

TAXI

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Talk

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Taxi - Talk

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Taxi - Talk

Carmen and Ulrike were sitting at the kitchen table having a late night snack after their reunification.

Carmen, wearing a terrycloth robe of Ulrike's with the sleeves rolled up twice, stared pensively into the Garfield coffee mug she was cradling between her hands.

"You know what, *Liebling*," said Ulrike, munching her second alfajor, "The next time you are afraid to tell me something, just make these and you'll find me unable to argue."

Snorting, Carmen looked at Ulrike and said with a lopsided smirk, "You'd get fat if I used that tactic."

Taking a sip of coffee to wash down the last bits of the dangerously delicious treat, Ulrike asked, "Why? Are you hiding that much from me?"

When Carmen didn't answer, Ulrike raised her eyebrows. "Well, then out with it. Seize the moment. I've had enough work-outs today and yesterday, so I can easily afford eating a third of these scrumptious little calorie bombs," and grinning, she reached for the box of alfajores.

Turning her gaze back to her coffee, Carmen smiled at Ulrike's antics. Hesitating for a while, she finally said, "I feel stupid."

When Carmen didn't elaborate, Ulrike asked, "Why?"

Glancing quickly at Ulrike before staring at her coffee again, Carmen said, "Because I've been making such a fuss over everything."

Ulrike shrugged. "No need to feel stupid. Next time, just tell me what's bothering you, so we can sort things out together before you get your knickers in a twist."

"But it wasn't about you or about us," said Carmen.

"I know," said Ulrike, "But we're together, and it affects me too in one way or another when something's bothering you. And I'd rather know what's going on in that pretty head of yours than be left guessing - I suck at guessing!"

"So do I, evidently," said Carmen with a half-hearted grin.

When Carmen remained silent, Ulrike quietly finished her alfajor, deciding to be patient and give her partner the time she needed to voice whatever else was troubling her.

After quite a while, Carmen mumbled, still staring at her coffee, "José hasn't talked to me since ... then."

"He's in Buenos Aires now, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Carmen, and, finally looking at Ulrike again, she explained, "But usually when he leaves town he would call me before he leaves and after he arrives. And he'd call at least once a week. He didn't this time."

"Is he okay? Do you have his number?" asked Ulrike, and as Carmen nodded, she asked, "Have you tried to call him?"

Carmen shook her head and said almost inaudibly, "I don't think he wants to talk to me."

"Has he talked to your parents?"

Carmen nodded and stared back at her coffee, letting her hair fall forward.

"Did he tell them that he doesn't want to talk to you?"

When Carmen shook her head, Ulrike reached over and gathered Carmen's hair away from her face. Seeing a single tear rolling down her partner's cheek she caught it and gently wiped it off her face. Then she said softly, "Come, let's go into the living room, hm?"

Nodding silently, Carmen followed her partner to the sofa, and when Ulrike took her in her arms, she broke down and cried, "I'm so sorry that I overreacted so badly. He probably hates me now."

"Carmen ... *Liebling*, listen to me," said Ulrike while she caressed Carmen's hair, "I don't know why he didn't call you, but I'm sure he doesn't hate you. Remember, when we were at Marco's that same evening? He seemed perfectly normal then. Maybe still a bit worried about

you, but there was no indication whatsoever that he had any hard feelings towards you."

"But why didn't he call me?" sobbed Carmen.

"Hm ... Perhaps he did," suggested Ulrike, "I've tried to call you several times, but either you weren't there or you had unplugged your phone."

Nestled into Ulrike's shoulder, Carmen shook her head. "I always plugged the phone back in before I went to bed. He's in Buenos Aires, and he's working, he wouldn't call before midnight."

Raising her eyebrows, Ulrike wondered, "He'd call you that late when he knows you have to work the next day?"

"He would call on the weekend," said Carmen, sitting up and taking the tissue Ulrike offered her.

"Okay, I'm not sure here," said Ulrike while Carmen blew her nose. "And I just admitted that I suck at guessing. But has he ever called you at night, especially on a weekend, since we've been together?"

"I don't think so," said Carmen. "He rarely calls at night when he is in town."

"Well, let me tell you this," said Ulrike, "Maybe it's just me, but, unless it's an emergency, I would never call anyone between eight in the evening and nine in the morning, especially not when I know that the person isn't single. I know you said he used to do it, but you were single then, and he didn't know that I wasn't with you for the last three weekends. "

"What has being single got to do with it?" asked Carmen.

"Well," said Ulrike, "As I said, maybe it's just me, but I wouldn't want to interrupt a couple's private time. I don't know what the time difference is, but if I were he, I'd try to call on the weekend somewhere between 11:00 and 19:00."

"I had the phone unplugged then," mumbled Carmen, playing with the belt of her robe.

"That's what I figured," said Ulrike, sighing. "Want to call him now?"

"I don't know," said Carmen reluctantly.

"Do you have his number?"

"Yes," said Carmen, "It's in my address book."

"But?" asked Ulrike.

"What if he doesn't want to talk to me?" asked Carmen, still fiddling with the belt.

Taking Carmen's hands in hers, Ulrike said, "I think he will be thrilled to finally hear from you. However, if you like, I can talk to him first."

Shaking her head, Carmen said with a smirk, "No, you can't. He's living at my godfather's place, and they only speak Rioplatense, which is the local Spanish dialect in Buenos Aires."

"Oh, I see," said Ulrike, and as she got up, she pulled Carmen with her. "In that case, you'll just have to trust my phenomenal guessing skills and call him yourself."

Making a face, Carmen tried to argue, "It's not cheap to call to Argentina."

"I'll offset it against tax," said Ulrike, refusing to let Carmen draw back into her shell.

Snorting, Carmen asked, "Declared as what, exactly?"

"A special service for a very special customer," said Ulrike, grinning.

Laughing, Carmen shook her head. "You'd never get away with that." As Ulrike was about to argue, she held up her hands, "All right, all right, I'll call him. I'll give you 50 Mark; that should about cover the costs, I think."

"Forget it," said Ulrike as she followed Carmen to the hall, "Take it as a thank you for the presents you sent me."

Taking her address book from her handbag, Carmen turned and looked at Ulrike. Finally, she nodded and said, "All right, thank you," and started looking for the number.

Ulrike wanted to head for the kitchen to give her partner some privacy, but Carmen held her back, and when she had dialled the number on Ulrike's old, standard, olive green telephone, she took Ulrike's hand and looked at her while she waited for an answer.

Ulrike listened to her partner talking in Rioplatense Spanish to her godfather, finding it

incredibly sexy despite not understanding a single word. After a few minutes, she perked up as she heard Carmen mentioning her brother's name, and when she stopped talking, Ulrike smiled and squeezed her hand encouragingly.

Nervously waiting for José to come to the phone, Carmen leaned her head towards Ulrike's, gesturing that she should listen in.

Leaning slightly down, Ulrike pressed her ear as close to Carmen's as the receiver allowed, but jerked back, when José almost yelled into the phone, "*Hey Schwesterherz! Where have you been? I've tried to call you about a thousand times.*"

Grinning from ear to ear, Ulrike poked Carmen in the ribs and mouthed, "I knew it!" as José went on, "*Papa said you're busy, but I'm not buying that. Have you moved in with Ulrike or something?*"

Blushing crimson, Carmen replied ruefully, "No, I haven't. I'm sorry. I've had some problems, and I had the phone unplugged during the day. I thought you'd call at night."

Patting Carmen's shoulder, Ulrike turned and went into the kitchen. However, as she wanted to close the kitchen door to give Carmen more privacy, her partner gestured at her to leave it open. Thus, she poured herself a fresh cup of coffee and sat down at the table, watching Carmen standing in the hall in her white robe that, because of Carmen's smaller size, almost brushed the floor. She smiled, as she saw her partner fiddling with the telephone cord while she told her brother, "I know. Ulrike already explained that to me."

Ulrike wondered if she should bring Carmen a cup of fresh coffee, and as Carmen looked over at her, she held up the Garfield mug with a questioning look.

Nodding to Ulrike, Carmen said to José, "I don't want to talk about it now; I'm calling from Ulrike's phone. I just wanted ... I just wanted to see how you're doing."

"Coward," mouthed Ulrike with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, as she placed the mug with fresh coffee on the sideboard. She chuckled as Carmen poked her tongue out at her. Now this was more like the Carmen she had come to love before all the drama started. And as she blew Carmen a kiss, she was glad to see that the sparkle in her partner's eyes had returned.

#

The next morning, Ulrike woke to the smell of fresh coffee and something else pleasant which she couldn't identify. Raising her eyebrows in curiosity, she stretched languidly, and then, smiling contentedly, she threw back the blanket and got up to investigate what Carmen had conjured up in the kitchen.

Seeing that Carmen was standing at the table with her back towards her, Ulrike walked up to her and hugged her from behind, humming, "Mmm, good morning!"

Turning around to face her partner, Carmen kissed Ulrike and said, "Good morning, sleepyhead."

Ulrike raised her eyebrows - Sleepyhead? - It was only half past seven! "How long have you been up?"

"About an hour and a half," said Carmen, grinning. "I've made fresh bread rolls."

"How'd you do that?" asked Ulrike.

"In the frying pan," said Carmen. "Your oven doesn't seem to work."

"I know. It hasn't been working for years. That's why I was wondering how you made them. I didn't know you could make bread rolls in a pan."

Shaking her head, wondering how anyone could live with a non-functional oven for years, Carmen said, "Well, they aren't exactly the same as oven-baked ones, but yes, you can. I must say, I'm pleasantly surprised that you have stocked up your kitchen cupboard so well that it even includes dry yeast."

Furrowing her brow, Ulrike thought for a moment, and as she remembered, her face lit up, "Ah, yeah, I bought that the other week. I wanted to make *Plinsen*, but I forgot to buy the

eggs and I couldn't be bothered to go out again. And then I forgot all about it."

As Ulrike was turning to leave the kitchen, Carmen asked, "Are you going have a shower now? They taste best when they are fresh."

"Okay, let me just freshen up a bit," said Ulrike.

Holding up the sleeve of the bathrobe with one hand, Carmen poured them both a fresh cup of coffee. Smiling, she realised that she hadn't felt this good in weeks, and she vowed that the next time she felt insecure, she would think of the previous evening to remind herself that talking her problems over with Ulrike was considerably better than trying to cope with everything on her own.

#

"Mmm, these are good!" said Ulrike as she finally took her first bite of the roll.

Carmen smiled. "I'm glad you like them."

"You really are a miracle worker in the kitchen."

Waving her hand in a dismissive gesture, Carmen said, "Nonsense! It's all pretty basic, nothing fancy."

"Well, it seems pretty fancy to me."

"For you even a fried egg is fancy," said Carmen, chuckling.

Pondering for a moment, Ulrike said, "Well, if it's not burned at the bottom and completely raw on top, I guess I'd consider it fancy, yep."

"And here I thought I was exaggerating," said Carmen. "You really are hopeless."

"I just don't like ... uh ... I just remembered that the flowers I bought for you are still at Frau Krüger's. I hope she isn't alarmed that she couldn't reach you yesterday."

"I suppose she can imagine that I'm with you," said Carmen, "But I have to go home soon anyway. I have to feed Tabitha."

"Oh, okay," said Ulrike with a touch of disappointment in her voice.

Putting her hand on Ulrike's, Carmen asked, "Are you coming with me?"

Her face breaking into a smile, Ulrike said, "I'd love to."

Squeezing Ulrike's hand, Carmen leaned over and kissed her. "I love you," she said as they parted.

#

They were just ready to leave when the phone rang.

"Hoffmann," answered Ulrike, and a moment later had to suppress a groan when she learnt that her mother was at the other end, asking her to buy a new flexi lead for Püppi as the stop lock on hers wasn't working and she didn't want to keep her on the short spare lead till Frau Schröder returned. "How is she doing?" asked Ulrike. "Do you know yet when she'll be out of hospital?" And covering the transmitter with her hand, she quickly conversed with Carmen, whether she minded stopping by at the pet shop.

"*She broke her hip,*" said Else. "*Her daughter says she'll be in hospital for several weeks.*"

"Gosh, I'm sorry to hear that. All right, I'll get the leash and I'll bring it this afternoon."

"*Is there someone with you? Is it Carmen?*"

Rolling her eyes towards the ceiling, Ulrike sighed and acknowledged, "Yes."

"*Then bring her for coffee and cake so I can finally meet her,*" said Else resolutely.

Cringing inwardly, Ulrike quickly asked Carmen if she would mind visiting her mother or if maybe she had something better to do - secretly hoping for the latter.

Alas, Carmen smiled and responded that she would love to meet Ulrike's mother.

Still pressing her hand on the transmitter, Ulrike whispered, "There's really nothing you'd

rather do?"

"Well, there is certainly something I'd rather do," said Carmen grinning, and seductively running her hand down Ulrike's spine. "But we can do that later."

"Unfortunate," mumbled Ulrike, and told Else that they'd be there around three.

"Why are you so reluctant to introduce me to your mother?" asked Carmen as Ulrike finished the call.

"Eh ... it's actually the other way around - I'm reluctant to introduce my mother to you."

"Why?" Carmen wanted to know as they headed for the door.

Shrugging, Ulrike said, "I don't know. I do love my mother, but she can be a bit annoying at times." She was just about to shut the door behind her, when she suddenly had an idea.

"Wait a moment," she asked Carmen and hurried back inside.

Curiously leaning against the doorframe, Carmen watched Ulrike rummaging around in the drawer of her sideboard.

"Ah, there it is!" exclaimed Ulrike, and holding up a key on a key-ring, she walked over to Carmen and said, "Here. Take this. Then you won't have to wait in the car again when I'm not at home. Just let yourself in."

"Are you sure?" asked Carmen, eyeing the key.

"Of course I am. You aren't going to rob me now, are you?" said Ulrike with a smirk, and nudging Carmen, she held the key closer and encouraged her, "Come on, take it."

Reluctantly, Carmen reached for the offered key. "Thank you."

When Carmen kept staring at the key in her hand and didn't move from the doorway, Ulrike asked, "What is it?"

"I..." Carmen paused, unsure as to how to voice her thoughts without the risk of hurting her partner.

"You don't have to give me yours, *Liebling*," said Ulrike. "I understand you like locking yourself up in your 'stronghold'; even though I wish you wouldn't feel the need to do that."

Looking up at Ulrike, Carmen said, "I will think about it, okay?"

"Sure," said Ulrike, and giving her partner a gentle nudge, she said, "Come on, let's go, hm? I feel a bit silly standing in the doorway like this."

As they were walking down the stairs, Carmen pondered why she was so reluctant to return the gesture. It wasn't that she didn't trust Ulrike. She did trust her, and of course she wasn't afraid that Ulrike might do anything inappropriate. But Ulrike was right, she liked holing herself up when she felt vulnerable and insecure, and she wasn't sure if she could abandon this need of hers, yet. And although she had vowed to talk to Ulrike when she had a problem, the thought of anyone, even someone she loved as much as Ulrike, being able to barge in on her when she felt she couldn't face another human being, was simply too uncomfortable to her at this point in time.

#

On the way to the car park, Carmen fumbled to get the new key onto her key-ring, and when it was finally attached, she held out the bunch of keys for Ulrike to take it, "Here, you can drive."

Holding up her hand, Ulrike shook her head, "No, no, no. It's my day off. And also, you should get accustomed to driving again. It's like falling from a horse; you'll get back up right away."

"I would never even attempt to ride a horse," said Carmen sulkily.

"That's not the point."

Heaving a sigh, Carmen said, "I know," and unwillingly trudged to the driver's side.

Fastening her seatbelt, Ulrike asked, "Do you know a pet shop on the way where I can get the flexi lead?"

"Sure," said Carmen as she manoeuvred out of the parking bay, "We can drive to the one I always go. Then I can also buy a few things for Tabitha."

"Great," said Ulrike and leaned back.

A few minutes later, Carmen asked, "Would you mind if we had lunch with Frau Krüger? I'd like to make it up to her that I avoided talking to her for so long."

"I don't mind at all," said Ulrike. "I think Frau Krüger is really cool. That reminds me, I wanted to ask you, is she talking in a Berlin dialect to you as well or does she only do that with me?"

Smiling, Carmen said, "I've never heard her speak in anything but a Berlin dialect. She's a true Berlin original, a bit like my Oma, though less extreme."

"Am I ever going to meet your grandmother?" asked Ulrike, curious about the old woman.

"Probably," said Carmen, and not wanting to talk about Oma Hertha, whom she loved as much as she feared, she quickly asked, "Do you like Milanese Napolitana?"

"I don't know," said Ulrike, "What is it?"

When Carmen described the Argentinian dish to her, Ulrike said, "Sounds delicious."

"All right, then that's what we'll have for lunch," said Carmen and turned into the pet shop's car park.

Having stopped at the butcher's as well, it was almost ten when they finally rang Frau Krüger's doorbell.

"Frollein Carmen! Und Frollein Ulrike auch! Na det is ja ne Wonne, Sie beede wieder zusammen zu sehn!" greeted the old lady, obviously pleasantly surprised to see the two together. *"Warten Se mal 'n Moment!"* Frau Krüger told them to wait and walked over to her sideboard on which the vase with the flowers stood.

"These are for you," she said as she handed Carmen the vase, "From Fräulein Ulrike. I tried to give them to you yesterday and this morning, but you weren't at home," and winking at Carmen, she went on, "I already guessed that you'd be with Fräulein Ulrike."

Carmen blushed. Although she had foreseen that Frau Krüger would assume that she was with Ulrike, she had not counted on her being so forward about it.

Ulrike grinned at the old woman's bluntness.

Clearing her throat, Carmen said, "Thank you for taking care of the flowers. We wanted to ask you if you would like to come over for lunch. I'm making Milanese Napolitana."

Searching her memory for a moment, the neighbour said, "Ah, that's the Schnitzel with ham and this Italian cheese with the name I can never remember, right?"

"Mozzarella," said Carmen, "Yes, that's it."

"I'd love to come, if I'm not intruding."

"It's no trouble, Frau Krüger, and I already bought enough meat for the three of us, hoping you'd agree."

"Well then," said the old lady, "When shall I come?"

"13:00, as usual, if that's all right with you?"

"Of course, thank you," said Frau Krüger.

As they went over to Carmen's door, Ulrike looked back at Frau Krüger who was watching them and then, making a thumbs-up sign, winked at Ulrike, before she closed her door.

Ulrike could hardly suppress a chuckle as she turned to face Carmen who handed her the vase in order to unlock her door.

As Ulrike watched Carmen unlocking the two security locks, she felt a pang of sympathy

for her partner's insecurity. Of course Carmen was reluctant to share her keys. This was her castle, her safe haven. To give this up and allow someone to access her sanctuary at will, would require more than just a little trust.

While Carmen fed her clearly unhappy cat, Ulrike went ahead into the living room, placed the vase with the flowers on the table and sat down, knowing that she'd only be in the way in the small kitchen. Reaching for the remote control, she switched on the TV.

Zapping through the channels, she thought how great it was that Carmen had cable TV. She still only had the seven customary analogue programmes.

"Tabitha is terribly mad at me," said Carmen as she came from the kitchen and stopped at the door to her bedroom. "I'm going to change before I put away the groceries. Then she can at least eat in peace."

"Okay," said Ulrike, not sure how else she should respond to this, as voicing her thoughts about how Carmen was spoiling the cat would certainly not be welcome.

Walking into the bedroom, Carmen noticed that the duvet looked rather crumpled. Thinking that Tabitha probably slept on the bed, she went over to straighten it and suddenly cried out in disgust, "*Iih! Pfui Teufel!*"

"What's wrong?" asked Ulrike as she appeared in the doorway.

"Tabitha peed on the bed."

Ulrike laughed. "She sure knows how to communicate her displeasure."

Carmen could clearly not see any humour in this, and as she stripped off the sheets and the duvet cover, she cursed, "I'll have to get the duvet and the mattress professionally cleaned."

"Nonsense," said Ulrike, "Just use bile soap."

"That only helps against the stains on the outside, it's not a sanitiser."

Rolling her eyes, Ulrike thought Carmen was making far too much fuss about this little incident. But it was her flat and her bed, so she refrained from arguing any further. Instead she asked, "*Liebling*, do you have a yogurt or something? I could use a snack before lunch."

Picking up the pile of bedclothes, Carmen looked at Ulrike and said, "I think I do. Just go and have a look into the fridge and help yourself to whatever you like."

Opening the fridge, Ulrike said jokingly, "Sorry to disturb Your Highness," as she noticed the cat staring at her. Spotting a plain yogurt behind the cold-cuts, Ulrike took it out and closing the door, she said, "Wow, you really were hungry, huh?" as she saw Tabitha stretching in front of her now completely empty bowl.

Ignoring Ulrike, the cat walked past her, her bushy tail held high.

Shaking her head at the cat's antics, Ulrike mumbled, "Well, actually, it's not like you were starving. After all, you could have eaten your dry-food." Grabbing a spoon from the drawer, she left the kitchen and hearing Carmen rummaging around in the bathroom - probably putting the laundry in the washing machine - she proceeded into the living room.

Settling down on the couch, she was just about to take her first spoonful of yogurt, when Tabitha jumped up, demonstratively sat down next to her and focused on the spoon with a hypnotising stare from her golden eyes as if endeavouring to will the spoon closer.

"You want some?" asked Ulrike and held the spoon with the yogurt closer.

As the cat's eyes followed the spoon, Ulrike held it in front of Tabitha's face.

"Eating from a silver spoon is more to your liking than eating the dry-food from your bowl, huh?" commented Ulrike as the cat began to lick the yogurt. "Well, I wouldn't want to eat from a bowl on the floor either, I'll give you that. Though I'm sure Carmen buys you the best food available."

"Who are you talking to?" asked Carmen as she came out of the bathroom. As she saw Ulrike with Tabitha, she asked aghast, "What are you doing?"

Shrugging, Ulrike grinned, "She prefers yogurt over dry-food, and the other bowl is empty. It's low fat. I don't think it'll do any harm."

"Probably not," said Carmen, "But she really shouldn't eat from the spoon."

"Eh, don't be so fussy, *Liebling*," said Ulrike.

Sighing, Carmen gave up her complaints as she saw her cat moving onto Ulrike's lap and settling down. It was rather endearing to see that a bit of yogurt seemed to have changed Tabitha's view of Ulrike. Nonetheless, when she saw her partner continuing to eat yogurt from that very same spoon, she exclaimed, "God, that is gross!" and shuddering, she turned and headed for the kitchen.

Ulrike chuckled and said to Tabitha, "Sometimes I don't understand your mistress. Here she's spoiling you like a little princess but then she's having a problem with us eating from the same spoon."

#

Carmen had just started to prepare lunch when the phone rang. Hurrying to her desk in the living room, she answered the phone on the third ring, "Ja?" ... "Ah, Mamá, I'm just in the process of preparing lunch, could we talk later?"

"Carmen, I've been trying to reach you for an eternity, and we haven't seen you since my birthday. What's going on? And don't tell me again that you're busy. You've been a teacher for almost 20 years and you've always had enough time to come over at least once a week - except ... is this about Ulrike?"

"No, Mamá, it isn't," Carmen tried to reassure her mother, "But she's here and Frau Krüger will come over for lunch, so I really can't talk now."

"All right, but then you must come here for dinner."

Nervously running her hand through her hair, Carmen thought that this day was becoming rather full, but when her mother kept lamenting about how long they hadn't seen each other and that she wouldn't take no for an answer, Carmen finally relented, "All right, Mamá, but it might be a bit later. I'm invited to Ulrike's mother's place for coffee."

"As long as you promise to come, I don't care how late it will be. And you're welcome to bring Ulrike, of course."

"All right, Mamá, I'll tell her. Can I please go on making lunch now?"

"Está bien. Hasta luego."

"Till later," acknowledged Carmen and, ending the call, she slumped down in her chair and groaned.

"What's up?" asked Ulrike, "Trouble?"

"That depends on how you define 'trouble' ... we've been invited to my parents' place for dinner. You can say no, but I can't."

"I'm not going to say no," said Ulrike. "It'll be more pleasant than visiting my mother."

"Somehow I doubt that," said Carmen. "God, I'm already exhausted thinking about the day ahead."

Grinning, Ulrike said, teasing, "That's what you get when you avoid people for weeks - the invitations accumulate until you can't avoid them any longer."

Poking her tongue out at Ulrike, Carmen dragged herself out of the chair and went back into the kitchen.

#

When they were finally sitting at the dinner table in the corner of Carmen's living room, Ulrike hummed appreciatively and commented, "This is the best thing I've ever eaten!"

Laughing, Carmen said, "You say that about every dish I make."

"That's because you outdo yourself each time," stated Ulrike.

"I agree with Ulrike. You're an excellent cook," said Frau Krüger, and she added with a smirk, "I consider myself very fortunate to have you as my neighbour." Leaning towards Ulrike, she winked and mock-whispered, "You've made a good catch."

Ulrike chuckled and glanced at Carmen to see her reaction. Seeing her blush, she felt an irresistible urge to tease her partner, and, mirroring Frau Krüger, she leaned over and stage-whispered back, "You shouldn't say such things while we're eating. She's making the tomatoes envious."

Sitting up, Frau Krüger replied seriously, "You're right. We don't want green tomatoes, after all."

Both Ulrike and Frau Krüger burst into laughter, while Carmen, who had turned an even deeper shade of red, cried out, "You are terrible!"

"No, dear," said Frau Krüger, smirking, "We're just helping you."

"How is making me blush supposed to be helping?" asked Carmen, a bit annoyed.

The neighbour smiled. "You see, my Willem, he always loved to make me blush. But the more often I heard such comments from him, the more I got used to them, and at some point my body simply wouldn't react any more. Instead, I found myself rather enjoying the teasing, and I learnt to 'retaliate'."

Grinning, Ulrike asked, "How did he take your 'retaliating'?"

"Oh, at first he was quite baffled," admitted Frau Krüger, "But soon it became more of a sport: we'd outdo each other with teasing remarks."

Frau Krüger was in her element as she was telling stories from the 'good old days'. With a proud look and a smile on her face, she recounted that, when her Willem courted her, he always called for her with a cab - a horse drawn cab. "*Mitte Droschke hatta mir imma abjeholt. Aba ne richtje Droschke, Frollein Ulrike, mit'n Jaul vorne dran. Ja, ja, dit warn noch Zeiten.*"

"That's amazing! That reminds me of the Iron Gustav," said Ulrike excitedly, thinking of the famous cab driver, Gustav Hartmann, nicknamed "Eiserner Gustav", who still lived on in the hearts of Berlin taxi drivers. Her face lit up and she asked, "He was alive when you were courting, yes? Did you ever get to see him?"

"*Den Eisernen Justav...*" Frau Krüger remembered fondly, "Oh, yes, I remember it vividly. It was 1928, the year my Willem and I were married. We saw him, first when he drove past on the Ku'damm when he returned from his trip to Paris. His horse didn't look too happy, but the Iron Gustav was tirelessly waving his hat at the crowd. An imposing man he was, with his full beard and all the decorations he had received during his trip. And then later in the evening, we saw him at Lunapark."

"Lunapark?" asked Ulrike, not aware of the location.

Frau Krüger waved her hand, "It's long gone. It was a huge amusement park, over by the lake. The Iron Gustav celebrated his return there, and we saw him, surrounded by a throng of people while he was having a beer."

"Wow, I wish I could have met him," said Ulrike. "He's sort of an idol for me."

"I rather liked the film with Heinz Rühmann," said Carmen, "But I seem to remember that he didn't like taxis. How can he be your idol?"

"That's just a legend," said Frau Krüger, "It can't be true because I know that he owned a motorised cab himself."

"Even if it's true, it doesn't matter," said Ulrike. "I admire him for his work ethics as a cab driver and for his courage to take on such an exhausting journey at his age and for his iron will to see it through. And I always liked that he has the same surname as my maternal grandparents. We might even be related, who knows?" Ulrike grinned and concluded, "Anyway, whether he liked them or not, I believe it must have been difficult for him to see

that the motorised cabs were taking over."

"It certainly was," said Carmen.

"I thought it was rather a pity myself," said Frau Krüger. "I've always been partial to the horse drawn cabs as long as they existed. They had a far classier appearance. Nothing against you and your taxi, Ulrike, but a beautiful horse and a nicely crafted cab are just so much prettier to look at than any motorised taxi."

"You'll get no argument from me, Frau Krüger," said Ulrike. "A horse drawn cab is definitely a beautiful sight."

Smirking, Carmen asked, "Would you exchange your taxi for one if you could?"

Ulrike shook her head and grinned, "Nah. The Daimler is far more comfortable, especially in cold and rainy weather."

"If we could marry, I'd love to drive to church in a white wedding carriage," said Carmen dreamily.

Ulrike almost choked on her water. Carmen wanted to marry her? She had never said anything to that regard. And even if it was just hypothetically - wasn't it a bit too early to be thinking of marriage? After all they only knew each other since June and had just reunited after not seeing each other for several weeks. And here Carmen was suddenly dreaming of white wedding carriages?!

"Don't look so terrified," said Carmen, "It's not as if I can drag you to the altar anyway."

Dismayed that her shock had showed on her face, Ulrike desperately searched for something to say that wouldn't result in digging an even deeper hole for herself. "I just think it's a bit early to be thinking of marriage, even if it's not possible."

"It's possible in Denmark," said Frau Krüger with a grin, "Though they call it registered partnership. But perhaps you could go there for a ceremony? However, I agree with Ulrike that it is a bit early. My Willem was courting me for almost three years before he asked me to marry him."

Before Carmen could get any ideas, Ulrike quickly asked, "Where did you meet him?" She breathed a sigh of relief when Frau Krüger launched into recounting how she met her Willem at the café-bakery of her parents, where he was a regular customer.

"That was nice," said Carmen once Frau Krüger had left.

"She's a hoot," said Ulrike as she helped Carmen carrying the dishes into the kitchen, "And she sure has interesting stories to tell."

"Mhm," Carmen hummed in agreement. "Just put those in the sink, I'll wash them later. We have to leave in a few minutes if we want to be at your mother's in time."

"*Mist!* I had hoped you'd forget," said Ulrike jokingly.

Carmen slapped her partner's well-muscled abs. "You are terrible! I'm sure she isn't as bad as you make her sound."

"I just hope she hasn't invited my brother," said Ulrike.

"Why?" Carmen wanted to know as they were getting ready to leave.

"He's worse than my mother," said Ulrike deadpan.

"How so?"

"I'll tell you on the way," said Ulrike as they headed for the lift.

#

"You wanted to tell me about your brother," Carmen reminded Ulrike as they finally were on the city ring road.

Sighing, Ulrike explained that her brother was a computer programmer - his third 'vocation' after finishing his degree in German studies and philosophy and trying his luck as a taxi driver. "He is a scrounger, inherently lazy and perpetually arriving late, and he usually

doesn't remain in one job for long. And I will definitely never let him work for me again!"

"What was wrong with him working for you?" Carmen asked, wondering how anyone could speak so badly about their brother.

Clenching her jaw at the reminder, Ulrike explained that he had persuaded her to take the night shift, convincing her how much she would benefit from it.

"And you didn't, I gather."

"Apart from the shitload of extra bookkeeping and tax-business work that it meant, which would have been okay had it been worth it," said Ulrike, "He didn't actually drive much at all. He got the car in the evening, all right. Then he'd take one or two tours and drive home, parking the car in his area even though I had asked him not to. And then I had to call each morning to get him out of bed to bring the taxi, which didn't always go smoothly either."

"Why?" asked Carmen as she switched to the right lane in order to take the next exit that would lead them to Ulrike's place as well as to Else's, who lived in the same area.

"Because he lives in Kreuzberg," said Ulrike. "The Mercedes star was stolen the first night. The second time the star, the radio and the taximeter went bye-bye; and when the car was broken into the second time and my insurance costs went through the roof, I told him to go to hell."

"Ouch!" said Carmen, making a face. "I see how that would make you less inclined to see him. When was this?"

"1975," said Ulrike. "But before you say that's damn long ago, I'm going to tell you that he hasn't changed one bit in all that time, and I see him often enough - unfortunately - because I'm the one he calls whenever there's a problem with one of his rust buckets. Can you believe it? The man is 40 and he hasn't yet managed to buy himself a proper car, not even a decent used one." Ending her rant, Ulrike said, "You'll have to drive past my place and turn into Peter-Vischer-Straße. The part of Cranachstraße where my mother lives is a one-way-street."

"Okay," said Carmen and followed Ulrike's instructions.

As they had turned into Cranachstraße, Ulrike pointed to an empty space a few cars ahead and said, "You'd better take that space over there."

"It's far too small," said Carmen as she was parallel to the space, "Let's see if we'll find a bigger one."

"Wait!" Ulrike called out. "It's Saturday afternoon; there won't be many choices. With a little wiggling it'll fit."

"I don't like 'wiggling'," protested Carmen, "I'm used to parking bays."

"I think you're pretty good at wiggling," said Ulrike grinning. "But if you insist, I'll do the wiggling."

Laughing, Carmen said, "All right oh great wiggler," and applying the handbrake, she put the Alfa out of gear and got out.

Instead of walking around the car, Ulrike just climbed over the centre console to get into the driver's seat and carefully manoeuvred the Alfa into the empty space. As she grabbed the plastic bag from the pet shop and got out, Carmen said from the other side, "The driver in front of you won't be happy. There's even less space left in front of him."

"Tough," said Ulrike and shut the door. Checking the distance between the Alfa and the other car as she passed through the gap between the cars, she said, "I don't see the problem. He's got plenty space. He'll get out."

"I wouldn't," said Carmen as she fell into step with Ulrike.

"You'd get used to it if you lived here," said Ulrike. "Where Norbert lives it's even worse. You're lucky if you find a parking space within five minutes walking distance."

"Well, in the evenings and on the weekends it's not easy to find one at my place either, but at least there are parking bays," said Carmen.

"Here we are," said Ulrike as she turned into the short pathway that led to the front door.

"It looks a bit similar to the house where we lived with my Oma when we came here," said Carmen.

"It's a typical pre-war building, I guess," said Ulrike as she opened the massive front door.

"Yes," said Carmen as she looked around the entrance hall. "I like the high ceilings. I remember in my Oma's flat I felt like entering a castle with the large rooms and the pretty stucco."

"Oh yeah, I know what you mean. Those flats are awesome, but in this house only the entrance hall and the staircase are large and beautiful, the flats aren't as big as in other houses I've seen, and there's no pretty stucco," said Ulrike. "Come on, my mother lives in the rear building."

As they walked on the pathway between the back gardens, Ulrike pointed to the raised ground floor flat on the right, "I grew up in that flat over there. Now, my mother lives in a two-room flat on the third floor."

Carmen smiled. "Our flat was raised ground floor too. An iron staircase went from our room into the back garden. My Oma and my great-grandmother were growing vegetables there."

"They grew veggies here too when I was a child," said Ulrike as they climbed the stairs, "Nobbi and I always got to climb the old plum tree, and we'd get a basket full for helping with the picking."

As Ulrike got out her keys and unlocked her mother's door, Püppi came running to greet them.

"*Mutti? Wir sind's*," she called out to let her mother know that they had arrived. And bending down to scratch the poodle behind its ears, she said, "Hi Püppi, I got a new leash for you and I brought you a few treats too."

"I'm coming," called Else from the living room.

Ulrike helped Carmen out of her jacket and hung it on the coat rack.

"*Guten Tag, Carmen, wie schön, dass ich Sie endlich kennenlerne*," Else greeted cheerfully as she shook Carmen's hand. Taking a step back, she took in Carmen's appearance and said, "I really don't know why my daughter was so reluctant to introduce us. I was beginning to think you were some sort of equivalent to Quasimodo. But here you are beautiful as if you'd just stepped out of a fashion magazine." And turning to Ulrike she said, "Really, Ulrike, sometimes I'm wondering what's going on in your head."

"Thank you for the compliment, Frau Hoffmann," said Carmen beaming.

"Now, come on in," said Else, "Coffee and cake are already on the table."

"I've got the leash and a few treats for Püppi," said Ulrike.

Without even looking back at Ulrike, Else just waved her hand and said, "You can put them in the kitchen."

Rolling her eyes, Ulrike sighed and placed the plastic bag on the fridge. Turning around, she saw Püppi expectantly looking up at her with her soft, dark eyes. Smiling, she said, "All right, you shall have a treat too," and taking one from the bag, she gave it to the dog and finally followed the others into the living room.

As she sat down next to Carmen on the sofa, her mother complained, "I tried to get your brother to come as well, but I couldn't reach him all day."

"He probably hasn't paid his phone bill and they cut him off," surmised Ulrike as she helped herself to a piece of home-made apple cake.

"That can't be it," said Else. "He's got a well-paying job now."

"Then why did he scrounge 20 Mark from me the last time I fixed his car?"

"Because the parts he had to buy were so expensive that he didn't have any money left," said Else, "Which is also why I gave him the money to pay his phone bill."

"You gave him money to pay his damn bill?! The parts only cost 15 Mark because we got them from the junkyard."

"Why do you make him buy parts at the junkyard?" Else asked indignantly.

Clenching her jaw, Ulrike explained, "Because he can't afford new parts, and it wouldn't be worth it anyway as his poor excuse for a car won't make the next MOT."

"Well, be that as it may," said Else, "His phone bill is paid, and I'm wondering why he wasn't at home all day."

"Perhaps he unplugged the phone," suggested Carmen, thinking of her own habit.

"Why would he do that? Especially on a Saturday," asked Else.

Cringing inwardly, Carmen said, "Perhaps he is busy working?"

"Ah, but you see, Carmen, he isn't a teacher. He is just playing with computers. He doesn't have to correct homework and prepare for the next lessons on the weekend, like you do. His new job is well paid, mind you, though I'm not sure why they are paying him that much for playing around with computers while important people like teachers get paid far too little if you want my opinion."

"I don't know," said Carmen, feeling a little awkward, "I can't really complain."

"Ah, but you are *Oberstudienrätin*, I hear," said Else, "I guess the salary is all right once you reach that level, and you've certainly worked hard to get there. Ulrike told me you've taken on a dance class as well?"

"Yes," said Carmen, smiling.

"I bet they aren't even paying you for it, or are they?" asked Else.

"No, it's voluntary," said Carmen reluctantly.

"That's very generous of you to take on extra work without even getting paid for it," said Else, "It's a shame that the government doesn't see the value of teachers and pupils interacting with each other in a less formal environment. I'm sure the pupils will greatly benefit from this dance class."

Ulrike finished her last piece of cake and leaned back. Tuning out the conversation, she smiled as she observed Püppi in her basket happily gnawing on her treat. She should have guessed that her mother would be all over Carmen, as she had already taken her side when she had spoken to her the previous day. The sole fact that Carmen was an academic in a teaching profession, with an official senior service title to boot, was clearly bringing out a sympathetic side of Else that Ulrike had hardly ever experienced.

Ulrike could understand why her mother was so enamoured with Carmen.

Becoming a teacher had always been Else's dream. Alas, she was denied the opportunity as her mother couldn't afford sending her into town to attend a high-school, even less a university.

Instead, Else had to leave school after only eight years in order to go to work so she could help support her mother and herself after her father had died in the war.

Later, once Ulrike and Norbert had started school, she had made another attempt to further her education and perhaps make her dream come true.

However, when her husband died unexpectedly when Ulrike was only nine, she had to give up all her studies and go back to work. Her studies had helped her in so far as she could get a job as a secretary at least, but she had never been able to fulfil her dream.

When neither Ulrike nor Norbert was inclined to follow a teaching career, Else had been terribly disappointed, though she had always hoped that Norbert would eventually further his degree in German studies and become a teacher.

Else would never understand why Ulrike didn't even try to find a job associated with her academic degree. Instead, she chose to work as something as primitive as a taxi driver, which in Else's opinion every idiot could do.

Ulrike was glad that her mother liked Carmen. Nevertheless, she couldn't help feeling a tad awkward sitting there watching the dog while her mother went on talking. She was going

on about the importance of teachers in general and high-school teachers in particular. Then she continued by praising Carmen personally for having chosen such a demanding career that required so much hard work and dedication.

Ulrike looked at the clock.

#

Later, on their way to the car, Ulrike asked, "How about we swap parents?"

Carmen laughed and said, "I really like your mother. But I understand your feelings now."

"Of course you like her; she was gushing over you as if you were the greatest person that ever graced the face of the earth."

"You don't agree?" said Carmen cheekily.

"Oh, I do," said Ulrike. "I just think that my mother's perception is somewhat skewed, especially when it comes to my brother or me."

"It appears so, indeed," agreed Carmen.

As they reached the car, Ulrike suddenly stopped and said, "See, that's what I meant. You either get used to this or you're screwed."

Dismayed, Carmen looked at the now even smaller 'wobble-room' and said, "Not even you can get out of there."

Gesturing to Carmen with her hand to give her the keys, Ulrike said grinning, "Watch and learn."

"All right, bragger," said Carmen, and handing her partner the keys, she crossed her arms and said, "Let's see you do it."

Ulrike blew Carmen a kiss and glided into the driver's seat.

It took her several minutes to get out, but in the end she honked twice, and with a smug grin on her face, she held the door open for Carmen.

"Show off," said Carmen, and smacking Ulrike's abs, she chuckled and got into the car.

"What've my abs done to you that you're smacking them all the time today?" asked Ulrike in a mock hurt voice.

"They're too perfect," countered Carmen. "They're making me envious. Come on, get in. I want to drive home first to feed Tabitha."

#

An hour later, they were sitting in the dining room of Carmen's parents.

Helmut and Ulrike were having an animated discussion about the current economic situation in Germany. Meanwhile her mother was reminding her why her father and Ulrike had far more reasons to complain about too much work than Carmen could possibly ever have.

"It's not like you have to work that hard for your money, after all," said Maria, "You have a safe senior service position with a fixed salary every month regardless of how many pupils you have in your class, and regardless whether the economic situation is good or bad. You even get a 13th salary without having to do any extra work!"

"I work hard too, Mamá," said Carmen. "And I am doing extra work."

"A voluntary dance class which you don't even get paid for," Maria said with a dismissive gesture.

"You just complained that I'm not doing extra work for the money I get," protested Carmen.

"I didn't complain," corrected Maria, "I pointed out why you have no reason to complain. You would get your 13th salary whether or not you did this dance class. So, if this voluntary class is too much work for you, you can simply stop doing it and it won't affect your income."

"It would affect my pupils," said Carmen.

"Indeed, they would have to go to a dance school and pay for the lessons, just as your father did for yours," countered Maria.

It was hopeless, thought Carmen; she would never win an argument with her mother. Longingly, she thought back at how much more respect and appreciation she had received from Ulrike's mother, and she secretly wished she could be back at her place.

#

It was already dark when they were finally on their way home. Ulrike had offered to drive so that Carmen could have a second glass of wine, and since she wasn't used to the Alfa yet, she was driving carefully.

"About that offer of yours..." Carmen said into the silence.

Ulrike glanced at her curiously, "Which offer?"

"Swapping parents..."

Ulrike laughed. "It does seem as if they each got the wrong daughter, doesn't it?"

"It really does," said Carmen and they both chuckled.

As Ulrike overtook an old *Trabbi*, she thought that Carmen's Alfa was actually rather a nippy little car. Nevertheless, she would never even think of buying an Italian car for herself. A solid German car was definitely more to her liking.

"You know," said Carmen, "Meeting your mother really helped me."

"Yeah? Why?" asked Ulrike as she changed back into the right lane, "Because she stroked your ego?"

"That too," said Carmen, grinning. "But no, seriously, it helped me realise that you were right."

"I'm always right," deadpanned Ulrike, earning herself a playful slap on the arm. Chuckling, Ulrike asked, "Okay, what was I right about?"

"That we can't change the perception of others," said Carmen, "And that it doesn't matter what others think about us as long as we are happy with our life."

"True," agreed Ulrike.

"I think we are rather fortunate that we are fulfilling the expectations of each other's parents'."

"How so?"

"Well," said Carmen, "This way it was fairly easy to be accepted by them. I guess it would have been a lot harder had it been the other way around. After all, you can't help but love your own parents and vice versa, but getting along well with the in-laws is usually not as easy."

Nodding, Ulrike hummed in agreement.

"I wonder how my parents and your mother will get along," mused Carmen.

"Uh ... I'd rather not think about that right now."

Placing her hand on Ulrike's thigh, Carmen asked seductively, "What would you like to think about instead?"

Grasping Carmen's hand, Ulrike gently removed it from her thigh and said, "If you could hold that thought till we get to a parking place ... I believe I would love to contemplate this idea with you."

Grinning, Carmen leaned her head against Ulrike's shoulder and said, "I love you."

###

Recipes:

Carmen's pan fried bread rolls



Ingredients:

150 ml water
20 g yeast
1 tsp. sugar

250 g flour
1 tsp. salt

- Mix the water with the yeast and the sugar and let it rest for 2 minutes.
- Add the flour and the salt.
- Knead the dough until it's no longer sticky. (It's easier if you use a machine with a dough hook first.)
- Let it rest in a warm place (e.g. on/next to the heater) for 30 min to 1 hour. (1h is better, but 30 min is okay too.)
- Form 4 bigger or 6 smaller rolls and put them on a tray with baking paper.
- Brush or spray water on the rolls and let them rest in a warm place for another 30 min to 1 hour.
- The rolls will now be sticky again, so brush them with flour again, get them off the paper and roll them in flour.
- Pour oil (like canola or sunflower) in a pan - at least so much that the bottom of the pan is covered - and heat it.
- Put the rolls in the pan and flatten them a bit.
- Fry them from all sides (first top and bottom, then stand them upright so that the sides can be fried too.)

Tip: These rolls are also very delicious when you add the following herbs/spices to the dough (before kneading): 2 cloves of pressed garlic, 1/pinch cumin, 1/2 tsp. rosemary, 1/2 tsp.

Thyme, 1/2 tsp. oregano, 1/2 tsp. basil, a handful chopped black olives. For these rolls I'm using olive oil to fry them.

Carmen's Milanesa Napolitana



Ingredients:

2 thin slices of meat (typically beef, but you can also use veal, chicken or turkey)

n/a flour

1 egg

n/a bread crumbs

n/a olive oil

2 slices of cooked ham

100 ml tomato sauce/salsa

250 g (2 balls) mozzarella (sliced or grated)

- Arrange three soup plates, one with the flour, one with the egg (whisked), and one with the bread crumbs
- Coat both sides of the meat slices with flour
- Dredge them through the egg from both sides
- Cover both sides with bread crumbs
- Fry in olive oil

- Put a slice of ham on each milanesa, spread the tomato sauce on top and cover with mozzarella
- Put the milanesas in the oven at 200°C till the cheese melts
- Serve with salad and/or chips (French fries)

###

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