

Sample translation (pp. 9-47)

BEING INCONSPICUOUS

by Dirk Brauns

Literary fiction

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THE SCREAM FEBRUARY 1965

He jumps up, feels for Angelika in the dark and whispers, “Did you hear that?” But she just pouts in her sleep, as though she wants to be kissed.

5:30 am. The second floor of a rental property in Berlin-Treptow.

Pigeons are cooing outside in the courtyard. In the kitchen, Angelika’s mother, who has an early shift, is taking the kettle off the stove before it can begin to whistle. The cedars in front of the kitchen window are swaying gently against the still-black morning sky.

The noise must have come from inside his anxious mind.

Turn it off! Go back to sleep! Focus on your role here—the future son-in-law; a welcome guest who has managed to hold his own beside the temperamental daughter of the family. He carefully shifts closer, letting himself be calmed and carried away by the warmth of her body and its familiar scent—creamy, slightly citrusy.

Then: pounding against the front door. Blows with a fist or a flat hand that reverberate through the apartment. Someone who’s wasting no time on using the doorbell is shouting:

“Open up!”

Seconds later, still completely disorientated, he hears his own name and the order:

“Get dressed!”

Already they’re storming into Angelika’s room. There are three of them. They shove the mother up against the wall, their faces expressionless. Angelika, who leaps up at them in her nightie, is caught and deposited in the corner with her mother.

“Stand back! There are no charges against you!”

They take him with them. In a white civilian vehicle they transport him to his “registration address,” as they put it. They don’t explain anything else. They make their way north through the winter-pale city. After about half an hour, they arrive in Berlin-Blankenburg.

Minus six degrees Celsius. Gusts of wind and a thin layer of snow that is whirled up time and again.

Two of the men wait with him in front of his parents’ house. They are wearing long, dark coats.

He has to stand next to them in the freezing cold, in an assigned spot by the garden gate. They pay no further attention to him. They don’t say a word, not even to each other; they keep their eyes trained on Suderoder Strasse, their hands in their pockets. Though there’s no way he can know it, he somehow *does* know they are doing this to conceal their guns. His grandmother is allowed to remain inside the house.

Where is she? Is she alright, or are they putting the 82-year-old through the wringer too? He gets up on his tiptoes and tries to make her out, but he can only see her guard behind the kitchen window, his profile pacing back and forth in an even rhythm.

When his relatives pull up in front of the house in their blue Wartburg, a ripple passes through the group. The men rush in their direction, ambushing them. “Your papers!” the one in the front barks. His great-aunt from Sachsen-Anhalt, who’d only come to visit and lend her sister and grandnephew her support, gets out and starts rummaging through her purse, her face ashen. Her husband is standing on the other side of the car as if rooted to the spot. If he were to

move now, he'd be at risk of getting shot. Thankfully he seems to have understood that.

They march in single file into the house. Martin knows the way, but he doesn't now. It's cold, strange and off-putting. Groping for certainty, it occurs to him that no shoes are to be worn inside the house. Grandmother insists on that. Before anyone can stop him, he kneels down and for a moment grasps onto his tattered slippers.

The relatives are each taken into a different room of the house. No one cares that Martin is shaking so badly he can hardly talk.

They shove him into the dining room.

The interrogator is sitting in front of him at the head of the dining table, in the glow of the overhead lamp with the hanging crystals that are always trembling slightly. He has to remain standing.

With his dinner-plate hands the man pushes everything aside, almost shoving it all off the table: the napkins standing up in their rings, Father's rummy cards, the blue fruit bowl that belonged to Martin's great-grandparents from Brandenburg.

The questions are about "solving a serious crime against the state." His parents have been arrested the day before. The man sitting across from him wants to know what he knows about their "covert activities."

"Nothing, nothing at all," he chokes out. His teeth are chattering; he is surprised the man is able to understand him at all. He turned eighteen just recently, he says; he's hard at work preparing for his final exams. He has a steady girlfriend too; her name is Angelika Walder and—as it appears they already know—she lives in Berlin-Treptow, Beermannstrasse 10. He has rarely spent the night at home recently. He's not very close to his parents.

The interrogator presses the point, threatens him too, but Martin sticks to his story. In the warmth of the living room he becomes more sure of himself, and finally they seem to believe him. His parents' arrest, he says ruefully, has come as a complete surprise. It's a shock.

That last part is true.

But he's known for a long time that his parents are spies. He doesn't know any of the details; he can't really understand it, and he doesn't really know where to put it or how to feel about it, but he knows it.

It's the bane of his existence, and now he's going to have to make a run for it in order to deal with it.

"liiaaah!" The tortured scream of a woman resonates through the house. It's an animal noise, a noise that reaches into every nook and cranny—it's impossible to tell where exactly it's coming from. Something falls with a dull thud. Doors slamming; footsteps thundering down the stairs; someone crying out "Heinz!"

Is that a real name? His interrogator rushes out. The door of the dining room has to be lifted up slightly and firmly pulled shut at the same time, or it won't close properly—there's a knack to it.

Through the crack of the door he can make out his grandmother lying on the kitchen floor.

"She collapsed. She needs a doctor, and quick, or she'll croak!" he hears. He's already out in the hallway. Two of the men are bent over the sprawled figure. He sees her skirt ridden-up, her skin-tone stockings and her slippers, strangely straight on her feet.

Suddenly he's the one who knows what to do.

"Our doctor lives around the corner. I can go get her."

“Go!”

He runs through the winter streets, once again in just a cardigan, his footsteps hammering on the sidewalk as he tries desperately not to slip or lose his slippers. Grandmother, please don't be angry, he pleads silently, there was no time to change my shoes! He storms down Suderoder Strasse—it seems endless—to the corner of Gernroder Strasse where—his arms outstretched—he swings around to the right.

Just before Gernroder Strasse meets Alt-Blankenburg, he reaches the doctor's house. His breath is steaming. He has never before rung a doorbell so firmly, with such insistent despair.

1. FIFTY YEARS LATER

The phone rings for a long time. First he hears it upstairs in the apartment and then next to him in the examination room. It's his mother.

"When were you planning on getting here?"

"In two hours, like we agreed."

"Could you make it a little later? Mona wants to call me."

"Sure."

"It's just because of the time difference. When my granddaughter in America wants to talk, I have to be *ready to roll*. You're not mad?"

"Of course not. Should I bring cake?"

"Lord, no. I have cookies."

She hangs up with a click. The sober noise fits with the room that surrounds him. Along the wall there's a display cabinet full of drugs and medical equipment. There's a metal table on a plinth which they use to examine the small animals. The tiled floor is brown like dried blood, which every now and then, after surgical procedures, is indeed to be found there.

His gaze wanders out through the window, to the sunroom. Seeing the wicker chairs with their homemade cushions, gathered around the circular table like splotches of paint, he remembers summer evenings—balmy air, clinking glasses and insects orbiting candles.

He turns away, takes a refrigerated box labeled "LAB" and carries it to the front door, putting it down right next to the bowls of cat food.

Friday, 3 pm. He stands in front of the old manor house that he fixed up himself, surveying it, and counts the chimes of the clock. He imagines them borne on the wind, carried his way from the nearby church. *Borne on the wind*, he likes that phrase. He whispers it out loud to himself.

He is sixty-eight, a veterinarian, a transplant from the city in a small community in Upper Bavaria. He's lost his Berlin ways—he greets his clients with an easy smile and prefers to wear sandals when he works. Over bare feet.

His wife Emma died a year ago.

Out front by the woodshed, his younger colleague with whom he shares the practice comes rushing across the street.

"*Servus*, Jürgen. I thought you were done with your afternoon rounds?"

"I was, but there's a problem over at the Bichlers'."

"What's going on?"

"Senior thinks one of his cows swallowed a nail."

"Good luck with that. The metal detector should be under the counter in the reception."

"I've already got it in the trunk."

They wave at each other, a curt flick of the wrist. Then his colleague takes off, leaving him behind. He stares at the spot where the car was parked just moments ago, and can conjure up all of it, watch it unfold in front of him like a film playing in an endless loop. Rubber boots are brushed off and put in the trunk. Rubber boots are taken out and put back on in a yard, in front of stables, his back leaning against the car, before marching off as decisively as possible. Detection of foreign objects, hoof-trimming, delivery assistance, Caesarian sections, surgery for twisted stomachs, artificial insemination... And you've got the client breathing down your neck the whole time. A farmer who won't stop talking and who always knows better. Or a farmer

struck dumb with fear and tension, which is even worse and requires the utmost calm.

With an exhaustion he'd never known until a year ago, an exhaustion that irritates him, he shuffles back into the house.

Emma would come to him in the kitchen now to bitch about his mother—her arrogance, her moodiness. About how his mother only ever thinks of herself; how she enjoys getting a rise out of her son.

"Cake? Lord no! I've got cookies! And you simply *must* come a little later," Emma would say in an affected voice, until the two of them would be doubled over with laughter. The old catchphrase "Today you'll show her!" would be brought out as well.

And they'd have tea. Dried mint and birch leaves from the garden, ginger or Earl Grey. Emma would notice his bare feet, point out the temperature and shake her head. She could never stop herself, even though she also admired him for his "hippie home remedies." Unlike her, he'd only been to the hospital once in all those years—and that had been when Mona was born.

She would, he would, they would. There's no point torturing himself. He considers himself a rational man—someone who is capable of looking at himself with a certain measure of detachment. But what he's been going through this past year—this thing that's been pushing him around, shoving him from one trough into the next—cannot be contained by the usual methods.

Emma's sudden death—in the bathroom in the morning while she was brushing her teeth—was too absurd. What happened defies categorization. He had picked her up and tried everything until the paramedics arrived. He had pushed down on her chest and breathed into her mouth, again and again, tasting peppermint toothpaste the whole time. It had been in vain—she didn't come back.

He still has another hour—how slowly time passes!—and so he goes down into the semi-basement to sort through old things. They're mostly Emma's things—he takes them off the shelves all around and slowly, very slowly, packs them into cardboard boxes. He fills the boxes up all the way to the top, closes and numbers them and stacks them all on top of each other, neatly set on their sides. He doesn't do this because he needs the storage space, or because he has any special plans for what to do with her skirts, blouses and dresses. Packing up the things she's left behind, taking an inventory of them, assigning them a new place—it seems the appropriate thing to do. When he's working away down there he gets the sense that he can equip her for her journey, as if all of it is happening according to some plan in which there's a role for him too. He longs for her. If only he'd paid more attention when she was still alive! If only he'd seen it coming! That's what he's thinking about as he's putting her clothes together, involuntarily and not infrequently stroking them as he does so. The feeling that he's lost his most important pillar of support, his only real friend, is hollowing him out from the inside. But he wants to be able to cope, for goodness' sake. What's the use in crying when he looks at a cushion sewn by her, when he helps himself to some tea from her still half-full caddy, or when the phone rings in the reception and she doesn't answer?

He stands staring through the semi-basement window, looking out onto the slope directly in front, the cobblestones overgrown with ivy, and doesn't realize at first that Mrs. Lohmaier has spotted him. The neighbor lady is standing in her driveway waving at him. Surprised, he raises his arm and takes a step back.

The old lady likes him. They've been chatting over the fence for years, congratulating each other on their birthdays, giving each other walnuts or apples and checking each other's

mailboxes when necessary. When he renovated the house and the adjacent stables after they'd first moved in, tearing down and putting up walls, stuccoing and painting the façade, she—the inveterate Bavarian native—had been the first to extend a hand in friendship to the newcomer. “You’re a hard worker, aren’t you?” she’d called out when he’d come rolling past her gate with a wheelbarrow full of bricks. “Well, you have a Prussian for a neighbor now,” he said, pausing to catch his breath. “Don’t ever say that again!” she scolded, putting on an expression that was resolute and mischievous at the same time. “I don’t like them Prussians. You live in Bavaria now. So you’re a Bavarian too!” That kind of warm banter had characterized their encounters ever since.

Even as a practicing veterinarian, to his surprise he had managed to become acclimated to country life and win over the locals just fine.

Just a few days after moving in, he’d been called over to one of the farms in the town to look at a cow that was having difficulty calving. The owner had been unable to reach any other doctor and had turned—out of pure necessity—to him, the young whippersnapper from up north. The man had watched his every move with great skepticism: the way he put on his long veterinary apron and pulled on the surgical gloves; how he then went about examining the female. The calf was stuck. Probably it was simply too big and couldn’t fit through the birth canal. But it was still alive. “I’m going to perform a caesarian now,” he’d told the farmer. The man had hesitated, but after he’d made clear to him that the calf likely wouldn’t survive otherwise, the farmer had brought over the requested bucket of hot water, soap, a towel and a small table for his surgical instruments. By the time he had washed, shaved and disinfected the cow’s left flank, the whole village was gathered around him. He knew more was at stake than just this cow and her unborn calf. He had to carry out the procedure—which was still fairly unusual at the time and which, though he’d learned it during his studies, he’d never had to perform himself—standing up. He cut through the oblique abdominal muscles and the peritoneum. Through the uterine wall he could feel the calf’s two hind feet. He pulled the uterus up to the incision and, thankfully, managed to cut through it using his scalpel. Then he asked the owner to grab the calf’s back feet and carefully pull on them as he widened the opening in the uterus. The calf slid out. It was still alive, and its mother was fine too. He quickly sewed up the uterus and the abdominal wall. As he was washing his hands, he was told that this had been the first caesarian ever to be performed on a cow in the area. The farmers that thronged around him patted him on the shoulder. The ice had been broken.

When Martin decides to retire, Koslowki is going to have tough shoes to fill.

The telephone rings again. This time it’s Mona, his daughter who lives in San Francisco.

“Hi, big girl. Did you get done early with Grandma?”

“It was a surprisingly short conversation. Hi, daddy.”

“How come?”

“She was having trouble with her hearing aid. I had to shout, but I still don’t think she understood very much.”

“Oh well. All she cares about really is that people hear what *she’s* got to say.”

“Meanie! She’s your mother, you know.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

He’s sitting on the swivel chair in the reception. In front of him there’s a framed note with a picture of a cat next to it: “Dear Dr. Schmidt, if it wasn’t for you our Mitzi would likely no longer be with us. On behalf of our entire family—thank you so much!”

His daughter asks:

“Did you get my email with the pictures?”

“Yes. Lovely!” he says, although he hasn’t looked at them. Wherever Mona is, wherever in the world she travels, she finds and photographs cows for him—German Holsteins, Belgian Blues, Argentinian Anguses—because she knows he likes cows and simply cannot understand the prevailing indifference that exists toward this animal that is so vital to people’s lives.

“Did you see the plate with the buffalo mozzarella?”

“Yeah, what’s the story there?”

“Just imagine—they serve that sort of thing at the coffee shop on the corner, with a cappuccino. They call it a Silicon Valley breakfast.”

He hears her laughter, clear as a bell—his daughter on the other side of the world. His heart clenches in his chest. An electric shiver passes through his body as he remembers what it used to be like when she would put her arms around him. Even as a little girl she tended to give long, tight hugs. Whenever he found himself the subject of these love attacks he’d make a face, as if he had far more important business to attend to. *How clueless can a father be?* he asks himself as she, somewhere south of San Francisco, continues to laugh at the idea of having mozzarella for breakfast. The fact that she has her mother’s voice doesn’t make it any easier. To avoid getting tearful, he forces himself to ask:

“And how are my grandchildren?”

“All good. Olivia’s birthday was nice, although there was a thunderstorm and we ended up having the party indoors. You sound funny. Everything ok?”

“I’m fine.”

He tries to decide what to tell her—or rather, what not to tell her. He misses his daughter like he misses Emma, but she’s alive! And during this entire phone call, he has that stupid picture of Mitzi in front of him. Saving animals, performing caesarians—sure, I can do that. But my wife just slips between my fingers, he thinks angrily.

Don’t go there, or you’ll both start crying. Mona fulfilled her childhood dream and went on to study veterinary medicine. At just six years old, she was already dissecting mice in Lohmaier’s barn. Later on she’d accompany him on his rounds, assisting in surgical procedures, going about her duties with the utmost seriousness. Even when she was still a student he’d had no qualms about having her do check-up visits or sit with dogs that were going through labor, which could take up the whole day.

He’d never doubted that she would take over the practice someday. But she’d preferred to marry a Californian. A perpetually-cheerful programmer with washboard abs and an insatiable urge to procreate. It seems to him like she’s been kidnapped and chained to what is already her third baby carriage.

She wanted it this way. He has to accept it.

He goes seamlessly from these thoughts to asking her about a message four-year-old Carry recently left on his machine.

“She said that her daddy will only quit smoking the same day he also becomes a woman. Out of the mouths of babes... Where did *that* come from, pray tell?”

The conversation drifts into the desired territory—pleasantly smooth waters, talk of Carnival parties, bedtime stories and tales from the playground.

A little later he leaves the house to go visit his mother, as agreed. He pulls the mahogany door shut behind him. The lock clicking into place and the turning of the key have a sense of finality

about them, although he can't put his finger on why. These days, he has to talk himself into leaving the house. He's become more thin-skinned, almost overcautious.

What Emma used to call his "quirks" are becoming more pronounced again. When he walks into the empty house, he wanders through the rooms and tries to identify if anyone's been there in his absence. Is that really so absurd? He checks wall sockets and lampshades for implanted devices. Emma never understood his admittedly-unusual way of re-entering the home. How could she? He grew up in a household full of spies!

He knows what it's like when your own parents lock themselves in the living room at night to compose secret messages.

His father had talked about it on his deathbed, in the detached tone he would use to talk about matters that were important to him: "It must have been about a hundred letters in secret code that I wrote in there and sent off to cover addresses. I wore gloves while I wrote them, old white fabric gloves that used to be Mama's. And I used prepared-silk cloths as blotting paper."

It wasn't quite the explanation his son had been hoping for.

The key still in his hand, he waits by the side of the road. The air is crisp and mild—spring is here. He can hear the car coming from the center of the village long before it swings around the corner.

He's partly obscured by the elderberry bush that hangs over the fence, but even so he's hard to miss: a slender man of medium height in a trench coat, who takes his handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe his shoes one more time. For a moment, he balances on one leg as he's doing it. Then he goes back to waiting, his face expressionless.

A woman from the neighboring village is in the car. He knows her from the horticultural club. As a leisure gardener, he has taken advantage of her expertise on numerous occasions—especially where pruning fruit trees is concerned.

Following an impulse, he does nothing to make his presence known to her, even though she's someone he knows and likes.

Perhaps that's one of my best qualities, he says to himself on his way to the garage, his face breaking into a grin: going unnoticed.

2 OLD STORIES

With two wrapped slices of mango quark pie in the passenger seat, he drives through the countryside.

The other drivers seem more aggressive than they used to be. They cut him off; they raise their arms threateningly; they only rarely use their turn signals. Even the simplest communication, he thinks to himself—communication that costs so little—is becoming a luxury. We are turning into antisocial beings, each of us trapped in the cockpit of our selves. The humming of the wheels and the purring of the engine are the familiar sounds of our isolation.

By the time he arrives at the retirement home, he feels like a traveler in a space capsule.

He parks around the corner and uses the back entrance—not before checking to make sure no one is following him. It's ridiculous, he knows it, but some habits are too deep-seated to shake off. Cake in hand, he feels self-conscious—there goes Mother's favorite, on his way to afternoon tea. But then again, that bears so little resemblance to the reality that it amuses him. On impulse, he pivots around in the foyer to go buy primroses from the florist across the street.

"Spring flowers! How lovely!"

The gray-haired women in the elevator are utterly charmed.

"Heralds of spring, actually," one of them weighs in, beaming.

By the time he gets off, he's smiling too.

His mother lives on the ninth floor, the "Anthony Hopkins floor." A portrait of the actor hangs proudly on the wall in the corridor to serve as a kind of mentor. He asks himself every time which roles inspired the decision to display his visage. He's mainly familiar with two: the stubborn, impenetrable butler in *The Remains of the Day* and the diabolical cannibal in *The Silence of the Lambs*. It's a fleeting thought. He hasn't brought it up with his mother; he doubts she even knows good old Anthony. But the fact that the seniors that live here should be confronted with this channeler of autists and cannibals seems poignant to him somehow—a little taster of the mental chaos and loss of reason that, in the end, everything degenerates into.

The cocoa-fiber runner muffles his footsteps. There's a faint whiff of urine in the air, but the wooden wall paneling—reminiscent of the interior of a ship—and the doors of the apartments, clad in bright leather, and above all the silence in the hallways, all suggest refinement and civility.

He's standing in front of her door. "Dr. Erwin and Hedda Schmidt," the name plate says, although his father died a long time ago and never lived here to begin with. Is this sign an attempt on her part to show what a picture-perfect family life she hails from? For a moment, Martin listens at the door, tilting his head. Then he rings the bell.

She opens the door right away. To his surprise, she's wearing striped pajamas with a woolly jacket on top.

"I'm glad you're here. I'm looking for an envelope."

"What kind of envelope?"

"A *letter* envelope. It should be at the bottom of the cabinet but, as you know, I can't bend over anymore."

She puffs out her chest imperiously, her index finger stretched out—still every bit the former office manager. Only her thin, bandaged legs and her wobbling stance indicate that the world is no longer at her beck and call.

They squeeze past each other in the entrance hall without really properly greeting each

other, without any body contact—she can hardly be touched at all at this point without ending up with bruises.

He pushes the flowerpot to the side and kneels down in front of the cabinet. She directs him:

“Those are my classical music CDs! Farther to the back. It’s a fat, brown envelope, A4 size.”

“What’s inside it?”

“Old condolence letters. I have to send someone my sympathies and need some examples.”

“This should be it.”

He hands her the package, and they sit down at the set table, stiff like two parties negotiating a business deal: he straight-backed on the sofa; she in her green velour armchair, surveying him.

“You want something, don’t you?”

“Where did you get that idea?”

“My son, I can tell.”

When he looks into her eyes, he knows where his own talent for analysis comes from. They aren’t eyes—they’re steel-blue floodlights. They’re aimed at him, unswerving, waiting. He feels a chill running through him and is annoyed that she can still get to him like this—a 90-year-old with her 68-year-old offspring.

He tries to block out the old stories. And yet he finds himself thinking of how, in East Berlin back in the ’50s, he had longed to be in the Pioneers—the East German youth organization—like everyone else. How he had quarreled with her over that. She never tired of telling him why she rejected the “Russian state” and its “proletarian cult.” And he would cry and plead with her to be allowed to join it. “All of my friends are members. They do the greatest things! Day trips and hikes and camps and group nights!” They’d eventually come to blows, he remembers with horror—blows on both sides, for the record. A desperate adolescent who wanted more than anything to join the ranks of that organization, he’d ended up slapping her in the face in the living room—although not until after she’d slapped *him* because he staunchly refused to see that this “marching club” was really just a thinly-veiled Hitler Youth.

“You’re right—there *is* something I want.”

He doesn’t feel like arguing with her, and he doesn’t have the strength for it anymore. And when he looks at her—her arms covered in bruises, her wispy hair, her sagging eyelids—he feels compassion rising up in him, maybe even affection. What exactly it is that he feels, what goes on inside of him—apart from the obvious things that he could enumerate like items on his to-do lists—remains an open question. He doesn’t know.

“What’s the matter? Do you need money?” she asks, instantly shattering his peaceable mood.

“Of course not. Whatever would give you that idea?”

He chokes on his cake and erupts in a coughing fit. She watches him with interest.

“There were times when that was the only reason you’d show up here.”

“Please! Do you need me to give it to you in writing? I’m grateful for your support, but I paid you back the loan for the house and the clinic, and more than twenty years ago at that. You got your money!”

“Okay, okay.”

She holds up her hands, unable to suppress a smile, and points at an ornate bouquet by

the window.

“Imagine—those roses are still left from your last visit!”

“It can’t have been too long then.”

“You never did know much about flowers.”

For some time they are engrossed in their mango-quark cake. Not a word is said about the fact that he wasn’t supposed to bring any cake—“Lord, no”—because she had cookies. The clattering of the forks is a measure of how hard they’re trying to put their disagreements behind them.

“I’m thinking about retiring and selling the practice.”

“What about Mona? What if she wants to come back after all?”

“How long am I supposed to wait? Until hell freezes over?”

She pauses and puts down her plate.

“What’s the matter? Has something happened?”

He’d like to jump up and just take off. No, apart from Emma’s death twelve months and nine days ago, nothing has happened—nothing whatsoever. Apart from that giant kick in the rear end from fate, which has clearly barely registered on madam’s radar, everything’s just hunky-dory.

Then he realizes that she could be serious—that she may not have the slightest clue about his struggles, which after all aren’t practical in nature. Ever since that loan forty years ago—which she’s still proud of—she’s reduced everything to that and believed that she’s had the measure of him.

That’s the way things are between them. Mother and son circle each other. They needle each other, almost as a matter of routine.

Sometimes he feels like his father. Him, too, she’d put in his place and try to bring into line—subtly, yes, but in response to even the smallest deviations. When the poor man looked at the cover girls on Western magazines like *Stern* or *Bunte*, for example, she always felt he lingered too long over them. She’d come rushing up to him and let out a pointed “A-ha!”

They’ve finished the cake by now and are drinking tea. There’s no reason to get worked up about anything. He presses ahead, saying out loud what’s been preoccupying him for weeks:

“By the way, the Spy Museum in Berlin contacted me to ask if I’d be interested in taking part in a project.”

“What kind of project?”

“They’re planning a special exhibition about the everyday life of agents in the ’50s and ’60s. From what I understand, I’m supposed to read files from the archives and then be interviewed as a contemporary witness.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“Why not? It’s about our history. I was contacted by the curator himself. He almost begged me to get involved. He considers the case to be spectacular and instructive.”

“Instructive? Well, isn’t that dandy. Do you have any idea what you’re going to stir up?”

“I literally don’t—how could I? I’m surprised they haven’t asked you, though.”

“They did. But those people aren’t even worth hearing out. And what does that even mean, ‘our history?’ Your father and I ended up behind bars because of our work for the Company. What you got up to later on can hardly be called espionage.”

“I just wanted you to know.”

She looks at him like he’s an object—something that has to be picked up off the floor and thrown out.

“Well, I hope you have fun! I guess you feel a need to root around in all that stuff. Whatever. I’m past it. It’s a closed chapter, you understand?”

She gets up and moves to a stool by the window.

The sky over the city is burning with the orange of twilight. Thin stripes of clouds criss-cross the sky like gunfire from opposing camps. Such a huge spectacle—pointless and beautiful. An excess of light and color that has nothing in common with the gray of the tower blocks and the stream of traffic crawling down the streets and highways. To the south, the mountains loom out of the mist—craggy mammoths, their fur heavy with snow.

He looks at his mother’s back. In spite of the bulky jacket, her silhouette is slight. Minutes pass, in which all that can be heard is the drone of the streets down below.

He asks himself the usual questions that a child muses over: What might she be keeping from him? How could her feelings for him best be described? Does he really know her at all?

Back in Blankenburg—the chapter she says she’s put behind her—he had once walked in on her with his father. Late one summer’s evening, in the garden behind the house. Whenever his bladder woke him up during the night, he liked to sneak outside to relieve himself. It would send his grandmother, who guarded her empire of plants closely, into fits of rage, but he didn’t care.

In the moonlight, under the fruit trees, he had stumbled upon his naked parents, like figures from a vulgar dream. They were absorbed in the moment and didn’t notice him. He backed away.

Later, when they had moved their secret activities of the other kind into the study—where most Sundays his father would compose secret messages and his mother would write her innocuous letters on top of them in regular ink—he would sometimes find himself thinking back to that tableau in the garden.

He was the spy who snooped on his spying parents. But had it always been that way?

He searches frantically for new, unused words to explain it, but no such words exist. He has to make do with the old ones.

What a life! Which way is up and which way down, which is back and which is front, he asks himself, still staring at his mother. Hazy images appear before his mind’s eye—episodes he buried a long time ago. He stumbles into a hotchpotch of family and state secrets. The outlines are becoming blurred. Ever since Emma died they get a little more blurred with each passing day. He is afraid of losing the ground beneath his feet.

Can the ground beneath your feet—or part of it, at least—be documented and numbered? Can it be rolled up, piled up or folded up and put away somewhere, preferably deep down in a basement or garage, and stored there as a ground-beneath-your-feet reserve for even worse times?

Abruptly she turns around.

“Seeing as how we’re talking about big issues. I’ve got something to tell you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I can’t be sure, of course. But I thought you might be interested to know that Angelika called me.”

“Angelika? Angelika Walder?”

“The very same.”

“I don’t believe it! What did she want?”

“To talk to you—what else? She wanted to know what you’re up to, how you’re doing. She also asked for your contact details, though of course I didn’t give them to her.”

He widens his eyes and edges forward on the sofa.

“I would have been happy for you to give them to her.”

“I thought as much.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“I figured I’d better not, Martin, because you were married. Your wife would hardly have liked that.”

“What? Hang on a minute—when did Angelika call you?”

“Five or six years ago.”

His wide eyes open even wider. It’s impossible to look any more dumbfounded.

“Five or six years ago? You never mentioned anything!”

“No, I didn’t. I’m mentioning it now.”

He gets to his feet, shaking his head all the while.

3 CALL HER!

The village is dim in the half-light, the buildings grouped around the church tower like a tent encampment where everyone is asleep. Several lights flash on in front of his house, triggered by motion sensors. He stands there, listening to the rain, which is coming down heavily by now, and looking at the worms fleeing the flowerbeds. They end up on the concrete road, lying there like bits of string. Several of them seem to be heading for the practice.

“Are you coming to see the doctor?” he asks politely, stepping over them.

In the kitchen, he uncorks a bottle and stares down at the stone floor, which dates back to when this room still served as a stable for goats. He hears the blood rushing in his ears. Tinnitus come, your whistling be done. In the name of confusion and this Valpolicella, he mumbles, moving to the chaise longue in the living room. Emma had fallen in love with the designer piece at first sight—they’d only been together a few months at the time. Like a little girl she’d pressed her nose up against the store window, barely able to tear herself away—but she didn’t want to talk about it.

“The original? Or maybe the Spanish copy...?” the salesman had asked in that courtyard in swanky Schwabing, in the northern part of Munich. He’d showed him the screws in the frame that were supposed to make all the difference. “A few screws more or less—who cares if it’s gonna cut the price in half, right?”

He can still remember that shark’s laughter—his knack for playing on things that had never even been mentioned. They were still living in that tiny student apartment back then. He was working on his dissertation, *On the History, Documentation and Analysis of Postdoctoral Theses in Veterinary Medicine in Germany in the Context of the Individual Subjects of Study (1810–1974)*. It wasn’t a topic that would in any way prepare him for his professional practice; his advisor, who wanted him to stay on in academia instead, had been the one to suggest it.

Apart from his discreet supplementary income, they’d had almost no money at all in those years, he recalls. But still they had purchased that outrageously expensive chaise longue—even if it *had* ended up being the Spanish version. It was absurd and wonderful. With the optimism of young lovers, they’d hurled themselves into a shared future. There was no challenge they couldn’t face.

He’s lying there, on this grand piece of furniture, as if he were riding a wave. He calms himself with thoughts of Emma—who lives in every object in this house—and once again replays the visit to the retirement home.

Did his mother really give him Angelika’s phone number? Careful now! She’d blown a gasket when he’d told her about the museum project. “What are you hoping to get out of broadcasting our lives to the masses?” she’d ranted. And then she’d brought out a club to hit him over the head with: Angelika. Madam Spy is highly adept at throwing out and withdrawing bait like that.

After the Stasi had released her, when it had become possible for him—their only son—to leave East Germany too, she’d started trying to talk him into breaking up with Angelika, all but demanding that he leave his childhood sweetheart behind. He remembers these discussions as though they were a surgical operation he had to undergo without general anesthetic. He knows that it happened. They argued over it for months. During his visits to Hohenschönhausen Prison and later by telephone, after she’d been bailed out in 1967 and was waiting in West Berlin for the rest of the family.

They fought about the future of his relationship. Strangely, though, he can't recall a single one of the arguments that she trotted out. There's nothing there anymore. No pain, either. Doubtlessly he'd acquiesced and assented to the decision, carried it out, so to speak. But the memory of it is gone, as though suffocated beneath the mass of corrections that he had to make for the fresh start in the West.

He holds the scrap of paper with Angelika's number in his hand. In his haste he'd grabbed the first sheet he'd seen; it was only as he was writing that he'd realized it was a notification to his mother from the building's management company. She hadn't realized. She'd slowly dictated the phone number to him one digit after the next, dragging it out. And as he'd been writing them down, annoyed, he'd been overcome by the impulse—an utterly childish one, it now seems—to keep the message from his mother and just pocket the piece of paper. You couldn't get any more childish than that!

Re:

Window cleaning in apartment no. 823

We ask you to make note of the following date for the cleaning of the windows in your apartment. If you are unable to be present on this date, please notify the site manager in a timely manner. To ensure that the windows can be cleaned properly, we'd also like to ask you to leave the window sills clear as much as possible. We cannot accept liability for any damaged items.

Best wishes,

Cleanux, Building Cleaning Services.

He reads through the text. The only detail that strikes him isn't exactly exciting—it conforms with his experience and expectations: the three requests aren't followed by so much as a single thank you.

All that is irrelevant. As he crumples and uncrumples the piece of paper, all he really cares about is one thing—Angelika's number, scrawled in blue felt-tip pen over the blah-blah about the window-cleaning.

He'd like to talk to her, but at the same time he doesn't know how. He makes a fraught attempt to run through the conversation in his head, slapping himself on the cheeks as if having trouble staying awake.

He looks at the telephone, gleaming silver on the kitchen countertop. Curiosity, certainty, risk, just a few meters away. And he looks at the clock. Out of the question! He can't. Five or six years have passed since she tried to get in touch, and a whopping 45 prior to that. What exactly is he hoping to achieve here?

He jumps to his feet and goes down into the basement.

During one of his tidying sessions down there, he found photos. He hadn't thought that they still existed; he figured they wouldn't have survived the moves. But here they are, in a manila envelope that he'd recognized immediately when he came upon it several weeks ago—yet he hadn't opened it; he'd put it away again. Angelika in his parents' living room, her hair cut in a jaunty pageboy style, wearing a short skirt, legs demurely crossed. Angelika in a bikini on the beach, triumphantly holding up diving goggles and snorkel, an impish grin on her face.

Angelika in a forest or park with her arms around him, his arms around her too, both of them beaming at the camera—the very picture of happiness.

He shuffles the pictures between his fingers. There are several stacks, held together by rubber bands. He wonders how he managed to keep them hidden from Emma. When he looks at them, he realizes he could hardly have shown them to her. There's a lump in his throat: a treacherous burning, as if he were doing something forbidden, as if he were rooting through the secrets of strangers—when he's the one in these pictures! He and this girlish young woman.

He studies her fine features; the way their hands are intertwined in several of the photos. Usually his hand is on top of hers, and she seems to be trying to slip out from beneath it with her long fingers. Some of them show very intimate moments, even though you wouldn't be able to tell that from what you can see at first glance. They're standing by a fountain, for example, looking into each other's eyes. But the way they do it attests to an astonishing closeness.

He looks at all of it with a strange feeling of wonderment. It makes him uncomfortable. Dredging up these memories seems wrong—as if he were cheating on Emma. Is it possible to go behind a dead person's back? He asks himself in all seriousness whether he should tell her about all of this. Whether he owes it to her, even, the next time he's by her grave. But the idea is horrifying—having to stand in front of that tombstone, shifting from one leg to the other and having to wait until the little ladies from the village have finished raking their graves, until they've gotten on their bicycles and have finally disappeared and no longer need to engage "Herr Doktor" in conversation about who has died recently, and how and why, and who is entitled to have the rosary prayed for them. Even his neighbor, Mrs. Lohmaier—much as he's fond of her—sang that tune the last time she ran into him at that cemetery: "Haven't you heard? Haindl—Georg—our chimney sweep, has gone to meet his maker. He lived to be 84. Not exactly nipped in the bud, I grant you..."

He puts the pictures of Angelika back in the envelope. Can you miss someone who hasn't been in your life in fifty years? He goes back upstairs, chastising himself all the while: "You fool! You dolt!" She's probably married or gone through a traumatic divorce. She's not likely to be blond or willowy anymore either. He tries to picture the havoc the years might have wreaked: how unbearable, how disappointed by life she must be. But the images that rise up in him—of how fat and foolish she will have become—don't ring true. He refuses to believe these fantasies.

9:40 pm—the telephone is still there, sitting in its charging station like the candy at the cash register. As he approaches it, he hears it whispering: "Do it! Call her!"

[END OF SAMPLE]