

Sample Translation (pp. 7–24)

I Was A Servant In The Hobbs Household **by Verena Roßbacher**

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Prologue

It was a lousy day. This is a simple story.

I found him over in the summer house.

My bed, the desk, the chaise-longue I loved so much, the handsome, pale-blue Persian rug: all of it covered in blood – I expect you know the details, the papers were full of them at the time. The ghastly death, but even in the weeks before it, the scandal, when the whole sorry business came to light. Above all the erstwhile presence of the Hobbs family in Zurich society life; the matinees, the illustrious circle of friends, the legendary dinners. The very idea, in fact, that a drama like this could play out in the upper echelons of society, only served to heighten the already explosive effect.

Back then there was a saying doing the rounds – and by ‘back then’ I refer to the weeks before the gruesome finale, the ultimate showdown that put an end to all those whispers, when a veil of horror was cast over the joys of hoary gossip. I refer to the days in which more and more details filtered through to the public, and the collective image of the family changed so drastically it was as if the rules of the game hadn’t merely shifted, but been rewritten in a single, fell stroke. The thing is, it wasn’t even *about* the Hobbs family. It was the principle. They just happened to be on the receiving end first.

It was a saying I encountered in various tabloid outlets; one that drew sage nods from talking heads on primetime television. Eager neighbours would allude to it on the morning croissant run, as they stood between the well-stocked shelves at *Panucci’s* delicatessen, alongside basketfuls of baguette and sourdough bloomer, only to fall conveniently silent the moment I entered the premises. It was something people preferred to whisper, as if it were a secret to be relished, albeit a truth they had long since suspected: the higher you climb, the harder you fall.

But it’s just a useless aphorism, a retrospective case of wiseacring, and total nonsense besides. For what does it actually mean? Where would we be if there weren’t members of our species prepared to scale such lofty heights, knowing that they ran the risk of failing spectacularly – of falling – and sustaining serious injury in the process. Even if, of course, there was some truth in it, especially since the Hobbses could hardly pride themselves on having made untold sacrifices for the sake of humanity. No, theirs was a rise rooted entirely in selfishness, a near perfect optimisation of their own comfort. They had climbed high. Or perhaps – as I write I am suddenly reminded of how I once spied them at night – there is another, infinitely more accurate, way of putting it.

I must choose my words carefully. For *I spied them*, that is to say, they didn't spy me, didn't have any idea I was there as I observed them through the crack in the hall door, the half-dark living room lit only by a well-lined and leisurely burning fire. No doubt they imagined me to have long since retired to the summer house, to be sleeping as deeply as the children upstairs, imagined, in short, that they were alone. On the wide window ledge stood an empty bottle of *Dom Pérignon* alongside two extremely delicate champagne flutes.

To the best of my knowledge they – I am referring here to the champagne flutes – had last been used a few months before the evening in question, when Frau Hobbs had learned that she was pregnant again. She must have seen her doctor that morning – no doubt she thought it vulgar and unbecoming of a woman of her status to purchase a test strip from the chemist amidst the prying eyes of her fellow customers, and learn of the joyful news with urine-covered hands.

For my part, I was in no need of a doctor. I had long suspected what was going on. I am a keen observer, and back then I inevitably had my busy, tidying fingers in the most intimate of drawers, the most hidden of corners; with the effect that I registered even the slightest of displacements.

But what am I saying? 'Keen observer'; 'registered even the slightest of displacements'? For that is precisely the issue where this story is concerned: I didn't observe keenly enough. And I didn't notice *any* displacements, be they significant or slight. All told, I did my profession a disservice.

Nonetheless back then, at least with regard to Frau Hobbs's pregnancy, my radar was still functioning properly – and indeed I *had* long suspected what was going on.

Two bars of posh chocolate that had lain untouched for weeks were suddenly gone from the cupboard; the undulating, anticlimactic trajectory of a temperature chart that had been kept for years flattened out overnight. These tiny details were enough for me to sit up and take notice. Apparently they had celebrated the much longed-for news late in the evening after I had withdrawn. The following morning I lifted the tray with its filigree glasses from the thick carpet, sweeping up cheese straw crumbs and trying to suppress a nascent thought. No, that's not quite right. Truth be told, I am anything but a dazzling mathematician – as Herr André had amply demonstrated some years before – but I am perfectly capable of putting two and two together. I wiped the glasses, polished them and placed them back in the cupboard. Then I went upstairs, studied the temperature chart and consulted the two appointments diaries. I felt uneasy.

Later I dialled his number and hung up before he could answer. What could I possibly have said?

That was then.

A few months later, her domed stomach was plain to see. It was the middle of the night and I had come back over from the summer house, having forgotten to soak the rolled oats. Since falling pregnant, Frau Hobbs had taken a bowl of porridge every day for digestive reasons. I stood there in the darkened hall, leaning against the dainty bureau by the wall and smelling the rich and somehow scornful scent of roses drifting from the dried buds in the silver bowl. I observed the vital, romantic diorama before my eyes. Herr Hobbs had removed his jacket; like a sprawling grey-patterned cat it lolled on the chair in the bay window. His tie hung loose and imperious over the shoulder of his striped shirt, while his shoes, casually discarded, flirted next to Frau Hobbs's glittering, elegant stilettos in front of the sofa, as they danced in stockinged feet to the music of Manitas de Plata.

Maybe *that's* how it was. *The higher you climb, the harder you fall* – but no, that's not right either. They danced way, way up high. They didn't climb, only to fall. God knows, the Hobbs family were no hikers; they danced, and all of a sudden someone cut the music. The great Manitas ceased to play and from one moment to the next all was still. There were a few awkward seconds during which, lights now harshly ablaze, they continued to dance unaccompanied by the narcotic plim-plam of flamenco guitar, then they looked up and the world looked on with them.

But back to the evening in question; yours truly hidden in the hall, the two of them with Manitas in the drawing room; the music still playing, the southern Frenchman still whispering his hoarse nothings. Time – and happiness – were still on their side.

Bernadette Hobbs, treacherous flames playfully, ostentatiously, licking her cherrywood hair, leaned against him, glistening and waxen like a perfectly cooked egg and he her toast, face nestled eyes closed against his chest. Herr Hobbs – I had never been quite so aware of it as in this moment, when a small, unprepossessing window seemed to open onto the uncharted depths of his being – was so unashamedly masculine, so imbued with the attributes of power, prurience and success, that he seemed to be mocking me, especially now in his studied nonchalance; his shirt alone, peering out slightly from his waistband at the back, seemed to be one great joke at the expense of my rigorously maintained appearance – even at this late hour. His hair glinted like dampened rust, like ferrous stones sprinkled the colour of dusk; his head lay blissfully upon his wife's locks, broad hands perched on her soft behind with the entitlement of a colonial gent.

It was some time before I could detach myself from the intimacy of the moment; it was as if the deceptively blissful scent of the roses allied with the furtiveness of my observations robbed me of any power to leave. A moment that, like a fragile bubble, seemed to drift through the darkness, and the years both future and past.

My name is Christian Kauffmann – here in Feldkirch I'm Krischi of course, there isn't a single proper noun in Vorarlberg that isn't made into a diminutive. Apart from that, it's a name like almost any other. You'll find Christians pretty much all over the world, and, where I'm from, my surname is just as unremarkable.

Incidentally, I didn't think my origins, my name, my family, and the regional peculiarities of my hometown were of any real significance. Quite the opposite. Once I had outgrown my roots, I made every effort never to mention them; I was actually happy to renounce my first name when I worked for the Hobbyses, to be a more or less different person – perhaps even no one. This wasn't triggered by precarious or drastic circumstances or some mysterious or even dubious aspect of my biography, on the contrary. There was nothing spectacular about my life, characterised as it was by a kind of benevolent monotony. Nor was there anything about my past that would have made for interesting discussion. But then perhaps it was precisely this naive ignorance, the idiotic hope that it was possible to begin again, blank and unencumbered, just the idea that it was possible to begin again *at all*, which ensured that things happened the way they did.

I am, as far as the societal perception of butlers goes, still relatively young, and while I am perhaps atypical, there *were* other people my age who embarked on the same course of training. How is it, then, that I feel so much older? Now that I am back in Feldkirch putting pen to paper, I like to imagine my life before my departure as somehow stringent: a clear, concise story that follows an obvious chronological path. No false bottoms, no ironical gimmickry: a man is born, lives his life, and, at some point, he goes on his way. Books like this are always latently psychophobic. They bespeak the touching desire – *my* desire – that so long as they are expressed clearly and with the best of intentions, things are actually easier to understand; that the world is cut-and-dried, black and white; a place where the answer is either 'yes' or 'no'. I didn't want to compromise this simplicity with explanatory notes; re-evaluate my memories; call into question and redefine that which had already been set in stone; I didn't want to cross things out and scribble improvements tight against the margin. And to this day I'm still wrangling with the following notion: was it the circumstances or my non-existent powers of perception? Would someone else – I mean John – have twigged far earlier? Would he have posed the right questions or drawn the correct conclusions? Or, perhaps I should formulate it like this: would he simply have remembered better? I suspect so – but how can I know? I've never asked him.

Still, perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps I am overestimating him. That doesn't make things any better. It just means that for the purposes of this account I find myself obliged to look into the chapters of a past I had previously thought closed, and re-interpret them line by line. And even that might prove superfluous were it not for the question of guilt. And that is interesting, for where does guilt begin? Is guilt a state or, better, a set of facts which

presuppose a deliberately malevolent action? Are these philosophical questions? Probably. I, at any rate, am unable to answer them. Can a person be guilty if they are unable to predict the consequences of their actions? Perhaps not. If I take stock of the years gone by I can recognise: chains of events, a tangle of facts and motives, and perhaps it would be more accurate to say that guilt is borne on many shoulders. I like this notion; it renders the question of guilt void. If everyone is guilty, then no one is guilty at the same time. Gösch gave it short shrift, it's just rhetoric, he said, guilt, according to his conception of it, is always *highly personal*.

The moment he uttered that phrase, *highly personal*, I knew that Gösch was only doing it to gauge my reaction, to gauge whether I thought he was actually referring to me; whether guilt was something I, myself, *personally* felt.

I don't know. All I can do is piece it together and see what comes out.

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In my experience, the naming of my profession always brings with it a kind of artless, voyeuristic interest; there is scarcely anyone who can escape it. Should conversation turn to my training in Valkenburg Castle in the Netherlands, it seems to go almost hand-in-hand with a vague longing for some form of boarding school life, cultivated by serial offenders such as *St Clare's* or *Castle Schreckenstein* and given unexpected fresh impetus by Harry Potter and his friends. The thought of learning one's trade in a huge castle (*Huize Damiaan*, originally intended as a monastery, is without doubt one of the most impressive buildings of its kind in South Holland, and, with its one-hundred-and-thirty-five rooms and expansive grounds, a pretty useful place to start preparing for a life in luxurious households), that is, in the most noble and traditional surroundings together with twenty would-be butlers from all over the world, working fourteen to sixteen hours daily and always perfectly attired in shirt and tails, merely adds a dash of *Downton Abbey* – oh how we miss you – to the already Hogwartian setting.

Upon completing my training, I became an accredited butler.

Sifting through file upon file of vacancies together with Robert Wenneke after graduating, I felt an itch to go abroad, perhaps to Australia or to a family on Malta. How exhilarating it would be to work for a minister in Paris or with businesspeople in London; on the other hand, I was uneasy about the prospect of going out 'into the world' for my first job, especially as my

English was still lagging some way behind Shakespeare's. I looked through the photos: families large and small, couples, single ladies and gentlemen, all posing in front of palm trees or in photo studios, or laughing on well-lit snaps.

In the end, it wasn't Wenneke's files that led me to the Hobbs family. No, curiously enough, it came about through Rosl Fraxner.

After finishing school I had, quite by chance, ended up spending nigh on a year working for a certain Dr Thaler. Needless to say, Rosl Fraxner had heard that following my stint up in his villa at Margarethenkapf, I had turned professional, so to speak, in the Netherlands, and upon my return she tracked me down as I was enjoying my Saturday morning coffee in *Element*.

She took her inevitable photo before sitting, unbidden, at my table. I lowered my *Financial Times*. 'This seat is taken.'

'I know, I know, I'll be out of here in a minute. I just heard you were looking for a job.'

'Who from?'

She gave an abrupt wave of her hand and rummaged in her rucksack.

We have always despised such receptacles, away from their traditional mountain setting. 'Rucksacks,' Gösch judiciously stated on one occasion, 'make a mockery of every silhouette. They are even more unforgiving of fat people, however, as they accentuate any existing *swelling* with additional, *artificial* curvatures, thrusting the shape of their bearer mercilessly into the spotlight.' Rosl Fraxner's specimen in particular – leather, with Aztec-inspired woven intarsia – served as a red rag. With her already *existing swelling* a rucksack catapulted a woman like Rosl Fraxner firmly into the realm of nightmares.

I looked on disapprovingly as she unearthed various tools of her trade and lined them up on my little table. There was a bright shawl, a travelpack of *Hakle feucht* wet wipes, two bars of *Milka* chocolate, a worn cosmetics bag, a crumbled, velvet-coated scrunchy and all manner of camera accessories. Finally, she pulled out a large envelope and passed it across the table before ordering herself a coffee.

'I'm afraid this isn't a good time. I'm meeting someone.'

'How nice. A little *amore* in your life at last. What's her name?'

'I'm meeting Olli.'

'I see. Well, I'll have bounced by the time that bandit arrives.'

Bounced is right, I thought to myself, as I laid the paper to one side and reluctantly, though it has to be said also somewhat curiously, fetched the papers from the envelope. There were two pages of typed text on thick paper alongside a tasteful family portrait.

The image showed the family taking coffee at a table in a late autumn garden; benign sunlight fell at an angle through the deep yellow leaves of a lime tree and bathed the protagonists in a wonderfully warm light. It was, as I would later come to realise, a photo

from their *Season's Greetings* range – one of the few in colour. Somewhat at odds with my image of the traditional family unit was the curious presence of not one, but two men. The picture showed a woman (evidently the mother), a small boy – the son, who else? – and this pair of – considerably older – twin brothers either one of whom could have performed the role of father (even if it wasn't initially clear which one did). At any rate, these four seemed to make up the Hobbs household. Taking my cue from the eloquent seasonal greeting, I surmised that one of the twins, the father, was a successful lawyer, while his brother, the text playfully insinuated, enjoyed altogether less success as a painter. I took another look at the image, and, with these two possibilities to guide me, everything suddenly became much clearer. The one twin was all regally done up in an immaculate, Italian-cut suit; the other wore a rumpled-looking three piece from the turn of the century that at one stage Olli, Isi, Gösch and I would have been only too glad to take off his hands. As painters go, he was a perfect caricature. I found both instantly sympathetic; no, it wasn't just that I found them sympathetic, they seemed strangely familiar, as if I had seen them somewhere before and immediately hit it off; perhaps it was that they both wore an intelligent, ever-so-slightly amused-looking expression, which made it feel as if one had been party to some salacious incident about which mutual consent dictated that there would be no further discussion.

Frau Hobbs, too, seemed instantly likeable – definitely good-looking –, and radiated that mix of warmth and authority I have always found so compelling. The little boy looked like little boys do, possibly a little mollycoddled and still carrying his puppy fat; in his polo-shirt and ironed slacks he was a dead ringer for those snotty-nosed little kids from the rolex adverts, in which watches are already being bought for the next generation. I felt sorry for him, even if my pity had limits. I'm not especially keen on children.

Rosl Fraxner had taken another of her disagreeable little snaps – Krischi Kauffman contemplating important documents – and I placed the image alongside the typed sheets and passed the package back across the table.

She drank a sip of coffee and swept her gear into her rucksack, leaving the Hobbs file lying on the table next to her cosmetics bag.

'An enchanting family,' she said, painting her lips with energetic strokes. 'Stinking rich, and you're exactly what they're looking for.'

'What's your connection to them?'

'None,' she tossed the lipstick back into the bag and glanced at herself in the little hand-held mirror. 'I've absolutely nothing to do with them. I don't know them from Adam. I just heard through my artist friends in Zurich, and naturally I thought of you straightaway.'

'Your what friends?' I did, of course, want to know why she had approached me with these documents. *She* of all people; *me!* But I was loath to pass up any opportunity to rile

her; the truth was I liked nothing more than to engage Rosl Fraxner in conversations in which she couldn't help but get on my nerves.

She folded the mirror and ran her fingers self-importantly through her hair. 'My dear friends, fellow artists, I always call them 'church artists', but not because they're religious or anything like that; they're an independent troupe of local artists who exhibit their work in a disused Zurich church. I've been hoping for an invite for years.'

'But you're not local,' I said, let alone an artist, I thought, why on earth should they invite *you*?

'Well, 'local' is a malleable term, isn't it? The boundaries are pretty fluid – especially where art is concerned. At any rate, these Hobbses come warmly recommended, very warmly indeed, an extremely nice family, and very keen on art. Just right for you.'

'Because I'm so keen on art, or what?'

'Exactly!' she cried in that horrifically loud, Dionysian way, that along with everything else had always made me give her a wide berth. 'You're *all* keen on art! It's just my pictures that you never come to look at. Too many revelations, I suspect. I've known you all since you were little nippers. Come by sometime and take a look at the old snaps!'

I gave a shudder. The last thing I wanted was to see her photos of me as a 'little nipper'.

'I'll think about it,' I mumbled.

'Superduper,' she pushed the Hobbs file determinedly back across the table, 'and this here is a *perfect match*, as they say. I've got a nose for this sort of thing, an artist's sensibility if you like. You must go to Zurich, to the Hobbses!'

If she manages to leave, I thought to myself, adopting the kind of fatalism that always characterised my exchanges with Rosl Fraxner, if she manages to leave without mentioning the word 'artist' again, then I'll go to the Hobbses. It was this kind of secret, little bet that sweetened my encounters with her, and I knew from experience how she walked unerringly into any trap.

'As an...,' she said – *artist*, I finished her sentence, certain now of victory, *as an artist*, but suddenly my friend Olli stood before us; instinctively she lifted her camera but he got there first, and took a photo of her instead.

'Frau Fraxner, how's business? Keeping a steady focus? Taken any important snaps lately?'

'Of course. I'm always on the move – the world doesn't just stop you know?' Busily she drained her cup, threw her make-up bag into her Aztec rucksack and swung it onto her shoulders; next she took a parting shot of us, all of a sudden playing the experienced still photographer again, and scurried out of the cafe without so much as giving Olli a second glance.

'You've beaten her at her own game again,' I said, transferring the Hobbs file to my bag. I was puzzled by the outcome of my bet – I had never lost one before –, but contrary to expectation, it felt fine. Fate had intervened.

'Too right,' he hung the camera around his neck and slumped onto Rosl Fraxner's newly vacated seat. He ordered a slice of cake and coffee. 'I'm seriously considering volume three of *Fraxner Takes Fright*, for the international market this time.'

'I've got a job,' I said.

'Oh,' he said, 'this calls for a photo.'

So I went to Zurich. It was Zurich, rather than Tokyo or Sydney, easily accessible but still far enough away from my hometown; the family spoke both English and German, which afforded me the chance to fine-tune my language skills; and I could throw myself into my new job without struggling with the pitfalls of an entirely new culture. Naturally, I assumed that after the recommended two to three years, I would take the next step; I wasn't planning on hanging around; I wanted to use the Hobbses, use Zurich, as a springboard to the wider world, to different households, fresh challenges.

That I'd stay ten years is something I would never have thought possible. But there were qualities latent in me which until that point had been concealed by the vitality of my friends: namely, my not inconsiderable lazy streak, and my singular lack of ambition.