

Translated excerpt

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Hey guten Morgen, wie geht es dir?

Klett-Cotta Verlag, Stuttgart 2024
ISBN 978-3-608-98826-0

pp. 7-31

Martina Hefter
Hey, Good Morning, How Are You?

Translated by Linda Gaus



ZERO

She hadn't slept in a while.

And when she slept, she dreamed of stupid things, like hundreds of little dogs that invaded her apartment, yapping angrily. Soon, she herself became an animal; she stopped cleaning the apartment. The animal was wide awake at night, but not especially active.

She lay on a yoga mat on the floor, a few scattered abdominal exercises, that was all. Actually, she spent most of the time staring at the ceiling. It was decorated with a stucco relief, several concentric circles with blossoms floating on them. They had been painted over so often that they looked like planets. They circled in their orbits, day and night. It was very nice to look at the planets and not much else.

Sometimes, Juno heard the motor of the hospital bed in Jupiter's room humming, then she knew he was still awake, he was adjusting the head. He had to know if she went to the bathroom or into the kitchen to get a glass of water. But Jupiter never asked questions, and how could she have answered him anyway?

I can't sleep because everything's too much for me. Something like that. First of all, that was wrong, and second, it wouldn't have explained anything.

Sometimes she picked up her phone and opened Instagram. She never looked at the feed first; it was usually boring. Instead, she went right into the direct messages. A glittering, bouncing curiosity. Was there another message from Unknown? In that case, the word *Requests* was boldfaced and blue. It was boldfaced and blue almost every night.

Hi beautiful / Hello cutie / Hi sunshine, how are you?

The ones who wrote her were called Jimmy Taylor_354 or Marcus DeBuonaventura. Their names were PhilGibson1973. William____Smith and Dr. Antonio Alessandro. Sun-browned men standing in front of yachts; White, gray-haired men with baseball caps and three-day-old beards.

A cowboy in boots, posing in front of a ranch. A US Army General in his dress uniform. A widower with two children, making pancakes in a luxurious kitchen.

In reality, young men sitting in an internet café somewhere far away were typing kitschy lies into a computer or a phone. Juno had seen a YouTube documentary about this; it was called *love scamming*. It seemed to be a good business. You wrote to older, apparently single women using a fake profile.

I saw your profile picture and was spellbound right away.

Then the love scammers started to initiate a relationship.

Good morning, my dear.

What have you eaten today? Take care of yourself.

I love you.

Stickers with red roses, stickers with coffee cups that said “love.”

A young man was filmed reading a book about psychological manipulation.

I miss you so. I dream of spending my life with you.

At some point, the love scammers asked the women for money.

I'm on a business trip and I had an accident; now I'm sitting here in jail, and I can't access my bank account. Can you help me out?

Juno was shocked and fascinated at the same time by how many women there were who believed talk like this. The people in the documentary told candidly of the sums these women had transferred to far-away countries via Western Union.

And now she too was on their radar, of course she was, Juno Isabella Flock. Juno, the wife of Jupiter, but the love scammers didn't know anything about that. Undeterred, they showered her with messages. And Juno liked to answer their messages.

In the dark, glittering euphoria of wakefulness, long past midnight, from her room with the planets on the ceiling.

Hi beautiful lady.

Hi.

How are you, how's the weather where you are?

I'm doing very well, thank you.
It's 112 degrees here, your brain just melts.
What are you up to?

I work for a construction company, ARCO, but I'm also a financial advisor. What do you do?

I'm feeding my falcons, I have three,
each one is worth \$20,000. Their names are Leo,
Bubbo, and Lucas.

Wow, that sounds interesting!

Middle-aged White man, gray hair, wearing shorts, standing under a palm tree.

White man, gray hair, leaning on a convertible.

Sun-kissed White man cuddling a fluffy white dog.

Californian sailor-man, graying Marine with stolen identity.

Come to Juno. She wants to play with you.

Hi, thank you, I'm doing well.
I live in Germany, a country with
giant seal pools in its zoos.

What do I do? I lie in the bath, drink liquor,
like everyone in Germany.
I smoke Euro bills, have you ever tried that?

Are you married? Nope, I live with three servants,
two men and a woman, we berate each other
while drinking a case of beer.

And you?

For a long while, the love scammers simply believed everything she said. First, it was fun: lying to a guy after midnight.

She reached out her hand: come to me.

It was funny in a mean kind of way.

Sometimes she hesitated.

Are you serious?
Smiley

How they stumbled, became insecure.

How something crashed into their world, debris from Juno Isabella Flock, who didn't smoke Euro bills but instead lived in a room next to Jupiter, who lay in a hospital bed at night. This hospital bed looked like a bed in an actual hospital, except it was covered with contact paper that's supposed to look like wood veneer. During the day, Jupiter sat in a wheelchair. The wheelchair was painted a shiny red; Jupiter picked it out himself way back when. Now there were a few scratches in the paint.

Every morning, he got out of bed and into the wheelchair; this took five minutes. First, Jupiter pushed himself to the edge of the bed, with his legs out front, then lowered first one then the other side of his body down onto the seat, supporting himself with his hands on the armrests. Jupiter said, someone should just lift up the Earth for a moment, that's not so hard.

Perhaps the men who wrote to her deserved to be taken in so easily. Just as the women that they were deceiving fell for their bullshit.

Was she trying to avenge these women? Probably not.

She couldn't sleep at night anymore, that was all.

The love scammers in their third-world countries didn't know anything about her at all, otherwise they probably wouldn't have written. She, who lay awake so long at night staring at the ceiling.

Hey, beautiful lady, what are you doing?

Juno answered quickly and effectively. How she was doing and what she was up to. That she'd been married twice and was now whiling away her time with a boring internist.

That she raised attack dogs.

That she loved dogs – wait, that was not a lie.

At some point she noticed that little truths were sliding into her lies. Something that was true.

This made Juno uncomfortable rather than amazed. Sometimes it felt good to tell the truth.

Hi beautiful!

How's the weather where you are?

The weather is gray and cold, November,
not a good month.
Yesterday I watched a film, *Melancholia*,
have you seen it? A planet crashes into the
Earth, it doesn't end well. There are two
sisters, Claire and Justine. Once, Justine says
it's good if the world is destroyed,
and Claire can't believe her ears.
How can you be so cold, Justine, hey,
we're dying here and you think that's OK?
Or when Claire realizes that she can't trust John.
John is Claire's husband, a hobby astronomer.
John says *Melancholia* will pass by the Earth,
don't worry. John is wrong, the planet comes
back, turns around. Claire's panic, Justine's
calm shortly before the planet hits. Claire
hugs her boys protectively in the garden.

Melancholia, isn't that a nice name for a stray
planet? I like to listen to the film score when I'm
out walking. Sometimes I think like Justine;
a collision like that with a planet or comet, and that
would be the end.

The love scammer didn't answer.

John gives Claire a wire loop, she can hold it up
against *Melancholia* in the garden. *Melancholia* is hanging

in the daytime sky, a big moon. Claire sees how it gets smaller and smaller in the loop; she thinks it will pull back away into outer space, she's happy. But just a day later, Melancholia is much larger than the loop. Melancholia came back.

How the birds fall from the sky, hail thunders through the air, the grass trembles.
Threats from outer space always make me especially sad because they're so much bigger.

The love scammer didn't read the message.

Hey, write me back, OK?
It's nice to tell you all of this.

The love scammer didn't read the message.

Hey, good morning, how are you?

The love scammer stopped answering.

Next guy, the fun continued.

I like romantic films that don't have a happy end, for example, *Open Water*, have you seen it?
A couple floats in the water, they had booked a diving trip on the open sea, there were several people on the boat, the crew miscounts and the boat returns to the harbor, forgets to collect them.
They're floating in the Pacific, he is attacked by a shark. She has to be strong, to comfort him, but he dies in her arms. She takes another breath, dives down, never surfaces again.
I always regarded it as a brutally forceful love story. How they have each other, hold onto each other, carry each other. He holds her so that she can sleep, that's when the shark comes.
I like the implications and the fact that the film doesn't sanitize reality.
Only this way can it actually be a romantic film.

The scammer had become unimportant while she was typing this, although at that point, he tried to step back in.

Yes, my dear,
true love is something wonderful!
Red heart

I always think it's great when the truth of true love is only revealed in

death.

Please don't say such things, dear!

But it's exactly this kind of thing that I want to say.

In the end, it's death that unites us.

I'm happy to share that with you, by the way.

Bitch.

That's how the chats ended every time.

At some point, the scammers stopped answering and this one got aggressive. Juno wasn't even angry with him. She spoke exactly the same way when she was feeling slightly aggressive that she did when she was being honest.

Sometimes it seemed to her that this was her most sincere self.

It was possible that she was the real Juno in the chats.

ONE

Juno. Names that end in *o* sound like thunder when it rolls down the cliffs of high mountains.

Or like deep sleep might sound. Like a sad sigh that someone in this deep sleep emits. Juno, that also sounds like something that repeats itself over and over. Two syllables, spoken endlessly one after the other, an audible GIF.

She had traveled to the mountains for a few days, to the place where she grew up. She was staying with her mother, in the same small apartment, right underneath the roof, and sleeping in her childhood bedroom, which was now a room for everything and nothing. Under the diagonal wood walls, it felt like you were in a tent.

On the very first evening, the usual: Juno lay on her back on the floor, as she did at home, looked out the window at the dark peaks of the Alps outside. Eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, she saw the lights of the hut at the top of the Neuner go out, one of the few huts that were open at this time of year. The lights were like the beacon of a lighthouse. Something that had been there forever and indicated a direction. She heard the TV in the next room; her mother had turned it up loud, she had become a bit hard of hearing. Otherwise, not much was happening.

She talked to Jupiter on the phone every day across the mountains.

Are you doing OK, are you coping?

Of course I am, said Jupiter through the ether, everything's great.

Jupiter was doing everything at home without her, opening the refrigerator, taking out the butter, the cheese, putting them on a piece of bread, adding some tomatoes, the mini cherry tomatoes that you didn't have to cut, for Jupiter could no longer hold the knife very well.

But when Juno was there, all of this had a different quality. Jupiter reached for something that she could reach for him in case of emergency: knife, coffee pot, plates. Juno was Jupiter's safety

net, but now they were each alone for five days without a safety net. Juno could fall on a hike, plummet on a descent, and not come back. And Jupiter could also fall. For example, on the slippery tile floor in the kitchen, he couldn't get up again, perhaps his phone wouldn't be nearby. Juno stayed awake as long as she could. She thought she would feel it if something happened. Although she had come here to learn how to sleep again, it's possible that she didn't want that wholeheartedly.

On the very first evening, she got another message on Instagram. It was from Owen_Wilson223. Juno thought for a moment whether she should block the profile right away; she wanted to sleep. Or look out the window a little bit. Her mother had long since gone to bed; she could also go into the living room and watch a movie on TV, open a bag of chips. On the other hand, a love scammer, Fake Owen Wilson, was sitting somewhere out there under the same night sky that lay over the mountaintops here, waiting for her to respond. It was too tempting. Juno opened the profile. As usual, there were only a few photos posted just a few days ago. A man with five o'clock shadow, around 50 years old; in the first photo, he was wearing a dinner jacket at a reception. You could see a company's logo on the wall behind him. Owen_Wilson223 was holding an hors d'oeuvre, smiling into the camera.

In the chat window, it said:

Hi.
Smiley

Juno clicked *Accept request*.

Hi!
Smiley

Not even two minutes later, Owen Wilson was online.

How are you?

I'm doing fine, and you?

I'm doing splendidly!

Smiley with heart-eyes
Where do you live?

I live in Romania, the land of
Dracula. Are you familiar with it?
And you?

My name is Owen, I'm from Ukraine,
but I live in Austin, Texas!

Wow, great!
Are you a cowboy now?
Did you have to flee because of the war?

Do you have children?

No, no children, but three dogs.

Wow!
Wow smiley

Actually, I'm not doing well at all.
I'm in the mountains now. Each morning
the sun tumbles out from behind the fog
and lights up the mountains, but it's a little
too much of a good thing.

Somehow you see the vulnerability of the Earth.

OK, lol!
Laughing smiley
Are you married?

It doesn't matter whether I'm married. And just so things
are clear: I only want to write my thoughts here. Something
about vulnerability. All astronauts said in interviews
that the vulnerability of the Earth is astonishingly visible
from space. That Earth is so small and tender. They were all
shocked what kinds of bad things are happening on this
tender planet.

You're funny, lol!
Two laughing-crying smileys

Waving grass flies through the wind,
the horses in the barn roll their eyes
but they are quiet.

I've tried to write a poem.
About the film *Melancholia*, a planet is called that
in the film. It comes from the depths of space, flies out of its

orbit, and trundles around, it will hit the Earth. Have you seen the film?

Longer pause, no response.

And you're not Owen Wilson from Texas anyhow. You're a love scammer in an internet café.

And I'm not from Romania. How I'm doing? If you'd really like to know:

I'm doing badly since I can't fall asleep.

No response for five minutes.

You probably think that's a first-world problem, don't you?

After another five minutes, the speech bubble popped up.

I like your poem about the horse.

Brief pause.

How do you know that about the scammers?

Who can take something like that seriously:
Owen Wilson from Ukraine, and your stupid
profile photo. All the schmalz too.

Are you angry with me?

No, I didn't fall for your act.

Okay.

Are you angry with me?

No. Do you take drugs?

No, why, should I?

I smoke grass.

Grass gives me the giggles.

That's good!

Laughing-crying smiley

I don't think it's good.

Laughter is good.

Sometimes it is, sometimes it's not.

You shouldn't think so much.

I can't stop.

Perhaps you'd rather sleep now?

No one, except perhaps Jupiter, would ever find out that she couldn't sleep anymore.

Five more days until her return to Leipzig.

In the small places in the big city, in her little room with the planets and in the room next door, where the hospital bed and wheelchair stood.

The room with a beating heart; Jupiter's heart, which abided there.

Juno set her phone aside and climbed onto the fold-out sofa that had once been in the living room. She was actually a little tired, and the slightly euphoric restlessness, the many ideas and thoughts circling in her head most days at this hour, which were like foreign starships or birds, weren't there today. Perhaps sleep would come. Owen_Wilson223 supposedly promised to watch over this sleep in the mountains, which was yet to come. While she, Juno Isabella Flock, would watch over Jupiter's sleep from far away, under the stars.

Good morning, were you able to fall asleep yesterday?

Yes, thank you, I did.

She didn't write anything else just yet.

Her intention was to hike a lot; perhaps that would help with her sleep. The first few days it was foggy, not hiking weather. You couldn't see the peaks, just the black pine forests below the cliffs. Go to the indoor swimming pool instead, said her mother, but Juno didn't want to swim. Once, she walked out into the Vils River valley. A narrow, bumpy path, the first mountain cliffs rose up gently to the left and right. She came here often alone as a child, to play, secretly, for it was too far away from home and also dangerous. Her parents would never have allowed it.

The Vils River flowed parallel to the path, a mountain river that had been straightened and put into a stone straitjacket further downstream, in the town. Here, it raced boisterously and threw itself into bubbling rapids. In the quiet spots, it was deep turquoise and had broad gravel banks. Juno had often ventured secretly into the water there in the summers and swum a few strokes, alone and unobserved, despite all the prohibitions.

Later on, she didn't tell anyone about this either, neither her parents, nor Jupiter. They were here together, right at the start, when they hadn't been together long and were spending a weekend with Juno's parents. Even then, Jupiter couldn't walk very well; he had to take breaks often, the hike took a long time. Juno just thought that he wasn't especially athletic. This wasn't anything that disturbed her. The river was quiet now, normal for this time of year.

The fact that she had swum here alone as a child was like a special secret. Having a secret was like hoarding a little treasure somewhere, buried deep in the earth under a tree; and only Juno knew the spot.

She didn't see her mother that much since her mother was often on the go. In the afternoons, they drank tea together sometimes, herbal mixtures that tasted like wood, pepper, or pine needles. You should take this tea along for Jupiter, said her mother; it won't cure him, but it will make him happier, and she promised to pack up some for Juno. As long as she could remember, her mother had gathered all the herbs in the mountains and dried them on the balcony.

Whenever Juno fell down as a child and scraped her knee or hurt her hand, her mother rubbed the spots with homemade arnica tincture. It always helped.

Will the tea also make me happier? asked Juno, and her mother said that no tea in the world could help her. She was trying to make a small, tender joke; you could hear that from her tone of voice. But then they were both silent for a moment.

That's probably right, said Juno.

The sky cleared on the third day. Juno photographed the snowy mountain peaks from the balcony; they were snow white in front of a baby blue sky. Now the town looked much bigger. And suddenly the nights were giant and high; the Milky Way spread its stars all across the mountains.

She had a message every evening.

What's it like in the mountains?
How high are the mountains?
Hi, what are you doing right now?

It's beautiful, lonely, windy;
at the moment, everything's a bit precipitous.
Sometimes I think it's like being on Mars.
I go hiking in the morning; there's
a moor with a beaver.
I like beavers, the way they pursue their goals
so busily, without asking why.

Lol. I like the way you write.
You're funny.
Laughing-crying smiley

Smiley

She didn't believe that Owen Wilson was writing to her as himself now, without a purpose, without an ulterior motive.

Wherever she looked, the devils were there first.

In the documentary about love scamming, she had seen that exposed scammers still tried to approach their victims, in other ways, with other lies. She thought about blocking the profile now after all. Just a click and goodbye. But she had already sent too many responses, too many of her words were in the atmosphere. Was it possible to pull them back?

Of course she was still lying a bit.

This time intentionally, for who knows with whom she was actually interacting.

Actually, I live in Chemnitz.

I'm on vacation right now.
A cute little city
with a lot of fountains and a castle.
No, I don't have any children, I can't
even cook.

(which was true)

She didn't say anything about Jupiter; she wrote that she lived alone.

That she lived from affair to affair, always taking new lovers. She made herself three years younger and wrote that she was an actress. Which was approximately what she would have liked to have been.

I'm only really there when I'm on stage.
Then I exist.

(and that was also true)

I still go to a lot of parties because what else should
you do? I like my life.

(debatable)

He was familiar with her Instagram profile. Perhaps also her real name. He could google. She didn't live in Chemnitz. He could probably find out some things about her. Photos of past performances in Leipzig theaters, program announcements. And even three interviews, two on national radio and once on local cultural radio.

Juno Isabella Flock. Her traces were all over.

In the nights that followed, they spent a lot of time on their phones, typing into the speech bubbles, even though Juno didn't want to at first. Chatting so much was something she'd never liked to do; it always gave her a stiff neck.

The dark wood of the balcony threw additional darkness through the window; she turned on a small orange lamp, held her phone right next to her face.

He told her that he lived in Nigeria. In a medium-sized city in the southwest.

Juno didn't look at Google Maps: she knew that he was pretty far away.

She also learned his real name: Benu.

Juno looked the name up later on. Benu was a figure in old Egyptian mythology, a type of precursor to the phoenix, a god of the dead. Benu spent the night in the Duat, the realm of the dead, and in the morning light, he was reborn as a heron.

Juno liked the name. It, like *Juno*, ended in something dark; like *Juno*, it had just two syllables.

If you repeated them without a pause, at some point they sounded like one continuous sound.

Once, far enough away, high enough up to be so direct, she asked Benu about scamming. Why he did it. She thought her question seemed factual and sincerely interested.

No police, please.

That, by contrast, seemed very urgent.

He would like to stop, but he had no choice.

The police are brutal here,
jail is hard-core.

You know best what you're doing. But don't worry,
I won't turn you in. I wouldn't even know where.
Smiley

“Hello, good day, police district in (Nigerian city in the southeast of Lagos). This is Juno Isabella Flock. There's a love scammer in your city, his name is Benu, could you please put him in jail? Thank you.”

Go ahead and write to women who are dumb enough to fall for that. The main thing is that I have a counterpart.

She didn't write that, didn't even want to think that, but she thought it anyway. For outer space was on fire, and the little dogs that sometimes still populated her dreams were dancing around like crazy.

You could only share something like that with someone who was far enough away.

Are you listening? Scammer Benu?

Nigeria. Juno had to think where exactly in Africa the country was, and she was ashamed that she didn't know for sure. Somewhere more to the left, not all the way down. She booted up her computer, looked at Google Maps; that was about right. Still.

Then she looked for the city where Benu lived. She had never heard the name. It was a little way away from the coast, in the country's interior; the Niger River flowed about two hundred kilometers further west.

She knew hardly anything about Nigeria. Once she had read a report about street artists in Lagos in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; it had impressed her. She remembered a photo, a few young men standing around in a mixture of native dress, rags, and punk costumes; in front of them were two hyenas bound by giant iron chains. The hyenas were kept like circus animals; the men strolled through the quarter with them, it said, and made the hyenas do tricks. The hyenas wore muzzles of knotted rope, Juno remembered that, and that she had thought how afraid she would be of these animals. And then she remembered "Boko Haram;" for a while the news was full of horror stories about them.

When was that again? She remembered those girls. Kidnapped from a school because they were girls who went to school.

Juno checked on her computer; it was 2014.

275 schoolgirls from the *Chibok Girls State Secondary School* were taken away in trucks by alleged security forces in the middle of the night and dragged into the forest along the border with Cameroon. Sixty-nine girls, now women, were still missing. Eleven women escaped in June 2022; they had all borne several children and found in some cases that their parents had died. It's been a while since we heard anything about that in Europe, thought Juno.

And the story wasn't over yet.

One evening, she was chatting with Benu about Nigeria.

Tell me something about your country.

That was what the other love scammers had always asked her, and she wrote that people ate rose petals for breakfast.

It's a bit bleak here.
The north is dangerous, nobody wants to go there.
Most people move to Lagos at some point.
I have no work, I sit around all day, at most I do
my laundry.

(by hand, Juno asked)

I live with my mother,

(he said he was 32)

I help her with the household,
sometimes anyway.
Winking smiley
Most of the time I'm bored.
I play some video games,
smoke grass.

Meanwhile, they were writing on WhatsApp and not using Benu's scammer profile. Bye-bye,

Owen Wilson. Juno saw his profile picture. His real picture, not the graying Mr. Wilson.

He looked friendly, a little older than thirty-two. Sometimes panic flared within her. Who knew who was really behind this phone sending his waves across to her little town in the Alps. If the waves could come this far, perhaps Benu could as well.

What else did he write?

That he liked listening to her. That he had to laugh at her sentences, they were special. That he found her funny.

Oh. Her heart leaped for a moment. She felt flattered. But surely this was just one of the usual love scammer tricks. He only said that to get something.

He wanted to get close enough to her that she would think it was real. Just as Melancholia came close to Earth and you could see the craters, like on the moon. She wrote back that this pleased her. Then she wrote that she would be out of touch for the next few days; she wanted to take a longer excursion to a mountain hut. No internet, she needed peace and quiet for a change.

The truth was that nobody would spend a few days in a mountain hut in November. Most mountain huts were closed in November. She just needed a break from him.

Everything had moved too fast, and the game had taken a different turn than usual. Juno had guessed that Benu would soon block her or stop writing to her. Like the other scammers, when they recognized that they couldn't get anything from her and that she was only stealing their time.

But this time, they were already in the middle of the game.