

Sample Translation (Opening chapter, pp. 11 - 32)

The Education of a Man **by Michael Kumpfmüller**

novel

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I was in my mid-twenties when I first saw her. Although more precisely when she first saw me, because when I noticed her in one of the first tutorial classes, she already seemed to be taking an interest in me. Her glance was clear and calm, strangely far-seeing, I thought, and ready for who knew what? It both pleased and confused me. Was this possible? She was sitting at one of the tables at the back, so I couldn't really see her properly because the class was very full, with about forty participants who were studying my reader, and whose respect I hoped I had earned at the start with a lecture on the late Stravinsky.

She was the kind of woman that I always noticed first. Fair-complexioned, dark blonde hair, freckled, inconspicuously dressed, but with a dark and searching look that was certainly bent on me. She was a few years younger than me, tall and slender, if not as delicately built as my girlfriend, with a broad, thoughtful brow and eyes that were almost black.

For a few weeks that was all I had. I saw the different clothes she wore and the way she whispered to her friend, for as a rule she turned up with another girl and showed little interest in the group as a whole. She just watched. Not in a particularly friendly way, as I regularly established, but challengingly and at the same time dismissively, as if someone like me raised all kinds of questions that she would have to consider carefully. She seemed to be discontented. Even when her eyes fell on me, she appeared to be thinking of her discontentment. I couldn't make it out. As if she were full of some old rage, even if she had no present cause for it. When I thought of her in my room in the evening, I toyed with the idea of speaking to her, because I liked her, and she seemed to be considering me for some possibility, not excluding a little adventure. And I was in dire need of one of those.

To this day I don't really understand it, but the fact was that I was living with a woman who in seven years together hadn't once slept with me. I'd tried, with various manoeuvres, with growing desperation, and a sense of increasing dislike when I realized, uneasily, what an intolerable effort it cost me to lie beside her at night and exchange so much as a friendly word.

She came from a little place near the border with the Netherlands, and in all these years she had acted as if our sexual problem was a question that she would be

glad to consider when occasion offered, only so far, unfortunately, occasion never had. Didn't she want to do it, or couldn't she? And was there a difference, anyway? That thought tormented me. Because ultimately, whose fault was it if not mine? She probably wouldn't have had the slightest problem with someone else. But she frequently and volubly denied that, hinting at some unfortunate incident way back in the past, something that neither of us dared to approach more closely.

I couldn't leave her. I would have felt so shabby, leaving her for such a devastating reason, although I was moving further and further away from her, simply acting as if we were living with each other. For a long time she hadn't known much about me, and she probably didn't want to know who I was thinking about, whom I met and thought of sounding out, given the chance; the blonde was only one example.

It was all painful and silent. My girlfriend had problems with writing, couldn't sort out her ideas, admitted that she had never been able to. It took her two days to pack a suitcase, she didn't cook, she didn't do the laundry, and she left me lists of shopping that she hadn't managed to do either. My patience was just about exhausted. I had sexual fantasies and ideas of the madhouse. I drifted around in downmarket dives, where I lurked at the bar late at night in wait for chances that never turned up.

I'd have gone with any woman. Could I still do it? I'd been able to seven years ago with Therese.

I waited, feeling certain that it would happen some time, yet I was surprised when it actually did.

The woman was twenty years older than me, and simply asked me – of all things, after an evening meal at my professor's house. She took me back to her apartment, where I tried to get inside her until early in the morning, but she was either too drunk or scared, because there were no condoms, neither she nor I had thought of condoms. I climbed on top of her and off again, she didn't get really wet, although I tried hard with her.

Finally I got up and went home. Not particularly ashamed of myself, indeed on the contrary, feeling elated. There was a certain freedom in my misfortune. I had kissed her, undressed her rather impatiently, as if this was the last chance in my life, making love in a dark apartment to a stranger who let me do anything to her, because that was the start of it, standing up as I kissed her again and again.

Her name was Rosalinde, but I didn't know that until a year later when she was dead, and I heard it from my professor, at whose place I had met her. Would it

have been different if I had whispered her name? She had gone out into the street and fell down dead. Obviously weeks before I heard of it, and now her funeral was being held. I wanted to go, and had difficulty in giving my professor a reason. I talked at too much length, but in the end I got my way and said goodbye to her, proud in a weird way because, after all, I had been something like her last lover.

There was no coffin, only a small urn because she had been cremated, which I thought was wrong. She had no family. Only a handful of friends, some of whom I knew, came to the funeral.

At the meal in a cheap restaurant after it, I sat next to the man in whose VW Beetle we had gone to her place that evening, half an hour's drive during which we kissed the whole time in a curiously contorted position, since she was sitting in front and I was sitting at the back, which theoretically made kissing impossible. I couldn't tell that story. But other stories were told. At the end of the meal a bottle of schnapps was passed around, and I still didn't know much about her. The others spoke of her with a certain regret, as if her life hadn't fulfilled all that it promised, and that was exactly my own experience of her.

At the end of the sixth tutorial session, which had been unusually tough going, I spoke to the blonde. She was almost out of the door already when I practically jumped over chairs and benches, wondering even as I did so just what my idea was.

She didn't seem particularly surprised, and immediately agreed to go and have a drink with me, yes, she'd be happy to go to the cafeteria, where she later told me that she hated the place. She talked cheerfully away, telling me that she wanted to be a teacher of music and French. Her friend had dragged her along to my tutorial class. The late Stravinsky, for heaven's sake, it wasn't her kind of music. But I liked the smell of her, I liked her voice, which was surprisingly low; she had never spoken up during the classes.

At close quarters she was less voluptuous than I'd thought, which at second glance I liked, as well as her curved mouth with lips that were a little too thin. She didn't give any impression of anger. On the contrary, she seemed to be concentrating hard, and asked me what it felt like standing up there in front of the tutorial group, when there was such a slight difference in our ages – in her case, it turned out, only about four years.

That was how we met. Unfortunately she had a date immediately afterwards, but that didn't matter. We exchanged phone numbers and went our separate ways. Was something going to come of this or not? All things considered, I wasn't sure, but still, I called her two days later, because she had said: just phone and maybe we can meet, go to the cinema, go for a walk, whatever. I suggested the new Mike Leigh film. Obviously she was straight out of the shower, because she said her hair was all wet, she must just wrap a towel round herself. Was she saying that for my benefit?

Her name was Julika.

On the phone her voice sounded even more attractive than in the cafeteria. She couldn't make it until Monday or Tuesday at the earliest, she said, and told me that she was expecting a visitor at the weekend, in fact in a few hours' time. She didn't specify what kind of visitor it was, and it didn't bother me that she was expecting one.

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We saw each other quite often over the next few weeks. We sat in cafés, met at the cinema, we once had breakfast at her place, and another time we made it a threesome with my girlfriend, whom I mentioned now and then, without giving the situation away directly, but indicating that it was something of a problem, and not just a recent one, or it could hardly have been called a problem.

With Julika I felt curiously relaxed, as if I were having a few days' holiday; time out that had little to do with my normal life. I enjoyed talking to her; we discussed our studies, the books we had read, the films we had seen, and in passing our families, which of us came from what part of the country, and what that meant to us. She came from near Stuttgart. I didn't know Stuttgart; Julika hated it, but luckily didn't talk with a Stuttgart accent, since her parents came from further north. As a girl she had been passionately keen on horse-riding; she mentioned ballet lessons, dancing classes, six months as an au pair in Paris.

She waxed enthusiastic about Paris. It had been the best time of her life, she said, she loved Paris, the architecture, the lifestyle. Her enthusiasm was in rather general terms. She didn't say much about the children she was looking after, two spoilt, snotty-nosed kids who made it clear that they didn't for a moment take this blonde from Germany seriously. But Paris itself! She could hardly imagine there was anyone who didn't know it! Here she became almost boisterously high-spirited. I can show you the city, she said, we'll go there one day if you like.

I noticed that she had stopped dressing all in black. She also had all kinds of coloured clothes, and was wearing a red blouse and a black and red check skirt. Not for the first time, I wondered whether there were men in her life. A boyfriend who lived in another city, affairs of some kind. She hadn't mentioned either of those possibilities. Perhaps she didn't fancy men? I could imagine that. I was getting used to her name: Julika. At first I had avoided using it as far as I could; I didn't like it, as if it were the wrong name, at least for her, as if I'd have felt happier with some other name.

Early in the summer I separated from my girlfriend. It had nothing to do with Julika, it was the outcome of a long series of disillusionments and false hopes, so when it happened, it did so almost casually. I told her I didn't want to go on living with her. She did not seem entirely unprepared for that; she nodded, accepted it or at least pretended to accept it, as if turned to stone. For the time being I couldn't have cared less. I went to my room and threw myself on the bed, expecting a surge of strong emotions, but I felt nothing. At last, I thought. That was all, just relief. Relief that it hadn't even been hard work; basically, it had seemed to happen as if of its own accord.

The weeks leading up to it had been much the worst, although I'd have had difficulty in saying what was worst of all: the shouting or the end of the shouting, the hours when we were getting our breath back or the hours when we went over everything again and again, the subject of sex included. You always wanted children, I said. How are we supposed to have children if we're not sleeping together? I tried to describe the way I felt inside, burnt-out, embittered, which was why, I said, I'm inclined to think it's perverse. Unnatural. Wanting to sleep with a woman is perverted, I claimed. To which she just replied, coldly, that I ought to have taken her by violence. Why did you never try violence? She mentioned a scene just before Christmas, when I'd had hopes for the last time, in her parents' weekend house and when she had seemed to be ready for it early in the morning, under a pile of pillows that I removed one by one as if she were buried alive under them, a victim who would be lost for ever if I made a wrong move. But I'd never thought of violence. So was that supposed to have been my mistake?

Now, at the latest, I ought to have talked to someone, but I couldn't. It was part of my dilemma that right until the last, I thought I was bound to wreck everything

if I talked about it. I'd never mentioned her other problems, either, the way she bit her nails to the quick so that they bled, the way she slept for up to fourteen hours a day. She never finished anything. She would read ten books at the same time, and take weeks over the first few sentences of the essays she was supposed to be writing. She was often too lazy, and then again too impatient, running around her room like an animal and beating her fists and forehead against the wall until she was bleeding. When I told her to stop it, she laughed. Laughed like a madwoman. Stop it, I said. I can't bear it. Whereupon she agreed with me at once: yes, life was unbearable, if only we'd never moved here to this godforsaken city, if only we'd never met. She lay on the floor in the corridor, the picture of misery, laughing that deranged laugh.

The last class of the seminar was the first that I was really happy about. Julika thought that was a good reason to celebrate, so we went out to eat together at a French café that she had described to me with enthusiasm, and as it turned out correctly. We sat there for a long time, and finally moved on to a bar, apparently some kind of brothel or at least reminiscent of a brothel, because everything was red and suggestive and plushy. So this was where she had dragged me. It was after one in the morning, and I felt uncomfortable, because there was loud music playing and it was difficult to hold a conversation. I concentrated on her skirt, the way she crossed her legs, her tights. She was smoking, and asked about my summer. Are you going to travel? Obviously she didn't need to work in the summer vacation, because she was planning to spend three weeks in the south of France, while I always had to earn money in the summer, and I'd hardly gone away at all for years – just once, now I came to think of it, when I had stayed in a hut in the mountains for four weeks, trying to get on with my own stuff.

Stuff? she asked.

So I told her that I composed music, phrasing it laboriously, as if that was the greatest secret I had to tell, indeed as if I were undressing in front of her, and that was probably the deal: she showed me her legs, and I showed her what had always been the most difficult thing of all for me to discuss.

Not that I had much to tell anyone, because apart from those weeks in the mountains I'd had no time to compose, what with my studies and my job. Did I imagine it, or was she hanging on my lips? Having her listen to me so intently was a bit like having sex. Or was it just my way of evading the ongoing issue of sex? I

mentioned my first attempt at writing a string quartet, I mentioned the songs, two or three works for piano, how it had begun, because it began when I was sixteen.

I told her all about it.

When we left the bar it was early morning. I thought I felt that we were getting somewhere. I really wanted to go to bed, but it seemed that the tension wasn't to be so quickly resolved, so we walked along the streets for a while, before going into another café just before six. I was very tired by now. I felt stressed and driven, as if I had to think of something that would reflect the new intimacy between us. There was a long silence that I felt was awkward. Wasn't she a total stranger to me? Or should I simply go with her? Ask her – if I could think how to ask that kind of question at the right time? I alluded to my present situation again: the fact that I was living apart from my girlfriend, that the separation was recent. My life, I pointed out, was rather complicated at the moment. Sometimes, I said, I don't know whether I'm coming or going; maybe we ought not to meet any more.

She rose to her feet at once. Gave me a cold, angry look, and walked away without a word of explanation. I was so surprised that I failed to call something disarming after her, I just sat there and watched her walk away quickly towards the U-bahn. The first morning sunlight was falling on the broad square, and there she went, like an offended goddess. I was in something of a quandary, alarmed by her violent reaction but at the same time relieved, as if I had escaped a regrettable situation in the nick of time.

I tried to sleep, and wrote her a card intended to placate her, not without repeating that I was in a difficult situation, and making intentionally sombre allusions.

I ought not to have gone out with her, but since I had, something like an obligation had arisen. In a longer letter, following up my card, I felt that I ought to justify myself, and apologized. And then, when she phoned a few days later, she seemed the same as before, said she'd like to see me if I would like it too, and with a new kind of pleasure that was the reverse of my guilty conscience, I agreed to meet again.

Once again she was the one who decided where, and once again we sat there until early in the morning. The previous incident was a good week in the past. I armed myself in case she referred to it, but nothing of the kind happened, on the contrary, she was quiet and almost shy. When she leaned back, I moved a little way forward. I

bent over the table and kissed her, a remorseful gesture to set things right, and she went along with it at once.

I felt embarrassed, kissing her in front of so many people, but the embarrassment didn't matter. In retrospect, I felt as if we hadn't said a word, but that was not the case; now and then something occurred to us that we had forgotten to say on previous occasions. Something that was not in any way connected to the kissing. Everything was askew, I thought, the place, the fact that I was here, all this kissing, although I enjoyed it too. Kissing was everything, and everything to do with the kissing was protracted. It was getting light outside; we sat on the steps of a drugstore for a little while, feeling curiously subdued, as if what was possible today had already happened. Or at least that was how I saw it. She didn't tell me how she saw things, she seemed sobered, but she didn't walk away again.

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I spent most of the summer with my parents. After the complications of the last few months, I felt happy, for a change, with most of my life there: the stupid job working for C & A, my friends of the past, although I could hardly get them to understand me, hours in my old room in the attic after work, when I thought about myself. After a few days, my life in Hamburg seemed curiously far away, as if it were only partly my own, a temporary state of affairs, like the rooms I lived in there, the objects surrounding me, the women. My whole life felt provisional. Like a series of stupid coincidences that had led to the worst possible outcome. I had separated from my girlfriend with difficulty; it was chance that I had met her in the first place, it hadn't been bound to happen. Was anything bound to happen?

I didn't know about Julika. One day I had a card from her, sent from Marseille, saying that she was thinking of me. Ever, Julika, she signed herself, although recently she had mentioned on the phone that everyone usually called her Jule. After that I called her Jule in my thoughts. Although I hardly thought about her at all. When I did, it seemed to be mainly about something sexual, far away rather than near, like an unexpected prospect that both tempted and alarmed me.

Once I was back in Hamburg I looked forward to seeing her. She was still in France, but planned to come back at the end of the week. On my answering machine, she sounded as if she had gone away only as a means of passing the time until I returned.

Since my girlfriend had moved in with her sister, our apartment gave an abandoned impression. I started clearing up, just in case I had to ask Jule there, threw away a few notes on which my girlfriend had left lists of things to do. Except for minor details, she had taken everything with her. I packed up the last of her books, the photos of hers that had been on the door of the fridge, assorted odds and ends, until she was only a ghost around the place.

I quickly skimmed her letters. One had been sent from Rome, the other from Naples, where she was working on complex excavations in blazing heat, with a group of students salvaging, with incredible patience, the tiniest of pottery fragments from any digger that came along later, and thinking of writing their doctoral dissertations on these excavations. On the whole she wrote with the volatility that she had shown from the first, as if nothing else had happened; it was all about her work, except in one place where she regretted what had happened, and said she couldn't believe it. How can you simply walk out, after seven years? For a moment I felt a an impulse to tell her, ruthlessly, the truth about herself, but it had all been said long ago.

Jule was astonishingly brown from the sun; I hardly recognized her. She was thinner than before the summer, and had twice as many freckles as before. She was smiling. Why didn't I kiss her? I did kiss her, but as if from a great distance, as if the past weeks were a hurdle that still had to be crossed.

We were sitting in the garden of a restaurant on the river Alster; it was pleasantly warm. We ate a light meal. Jule asked about my weeks with my parents, but I had already written to her about much of what I could say, although I kept most of it to myself. The beginning of our conversation was tough going. I moved a little way back, and began talking about my girlfriend again, in less obscure terms this time, saying how angry I was at letting it all go so far. I described various scenes of the last few weeks, leaving out no detail, because it was the details that stuck in my mind and would give me no peace. I said what there was to be said on the subject of sex, the incredible offence that it all entailed, the irrecoverable loss. I had wasted the best years of my life. I regret it so much, I said. Sometimes I consist only of remorse; I no longer believe in it, although everyone knows it's so delightful.

It took me a long time to exhaust the subject after several false starts, playing things down, disguising them. I told her about my youthful love, my first time – it had been innocent and uncomplicated, just under ten years ago. Really, as long ago as

that? The question was why I mentioned it at all. One September afternoon, in my room. Just so that Jule would know it hadn't been a nightmare for me all along.

I looked at Jule. I had never liked her better than now, in her blue dress, for she was wearing a dress today, the first time I'd seen her in one, and had put on make-up, her cheeks, her mouth, just enough to enhance what was already there.

She seemed thoughtful, and said nothing for a long time. Her answer was to tell me about her men, the few that there had been in her life. At least, there seemed to have been only a few. She hadn't a good word to say for them, not that she told me exactly what she held against them, but obviously she felt, in retrospect, that she had been exploited. Had they been brief affairs, or lovers who had aroused more hopes in her? To the end of her account I didn't find out, and did not feel like an expert on the subject; her grief was not the same as mine.

Three evenings later I went to her place with her. It still felt wrong, but that didn't matter now. After all our confessions, this was the next, logical step. Even as we went the last few metres I was thinking that it was crazy, and that was just why I was doing it. In addition she was wearing that dress again, she would take pity on me, if it depended on pity. Damn it all, she would set me free from the nightmare.

One of the best moments was when she opened the door. She opened the door of her apartment and said: come in. After that there was a little turmoil, a certain delay to do with her dress and the fact that she was suddenly naked, as if I hadn't expected that. She was more passive than I'd have anticipated, considering that we were in her home, but I coped surprisingly well. I was trembling, but I coped. At the same time I was rejoicing. Didn't I have good reason to rejoice? I was sleeping with a woman whose earlier lovers had rejected her, but all the same she was ready to risk it again. With me. She had said so, had told me so without words, as if it were a miracle for her, too.

I had entirely forgotten what it was like. I took things as they came, odours and sounds, the suggestion of effort overlying it all, the difficulty. When I sensed my sperm rising I laughed out loud, as if I had never felt stronger and was potent in a new way, ready to do it again at once, again and again.

I was very grateful to her, and said so. I was brimming over with gratitude. She had restored me. As a man, as a sexual being. I had a body that could be used, I had muscles, blood racing now here, now there, I felt part of the world again. I could

uproot trees, I said, to which she made a remark about my red hair, because I had red hair everywhere, and freckles like hers.

It occurred to me that I did not particularly miss her afterwards. I longed for her body, and dwelt on the images in my mind. I came upon many of them only in retrospect, as if I had perceived no more than half of it in her room with her, the way she stripped her dress off over her head, the way she lay spread out before me. I thought of all that with a continuing sense of joy, particularly at the moment of penetration. That was probably the best of sex, I thought, that moment of entering a woman. Or was I a special case because I'd gone without it so long? I was writing my final paper, on Anton Webern and the Viennese School, and had those images in my head all day, as if I were standing in her room and could watch us together. That was all I needed. I had those images, and didn't stop to think that they could be repeated.

I had been working on my paper for months already. I should have handed it in ages ago, but I somehow couldn't finish it, although I was writing from morning to night and spent as little time as possible on the phone – once over a long call from my girlfriend announcing the imminent arrival of another letter, and darkly threatening suicide from a telephone kiosk somewhere in the provinces of Italy. She was in a gloomy mood, talking about a rash, she had red patches all over her body, she said, not that I wanted to hear about them, and all of a sudden she talked about sex, said she wanted to see me. As soon as she was back from Italy, she said, she would come and see me. I should think it must be lovely, she said, please give me a chance. I persisted in not answering.

The same plan featured in her letter, described in her familiar naïve and wounding manner, as if she couldn't understand, for all the love she professed, why I made so much fuss about it. I know it means a lot to you, she wrote, which simply reinforced the fact that it meant not the slightest thing to her. I dreaded the thought of it; would she really venture to come to my door? I wouldn't open it, I decided, touching as I found her new willingness to try again.

In fact that was the worst of it: she still moved me, as if she had been given into my care, almost like a child whom I had no right to reject. Her father had recently written to me along those lines, in total ignorance of the real situation and as if I had only the most deplorable of reasons for parting from her. Did he know anything

about his daughter? I doubted it. All the same, I was left with a faint sense of guilt, as if I had been inconsiderate of everything and everyone.

In a depressed mood, I went to see Jule. I didn't phone first, I simply turned up at her door, not quite sure whether that was all right. She seemed surprised, but glad although, or because, that wasn't our usual way of meeting. She had been going to the cinema, and asked what the matter was. Do you want to talk about it?

I told her, briefly, about the phone call, my paper, how it was all getting me down, and she ran me a hot bath and said after that we'd see what else she could do to cheer me up.

Poor you, she said, in a tone of voice that I hadn't heard from her before.

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Two weeks later, she called and told me she was pregnant. My head immediately began ringing, so I had difficulty taking in the details. She wasn't absolutely sure, she said, but everything suggested it. She had done the sums several times and came up with the day when – well, you know. Oh my goodness, she said, are you still on the line? I said yes, I was, although her voice was not coming through to me reliably. It was as if she were speaking from behind a door, I thought, surprised that she sounded so composed.

You can never be sure with these things, she said, don't worry about it, I just thought you ought to know.

She asked again whether I was still there, to which I could reply only that I hadn't reckoned on this, the news was a shock, but yes, let's wait and see, my God, thank you for telling me.

I spent the next hour pacing up and down the apartment, shaking my head, because I didn't think it was possible, I took it for a cruel joke, since after all it was clear that yes, it *was* possible; we hadn't used any protection.

I felt let down. I'd slept with a woman for the first time in years, and now this. I thought I didn't deserve it. Please don't let it be true. I was stupid, but all the same it's not fair, and what's more I hardly know her.

The longer I prowled around the apartment, the worse I felt. I couldn't take it as lightly as she did. Or was she just pretending? I called her back, and now she did indeed sound more subdued, almost as worried as I was. We agreed to go for a walk beside the Elbe, because we had always liked walking there best. We couldn't or mustn't say we had liked it best *before*, or not yet, although that was how I felt.

We met the next day, and the day after that, and so on for two weeks. I spent the night with her, we talked, we made love, but it wasn't the same. I couldn't face working. I just sat around, lay awake until the early morning, or got up in the middle of the night and contemplated my future with horror.

I should really have talked to someone, I urgently needed to, but not to Jule, who went on being as brave as if nothing were wrong, only I couldn't think of anyone. I began to think I was going out of my mind, and I hardly slept at all. I went to a doctor, who sent me for counselling. The psychologist listened to me patiently, and instead of giving me the sleeping tablets I asked for, he advised me to take myself out of circulation for a while. The word *clinic* was mentioned. One could say no to a crisis, he told me, one could withdraw from it into a protected place for a certain time, to summon up one's strength.

I thought about that for a few days. According to Jule I was free to do whatever I wanted, but that wasn't much use. Was I really in such a bad way? I fought my pride, I fought my cowardice, because ultimately I was simply too much of a coward, and therefore my state of mind couldn't be as hopeless as all that.

The longer it all dragged on, the more sanguine we felt. A period could be delayed, said Jule, for more reasons than anyone could count, and sure enough she phoned one day and said she was bleeding, it was a false alarm, she wasn't pregnant.

As before, I could hardly believe it, almost as if I didn't feel this was right, although it was my salvation. Once again I went to her as quickly as I could, bought champagne to celebrate the day, couldn't credit my luck. I'd been let off the hook. I had a future again, everything was open to me, in fact more so than ever. What was I waiting for? I was twenty-seven, it was high time I finished my studies, I wanted to travel, I'd have to find a new apartment, all as soon as possible.

For two weeks I was full of energy, I found a small apartment, worked on my paper day and night, sometimes feeling annoyed that she kept phoning in the morning, when I was just getting into the rhythm of my work and seldom listened closely to her, especially as I wasn't expecting bad news any more.

I knew it when I heard her voice. Jule? I said, although I could see what was coming now, I saw that the whole house of cards was about to come down around me. She had had a test. Two, to be precise, both positive. I thought: why these tests all of a

sudden? As if it was a question that I positively must ask her soon. I went to her place, feeling stunned, but she didn't want us to stay there, she wanted to walk beside the river, as she had two weeks ago.

Talking was difficult. There weren't many alternatives, and none of them was pleasant. I felt I had been taken by surprise, and could only say that I myself couldn't imagine it, we had known each other for only a few weeks, I was hardly in my right mind, and once again, I said: not in these circumstances.

Her only reaction was to take my hand, not disappointed, as if that was what she had expected. She herself, she assured me, saw it the same way. Or was she only saying so? We discussed the next steps; consultation with a gynaecologist, counselling. You needed a certificate for the termination. Did she really say termination? I watched the shipping pass me by, an oil tanker, a barge carrying coal, while I was positively stumbling along at her side, promising to go to all her appointments with her.

That evening I phoned my sister, the only person I had told about Jule, so I wasn't springing my bad news on her out of nowhere. She was full of consternation, was sorry for me and Jule, and asked if she could help, but with the best will in the world I didn't know how, or what with.

The termination – as we had agreed to call it – took surprisingly little time. It was all over in less than an hour, she had it behind her and looked unchanged, although she was very pale and rather unsteady on her feet, but she was not in much pain. She had tablets in case she needed them, and remarkably she felt hungry, so I brought her something from the bakery later, when she had been lying down for some time, and didn't want to talk. Was this the same bed in which I had slept with her? She was supposed to lie down a lot over the next few days. I didn't know what to do, and looked at her with concern, wondering whose fault this really was, mine or mainly hers. After two or three hours she sent me away. She wanted to sleep for a while, she said, she liked having me there, but not just then.

I had no talent for sitting beside her sickbed. All the same, I went to see her several times over the next few days, if not as often as she might have wished. She still didn't want to talk. She did not reproach me, and seemed to be taking it all well, or perhaps that was the reproach. She had a small black and white TV set on which we watched old films, and one October morning the funeral of Franz-Joseph Strauss.

I moved a little further away from her in the following weeks, renovated my new apartment in the Wilhelmsburg part of the city, packed my belongings, and got friends to help me with the move. Jule did not turn up until late in the afternoon, when she met them, and in the evening they all sat in my five-cornered kitchen, which also contained the shower, and congratulated me on my new life. It got late, and Jule stayed on. For the first time, we spent the night together somewhere other than at her place, so that, too, was like a new beginning, although not a beginning that I believed in.

[END OF SAMPLE]