

Sample Translation (Pages 5 - 33)

The Light in the Distance **by Linus Reichlin**

novel

Translated by John Reddick

Linus Reichlin: Das Leuchten in der Ferne

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Return

Miriam came back in October, just as the first snow was falling. Martens didn't recognise her at first: he thought the figure in the distance was Pason, who had gone down to the village a while earlier to pick up some chickens. But then Martens noticed that the person he could see far below him battling against the wind on the stony hillside with its dusting of snow was clearly unfamiliar with the terrain. Pason would have made his way up the slope with more ease and less effort: he knew the short cuts, he knew where the going was difficult.

Martens narrowed his eyes and peered through the flurries of snow. He was quite sure now that it was Miriam. She looked up at him and stopped. There it was: the precise moment when each recognised the other. She swung her arms around: *I'm coming to collect you!* He raised his hand and waved. So it was over; one phase had finished – and another was beginning. The thought prompted no sense of relief, just a feeling of weariness; and the nearer Miriam came, the greater the weariness. Nothing was left but his longing for a chair and a table with a white cloth on it. Dilawar came and stood next to him, coughing, his eyes burning with fever. Dilawar put his hand on his shoulder and said something in a friendly tone. Martens understood three words: “good”, “woman” and “go”.

I Lowland

The violinist, and numbers

Six months earlier, in May, Martens had been sitting in the waiting room of the City Council's local office. It was the hottest May since local offices had been introduced in Berlin, and the hottest May of his entire life — a life that straddled two centuries and had so far lasted fifty three years. He was sitting there because he had fouled up. He hadn't managed to hold on to his excellent but expensive apartment in Schöneberg; he'd had to leave it and rent a much smaller flat almost in Neukölln that was gloomy by day and noisy by night. From 8pm onwards he had to listen to the mechanical moans of a woman in the flat above that went on until after midnight. In the intervals

when she douched herself and made ready for her next client, someone in the flat next door began practising their violin. Martens had only been living there for a week and still hadn't discovered why the violinist only played during moan-free periods and stopped as soon as she got back on the job. What was the connection, he wondered. The violinist usually played Mozart, but in the same mechanical way in which the woman did her moaning. One was engaging in a pretence of lust, the other in a pretence of music. The violinist did at least give Martens the feeling that he hadn't hit absolute rock bottom, seeing that there was one other person in this dump of a house who knew the *Allegro moderato* from the violin concerto in B major.

A much-read reporter, thought Martens. "Much read": one of his editors had once used this expression in his annual appraisal form. "Sooner or later", thought Martens, "I'm going to knock on the violinist's door and I'm going to say 'Hello, I used to be a much-read reporter and you know some Mozart: let's write an opera together. I'll do the libretto. Operas can make you rich: just think of the *Magic Flute*.'"

Martens was feeling drowsy. All the air in the waiting room had been used up by this time, and nothing was left except air that had already been breathed by everyone else in the room. He reckoned he would probably never again become a much-read reporter: the crisis was too big for that – his own crisis and the crisis facing print media in general. People got their information about wars going on in the world almost exclusively from TV and the internet these days. They trusted images more than words; they considered films and photos more neutral, whereas narratives produced by named authors were readily suspected of being subjective. There was scarcely a single newspaper left that gave any space to war reporting, and Martens was now too old to become a foreign correspondent – the only remotely tolerable alternative. He was too old for the one, and too stubborn to give up the other – for against his better judgement he still believed in war-reporting, he still believed in the efficacy of words. He believed that the subjective narrative of an individual could convey the essence of a war and the events surrounding it more effectively than a documentary. It was precisely the reporter's subjectivity that enabled him to penetrate to depths that no film could hope to reach. Take landscape, for instance – a key factor determining the character of a war: the defining features of a landscape could be easily filmed – but without conveying any insight into their true significance, since what really mattered was the interplay between the various elements of the landscape and the people who moved about in it in their countless different ways. But it was hard to get this across to young editors fresh from the College of Journalism whose entire life experience would fit inside a matchbox.

"For God's sake stop harping on about it!" thought Martens. He was fed up with his own incessant belly-aching. He had it pretty good, relatively speaking: people out there were getting

shot at, others were already dead. “You’ve probably shot at some of them yourself,” he thought, “that woman in Quatlum, for instance”. The very thought of her made his self-pity drain away. Everything froze in him whenever she came into his mind.

After a while, he looked up. The indicator board that everyone in the waiting room was hostage to was displaying the number 136. The ticket in Martens’ hand bore the number 158. He kept his eye firmly fixed on the indicator and began counting. Twenty one, twenty two, twenty three. At one hundred and fifteen the number changed to 137. When it read 142, Miriam came into the room.

A present

He noticed Miriam because she moved so beautifully. The way she detached her number from the ticket machine. The gentle way she steered the hand of the little boy who was with her from the button on the machine. The way she swung her head around as she looked for an empty seat. They were all flowing movements that seemed a perfect emanation of her inner being. She was a woman fully at home in her own body; she was at one with it right to the very tips of her fingers. She moved with the natural grace of a jellyfish – and that was meant as a compliment: for Martens there was no more perfect harmony of purpose and movement in the whole of nature than that embodied in a medusa with its ability to rise to the surface of the water by the merest rustle of its fronds. He was full of wonder at the gait of the woman: how gracefully she floated along on her small, lithe feet, as though she were weightless! It was all rhythm and melody, with no hint of heaviness.

Once she had sat down he was able to take in her face. Her hair was black and silky and glossy, and she wore it short – probably to avoid conforming to expectations. She was extremely pretty, thanks to her large, dark eyes, her full mouth, her small slender nose. With longer hair she would have been rated a beauty by any man alive, but her whole manner gave Martens the sense that coming across as your average beauty was the last thing she would want.

She sensed his interest in her and suddenly threw him a glance, her look traversing the space between them with unremitting intensity and hitting him with a kind of gentle force. By the time Martens smiled at her she had already turned her attention back to her little boy, standing there beside her rubbing his eyes and then resting his head on his mother’s lap. She stroked his back. The lad was tired; he was about five, Martens reckoned. Tired children make for difficulties,

and it could be a long time before the woman's number appeared on the indicator board, which had still only reached 144. Martens had already been waiting for more than an hour and his turn had still not come, which meant that the woman would be waiting for another two hours, if not longer. How was she supposed to make the child behave for that length of time? He didn't want to go to sleep. He didn't want to sit on his mother's lap or on the spare seat next to hers. His tiredness was making him cranky, and fed up with the entire world. He tore a sheet of paper into tiny pieces and scattered them all over the floor. I'll show you just how bad things can get when a boy's as tired as I am! I'll chuck these bits of paper all over the place, and it's all your fault! The woman told him to pick them up again, but no, he wasn't going to pick them up right now. They were all exactly where they were meant to be.

He then stood on the chair, jumped off, and clambered back up again. He did another jump, tumbled over, and started to cry. The woman comforted him, and pulled something out of her handbag – a card game of some sort. The child made a grab for it, knocking the packet all over the floor. The woman gathered the scattered cards together, and by this stage she was looking thoroughly exhausted, her face suddenly small and empty.

And the indicator board was still showing 144.

Martens was glad that he wasn't responsible for the child, and that it wasn't going to be his job to keep him quiet for the next two hours. Many years earlier his own daughter, Nives, had been five, and he knew exactly what the poor woman was facing.

With the board on 146 the boy dashed out of the waiting room, and the woman ran after him and brought him back again. Her movements were less harmonious now, they were a touch abrupt and jerky.

Martens stood up and went over to them.

And for the first time ever, he spoke to Miriam.

“Take my number”, he said, “the boy's tired, I reckon; then you can get home a bit sooner.”

The woman was completely taken aback. “Thanks, that's very kind of you”, she said, “but I'm okay.”

“It's no bother, honestly. I've plenty of time.”

She took the number, and thanked him. “That really is kind of you.”

“Right”, he said, “that's it then. Cheers.”

“No, wait! You haven't got a number any more. Take mine.”

“Oh yes, course I haven’t, completely slipped my mind”, he said.

She gave him her ticket: 199.

“Do you want to reconsider?” she asked. “You’ll be waiting a very long time.”

“Doesn’t matter”, he said, “I’ve plenty of time.” He laughed: “Truth is, I don’t have a job at the moment.”

He felt embarrassed at having mentioned it, it had just slipped out, probably because he’d just told Lukas, his best friend; he hadn’t let on to anyone else, not even Nina. It was about time he began trumpeting it from the rooftops, so he might as well start by telling a complete stranger.

“I’m a journalist”, he said, “but it’s difficult at the moment: the papers don’t have any money. But there you go, that’s just the way it is.” And some people are being shot at, he thought to himself.

The woman said nothing, and the little boy studied every detail of Martens’ face: forehead, eyebrows, nose, mouth, then back to his forehead.

The invitation

Martens carried on waiting – but it was the woman he was waiting for now. She hadn’t introduced herself, and nor had he. He supposed it was one of those encounters in life where there was a sudden vivid spark that instantly fizzled out before the fire had a chance to catch. In his mind’s eye he saw the woman wrap up her business in the council offices then disappear in the vastness of the city. It was difficult to track people down in Berlin, and his chances of happening on her again were virtually zero. But then the little boy came hurtling into the waiting room. He raced up to Martens, juddered to a halt as though reining in a horse, turned on his heel, and dashed off again with a shout: “Mama, he’s still here!”

The woman came back into the room.

“I wanted to thank you again”, she said, “and ask you if you’d like to have supper with us. It’s spaghetti carbonara. I do it without cream.”

“Then you must be Italian.”

“No, it’s not quite as straightforward as that.”

She laughed, her face opened up, and Martens saw warmth and sincerity. He was touched, and accepted her invitation without ado.

“Glad you can make it”, she said. “Eight o’clock, then, Zossener Strasse. My name’s Miriam. Miriam Khalili.”

“Moritz Martens”, he said.

They shook hands. “See you later”, she said, and started to leave. Just before reaching the door she turned round again.

“She turned round!” he said to himself.

He had a further two hours’ wait until an official stamped a piece of paper confirming that he’d had to move into a dark, cheap little flat because he hadn’t managed to achieve a normal relationship with the world at large – that’s what it amounted to, after all. He had expected too much of life. Hildegard Knef had said it all: “Red roses shall rain down just for me, And every last miracle be mine to see, The world shall become a better place, And hide its worries from my face” – she had sung the song specially for him. But life was now showing him that it was just plain ordinary, and that it would punish anyone who failed to accept that fact. Life was as ordinary as a bank account that was never overdrawn or a mortgage that was being gradually paid off; it was as everyday as a late train or the broken coffee machine in the office. Ordinarity was the very principle of life, it had even prevailed in Rwanda in that tiny backstreet bar stinking of urine where he had interviewed those three Hutu youths. In voices devoid of feeling they had told him how they had got up each morning, sharpened their axes and machetes, and gone hunting for Tutsis hiding in cellars and holes in the ground. When they found them, they either wounded them in such a way that they would die a lingering death, or else killed them there and then, depending on their mood – though killing was harder work. “If you’re going to kill someone, you have to strike three or four blows,” one of them explained, “but you can wound them with a single strike, then they just die anyway.” The others agreed with him: killing them outright was too much like hard work. It wasn’t too bad in the morning when it wasn’t so hot, but wounding was the thing in the afternoon. Once evening came the Hutu boys fell onto their sleeping mats completely exhausted, then started afresh the following morning. Martens saw no hatred in their faces, no passion, no sign that killing gave them pleasure – just the tiredness that comes of doing an ordinary day’s work.

While the council official was busy putting the necessary stamp on his residence papers, it occurred to Martens that those same three individuals were probably now all married with children, and feeding their families thanks to the watches, gold fillings and jewellery they had stolen from the Tutsis. They had either salted the stuff away in a pot somewhere, or else sold it and hidden the

proceeds under their mattress. They would have saved it, not squandered it: they were ordinary people, well aware that the time they spent building up a bit of wealth would constitute the best period of their life. “But what about you”, he thought, “you haven’t built up anything at all.” He had immediately blown the buckets of money he had earned with his articles – and what a flood of money it had been! In the really good times his stuff had even been printed in the *New Yorker*. He should have realised that things wouldn’t go on like that for ever, and that it was just a matter of time before the editor of the *New Yorker* told him in an email that the topic of the piece he’d offered him was unfortunately a bit too close to that of another that they had already accepted – meaning that the other piece was better than his. You couldn’t get to be worse than other freelancers and still spend fistfuls of money, you couldn’t lunch on confit of lobster with *trilogie de chou-fleur* and hazelnuts in a posh Kreuzberg restaurant while editors and sub-editors were getting ever younger and scarcely knew any longer who you were or what good stuff you’d done. It wasn’t a good idea to get both older and less good at the same time unless you already had a stash of a few hundred thousand euros to fall back on.

Save while you’re alive and you’ll have loads when you’re dead – that had always been Martens’ little joke when he was younger. But life didn’t reward jokers: it rewarded people who accepted ordinariness and talked at dinner parties about making provision for their old age and the investment value in inflationary times of owning your own home.

Martens left the council offices and got into his car. The butterfly valve on the throttle wasn’t working properly, and he was faced with repairs that he couldn’t afford. Even a butterfly valve was beyond his means at the moment. It’s true that together with his mother and brother he had inherited a house in Friedrichshain following the death of his father, but his mother had a life interest in it and it couldn’t be sold until after her death. And you’re not going to wish your mum was dead, thought Martens, just because you need a new butterfly valve!

White shirt

Once back at home – if it deserved to be called a ‘home’ – Martens took one of his white shirts from its place on the wall. He had sold his much-loved rustic wardrobe, an ancient and immense piece of furniture: there just wasn’t enough room in his tiny flat, it would have dominated everything. He had banged a few nails into the wall, hung a clothes hanger on each one, then used

it as a kind of rail on which to hang further hangers carrying his shirts. His system looked good thanks to its sheer simplicity, as though it were the brainwave of some minimalist interior designer. Standing in front of the small nineteenth-century gilt mirror he had inherited from his grandmother, Martens buttoned up his shirt, which had been made to measure for him some years earlier by his erstwhile personal tailor. He had changed shape since then, however, particularly over the last year. The fewer commissions Martens had been able to garner, the more lavishly and frequently he had eaten out, either by way of defiance or out of a childish sense of honour. Or perhaps he had put on weight simply because the dearth of commissions had left him more time to feed his face.

Still standing in front of the mirror he went down into a squat to check whether his shirt would be stretched too tightly across his stomach when he sat down, tight enough for it to pull apart between two buttons and expose the flesh beneath. And it was. So the woman – Miriam – would glimpse a bit of flesh between his shirt buttons, he realised, but there was nothing he could do about it. On top of the shirt he put on a fine linen jacket; in beige with a claret-coloured lining, it, too, was made to measure. He took off the brown shoes he had worn to the council offices and slipped on a pair of black Italian ones: ‘Never wear brown after six’.

He studied the overall effect in the mirror. Yes, he had a belly on him, and as he wasn’t particularly tall his belly was plain to see. But this physical shortcoming was disguised, at least initially, by the elegance of his clothes.

Martens consoled himself with a glance in the mirror: ‘That’s quite some face!’ he thought to himself. He really did have a very good face, he decided, strong and expressive, with large, dark brown eyes. Levantine eyes, inherited from a Lebanese great-grandfather, and a strong nose. His unruly hair was still blond – not as dazzlingly blond as in his younger days, but without a single grey hair, and what with this and the intense gaze of his dark eyes he reckoned he cut a pretty fine figure for someone going out on a date.

“You’re the vainest man I’ve ever met”, Nina had told him once. But she liked his vanity: you could rely on vain men not to fall apart when you left them. It was important to Nina that he was self-sufficient right across the board, given that she didn’t seem all that serious about the relationship they had been in for the past six months.

He rang her: they were supposed to be meeting up that evening. Her soft, gentle voice; her way of keeping him at a distance through irony. “Oh dear, so you prefer working to going out with me? Who am I going to go to the cinema with now? I don’t know all that many men, do I, and most of those are married, plus it’s Friday.”

He couldn't do anything about it, he said. He lied to her, claimed he'd been commissioned to do a piece on the new Taliban generation that had to be sent in within forty eight hours. "But after that we can go the cinema three days running, I promise you."

"Once would be enough", she said.

"Yes, I know", he said.

"Will you come round to mine afterwards, once you've done enough work?"

"If it's not too late by then. I expect you want to go to bed pretty early", he said. "How was the press conference?"

She told him about the press conference she had given in her capacity as spokeswoman for a food company. Bacteria had been discovered in some of their products. Nina had a tough job on her hands. She had to write almost hourly press releases, and she made big efforts to win over hostile journalists by engaging them in personal conversations – seemingly on her own behalf as a woman, of course, not her client's: getting really close to a journalist was the surest way of pulling the wool over his eyes. She recounted some of the devious questions his colleagues had fired at her at the press conference. He didn't respond: it wouldn't be fair to criticise colleagues who spent their lives investigating bacterial infections in eggs and writing inflammatory pieces on the terrible effects of aircraft noise on the owners of holiday homes around the Müggelsee. It would be unjust to criticise them for focusing on issues that he'd been unable to take seriously ever since he'd seen a four-year-old girl come crawling out from beneath a pile of corpses in a mass grave. These fellow journalists of his inhabited a very ordinary but worthy world in which bacteria in eggs were a matter of great significance. Autobahn works posing a threat to frogs or breeding birds, or a politician's dodgy expenses claims, were so important in this world of theirs that they banged away on their keyboards night and day. Expenses claims: see our leading article. Expenses claims: see our commentary page. Expenses claims: new revelations! Nothing could be seen of the girl to start with except an arm, a stick-like, fragile arm stirring like a tiny little worm amongst the tangle of arms, legs and bodies over which quicklime had already been scattered. A sign of life scarcely perceptible in this monstrous reservoir of death, which a bulldozer was on the point of covering with earth. "Stop! Stop!" yelled Carlsen, the photographer accompanying Martens. He ran towards the soldiers charged with filling in the grave, lost hold of his camera, stumbled, fell to the ground, and screamed "Stop! There's a child! A child! It's alive!"

"Vogt was nice though", said Nina. "He sends his regards, by the way."

"Sorry, what was that?" asked Martens.

“Vogt, from the *Wochenspiegel*”, she said. “You do know him. He came and spoke to me after the press conference because the two of us have a mutual friend – you. He said you and he once went on holiday to the South of France together.”

“Oh right, yes, so we did”, said Martens, but his mind was on the little girl. “If Carlsen hadn’t reacted, she would have died”, he mused. “I’d have reacted as well, but too late; I was... I don’t know...” He’d simply been rooted to the spot.

“How does Vogt know about us?” Nina asked. “He said the last time you met was two years ago. So I thought he probably couldn’t have heard about it from you?”

“No, he did. I think we spoke on the phone at some point”, said Martens. “But I really have to be off now.”

“Off? Where to?”

“Back to my desk”, he said.

Sinan in the room

Aeroplane noise was a relevant issue.

Martens set off for Zossener Strasse.

Fellow journalists who wrote articles attacking noise pollution by aircraft were doing their bit to make the world a quieter place, a fairer place – whatever. You didn’t do yourself any favours by being scornful about such things, especially not if you weren’t aware of the risks entailed in getting involved with the world of the extra-ordinary and the utterly vile. Experience of extreme vileness altered one’s criteria for measuring the importance of things. Anything that was less vile was also perceived as less important – even, on occasion, love and trust. Vileness laid claim to being the sole thing of significance, by comparison with which all else gravitated into the realms of banality. Fall victim to this perspective and one was lost; it was the beginnings of an obsessive take on things, of an arrogant compulsion to devalue everyday life and the deeds and aspirations of other people.

Aircraft noise mattered.

Martens laughed. He imagined writing an article entitled ‘Aircraft noise matters’ which would acquaint his readers with the trials and tribulations of a war reporter.

He needed cigarettes. He parked on the cycle lane, switched his hazard lights on and bought a packet in a roadside kiosk.

He smoked as he continued his journey, dropped ash on his white shirt, and attempted to blow it away. He’d failed to notice a cyclist and had to brake hard.

“Ever heard of giving way?” screamed the cyclist, his face distorted with rage.

Giving way is important, thought Martens as he drove on.

Give way.

Plenty of carbohydrates.

Pension contributions.

All the ordinary things, God bless them.

As he drove along, people were patronising the local shops, sitting outside bars drinking beer in the evening sunshine, putting coins into parking meters. Standing at fruit and vegetable stalls they pointed out the produce they wanted and the stall-holder weighed it out and bagged it. They stopped in front of shop windows then moved on to the next one. They all looked healthy, they were all in one piece. No one was missing an ear, an arm, a foot. Martens stopped at traffic lights, and a man crossed over with his dog on a lead.

Martens was making a really big effort: he wanted so much to take these things seriously.

He arrived ten minutes early in Zossener Strasse. He smoked another cigarette, found a bell with a slip of paper sellotaped next to it bearing the hand-written name Khalili, and rang it. She lived on the fifth floor, and as he got to the top of the stairs completely out of breath and saw her opening the door for him, he suddenly realised that he hadn’t brought the obligatory present.

“Look on me as a bunch of flowers,” he said, “even if you find that difficult: I’m afraid I forgot to bring you anything.”

She laughed. “And I’ve forgotten to cook. But there’s wine, and frozen pizza.”

“She’s changed her clothes”, he said to himself. In the council offices she’d had jeans on, now she was wearing an above-the-knee bordered skirt and a white T-shirt. She had no shoes on, so he asked if she minded him retaining his. She held the door open for him to enter the flat, which

was dark and constricted like his own and smelled of other people's food. Entering the small living room, which looked out onto a railway bridge, he was surprised by the furniture.

“This stuff's certainly not from Ikea”, he said, and she said “No, it's all hand-made. My ex-husband is a gardener by profession, but cabinet-making is his hobby, and he made all these pieces himself.”

“The sofa's really beautiful,” said Martens, “so's the table.” He stroked the table-top, which had beautifully crafted inlays. The edges of the table hadn't been planed straight, but followed the natural run of the grain. It was a really beautiful piece of work – not entirely perfect, for it was clear that it had been made with immense love rather than immense skill, but in the end it was this element of love that really defined it.

A smell came wafting into his nostrils from the kitchen, which was linked to the living room by a short, narrow corridor.

“So you *have* cooked”, he said; “it smells like carbonara.”

Trains rumbling across the bridge outside made the glasses standing on a chest of drawers rattle. Cardboard boxes from a house move were stacked against one wall. A door stood half open, Martens could see the corner of a bed that filled the entire room beyond, it seemed unlikely that the door could even be fully opened.

In the kitchen a small table had been laid for two. There was a candle on the table. Martens resisted the temptation to light it. Miriam tipped the water out of the spaghetti saucepan, steam filled the kitchen, Martens felt hot in his jacket, but there could be no question of taking it off at this stage. He turned the bottle of wine standing between two plates on the table so that he could read the label. It was a Matthias Gaul riesling. “So she buys white wine to go with pasta,” he thought, “and a really good one, too, with a pretty hefty price tag. She lives in this shabby little flat, yet she buys expensive wine.”

That appealed to him.

“I hope you like white wine”, she said, turning round at the stove. “I've got some red as well if you'd prefer it, but this stuff's really good, even with spaghetti.”

“Yes, I've had it before, and I'm not keen on red wine anyway.”

“Me neither”, she said, turning back to her saucepans on the stove.

He lit the candle at this point.

They clinked glasses, then started on the spaghetti, the candle flame flickering between them.

“What about your son?” asked Martens. “Is he already asleep?”

“Yes, he’s asleep”, she said. She reached for her glass and drank some wine. “His name’s Sinan”, she said.

The spaghetti was overcooked, but the carbonara had a smoky, astringent taste, just as it should.

“Sinan?” he said. “That’s a Turkish name, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“This is really tasty”, he said. He felt hot in his jacket. He glanced down and saw a sort of mouth gaping back at him, the result of his shirt being so tight over his belly.

Their eyes met as he looked up again, then moments later the little boy was standing there in the kitchen. He was wearing red pyjamas. “Mama, can I come back in now?” he said.

Miriam stood up.

“No”, she said, “you’re going straight back to bed.”

“You’ve got to take me, then!”

“Fine, I’ll take you”, she said.

Martens was now on his own for a while. He suddenly felt a bit uncomfortable: what did Miriam want from him? And what did he want from her? He refilled their glasses, drank from his own, and filled it back up again.

Miriam came back. “Sorry about that,” she said, “he can’t get to sleep, he wanted me to read him another story. Have you been there and done that?”

“Yes,” he said, “but a long time ago. My daughter’s twenty five now. Her name’s Nives.”

“He might come back”, said Miriam, putting her spoon and fork down on her still full plate. She looked out into the hallway. “We normally eat together,” she said, “even when guests are here. He’s not used to being left on his own at this time of day. But I didn’t want him here on this occasion. The fact is, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about. Something that may interest you as a journalist.”

“What might that be?” Martens asked. His glass was empty again. “And do you mind if I smoke? Provided I sit by the window?”

She said he could, but she insisted on opening the window herself, and asked him to puff his smoke right out into the open air. She drained her glass with three large mouthfuls, half-filled it again, and leant against the sink while he smoked his cigarette out of the window.

“I’m having a tough time financially at the moment”, she said. She was a graphic designer, she explained, but had lost her job when a new boss had taken over. She had worked previously as a photographer in London, and had lived there for three years. But she didn’t have any contacts in the German press.

She drank rapidly, and opened another bottle. They were both sitting at the table again. The candle was smoking. Miriam shut the kitchen door and spoke in hushed tones. She was nervous, her movements were fidgety, she barely looked at Martens at all.

“My father was an Afghan”, she said. “Not an Italian.” She attempted a smile. “You thought I was Italian, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did”, he said. She was very beautiful in the candlelight with her narrow, gentle, softly shadowed face, her long eyelashes, her clever, intelligent fingers curled around her glass.

“Someone told me a story recently”, she said, “someone who lives in Afghanistan. It’s about a *bacha posh* – that’s what they call a girl in Afghanistan who’s been brought up as a boy.”

“I know”, said Martens. He broke a piece of bread off and dipped it in the half-congealed remnants of his carbonara sauce.

“What, really?” Miriam looked at him over the top of her glass.

“I’m afraid it was all because of me that a *bacha posh* started smoking”, he said. “I was in Afghanistan to write about dog-fighting in Kabul. A Tajik dog-trainer invited me to go to Kunduz with him, where his family lives. That’s where I got to know the *bacha posh*, she was working in her father’s tea shop. She demanded twenty dollars and a pack of cigarettes for a pot of tea. She was only eight or nine, and she said it was her first cigarette. She smoked three of them, one after the other.” Thoughts raced through his head: And there was I, one week later, on the road to Quatliam with Sergeant Kessler’s patrol. An ambush, shots from all directions, everyone leaping out of the vehicle for fear of rocket-propelled grenades and throwing themselves on the ground. Shouts, the thud of grenades, plumes of dust, things sparkling in the sunlight, whole clouds of dust hiding shadowy figures. Suddenly there’s a rifle in my hand and the helmeted head of Kessler screaming “Hope you know how to use it, we can’t protect you, you’ve got to look after yourself now.” Even Behrend, the medic, has a rifle: doctors are favourite targets for the Taliban. Then a shadow

lurking in the cloud of dust, a sudden movement, someone jumps out from behind a car, Behrend yells “Stay where you are!” and fires. Me too: I fire into the cloud of dust, just a single shot. A journalist and a doctor had fired at a woman, and Behrend thought he was the one who’d killed her, and that seemed very likely. I hadn’t taken aim, I’d probably fired into the air. But I can’t be absolutely sure it wasn’t me, Miriam. – Thus his thoughts; but his words were different: “I hope there’s more to your story than that! A lot’s already been written about bacha poshes.”

“Her name’s Malalai”, said Miriam, “and she’s fourteen years old. Her father only had daughters, four of them, and when Malalai was two he stuck her in boy’s clothes, cut her hair short, and treated her from then on as his son. She went to school as a boy, learnt to read and write, played with the boys, joined them in making fun of the girls, and at home was allowed to lord it over her sisters. But when she turned thirteen her life as a boy was finished. At thirteen, bacha poshes have to turn back into girls, and in a society like Afghanistan’s this means that they lose all their rights, and that from one day to the next they have to start living a life for which they’re completely unprepared and which they despise – for who on earth would want to be a woman? Malalai wanted to stay being a boy, but her father had promised her to a man who owned two taxis and was offering a good dowry. Three months before the wedding she ran away, wearing men’s clothes and taking a bit of money she’d stolen from her father.”

Martens poured some olive oil onto his plate, added some salt, and dipped his bread in it.

“She joined the Taliban”, said Miriam.

Martens began to find the story interesting at this point.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“I was told by someone who made me promise not to answer that question.”

“And when did this take place?”

“Three months ago.”

“And where?”

“Malalai lived in Feyzabad”, said Miriam, “in the province of Badakhshan.”

“I’ve never been there”, said Martens, filling Miriam’s glass and his own: there was nothing left now but crusty bread dunked in olive oil washed down with the heavy white wine.

“Is she a Tajik?” he asked. It was a trick question to find out whether Miriam knew what she was talking about. Badakhshan, a province in the far north-east of Afghanistan, was populated

largely by Tajiks, with very few Pashtuns, but since the Taliban recruited their fighters almost exclusively from amongst Pashtuns, the bacha posh was unlikely to be a Tajik.

“She’s a Pashtun”, said Miriam, “and I’m half Pashtun myself. I speak fluent Pashto and Dari. Do you want to listen to some music?”

“Not particularly”, he said. “Not unless you have Led Zeppelin, and that wouldn’t quite fit right now.”

“I do have Led Zeppelin, their *Remasters* CD. But it really wouldn’t fit at all.”

“What, you like Led Zeppelin?!” he asked. She must have been some ten years younger than him, just over forty five, he reckoned, and it was rare for people of her generation to be keen on Led Zeppelin.

“Robert Plant is one of my favourite singers”, she said. “Him and Pavarotti.”

“Yes, the two of them are very alike,” said Martens, “and I don’t mean that ironically. Pavarotti should have duetted with Plant, not Freddy Mercury. Plant’s the opera singer amongst rock musicians, not Mercury, he was just a copy-cat. Let’s drink to them both!”

They clinked their glasses together, the dull sound telling Martens that they weren’t made of crystal.

“So she joined the Taliban?” said Martens.

“Yes,” she said, “a group commanded by Dilawar Barozai.”

She certainly knows what she’s talking about, Martens said to himself.

“Dilawar Barozai?” he asked, “*the* Barozai? The man who killed the two British journalists?”

“Yes, him.”

“And this girl’s fighting under his command? Under the command of Dilawar Barozai?”

“Yes.”

“So they obviously don’t realise she’s a girl.”

“No.”

“Because they’ll kill her if they find out.”

“Yes.”

Martens pondered things. It was easy for a girl to pretend to be a boy in Afghanistan, precisely because of the grotesque gulf that separated men and women. All she needed to do was to put on a *tunban*, baggy trousers, and a *pakol* by way of a hat, and she would be taken for a man by everybody. She could even grow her hair long and put *kajal* on her eyelids, since lots of Pashtun men did that in order to appeal to other men. Sex between men was quietly tolerated, and even preferred to sex with women, since women were regarded as unclean; it was more honourable to become involved with a man – it just couldn't be openly talked about. So provided no one saw her naked, the girl would go completely unrecognised amongst the men in Barozai's troop.

“That's a pretty good story,” Martens said. “A girl who's grown up as a boy runs away and joins the Taliban because her father wants to marry her off and she prefers to go on living as a boy. The only problem is that the story can't be authenticated. There's no way of contacting the girl. If I go to a newspaper tomorrow and offer them the story they'll say 'Great, we'll do it – but only with an interview and photos.'”

“She wants ten thousand dollars for the interview.” said Miriam. Her glass was empty again, and she closed her eyes. “She's afraid that one of these days someone will notice. She wants to go to Pakistan and then on to Germany. She'd like to live in a country where everything would be just as good for her as a female as it would be if she were a man. For ten thousand dollars she's willing to meet me, tell me her story, and have photos taken. So tomorrow you can go to a newspaper and offer them an article complete with interview and pictures.”

“You take the pics and I do the story – is that what you have in mind?”

“Yes.”

“The story does interest me,” he said, “but I'm wondering how you've managed to make contact with a girl who's constantly on the move in the Badakhshan mountains as a Taliban fighter. Have you been in Afghanistan recently?”

“No.”

“But your source of information is an Afghan? Is it one of your relatives?”

“It's Robert Plant”, she said.

“Oh, really?” he said. “That's fine then.”

“What I'm asking is that you find a paper willing to print the story”, she said. “And finance it: travel expenses, the 10,000 dollars, and my own fee. I'd be happy with 2000 euros.”

“What an extraordinary and beautiful woman”, Martens said to himself. He was a bit drunk, and fell in love with Miriam’s face beyond the candle flame.

“I’ll have to think it over”, he said.

“I need the money desperately”, she said, and stood up. “Let’s go and sit in the living room”, she said, opening the kitchen door. “But please be as quiet as you can, because of Sinan.”

“But I was just about to burst into song!” he said.

“Would you like some salami?” she asked. “And more wine?”

- End of Sample –