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English sample translation

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(extract from chapter 2)

Lynn gets up, in the morning, cleans herself then the hotel rooms, she got the job, Heinz got it for her, and her therapist put in a word that contained everything: exposure therapy, report, conversations, contract, trial period, the sack at the slightest offence. Offence, Lynn thinks. Time commits any number of offences. Every day is an offence. Lynn does everything at the same steady pace. Changing bed-linen, turning back bedcovers, dusting, vacuuming floors, cleaning toilets, mirrors, tiles, bathtubs, folding over loose sheets of toilet paper, placing chocolates on pillows, lighting a cigarette during her break and letting the smoke rise, standing by the window, taking care not to touch the windows, no greasy smudges on the panes, no ash blown into the room, running her hand round the rubbish bin in the bathroom, the wastepaper basket in the bedroom to check they're clean on the inside as well, away with gobs of chewing gum or sticky remains of drinks or broken pencil points, looking over the room, going over the room one last time, not leaving any polish or cleaner lying around, no screwed-off lids, no cloths in the bathtub, finally opening the minibar and noting down what's needed.

(...)

Then time to knock off, time for everyday things. The hours seep away, the evenings sink into the sofa, the nights are dreamless. Lynn stands in supermarkets and watches the people pushing their trolleys down the aisles, knowing what they have to buy. Lynn follows one of them and takes the same packets off the shelves. Almost like that film, Nikita. Lynn joins the queue at the checkout behind the other person and puts exactly the same things on the conveyor belt. Mostly no one notices. But when they do, they give suspicious glances. Lynn fulfils her duty to take in sustenance. She enjoys deliberately prolonging the preparation of food. Then she does things which are basically pointless, she likes peeling radishes. It's not easy because radishes are so small. Lynn smiles as she slices the red skin off the little balls because

she's thinking of people who only wash radishes then pop them in their mouths and because she thinks they look so much nicer, radishes do, when they're naked, all white, all bare. Now and then Lynn goes for a walk and she chooses places where everyone goes, City Park, for example, does a circuit, sometimes two, now, in the spring, when the sun comes out, she sweats a bit because she's still wearing her coat and a thick pullover underneath her coat. If she sees a stone lying on the path, just big enough to fit in the palm of her hand, she picks it up, takes it with her and throws it in the pond, which hasn't got much water in it at the moment. She watches the ripples spread and claps her hands in delight when the biggest one finally collapses on the bank.

In the evening Lynn looks at the television. She rents films, she likes watching Modern Times, sheep, people, sheep, Lynn thinks, they all get fleeced one way or the other, she makes the DVD slide out of the slot and takes the film back the same evening. That way she saves one fifty. Outside it's only gradually getting warmer. Night takes shallow breaths. Sometimes she just sits there and lets the film get gobbled up by the DVD-player. Then she watches out of the corner of her eye. Doesn't bother with words. Doesn't know what it's about. Just the odd detail strikes her now and then. When someone blows a bit off fluff away or their hair falls over their eyes or when Lynn sees something at the edge of the picture she can think about, a prop that appears to have been put there heedlessly, the camera doesn't even consider it necessary to dwell on it, just pans across it, a football table, not set up, just stacked up behind the door, a pink bow round the handle of a rubbish bin, an overturned, dried-out inkwell, a parka in the cloakroom, a declaration of love carved on a tree, illegible, a swing in the background, still moving gently, as if a child had just jumped off and run away from the playground shortly before the actors walked past the swing, and instead of following the film, Lynn asks herself what sort of child could have been swinging there and why had it run away so quickly and had it been afraid?

Lynn yields to sleep unresisting. Nights are neutral. They don't present a threat. Nor alleviation. Nights swallow me, Lynn thinks, and I get spat out in the morning. Heinz has given Lynn an advance, the bills have been paid, the telephone's been reconnected. Lynn rings her mother every Thursday. But she doesn't go to see her.

The journey there alone would take four hours. Her therapist's forbidden it, Lynn tells her mother, a long journey like that. Her mother mutters something Lynn can't understand, nothing angry, just something sad, Lynn thinks. And her therapist nods too much. Lynn goes to see him every Friday. His constant nodding irritates her. Sometimes Lynn deliberately says things which, she thinks, cannot be accompanied by a nod and still her therapist nods. Every time it drives her up the wall. Lynn takes a grip on herself, often she doesn't even look at him, her therapist, but then she thinks, if I keep my eyes modestly fixed on the floor he'll come to the wrong conclusion. Lynn's given pills, but she doesn't take them, or only rarely. Once she did raise her voice, will you stop it, Lynn shouted, will you stop your nodding. But her therapist just said, that's good, that's good, let it all out, nodding all the while. Every Friday her therapist. Every Wednesday her day off. Every Thursday the call to her mother, always at half seven in the evening, before the news. Her mother's always watched the eight o'clock news, not a day passed without the eight-o'clock gong from the living room. Every Monday her meeting with Heinz, the price she has to pay to get into the normality show. Lynn sprays limescale remover round the rim of toilet bowls and watches the deposit melt away, melt away like the hours, she thinks.

It begins imperceptibly.

Lynn stays at work longer and longer. She can hide in her work as if in a cave. No one sees her.

(...)

Lynn often stays until five or six, voluntarily prolonging her working day. She looks for work and she finds it, lifts, long corridors, the inside of flower vases. Overtime is not part of the deal, it's neither paid, nor can Lynn take time off in lieu. It's her own time. But no one stops her doing it. Heinz thinks she wants to show us, wants to prove she's a good worker, doesn't want just to get through her trial period but to do so with flying colors. But even after the three months are up nothing changes. On the contrary. Lynn works until seven, sometimes till eight. Goes round the kitchen, the breakfast room, reception, the workshop, the laundry, always finding things that need doing, she also cleans rooms that are unoccupied, even unoccupied

rooms gather dust, Lynn thinks, she turns back the bedcovers there too. No one tells her not to. They let her get on with it. And very soon Lynn has disappeared behind the work of the hotel, doesn't attract attention any more, it's as if she's an invisible part of it, an inventory item that moves, almost imperceptibly, now and then, a spirit that comes and goes and comes at will, a brownie that works as it passes. Something falls on the floor — Lynn's there to pick it up. A magazine in the lounge — it doesn't lie around for long. A dirty mark where a guest coming in from the rain's wiped his feet — before the head of reception can see to it, it's already been wiped up.

But Lynn spends most of the time in the rooms. And there it's the presence of things, the importunity of things, the all-enveloping immediacy of things which stretches over Lynn like a sheet. A toothbrush left behind? The guest will have to buy a new one. Cheap deodorant? Not much bothered about personal hygiene. Hairs from shaving in the wash basin? Signs that he doesn't give a damn. Sanitary towel in the toilet bag? A faint tang of stomach-ache in the air. A man's watch on the bedside table? The man will have to ask the time while he's out. Lynn picks up the watch, dusts the table, but then puts the watch back, exactly the way it was. Spots of water on the mirror? The woman shook her head before drying her hair. An open packet of Dunhill cigarettes on the bedside table? Lynn lights one of her own, certainly not one of someone else's, only her own, but she breathes a sigh of relief when she goes into a smoky room, then she can smoke at the open window during her break from cleaning, no one will notice, smoke will mix with smoke, she's never heard of anyone who can distinguish between Dunhill cigarette smoke and Marlboro cigarette smoke.

(extract from chapter 7)

(...)

On Saturday Lynn leaves the hotel at four. Back home she checks her purse, as she's done so often that day, counts the notes, takes out two, puts them on the living-room table. Places the water bottle on the edge of the notes so they won't blow away if Chiara should happen to want to open the window, there's a strong summer wind outside. Every minute Lynn looks at the clock, getting more and more nervous. Then the front-door buzzer sounds, Lynn presses the button and waits until Chiara's standing in the doorway.

'Hi,' Lynn says, 'come in.'

'Hello,' Chiara says, drawing out the o, a dark, bottomless bowstroke. That voice, Lynn thinks, it doesn't go with Chiara, it belongs to a person sitting deep down inside her, waiting to come into the world at some point. Chiara pushes past Lynn. Everything she does, she does naturally, as if it's a matter of course. She looks good, Lynn thinks, and closes the door. Just her hair, too dyed. A short skirt, black stockings, high-heeled shoes, a top, small breasts, Chiara's not wearing a bra, Lynn sees that straight away, she'll be in her mid-twenties, Lynn thinks, her make-up's quite the opposite of understated, and Chiara's eyes, Lynn saw that at once, are almond-shaped, brown, they don't go with her blond hair.

'Why d'you dye your hair?' Lynn asks.

Chiara turns round, looks Lynn up and down for a moment.

'Where did you get my number?' Chiara asks.

'How much time have you got?' Lynn asks.

'Well what d'you want?'

'How long have you been doing this?'

'What?'

Lynn doesn't reply. Chiara sits down on the sofa. She crosses her legs. Lynn can see her garter under her dress.

'You think I'm a whore,' says Chiara. 'I'm not. I'm not a whore.'

‘If I say get undressed, you’ll get undressed,’ says Lynn.

‘Depends if I want to.’

‘And if I’m paying?’ says Lynn, pointing to the money.

‘I choose my clients, I don’t stand on street corners and take anyone who happens along, I only fuck people I want to fuck.’

‘You do it for money.’

‘I haven’t got a pimp. Whores have to do what they’re told to do, I do what I want.’ Chiara stands up. ‘Tell me where you got my number.’

‘Wait,’ Lynn says. ‘Wait.’

Chiara sits down again. Lynn picks up the bottle of water and opens it. There’s a spurt of fizz. She puts the bottle to her lips and drinks. She holds it out to Chiara.

‘My number,’ Chiara says.

Lynn has another drink because her mouth is oddly dry, dusty, someone ought to invent a duster for mouths, for this kind of situation, she thinks, when your mouth’s dry with dust you ought to have a mouth duster, to clear the dust from inside of your mouth, so you can start talking again, without those slurping noises you get when your mouth’s too dry and your spittle’s not liquid any more, just a viscous lump.

‘You were in the Eden,’ Lynn says. ‘Not long ago. With a man. Room 304. I was lying under the bed. I wrote down your number. From your card. You put it on the table.’ She doesn’t believe me, Lynn thinks. ‘I’m a chambermaid there,’ she adds.

‘In the Eden?’ Chiara asks.

‘Yes.’

Lynn can almost hear Chiara’s thoughts working out their own version: a chambermaid finds a prostitute’s card and writes down the number because for once at least she wants something exciting to happen in her life.

‘Do you find it more enjoyable with women?’ Lynn asks.

Chiara frowns. She thinks for a moment. Then she wipes out something in the air, as if she were trying to drive a fly away. ‘Of course,’ Chiara says, and Lynn knows Chiara’s just saying what Lynn wants to hear. ‘Aren’t you going to sit down?’ Chiara asks. ‘Are you afraid?’

‘What?’

‘Are you nervous?’

Lynn joins Chiara on the sofa. Chiara puts both arms round her back.

‘How can you touch someone you don’t know?’ Lynn asks.

‘We’ve all got two legs and two arms and one head and everything else that goes with them. For example a back.’

Chiara draws Lynn to her a little, not an erotic gesture, sits there, beside her, holds Lynn in her arms, holds her tight, Lynn tries to cling on to her clarity of mind, she knows what she’s doing, she thinks, and then she notices Lynn slowly move on to caresses, up and down her back, she hears Chiara make a sound, a soft exhalation, as if she’s enjoying what she’s doing, perhaps she really is enjoying it, Lynn thinks, you look great, Chiara says, I like your nose, faces come closer, I go for women, Chiara whispers, not seductively, not mendaciously, the tone of voice sounds genuine, Lynn thinks, that must be genuine, and you, Chiara asks, ever been with a woman before, no, Lynn says, and Chiara strokes Lynn’s cheek with the back of her hand, her outspread fingers run through Lynn’s hair while Chiara’s mouth opens, she takes Lynn’s chin in her lips, Lynn closed her eyes long ago, Chiara’s hand moves slowly along Lynn’s thigh and that thumb, that doesn’t seem to know where it wants to go, Lynn’s breathing audibly, she’s forgotten the questions she was going to ask, she’s forgotten everything around her, go on, she says, then she doesn’t say anything else, she’s a body, nothing more, a body that feels and loses control and only when she hears the sound of the shower does she realize she’s lying naked on the sofa, alone, her body covered in moisture. Lynn stares at the ceiling. Chiara comes out of the bathroom, she’s dressed.

‘Almost seven,’ she says.

Chiara takes the money that’s on the table.

‘You’ll ring me again?’

‘Sure,’ says Lynn.

‘Next Saturday?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ciao.’

‘Ciao.’

‘How was it?’ Lynn calls out, but the door’s already shut, Lynn’s alone and the money gone, but then Chiara didn’t ask for more money, even though she stayed

longer, she stayed almost an hour longer, she did that of her own free will, Lynn thinks, she'll have had a good time too, otherwise why would she stay so long, she'll have enjoyed it too, she must have enjoyed it otherwise she'd have said that'll cost you the same again, a whole hour free, Lynn thinks, trying to shrug off thoughts of introductory special offers, of marketing, of customer service, of the importance of client satisfaction at the initial encounter, Lynn's mind fights for all its worth against her thoughts, that can't be it, not after what's just happened. And she knows she'll do it again, has to do it again, she knows she's found something. Every Saturday, Lynn thinks, I'll do it every Saturday.

(...)

(extract from chapter 8)

Lynn stands at the mirror looking at her ID card she glued to it. Linda Zapatek, she thinks, that's me, Wednesdays off, Thursdays phone call to Mother, Fridays the therapist.

Saturdays Chiara.

In order to pay her, Lynn sells the laptop and the stereo.

It's the little things that fascinate Lynn. The gap between a tiny birthmark and her navel. The way her lips shine after the cherry red's gone. The almond-coconut taste behind Chiara's ear. The way Chiara goes Mmmm when she takes her mouth away from Lynn's body. The unexpected jerk when she pulls Lynn's hair back sharply. The suggestion of a bite on her neck. The thread of saliva she rubs over Lynn's breast. Chiara's hands, which sometimes don't even touch Lynn's skin, only the air over her skin, so that the little hairs stand on end, reaching out to Chiara.

They're lying beside each other, the sofa-bed's been pulled out.

Chiara doesn't smoke. Lynn does.

'Was it, I mean, did you have to force yourself?'

'Are you crazy?'

‘Are there people where you do have to force yourself?’

‘I told you, I choose my own customers.’

‘Customers?’

‘Customers. I don’t take just anyone.’

‘I mean, am I a customer too?’

‘Well, yes, a special one in a way.’

‘Special in what way?’

‘Very special.’

‘But you’ve only been with me three times.’

‘You can tell something like that right from the start.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘Don’t you feel it?’

‘How long are you going to go on doing this?’

‘What?’

‘This here.’

‘With you?’

‘With anyone?’

‘There comes a time when you get too old.’

‘And then?’

‘Something or other.’

‘Go off somewhere?’

‘Where?’

‘The Caribbean?’

Chiara gives a weary smile.

Best of all Lynn likes her conversations with Chiara. Actually just scraps of conversation. Questions, answers. Lynn listens for Chiara’s tone of voice and tries to find out what Chiara really thinks, tries to make a connection between the words and their meaning. Does Chiara mean it seriously, is she lying, is it meant ironically, is it concealed mockery, is it covert contempt, is it honest affection, closeness, distance, detachment, togetherness, Lynn gets enmeshed in the tangle of possibilities. She observes Chiara’s mouth: at some words she sees her teeth, at others only her lips, now and then you might almost say she’s going to smile, but at the last moment the

smile's torn up and a new word formed, her mouth's like a stage where new actors keep appearing and sometimes Lynn would love to be sitting at the back of her throat in order to see the actors before their entrance, to see through them.

'By the way,' says Chiara, 'next Tuesday I'll be in the Eden again. The guy rang up.'

'What does he do?'

'No idea.'

'Room 304?'

'Exactly.'

'Ever been hit?' Lynn asks.

'Give me those shoes.'

'Next Saturday?'

'Same time?'

'Same place.'

'Looking forward to it.'

'Ciao.'

'Ciao.'

Markus Orths, born in 1969, studied philosophy, French and English literature and lives as an author in Karlsruhe. For his novels and short stories he has received various awards, among them the *Sir Walter Scott Award*, *Limburg Award*, *North Rhine-Westphalia Award*, *Marburg Literature Award*, *Moerser Literature Award*, *Floriana Award*, and won the *Berlin open mike* – one of the most important literary contests for young writers.

DAS ZIMMERMÄDCHEN received the *Telekom Austria Prize* at the 2008 Ingeborg Bachmann literary competition at the German Literature Days in Klagenfurt.

Mike Mitchell taught German at Stirling University for many years before turning to work as a full-time translator. He has translated a wide range of German authors, from Grimmshausen to Goethe, Meyrink, Kokoschka, Kubin, Glauser and Krausser. He has frequently been shortlisted for translation prizes, most recently the 2008 *Weidenfeld Prize*; his translation of Herbert Rosendorfer's *Letters Back to Ancient China* was awarded the 1998 *Schlegel-Tieck Prize*.

His translation of Marcus Orths' *The Staff Room* is due to appear in June

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