitated that her stomach was in knots, and she spent most of the exam in the toilet in the Institut Français. Later it emerged that her agitation was less to do with the exam than with her new ovulation calculator. It was not particularly well put together. David, her first-born, was more so. He came into the world seven months later. Weighing in at nine pounds, he was fifty-seven centimetres in length, and the reason why Eva never made it. Not to the French exam, or to the assistant's post at the specialist heart centre in Paris. She had hung on to the signed contract: "As a symbol of the life I nearly lived," she said.

Judith sat the exam as planned, and failed. The handsome sum of money she had paid to be systematically freed from exam nerves (and which she had diverted from the household account behind Kai's back) could have been put to better use.

Only Caroline, the lawyer who had graduated with honours, passed. Top of the class, naturally. Caroline's French was scintillatingly perfect. Although Luc followed her career closely in the papers, it was never clear to him what she needed the language for: none of the hardened criminals she saw as a defence lawyer had ever tried to rob the Louvre, hijack an Air France plane or blow up the Eiffel Tower. And Caroline's husband Philipp, a GP in Lindenthal, preferred Italy for their holidays. And it wasn't that Caroline's two children needed help with their French homework. Caroline's children had no trouble at school, unlike Eva's four.

Luc could have spent hours telling stories to his inquisitive son. But he stayed silent as the grave. The restaurant owner was smart enough never to let the ladies notice how much they were giving away without realising it. Luc was the Tuesday ladies' discreet attendant and admirer, and Le Jardin was their confessional box.

The table was laid to perfection, the chef was poised in readiness, and the candles had burnt halfway down.

"So where are they then?"

Luc checked the clock impatiently. Quarter past eight.

It was a common occurrence for groups from the nearby Institut Français to stop off at Le Jardin. It was unusual for a lifelong friendship to grow out of it. But it was unheard of for the Tuesday ladies' table to remain empty on this day of the month.

When Luc closed up shortly after eleven, without Caroline or any of the others having called, he knew something must have happened. Something worse than anything he'd seen in the last fifteen years.

2

"We have to call Luc and cancel." The friends had spoken about it a few days previously. But when Tuesday arrived, none of the women were thinking about it any more.

Arne, their friend Judith's present husband, was on the fourth floor of St Joseph's hospital in Cologne. "The fourth floor" - those were the harmless-sounding words the doctors and nurses used to describe the hospice floor, where people went to die. Everything was subdued here: the light, the voices, but most of all people's expectations. On the fourth floor you waited for death. Arne had been waiting six days. And with him Judith, and her friends from the Tuesday group, who were taking turns by her side.

Arne's illness had been like a rollercoaster. Each turn for the better was revealed as an illusion. You were hauled upwards, only to plunge into the abyss on the other side. The pieces of bad news came in quick succession:

"Inoperable."

"Terrible blood values."

"The chemo's not working."

"It's just a matter of time."

That had been nineteen months ago. Nineteen months in which Arne and Judith had avoided the topic of death whenever they could. Judith tried to put aside the thought that Arne would soon no longer be by her side. But the end was still inevitable.

"We must make sure there's always one of us with Judith," Eva had prompted them, and she divided the Tuesday ladies into shifts right round the clock. And yet she was the first one to break ranks. Lene, Eva's thirteen-year-old daughter, threw her mother's timetable into confusion with an accidental somersault off her bike, which left her with a wobbly incisor. Eva could hardly leave her alone in that state.

"Can you fill in for me for a bit?" Eva texted Caroline.

"I'll be finished here in no time," promised Caroline, who was in the middle of a hearing.

But before anyone was there to relieve her, Eva had to go. And so the thing that everyone had tried to prevent had happened: Judith was left alone on the fourth floor for the first time. Alone with her fear.

"We make it as cosy as possible for family to say goodbye," the robust ward sister with the harsh Eastern European accent promised. She just popped by occasionally to change the drips, and to bring Judith tea that smelt suspiciously of rum.

"Illegal, but good," the woman whispered to her conspiratorially. "The fear, it dissolve in alcohol."

"Thank you, sister..."

What was she called again? Judith would have liked to call the woman by her name, but couldn't make head or tail of the adventurous row of consonants that undulated across the Czech nurse's enormous bosom.

"The Czechs are incredibly stingy with their vowels," Arne had joked with her on the first day, in a moment of surprising clarity: "They should make a deal with the Finns to get them distributed more evenly."

Judith laughed tiredly.

"I'm serious," Arne insisted, his voice weak. "Take the word ice-cream: the Czechs say 'zmrzlina'. And the Finns? 'Jäätelöä!'"

Judith had no idea if that was true. She understood only too well what Arne was really doing: even on his death bed, he was trying to cheer Judith up. Until his strength left him.

Judith had to look on helplessly as Arne sank more and more wearily into the pillows, his nose more pointed, his breath growing shallower. His hands fluttered as if they were trying to fly away. With every minute that passed there was a little less of the big, strong man she had fallen head-over-heels in love with five years ago. In spite of his prickly beard and his love of checked flannel shirts.

"He looks as if he might reach for a guitar at any minute and start singing about whiskey, women and guns," Estelle whispered too loudly to the other Tuesday ladies the first time they met him.

“I have a shapeless face and terrible taste in clothes. It’s a part of who I am,” Arne retorted just as boldly.

He felt the same way about Judith. She was a part of him. A whole thirty-six days after he had discovered her in the bookshop between Feng-Shui and Buddhism, Judith and Arne got married on a boat on the Rhine.

“Floating in the stream of life,” Arne proclaimed, “it’s us, all over.”

The Tuesday ladies weren’t the only ones who had been overtaken by events.

“We’re all so happy to meet Julia,” cooed a spherical aunt in a lilac ensemble. She exuded a perfume of mothballs and eau de Cologne.

“Her name’s Judith,” Caroline corrected for the umpteenth time: Arne had a lot of aunts.

The old lady’s face took on a colour that matched the lilac outfit beautifully.

“It doesn’t matter,” Estelle said dismissively. “We only met Anton a few days ago as well.”

“Arne,” the aunt reminded her, not appreciating Estelle’s sense of humour.

“It all came as such a surprise,” people said to each other, and then, in wonder: “Who’d have thought it.”

“Me,” announced Judith. “I knew from the first moment I saw him that I’d grow old with Arne.”

And now fate had landed her on the fourth floor.

Outside, the sun burst from behind the clouds for the first time in days, visiting time began on the wards, and on the fourth floor time dripped slowly away. Fifty-nine minutes until the sister would pop by again, ten minutes for tea, three minutes to straighten Arne’s pillow, thirteen seconds for the droplet of morphine solution to drain from the bag and trickle down the transparent tube.

And where was Caroline? The Tuesday ladies were all welcome. Their company comforted her. Eva brought Tupperware boxes full of delicacies to brighten her mood, Estelle brought the latest gossip, Kiki brought her cheerfulness and a flurry of activity. But even that felt better than this deathly silence, in which you could only wait for the final moment.

There was a noise from the corridor. That was the morticians. You could hear them coming a long way off. The ward beds rattled, but the undertaker’s trolley slid across the linoleum on soft rubber wheels. First you heard a delicate humming, then the heavy footfalls of the relatives leaving the room where someone had died. An hour or two later the workers arrived to disinfect the room with their squeaky cleaning trolley. Then another rattling bed. Judith hated this song of death, which repeated like a canon on the fourth floor: she had already heard it right through a few times in the last few days. It might even be worse than Arne’s rattling breath.

When Arne had been well, she had had a thousand wishes. Now there was only one. If she could just hear his voice again, his exuberant laughter, feel his hands on her skin. Just once. Please.

Judith didn’t know how she would carry on without Arne. She couldn’t imagine leaving the fourth floor and going back to an empty flat. How was she ever supposed to sleep in the bed she had shared with Arne? She had never liked the clunky monstrosity that cluttered up her bedroom.

How strange. Judith would be celebrating her fortieth birthday soon, and she had never bought her own bed. At seventeen she had left the bunk bed she shared at home with her nine-year-old brother, and moved in with her boyfriend. Kai was twenty-seven and the

owner of an eighty centimetre wide mattress. At every movement her arm scraped against the wall, which felt like a grater. Kai had mixed wood shavings into the white emulsion.

“Real woodchip paper is far too expensive,” he decided dictatorially.

Judith loved bright wall hangings in warm colours, but it was Kai’s flat. And Kai’s money, and Kai’s ideas about life. And these included woodchip wallpaper, frugality and wedding rings. Even when it came to sex, Kai loved predictability. He always kissed in a diagonal down to her belly button, whilst working his way to her right thigh with the palm of his hand. As if he'd learnt it by heart from a sex manual. After a few years at his side, Judith was so turned off by it all that she fled to Wolf and his waterbed. And later to Arne. Kai put newspaper on the car seats when it rained. Arne danced barefoot in the park and washed his feet in a puddle.

“Theoretically.” The word cost Arne a huge effort. Judith jumped. Silence had reigned in the room for days, and now a word.

“Theoretically,” Arne murmured again, lifting his hand and letting it fall in exhaustion. Whatever Judith tried, no matter how close she came to his mouth, there was just this one word: "Theoretically!"

On his deathbed, Thomas Mann asked for his glasses, Goethe for more light, and Jesus, according to legend, for nothing. “It is finished,” he is supposed to have announced on the cross, before returning home to his heavenly father. In Judith’s ears, this sounded as if five marketing experts had spent a long time pondering the last words that would have the greatest effect at a crucifixion. Arne's last message to those who survived him, his last word, was "theoretically".

It made no sense. Her first husband, Kai, was the embodiment of theory. Arne was practical, he enjoyed life, he was incurably optimistic, and had great affection for everything that moved between heaven and earth. Would he have gone to Lourdes otherwise, to Our Lady’s Grotto?

The door flew open and wrenched Judith from her thoughts. Caroline. Finally. Finally! In relief, she buried her head in Caroline’s shoulder. The lawyer was not somebody you embraced lightly, but Judith was just so pleased not to be alone any more. Caroline stroked her friend's back gently. “I’m so sorry, Judith.”

“Eva had to leave early. Because of this thing with Lene’s tooth. She fell off her bike.”

“When did it happen?”

Her voice sounded sympathetic. But Caroline was usually the first to criticise when Eva allowed her family to monopolise her too much.

“Oh, yesterday afternoon. When Lene was coming home from school. But the dentist wanted to check it again today.”

“Judith, I’m talking about Arne.”

Caroline fixed Judith with a strange look. It was these watchful, clever, incorruptible eyes that made her opponents fear her in court. Sometimes Judith did, too. Judith turned to Arne in search of help, and discovered what Caroline had realised at first glance. Arne had stopped breathing. The thin skin stretched across his wasted face had a grey sheen to it. He had gone so quietly. As if he didn’t want to frighten her.

3

Arne Nowak died early on a Tuesday evening. He left behind his wife, Judith, a three-room flat in Blumenthalstraße, two dozen flannel shirts, and a ticking time-bomb. But Arne had only become aware of this when he was already captive on the fourth floor. In the vague, twilight state induced by the morphine, the terrifying thought flashed through his fuzzy mind: his pilgrimage diary, the black Moleskine notebook, it was still in the wardrobe. It was a safe place – so long as he was alive. And now he had forgotten about it.

His unshakeable optimism had played a final trick on him: Arne didn't want to admit that his time on earth had run out. Every day he led himself and Judith to believe that the tumour was allowing him more time. Every night he prayed for a reprieve. Why had he not burnt the treacherous notes when he was still blessed with the time and strength to do so? Judith could never know what he had done. No black marks should mar the memory of the years they had spent together.

What if Judith found the book? What if she told the Tuesday ladies about it? What if she showed them the notes? Ten eyes would see more than two. Estelle had a weakness for scandal; Caroline was an infallible lie detector. But once he had reached the fourth floor, he could no longer even manage to picture the consequences of the truth coming to light. Not only for Judith, but for the other Tuesday ladies.

“Theoretically...”

“Theoretically, you can start throwing my things away now,” he tried to advise Judith. “You don't have to burden yourself with all my old junk!” The thought vanished before he had finished thinking it.

“Theoretically,” was all he could get out, before losing the thread and his concentration. For a moment he knew there was something important he had to do, and then there was just the tiredness. A veil of languor fell over all his worries. His mouth was dry. He didn't care. He didn't even want to breathe any more.

Sometimes a word penetrated the fog, sometimes he felt Judith's hand on his. With an effort, he raised his eyelids, saw Judith's moist eyes, and in the next second had forgotten them again. Nothing could be held onto, no mistakes rectified. Sometimes he no longer even knew where he was. It smelt so funny. Like long-gone days. Like cigarettes. Like Eckstein No.5. He recognised the brand straight away. His grandfather had smoked it after the war. “The diary, maybe my grandfather...I should...” went through his head. Then there was nothing more.

Arne Nowak died with the vague feeling of having forgotten to do something important. He was to be proved right.

4

It was a dignified funeral, and an atmospheric wake in Le Jardin. “Deadly boring, that speech,” Arne would have grumbled. But the mourners were satisfied. Only Judith was troubled by her bad conscience.

The feeling of not having made the best of their time together was growing inside her like a tumour. Judith tortured herself with reproach. She had squandered so many moments of their life together. She longed for those first happy days with Arne. Breakfast in bed, lunch in

bed, and in the evening, sleeping together on top of the breadcrumbs. How she would have loved to complain about crumbs in the bed again.

Six months after Arne's death, Judith had the feeling she had reached rock bottom. Without Arne's deep bass, the characteristic sound of his slippers and the papers that he perpetually left lying everywhere, the flat seemed strange to her. She hardly had the heart to throw away things that had belonged to Arne, and which had now become useless. Where she tried, it had left a vacuum: empty pegs on the coat rack, a deserted bedside table, an unused shelf in the bathroom. Judith had nothing to fill the gaps Arne had left behind.

She had not dared tackle Arne's wardrobe yet. Until today. Cautiously, she slid the door open. Her hand brushed gently over his suede jacket, and the corduroy jacket with the oval leather elbow-patches that he had worn in the bookshop, and finally his shirts. The smell of memory was as sweet to her now as these tasteless items of clothing had once been embarrassing. Carefully, she pulled at a flannel monstrosity in brown, green and orange. Something fell out. An object. A book. Arne's diary.

Arne had sellotaped a small picture of a saint to the black cover: on the edge of a stream, surrounded by sheep, a little girl was praying to a vision of the Virgin Mary. Judith knew the story behind this image. The little girl was the miller's daughter Bernadette Soubirous, to whom the Virgin Mary had appeared more than a hundred and fifty years ago. The place where the little girl had had her vision was now the pilgrimage site of Lourdes. Thousands of pilgrims came here daily to seek healing and strength. Pilgrims like Arne.

Arne had begun his journey to Santiago de Compostela two years before he was diagnosed with cancer. It was two thousand four hundred kilometres from his front door in Cologne to the western portal of the imposing Spanish cathedral that was home to the grave of the apostle James. Arne had divided the distance into stages that could each be accomplished in two to three weeks. As a teacher at a vocational college, he had a lot more holiday than Judith, who at the time of her marriage to Arne was working as a receptionist at a therapy centre in Cologne, where she showed clients to the various physio-, occupational, dance, play and speech therapists who had gathered under its roof. After Arne's death, Judith had quit her job - against the advice of her friends.

Arne's pilgrimage was timetabled to take several years. The stops on his journey were meticulously recorded in a diary. Arne had shown Judith a page here and there: a drawing, a poem, a postcard that he had stuck in during one of his stops. Judith had forgotten the book existed. Now it struck her as Arne's most important legacy. With rapt attention, Judith began to leaf through Arne's pilgrimage trips.

Judith was so moved by being reunited with Arne's thoughts that she didn't even hear the phone ring. Page after page, she roamed the Path of St James with him, until the text broke off, mid-sentence. After he had been diagnosed with cancer, Santiago de Compostela had become unreachable. Arne adapted the route. His goal and his hope were now Lourdes, which lay on a neighbouring route to the Path of St James. The black notebook accompanied him on this last trip, and he chose Narbonne Plage as his starting point. This was to be a journey of four hundred and thirty kilometres, divided into seventeen stages. The virginal white of the notebook's last fifty pages, and the tragic reality behind it, hit Judith like a bolt of lightning. Arne had hoped to find healing at Bernadette's spring. He had never reached Lourdes. Completely exhausted, he had broken off his trip. Six weeks later, he was dead.

In the months after Arne's death, Judith had been caught in a kind of paralysis. Some days she managed no more than the bare essentials: breathing in. Breathing out. Breathing in. Breathing out. Now her mission was right there in front of her, as clear as glass.

5

Caroline was worried. The instant the hearing ended, she tried Judith's number again. She had been trying to reach her friend all afternoon. The first Tuesday of the month had come round again, and Caroline wanted to make sure that Judith hadn't forgotten where she was supposed to be. There was no way Judith could miss the discussion of their annual trip.

A legal colleague congratulated her on winning her case with a thumbs-up. Caroline only paid him a moment's notice. She had an uneasy feeling in her stomach. If Judith didn't show up at Le Jardin, she would drive to Blumenthalstraße straight away.

Loud footsteps interrupted her gloomy train of thought. Estelle always claimed you could tell the difference between cheap and expensive shoes by the way they sounded when you walked. Plastic squeaked. These sounded like expensive leather soles: lawyer's shoes. It was actually the representative for the adverse party, Paul Gassner, frantically trying to catch up with her. Even after she had ruined his day, and his good relationship with his client. And not for the first time. Gassner was not without charm, but Caroline wasn't in the mood for a debrief on the trial. She was in a rush to get to Le Jardin, and tried to get rid of him as quickly as possible: "The judge ruled in our favour. I don't see what there is to discuss."

The lawyer was not so easily shaken off. On the contrary. Without further ado, he made her an offer. "Frau Seitz, isn't it about time we worked together? We'd make a fabulous team!"

The way Gassner said it, it sounded like an indecent proposal. Was he after a date with her? For God's sake. She was married. Happily married. "As you know, I'm spoken for. Professionally and privately." That would hit home.

The lawyer was unimpressed. "My dear Caroline," Gassner persisted, "let's be honest. Neither of us is in the first flush of youth. If you want to make a fresh start in your career, now's the right time."

What an absolute cheek! But Caroline didn't give anything away. As a criminal lawyer, she had learnt over the course of many trials not to speak frankly about anything. Although inside, her blood was boiling, she maintained a calm exterior: "Who told you I wanted to change my life?"

"The kids have left home, no sign of any grandchildren yet. Your husband has his practice, his conferences, his sport – and you? Meeting your friends from that French course once a month? That can't be all, can it?"

Caroline paused for a moment. Cogs were whirring in her head. How could a stranger know these things? What did he want from her? Was she mistaken, or was there a note of sympathy in Gassner's voice? For a moment, Caroline even forgot her concern about Judith.

"Please don't hold it against me that I've been making enquiries. It's natural to want to know who one is inviting into one's chambers!" Mr Cocksure explained, giving her an impudent grin.

Caroline's look spoke volumes. She didn't seem like somebody who would care about being spied on. But this man was just trying to laugh it off. He clearly thought he was the George Clooney of the Cologne legal world. Caroline smiled back, just as charmingly:

"Where can I reach you?"

"For clever women and good news, I'm available any time of the day or night."

Feeling sure that he had a chance with Caroline, Gassner scribbled his private number on a business card. "So you'll give my offer some thought?"

"No," said Caroline curtly. "But if I need any information about my life and my mental wellbeing, I'll be in touch."

She snatched the business card out of his hand, and left the man standing there in bewilderment.

As she got into her car, a contented smile lit up her face. Caroline enjoyed being courted. But her esteemed colleague didn't need to know that.

"The other party's lawyer tried to *headhunt* you?" The Tuesday ladies laughed gleefully when, half an hour later, Caroline volunteered the anecdote at the fireside table.

"As if I would get involved with someone who'd been snooping around behind my back," Caroline added.

She felt quite at ease. Because Judith had just walked into Le Jardin. She looked paler and more translucent than the previous time. But she was there. Caroline was so relieved to see Judith that she forgot about the lawyer's strange undertone. In her briefcase, the business card with her colleague's private number lay dormant.

6

Tom had now experienced the first Tuesday of the month seven times. Seven times he had laid the table; seven times tried in vain to attract Kiki's attention.

It was a while now since he had needed to give any thought to which dish was destined for whom. The salad belonged to Judith, who hardly reacted when he served her the lovingly created plateful. Caroline, who was sitting at the head of the table, as if she was chairing the gathering, kept looking over at Judith. Caroline couldn't enjoy her fried potatoes, her beans, or the meat. Something was wrong with Judith. But what?

Estelle didn't notice any of this. With an unbridled appetite, she was tucking into her lobster with a seafood and tarragon foam. Normally Luc didn't put any luxury frills on the menu, but once a month he made an exception for Estelle. Estelle repaid him with generous tips and recommendations amongst her nouveau-riche circle of friends, who made Le Jardin into the 'place to be'. The only thing that interested Estelle more than exquisite food was amorous intrigues. She was revelling in the story about the lawyer. "Caroline's got a secret admirer!"

"It's purely professional, Estelle."

"Who told him about our French course? That was fifteen years ago," Eva wondered.

Caroline was no less baffled. "He even knew about Philipp's diary. Better than I do myself."

Kiki gave a deep sigh. "This sort of thing never happens to me. I still have to say thank you very much when I'm allowed to design another plastic cup for Thalberg. Nobody's ever tried to headhunt me."

At that point, Tom flambéed Kiki's food. He was attempting to impress her with a spectacular flash of flame. She didn't even look at him.

Disappointed, Tom turned to Eva, who was still holding the menu in her hand. Whilst the others had long since started to eat, she still hadn't decided. She tugged nervously at her too-short jumper. How did her friends always manage to look so perfect? Eva had ended up in jeans, a jumper and a ponytail again.

"Liver. Maybe I should have the liver. Frido loves liver."

Her friends rolled their eyes. It was difficult to believe that Eva had once been the most ambitious of the quintet. Fifteen years of marriage to Frido and four children later, she

didn't even know what food she liked any more. Eva only cooked for and thought about other people.

"I'll have the same as her," she decided, to put an end to Tom's waiting. Eva gestured toward Judith, who was pushing a few lonely salad leaves and tiny bits of carrot around her plate, her head bowed. She was also aware that Caroline wasn't letting her out of her sight this evening. With this particular look that she recognised from the hospital. This look you couldn't escape from. The one that forced you to talk.

"I'm fine...really...I'm going out a lot more...I just haven't got round to it this week...I planted more flowers on the grave," she murmured. Judith couldn't stop the tears welling up in her eyes.

"Can I do anything for you?" Caroline enquired.

"Don't keep asking, Caroline, please. Otherwise I'll have to cry again, and I don't want to cry any more..." her voice cracked.

For six months the friends had been watching Judith torture herself. It was time to do something about it. They made an effort to cheer her up. "So let's get down to it. Where are the Tuesday ladies going to go this year?"

Luc nudged his son: "Look, watch what's about to happen!"

In fact: Caroline had hardly uttered the sentence when a tumult broke out. Estelle was the first to make her wishes known: "I want to sleep under the stars. There don't have to be many: five stars for the hotel; two for the restaurant."

Kiki interrupted her straight away: "I need the big city. I want to go out and party. I'm all on my own at home. The day's coming when the only birthday cards I'll get will be from Tchibo and T-mobile."

"It's all fine by me," Eva put in, "I'll go with the majority."

Luc grinned. "This will go on for at least an hour. Then Caroline will have the final say, and there'll be a ceasefire and we'll serve champagne."

Caroline tried to bring order to the proceedings with some concrete suggestions: "A client was telling me recently about a little guesthouse in Austria. It's great for walking. And the tennis court..."

The others would never find out what was so great about the tennis court, because Estelle's mind was already made up: "Guesthouse? That sounds like twin rooms to me. I'm not sleeping in a twin room; I don't even have one of those at home."

"I'm not going to come this year." Judith had spent the whole meal thinking about how she was going to tell her friends. Now her quiet dissent was lost in the confusion of voices.

"The guesthouse has thousands of possibilities. We don't have to..."

"I'm not going to come this year!" Judith repeated, so loudly that it shocked everyone.

An awkward silence fell over the group. All four looked speechlessly at Judith.

"What did you say?" Caroline asked.

"I'm not going to come."

Comments rained down on Judith from all sides.

"Why not?"

"What do you mean?"

"You of all people should be getting away from it all."

"What made you decide that?"

"Of course you're coming."

In the restaurant, the other customers had all stopped eating. They were watching the women's animated discussion with undisguised curiosity.

“I found Arne’s diary,” Judith tried to justify her decision. The Tuesday ladies were still baffled.

“What does that have to do with our trip?”

Judith gave a faltering explanation of what she meant: “Arne kept a diary. Just when he was travelling. On the Path of St James. He wanted to go to Lourdes. Because of the holy water.”

Her eyes filled with tears. She grew quieter and quieter. “If he’d got there...these, these white pages in Arne's diary, that's the worst part!”

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with our trip,” said Caroline with a shake of her head.

Judith tried to sound more resolute: “I don’t have time to come with you. I’m going to finish Arne’s journey.”

Finally it was out. Judith knew what this meant for her best friends. None of them had ever deviated from their tradition. It would be the first time in fifteen years that they wouldn't all be together for their annual trip.

Judith hunched her shoulders defensively, expecting her friends to throw at her all the things she had already told herself a thousand times.

“Six months, Judith! Isn’t it time you started having a life again?”

“You have to say goodbye to Arne.”

“Judith! Look forward! Don’t look back!”

“Have you tried going to confession?”

That had been the priest at Arne’s funeral, whose words were still ringing in her ears. But why should Judith go to confession? Why focus on the things you'd done wrong in life? She hated that about Catholicism. You felt guilty all the time. For everything possible. And for impossible things as well.

“Rubbish, Catholicism forgives everything. That’s a tremendous comfort,” Arne would have told her.

Judith carried on a constant inner dialogue with her dead husband. She kept thinking about how she could stop thinking about Arne. At least for an hour, or even for five minutes.

“I think,” Judith added, “I’ll only find peace when I’ve walked his path to the end. Arne's diary has to have an ending.” It was another attempt to make her friends understand. But how *could* the Tuesday ladies understand Judith's problems? Judith had never dared tell anyone about her feelings of guilt. Or about so many of the other things that tormented her.

Caroline did her best to interpret Judith’s words. “You want to go on a pilgrimage to Lourdes?”

Judith nodded. “On the same route that Arne took.”

“So how does that work? Do you do it on foot, or do pilgrims have to crawl on their knees?” Estelle asked, earning an energetic kick in the shin for her trouble. Discretion was not Estelle’s forte. “You don’t have to kick me, Eva. It’s a reasonable question. Isn’t it, Judith?”

Judith didn’t respond to Estelle’s anarchic remark. “It’s my way of saying goodbye to Arne, of closing that chapter in my life. I just have to, I don’t know...”

She had promised herself she would be brave. But the tears kept running down her cheeks. Judith's hands were trembling as she reached for her glass. It tipped over. The red wine spread out over the tablecloth like a pool of blood.

“I’ll come with you. I’ll be your companion.” Caroline had arrived at an instant decision. “You don’t think I’d let you trek through the wilderness on your own, do you? In the shape you're in?”

Judith was so surprised by this turn of events that she stopped crying. “You'd do that for me?”

Caroline nodded. She knew her friend only too well. Judith was given to procrastination and doubt; her life was messy and makeshift, she was always starting something, and had done nothing since Arne's death. Pilgrims, Catholicism, adoration of the Virgin, miracle cures: all nonsense, Caroline thought. But still, she would make sure Judith put her plan into action. You didn't *have* problems: you *solved* them. Even if that meant going on a pilgrimage.

“You can count me in, too,” Kiki joined in. She had a feeling this was a crazy idea, but sometimes you had to make a radical move if you wanted to achieve anything: “Maybe you can pray for a nice man in the Grotto as well as for healing. I'm on the brink of buying a cat so I have something to make a fuss about.”

The friends laughed. They knew better: the problem was more that Kiki found it impossible to settle down. There were plenty of suitors, and plenty of beds. But Kiki never stayed longer than a few months.

Her friends' sympathy warmed Judith's heart and gave her a little solace. Caroline's eyes moved to Estelle. “Anyone else?”

Estelle avoided meeting anyone's gaze. For pity's sake: a pilgrimage. She even employed a dog-walking service for her poodle. Why spend an hour and a half ambling along the Rhine when you could fly to London in that time to go shopping? Rather than giving an answer, she subjected the wine bottles to a thorough inspection. As if this turn of events wasn't enough: were they *all* empty?

Eva raised her hand shyly: “If everyone else is in agreement, then so am I. I should be getting more exercise, in any case.”

For the hundredth time, she pulled her too-tight jumper over her conspicuous curves, but the next second, she was swiping a piece of meat from Caroline's plate. Typical Eva. To begin with she just had the salad, and then she ended up eating all the leftovers. This bad habit, which she also practised at home, had over the years left her ten kilos overweight, with a chronic bad conscience. Tomorrow she was definitely going to start the pineapple diet. And because today was already a write-off, she also finished off the lobster in its tarragon bubble-bath.

Estelle waved the wine list. She was actually just trying to get the attention of Tom the waiter, but Caroline took it as a vote in favour of the motion: “Estelle is with us as well. Passed unanimously. The Tuesday ladies are going on a pilgrimage to Lourdes.”

“I'm sorry?” Under her carefully-applied foundation, Estelle's face turned pale. Her eyes were filled with naked horror. Caroline took no notice. This moment was all about Judith.

“We can't take your grief away, Judith. But we can walk that path with you.”

Judith was moved as she looked into their encouraging faces. The unconditional affection overwhelmed her. If they had met today, it was likely that none of them would have become friends. But fifteen years together made all their differences unimportant. Judith had seldom been so acutely aware of their bond as at this moment.

Estelle had not yet recovered from her shock when Tom arrived at the fireside table. Luc saw with satisfaction how well-practised his movements had become. In six short months he had succeeded in transforming Tom into a real waiter. The boy had talent. And no wonder: he took after his father.

“May I serve the champagne now?” Tom asked politely.

Estelle could only croak.

“I think I need a doctor.”