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Sample translated from the German by Lucy Jones

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You get used to the noise of the hydraulic presses while you're googling the top 11 most unusual UFO sightings, Karin says. You get used to the whining of the blenders while you're writing a feature on the 23 strongest Pokémons. You also get used to the hissing of the SodaStreams and the agonising squeals of the juicers every time Marta feeds them another Nokia 3310. Karin waves at Marta. Marta waves back with a handful of Nokias. I wave too.

Karin's voice has a warmth that's totally out of place in this cavernous, sparse office space. She looks after me as attentively as if we've known each other for years. She introduces me to the female colleagues from the listicle department and the male colleagues from the video and meme departments. You get used to the overtime, she says, and the constant groans, laughter and hysterical shrieks that echo through the gigantic office complex day and night. You get used to the regular earthquakes, draughtiness, potholes and burst pipes. And to the terrible coffee machines with their forty cent discount for employees, and the awful food in the cafeteria. Number 7 is a tuna fish dish that'll make you cry. You get used to the monotony, the numbness, and the fact that your work deteriorates over time into a mindless chain of routine actions: googling *tourist sights India*, Ctrl C, Ctrl V, structuring the text, giving it a title: *The top 14 most underrated Indian tourist destinations – no one knows number 7 HOW COME???!*, send, next article, googling *Hollywood heroine*, Ctrl C, Ctrl V, structuring the text, giving it a title: *The 13 most drug-addicted film stars – number 7 is completely deranged LOL*, send, next article. You get used to all this without any problem as long as the racket in the background continues, as long as the blenders are still blending, and the juicers are still juicing. But what you never get used to is the sudden, unexpected hush that descends when someone quits, a person who can't take it anymore, and the whole office comes to a standstill for a moment until the situation has been defused.

You should come to the work social later on, says Karin and plops down into her swivel chair after allocating me the desk on her left. Karin's desk is littered with postcards that she's picked up in the toilets of bars and rewritten with a marker pen. One of them now simply states: *Don't live your life*, another, *Everyone knew it was impossible until a fool came along who didn't and DIED*. Hundreds of browser tabs are open and piled on top of each other on Karin's laptop, clips from various American late-night shows, Twitter, Wikipedia pages and thesauruses. Karin picks up a fidget spinner in her left hand and gives it a flick, saying, I'll just quickly finish my article and then we can go for a drink. I nod. Marta tosses another Nokia into the blender.

Are you on Twitter? Karin asks when we're standing in the elevator. I nod. Tight spaces always make me nervous but this is even worse because the elevator is an old miner's cage, patched up a few years ago with some kind of metal casing to make it look like a normal elevator. The entire building is directly over a mine.

This used to be a colliery, says Karin. Then a factory for car parts and now a content farm. The building is directly above the old mining shaft. The tunnels branch out from this central one-and-a-half-kilometre-deep shaft like ribs from a spine, and coal was only excavated from a safe distance of several hundred metres inside the tunnels. The elevator is regularly maintained and repaired, of course, but it's still the same elevator that the miners used to descend into the pit. Only now it goes two floors higher into the new storeys that have been added. Do you happen to follow Jen Statsky? Karin asks. I shake my head. The elevator is dimly lit. A few of the ceiling lights are not working. I look at the dashboard showing the different floors. Do you follow Megan Amram? Karin asks. I shake my head again. The building doesn't have as many floors as it seems when you look at it, says Karin as we rattle our way up. She points to the fifteen buttons on the elevator wall, two-thirds of which are not labelled. It's a relic from the past, she says. The floors below the second storey aren't in use. I nod and exhale, just as the doors finally open on the ground floor. Do you follow Bryan Donaldson? asks Karin.

The old Stauberhaus, where the brewery of the same name used to be, is in bad shape. Partly underground and almost deserted, it's right next to the *Smile Smile* office complex. As I listen to Karin,

Cory, Marta and Yusuf talking, I realize that most people here stumble into this sector in a fairly similar way. They're all young, ambitious newbies with creative talent who have never managed to make a living from what they love doing. Cory – probably two or three years younger than Karin and me – still sends applications to various film schools with short features on surveillance capitalism, body dysphoria and Russian cosmism. Yusuf acts like he's just doing a temp job alongside his studies, except that he hasn't been accepted anywhere yet. However, he regularly sends letters of motivation together with his portfolio to apply for courses and residencies for photographers and visual artists abroad. Marta, on the other hand, is slowly approaching forty and is probably the only person in the firm who seems completely fulfilled by her work in the video department. She's just happy not to be working in a troll farm anymore.

Karin and I are about the same age, an age when it's difficult to justify why you haven't got a degree yet. Ever since she was little, Karin's been scribbling parodies of political events and news in exercise books. She grew up with Stephen Colbert and Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, John Oliver, Amber Ruffin, Hasan Minhaj and Seth Meyers. Karin has absorbed so many hours of political satire that the talk-show format is indelibly engraved on her mind. It takes her no effort to imitate; it comes as naturally to her as breathing. From a young age, she talked in soundbites and pop-cultural references. She wrote acerbic satires of American politics, society and culture without having ever set foot in the country or having met a single American. After school, she began a training course as an English and Ethics teacher, more as an alibi to keep her parents happy. Because she financed her studies herself, she also wrote satirical pieces for a local newspaper on the side. Soon, however, lack of money and time forced her to write texts for company events, book reviews and descriptions of IKEA furniture. Several times she tried to get into writing for the late-night shows she used to watch, but without contacts, forget it, she says, as she knocks back her beer and orders another round in the gloomy cellar where the air is smoky and stuffy, the wooden floor is sticky and the sixty-year-old DJ is wearing a Fritz Hoff T-shirt. The music he's playing sounds like regular pop from the Noughties but sometimes there are weird glitches and bugs, or the track switches mid-song to something totally different. Karin says she hasn't given up completely yet. She at least hopes she might get an internship on one of the late shows. Sometimes they take on people they've discovered on Twitter, she says, and

points to her mobile. That's how Jen Statsky got her job with Jimmy Fallon. She'd applied for a job there and was turned down, but as soon as her gags took off on Twitter, they offered her a contract. That's how Megan Amram got her job on *The Simpsons* too. And Bryan Donaldson was just a regular IT guy at an insurance company in Illinois until his Twitter account blew up and now he works as a gag writer for the *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. Donaldson just packed his case and moved to New York even though he'd never been there before. Can you imagine? The gags he used to fire into the ether now feature on prime-time TV.

She's not kidding herself, Karin says. Content writing for *Smile Smile* is just a stopgap like all her other jobs. By now she's done pretty much every hack job going. Lastly, she even did a year's stint at a tabloid, first as a proofreader, then as a reporter, churning out one-hundred-word articles about celebrity suicides, celebrity break-ups and celebrity drug abuse that were printed alongside ads for laxatives and electric blankets. You get used to anything, Karin says. You get used to being screamed at by coked-up bosses. You get used to reports of femicides focusing on the murdered woman, and if possible featuring a photomontage of her corpse or at least a description of what she was wearing at the time of her death. You get used to the phrases *sex murder*, *family drama*, *child killer* and *incest grandpa*.

The waiter puts fresh drinks on the wobbly table and Karin carries on talking in a slightly lower tone of voice. She had a burn-out on her twenty-fifth birthday, she says. A proper burn-out. With the words *too ugly*, her boss had thrown back at her a text about an eighteen-year-old who'd lost her entire family during a paragliding accident. After she'd tried for a full forty minutes to photoshop the slightly overweight survivors, she'd lost it completely. A full screaming meltdown, the shivers, the top 10 funniest panic attacks, hospitalised, anti-depressives and a couple of weeks in a closed ward on suicide watch until she was finally released.

She then tried a few times to get into the established satirical magazines but the three or four articles she'd previously knocked out in a day now took her one or two weeks to write. That's when most people give up, Karin says, finish their Bachelor in Theatre Studies, take on a job in a franchise bookstore or become a chef at Vapiano. But those who can't bring themselves to switch careers, either

because they're too proud or frustrated and insist on working as a creative or a journalist, or at the very least as a writer, all end up writing listicles for *Smile Smile*.

A listicle has the same relation to serious journalism as a McDonald's chef to a gourmet chef. It's assembly-line work, just with worse back problems. It's like painting by numbers without any creative value, but despite this, Karin says, there's that click, that satisfying locking into position of a tiny, hidden gearwheel each time she finishes one of those awful lists, even if it is just the top 16 least popular Brendan Fraser films.

The assembly-line work has a liberating effect, Karin says. She's resigned herself to the fact that she'll never be a real comedy writer. Since she started working at *Smile Smile*, she can joke again in her free time like she used to do. On Twitter, for example, she regularly posts stuff that she'd have flogged to online magazines a few years ago. She doesn't feel any pressure to be funny on call anymore which means that she can finally laugh again. Bryan Donaldson now follows me, Karin says, taking a sip of her beer. Bryan Donaldson even favourited one of my Tweets. And he's in New York after all. Who knows, maybe something will come of it.

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A listicle is generally a list of facts or tips, mostly with a clickbait title following the format: *The [insert number + adjective + noun] that will help you learn something useful! – Number 7 is totally awesome! The 7 best dwarfs that live over an awesome number of hills and far away! Number 7's name is hilarious!*

Because a listicle usually has ten items, you mention number seven in the title as something special so that the reader practically has to comb through the whole text to get to the promised number. And the number seven has a magical glow that gives the article that certain something.

Karin is the best listicle writer. While I plod on with my articles in the first weeks, she sits next to me on her swivel chair, legs tucked under, a fidget spinner in her left hand, a cup of coffee on her cluttered desk in front of her, knocking out her texts with her right hand without looking at the

keyboard. A classic Karin trick, for example, is to mix up the order of the list. She sometimes turns everything upside down, shuffles things around or repeats the same number several times, just so that people share her article out of sheer confusion. Sometimes she'll write things like *The best 3 ways of faking your death – number 7 isn't on this list!* One of her specialities is deliberately peppering her texts with mistakes, contradictions or surreal moments in a way that has revolutionized the entire industry.

11 fantastic tips to get a grip on your life!

Number 7 will come as a surprise!

1. Tidy your room! A tidy state of mind lives in a tidy flat!
2. Leave enough room for creative mess! Leave your work tools lying around your living room – that's how Einstein worked!
3. Write a manifesto, distribute it among your students, instigate a bloody revolution, bring back the guillotine, change your name and emigrate to Belize before the shit hits the fan.
Fun, fun, fun!
4. Finish your 11-point listicle at point number 4 lol, there isn't a number 7! Surprise!

Karin says that this is her way of sending out a philosophy to the world that there's no definitive truth, that there are at least two sides to everything, and that there are no simple solutions to the complex problems of our crazy times. Admittedly, that's bold talk for someone who's written forty to fifty lists of the best Third-Gen Digimon Fusions but if you can't inject your work with a modicum of meaning, you're going to lose your mind sooner or later. As Gandhi once said, monotony leads to contemplation and contemplation leads to superstition and superstition leads to madness. Gandhi said no such thing of course, but it's not like people can check on these things anyway. 96 per cent of all inspirational quotes on the Internet are made up. At least that's what it says on one of Karin's lists.

The only common theme running through all her lists is the reference to number 7 which will shock, surprise or make you cry. In any other firm, Karin would have climbed the career ladder in no time with her talent. But at *Smile Smile*, there are no ladders to climb.

Smile Smile Lists together with *Smile Smile Fun Videos* and *Smile Smile Memes* belongs to *Smile Smile Inc.*, a firm founded in 2009 with headquarters in Larnaca, Cyprus. There's probably a Russian parent company behind it and from then on, the facts get a little murky. The firm has locations throughout Europe. *Smile Smile* owns dozens of listicle outlets and online newspapers and it has just as many Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok accounts. It also runs four of the ten most successful YouTube channels, mostly featuring Do-It-Yourself recipes and handiwork instructions, fetish, ASMR, lo-fi hip-hop beats to study or relax to and the destruction of expensive private property. The offices are organised chaotically so that the listicle writers often sit in the same rooms as the video and meme departments without anyone knowing what anyone else is responsible for.

While I'm summarizing the top 15 most fatal aeroplane crashes, Marta is behind me filming herself brushing her teeth with glue. While I list the top 7 most violent Iranian fairy tales, Yusuf takes a close-up of himself shaving his head while making indecent groaning noises. Cory films a watermelon in the microwave, an orange in the microwave, a Nokia 3310 in the microwave, an iPad in the microwave, and a smaller microwave in a larger microwave. Marta films a hydraulic press crushing a microwave, a hydraulic press crushing a champagne bottle, a hydraulic press crushing a Nokia 3310 and a hydraulic press crushing another hydraulic press. In the meantime *Smile Smile* destroys so many Nokia 3310s that Nokia has decided to produce a new edition that can be shipped straight to the destruction site.

The firm makes 500 new videos a week, 2,000 listicles, and just as many memes on various YouTube channels, websites and social media accounts. I write my listicles, my salary is wired to my account from an obscure Eastern European bank and I don't ask any questions. I find my feet. I accept my fate.

I go through the development stages of an employee at *Smile Smile*, as Marta calls them. Everyone here goes through the same thing. In the first one to two months, people sink into depression

about having given up their high-flying dreams of being a creative. Then at some point, they get a surprising energy boost when they realize they can find some kind of self-fulfilment in even the dumbest, most tedious jobs. For some, this meaninglessness can lead to a nihilistic rejection of life, or a kind of religious zeal, as is the case with Karin.

I watch her decline in real time as I sit next to her at work. Firstly, her topics become increasingly radical and weird. *The best 18 alibis in a hit-and-run. 9 methods to dispose of a dead body. The 12 best Jeff Goldblums – number 7 is Jeff Goldblum!* After a while, I notice a bigger change in her personality. Karin thinks that she can change the world with her lists, that she can send subliminal messages to the outside world that will burrow into people's subconscious and lead to lasting social change. She starts inserting hidden messages into her lists – in the first letter of each word, the first words of each sentence, or sometimes, less subtly, in direct calls for violence and revolution. The only reason Karin is not yet under surveillance by the intelligence services is that none of her texts has ever made it to the outside world.

Smile Smile articles aren't published directly but undergo a series of edits and corrections. During the first stage, they are sent to the in-house graphic design office where an entertaining stock photograph is inserted into each point on the list. The illustrated articles are then forwarded to the PR department where content is checked for mass suitability, target audience relevance and shareability, before being sent to an internal inspection facility where legally problematic content is filtered out or added, according to what's required. In a final editing step undertaken by a different graphic design office, the photos are replaced to match the new text. The final product has nothing in common with the original text whatsoever. In reality, not a single word written by Karin, myself, or anyone else in our department is published.

In my case, it took about half a year to accept this meaninglessness. Karin, on the other hand, doesn't seem to want to accept this even after nearly three years. First, she convinces herself that the editors don't cut that much text, and leave the essence of what she wrote intact, although the phrasing might be different. When she realizes that absolutely nothing remains of her original texts, she explains to me that she can still influence the work of the censors and graphic artists with her choice of

words, and thus indirectly, in homoeopathic doses as it were, influence society. Her filtered-out words leave traces of memory in the texts, which would look different if she hadn't written what she'd written. A tiny piece of her work is still contained in the end product and her genius and passion still make it out into the world. She remains in her published *Smile Smile* article as the gap between the letters, as the essence or soul of the text, as number 7.

But she can't keep up this fantasy for long. What drives her crazy is the fact that she has been paid for years to write words only to have others delete them. We earn our living by actively working past the product and into a void. None of the lists she proudly shows me every day and I test-read for her – all those jokes and stories – none of it survives. Her voice grows colder. Her mood becomes more and more placid.

On the day Karin loses her mind, she has been writing non-stop for nine hours without looking up from her screen a single time. She only occasionally lifts her right hand from the keyboard to flick the fidget spinner in her left. She has written almost 500 lists, some of them even really good. I ask her several times if she'd like to go for a coffee but she doesn't react. She has just written and sent an article about the 24 most coked-up Nicholas Cage performances, knowing that the actor will be switched for a more suitable one, as well as the drug and, in the end, the whole topic. She gets up from her swivel chair, walks calmly through the office to the video department towards a hydraulic press in which Marta has just placed a microwave and jams her right hand between the aluminium casing of the microwave and the relentlessly descending stainless steel press, which passes through her as if she simply weren't there.

That's the moment: everything in the office comes to a standstill for as long as it takes to defuse the situation and people can go about their normal business again. It's the same length of time that the fidget spinner in her intact left hand takes to stop spinning and return to its starting position with a gentle click.

In the following days, the video of Karin's accident goes viral and sets off an international debate on YouTube's ethical guidelines that tails off after a week. It is the firm's fourth most successful video to date, right after *Diana and Paul bake Valentine's hearts with mustard PRANK*.

When I visit Karin in the hospital a few weeks later, she seems stable all things considered. On a small night table, there are flowers, a pack of nicotine chewing gum, and a card signed by all her colleagues. I add a plastic cactus to the collection because I couldn't think of anything else to bring. Karin has taught herself to write with her left hand and the walls of her room are covered with scrawly, crooked lists that she insists need editing and deleting. The hospital cleaning staff does act the part of editors. When they come in to clean, she always asks politely whether the lists should be longer or shorter, need more or fewer pop-culture references or shock factors, and how they have been received by the general public. Now and again she writes confused strings of thoughts on Twitter. Her mobile phone has not been confiscated. She seems to have a good relationship with the staff and her fellow patients. Once a week she reads the entire ward some of her texts and gets positive feedback. All in all, she doesn't seem to be doing too badly. Except that when I tell her how much I and the whole team miss her in the office and at the work socials, her face falls and she won't say a word to me until I leave. When I'm standing by the door I hear her voice behind me one last time.

Did number 7 make you cry?

I think for a moment.

Yes, number 7 always makes me cry.

Nice, says Karin. Let me know if I should change something.