



Claudia Schumacher Love Is Fierce

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On violence, tenderness and the power of liberation

“Dad was so good at identifying our innermost weaknesses. It meant that all we could do was hang, motionless, like flies in his web, and tolerate everything he did to us. He was our dad, after all, our hero. It wasn’t in our nature to resist him.”

The Ehres are a picture-perfect family: the parents are lawyers; the children are the best in their class. Yet life in their small-town villa is grey. The father pushes the children to their limits and beats them and his wife. As Juli grows up, she tries to put a stop to the violence – violence which her mother vehemently denies is being inflicted. But how can you begin to liberate yourself when you can trust neither your parents nor your own memories? As Juli cuts off her family, this severance grows into somewhat of a crusade. We follow her over three decades as she tries to reclaim her own life with all her might.



Claudia Schumacher, was born in Tübingen in 1986 but grew up in Stuttgart. She studied German and American literature and art history in Berlin, where she was one of the co-founders of the magazine *Furios*. Then, while living in Zürich, she worked as a journalist, columnist, and publisher – amongst others at *NZZ am Sonntag*. She now lives in Hamburg. She has been writing a weekly column for *Weltwoche* since 2016

Sample Translation
by Sinéad Crowe

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2007

There’s a stink of chlorine in these seventies’ swimming pools, and a crack squad of the world’s toughest cleaners couldn’t get rid of the stench of mould. I feel weirdly weightless, pretty awesome, in fact. My body is silky smooth. No wonder: got up at 6:30 to stand against the wall for a cold hose-down from Frau Heirich. Then a brisk, chilly two-hour walk with the cancer patients and other crocks, followed by a good hour-long bawl ‘cos I’m sure I’m losing my mind. A little me time to run through my various suicide options once more, but after a terrified look at the veins on my left wrist I decide to postpone the deed. A slightly tipsy trip to the sauna. Now a break on the lounge, and what can I say, it’s all good.

Lunch wasn’t too bad today. I stuffed my face: meatballs, mashed potato, vegetable casserole, chocolate pudding. Rounded off in time-honoured rehab-tradition with coffee and a shot of schnaps in Magic Margot’s room. I like her. She’s senile but jolly, and she has an overnight bag she’ll probably never need again filled with the weirdest crap: a little starfish, tarot cards, fireworks – fuck knows why. Magic Margot is like a batshit Mary Poppins. Sometimes I pour my heart out as she takes the schnaps out of the bag and adds it to our coffee, crooning cheesy German hits all the while. She knows loads of those songs, doesn’t seem to have any particular favourites. It’s deeply moving, listening to her renditions of après-ski bangers about penis lengths. I couldn’t ask for a better one-woman show than Magic Margot.

Sometimes, though, she appears to be listening. She’ll sit beside me in silence as I go on and on. She lets me talk away, nodding and sighing every now and then. When I’m all done and emptied out, she’ll put a sympathetic hand on my arm and say, Oh sweetheart, I wish there was something I could say to help. But I’m afraid I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re on about. Hey, at least she’s honest. It’s not her fault she’s a fruitcake. She never asked for this, to be incapable of understanding or remembering anything. Except for song lyrics, that is. God knows how she manages to retain them in that goldfish brain of hers.

I wouldn't change anything about my relationship with Margot. Sometimes you need to get things off your chest without any witnesses. The doctors talk about patient confidentiality, but you can't be sure. With Margot, I know it'll all go with her to the grave. And besides, she always has the right reaction when I cry, which proves she once was a good person and basically still is, in my opinion.

So now I'm in a food coma on the lounge, nice and woozy thanks to Margot's schnaps. I'm a big fan of daytime drinking. It doesn't fuck you up like evening drinking, when your thoughts darken. Daytime drinking is a chill magic carpet ride in wonderland. I float along blissfully, watching the old folks swimming below. There's a peaceful, meditative vibe, reminds me of a cemetery. I'd say they don't know what to make of me. So young, looks healthy enough, lolling about here all day – it'd be nice to have her problems! And they have a point. I won't deny that my current health problems, my general indecision vis-a-vis whether to go on living or not, are more psychological than physical in nature.

Mum and Dad took me out of school a couple of weeks ago. The girl's lost the plot, they said, but they didn't send me to a psychologist. They know full well why. Mum says we can't tell anyone or they'll lose their law licences, and that won't help the situation, quite the opposite. Sometimes I'm so angry at Dad that I picture him dead. Lying in a ditch or wherever, run over some night by a drunk driver. Or I'll think, Give me one more good thrashing and I'll take my bruises down to child protective services. But then I'll start bawling and think, Dad, I love you! Which is true. I mean, I'm his daughter. In fact, I probably take after him more than Mum. All this wanting, suffering, burning. Mum only ever wanted to be agreeable and attractive. But you've got to hand it to her, she forgets nothing she's read, like the name of Swaziland's youngest senator. The first time Dad knocked me around was when I beat him at mental maths. Which makes no sense at all: first he hammers it into you that in the Ehre household, only top performance will do, but once he thinks you're better than him at anything, he goes ape. I can't bring myself to rat on my parents, though. And to be honest, I'd rather live in a house with a garden than in some institution for teens from broken homes.

But for now I'm here, in a hydrotherapy rehab clinic with peat baths. There was great excitement when they showed me the Auenried Baths brochure: mud wraps, water treading, treatments with peat pulp and hay-flower compresses – welcome to Rollator City, where old people are rocked back and forth in warm water until they cork it. Purgatory. In the cafeteria

they sell Swabian soul breads: *a half or full soul, served warm or cold*. There’s an emergency button in every toilet in case someone keels over. Not sure how this is supposed to rid me of my death wish, but I shouldn’t complain. I’ve been instructed to take daily walks. Outside the town hall there’s a plaque dedicated to those pesky daughters of Bad Auenried who were tortured and burned. Witch hunting was huge around here before they discovered water treading. Nearly two hundred women died at the stake right up into the eighteenth century. They always let one lucky lady go, so you know, every cloud.

When Mum dumped me at this rehab hole, in a big rush with her I-think-I’m-being-followed look – a quick signature and she was gone – I sank to the floor in shame. Just before I passed out in the foyer and probably would have choked on my own puke had two staff members not been standing nearby.

But to be such a psychological wreck at seventeen, surrounded by burnt-out mothers and prostate patients, it’s kind of extra. I actually wouldn’t mind if someone took a picture of me right now. In a hospital bathrobe two sizes too big and Anna Wintour sunglasses on a battered pool lounge. Thanks to my light-sensitive headaches, I can’t get through the day without tinted lenses. But if you’re stuck with a role you don’t want, you might as well ham it up. At least then it’s funny.

Most of the time I’m tired, just dead tired. I conk out at eight and sleep for eleven hours. Mornings in the pool usually knock me out again. Half-asleep, I play Devil May Cry 3 in my head. I’m Dante, the Devil Hunter, slaying monsters with Agni and Rudra, the twin demon swords made of fire and wind. Leaving me here without my PlayStation, that was bang out of order. Dad acts like I’m genuinely here because of the gaming. When in fact video games are my only refuge from his insanity. It relaxes me, losing myself in a world that’s even more dangerous than my own. To survive, I have to stay focused, and then I have peace, no room for the demons in my head, the voices constantly talking to Dad, trying to make him see sense, to defend myself from him.

At home I rarely sleep longer than four hours at a time. Dad confiscated the keys to every room in the house, which is why I’m always waiting for him to show up at the end of my bed in the middle of the night for some bullshit reason. I forgot to empty the dishwasher or I left my bike outside, so I’m punished with a punch in the face. And then there’s the racket downstairs. How many times have I lain awake wondering if Mum will be able to leave the

house wearing a polo neck in the morning or whether he was stupid enough to gouge her in the face again? Once Mum had to be signed off work for several weeks to make sure no one cottoned on to the shit that goes down at our place. But he’s learning. Now he makes sure she can get out with a rollneck, even in August. The clients think she’s just a bit eccentric. I reckon Mum now has ten designer rollnecks for summer. Like they’re some kind of fashion statement.

Thing is, when I’m contemplating ending it all, I start to feel a bit more upbeat. I’ll give it one more day, who knows, miracles happen. I forget everything, I’m healthy again. Things could turn around, right? No idea how, but fuck it, I’m seventeen, I’m entitled to a little hope. And if things don’t improve, I can always top myself tomorrow. I’ve been telling myself this for so long now I can’t remember when I started. Sometimes I think about the good times, about before. The Saturdays when Mum would pack me into the car and we’d head off to Stuttgart, good moods and an ABBA CD, breakfast in a café on Schlossplatz, neverending croissants, then we’d stride off arm-in-arm down Königstrasse: That dress would be gorgeous on you, Juli darling, don’t you think? That’s my name, by the way. Not Juli Darling, Juli Ehre. Hi.

Anyway, then I’d raid the shops until the credit card started smoking, Mum egging me on. Nods of appreciation when I came out of the changing room, as if I was the finest piece of ass she’d ever seen. Oh yes, we’re getting that, she’d say, pulling something else off the rack before I disappeared into the changing room again: Pinafores are back in, aren’t they? Let’s get you one. I loved it. Mum and me against the world; no one could hurt us, not even Dad. When we were out and about together, we were more like sisters than mother and daughter, but of course Mum was the prettier one, always was. I was so proud of her, and maybe she was a little bit proud of me too. On those days we suddenly had money, lots of it, but I never asked how come given that she’d been in floods of tears after a visit to her financial adviser just five days earlier. For us, money was a matter of feeling, nothing you could calculate. The sales assistants would go on about how stunning everything looked on me, that my athletic figure was made for that year’s summer trends. Some were envious of us, and I enjoyed the sun as if I were a potted plant on its first day outdoors after winter in the basement.

Things were still alright back then, by and large. I won umpteen figure-skating trophies, got the best grades, and even managed to be one of the cool girls in the schoolyard.

Sample Translation “Love Is Fierce” (C. Schumachen)

Which was my greatest achievement, really, seeing as everyone hated the girl with the second-best grades just because of her grades. I sometimes dream about that time. When I’m not dreaming about Bruno whimpering on the floor, foetal position, blood on his face. I wake up, a wave of relief until I realise, Oh, it wasn’t a dream.

I have images in my head. Mum’s bruises at the breakfast table. Dad’s Salvador Dalí stare when he says he’s going to kill me. It’s like a broken projector, liable to switch on at any time, unwanted and at the most inconvenient moments. Massive pictures appear on the wall in front of me, and there’s no escape. Because no matter where I look, there the pictures are.

To the outside world, of course, we’re the perfect family. Everyone in Ederfingen knows us. Dad’s a lawyer in the automotive industry, his firm advises all these suppliers in the region. There’s a rumour he nearly played professionally for VfB Stuttgart, which isn’t entirely true, but he never sets his clients straight. Instead, he confuses them by quoting Hegel or Habermas. Here comes the marvellous Herr Ehre, a man without rival!

At his side, the woman with a waist so small he can practically encircle it in his mid-sized hands. And let’s not forget the handsome sons. We could have performed in the circus, that’s how astounding we were. Dad teetering on the high wire; Mum responsible for the sexy bits, flying by in a skimpy outfit; Bruno the lion tamer; and Max doing something vaguely delicate and soulful – a fire dancer, maybe. I’d be the master of ceremonies, keeping an eye on everyone, charming the amazed audience until they’d parted with five times more money than they’d intended. If Alex could be arsed gracing us with her presence, she’d probably be sitting in the auditorium. My big sister, the next eldest after Max, was always different from the rest of us: ash-blonde hair, unremarkable, unflappable by nature. I remember once during carnival, she wondered aloud what she should dress up as. Why don’t you go as the milkman’s kid, Bruno said. If my parents had been the kind to accidentally leave one of their kids behind at a service station, it’d have been her. Even when Alex was still living at home, she was always out. If she has a talent, it’s her ability to keep her nose out. She works in a hotel in Cologne now, never comes home.

When we were small, Dad liked showing me off. My superpower was in my head, which I suppose is why he never hit me as hard as the others. Anyway, we once had an IQ test at school, back when that was a thing. We didn’t have to share our results, but of course word got around anyway. Which was good for me, ‘cos then everyone knew the score: that I wasn’t the kind of dupe that would do their homework for them, far from it. I had to play dumb to avoid being the best in every single subject. What was crucial was that I dominated. It kept me safe.

You have to dominate to make the grade at home. Fail to excel, and Dad will subject you to a tirade of abuse and humiliation in front of the rest of the family. Mum eats a quarter of what I do, weighs herself every day. Because if she puts on 800 grams, Dad will say, Fat cow. I thought I could keep the shaky peace at home by being perfect. So, as well as getting straight As, I made damn sure I was class president every year, played two instruments, was

constantly winning ice-skating trophies and had a washboard stomach. Whenever someone sang better or jumped higher than me, I put clothes hangers on my bed at night as punishment.

But when I was fourteen, everything descended into brute violence anyway. Dad would follow me around the house, threatening to kill me. I don’t think there was ever any reason. Or maybe there was: I had a tendency to burst out laughing. I’d just be standing there, my nerves shattered, Dad in the middle of one of his freak-outs, and I’d have a fit of the giggles. The man was a joke without a punchline. I never said that out loud, but he could tell. Mostly, though, I’d just stand there with my pulse thumping in my eardrums, no air, my hands trembling and sweat stains under my armpits.

The weird thing is it’s only recently I started doing really shit. Back then, I didn’t dream at night. Now, I think I’m lying on top of my own corpse, until I wake up and realise it’s just the wire from the rehab mattress. Whenever all hell broke out at home, I was able to pull myself through it. There were no medals, but it was war: body riddled with bullets, but you keep getting up in the morning and stirring water into your spoonful of coffee. Just keep going and for God’s sake don’t lose your nerve. Till everyone’s a complete basket case and the game’s up.

Everyone apart from Alex, that is. Over in Alabama, where she was spending a year at school, she wasn’t really aware of what was going on back home. She extended her stay, had an A tattooed on her neck, got her high-school diploma. When she came back, she packed up her stuff and went straight to a hotel school in Cologne. Didn’t go to university, to Dad’s horror. But it’s only Alex. Max is studying politics in Tübingen. He hasn’t lived with us for a good while now; mind you, he didn’t move too far away. He’s in Schiederach, on the outskirts of Ederfingen. For some unfathomable reason he comes home once a week, the masochist. He’s screwed up for sure. But not as screwed up as Bruno, Mum and me. We experienced Dad’s madness at its most extreme, and it affected us the longest. It destroyed us.

Even worse than war is the normality afterwards, when you suddenly have time to ask questions for which there are no answers. Pain comes with a time lag. You don’t feel the bullets until later.

I can’t shake the memory of the evening Bruno came back from the quarry lake. It was three years ago, August, I think. A pink evening sky, warm air, the smell of grass and summer

holidays. Bruno was sixteen and a star. Back then, when I still had a few girlfriends, they all had a crush on him. If they were in a boy band, Max wouldn’t be an obvious heartthrob. But Bruno is a born frontman, an attention-whore with muscles, stubble and chestnut curls.

I was in the garden laying the table with Mum: turkey salad for us and pizza for the boys. Bruno came into the garden like he was walking on stage. If I remember right, he was besotted with this girl Sofie at the time. But in any case, you’re bound to be in a good mood if you’re a young god and you’ve spent the day showing off your six-pack down at the lake. All the day’s sunrays seemed to pour out of his grin. Inside, Dad was opening a bottle of wine, and Mum sent Bruno in to get cutlery.

Suddenly we heard thumping from inside. It sounded like someone was being thrown against the wall. Then came Bruno’s voice, begging. When we went in, Dad was beside himself, his eyes manically wide, as if he was on drugs.

It was because Bruno hadn’t washed the convertible, but pretty soon it was because Bruno was an arrogant piece of shit, undisciplined, disobedient, it’d be a miracle if he finished school. The loser takes after you, doesn’t he? You’re no different, Dad said to Mum. And Mum said, Yes, Kurt, It’s my fault, I spoiled him, I’m sorry. She’ll say anything when she’s scared.

Then Dad punched Bruno in the face. In his eye. In his mouth. Between whimpers of pain and humiliation, Bruno gasped, But I didn’t do anything, Dad. Stop, Dad, I didn’t mean to, Dad. Dad, please, please. Until eventually he was lying on the floor, his left eye swollen, his mouth bloody. Roaring, Dad kicked him in the head, wearing shoes he’d put on specially.

I just stood there crying. Mum, do something, I said. But I didn’t do anything either. I had shattered into a thousand pieces. Heart, head and body incapable of working in unison.

Only when Dad was done did Mum go over to Bruno and say, Come on, you need to get stitched up. Just a regular evening at home with the Ehres, the wholesome family with the sweet kids and charming mother.

They went round to Uncle Günther, Dad’s little brother and lackey. He’s a doctor, lives just a street away. He’s *helped* us a couple of time over the years, no questions asked. In return, my parents’ legal services are available whenever a patient sues him, which has been known to happen. Günther wrote Bruno off sick. In the days that followed, he barely left his room.

We were all beaten, but none of us got it as bad as Bruno. Pure luck that he survived.

Sample Translation “Love Is Fierce” (C. Schumachen)

Had any of us known how easily the problem could be solved, Bruno would’ve hit back much sooner, I’m sure. By the age of sixteen, he was already taller than Dad. When I measured him for his driving licence, he was six foot two. And stronger than Dad too. His friends sometimes call him *Gladiator* because he looks a bit like that actor. Hard to understand why he took the beatings for so many years.

I suppose Bruno was just like us, believed that Dad knew something about him he didn’t know himself. That he deserved the beatings, even when they came out of nowhere. Dad was so good at informed us about our innermost degeneracy that we put up with it all, suspended motionless like dead flies in a spider’s web. After all, this was Dad, our hero. Standing up to him just wasn’t in our nature.

pp. 130 – 139

2014

Sanyu and Jules, Jules and Sanyu. If Anikó hadn't had her crackpot feminist camp idea, we'd never have met. It was half a year ago, in January. It feels unreal now, like the whole fucking summer.

After Global Challenge Dubai, I just lay in bed, day after day after day. We'd won. Ding, ding, ding: \$75,000 prize money, enough for everyone, in one weekend. I'd been raking in obscene amounts of cash all season, all on top of my PhD scholarship. Thanks to Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, I was more than just financially independent from my parents; I was rich. For my age. Our team was killing it: in Germany, Brute Force was unbeatable, and it looked like we could hold our own internationally now too.

That was just a taster, Dominik kept saying on the flight home. Just a taster! The coach was waving his champagne around like a fucking pimp. We flew Emirates, business class, all paid for by the sheikhs. We'd beaten the South Koreans, against all the odds. In the 16th round, when I was the only surviving member of my team, I wiped out the last three opponents. It was exhilarating, the concerted aggression. My goal wasn't victory, it was complete annihilation.

I guess the one thing cushioning the blow for the South Koreans was that at least I didn't look like a woman. After the preparation phase, which involved seven ten-hour training sessions a week, the circles under my eyes had turned black. There was no time to put on make-up, I'd shaved my head to save time getting ready in the morning, I wore the team sweatshirt like everyone else, and my teammates called me *bro*. After seeing him tonight, it's no wonder Jules the Explosive is Germany's highest-ranking Counter-Strike player, the guy at the prize-giving ceremony said. It took some doing. The haters had spewed bile into the Internet when word got out that Brute Force had accepted their first female member, me. There was just one other woman at the championship in Dubai, a sexed-up co-host: porn-star glamour, servile grin, bleached teeth, hair down to her butt.

Back when I was new in Berlin, lost and sleepless, dominating during a particularly extreme gaming phase and moving up the ranks, Dominik messaged me, said he wanted to

meet. When I sat down opposite him in a café on Alexanderplatz, he looked taken aback, needed a moment to gather himself. Like most women gamers, I don’t use voice chat, and my username is gender-neutral. The one thing he hadn’t expected, he said, was a woman.

Me being the best player was bad enough for the team’s morale, Dominik told me in the early days. You’d best not wear jewellery or anything figure-hugging to meetings, he said; The last thing we need is a Yoko Ono! I didn’t laugh. If one of the guys falls for you, the whole team is screwed, he added. Needless to say, it was up to me to make sure that didn’t happen.

There was no lack of morale on the flight back from Dubai. We now stood a good chance of qualifying for one of the majors, a whole new level with a quarter of a million up for grabs. In the collective euphoria, Dominik was uncharacteristically magnanimous: To our captain! We clinked glasses, the guys slapped me on the back and hugged me. Though I felt nothing, I forced a smile. In my bedroom back in the flatshare that night, I fell into a hole. When I was a kid, I thought I’d keep catastrophe at bay if I just kept bringing trophies back home to my parents. But it made no difference. They’d never be proud of my gaming, didn’t matter how good I was. Winning made me sad, I couldn’t help it. Back when I just played for myself, it was fun. The prize money had made me independent, satisfied my defiant streak. But it wasn’t enough to make me happy.

An outsider might have mistaken my condition in the weeks after Dubai for depression. It was the first time Anikó had seen me like this. I saw the alarm in her face whenever I bumped into her in the hall on my way to the toilet. Most of the time I just lay in bed staring at the ceiling, ignoring her knocks on my door. Unless you’ve done competitive sports yourself, you won’t understand how playing at the top completely destroys you. My mind was shot after Dubai, my body too. The months of preparation, the tense seated position, being stuck indoors all day, the stress hormones, the overstimulated tendons and ligaments, the constant muscle pain in my arms, the brain overload. It felt like my synapses weren’t connected any more, like the current wasn’t flowing. The slightest attempt to organise my thoughts hurt. I got through a packet of ibuprofen in the week after my return. My right arm ached, so I could only sleep on my left side – and now, after weeks of staying awake, that was basically all I did. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Pizza, pizza, pizza.

Bruno drove down from Hamburg, chopped up some fruit for me, lay down beside me and told me about his new band, how audiences were reacting to their songs. But he

didn't sing or play anything for me. He'd seen my states of total exhaustion before. They grew with the pressure I was under, and lately they'd been getting worse. Out of nowhere, I started to weep. I couldn't stop. Bruno held me until I calmed down, and soon afterwards I was asleep again.

In the meantime, everyone was on my case. The institute was bombarding me with emails because without telling anyone, I'd stopped showing up to the tutorials I was supposed to be teaching. If I was honest, it was impossible to combine a doctorate with professional gaming. I'd taken weeks of sick leave for the competitions. People were starting to notice, and my insomnia had reached new extremes. I kept Sven hanging, didn't answer his messages. Did I want to break up, yes or no? I didn't know Sven was still on the scene, Bruno said, and I pretended not to hear.

At first, I didn't think my exhaustion was anything out of the ordinary. It'd been like this since I was a kid: I'd dissolve in my achievements like aspirin in a glass of water. Afterwards, everything was dark, prematerial, and I'd need time to take form again. But now, after ten days, I tipped over into an apocalyptic sadness that even I found odd. It was as if my life was bobbing around on the open seas while the captain was knocked out in his Ikea bed. And I could think of nothing better to do with my €15,000 prize money than to order one pizza quattro formaggi after another.

That's it, Anikó said one day as she stood in the doorway of my room. She screwed up her nose, ran to the window and pulled it open. Standing in the rush of fresh air, she crossed her arms and said, You stink. Sorry, I said, my head on a greasy pillow. We looked at each other. I propped myself up, and the primeval jelly I'd been for the past few weeks began to take some kind of shape. Was I in for a sermon? Why was Anikó's hair pink? Would I be able to manage a shower?

An hour later, washed and clean, I sat down at the kitchen table. We ate chives and salt on buttered bread, and I could hardly believe how good it tasted. When Anikó offered me a small plate of yellow pepper slices, I smiled for the first time since I'd got back.

Here's a crazy idea, she said. How about stepping outside the door when you're done eating? I nodded obediently, which seemed to satisfy her. Later, as I was putting on my shoes, I felt dizzy and had to lean against the wall for support. You'll need to be back on your feet by the weekend, Anikó said. We've got plans. – We do? I said. What kind of plans?

Sample Translation “Love Is Fierce” (C. Schumachen)

Anikó raised her hand into a stop sign. Ah ah ah, she said. No questions, no excuses. I’ll take you down to the station by force if I have to.

Saturday morning came around, and I found myself sitting on the floor of a university building in Dahlem, surrounded by asymmetrical haircuts, listening to an obvious nutjob wearing a wrap top covered in crochet roses explain how to block the entrance to a strip club. I guess it was Anikó’s revenge for the delirious lecture I’d delivered from my bed, slumped over a pizza box: why women are so annoying. It was a pretty incoherent lecture, I’ll admit. About how women are two-faced snakes, that kind of thing. I probably should have explained that Mum had just called. One of the few people who had our landline number, unfortunately. Anikó didn’t say much while I trashed our own sex, just sipped her tea. Her dragging me to the Berlin Feminist Boot Camp says a lot about her sense of humour.

I don’t know much about feminism, but I can’t stand the snivelling, the sense of victimhood. So stuck among these self-proclaimed feminists, constantly offended middle-class daughters and privileged cry-babies who blame all their neuroses on the patriarchy, I clenched my jaw and cursed Anikó. If we were to block the entrance to a strip club, the women who work there wouldn’t get paid. Where was the logic in that? Nevertheless, we ended up practising a sit-down protest. A few of us had to sit back-to-back on the floor and link arms. I stayed standing with some other girls, handing out leaflets, informing passers-by. The others had to play police officers coming to break up the protest. Crochet Rose wanted us to be mindful of everyone’s feelings, even the cops’. We closed our eyes to listen to our inner voices, and then it happened: the James Bond theme tune blared tinnily through the room. Crochet Rose froze, we scanned the room. Who was responsible for chauvinism’s invasion of our safe space? No one moved.

That’s when I saw her. The girl standing diagonally opposite me. She met my gaze, cast her eyes upwards and said dramatically but barely audibly, It’s my phone, shiiiiit! And then Sanyu and I burst out laughing together for the first time.

When I think of her laugh, my heart seizes up like a Tour-de-France cyclist’s leg. It booms from her belly, her whole upper body vibrates. When I heard that mighty laugh for the first time, I stood stock-still, my perceptions suddenly heightened, as if I was gaming on Ritalin. I noticed the point above her eyebrow, the left one, right away: a small birthmark in the shape of a butterfly.

I can’t believe she’s gone. I’ll think, Haha, can’t wait to tell her about last night: Anikó, pissed, fiddling with her key on the wrong floor and flinging herself at the guy who opened the door. But when I pick up my phone to write to her, I become paralysed. An incubus sits on my chest and the energy drains from my bones.

There’s only one Sanyu Cooper, and I’m not just saying that because I was dumped, and all freshly dumped people idealise the arseholes who walked away. Literally no one else in the world has the same name as her. When we were still together, she told me that on her eighteenth birthday, she went to the deed poll office and got herself a long-wanted gift: Sandy became Sanyu. She wanted rid of the white-trash name her British father had lumbered her with. I admired the guts it took to refuse to be defined by others, to reinvent herself.

Long after she had broken off contact and nothing I said could get through to her, she would unblock me every now and then, just long enough to leave a hate message. Because it was all my fault. Because we were made for each other. Because I’d ruined everything. I can’t make sense of half her accusations, but don’t pull your punches, Sanyu! What other crimes have I committed, apart from rejecting you, choosing Bruno over you, and playing misogynistic games like a *fucking incel*, as you put it?

She’s shut me out the way she said I shut her out, refusing to let me comfort her. She’s like a wounded sniper who won’t come out of hiding, just keeps shooting until her last bullet is fired and she’s a goner.

Some people need time to fall in love. And even longer to know that it’s love. Not me. I knew right away.

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She was wearing a mustard-coloured dress with seams on the bust like early-career Madonna. Her gaze drifted across the crowd, but she didn't seem to be looking for anyone. She had deep red lips, and there was something arrogant about her and the disdainful way she scanned the room. She looked expensive. Like the perverted little bitch in *Cruel Intentions* he used to jerk off to. For all their beauty, they both had something ugly that turned Thilo on.

That evening, she looked imposing in her dark-blue high heels. She was extremely thin, and it made her look long-limbed. Tall, even. For a woman. Later that night, as he was undressing her, he'd realise she only came up to his chest.

She stepped onto the dance floor, and Thilo gulped down the rest of his gin and tonic, his eyes following her the whole time so as not to lose her. He got up and made his way over. Before he'd even reached her, she froze and held her head still in the air, like quarry picking up a scent. When he stopped right in front of her, she fixed her bottle-green eyes on him. Then she smiled and said something odd she wouldn't remember later: Ah, there you are.

She danced like a vine, wrapping herself around his body. By the time the song was over, he had a hard-on and she was rubbing her ass against it. He'd never felt so euphoric, and he wasn't even on coke. The scent of her body made him reel. She smelled of milk and honey, fertile. She had this shimmering energy, a charged ambivalence that made her seem at once fearless and fragile, tender and merciless. Usually, Thilo regarded paradoxes as hindrances. Things that needed to be eliminated. If you wanted to get ahead, you had to leave contradictions behind you at the fork in the road, avoid unnecessary friction, anything remotely subversive.

Years later, he'd remember what went through his mind during their first dance: This woman is a killer. An image sprang into his head: her straddling him, her face bloody, a knife at his throat. He didn't believe in premonitions, but for a moment he was afraid of her. He could crush her between two fingers like a cricket, though, and the thought comforted him. She nibbled his ear, he panted, she kissed him hungrily. Shortly afterwards he dragged her out of the club by the hand, and she laughed as he flagged down a taxi.

In the hotel room, he watched as she peeled her tight dress up over her head. She was

Sample Translation “Love Is Fierce” (C. Schumachen)

wearing nothing underneath. When he lay on top of her the first time, his muscles against her fragile body, he moved with restraint. He fucked her respectfully, yet he came in less than a minute. He never normally shot his wad that quickly, nor was he particularly excited by this kind of vanilla sex. What was making him feel every cell in his body was the knowledge that he’d found her: the mother of his children.

When he opened his eyes in the morning, she was asleep on his chest, like a feather. Incredible. Physical contact was usually a big no-no when he was trying to sleep.

He had rules. No breakfast for women who go to bed with him on the first night. And yet here was Thilo gently lifting this naked woman off him, checking he hadn't woken her, and slipping out of the room, his heart pounding. In the queue for the bakery, he wondered if she'd still be there when he got back. Don't be such a girl, he told himself, but he couldn't help feverishly hoping he'd see her again in a few minutes.

When he returned, the door slammed shut behind him and, to his delight, he heard rustling coming from the bed. He walked towards her slowly, a bag of bread rolls crackling in his right hand, two takeaway coffees in his left. Julia was sitting up in bed, the duvet across her chest. She stared at him, her lips slightly pinched. Hi, he said warmly. What time is it? she asked, sheepishly running her hand through her hair. Good, Thilo thought: she's embarrassed. Nearly twelve, he answered in a silky voice. No, it can't be! she exclaimed. I haven't slept that long in ages.

She practically disappeared inside the workout shirt he gave her. Her nipples were erect, and he wanted to grab them. That dress you had on yesterday, he heard himself say. It was incredibly hot. Silence. He worried that his comment was a bit full-on for the brittle ice of a morning after, but eventually she laughed.

It is, isn't it, she said. It belongs to my mother. I've got it on permanent loan.

Your mother? Thilo asked.

Julia laughed again and picked up her chocolate croissant. When she took a bite, he saw scars on her forearms that he hadn't noticed yesterday. He paused for a second before asking, What happened there? She kept chewing, suddenly seeming bored. It unnerved him.

Oh that, she said coolly. I was trying to shock my parents. Teenage nonsense. Think of it as my tramp stamp. He had to laugh. She was outrageous.

After he'd checked out, she took him home with her and they spent the rest of that Saturday on her sofa.

Thilo told her about Hoyerswerda, the small Saxon town he was from, about his grandmother, who to this day was a second mother to him, and about how he'd moved to Franconia in his teens after his actual mother left his father for her southern German lover. He only talked about the good stuff, not the grim stuff that made up seventy percent of his

childhood, but he was still astonished by how much he shared. He was feeling comfortable with this woman up until the moment she said, Never thought I’d sleep with a Saxon.

He looked at her as if she’d just slapped him in the face.

Julia was smoking. With some difficulty, Thilo stifled the impulse to snatch the cigarette out of her mouth, snap it in two and instruct her not to smoke in the apartment. It was her apartment, after all.

Julia exhaled lazily. I’m glad you have a Frankonian accent rather than a Saxon one, she said. No offence, but I can’t get wet when I hear an East German accent.

Cunt, Thilo thought. That’s it, I’m out of here.

But he didn’t say anything, and he didn’t leave either, because the cunt was now sitting on his lap, her arms draped around his shoulders, and he couldn’t help liking it. When she kissed him, she tasted like an ashtray, but when he encircled his two hands around her waist, it was as if her body had been carved from ivory just for him. He felt himself softening.

What were you doing all alone in that club last night anyway, he asked. Nothing, she replied. I just wanted to feel light again. She started talking about her ex. The breakup had knocked her for six, she said, but it was more than six months ago now.

Thilo felt a wave of insecurity rising within him. He picked her up, carried her over the threshold of her bedroom and, to her amusement, dropped her on the bed. This time he fucked her properly. She made all the right noises.

She seemed relatively normal in their WhatsApp chats in the weeks following that first encounter. Sometimes she bombarded him with messages, sometimes she didn't write at all, but Thilo wasn't worried. In his experience, most women were a bit unstable, especially the pretty ones.

He soon realised with disappointment that she generally didn't dress the way she had when they first met. She went around in jeans and hoodies. She was nearly finished her doctorate, which impressed him. Something to do with homotopy type theory and proof assistants. On one of their first dates, he made the mistake of asking her about her dissertation topic. Nice of you to ask, she'd squealed in the burger joint as she grabbed a napkin and started scribbling equations on it. He felt increasingly stupid until eventually she laughed and said, Basically, the aim is to formulate mathematics in such a way that every statement can be logically verified by a computer. Think about it: computers might render us mathematicians redundant one day. She intimidated him. But outside the university, she was incredibly immature.

She was great to get pissed with, then, destroyed the next day, lie around watching a ridiculous Swiss series about morticians and eating Indian takeaway. And it was fun, the first few times. Just, it happened a bit too regularly. Thilo's friends from the University of St. Gallen, where he had done his master's, were getting married and saving for houses. Sure, he'd just met Julia. And she was a bit younger. But the stuff they got up to seemed a bit juvenile, even for her.

On Fridays, after a long working day in Zürich, he'd board the 20:25 plane to spend the weekend with her in Berlin. Some nights when she opened the door, she was in a bad state: deep circles under her eyes, rancid-smelling sweat. She was a bit too fond of recreational drugs for his liking. Later, looking back, he'd wonder how he managed to fuck her in that condition. Once she lit a cigarette in bed and giggled. Sex as exorcism, she said. Worth a try.

They carried on like this for a good three months until one Saturday morning, she refused to get out of bed. He went into the kitchen and brought back cheese sandwiches and a glass of milk. When she saw him holding them in front of her, she burst into tears. He sighed, put the food down on the bedside table, lay down with her and squeezed her against his chest. When she'd calmed down a bit, he sat up, pulling her up with him, and said, Talk to me.

I’m a mess, she sobbed. And Thilo found out that in addition to the pills she popped at parties, Julia was guzzling other medications: promethazine to sleep, Ativan to relax, Ritalin to game. Up to now, he’d thought she only gamed occasionally for fun. When he realised just how much time she spent in front of the monitors that made her bedroom look like a security control room, he wondered if she was dense or something. But apparently she’d been a professional gamer not long ago, had made money off it, and he respected that. Now, despite the pills, she couldn’t sleep, so she gamed most nights. No day passed without her taking something to make her feel a certain way. It was as if she didn’t want to leave any moment, any feeling, to chance.

She sounded like Dr Frankenstein and his monster wrapped up into one. Who’s prescribing you all these drugs? he asked. My uncle, she said. He’s a doctor. Thilo found it all a bit ghastly. But she seemed to realise her life had gone down a pretty sordid path, and that was a start. Ten years ago, he’d managed to get Kevin off the bottle, had dragged him out of every dingy bar in town by the scruff of his neck. He could return this woman to sobriety too. You’re a junkie, he said while Julia, having cried herself out, got stuck into the milk and sandwiches.

She choked on the milk. What? Don’t be ridiculous.

Well, what would you call it? You’re always on something, can’t get through the day without a hit.

She glared at him, pushing her greasy hair back off her forehead, and adopted a condescending tone: Learn English first, you Saxon idiot. The word *junkie* comes from *to junk*, which is slang for *to inject*. And I’ve never injected myself with anything.

What are you on about? Thilo asked, suddenly furious. He grabbed his phone and googled the word. With a triumphant sneer, he showed her the screen. The word *junkie* comes from *junk*, he said, which means *rubbish*. There’s no verb *to junk*.

She stared out the window for a moment and then, without a word, went into the bathroom.

Another man might have been unsettled by these new insights into Julia’s world, but Thilo was smart, he sensed his advantage. What he had here was a top-end woman. Needed a bit of work, sure, but he was getting her for free. She was going to need him, and she’d be grateful. Once he’d polished her up, she’d shine like the diamond he’d spotted the first time

he saw her.

She re-emerged from the shower stony-faced. As she was putting on her bra, he hugged her from behind and kissed her neck. Maybe you just need a change of scenery, he said and started talking about his idyllic suburban life in Uetikon, on the banks of Lake Zürich. The standard of living was so much higher there than in Berlin, the peace and quiet would do her good, the mountains, his well-appointed new-build with all these empty rooms she could decorate however she liked, and there’d even be space for a meditation room. You wouldn’t be the first German to seek refuge in a Swiss sanatorium, he said. When she looked at him with a serious expression, he took her hand. He knew he’d won.