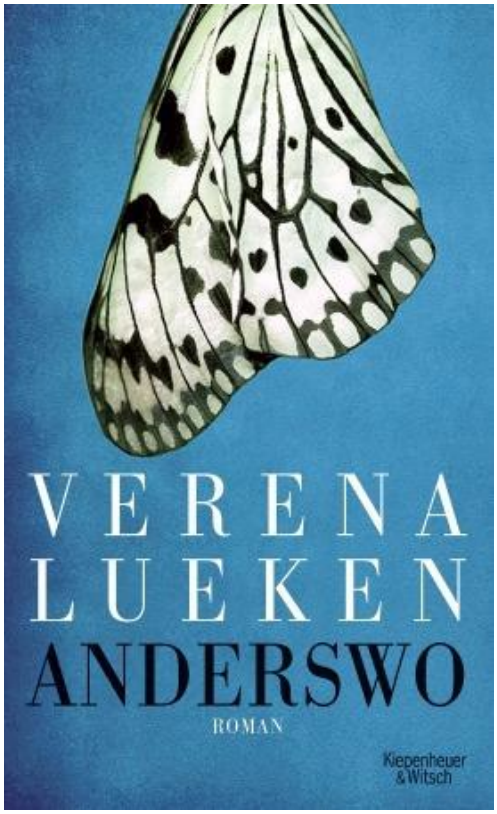
Sample Translation (pp. 7-38)

Elsewhere
by Verena Lueken

Translated by Jamie Lee Searle



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I

This year, too, had passed without her receiving any message from her father's universe. The last night crept from the sea onto land, velvety warm beneath the clear sky. The stars fell downward in a steep trajectory, like diamonds in a shaft to the center of the Earth. They joined fleetingly, into playful formations, then broke away from one another again and formed new ones. Shooting stars. Satellites.

Her neck cricked back, she stood in the midst of men and women who were determined to have a good time on this Caribbean New Year's Eve, and, if necessary, to help it along with anything still considered halfway proper in this part of the world. What am I doing here, she thought briefly, and then: Is it always like this here? Do the stars tumble down over one another every night, or only when the years turn? She watched the diamonds falling in the shaft and wrote a text message to her brother. "Happy New Year, Andreas! From the Earth's core, b."

No one seemed to be paying any attention to the sky. The table she was led to was still empty. She had come with friends, but her small group would occupy only half of the chairs. On their way, they had talked about who the others were likely to be, couples, solo travelers, perhaps a family with sulking children. She was hoping for couples, individuals. A bunch of friends, like they were. For a while no one came, then, eventually, a young couple who kept entirely to themselves. Three chairs were cleared away.

A large family sat down at the neighboring table, men dressed in black with dark, oiled hair, the younger ones in good shape and vain, the older ones also vain, despite their immense bellies. Then the women. The mothers in black too, and fat, with newly carved faces, among them three or four young ones, the daughters and daughters-in-law, she presumed, in shimmering little dresses over firm breasts, buttocks, and thighs. They

were already swaying to the rhythm of the music that drifted over from the nearby stage as they were led to the table. In her ears, the lukewarm hits from past decades which the DJ played to warm up hadn't sounded very animating. She shouldn't be so severe, she thought, as she watched the girls sashay over to the neighboring table, not on New Year's, not in the Caribbean, not on this night, which followed a less than thrilling work trip and had brought to her immense surprise the company of friends who had come over from New York. Even later on, the young people from the neighboring table still wouldn't go over to the dance floor, but would simply stand up, push back their chairs, and begin to dance, with supple knees and hips and absent expressions.

Almost as soon as the men sat down, they began to make phone calls. Each one clearly still had important business to resolve in these last hours of the year, possibly in other time zones where the new year had already begun or where the old one would last another few hours. But perhaps the calls were only to the docks, where the boats moored after they had picked up packages which fell down to sea out of planes from Colombia. The men planted thick cigars in their faces and puffed little white clouds of smoke into the clear night. Would the band that had been billed for later dare to play a narcocorrido? Did the men at the neighboring table perhaps even have one of their own?

When the fireworks started up, the bodyguards of numerous guests at the surrounding tables suddenly stepped out of the background, one hand to their ears, the other pressed against their gun holsters. Behind the men at the neighboring table, too, there suddenly stood black-clad forms with shaven heads and broad backs. Four bodyguards for five men, what did that mean?

The fireworks would offer the perfect moment for an assassination. The din was loud enough to drown out a machine gun volley, should someone decide, on this last night of the year, to settle an old score. Or to straighten things out, in his mind, for the

coming one. But nothing happened, apart from the waiters taking the opportunity to shovel new lobster onto the buffet.

Perhaps, she thought, these people at the neighboring table who possibly had their own narcocorrido would later look back on this New Year's Eve as the height of their Golden Age. Perhaps they were enjoying everything they owned and hoping to amass even more of it in the future. Perhaps they were cruel and enjoyed that too.

She had once known a family like that. Well-dressed, cold, and rife with wrongdoing. She had celebrated a wedding with them. They sat her at the children's table, because as the girlfriend of one of the sons she wasn't considered as belonging, a detail she had no more forgotten than the huge hat with the gauze brim she had bought from a junk dealer for the occasion. Even though it was decades ago, the memory suddenly appeared before her as though it had only just happened.

Perhaps, though, the best years of the people at the neighboring table were already behind them, and on this night they were calling down dead phone lines, just to maintain the facade, for the sake of the children. Who already seemed completely ruined for any life other than the one they were putting on show this evening.

She asked the DJ, who long after midnight had taken back over from the band, for songs from her favorite albums. "Kind of Blue". "Blue Train". The DJ grinned at her and suggested "Mack the Knife", but she found that only mildly amusing and shook her head. Dawn already lay over the ocean, and the family at the neighboring table seemed to be readying themselves to leave. But once the first dappled tones of "So What" and the crescendo of the bass line finally gave way to the wind instruments letting rip, making the membranes in the loudspeakers shake and sweeping aside the last melody remnants of the earlier trash songs that still lingered in the flower bouquets, the buxom girls and their muscular husbands and brothers picked up the beat in their buttery-soft limbs and

danced themselves, quietly and raptly next to their chairs, once again into a trance, like in a nightclub in 1960s New York. The fathers left their phones alone and at first tried to doze, but soon fidgeted around increasingly in their chairs as the mothers plucked at their shawls, flicked a few crumbs from the table and shot glances into the darkness, the target of which she was unable to make out. The bodyguards finally went over to the buffet.

She had stayed with her friends next to the loudspeakers on the dance floor, keeping her eyes open so as not to miss how the trumpet solos raced their way through the rows of tables and roused the revelers, who had thought the night was over after all the champagne, the last lobsters, the fireworks, and that the New Year, which had begun gorged, drunken, and lavished, would continue in the same vein. Claudio, she thought. What was he doing tonight? Was he playing this song right now, perhaps? She looked for a moment up at the stars, the satellites, and said softly: “Hi there.”

Her gaze had hung there, suspended in the darkness. This year too, she thought, she had remained undecided on the fundamental questions.

Was there anyone who could be relied upon in the family at the neighboring table? Right now they looked so peaceful, as the young ones danced and the old ones waited with barely dwindling patience until they had had enough. Had there ever been one of them who could be relied upon? For sure they were Catholic. For sure the fathers were sentimental and the mothers filled with bitter spite. But here, and perhaps every time they went out together, they demonstrated family. Unity in a certain vulgarity, a claim to power, behind which lurked the potential for brutality. If she had gone over to their table and said: “You know, you look exactly like everything that disgusts me about families,” they would probably have looked up with disbelief, then closed in for the attack.

Perhaps the family was completely harmless, she thought, to try out the thought. In spite of the bodyguards. But she didn’t believe that. At least one of the boys, of that

she was sure, would have to atone for all this. One of them would stand up at some point and say, I won't be a part of this. He would reject the calls in which package drops from Columbia to the bay were being confirmed, and not send anyone to fish them out of the sea. He would risk losing his inheritance, if not worse. If he were lucky and stayed alive, he would find some unexciting job and try to stay respectable.

Someone from the family she had known a long time ago had done that. She believed it had to be that way. One had to turn away without betraying the others, otherwise all families and the world would long since have gone up in flames.

She looked at the men closely, one by one. All of them were tired after the long night, intoxicated. Which of them would get out was impossible to predict in their current state.

But perhaps all this was just a figment of her imagination, and it was solely down to her and the fact that, whenever she saw families sitting together, she quickly became suspicious. And thought of unhappiness, of disappointments. Sometimes, too, of criminal organizations.

II

The room, where she sits on a simple stool, almost disappears into complete darkness. She can just make out the silhouettes of a table, a second stool, a lamp above, swinging back and forth and back and forth. Specks of dust whirl around in the weak strip of light. A man dressed in black stands opposite her, another by the door. Stick men, life-sized and in suits, as always. Their hairless heads as flat as discs, with painted-on eyes and a hole in the middle they are speaking out of. *What!* The *A* makes the hole look like a narrow egg. They articulate in an exaggerated manner and speak in chorus. In the oscillating light, she glimpses a device against the wall by the door, but can't figure out what it is. A lie detector, perhaps. The instrument box for later. A record player? The situation is clear. But who is interrogating her, and why?

What are you doing here?

- Working.

How old is your father?

- Dead.

What you know about him?

- Not much.

Don't make excuses.

- We were never very close.

When do you think about him?

- Almost never.

Try harder, baby.

Baby? she thinks, and says:

- He looked good.

What did he smoke?

- Benson & Hedges.

Did you like the smell?

- Not very much.

You're being very monosyllabic, do you know that?

- He didn't know Cicciolina.

You're crazy. All men know Cicciolina!

The light from the lamp touches the device in front of the wall again. Now she sees how thick the layer of dust on it is, and feels reassured. The men walk to and fro agitatedly, their legs becoming ever longer and their pants ever shorter. They stand without socks in the narrow black shoes, which grow with their legs. The discs with the holes and the painted-on eyes rotate slowly on their necks until the men are wearing their ridiculous faces backward. Only now does she notice that they're moving synchronously, in mirror image. The lamp swings back and forth. The dust particles dance in the dim light. It's completely quiet. She has lost sight of the stick men in suits and gives a start when they suddenly lean over her from behind, to the left and right, and begin to pull violently at her arms, each man from his side. The holes in their heads start to flash wildly.

Let me go, she cries, kicking out with her legs, *my father has nothing to do with it!*

She woke up, feeling dented. Flung the window open. The day beamed at her, as though it wanted to say: cheer up. The sky, azure blue, arched high above. Watercolor blue, she thought. A swarm of birds. There was a house opposite, blocking the view. In front of it a row of dead, almost leafless plane trees. Some of them had grown together at their stumped branches, making the trees look as though they were holding a tattered paper garland that had lost its flowers.

The bedding with the two napped stripes and the stiff linen sheet she had woken up on had felt familiar. Opposite the bed stood the folding closet made of transparent

plastic with the zipped front, which she had bought when she moved in years ago, to hang up her almost exclusively dark slacks and jackets, and sometimes a dress too, until she had a real closet. The house on the other side of the street, with the weather-worn sign “Home for Unmarried Workers” above the entranceway, seemed familiar to her as well, and on closer inspection so did the piece of sky, from which the swarm of birds had now disappeared. And so did the dream, which she had battled with over recent years in other locations too.

It was always the same one, except that the men sometimes wore socks, neon checked. The longer their legs grew and pant legs didn’t, the brighter the socks glowed. This time the men had been there without socks, the story was in black and white. Why, she thought, as so often after this dream, did she always dream such terrible dialogue? Why couldn’t she figure out who was asking these screwy questions? She had no idea where the comic figures in suits with the disc faces and the painted-on eyes and mouth beneath came from. And why did she only ever come up with the same idiotic answers?

She had come back late the evening before, from another climate zone, another bedding, another time. She was still half caught in it, like in a twisted coat sleeve, and had to writhe and stretch and contort in order to arrive in the here and now. In the here and now! She hated it when she used such hackneyed phrases, word husks, even when she was alone. Especially when she was alone. The dream was the last thing she needed right now.

The apartment she was struggling to arrive in was small and sparsely furnished. There were a few chairs and a large table, and an armchair with a high backrest that she sometimes fell asleep in when she couldn’t make up her mind about going to bed. She had moved into this unremarkable-looking building with just five floors because it was near the airport, practical lodgings between her travels. She had never seen nor heard her neighbors, which led her to presume that they lived, like her, temporarily here and there. She liked the thought. It meant she didn’t feel alone, but was left undisturbed.

On her travels she collected material for the stories with which she earned her money. Sometimes, however, she kept the most interesting details for herself and cheated a little when writing, so as not to get into difficulties with the publications she was on the road for. The magazines which printed her stuff were firmly in the middle of the market, and believed their readers capable of only mid-level powers of imagination when reading about places where they might, one day perhaps, spend their vacations, start a business, buy a vacation home, or open an offshoot of their company, which for many readers of these pages all amounted to the same thing, from a tax point of view. This was why she had to cut out of the stories anything that was located a little on the margins.

Amusingly, the things that were considered unsayable in these glossy magazines usually did lie off to the side, in corners into which light didn't always fall and which were seldom swept. On the margins like the countless dead monkeys in graves next to a temple street in Cambodia. Like the light blue plastic bags dancing on the waves of the Indian Ocean, which would end up caught in a coral reef, in shreds, before the coast of Sri Lanka. Like the girls in the shadows next to the promenade in Havana, who were actually still children and could be bought for next to nothing. The boys too.

When things like these slipped into her writing, she deleted them on her next read-through. She felt, when she was editing her texts, like Charlie Chaplin packing a suitcase. With a big pair of scissors in her hand to make the contents fit, cutting off a pant leg hanging out from beneath the lid on the right, a jammed sweater shoulder on the left, so that by the end everything looked neat and the suitcase would close.

She didn't believe that life writes the best stories. How would that go? Life was life. The stories were made out of it by others. Who left out what unsettled them, or made up what was missing. She had nothing against that. She did the same. But she insisted on differentiating between the two. Life happened of its own accord.

Alongside the travel reports, which she pruned, pressed, and polished so they would look their best in the luxury magazines and be ready for their glossy illustrations, she had a small collection of outtakes, of deleted material, unused scenes which, to her, seemed too good for the wastepaper bin. They lay around, unorganized but not inaccessible, in notebooks, on external hard drives, in emails that she had sent to herself, on slips of paper of differing sizes and colors. Despite this disorder, she was convinced that someday a story would grow out of them, one which would perhaps look like a piece of clothing someone had patched together from all the cut-off pant legs and sweater shoulders which fell during Charlie's suitcase packing. Once she really put her mind to it, she would piece together from her outtakes a new picture of the world, one that was more complete than the version she palmed off on the magazines.

She had sold her New Year's Eve reportage for a very good fee, and so didn't need to think about earning money for a few weeks. Who cared if she herself thought the story was dead boring? Caribbean themes were always coming back to the foreground; this time it had just been the Dominican Republic's turn. She had written nothing about the complicated social relations in the Americans' luxurious private homesteads, nothing about the deplorable circumstances on the Haitian border, but had penned instead a trivial account of riding across coffee plantations and made reference to the signs among the not-too-wild nature which announced that there was still land to be bought. A photographer had been traveling through the region as well, and had lean horses with lean people astride them gallop through the well-tended wilderness, so that by the end the article had looked better than any day she had spent there. Apart from New Year's Eve.

She had been unable to get the family from the neighboring table that night out of her head. In the days that followed she had wondered how she could get access to hard information, had made a few inquiries and even went to the police. The official at the desk, in neatly ironed uniform and very accurate in other ways too, had asked: "Do

you want to report something?" When she insistently declined, he merely lifted his arm and pointed, without looking up, toward the exit. And that was that.

It quickly proved itself to be utterly improbable that she would find out something about the New Year's Eve family that could be verified. And probably the most interesting thing hadn't even happened yet—that one of the sons or sons-in-law would turn away, as had happened in the family with the children's table at the wedding a long time before, and find shelter somewhere the power of the uncles and the fathers didn't reach and where no one would write the men a narcocorrido. The only results of her research so far were two blogs which dealt with drug-related crime in the area. She subscribed to both and resolved to keep herself up to date.

As per order, she had written up the story of a sugarcane baron who had brought back to life, against all the odds, the long-rotting factory belonging to his father after the latter's death. The contact had been established in advance, she was well-prepared, but she wouldn't have been surprised had the whole thing turned out to be some cheap staging.

But if it was staged, it certainly wasn't cheap. The sugar baron had proudly led her around his complex on New Year's Day, when no one was there and the immaculately cleaned factory was awaiting the first working day of the new year. Blathering constantly, he had boastfully escorted her around in a dark twelve-cylinder Mercedes and driven her to his private helicopter pad in order to take her on a flying visit to Havana, where they drank mojitos with his picture-perfect daughter and then flew back again. According to him, the beautiful daughter with a master's in business administration moved in New York in the best circles, which he didn't describe any further. "Soap opera," she had written in her notebook at the time.

When she thought back now to this first day of January, she couldn't help but yawn. Success stories bored her to tears. She found it a much more rewarding task to tell

the story of why something went wrong. So far, however, she hadn't found an editor who agreed.

She glanced once more up at the sky above the home for unmarried workers, then closed the window. Blue, she thought. The azure blue in the watercolor box had been her favorite color as a child, always the first one she rolled the paintbrush around in, until it was completely saturated. Almost as soon as she had begun to paint, the color compartments sloshed over, because she used too much water. The azure slowly became completely liquid and ran out and formed little droplet lakes of differing blues among the other colors. This is exactly how the sky looked that day, the day that began with the bad dream of the interrogation, of which she still couldn't make head nor tail, even though the dream had been regularly and briefly throwing her off-center for a few years now. The sky was uneven, yet shone brilliantly, except it had no edge to run out over.

Blue was everywhere that things got serious for her. The blue nights in New York, which begin in June around the time of the summer solstice, carrying in them a waft of summer, but no heat yet, just the light that somehow gets stuck between the buildings. Blue Nights, that was also the name of a book by Joan Dideon, important to her because it tells of how objects, photographs, letters, predominantly call into your memory things that are of no use to you. Because all of them belong to a life that is past, irretrievable, and the memory says nothing but this. Past.

It wasn't like that for her, she thought. Perhaps she loved the book for the very fact that, every time she read about the irretrievable, it called awake in her this resistance. She wasn't there yet. She still thought of the past as though it could perhaps be changed. As though an old pain could be avoided if she bolstered the story a little or smoothed it out or if something else would occur to her that she hadn't thought of yet, and the whole thing would get a more stable center, a more friendly conclusion.

No one ever got over anything, she was convinced of that, not even Joan Dideon. The soul was a sponge from which nothing ever drips back out. This seemed irrefutable to her. Hurts remain. The emptiness her father had left behind in her. After a while she had succeeded in reaching the edge of this emptiness, and something else had stepped into the center. Temporarily. A series of the temporary. Nevertheless.

Even though she steered clear of situations that reminded her of something she couldn't get over, she still mostly believed that, if you looked at things in the right way, even the past can lead to something that isn't yet apparent. As though the potential of that which is long past has perhaps not yet been entirely exhausted, and you could go back in your memory and get out of it something you previously overlooked. She pictured things currently present as a provisional solution, as a drafty stilt house built on the rickety poles of the past, which don't have to stand forever exactly as they are right now. The present is only a stopover, because even the past still carries within it the possibility of change. The stilts could be stabilized and even moved, so that the house is no longer in the water, but instead at the edge of the forest or behind the dunes.

This was more or less the way she had found her own place within the times. Kept the transitions fluid. Provisional in every sense. Stopover was certainly the right keyword. No one had to keep going back to where it hurt, she was convinced of that, and she had redirected her steps accordingly. A long time ago to New York, for example, where there was nothing that had anything to do with what was already past for her back then and that she couldn't get over. For her, New York had been a city without memories.

A long time ago, she had bought a small apartment there, which she now rented out almost the whole year round. It was a simple shotgun apartment in a then-miserable area, one window on one side, another on the other and between them an elongated room in which she had partitioned off a sleeping nook with a bookcase. Shotgun, because you could fire a gun from one end to the other without any obstruction. Even

though she would have nothing to do with guns, she liked the fact that her apartment had this name, and so that was how she advertised it: “Shotgun apartment to rent. Sparsely furnished. View of the courtyard with a piece of sky above. Summer, autumn, and winter.”

In the weeks around the June solstice she lived there herself. Only for the blue, for the light evenings. For the emptiness in her mind. She walked. Not particularly quickly, but for long stretches. She trotted through the streets, which didn’t get properly dark, from west to east and all the way south and sometimes up to Harlem, and thought just one thing: blue. Like the sky above the river. Like the Manhattan Bridge. Blue, like The Blue Note, the New York club in which she had spent many hours, evenings, early mornings, for comfort, out of high spirits or happiness; the club in which she used to meet Claudio when they were both in town, and simultaneously the name for a tone that promised as much as the nights of the same color. A tone that was just as fleeting, just as secretive, perhaps an illusion. Blues. Melodies of other tones, close to blue, ones she wished she could hum, play, sing. The bird that reliably twittered to her in Central Park, as though it had been waiting solely to greet her when she was back in town. Just a week ago it had strutted around in front of her window overlooking the courtyard, in the walled niche on which the large boxes for her building’s air conditioning units stood. The niche had been damp from condensation, and she, and the bird too, she believed, had thought it had rained overnight. Bluebird. And again and again the sky, like now.

Claudio hadn’t known she was in the city, and it was by chance that she discovered the announcement for his concert and had scavenged a ticket. She sat in the second row. He spotted her immediately, and it seemed to her as though he briefly rejoiced into the trumpet, while making a few sliding dance steps which were fitting for the song but she took to be a greeting. There had remained between them a tenderness, which surrounded her as he began to play in earnest, just as though she was sitting there completely alone. There in the darkness, she cried a little, not from grief, but

because she was able to completely relax when he was near her. Later they walked arm in arm through the city, and he spoke of his sons, his divorce, his heartache with his family. They were still good together. Even though they were no longer a couple with a future. But they still felt this great joy in one another. In how they had shared something between them for as long as this Them had lasted.

While they were a couple, back then, they had both changed. Claudio had distanced himself a little from his family, who distorted his view of things. She had left her father behind her. Family had been the last thing on her mind. She was mistaken when she believed that Claudio saw things the same way. She and Claudio, together they could have found something for which there wasn't yet a name. They hadn't managed it. But until that point they had had the best from one another. And because they knew that, they still loved one another. Even though they no longer made plans together.

She had come back from New York the previous evening. In the small apartment with almost no furniture near the big airport, another stopover, albeit with her own bedding and the view of the home for unmarried workers, she had fallen into bed and awoken the next morning from her dream, which still hung in the room, absurd and puzzling and well-known as it was.

Dead tired and reluctant to begin the day, she stared into the sky, from which the birds had now disappeared. She sat down on the floor and opened the suitcase she had left standing next to the bed the evening before, took out a blouse, a pair of slacks and a jacket before letting herself fall back onto the bed for another few minutes. What she needed now was a walk, she thought. But she had an engagement. At the cemetery. The message had reached her before she left New York, and she had known that after a brief night in Germany, a burial would be her first destination.

They were carrying to the grave a man with whom she had no personal ties. She had come to support a friend who was grieving deeply for this man, the friend's father. Most of the mourners were strangers to her.

She had put on the black slacks from her suitcase, hose too, and a thin dark coat around her shoulders, too much fabric for the unusually warm early summer's day. The message that the dead man had asked for the mourners to come dressed colorfully hadn't reached her, and presumably she wouldn't have bowed to his wish anyway. She hadn't known him well enough for that. But she preferred it this way. Considering that she wasn't grieving, black at least showed respect on this special day, respect for the deceased and those who were lamenting his death in their colorful shirts and cheerful dresses.

While in the funeral chapel speeches were made and songs sung, stories told and guitars plucked, she wandered in her thoughts around other cemeteries. Cemeteries from films with cars rolling across them, black limousines which discharged men wearing sunglasses and women beneath veils and with opaque tights and high-heeled shoes, the heels sinking into the grass on the way from the car to the grave. In these scenes, too, there were people among the mourners who had come for other reasons. She thought of the cemetery in Queens which cuts through the highway from the airport to Manhattan and which always looks dusty from the taxi, and of the forest cemetery in Maine with Main Street running through it. Of the urn in a friend's closet that the latter had stored her husband's ashes in and labeled "John"," just in case the container should fall into someone else's hands. Of the Buddhists' huts in Asia decorated in white, to announce, this is a house of mourning, and of the tuk-tuks that throttle their speed and stop beeping as they drive past them. She thought of the antique tomb steles she had often seen in museums, on which the dead are depicted sitting, while the mourners stand alongside and look down at them. As though at any moment they would leave and leave the dead simply sitting there. That confused her every time, because conventional

wisdom dictates that it's the dead who go and leave us, the living, behind. Her thoughts drifted on to the orange-colored tulips with which she had decked out her mother's coffin. To the Handel piece which a small string combo had played alongside the tulips in the chapel. To the small hat which an elegant guest had put on for the sad occasion.

A masked duo was now performing a sketch in front of the coffin containing her friend's father. She didn't understand it, but it went down very well with the mourners, as she inferred from the whispers and soft laughter that bounced through the rows, from the back of the funeral chapel and forward across the cold masonry to the coffin and the masked players. The masks had turned toward one another and then away again, had run around in differing directions, as though they had forgotten where they actually wanted to go, but then found each other and stood alongside one another for a while, while they circled their arms in an anti-clockwise direction. Afterward, the guitar player began again and played something southern-sounding, while the masks went away, taking the soft laughter with them.

She wondered whether there was a connection between the song and the dead man, or the loved ones he had left behind. She wasn't sure how many widows were sitting around her. From stories she had heard, she knew that her friend's father was a ladies' man, and that even he had called himself that, partly because he liked to stand out in this sense, to make up for the painful fact of not having earned admiration by other means, and partly because of the women. But she didn't know any of them.

The song trickled away. A few plucked tones. Another speech.

She dozed off. Drifted back in her day to the moment in her dream when one of the men had called her 'Baby' and she had kicked out and shouted, *my father has nothing to do with it!* She gave a start and looked around her. Had she actually shouted out loud? But no one was taking any notice of her.

And yet her father was suddenly there, with a presence that alarmed her. During none of the speeches and conversations about dead fathers this morning had her own come into her mind. Not even his burial, here, in the same cemetery, with the service in the same room she was sat in right now, dozing off to other peoples' family memories, which cut no paths to her own. There had been no masquerade performance back then, of that she was sure, and only one widow, too. But she was unable to remember the flowers on his coffin. Or anything that had been said and whether music had been played. Or barely anyone who had been there.

At least she had been reminded that she'd had a father, too. That he had died. That she had buried him, like her friend was now burying hers. The dream so familiar to her had never done that: made her think about her father.

Now she suddenly felt the same tension as back then, when his coffin was lowered next to the pulpit and was suddenly no longer there and how she almost ran forward to see if it had fallen down. Her brother had only just managed to hold her back. She had wanted to cry out, what were you thinking, letting the coffin with my father in it disappear! And yet she hadn't had any plans for his coffin, just the feeling that she should care. She knew, of course, that it was going to the crematorium.

She was in her early thirties when he died. Of all the atrocities that she presumed his life to contain, she had seen barely anything, and had been told almost nothing. He died on a night when she was living in the same city, but not sitting by his bedside. In the years beforehand, his trembling had become increasingly severe and he increasingly sad, that was how it seemed to her. They had seen each other a few more times. On one occasion, it almost felt as though they were close. He spoke and she listened, for one or two hours. That had been all.

Back then she feared that the greatest atrocities of her own life still lay before her, and it wouldn't have helped if he were there for them. They hadn't known one another, hadn't known who the other person was, even though they had lived together for thirteen years. Only once had he briefly turned to her, but by then he was almost dead. And she had stopped calling him early on. They had missed one another, she and her father, it was as simple as that.

The memories of him, sparked off by detours across cemeteries and other dead men, a brief slumber and a plucked song, something southern-sounding, were not welcome, that was certain. Because she feared that more would come; fed always from a manageable reservoir, a handful of pathetic situations, nothing more. Almost all of them had left scars, in one way or another. It was a long time since she had believed that a father-daughter narrative had to be formed from it, with a proper beginning, a middle, perhaps a climax from which everything flowed into a believable ending. A kind of sum of the whole. An all-embracing reconciliation. Early on she had tried for a while to put the fragments together. To establish connections. To make something well-rounded out of it all. But not for a long time now.

And yet. When she thought of him, as seldom as that was, time played no role. A kind of perpetual present set in, in which everything once again seemed possible. A connection beyond the fact of his death. A shared experience, something they would have in common.

Everyone retains something from the dead, she thought, as her gaze wandered over the unadorned walls of the chapel. That was how it was supposed to be when it went well. Something that became part of you. Perhaps that was the meaning behind the masquerade alongside the coffin of her friend's father, behind the song. She thought of an old acquaintance, Bob, from Montana, who had told her that whenever something seemed unbelievable to him, he suddenly heard himself commenting more and more frequently: "More luck than judgment!" That was what his mother had always said

whenever he succeeded in something. When he finished top in college. His first job at a university out in the sticks. The tenure with pension, eventually, at an Ivy League college on the West Coast. More luck than judgment! He hadn't found it the least bit funny while his mother was still alive; she died one day while he was giving a presentation in Ottawa, telling his Japanese listeners about different forms of politeness in Finnish, which would decide whether one belonged to those who were speaking or not. Bob was a linguist.

More luck than judgment! Since that day, when his mother had died far away from him, he had suddenly started saying it. About himself. About his students. To her. To start with he added, "as my mother liked to say," or "to quote my mother," but before long he left off this adjunct.

What had her father liked to say? More luck than judgment? It was possible that he had said that from time to time. To her, who he didn't believe capable of much. *Not too bad, all things considered*. He had said that sometimes, when he was in a very good mood. But not to her. To her it was more likely he would say: You can't have everything.

She had heard this saying in the most unlikely parts of the world, and always wanted to cry out: but why not! Perhaps her father had said it to minimize her expectations of him and of life in general. She was no longer sure. When she thought hard, though, she remembered more and more situations in which someone had used this idiotic saying, and how a short flash of memory had jolted through her mind in which she recognized her father. She rummaged around for other sayings and found none, searched for terms he liked to use, and found three: Hooey. Chop-chop. Officers' Mess. She also remembered the bottle-green Opel Kapitän which he had driven for a while, and which, every time they were leaving for vacation, would break down halfway with carburetor problems.

Nevertheless, she thought. Did anyone still say these things? Hooey for nonsense? Officers' Mess for cafeteria? Chop-chop, when you want someone to hurry up?

His eyes had been a watery green, and green was always his favorite color. Like young birch green, she thought, while an uncomfortable feeling rose inside her. The feeling that she would never be rid of him. And already she was picturing herself as a fat child again, in the patio restaurant near her childhood home where they had the best young potatoes, and watching as she sat there beneath the trees in the first warmth of spring, mashed a whole mountain of the soft yellow tubers in melted butter, sprinkled salt over it and then ate it up ever so slowly, as though somebody had put life in slow motion. "More ice cream?" her father had asked once she was done, and she hadn't heard the sarcasm, hadn't seen the disapproving glance that grazed her chubby cheeks, and so cried out excitedly: "Yes, yes, yes!" When the ice cream came, three little scoops without whipped cream; chocolate, raspberry and lemon, just how she liked it, he said: "Be careful you don't get even fatter." She was barely ten at the time, and had decided from that moment on to leave her food untouched whenever possible.

Ugh, she thought. She hated everything connected to this memory. The feeling of being fat, which, in the moment her father said it, she felt for the first time and never rid herself of again. His icy gaze, which clung to her skin like a piece of cold metal. Today she asked herself whether he had always had this gaze in his repertoire. Or when and for what situations he had adopted it. No one looks like that from the start. That lunchtime in the garden, when she was ten, his eyes were no longer green, but grey, like the sea just before a storm. At some point they had changed and simply stayed like that. The green disappeared forever. Since that day, her heart would race and her palms moisten whenever she saw in the window of a musty cafe the sign showing a silver ice cream bowl on a round base with three scoops and a waffle alongside it. Man, oh man, she

thought, more than forty years later and she still wasn't armed for these feelings. Besides that, these kinds of sentimentalities annoyed her beyond measure.

She looked around. The others, too, seemed to have slowly tired of the masquerade, guitar songs, speeches, and anecdotes about the dead man. And just as she was thinking, that's enough now, the group of mourners stood up to accompany the coffin, containing the father of her friend, over to the grave.

There wasn't much she knew with certainty about her father. The dates of his birth and death, the green eyes, hair color, profession. That he went to the hairdresser and manicurist once a week. That he had his shirts custom-made, and usually his suits, too. That he put on a hat when he went outside. That he tried to be a family man, and when he didn't prove to be overly successful at it, that he gave up as though after a long battle. That he drank too much, martinis, whiskey, and smoked too much. Trivial things, really. Apart from this: that he came from family that was torn on the inside, in which no one but him ever got divorced. That he had loved a few people. His mother, or so she presumed in any case. Her mother, at least for a while. Andreas, his son, her brother, especially. And possibly his older brother Karl, whom he had lost contact with during the war and was no longer able to look for once he decided he wanted to reconcile, because by then he was too old.

She was one of the last to join the procession, following as the coffin containing her friend's father passed by, was one of the last to throw earth into the grave the coffin was lowered into, and quietly said her goodbye. She paused off to the side, beneath a tree that had once given shade to numerous now-abandoned graves, listened to the birds and watched the mourners, who were stretching their legs and speaking in muffled tones and embracing one another.

Was there a trick, she thought, to staying in conversation with the dead across the rift between life and death? They no longer needed our comfort, but we perhaps

theirs. Did it help to believe in something that lay beyond this world? She couldn't imagine it. Even when she had searched for it in art, she had only ever discovered what she recognized from this world and was part of her. Mourners beside the dead. Mourners without the dead. The dead without mourners. Light, angels, demons too, but nothing that suggested another world.

She had enough to contend with in this one, anyway. Especially now that her father was getting in the way again. A dead man! A phantom to her, even for most of the time that he was still alive. Whenever she thought of him now, his features from the years they had spent together became blurry. But she remembered his thick hair, which he combed back and pasted to his head with brilliantine, and that it shimmered silver when he was barely forty, which made her father an even more striking sight. When his hair turned snow-white even before his fiftieth birthday, she and Andreas were amazed by how young he still seemed to them.

Above all, though, she remembered the way he moved. How he would lean forward in the chair, his forearms resting on his knees, throwing around him a smile that no one could resist. And she could picture so clearly the panicked look he sometimes sent off into space. It was a gaze that carried a plea: hopefully no one will recognize me! That was how her father had sometimes looked when visitors came on Sundays, or when they were sitting with her mother's friends around a stove in the mountain village of her childhood vacations and the grown-ups were speaking about serious things, while she and Andreas were behind the oven deliberately mixing up the socks that were hung there to dry.

Unmistakably, her father was a man of the sixties, with everything that came along with it. The nonchalant success that was easily accommodated in well-fitting suits, and the melancholy rooted in a past that concealed a secret. Men like this knew the war, but they didn't speak of it. They had achieved a certain level of affluence and stood confidently on supposedly unshakable certitudes, for example regarding the

relationship between men and women, or parents and children—until, slowly but surely, this ground was pulled out from beneath them. And the women followed their own paths and the children wanted to know what direction they should choose now and whether it was the right one. What the men of the sixties retained from the seemingly incontestable certainties they had trusted so devoutly—until everything turned out differently after all—was a belief in progress, which, looking back, still took their breath away.

When he was middle-aged, her father was a brilliant businessman. He had built his career in a chemical company, and even as a child she believed he was good at what he did, even though she didn't know exactly what that was. It had to do with colors and later with Skai, an artificial leather he was strangely proud of, as though he had invented the recipe for it himself. Which wasn't the case; he was a businessman, not a chemist. Blue and red combined beautifully with this material. Red shoes, blue sky. He had his monogram sown onto his custom-made shirts, at the bottom alongside the penultimate button, so that it was seen only by the woman in the launderette who ironed it and put it with his others. Because he left his shirt untucked for as long as possible in the mornings, the monogram, when she was little, lay precisely in her line of vision while her father was shaving. It had always made a powerful impression on her, and she later despised the showoffs who had their monograms embroidered onto their shirts above the belt.

As an old man, her father looked different. Fragile. As though he had gone through time seemingly untouched for long enough and only now felt the injuries that he had received. When, in the years before he died at a not very advanced age, he sometimes sat there, thin, with a glass of whiskey in his hand and a cigarette between his trembling fingers, staring outside, he looked as though he was waiting for something. Perhaps he was waiting only to become a little older and then to go. Unrecognized by almost everyone he had had anything to do with.

She should come along with them, eat some pasta, said her friend. With inscrutable faces the gravediggers were now shoveling thick clumps of earth onto the coffin, every loamy clump a plopping blow, then a dull thud, until that too stopped. Lucky that it was warm, she thought to herself as she looked at the grave slowly filling with earth. If the ground was frozen like at Vienna's Central Cemetery at the burial of Harry Lime in ''The Third Man'', the gravediggers would have to come with electric drills in order to make a hole for the coffin, so that it could even get under the earth.

Her friend tugged at her sleeve and repeated the invitation. But she didn't want to eat. Didn't want to sit next to the people in colorful clothes who she had watched for so long. She wanted to go to her own father's grave, which she hadn't stood at in a long time. She suddenly had the feeling that it was a good moment to stop by again, a few decades after his death.

Was there a second chance between fathers and daughters? Would he have used it if he had seen it? He certainly hadn't searched for it. For a moment she was firmly convinced that, this time, she would do something right and capture him for herself. Find him in his grave and say, Hello, do you remember? She hadn't been fat for a long time now. He would nod to her, and from the ghost that he had always been to her would emerge a man of flesh and blood with heart and soul, who may be dead now, but before that had been alive. You can't have everything? Mother and father? Was he serious?

"Hooey!" he would cry, and she suddenly felt sure and trudged off confidently. Back to the funeral chapel. Then around it to the left, across the big lawn, past the stone angel off into the shrubbery, again to the left. And stood somewhere she had never been before. And apparently her father hadn't either. Not even after he was dead. His grave wasn't there.