Renata, a German teacher at an Adult Education Institute in London is,

arguably, the person who has had the biggest influence on me. Ever.

I had been attending German conversation classes in London while I waited

for inspiration to strike and decide on my future career. I hadn’t wanted to be

like most Brits who have learned a language at school, and then, out in the big

wide world of job seeking, just drop it as a minor inconvenience.

I’m still not sure why, but Renata was the main reason, I became a teacher.

Although she wasn’t what you’d call a stunner; she had this menthol

cool, clean manner. She was highly efficient, always well prepared and

completely unflappable.

I began chatting to her after classes and, to be honest, I got the distinct

impression that she liked the idea of being pursued. A few weeks in, I

asked her out.

‘Excuse me Renata.’ I approached her after the others had gone. ‘I wonder

if you might fancy a drink some time.’  
  
 She appraised me as though she’d never seen me before. ‘No thank you. I

have to get home.’ That was it, no attempt to soften the blow.

‘Well what about some other time, maybe?’

‘Thank you for asking.’ And then she just turned and left.

I carried on going to her class and her manner to me didn’t change in any

way. However, I had the feeling that all was not lost and bided my time. One

evening she told me, in her usual direct manner, to visit her.

Renata Eckhart, the wrong side of 50, she told me, divorced, mother of two

adult children, knows the secret of true contentment. She was transformed in her

small second floor flat.

It was more like Kew Gardens: plants on every available surface. All sorts,

cacti and ferns, plants with huge, shiny, dark green leaves, a horticultural mini-

paradise.

She looked great, at least 15 years younger, which is what I originally thought

she was, her skin smooth and glowing, her eyes sparkling.

‘What’s your secret Renata?’

She laughed and glowed even brighter. ‘There’s no secret. I live a

macrobiotic life.’

‘Whatever that is, it seems to work.’

‘It’s based on ancient Japanese theories and practices and is often combined

with other Asian disciplines, such as shiatsu. It’s about interaction with our

environment, which means, among other things, eating only fresh and natural

ingredients.’ She lectured.

I thought it best to let her speak, open up. Then, before she knew it we’d be

babbling away like old friends.

We were sitting on Renata’s balcony, in south west London, surrounded by

a profusion of green and herbs and spices. An oasis in a concrete desert.

‘How did you get into all this then? Was there some sort of trigger?’  
  
 ‘I had been unhappy for years. My husband, well let’s forget about him, I

have. I had migraine and back problems. I was desolate and my children had

flown the nest. One day, I confided in my yoga teacher who introduced me to a

macrobiotic practitioner.’ She said.

As if on cue, she disappeared, leaving me gazing ignorantly at her flora. She

returned a couple of minutes later with a small wooden tray containing a cup and

a slice of cake.

‘It’s cold kuchicha tea, derived from the twig of the tea shrub.’

Then she handed me a slice of pumpkin cake which, like the tea, tasted, to

my jaded palate, fresh and delicious.

‘I now lead a fully macrobiotic life. I only eat rice, whole grain and fruit

and vegetables that are in season, but no meat or fish. And I don’t drink

alcohol.’ She gave me, what looked like a withering look. I’d mentioned

during a class how much I looked forward to a pint after evening school.

Once she was in full flow it wasn’t easy to break in, even if I’d wanted to,

which I now did, in the face of what, judging by the zealous look in her eyes,

looked like becoming a verbal onslaught.

‘Living this life, you learn that food is your prime energy source. Usually,

people waste too much energy when digesting, because they eat impure foods.

Through this nutrition your body and mind are purged. You are transformed.’

‘You sound evangelical.’ I teased her.

Actually she gave off the squeaky clean aura of a high up in some sect or

an alien from ‘Invasion of the Body Snatchers’.

‘I prefer to call myself spiritual.’

Renata, originally from Berlin, divorced after nearly thirty years of marriage,

and with the kids out of the way, decided to try her luck in London.

Her modestly furnished flat was full of old, faded children’s paintings.

‘I imagine you have a good relationship with your children.’ I nodded at the

prominently displayed artistic endeavours.

‘I always encouraged my children to express themselves. I’ve kept all their

drawings and things. Now it’s my turn.’ She glanced at the pictures. ‘This way

of life has made that possible, it has cleared my thoughts and given me strength.’  
  
 ‘Has it given you anything else?’   
  
 ‘Patience and tolerance, and I never get angry. But, for me, the inner benefits

are more important.’ She said.

‘Such as?’  
  
 ‘The feeling of complete freedom, of knowing I have found my way. It is

phenomenal. I am fulfilled, content and so grateful.’

To be honest, Renata was genuinely inspiring but the thing about her

was, that when I was with her, I felt that we were engaged in some sort of

superficial relationship, that she almost wasn’t involved in, at least not on an

emotional basis. I always felt that we were participants, or at least I was, in a

reality show about relationships.

We stayed together for a few months, until she decided to move on.

I knew she wouldn’t have had any qualms about ending it. As it turned out,

I was right.

We never became, what you might call, an item, she wasn’t looking for

that.

In fact I don’t think she was looking for anything.

It didn’t really matter what I was looking for, Renata called the shots. It was

almost like we were separated by some invisible wall.

You know those lab scenes you see in films or documentaries about radio-

active material, where the lab assistant sticks his or her hands through holes in

the glass walls and inserts them into gloves to go about his or her business ?

In a way that was how our relationship was conducted. At arm’s length.

Renata’s arm.

She wasn’t what you’d call effusive. For example, I’d ask, ‘How are you

Renata?’

‘Not too bad. How are you?’ She’d answer with a suspicious look.

‘Me? Great.’ I’d invariably answer.

One day in bed I challenged her. ‘Renata why are you always so

guarded?’

‘I could ask you why you are always the opposite.’  
  
 ‘Why give in to doom and gloom?’ I asked.  
  
 ‘It’s dangerous to acknowledge when things are good.’ She answered.

‘Dangerous?’  
  
 ‘If you relax, even for one second, if you assume everything is super in

your life, that’s when the bad things bubble up to the surface and spill over.

Then you’ll regret it. Never give into good feelings. Never.’

‘You’re obviously speaking from experience Renata.’

We were lying there in a loose clinch, me slightly dozy, feeling spent but

good.

Renata, tense, like a plank, with her thoughts clearly somewhere else.

‘Let’s just say, I thought I had everything I could want in life.’ She sighed.  
  
 I wanted her to elaborate, but from the impersonal manner in which she

prised us apart, I knew that was a non-starter.

Sex was a bit like that. Don’t think I’m dumping on Renata. I know it takes

two to tango. Maybe our chemistry just didn’t mix. But sometimes sex was a bit

removed. It’s not that she had qualms about anything. She’d asked me

directly what I liked and, when she wasn’t in the mood, she wasn’t averse to

giving me a good servicing, but she divorced herself from intimacy.

Kept something back.

She never really let herself go.

I’d always thought that in a physical relationship older women valued the

closeness and T.L.C., almost more than the act itself.

Renata would lie there all serene and macrobiotic, like she was operating on

remote control, completely indifferent to the proceedings.

In the beginning I used to pop round a couple of times a week, unannounced.

‘Oh. Timothy. It’s you.’ The way she said my name was also strange, almost

like in slow motion.

‘I thought I’d surprise you.’ I’d hold up a plant or something I’d collected

on the way. Actually, it was always a plant or flowers because, her being

macrobiotic, the choices were a bit limited.

‘We need to put our relationship on a more regular basis. Come round

tomorrow at seven.’ She instructed.

That’s how it was.

So I’d obediently come around at the appointed time. Her entire hallway,

what you could see of it through the plants, was like following some barely

explored path through the rain forest. It was lined with wooden shelves, no

doubt untreated, and containing, what seemed to me, every single edition of

Der Spiegel ever published, all tightly packed together.

She’d grab one at random. ‘Timothy. Read page 33, please.’

I reckon she actually knew what was on every page of every Der Spiegel.

She always had her nose in it, old and new copies. I even asked her if she

was researching it to specialise in it for a quiz show. But she just dismissed

my question with a tired shake of her head.

So I would read it and she, painstakingly, corrected my, even to my ears,

jarring British pronunciation, and then we’d discuss the article, then I’d have

to write a précis and bring it on my next visit.

She’d usually read through it, correcting me just after a bout of sex. I often

wondered if there was some sort of link. I mean it’s not exactly what you’d call

afterplay is it? Or whether she wanted to bring me back down to earth.

To clarify, at the point of orgasm I can be a trifle loud.

Whatever her reasoning, it certainly put a damper on things.

I’d be lying there panting, hoping for some gentle stroking and trying to give

her a cuddle, but somehow my text would appear in her hand, which she held

stretched out high above my head.

‘No Timothy. The verb gehören is Dative. Therefore: Das Buch gehört mir.

Not mich.’

‘Sorry Renata. I forgot.’

‘And Timothy, Rücktritt is not pronounced as in the English luck, don’t

forget the umlaut.’

‘I’ll make a mental note.’

‘Repeat it please, Timothy. Rücktritt.’

‘Rücktritt.’

‘Is my correcting your mistakes a problem for you Timothy?’ She’d look over

her glasses at me, my head nuzzling her perfectly formed and firm breasts.

‘Certainly not Renata. That’s the only way to learn.’

‘Good boy.’ Then she’d pat me on the head. In the last weeks of our time

together her hand would linger longer on my head after she’d patted me or

ruffled my hair. It was as if she was thinking or considering something.

‘Are you OK Renata?’

‘Not too bad. Why do you ask?’  
  
 ‘You seem a bit distant.’ Even more than usual, that is.

Then she’d sigh, not for my benefit, she wasn’t like that, but almost

unobtrusively.

Then she’d pat me again, to reassure me. I think. Maybe she was then beyond

reassurance. Perhaps her course had been set.

‘Tell me about your children.’ I asked her one day.

I sensed her unease, immediately.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Where are they? What do they do? Are they married? Are there.........?’

‘Slow down, Timothy .’

She manoeuvred herself into an upright position, so my head fell onto her lap

giving me another view of her breasts.

I loved looking at them and giving them a gentle tweak which, judging by her

usual reaction, she also found a pleasant distraction. I was lying on my side,

watching her swallow and compose herself and, as though playing for time, she

carefully scooped her long ash blonde hair behind her ears.

‘They both live in Berlin, near their father.’  
  
 ‘How often do you see them?’ I had the feeling that if I got her to talk about

what was obviously a tricky subject, it might help her, in some way.

She began hesitantly. ‘You know, a mother will do anything for her children,

for their happiness, endure anything, for however long it takes.’  
  
 ‘What are you telling me?’  
  
 ‘They’re closer to their father.......at the moment. You have to allow men their

little victories. It’s good for their fragile egos.’

She played with my hair, absently.

‘I may have loved them too much, to make up for other things. But as a

mother, how can you step back and rationalise?’

‘What do you mean Renata?’  
  
 ‘My ex was, certainly still is, a perfectionist. Everything had to be in its place,

including us. Manfred would never stand for anything less than complete order

in the house. He could be very ............... excitable.’ She smoothed down the

duvet with the palms of her hands and, satisfied, patted it. She seemed to have

drifted into the past.

I thought, I should leave her alone for a spell. I began to ease myself out of

the bed, to go and have a shower. ‘Ich gehe in der Dusche, Renata. ’

Her hand stroked my buttocks and stayed there, deliciously soft, but I felt

as though her hand stayed too long. Instinctively, I felt I knew why, but I

couldn’t put it into words. Then she said, plaintively, ‘Ich gehe in die Dusche.

The verb gehen is Akkusative.’

‘Thanks Renata. I mean, Ich danke dir.’

I think she was hinting at something. And I had a vague idea what it was.

She wasn’t sniffing or even glassy eyed. I could see she’d come to terms with

life, with things she couldn’t change. She was telling me, in her own way,

why she was alone and why, I think, she wanted to remain alone.

I would say, we parted on good terms. One day she just wasn’t there

anymore.

I wasn’t the only one, who didn’t really know Renata. It seems nobody did.

She just upped and vanished. Literally disappeared into thin air.

I don’t think Renata was the type of person to end it all, but who really

knows?

I found out afterwards that she’d arranged everything down to the final detail.

She sent a firm to clear the flat, after transferring all outstanding monies.

I’d been round a few times and there’d been no answer and, as it was the end

of term, Renata was no longer at the school. But I’d noticed a rustle at the

curtains of the window of the ground floor flat and a little, old, face peering out

through a dust covered window pane.

I’m a persistent bugger so I kept calling round; Renata had never wanted to

give me her telephone number.

Eventually, the old lady rustler behind the curtains opened the front door.

‘Can I help you young man?’ She said, with only the top of her head visible,

which was encased in a black like skull cap, in the door crack. Her head was

lower than the chain lock.

‘Well, actually, I’m a friend of Renata Eckhart’s. I’ve been coming around for

a few days looking for her. I mean, I’m getting a bit concerned about her.’  
  
 ‘Are you her admirer? Timothy isn’t it?’

She even said it like Renata. Long and drawn out, like she was steaming it.

‘In a manner of speaking and yes.’

‘I asked Renata about you. But she was very coy.’ She smiled.  
  
 ‘You know her well?’

‘Knew her dear. She’s gone. Just upped and went. Not a dickie bird.’  
  
 She unlocked the chain, with some difficulty, and pulled the door open. Just

over her shoulder I could see an open flat door. Some old Blues tune was

wailing out.

‘That’s Robert Johnson dear, ‘Preachin’ Blues’ I believe it’s called.’

‘Oh. OK.’

‘Come in dear.’

‘Thank you.’ I squeezed past her skeletal form, she was wearing one

of those flowery wrap around aprons, but it looked as though it had been

wrapped around her fragile form a good ten times, then tied tightly at the side.

She followed me, humming along to the Blues, through a narrow, dark

corridor and, once inside , from somewhere behind me, reduced the volume.

We sat in her little old lady front room, with lots of photos, old and new,

babies, children, adults and groups, perched on every available piece of

furniture: a piano, small side tables and a coffee table and a sideboard.

She featured prominently

There were mounds of dust on the furniture, making the subjects of the

photos look like they were explorers cut off in some barren, unforgiving

landscape.

On one of the small tables there was a china tea pot with two cups, as though

she’d been waiting for me, or at least expecting company.

She served me a cup of some unbelievably strong tea. Although still hot, it

tasted like it had been standing for hours.

From another table she offered me a plate of thickly cut slices of marble

cake. ‘Help yourself dear.’

‘Thank you.’ I don’t need to be asked twice, if somebody’s offering marble

cake. The drier the better.

‘Sorry. I don’t know your name.’

‘It’s Agatha Powell, dear.’

It was difficult to estimate her age, but I though at least ninety. Her face was

heavily powdered but it couldn’t camouflage the heavy bags and jowls. Thin

strands of suspiciously black hair peeked out from under her cap.

She was heavily stooped, which made her seem even smaller, but when she

moved, she was incredibly light on her feet.

‘Mrs. Powell. Do you know where Renata is?’  
  
 ‘Call me Agatha dear. It’s so refreshing to be around young people.’ Her

voice was chirpy and clear.

‘Thank you Agatha. And.....’

‘What dear?’  
  
 ‘I was wondering about Renata.’  
  
 ‘What about her dear?’

She prodded the plate of cake and leaned towards me. The old, scratchy

Blues forming a mournful and appropriately haunting soundtrack to our

conversation.  
  
 ‘Do you know if anything has happened to her?’ I asked.  
  
 ‘I don’t know dear. I don’t know where she is.’

‘She seems to have disappeared.’ I persevered.  
  
 ‘Yes. She’s gone dear.’

‘Yes I know. You said. That´s why I’m here. Do you have any idea why or

where ...? Did she say anything to you?’

‘What about dear?’

Agatha seemed quite happy and, to be honest, looked remarkably alert, but I

was getting nowhere, fast.

‘Did Renata leave any note or indication about her plans?’  
  
 ‘Were you having an affair with her? I asked Renata. I’m an old lady I can

ask anybody anything.’ She smiled, sweetly.

‘Yes. We were.’

‘You must be worried then dear.’  
  
 ‘That’s why I was wondering.......’  
  
 ‘The thing is dear, Renata was a lonely soul but, every now and again, she

had men friends, usually young ones, but none of them stayed around as long as

you.’  
  
 That’s me, persistent, as I said.

‘What do you know about Renata, Agatha?’

‘Well, we often had long conversations dear, over a drop of some lovely

slaps. Renata always served it ice cold. She even put the glasses in the freezer,

she said.’

‘You mean schnapps.’  
  
 ‘That’s what I said dear.’

‘Yes. Sorry. I mean. I thought she was, well that she lived a very healthy life.’

‘Well, it’s not for me to judge dear. But Renata could knock it back with the

best of them. I’ve always liked a person partial to a glass. Do you drink dear?’

‘Yes. I do. But...’

‘What dear?’

‘Well, I like a pint.....’  
  
 ‘No dear. You said but.’  
  
 ‘What? I mean, pardon Agatha.’  
  
 ‘I think you’re a bit confused dear. She was looking at me, quiet concerned.

‘Agatha. Renata, well she led me to believe she didn’t touch alcohol. I mean

she led this macrobiotic life and all that.’  
  
 ‘Micro what dear?’

‘Macrobiotic. It, basically it’s a healthy form of eating and exercise.’

‘You mean that cooker thing dear?’

‘I’m....’

‘With the razor beams?’

‘Yes that’s it.’

‘Not Renata dear. She loved to tuck into rubbish food. You know?’  
  
 She poured herself another cup of tea, and smiled angelically.

‘What about children?’ I asked.

‘As far as I know she never married dear. Well one doesn’t exclude the other.

But as far as I know, she was childless. I’ve got three daughters, four

grandchildren and one great grandson dear.’

‘Congratulations. How often do you see them?’  
  
 ‘I’m one of the lucky ones.’ She waved a hand, as though she was

introducing them to me, inviting me to look at the photos, which filled the

room, like a silent audience.

‘They all take it in turns to pop in during the week and we all get together at

the weekend dear.’

‘That’s fantastic.’

‘I mean dear, a mother can tell. I’m sure Renata had not been blessed’

Another old Blues was shuffling along, but too low to identify.

‘Do you like that Blues stuff dear?’  
  
 ‘Some of it. But I’m no expert.’  
  
 ‘My late husband, Trevor, he loved it. To be honest it’s not my cuppa dear.

It’s very gloomy I think. Still if it was good enough for my Trev, it’s certainly

good enough for me.’ She paused, looked beyond me and seemed to slip back

into a happier time. Listening to Agatha, I realised that Renata had constructed

an alternative life. Which would explain the almost demented attention to detail,

when she explained her devotion to a macrobiotic life.

Agatha stood up to pour me another cup of tea. Suddenly she seemed a bit

unsteady on her feet.

‘Agatha, are you OK?’

‘It’s stones in my passway, dear.’

I jumped to my feet.

‘Do you have some medication somewhere?’

‘No dear. That’s the title. ‘Stones in my Passway.’ It’s a Robert Johnson

song.’

Agatha seemed to be tiring, so I made my excuses. Frankly I would have

preferred to stay a bit longer, so enjoyable was her company.

‘Well Agatha thanks for the tea and cake and your help.’

‘They say she made a deal with the devil dear.’

‘What?’ I nearly shouted. Then I realised she was probably rambling.

‘Yes dear. Robert Johnson. That’s where his music has its origins,

apparently. Some unearthly pact.’  
  
 ‘Oh he.’  
  
 ‘What do you mean dear?’  
  
 ‘Sorry Agatha. I misunderstood.’  
  
 ‘Maybe you should have a rest dear. You do look a little peaky.’

I did some checking, it seems at least 200,000 people go missing every year in

the U.K. O.K. most of them turn up again, within a few days, but there is still

an unbelievably high number, some 10,000 a year, who just never turn up again.

Renata was one of these and remained so. As far as I know.