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The Night Was Pale, the
Lights Were Twinkling

Novel

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die Lichter blinkten. Roman)

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In memory of Gregor

... abandoning his guide, drawn by desire for the heavens,
he soared higher.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Book VIII

Hush now baby, baby, don't you cry.

Mamma's gonna make all of your nightmares come true.

Mamma's gonna put all of her fears into you.

Mamma's gonna keep you right here under her wing.

She won't let you fly, but she might let you sing.

Pink Floyd, *Mother*

LENNARD

If the sun shone at night, it would be speechless at what comes to light. Daylight can't reveal the underbelly of a city. Because it is only at night that the metropolis bares her long legs, only then does her pulse twitch in the nervous lights. And only when it is looked at from afar does this arachnid glow in the dark from which the night carrier drones of the Federal Post Office had just come to deliver letters along their assigned routes. Ten years ago to this day, night carrier drone Gert had taken over area 10999-32. He always approached Kreuzberg from the southwest, always at the same time, always at the mandatory leisurely pace and always along the same route. And every night, along the way, his image sensors captured the paradox consequences of human nyctophobia, the fear of the dark which was pushed back with parties and glaring twinkles, with lights and will-o'-the-wisps that no daylight could match. The night was powerful, it infiltrated the emotions, it controlled the minds, happiness was created and destroyed in the dark.

Tonight the evening was clear, the sky was empty, its blackness seemed far away, it was cool. As always around this time, Bergmannstraße was busy. People everywhere, couples and groups clustered in front of and inside the bars. They walked across the street, vehicles carved their path through the crowd. A patchwork rug of laughter and conversations unfurled and pushed its way up the facades, across the lit and opened windows. Gert flew roughly two metres above the heads, steering towards Hasenheide and then further towards Görlitzer Park. If they looked up, they would see the silver box, tightly packed with letters, attached to him. Gert started his tour on Wiener Straße. He had been delivering love letters to a certain Gustav Appel in house number 47 on the third floor for two years. Every Saturday night he posted one in the dedicated letterbox next to the living room window. But tonight the slot was taped shut. He pushed the letter against the Sellotape membrane to no avail. After that, as regulations dictated, he swung towards the window and knocked against the glass with a plastic finger. Mister Appel hadn't shut the curtains and Gert wasn't allowed to save or process the image his sensors captured. He wouldn't have understood the situation anyway, because he wasn't built to understand what he ›saw‹ there. Gustav, a man somewhere around forty years of age, was lying naked and motionless in a pool of sick on the sofa. Four empty bottles of vodka, a few pills and remnants of a white powder on the glass table, next to a small knife. Gert knocked against the glass once more with his plastic finger, as stipulated by regulations. Then he turned back towards the letterbox, printed a sticker, stuck it to the box, clearly visible, and floated down one storey. He posted the letter at the neighbour's. After that he continued on his route.

At the open windows of the neighbour's flat appeared Beata, who had noticed the delivery, and picked up the letter. »I made dinner, Lennard. Why do you want to spend money in a restaurant?«

»Kitten, we have something to celebrate. Have you forgotten?« said Lennard, after letting out a sigh, and covered her neck with small kisses. »Just leave the bill.« He took the letter from her hands and let it fall to the polished hardwood floor. His hands were massaging her shoulders. Beata turned to face him and put his arms around him, he rested his cheek on her chest.

»I went to the supermarket especially.« Beata had pouty lips and dark blonde hair and was half a head taller than him. »And I washed the tablecloths.«

»If I had more money, we could have adjusted this cooking and washing thing as well.«

»But that's how Pedro wanted it.«

Lennard put his hands to her cheeks. His face betrayed the fact that he was sick of hearing that name and that he didn't give a fuck about whether she cooked and cleaned and that this Pedro had to be a nobody because he had them equip an arithmetic logic unit as hot as Beata with such mundane features.

When Lennard had met Beata three months ago on the street in front of his house, he couldn't believe his luck. It was a Friday night and he was skint. On top of that, he had forgotten to pick up the keys to his new studio from the landlord and therefore was homeless for the weekend. And Beata had just been dumped, for the second time, an ex without an attachment figure in a clean, deserted apartment. Because her last ex, who had moved in with his new lover, owned the flat, she wasn't put out on the street immediately. He was looking for someone who would be able to sublet the flat as well as take over Beata. He had a good heart and Lennard appeared at just the right time.

Beata looked like a model, but she didn't know what she looked like, what kind of an effect she had. That wasn't important. An ALU existed exclusively for their attachment figure who had had them programmed and manufactured according to their desires. Lennard had seen a couple of these abandoned ex-partners, but Beata moved him with her glamorous grace. There was something about her that reminded him of his mother, but, oh well, he wasn't in a place to be picky. When they met, she had been leaning against the wall of the house and looked in his direction as he trotted past with a joint in his mouth, just as if she had been waiting for him. He had actually been on his way to a new acquaintance who wanted to learn how to dive and had bought his old equipment. Lennard was supposed to become his diving instructor. They had made loose plans for the night and Lennard was hoping that he could spend the following two

nights on his sofa. But when he was faced with Beata and she was staring at him so expectantly, he had simply looked her straight in eyes and said: »Here I am.«

She hadn't smiled, just said: »Now the food has gone cold.«

»No worries. In this heat, it's better like that. I'm starving.«

She had nodded. »I could tell by looking at you.«

This scene had been anything but unusual. There were countless cases like Beata's in this city. The Hubot business was booming. The arithmetic logic unit »Beata« had been programmed by PersonalPartner, finely attuned and shipped according to the customer's wishes. With the promise of meeting the requirements of every relationship ideal, PersonalPartner had become a giant on the stock market. Their competition, Youbotlove, even declared Berlin the »capital of the new way of love« in their advertising pitches. If you were still walking around lonely and heartbroken these days, it was your own fault. Nobody had any empathy for that any longer and even notoriously broke people like Lennard could easily enjoy these artificial lovers and life partners, albeit second hand, because ideals and trends were like everything in this city: fleeting.

Beata worked great in all domestic matters. In addition, she was friendly and patient. But she didn't know how to provide love and warmth. At least he could forgive her for that, unlike his ex-wife, Lennard thought. Beata wasn't bitter, wasn't vein or selfish, nor was she bossy and hurtful. But she wasn't caring and affectionate, either. She hadn't had those programmes installed, because this Pedro had obviously had no need for them. And Lennard couldn't afford a suitable upgrade. And so he tried, painstakingly, to teach her the behaviours he so longed for. After a month of training she hugged him after he massaged her shoulders, and he was able to rest his head on her chest. Her lips also touched his if he asked her to kiss him; it wasn't a real kiss, it was just a touch, but he was thankful even for that. And in fact, Lennard was happy that Beata cleaned up after him without any reproach when he came home in the early hours of the morning sometimes, totally wasted, and threw up in the bed later, half asleep. She was never disgusted by him and unlike his parents and his successful brother, she spared him the sarcasm when another one of his business ideas went bust or when he left his wallet with the last bit of cash the ATM was willing to spit out somewhere. When Lennard thought of his mother, he also had to think of all the disdainful and disappointed looks he had received in his childhood for all the lost gym bags, the inadequate grades and the bad report cards (he had passed his O-levels by the skin of his teeth) and that he so would have liked to exchange for a hug every now and again. Only with Beata and her brief, friendly hugs he felt like he was getting that little bit of respect that keeps every person alive for the first time. He

had sold his beloved canoe for her. It had got him enough money to furnish Beata with his identifier so that now she belonged to him officially. Now she was able to miss Lennard when he was gone. This feeling of gratification, knowing about this new, unknown force of gravity in his life had been worth every cent. How would he have ordered Beata to be if he wasn't constantly broke? Lennard had no idea. Today, they had wanted to celebrate their connection and she was just supposed to be there for him. Just love him. As well as she could now. He took his hands off her cheeks and caressed her face with his fingers. »Never say Pedro again, please. We're connected now. Only ever say: Lennard.«

She smiled. »Lennard.«

»Kiss me!«

She kissed him.

And he was glad this was working better now. »You and I have a date, kitten.« And that he could show it to everyone out there now.

»Am I still not right for you?«

»You are perfect, kitten. I can't expect anything more.«

»That's not a bill, the letter is for Mister Appel.« She motioned towards the floor with her head.

Lennard picked up the envelope and looked at it from both sides. He smelled lavender. »He'll be in touch.« Then he took two pills. With a worried look on her face Beata asked him if he was having headaches again and he replied: »No, I'm just taking something against the pains of sobering up again.«

Lennard and Beata left the apartment. »Wait,« he said and grabbed the letter before he closed the door behind him. He sprinted up the stairs to the neighbour's flat. Beata followed him. Lennard had an athletic body, broad shoulders, slender hips. He wasn't tall but strong and had muscular arms. He rang the doorbell twice and knocked, but nobody answered. »Mister Appel?« They waited a few seconds for an answer then walked down the stairs hand in hand, out onto the street.

The uneven cobblestones were glistening from the recent drizzle and intensified the glow against the night. Ever since the successful start of the Hubot dating sites five years ago, the population of the city had more than doubled and the number of those travelling through on the search for meaning or on business had almost tripled, in the streets, on the trains, in the bars, the shops, the parks, that feeling of Tokyo everywhere, the overcrowding, that surge of people. This dense, warm fabric that had grown in this city, that made everyone who once became a part of it believe they were more alive here than anywhere else.

Lennard and Beata strolled with the stream. Berlin was no longer the city of singles and outsiders that it used to be, here was where you found your true self through the new love and showed the originality of your being with the choice of your partner. Nobody went out alone at night anymore. Lennard squeezed Beata's hand, because this night he felt that he belonged and how grateful he was to be like the others for once, not a loser but socially acceptable.

[...]

ROBERTA

She was heartless and highly sensitive, but free, the first investigator of her kind. She was nobody's property and had more decision-making power than the average policeman. As the first of her kind she had even been granted an official flat so that the conditions of Operation Roberta were as close to reality as possible. It was on the first floor of a pre-war building in a narrow alley, with a bathroom and two sparsely furnished rooms: bed, sofa, table, a chair, a sideboard, a wardrobe. A high, slender mirror next to the living room window. A dimmed light bulb on a standard lamp standing directly on the flooring next to the door illuminated the room. Roberta looked at her reflection in the mirror. The diffuse bluish neon writing of the kiosk across the road flickered in her face. Her chest rose and fell steadily. Her neck was lined with age, growth rings that were meant to indicate her life experience. She noticed the perfect asymmetry of her breasts, the left breast was a little smaller than the right one. Modest pads of fat hugged her hips. She tugged at her brunette shag haircut and felt the brown locks between the legs, a biblical bush that only pretended to guard a moist sacrament, they protected a lust that she hadn't been programmed with. The hair smelled like para-dichlorobenzene, which is also contained in mothballs. Roberta understood that she embodied the trained naturalness of a mature woman who wasn't meant for love. Delicate senses but not even susceptible to a coughing fit. She wasn't the wanted child of one of these powerful Hubot dating sites, she was merely the ray of hope for IntellabourLtd., a startup that wanted to flood the highly competitive job market with KI workers.

It was nighttime. She knew that this was the fleeting time of day in which mostly people with desires were out on the streets. Desires that she, Roberta, knew nothing about. Desires that she, as a woman, should have. But she had only existed for a short time, she was only the quote of her life, she wasn't even more than its form. Roberta put on lace panties, the polyamide brushed against her legs, small bumps formed on the surface of her skin. There was a tingling on her lips. She was unsure of whether this was good or bad, a mistake or a sensory perception. She put the bra around her, as she had been instructed to do. An employee of Intellabour wasn't allowed leave the house without a bra. She stepped into the jeans and slipped on the blouse. Accompanied by flat boots and a grey felt coat. And the glasses, they were mandatory too: a pair of big, round, brown horn-rimmed glasses that looked like an additional defence mechanism against the testosterone, disproportionately omnipresent in her new working environment. She was to appear companionable, the chief developer at Intellabour had told her. Companionable with the simulated breathing. Companionable with her dimmed femininity.

Companionable in her imperfection. And Roberta practiced total mimicry, and now the mirror was merely imitating the mirrors. But both nature as well as life were lagging behind art. Roberta was unnatural but not artificial.

The nightly heart of the city was beating through a slight fog today, the light was literally crawling along the streets or dispersed underneath the streetlamps. In the fog, every light gives the truth a wide berth, that's why every person was looking at least ten years younger tonight. There was a damp calm, the usual nightly rustle was held back by the steamed-over windows of the bars. Silhouettes, it could also have been hallucinations, flitted across the cobblestones like ghosts here and there and disappeared in the mist of this perfidious dampness, behind which dust, exhaust fumes and aerosols, and generally a fundamental lack of freshness, could hide easily. Roberta didn't breathe anyway. A heartless pulse was enough for her.

She walked across the asphalt with even paces, her leather boots making a crunching sound like broken souls. Her breasts were swinging up and down slightly with every step, she had buried her hands in the pockets of her felt coat. This milky blindness of her first night corresponded to her lack of identity, of experience, of emotions. She was not a piece of insentient synthetic junk, her vocabulary might be used but was all the more differentiated and expressive for it. She was a kind of disposable deity, on deployment to fight the repercussions of human inadequacy. She was the unwanted child of unions and job centres. She was the substitute reason in times of increasing mindlessness and callousness among humans. And Operation Roberta had almost failed. It had taken the developers three attempts until finally a viable image of the world had formed in Roberta. After her super brain had calculated, connected, and categorised the entire volume of data contained on the internet, with which she had been fed, for the first time, she had assumed that the world was a perverse playground for powerful cats and dogs and that humans were their slaves. The department for Research and Development had worked overtime searching for a solution. After the second attempt she thought the world was a trade fair all about killing effectively and for entertainment with corpses. Only after the third attempt and long nights of optimising her neuronal network was Roberta able to place her priorities as desired and understand that humans and human life were at the centre of this universal history.

Music and subdued voices drifted over from across the street, beats, laughter, palaver, bawling. She hesitated and tried to make out anything. The fog over there was glowing with a pinkish hue. A crow was picking at the carcass of a kebab by the side of the road – the image of a powdery bird of death that she knew from ghost stories where a crow always augured ill. The animal didn't fit the picture. Roberta stomped her foot on the ground, the bird screeched

and flew away. Carefully, she approached the source of the noises, a packed bar called Pink Elephant. Just then an older woman and a younger man left the bar, she clung to a streetlamp and vomited onto her shoes. He caressed her back with his hand and talked to her quietly. That's when his and Roberta's gazes met. He wasn't soulful-corporal like the woman, he was an ALU like Roberta, still he denied her access. He turned away from her, put his arm around his partner's waist and staggered off down the road with her.

The adrenaline inside the bar hung down from the windows in a haze, there were holes here and there through which Roberta was able to take a peek inside. For a moment she scanned the scenery. No seat in the bar was empty. Loved-up couples were ogling each other at the tables or dancing in tight embraces around the room, couples or even trios of all genders and inclinations. Others were huddled together at the bar, talking, looking at themselves or those standing next to them in the mirror across from them. Nobody was alone, everyone seemed to be taking a social bath. But something was off here. What was wrong here?

Roberta entered the bar. A band was just starting a new song. Many were dancing among the tables. Unsure, she stood at the bar and took off her coat. The barkeeper sized her up quickly.

»Are you waiting for someone?«

»No, I'm not.«

»Single for the night then, eh?«

Roberta grinned and looked at his babylike, bloated podgy face, his arm fell to the counter like a butcher's knife as he leaned in to her.

»Then the first drink's on the house, eh?«

She looked at him. He took turns staring at her breasts and her face. She met his gaze and also looked at his chest briefly. The invitation seemed polite and attentive to her. She nodded.

»What'll you be having?«

The only thirst Roberta felt was that for an identity. Even though she was off her face with foreign data, her own file was still empty. She belonged nowhere, had no social network, she had no face. She still had to practice being Roberta. She had access to so many answers she could give now. »Prosecco gives me a migraine,« she said. »Give me an alcohol-free beer.« She wanted to decide if she liked the taste later.

He looked at her breasts again, then he nodded, opened a bottle, put the glass in front of her and poured in two finger's breadth. »There you go, milady.«

»Very generous, kind sir. Thank you very much.« She took a sip, looked around the bar and slightly bobbed her head along to the music. She had no partner to dance with. Suddenly

she felt half the crowd in here trying to contact her. She could feel their eyes on her. She realised that hardly any of the people present were here with a human but with their personalised partners, their arithmetic logic units perfectly adjusted to all their narcissistic needs. Love 3.0 finally satisfied all human wants and needs. All of them. Pleasure? Recognition? Contact without commitment? Ecstasy? Comfort? Protection and safety? Ego boost? Adventure? Hunger for exotic experiences? Platonic friendship? Trans? Homo? Hetero? Poly? Interspecific? There no longer were any connections that couldn't exist. The development of the self now had a new social stage on which it could be admired.

Roberta didn't want to imagine that she could freeze all these personalised ALUs disguised as individuals with a single command and destroy the illusions of these people from one moment to the next, she didn't want to imagine that these people had actually come here alone, that they were isolated, because hardly anyone was able to form a connection with others anymore. Roberta didn't want to be the snake in disguise but become part of this euphoric throng of people. She understood that she, too, was here alone, that nobody and nothing belonged to her, not even an illusion. She tried to dance in between two couples so as not to attract any attention, but dancing was obviously not something she was made for. It didn't take long and a man snuggled up to her from behind. She turned around: a corpulent whiner with snot-green eyes, not an intellectual. The alcohol content in his breath was already twice as much as the 0.5 per mille allowed when associating with Hubots. He clung to her hips and swayed his butt back and forth. Roberta imitated him. She smiled but kept him at spitting distance for now. His name was Karl.

»Roberta ... Beautiful name. You're not real, are you?« He was out of breath. And he, too, stared at her breasts.

She had noticed how he briefly narrow his eyes to a slit at the word ›real‹ and pulled away his upper body slightly. He was afraid of women, of real women. If she lied now, her first episode here would be over. She smiled at him and said: »Deceptively real.«

»So you're an artificial one then?«

She nodded. She found that term flattering as it emphasised the art of her.

»Are you an ex?«

She shook her head.

He whispered directly into her ear. »Sorry for asking this, but why do you look so much like an old maid then?« He laughed with embarrassment.

She looked at him closely. »But that turns you on, doesn't it?«

With an overexaggerated gesture he indicated that she was rather smart. He took her to the table where two identically looking young men were talking to each other, one of them an ALU, the other his son.

»Boys, what did I tell you. She's an artificial one. What a keen eye I have. Please, Roberta, sit down with us.«

Karl's own ALU was in for maintenance at the moment. He didn't talk about the particulars. But the brittle greed Roberta could read in his facial features let her guess that he might have taken it too far with her. Or she with him, since he had ordered her that way. Some animalistic torture could have put her out of commission. Roberta felt suspicious looks from Karl's son Ben, actually from his double. Ben didn't even like artificial women, and virtually no men either, he seemed to be his own biggest mystery and greatest adventure.

»Well, Roberta, if nobody ordered you, how did you get here? You're not an ex, what are you then?«

»I'm a highly skilled worker,« she replied.

The raised eyebrows implied disconcertment, surprise and appreciation. Roberta saw Karl distance himself again, he leaned back and crossed his arms in front of his belly.

»What do you do then that you're so highly skilled at?«

She mustn't mention the word police under any circumstances. Investigator, inspector on probation, none of that was she allowed to say. »What do I look like to you?« She pushed her glasses back and looked as nice as she could.

»Nurse?« asked Karl.

»Librarian,« said Ben's doppelgänger.

»Or chairwoman of the Friends of the Association for Therapeutic Pensioners' Dance,« Ben said rather than asked.

Roberta watched Karl closely, she was reading his body to see what he would prefer. Roberta grinned and made the same overexaggerated gesture Karl had made earlier at Ben's doppelgänger. »Librarian, you guessed it.« Karl seemed relieved. So, he wasn't afraid of an artificial librarian. He took Roberta's hand in his and kissed it. Roberta had billions of data evidencing that this act caused a sensation in women that made them laugh but when his damp lips were registered by her sensors, she received an analysis report containing the composition and the temperature of his spit and therefore the confirmation of his devastating drunkenness.

»Is something wrong?« he asked.

Should she tell him that she couldn't feel anything at all? Then this first episode would end here, so what. »Everything is alright. Librarians are just shy.« Her grin was stony.

»I'm highly skilled at that,« Karl said and pulled her to the dancefloor. He kept advancing further and further, kissing her neck, tickling the inside of her ear with his tongue, touching her breasts and finally placing a moist kiss on her mouth. His desire led to countless analyses in her and activated strange, fruitless stimuli. She wasn't afire, she felt no animalistic desire, no attraction, no magnetism. But she didn't want to be a piece of insentient synthetic junk. And she had this scene in her memory software, billionfold. She knew the models. Roberta started to reciprocate his intimate advances and finally she did what was done in the majority of these situations: She took Karl's hand and pulled him towards the toilets. They locked themselves in a stall and cascades of rhythmically recurring data flooded her sensory apparatus until a dripping wet trumpet blast Karl eventually released through his mouth and nose ended the procedure. He leaned back against the wall and kissed Roberta's back for decency's sake. And she knelt in the sludge of data from this failed sensual experience.

When they got back to the table, they found Ben & Ben immersed in a waterfall-like conversational flow. They didn't take notice anyone around them. Both together were exactly the kind of profile neurosis with the ability to converse that ended in suicide in great numbers.

Roberta didn't want to process any more hand kisses and no more looks. »I have an early start tomorrow.« She retrieved her coat and smiled goodbye. Karl wanted to hold her back, she placed a kiss on his cheek automatically, left the pink elephant and disappeared into the fog of the late night. The hazy lights of the billboards tinted her face and the deaf-mute grin on it all sorts of colours as she walked past.

With dawn the city experienced the demise of the euphoric atmosphere. The sun tempered the beating heart of the night. But by then Roberta was already lying on her charging pillow in her official flat.

DAY 7

[...]

Roberta rang the bell that said »Bruns« at the Salzufer. She rang a second and a third time until she heard Cleo's voice through the intercom.

»Who is it?«

»Cleo, it's me, Roberta. I have a tremendously important message.«

»What is it?«

»Here, on the street?«

The door opened with a click. Cleo lived on the fourth floor. She stood in the doorway of her flat wrapped in a blanket.

»Cleo, you look white as chalk.«

»I'm sick. Make it short.«

»Can I come in for a second?«

Cleo stood aside and let Roberta in. Her flat revealed a different Cleo. A little chaotic, playful, emotional, obsessive. She was laughing in the photos on the walls of the hallway, in one of them she was lying in the arms of a man. But there was nobody else in the pictures but her.

Roberta whispered. »I don't want to keep you long. I didn't want to —«

»You don't need to whisper. I'm alone. I'm listening.«

»Leonhard Fischer has agreed to cover the cost of the funeral. I just left the gala at the Ritz-Carlton.«

Cleo studied at her closely. »You went in there dressed like this?«

»No, Beata styled up me and Goran and we wore evening attire.«

»That Mikkelsen guy?«

Roberta nodded.

A smile appeared on Cleo's lips, which were chapped and sore. Then she hugged Roberta. »Well done, special investigator.« She spoke through her nose. »You have earned a proper job for that.«

Roberta grinned from ear to ear. »In your department?«

»That's not up to me.«

Roberta peered into the living room furtively, at a display cabinet that held countless objects. She could stay here a little while longer, with this friendly Cleo who didn't fire off

these merciless looks, who wasn't in the role of a fighting machine. »Would you like some tea or did you want to leave?«

Cleo was looking feeble, her forehead was glistening with sweat. »Okay, let's toast to it with some sage.« She coughed.

They took the tea into the living room, where Cleo slipped under a blanket on the sofa. Her eyes were watering, snot was running down her nose. Roberta stared at a photo that showed Cleo with the same man from the hallway. Forehead to forehead they were looking into each other's eyes. »Your husband or boyfriend?«

»Where is your child?«

They had asked simultaneously. And this clear appellation of the absent subject dragged the truth that could no longer be masked with cool phrases from the fog. Roberta began, because she believed that it would make it easier for Cleo to speak afterwards.

»I don't know where my son is. He is with her and not with me. I'm just her copy and I have no claim to him. I just saw them again not that long ago, but I lost sight of them pretty quickly.«

She could tell that Cleo didn't believe what Roberta was saying. She couldn't believe that another, human Roberta existed, the same age, at the same time. That was forbidden. That was only possible in strictly regulated exceptions. She, Roberta, should have stayed with the woman, with her identifier.

»I think that she doesn't know about me. Maybe it's a coincidence. Nobody, maybe not even Intellabour, knows about it.« She said it was like someone else driving on her tracks, like someone else talking on her sound track. A double booking in the system. It happened, it wasn't that bad. She had other options, but at least this way she knew that she should have made a good mother. She smiled again and sipped her tea. She could see that Cleo found this conclusion naïve.

»How do you know that she's a good mother? How do you know what a good mother is?«

»I don't know anything. I'm making small talk. I could have just as well said: At least this way I know that I should have made a good screwdriver.«

Cleo coughed. A few drops of tea landed on the blanket. »Oh dear. Whoever programmed you, Roberta, was having a good day.«

Roberta realised that this was a compliment, her teeth sparkled with joy. »You shouldn't draw any conclusions from a tool about its inventor.«

»We're so screwed, aren't we?«

»Now it's your turn.«

Cleo got up and made some more tea in the kitchen. Roberta scanned every detail in the room. Cleo had had long hair once. And worn dresses. Roberta was staring at the picture until Cleo came back into the room.

»Well, there's not much to say.« She plunked down on the sofa. »That's Thilo, my brother. Was my brother.«

»Was?«

»Genetic disease. He died two years ago.«

Roberta was surprised. How could she have misjudged this so badly? She had been sure that the man on the photos had to have been her husband. »You're kidding me, right?«

»You're tactless.«

»I'm sorry.«

»He got it. And I'm just a ticking time bomb. I had my ovaries removed because of it. I did it for him.«

Was there a connection between this sentence and her stay in the DRK Clinic two years ago? Roberta calculated and calculated, because she didn't know what to say to that. »You know, things exist even without a body. Just because we can't see Thilo doesn't mean that he no longer exists.«

»You're talking nonsense.« Cleo looked at her.

...

...

»Why do you call us ›fucking things‹?«

»We all call you ›fucking things‹.«

»But we love you.« She switched to Lennard's voice. »I love you, Cleo. I could be a man. I could be your man.«

»Really?« Cleo laughed, she was drinking straight from the tea pot now. »I have everything I need. If I want sex, I take my vibrator out of its drawer.«

»And someone from the State Office of Criminal Investigations?« She was thinking about the guy from administration that she had seen eating egg with mustard sauce in the cafeteria.

Cleo shook her head. »Leave it be, Roberta. I'm managing just fine.« She lay back down, she was obviously very tired, and coughed again.

»Do you think that they made me a woman so that I seem less threatening?«

»Who told you that load of crap? Seiffarth?«

»No, but that's the way this world thinks, isn't it?.«

»Hmm, I understand ...« Cleo had closed her eyes. Her cheeks were burning up.

Roberta put a hand to Cleo's forehead. 38.8 degrees. »Are you a feminist?«

Cleo just blinked. »I'm a woman, that's got to be enough.«

»But I'm not even that.«

»Fake it till you make it ...« Cleo didn't open her eyes again, she had fallen asleep.

Roberta sat on the floor next to her and stroked Cleo's stubborn hair. She thought that there was no systematic difference between humans and machines as long as both followed the same logical basic rules. That both seemed to be mutually dependent, as though both had been factored in by evolution. They had to get along. For whatever reason. And humans had to learn to love them, just as they loved humans.

»Do you know what Lennard has taught me? You don't have to wonder about the meaning of your life, because there is no meaning, you are the meaning. You are the heroine of your own life, the protagonist. There's only the question of dramaturgy. Am I in a comedy or in a tragedy? You don't need to know anything else about your life ... Well, and then there are all the subplots, of course, and stuff like that, but that's comforting, isn't it?«

Cleo didn't respond, but maybe her words had still found a way into her dream. Roberta didn't want to wake her up again. She leaned against the sofa and remained seated. Until the morning. Too long. Her charging pillow was at home. She entered a kind of standby mode, a kind of semi-consciousness, in which she could only perceive shapes. She heard and processed information only in bits and pieces. Cleo appeared to have woken up. She called for her, called her, called her, she shook her, she shook her more forcefully. Then it was silent, for quite some time. Only Lennard's voice was still there, it wanted to keep her running, talking and talking incessantly. *A strange bicycle is driving along a country road, a guy sits on top of it, who, you can see it from here, is obviously wearing shoes that are too big, waaaaaaay too big, I say, for him, bathtubs so to speak, they are bright yellow, a striped jersey, trousers with huge patches that stand out, well, a pair of braces too, and, naturally, an extremely outlandish hat that has the look and shape of a termite mound, it must be bobbing up and down and sliding off all the time, because the man keeps having to set it right again. Because, of course, he needs one hand on the hat to do that, he is swerving the whole entire whooshing drive. It seems as though at least one of the bike's wheels is buckled, which makes the entire construction sway so much that the plates of protection and of embellishments, which the bike is rich in, rattle and clatter, so much it makes you retch on your tiptoes.* Someone had just connected her to her charging

pillow. She was still too weak to see who it was. The man with the hat? The one with the ...
crumbling paste ... stinking tree ... meathead ...