

Skip

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Sample translation by Rebecca K. Morrison

The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear.

The fact that life is problematic shows that the shape of your life does not fit into life's mould. So you must change the way you live and, once your life does fit into the mould, what is problematic will disappear.

But don't we have the feeling that someone who sees no problem in life is blind to something important, even to the most important thing of all? Don't I feel like saying that a man like that is just living aimlessly - blindly, like a mole, and that if only he could see, he would see the problem?

Or shouldn't I say rather: a man who lives rightly won't experience the problem as sorrow, so for him it will not be a problem, but a joy rather; in other words for him it will be a bright halo round his life, not a dubious background.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

My name is Skip Landau, my mother came from England originally, my father from Paris. His parents emigrated to France from Hungary because they were prohibited from studying medicine, being Jewish. They survived the war, just, and so did my father, in some village or other in the South of France.

Quite why she went to Paris in 1946 is something my mother never explained. Presumably she wanted to get away from home, far away and fast; she claimed that she had a desire to learn French and to become a painter. She certainly did paint, she was as good as the next person. I don't know why she gave it up. Perhaps she did not give it up as such, but continued instead with drawings in small format sketchpads. She had these little sketchbooks. Perhaps I will come across them in amongst her belongings when I finally get my act together, open up the last box and go through its contents. I will make decisions, what I can use, what I will keep; a

prospect that fills me with unease. The box has made it as far as my Berlin apartment now.

As for her paintings, I did not keep any for myself. To begin with I thought I would never manage to shift them, there being around a hundred - eighty-seven to be precise. But friends and acquaintances of my parents kept turning up and asking after them, and before I knew it, all I was left with was a single, small, square picture. It had always hung in my office, in the room with a view of the courtyard in Newe Zedek, which means Oasis of Peace. I lived in Israel for a long time. Now I live in Berlin.

My mother met my father on her second night in Paris. That is the story according to my father. My mother used to say that she saw him in a café and fell in love before they had exchanged a single word. My father said she spent the night in his bed, her second night in France, the night they met. He had his own apartment, a tiny apartment in the Jewish quarter.

His parents were living a little bit out of town at that time, in Neuilly. My grandparents were observant in their way; my grandmother was apparently a sincere believer, and perhaps would have been better suited to an Orthodox husband. It has all disappeared, just as she has: her belief, her traditions. And I am not even strictly Jewish according to the law for my mother was not a Jew. Even though one of her aunts once spluttered that she had never heard anything so preposterous - the family name, my mother's maiden name, was Blomfield after all.

May be. Maybe not. Whatever. I have made a point of living as far as possible in adherence to my interest in the visible world. The visible and the tangible always; how people moved within walls and around furniture.

And so I became an architect.

I wanted to build houses. Apartments, too. And courtyards. Courtyards where children could play within view of their mothers looking out of kitchen windows; the courtyards would have

benches beneath trees - blossom trees. Everything would be filled with life and clarity, open; every movement could create a place for human exchange. There would also be tucked-away rooms, places people could retreat to, a space for thinking and reading; and walls for books - although not as many dark-hued tomes as my grandparents possessed, floor-to-ceiling shelves, bindings of black or brown. Perhaps, however, I am remembering only those books brought from Budapest.

I built a house once, with a courtyard. A three-family house.

It was one of the happiest times of my life. I worked day and night. No, the nights I spent together with Shira in her small apartment close to the sea. You could hear the waves from our bed. And I held her in my arms as she fell asleep, held her, and held her, with confidence in our lives stretching ahead. And belief in our children, who were born two and three and a half years later.

For a great many years I was far too caught up with myself and with Shira, with my work and with my sons when they eventually came along to spare a thought for what it means to have life ripped away all of a sudden, with no warning and terribly, and what it means when a life-span steadily decreases, and days are got through with heavy tread and troubled spirits, with bitterness sometimes, blindly. In retrospect I re-lived some of those days a second time. Moment by moment. Bewildered, emotional. Frightened.

For a long time it felt as if I was dogged by bad luck. I longed for Shira to fall pregnant, but pregnancy did not happen, not with me. I had expectations of another house-building commission, but was instead given renovation jobs on existing buildings. I was hopeful Shira would regain her health, instead she died. Death crept ever closer and yet I paid no attention to the shape of the passing days, days in which nothing remarkable happened, happy days. Sometimes I felt as if I had already died.

There was no particular experience, no dramatic incident, no profundity, if you like, that left its mark on me. If that really does exist: individuals, who are especially sensitive, have particular depths, are particularly well-suited, chosen. I am half-Jewish, so half-chosen at best. That figures. For years I suffered because of it and perhaps that is why I emigrated to Israel as a young man. It is much rather the case that I am *not*: I am not a father, for I did not create my sons, and I am not an architect, for I do not build my own houses; I am not Shira's husband any more, for she has died. I am not lonely, for here in Berlin I have Zipora.

Skip. That was always my name, I have no idea know what my mother's thinking was. Skip Jonathan Landau.

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Springtime in Israel is not as spectacular as it is in Europe. I always missed that. In Tel Aviv,

however, I took in each flower, the varying shades of green, the changing light. I watched the fruit-bats set off on their forays. And I loved the mild night-time air. Now when I lie awake in Berlin, I think about my sons. I am glad that they are both living in England. They were in the military, but they won't be called up, and are not required to attend reservist training.

Shortly after my immigration to Israel I did my military service like everybody else. But I had absolutely no interest in dying. It was a friend who had the idea - why not volunteer for corpse identification. That would guarantee no harm could come to us. Either there would be nothing to do, or it would be busy as hell and we would be in demand. We were in demand. At some point I concluded it would be better if identification tags were kept in the heels of shoes - shoes are less interchangeable than a tag worn round the neck. Time and again we realised that a dead man's tag had been exchanged with that of another man in the unit.

Israel may not be the best place in the world, but it remains a home. It is highly unlikely Avi and Naim will return there, just as I chose not to return to Paris. I have kept the house in Newe Zadek; it still belongs to me and to us. We can still return, if we want to. One never knows.

I have been in Berlin for a few years now. Seven years. And I sense that soon a call to elsewhere will come. I need not do anything in particular, that I know. Other than wait. Keep my mind open, perhaps, my soul, if you like, *nefesh*, as it is called in the Hebrew. In Hebrew it is a regular enough word. Soul. When I first arrived here, I was surprised by how much I could understand and how quickly I could speak German, although I only had my grandparents' Yiddish melodies in my head, along with that little bit of German so reluctantly taught in school. To begin with my sentences were clumsy and riddled with mistakes, but they were also full of air, full of breath. Air and water, according to the

writings of a famous twelfth century mystic -
Yitzak of Acco, I think his name was - air and
water are what make the dead consonants dance,
and thus out of the letters, nothing more than
small dead bones on their own, words are formed,
sentences, language. Sentences thrumming with
life. Rather inconsequential whether they are
correct or not.

But confidence is essential.

Confidence that an accident cannot alter
everything, that words remain. Breath. Air.

Little bones.

Of course much depends on one's depiction of the
soul, what one conceives the soul, or whatever,
to be. A thread. A bundle of slender threads.

Voices. Movements, too, perhaps. I am waiting for
a summons, to whomever or whatever.

"What do you imagine they are like?" Naim
once asked.

"Who do you mean?"

"The dead!" He had his back to me. I knew he was thinking of his friend Joni who had been killed in an attack.

I answered slowly. "I do not imagine them at all."

They are simply there, I wanted to say. *I see them, but I find it impossible to describe them,* I wanted to say. But the words remained unspoken.

Naim looked disappointed, his back dejected, his shoulder blades pronounced beneath his short-sleeved shirt.

"And Mama?" he asked.

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When Shira died, someone else who took care of her. It was not me, at any rate, And perhaps she did not need any help or company in those initial hours and days after death. After all she had had plenty of time to prepare for it. On the thirtieth day after a death, it is the custom for us Jews - or, in my case, half-Jews - to gather

by the grave of the deceased. To pray. To converse with one another. To weep.

I experienced Shira's proximity differently after her death. I knew her so well, her touch, her tendernesses, those last traces of desire when she was already sick. Not desire exactly perhaps, but rather the knowledge: this is the last time, this is the last time. She took my hand and guided it over her body with this alarming intensity. I can hardly describe it - it was as if there was a distance to be bridged, a distance that was too wide, growing by the minute.

It is different with the other dead people. I am not myself then. Or that is exactly who I am: Skip. The man who misses a step, who hops. The man whose name is meant for others: come here, travel there. The man who can be left out, who is insignificant. For that is what death is: everything we leave out.

When Shira was dying, I had a girlfriend. Nina. We often saw each other in the café. We

started to frequent the café at the same time each day, for a whole week. Then we stood up at the same time, took each other by the hand, and left. We went to my office with its pretty divan where I was sleeping. The blanket was from Bukhara, an old-fashioned design with flowers and decorative shapes in red, blue and green, the colours shimmering and bright. Nina admired the cover, then she undressed. I can see her in front of me, slender, unimaginably lovely. And simultaneously, I wished she would go, not because I felt I was betraying Shira as she lay in hospital, but because I no longer belonged to this world, to this beauty, or at least only my eyes belonged. Perhaps she would have allowed me to simply look at her, perhaps it would have aroused her more than my hands, my sex. We felt an intimacy, were drawn to one another, strangers though we were. We looked at each other and I said, "Skip me!" The silly old joke, how often have I heard it, how often have I cracked it. But there we were, that is how it was. Nina said

nothing. At some point she went away. I tore the scrap of paper with her number into little bits and deleted it from my mobile phone. A week later it popped into my mind, her telephone number. It is not a talisman, it is nothing I incant, and it is probably somebody else's now. But the number is there in my head, indelibly it seems, although I can barely recall the detail of Nina's face.

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I never did tell Shira about my other work, if that is the right word for it, and if I regret anything it is not that I had an affair while my wife was dying, but that I found neither the words nor the courage to speak about what I had experienced.

She was suspicious when I travelled. *Why are you travelling to Paris? Where are you travelling to?* She never made the connection - that when I travelled, wherever I travelled to, there was an accident of some description. I had to get to

Amsterdam. *Where? Amsterdam? What do you have to do in Amsterdam?*

The first time it happened was in 1988. It was around the 20th of July that I received the message, if that's the right word for it. There was nothing particular, no concrete communication. I had dreamed vividly in the night. There had been a face, a face I did not know, the face of a young man, in his early twenties perhaps, a lovely face as young people often have, dark eyes, long eyelashes, rosy lips - not outstanding, still growing into his looks.

And then at noon when I was in the Café Tamar eating a bagel and looking over at the owner, Sarah, who was rushing between the Formica tables in a bad mood because some rascal had made off without paying in the morning, at noon, then, I decided that I would fly to Paris.

That day. Or the next at the very latest. The urge was so powerful that I got up to make my way to the travel agency in Allenby Street.

"Hey, are you planning to disappear without paying, too?" Sarah cut in.

I turned round - I still remember this clearly - bewildered, confused. "I'm going to the travel agency," I stammered. "I need to get to Paris."

Her blue hair stood up on end, like an electric shock. But Sarah is not the kind of person in whose presence you are likely to see ghosts. Ghosts would give her a wide berth, she had fought against the British, she was afraid of nothing, apart from her heart, which would kill her. Back then I was forty years old, and how old was she? Sixty perhaps. There must have been something in my expression, as I fished for money and left a tip in the small glass next to the cash register. "What's up?" Sarah asked.

"I have to go to Paris and I don't know why," I answered truthfully. She held my gaze.

"Did someone tell you to?"

I shrugged.

Sarah helped me. She called the travel agency for me. She said I would be round to collect the air ticket. She vouched for me.

When I came back she did not ask me anything. She simply brought over a freshly-squeezed orange juice and a bagel with cheese.

I made up some story for Shira and the children about my father taking a funny turn. They did not believe a word of it.

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When I arrived in Paris for the first time in four years, I was tired and at a complete loss. No one was expecting me; no one knew about my visit. I have no brothers or sisters. My parents no longer lived in Paris itself, but a little way out in a house in Jouy-en-Josas. My father had retired from his hospital work, but still treated patients twice a week in an eye clinic near the Jardin du Luxembourg. I had never in my life stayed in a hotel in Paris.

To begin with I thought about calling an old school-friend. She and I had stayed in touch. I imagined how it would be to hear her voice again and how nice it might be to see her, but I was aware we had little in common now. She was an in-house lawyer at a major energy company, she had married and divorced, and she had the most delightful back and bottom. She might well have been happy to put me up. But when I dialled her number and heard her voice, I hung up.

I got on the metro, emerged at Saint-Germain-des-Prés and walked to Rue Jacob. I took the smallest room in the Hotel Des Deux Continents.

It was an attic room. The windows were open, two of them thank goodness. There was a washbasin as well as a tiny separate toilet tucked away behind a brown laminated door. Out on the roof pigeons were cooing.

Curiously I did not have the same sensation I had had as a child when my bedroom had been up on the fourth floor with a view of the street in the Marais. I am not sure why my father chose an

apartment there. Perhaps he wanted to feel close to the 'catastrophe' - he never referred to it by any other name - close to those who returned from the concentration camps. Our home was in the Rue des Minimes. It was a spacious apartment. Equally it could have been my mother who refused to move to the suburbs. In the Rue des Minimes when I was older my room was under the eaves and my mother had a studio off the courtyard.

Lying there on the hotel bed, my thoughts returned to my mother's attempts to rent the studio, two rooms with large windows, one of them almost forty square metres, and how long it took for my father to agree at last. She disappeared into it for hours on end, whole days, and emerged hungry, happy and excited. Our apartment was kept spick and span by a housekeeper who doubled as my father's secretary. I saw my mother once more in my mind's eye, her cheeks flushed - although that afternoon perhaps I understood something I had not realised before - and then her face merged with that of the boy. It was as if our eyes met,

the sensation was so real that I sat up on the bed, all alone in the small hotel room.

"Hey," I called to him, "Where are you going?"

"Why?" he replied. "I'm off to my girlfriend's. She lives in Maisons-Alfort." The boy gave me a cheeky look. "What has it got to do with you?"

Yes, what business was it of mine?

"I didn't call you here," I said to him crossly. I must have said it out loud. He lowered his head, mulled this over. Now he looked every inch the schoolboy, ready to disappear into the shrubbery with a sharp move to the left. For sure enough, there by the edge of a large, deserted courtyard, lined with plane trees, were bushes. A couple of boys in dark blue jackets came running up, shouting something at him. The boy, my boy, pulled a face. He was not close to tears; it was rather a defiant expression. I could not make out the exact words they shouted, but I could imagine.

"I have to dash," he said, looking older now. Just that: I have to dash. He did not say why, simply went on his way with renewed energy. I felt it as a body blow - was he really going? There I lay in the hotel, in the city I had grown up in, alien to me, made unfamiliar by the passing of two decades.

Shira had never enjoyed being in Paris. "I feel like a peasant here," she had complained. And once even: "I feel like a German!"

"Are you crazy?"

I had no idea what to do other than to run it down, the idea was so absurd. Shira, a third generation Sabra from Safed - Israeli aristocracy - had lowered herself to marry me, a half-Jew who had to convert to step beneath the Chuppa in Israel. Shira was blond and had blue-green eyes. But that was not the reason she felt like a peasant, like a German; it was because she felt she came across as unrefined. My parents got us tickets for the theatre although Shira's French was lousy; they got tickets for concerts although

Shira was not fond of classical music. They were keen for us to join them in museums, so that we could restore ourselves, come in from the desert, drink our fill. As Shira once commented bitterly after a visit to the Musée de Cluny, "Drink our fill of crucifixion scenes!" She was not curious about my childhood, had no desire to see the streets through the eyes of the boy with the scooter, his beloved blue scooter. Or to hear of my brave adventures on my hobbyhorse, which I had been loathe to let go, relinquishing it eventually at the age of eight when the neighbourhood lads came chasing after me, taunting. I had exited the city clumsily, stumbled out of it, lost my footing, left the neighbourhood and the city in a helter-skelter manner. How can a city become so foreign, leave one cold? But that is only partially correct, not the whole truth, and Shira knew it.

"You move differently here! You even look different here!"

I always came across something - a jacket, a shirt, a pair of sunglasses, a cap - at my parents' house, things that had once been mine, and belonged to Paris.

"You speak differently! That accent! You smell different!"

"I am using the same aftershave I always do."

"It's not that," she said. "It is the cars, the cobbles, the pigeons, everything!"

Come my darling, I felt like saying to her.

Look how much tenderness we wasted.

I lay on my back and looked for the boy I did not know, and whom I had no business knowing.

Where are you? He picked up speed. *Where are you going?* I was troubled, paralysed and troubled

just as I used to be back when I had my

depression, during those days when I tussled with myself as to whether we should have children when

I could not father them. I was the problem, it

transpired. And so it followed that I should be

the one to come up with a solution, offer an

answer of some sort. And however great the

problem was - it was omnipresent, there was nothing it left unsullied, untouched - it was apparently impossible to pinpoint where the problem lay: the sperm count, its mobility. For during all that time I was not impotent. I slept with Shira as often as she wanted, but with no result. And then one day she came home, confused, embarrassed. She told me that she had met a man in the café, Sarah's café, who looked just like me. She did not elaborate. I had to join up the dots. She asked me to meet her there the following day, pointed him out, and left. He was a dentist, a Sabra, I did not particularly like him, although the similarity was undeniable. He found it amusing, he was amused by me and by Shira, and perhaps he was amused at himself. And when two days later we met in a small bar in King George Street I popped the question, worded my request, he simply said: "Why not?"

That was that. It did not diminish my depression.

Shira was pregnant, had two boys, our sons, who were not mine, and now, as if gripped by madness, my mind possessed, my insides twisted, I was looking for this other boy, a boy I did not know, and yet for whom I harboured such acute fear, that I could not bear it, and I jumped up from the bed to head outdoors.

"Ruben," he said suddenly. "My name is Ruben."

He looked around and I watched as he took a downwards escalator. People pushed past him. It had long since turned to late afternoon or early evening; the sun was low in the sky. *Where are you?* I whispered. A passer-by looked at me searchingly, then she smiled and I smiled back, said something about the lovely weather and the fact I had just returned home. *Home*, I actually said the word, and she stood still. I was about to invite her for a coffee, when I suddenly heard the boy as if from a distance. He was calling to me, a little impatiently, in a quiet voice.

"Hey, what is the matter?" I said walking on.

"Hot here, sticky," he grumbled. "If she hadn't said I could spend the night with her, I would be making a beeline for home."

"Where do you live, then?" I asked him and looked up at the houses - I had reached Rue de Furstemburg in the meantime. I followed the curve round and walked along Rue de l'Abbaye, towards Rue Saint Benoît. "Somewhere round here?" I said to the boyish face, grown pale and sweaty. I was feeling the heat, too.

"Yes. Merde," the boy said. Then he looked up, alarmed. "What is that they are saying? What kind of announcement is that? That's crazy! No one will get out!"

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I was standing in Rue Saint-Benoît in front of house number eleven, looking up at the dormers of the pale grey house. "Ruben?" I called in a quiet voice. A few people were going into the restaurant opposite. One man stopped and looked

back at me with a question on his face as though he remembered me; and when he called out to his companions I realised that we really did know one another, from school, or student days, who knows. I turned away and gave myself a quick once-over; a pair of shabby, shapeless trousers - I had not dressed up for the journey.

And I was gradually aware of being hungry. It was just after seven o'clock.

Something to eat, I thought, or a glass of wine.

Today I know more. Back then I merely slid into a strange state. In some brasserie or other I drank a glass of wine, then I took the Rue Bonaparte down to the Seine. Drank another glass of white wine. It was the aperitif hour and such a peaceful summer's evening. In Berlin we do not drink much now, one glass of wine perhaps, two at the very most. Earlier, in Tel Aviv, Shira and I would smoke a joint on the odd occasion. In any event the alcohol that evening had an immediate effect, although of course I was not drunk. The

whole evening, aimless as it was, struck me as incredibly stressful. At around half past seven the first ambulances could be heard. By that time I had reached the Seine, the Quai Malaquais; then I stood on the Pont des Arts looking over towards Pont Neuf. There was no ignoring the sirens.

People out strolling looked worried; they gazed around, looking for a clue. Something must have happened behind the île of the Seine, who knew what - a terrorist attack perhaps, something of that order. Terrorists.

I called home at some point and mentioned that the sirens were incessant. Shira was chilly. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied. That was true at least. I was dog-tired but kept wandering around without eating, without sitting down anywhere. I bought a bottle of mineral water.

I emptied the bottle, bought a second. Looked down at the Seine. If I could have, I would have leant my face against the quayside wall and fallen asleep.

Helicopters were flying overhead. They disappeared, then returned. Eventually the sirens dissipated. It was still warm out. I had no desire to return to the hotel.

When I finally gave in it was close to two in the morning and the hotel door was locked. I had to wake up the night porter. He wanted to know if I had ordered coffee. "For eight o'clock," I said, and wondered why. Why eight o'clock.

I was awake before then. I woke up just after seven, precisely twelve hours after a train in the Gare de Lyons had careered into another, but I did not know that then. Perhaps I woke up at the very moment some boy, or young man, who had been sitting in the regional train, died, having lain unconscious or awake waiting to be rescued. I could not know that. To this day I still do not know. As if prodded by a sharp knife, I woke up just after seven.

It was bright outside. I remember looking around, not because I did not know where I was, but because I was looking for somebody.

"Hey, where are you hiding?"

"Here," his voice was muted.

"Where is here?"

"Here."

Later I heard a knock at the door, and a tray with coffee and a croissant being placed outside my door.

That would be all I would eat that day. I said that I would be staying another night. When I was speaking with the concierge my gaze fell on the newspaper: *Train Accident in Gare de Lyon*.

The photo showed two trains wrapped round one another. A paramedic kneeling by a blood-soaked body. Further uniforms in the background.

The concierge was looking at me as I stared at the newspaper. But I did not understand, not then. I went back up to my room and locked the door behind me. Both the windows were wide open. I had not bothered undressing in the night, I remembered, and was suddenly aware that my shirt stank of sweat. It was my sweat and yet somehow different, as if it came from another body. It

disturbed me, and I paced back and forth in the room, then lay down on the bed once more, my eyes open, tired and alert at the same time. The pigeons were scrabbling on the roof. Voices from below drifted up, women's voices, so it took a while for me to decipher the other one, a whimpering or the softest of sobs. I could not locate it. I stood up and walked over to the head of the staircase beyond my door; then I looked up at the roof, as if on its ridge, among the chimneys and pigeons, a child might be huddling, or some youth, or a young man.

That was the voice, or was it, it certainly was not the voice of a young man, but also not a child's - it was impossible to match the voice with a physical body, and yet it was the voice of a man.

"Ruben?" I whispered at last. "Ruben, is that you?"