

A Time for Jokes

Finn-Ole Heinrich, from the short story collection *Gestern war auch schon ein Tag*  
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Translation: Katy Derbyshire

‘What a feeling,’ she says. ‘It’s like everything’s new, it’s really funny.’ She means being out again, I think. On her own two legs, so to speak.

A bright morning just before the summer, a time for T-shirts, tops and skirts. The road’s empty this early, me watching Susan without looking at her. I drive too fast, for the first time since I took her to hospital, weeks ago when you couldn’t quite trust the spring. Fifty miles an hour through the village, taking the curves sharply. I can do that again now. At the corner of my eye, Susan looks in all directions, as if there were something new out there, not in here. Where’s her fear? That curiosity, that smile – so familiar. What’s new is that I don’t want to buy it. I drive too far to the left across the central strip, watching the white stripes as they disappear under the bonnet, a dull rhythm.

‘It’s all so exciting,’ she says and smiles in my direction. I drive slightly further right again, raise my head and smile back.

‘I’m so glad to be going home again,’ she says. Why so cheerful, I think. Do we have to be cheerful now?

I stop outside the front door and get out; Susan pushes her door open too. I walk around the car to help her out like an old-school gentleman. I pull her up out of her seat, put her left arm around my neck, and walk slowly as she hops hurriedly towards the house, our rhythm not yet practiced. We falter but don’t stumble. Her long brown curls bob to and fro; it’s just a few yards but it’s hard work, for both of us. She laughs, as if the way we’re limping were funny. Then she takes her arm away from my shoulder, supporting herself against the wall. I unlock the door. As I go to put her arm back around me she grins and nods towards the road. ‘Go on, you go and park the car, I can manage.’ She reaches for the door handle, the other hand on the doorframe. Cocky as a gymnast on the parallel bars, she swings herself one-legged into our flat. She wants to show me how much she can do, how confident she is.

Folded up like this, a wheelchair looks like a piece of fitness apparatus, I think. I lay it down on the pavement, the crutches next to it. I close the trunk, standing a moment longer. Leaving the equipment on the ground, unguarded, I drive the car into the backyard, where the neighbours’ children are hammering a football against the red brick walls. Who’s going to

steal crutches and a wheelchair?

We're lying on the sofa in the living room. The TV is on. Rain outside. I'd expected depression. Except I'm the melancholy one. She's slotted herself into our unfamiliar new life without a word of complaint. Her energy is incredible; she cracks jokes about her disability as if she'd got a bad haircut, not the slightest bit vain. Strange that it's me, the one whose body isn't maimed, who can't cope and needs her to cheer me up.

If the rod pierced her knee and lower leg like the doctor explained to me, the foot that's missing now must have been unharmed. What do they do with leftovers like that, I wonder.

Susan's draped over the sofa, her chin on her chest, her backside almost on the edge, her leg stretched out. She yawns, stretches, then she lifts her legs up in the air. She holds them up there above her head for a moment, it looks like gymnastics, and looks at her legs, or what's left of them. Her face goes red, she presses out: 'Strange, I don't miss anything at all.'

*I do*, I feel like answering, taking care that my lips don't mouth my thoughts. Susan lowers her one and a half legs slowly and deliberately, then puffs and pants exaggeratedly. That's what she does now. Whether she's reaching for the butter at the table or in pain – she's always trying to find something funny, always making a joke. I get up and go through to the kitchen. *I do*. Why can't I just say it: I don't believe you, how can anyone lose their leg and then say they don't miss it, don't miss anything at all? It's not there any more and it's so obvious that it's gone – why is she acting like this?

'D'you want a glass of water?' I call out. 'I'm fine,' she says, 'but can you come and change the channel, I can't be bothered to limp to the TV,' and gives a croaky laugh.

I don't go jogging in the morning any more. To start with it was out of tact. Now it's to provoke her. There's something we ought to talk about but we're not talking. We're acting like we always do, but it's not like it always was. I want her to ask: *Why don't you go jogging any more?* I want to answer: *Because I don't want to upset you*, and then I want to know what she says to that.

The wheelchair is leaning against the wardrobe in the hall, folded up, the crutches in among the umbrellas like a bouquet of mixed flowers in a vase. I've seen pictures of the

prosthesis they're making right now. A kind of oversized thimble that you put over the stump, below it a sickle-like foot made of carbon-fibre, shock-absorbing, a sports prosthesis. Of course she had to choose a sports prosthesis. As a signal: *now I'll show them*. Susan and her little manifestos.

I'm sitting up in bed, my back against the wall; she's lying between my legs, her warm lips playing on my limp cock. My head drops backwards, automatically. I moan to show her I like it; actually, I feel uneasy.

I've read about what they call negative fetishists, people who get sexually aroused by cripples and amputees. How can they? I'm just scared of hurting her. I can't help thinking about the bandaged end of her leg, that I might push up against it. How it'll feel when she spreads her legs and a stump thrashes in the air on the left. Would she tip over if she got down on all fours in front of me? Questions like that would make Susan laugh her croaky laugh. I wouldn't know how to join in the laughing; I keep them to myself.

I concentrate on Susan's mouth, her hands on my balls. I want to get hard, for her. I can't. How humiliating to disappoint her now, the maimed one, the disabled one. Her motions are the same as before, her scent, her voice; everything feels the same as before.

I concentrate, my eyes closed and looking hard for pictures, for situations and moments. But when I think of Susan I see her with two legs, me fucking her lying down and holding both her thighs in my hands or standing up from behind, her right leg straight, the left one bent over on the table.

I can't.

'What's the matter?' she asks.

I smile. 'Nothing, I'm just tired. I need to get some sleep, sorry.'

Sorry. I turn my back on her, the words dangling in the room. I pinch my eyes closed. I want this moment to pass. Her hand slides between my legs. She makes a grumbling, growling sound. That just makes it all worse. Why does it have to be her that starts it? It ought to be me. I ought to encourage her, to show her that I'm standing by her, that everything's fine.

I'm scared that what I'm feeling might be revulsion.

Her breath is hot, she purrs and squeaks and shows me how wet she is, she licks at me, she whispers, moans and sits on me and all I can think of is what's missing, what's not there, what's not working.

Your girlfriend's disabled, I think, fiddling with a paperclip. From my desk at the office I can see the windows of the fitness studio opposite. The tiny people start training early in the morning, scurrying to and fro like agitated ants. Behind me office noises, conversations in the distance. Of course I haven't taken any time off, haven't had a crisis, not at all. On the contrary: I'm safe here, there are clear-cut tasks for me here, clear-cut subjects, we talk about the latest orders and submissions. Of course my colleagues have asked after her, their lips pressed together, nodding encouragement. Soon they've all given their nod and then I'm back to my drafts. At lunchtime they leave me out of their jokes and remarks, maintaining normality and avoiding me. The kitchen quietens down when I walk in for a coffee, and in the looks that bounce off me I make out what they think of as understanding.

Who wants a disabled girlfriend? I wish I had a friend I could ask if he thinks what I think is wrong: No, nobody wants a disabled girlfriend. How can anybody want that? I want to tell someone about it who doesn't know instantly what to do. Is it alright to think about leaving her? Why is a missing bit of leg on the end of my girlfriend driving me almost crazy? And why is life so easy for her, as if it were just an item from the supermarket shelves that had disappeared and been replaced by another one?

Once I woke up in the middle of the night because she was whimpering and weeping in her sleep. I didn't wake her, didn't stroke her or kiss her, just watched her. It was good to see her crying again, to see her crying at last. I'd almost forgotten what Susan looks like when she cries.

The prosthesis is called *Sportfoot*. I don't touch it.

I liked it better when Susan moved around the flat on the office chair. The way she pushed herself off from one wall with her foot and whizzed across our newly laid flooring. I liked the grooves in the floor and the prints on the wall better than the tiny scratches the sickle leaves behind everywhere now. The way she rumbled over the thresholds on the chair didn't sound as harsh as the hard *tack-tack* of carbon-fibre on wood.

Her humming and gargling from the bathroom in the morning, the way she can't stop laughing and chatting away after her first coffee, all the press-cuttings she spreads around the flat just like she always did, her loud laughter on the telephone, the crumbs in the bed, the light she always leaves on in the bathroom, her dancing melodic tuts when she's waiting or annoyed, her stomach rumbling when she's hungry, louder than anyone else's I know. It's all there, again and still. The way she puts on make up as if she were going to a fancy-dress

party. That's how I fell in love, with her proud, amused clown's face, with the way she always exaggerates slightly, can see everything with a smile. And now.

There's nothing wrong with me. I can jerk off. I can force myself to think of Susan as I do it. I can even, if I'm aroused enough, insert pictures and scenes in which Susan has her stump instead of her leg. Maybe it's all a matter of time, of getting used to it.

I want to take down the picture of her in the bathroom. A photo where everything's just right: the light, the colours, the angle, especially her and her body. She's pushing the balcony door open with her backside, two beers in her hands, a dirty smile on her face with her mouth open. She's framed in yellow by the morning sun. Drinking on the balcony on a Sunday morning, people-watching, cushions under our elbows. A shirt, wool socks, boxer shorts and her smooth, soft buttermilk legs with their freckles. I want to take the photo down but I don't dare, and when I'm in the bathroom I try to find faces or patterns in the woodchip wallpaper instead.

Her body's not the same body I just had to have that balcony summer. I don't want the new one. I don't want to be someone who runs away from disability. I don't like those kind of people. I am that kind of person. I wish I could put that thought aside somewhere and forget about it. I can't. I write it down on a piece of paper and burn it. I can't believe I'm losing it like this.

Susan's sitting in the middle of the room that used to be our living room. I'm standing up, breathing loudly in my jogging clothes, sweaty and watching her. She's taken off her bandage and is rubbing cream into her stump, spreading lotion onto her body's youngest skin surface with rhythmic circular movements. Perfectly natural, lost in thought, logical. Do I want to be in this room, I ask myself, do I want this to be my life?

She looks at me, smiles: 'How's it going?'

'Alright,' I say.

I wonder if she doesn't feel there's less of her now. And when I ask her, weeks later, she gives me a long, earnest look, contorting her mouth slowly into a smile and touching the place where her knee ought to be, and says: 'True. I do a bit. I've lost nine pounds.' A time for jokes. I nod. I don't tell her she cries at night. By day, it seems, she's doing just fine.

She's squinting slightly. She looks across the marketplace as she drinks. Her fourth or fifth beer already. Her carbon-fibre knee moves to the beat wafting over to us in swathes from the sausage stall outside the church. Susan's grown into her unfamiliar body. I used to miss that body when I couldn't touch it for a few days. Now I appreciate the slightest distance. Skin on skin, our bodies grow warm like before, but all that remains of that warmth is the temperature. I imagine long walks in summer with shorts and prosthesis, her sickle-foot in the grass, her stump flailing and splashing in the water. I can't think light, laid-back thoughts any more.

All of a sudden she gets up, stirs my thoughts around with her eyes and kisses me; a long kiss. Then a fast *tack-tack*, shoe and carbon-fibre on the marketplace cobbles. She runs up to the tree in the middle of the square. I've never seen anyone climbing it, not since I've lived here. But now Susan, my disabled girlfriend. Her croaky laughter, her sickle on the bark, her hands on a branch, climbing up. Hanging head over heels from the tree like a child on a climbing frame. People look. I drink my beer; I'm not part of this.

*Finn-Ole Heinrich was born in north Germany in 1982, and is a writer and filmmaker. He started out on Germany's flourishing slam scene, before publishing his first short story collection Die Taschen voll Wasser in 2005. In 2007 came the novel Räuberhände, followed by the short stories Gestern war auch schon ein Tag in 2009, from which this story is taken. His writing focuses on characters on the margins of society, often looking at disability, ethnicity and friendship from an unusual perspective. He has won fifteen different stipends, grants and prizes for his films and writing since 2002.*