Sample Translation (pp.7-34)

Oh, This Void, This Unspeakable Void by Joachim Meyerhoff

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Publication: November 2015 (Hardcover)
352 pages
ISBN: 978-3-462-04828-5

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At the age of twenty, to my great surprise I was given a place at drama school, and since I couldn't find a room I moved in with my grandparents. The two worlds couldn't have been more different. That's what I want to tell you about: my grandparents, whom I loved above everything else, imprisoned together in their beautiful house, and what it's like when someone says to you: 'You must learn to smile with your nipples.'

Five stages

Stage one: champagne

It never mattered when I visited my grandparents. Whether I was four, ten or fifteen years old it didn't matter, they always remained the same.

The holidays that I spent with my grandparents before training as an actor have merged vaguely in my memory into a single, fraying cloud of time. Which may have something to do with the fact that single prominent events interrupted my grandparents' everyday life only very rarely. Their life itself was the event. Each individual day represented all the days, and each one of those days was a small miracle. A sequence that they celebrated, marking it out with ritual, discipline and whimsy.

Apart from Sunday, when they went to church or set off on hikes, all their days looked exactly the same. I have often wondered if they had ever spent their days differently, because in all those years I never experienced anything unpredicted in their company. Perhaps it would even be true to say that the central core of their existence consisted in avoiding surprises, and the older they grew, the more meticulous they became in the sequence of their actions. Their beautiful house near the Nymphenburg Park, which they only left twice a year for any length of time – two weeks in Lanzarote in February, two weeks in Dürnberg, a spa town in the Austrian Alps, in late summer – was the ideal place for their time management and their journeys.

I can't think of a single object in my grandparents' house, no piece of furniture, no bowl, no saucer, no carpet, which ever moved from its place. Even the keys on the key panel always hung in the same sequence, just as the knives on the magnetic strip preserved their formation for decades. Certainly, over the years a few things were added. A place for them

was found, and they stayed in it for ever. Just as if the empty space had been waiting patiently for that very object.

The house was always clean. But since the cleaning lady, Frau Schuster, was always the same one, the ironing lady was growing old and deaf, and Herr Moser, the equally aged gardener and odd-job man, could eventually push the lawnmower back and forth across the garden only at a snail's pace, irregularities appeared which my grandparents, being even older than their staff, didn't notice. Dust devils in the corners, fallen nuts, crooked creases, unmown islands on the lawn. The cleaning lady became forgetful, left her things lying around, and even once played the trick of putting the vacuum cleaner back in the cupboard without turning it off. It went on sucking away miserably in there until my grandfather said: 'Am I going mad, or is there a buzzing noise somewhere?'

My grandparents were always very well turned-out, very neat, they looked dazzling. They were almost exotically cultivated. But in that very cultivation they were a little other-worldly, as if they had fallen out of time.

My grandmother was an actress, but she had given up acting in the mid-sixties. Everything had gone stale, she said. She liked to use that word when talking about contemporary theatre: stale. In fact, she hadn't been to see anything for years. And while, if one believed her assertions, she had no desire ever to return to the stage, theatre and drama had slipped into her everyday life. Even when she spoke of the most mundane matters, her way of thinking, the way she held her head, her gestures always lent a grandiose quality to what she said. Although my grandmother never seemed shrill or even operetta-ish. No, her whole personality tended resolutely in the direction of grand drama.

Sometimes, as if pierced by a deep pain, she would let her eye drift into the distance, and raise her arms so slowly that not even her gold bracelets clacked together, and only when she was certain that everyone at the table was looking at her enthralled did she say: 'Mohhhh….' And then, after a long pause, 'the brie is a poem this evening.'

Then my mother always exhaled irritably. 'God, mother, please!' Time and again my brothers and I, or even guests, would fall for such seemingly significant moments. Each time we would think, because her performance was truly outstanding, that something had happened. Into the middle of a conversation she would cry: 'Am I mistaken,' throw her hand to her wide open mouth, pause, and then, in a tremulous tone, 'or is there a bit of a draught in here?'

Shortly after the war my grandmother had had a serious, indeed a fateful accident, the consequences of which had taken root like a parasite in her life that had so nearly come to a premature end. That disaster had left her with one short leg, disfigured with scars, which needed a lot of attention and had to be massaged and kept in motion every morning. She locked herself in, because when she was doing her painful leg gymnastics no one was allowed near her. Even as a child, whenever I could, I would listen at the door and hear my grandmother's whimpering and groaning behind it. Rubbing, indeed squashing the pain out of her leg seemed to be a hopeless undertaking. All through her life that leg became a source of pain for my grandmother, one which welled up afresh each day and could never be defeated.

If you asked her, 'How are you this morning?' she could be relied on to say, 'Fine, my darlingy.' 'And how is your leg?' Just as dependably, 'Wretched. It is horribly insulted today.' I have heard it a hundred times and imagined it very strangely: my grandmother's insulted leg. That leg, tortured in secret every morning behind the closed door, held a magical attraction for me. No one was allowed to see it, no doctor, not even my grandfather. It was filled with the most terrible memories. Memories that my grandmother tried to extinguish with her disproportionate ambition, a brutal ruthlessness which in her massages she directed at herself.

On the other hand the gymnastics practised every morning by my grandfather, the Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, was an abstruse simulation of gymnastics. His bright white hair dishevelled by the night, he stepped into the open. In his underwear he looked like a hermit illuminated by the Holy Spirit. He was surprisingly hairy. After a few deep breaths he began his choreographic routine in honour of Friedrich Jahn, the father of German gymnastics. Because of his great age these exercises were merely suggestions of the movements that he had once doubtless performed with vigour and brio. On his age-thinned matchstick legs he made a few mini knee-bends. But he only bent his knees by a few centimetres. Then he put his hands on his hips and circled them gently. It made him look like a slightly effeminate professor. A decrepit manikin on the balcony with morning sun in his hair. He stretched up his white arms and did a windmill, turned his striking head back and forth. Some practices were barely perceptible, and for minutes at a time he would just stand there and practise internal gymnastics.

Then came the visible highlight. He reached with both hands under the back of one knee and drew his leg up in front of his chest. He held it fixed there for a moment, let it go again, stretched it and laid his leg sideways on the balcony railing. His ribs protruded in his narrow chest, he let his head fall backwards very slowly, raised his hands high in the air and

moved his fingers slightly. Looking heavenwards he opened his mouth, and seemed to be waiting for a divine offering. After the effort of getting up, the generous gargle of a mysterious gargling solution and their daily gymnastics, they both showered in their separate bathrooms every morning.

Hand grips had been pegged up all over the walls in both of my grandparents' bathrooms. I always liked studying the constantly changing hand grip positions, as they provided information about my grandparents' different and progressive frailties. Once, by chance, I saw my grandfather in the bathroom in the morning. Naked. He was swinging from hand grip to hand grip like an ancient grey-haired gibbon.

Once my grandparents had reached the breakfast table, they were always completely exhausted, but they looked dazzling. Always a mixture of tanned and rosy. In the morning my grandmother usually wore pink trouser suits. She loved pink. The room I slept in was called the pink room. We were billeted there even as children. It was my grandmother's room. She withdrew to it or spent half nights in it when my grandfather snored too much, or her inner unease could not be defeated by strong sleeping tablets. It was her pink refuge. The walls were pink. Pink quartz grapes and pink quartz fruit lay in a wafer thin pink quartz bowl. The lampshades were antique pink. The bed covers were always pink. Matt pink light fell through the pink fabric blind on to the antique pink carpet.

My grandfather wore light-coloured three-piece suits even over breakfast and, after washing his hair, on Mondays and Fridays, a hair net. The housekeeper had laid the table without a sound in the morning. Every time I woke up she had already been there for a long time. But before they started having their breakfast, there was a glass of champagne for everybody on the dot of nine. That always made them feel better straight away. After breakfast there was, for the huge quantities of tablets that they fumbled every morning from their little decorated tins, another glass of champagne. Each of them swallowed down what must have been fifteen tablets. A whole handful of multi-coloured pills. My grandfather took one pill after the other, and after each one he took a tiny sip. My grandmother threw them all into her mouth at once and drained the whole glass in one gulp, the curved glass enlarging her teeth to a frightening degree, and then liked to say, 'They know where they have to go.'

Breakfast with them was always delicious. Good filter coffee. Normally I wouldn't have drunk it so strong, but here I liked it that way. A yoghurt with linseed and sea buckthorn syrup. Toasted slices of bread roll. It would never have occurred to my grandparents to cut a roll in half. The rolls were cut into thin slices like small loaves with the bread-slicer and

toasted. There weren't many things that would have horrified my grandparents more than bread rolls or slices of bread that were cut too thick. My grandfather held them against the light. That was the test. You had to be able to see the garden, the magnolia, through the slices of bread. Even though we always pretended to admire the way they ate thin slices of bread, my mother and I hated it, so we were always tempted to cut the slices too thick. My middle brother called these slices of bread 'transparencies'. You were never full after breakfast or other meals at my grandparents' house. And my fat father had deemed their whole celebrated food culture to be a mere simulation of eating. If he came from Schleswig to Munich, which he did very seldom, he would go immediately after the simulated meal to the nearest pub to eat properly, as he put it.

Throughout their lives my grandparents ate only home-made jams. There were jars in the pantry that were as old as I was. Some of them preserved by my aunt Tia, who had already passed away. Wild raspberry jam from 1967. That pantry was also a treasury and even a chamber tomb.

On New Year's Day my grandparents always had turtle soup. When it was banned, they bought up all the stocks in all the delicatessens they knew. They drove around in a taxi all morning. Their yield must have been a hundred tins, which kept them supplied for some time.

After breakfast my grandparents read the paper. Every morning they got two copies of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, since they liked to read the review section together, pointing out interesting passages to one another.

After reading the newspaper they both went into the garden, which they loved above all else. As a child I thought there was something grotesque about the persistence with which my grandparents admired that garden every day. On their strolls around it they always lingered by the same blossoms. 'Look, Hermann, the iris!' 'Yes, and there, Inge, another bud is coming!' 'Mohhhhh.' And they always devoted little moments of commemoration to the already fading shrubs. 'Do you remember how wonderfully the witch hazel blossomed this spring, Hermann.' 'Very early, spring was early this year.' 'Moser will have to prune that one again!' Little walnut trees often grew in the lawn, as the squirrels came over from the park and buried or lost their booty here. 'Moser will have to pull up those little trees, or soon we will have a walnut forest.' At the heart of the garden was a multi-trunk magnolia. Four smooth trunks rose in harmonic curves to the roof.

If, after blossoming, the magnolia caught frost and turned black, or snow fell on the open blossoms, my grandmother lapsed into despair, could no longer go into the garden and took an extra pill for her ‘magnolia pain’ as she called it.

The great adversary of the magnolia was a flourishing wisteria. For years it had been weakening away but then its roots had passed through a barren layer of soil, and suddenly, one spring, it climbed up to the balcony railings. My grandparents talked about it as if it were an untameable beast, they called it the “green Hydra”. The roots would pierce the cellar walls, they said, and the tendrils were so strong that they might bend the bars in front of the windows or even pull them off the house completely. But when the wisteria blossomed, the whole garden side of the villa disappeared beneath the bluish-purple umbels, and year after year they didn’t have the heart to prune it.

Otherwise Herr Moser ensured order in the garden. Any method was permitted, and in the garden shed, concealed beneath a huge weeping beech there was scarcely a container unadorned with a death’s head.

After that my grandfather went to his study. In spite of his great age he worked every day from ten until one. When he grew too old to work and was increasingly unable to see, he still went to that room every morning and just sat around at his desk, in the middle of his enormous library. Filling the wall on one side the philosophical books, on the other side the theological. A whole shelf full of bibles, hymn-books and prayer-books. The portraits of Schelling and Fichte glared at a worm-eaten wooden cross from the 15th century on the opposite wall. You still had to knock.

If I took a book indiscriminately from one of these shelves and flicked it open at a random passage, I could be sure to find notes written with a sharp pencil in the margin in his tiny handwriting. In the course of his life he had supplied hundreds of books, thousands of pages with commentaries. I could neither write so small nor read such small writing. For me they were hieroglyphs from an unimaginably alien world of ideas. What impressed me, but also vexed me, from early on, was the incredible discipline and capacity for concentration that flew at me from those umpteen thousand notes apparently etched into the paper. How could anyone, I wondered even as a child, and then still more intently as an adolescent, be so meticulous? On the backs of the books it said: Kant, Schelling, Kierkegaard or Fichte, and in the books there was barely a page on which my grandfather had not made notes. Often he also squeezed his thoughts between the lines. Whole pages of books were overlaid with a second, hand-written page. As soon as there was no more room, slips of paper were added.

Inserts cleanly cut by himself from sheets of paper that he no longer needed. Thriftiness and a deluge of ideas.

I didn't understand a thing. Neither the notes nor the texts themselves. Throughout his life my grandfather moved in a world of disciplines and ideas that was completely unattainable to me. He was on the boards of various institutions such as the Catholic Academy, the Görres Society, the German Cultural Advisory Committee and the Fichte Complete Works Commission.

For years if not decades he had written articles on philosophical subjects for a state encyclopaedia that was dragging itself on from letter to letter. Drily he would say things like: 'Well, I won't live to see R', or 'I'd love to do W for Worthiness'. His colleagues were not much younger than he was, and one or other of them died on the way to Z. As a result the project had lost some of its vigour. More and more rarely was the reaching of a new letter celebrated with an extra glass of champagne. 'Today,' my grandfather would say when that happened, 'we finally finished M after three years.' 'What did you write about?' 'About Morals and Metaphysics.'

Stage Two: white wine

On the dot of one there was lunch. Good, simple food. Always a soup to start. In the course of the week the soup underwent a very special transformation. As the leftovers of the previous day's soup were mixed with the new soup every day, on the second day this soup doubled its tasting experience, so to speak. Then on Tuesday the soup had trebled its flavour, and on Friday it had become a highly complex mixture of soups. If you tasted the soup with proper concentration on Friday, you could experience the whole week all over again, and my grandfather said from time to time when he ate his Friday soup: 'We had really excellent soups, this week Inge!' Then there was no soup on Saturday, and on Sunday the whole thing started all over again with clear oxtail soup. For the main course there was often a little salad with a very sweet dressing made of honey, lime juice and cream. Always fresh vegetables, never boiled, only ever poached. And fish, particularly char, venison, tongue with hot peaches. It would never have occurred to my grandparents to eat a soufflé. My grandmother despised anything topped with cheese. They never even ate pasta. That was difficult for us children. Pizza and fish fingers were unknown to them. My grandfather liked to have order on his plate. Here the cauliflower, there the potatoes, there the fish. Between the individual ingredients the plate was required to be visible. As a child, when I hacked up the meat, then

mashed up the potato with my fork and mixed it into a pulp with a lot of gravy, my grandfather looked at me as if I were crushing his wonderfully structured brain along with them. Of course there was wine with lunch. Cold white wine. My grandfather pretended to be a wine connoisseur, tasted the wine and always declared it good. Although with lunch they never drank a white wine other than 'Ruwer'. The label showed the vineyard, where you could apparently eat as well. Again and again, for hundreds and hundreds of lunches, my grandfather announced that the wine was good, and pointing to the label, he said again, every time: 'Have I ever told you that you can eat well there too?'

I had usually recovered by then from the two glasses of champagne with breakfast, and looked forward to the white wine.

There was always pudding. Usually fruit, which as children we had seen as a sort of fraud. Fruit was definitely not a pudding. After each course my grandmother rang a little bell and the housekeeper came running in. I was always embarrassed to be served like that. The housekeeper was, and this remained an eternal mystery, always barefoot. But my grandparents were able to laugh heartily about the fact. They didn't care about anything like that in the slightest. And yet things weren't easy for the housekeeper and the other aged employees. Not that my grandmother was unkind, on the contrary, she was even exceptionally polite. But that politeness concealed a perfidious condescension, and even her beauty on its own made the people who worked in the house uneasy.

The dirty dishes had to be thoroughly washed by the housekeeper before being put into the dishwasher. Basically the dishes were already clean when they were sorted into the dishwasher according to a system that had to be followed precisely. During this pre-wash my grandmother sat in the kitchen and watched the struggling housekeeper with eyes that had become completely keen again in old age, waiting for accidents. If something fell and broke, as it inevitably must, she cried with her previously professional, now still powerful voice: 'Mohhhh!', smiled benignly and said, 'Not bad, not bad, very old, very valuable, but not bad.' She also liked to notice when my breakfast egg fell from my spoon to the floor under her watchful gaze. 'Just throw it away,' and then, after a small, cheeky pause – 'oh, you already have done.'

Under the observant gaze of my grandparents you always found yourself in a state of unpleasant tension. The guests who came often were gripped by it too. I saw sixty-year-old former students of my grandfathers, now themselves fully qualified philosophy professors, sitting bolt upright on the edge of their chairs like primary school children and, with

trembling fingers, taking a single peanut which my grandfather unerringly, and in spite of my grandmother's instructions, called 'Cameroons'.

In the kitchen there was a little bull's eye window in the wall, no bigger than the bottom of a bottle, through which visitors at the front door could be observed. Many times I saw from here guests not just walking up to the house and then, as soon as they reached it, ringing the bell, but pausing at the door with their fingers already on the bell. It was plain that these frozen visitors had realised that by entering my grandparents' house they would have to subjugate themselves to their world for the next few hours. Couples made final agreements, women took their mirrors from their handbags or plucked hairs from the shoulders of their husbands' coats. Then they nodded to one another, took a deep breath and pressed the button. The bell rang out as loudly as the school bell in the film version of an Erich Kästner story. On one occasion a former drama student of my grandmother's had even drawn back her finger from the bell-push without ringing, stood there for a moment shaking her head, looked around for a moment and then delightedly retreated again.

The older she grew, the more often it happened that my grandmother also dropped things, or knocked them over on the table and broke them. Then she was silent with rage. Shook her head at herself. As if her clumsiness were an ominous sign.

This almost daily breaking of crockery had turned Herr Moser into an expert in the gluing of shards. He spent hours at my grandparents' kitchen table with the fragments, some of them tiny, and his beloved superglue. Superglue became his be-all and end-all. Superglue was the revolution, the quantum leap. Herr Moser even reassembled the finest Nymphenberg porcelain when it had shattered into the tiniest pieces. He collected the shards of irreparably smashed crockery in a box. And he actually managed to glue together an otherwise out-of-stock soup bowl from that pile of fragments from different vessels – plates, cups and bowls – and resurrect it. My grandmother said: 'Mohhhhh' – because Mohhhhh could also mean the supreme acknowledgment – and put the soup bowl right at the back of the cupboard.

After lunch, when I was dismissed for the inevitable lunch hour, I was often only able to read half a page of my book. The food and wine at a completely unfamiliar hour meant that I fell into a deep sleep and had to be woken. I nearly always had a headache, and took an aspirin from the overflowing medicine cabinet. But here too, as in the pantry, there were also medicines that were thirty years old and older. My grandfather thought the use-by dates on medicines were a trick on the part of the pharmaceutical industry. Like the turtle soup, my grandparents hoarded medicines which they still believed in, but which had been taken off the market long ago.

At twelve or thirteen I had a number of corns on the sole of my right foot and showed them to my grandmother. The powerful grip of my grandmother's fastidiously manicured hands should have been a warning in itself. She grabbed my foot, studied it carefully, pressed each corn with her thumb, and even when I howled with pain she knew no pity.

'Oh, my poor darlingy, I think I've got something for you.' She stood up and came back with a tiny phial that had a whiff of alchemy about it. 'You'll see. It works real wonders.'

'Is that stuff still all right? Where did you get it? Am I supposed to drink it?'

'Drink it, what nonsense, you apply it directly.'

Again she took my foot in her hand and held it tight with all her grandmotherly strength. It was gripped as if in a vice, and the sinews stood out on my grandmother's tanned hand. The seal of the little bottle was revealed to be a pipette, with which she sucked up a few drops of a greenish liquid. She gripped my foot even more firmly, which I could only interpret as meaning that she knew full well things were about to get tough for me. I tried to pull it away, to free myself. There followed one of those moments during which my grandmother transformed herself in a flash from elegant to evil enchantress. 'Will you keep still! You, lad, you!' she hissed at me all of a sudden. I froze. She pulled the ball of my foot very close in front of her face and dripped the tincture on my corns. For a moment I didn't feel anything. But I heard something. A quiet hiss, like when you spit on a hot plate. There was a smell of burning hair and charred fingernails. Her face had already returned to the impassive, wonderfully harmonious grandmotherly countenance. 'Bravo, my darlingy, bravissimo. We've done it. You are an enormously brave boy!'

For the first few hours after this treatment I didn't receive any overly unsettling messages of pain from my trainer. But later that evening I could barely climb the stairs to the pink room. I cautiously took off my shoe. Saw my sock. It had holes, it had burned away precisely where the corns had been. Four perfectly circular holes. I pulled it off and turned my foot over. Where the corns had once been I now had blackish, crumpled hollows. I put my finger-tip to one of the spots. The roasted flesh yielded softly. Over the next few days I could hardly stand, but then the revolting troughs filled again with fresh pink flesh and the corns never returned. It is no exaggeration to establish that my grandparents were practically obsessed with the multiplicity of their medicines. My father, who was a psychiatrist working with children and young people, tried to make it clear to them that most of their pills were

superfluous, even dangerous, but their person of trust was an ancient lady doctor who was happy to issue prescriptions.

When my grandfather developed a cold he immediately took an antibiotic, but only ever a single tablet. He would have nothing of the idea that you have to take antibiotics to the end. He said to my father. ‘What’s that supposed to mean, taking them to the end? I don’t take aspirins “to the end”.’

The afternoon hours of rest from two till five dragged on with endless tedium. Time squatted around in my grandparents’ house, as if those three hours were apathetic inmates in an institution. A hundred and eighty sedated minutes. As a child you could get lost in in those three hours. Absolute peace was the supreme commandment. I was condemned to silence and, in leggings and polo neck sweaters, I played deadly boring, self-invented games. I coiffed the fringes of the carpets with my comb or tried to roll an orange across the room through the legs of the chair to the opposite wall. Or I invented television advertisements. For this I stood in front of the mirror in the corridor, took a random object and did a sales pitch for it: ‘Look at this umbrella. Our latest model. It has a finely wrought snapping mechanism. I’ll just put it up. Look at this big canopy and the fine spokes. They’re made of titanium. The fabric isn’t fabric. It’s fish skin. Watertight fish skin with titanium spokes. The wooden handle isn’t made of ordinary wood. This is petrified wood, so-called fossil wood. These handles were hand-chiselled from fossil wood, screwed together with titanium spokes and stretched with fish skin. A truly unique umbrella.’ However nonsensical. Every minute became an opponent to be wrestled to the ground.

Like a bomb disposal man, I cautiously jiggled out the bottom drawer of the side-table, which tended to produce incalculable squeaks, where my grandparents stored their sweets.

Delicious Swiss chocolates, revolting candied fruits and unpredictable pralines, which I often bit into and then had to run to the toilet because I’d poured some kind of repellent alcoholic puree into my mouth.

If I was lucky my mother rescued me, interrupted her lunchbreak prematurely, came to me and asked quietly: ‘Shall we go to the park?’ I nodded and then, as soon as we were in the open, I rolled around the grass, unleashed at last, or thrashed trees with heavy branches. Ran and ran until I had arrived back in my own time frame.

On such summer or glistening winter days the endlessly dragging hour between midday snooze and six o’clock whisky were bridged by my grandmother with a decent shot

of rum in her tea, or else she counted out huge quantities of abstruse healing drops into her thumb cavity. Sometimes this drop counting didn't go quickly enough for my grandmother, the essence hesitated and trembled provocatively slowly on the rim of the little glass bottle, so that she suddenly had enough, pulled out the plastic insert with her teeth, spat it on the coffee table and took a mighty swig straight from the bottle. These afternoon spirits, disguised as health drops, went by names like 'Metavirulent', "Meditonsin"or 'Esberitox'. My grandmother had bottles of a size that I never saw in a chemist's, and yet she never managed to make them last more than two or three days. My grandparents were rarely ill, and I'm sure the many varieties of alcohol were one reason for their resilience. Bacteria, viruses and other pathogens had difficulties getting through the high-proof air with which my grandparents surrounded themselves. I imagined a wildly determined tribe of viruses being sneezed at my grandmother by the housekeeper and flying at her like a fighter squadron before being rendered harmless by her acrid alcohol breath, falling numbly to the ground.

Stage three: whisky

By just before six at the latest I was woken with calls like "Darlingy, it's time". Because at six there was whisky. This six o'clock whisky was the start of the evening. From five o'clock my grandparents were constantly looking at the clock. Often my grandfather counted the last ten seconds before six loudly backwards. 'Ten, nine, eight, seven…' and called out loudly, 'Ah, six on the dot.' Then he opened the bottle and everyone had a whisky. They drank it with a lot of water and without ice. It was never a particularly good whisky, neither smoky nor peaty nor earthy, but it tasted good to me. I didn't drink whisky anywhere else, but at my grandparents' house I yearned for it just as much as they did. With her whisky my grandmother smoked her first cigarette, Dunhill Menthol. The cigarette smoke, the whisky rising to my head, seemed to intensify the fragrance of the flowers, because the big vases were always full of flowers, summer and winter. Mostly lilies, but also sometimes stocks or peonies. The flowers, carefully arranged by my grandmother, marked out their own scented territories with their intense perfume. If you took the long walk from the kitchen through what my grandparents called the pantry, through the dining room to the living room, you passed four vases and moved through four fragrant air-locks. The smell of lilies was an actual wall, an anaesthetising cloud that I hurried through more and more rather than enjoying it, while the roses made me walk more slowly and inhale deeply. All kinds of other smells clustered around those fragrant honeycombs. There was no other place in my

grandparents' house that didn't somehow smell unmistakable. But the undisputed ruler of the perfumes was of course my grandmother herself, who threw herself into the daily battle of the odours perfumed with 'Shalimar'. I loved that pregnant bottle, as I had once called it as a child, that fluted flacon with the rough glass stopper. Every morning my grandmother turned the bottle once on its head and then back again with brio, pulled out the stopper and franked herself with it behind the ears and on the throat, as if she were the most precious postage stamp in the world. Even the lilies fell to their knees before her. Once my grandmother had passed through the odoriferous island of the lilies, for several minutes it smelled only of her. The flowers fearfully retracted their scent-feelers, and waited for the Shalimar trail to pass. If you walked behind my grandmother from the cellar up through the ground floor and the first floor to the attic, she was all that you could smell. If the house smelled of food, which it very seldom did, if, for example, the flatulent smell of cauliflower had been so bold as to venture out of the kitchen, my grandmother effortlessly managed to cut a swathe through the stench with her own aroma. And I could actually find her without calling for her.

Even today, in the duty-free shop at airports, I walk over to Guerlain, pick up a bottle of Shalimar and let my grandmother's spirit out of the bottle. A magical moment, so intense that I am astonished every time not to find her standing in front of me when I open my eyes. When I encounter the smell by chance, in a lift or the huddle of people at a theatre cloakroom, I feel as if the woman so perfumed is a thief, who has stolen my grandmother's scent and used it without asking. The smell of Shalimar belongs to her alone.

Along with the flowers, the whisky, a special smelling sort of cheese crackers and the swirls of Dunhill Menthol smoke, the heavy Shalimar perfume thickened the air in the living-room. Over the course of the vening the smells condensed into a cumulative experience that both stimulated and numbed the mind, and slightly tightened the stomach. Up until the eight o'clock news, which my grandparents listened to at a volume that left me dumbfounded every time, we drank two or even three large whiskies. Even though I can't actually imagine that they have always listened to the news turned up to that insane volume, I don't remember ever sitting in front of the television without that sound level. At shortly before eight a clock appeared on screen, and the last five seconds set to a special ticking noise. Even that ticking on its own made me press my head against the back of the armchair. Because now I knew that the gong would be followed by the words 'Here is the first German television channel with the daily news', followed by the news fanfare. The fanfare smashed into my grandparents' sitting room, in which otherwise silence prevailed, like an almighty rock fall.

Quite often my grandfather, immediately after the daily news presenter had starting reading out the first headline and my ears were roaring, called out, ‘What’s going on?’ Of course I thought he meant that it was far too loud, but he roared: ‘I can’t hear a word’, and turned the sound up as high as it would go. How my otherwise sensitive, indeed oversensitive, grandmother could bear it was a mystery to me. Because the reason for this sound-volume madness was quite clearly my grandfather’s deafness. That grandparental television torture instrument roared my earliest television memories into deep-seated layers of my brain. The abduction of the Israeli athletes in the 1972 summer Olympics. Although that memory was not plunged inextinguishably into me only by the yelling television. Unforgettably menacing, but for a five-year-old entirely fascinating, when the rotating helicopters were flying low directly over the house on their way towards the Olympic Stadium.

Stage four: red wine

My grandparents never ate their supper at the dining table. The dishes and bowls, already prepared by the housekeeper in the late afternoon, were placed on the curved marble surface of the table by the sofa. At supper too my grandfather would present himself as a wine connoisseur. And for all those years they always drank the same two wines. Sangre de toro or Merlot. And that was when conversations were held. Conversing over red wine was the finest thing as far as my grandparents were concerned. Those discussions were very special. Once the right degree of drunkenness and excitement had been reached, they became an art form in their own right.

We talked about books, theatre and big subjects such as freedom. My grandfather had written a great deal on the subject of freedom, and every now and again he even tried to let us be party to his thoughts in very simple words.

My grandmother recited her favourite poets, always Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs or Matthias Claudius. By heart, of course. ‘Please, Inge, would you be so kind and perform Claudius for us?’ He looked at her lovingly and asked, like a shy admirer, for her art. But she was happy to be persuaded. ‘Heavens, no, out of the question. I forgot it long ago!’ ‘Please, Inge, you do it so wonderfully.’ ‘Mohhhhh, all the things you want from me.’ ‘If you don’t want to, then don’t, of course. No one is forced to perform Claudius.’ ‘Oh, heavens above, all right then.’ What was great was not only how she recited, but also the fact that she didn’t change her posture. She stayed leaning casually back in her chair, waving the tip of her cigarette on the left and the wine glass on the right: ‘Humanity’. Even that had hit home.

Spoken abruptly, curtly. Quite clearly: it was about us. Here we sat, humans, nothing more. She had done that with the title alone, so that we sensed that the human being in this poem would be something very fragile and threatened. She approached the first verse in a matter-of-fact, almost chilly way, before becoming surprisingly more and more charged from line to line.

'Sleeps, wakes, grows and eats, has brown and grey hair', she grew louder, more intense, 'and it all lasts…' now she threatened us, with metallic clarity she read us the riot act, 'if you're lucky, eighty years.' She had allowed 'if you're lucky' to burst brightly, and then, at 'eighty years', vocally slipped back into black, bitter depths. The last two lines were darkly whispered prophesies. 'Then he lies down with his forefathers, Never to return.' And she stretched out the 'u' in 'return' as if to suggest the possibility of hope.

When my grandfather went to the toilet, my grandmother said as soon as he had left the room how ill he was. 'Hermann suffers so much. He hasn't been well for ages. He's in a desolate state.' But then, if my grandmother stepped outside, my grandfather said exactly the same thing about her. 'Inge can't manage any more. It's all getting too much for her. Her legs won't hold her up! I'm expecting the worst.' Then, at about eleven, they were quite inebriated. But nowhere near as drunk as me. I could handle much less than they could.

My grandmother often suffered from her husband's patronising attitude. In his alcoholic state he began every sentence with no, and then reprimanded her unstintingly. 'Hermann, would you like some more red wine?' 'No! Half full.' Or: 'Hermann, does the Appenzeller cheese taste good to you today?' 'No! It's excellent.' But she wasn't defenceless. He said: 'Slowly does it. Careful, Inge, with your short leg.' She said: 'Heavens above, just leave me in peace.' The tone could change quickly. All at once. My grandmother demanded: 'Hermann, stop drinking. You're just talking nonsense now.' He said: 'Inge, you're disgusting.' And a quarter of an hour before we had still been talking about knowledge through despair or the revelation of God through suffering in Kierkegaard.

My grandparents listened to music every evening. They had only a few records, which were terribly worn from being listened to so much. One of their most abstruse rituals began, one to which they remained loyal whatever else was going on. They lit candles and lay down together on a big cashmere rug on the floor. Then they lay there like corpses that had laid themselves out. They did that even when they had visitors. They said, 'Don't let us bother you, but we're listening to our music right now!' Some records always got stuck in the same places, and it was a long time before they noticed. No one dared to liberate the needle stuck

in the groove. They dozed. Lay on the ground, holding hands, and the guests sat there and watched them listening to music.

They both despised Wagner, and Mozart too was only put on rarely. They liked listening to Benjamin Britten, Bach cantatas and a lot of Schubert, but there was one song they liked most of all: 'Solveig's Song' from *Peer Gynt* by Edvard Grieg. A hundred times it crackled from the much-praised but only mediocre speakers. It ends with the lines:

'The same sun warms us, regardless of where, regardless of where. And if you are in heaven, we will meet there, we will meet there.'

Stage five: Cointreau

The end of the evening came in sight when my grandfather called out: 'Now it's time for Cointreau!' That sickly-sweet orange liqueur always finished me off. My grandfather lurched on to the terrace to breathe in fresh air. He always needed a lot of air, as he had only one lung. The other had collapsed. During the war, to avoid having to go to the front, he had simulated a kidney infection and infected himself with tuberculosis in the hospital, which actually saved him.

To guard against wine-scale, my grandmother filled the red wine glasses with water overnight. I helped her clear up. Her hair was down by then, and she was strangely sober again. She woke my grandfather, who went to sleep on the terrace come rain or shine. I even saw him sleeping there with a light covering of snow. Goodbyes were said with a kiss at the bottom of the stairs. With increasing age my grandfather became a feared kisser. If he had tended to avoid all physical contact and been slightly gruff about it when he couldn't, in old age he became more yearning. He took my face in his liver-spotted hands, drew me to him with his bony, astonishingly powerful fingers and kissed me for a long time on the mouth. He closed his eyes as he did so. That goodnight kiss always filled my mother with deep revulsion. One evening when he had drunk a little more than usual, I even felt his tongue between my lips for a moment.

When I bent down to my grandmother, she always recoiled slightly. She never kissed back, only let me brush her smooth cheeks with my mouth.

As both of them could only walk with difficulty, they had had a stair-lift installed. Every evening each of them always wanted to let the other go first. Once they had agreed, they swept gracefully away with a wave. All the way up the long stairs with a gentle sway. Inebriated old angels.

Shortly after this ascension I too went to bed. Completely plastered. There were evenings when I was so drunk that I too could only get upstairs by using the stair-lift.

The bed with the pink cover was too short. I had ludicrous dreams, slept badly, my big feet dangled in the dark. On nights like that I missed the cries of the patients that I had heard throughout the whole of my childhood, lying in the nursery, as our house was in the grounds of an enormous psychiatric institution. The roaring of the patients had always sent me off to sleep calmly and soundly.

But my grandparents' house sank into a leaden villa-district silence, which mingled with the damp silence of the park that wafted over the weathered walls to form a grave-like silence that oppressed me.

When I woke up, in red-wine confusion, I heard my pulse thumping in the down-swollen pillow. When the wind blew in a particular direction, mixed in beneath the hammering of my heart was a dull beating noise that supposedly echoed over from a far-off shunting yard. Like nocturnal animals the metallic sounds only dared to come out after darkness fell and crept in the shelter of night all the way into the villa district. It sounded as if, deep in the belly of a stricken ship, someone was beating his hands exhaustedly against the rusty walls. There, my middle brother informed me many years ago, they secretly assembled tanks.

I rolled back and forth, alone in the vast cargo hold of the night. These sounds, almost like hallucinations, lent wings to my imagination. I saw starved figures before me who, exceeding their strength, turned cranks, or by spinning iron hamster wheels in spite of their weakness, powered a futuristic looking night-machine, and perhaps even had to supply the power for the whole world.

The next morning, at exactly seven thirty, my grandmother knocked on my door to wake me. As always, she looked dazzling and smelled of 'Shalimar'. My grandfather looked in on me too, as fresh as if he had just had three weeks' holiday in the mountains. You could never tell by looking at them that they drank so much. But I felt as if I was ill. Fatally ill.

And then it all started all over again from the beginning. Often, as I lifted my head from the pink-covered pillow, I heard the barefoot housekeeper downstairs popping the cork from the champagne bottle again. I was never so shattered as I was after a few days at my grandparents'.

[END OF SAMPLE]