

Standby

By Daniel Wisser

Translated by Stefan Tobler

The forehead is felt. A phrase is thought: *headache behind the eyes*. That is how the headache is described by him. Seven or eight different kinds of headache can be differentiated. It is claimed by his wife that he is always sick, has a continual cold. That he should have his sinuses checked out. But a headache of the eyes and a slight nausea are not caused by the early stages of a viral infection.

Saturday morning. Saturdays are not for work. Nor will he be able to go to the office tomorrow. Saturdays are not loved by him, nor Sundays. He does not look forward to the weekend.

On the bedside table, next to the pile of books, next to the glass of water from which not a drop has been drunk all night, and next to the painkillers, his mobile is found. The display looked at: no new calls. The phone always has to be at the ready, as he is on standby at the weekend. Reaction time 20 minutes max. Response time 60 minutes max.

Perhaps a painkiller should be taken right now. Possibly the world will present itself in a new form this Saturday: he will be left by his wife; his father will have died, will have fallen asleep peacefully in his old people's home and not woken up again. And Eva will approach him – tomorrow, soon!

There is nothing more painful than waiting for a day, an hour, a week to pass. He imagines how his father waits in the home for every meal, without actually wanting to eat. Through the continual intake of morphine, his appetite is dulled and bowel movements a torture. To his father breakfast, lunch and supper are only markers that show him that time has not stopped, that he is not waiting in vain for death. He thinks that his days feel shorter the greater his age. But he interrupts his thoughts as it is pointless to waste his time speculating about time's stopping, slowing down or speeding up. And yet he cannot forget one sentence, although he does not know where he heard it: *time knows no weekends*.

So that Saturday can be survived, repairs are carried out in the flat, light bulbs are changed, updates are installed and the rubbish and recycling taken out. On Saturdays he deals with the car: an outside wash, inside clean, and so on. Soon, he thinks, a car won't mean anything, won't be worth anything. There won't be any fuel for it. Mobility will change. A huge wave of regionalisation will create new political divisions in the world. There won't be a unified perspective on the whole situation.

That will be to the good, and even simple people will live according to healthy rules, one of the most important of which is the will to die. He had it already as a child. He enjoyed the thought of his own death and that of other people. A catastrophe, a flood, something *extraordinary* would even today be better than visiting his father every Saturday in the home and having to observe his pointless and dull life up close.

This Saturday will have to be survived. There is a duty to get up. To count down from *ten* to *zero* and then to get up at *zero*. At *zero* his torso will be raised and his legs swung out of the bed. *Ten*. The commands to move his legs have not been carried out. *Nine*. To get up, the sheet must first be pulled back from his body. *Eight*. For Thursday evening a walk with Eva has been agreed. No doubt the meeting will be called off by Eva at the last minute. Eva used to work in the same department as him. Four years ago Eva was trained by him. *Six*. During the training period a lot was laughed about, by both of them, the apparently long-forgotten party line telephone, *Winter Games* on the C64 and *Painting by Numbers*. Counting by numbers. The last number had been forgotten with the thought of Eva. The count from *ten* to *zero* had to be done again. An increase, an intensification of the headache of his eyes is noticed. There is no way his bed can be left right now. No part of his wife's body can be made out next to him. She is probably sleeping in front of the switched-on television on the sofa in the living room.

The countdown is not restarted and nor are any body parts moved, but memories are awoken – memories of the day when Eva was introduced to him. It happened almost four years ago – on 6th September 2004. The managing director was suddenly there, and beside her was the new colleague. A pale hand

that shook slightly was held out to him. The hand was shaken reluctantly and then let go once more. He did not like to shake hands with people.

Every day Eva sat beside him at his desk to have the basics of the software and its applications explained to her. Usually Eva wore light coloured or even white clothes. Her skin, however, could not be described as pale or white, but would have to be described as transparent. He could see Eva's veins clearly. Sometimes he could see through her skin as far as her heart.

Now and then there was a meal out together. There was nothing better for him than studying Eva's way of moving when she entered the restaurant or left it or when both were heading to his car. Eva's hands touched every object hesitantly. When they pointed to something on the monitor, they were guided by extreme care not to touch the surface of the screen with her fingertips. This attention on the part of Eva was noted with great joy, because people who touched his monitor were hateful.

With time, the conversations over lunch were carried out with less caution. Soon more than an hour was taken for them. Eva wore her hair tied back more and more often. One day a compliment was made about it. When she thanked him for it, her throat trembled more than usual. Her sternum was given a proper shaking by the beating of her artery. The two of them had long been talked about at the office.

Before anything else, the toilet has to be reached before his wife wakes up. The toilet was always locked by him, because he did not want to be surprised. What would suit him best would be if his wife were not present in the flat at all when he used the toilet. The first time an unpleasant smell from his own body was noticed was two years ago.

He will not be able to save Eva from doom. She is too unpredictable. After the catastrophe people will be needed who can act independently. Women will give birth to children and nurse these children and the men at their breasts. They will work, cook and defend the territory.

His breath is held. The television in the living room can be heard. The humming of the fridge in the kitchen. The lid of the rubbish bin in the courtyard is slammed shut. None of that is heard by his wife. His problem is that he hears everything he can hear. While his wife does not notice any background sounds,

noise and high frequencies drive him crazy. The high, pulsing ultrasonic sound emitted by the rat repellents, the scraping of a fork or a knife on a plate, the whistling of electronic equipment, the noises of the central heating and the fridge. The television also emits a continuous high-pitched tone that is apparently not heard by his wife; otherwise she would have gone crazy long ago.

A painkiller is pressed out of its packaging. The glass of water, from which not a single drop has been drunk all night, is taken in his hand.

He had even considered proposing to Eva four years ago. Admittedly it would have been necessary to rid himself of his wife first. Not that she was felt to be a particular obstacle, but Eva would no doubt have insisted on a proper solution. Even at the age of twelve a death was brought on by his wish for it – the death of his uncle's wife. When his father told the family the news the next day, the pretence of mourning was necessary.

But with regard to his wife the required inner decisiveness could never be found to carry out what was necessary, and so marriage to Eva was always put off for later. What is more, it would have been necessary or at least preferable for Eva or him to have resigned first. Back then, as part of a re-structuring process, he had been offered the post of team manager in the call centre by the managing director. It was a few weeks after Eva had joined the company. However, in a conversation about this post the regular lunches with Eva had been broached. His answer – that he was married and it was a private matter who he went to lunch with – met with a smile. The managing director's reply was that it was indeed a private matter whom he ate with. And as private matters can change, he would not need reminding by her that intimate relationships between members of staff were *barely tolerated*, and *not tolerated* at all between members of the same department.

Eva was told of this conversation over lunch. As a precaution, they decided not to email each other at their company addresses.

He was embarrassed. The meatloaf was investigated slowly on the plate with his fork, pushed to the edge and turned over. It annoyed him that it was not brown on the bottom and was still partly raw inside. Eva congratulated him on his new job as team leader. The ketchup had been served in a slapdash manner on a wilted lettuce leaf. The frying juices had spread over the whole plate and

made the fries soggy. The plate with its meatloaf was rested on one side on a pile of five beer mats so that the juices collected on one side and the fries on the other side were once again kept dry. It was agreed with Eva that next week *Hana-Bi* would be watched in the cinema. Then they raised their glasses and said cheers.

He needed more time. Time to end his marriage. Time to rid himself of his wife. Perhaps he should hit her once or cheat on her in a public way, so that he would be left by her? Eva's face was observed from the corner of his eyes. She appeared to be concentrating completely on her food; but he felt how her legs were moving under the table, and he saw her heart beating. Just that he could no longer look her in the eye. He wanted to go to the cinema *now*. Right now. Or at least as soon as work was done. He even considered suggesting that. But then he calmly ate the meatloaf which was already cold. The bill was paid quickly and they left. At his car, Eva's door was opened by him, a real gentleman.

That evening the washing machine was crammed full and the longest wash cycle started: *Non-crease Cotton Cycle with Pre-Rinse* (800 rpm spin cycle). Duration: 240 minutes. When the *non-crease* programme was used, then the *Soak* button was not to be pressed. When his wife came home, went to the bathroom and got undressed, the programme started by him was still running. Just as had been intended. She could not wash the shed clothes and so she stuffed them into the laundry basket. When his wife got out of the shower, he went into the bathroom. She got a shock. The clothes which she had stuffed in the basket were taken out again in front of her and smelled with a noisy intake of breath and closed eyes.

After getting up he went into the living room. As expected, his wife was to be found sleeping on the sofa. The television had not been turned off in the night. The temperatures and direction and strength of the wind in various holiday destinations flickered across the screen.

On the toilet he realised that the end of the toilet paper had been stuffed into its card roll. In the bathroom the showerhead has not been placed in its holder, but laid in the bath. Whenever the sink is found dirty, the dirty crust is scrubbed away with his wife's toothbrush and the brush then returned to its cup. In the kitchen the carton of milk has been left on the table over night, instead of being

placed back in the fridge. On the table there is a box of matches which has already been used and now contains used and unused matches. The dishwasher is opened. The crockery is clean, but the cutlery rack has not been used to clean a dessert fork which is very dirty after being used to eat a cream cake. Wherever the eyes alight, an untidy mess is found.

His wife sleeping in the living room is woken up. It is done by thumping the back of the sofa with his palm, without having to touch his wife. He asks her if she will go to the old people's home with him. He visits his father there every Saturday. He asks once more. No reply.

On the day for which the trip to the cinema with Eva to see *Hana-Bi* had been agreed, instead of his work being left at seven-thirty like any other day, it was left at four. He wondered how they would be sat in the cinema? Who would be sat on the right, who on the left? The film would be paid scant attention. Instead attention would be paid to the breath of the other person, to the position of the arms on the armrests between the seats. He went back into the bathroom to apply his deodorant again before leaving the flat. He went back into the hall to look at himself in the mirror, then leaving the flat. He went back into the flat a third time to take his tie off. Then the door was locked. At that moment his mobile phone rang. It was not a customer. It was not his wife. It was Eva.

What followed was a long monologue with him standing in front of his front door, the key still in his hand. Eva said that she had picked up her nephew from the nursery and then played with him in her flat. And that her nephew, playing, had accidentally stepped on her glasses, which were on the floor, and one of the lenses had broken. Without her glasses there was not much point in watching a film, of all things. He went back inside the flat a fourth time. Still with his mobile pressed to his ear, he was annoyed that he had left the office at four for no reason, while on the phone the glasses issue was still being explained. Eva's suggestion was to meet in a bar. The name and address of the bar was given. Then a mistake was made: the suggestion was accepted.

After hanging up it appeared obvious that he knew too little about Eva. Suddenly there was a nephew. And perhaps nieces, husbands and lovers would turn up next. Strange too how the complicated story had been introduced: she had picked up her nephew at the nursery. As if that mattered. It would only

matter if the whole story was a lie and was supposed to sound plausible. In such cases details are always made up.

He reached the bar half an hour too soon. Four clocks were hung above the bar, and above them was written *Vienna, New York, Sydney and Johannesburg*. The bar stools were screwed down, but far too far away from the bar. He had to lean forwards to reach the bowl with peanuts. Slave-driver jazz boomed from the loudspeakers. The whole room was filled with the smell of a toilet deodorizer. A Martini was ordered.

Eva came twenty minutes late. Of course the first question was about her glasses. In no way had Eva apologised for the cinema being cancelled and the film which, according to Eva over lunch you just had to see, not being seen. What was even more disappointing to him was that she did not bring her broken glasses. Asked about contact lenses, Eva's tetchy reply was that although she had them, she was not good with them. A monologue was started by Eva with the theme of how stressful today was. However she was immediately interrupted by him and asked about spare glasses. Obviously Eva did not want to talk about the real problem. A tortuous silence of several minutes ensued.

Later the conversation picked up somewhat. After the Martini and one gin and tonic, a second gin and tonic was ordered by him. Eva praised the bar extravagantly. In answer to this praise, the Sydney time on the clock above the bar was read off by him. The second gin and tonic was served. The server's perfectly ironed blouse, which allowed a glimpse of two young breasts when she leant over, captivated him. Her hair was woven in a tight braid. Two giant creole earrings hung from her slightly protruding ears. She looked so long into his eyes that he was unable to hold her gaze. The duel was lost by him. The toilet was visited and an alarm signal programmed into his mobile phone. In ten minutes the alarm would go off.

Back from the toilet, at the table the conversation was picked up where it had left off. He thought it would have been better to set the alarm for five rather than ten minutes. Finally his phone rang. A quick pop outside and a pretend call were needed, and payment of the bill by credit card and a brief apology. His hand had only been a few millimetres from Eva's forearm this evening. He could have

reached out and confessed his love. Yet this evening something had stopped his touching Eva.

At home it was just a matter of sitting around on the sofa on his own, staring at the television, without turning it on. The vodka was drunk straight, as he was too comfortable where he was to prepare a Martini. At the front door there was rummaging around in a handbag for a minute for a key. The door was unlocked. The handbag was dropped by his wife in the hall and the bathroom entered immediately. There a long shower was taken, the washing machine was turned on and then the living room was entered in a bath robe. Normally too much detergent was put in by his wife, which was then sucked through the detergent compartment too quickly. That led to an excessive build-up of foam in the drum of the washing machine. Again and again his wife has been asked by him to pay attention to the markings on the detergent container. He was asked if he had been out. He answered that he had *not been to the cinema*. Why was a tie lying in the hall? Silence. The television was turned on.

The way to the old people's home was slowly covered. The home is only ten minutes away from the flat. Even on entering the overpowering smell of old people's home is recognisable. He is waved at by the receptionist and is pointed upstairs. That means that his father is in his room and not the cafeteria. The wide open door to the room is knocked on twice.

Yesterday things went exactly like today, just less painfully, he is told. The brought newspaper is unfolded. His father is never addressed as *Father* or *Dad*, just by his first name. He was laughed at by his schoolmates and friends and then later by his own wife for that. The pain apparently increased so much by the third day that the doctor had allowed his father to have his plaster changed every two days. The day after he was always exhausted, nodding off all the time, although according to the doctor he ought to be restless. There was no higher dosage. The only thing that could be taken in addition was the drops.

Yesterday his father had watched the opening ceremony of the Peking Olympic Games, he is informed. A spectacle, something of Hitler and David Copperfield. The newspaper is put away. It will be read again tomorrow. He has no patience for politics any more, let alone the paralytic boredom of so-called domestic politics. Democracy is the dictatorship of the mentally ill and weak in

the head, in his father's opinion. If the fate of the state depends on success with the majority, then such situations arise. That people should read about it, and preferably with interest, was just outrageous.

His father shakes/trembles so violently that his soup is spilled and an empty spoon reaches his mouth every time. The question is asked as to why his wife has not come this week either. Whether there had been a fight? The answer too is given by his father: of course there has been a fight, he can see. He has not been married twice to not notice something like that straight away.

There is a silence. It is now, his father says, a little after five and he has already eaten his evening meal. Long hours stretch out ahead of him before he can begin to pretend to sleep. The television will be on the whole time. In truth, the old people's home is a concentration camp for cripples and those no longer capable of living.

He would most like to be burnt alive and have his ashes scattered, the thought of burial was appalling, says his father. In fact he did not want to be buried anywhere, but to be left in peace in death. Suddenly the regular visits are felt to be a great injustice by his father. As an injustice and at the same time as deceitful. He is to greet his wife, not to greet her warmly, just to greet her. They are to take the path home via the park.

In the park a bench is sat on, a tree looked at and a deep breath taken. The second hand of the watch is followed. A deep breath is taken for ten seconds and breathed out for twenty seconds. Two breaths per minute. Perhaps he could also make do with one breath? He disappears slowly during the breathing. He is no longer noticed by anyone. A squirrel hops from a tree with bits of a nut in his mouth, runs to the bench he is sitting on, and stands just a few inches from him. What a degenerate animal, to trust the silence! He does not like animals; he does not want to eat or see them. At the main entrance to the park a woman is attacked by a dog.

At home his wife is just being phoned by his father. His father is told that there has not been a fight and there is no marital crisis.