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MEMORIES OF HEIDELBERG

English sample translation by Rob Myatt

[pp. 9–34]

THURSDAY

On the recommendation of a friend, Isolde and Bertram have booked themselves a week at the Kurpfalz Boutique Hôtel & Spa, right on the banks of the River Neckar. A whopping five-hundred euros a night for a Deluxe Suite, but apparently *even* better and more exclusive than the excellent, and only half as expensive, five-star European Court Grand Hotel they ordinarily put up at. Plus, mid-May is already peak season.

After six turns at The Court, Isolde was desperate for a change of scene – and a change of river bank. The other side of the Neckar is less busy, it might even be prettier. The grass is always greener on the other side, thinks Bertram. But, her wish is his command, although if it had been up to him: Never change the European Court! This is as good as it gets. Erika (Isolde's) mother is only turning eighty once. Says Isolde. A rather unimaginative and not particularly valid reason, thinks Bertram, seven nights at five-hundred each, that's three-and-a-half grand for the accommodation alone. Madness.

With Bertram's defensive driving style, the five-hundred or so kilometres from Oldenburg to Heidelberg takes around six hours. Out of boredom, and for reasons of thrill-seeking that shall remain strictly confidential, Bertram challenges himself to keep on closing his eyes while driving at full speed. What started as three-second bursts has, over time, grown to eight. At a hundred and thirty kilometres an hour, that's two-hundred and eighty-eight metres of flying blind. Without cheating, meaning no counting faster in his head! Bertram's ultimate goal is fifteen seconds. Which should be doable in good conditions (a quiet Sunday or a bank holiday, good weather conditions, on a straight section of the autobahn). That would be five-hundred and forty metres, half a kilometre! Thankfully, Isolde hasn't once caught wind of his *suicidal antics* (that's probably what she'd call it) – and long may that continue. Blinking means wasting a fraction of a second of your life; only in the intervening seconds of the now do we live.

The traffic grinds to a halt just outside Osnabrück. Bertram's phone rings and the display lights up: an unknown number with a Heidelberg dialling code. It's Ms Hildebrand here

from the Kurpfalz Boutique Hôtel, when might we be expecting you, enquires a professionally friendly woman's voice. Around six-ish. Of course, unfortunately our reception staff will have left by then, says Ms Hildebrand, but you will receive an email with instructions on how to park and check in, and where you can collect your key.

Five-hundred euros for self-service? Pull the other one. Is it a hotel or a youth hostel? FOR FIVE-HUNDRED BIG ONES, THE RECEPTION OUGHT TO BE STAFFED ROUND THE CLOCK! LET'S CANCEL RIGHT NOW AND MOVE TO THE COURT!

Is what Bertram wants to say but he doesn't dare – Isolde is already melting in joyful anticipation, like butter in a frying pan. One wrong comment will turn the autobahn into the Highway to Hell. Bertram feels a strange sensation in his throat, as if he has a rolled up piece of paper stuck in it. After much gulping and coughing, he gets it under control just before he starts panicking. He does his best to strike up a car convo: what's new with Godehard, any movement *job-wise* (Isolde's brother, who has a PhD in economics, works for the Neubert Publishing Group). No. And how are things on the partner front? Isolde doesn't have any updates. Perhaps *Godi* (as he's known to his friends) has decided to hang up his boots after years of fruitless searching. It wouldn't surprise Bertram: Godehard, the archetype hopeless nerd, bookworm, trained hermit, looks as if he's spent the last few decades locked in a cupboard. Deathly pale, he stinks of moth balls and other assorted spheres of unknown origin.

'And otherwise?'

'What do you mean?'

Hm. Isolde's response is brief, her mind elsewhere. An amorphous weariness settles on Bertram, he suppresses a yawn and falls silent. The journey is dragging.

Isolde and Godehard. Not for the first time, Bertram wonders what on earth their parents were thinking. Godehard, the medieval saint, Isolde, lover of Tristan. An *imposing woman* with big bones, five eleven, bushy, wavy, slightly frizzy blond hair. The bird's nest on top of her head only accentuates her statue-like figure. A Valkyrie, born of the opera stage. If Isolde had had a sister, she'd be called Walpurga. Probably. Not that his own name is much better, thinks Bertram. Isolde, Godehard, Bertram, nonsense names that have fallen out of fashion. People with names like that are not people to be taken seriously.

While they take a break at Münsterland Services (1x King Junior Meal, 1x Crispy Chicken, 1x Regular Fries, 1x Cheesy Onion Fries, 2x Cokes), Bertram checks his emails. Message from

info@kurpfalzboutiquehotel.de: Their suite, Suite 24, is located in the main building. Keys can be collected ‘from the *Karolina* floating restaurant’, located diagonally across from the hotel. Not dodgy at all.

Bertram regrets his choice of burger almost as much as he regrets booking the overpriced suite. The crispy chicken is lukewarm at best and has a metallic taste to it, and the two halves of the bun are completely sodden. Grease, meat juice and dressing run down his hand. He tries jazzing up the burger with some salt, but he can jiggle and shake and bang on the ground as hard as he wants, the contents of the shaker have long since ossified. Oh well, there’s too much salt in his diet anyway. Salt = sodium chloride, you can tell from its proper name alone that it’s poison, must be. He urgently needs to reduce his sugar intake too, and animal fats, thinks Bertram, as he fishes a 125-gram pack of Almond Intermezzo out of his jacket pocket while Isolde is in the loo. €5.69 from The All Organic Company and hands down his favourite nibbles. It’s addictive and tricky, and has cunning ways of convincing you you’re not full. ALMOND INTERMEZZO: FACTS & FIGURES. Contains: sugared almonds, milk chocolate-covered almonds, blanched almonds, caramelised almonds. Nutritional values: 567 calories per 100 grams. Almond Intermezzo = Devil’s Intermezzo. He eats mechanically and with an unrelenting voraciousness, anxious to cram in a sufficient amount of nutrition in as short a time as possible. A minute and a half later, the packet is all gobbled up. He disposes of it immediately. He’ll get a right earful if Isolde catches him with such calorific poison. He’d get a lot more out of food if he could chew it a second time, like a cow or a sheep.

They reach Heidelberg an hour later than scheduled. Next disappointment: hotel and river are separated by a massive highway. You might have expected private access for five-hundred a night.

Isolde’s bubbly, child-like enthusiasm is not to be diminished: ‘Look, there’s that boat we’re supposed to collect the key from!’ That boat. The *Karolina*, a former Rhine–Neckar passenger ship, built 1929, 28 metres long, 6 metres wide, since decommissioned and converted, is now a floating restaurant and *cocktail lounge with maritime flair*. Very retro, Isolde comments. *Retro*, thinks Bertram. What is she on about this time? Her lexicon has become contaminated. *Just chill, soak up the wellness and unplug in the retro cocktail lounge, you know you want to.*

A gust of wind lifts Bertram's hair until it is almost vertical, like the feelers of an insect. He pats it back down with his hand.

Accessed via a narrow gangway, the Karolina looks upon first inspection freshly renovated and in pristine condition. A set of stairs leads down into the bowels of the ship where the restaurant, a sort of club room, toilets and kitchen are located. Another set of stairs leads to the top-deck bar.

A woman of perhaps fifty comes bouldering down the stairs, a Mamma Italia type. She looks as if the Michelin man has been squeezed into a blouse and a pair of trousers. Around her neck is a thin gold chain with a nameplate that reads 'Marina'.

'Buongiorno, cosa posso fare per Lei?'

After Bertram rattles off his script, Marina disappears behind the bar, rummages in a drawer and then hands Isolde an envelope.

'Your suite is on the second floor. Oh, one moment please.'

She takes the envelope back from Isolde and writes something on it. Slanting to the left, her writing is so tiny it looks like the warnings on a box of medication. Virtually unreadable.

'Would you still have a table for two for this evening by any chance?' asks Isolde.

'Due persone? Sì, naturalmente.'

'Eight o'clock?'

'Any time! Back there, in the lounge, al fresco.'

She points to the uncovered stern of the ship which is separated from the bar by a curtain made of stiff black brocade. Looks like an exclusive VIP area, thinks Bertram, somewhere where they always keep a few spots reserved for special guests.

'Wonderful, thank you.'

'Welcome. See you soon!'

A peculiar atmosphere hangs over the empty hotel, as if the place has been evacuated. To the left of the deserted reception is some sort of saloon bar, to the right the stairs and lift. They just about squeeze themselves and their luggage into the tiny lift. A fifty-euro dwarf lift (definitely not five-hundred), not a place for people with claustrophobia. The dingy air inside robs him of breath.

'Let's take the stairs next time,' says Isolde.

The difference between a hotel *room* and a hotel *suite* is that the latter has both a bedroom and a separate living area that is accessed via a small vestibule. The bathroom, which has been finished with high-quality (Dornbracht/Villeroy&Boch) fixtures and a sophisticated lighting concept, has a double sink and separate shower cabin, all as advertised on the website. But where is the charming, spacious loggia, perfect for unwinding? False advertising, much like the floor-to-ceiling windows. At best, you can see the river and the castle when standing. Bertram's mind wanders to The Court, with its wonderfully secluded location, exclusive bar, incredible wellness centre, choice culinary delights and always friendly staff who can read their highly esteemed guests' minds and cater to their every whim day or night. Oh well. He takes off his shoes, hoping they don't pong after the long journey.

'What do you think? It's gorgeous here, isn't it?'

Well, at least their new digs have pulled Isolde out of her sullen standoffishness. That's something. 'I can't wait for dinner. Can you?'

'No. But we'll have to hurry if we want to make it for eight.'

'I'll just get ready quickly and then we can go.'

'Alright, I'll start unpacking.'

His suitcase (with its integrated garment bag which is concealing seven or eight packs of Almond Intermezzo) is so well-ordered, it almost looks like a soldier's pack: the black socks lined up like hand grenades, the trousers piled like decoys, the shirts stacked like roof tiles. The things he will need for the next couple of days he hangs in the wardrobe in the tiny hallway, all the rest, especially the Almond Intermezzi, he leaves in the suitcase. Isolde tends to fully unpack her suitcase and large holdall, so she needs a lot of wardrobe space.

Once he's done, he sits down on the bed and waits. He's been here before. *I'll just get ready quickly*, sure. The soles of Isolde's bare feet flip-flop across the floor. And now she's brushing her teeth as well. Her electric toothbrush is as loud as a kitchen mixer but she refuses point blank to replace the tired old workhorse from the dental hygiene bronze age with a contemporary model. He knocks on the door.

'Nghhh?'

He pokes his head in. 'Are we nearly ready?'

'Ah ah, ust a se'on...'

Toothpaste drips from her mouth, staining her dark-brown jumper. Bubbles, spit, mucus.

‘Here we are.’

‘Benvenuti. Welcome again.’

Big Mamma Marina leads them past the bar to the stern of the ship. She sways as she walks, though not particularly gracefully, her feet turned outwards, her arms swinging and her hips jutting out from beneath a tight skirt like a sickle. She hands them the menus with the skill of a card dealer. Slick, professional, precise.

‘Innanzitutto, il menù e la lista dei vini.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Prego. Are you warm enough? Or should I turn the heaters on?’

‘What do you think, Isi?’

‘No, grazie,’ says Isolde in a saccharine tone, her mood still hotel-sweet. ‘It’s nice as it is.’

For now, thinks Bertram, for now. It’ll be not nice in an hour at most, though we’ll probably be long gone by then. He is dog-tired after the long journey and wouldn’t be remotely opposed to heading off promptly to the land of nod. Get in, get fed, get out, the way they do at their local *Rodizio Oldenburg* steakhouse, the way they do everywhere they go. Her enthusiasm reinvigorated, Isolde reads aloud from the menu:

‘Sicilian salad with mullet di scoglio, fennel and fillet of orange. Salad with purple artichoke, young caciotta and radicchio tardive.’

Not so loud, thinks Bertram, what will people think (not that there is anyone else here, mind).

‘Pea ravioli with Belper Knolle cheese and datterini tomatoes.’

Alright, that’s enough now. But Isolde, her eyes locked in a squint, continues her mouth-watering rambling:

‘Ravioli with rock oysters and spinach. Roman kid goat with mountain lentils.’

Finally, she puts the menu down. Kid goat, thinks Bertram; kid goat is kid goat is kid goat.

‘Look how beautiful the sunset is.’

‘Mm.’

Marina brings over a basket of home-baked ciabatta and a bowl of olives. Have we decided yet? Isolde goes for cannelloni filled with chili spinach and goat’s cheese, Bertram for

spaghetti frutti di mare alla Enrico, not that he has a clue what style *alla Enrico* is, but he doesn't feel like asking. All paired with a bottle of *Torres Milmanda* chardonnay. Excellent choice, says Marina approvingly, as if talking to connoisseurs. The ciabatta is soft, moist and oven-fresh, the olives are marinated in oil and herbs. Proper tasty grub.

Sitting and waiting, waiting and sitting. Half-conversations petering out in apathy. Seventeen years of marriage has boiled their communication down to a minimum. A stream of wordless thoughts presses at his throat but nothing comes out. There is a sour smell emanating from somewhere. Bertram breathes into his hand surreptitiously and determines that the sour smell is coming from his stomach.

THE FOOD'S COMING, THE FOOD'S COMING, THE FOOD'S FINALLY COMING!

Marina balances the tray with her hands while at the same time holding the door open with her foot. A feat of artistry from a woman at the top of her game.

They tuck in.

'Quite exquisite,' Isolde gushes, 'and deliciously spicy, a delicate combination of spices, hard to pinpoint. Want to try a bit?'

'No, thank you, afraid I'm already full,' says Bertram who, once again, has eaten too quickly. The food is above-average at best, despite the flowery language on the menu. It seems to have made an impression on Isolde. Her gushing review perhaps also takes account of the unique demands associated with preparing food on a boat.

The weather is slowly turning chilly. Marina, who it seems is blessed with a seventh sense, switches on the heaters.

'Oh, that's not necessary, one is more than enough!'

'No, no! Nessun ospite si è mai congelato con noi. Prego.'

'Where are the toilets, please?' asks Bertram.

'Past the bar, down the stairs, first door on your left, signore.'

His now one-hundred-and-nineteen-kilo frame only just fits into the cubicle. There is a delicate scent of piss in the air. Neither the urinal cakes nor the automatic air freshener by the door are enough to cover up the funk. Above the sink are signed photos of celebs he's never heard of. Michael Ande. Friedrun and Horst. Anna-Carina Woitschack. A notice pinned next

to the mirror reads: WE KINDLY ASK GUESTS NOT TO DISPOSE OF TOO MUCH PAPER IN THE TOILET. WE ARE ON A BOAT!

Why *not too much*, thinks Bertram, why not simply *Please do not dispose of paper in the toilet*? And the line about being on a boat is entirely unnecessary. Besides, it's a decommissioned, restaurantised *aquatic vehicle*. Is that even a thing? Cutter, hydrofoil, flat-bottomed boat.

'The toilets are tiny.'

'Well, we are on a boat.'

'That's what it says down there.'

'What?'

'Never mind. The bar of soap was nearly all used up. Guess they forgot to replace it.'

'They don't have a lotion dispenser?'

'Lotion dispenser?'

'Jesus, Bertram, don't be so obtuse. A soap dispenser. Liquid soap.'

'No, they don't. I wondered about that too, to be honest. No hand dryer or proper towels either. Just paper.'

The drab minutiae one pads a conversation with when one has nothing to say.

'It's really low, too. You have to duck. And I definitely can't put on any more weight.'

'It would be enough if you laid off the sweets and the snacks. The fact that you actually tell yourself nuts are healthy.'

'In *moderation* they are.'

'But not kilos of that almond mix. What's it called again?'

'Almond Intermezzo. But that's why I hardly ever have cheese. And only the occasional cold cuts.'

The tiny speaker above them suddenly begins to splutter and whine, first *Senza una donna*, then *Gloria*, then *Bello e impossibile*. Classic ristorante muzak, sadly not the originals, but instead some domesticated easy-listening renditions, the kind you associate with going to the dentist.

'What a racket.'

'Yeah, terrible.'

At least that they can agree on.

*Memories of Heidelberg are memories of you.
I still dream of that time,
When it was all new.
Memories of Heidelberg are memories of joy.
But that time in Heidelberg
Is gone now, my boy.*

‘Bit out of left field, no? Who sings that again? Ireen Sheer? Mary Roos?’

‘Peggy March.’

‘Oh yeah, that’s it, Peggy March. Wonder what she’s up to these days.’

*At the fireworks by the old chateau,
I saw you, only for a second though.
But there began
Our fine romance
That I’ll remember till my last dance!
Whoa, whoa, whoa, memories of Heidelberg are memories of you ...*

A forgotten hit from a faded era.

‘Let’s get the bill.’

The *Chef del Ristorante*, a small, bald-headed, sort of ferret-like man with a rubber smile places a small, carved wooden chest on the table.

‘My friends. How was everything?’

Friends, thinks Bertram, we’re not there just yet.

‘It was *delectable*, really *bene*,’ says Isolde. Delectable, retro, rustic.

Bertram slides a hundred euros into the box. ‘Quite.’

The chef does a small bow and reaches out his hand first to Isolde and then Bertram.

‘Thank you, thank you very much.’

The well-practised rubber smile turns into a warm professional smile, one that makes the guests feel good, that sweeps away their worries and anxieties, a smile that says: There is no-one in this entire world whose presence I appreciate more than yours. Marina is responsible for the artistry, the chef brings the vibes.

‘Enrico,’ he grins at them both, his hand outstretched.

‘Nice to meet you. I’m Isolde, this is my husband, Bertram.’

Isolde and Bertram – names from a seventies comedy sketch.

‘May I offer you a drink on the house?’

‘That would be lovely. A grappa and a sambuca, please.’

Enrico offers another bow and scurries away.

‘Did you remember to leave a tip?’

‘Thirteen seventy, that’s sixteen percent.’

‘A simple yes would have sufficed.’

‘I reckon it’s going straight in Enrico’s pocket. Seems like a bit of worm, don’t you think?’

‘Just because he’s short doesn’t mean there’s anything worm-like about him. You have a very warped way of looking at things.’

‘A warped worm creature.’

‘Enough now, he’s coming back.’

‘Salute,’ says Enrico with his professional grin. ‘And hopefully see you again soon!’

‘Oh, we’ll definitely be back,’ says Isolde effusively. ‘Ciao, Enrico!’

He grins so broadly, it looks as if his face is about to explode.

‘Sarebbe un piacere, any time! Isolde! Bertram!’

Bertram knows a thing or two about hard liquor. This one tastes of no-name brand. He keeps it in his mouth until it stops burning, then lets it trickle down his throat in small little gulps.

Isolde suggests they could listen to a true crime or science podcast before bed. Yeah, sure. Bertram is fine with any kind of white noise. Anything is better than the eternal silence or any sort of rumination.

‘I’ll say good night now, in case I nod off,’ says Isolde, turning over on her side. The outline of her still exquisite backside is visible beneath the covers. The imposing behind of an

imposing woman. Big and round and beautiful and firm and pale. He loves pale women. Pale, broad-shouldered and full-breasted. Sometimes, when he still had the confidence and the sparks would start flying naturally, he would give her a spank. Her bottom was so elastic it almost spanked him back. Her figure may not be as imposing anymore, as her curves gradually smooth out and merge with one another, but he does still find her seriously hot. After all these years. A brief sexual impulse comes over him every time he looks at her. Even the weightiness and sweaty stickiness of her upper thigh and her large, freckled breasts, that always looked as if they were about to burst forth from the cups of her bra, used to drive him wild.

Until that night, a hundred years ago, when she *called time on their sex life*. Spooning her, he pressed his semi against her bottom, the way he always did, and waited for things to take their usual course. Not the most imaginative approach, sure, but old habits die hard. At least, that's how *he* saw it.

That evening, however, things took a different course. Without turning over, Isolde began talking to him in a strangely affected tone. 'Bertram, I've been meaning to say this for a while but, it's not for me anymore, that stuff.'

That stuff? Not anymore? That stuff's not for me anymore? What stuff is she talking about?

Of course, he knew what she was talking about. The implications of her words were immediately apparent.

'What do you mean, it's not for you anymore?'

'I'm done with it.'

'With what exactly?'

'Come on, are you really going to make me spell it out? Don't, it's humiliating.'

'*By no means* (by no means, whatever next) is it my intention to humiliate you. But before I misinterpret anything, might I ask for some *clarification* (clarification, that's whatever next).'

'Jesus! Fine: sex. I don't want to anymore.'

The quite pointless digging continued: 'You mean, in general?'

'I think so.'

'How about we just press pause for now?'

‘Press pause? Please don’t act like you don’t understand. This conversation’s been weighing on me for God knows how long, don’t make it worse than it already is. And please don’t ask if it’s you or if there’s someone else. There isn’t. I just don’t want to anymore. Even the thought of it makes me nauseous.’

NAUSEOUS!

Intense smells, cloying stickiness, fleshy slapping; animalistic grunting, slobbery licking, ravenous sucking. It can all be a turn-on, or a complete turn-off.

‘Do you really think that’s never going to change?’ He felt hurt by how short she was being with him – and he was starting to panic about his sexual future. ‘What if you went and saw a doctor? Maybe it’s something physical.’

‘Something *physical*? Of course it’s something physical, what else would it be?’

‘But, just like that, out of nowhere? Without even giving me the chance to ...’

‘Bertram, please. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing more to say. Let’s just go to sleep. Please.’

‘Okay. Let’s say this then: if anything ever changes, you let me know. Until then, I’ll leave you be. Promise.’

After that, his penis had withdrawn into his belly where it remained to this day, his desire had dissolved and dispersed in a wave of melancholy. No more wading through post-coital puddles, lying about in pools of shared sweat, drowning in hormonal ooze, being subjected to the excretory aromas of copulation. There’s no other way of looking at it!

Now, the useless sausage between his legs hangs there like a protuberance, waiting for action that will never come. On the rare occasion he does still feel *stimulated*, he stifles it, snuffs it out. It’s a skill, he’s trained himself. On the plus side, he can fatten himself up in peace without feeling guilty. Still, though. His paunch heaves under his polo shirt like a sack of pumpkin seeds. His abdominal muscles have given up all fight, he really doesn’t need to suck in his milky spare tyre anymore. Doesn’t need to suck in anything anymore. To turn inside out, let it all hang out. By the time he’s so fat he can’t see his thing anymore, he’ll have forgotten he ever had one in the first place. A *nasty old fat-arse* who takes up two seats on the train. As voracious as a cannibal, as old as a dinosaur, as fat as five prize pigs and as deaf as a post.

FRIDAY

At 9 am, a text arrives from Brother Godehard: Birthday girl in intensive care at Kurpfalz Hospital since yesterday evening with acute double kidney infection. The party has already been cancelled. Thank God Isolde can't read minds because in a matter of milliseconds, a feeling spreads through Bertram's body like a drug: INFINITE RELIEF, HAPPINESS.

He was looking forward to the party about as much as dental surgery without anaesthetic. He wishes his mother-in-law, Erika, a full and speedy recovery, of course, even if the two have from day one been united in a sincere, insurmountable dislike of one another that made every family gathering torture. He won't be sad not to see Brother Godehard either and this wedding hotel up in the Odenwald Mountains is the dictionary definition of an insular wasteland.

We could break camp first thing tomorrow then. Godehard lives round the corner, he can sort everything out.

Isolde is clearly in a state of shock. Her eyes are flickering, helpless, hopeless, her cheeks a feverish red. Oh God, oh God, she mumbles, accompanied by a gurgling groan emanating from some secret place deep within. Bertram puts on an appropriately concerned face and tries to match his body language to hers. He hopes his silent hug method can convey his empathy. Oh God, oh God, she repeats, walking over to the window and opening it. Dozens of pigeons scatter and swirl, as if startled by the wind. You can hear the whoosh of their wing flaps and see their shadows sailing across the puddles in the road. It rained overnight.

Then Isolde's ringtone thunders around the room and she jumps as if struck by lightning. It's Godehard with an update: she'll live (Bertram hadn't realised it was *that* serious), but no visitors for now.

'That's good news at least,' says Bertram, pulling her towards him again. She acquiesces to his awkward hug limply.

It feels a bit weird, like a clumsily tied package. They're both out of practice, two hugs in one day requires a bit of warming up first.

'Can I do anything?' Bertram tries to put on his most empathetic voice.

‘I don’t know. I really don’t know.’

‘What do you say we go for a stroll along Philosophenweg? It’s not far from here at all. Bit of exercise, some fresh air, clear your head, as much as that’s possible under the circumstances.’

‘Yeah, maybe that’s a good idea.’

Arriving in ancient cities like Heidelberg, you get a sense of what it means to be merely an insignificant puff/blip/speck. The seven-hundred-metre and incredibly steep climb up Schlangenweg brings him to the brink of collapse. Grunting, gasping and wheezing, he heaves himself forwards like an emphysema patient clambering across a cliff face. Perhaps it really is emphysema he’s feeling? A shudder comes over him, waves of shudders, his red, contorted face is swollen like a blood moon. Isolde, it seems, can’t bear to look. Her gaze is fixed firmly on the hillside beyond him.

It seems his suicidal lifestyle has chosen this precise moment to serve him his just desserts. All the crap he has been shovelling into his gullet for years on end, the delicious butter, the greasy lard, the four-egg (or more) omelettes, *varieties* of cheese with enough cream to make your head spin, hearty offal (preferably Berlin-style roast calf’s liver, soured kidneys with capers, rich pig’s heart stew), frozen ready meals, pizzas and baked goods, tortilla chips drenched in chili dip and tonnes upon tonnes of Almond Intermezzo. Giant lava flows of ultra-saturated fats have passed through his tubes, leaving behind a tiny little morsel with every food orgy and now the day is fast approaching when his fat-clogged innards will collapse. Final stop: Philosophenweg. The heart attack will either kill him *on the spot* or catapult him into a double bed at Kurpfalz Hospital, right next to his mother-in-law Erika. He can smell his nervous sweat, clammy, like the bottom of a well. He sucks in air through windpipes that have narrowed to tiny slits. Everything packaged into a pain that flutters beneath his ribs. His face is throbbing and pounding, a nerve in his top jaw is pulsating, there is a light behind his eyes that is getting brighter.

‘Quite the lung-buster,’ he pants. ‘We should exercise more.’

‘We? You’re the one that’s completely dead!’

She whips out her phone, takes a picture of him and shows him: an old, pecked-out scarecrow with an oversized Hermann Göring head that is blowing copper red. He’s asked her

plenty of times now to stop it with the unsolicited snaps, but she never remembers. *So you can see how serious it is.*

‘You need to finally pull your finger out, lose some weight and actually keep it off. At least get down to a hundred and ten kilos. That much should be doable.’

A hundred and ten, thinks Bertram, that’s almost three seconds of flying blind.

‘Not that you actually eat all that much,’ Isolde adds. ‘Come on, let’s go sit on the bench.’

If only she knew. Since he generally gorges on the most taboo calorie bombs in secret, Isolde assumes there must be something wrong with his metabolism or his thyroid or some other gland that’s gone haywire or a messed-up enzyme or that it must be a mutated virus. No-fault obesity. Stranger things have happened. He keeps up the façade.

‘Yeah, true. Look.’

‘What?’

‘Her, just walking up now.’

Unlike him, the big fat fatty who just schlepped his lizard neck and his hulking shoulders and his sore arse up the hill, the young woman races up Schlangenberg with the ephemeral ease of a mountain goat. Maybe, perhaps, no, *definitely* part of her daily workout. Twice up and down = two-thousand metres = a hundred and eighty metres of elevation.

Not even slightly out of breath, she quickly snaps off a few selfies which she inspects, edits and posts while still walking. Then she sits down on the bench next to theirs, still smiling a broad and quite natural smile. She puts her phone away and places the back of her wrist against her forehead so that her fingers hang down like broken wings, her mouth now frozen in an apparent expression of defiant indignation. A new pose she’s been working on?

She has braided her hair around her skull like a platinum-blond helmet. The halter neck top perfectly frames her toned and lightly tanned arms with their delicate golden hairs.

For creatures like her, Isolde and Bertram (and people above a certain age in general) are like air, cold air, ice-cold air, a draught, an air current that will make you ill if you’re exposed to it for too long. She lights a cigarette – she’s no health fanatic – and lets tiny little clouds of smoke escape from between her barely parted lips. Soon enough, she is glued to her phone again. She uses her free hand to take off the designer running shoes that really do look different to ordinary trainers. Incredible feet, dainty, perfectly shaped little trotters with perfect, dinky little piggies, the nails bright, youthful half-moons. A foot fetishist’s feet. The polish on

her left big toenail has cracked. A statement, not an accident, a tiny imperfection that takes her hotness to a different level, makes her stand out from the 100,000 other small-time influencers, Bertram thinks to himself – not that he’s particularly au-fait with digital cultures.

She pouts with glossy lips and immediately launches into her next *profound and authentic* shot-storm. The fact that everything always comes together for these people too, as if they want nothing more than to live up to their own stereotype. Stupid-cocky balance. Then her phone rings. Really? She actually uses her phone to call people? It’s not as if she needs to. She holds her phone flat in front of her mouth as if about to bite into it like a Ryvita.

‘Bit stressy at the moment but, like, overall still vibing ...’

That way her voice goes up at the end of the sentence is so inane that in that moment, even the ordinarily docile Bertram wants nothing more than for her to lose her balance during her next selfie and plummet headfirst down the mountain.

‘Should we get going slowly?’

Isolde nods without saying a word. At least they have that much in common for now: the desire to be spared such impertinence.