

Heinz Strunk

## THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN 2

English sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

### CROSS-COUNTRY DRIVE

Heidbrink fixates the pale blue numbers shimmering on his digital alarm clock as if hoping that he could urge them forwards by sheer force of will. Pinpricks are assaulting his fingertips, his face feels taut as if the was packer's tape underneath his skin. The clammy residue of sleeplessness on his skin feels disgusting, but under no circumstances will he hop into the shower now. He wants the night to pass, pass, pass.

It was 3:27 am when it ended for him. Another four hours until the alarm will go off. Dark thoughts crawl out from the craters and maws of his brain and orbit around upcoming adversities, obstacles to be expected, possible complications. The images rise against the inside of his lids, he rubs them away. They creep up, he rubs them away, they crawl up, he rubs them away. He takes a deep breath. And another, and a further one, he tries to spiral slowly towards sleep by following the rhythm of his breathing. Thoughts turn to images, fade to spectres, begin to get tangled like in a dream. Finally! Until the itching starts. Always, just as he is about to cross the threshold, this bloody itch ruins everything. First his neck, then the stomach, then the back of his head, then his left calf. He rolls over onto his stomach and presses his face into the mattress. Desperately tired / wide awake. Desperately tired / wide awake.

The word REGIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE ENTITY flashes through his brain. For whatever reason, this word monster has always exerted an inexplicable attraction for him. But not now, please! Somehow he feels compelled to keep mumbling the word quietly: regional administrative entity, regional administrative entity, regional administrative entity.

He might as well give up. Get up, action, go! Thoughts originating in the horizontal position only result in discomfort, once you're moving, the knots often dissolve by themselves, you focus on something else, and don't you know it, they're gone. Drink, pee, wash hands.

Recently he's taken to use mouthwash to get rid of the foul taste. A gargler, mouthwash dude, oral cavity freak. Heralds of old age? The detergent drawer of his front-loading washing machine sticks out like a tongue covered in sherbet; seems he forgot, again, to switch on the machine before going to bed. Switch on, wrap up, doze off. He leaves the door to the bathroom open so that the sloshing, chugging and see-sawing might help him find sleep. The sounds specifically designed for that (Distant Thunder, Ten Hours of Rain, Waves, Frogs) rarely do the trick; his brain, a frothing, tumbling washing machine full of dirty laundry, refuses to be fooled quite so easily. The seconds tick by, the minutes hover, cobwebs wrap around his head and he is overcome by a furry, mushy tiredness. When, after an hour fifty, the washing machine switches to the spin cycle with a high-frequency, whining cry, he jerks awake. Go, jump up, unload, hang up. A paper tissue has disintegrated into atom-sized bits that have burrowed into trousers, shirts, t-shirts, socks, it will take a thousand rounds of washing until they're really all dissolved or plucked off.

Current traffic conditions indicate a travel time of 4 hours and 52 minutes. Although, 'traffic conditions' is the wrong term, as this early in the morning there is no such thing as a condition; at his destination, there should be no traffic at all. He has studied the route so often that it is (already) burnt into his memory: A1, A20 to Pasewalk-South, then continue on country roads. Town signs displaying lost places, all with an 'O' in their name: Rubkow, Bargischow, Neu Kosenow, Klein Jasedow: if he were to continue east, he'd soon reach Poland. Or: he simply stays where he is. He could some drink beer/wine/liqueur and write an email to the clinic: 'Unforeseen circumstances ...'

It is cold in the kitchen, a draft comes in from the tilted window. It's been snowing without interruption since yesterday evening, one million snowflakes have spread a cloth of purest white across the world. Perhaps the motorway is impassable? The A-, B- and C-roads surely must be. This deep into the East, do they have snow-ploughs at all?

But: no excuses, he's not allowed to make those. He will see this through. One month. Thirty days. For the past six months, this date has been sticking out from the calendar like a nail, it has crept up on Heidbrink like a feline predator, and he has done nothing but prepare mentally. To chicken out at the last moment, after all this stress, would be a) acknowledging complete failure and b) out of proportion. He is an athlete for whom, after months of training,

the day of the competition has arrived. That's how he has to look at it. And once Heidbrink is actually there, the trap will snap shut and others will be determining his fate.

A suitcase and a large bag (at a volume of 180 litres, a very large bag indeed) have been waiting in the corridor for days now, all packed and ready. It doesn't bear thinking about breakfast; he'll surely regain his appetite in the course of the morning. The glove compartment holds his emergency store: milk chocolate with hazelnuts, a peanut bar, mixed nuts and raisins and, for something savoury, a Kaminwurzen salami stick from South Tyrol (plus miniature packets of mustard) waiting to be polished off before the expiry date.

A gust of wind sends a few broken-off twigs bouncing across the ground, a shredded plastic bag takes to the air at speed. A wind that probably originated in the polar regions slips underneath his collar and freezes the sweat on his back. In a doorway squats a huge dog, its head the size of a paint bucket. There'd be space for another dog inside this beast, dog inside dog. A giant of a dog; as an avalanche search dog it could probably rescue two or three people simultaneously. On his way to the underground car park, he gets a cappuccino, a black bread avocado sandwich (with dill) and a Franzbrötchen pastry. He faces five hours of 'cross-country driving'. This expression is a fixed term in the vocabulary of German driving schools, the label for a specific, two-hundred-and-twenty-five minute long drive across country roads.

At the roundabout in Horn, he takes the exit to the A24 towards Berlin. Cars whoosh past him in curtains of dirty spray, grey sleet hits his windscreen. His face in the rear-view mirror: not a pleasant sight. A pseudo intellectual, a geriatric child, Woody Allen Jr, pale, cheesy, sickly, eyes red and bleary as if someone had poured salt into them. On top of this, his expression is entirely expression-less, despite the fact that there's lots going on inside him. After two-and-a-half hours, he passes Güstrow. Another place he's never been before. He could take the next exit, turn around, he is free to do or not do as he pleases. According to his sat-nav, he'll reach his destination at 12:45, making him an intruder bursting in at the height of the main meal of the day. What delicacies might be on the menu today? Plain fare de luxe, he imagines; Königsberger Klopse in a creamy caper sauce. Whatever made him think of this? Is it because he hasn't eaten this, an everyday dish from childhood days, since way back when? Culinary flashback. Just thinking of the fluffy meatballs makes his mouth water. Just before Anklam he stops in a parking bay to have breakfast. The avocado sandwich is delicious and the pastry is a squashed mess. The

secret of tasty Franzbrötchen: always toast it, twice, which isn't possible in a car, that extracts the moisture from the squashy mess and makes it nice and cross. Drop it into the slot, press down the lever, lever arrests, heat rises and covers face in a sugary coating. The itch hits again, this time at the back of his neck. He rolls his head from side to side against the headrest, which makes it look as if he were sunbathing.

By the by, what does Anklam have to offer in the way of hotels and holiday accommodation? The apartments 'Otto Lilienthal' and 'Siedlungsnest' get five-star ratings of excellent. 'Stolpe Manor' (Relais & Château), according to their web page, sports a grand driveway. A vast park. Warm lights inside the manor house. He could spend a few days there, get spoiled in the spa and restaurant and then, well rested, return home. Or perhaps not? A rabbit hunching on a spot of grass watches him, its nose quivering. No, says the rabbit, go!

The steering wheel is sticky from the sugary Franzbrötchen, flakes of which hit the windscreen and dissolve. The closer he gets to his destination, the queasier he feels. An invisible noose descends around his throat, his stomach is roiling as if a swarm of insects had chosen it as their gathering place. Another five point five kilometres. There's really nothing here. No house, no mouse. No farm, no barns and stables.

Polish borderland.

Ahead, a hill rises, barely more than a minor swelling; beyond that the outlines of the building emerge from grey emulsion of this winter day. For centuries the castle has been squatting there, looking out across the fields. A large gingerbread house, with icing. Heidbrink experiences a sensation of the unreal.

Another nine hundred metres, eight hundred, seven hundred ...

DELIVERY ENTRANCE

Four hundred, three hundred, two hundred, one hundred, ninety, eighty, seventy ...

PRIVATE PROPERTY. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

About thirty vehicles are scattered about the sprawling, unpaved parking lot. He is probably being observed, from everywhere and nowhere, to check that he parks properly and sticks to the pedestrian speed limit, to assess what sort of a fellow he is anyway.

On the day of your arrival, present yourself at reception, it had said in the confirmation e-mail. Better to call ahead briefly.

'Hello?'

'Hello, my name is Jonas Heidbrink, I am registered to arrive today.'

'Hello, Mr Heidbrink! Good to have you here, you can stay in the car, someone will come and fetch you.'

A voice trained to make new arrivals feel good.

Don't worry, you've come to the right place! Yeah, right – run, as long as you still can!

One minute passes. Two, three, four, five. His toes are so icy that they feel like hot pebbles. Nobody shows up, nobody comes to fetch him. He gets out of the car. The moment he enters the castle, everyone in there will die, instantly.

## OUT IN BAD STANDING

Two pillars, stone lions crouching atop, frame the stairway leading up to the castle with its three wings. The pull of the past is tremendous, calling up images of gas lanterns and landau carriages, of serving maids in striped blouses and liveried coachmen.

The light, too, is different here, light from olden days.

Heidbrink counts fifteen steps. (Fifteen more steps to the sanatorium.) In the foyer, which is tiled in light marble, a neon-yellow pyramid saying CAUTION – WET FLOOR blocks the passage. Immediately, a woman hurries up and hastily removes it.

'I am sorry, housekeeping must have forgotten this here. Mr Heidbrink, yes?'

'Indeed.'

Super tense, he clutches the car key so tightly that it throbs in his hand; for a moment, he is gripped by an overwhelming, almost paralysing confusion.

'My apologies for keeping you waiting. A call that I had been expecting all morning. I'm Nurse Irene.'

She offers Heidbrink her hand. A cordial smile spreads across her face.

'No worries.'

Nurse Irene is a middle-aged woman with a round, friendly, somewhat bland face. She has pinned up her hair with combs on either side, which results in a somewhat puffed-up

mushroom coiffure that probably dissolves in a single twist, if necessary. She emanates a soapy friendliness.

'Would you like to see my ID card?'

'That would be good. Then I still need a few general details. We'll go through that together, that's faster.'

Why should that be faster? Never mind. Heidbrink dictates, Irene writes. Her wrists show no veins, they are round and narrow like those of a child. She says out loud whatever she's writing down, her lower lip forming astounding shapes as she does so.

'J o n a s H e i d b r i n k.'

She draws out his name in a way that makes it sound like a wail.

'Born 8th April 1986 in Neumünster.'

What Heidbrink wouldn't give not to have been born in Neumünster. His birthplace is a black spot on his otherwise spotless record, a stigma, a shortcoming.

'If it says so, then it's probably true.'

'Ha ha ha ha ha,' Irene vocalises.

Her laugh is slow and sluggish, like a cow's bell.

'Profession: inventor?'

'You could also call me an entrepreneur, but inventor sounds a bit more original, don't you think?'

'Ha ha ha. Yes. Gyro Gearloose.'

Laugh, rattle, clonk, pang. You can hear the good cheer clatter in her chest. Which is located precisely where it's supposed to be. She is so down-to-earth, so firmly planted that even a snow-plough would not be able to shovel her aside. She probably wears steel stockings.

Steel is most likely also the material the knight's armour is made of. It's positioned behind Irene's desk, slightly to the right. The knight's silver gloves are folded around the blade of the sword he holds between his legs. The contraption is perhaps five foot three high, so the warrior who was meant to fit inside must have been at least four inches shorter. How could such a small fellow, a Tom Thumb measured against modern standards, have been able to move around in such a monstrous armour, let alone fight, let alone mount a horse, let alone sit atop a galloping horse, holding shield and a pole arm (a lance)? Heidbrink squinted in an attempt to

read the text on the information plaque, which – whoever came up with that bright idea – has been fastened to the closed visor.

‘Step closer, if you like. Otherwise you can’t see anything. It’s quite interesting.’

Heidbrink steps behind the desk.

Foot soldier, c 1530. Mail chain, iron hat with flanged comb. Wrought-iron gauntlets. Visor helmet with circumferential decorative lining rivets. Fluted bell, stepped bellows visor. Fluted back. Large fluted pauldrons, recessed rim with corded edging. Fluted arm patches. Fluted knee-cups and greaves, iron shoes.

Ah. Why iron hat? And there’s no chain mail to be seen.

‘Would you have a licence plate for me?’

‘HH-TY 1843.’

Her handwriting slopes leftward, it is squiggly, spidery, a child’s scrawl. Outside, a reversing lorry emits a sad whimpering, as if it was looking for something that can never be found again. When the whimpering stops, all goes quiet, except for the scraping noise of Irene’s writing implement. Quieter than quiet, an odd atmosphere, like after an evacuation.

‘Do you have a living will?’

‘Is there a healthcare proxy?’

‘Have you been assigned a level for long-term care?’

‘Any known allergies?’

‘Have you lost weight in the past three months?’

‘Have you gained weight in the past three months?’

Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat.

He has trouble focusing on Irene’s questions. His thinking is suffocating, as if someone has placed a wet towel over his head. On the desk, there is a bowl with polished, artificial looking apples. Out of the blue, a hand shoots out from behind Heidbrink and grabs one. Startled, Heidbrink turns around to look. Behind him stands a small man, his egg-shell pale paper face cut into two by a small Errol Flynn moustache, a silent-movies look.

‘Mr von Berg. What ails you?’

‘Nothing urgent. I can wait.’

‘This will take a while.’

‘No matter. I have time.’

Errol Flynn sits down in an armchair and eats his apple. So it's not artificial. Heidbrink is repelled by the regular, crushing bites and unappetising slurping noises the pale ghost haunting this castle makes.

'What is it, Mr von Berg? If it's something complicated, I would rather ask you to come back this afternoon.' Now there is a slightly gruff undertone to her voice. Irene runs a tight ship, she's not someone you can walk all over. 'This really will take too long. I will have lunch with Mr Heidbrink in a moment and then show him his room.'

Lunch? He isn't hungry at all. He is afraid of the room. He is afraid of the other patients. Actually, he is afraid of everything.

'I've had something to eat on the way here,' he says quickly. 'I would prefer to get unpacked first.'

'But the table has been laid for you.'

'I have no appetite.'

'Just a bite. Come on, I'll show you where you sit, that way you can start to get settled in a little.'

Resistance is pointless. Whatever, sooner or later he'll have to deal with it all.

'You can leave your luggage here for now.'

Irene leads, goose-step, he follows. The (castle) ghost follows them with his eyes. She's a little plump from behind but has kept her natural proportions. They walk through a tube-like transit room, apparently part of the dining wing, Heidbrink counts fifteen patients. Rustling noises, clinking glasses, clattering forks and knives, quiet, pecking conversations, a choral of murmurs and lisps and spittle-spraying. Irene makes up for it by talking all the louder. She comments on the weather, probably a proven method to put new arrivals at ease and make them feel safe.

'Actually, this is the coldest January we've had in eleven years.'

How often has she said this sentence, he wonders? Apart from the current weather conditions, she probably has the last ten years' records up her sleeve, plus weather phenomena recalled by family members, future weather, and what weather to expect in the beyond. Doling out friendly smiles to all sides, Heidbrink hastens through the cordon of diners. He senses their eyes on him, feel three metres tall and naked. Irene opens a sliding door, and Heidbrink feels as if he is being pulled into the large refectory as if by a vortex.



'Come.'

Irene leads him to a table for six at the front of the room, where his place is identified by a card with his name. His back to the buffet, a view of the park surrounding the castle. Besides him, there's only one other man, who is engrossed in his mobile phone. MR MARCEL RINKHAUS, says his card. Two more places are set. MS MELANIE UTHMANN. MS DENISE FRICKE. To the right, a further table for six and actually with six occupants; Heidbrink counts another half-a-dozen tables arranged around the buffet.

Eight times six is 48, minus two is 46, plus the people in the tube-like room, that would add up to about 60 guests. The room borders on the half-open kitchen where three chefs in white hats chop, fry, toss. Nurse Irene hands him a stack of forms.

'This is your pledge not to ingest any alcohol nor drugs nor medication during your stay here, unless the medication has been specifically prescribed. Take your time reading it all, and then please return it to me later with your signature.'

And she's gone.

Mr Marcel Rinkhaus is scrolling through the weather forecast for the next few days without paying any attention to the new arrival. The top dog letting him know who should greet whom, who calls the shots and sets the music. Three cheers for mobile phones, Heidbrink thinks as he pulls his from his pocket. But, as the one who is joining the table, he has to say something, anything.

'Hello.'

'Hello', Rinkhaus echoes, his voice devoid of any tone, lifts his hand and immediately lets it flop down again, as if to signify that there might be a lot to say but he can't be bothered. His eyes express a condescension that is difficult to grasp, his gaze denotes intolerance, arrogance and lack of humour. The new arrival has been weighed and found to be wanting. Now Rinkhaus lets his gaze flop too, down to his device, checking his standard apps: news, weather, birthdays, step counter. At the neighbouring table, a man spears a cherry tomato hiding in his salad but misses the mark, the tomato bounces off the plate on lands on the floor. He grimaces stupidly and leaves it lying there. Rinkhaus stares at his display with the fervour of a true believer. Outside the walls of this fortress, Heidbrink wouldn't waste a second thought on someone like this, but who knows whether he might become important. A natural ally in a hostile world. Rinkhaus, Patient 0 (Zero), all the way at the top of the inmates' hierarchy. Somehow, though,

this guy gives off an untrustworthy, shifty impression. Perhaps he works in the financial industry, but in a third-tier rank, shady. Selling non-existing holiday homes. A stoned trader who has just sunk a million worth of someone else's risk capital. General agent of the Allianz insurance company in Büsum.

Heidbrink, exposed to strangers in broad daylight, unprotected, is all alone and must pretend to be feeling halfway comfortable. All of this is part of a comprehensive test. He is reminded of class trips or youth camp or confirmand retreats. Immediately after arriving at the destination, everyone engaged in a desperate quest for quick closeness, a place in the community, trying to score with the other sex, to hang out with the cool gang. Those who didn't achieve that right away spent the rest of their time being left out to dry. The most memorable events in life are those tied to moments of deep shame and humiliation, which you then carry around with you for the rest of your life. His very last youth community holiday adventure trip had taken him to Sweden, where he had been, without ever discerning the reason why, the outsider and mega loser from day one. THE CAMP YOU'VE DIALLED IS NOT AVAILABLE. No matter how helplessly he'd tried, he hadn't been able to change that. He had to sit with the cast-outs or on his own, the tables with the cool people were barred to him. Eventually he'd been forced to join forces with the lowest-ranking member, Hans-Joachim. Hans-Joachim, what a fucked-up dud name. Any opportunity there was, Heidbrink had tried to wank his way out of his despair – his wanking frequency had been truly dizzying. Turn misery into wanking. The saddest of all low points had been when Corinna or Cosima or somebody like that had caught him in the act. The memory is as fresh as on day one. And now, the sequel looms. The room shrinks to the size of the table where he and Rinkhaus sit: Patient Zero v Hangaround, Fullmember v Prospect. RINKHAUS: EXPECT NO MERCY – HEIDBRINK: OUT IN BAD STANDING.

One month. Thirty days.

Check-list clinic routine, sanatorium routines, institution practice: it's a well-known fact that in hospitals, homes, prisons and care facilities, the meals – highlights of the day and frequently the only friends one has – are served very early. The very young, very thin waiter (in black-and-white livery) hands Heidbrink a laminated menu. He is long and lanky like a dragonfly, seems to consist only of elbows, shins and hip socket. The skull with its small mouthpart and teeth bent inwards emphasises the impression of an insect. Saying a prayer – praying mantis. Mantis. Fascinating mantis, male form: man-tis. The man-tis waiter now tells

him, his squeaky falsetto voice that of whirring insect, that there is a daily choice of one meat, one fish and one vegetarian dish. The salad buffet is all-you-can-eat. It would be most practical, says Man-tis, if the guest could tick his choices for the entire week. Heidbrink chooses all the meat dishes. Even though at home, he basically eat only vegetarian. Why does he do this? Anticipated protest against something he is unable to put a name to. Part of the adventure 'clinic' is the adventure 'meat dishes'. Kale with smoked pork chops and sausages, Zurich-style veal stew, beef olives, neck roast, Boeuf Stroganoff, beer soup with bacon, filled pasta squares in broth, rolled pork roast, sausage goulash, meat loaf: all classical plain fare, nostalgic dishes re-interpreted by no fewer than three cooks for the modern palate. German soul food designed to attract privately paying guests and empty their pockets. At 823 Euros per day you might expect a certain standard. Pay privately and you're at the top of the food chain, followed by private patients; third-class patients (patients on national insurance: please do not resuscitate!) are not accepted in the first place. In contrast to a hospital, where the patient is a supplicant, here it's the sanatorium pleading for the goodwill of the cash cow.

Today, the programme offers spaghetti Bolognese. Heidbrink casts a yearning look towards the parking lot. Most of the cars are probably those of staff; he guesses that a lot of the patients are brought and fetched by relatives. His car's engine should still be warm to the touch, at the least. Surely it has happened, occasionally, that patients didn't even start their sojourn here, or took to their heels right after checking in. He pictures and hears himself zooming off, with squealing tires, the castle disappearing in the rear-view mirror like an island in the fog.

At the buffet, four fellow patients pile their plates high. Patient – he still has to get used to this word. Patient among patients. The more people there are around him, the lonelier he feels, it's always been like that. It will take a while until he is ready to feel his way along the seasonal delicacies, a small bowl in his hand, and exchange a few words with this or that fellow patient: Have you tried the tomato salad? Whatever is this? What's the idea behind this, I wonder? There are countless reviews of the clinic on the Internet, which of course he has read, all of them. His strategy: make himself invisible (for now), like a fish slipping inside a coral reef, show up on the dot for treatments, therapy sessions, meals, follow instructions given by doctors and nursing staff without any protest. A good patient who, after the appropriate probation period, will be given this or that liberty.

With the hint of a bow, Man-tis serves Heidbrink his plate of food. 'Good hunger,' Rinkhaus says without lifting his eyes. Oh yes, thinks Heidbrink, soon Rinkhaus will be history, and he will be the old hand lording it over the novices. His table neighbour pulls a face as if he had stomach issues and was fighting reflux. Perhaps that's why he is not touching the food. Or he has already eaten. Why might he be here? It is hard to imagine that someone like that would ever find himself with an unbalanced psyche. But looking at me, you'd probably also think nothing's wrong.

The Bolognese is pleasantly peppery, fruity, sharp. Heidbrink can taste grated lemon peel. A premium Bolognese composed by white-hatted chefs. Almost by accident he devours the entire portion. For dessert, Man-tis serves apple compote with one scoop of vanilla ice cream. Done and dusted, off you go.

'See you later.'

'Yes, later,' Rinkhaus mumbles, staring at him as if he were appalled not only by his presence, but by his very existence.

Heidbrink slinks through the transit room, now devoid of people, and into the foyer where he hands his signed commitment form to Irene.

'Did you enjoy your meal?'

'It was delicious, thank you.'

'You see! Right, now I will show you your room.'

Heidbrink's 180-litre bag is full to the brim with undergarments. The elevator is located in the right wing, at the end of a long corridor lined with red carpet. Several rooms lead off this. Or rather, halls. Basilicas. Anklam Hall. Stettin Hall. Baltic Sea Hall.

'Your room is number 222, on the second floor. You have a great view from up there. The best in all of the residence, if you ask me.'

The room, about 25 square metres in size, has a freshly sanded and oiled parquet floor, Oak Antique. It seems that the place has been recently gutted and renovated; the smell of paint, grinding dust and primer residue still lingers in the air. A single bed pushed against the right-hand wall gives the room a touch of monk's cell. It's as cold as in an attic with a window going north. The room seems as if no one has ever spent a night here, it will dissolve into nothingness the moment that Heidbrink, whether dead or alive, vacates it. Irene crosses the room and turns up the radiators.

‘It heats up really fast,’ she says, smiling at Heidbrink through her curtain of dimples. At the price of 823 Euros, he thinks, they could really have heated this in advance.

‘Take your time to unpack. Then please come to the foyer just before three; the psychiatric and general physical examinations take place not in the main building but next door, in the former servant’s quarters. See you then.’

Her hand makes a gesture that is difficult to interpret, dismissive and at the same time summarising, and she leaves.

Opposite the bed, a low-board on which there is a (sub-size) TV, to the left a massive hinged door cabinet, to the right a desk and chair. In front of the window, a small lounge area with a table and cocktail chair. The best view in all of the residence. Heidbrink stands at the floor-to-ceiling window and looks out. Behind the moat, marshlands extend into the distance. A seemingly endless expanse of marshlands. He imagines it stretching far beyond the border, all the way across Poland and into the icy vastness of Russia. Is this part of the Peene marshes? Of the Peene lagoon? Of the Pomeranian lagoon? Heidbrink opens the window. Down below stands an old man, bent crooked, exhaling a cloud of smoke shaped like a swallow’s tail. His clothes are too big for him, which makes him look lost, like a primeval gnome. He stubs out the cigarette against the wall, uses his fingernail to slit open the butt, shakes the tobacco crumbs into the wind, rolls the paper into a tiny ball and flicks that off. He bends down to unfasten and re-fasten the Velcro on his shoes; it looks as if he is testing whether he is still capable of that. Too old to exercise, too young to die. This is such an exertion that he is attacked by a bout of coughing, which peters out in a damp, unhealthy sounding rattle. The moment the coughing stops, he lights the next cigarette. Heidbrink has never seen anybody smoke this fast. There is almost no wind; the old man stands in a pillar of smoke, his hair lacquered still by the fumes. He moans softly, as if smoking physically hurts him. He stubs out the cigarette, again slits open the butt, shakes the tobacco crumbs to the wind; this time he simply drops the cigarette. He coughs extensively and then farts, as if to say farewell. And what a fart it is. Then he traipses off on his little old man’s legs. Cautiously, Heidbrink closes the window.

The daylight shower bathroom is in impeccable condition. Wall-mounted washdown toilet, retro-style single-hole wash basin, shower cubicle with full glass enclosure, rainfall

showerhead as well as handset. The room is heated by a tubular radiator for warming towels and a panel radiator underneath the window.

He unpacks, arranges and sorts things. Things will get serious in a moment, he'll have to show what he's made of. He has prepared meticulously for the intake interview. Make your sentences fit for printing, don't waffle, let one thought lead to the next and spin it on consequently to the next until everything of relevance has been said. Give the impression that you are willing and able to undergo therapy. A likeable patient. Everyone wants to be liked, and that applies in particular for those with a fragile soul. After many small tests (insomnia, cross-country journey, checking in, first contact with patients and staff) he is now facing the first big test. Finally, he gets to talk about all those things that have accumulated inside his head.

Out of the blue he is overcome with tiredness, he is properly attacked by fatigue. He's been up and about for eleven hours and has been eating almost without interruption: avocado sandwich, Franzbrötchen, ragù alla Bolognese. In-patient stays equal taps for obesity. Sitting around, nothing to do, boredom – boredom, nothing to do, sitting around. At thirty-six he is approaching an age where it's a hell of a challenge to avoid contracting adiposity.

He chooses a neutral look: jeans (Jacob Cohen), Steve Jobs turtleneck (cashmere), jacket (also cashmere), ankle boots (welted). His Sunday outfit, the only one. Besides two jogging outfits, he has no fewer than three pairs of pyjamas in his bags. Long underwear, gloves, scarf, hat. Clothes well worthy of the insane and the penitent. Is it possible to do laundry here? He forgot to research that.