

THE FERRIS WHEEL

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Monika had moved into the Ferris wheel in the summer of 2003, after she had dropped out of law school for good. Her parents, wealthy entrepreneurs, had declared themselves willing to keep helping her out financially, and had not even been surprised by the extraordinarily high rent for the apartment in car no. 21 of the gigantic steel construction on the outskirts of the city.

Built in the late 90s by Austrian star architect Albert Zmal and accompanied by some media hype, the blue wheel, with its cross braces and bicycle-like spokes shimmering through the fog on this September morning, had gradually become the new emblem of the city. At the same time, however, the demand for the apartments declined steeply, which most likely had to do with the way you left your dwelling, which took some getting used to. Either you had to wait up to forty minutes until the car reached the ground, or you pressed the stop button and took one of the express elevators within the spokes to the central main tower, from which you could get outside by way of the stairs.

At the moment, Monika's apartment was at the top, the highest point of the wheel, several hundred yards above the ground. Monika was sitting at the kitchen table and warming her hand, which suffered from chronically bad circulation, on a steaming cup of tea. Darjeeling. She read the label on the little teabag for the third time already. A

friendly, almost tender word, like darling, only stretched apart in the middle by a foreign syllable.

Her day had begun dismally. First she had tried to air her rooms, but realized that someone had once again pressed the stop button, probably was even *holding it down*, which always happened when someone was moving, and that she was still hovering much too close to the noise and grime of the main street. So she had taken a bath and then painted her toenails, but that had not improved her mood.

She looked out the window. The gray exoskeleton of a vacant factory building on the other end of the city park could be seen clearly. Next to it an ugly white church steeple. Everything else was more or less hidden in the fog.

The highlight of the day lying ahead of her was the visit from a technician. Monika was expecting him to arrive at ten o'clock. Yesterday, when she had pressed the button, the wheel had only stopped for five minutes and had then automatically started moving again, and she had fallen down in the slowly tilting elevator. That was dangerous, that sort of thing shouldn't happen. She had immediately called the doorman in the main tower and explained everything to him. He had apologized repeatedly for this error in the controls and promised to send someone to her apartment the next day.

Monika looked at her watch. It was only seven. My God, she thought, what am I going to do for three hours? A walk was out of the question, because she didn't know how much time she would idle away. Of course, there was the cafeteria in the main tower, but there she would probably run into old Frau Schuster from car 7. She often sat there early in the morning, and Monika was in no mood for a conversation about houseplants, cake recipes and the literary success of the woman's grandchildren. No, she

would simply stay here in her apartment and try to kill time. She took another sip of tea. Still burning hot. Morosely, she went to the sink and added a dash of ice-cold tap water to the cup, stirred with the little silver spoon and took a sip. No difference. She put the cup back on the table and went out onto the balcony. Fresh air greeted her, foggy, oxygen-deficient city air. She folded her arms over her head and tried to take a deep breath, but then this gesture struck her as much too silly, and she went back into her apartment. She sat down on the small, velvet-red yoga cushion next to the heater and turned on the television. Scrolling through the digital guide with the remote control, she found a self-massage class. It began in seven minutes. Just the thing, thought Monika. She changed the channel to a hectic cooking show, then to MTV. A boy band was jumping around the stage. One of the young singers tore his shirt off his muscular upper body, and Monika shook her head. Then she switched back to the channel with the self-massage class and waited. Three minutes to go before the beginning of the show. She watched the end of a documentary on the life of insects. There was a shot of the multifaceted eye of a fruit fly, in which the planet earth was reflected hundreds of times.

The self-massage show was hosted by a woman. She was at most twenty years old and was wearing a skin-tight leotard. Huge tits, Monika noticed, giggling and holding her hand in front of her mouth. The first exercise consisted of a gentle massage of the neck muscles with the balls of the thumbs.

– This exercise is ideal if you work sitting down for a long time, thereby straining your neck, said the girl on the screen.

Monika tried to do the exercise exactly as it was demonstrated to her. The result was a slight dizziness.

– Make sure you don't press too hard, said the masseuse, as if she had guessed Monika's problem.

Monika reduced the pressure of her palms, but that didn't make it any better. The exercise seemed only to exacerbate her tension. She stopped and waited until the next exercise began. Soon she lost patience and switched back to the music channel. An interview was being conducted. Two smiling men on a black couch, holding their microphones as casually as if they were beer cans they wanted to pour over themselves. At first she couldn't tell who was the star and who the host, then she listened for a while and figured it out. Bored, she switched back to the self-massage.

When the show was over, she turned off the television and went to her CD rack. For a long time she let her forefinger wander over the band names, then she chose a CD she had had in mind anyhow. Suzanne Vega, Monika's absolute favorite singer. Many years ago she had seen her live and remembered to this day what she had been wearing on that wonderful occasion. She especially liked the a cappella version of "Tom's Diner." That song could brighten any morning, however gloomy, in Monika's view. Besides, it couldn't hurt to store up a catchy tune; you never knew what silly and tormenting songs would get stuck in your head in the course of an entire day.

The little simple melody was so elegant and graceful, it almost enticed you to write your own verses, yes, she always felt like singing, or at least thinking, all linguistic expressions of the day in that melody. And the lyrics were definitely the most beautiful poem about life in a city that Monika knew.

I am sitting in the morning

at the diner on the corner
I am waiting at the counter
for the man to pour the coffee

That triple specification at the beginning, temporal and spatial. *In, at, on*. It was a completely simple image, a zoom-in from above on a solitary person sitting in a café. That was true poetry, not the difficult cryptic nonsense that was constantly presented to you everywhere. She sang along softly until the end of the song:

I am thinking of your voice
and of the midnight picnic
once upon a time before the rain began
and I finish up my coffee
and it's time to catch the train

Monika played the song five times in a row, but no longer sang along (because the sound of her own voice always gave her a feeling of abandonment); instead, she merely moved her lips silently with the words. Then she listened to the whole album. Meanwhile she looked out the window. She thought about how great it would be if the window could be controlled by the remote too, just like the stereo system or the television. Then, at especially wonderful moments, you could simply press pause, or speed up or slow down the course of the day, as needed. Fast forward. How light-footed and uncomplicated a city always looked in time lapse: the headlights of the cars fuse into multicolored May

ribbons, which run seamlessly through the streets, the sun is a coin tossed from east to west, construction cranes do gymnastics over emerging buildings, clouds race across the sky like flocks of sheep fleeing a shepherd dog. Everything is fluid, everything merges. People can be seen for a hundredth of a second at most, flash through the picture like impurities on old film stock.

Monika was sitting there with her eyes closed when the doorbell rang. The sound ruptured her daydream and the urban poetry of Suzanne Vega's songs. She pressed stop on the remote control, stood up and went to the intercom. On the small screen she saw a man in overalls. That had to be the technician. He was much too early, it was just ten after nine. For a moment she hesitated, then she pushed on the stylized blue thumb under the screen, and the door opened.

– Good morning, said the technician. From the Treadmill Company, I'm here because of the control box...?

– Yes, please, said Monika, stepping aside.

She was about to show the technician the way, but he found it on his own. All the apartments in the Ferris wheel had the same floor plan, only some were the mirror image of hers. The man had already been in many apartments and knew immediately where to go. Monika followed him silently. As she passed a mirror, she briefly checked whether her hair had gotten messed up during the self-massage. No, everything was fine. She looked the same as always.

The technician had found the control box and began his inspection without a word.

– Yeah, said Monika. Maybe some error in the time controls...

– Mhm.

He removed the top cover. When that was done, he looked around as fast as lightning, smiled mechanically and said:

– You have a nice apartment here.

– Thank you, said Monika with a shrug.

The technician nodded emphatically, as if she had contradicted him. Then he turned back to the control box and murmured:

– Stupid, the thing with the stop button. Poorly programmed, if you ask me. But still. You're pretty lucky.

What exactly he meant by that was unclear to Monika. She didn't ask either. Instead, she said:

– I don't even want to think about what would have happened if I'd had to get out of my apartment really fast. I mean, *really* fast.

The technician had now removed the last screw and lifted the gossamer-thin, flesh-colored metal cover from the control module.

– Did you try pressing it again?

– What, the button?

– Yes.

– But that would have been pointless. It's not even possible. I mean, if the wheel suddenly starts turning again while I'm in the elevator, I fall down, no matter what I do, right? Besides, there's no button in the elevator, so what's with that question, did I press it again?

– Okay, okay, said the technician. I only wanted to make sure.

He wiped his face with his hand, then felt for a particular tool on his belt. Having failed to find it, he bent over and looked in his leather bag. He rummaged and rummaged, and finally he found it: a long silver thing, which Monika could not identify to save her life. A thing like that might be used in operating rooms or torture chambers, but here –

She cleared her throat and looked elsewhere. It was so burdensome to have strangers in your apartment.

It had taken the technician over an hour to repair the malfunctioning in the time controls of the module. And yet he could not rule out with certainty that the problem might recur at some point.

– Okay, said Monika.

– I cannot rule out with certainty that the problem might recur at some point, repeated the technician.

His facial expression was grim. He seemed to be angry with himself. Probably it did not happen often that he could only half-complete a job. Monika no longer wanted him to leave. She accompanied him to the apartment door and let him out.

She looked at her watch and decided that it was not too early for a proper lunch. From one of her four shelves devoted solely to the subject of food, she took a cookbook specializing in Asian dishes. She found something that looked pretty good and began to read through the recipe. Half of the ingredients listed meant nothing to her or she didn't have them at home. Disappointed, she shut the book and put it back on the shelf.

In the kitchen it was completely silent.

Monika clapped her hands a few times. Since that didn't make any change worth mentioning, she began to sing. Her voice was definitely similar to that of Suzanne Vega, not very, but a little bit. Softly singing, she got dressed, chose the lightest of her three autumn coats, put on her favorite scarf and pressed the stop button. On cue, an extremely gentle jolt passed through the apartment. If you didn't know, you could easily think it was only in your head.

She left her apartment and took the elevator to the main tower. The café with the unimaginative name Wheel Bar was empty, despite the fact that it was lunchtime. No trace of Frau Schuster, thank God. Monika sat down at a table near the door to the kitchen. That way it would not take the waitress so long to bring her the order.

– Hello, Frau Stilling, said the waitress. It's nice to see you here often.

Monika suddenly got hot. She had forgotten to take off the scarf.

– Oh, yeah, she said, red-faced. The coffee here is really good.

– May I bring you one?

– No, I'd like to eat something. So just a small beer and...

Though she had known the menu by heart for a long time, she opened it and studied the selection of snacks. *For a quick bite*, was written there.

– A grilled cheese, she decided. With ketchup.

– Sure, the waitress said with a beautiful smile.

Monika watched her as she walked away. The outfit she had to wear to work was somewhat reminiscent of a tennis uniform. Over the young woman's small, compact behind the material stretched and produced a single crease. Monika closed her eyes for a moment and thought. Then she shook her head and opened them again. She touched the

cool surface of the table, felt crumbs and greasy spots, which came from previous customers. Perhaps even from herself. When she ate lunch in the Wheel Bar, she almost always sat here. It was her regular table. My regular table, thought Monika, repeating it a few times until the words began to take on a strangely bleak meaning. After five minutes, the waitress brought her order. Monika avoided direct eye contact, but watched her walk away again. The crease was still there and winked with each step.

She ate slowly and deliberately. Sometimes she found herself gobbling down her food much too fast, and then she felt sick. The grilled cheese was perfect. At once crisp and juicy. The cheese was only just beginning to melt.

After she was done eating, she remained sitting for another hour and looked out the window. From here the fog looked less dense. Perhaps that was because she had not washed the windows in her apartment for a long time. Or the weather had simply changed. One or the other. The young waitress came repeatedly and asked whether she could bring anything else, and each time Monika thought about it and flipped dutifully through the menu, only to shake her head and murmur:

– Thanks.

The waitress never shed her friendly smile. Monika sat there and watched her. The afternoon began. Eventually she decided that she had been sitting here long enough, and paid. She did not forget to give the waitress a proper tip. Then she returned to her apartment. When she took off the scarf – why had she put on a scarf in the first place, when she had not gone outside at all? – tears suddenly came to her eyes. She could not help thinking about the young waitress. How old could she be? Sixteen, seventeen.

She felt like taking a bath, for the second time that day, but this time she did not fill up the tub all the way. From her dresser she took her – but the name of this device sounded so silly, like a hero in a stupid comic for children. She felt embarrassed every time she read or heard it. But it was necessary. Otherwise she would burst. With desire, with – Just a short session in the bathtub, she told herself, then she would feel better. She still needed lubricant to insert the black thing into herself. Like a teenager, she thought. In general it was very hard for her to have an orgasm when something was inside of her. From outside it was easier and faster, but the result was never that intense. She sat in the warm water, which was only up to her bellybutton, and pushed a rolled-up towel under her neck. Since the water could not reach part of the tub, she flinched from the cold surface as she leaned back, but after a few minutes she had gotten used to it, and everything went quite easily. She thought about the young waitress. She imagined her wet, as if she had walked through the rain. The uniform, as if of its own accord, peeled off her small, supple, spirited body. My God, all the things you could do with a body like that.

The first orgasm announced itself very quickly. Before it was there, she had decided to satisfy herself three times, but then she came so intensely that she began to cry again, and she could forget about the other two times. She howled like a small child and slapped the bathwater with the flat of her hand, spraying it everywhere. She would have liked best to get up and go down naked and wet to the Wheel Bar, to kneel down there in front of the girl and ask for her hand.

Gradually she calmed down.

With slightly trembling legs she climbed out of the tub, bent down (so that a pleasant aftershock passed through her lower body) and drained the water. With a soft towel she dried herself off, especially carefully between the legs. She was very sensitive. Easily hurt. A breath of wind could kill her.

The massage device she put back in the dresser, placing three layers of colorful underwear over it. Then she sat down in front of the television and changed the channels indiscriminately. In a sitcom, laughing people sat in a coffee shop and were served by a very old, ugly waitress. Monika had to smile, and contentedly wrapped her arms around herself.

Just as she was starting to follow the plot of the sitcom, the telephone rang.

– Hello?

– Hello, Moni. It's Elke. I just wanted to ask whether it's all right if I drop by tomorrow with the boys. You remember, we spoke about it a few weeks ago.

Elke was her sister. She was a single mother of two sons. Monika recalled Elke mentioning once on the telephone that her two boys would like to see the Ferris wheel from inside. Monika hadn't had time just then, and Elke had called at most three or four times since. They hadn't seen each other for a long time.

– Okay, said Monika, amazed at how easy it was to say that. What time tomorrow?

– Oh, I thought in the afternoon. Around three?

– Great. So how are you doing?

– Actually the same as always. It's never quiet for a second here, my two little performance artists make sure of that.

The two sisters exchanged a few more words and said goodbye. The conversation had not been especially profound, but that was quite all right, in Monika's view. She returned to the sitcom, but the commercials had begun, so she changed the channel.

She watched television until evening. At one point, she warmed up a frozen pizza for herself. It tasted disgusting, much too many mushrooms. She threw half of it away.

The bitter mushroom taste brought back her bleak thoughts, and she searched for a channel on which people were talking. She needed voices that always sounded the same, or else –

She searched and searched and finally found a panel discussion on modern music. She listened and concentrated, trying to understand somewhat what they were talking about.

– The problem of the series in itself is far from obsolete, let alone solved, said one of the men.

Monika didn't understand anything. Nonetheless, she listened until the end of the discussion, then went to bed. It was already quite late, she hadn't noticed the time. That happened often when she sat in front of the television. The hours passed as if they were being dissolved in hot water. While brushing her teeth Monika briefly had to think again about the girl in the café, and the movements of her toothbrush slowed down slightly. She gargled, spit the foamy water into the sink and watched it disappear down the drain.

The bed was cold, the pillow uncomfortable and misshapen. As if she were lying on a fully inflated balloon. Her chin was pressed against her chest, and despite the fact that she was lying down she felt like she was hanging her head. So she had to sit back up and shake the pillow and even beat it a little until it was soft enough. Then she lay still for

a long time on her side and listened to herself breathe. Her left nostril was slightly louder than the right.

They're only coming over, she thought, because I live here. They don't want to visit me at all. For them I'm only a means to an end. They want to see the Ferris wheel, ride the express elevator, wander on the stairs in the main tower, have something to eat in the café. Order something from the waitress. Behave like young monkeys, soil everything and scatter food on the floor. And I, I have to play the friendly aunt the whole time, have to show them my apartment, go out onto the balcony with them and explain to them how often I sit downstairs in the café and that it is one of the few constants in my life.

And then she suddenly saw the whole thing clearly: The visit from her younger sister and her children would be the highlight of the day tomorrow. Just as the visit from the technician had been the highlight of the day today. Highlight, the word expanded, became sticky and choked off her air supply. Monika felt afraid. She switched on the floor lamp next to her bed and looked at the clock. One-thirty. It was actually already too late, but she had to try anyway: With ice-cold fingers she dialed her sister's number, let it ring once and then hung up with pounding heart. Like a little kid, she chided herself. Of course, the telephone rang shortly thereafter. She picked up:

- I misdialed, Elke. Sorry.
- It's okay, said the drowsy voice of her sister.
- Did I wake you?
- What?
- Did I wake you up?
- Yes. I think so. You woke me up.

– I'm sorry.

– You woke me up. I was just dreaming...

The voice broke off. Something rustled. Perhaps Elke had sat up in bed. What might her bedroom look like? Monika had never been there.

– Sorry, she said, that was really stupid of me.

– I was...ah, wait a second...Okay, that's better. I was dreaming, you know what I was dreaming? Something really funny. I dreamt that it was raining fans. Rotor blades and such. Little saw blades...

– I'm such an idiot, said Monika, I shouldn't have woken you up. But you know, now that you're already awake, can I...could you maybe...possibly do me two favors?

– Hm?

The muffled rustling of sheets. Slow breathing, much too close to the receiver.

– First of all: Could you maybe come over with the children some other time?

Silence. The breathing became somewhat softer.

– You didn't misdial at all, Moni, her sister stated quite matter-of-factly. Go ahead and say it. I know you, after all.

Monika bit her lip and thought: I'm biting my lip. The gesture was dumb and unoriginal. I definitely watch too much television.

– And second, she went on hesitantly, please don't be mad because of...you know.

– Why didn't you say that before? What's different now at...my God, one-thirty?

Now it's nighttime, came to Monika's mind. Aside from that there was actually no difference. She had thought about it a little, that was all. She preferred to be alone. At least tomorrow. At least for the next few days or weeks.

– Moni, what’s going on? Elke asked after a while. Talk to me. You woke me up, so talk to me.

– I don’t know what to say, Monika confessed. All I can say is that I’m sorry. It’s only because of...Today a technician was here in my apartment.

– There in the Ferris wheel, Elke said with a somewhat sleepy voice.

– Yes, and he...he had to come, you know, because there was a problem with the control mechanics or something. It was pretty dangerous. What would have happened if I’d had to escape from the apartment really fast? Do you understand?

– No, I have no idea what you’re talking about, Moni. But if it helps you: Yes, I understand.

– Thanks.

– No problem. But I’m really tired, maybe tomorrow we can...?

– I didn’t want to wake you up. It’s just...maybe another time. Please.

– You really mean it, don’t you? said Elke. You don’t want me to come over with the boys.

– No, it’s not that. It’s about tomorrow. And the next few days. I’d prefer to be alone.

– But why? You’re always alone anyway.

– No, I’m not.

– Yeah, I know, the technician who was there today.

– That’s not what I mean.

– Did you make him up?

– No. Something really was broken.

– The control mechanics, yeah, you mentioned that.

Silence. The two sisters breathed into the receivers.

– Don't be mad at me, okay? Monika said finally. Remember favor number two.

– What?

– Favor number two, which I asked you to...oh, forget it.

– I'm not mad at you, I just don't understand you. The boys have been talking about nothing else for two weeks. They want to ride around once in a complete circle. And they want to see how it is on the balcony, whether you can feel the wind from the motion and such.

– No, Monika said softly and earnestly.

– No what?

– No, you don't feel it. The wheel moves much too slowly for that.

– Moni, what's actually going on with you? Why are you calling me so late and telling me not to come visit? Is something wrong, do you need help?

Monika thought about it.

– If I needed help, I'd probably let you come, wouldn't I?

– I doubt just that. There's something you're not telling me. Have you...have you moved?

Monika had to laugh. She had not expected that. But it was such an elegant, crystal-clear solution to the problem – at least from her sister's point-of-view – that it almost cheered her up.

– No, she said with a laugh, no, I haven't moved. I'm still up here, that is, at the moment, I think, I'm pretty far down. But then it goes back up again, all day, all night. Up and down.

– Up and down, repeated her sister. Still, there's something you're not telling me.
– No, there's not. I was just lying awake for a long time and thinking. That's all.
– Hm. The boys will definitely be disappointed. It's quite possible that they won't want to visit you at all anymore. Because they're insulted. You know how children can be.

Monika felt tears gathering in her eyes.

– Please, Elke, don't do that.
– What?
– The guilt trip. I've just been going through withdrawal from guilt. I quit cold turkey, so to speak.

She couldn't help thinking of a plucked turkey lying on a silver platter with its fat thighs pointing upward. Elke yawned close to the receiver, then she said:

– But it would be a lie if I told you that the two of them wouldn't be disappointed. They were so looking forward to it. And to be honest, so was I. How long has it been since we last saw each other?

Monika had to think about it.

– You see? said Elke, you have to think about it. Three. It's been three years. Last week at some point it was, to the day, exactly...

– Three years, Monika completed the sentence.

– So? What’s the problem? Three years, that’s a long time. And tomorrow those three years could be over.

Monika bit her lip again. This time she didn’t notice it.

– But it’s not about that at all. It’s not that I wouldn’t like to see you. You don’t have to calculate for me how long we haven’t seen each other.

– Yes, I do, because you don’t even know it anymore.

– My memory was never – , Monika began.

But then she did not go on. A very, very gentle jolt passed through her apartment. Someone had pressed the stop button, and in the middle of the night.

– I think I’m going to lie back down, she said. Sorry again that I woke you. I somehow have no sense of time.

– Wait, said Elke. Do you really not want us to come tomorrow? I mean, are you sure?

Monika thought about what she could still say. It seemed as if she had tried out all available sentences. There was none left that would have been appropriate.

– Don’t be mad, she said finally.

Elke didn’t reply. Then she cleared her throat and said:

– All right. If that’s what you want. Then I’ll pass that on. To the boys.

– Okay.

– Okay.

– Good night, Elke. I hope you can fall asleep again, after I –

– Don’t worry about me, Elke said, and hung up.

Now Monika was alone again. She stretched out in bed and listened to the wind blowing through the night outside. Like a drunk man on the run. No, that wasn't right. Basically, the wind could not be compared to anything. Especially not when you were at its mercy, somewhere between heaven and earth in a slightly rocking car containing four overpriced apartments. And one of these apartments contained her, Monika. She lay in bed, in a pitch-dark room.

Down in the Wheel Bar the lights had definitely gone out a long time ago. She imagined what it would be like to break in there at this hour. What would she find? An abandoned restaurant with tables, on which the chairs practiced headstands. And in a closet the lifeless uniforms of the waitresses. The little nametags. *Tina*.

Monika forcibly dragged her thoughts away from the name; it was difficult, like a pack of dogs attached to a single leash. But she managed it. She strapped a rocket to her back and flew over the city. The black night sky made her invisible. Down below passed the many thousand buildings that made up the city. And all of them were filled to bursting with people. No space was wasted.

The wheel continued to stand still, and Monika wrapped herself tighter in her blanket. At that moment, strangers were riding the express elevators to their apartments.

Monika rolled onto her side and stared into the darkness. I won't close my eyes, she thought, until we start turning again. But she knew that the gears of the Ferris wheel always got going again with extreme restraint and gentleness, so that you scarcely noticed it. There was nothing wrong with that in itself. The only problem was that no one deserved to be treated so tenderly. No one. At least not tonight, thought Monika. At least

not by a gigantic inanimate metal structure on the outskirts of a medium-sized industrial city.