

Sample translation pp. 7-27 and pp. 37-41

YOU OF ALL PEOPLE by Monika Peetz

Novel

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Publication: September 2016 (Paperback)
256 pages

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He's not one of them

Everything was running like clockwork. Flaming torches led the guests down the path along the castle walls from the car park to the brightly lit orangery. My sisters had spent half of Saturday decorating the room, which had floor-length pane windows and an imposing glass roof, for the big party. The ABC team, as my father used to call my elder sisters, was working in rare harmony. Beate, the oldest and most strategic sibling, was in charge of everything from key decisions to minor details, while middle sister Carla and her daughters were taking care of culinary matters. They were doing everything they could this evening to support Anja, the youngest of the trio. My task, as the little brother, was clearly defined: I was responsible for everything heavy, grimy, greasy or electric. I was balancing on a ladder, high above the heads and the hustle and bustle, and fastening the last LED-lit balloons above the long table.

Anja, the centre of attention, was still running around in her underwear. She was adjusting the tablecloths that my three nieces had personally dyed with water-based ink, making last-minute alterations to the seating arrangements and testing the cold buffet and the quality of the wine. Anja insisted that everything had to be identical to the first time, even if everything was different.

She was fretful as she instructed Beate in the secrets of modern digital technology. 'You just have to press the button,' she trilled. 'This camera's foolproof.'

Generally, it was Anja who was in charge of recording family events for posterity, but on this special day it was to be my technologically challenged sister Beate who was on chronicling duty.

'And what's this button for?' she asked.

'You don't need to understand it – you just need to *do it*,' Anja bawled at her.

I usually avoided family get-togethers. I had grown up amid my elder sisters' catfights. Sarcastic taunts, poisonous digs and inquisitorial questioning were familiar territory to me. One of my sisters could always be depended upon to ask if I'd finally found a proper job, or at least a steady girlfriend, whereas I would have preferred a steady job and an *improper* girlfriend. I edged my way out of the danger zone before my sisters' combined anxiety could home in on a new target.

The guests arrived in dribs and drabs and well before the scheduled time. The first part of the ceremony was going to be held in the garden. None of the guests let the light drizzle, cold feet and muddy ground dampen their enthusiasm, for no one wanted to miss this special occasion. Instead of champagne, waiters served warm punch and hot chocolate with a kick. People whispered to each other around braziers, the only source of heat on this unseasonably cold May evening. 'Have you ever been to something like this before?' could be heard from many mouths.

Outside, there was an atmosphere of tense expectation; inside, there was panic. Carla tweaked, twisted and tugged at the dress. Anja's slender figure was all at sea in the baggy white tulle wedding dress that would transform any woman into a cream puff. She had lost a great deal of weight since purchasing the stately robe. Now she was struggling for composure.

'You don't have to go through with it,' I said.

'I'm going to have a great time,' Anja replied defiantly. 'I've been looking forward to this moment for months.'

It was a risky enterprise to contradict my sisters in a crisis, something I'd learned to my cost as the youngest of the family.

'The guests are getting fidgety,' Beate declared tyrannically. 'We need to get started.'

'Ready?' asked Clara.

Instead of answering, Anja offered me her arm. Under normal circumstances it was a father's task to hand over the bride to her fate. However, due to the

Morbach family's chronic lack of men, I was now stuck with this task. Arm in arm, and at an appropriately solemn pace, I led my sister out into the garden. Anja's fingernails were boring into my upper arm, and I could feel her thin body quivering. The double doors opened. There was a surge of applause. The music struck up, but instead of a wedding march we were hit by the joyous beat of Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive'. My eyes roamed inquisitively over the crowd of heads to find that there was not a single man among the guests. Maybe it was normal that Anja had only invited girlfriends to celebrate her big moment this evening. But how was I supposed to know how to behave at this kind of event: it was, after all, my very first divorce party. The celebration was being held in the same place where Anja had sworn eternal fidelity to her ex-husband Joshi. The air stewardess and the ambitious Internet retailer had covered the ground in record time. An explosive romance had been followed by an express wedding, a sudden meltdown and a dramatic divorce. Eternity had come to an end at Schöneberg family court a mere twenty-two months after it had started.

'Welcome to the single women's club,' my sister Beate called cheerfully.

This battle cry was the signal for the spectacle to begin. I just about managed to leap to one side before the first spray-can salvo hit Anja. It was time to ritually destroy the white wedding dress that had brought her so little luck. Bought at the time for the most wonderful day of her life, the expensive piece of clothing was the last physical proof of the greatest mistake of her life. Purple paint splattered the white silk, followed by green and yellow and blue. Anja stuck her fingers in one of the splotches, and a trail of yellow hands ran across the dress like the prints of a passionate lover. Gloria Gaynor rejoiced, the bass thumped, the laughter grew louder, paint dripped from the dress and Beate took photos for the family album. With a little help from her friends, Anja drowned her romantic sorrows in acrylic paint and red wine. I remained the only male permitted to take part in the ceremony.

'This is my little brother,' Anja explained. 'He's not one of the enemy.'

I spent dinner squashed between a stewardess colleague of Anja's, who only ever referred to her ex-husband as 'my little worm', and Anja's childhood friend

Sanne, who described the benefits of a low-fat yoghurt breakfast in great detail to the gathering. No wonder she was already twice divorced: she probably only had sex to burn calories. After two hours overdosing on Sanne, I'd had enough. 'I'm against quotas for women,' I burst out.

I didn't need to see any statistics to know that there were more women than men in Germany. My entire life had been defined by a surfeit of women. Apart from my sisters and nieces, my family comprised Beate's changing partners – she was now exclusively into women – and one chronically absent and one newly divorced brother-in-law. The female nursery teachers, primary school teachers and secondary school teachers of my early years had been followed by female colleagues, bosses, neighbours and a woman chancellor. It wasn't so easy with women – not in my private life, and much less so professionally. Every time I was within reach of a steady job, I could bet my life that five minutes before applications closed, a woman would pluck it from my grasp. If failure was character-building, I had developed more character than I could handle over the past few months.

'I'm against quotas for women,' I repeated. 'You've got to be allowed to say that.'

You weren't. Not on this special day, and not to Sanne.

'Sexual frustration?' she said, glaring at me. 'Or just a premature midlife crisis?'

I was spared having to answer, for right then Carla came into the room, balancing the divorce cake on her fingertips. Gasps and applause rippled through the orangery. A lone figure in a wedding dress was enthroned at the pinnacle of the virgin-white, flower-adorned cake. A trail of bloody red ran down the three tiers to the bottom of the cake, where the discarded husband was lying in what was meant to be a pool of blood. It cut me to the quick to see Joshi like this: unlike Anja I had got on very well with my brother-in-law.

'So?' asked Anja as she handed me a piece of cake. 'How are things going with Sanne?'

I had no idea what she was talking about. 'Nothing's going anywhere,' I said. 'Except me, perhaps – away from here.'

‘You really think I haven’t noticed you’re interested in Sanne?’ Anja insisted. ‘When we were younger, you used to come into my bedroom every time Sanne stayed the night.’

I couldn’t fathom why Anja, newly divorced, couldn’t wait to get someone else into the situation a divorce judge had just helped her to escape.

‘Who says I’m single?’ I countered.

‘Experience,’ Anja replied tersely.

I had no desire to discuss my relationship status with Anja, although I did ponder why I was still on my own. Using the ingenious mathematical formulas developed by astrophysicist Frank Drake and the regional statistical office, whose website provided extensive demographic data, I had painstakingly assessed the chances of meeting my dream woman in Berlin. The formula had originally been designed to calculate how many alien species one could expect to find in the Milky Way. I had adapted the variables to deliver a mathematically robust answer to the question of how many potential girlfriends I might expect to meet in Berlin. My exclusion criteria weren’t especially eccentric. She should live within a fifteen-mile radius, have a steady job, be no more than five years younger or older than me *and* single. She would preferably belong to a sports club (a little more sport wouldn’t do me any harm) and like horror films (my teenage collection had been waiting a long time to be rediscovered). This approach whittled the 1,779,366 women registered as living in Berlin down to roughly 4,000 possible candidates. I then had to allow for the fact that about 5% of women appealed to my eye. Conversely, *I* would only score with about 3% at most. My final inventory amounted to six women who, on a purely mathematical basis, ticked all my boxes. The logistical challenge was to find those six in the urban jungle.

‘I might soon have some news,’ I explained cryptically.

‘Tell me,’ Anja demanded; patience had never been her strong suit. She beckoned to Beate and Carla. ‘Tom’s got a new girlfriend,’ she announced.

Three pairs of eyes lit up in anticipation of long-awaited news about my love life. I was doubtful whether my sisters, none of whom was experienced or interested in maths, would think much of my theories.

'I'm going for a smoke,' I said to curtail the conversation.

'Since when do you smoke?' Beate asked with irritation.

'Since now,' I said.

I wasn't the only one whom Anja's divorce party left a little cold. Out in the garden I came across Carla's daughter Florentine, who was poking around in the flowerbeds of the castle grounds with a stick and dropping the worms she found into an empty cola bottle. Her skinny body, large teeth, short hair and mud-coloured hoodie made her look like the nephew I didn't have.

'For my compost,' she explained. 'I'm breeding worms.'

Florentine and I were alike in many ways. She didn't think much of convivial family get-togethers or romantic disasters either.

'Anja's only pretending she's happy,' was her trenchant analysis. 'I think she's only being so loud so that no one notices how much she misses Joshi.' Twelve-year-old Florentine was smarter than all the adults around her. She cast a sad glance through the large windows at Anja, who was leading the dance as her two sisters clapped along. She was performing an eccentric solo.

'I've got something for you,' said Florentine, fishing a crumpled invitation from her trouser pocket. Printed on the finest paper, it was from the chamber of commerce and requested the company of Mrs Florentine Bender at a Young Business Club networking meeting. 'Mum won't let me go,' she complained. 'She forces me to go to bed at eight o'clock – when we aren't celebrating a divorce, that is.'

Florentine was a constant source of surprises to me. 'How did you get an invitation from the chamber of commerce?'

'I applied to them for a start-up loan,' my niece explained earnestly. 'For a new business idea.'

'But you're yet to tell them that you're only twelve years old,' I advised her.

Florentine nodded. 'Young entrepreneurs face discrimination everywhere – even within their own families.'

On the dancefloor the ABC team had welcomed Florentine's sisters into their midst and were dancing in an exuberantly silly fashion. We didn't appear to be missed.

'Don't you get enough pocket money to fund your plans?' I asked.

'Mum stopped it after I scorched the kitchen table during my last experiment,' Florentine admitted.

I was amazed by my niece's inventiveness. 'How big a loan do you need?'

'Fifty euros,' said Florentine.

'That's a lot,' I pointed out.

'I can offer you a stake in the company,' my niece added gravely. She had read up on the matter and was approaching her funding problem in a highly professional manner. Her father's business acumen had obviously been passed down to the next generation, but unfortunately Alexander was in Russia. Or was it Asia? Ever since my own father had walked out on my sixth birthday, all the male entrants into the Morbach family had turned out to be but fleeting guests. Anja was divorced, Beate was attracted to women and Carla's husband – and Florentine's father – was so overworked as a sales executive that he seemed like a distant relative whenever he pitched up in his own family. I hoped he at least took a little time when he was away to feel some pride in Florentine.

I pulled out my wallet. 'This is a silent investment,' I warned her, putting my finger to my lips. I had no desire to pick a fight with Carla.

'I'll mail you the business plan and the contracts,' Florentine promised. 'You go to the chamber of commerce networking meeting and report back to me.'

I was not surprised by the determination with which she pressed the invitation into my hand. I was less worried about her future in business than I was about my own.

'Who knows,' she added, 'maybe you'll meet a nice woman there.'

I gave a wan smile. If twelve year olds were wondering about my love life, the situation was more serious than I'd thought.

One & 1

The Sunday after the divorce party began with a hangover – and nothing else. Six days a week I could convince myself that I was enjoying my single life and the fact that I was responsible only for myself. On Sundays, however, the streets were full of couples with their arms around each other, families in weekend mode and new lovers still radiating the intimacy of their first night together. My diary was as empty as my fridge. No one had bought my favourite yoghurt, ‘that salami you love’ or a bottle of Prosecco for breakfast in bed. The fact that I didn’t really appreciate either Prosecco or crumbs in my bed did little to console me for my Sunday blues. Even my well-worn penguin soft toy was hanging its head. I could count my blessings that penguins were monogamous creatures, for otherwise it would probably have left me long ago out of sheer boredom.

Florentine was right: something had to be done. On average, men got married at 33.6 years old to woman four years their younger. Statistics showed that most couples had known each other for five years by the time they proceeded to the altar. In those conditions, and with my twenty-ninth birthday looming, I had every reason to panic. If my peers embarked on relationships galore, one of which would end in marriage, the threat was growing that one of my six ladies was this very minute getting friendly with someone else. With every day I spent alone, the chances were diminishing that my relationship status would change during my lifetime. Women were everywhere – except in my bed. I was single, and had been almost since birth, if one discounted my relationship with Sophie.

I had twenty-three days left until my birthday on 21 June. The probability that in this short timespan I would run into one of the six women who might mathematically complete my existence in the bakery around the corner, at the dentist’s or in the street was virtually zero. After all, I also had to add the Tom factor to everything else. Even if my dream woman were to be sitting opposite

me in the underground, it was extremely likely that my behaviour would be so peculiar, so quirky that any candidate would run away in horror before she could fall in love with me. Frank Drake's formula expressed in figures something I had long suspected: I would probably encounter an alien before I met my wife-to-be.

The search for the perfect woman was like the hunt for the God particle. Scientists had found out in the 1960s that some such elementary particle must exist, but the quest for concrete evidence had gone on for decades. I don't want to think about how much money the European nuclear research centre CERN had to spend to prove that the theoretically possible was real.

If fate did not turn up any results, then I'd have to lend it a hand with scientific methods. For me the formula for happiness was *One & 1*. That was the name of a dating website which, to my great joy, was run by mathematicians. The company's software matched people according to the information customers had entered themselves. The catalogue of characteristics contained one hundred and fifty questions. The people at *One & 1* were firmly convinced that algorithms were the key to undying love. If any of my potential partners was on the website, I was bound to find her in record time; all I needed to do was sign up. I'd been studying their offer and the small print for days, but now the time had come to leave theory behind and log in. Within seconds I'd received the automatic answer from Nico, *One & 1*'s founder. *Great to have you with us*, he wrote. *Take your time answering the questions, but don't overdo it: spontaneity always pays off!*

I'd never been good at performing on command, not even in my specialist subject, maths. Whenever I was called up to the blackboard at school, I could be sure that my mind would have emptied by the time I reached the front.

I stared at the computer screen, frozen like a rabbit faced with a hungry snake. Height, age, weight: in a flash I entered the exact details. However, the personal questions overwhelmed me. I spent half of Sunday pondering whether I'd rather go to a desert or a forest, like to spend my holidays in a sailing boat, on a bike or sunbathing, and whether I preferred classical music to pop, or Bach flower remedies to aspirin. How was I supposed to know if the glass was

half full, half empty or simply unsuitable? To cap it all, I was meant to rate my answer on a scale of one to ten. The question of how important order was in my life compared to the wish to have children and a healthy work-life balance had me racking my brains for hours. Selecting the right photo for my profile that would entice female candidates to get in touch with me was even harder. Was this down to my awkward demeanour, my weird clothes, the side parting in my unkempt hair or my chronically startled photo expression? I looked like an unkissed frog even without any nerdish coke-bottle glasses. My stomach was in knots as I sent my profile out into the world. The great wait had begun.

From zero to a hundred

Nothing. Nought. Nada. No sign of life from *One & I*. It was obviously asking too much of the system to find a partner for me from within the existing data. That Monday morning began like any other Monday. At 6.45 I jumped out of bed, put on my watch, drew first the left then the right curtain and made directly for the shower, where for six minutes I alternated between hot and cold to jumpstart my circulation. I'd picked my clothes the night before to avoid wasting the start of the day on trivialities. I pulled on blue, snakeskin-patterned shoes to go with a pair of beige trousers and a checked shirt. This striking footwear was a present from my ex-brother-in-law Joshi, who had given me an assignment to test the durability of a new kind of rubber soles for his webshop. Looking at their eccentric design, I wondered if I might not be taking my assignment a tiny bit too seriously.

A hellish din prevented me from thinking straight. 'Hands up nigga, hands up, hands up in the air,' a rapper yelled. Horrible gangster hip-hop with a pounding electronic bassline was leaking through the ceiling, accompanied by incessant stamping on the wooden floor above. Kimmie, a slightly overweight twelve-year-old wannabe hip-hop star, had recently moved in upstairs from me. Her single mother owned several hair removal studios, which were such a success that she could afford to employ a horde of Polish builders to convert our house's ramshackle attic into a luxury penthouse. After months of hammering, banging and drilling, Tamara and Kimberly had moved in shortly after Easter – and Kimmie had been dancing on my head ever since. Despite her excess kilos the girl dreamed of making it big in show business. From watching hundreds of casting shows she had internalised that constant repetition and training could earn you a stage career. I had my back to the wall: with an eye to her daughter's future accommodation needs, Tamara had purchased the lower floor as well – with me as her tenant.

Before the Schmitz ladies had moved in, my morning routine had hummed like a clock mechanism in which every cog combined smoothly with all the others. I now had a fifteen-minute window to nip out unseen to the baker's before the mother-daughter duo set off to school and work. For safety's sake I'd check through the spyhole every morning whether I ran the risk of getting embroiled in a morning conversation or, worse, of being given a sniffing by Paris and Aphrodite, elegant Afghan hounds who thought they were something special. Like a cat burglar I would sneak out to Schwab's bakery, where I bought two buns, half a loaf every three days and a fresh packet of coffee twice a month from an unvarying and invariably indifferent sales assistant called Annette. My ex-girlfriend Sophie had always tried to persuade me to work my way through Schwab's huge range of products, but I was a creature of habit. 'Instead of agonising at the baker's about what I want to eat each day, I can think uninterruptedly of you,' I told her.

Shortly afterwards, she decided to go without my fresh buns and warm thoughts.

Sophie was gone, and the Schmitzes were as present as anyone could possibly be. On a good day I would negotiate the staircase without any collision; on bad days, I would run straight into my new landlady and be subjected on an empty stomach to conversations about the weather, the refugee crisis, Kimberly's next performance, her dogs' digestion or world peace. Today was a particularly bad day. Hopelessly entangled in their retractable leashes, the Afghans were blocking my route home. From inside their flat, Kimmie was screaming out into the staircase that she could find neither her second shoe nor her homework nor indeed her key.

Tamara dismissed the morning chaos with a smile. 'I've got something for you,' she announced, pulling from her oversized handbag a piece of advertising merchandise that invited me to the opening of her new branch in the shopping centre at Leipziger Platz. An overpowering stench of soap gave a clue to the contents of the smart cardboard box.

‘Drop in for a glass of rosé,’ she purred. ‘It’s time we got to know each other a little better.’

Exhausted, I gazed deep into my espresso and ate first the bottom and then the top of a bun at the folding kitchen table. After the second cup of coffee I’d sufficiently recovered from meeting Tamara and her daughter that I felt both psychologically and physically able to get down to some work. As a freelance business consultant, June was traditionally the most non-lucrative of my many non-lucrative months. As the sun grew warmer, it sent the small business owners and entrepreneurs I helped with their business planning and logistics into a summer frenzy, which appropriate temperatures could easily extend into October. My clientele, which was only really to be found in the capital, lived to the rhythm of the seasons. Why should anyone want to analyse company data when they could be sitting in a beer garden with likeminded individuals dreaming up innovative ideas? My lack of a time-consuming private life left me ample time to devote to acquiring new customers. I’d jotted the names of some potential business partners and ideal target clients on a piece of paper. I drank an unscheduled cup of coffee to buy some time and run through my telephone spiel once more. *Hello, my name is Thomas Morbach. I have studied you and your [insert product or service] and I’ve got a few ideas for how to save you a significant amount of money every year. I’d be very glad to meet you and discuss them.*

Relevant telemarketing guides recommended that you should smile while presenting unsolicited advertising. Apparently, an open, friendly approach paid dividends, even if it was all an act.

I drank another cup of coffee: a little extra caffeine made my voice more cheerful. By noon my heart was going so haywire that for health reasons I decided to postpone the cold calls until the following day.

Life as a freelance was more difficult than I’d imagined. Back in the day, I had in fact enjoyed a meteoric start to my career. I had just finished my fifth year of pure mathematics at Frankfurt University (deliberately far from Berlin, my

sisters and my memories) when I accepted a summer job as a stand-in errand boy in a bank. Day after day I pushed my squeaking trolley laden with mail, internal memos, records and sandwich orders around the twenty-eight-storey tower block.

After two weeks of prolonged treks around the mazy corridors, meeting rooms and rows of office, one of the younger investment bankers, Mareike Vogel, summoned me to her office to obtain some answers.

‘How do you do it?’ she asked. ‘You deliver the mail three hours earlier than our permanent employee does.’

I had nothing to report other than that I’d memorised the office numbers, floors and names, and developed a computer-assisted distribution system at home. Henceforth Mrs Vogel regularly consulted me whenever she encountered a logistical problem. Shortly before Christmas I was given my own desk on the third floor. Crushed by constant financial worries, I gave in to the temptation to abandon pure mathematics and take a shorter path to full-time occupation. From the zero in the mailroom to a corner office in a hundred days. I didn’t work in the front line but in the bank’s back office, where the offices were crowded, the wages meagre, the suits ready-made and the shoes well-worn. Instead of studying I now spent fourteen hours a day calculating the risks of Vogel’s department’s securities deals. Her ambition to develop new and ever more complicated financial products was quite breathtaking. Nobody cared that none of them stacked up. The higher one went in the office block, the less the bankers understood the figures and statistics I churned out day after day. Mrs Vogel regularly railed at us ‘quants’ (as quantitative analysts were known) for being bean counters and stuck-in-the-muds. Our department was one of the first to be dissolved when Mareike Vogel’s castles in the air came crashing down in the credit crisis. Mareike Vogel received a bonus and was promoted to the board, whereas the back office was collectively fired for proven incompetence. With no degree and a role in the risk management of a stricken bank as my only professional qualification, flight into freelancing was an act of pure self-defence, as was returning to Berlin.

In record time I found an affordable flat in Friedrichshain, and the small start-ups that had moved into my stylishly run-down area of town became my first clients. Young do-gooders tinkering with environmental concepts; event agencies; a corner shop that had entirely dispensed with throw-away packaging; a housewife who delivered her own homemade cakes by bike; Pottery Pat, who bought up old crockery and applied photos to transform plates into works of art; tireless app developers: all of these entrepreneurs were chronically broke and chronically full of beans. They fired off ideas into space at an astonishing rate, as if their brainchildren were firecrackers on New Year's Eve. Their lives were driven by the undaunted hope that they would invent the next Ebay, Facebook, Snapchat or Amazon *and* have enough leisure time while doing this. Since tomorrow's captains of enterprise were short of cash today, I worked on the basis of provisions and stakes in their firms. My clients called themselves 'entrepreneurs' and their approach was that of the blind hen that eventually finds a grain of corn simply by dint of pecking for long enough. The laws of probability were on their side. My customers may have been blind hens, but they were indefatigable: if an idea to organise city tours as relaxed marathons didn't catch on, then maybe a new website providing personalised travel guides, or a start-up that amalgamated lottery syndicates to increase their chances of winning, would. I helped them find start-up loans and EU grants, and deal with logistical challenges and – far more frequently – insolvency. All for an hourly rate. I had been working for less than the market price since the introduction of a start-up bonus. I had a colourful collection of company T-shirts, an endless range of cotton bags with cool prints on them, and headaches at the end of every month about how I was going to pay my rent. Florentine was right: this networking meeting couldn't have come at a better time.

[...]

The eighth dwarf

Her name was *L!saH* and she knocked me sideways. Her email began with the promising line: *Alone among dwarves.*

In year three I was in the school drama club, she wrote. I was top in German and longed to play Snow White. Unfortunately I'd skipped a year, so I was much smaller than the others, and during the dress rehearsal they realised that they couldn't tell me apart from the dwarves. In the end, Ilona from the parallel class got the part, and I was belatedly cast as chief dwarf. And that's how it stayed: I was the eighth dwarf, one of the boys, their best mate. Ilona got the prince and had a baby before leaving school; I embarked on a career. But can this be it? Going to work every day and collapsing into an unmade bed every evening?

I fell for the eighth dwarf straight off. Nineteen days before my twenty-ninth birthday my life seemed to be changing for the better. In Joshi I had a new client who had me working round the clock, as well as the prospect of a fulfilling love life. The woman who had made such an outstanding entrance not only shared my sense of humour; she must also have some relationship with numbers – hopefully, an erotic one. And she was sporty too. Every morning before work she would stop at Schlachten Lake to train for the Müggel Lake swimming race.

For five days I worked on the perfect answer. I honed it until it was a harmonious balance of questions and storytelling. If *L!saH* were to be the woman of my life, she would be able to decode the secret message that I was after an equal partnership. I had more trouble signing off. I was aware that the sole purpose of the first email was to overcome the hurdle that stood between me and an actual date.

'Come up with something,' Joshi suggested. 'Something creative. Artistic ambition always appeals to women.'

Since I had only been in charge of lighting for the school play, I had no choice but to be honest. *In January I signed a new health insurance policy, which*

also covers family members, I wrote. I'd be delighted if you would become a member of my family.

'That is the most unromantic letter in the whole universe,' Joshi snorted, when I asked him for his opinion. I decided to ignore Joshi's hilarity. Joshi was a wannabe ladykiller; he didn't have a clue about long-term relationships.

I rewrote the passage fourteen times and experimented with eight different fonts, especially ones that Google classified as potentially romantic. I eventually rejected the squiggly ones. My text suddenly looked as kitsch as a wedding announcement by one of the seven dwarves and Snow White. I finally settled on a font whose numbers had lines along the top and the bottom, ensuring that they blended nicely into the text.

L!saH let me stew for fifty-one hours and thirty-six minutes over whether it might not have been better to lie to her about my insurance policy. Maybe she had lots of other dwarves to choose from? After two days I received a short email. Lisa ignored my health insurance hint, and instead abruptly changed the subject. *Do you play pool?* she wondered.

I racked my brains as to what the proper and desired answer might be. Perhaps *L!saH* had come third in the Berlin Pool Championships and couldn't imagine spending her life with someone who took no interest in her hobby. How long would I have to practise until I could sink a few balls without any mishaps? I had no doubts about my ability to calculate the trajectories the balls should take, but execution was a factor of uncertainty. I'd always been better at theory than practice.

After weighing up all the alternatives long and hard, I opted for a confident forward defensive. *No pool, I wrote. Not even to swim in.*

Something else we have in common!!! she wrote back enthusiastically. *I can't play either.*

Immediately I replied, *Why did you ask then?* Lisa obviously liked dealing in ricochets.

My mother plays pool, she answered. She thinks you can expect great things of a man who handles a cue elegantly. I hate pool.

Nico, *One & i's* head of data, advised willing customers to delay answering contact emails for a while to leave room for their imagination to express itself. I decided to ignore him. We were chatting in real time.

When were you last truly happy? I asked.

Her reply was short. *Sunday at 9.45 pm.*

Five minutes later she added, *I'm happy every Sunday at 9.45.*

Was Lisa a TV-obsessed couch potato? I hoped that she at least meant the crime films on Channel One and wasn't a fan of the other channel's romantic comedies, in which lords of the manor, country noblemen and plantation owners in Africa whispered flowery love declarations in front of scenic backdrops.

CSI? I guessed hopefully.

Laundrette, she wrote back. Every Sunday I haul 13 kilos of washing there. An hour and a half later, my life lies clean and uncreased before me. I like it when my wardrobe smells of a fresh start.

What is your most precious possession? went one question from Nico's official list of questions. *Not having to have many possessions,* Lisa had answered. Apparently not owning a washing machine was one of the high points of her life.

A feeling of missing someone I'd never seen caught me violently off guard. I could already see myself in her dazzling white bedroom from which every trace of past failures had been washed away, and I attempted the ultimate push: *Can you send me photo of yourself?*

The picture that fluttered into my inbox ten minutes later dispelled any doubts I'd had. I typed the final, decisive question: *When can we meet?*

[END OF SAMPLE]