

Sharon Dodua Otoo

This is Kinda How It All Went Down...

April 2026 . 144 pages

A razor-sharp "Road-Novella" and a profound exploration of systemic racism and intergenerational trauma in Germany.



"I would like to claim that I regret it, but that would be a lie."

They are on their way to the German beach town Timmendorfer Strand: Amata Haller and her boss Heinz Brockhaus, who offered to drive her there. Amata is in a hurry; her mother is waiting, as every year on May 3rd. For this day marks the anniversary of the sinking of the "Cap Arcona," the catastrophe towards the end of World War II that her grandfather barely survived. The heat presses on the overcrowded streets, the drive gets longer and longer, Brockhaus talks incessantly, and Amata loses her composure. At the end of the day, Brockhaus will no longer be alive, and months later Amata will stand trial.

Sharon Dodua Otoo (*1972 in London) is a writer and political activist. She writes prose and essays and edits the English-language book series Witnessed (edition assemblage). In 2016, she was awarded the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for "Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin". Otoo is politically engaged in the Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland e.V., Phoenix e.V. initiative, and is connected with the Schwarzen queer-feministischen Verein ADEFRA. "Adas Raum", her first novel, has been translated into many languages. She lives with her family in Berlin.

Sample Translation: Jon Cho-Polizzi

© S. Fischer Verlag GmbH



Letter from Amata Haller to the Editor

JVA Lübeck Correctional Facility, 15th of January, 2026

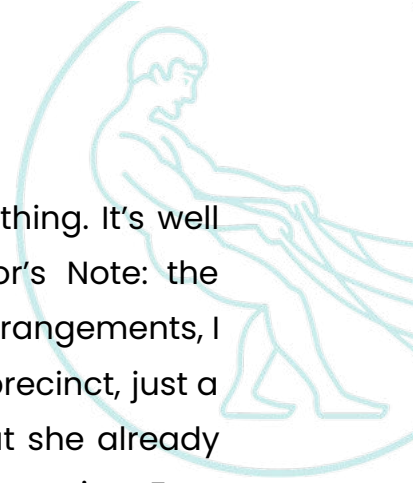
Nkechi,

They're picking me up in an hour, so I'll get straight to the point. I'm finally going to have my day in court, and I'm planning to plead guilty as charged. Because I did kill Heinz Brockhaus.

I wish I could claim that I regret it, but that would be a lie. I even did my nails in celebration: that glittery silver polish you know I love so much. And so, I'm ready—committed even—to bear the full consequences of my action. (Committed! When I say this word, I have to think of you.)

For weeks now, I've been waiting for this day. The interrogations, the documents, the media inquiries—finally, I'll have them all behind me. Particularly all the things those people who should have known better have been saying about me. People I'd been trying to change the world with not so long ago. And other people I still consider my family despite it all. And you know, Nkechi, I would not have thought I'd live to see the day when I could not depend on you. But, having read your statement, at least this much is clear: We never really knew each other. [Editor's Note: The author's admission here is true.]

In any case, what I wanted to write was simply that all of you are wrong. And after my testimony, everyone, even those in the cheapest, backrow seats, will understand just how laughable y'all's accusations really are. And maybe you already know this, but I wanted to put it down on paper. Just to be safe.

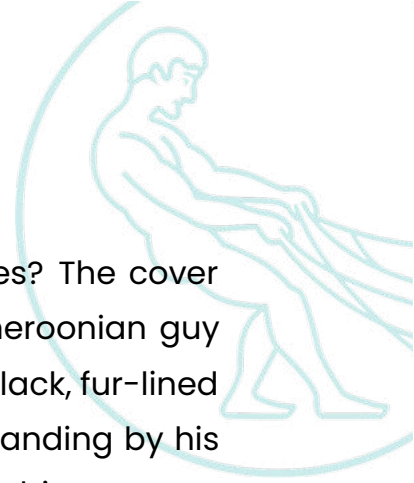


Because, actually, I had planned to keep quiet about everything. It's well within my rights. But after meeting with Frau Talwan [Editor's Note: the author's criminal defense lawyer] yesterday to make the final arrangements, I had to think again about the first time I met her. It was at the precinct, just a few hours after my arrest. I didn't want to talk then, either, but she already knew everything. We waited forever for the interrogation. And every time Frau Talwan spoke to me, her gaze rested somewhere just above my head.

It was only when things really got urgent that a grumpy cop took me out and led me to the toilet. On the way there, we passed an older gentleman with just a cul-de-sac of greying hair and one lazy eye waiting in the neighboring interrogation room. His grey curls ended just above the ears. He seemed friendly enough. Maybe my grandfather might have looked like him if he'd been lucky enough to live to that old age? Anyway, I asked Frau Talwan yesterday whether she could remember this old man. Her gaze drifted back above my head. And maybe she didn't hear the question. But it wasn't until I was back in my cell that I realized why I'd suddenly had to think of him.

It's like a tiny cage, this cell. If I stretched out my arms, I could touch both opposing walls with the palms of my hands! But at least I have my own cell. And by the way, I'm really not offended that you haven't come to visit me pretrial. After everything that's happened, it's better this way. And I wouldn't have been able to show you my cell anyway.

Yesterday, just as I was walking in, I paused in the doorway and looked around. Because I already knew the "last times" were approaching. The last dinner. The last shower. The last call for "lights out." The last breakfast... I lay down on my bed—the last time I would sleep on it—and then something tumbled to the floor. At first, I thought it was Frau Talwan's laptop, and my heart skipped a beat. She'd been reluctant to let me borrow it, and only did so after acknowledging I'd have had a pretty hard time preparing myself without it. But the thing that fell from my bed was a book. And I'm curious whether you can guess what book that was...



It's not a particularly thick one. Maybe some 200 odd pages? The cover shows a well-dressed couple staring past the camera: a Cameroonian guy wearing a shiny black top hat; a white shirt; a tie; and a long, black, fur-lined mantel. He's holding a walking cane. And a white woman is standing by his side in a dark colored hat and a long, soft mantel with an even bigger, even furrier collar than her man. Well? Of course, you know what book I mean.

In any case, I picked it up, and leafing through it, I came across a picture of the author. And immediately, I knew: It was he whom the friendly-looking man in the interrogation room reminded me of. How had I not seen it before? The couple on the cover were his parents. The author's story had been with me now for weeks—partly because I read so slowly, but also because I don't want it to end. You know, this book contains the memories of a person—an Afro-German—born in Berlin almost precisely 100 years ago! Just think of all the things he lived to see. Experienced. The Weimar Republic. The Nazi times. The Second World War. Reconstruction and the Wirtschaftswunder. The Fall of the Wall. Everything! And the author's voice is with at daybreak: I hear him at sundown; I hear him at noon, in the morning. I hear him at night. Without him, I'd be more than imprisoned, I'd be lost.

I could see something in the corner of my eye, and when I looked up, two moths were spiraling around the lamp, following the pattern of my thoughts: What if this autobiography wasn't merely a gift, but also the fulfillment of the author's obligation to folks like me? What if I could take him as a role model? Sure, maybe I'm unimportant today, but in 100 years... who knows?

And this must have been the right conclusion, because by 8 PM, when I put my hands on the keyboard, my fingers started flying at a speed I'd not thought possible. I wrote and wrote and only took one little break when the letters started swimming together and the walls began to spin. I took a few big gulps straight from the tap and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. I wrote and wrote, ignoring the pain in my right wrist. I wrote again and wrote until

the wee hours of morning. I only stopped when the gaps between the clouds began to glow and finally—after I had closed the laptop—the whole horizon stood in flames.

People who know about these kinds of things have told me I need to put it on my record—that I need to be completely sober, fully conscious, during the entire writing process. So all statements are true. And I'd like to add that any resemblances to actual events or persons living or dead are not coincidental. They're entirely intentional. And that's why I also wrote about you, Nkechi. But I only wrote the truth.

I think the judge will have to recess for at least an hour. And then, when she sees me back in the courtroom, she'll order me to stand. And despite my quivering legs and shaky hands, I'll do it. I've still got that much pride. And then she'll stare at me and speak the way you sometimes do to me. But I won't understand a thing, on account of the pounding in my ears and the flickering before my eyes. And so, I'll probably first comprehend the severity of my sentence much later, maybe after I'm seated in the police car. And then I'll feel sick; ever since last year, I've hated sitting in the backseat. The handcuffs will be entirely unnecessary, but at least the sirens won't be on. Trees and buildings and the not-guilty will all rush past me. I'll be concentrating on just breathing. And I'll breathe and suffer because the ride will still feel far too long.

And when it's all said and done—when the courthouse is long emptied, every news article written, every radio report aired, and every TV interview conducted, I'll have one final wish: My testimony must be published! In full. As far as I'm concerned, you may begin with this letter. Because it's important that those who follow after understand what I have done. How I did it. And most of all: why. They should know the things that led me to my action, big and small. Know that I did what I must do. And they should also know that Brockhaus's murder could most definitely have been prevented! But it should be clear to them that so many things went wrong, so many stones were left

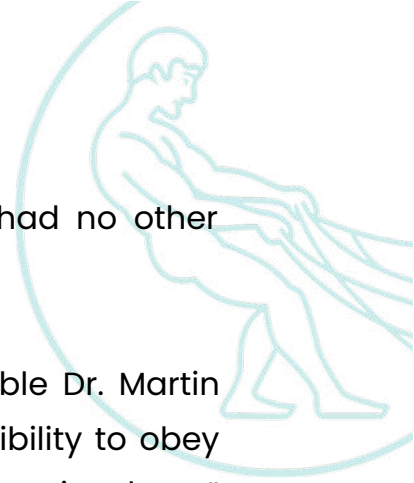


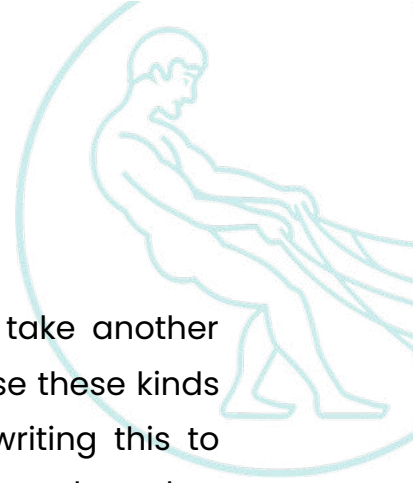
untuned, so many chances missed—that at some point, I had no other option.

I stand by my action. Because, in the words of the honorable Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” [Editor’s Note: Emphasis and German translation by the author.] And you must know that any law that claims men like Brockhaus should not be killed cannot be just.

And so, Nkechi, this is my final request of you. Only this. And afterwards, I promise, you will never hear from me again.

Amata





1. The Truth

The short version is: I saw to it that Brockhaus would never take another breath. But I do need to take at least a small step back because these kinds of things don't simply happen by themselves. Not that I'm writing this to downplay my role. No way. This is a proper confession. I read somewhere that confessions typically have an inherent, mitigating impact. And that's not what I'm after here. I want to experience the full weight of our legal system. It's just that I also wish to maintain that this world has far too many shades of grey to divide people up categorically into the "evil" and the "good."

If it were up to me, Brockhaus's cause of death would be classified—at least in part—as a suicide. After all, on the last day of his life, we were stuck together for hours. Almost literally. Because his air conditioning was broken and the autobahn was basically one big parking lot. It shouldn't take that long to get from Berlin to Timmendorfer Strand. When I drive myself, I usually make it in just three and a half hours. But, of course, it helps when there's less traffic.

Why were we headed there in the first place? A better question would be: Why did Brockhaus even want to tag along? Because as far back as I can remember, Mama and I hold our own little memorial every year on the 3rd of May to commemorate her father's triumph over death. This is our story. Brockhaus had nothing to do with it. We simply happened to work in the same office, for the same non-profit. We sometimes served ourselves from the same coffee pot. And that was about it. Technically, he was my boss, but I tried to avoid him as much as I could. We never so much as spent a single break together.

But I'd made the mistake of calling Mama from the office, something I normally never do. Because even though Brockhaus and I both work with headsets, somehow he always managed to overhear precisely the things I would have wished he hadn't heard. Like that time when I complained to



Anne [Editor's Note: the IT coordinator] about Herr Zimmer prattling on and wasting a full hour of my time on the phone. Herr Zimmer was our biggest donor, and he let us know it every opportunity he had (and saw to it that he created as many of these opportunities as possible). While I was telling Anne about my conversation with Herr Zimmer, I imitated his voice. I can do this well, if I do say so myself. And so, Anne and I were laughing until we were interrupted by Brockhaus clearing his throat. As it turned out, our dear Herr Zimmer was an old tennis partner of his.

In any case, a few days before our appointed meet up, I called Mama to tell her I'd forgotten to reserve a rental car. I remember, I was drawing rows of running stick figures on a piece of scrap paper—I can only really talk to Mama on the phone if I'm doing something else at the same time.

"Then you're going to be too late," she'd said. And that really wasn't fair. After all, I was the only person to accompany her each year on the 3rd of May. So, what did too late even mean? I rubbed my forehead, drew a further line of leaping stick figures, and promised her I'd take care of the bouquet of lilies. But she had nothing to say to that. And I know, I know: I'm too old now for that kind of thing, but I still miss the days when she used to praise me for everything I did. This time her final words weren't: "Take good care!" or "I love you!" but rather: "I'm not going to wait around for you, Amata. I can't do it anymore." And I laughed because I thought it was a joke. Only she did not laugh with me.

After I'd hung up, I realized from Brockhaus's 'humanitarian stare' that I'd been talking too loudly again. His eyes were cloudy. Deep furrows parted his brow from one temple to the other. His mouth hung slightly open, ready to form words I had no interest in hearing. I graced him with a tightlipped smile and took up my headset in one hand. But, of course, he asked me if I had a problem he could help me with. I waved him off.

"That's nice of you," I countered, "but it's really no big deal!"



And then he wanted to know where I needed to be.

"I'm going to Timmendorfer Strand," I said. "It's supposed to be good weather Saturday. Easy-peasy."

I donned my headset, slowly, so as not to appear rude, but unfortunately, I was so hesitant that Brockhaus felt encouraged to keep talking. He stroked his chin. Repeatedly. And nodded in my direction.

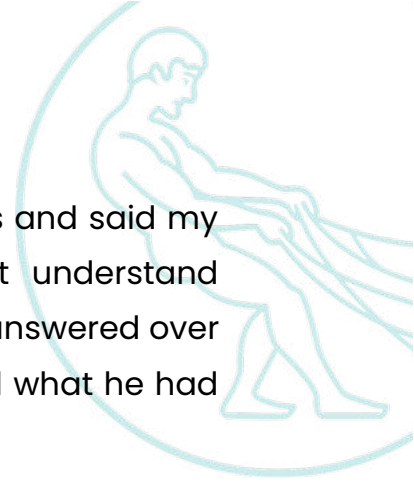
"That's quite the journey by train," he noted.

And hardly had I shrugged my shoulders—the rental cars were all reserved, what else was there to do?—when Brockhaus put two and two together and confronted me with five.

"I'll drive you there! It's the least that I could do."

Of course, I told him I'd already bought train tickets. That the connection really wasn't too expensive, that Mama would pick me up at the local train station—I didn't have time to make any further excuses so spur of the moment. But I finished with: "That's really sweet of you, Herr Brockhaus, but it's totally unnecessary!"

At first, he only smiled. Complete silence. I even dared to exhale, if only a little bit. And then he cleared his throat, observing how moving it was to see the lengths I went to to maintain a good relationship with my mother. How proud she must be of me. I recall staring at him just one moment too long. In my defense, his eyes were starting to tear up. But when his voice cracked, I readjusted my headset and turned away. Some things simply cannot be unseen.



And later that afternoon, when I'd already packed my things and said my goodbyes, he called out something after me that I didn't understand because I was already halfway down the stairs. "Yep, see ya!" I answered over my shoulder as I sped away. But I should have doublechecked what he had said.

Mama and I met every year on the 3rd of May at 2 pm at Timmendorfer Strand. She'd agreed to this new meeting time, but she still never missed an opportunity to inform me that it meant I was missing the official commemoration ceremony. If it were up to Mama, I would have arrived in Hamburg the evening before and spent the night at her place. That way we could have both been at the Waldfriedhof by 9 am to lay a wreath, the way we used to do. Only, I'd never really felt comfortable with that. It felt wrong, standing with all the others in front of that giant wooden cross and mourning the casualties and murder victims. After all, my Opa had not been one of them.

In the end, Mama tolerated my absence from the commemoration ceremonies because I had been able, year after year, to convince her how terribly sorry I was that something urgent had come up again. There was always something. A last-minute training that could not be postponed. Or an audit. And she could be understanding of such things. Migraines worked well, too. I had them all the time. Otherwise, there was the variation where Nkechi needed my support. Wherever Nkechi was concerned, Mama let anything fly.

Since I've been living in Berlin, I rent a car every year and leave by 8 am at the latest. But, of course, that won't work this year now. And it didn't work last year, either, as we all know. But it had always worked before. If I made good time, I'd head to a café with white tablecloths and sit there in the sun alongside all the beautiful people. Sometimes I drank an espresso macchiato with an outstretched pinky finger. Sometimes I enjoyed a piece of cake with it, as well. And on particularly nice days, I'd take a moment to stroll along the promenade and browse the shops. But when I didn't make good time, I'd park

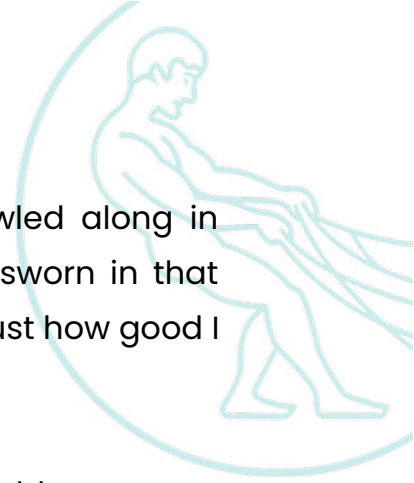
in the supermarket parking lot on Höppnerweg and run sweating straight down to the beach. In either case, Mama was always there waiting for me.

But when I received Brockhaus's text message at 7:40 AM on the 3rd of May, 2025—it was a Saturday—I was still lying in bed where I'd already been staring at my cleverphone for some time. I can't really say how long—three minutes or three hours? Either could have been possible because: Kwame had responded! People who don't know him can't possibly imagine what that meant for me. He'd only written "of course" but I'd already read his message so many times I would not have been surprised if it had started to disintegrate, letter by letter. Kwame had agreed to meet with me that evening! Even now, all these months later, I still feel a tingle in my stomach thinking about it.

I'd known his last name was Ofofu before I even saw him. Since the beginning of January, we'd both been members of Nkechi's initiative "Beyond Reparations!" Our meetings were online. And she'd made it a requirement for all of us to use our real names when we took part in the weekly meetings. But if you were to go to the effort of searching online for information about a 'Kwame Ofofu,' you'd quickly discover that it was about as informative a search term as 'Tom Smith.' And trust me, my 'research' had been very intensive indeed. So intense, in fact, that it was borderline illegal. And still, between the months of January and May, I'd only been able to find out that he lived somewhere in Accra and that he'd lived for a while in Halle—where he'd learned his near perfect German. And so, yes, at that point it had 'only' been a confirmation of an online meeting. And still, I giggled like a kid every time I read his message. But come on, let them who haven't been infatuated cast the first stone.

I swung myself from bed and floated—wrapped in my blanket—through the living room, humming along to the sultry voice of Nina Simone. Feeling good, and I really was. Because I'd already had two days off work and wouldn't have to be back in the office until Thursday. Ohhh ... and I'm feeling good ...

Nina sang full-throatedly. "Und es geht mir guuuut ..." I bawled along in translation. And as strange as it might sound, I could have sworn in that moment that the birds flying by my window really understood just how good I felt.



That's how my day'd begun: full of rhythm and yearning, with bluesy tones and endless peace. And between each line, a promise of more to come. But when I finally consulted my cleverphone to see what Brockhaus had written me about, I was informed that he:

- would pick me up soon (Fennstraße, right? in Moabit?)
- was driving me to Timmendorfer Strand (with great pleasure!)
- wanted to know whether I was already dressed (or at least, well on my way?)
- was practically at my door (but still needed to stop for gas!)
- wasn't trying to rush me (any time in the next half hour would be just fine!)

I facepalmed myself so hard that I saw stars.

In hindsight, I know it would have been best if I had just left immediately. No shower. No makeup. Just thrown on my clothes and headed out the door. It really doesn't take a whole lot longer with the train than it does with a car. Of course, it was a hassle to change in Hamburg and then again in Lübeck, but the distances between them were long enough to fall asleep with a good book, startle yourself awake, panic, then relax again once you realized you still hadn't reached the transfer station. And then, fall asleep again. On the way, I could have replied to Brockhaus and told him I appreciated his offer, but I really did prefer to travel on my own. That we'd see each other again next week at the office. Of course, that would have pissed him off, but let's be honest: from his perspective, that still would have been the better outcome. But instead, I'd tried to downplay the issue. My thinking was: Come on, I can

let Brockhaus drive me to Timmendorfer Strand. How bad could it really be?
[Editor's Note: See Appendix 1.]



Appendix 1: 3rd of May, 2025

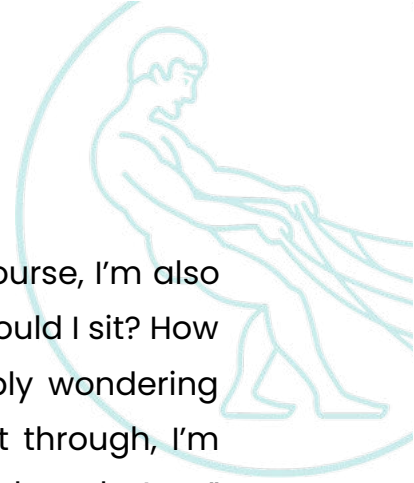
Transcript from Audio File on the Victim's Mobile Phone



Heinz Brockhaus's Final Words

I would have been here earlier, I know it's getting late, but I did leave on time and actually it really doesn't take more than 40 minutes from Mariendorf to Wedding, in fact, at night, I can easily make the trip in 30—especially when I get nothing but green lights the entire way—but this morning, just before 8, there was a bad accident at Potsdamer Platz, a real mess: a semitruck slammed right into a bicyclist—at least that's what they said happened, I wasn't there to see it, but I heard about it on the news and then I saw how they blocked off the streets and then the traffic was rerouted and the entire city was one big jam, and I really did do everything in my power to arrive on time—and I know how important this day is for you, and, of course, I would have made it, I used to be a bike messenger after all, I've told you that, I know the backstreets of Berlin like the inside of my vest pocket, but there are a thousand construction zones right now and all these Sunday drivers on the road and for some reason everyone in Berlin is moving house today, it's unbelievable, and then there was this guy, there's always one of them, driving exactly 29 in a 30 zone, this jackass, I even had to honk once or twice, not too loudly of course, I don't know what his problem was, but then we both got out at a red light, right there at the corner of Schöneberger Ufer, and we really got into it, I had to take out my phone and start recording an audio file, you know, to gather supporting evidence about the incident for my case when I press charges, because he really did get out of line, and at some point, I just lost it, and I smashed my phone to pieces, and I know, this was not my finest hour, I'll admit, but it's a good thing that I did it because otherwise I might have given him a real taste of his own medicine, and so, when you see it that way, I did get off pretty light—or rather, he did, because after all, I wasn't in the wrong, he provoked me. But what I really wanted to say is:

It's time to go!



We can leave now. But only if you want to. I'm ready. But of course, I'm also happy to take a seat. Really. Whatever works for you. Where should I sit? How about here? I'll wait, no problem. Of course, you were probably wondering where I was. And if you were trying to reach me, it didn't get through, I'm afraid. I can't read my messages. My screen is done for: "Spiderweb App," that's what the kids call it these days, right? Isn't that clever, though: Spiderweb App! I could just die. Really. But my screen is totally shot, it just doesn't react at all. Look. And I'm done trying—those tiny splinters, you can't get them out of your skin once they've dug in. But anyway, I really had no way of contacting you.

By the way, you look absolutely stunning. I wanted to tell you first thing when you opened the door, but I heard recently—I can't remember what program it was, it was on the radio last Saturday, sometime around noon, and I heard that women don't like it when men pay them unsolicited compliments anymore! And of course, that made me feel insecure. But it can't be true. Can it? What's wrong with telling a person she looks good? A compliment! That's something positive. I know I always appreciate it when a compliment comes my way. And I live by the Golden Rule: Treat others how you'd like to be treated! If only everyone followed my example, life would be a whole lot easier for all of us.

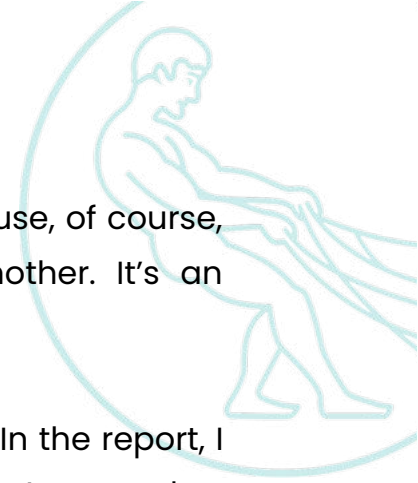
Just take my offer to drive you, for example! Of course, today, I would have much preferred to simply stay at home. It's such a rarity for me to just have a whole day for myself. There's always somebody who wants something from me. Really. I never get a break. Today was a real first. I could have slept in. I could have read the paper. I could have enjoyed a nice breakfast in my favorite café. I'd even thought of going for a hike. But then I thought: No, no, no. Amata needs your help. Just think about her mother! She's looking forward to her eldest daughter being there for her on such an important day. Yes, I did. And we all know how unreliable the trains can be. And so, I just thought about myself, how I would feel if a kind person took the time to pick

my son up and drive him somewhere I was going to be. Because, of course, there's no question about me driving you to see your mother. It's an open-and-shut case.

But this radio journalist was convinced that he knew better! In the report, I mean. The one about women and compliments. You know, I can't remember his name now and maybe that's a good thing, because truth be told, and I'm putting it mildly here: I really had to wonder about him. In fact, I nearly had to write a formal complaint. Because, yes: It's highly irresponsible to broadcast that sort of thing. Particularly in times like these.

Of course, I'm not trying to say we men are always right. God knows, when I have to think about my own father, I can only shake my head. Now, he was a real tyrant! Lived by the rule: If you don't listen, you'll find out the hard way! But I realize he didn't know any better. He grew up in a time when that sort of thing was normal. Thank God, we're much further along as a society these days. And believe me, I've learned a thing or two from my own children. And that's why I'm always the very first to extend a hand and apologize when I make a mistake. It's a learning process, and of course, I want to learn. A life-long learner! You know me. But it's got to be an actual mistake. I mean, come on. There are enough problems in the world, God knows, but the times in which women were actually oppressed are over. Leastways, here, in this country. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about!

Have I ever told you about my mother? Did you know she had a PhD in history? In any case, she never got my father's permission to have her own career. I can still remember their conversations like it was only yesterday. It really wasn't that long ago. I was born in 1962, can you believe it! And we were a perfectly normal family, imagine that! So many women in my mother's generation were forced not merely to love and honor their husbands, but also to obey them, too. They said it in their marriage vows: those very words. Why don't they do a report about that? About all the progress we've made as a society? But instead, we're being preached to by the media about how giving



compliments is the real problem! I've never heard a woman complain to me about getting a compliment. Not once. It's a completely artificial scandal. Fake news! And I'll say it again, loud and clear: It's irresponsible. That's what it is.

God knows not everything is perfect here in Germany. We've got plenty of problems. The homeless, for example. Unemployment! Our public healthcare system is a mess! That's what we should be talking about. But no! According to the Gods of Political Correctness, unsolicited compliments are the real problem! And anyone who disagrees—but, no, I'm holding you up. You know, it's really getting late. We really should already be on the autobahn by now. But take your time. I'll just sit here and wait until you're ready.

