

WHERE WE TOUCHED THE SKY

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I was going back one last time. For ten years, this place had meant everything to me. Now, the sheer scale of the moment left me silent. I couldn't recall a time when I had driven to the stadium without the radio on or music playing. This place had become like home to me because I had experienced so much here, so many potent, ever-changing emotions – a rush that never ended.

In that half hour my head teemed with images and memories. Looking back, the sun seemed always to be shining, the colours vivid, joyful somehow ...

A few weeks earlier, though, I had received the message that I had at once longed for and dreaded.

'All done!' popped up on the glowing screen. The party-popper emoji that followed felt like a typo. My gaze hung on the flame of the candle on my desk, burned down to a stub. Then my phone buzzed again:

'Release signing 10 tomorrow.' Another party popper. Definitely not a typo this time.

So there it was. The love of my life was over. I was leaving Borussia Mönchengladbach, the club I had represented for over a decade.

I had known something was up for nearly a year, though nobody had actually said anything. I'm certain that everyone possesses finely tuned antennae and we can sense when something is coming to an end – a relationship, a friendship, your job ... It is a kind of seventh sense that can't be explained, like that awareness of someone watching you from behind your back. It's inexplicable but real all the same. I had picked up on it from the way people looked at me – or

didn't, to tell the truth – the way people at the club avoided me or concealed themselves behind a weird kind of friendliness. I hated the feeling of being almost sure what people wanted to say to me, but knowing they just could not bring themselves to do so. And then there was the hope that I was just imagining it all. It's the hope that kills...

Like a scene in a corny movie, the candle flame was still burning, but only just. When I looked at my phone it was 23:06. In all my years at Gladbach, those had been my shirt numbers.

"K," I replied.

It was the first time in my life that saying ok had made me feel fear. It was not a fear of anything in particular, like the terrors I had carried with me since childhood, the dread of wasps or burglars. It was something indistinct, uncontrollable, a subdued, slowly crushing anxiety. But it was not panic, either. It was a sense of disquiet which left me staring into nothingness for ... I had no idea how long.

At some point I got up and brushed my teeth but did not look in the mirror. I set my alarm for 6.23. It did not need to be so early, but it seemed right.

But once more from the top. It was quarter past eight on a Friday evening, prime time, the first match of the new Bundesliga season. Borussia Mönchengladbach against Bayer Leverkusen. Attendance 54,022.

Arriving at Borussia Park, I felt like a guest at my own funeral. Club stalwarts embraced me without a word, pressing too firmly and then looking me too deep in the eyes. I cracked dumb jokes and played the fool – like I always do when I'm sad.

There was only one thing I had promised myself I would do. I would take one last deep breath in this stadium, feel the air of Borussia Park fill my body one last time. I wanted to inhale all the emotions and stories of a whole decade for the final time, then take the plunge and let it all go ... forever.

The entire crowd rose when I stepped out onto the pitch and looked around me. I shook hands while almost 55,000 people roared out my name for one last time. The applause had never seemed so heartfelt.

I squinted my eyes one last time. I always do it when I want to "save" a moment. It feels like I'm taking a photo to store in my memory.

A moment I'll never forget. A moment just for me. A moment to give me peace. A moment when my true love and I had to say "farewell".

There are several stages to saying goodbye. Usually, a moment of pain is followed by a sense of liberation and gratitude for what has gone before. But after that comes the period of emptiness. Some people feel it more than others. It is what they mean when they talk about being in a "deep dark hole", when you feel as if the ground you used to stand on has suddenly given way and you are sinking into a strange, echoing silence. When you find yourself in a void like that, you aren't

just at a loss for answers: everything you relied on to protect yourself has suddenly gone, too.

I think that was why, during my final year at Gladbach, that period of uncertainty and insecurity, some kind of survival instinct made me start writing. A lump weighed heavy in the pit of my stomach and threatened to spread through my body like a disease. That was why I used my first book, "Summer, When Life Began", to preserve a memory of a time which had been so huge and new and exciting. It 2006, I was fifteen, an age of countless first times. I threw myself back in time because now was full of endings and I did not want to live like that, when "farewell" was just around the corner and I did not know when it would come knocking.

It worked. "Summer, When Life Began" was a breath of inspiration in my life. Writing that novel and seeing how people responded to it gave me new courage and unleashed emotions I had never felt before. That book helped me escape the deep, dark hole. More than anything, though, it helped me start a new story.

That's the story I am going to tell in this book.

*

The sun shone almost apologetically over the rooftops, apparently sorry for being away so long.

I climbed onto my Vespa. I had hardly slept all night, I was so full of nervous energy. It was a wonderful, long-forgotten sensation, like the night before Christmas or your birthday, when you thought life would go on getting better every year.

It was the first warm, fine day of the year. A day for a hoodie, open-face helmet, sunglasses. Head right and right again before keeping left, then past a park, through a tunnel which still smelt of winter, and I was there.

My favourite bookshop in Düsseldorf, all five floors of it. In my youth I had often sat here, reading, or just watching the world go by. I love how people in a bookshop feel no need to put up a façade to avert prying eyes.

I cannot describe how it felt to buy a copy of my own book at last. I still had my sunnies on but had swapped the helmet for a cap. Twenty-three euros at the self-service checkout. It was still early and the shop was empty, so I decided to do some housekeeping in the fiction section on the second floor. It took no more than a moment to rearrange the display so my book was front and centre when you came up the escalator, there for every customer to see. I went on up to the fourth floor and found a spot with a perfect view over the atrium and the

display of novels two floors below. I sipped my oat milk latte and watched.

Every time someone came up the escalator my heart began to race.

I tried telepathy. "Come on, don't stare at your phone." "Pick it up." "Read the blurb." "Buy it." "Please."

I must have sat there for three-quarters of an hour, but I was enjoying it and quickly lost the feeling that I was just hanging around.

That was when I saw him.

A young man. The first person to buy my book. I could not help but grin. The feeling was crazy. And new.

The jacket he wore was too thick for March. It looked like it had seen a fair few winters.

My gaze followed him to the cash desk. He paid for my book in coins which he counted out carefully, humbly somehow, from a brown leather wallet. Like his coat, it looked like it could tell a tale or two of its own. The woman at the till counted each coin herself. It took some time, and something about it stung me, not out of pity, but because I could tell how much it meant to him. There was this man, who clearly did not have much to his name, and of all the books in this shop, he was buying mine.

It struck me that to him, twenty-three euros must be completely different than for me. Then I realised that it was years since I had seen anyone pay for anything with coins.

Like a detective, I kept my distance. I still cannot explain the impulse I felt to speak to him. It was not mere curiosity. It was a sudden hunger to engage with someone on a genuine level. The way he counted out those coins seemed weighed down by something which reminded me of what I had lost. I wanted to know if the words I had written for myself could resonate with him in his world.

I was standing right behind him and reached out tentatively to tap him on the shoulder.

He turned around and looked at me. He wasn't surprised or mistrustful. He was just *there*.

'I think I've just bought your book,' he said, now taken aback and wary.

'I know. Hi, I'm Chris.'

'I'm Roman.'

Back Then

The big strong man who bore Roman on his shoulder through the forest had seen much of the world during his time in the forces. Now, though, he was a strict but loving father, a family man who wanted to take his son to a very special place before he started school. Golden shafts of sunlight pierced the branches, and the leaves rustled while the man whistled a tune. As always, nobody else knew the song, but it still sounded like home. When they came to a small, moss-covered boulder, the man pulled out a folding knife. Roman's eyes widened. Like every seven-year-old boy, he loved knives, pistols and all things forbidden.

'Roman, 1994'. The man carved the letters almost an inch deep into the thick bark of an ancient tree. It was an oak. Roman knew that, since his father had told him everything about the forest near where they lived. Without a word, he drew his son into an embrace.

'From now on, this tree will always be yours.' His voice was calm, solemn.

Back at home, Roman could not wait to tell his mother all about his own tree. He didn't even notice his favourite cake waiting on the big dining table when he raced in. Next to the cake lay the *Schultüte*, the cone packed with sweets, toys and gifts that every child receives before starting school. That morning, he had not taken his eye off it, even for a second.

"It's gone eight already, time for bed! You've got school tomorrow." Hearing his mother say those words made Roman feel taller already, more grown up. He liked the idea that tomorrow, he would be going to big school.

His mind teemed with questions. Would his teacher be a man or a woman? Was cowboys and Indians rucksack really cool? Would the girl with the

blonde hair and the blue Alice band from the music school be in his class too?

And would that tree really always be his?

1

The rocket fizzed up into the sky and exploded into a shower of fiery sparks which fell silently, as if someone was sprinkling confetti over the millennium which had just come to an end. Roman blinked, the noise still ringing in his ears. They had bought the rocket together, he and his dad. Or ... the man who Roman had believed was his father until just a moment ago.

Only 96 hours earlier, they had been standing outside the big Saturn store and everything had seemed just fine. It was the big end of year sale.

His dad had said, “The new millennium – you’ll only ever get to see it once in your lifetime.” His eyes were shining, and Roman felt his eyes shining, too. The rocket promised to go off in a silver “2000”, or maybe the sparks would do it, or would it be in the smoke? It didn’t matter. Fifty marks. Pricey, but his dad had smiled. “It’s worth it for us, right?”

Roman had nodded with the trust only felt by the child who believes his father will never die. *You’ll only ever get to see it once in your lifetime.* He had believed him. As he always did.

All around them fireworks fizzed, crackled and popped. But the loudest explosion of all was the one that went off in Roman’s head.

“Roman, I have something to tell you.”

At first, Roman wasn’t even listening. He was just looking up into the sky, his mouth agape. But then his dad went on. “I’m not your biological father,” he had said, as offhand as if he was telling the time. “We adopted you when you were still very little.”

Roman heard him. His heart missed a beat. He said nothing and just went on staring at the sky.

The light of the rocket faded. The “2000” was gone but the truth remained. He knew there and then that it was true. It was not just a bad attempt at a joke. The eyes that looked at him were too serious for that. That firm, serious expression only came over the man’s face at school report time, or on the one occasion when Roman had stolen something. But this was much more than just getting a D in Maths. You couldn’t just come out with something like that though, could you? Where was mum?

But wait. She wasn’t even his mother.

Roman had to get away. All of a sudden, every word felt like a punch that shook his body. The air itself seemed stale, poisoned by this new truth. At a run, he took off all the way down the road. There were dads everywhere, carrying their children on their shoulders for them to hold their sparklers higher up towards the night sky. Laughter broke on his ears like shattering glass. He saw mothers capturing the moment forever with their cameras while eternity was crumbling all around him.

“Roman!” called a voice behind him. It sounded like, someone was saying, “Roman, stop, it’ll be ok.” Those words sounded wrong now after what had just happened.

Tears filled Roman’s eyes, but not from the wind or the cold. Why did it have to be him, for God’s sake? Why had his father chosen that moment to tell him? But what he really couldn’t understand was why he had told him at all. He wiped his face with his shirt collar which was poking out of the top of his jacket. He never wore shirts with collars. Today, though, he had been made to put one on, what with it being so cold outside. That just made the whole thing seem even more unreal. Roman looked back. The

entire sky was a mass of twinkling, sparkling light and colour. He squeezed his eyes shut and his heart stabbed with pain. He had never felt pain like it, and in that moment, Roman realised this pain wasn't going to go away if you just ignored it.

He smiled. One of those, "It's cool, I'm twelve and I'm just out for a walk," smiles. Smiling hurt, though. It was the first time in his life that it hurt to smile. He ran faster, stumbling slightly as he sought out darkness. He found it behind a tree next to the massive iron gates of the cemetery. And he sat there until the sky at last grew dark again.

*

In the moments after he awoke he had no idea where he was. Had he really come home and gone to bed? Yes, this was his room. He was still wearing his jeans, but the shirt lay tangled under his desk. The wind moaned fitfully through the window which stood ajar. It smelled cold. Snow had fallen. It was the beginning of a new millennium.

In those first few seconds, Roman lay uncertain of his whereabouts. Then came a fleeting hope that it had all been a dream. But as that moment passed, he recoiled in fear of the world and what it now held for him. He pictured himself like a lifeless marionette, waiting in vain for its entry in the puppet show. He lay there, motionless, his legs straight, his hands folded across his breast as if at prayer. He did not blink. All he could feel was his pulse in his fingertips.

He had never fainted before, but he knew about the dull rushing sound in his ears from movies. Nothing was clear, nothing made sense. There were only fragments. A laugh. A jumble of voices. Words drawn out too long which disappeared into silence.

Roman's bedroom was on the top floor in the attic. It was the only room up here, reached by a staircase, almost as steep as a ladder, which his parents – though they weren't his parents, were they? – hardly ever climbed.

He loved being up here. It was peaceful, his own kingdom. His own nest within the family home. He didn't care that it got hot in summer and cold in the winter.

He crept slowly to the door and put his ear to the cool wood, cautiously pushing the handle down.

It was locked.

He never locked his door.

Cautiously, Roman turned the key, allowing the door to creak open a fraction. The light that pushed its way in was warm. The air that followed was warmer still.

"Breakfast's ready!" His mother's voice pierced him like a poisoned arrow. Roman did not reply. Speech was impossible.

"Hey, breakfast's ready!" Softer the second time. She was standing right below him at the foot of the ladder.

"Are you coming down?" Her voice sounded so gentle, so familiar, but changed utterly. She looked at him, uncertain, fearful, imploring.

"Five minutes," he said. Had he really said that? He wasn't sure.

He waited until the air was clear and clambered down the ladder, making as little noise as he could so he could conceal himself in the bathroom. The water from the tap was pleasantly warm and he let it run until the basin was almost overflowing and he could put his whole head underwater. Those moments underwater felt as if the whole world was asleep. He had always liked the feeling, but today he needed it to stop him from falling to pieces and screaming out loud.

As he descended the stairs, Roman felt his arms and legs tremble slightly. Every few steps he paused, trying to hear what was going on in the sitting room.

Just like any other morning, Josi was opening and closing her lips with a pop as she watched that TV show about the dolphin, the one with talking animals which she loved. Every now and again she burst out laughing with delight. Roman remembered his mum being pregnant four years ago. So Josi could not be his sister, then. It was a shame – he loved her more than anything in the world.

Coming round the corner, the aroma of coffee jolted him like an electric shock. For a moment, he wondered if he should not just pretend that today was a normal day. Carry on as if nothing had happened.

He froze, like a statue whose arms are fixed forever across its torso. He was a lump of stone, trapped in limbo between filial duty and simply wanting to break down under the strain of it all.

“I’m sorry about what happened yesterday. I told your father I wasn’t happy about him telling you like that. You need time to take it all in,” she said. Her voice was weak and anxious.

“All that matters is that it doesn’t change a thing.” This, apparently, was supposed to explain everything.

Then, “Isn’t that right, darling?”

She looked across at the man who was not his father. He raised his eyes from the newspaper.

“I’d had enough. I was sick of lying to you. Of course it doesn’t change a single thing, and I’ve never said it would. You are our son. I would have told you all that if you hadn’t run off like that.”

Then, silence. ... Nothing apart from the rustle of the newspaper, the babble of the dolphins and the hissing steam of the coffee machine. The woman looked at Roman, her face tormented, despairing, questioning, caring. They were both right, but they were both wrong. He did not want to be lied to, but they should never have started lying in the first place. And he was sure as hell that yesterday had been the wrong time for a conversation like that.

Did he feel angry? Nothing. Nothing at all.

Nobody seemed to know what to do next, and Roman could relate. He didn’t know either. But then again, he was not the adult in the room. Impassively he went back up to his room and looked at the shirt which still lay in a ball under his desk.

Two or three minutes passed. There was a knock on his door, which he had locked behind him by some automatic action which he could not fully explain. The handle turned. The door stayed shut. Roman hung his shirt on a hanger over the window frame and opened the door.

The two strangers came in, having put their differences aside, apparently, and sat on his bed. The last time that had happened was when they told him his mum was pregnant with Josi.

Roman remained fixed to the spot. His eyes were heavy, swollen with tears – or by trying not to cry. His gaze was empty, his head too.

Later, he would realise he had been too deeply in shock to feel anything at all.

“This is for you. We wanted to give it to you when the time was right,” said the man he used to think was his father. He had never called him Dad anyway. Roman’s best friend Stevie called him “The Lieutenant”. It seemed even more apt right now.

The man pulled out something rectangular wrapped in newspaper. A gap in the crinkling revealed a brown, leather-bound book.

“Here,” said the Lieutenant, passing it across to him.

“If there’s anything you need, if you need us, or just want to talk – we’re here for you,” said the woman. The two of them got up uncertainly and looked at Roman. “We’ll leave you in peace for a while.”

Roman took up the book and opened it doubtfully. The paper was a pale yellow, the sweeping curves of the handwriting a sign that writing this had been a labour of love.

The book was from his true parents, passed on to him by the people who had spent so many years pretending that was what they were. Roman looked back at the same patch of the floor, at the faint scratch in the bleached wood. He shook his head. Would this book reveal the secret, fill the void? He flicked through it once more. He was burning to read it, but at the same time, he could not bring himself to.

Why did they have to tell him? Why now? What was he supposed to do with this information? Did they expect the truth to make things better? Who was it good for? Right then, it all felt like a misunderstanding, or a

particularly crass episode of one of those “prank” shows which they watched together every Saturday, the ones that made Roman laugh so hard sometimes he would fling himself from one corner of the couch to the other.

It almost felt like he was waiting for the Lieutenant to come back in, let the mask drop and do the big reveal. But there were no cameras, only the inexorable ticking of the clock.

What kind of word was it anyway, “Information”? As if the lie he had lived all his life was just something to be brought up in passing, a word on scrap of paper that had been blown into the wrong life.

He turned the key in the lock, picked up the book from his bed, hung up his shirt, then chucked it back under his desk. He went over to his window. It was still snowing. A single hot tear trickled down his cold cheek.

He wasn’t dreaming.

*

Almost a year had gone by. It was the first Christmas Eve of the new millennium. Roman was on his bed, lying on his front, holding the book. Again. Probably for the thousandth time. No, it was definitely the thousandth time.

Every page was familiar to him, every crinkle in the paper, every word. What had hit him hardest was the photo of him slipped inside. Two faces, somewhere between hope and saying farewell. There were long, convoluted sentences. An explanation. Or an attempt to explain why they had not been able to keep him.

The final sentence summed it all up.

They had escaped from Yugoslavia in the late Seventies but had to return in 1989. Their residence permit had expired, but the country they returned to was on its knees. They wanted to spare him that. “The place where we’re going isn’t for children.”

So that was why they had decided to leave Roman in Germany. He had been one year old.

Roman had learned from his adoptive parents that he had been found in a hospital and ended up with them. They had talked about it, but the Lieutenant had generally only frowned and replied, “You are our son. Your birth parents did the right thing.” Roman’s mother seemed to have questions which she dared not ask.

The whole idea was almost unreal. He had spent the Nineties following the news about the wars in Yugoslavia without the slightest idea that his own parents were there, lost among the rubble and the headlines. And all the while he had been growing up in this cocoon, his homeland had become the stage for atrocities of every kind – atrocities which, until now, had seemed strange and distant.

Roman was not angry with anyone. Really, he wasn’t. He was okay with it all. Well, maybe not everything, but pretty much everything. In any case, he was doing fine – the answer you give when you don’t have anything else to say.

The photo tucked into the book had faded with age. It showed his parents leaning against a Ford Scorpio. They looked happy. He could not make out the colour of their eyes – the sun was too low in the sky, leaving their faces overexposed. Did he look like them? He could not tell. They had their arms around each other’s shoulders, looking more like old school friends than lovers.

On their left was another car, light green in colour, but only the wing mirror was visible.

But it was not the photo that his mind turned back to time and again. It was the handwriting.

Ever since he had first opened the book, it had been a constant nagging presence in his thoughts. More than anything, the capital “J”, with its expressive curve like a treble clef, had caught his attention. He had seen that “J” somewhere before. Beyond doubt.

Stevie, his best friend and the only person he had told about the book, thought he was imagining it.

But Roman knew he wasn’t.

Josi potted in without knocking. Roman jumped, flinging the book under his bed.

“Santa’s coming!” Josi said, her eyes shining.

No he’s not. Your parents just made that up (like pretty much everything), Roman thought for a fraction of a second. But he did not say it. It was not Josie’s fault, was it?

So, just like every other year, he stood next to her at the window and looked out at the frozen Christmas night, both scanning the sky to find the brightest star in the heavens. Roman counted slowly to one hundred, and as he did, Josi grew more and more restless with each passing number. He could almost hear her little heart racing. And for just a moment, it all felt like the old days.

“One hundred!” cried Josi and tore off down the ladder, bursting with anticipation. Roman stayed where he was, staring out into dark, clear night.

He thought about how everything had changed in the year that had passed. They still sat together to watch TV, but they no longer leaned on one another's shoulders. They still said, "Night, night, sleep well," but that came more quietly now, called up from the landing below, now whispered from his bedside. Even his birthday cake in summer had tasted different somehow. Roman did not know if it was him, or them. Or if it was just what had happened.

"Time for presents!" echoed up the stairs.

There it was again. It all the same but different now. Roman went down the same stairs as every other year, but he did it differently. More cautiously, as if what awaited him at the bottom was not really the best night of the year.

Nothing had changed about the chill that had descended on his relationship with the Lieutenant. Roman often wondered if that chill had not been there ever since Josi was born, looking for signs that his false father had never really loved him. Of course he found them, gathering them up like shards of broken glass. Those times when the hug had been too close, the silences behind the newspaper, the measured coolness of his instructions. Roman used to think it was discipline. Now he knew it was distance. The Lieutenant had not raised him as a son; he had trained him like a recruit placed in his charge. But his heart had never been in it. Roman had come to accept that the times were long since past when the Lieutenant would hoist him up over his shoulder with his big hands, smiling. Had his eyes even gleamed just a little? Back then he would often be away on deployment abroad for long periods, living a life cut off from society somehow. Some of what went on there stayed far away. Some things he brought home with him.

There were things he had left behind there, some he had brought home with him, patterns of behaviour he could not shake. At least, not to Roman. It was different with Josi. The Lieutenant had no problem being close to her. His face lit up the moment she laughed. Just as she was doing right now, as she tore open the wrapping paper, her eyes huge with excitement.

Back in his room, Roman leafed through the instructions of his new radio-controlled car. He had put it on his Christmas list, and he had got it. It made him happy. Really chuffed, actually, though he used to be able to show his happiness more easily. It was already late when there was a tentative knock at his door. Josi came in and closed it softly behind her. She should have been asleep by now.

“Roman,” she whispered. “You’ve changed, haven’t you?”

“Changed?”

“Yes.”

Roman got off the bed and went over to her, kneeling down so their eyes were on the same level.

“I will always be the same for you,” he whispered back.

Then he pressed her tightly to him. He was her big brother. He could feel that truth in his bones. Who cared if they had different parents?

He gave Josi a piggyback to her room and, having closed the door as softly as he had opened it, he swallowed.

He sat on the stairs. All around him, there was only the silence of the house.

He did not think he had changed, but didn't everyone who had changed think they were still the same? Josi's question had found the mark. She was five, so honest, so pure. He could count on her to tell the truth.

Was it him who had changed, then?

Although it was late, Roman slipped out into the cold air where he could breathe more deeply, more aware of everything. Free. He set off for the cemetery. Ever since that New Year's Eve he had often come here to roam among the lines of graves. The heavy, black iron gate gave a short scrape as it dragged along the ground. Then the silence returned.

As he passed the gravestones in all their different shapes and sizes, he calculated how old the individual buried there had been – and how much time he had left, should he live to the same age.

There among the dead, life took on a curious new meaning for Roman. But panic seized him at the thought that death was waiting for him, too. Suddenly he found he could no longer breathe through his nose. The sharp, rapid intakes of breath stabbed into his breast like icy needles. But he had learned that this sensation, too, would pass. As the hammering subsided in his breast, a curious sense of relief eased his mind. Death had its own form of justice. It was waiting for the Lieutenant just as it was waiting for him, and had waited for all these strangers who had been lying under their gravestones for so long. This sense of finality soothed the chaos in his life. If everything passed away in the end, questions of where you came from and what was true seemed to lose some of their suffocating weight.

Just then he saw something. No more than a glow at first, a glimmer of warmth amid the darkness.

Roman stood still. The light couldn't come from a lantern fixed to one of the gravestones – it was moving too erratically for that. He took a step towards it, then another, cautiously, until he could make out the candle flickering in a glass jar. Someone was kneeling next to it.

The girl – yes, it was a girl! – was bending over the glow of the candle beneath a tall tree. Her long hair had fallen forwards. Something about the way she was kneeling seemed more mysterious than the cemetery itself.

Torn between curiosity and fear, Roman ducked down behind a thick hedge. For several minutes, nothing at all happened, but he had never experienced a moment as fascinating as this one.

When the girl at last got up and extinguished the light with a movement of her hand, there was nothing left but sudden, deep darkness which settled over the scene like a cloak. The girl walked towards the gate without looking back.

As she stepped out onto the street, it seemed as if the streetlights brought the shadow to life.

It was Mira, the girl from next door. Mira was in the year below Roman at school, and, as far as he knew, he might as well not exist to her. They had always been neighbours and Roman knew that they used to play together, but at some point that had died away and Mira had even begun to ignore him. There were days when he would walk the whole way home from school only a metre or two behind her, but when they reached their front doors, each would disappear without a word to the other.

What had brought Mira here? He did not know. Nor did he understand why he was certain that at some point, he was going to ask her.

All that was certain, was that he would never forget this moment, ever. It was the first time so long that he felt he was not alone, even here, with the dead all around.

The clouds scudding across the full moon seemed close enough to touch.

He wanted so much to see a shooting star. He could really have done with a wish right now.

I was nine in the Year 2000. It was the first New Year's Eve that I really took in at the time and still remember today.

For weeks before the big day there had been one topic of conversation in our house: our Thousand and One Nights-themed party. There must have been forty people there. Mum made her famous potato soup. There were rockets and Catherine wheels, while lucky charms and pictures cut from coloured film adorned our windows. Streamers criss-crossed the garden. There was confetti and fun snaps for the kids.

I had dressed up as Aladdin and was looking forward to staying up so late. I loved "socials", as my grandparents called them, at our house. I loved being in my own home where everyone else was out at a party. The smell of heating oil down in the cellar, or the bathroom upstairs, out of bounds to all guests. And the coolness of my childhood bedroom when I needed a break from all the smoke, noise and other people.

Ten, nine, eight ... the noise of the countdown swelled. Midnight, and cries of "Happy New Year" all around.

Everywhere, rockets were fizzing up into the illuminated sky. In those first few minutes of the new millennium, I was aware of nothing but the most awe-inspiring firework display of my short life so far. I played cops and robbers with the kids next door and nobody told us to go to bed. The smoke from the rockets and the glow of the magic lanterns were the perfect backdrop. We laughed and made one another jump, running around in our winter jackets until we gave off steam.

It must have been two in the morning when I lay down, mind and body absolutely exhausted. I dropped off in seconds into a deep sleep – just like I had every night when I was young.

That brief conversation with Roman gave me the feeling that he had a story to tell. I wanted to know who this man was, this guy who had bought my book the day it came out. I bought him a coffee, and, after a bit of small talk, he started to open up – and didn't stop. Right from the first sentence there was no mistaking that his story would be closely bound up with mine. Until that point, I had never thought that my childhood, which had seemed so normal to me, might actually have been unusually happy.

There was the fact alone that I had parents who really were there for me. I could rely on them and I felt their love for me every day. Their love surrounded me as entirely as the air I breathed, and I absorbed their care for me like oxygen, without ever wondering if I deserved it, and without ever realising that I needed it to survive.

The following morning, the first breakfast of the New Year. No table could have been set with more love and care. It groaned under the weight of all my favourite food, candles glowed softly. Next to my plate lay a small card from my parents, a handwritten note with wishes for the new year.

Today, I feel mortified at how little it all meant to me that day. At that very moment, Roman was sitting amidst the shattered ruins of his identity and wondering if anything would ever be real again, I was

irked by my parents' sentimental affection. I failed to see how much they loved me, because I had no idea what it meant to have that love snatched away.

[END OF SAMPLE TRANSLATION]