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Heinz Strunk

IT'S ALWAYS SO LOVELY WITH YOU

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A catastrophic love story.

He's a musician in his mid-forties and is not really unhappy with his dull life. His girlfriend Nadine has a good income as a mathematical economist, and the recording studio also pays a few bills. Dreams of a career as an artist are long buried and no longer painful.

Then he meets Vanessa, a very young and extremely beautiful young actress. And for some inexplicable reason she is interested in him. Surprised that she knows his music. She's a huge fan, her mother was too, back in the day. And now she tries to convince him to give it all another go. He falls in love with her. How ridiculous!

They embark on an affair. He leaves Nadine. His happiness and the chaos keep growing. Vanessa represents both of these to him. But he cannot leave this woman and her demons. In the end, could this be down to him and not Vanessa?

The musician, actor and writer **Heinz Strunk** was born in Hamburg in 1962. He is a founding member of the comedy trio Studio Braun. His book *Meat Is My Veg* has sold half a million copies. It has since been adapted into a prize-winning radio play, an operetta at the Hamburger Schauspielhaus and also a feature film. *The Golden Glove* topped the bestseller lists for months and was nominated for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize 2016. In autumn 2016 he received the Wilhelm Raabe Prize.

- Longlisted for the German Book Prize 2021!
- 45,000 copies sold.
- His previous bestseller *The Golden Glove* sold more than 230,000 copies. Rights sold to the Czech Republic (Euromedia) and Finland (Sammakko).
- English sample translation available.



HEINZ STRUNK

IT'S ALWAYS SO LOVELY WITH YOU

ONE

A light snow flurry has begun, covering the balcony with a thin layer, snow like dust. The snow swallows the sound; a silence like in the deep sea, in panic rooms, in the Arctic night. He listens to his breath. Holds it, counts. Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four. What would it be like, to go through life holding one's breath? He can't imagine it. No human being can.

He can smell cigarette smoke. Julia is out on the balcony, the door to the bedroom is slightly ajar. One last cigarette and one last parting glass. And yet Julia isn't going anywhere, she's sitting there, on an upturned crate, and she doesn't have a glass in her hand either.

He gave up smoking a long time ago. Gave up is the right term for it. When was it exactly? No idea. If you can no longer remember when you stopped, it's a good sign that you're definitively over it and on the level of a never-smoker. Never-smoker, not a non-smoker; there's a meaningful difference. The non-smoker is a smoker who's denying themselves the pleasure, but would love nothing more than to light up; the never-smoker has never smoked, ergo, nor do they know what they're missing.

Julia comes into the bedroom and lies down next to him. She has thoroughly washed her hands, brushed her teeth, rinsed her mouth, washed her face. She plans to give up smoking too, a year from now. Just in time for her fortieth. Still shivering from the cold, she mumbles "brrr, cold, cold, cold" and snuggles up against him. Her skin feels icy and clammy.

"Is that okay? Or too cold?"

"Yeah, it's okay, actually it's kind of nice. I'm feeling really hot."

She picks up her water bottle from the nightstand and drinks; small, sharp swallows. They lie there peaceably, the shadows on their faces flow and merge into one another.

"Another one done and dusted."

What does she mean? The weekend? What else. When precisely is the weekend done, for that matter, over, completely and officially? On the dot of midnight? Or even before that, when Sunday evening trickles away amid the glimmer and flicker of the television? The glimmering and flickering used to be accompanied by the rustling of static, but that was done away with, like the close-down. For him, the weekend has felt over for about an hour already. Yesterday like that, today like that, and tomorrow completely different again. When you're a child, you're crazy for life, wishing time would stand still, not even going to the toilet through fear of missing something. Life consisted solely of beginnings, and nothing had an end. Now he's totally fine with time passing quickly.

Dosing the days away without ambition, arriving where you are through a series of coincidences. Drifting, increasing opinions, decreasing opinions, following unclear patterns...

Once his brain has started to chatter, it's not easy to get it to stop. It begins to produce thoughts which are almost entirely useless, worthless and meaningless, as though it has an extra convolution solely for that purpose. Thinking and brooding, until everything becomes too much and the confusion can no longer be ignored. So, enough now, finito, silenzio, cut.

"Put your arms around me, will you."

Her breath meets his nostrils. Beneath the toothpaste scent, barely perceptible, lies a fermented note.

"Gladly."

"When are you going to read to me again?"

"Not right now. I've got a headache for some reason."

He practically never gets headaches. Today is the exception. The pounding is irregular, it comes and goes.

“But you never get headaches.”

“It’s only a bit of one. I’m sure it’ll pass.”

“But next Sunday.”

“What?”

“Reading to me.”

“Yes, we’ll do that.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“We do have it good together, the two of us.”

“Yes, we do.”

Here we lay, he thinks. Here we lay now. Here we lay around. Julia is still shivering.

“For me today was almost the nicest.”

She has this habit of reviewing the weekend before going to sleep. A ritual. She runs through each and every phase once more, revelling in the details, down to the most miniscule, the minutest of minutiae, making sure that he found it as lovely as she did. The lovely walk, the lovely visit, the lovely meal, the lovely evening, just now, which they spent doing jigsaw puzzles and reading. For some strange reason she has rediscovered jigsaw puzzles. She does a jigsaw, he reads. Doing a jigsaw is actually a kind of handicraft, he thinks, the home improver home-improves, the brain athlete riddles, relentlessly and ferociously. Handymen, DIYers, hobbyists: people with whom something is amiss.

She speaks in a completely distinctive, awkward, almost childlike way, not caring about grammar. It babbles like water.

“Or what do you think?”

He nods. He could say something, but he contents himself with a nod and forgets that it can’t be seen in the darkness.

“Hello?”

“Oh yes, sorry, I’ve been nodding the whole time. I concur on all the decisive points.”

“That’s good then.”

It was certainly just as lovely as last weekend and the one before last and all the ones to come. You could lay next weekend and last weekend and the one preceding that and the weekend a year ago on top of one another, and the result would still be more or less the same. That’s what life and weekends are like: the circles get smaller and smaller, they approach zero radius.

“Or was there something you didn’t like?”

It was getting annoying now.

“No, no, everything’s fine, I’m just tired.”

“People either have a headache or they’re tired. It can’t be both at once.”

That hit home. She was right.

“The tiredness eclipses the pain. And it’s only a bit of a headache, like I said.”

“Eclipses. That’s a clever way to extricate yourself from the whole affair.”

Affair? What affair? She turns her head towards him, looks at him with pupils that have shifted from the centre of the iris. She raises her eyebrows and rolls her eyes, a look which once belonged to the sentence “You can’t be serious”, but could now mean all manner of things. “Oh well, it doesn’t matter. I don’t think I’ve been to the zoo in twenty years.”

How did she get onto that?

“Do you mean that you’d like to go soon? We can do that.”

To the zoo! Why would he go to the zoo?

As she talks on, his back starts to feel damp. Unpleasant. He listens to her as though through a soft mush. Every now and then he says: hm, yes, ah, exactly. Reducing her pace, braking, tapering off. It works; the flow of words slowly peters out.

“Okay, so good night then.”

“Good night.”

“And I hope you feel better.”

“What’s that?”

“I mean, because of the headache.”

“Oh right.”

“Precisely, oh right.”

He pulls her against him. Until she’s fallen asleep, he is responsible for her.

I don’t think I’ve been to the zoo in twenty years. The sentence hangs in the air still, like warmth, like smoke.

He yawns, with his mouth closed so as not to wake her. Dear Julia, he thinks, such a dear person. If only everything were a little simpler. If he were simpler. Then they would live in this room together until they turned to dust and fluttered down to the ground. The moonlight pours into the room, white and watery. As naked as a white hole, the moon. Julia begins to snore quietly. Carefully, he loosens his embrace, and she turns onto her back.

After a while, the snoring is joined by a whistling and a kind of pulpy wheeze, the after-effects of a prolonged cold. He gently turns her onto her side. The snoring falls silent, the whistling remains. She shifts onto her back again. He can twist and turn her as much as he likes, he thinks, but none of it helps. She murmurs something incomprehensible and grabs his hand. Still cold. How can somebody sleep with such cold hands?

Something smells strange. Is it her? But what does it smell of? Mashed potato? No, mashed potato smells different. Damp cement. Not that either. Traces of solvent. Oh, it doesn’t matter. How does he smell to her nose, he wonders? Julia often says she likes his smell. Hopefully it will stay that way. It’s a known fact that people in long-term relationships let themselves go. God forbid, he won’t let it come to that; if he’s sure of one thing, it’s that.

In her sleep, she presses her feet against his. Cold like a piece of meat that’s just been taken out of the fridge. It’s always the poor feet, numb and cold and heavy. Cold hands, cold toes, warm nose, he thinks all of a sudden. Another completely aimless thought. Perhaps the sentence can be thought around in circles until I eventually nod off. She pushes even more firmly up against him. Ease up a bit, he thinks, I need some room to move, just a few centimetres would help. But whenever he pushes her away, she wakes up and is disappointed: “I thought you were going to hold me a little longer.”

When they haven’t had sex for the really lovely, really long weekend, she’s particularly sensitive. But what can he do? Unfortunately she no longer awakens any desire in him; in fact, her presence has something downright sedative to it. Perhaps she’s secretly slipping some softener or slackener into his drink. Among practically all the couples he knows, sex is a forbidden zone, a minefield, sexuality belongs to a long-gone phase of life. Love, Sex and Tenderness, like the eponymous Bravo magazine column from the year dot. Love, Sex and Tenderness becomes Love, Cuddling, Tenderness, and eventually Friendship, Closeness, Comfort. Before they didn’t speak about sex because it wasn’t necessary; nowadays they don’t speak about it, because it doesn’t lead to anything. What kind of discussion would be suited to solving pertinent problems? The reverse of dirty talk, it occurs to him. Utter drivel, but one gets the point.

Sex toys don’t help either. Lingerie, toys, accessories: wrapping something that lacks allure in alluring things only makes it less alluring. Take it out again quick, please, that thing, hide it or even better throw it away! They’re still in the cupboard somewhere. If he secretly got rid of them, there’s no way she would notice, and there would finally be more room in the cupboard.

“Where are those thingamajigs?”

Julia, as always, will sleep like a rock until the alarm goes off at six sharp. Then she’ll jump out of bed without hesitation. Wide-awake and full of beans from one second to the next. Sometimes she whistles as she makes her morning coffee, that’s how cheerful she is. Because Julia finds life fundamentally lovely. And she’s fortunate to not only do something she enjoys and is good at, but

also gets to feel that she's contributing something meaningful (familiarising children and teenagers, in an anxiety-free way, to the big, wide, inscrutable world of mathematics). She would like everything to essentially stay as it is. You can get along well if you don't have over-exaggerated expectations. Happiness formula number one: being content with what life is prepared to offer. What does a person actually need with a big castle and a dozen steaks? No matter how rich you are, you can only ever be in one room at once, and after two or three steaks at the very most, you're full anyway.

She likes the banality of her day-to-day life, the thin stream of events which calmly trickle down over her. Everything pleasantly uniform, well-ordered like on a shoe rack. She has exchanged the hysterical, feverish happiness of young people for the peaceful, quiet happiness of adults. The desire to experience something new, or to discover a new feeling; this she has dispensed with, outwitted, tricked. If he were like Julia, everything would be easier. He tries, in any case.

He reaches for the tube of peppermint drops that is nestled amongst all kinds of bits and bobs on his nightstand. Bits and bobs, he thinks, such a lovely, life-affirming and cheerful expression. He takes a drop, pushes it first into one cheek and then into the other, and eventually to the tip of his tongue. He stiffens his tongue and feels the drop slowly dissolving, being sucked flat into a little pad. Just before it reaches that point, he bites into it, a tiny drop runs down his throat. It feels wonderful. He takes another, and a third and a fourth. It could go on like that, for all eternity. From drops to little pads, from human beings to stick figures.

Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three ... Boredom is a harbinger of death, he thinks, present even long before dying. Sorrow, boredom, smells, whistling. Even though he was already wide awake, he becomes even more so now, and yet that actually can't be. Soon the wakefulness will tower up over me and beat me around the ears until I finally get up and DO SOMETHING.

On evenings like these he is unhappy at home, passionately unhappy, if there is such a thing: swimming in bitterness like a fish in water. If unhappiness were to be banished from Earth, he wouldn't even know what to do with himself.

When they first met, Julia felt drawn to his unhappiness. She found it alluring, because it was something she didn't have access to. She wasn't familiar with unhappy artists. Isn't unhappiness inseparable with the artist's fate?

Tomorrow he doesn't have much on; no appointments, errands or work that can't be postponed. Theoretically speaking, he could spend the entire day in bed or somewhere else (brothel, casino, 24-hour bar). He's overcome by a strong urge to have a drink. He hardly drank anything over the weekend, so he can permit himself a sip now, even though drinking alone is known to be a dangerous business. He quietly gets up and pads into the living room in his underpants.

There's only brandy. An afternoon brandy goes down nicely, that's what Uncle Whatsisname always used to say. Swirling the glass like an aficionado, he looks out of the window. He likes looking out of the window. Smooth, full of body. He puts his fingers to his nose. It smells as though he's touched dirty coins. A bad habit, sniffing his fingers, he really should break it. People that sniff at their hands look disturbed. Like some animal, they're always snuffling at themselves too, sticking their noses or snouts into all kinds of possible and impossible openings.

The falling snowflakes are barely visible, apart from in the glow of the streetlamps. Now and then, car headlights make fan-like slits of light glide across walls, ceilings, lamps and all manner of things. One of the streetlamps has his bike attached to it, or what's left of it. The saddle, tyres and small parts have been dismantled, plucked, cannibalised, even though this isn't a neighbourhood for vandalism. Now the frame stands there, until it crumbles into filings and rust and whatever else. The poor bicycle, the loyal chassis. Ten years of dedicated service. Dear old gonad-chassis. Solitary and alone, like its owner.

He tops up his glass and sprawls, slouches, plants himself on the sofa, turns on the TV, mutes it and imagines the rays pushing through the door and walls and whirling around in Julia's dreams. What would the result be? She keeps a dream journal and will make a note of it over breakfast.

He tops up his glass again. Why not? He can top up his glass as often as he wants. Being drunk means not despairing over questions which have no answer. As a child, his ideal life was to lay in bed, watch Louis de Funès films, eat milk chocolate Langues de Chat and drink ice-cold Fanta. True happiness, childhood happiness. Faint memories, as thin as swathes of smoke; unfortunately he can't remember much of his childhood. He was cheerful. Courageous. Curious. He consisted almost entirely of anticipation. For Christmas. His birthday. Easter, Whitsun, short, mid-sized and long school holidays, even Carnival, just imagine. He had pictured life as a sequence of happy moments, which in the future would multiply more and more, the happiness getting bigger and bigger, until eventually, right at the very end, as an old man, he would be completely happy. That's how it was back then, the entirely carefree happiness of childhood (if he remembers correctly).

There are people to whom happiness comes as easily as breathing. He is not one of them. And yet, objectively, he probably doesn't have any more misfortune, nor any more fortune than others either. There are people who feel at ease in their own skin, and others for whom that's only partially true.

A good calendar motto, incidentally. Was there some institution you could submit calendar mottos to, like the organisation to which people suggest candidates for the slang- and/or non-word of the year?

The air stood motionless in the darkness. It's probably unusually calm. What's happening on the floors above him, he wonders? Are there any dead bodies in the building? Long-ago murdered hostages? Mummified pensioners in threadbare wingback chairs, waiting to finally be lowered into the ground, bone-dry skulls pressing their noses flat against the clouded windowpanes? His glass is empty again already. How quick it always goes.

The low point of the weekend had been Saturday. Always Saturday; Saturday, New Year's lite. Saturday used to be his favourite day, Sundays were bad, and now it's the exact opposite, like this weekend. They had been out, or had at least attempted it. An undertaking doomed to failure, as should be obvious by now, one learns from one's mistakes etc.

Apart from a brief phase in his thirties that he can only vaguely remember, he has always had an aversion to partying (it was called something different back then, he's forgotten what). By now, his party-gene, if one wants to call it that, has gone missing once and for all. How old is he again? Exactly. As old as those who seemed old in his youth.

In his opinion, party people suffer from a kind of mass psychosis. They're all crazy, wild, possessed, because there is neither a rational nor irrational reason to have fun. Life is a serious matter.

It's not that he's a 24-hour party pooper (great term, he overheard it somewhere recently), and the party animals aren't really crazy, of course, he's just over it. And yet he's not even that old, he's in the best years, virile, good body, mature, a sonorous, deep voice, not even the slightest hint of a receding hairline. He knows that, but the awareness of it has gone missing. It only comes to him now and again, predominantly when he's being honest with himself, in comparison to Julia.

Julia, unfortunately it has to be said, has become sort of an embarrassment to him. She's taken on an old maid-esque quality. Old maid-esque, if not even a little grandma-like. She has a waddling gait, plodding like a farmer in clogs. A beautiful walk is half the battle. There's nothing more attractive than a young walk. The gait says more about a person's true age than the hands or neck. And how quickly it changed! As though, without apparent reason, she took a sudden leap forward into old age. Or is he the reason? Has she become old by his side? From teen to aunt. Soon she'll be one of those women who men don't even glance at on the street. The ones you unconsciously avert your eyes from when they walk into a sauna. The ones who forget to pluck their eyebrows and to go to the dentist. Unlikely that a man will ever again whisper into her ear "I'm blinded by your grace".

Sometimes, when they're walking in the city and their reflection flashes up in a shop window, it actually makes him jump: What do they (we) look like! Provincial types who have crawled in from the exurbs for the weekend, parents whose children have just left home and can now finally do or not do whatever they want, but have forgotten how: astonished, clueless, joke figures stumbling

through the highly-charged night. The more charged the night, the more the joke figures discharge and vent. Rude, awkward, scared of strangers, the uncool wander through the night to make the entrance of the cool ones sparkle all the more; and, unlike the cool, they always think far too much about the impression they're making. Effortlessness marks out those to whom everything comes naturally; with the tryhards, you don't really like to look. The world, to make this entirely clear, belongs to those who are singing and dancing.

He tops up his glass one last time. The taste is a little overpowering after the fourth (or fifth?) tankard, but he's not drinking because he likes the taste, but because he needs just one more sip. His head hums from the alcohol and the spinning of the universe.

He could listen to music. But he's way too knackered for that now. And besides, you shouldn't listen to the music you like too often, otherwise you wear it out, and it has to keep, after all, possibly for a lifetime. It's high time he went to bed, and his bladder is full. On the way to the toilet, he has to hold onto the wall. You never realise how drunk you are while you're sitting down, he thinks, it's only when you stand up that the hour of truth strikes. He has to brush his teeth too. When he turns on the light in the bathroom and glances at the mirror, he really and truly and genuinely gets a shock.

WHAT DO I LOOK LIKE?! MY GOD, THAT CAN'T BE.

Whenever he's drunk, he would do better to avoid looking in the mirror, because the alcohol changes his perception in an unpleasant way, and he genuinely sees ghosts. Some people drink themselves beautiful, he drinks himself ugly: he finds himself staring into the wrinkled, wizened face of an ape. An ape? Not even an ape, in actual fact, his skin is too puffy and pimply and flaky and unclean. And reddened. A red, sweaty clay figure face, kneaded by a small child, wide and messy, eyes in aspic, his forehead drooping, a low-hanging bottom lip, protruding tongue.

There must be something strange going on, it must be some kind of optical illusion, a mirroring, refraction, something like that. Instead of immediately turning the light back off, he decides to immediately get to the bottom of the matter. His underpants are sagging like a nappy. A shapeless, soft, limp nappy. Off with the nappy! He has to do it.

An upright sack full of entrails. Jellyfish-like, lily-white flesh. Which is limper, the skin or the flesh? But the best, as always, comes last: the SACK. Can such a sad sack still be lifted? A double testicle lift, with penis straightening and erectile tissue enlargement. What he's seeing has lost all market value. He might as well lump himself in with all the other knackered and weathered ones tomorrow. "Sexy. A sexy guy, a really sexy guy," he mumbles to himself. "Just sexy."

He has banned the word from his vocabulary, but this is an appropriate moment to dig it out again.

"Sexy, sexy, sexy, sexy guy."

"HEY, WHAT'S GOING ON WITH YOU?"

He jumps as though he's been shot. Julia is standing in the doorway, pale, horrified, at a complete loss. "Are you not feeling well?"

Good question.

She doesn't have the faintest clue what he's doing, what the meaning of this is. A naked ghost that has arisen from the coffin; the man needs to be protected from himself. The doctor should be called, or the police, or both, and while you're at it the fire service too.

"I really don't like myself."

That's putting it mildly, of course.

"Oh man."

She can't think of anything else to say. The silence stretches out.

"I'm going back to bed."

She throws him a (bolstering?) smile, which grows helplessly in width. She has forgotten to take off her make-up, the thick mascara around her eyes has run and re-dried.

"I'll be in soon. Do you need anything?"

She doesn't reply. The door opens and then closes.

TWO

While attempting to squeeze through a narrow rock crevice, he gets stuck. He jiggles and wriggles and holds his breath, but it's no use, the more despairing his efforts to free himself, the more hopeless the situation becomes. Soon he can't move even a centimetre forward or back, he can't catch his breath, he's at risk of suffocating. The recurring nightmare, which he has been having for about a year now, crumbles as he wakes up, but leaves behind an apprehensiveness that overshadows the entire day.

As he goes to turn onto his other side, he's suddenly hit, as though by a succession of blows, by the memory of his nightly performance. What was wrong, what does it mean, why does he do a thing like that? An embarrassing, almost total loss of face, which makes all the previous faces look like sloppily-worn masks. Julia, his dear sweet Julia, has to please, pretty please, forgive him and give him back his face.

Close by, the kitchen soundtrack as always; coffee-brewing sounds, whistling sounds, clatter-clink-crash sounds, fragments from the radio. A new golden oldies station, which for twenty-four hours a day broadcasts dead teen-songs from lost times.

When Julia comes into the bedroom to say goodbye, there's a gentle smile on her lips. A stroke of luck, he thinks, it seems everything is halfway in order again.

"Hey, that thing yesterday, was it really awful? I mean unpleasant? Were you very shocked?" His mouth twists into a doughy grin.

"You know what?" Her voice has a pleasantly relaxed timbre.

"No, what?"

"You should go to a headshrinker. So he can shrink all the crazy in your head."

Shrink all the crazy. Fantastic, just imagine. Julia's manner is simple, refreshing and amusing. She doesn't complicate things unnecessarily, she doesn't bear a grudge, she's solution orientated. They stare at one another. A strange feeling. They used to look at one another like that frequently, like lovers. Julia scratches her nose and seems to have momentarily forgotten what they were talking about.

"I've known you for long enough now. Everything's fine."

"Oh, okay. I just wasn't sure."

"I know. And you've been brooding about it this whole time?"

"Yes, perhaps."

"Don't torment yourself so much. You're a wonderful, good-looking man, with a slight screw loose. I have to go now. We'll see each other on Wednesday perhaps."

She gives him a kiss on the mouth and scratches his head, like somebody would a child's hair or a pet's fur.

"We'll speak later."

Then she's gone. We're like two termites, he thinks, our strength lies in endurance.

He closes his eyes. The clock on the nightstand ticks on, its hands rotating in a circle. The hangover is brutal, it won't be easily slept off. He imagines how lovely it would be to feel morning cheerfulness. The air clear and pure, the azure of the sky saturating the earth, participating in the community of awakening. He feels the need to see himself as part of the working society, because somebody who oversleeps on Monday will soon fall behind, and before too long, no longer be able to catch up.

Please, God, he thinks, have mercy and let me sleep a little longer. He calls upon God exclusively in alcohol-related states of misery, for God is surely not above a modest favour, given that he has such a hard time with the bigger ones.

All of a sudden, he thinks about sex. That's another thing: almost as soon as Julia leaves the house, the hormones kick in. His imagination runs wild, shifting positions which become increasingly

acrobatic and demanding; if he's lucky, he manages to doze off with these thoughts. That's how it is with the brain: when things get too complicated, it turns itself off. Silence descends heavily like a cloud, pulls down his eyelids, and he falls asleep again.

After showering, he takes a long hard look at himself in the mirror. He looks like he always does, no marks, no indentations, no nicks or notches, no pockets or grieves. With a little generosity, he could pass as having characterful features.

He goes out onto the balcony to get a sense of the weather. Recently he's gotten used to doing this again: bypassing the weather apps and playing weatherman himself, briefly poking out his arm, leg or entire body. Nothing is falling from the low, grey snow-sky, there's just a dirty yellow shimmer from the office lights of the city. The boughs of the trees are heavy with melting snow. The wind tastes sour. Well, not bad, he thinks. Perhaps he might go for a quick walk after all.

As he steps out of the building door, he almost runs into someone. A young girl, seventeen or eighteen, a mutant of babyface and sex bomb. It takes his breath away, his shoulders and chest cave in, his jaw drops, he almost keels over. In the fraction of a second, she sparks within him a brutal lust, ten billion neurons fire simultaneously, inner secretion goes into full gear, the ion channels open as wide as barn doors.

"Oh, excuse me," he says softly.

"No problem," replies the girl, without looking at him. She knows the effect she has; that, since a short while ago, in the blossom of her youth, she hits like a bomb. She quickens her pace, turns around after a few metres. Does she feel followed, threatened by him? As their gazes meet, he smiles. Friendly, harmless, fatherly, that's how he intends it, but his smile crashes and burns, he senses that his facial expression is idiotic. A trace of panic appears on the girl's face. He lifts his hand in a kind of – yes, what? – conciliatory gesture, to signal that he's okay. She turns away and walks on. What a graceful walk, he thinks, she's floating at least ten centimetres above the pavement. Once again, it's the gait that separates the wheat from the chaff. Some float; with others, the pavement caves in. He gawks after her until she disappears behind the next bend.

The walk home takes about twenty minutes. The thaw has begun, streaks of pockmarked slush stretching across the neighbourhood like a spider's web. Rainclouds roll across the sky in long thrusts. A big, black dog with yellow eyes springs out of a doorway and barks at him. He flinches. So much for always looking where you're going, perhaps people should look to the side more often, where others don't, where dogs and ghosts lurk. The dog growls after him, no sign of the owner. Ever heard of keeping them on the lead?

Once again, he has forgotten to leave a window ajar. The apartment smells of old vacuum cleaner, it's dank and stuffy. He flings the window open, sticks out his head and counts to a hundred. The windows of the apartments on the other side of the street look like grubby sheets that have been nailed to the wall, walls and roofs and buildings and windows, grey on grey on grey on grey. A pensioner couple are glued to one of the windows like skewered butterflies. Also grey, motionless. They never have to work again, he thinks, they can spend the whole live-long day staring out of the window. Walking from one corner to another. From one corner to another and whistling as they go. Walking from one corner to another and putting on burping concerts. Or something completely different; the calm joy of those who fritter away their time without haste or guilt.

He's still really groggy. If he doesn't have enough energy to work, he could tend to everyday tasks, light, undemanding chores that won't resolve themselves. Like using a ceramic glass hob scraper to scrape candle wax off the TV stand, for example. The permanently expiring candles are an annoyance that can't be controlled. There was recently a fire in the neighbouring building. Presumably neglect, alcohol, drugs, burning fag butts, collapsing candles; the apartment fire as the low point of a life which has careened hopelessly out of control.

The sum of unsolvable problems, which eventually lead to a redemptive fire. Torching your own digs while under the influence, and straight to the mental hospital, beware.

He makes himself a pot of tea – coffee is out of the question with his hangover – and curls up on the sofa in an embryo position. He has many hours to get through; wasting a lifetime is almost as difficult as filling it.

It's not even early afternoon yet, which will be followed by late afternoon, then early evening, prime time, and only right at the end, in the endlessly distant distance, late evening. And only once that's officially over can you go to bed.

Tick-tock, tick-tock. He bought himself a beautiful old wall clock for his birthday. The ticking is almost as cosy as rain pattering against the window. Tick-tock, tick-tock, how delightful it is to listen to time passing. The time seeps into the holes that he stares into the air, wormholes, black holes, all kinds of undiscovered and as yet unnamed holes. Tick-tock, tick-tock.

That's enough, come on. He goes to work. That's how human beings are programmed; sooner or later, everyone goes to work.

In the sky there are now streaks of pink and a strange light. Sparrows skid across the remaining snow, scuttling and hopping away, their wings hanging; in front of the Habib Grill, dirty and fluffed-up pigeons battle over kebab remains. He imagines that all the people he sees are completely normal workers, longing for the end of the working day. Perhaps there are criminals amongst them too. You can't tell by somebody's walk whether they're going to work or coming back from a hold-up.

His workspace is eighteen square metres in size and located on the ground floor of a two-story, run-down commercial unit. Rear courtyard, post-war construction, three hundred and ninety-three Euros rent all included. He shares the bathroom with four other tenants, a photo studio, a sound studio and two graphics studios. Graphics studios. Studios with graphic designers in them.

His own studio is called Audio Concept. Not particularly original, but still better than Eurovoice, Soundsmith or Noiseless. In any case, it's too late to rename it now. And it's immediately clear what it offers: audiobooks, radio plays, podcasts, e-learning, guides, tutorials, telephone recordings, interviews, explanatory videos, image films, voiceovers for product videos. AUDIO CONCEPT – EVERYTHING LANGUAGE CAN DO. He's quick, and delivers good quality at reasonable prices. Word has got around; Audio Concept's workload has steadily increased over the years.

Two unedited productions await, an audiobook and a radio play. The audiobook has to be edited, which means eliminating verbal errors, background noise, pauses. It's called cleaning. Cleaning is devoid of creativity and about as boring, long-winded and tedious as it sounds. The radio play also needs to be sound tracked, which means selecting the appropriate sounds and atmospheres and positioning them in the right places. An unending number of sounds need to be inserted, from the very short (operate light switch), to short (unfold newspaper), medium (church bells), to long (village square in the morning/open-air swimming pool/football stadium/building site). In his sound library there are thirteen different kinds of telephone ringtones alone. From ding to dong. If the telephone rings in minute forty-seven, he has to put the signal in the right place. Incredibly fiddly work, with millimetre precision, micro-millimetre precision; precision work doesn't get any more precise than this. Another example: a person enters an apartment or a house or a hut or a LODGING, DIVERSE. This action has to be accompanied by a sequence of sounds which are intuitively understood: press door handle – open door – another clinking sound – take two steps into the room – shut door – footsteps – open zip – take off jacket – footsteps – place keys on a surface – footsteps – pull up a chair – sit down. He created this audio file himself, consisting of thirteen separate files, because it can't be bought in any library. His archive also incorporates Human Standards (he thought up the term himself) like gargling, sneezing, snoring, choking, spitting, scratching, joint cracking. Unique, top-quality material, because where else can you find files like The Big Fart, Toot long, Toot short, Fart – big and dry, Fart – small and gross, Trumpet Fart 1, Trumpet Fart 2?

The radio play to be edited for the traditional company Rollercoaster is titled “Mr Roabarb, Mrs Grump and Pongo” and belongs to the category Audiobooks for Children up to Twelve Years of Age. Further categories are crime, science fiction, entertainment, erotica, education and knowledge,

humour, literature. So far, only the naked voice recordings are a wrap, most of it by actors; a few tracks he recorded himself, to save money. He adjusts the pitch and sound of his voice with the help of a pitch shifter, and can make himself sound like a ninety-year-old man with bronchial catarrh, a little girl or Mickey Mouse himself. The technology has advanced at a breath-taking pace; it won't be long before no speaker is required at all.

He powers on his computer and gets to work on the audiobook. The speaker has a cold, you can hear it: stomach grumbling throughout, throat clearing, suppressed coughs, by rights he should come in again, at least to rerecord the most phlegm-congested passages. But that would mean stress and strife, and then he'll ask for a grace note, God forbid, so he'd rather battle through this inferno of ambient noise. Spit, slobber, splutter. They don't call it hard graft for nothing. Definitions for work: hard labour, toiling away. Everything that's torturous. If something is fun, it's not work. He tinkers and tinkers. Why can't the telephone ring, an urgent message or email arrive, or the power cut out?

Then the telephone does ring. Yes, yes, yes! It's Frieder, his friend Frieder, his oldest, presumed best friend. Does he have plans this evening? Not that I know of. Does he want to accompany Frieder to a film premiere? Nothing earthshattering, an arthouse film, but despite the low budget, the production company is known for high-end premiere parties. Aha. Exactly. "So, are you coming?"

Why does Frieder, unlike him, constantly get invited to premieres, parties, events? Because, unlike him, he's on all kinds of distribution lists. And how do you get onto these distribution lists? Good question. It's half past four, and an endless stretch of cleaning lays before him. So yes, okay, but not for long, it is Monday after all. Sure, says Frieder, meet you there at half seven.

On the way home, he's overcome by a great listlessness. Earlier, he was almost looking forward to it, and barely half an hour later, none of that remains. Always these inexplicable mood shifts; you can't rely on anything, least of all yourself. But if he were to cancel, it would be the third time in a row. I still need Frieder, he thinks. How, for what and why, he's not sure.