

Sample translation

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Joachim Meyerhoff: Wann wird es endlich wieder so, wie es nie war

(“When Will it Finally be like it Never was Again?”)

Novel

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Enough of Your Nonsense

My first dead person was a pensioner.

Long before accident, illness and old age made the next beloved members of my family disappear, long before I had to put up with the fact that my own brother, my too young father, my grandparents, even my childhood dog were not immortal, and long before I ended up in a compulsive permanent conversation with my dead – so cheerful, so desperate – I found a dead pensioner one morning.

I had turned seven a week before and had been feverishly awaiting my birthday, as it meant I finally attained the right to walk to school unaccompanied. From one day to the next I was allowed to stop and go whenever I wanted. The grounds of the psychiatric hospital where I grew up and the gardens, houses, streets and bushes outside the institution walls were as if transformed, and I discovered all manner of things I had never noticed in the company of my mother or my brothers. I took slightly longer strides, feeling incredibly grown up. The fact that I was on my own made the things around me stand out alone as well. Eye-level juxtapositions: the crossing and me. The kiosk and me. The wall of the scrapyard and me.

I was surprised at how many decisions I was suddenly allowed to make. Holding my mother's hand, I had usually daydreamed or chattered and let her take me to school, paying no attention to the way, like a letter taken to the post box.

For the first week I had obediently taken the agreed route as solemnly promised – the route my mother had taught me, with all the necessary looking-left and looking-right and then looking-left-again. But on the following Monday I decided to take a slight detour through the allotment gardens. I pushed open a green barred gate and strolled along a path between miniature homes and gardens, fruit trees and vegetable beds. I didn't feel quite comfortable with the idea, as my father had expressly forbidden me from ever entering the allotment gardens. 'Men often hide in the huts,' he had warned me, 'so please don't go that way. Is that a deal?'

'Sure, Dad, it's a deal!'

I scrumped an unripe apple, bit into it, spat the sour bite precisely between two fence slats and catapulted the remains as far as I could across the roofs. I waited for a sound but absolute silence prevailed, as if I had chucked the apple directly into weightlessness. I spat a few times and went on. I hadn't expected the allotment gardens to be so large and confusing. At every opportunity, I turned right in the hope of reaching a gate that I knew precisely, from which it was only a few hundred yards to my school.

I looked at the new watch I'd been given for my birthday. I hadn't wanted one but the watch was the condition for my new independence. Five minutes to eight already. I really had to hurry to get to school by eight. I came to a garden fence I had passed once before and quickened my pace. All the paths looked the same and I tried to ignore the unease welling up inside me. Gone was the tangled sweetness of the allotment gardens, only a moment ago waking from their early-morning peace, as was my newly awakened joy at exploring them all on my own. Far away but still clear, the school bell rang. I broke into a run. My satchel clattered hard against my back, as if I were being goaded on by a cantankerous coachman.

At last I came to a long straight path, at the end of which I spied the long-sought gate. When I reached it, it was locked but I recognized my route to school on the other side. I leapt up and gripped the top of the gate. The holes in the wire lattice were small and the tips of my shoes kept slipping, and it was only when I pressed my feet flat against the wire that I managed to climb to the top. I swung one leg over to the other side and was just about to pull the other one after it and jump down when I saw a man lying in a flowerbed in the garden to my left. I knew instantly that he was a dead person.

To this day, I'm still amazed that I didn't get the slightest shock, didn't run away in fear. Quite the contrary – tense with curiosity, I slid my behind bit by bit along the top of the gate towards the man. Now I had an even better view of him. He was fully dressed in what seemed to me an elegant manner. All in beige. One of his pale brown summer shoes had slipped off his equally pale brown sock, his shirt was neatly tucked into his light trousers, and my father also wore a similar woven summer belt on occasion. His

feet and calves were on the lawn, the rest of his body among the flowers. I didn't know what kind of flowers they were but they were bright and colourful.

Why was I so sure he was dead? Why did I not consider fetching help, not even for a fraction of a second? Why did it seem to me that this corpse was destined for me and all my own?

The stems around his torso had snapped, some of them broken off, as if he had beaten about himself, rolled on the ground in the throes of death, grabbed at the plants in agony. He lay face-down, his grey hair dishevelled. I couldn't take my eyes off him, perched on top of my viewing gate looking down at him. I was torn. Should I drop down to him, clamber into the flowery realm of the dead, or should I jump down on the other side – the side of the living, cars, passers-by and the inexorably advancing school day? One of my legs was suspended above the garden, the other over the pavement. A thought, at first rather vague, cemented into a sensational realization and finally made its way via my tongue to my lips: 'I've found a dead body,' I said quietly, several times over, with increasing enthusiasm, 'I've found a dead body.'

I leapt off the gate on the street side and ran to school, pushed open the school gate, raced up the stairs, burst into my classroom and heralded the glad tidings with voluminous jubilation: 'I'VE FOUND A DEAD MAN!!!!' The teacher and all the pupils looked at me as though the saviour himself had come crashing through the classroom ceiling. What's going on? Are they deaf? I thought, jerking my arms upwards, clenching my fists in victory and yelling even more loudly than before, 'IIIII'VE FOUUUUND A DEEAAD BODYYYYYYYYY!!!!'

'Goodness me, what on earth's the matter with you?' the teacher snapped at me in an irritation I found utterly incomprehensible. 'What's got into you? How dare you come barging in like that? Have you lost your mind?' At this point, I was overcome by a deeply felt sense of clemency for the slow-wittedness of my fellow pupils, as they eyed me with disbelief, and for my teacher, whose features had escaped their usual professional control. I mustn't expect too much of these people. Assured of my upcoming triumph and deliberately slowly, I let them in on the secret of my sensational discovery. 'There's

a man in the allotments – and he’s dead. I found him. He’s DEAD!’ I spelt it out all too clearly into all the gaping mouths. ‘There’s a body in the flowerbed. A man. A dead man. I found him. Yes, me. I found a dead body!’

‘Sit down at your desk.’

I shrugged my satchel off my shoulders and took a seat. My God, how low the desktop was. My knees barely fitted underneath it. That was no surprise to me, though. Anyone in possession of a dead body takes a leap forward, shoots up in height, expands outwardly and has a decisive head start. The teacher stepped out from behind her lectern, which suddenly looked tiny and pathetic, stepped up to me, squatted down and gave me an earnest stare. There were to be many more occasions in my life when I encountered that look, that stare that says unmistakeably: ‘That’s enough of your nonsense. It’s not funny any more.’ That look that gives you a choice, between taking your leave from the community of veracious and upright individuals as a Baron Münchhausen, a purveyor of lies and untruths, and becoming an impostor beyond all redemption, or admitting, regretting and disdaining all improbabilities.

She looked at me like that for a long time. ‘Right, what’s the matter? Tell the truth: What did you find?’ I held my tongue. As if her voice wanted to open up a path of retreat from my mistake, she uttered an embracing phrase to remove all burdens from my shoulders: ‘Come on, tell me. What really happened?’ I was still out of breath from my rapid dash, or to be precise, my breathlessness only broke out now that I was expected to answer calmly.

‘I found something.’

‘And what did you find?’

I gasped for breath. ‘A dead body!’

‘A dead body?’

‘Yes.’

‘And where?’

‘In the allotments.’ Never, not in any lesson, not even when the key-ring-flinging headmaster with his severe war wound to the head stood in for a sick teacher, had it ever been as deathly silent in the classroom.

The more pressure I was under, the more uncertain I became. Insisting on my dead body suddenly seemed much more difficult than giving in to the teacher’s incredulity and simply denying all, saying, ‘You’re absolutely right. I do apologize’ or ‘I think I must have made a mistake. Perhaps it was a pair of trousers, yes, trousers, or a fallen-over scarecrow. Exactly, that’s what it was. I’m so sorry I’m late. It was an excuse. I didn’t find anything at all, let alone a dead body.’

But I wasn’t going to give up that easily, not even now that she raised the pressure. ‘If what you say is true I’ll have to call the police. They’ll go and have a look, and if there’s nothing there, you’ll be in big trouble – I promise you that.’ Oh no, the police, I thought, what shall I do? Perhaps I really had been mistaken; perhaps he’d simply been unconscious or looking for something in the flowerbed. Perhaps, I thought desperately, he had long since got up again, put on his shoe, straightened the flowers, combed his hair and sat down on a deck chair outside his neat garden hut. The policeman would step up to his garden gate, I imagined, and say to him, ‘Good morning sir, pardon the interruption, but have you seen a dead body around here anywhere?’

‘A dead body? No, officer, I most certainly have not.’

‘A little boy claimed there was one in your flowerbed.’

‘Goodness me, I haven’t heard such nonsense in years. In my garden? A dead body? Incredible what those young whippersnappers come up with, you’d hardly credit it, would you?’

‘You can say that again. Well, have a nice day, sir.’

What on earth was I to do? Everyone was looking at me. Even the plasticine dinosaurs we’d made in craft class seemed to be staring at me sceptically from the windowsills. But it was true, true, true! ‘Yes,’ I proclaimed. ‘I saw him. Lying on the grass. He was dead!’

‘Right.’ She nodded. ‘Everyone – and when I say everyone, I mean everyone – stay at your desks in the classroom. I’ll be right back.’

As soon as the door closed behind her everyone, and I mean everyone, came running over to me.

‘Really truly?’

‘Where was the body?’

‘What did it look like?’

‘Had it already started rotting?’

I leaned back and gave my answers. ‘No, not at all.’

‘How did you know he was dead?’

‘I could tell.’

‘Hey, what if he was still alive?’

‘Maybe it was murder?’

‘Did you see any blood?’

I was just about to give in to temptation and claim to have spotted a tiny amount of blood on the back of his head. I could see it in my mind’s eye. ‘It might have been a murder,’ I said. ‘There was... No, I didn’t see any blood.’

The teacher returned and the children dashed back to their seats. She positioned herself behind the lectern, raised her hands to command silence and called out, ‘You’re to go and see the headmaster.’ I stood up and went to the classroom door. She came over to me, put her hand on my back, its warmth instantly penetrating my sweater, scorching my skin like a hot admonishment, and whispered a warning in a discomfiting tone so quiet that the other children couldn’t hear it: ‘There’s still time to tell me the truth. You know the headmaster hates being lied to. Are you quite sure?’

Her trust in me was already undermined because she had only recently convicted me of lying. It was no big deal, as far as I was concerned. Two boys had been fighting in the school playground. I had never seen a real fight, but a tight crowd of children had formed around the two. I tried to squeeze my way in but I simply couldn’t manage it. I heard panting and catcalls of encouragement. And then I saw our teacher running

across the schoolyard. The show would be put to an end at any moment. I shouted, ‘I want to see too!’ Not a chance. ‘Hey, let me through! I want to see too!’ Still no reaction whatsoever. And then without thinking, I yelled at the top of my voice, ‘I’m a doctor!’ The outer ring of onlookers gave way and I beat a path through the crowd. ‘Let me though. I’m a doctor!!’ A cordon formed, at the end of which I finally caught sight of the punching and kicking boys. And so I stepped up to the hub, a seven-year-old doctor on the way to his first emergency.

Just then the teacher grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and shoved me aside. ‘We’ll talk later, alright?’ And she plunged between the wrestling bodies locked together on the ground, like a plucky referee.

During the next break I had to go to the smoke-filled staff room, sit down at a table with her and respond to her interrogation. ‘What was it you said?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Oh, yes you can. Don’t lie to me.’ I lowered my curly head, more as an outward sign of guilt than out of conviction. ‘Repeat right away what you said! Or I’ll call your parents.’

‘I’m a doctor.’

‘Have you lost your mind? What was that for?’

‘I meant to say: my father’s a doctor.’

‘What nonsense! And why?’

‘I wanted to see.’

‘What was there to see?’ The teacher spoke to me as if I was dim-witted; stretching her words, overly clear: ‘You – are not – a doctor!’ I nodded. ‘Who – is – a doctor?’

‘My father!’ I spoke directly into an ashtray on the table, and tiny particles of soot floated upwards as I confessed into it.

‘Alright. Off you go now.’

Even in the abandoned corridors on the way to the headmaster, I still felt the teacher’s hot hand on my back. The headmaster was sitting behind a monstrous desk. Neither the door nor the windows of his office looked large enough to get such a huge piece of furniture in there. The entire school must have been built around his desk. I broke into

an instant daydream, envisioning a giant desk floating though the air on the end of a crane. Builders shouted ‘Up a bit! Bit further left! That’s it!’ and positioned the huge table perfectly in the middle of nowhere, while around it the walls of the school were erected.

‘Where did you find it?’

‘What?’

‘Where did you find the body?’

‘Right by the gate. It’s locked though. It’s in the garden behind it.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I think so.’

‘What – you think?’ He looked at me with a piercing stare, a real headmasterly stare, which seemed rather blunt, however, rather jaded. I was immediately certain he had aimed this exact same stare at hundreds, if not thousands of children before me.

‘Either you saw a dead body or you didn’t! You know, my boy, I’ve seen plenty of dead bodies in my day, and you don’t forget the sight of them so easily.’ He looked me deep in the eyes, and yet somehow looked through me into a different time. ‘Bodies frozen in the snow with twisted arms and legs, that’s not a pretty sight. We stole the dead Russians’ jackets to keep out the cold. I lost four toes, you know.’ The headmaster removed his glasses and I saw a furrow in his bald skull, presumably pressed into his skin by the sides of his spectacles. I found the man deeply suspicious. On one occasion he had brought an accordion into our classroom, sung folk songs and then burst into tears. For minutes, he stood weeping in front of the class, pumping the accordion to and fro without it making a sound. Like a wrinkled animal, the instrument struggled for breath, crouched gasping on his lap and only expired when the bell rang.

‘Are you listening to me, boy?’

‘What? Yes, sir. I did see it, I’m quite sure. In the flowerbed.’

‘Sure?’

‘Sure.’

‘Right!’ He picked up the pitch-black receiver from a huge telephone, already outmoded at that time. ‘Good morning. This is Headmaster Waldmann at the North School. I’d like to make a report. One of our boys has found a dead body in the allotment gardens.’ He listened, looking at me. ‘When was it?’

‘Eight o’clock, one minute past eight!’ I responded, glad to know at least one thing precisely.

He added ‘Yes, fine’ two more times and hung up. ‘You can go back to your class now.’ What, I thought, is that it? Halfway out of the door, I turned back to him. ‘Shouldn’t I show the policemen where it is?’

‘If it’s there, they’re bound to find it. Off you go now. And give my regards to your father.’

‘Yes, sir.’

On the way back to the classroom, the idea suddenly came to me of running out of school to the allotments gate and getting there before the police, to check the body was still there. But at that moment the bell rang, the children came streaming out of the flung-open doors and my idea went under in the general pandemonium. Boys and girls surrounded me, riddling me with questions about the pensioner, and to begin with I even managed to tell the whole story in a truthful manner. But soon it was simply too tempting to keep the questioners and listeners transfixed – among them a number of girls – by means of minor embellishments. At first I had answered the question ‘Did you see his face?’ with a clear no. But then, at the third or fourth ‘Are you sure you didn’t see any more?’ I answered, ‘Maybe a little bit more. His nose.’

‘But if you saw his nose you must have seen at least one eye?’

‘I did. His nose and one eye.’

‘Was it open or shut?’

‘It was...’ I grew very quiet, ‘...open.’ My questioners longed so much for the deceased man’s face that they turned him on his back little by little though the intensity of their questions. I didn’t want to disappoint them. From one break to the next, my dead body got more and more gruesome. By ten o’clock his wide-open eyes were staring at the sky,

by twelve a pale tongue was lolling out of the toothless pensioner's mouth, and only the start of our last class prevented a shiny black beetle from crawling down his throat.

At the end of the school day – I hadn't paid the slightest bit of attention to any of our lessons, I was so busy fine-tuning the details – I finally broke through the last rampart of truth. Surrounded by a huge crowd, I spun yarn after yarn in the school playground. The star pupil, a boy who often missed days at a time of school to take part in chess championships in both parts of Germany and didn't usually waste a single glance on me, asked, 'And you're a hundred per cent certain he wasn't alive?'

'Yes, pretty much, but then...' I looked thoughtfully around the circle of children hanging on my every word and suddenly acted surprised, as if a missing piece of the story had fallen into place. 'But then, if you put it like that... Two fingers on his... wait... yes, his left hand were moving underneath the flowers.'

'Underneath the flowers? How could you see them then?' his chess-steeled brain objected.

'Well,' I said, overwhelmed by the attention I was receiving, savouring the tension, 'his fingers moved really slowly, like worms coming out of the ground, crawling through the petals and leaves to the surface.'

My family's reaction to my dead body was varied. My mother clutched me to her bosom and consoled me. 'You poor thing, are you really all right? It sounds so awful.'

My psychologically trained father spoke to me about the transitory nature of life, placed my discovery in an all-encompassing context and explained how the pensioner had died.

'It sounds like a heart attack. He won't have suffered. It's actually a good way to die. Picking flowers in the morning.' To my relief, he didn't ask what I'd been doing in the allotment gardens in the first place.

My two older brothers didn't believe a word I said, even though I'd returned to the original version of my corpse discovery story – as best I could remember it after all the embellishments. It was only after I'd thrown one of my tantrums, weeping bitterly and sobbing, 'Why won't you believe me? I swear by all that's holy, I swear on my life, I

found a dead body!’ that admiration gradually took the place of their scepticism. They comforted me and squeezed every last detail out of me.

There were a number of things that mortally offended me, however: that not one policeman came to interview me, that I didn’t get in the newspaper – I envisioned a large photo of me pointing at the place where I found the body, my face earnest and mature – and that there was no reward for finding dead people.

During the next few weeks I had to tell the story over and over. At school, at swimming lessons, to my brothers, my relatives and friends of my parents. I refined the narrative every time, memorized particularly good turns of phrase and even developed something like variations to suit particular audiences. Other school kids and my brothers wanted blood and gore, the word ‘putrid’ was a sure-fire hit, and the phrase ‘His wide-open eyes stared at the sky. They were slightly putrid’ made even me shudder anew at every telling. Male adults were impressed by precociously resolute behaviour: ‘I memorized everything exactly: the time, the place, the position of the body, and then I ran straight to the headmaster and reported everything!’ With female audiences, I gradually abandoned my fear of pathos and shamelessly served up lines like ‘A gust of wind wafted rose petals across his stiff body. Some of them caught in his grey hair.’

Of course, I was perfectly aware that I was lying, but it seemed to me as if the story had taken on a life of its own and I was responsible for doing justice to it, proving myself worthy of it. It’s not just anyone who finds a dead body, is it? It was vital to me that this unusual incident felt at home with me, that it stayed with me, and I lavished it with garlands and arabesques.

And then something inconceivable happened, something that changed who I am to this day. I was telling my pensioner story for the umpteenth time, this time to a friend of my oldest brother. As always, I began with my decision to leave the usual path to school, threw the unripe apple, built up the tension, lost my way, climbed to the top of the gate and spotted the man collapsed in this flowerbed. To stop me getting bored, I would invent new details every time, and I finished with: ‘And then I saw he was wearing a ring

on his finger. It looked very valuable. For a moment I thought about climbing down and pulling the ring off his finger. But then the school bell rang and I ran off.'

Just as I was inventing the ring, a hot flash ran down my back and I really did see the ring in my mind's eye. It was true! I hadn't invented it at all. My dead body was wearing a golden wedding ring on his left hand!

I called out, 'It's true. It's really true! He was wearing a ring!'

My brother and his friend gave me a look of confusion. 'What do you mean, it's true?'

'The thing with the ring. It really is true!'

Never will I forget that moment. I had invented something that was true. The imaginary ring, the ring plucked out of mid-air, had brought the actual ring, the true ring, back to life. Like an archaeological tool, my lie had scraped out an encapsulated detail and dragged it back from the depths of my memory.

It was an incredibly liberating realization: inventing is remembering.

[...]

Chapter 8: ‘Forty Spheres of Care’

Two days before my father’s fortieth birthday, my mother and I had a terrible row – though row isn’t really the right word. While I rotated around the kitchen floor like a human gyroscope powered by rage, my mother stood there stunned, observing me like I’d been seized by an attack of rabies. Like so many times before, she had set me off by doing a good deed. That was my mother’s speciality. Completely certain of her actions and at peace with herself, she tapped, well no, she drilled her loving, motherly finger into the tender wound. She was always perplexed when she saw what she had caused. She considered herself the friendliest person in the world, someone who found all underhandedness and maliciousness completely alien, which meant she just couldn’t understand why anyone could bear her bad feeling. The whole thing was further complicated by the fact that she was for all intents and purposes a loving person through and through. But somewhere in my mother was a subversive power that injected her with the most peculiar ideas. Here’s one example of many: my eldest brother bought her a drawing by Picasso for her birthday, a matador with a bull. What was so special about this drawing was that Picasso had drawn the entire picture without taking his pencil from the paper. The two figures were intertwined together in a single line, thus creating not only a combative, but also a graphic unity: the torero just before the fatal blow and the onrushing bull. My mother was so pleased that she hung it the same day while my brother was out fishing – in his room. He came home, saw his birthday present hanging over his own bed, went to my mother and asked: “Mama, what’s the bullfighter doing in my room?” My mother replied lovingly “It looks good there, right? I just thought it was the best place” My brother said: “Yeah, but it’s your picture. It’s a present”. And my mother kept talking enthusiastically “That’s OK. I’ll lend it to you!” That this made my brother disappear into his room, slamming the door behind him, was a complete mystery to her. Sympathetically she asked my father: “What’s up with him? Maybe he didn’t catch anything!”

The trigger of my own meltdown was similar. As I wanted to finally give my father

something other than a glass coaster for his birthday, I had thought up something really special. He loved marzipan potatoes. My plan was to give him forty of them for his fortieth: not bought, but home-made. By me! This was – I was certain of it – a fantastic idea. This was how I would reach the same level of present-giving as my brothers. An eight-year-old spares no effort: he will become a confectioner and make his father his favourite sweet.

I asked my mother to get me the recipe and went with her to buy the ingredients. The list sounded exotic: almonds, icing sugar, bitter almond oil and cocoa powder. One ingredient – and I liked this the best – had to be picked up from the pharmacy: rose water. The marzipan potatoes were therefore more than just a sweet; they were a kind of medicine. I proceeded very carefully and forbade any maternal support whatsoever. Five hundred grams of almonds have probably never been weighed as precisely as I weighed those almonds. Three's too many, two's too few. One's too big, the other's too small. I nibbled half way through the all-important one. My mother came past and said cautiously: "You have to shell them!". Shell almonds? Is that a joke? "The shell's already off, Mama! Almonds are nuts!" "Yes, but look here, this brown skin needs to be taken off. Are you sure you don't want me to help you? You have to pour boiling water over them."

I was worried that if I didn't do everything 100% myself that my brothers would say: So really this is a present from Mama and you? But I had no idea what she meant, so I reluctantly accepted her help. The almonds were blanched and afterwards I could just squish them out of their husks. They came shooting out! I took a step back and shot warm almond kernels into the bowl. I crumbled them up, mixed them with the sieved icing sugar, added the bitter almond oil along with thirty perfectly counted out drops of rose water. I kneaded the mixture together. It actually smelled of marzipan. In this moment I was completely sure that I never wanted to do anything else other than this. I had found my calling. I would become the best marzipan maker of all time. With the balls of my hands I rolled spheres the size of cherries. That's what it said in the recipe: cherry-sized. I considered this for a while. It could have just said 'marzipan potato-sized'

in my opinion. Everyone knew how big they were meant to be. Would it say in a recipe for a cherry cake: marzipan potato-sized cherries? Never ever!

I formed forty potatoes, one for every year. That was the first time I got a sense of how old my father really was. How much older than me. After the first potato I said out loud: ‘One’. My father is one. What a peculiar thing to imagine. My one-year-old baby-father. After the eighth potato, he was as old as me. I thought eight was a lot, but on the baking sheet it looked like bugger all. And so it went, until all forty were done. With every marzipan potato that I circled between the palms of my hands I felt a little of what the passing of a year was. How much, and yet how little a marzipan year was. I rolled and daydreamed and saw a cocoa-dusted future before me.

I spooned the cocoa into a bowl and placed it next to the baking sheet. I needed the loo. To prevent the potatoes from drying out I dunked a tea towel in water, wrung it out with all my strength and lay it, protective and moist, across my work. Sitting on the toilet, I thought about how I could most effectively package my grandiose present. Individually would be crazy. In the shops they sell them in little see-through cellophane bags, but that seemed far to simple. It was completely silent in the bathroom. The cleaner had been in the morning and it always felt like the blinding white bathroom was much quieter than the not quite so clean one. My hoovered and tidied bedroom was similarly stupefied after her visit, and it would only be after I had chucked my shoes in the corner and rumped the bedcovers that it felt like itself again. When I was ill and didn’t have to go to school, I liked to sit on the closed toilet seat and watch my father washing and shaving. He wore nothing but a pair of his vast underpants. His back was covered in hair and for a man who never did sport he had a remarkably wide lower back. Every morning he would clean his bald head with a cotton wall ball dipped in the shaving water until it was pink and shiny. He would show me the dirty grey cotton ball: “It’s astonishing what comes out even though I’ve showered”

He used an electric razor and pressed it so hard against his face that the skin would be slightly irritated and as smooth as a baby. The sound of the razor would tell me how long there was left until he’d be finished. The rasping sound would get quieter and

quieter. Finally, it would gently purr frictionless over the soft fatherly skin. In order to shave he would partially open two of the little mirrored doors of the Allibert cabinet. In all three parts of this mirror triptych I could only see my rosy father. If I made my eyes go out of focus, which I liked to do often, I saw a three-headed many-eyed man with an overlapping mouth and a hairy back. This blurry monstrosity could do three things at once: practise his speech for the staff meeting, shave, and clamp cigarette after cigarette in the corner of its mouth so the ash would simply fall into the sink.

Hanging on a hook on the wall was a flannel that was for one thing and one thing only: the dreaded bum flannel. My father wiped his bum clean with it every morning after his half hour shut away in the bathroom, and my brothers and I, and our mother too of course, had a healthy respect for this thing. My brothers would threaten to wash my face with it or, totally absurdly, dare me to suck on it: “If you suck dad’s bum flannel dry you can look through my microscope every day for a year” my middle brother would say.

A good idea for the packaging came to me in the quiet of the bathroom. I wanted to make a tray out of tin foil with forty troughs. Maybe I would find a marble in my room that I could use to mould the dents in the foil. I hurried back to the kitchen.

The baking sheet was empty. The damp tea towel was balled up on the kitchen table. My first suspect was the dog. But hadn’t I seen him sound asleep on the porch? Or was he faking? Did he have a mouth full of marzipan potatoes and was he just playing dead? I ran to him and prised open his lips. I startled him, he had no idea what I wanted or why I was pulling on his tongue. I ran back to the kitchen. There I discovered a bowl covered with a soup dish on top of the fridge that I was sure wasn’t there before. Around the edge of the bowl I could make out cocoa powder.

I lifted the cover off of the bowl. There they were! Dark brown, cleanly domed, a pyramid of powdered orbs. Done and dusted, coated in cocoa. I screamed. My mother ran in, overcome with worry that something terrible had befallen me: “What’s happened?” I suddenly had no idea how to construct a sentence. How to start or end one. I pointed at the bowl and bawled “Whaaaaaaaaatttt?”. And then again

“Whaaaaaaatttt?!?” My mother didn’t understand and looked at me blankly. “What’s happened sweetheart?” I snatched the bowl and held it in front of her:

“Whaaaaaaatttt?”. She shook her head. She was sure she knew me, but this blond-haired boy with the bowl in his hands who kept screaming ‘Whaaaaaaat?’ was a real puzzle to her. “But they came out so well!” she cried. I screeched an octave higher: “IIIIII waaaanted tooo dooo iiiiiiit!” and then another drawn out and pain-filled

“Whaaaaaaatttt?”

I reached into the bowl and mashed the potatoes together. My mother watched me do it reluctantly: “What are you doing that for? They were so nice! Now, really. It’s not that bad.”

I ran back to the bathroom with clumps of it in my hands, locked myself in and began to wash it off. How could she? There was nothing I was looking forward to more than individually coating my forty presents with cocoa powder. It would have been the pinnacle of my efforts. That was it! That’s what I was really proud of: that I had done something with care. That was the real present. Me, the erratic one, always easily distracted, me, the one who never read a book to the end, that couldn’t conduct a long conversation without staring off into space, who became hysterical if he had to sit in silence for thirty minutes at school, the one who slipped into a daydream at every opportunity, I wanted to give my father forty cocoa-powdered balls of care for his fortieth birthday. A dusted promise of the future! All destroyed, thanks to my mother, with her obedient pre-emptive help.

But the drama would escalate even further. I washed the sweet clumps away under warm water. It smelled stronger and stronger of marzipan. The scent was exactly as I had imagined it would be in my own factory. There was a knock at the door, my mother pulled down the handle. She spoke in two voices. One of them was comforting and said: “Please come out. I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you wanted to do it yourself”. The other voice was annoyed with me and admonished “Come out now. It’s not right to get so upset about something like this. You’re acting like something much worse has happened”. And while the tears came, the clumps of marzipan dissolved in the hotter

and hotter water, became smaller and smaller, ran through my fingers and disappeared gurgling down the drain. I tried to hold onto it, to make it anew. But by then it was a creamy paste, just marzipan soup. The plughole let out a bitter almond burp and pulled the last gulp down.

For a moment longer I mourned the forty-part bereavement, and then came the rage. A hot wave rising from my feet, a swell of vengeful thoughts. I saw fists and blood, lifted my head and suddenly saw my mirror image standing there. I hadn't realised how wild I looked. My reddened eyes stared at me with bitter anger, my bottom lip quivered. I was fascinated by this unrecognisable, uninhibited, devilish, scowling boy. I wouldn't let myself out of my sight.

My mother knocked and called: "I'm sorry. I just wanted to help you!"

With a higher, cheerfully humble voice I shouted "That's OK! I'll be out in a minute!"

The tone of my voice didn't go at all with my wrathful face. This was what made it so strangely appealing.

"Are you sure?" my mother asked.

"Uh huh, I'm sure Mama. Everything's fine now."

Her mouth must have been really close to the door as she said, not very loudly: "Please come out." Frothy spittle had collected at the corner of my mouth. I didn't lick it away; I let it run down my chin. "Really, Mama. I'll be right there" I purred in a chiming and boyish voice, staring at this out of control, wayward, slobbering being with blood-shot eyes.

My mother left. I opened my lips as wide as I could, clenched my teeth together and growled at myself. Only lots and lots of cold water could wash away the hateful face. But seeing myself like this made me both curious and fearful. Where does this second face come from, I wondered, and could it be my true face? Had I seen myself, my true self, for the very first time?