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Intermezzo

(Zwischenspiel)

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Sample translation by Simon Pare

I took the last cup of coffee out onto the balcony. It was only half past eight and I didn't have to set off until ten, as I had fetched the flowers yesterday evening. Half of my view of the sky had been blocked off the previous year. A fifth floor with a terrace was added to the top of the new building opposite, but I'd never seen anyone up there yet. I lit a cigarette, tilted my head back and eyed a thin wisp of cloud floating slowly towards me over the terraced roof. When it was directly above me it suddenly changed direction and drew back along exactly the same course it had come. I shut my eyes, then opened them again. The bright sky dazzled me, the picture shattered into flickering dots: it was like a Monet painting of the sky. It stayed that way. The small scrap of cloud was the only one flying backwards as the other denser clouds were wafted east above my head and on over the roof of my house by the gentle westerly breeze. It could only be an optical illusion, I thought, or a peculiar airstream I had never seen before. I scanned the stretch of sky over my house for the little cloud, but could no longer find it; it had either evaporated or disappeared from sight. Or it had never existed. The flickering in front of my eyes hadn't gone away. The house opposite, the windows, the roof, the crown of the plane tree dissolved as I looked at them into thousands of coloured dots that were likely to fly away at any moment and reassemble somewhere else. I shaded my eyes with my hand and took a couple of long, calm drags on my cigarette. I kept seeing the small cloud floating towards me on the inside of my eyelids, only for it to change direction as though guided by some force or other. I searched for some meaning to it, found none that fitted within the scope of my experience and settled on an optical illusion. Even after I'd reopened my eyes, the

outlines of things kept shifting strangely, doubling up and quivering, as though everything around me were in a state of imminent disintegration. I was worried and could feel my pulse. It was beating strongly and steadily behind the vascular wall, and the words “stroke” and “heart attack” fleetingly crossed my mind, but only my irritated eyesight disturbed my general sense of well-being. I had just looked into the blazing light for too long, I thought, and retired into the flat. I cleared the breakfast plates into the dishwasher. An attempt to tidy my desk failed because the letters on the bits of paper and correspondence wriggled and twitched like insects with their legs stuck in a pool of honey. There was a phone-in programme about intestinal cancer and how to treat it on the radio. A 68-year-old listener from Großburgwedel wanted to ask the professor from Hamburg whether persistent constipation could cause cancer of the intestine. I turned it off.

I hated medical advice programmes, all the more so if they were about constipation and intestinal issues.

Olga had been extremely coy about her illnesses. During our last conversation when we postponed a rendezvous, she had mentioned abdominal pains. Nothing serious, she just didn't feel too good. Her voice sounded steady – no audible pain, quite optimistic. Three days later she was taken to the hospital with an intestinal obstruction. She was operated, contracted pneumonia, then had multiple organ failure, and a week later she was dead.

When I thought of Olga she always appeared to me in the same pose. She was sitting upright in an armchair, legs close together, fingers intertwined on her lap, her hair up in a bun. She was wearing a dark-blue cardigan over a light-coloured blouse and a narrow skirt that covered her knees. To describe Olga's appearance as elegant would be an exaggeration, although the way she wore her skirt, blouse and cardigan made an elegant impression. In any case that was the word that came to my mind when I sought to describe Olga. Or I would say that Olga looked like the ideal vicar's wife or as if she came from an old military family. Olga was fifty-five when I got to know her, and her soft features and oval face were still beautiful. The most beautiful thing about Olga were her eyes, which always reminded me of a particular El Greco painting of the Madonna. There was a soft gleam in those eyes, in which anyone she turned them on could find affection, or at least attention. Her appearance had not changed one bit in the decades we had known each other. Of course she had grown older, but her figure – slim, upright and, if the word fashion could be applied to her at all, steadfastly old-fashioned – had remained unaltered until the end.

I was in the third or fourth year of my studies when Bernhard introduced me to his parents one Sunday. Olga had baked an apple cake. I could recall a coffee service with a

hunting motif that I found twee. At the time I probably found anything that wasn't plain and Bauhaus-like twee, and twee was virtually a synonym for bourgeois, and bourgeois was a dirty word. The opposite of bourgeois was modern. For my mother and Comrade Keller, the opposite of bourgeois was socialist, and they would presumably have spied a glorification of feudalism in the hunting scenes on the coffee service. The coffee service, the bun, the cream blouse, Andy calling his grandmother Mama because his real mother had left with only a postcard by way of goodbye; taken together these formed my first impression of Olga. There had always been a trace of pity in my fondness for Olga, or occasionally even contempt. Olga - the mother, wife and grandmother who had missed out on her own life. I had even suspected that Olga's love for Andy, whom she had raised for six years like her own son, concealed a void Olga was trying to fill after her own children had grown up and left home. I hadn't met any women like Olga before. My mother and her friends had an income of their own and loved their jobs, or at least they claimed to, even when these were as ridiculous as working in a socialist news agency under a boss like fat Doro.

I gradually got used to my impaired vision, which at least left things where they were and so didn't affect my bearings. What is more, it certainly wasn't a sudden pathological alteration, just a temporary irritation, a weird state that had its good sides once you'd come to terms with it. The transformation of the everyday into its impressionistic variant; furniture, walls, pictures and vases that dissolved into dancing dots at one moment and gently undulating waves the next. It was only when I thought of Olga that her sharp outline appeared to me amidst the other flickering objects. As in a painting by Liebermann, she sat upright in her armchair with her head slightly inclined, as though trying to intimate to me that she would welcome conversation.

So what did Olga's death actually change? We had seen little of each other latterly; we would occasionally talk on the phone and I often had a guilty conscience when it suddenly struck me how long it had been since I'd last paid Olga a visit. Yet the thought that Olga was there always had something soothing and warming about it. And now it occurred to me that the certainty that Olga had been there was just as comforting. *For as long as you live on in our memory you are not dead.* That was the kind of phrase you didn't take seriously when you read it on a gravestone or in an obituary. But that was exactly what it was like. I couldn't miss Olga because she was no less absent now than over the last few months when she had lived seven or eight miles away and we were bound together only by the knowledge that the other was there. Olga was dead. But what did that mean when Olga was clearly sitting opposite me,

looking at me as though she were waiting for me to address her. Oh Olga, I said to the room, less of a greeting than a small sigh of a thought.

“Oh Olga.”

“Yes, Ruth.”

My confusion found an outlet in a nervous laugh. “Are you really there or am I dreaming?”

“You only have to think of something for long enough,” said Olga.

She didn’t look like a ghost, she didn’t sound like a ghost; she sat opposite me, large as life, and spoke to me the same way she always had.

“Olga,” I said carefully, as though stepping onto thin ice, “Olga, I was just thinking of how one evening you... Do you remember?”

“What?”

“... of how you came to see me one evening after I’d left Bernhard? You turned up at my door with a bunch of ox-eye daisies and a humming-top for Fanny.”

“You hadn’t been in touch with us and we didn’t want to lose Fanny,” said Olga.

“I thought that Hermann and you must loathe me. Hermann had always been a patriarch. And you would never have done what I did. You would never have abandoned your child’s father with his ill young son.”

Olga smoothed her skirt although there didn’t appear to be a single crease in it. “No, I would never have done that.”

“I felt awful and ashamed.”

“You felt guilty, but you still left. I admired your courage.”

Olga gave me a long look, as though she were scanning my face for the traces of my decision, then said, “You know, the guilt will always be there, whatever you do.”

“That’s precisely what you said that evening: ‘The guilt will always be there, whatever you do.’ I never forgot those words or that you were the one who said them.”

“I know you thought I was a scatty housewife,” said Olga.

“Not after that evening. We drank a whole bottle of wine and you told me you’d gone to drama school in Königsberg. I couldn’t imagine you as an actress – you were too bashful.”

“Too bashful, ha. Maybe. But I never got to find out. First the war, then Hermann, then the children. I would have liked to be an actress.” Olga laughed, raising her arms gracefully above her head, and for a few seconds she looked like she did on the photo I had once seen of a very young Olga, almost a girl still, with gentle, expectant eyes, her forehead shaded by a big, white hat with a dark-blue spotted bow on it.

“I admired you too,” I said. “Because you weren’t like me.”

“Yes,” said Olga. “We always want to be someone else. I would have liked to be like you – a little bit at least – and you like me. But we only have one life.”

“You had a life, one whole life. I had four-quarters or six-sixths, and I can barely remember some of them.”

“You should go now, otherwise you’ll be late for my funeral,” said Olga and immediately began to fade into the general haze.

“Stop, wait,” I called.

But there was only the shadow of the curtain flapping over the armchair Olga had been sitting in a second earlier, billowing in the wind coming through the open balcony door.

I had replaced Christina, the female voice on my sat nav, with Stefan. Stefan may have given the same instructions as Christina, but I still found them more trustworthy. Stefan put me at ease, whereas Christina's annoyingly cool voice prompted me to argue with her. "What do you mean by four hundred yards? How am I supposed to know where four hundred yards is?" I would say. Or if she still hadn't given any instructions before I reached a junction, I'd shout out, "Hey, could you say something?" I tended to be more polite with Stefan, which gave me food for thought. Shortly before Winterfeldtstrasse met Martin-Luther-Strasse, Stefan gave the order to turn left. I was supposed to take the inner city expressway, something I was determined to avoid. I turned right. Stefan kept admonishing me to turn round at the next opportunity all the way to Kleiststrasse. His voice seemed to get harsher with every order. But this time I refused to bend to my basic trust in the authority of male voices, albeit only for directions, and carried on driving towards the Siegessäule. I knew my way until Pankow, and Stefan would surely have calmed down by then. From time to time he would say something, but I didn't listen to him, particularly since my continuing troubled vision demanded that I focus all my attention on the road and the vehicles around me. I have to admit in retrospect that I was a terrible threat to the other traffic, and I attribute my lack of awareness of this to my general befuddlement. The city, its tree-lined streets and its inhabitants in their summer clothes, even the cars on which the sun's rays exploded into glittering stars, struck me as so beautiful, more beautiful than ever before. A mellow joyousness lay over the coarsely pixellated pictures that sent me into a transport of delight, as if I were not on my way to Olga's burial but to some place of unknown promise instead. In Rathenower Strasse fiery blue flames rose from the Aral petrol station, shooting skywards in a swirling column and melting into the endless expanse as though they were the one and only source of the blazing blue of the sky. Even Prinzenallee seemed less desolate than on other days. The stout matrons in their smock-like long coats waddled along at a leisurely pace like old steamers, garish pennants fluttered from young women's heads. Only the young men were unadorned and, on the contrary, I could actually see the cloud of testosterone that surrounded them like the exhaust fumes of a car, every stride vibrating with power for two. I was glad when I finally caught sight of the railway bridge on Wollankstrasse, which used to be a section of the wall between East and West Berlin, just where Wedding stopped and Pankow began. From here on I needed Stefan. I didn't know the street marked on the death announcement as the address of the cemetery. Fanny had said that the cemetery was just outside the city. Stefan said nothing; I drove straight ahead. Nor did Stefan say anything at the town hall, where I used to turn left to visit Olga when we all still lived in East Berlin. I kept driving straight ahead even though I

thought this was a mistake. Why would Olga be buried so far from her flat and not alongside Hermann, her unfaithful husband, unless that was precisely what she wanted – to make up in death for something she hadn't managed to do while alive – but I didn't believe that. Yet I drove on until I reached the church, where Stefan ordered me to turn right. But that wasn't possible because the street was closed for roadworks. It was too late to go left, so straight ahead again. Stefan protested that I should turn round and then take an immediate left into the closed road. I went right. Stefan was quiet for a while. I drove slowly to give him time to think. I don't really remember what happened next. I didn't even recognise streets and houses I should have recognised. Everything looked strange, wonderfully strange – the bright villas with their gleaming roofs, streets like parks, and the twinkling sunlight through the branches of the tall trees. I'd completely lost my bearings. Stefan told me to go right one moment and left the next. Sometimes I did as he said, sometimes I didn't, according to whether his instructions seemed correct or not. We didn't agree. When I spotted a good-sized, shady parking place I stopped, opened the window, lit a cigarette and switched the radio on. The presenter was just saying goodbye to a food expert and the ubiquitous chef Sarah Wiener with whom she had been discussing the topic "Give us today our daily toxin". I shut my overheated eyes and abandoned myself for a while to a dark sleep, illuminated only by the occasional red flash, until Olga's voice was suddenly addressing me over the radio. "It's eleven o'clock," said Olga, "and now you're going to be late for my burial." Then there were a few pips and a man's voice announced the news. First I switched the radio off and then I ended my communication with Stefan. It was too late. My shock at missing Olga's burial gave way in seconds to a huge sense of relief. I didn't have to meet Bernhard or Andy, I didn't have to be there with Fanny as her father's daughter, I didn't have to hear any funeral speeches or any whispered expressions of grief. I found the usual teariness of funerals embarrassing. I had tried to forbid my mother to weep at Comrade Keller's funeral. "Cry before or after, but not there," I said. It was heartless of me, but that day she cried neither before nor after, only at the cemetery. That's how it always was. People would chatter away until the cemetery gates about the banalities of their everyday life, the cold they'd just shaken off, their upcoming holidays or a successful roast goose. No sooner did they feel the sacred turf beneath their feet than they would reach for their handkerchiefs and screw their faces into grimaces of grief, their mouth tense and liable to weep at any moment, their eyes not just lamenting but also reproaching God, fate or whatever that particular individual happened to believe in. And when they left the cemetery - but generally beforehand, while they were standing there impatiently, waiting to throw their three handfuls of sand after the deceased -

they would set aside their grief like a useless raincoat after a storm. Yet the half hour during which they followed the mourning rituals to the letter seemed to bring them relief. No such relief was granted to me. No tears could dissolve my horror at death, because it was nothing but an echoless void that gobbled up all emotion and I could only surrender, paralysed and stunned. Ritual mourning would probably not have bothered me had I somehow been able to share in it. I had escaped this time. I had done my best, but it was too late.

I drove along aimlessly, sticking to the main road. Somewhere I would recognise a street or a junction and then I'd know how to get home again. I couldn't rely on street names or signposts because even large letters were still swimming before my eyes. The street meandered between house fronts, past parks, billboards and small green spaces, grew narrower and narrower until the branches of the trees growing between the slabs on the pavements to the left and right met in the middle and, like on old roads out in the Brandenburg countryside, formed a latticework roof over the carriageway, which led me to assume that this road could only be heading out of the city, where I definitely did not want to go. When the houses suddenly ceased on my right and the only thing to be seen was a sandy strip in front of bushes and trees with two cars parked on it, I immediately turned in, parked my car next to the others and got out.

A few paces along a path knobbly with thick roots I was enveloped in cool, diffuse greenery, in which I gradually began to make out small islets of foaming white, flowering bushes, maybe *spiraea* or false jasmine. The sweet smell of blossom floated in the air and I felt as if my wanderings had brought me to an oasis of bliss. I sat down on a bench and took a few deep breaths, but I must have sighed, for suddenly a voice that could only have been Olga's asked: "Are those sighs of relief, simply because you don't have to be at my funeral?"

"You can't be there yourself if you're here."

"I can be everywhere at once now, both here and there," said Olga and stretched her legs out a long way from under her white death robe.

"I'll come some other time. On my own," I said.

"Like when I was alive," said Olga.

"That's right. After Hermann kicked me out because I'd poured a glass of red wine over Rosi's new salmon-coloured dress at your sixty-fifth birthday party, remember?"

Olga laughed. "She dyed the dress black later, but the stain wouldn't come out. I don't remember what you were arguing about."

She tilted her head back slightly and sat motionless for a while like an animal sniffing for scent, as though sifting the passing breeze for this forgotten memory.

“About Hendrik’s book,” I said.

I found it strange that Olga remembered the stain on the black-dyed dress but not the fateful argument that had preceded it, which I’d stored up like a film scene I could conjure up at any moment.

Hendrik, with whom I’d been living for a while by then, had finally managed to get his novel published by Suhrkamp in Frankfurt after years of quarrelling with the censors. And Rosi, who had a friend who worked at the Ministry for Culture, had claimed to have “heard a few things about it”. I wanted to know what she had heard, and Rosi said that the book was supposedly fairly provocative, to which I replied that that depended on who was reading the book.

“Well,” Rosi answered with the stupid, arrogant smile of those in the know which always made me feel like taking a swing at one of those smiling faces. “Well,” said Rosi, “if someone will insist on putting sensitive words like ‘Stasi’ and ‘Wall’ in a book, they shouldn’t be surprised if it doesn’t get printed.”

“But the Stasi and the Wall exist,” I said.

Bernhard, who had been talking to his father up until that point but had obviously overheard his wife and me arguing, intervened. After all, he said, a novel wasn’t a lexicon that had to include everything that existed. Literature thrives on metaphors and similes, not spelling out real life. You didn’t have to use the words “Stasi” and “Wall” to write about crises of conscience.

“You don’t have to,” I said. “But aren’t you allowed to?”

Rosi shook her head in disbelief. “My God, Ruth, don’t act dumber than you are. If someone writes ‘Stasi’ and ‘Wall’, then he obviously doesn’t want his book to be published, not here in any case.”

She took a sip of her wine and said, directing the same smile and her gaze at a spot just below the ceiling: “Maybe it’s the lure of Western currency.”

I opened my mouth to say something in reply, but before I could think of a riposte to Rosi’s outrageous comment, my arm had taken on a life of its own and emptied the full glass of wine I was holding all over Rosi’s new salmon-coloured dress. Rosi screamed and ran to the bathroom in tears. Bernhard fetched a cloth from the kitchen to mop up the wine that had missed Rosi’s dress. I hurled a few insults after them, of which “quisling” was the most inoffensive, and lit a cigarette with trembling hands.

I couldn’t remember why I’d lost my self-control on that particular day. Maybe I’d just had too much to drink. But I do remember the beseeching looks Olga cast at her son and

at me until Hermann brought his fist down on the table, making the glasses and plates rattle and demanding respect for a mother and her day of celebration in a harsh, patriarchal tone of voice. Anyone who couldn't abide by that would have to leave, he said. I called Fanny, who was playing in the garden with the other children, and left. I wrote a letter to Olga apologising for my faux pas and announcing that I would send Fanny on her own next time, since I couldn't guarantee that I'd be able to control myself any better in future. Soon afterwards Olga rang me up and said, "Come and visit me on your own then. It'd be better. For everyone."

I haven't seen Bernhard since that day, apart from once when we were already living in Schöneberg.

"And you don't remember that?" I asked.

"Is it important now? You were always arguing, Rosi, Bernhard and you," said Olga. "I remember one long argument. Anyway, I have to pack a few things for the journey now."

And then all of a sudden Olga was gone. I was sitting on the bench alone with Olga's voice ringing in my ears. The park, which had seemed so deserted only moments ago, had mysteriously filled up with people. They were lying and sitting and walking on the lawns and paths, some had even made themselves comfortable in the lower branches of old trees. The strange thing was that I could make out some people as clearly and sharply as Olga, while others were blurred, just as my perception of the trees and bushes and the bench I was sitting on was as a series of dancing particles. But I had long since come round to the fact that things I didn't usually believe in were happening that day. Otherwise I wouldn't have found it possible, although not normal, that Olga should speak to me on the radio or suddenly be sitting next to me on a park bench and just as suddenly disappear. I sat there on my own on the bench and pondered what I should do for the rest of the day. I ruled out driving home, putting a cold compress on my bewildered eyes and waiting for the setting sun to bring this spooky day to an end. It was, after all, still the hour of Olga's earthly send-off and even if I wasn't standing by her grave with the others, this time should belong to her. I remained sitting, closed my eyes and surrendered entirely to my inexplicably ecstatic state. I must have nodded off for a few minutes. A noise awoke me with a start. In my light sleep I took it for the snap and crackle of a nearby fire, but it turned out, when I was fully awake, to be the wild crumpling of a bulky paper bag from which the man next to me had presumably taken the pastry he was now holding in his lips while he worked the bag into a paper ball and toe-punted it onto the lawn. He pulled a bottle of beer out of his jacket pocket and opened it with

his teeth. I dropped my lighter and, as I picked it up, slid as if unintentionally to the very end of the bench. I could simply have got up and left, but I was afraid that an ostentatious departure would hurt the man, whose appearance and behaviour repelled me but also aroused my compassion. When he looked at me, I was unsettled by his keen, watery-blue eyes in a face disfigured by alcohol that, like most drunks', had something apelike about it. I had wondered before whether our civilised skin was really so thin that it could be washed away by drink, laying bare the ape below the surface. Those bright, blue eyes and their defiant, almost brazen gaze reminded of someone or something, and while I was trawling my memory for something to match this feeling, I realized that I hadn't pixellated the man but saw him just as clearly as I saw Olga, and I wondered what this meant. The man released the neck of the beer bottle with a smack of his lips, staring at me with a fixed gaze, shook himself and said, "I can't bear to see so much repugnance in such beautiful eyes. You may leave, Your Ladyship."

His articulation was sharp and he stretched the words out as though each were precious to him. I knew this tone of voice; it matched the eyes.

"Bruno?"

He turned his whole body towards me, gripped his chin between his thumb and index finger in a show of bemusement and ran his eyes back and forth across my face.

"And who are you?"

"Ruth," I said. "Hendrik's wife. Back then. Are you really Bruno? I thought you were dead."

"Of course I'm dead," the man said. "Would I be sitting in this unsociable park rather than in a proper bar with other drinkers if I weren't?"

No doubt about it, the man was Bruno. But if he really was dead, why was Bruno sitting next to me on the same bench as Olga, who was also dead? I didn't believe in God or homeopathic remedies, never had my hand read or requested a horoscope, and suddenly dead people were visiting me and I was talking to them as I would to the living. Later, I sometimes thought that it had all begun with that little cloud, whose single-minded backwards path across the bright sky I had tracked until I could no longer see clearly. Its mysterious change of direction had cast a spell on me. It had led me astray and to this park. But I only thought that later. Nothing I was to experience that day defied my conception of normality, as though for a day I had become part of what I didn't believe in.

A deep sound like the rumbling inside a hollow body rippled out of Bruno, but it was meant to be laughter. "Hendrik," Bruno said almost affectionately. Then a second time, violently: "Hendrik the traitor. Who ran off when he caught the whiff of success. The great

exegete of friendship, but then it wasn't worth the beer he'd toasted it with. 'My friend, I need you like a breath of fresh mountain air.' And when he'd pumped his lungs full and looted my mind, he made off and he shat on friendship."

He took a noisy swig from the bottle and turned to me with his head tipped back as if he were going to examine me like a painting.

"Don't take my words so seriously, Your Ladyship," he said. "It's merely phantom pain, as my beer is just phantom beer. Pure pretence."

"It seems so real," I said.

"Real? Do you mean as in life, real life, meaning that only life is real? Death is like art. Pain captured on canvas eternally outlasts the moment of life that inspired it. The cause of the pain is no longer of any consequence; only the sum of all the pain ever felt is captured in the painting. Think of Munch's 'The Scream'."

"Do we need to know what horror made the person – we can't even tell if it's a man or a woman – open their eyes and mouth so wide? Every mortal can feel this horror within them, and everyone's horror, even that of the dead and the unborn, is preserved forever in this picture, more real than any living person's horror. Death is like art. It marks a noble end to even the most dissolute, most ruined life. Death ennobles swindlers, murderers, drunkards and every other ne'er-do-well; it welcomes them back, nature's failed attempts at creation, to the great recycling centre where good and evil rot in harmony. Believe me, Your Ladyship, nothing is more real than death. Life is utterly random. Even our conception is a joke. Imagine this: a man and a woman who would never have come together when sober are led by intoxication and moonlight romance, let's say, to couple for one night – and there we have our random parents. The next random occurrence is if one tiny little sperm reaches its goal or not; then, whether the mother who has received us wants to keep us and, if she does, what genetic make-up we start out in life with. Good-looking or ugly, talented and clever or stupid to the core like most people, strong or sickly. All random. What a humiliating foundation for life. Death, however, is a knight, honest and reliable. With death nothing is random: he leaves no one behind. And only in the darkness of death does our life appear in its true light."