

Sample Translation (pp.39-74)

Reflecting the Sun **by Jan Costin Wagner**

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Reflecting the Sun

1

When Harford draws the curtain aside in the morning to let the sunlight in, there is a man standing on the other side of the road, looking through the window and right into his eyes.

Harford stays where he is for a while, waiting for the man to look away and move on.

“What is it?” asks Lena, who has sat up in bed.

“Hmm?”

“What’s going on out there?” asks Lena.

“Nothing.” He draws the curtain over the window again, bends down to Lena and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

He shaves, brushes his teeth, showers and gets dressed. Then he goes along the corridor, which is in shadow, to the living room, sits down at the table laid for breakfast, and returns Lena’s smile. He drinks some coffee, helps himself to a roll, spreads it with butter, puts a slice of ham on it and skims the newspaper headlines.

“There’s someone outside,” says Lena.

He looks up.

“There’s a man standing right opposite. On the other side of the road.”

“Yes . . .” says Harford.

“You mean you’ve seen him before?”

“No . . . no, of course not,” says Harford.

“Then go and look. I think he’s staring in at us.”

Harford gets to his feet and goes over to the window wall. A mild wind blows in through the open terrace door. A warm day, he thinks. The water in the swimming pool is a calm surface reflecting the sun. The man stands in the shade, under a tree.

“He’s been there ever since I began setting the table,” says Lena.

Harford returns to the table, sits down, and bites into his roll with ham. He reaches for the newspaper.

“Lauritzen is coming today,” says Lena.

He nods.

“To clean the pool. And he’s going to try to save the hydrangea that looks like dying.”

“Good, fine,” says Harford.

“And this evening Verena and Benny are coming to supper. I thought we’d eat about eight. Can you make it home for then?”

“Of course,” he says.

“Fillet steak,” says Lena. “Because Benny likes it so much. And of course so do you.”

“Splendid.” He folds the newspaper, empties his cup of coffee, stands up and caresses Lena’s arm. “See you this evening,” he says.

As he goes out into the open, a gust of warm air meets him. He gets into the car. The man is standing under a tree to his left. Harford turns right. As he drives he observes the summer day beginning on the other side of the windscreen.

He parks the car in the slot reserved for his number plate, says good morning to the doorman, and takes the lift up to the twenty-sixth floor. Computers are already humming in the large main office. Harford nods to his colleagues and enters his own office. The door latches quietly when he closes it.

He goes over to the window and looks down at the toy cars on the ground below. He watches them crawling forward. Then he sits down at his desk and starts the computer. The tinny wake-up call of his electronic diary reminds him of his first engagement that day, not that he had forgotten it anyway. Two Japanese. Nakamura and Akimoto. He has learned the names by heart. Mr. Nakamura... Mr. Akimoto... please sit down. He has another quarter of an hour first. Closing his eyes, he rests the palms of his hands on the pleasantly cool surface of his desk.

Then Nakamura and Akimoto are sitting in two leather armchairs, sweating. He can’t think why. The air conditioning is on, and if anything he feels too cold. The conversation goes smoothly. He shows the visitors round the building, and they end standing on the roof terrace with the wind in their hair. The sun is level with their eyes. Nakamura and Akimoto laugh, and his smartphone plays a classical melody. Lena.

“Lena?” he says.

Nakamura pretends to be about to jump off the roof. Akimoto laughs, and Lena says she’s worried.

“What about?” he asks.

“That man is still standing outside and staring in,” says Lena.

Nakamura has spread his arms wide and mimics flying like a bird.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes... yes, of course.”

“It scares me,” says Lena . “That man staring into our house. He doesn’t go away, he doesn’t move.”

“Yes...”

“There must be something we can do to stop it.”

“Yes... let me think for a moment.”

“Shall I go out and ask what he’s doing?”

“No!”

“I could simply ask what he wants.”

“No... listen, if he’s still there in an hour’s time call me again.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll see.”

“Right,” says Lena.

Akimoto points to an aircraft and puts his hands over his ears. “So clooose,” he calls.

“Yes, there’s a large airport near here,” says Harford, and Akimoto smiles.

A little later he is sitting in the canteen with Margraf from the legal department and Larsson, the departmental head. Margraf doesn’t think there will be any problem about the merger with the Japanese company, and is tucking into a large green salad with strips of chicken breast. Larsson never sees problems anyway, and is telling jokes. The smartphone plays its classical tune. Harford takes it out of his jacket pocket with deliberate composure.

“He’s still here,” says Lena.

“Yes,” says Harford.

“Can you come home?”

He says nothing. Larsson tells a joke, Margraf laughs. “Yes, I’ll start as soon as I can.”

“Thank you. I’m getting so that I hardly dare to look out of the window.”

“See you soon,” says Harford, ending the call.

Larsson seems to be waiting for him to laugh at last.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to leave earlier than usual today,” says Harford.

Larsson turns down the strength of his smile. "Anything wrong?" he asks.

"No, it's not too bad... Lena's in bed with a temperature."

"Oh."

"Well... I think I ought to start."

"Of course, you do that," says Larsson, already smiling again.

2

The motorway is broad and empty as he drives home. On the car radio, the newsreader talks about the successful launch of a rocket, the failure of a conference, a girl who has disappeared without trace. The fine summer weather looks like continuing.

Lena is standing in the doorway when he arrives. She puts her arms round him. He stands there in her embrace for a moment, then moves away and walks down the corridor and into the living room. Going up to the window wall, he sees the man under the tree in the background. In the foreground, the bare-chested gardener, Lauritzen, is cleaning out the pool at his leisure. He has a net in his hand, and doesn't seem to notice the man standing under a tree on the other side of the road.

Harford goes out on the terrace, and says good day to Lauritzen without taking his eyes off the man. The water in the pool is splashing quietly.

"Hello, Mr Harford," Lauritzen calls.

Harford goes back into the house. He doesn't know the man. He has never seen the man before. Lena, standing in the middle of the room, seems to be afraid to move.

"Where are the field glasses?" asks Harford.

Lena looks inquiringly at him.

"We had a pair of field glasses once, right?" says Harford.

"Yes," says Lena. "I don't know where they are. Or yes, I think they're down in the hobbies room. I'll go and look."

Lena goes away. He can tell how relieved she is to have something to do at last. Harford turns back to the window wall, and looks at the man under the tree. Lena comes back, out of breath, with the field glasses. He looks through them, and flinches. He can see the man's face at very close quarters now.

“Well?” asks Lena.

He slowly shakes his head. He doesn't know the man. “No,” he says, and hands Lena the field glasses. She holds them up to her eyes and says nothing for a while.

“Who is he?” she asks at last.

“I've no idea, but we're about to find out, because I'm going outside now to ask him,” says Harford.

He goes down the corridor and out into the garden. Gravel crunches under his feet. Lauritzen is humming a tune, the water is splashing quietly. Harford keeps his eyes on the man as he approaches him. The man stands there motionless, still staring at the windows on the front of the house. Harford crosses the road; he is still twenty metres away. Ten, five. The man does not move.

“Hello,” says Harford.

No reaction. He is standing right opposite the man now. Mrs. David is pruning a hedge in the garden next door.

Slowly, the man turns to look at him. He smiles.

“Can you hear me?” asks Harford.

Smiling, the man turns back to the garden again. The swimming pool. The façade with its windows. Harford walks back. He feels dizzy; it's the heat, he thinks. Lena is waiting in the doorway.

“Well?” she asks.

“Nothing,” says Harford.

“Nothing?”

“I don't know any more. A nutcase. He wouldn't speak to me.”

“Is that all?” Lena's voice is cracking.

“Yes. He'll soon go away.”

Lena stares at him for a few seconds. Then she picks up the phone. “I'm calling the police.”

“Oh, please,” says Harford.

“Please what?”

“I mean, don't...”

But Lena has already tapped in the number and is talking. She describes what's happened. A man, a stranger. Standing outside our house, doesn't move. Stares in. He's pestering us. My husband tried speaking to him and got nowhere. Since

today, yes, of course. Yes, since this morning. What do you mean, there's not much you can do? Ah. Yes, please do that. Thank you.

"What a nerve," says Lena.

Harford thinks of the man's smile, and concentrates on the flickering in front of his eyes. Flickering white flames on the periphery of his field of vision.

"They say they can't do anything so long as the man just stands there," says Lena. "And it's only been a few hours. They think we may be wrong and it's only a coincidence."

"Well, maybe they're right," says Harford.

"What?"

"I mean... well, no... of course not. I'm sorry..."

"But they're going to come round all the same and take a look at the man."

"Good," says Harford. "Fine."

"What's the matter with you?" asks Lena.

"What... what do you mean?"

"You look so pale."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Harford." It is Lauritzen's voice. Harford turns and sees Lauritzen there in the living room, with his bare chest tanned brown.

"We were going to take a look at that hydrangea," says Lauritzen.

Lena nods. "Yes, you're my last hope," she says, leading the way. Lauritzen follows. They go out of doors and on to the terrace.

Harford stays where he is for a while, and then on impulse goes upstairs to his study. The Venetian blinds are drawn over the windows, but it is oppressively hot. He switches the ventilator fan on and arranges the papers lying on his desk. He keeps arranging them in different ways. By date. By urgency. By their content and the viewpoints they express.

Finally he throws the whole stack of papers on the floor, goes over to the window and looks through the Venetian blinds at Lena and Lauritzen standing beside the hydrangea. The man is standing under the tree on the other side of the road. A man he doesn't know. A middle-aged man staring at his garden. At Lena and Lauritzen. Mrs. David is watering flowers in the garden of the house next door. The police car is blue and white, and stands out distinctly from its background in the sun. Two uniformed officers get out.

Harford runs downstairs and opens the front door. Lena, standing at the garden gate, is already talking to the police officers. Lauritzen, a little way from them, is inspecting the hydrangea. Harford goes over to the gate. Lena is talking, the police officers nod. Now and then they glance at the man, still standing unmoved in the shade of the tree.

“Looks peaceful enough,” Harford hears the younger of the two officers saying.

“Yes, but...” says Lena.

“The problem is that there really isn’t much we can do as long as he doesn’t get... well, active in any way,” says the other

“Get active?” asks Harford. He is sweating.

“He really is just standing there. And only since this morning, if I understand you correctly...”

“Yes,” says Harford.

The police officers nod, and exchange glances.

“We’ll just go over and say a friendly hello,” says the younger. The two of them cross the road towards the man. Lena takes his hand. Together, they watch the two officers speak to the man. The man shakes his head several times, and seems to be perfectly relaxed.

Where do I know you from, thinks Harford, where do you come from?

Lena’s fingers are digging into his skin. The police officers come back.

“Not exactly talkative, that fellow,” says the younger man.

“I tell you what I’d suggest,” says the older one. “If the man’s still here in the morning, then call us again. But I really don’t think you have anything to worry about. He’s harmless.”

Lena’s hand goes limp in his. The police officers say goodbye. Mrs. David, watering flowers, glances at them surreptitiously.

“I can fix this hydrangea,” calls Lauritzen.

3

Early in the evening, Verena and her boyfriend Benny arrive. Harford sits in the shade on the terrace and watches Verena swimming.

Energy, he thinks. It's all about energy. The word has lodged in his mind. Benny is telling stories from his legal practice. All the things that have happened to him over the last few days. Spectacular. Verena pushes off from the side of the pool, diving down through clear, cold water. His daughter Verena. A grown woman now. Elegant and self-confident. She laughs a lot, she seems to be happy. She always did laugh a lot.

She doesn't jump into the water head first these days. That's changed. As a child she always jumped into the water head first, and Lena would call to her to stop doing that, she could slip and break a bone or something. An accident could happen. They used to worry so much when Verena was out on her own, riding her bike.

Benny blows a lock of hair away from his face, and asks, "Could that guy over there be staring at us?"

Harford glances at Benny. Benny's eyes are fixed on the man under the tree on the other side of the road, and he adds, "Yes, in fact I'm sure he is. Do you two know him?"

Harford shakes his head. "Nothing to worry about," he murmurs.

Verena climbs out of the pool and wraps a towel round herself. Water drips from her hair to the ground. "Hi, all of you," she says, running her fingers through Benny's hair.

"Hi, you," says Benny, and Harford thinks of a moment that doesn't exist. The first moment after the impact. He imagines watching himself as he falls.

Lena is carrying a tray laden with plates, cutlery and glasses. It is a warm, mild evening. The wind caresses the water. The man under the tree on the other side of the road smiles.

"Have you seen that guy?" Benny asks Verena.

"What guy?" asks Verena, following the direction of his glance.

"The one over there."

Verena looks at the man under the tree for a while.

"Who is he?" she asks.

"We don't know," says Harford.

"Has he been standing there long?"

"Since this morning."

"What?"

Lena brings out the meat and a large pan of potatoes.

“Delicious,” says Benny.

“Enjoy the steak,” says Lena.

“I’d like to ask him what he wants,” says Verena. “I mean, he’s watching us while we eat.”

“Doesn’t work. I’ve already tried,” says Harford.

“So?”

“He won’t speak to me.”

“I don’t believe it! What does he want from you two?” Verena asks her parents.

“He smiled at me,” says Harford. The meat is very tender.

“From the purely legal point of view, this kind of thing is rather complicated,” says Benny.

“Enjoy the steak,” Lena repeats. Then she suddenly jumps up and winds the awning as far down as it will go. “Now all he can see is our legs,” she says, sitting down again.

“Wonderful,” says Harford.

Lena looks inquiringly at him.

“The steak tastes wonderful,” he says, elaborating on his remark.

While Lena is assembling dessert in the kitchen, darkness slowly falls. Verena is talking about the work for her exam. She’s making good progress, she says. She lays her head on Benny’s shoulder and says he’s already helped her through several small crises.

“That’s good,” says Harford.

Lena brings dishes of vanilla ice cream with raspberries, and a little later Verena and Benny set out. They are all standing in the drive. About forty metres away, the man is standing under the tree in the faint light of a street lamp. He seems to have closed his eyes.

“I’m going over there,” says Verena, and crosses the road, although Lena calls to her to stay where she is.

Harford sees Verena speaking to the man. He can just hear the sound of her voice, without being able to make out the words. Benny has followed her a few metres, and is standing irresolutely in the road. Harford too has his hand on the gate to the drive, ready to open it and run if anything happens. But nothing does. Verena comes back.

“What did he say?” asks Benny.

“Nothing,” she replies. “He didn’t even open his eyes.”

“What a weird thing,” says Benny.

“He made out he was asleep, and he smiled,” says Verena.

Benny shakes his head. Harford nods. Nods to himself. A hot, numb feeling spreads over him and seeps in, pervading his body.

“You must do something about it,” says Verena to her parents. “Otherwise I’ll worry.”

“It’s not that bad,” says Harford. “We’ll clear it up in the morning. If there’s nothing else for it, I’ll call the police and say he jumped into the swimming pool in the night. That ought to be a good enough reason for them to take him away.” He feels a kind of smile on his face. He likes his idea, there is something forceful and conclusive about it. Verena and Benny wave goodbye from their car. Harford and Lena keep their arms raised until it is out of sight.

Lena clears away the remains of the meal, and Harford switches on the news. A rocket has been successfully launched, a conference has failed, a girl has been missing for several days. Not much has happened since he drove home in the afternoon.

Then they lie side by side in bed. He breathes slowly and regularly, and hopes that Lena will go to sleep quickly. He feels that he has to think. Think about certain things calmly.

Lena sounds wide awake when she begins talking. “Suppose he really does want to come in?” she asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Suppose he really does want to swim in our pool. Or suppose he comes in here, breaks down the door and just comes in.”

“Oh, please.”

“Oh please what?”

“That’s not... I mean, why would he want to do that? We’re probably simply imagining things. It will all be over tomorrow.”

“I don’t know...”

“Don’t worry. Try to sleep.”

He gropes for Lena’s hand and holds it firmly until he senses that she has gone to sleep. Then he gets out of bed and goes straight upstairs to his study.

The ventilator fan is still on; he forgot to turn it off. The room is cold. Looking through the Venetian blinds, he can see the man standing in the light of the street lamp. He meets the man's gaze, his eyes.

He takes a clear plastic folder containing newspaper articles out of a drawer in his desk. He has cut some of them from the papers and printed out others. He concentrates on the pain behind his forehead. Only now does he realize that the pain has been there all day, even when he was standing on the roof terrace with Akimoto and Nakamura. The strong wind up there brought him some relief from it.

He finds it difficult to remember Verena as a child. The man out there... he doesn't know him. He only knows why he has come.

He takes the articles out of the folder and spreads them on the desk. He reads them. Sentences that are inaccurate, illustrated by pictures that don't reproduce what he saw. Of course not. He thinks of Verena.

He picks up a pen, takes a sheet of paper, and begins to write. It is easy. One word after another, he doesn't even have to think about them.

Then he goes downstairs. He walks over to the window wall and opens the door to the terrace. He sits down. The air is still, but it is a little cooler now. A pale moon hangs in the sky above the garden and the swimming pool. Now and then there is sheet lightning, and thunder rumbles. But the storm doesn't seem to be coming closer. The man opposite him on the other side of the road has closed his eyes, and he closes his own as well.

4

He sets out in good time the next morning. He waits only to drink a cup of coffee, then he kisses Lena on the cheek and tells her she doesn't have to worry any more, he will fix things.

Lena looks sad and tired. Maybe she wasn't asleep at all when he left the bedroom in the night. Maybe she lay awake all night, like Harford himself.

He doesn't ask her.

The man is standing under the tree when he steers the car out of the drive.

5

Lena Harford finds the letter about an hour later. She seldom goes into her husband's study, and she has entered it this time only because she thought that she could observe the man under the tree from the window of this room without being noticed. Without feeling that he has spotted her. Her eyes fall on the letter, and she reads the opening, which confuses her. She puts down the field glasses, picks up the sheet of paper, and begins to read it all:

Dear Lena, please tell the police that the missing girl is on the outskirts of the wood near Klausen, close to the way into the village. Right beside the old barbecue area. The makeshift grave is covered with branches, they'll find it. I knocked the girl down. I was very drunk after that meeting with the fund managers from Nuremberg, you'll remember the evening. I don't know how it could have happened. I was driving much too fast. She was coming towards me on her bicycle. At the moment of impact I looked into the girl's eyes. We were very close. I sat up here for a long time that night, and after a while I thought that things would go on. That I'd be able to carry on. The man outside our house is there because of me. He knows what I see in my mind's eye. When you read these lines he'll have gone away. I'm sure of that. You and Verena are the important people in my life, I want you to know that.

Lena Harford puts the letter back on the desk. She picks up the clear plastic folder that was lying under it, and unfolds the newspaper reports. They have been carefully cut out, and she spends a moment thinking: that's not at all like him. He isn't a DIY sort of man. Most of the articles are accompanied by a photo of the missing girl, the same photo that she has seen on the news. The police were asking the public to help with their search.

She feels strangely weightless. Her hands are shaking; she sees but does not feel it. Someone rings the bell at the front door. She hears the soft, muffled sound and goes downstairs. She opens the door. She is not surprised to see Larsson. He is standing there, rigid, and seems to be trying to find words.

"Come in," she says. "I know already."

Larsson says nothing.

“Martin wrote me a letter,” she says, going ahead of him. She sits down at the breakfast table in the living room. Larsson stands there undecidedly.

“Do sit down,” she says.

Larsson stays where he is. She waits.

“Martin has... fallen off the roof terrace at the office,” says Larsson.

Lena nods.

They are silent for a long time.

“Yes,” she says at last, getting up. She feels a breakdown coming on, something that she has never known before, but it will be here soon. She also feels that Martin didn’t think it through to the end. As he fell, he will have wanted to go on living.

She goes over to the window wall, thinking that she must call Verena. The water in the swimming pool is a calm, blue surface reflecting the sun. The hydrangea is in flower. There is no one standing in the shade of the tree on the other side of the road.

6

The deaf mute is walking. He takes care to look as if he knows where he is going, because he is well aware that he has no destination in mind.

They will have to find him themselves, because he has no sense of direction at all, and that, as Marianne always says, is part of the syndrome of his condition. So are the images and voices that mingle with his thoughts – thoughts that, he realizes, he cannot communicate except to himself.

But they will find him, because they always do find him, and that’s good. The knowledge calms him down. Marianne will be cross. She’ll ask, as usual, what he thought he was doing, just going off like that, and as usual she will fail to understand him.

Because she doesn’t realize how important those times are to him. The days that he spends on his own. In places that he can choose for himself.

He will try to tell her what he has seen. The house he has always dreamed of. The swimming pool. A huge, colourful garden. It is like the reflection of what he has

imagined. He tried to memorize the name of the street and the number of the house, but all of that has already disappeared into the darkness deep down inside him.

He is tired. He looks forward to seeing Marianne again, and feels a slight, almost pleasant pain wandering through his body at the thought that he will never find his way back to the house with the garden, and the swimming pool, and those happy people.

Christmas Angel

In the afternoon, as darkness slowly comes on and the driving snow falls faster, Modin climbs over the low fences and goes through the gardens, looking for houses left empty over Christmas.

There is a light on in old Mrs. Beck's living room, but he knows that she's not there. Her son came to collect her in the morning, and she has gone with him. From a distance, Modin saw them sitting in his car. Ella Beck put a basket full of gift-wrapped presents in the boot and sat in the passenger seat, and her son turned the key in the lock of the front door twice before getting into the car and driving away.

Modin goes over the snow-covered lawn to the terrace and looks at the large, empty, brightly lit room on the other side of the window panes. Ella Beck is one of those people who like to make it look as if they are still at home even when they have gone away. Others pull all the roller shutters down before leaving, and activate alarms installed at varying degrees of expense. Others again don't even contemplate the possibility of strangers breaking into their houses in their absence to steal things. Especially not at Christmas.

And yet Christmas is the best time to do it. Householders have either gone away, or attend church at a predictable time. It isn't time for that yet, so Modin begins by turning his attention to old Mrs. Beck's house, standing there bright and empty in the darkness.

He takes a deep breath, then breaks a pane and opens the terrace door, actions that cost him only seconds. It doesn't take him long to find the money in the old lady's bedroom. It is not actually under the pillow, where elderly ladies are said to put their money, but not far off, in an envelope under the bed. The emergency cash that Ella Beck has not taken to the bank, because she doesn't trust banks, and has not taken away with her to her son's house, presumably because she is afraid that the money might somehow or other get lost.

780 euros, not quite as much as Modin hoped for, but not as little as he feared either. Suitably elated, he goes along the corridor, through the living room, and slips out through the damaged terrace door that he left on the latch, disappearing in the dark again on the way to his next destination, which he expects to be particularly rewarding.

The Seidels' house, colour-washed pale blue, stands quietly in the gathering gloom. Two snowmen in the garden face one another like duellists, ready to start fighting with their brooms. Crouching in the bushes of the garden next door, he watched the two little boys building the snowmen the evening before, and a vague memory of his own childhood surfaced in him, although he couldn't quite pin it down. In the end the two boys quarreled over which snowman should have which broom, their mother came out to settle the argument, and their father, Leonhard Seidel, stood on the terrace in silence watching the scene.

Modin goes through the garden, past the snowmen, and stops a little way from the house behind one of the snow-laden fir trees. He watches the members of the Seidel family pursuing different activities in different rooms. The mother is in the kitchen, where she seems to be doing several things at once. The boys are lying on their beds down in their room, watching TV. The father, Seidel himself, is standing in front of a mirror in his study, adjusting his suit and straightening his tie.

Modin's glance lingers on Seidel, and he thinks that he has never seen him look anything but as spruce as he does now. He can't see the Seidels' bedroom from the garden, so he doesn't know whether Seidel ever wears anything other than suits with blue or white shirts and ties in assorted shades of grey, at least for sleeping.

By now Seidel has finished examining himself in the mirror, and as always before leaving the house he casts a glance, as if to check up on it, at the item that gives Modin great hopes of this house... the little safe hidden, in the classic and obvious manner, behind a picture on the wall. He watches Seidel leave the study and go into the kitchen, to exchange a few words with his wife. The woman leaves the kitchen, and soon afterwards is standing in the twin boys' bedroom. The boys do not appear exactly pleased with what their mother has to say, but all the same they follow her upstairs.

Modin goes over the snowy lawn, cautiously approaching the front of the house. Seidel, stooping slightly, is already standing beside the car in a flurry of snowflakes, scraping snow and ice off the windows slowly but steadily, with regular movements. Then the mother and the children come out of the house and get in. The boys laugh and scuffle on the back seat, probably competing for the best place. Seidel stands there for a while longer, inspecting his house for what seems to Modin a noticeably long time, then he too gets into the car and starts the engine.

Modin takes a few steps back into the garden and watches the family drive away. He looks at his watch, and thinks that they intend to be at church right on the dot. He crosses the garden and goes over to the narrow flight of steps leading down from the terrace. He puts one foot cautiously in front of the other, thinking of probabilities as he reaches out with one hand and touches the glazed door leading to the boys' room.

Closing his eyes, he smiles, because he can sense no resistance. Ultimately, all success depends on serious, meticulous research. Leonhard Seidel has protected his house with an expensive technological alarm system. It would be unthinkable simply to smash a window pane here, as he could in old Ella Beck's house. But Seidel doesn't know what Modin knows, which is that his two sons like to leave the door leading from their room into the garden on the latch. Presumably that unlocked door, through which Modin now enters the house unimpeded, symbolizes a wish for the freedom that the boys will never enjoy with a father like that.

A pleasurable shiver runs through him as he climbs the stairs and goes along the dark corridor leading to Seidel's study. He stops outside the door for a moment, then presses the handle down, and there he actually is in the room that no one but Seidel himself may enter. Not the children, not his wife.

But he, Modin, is in it.

He goes past the desk and over to the painting, a still life of grapes, peaches and a white rose. He takes it down, and smiles as he looks at the little safe let into the wall, knowing that it will not be an insuperable obstacle. It isn't difficult to break into a safe once you have seen how it works.

This one takes Modin just under thirty minutes, and then he stands in front of it for some time before summoning up the strength to admit that the contents do not meet his expectations. No cash, no papers. Nothing at all. Only a small, black notebook. Modin takes it out and skims the first lines, written in Seidel's neat hand, some of the entries short, some longer, all of them dated, the first written in July of the year now coming to an end. A diary.

He stands there for a while, unsure what to do, holding the notebook like something to be weighed up carefully. Then he puts it in his trouser pocket, closes the safe, and hangs the picture back in its place on the wall. Looking at the time, he gives himself another twenty minutes to find what wasn't in the safe somewhere else in the Seidels' house.

Seidel, leading investment banker, fund manager at Norda Bank, prosperous, to put it mildly, and at the same time a man of set habits who does the same things at the same time every evening. A control freak who always wants to be ready for anything – Modin didn't study psychology for nearly a year without feeling he can be sure that, in the circumstances, a man like that keeps a reserve of emergency cash in his house, a far larger sum than the money under old Ella Beck's bed.

He goes all over the house, swiftly but methodically, resisting the impulse to switch lights on. In the bedroom, which he has been unable to see from outside, he observes the two beds standing about a metre apart, as if someone had once chopped a double bed in half exactly down the middle. The sheets, quilts and pillows are white, shimmering in the darkness like the snow beyond the windows. Modin stands in the doorway and thinks that what he is looking for can't be here in this bedroom. Seidel would never keep anything that matters to him in a room shared with another human being.

He goes on down the corridor leading to the kitchen and the large living room, which contains the tall, slender Christmas tree that Seidel was decorating yesterday evening, taking hours over it without losing patience, while the boys built their snowmen outside. A soft light falls on the tree, goes out a few seconds later, and Modin steals along the corridor to the kitchen, where he sees the Seidels' car standing in the drive on the other side of the window. Seidel is just getting out, and the boys are already running to the front door.

Modin goes down the stairs fast, but without undue haste, concentrating, as always in such situations, on not doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. He goes through the boys' room to the unlocked door and out into the garden, and the snow that is not falling quite so thickly now. He stands behind the fir tree where he took shelter before. Once again he sees the snowmen and the house that he was in just now, where lights are being switched on again.

Modin closes his eyes, and wonders whether anything that he did inside the house could have left clues behind. But he can think of nothing. Everything in the house is unchanged, just as if he had never been there. Everything is in its right place, nothing is missing. Except for the little notebook.

He opens his eyes again, and sees that they are all doing the same as they did before. Seidel's wife is preparing a meal in the kitchen, the boys are lying in front of the TV set in their room downstairs, and Seidel is sitting at the desk in his study. He

sits there just as he did earlier, before the family set off for the Christmas church service, motionless, with his eyes fixed on the distance, looking out through the window at the dark, snowy garden where Modin is standing.

Modin imagines Seidel standing up, taking the picture off the wall, opening the safe and realizing that the notebook is missing. But he does nothing of the kind. Instead, he pays some attention to a drawer in his desk, and Modin wonders whether it's as simple as that – whether Seidel intended, all along, to confront any thieves who manage to enter his expensively secured house with an empty safe, while he keeps the cash and valuables they want in a desk drawer less than three metres away.

Seidel sits in that rigid position until, after a while, his wife appears in the doorway saying something to him. Seidel nods, and follows her into the living room. The children join them, and Modin watches the Seidels celebrating Christmas. Seidel switched on the electric candles that adorn the tall, slender tree, and the children pounce on the gifts under it. A little later they are all sitting in the dining room. Modin has a view of only a part of it, but he can see Seidel slowly raising his fork to his mouth at regular intervals.

Modin takes out the notebook that, on impulse, he has brought with him. If Seidel keeps it in his safe, it may have some significance, although Modin can't imagine what. He has seen Seidel writing again and again on the evenings when he himself was keeping the house under observation. He opens the notebook at the first page, and looks at the date: 17 July. That was the day when Seidel began to keep his diary. The first entry is short and rather mysterious, a kind of tentative dialogue. *From today, I am going to set down my thoughts, putting them into a form that will give me a clear view of the situation as it develops over the coming weeks and months, allowing me to assess it. It seems to me appropriate to do so, perhaps even necessary. The future will show whether I am right in that assumption.* Modin leafs on through the notebook, and then back, coming upon entries that are either more or less relevant – *the boys are doing well at school... the days are getting shorter now... one of the twins fell off his bicycle and has injured himself, but it is not, as initially diagnosed, a broken bone in his hand, only a sprain, although that is bad enough...* Modin finds that Seidel's wooden, curiously stilted language is beginning to get on his nerves, particularly because none of the closely written pages seems to contain any hint of whether Seidel is keeping valuables at home, and if so where – information that could make breaking and entering the man's house for the second time worth his while.

Indoors, the Seidels have finished their meal, and Modin reads on, increasingly annoyed and discouraged, until around the middle of the notebook a phrase catches his eye. *Securities and Exchange Commission*. He stops, breathes out, and focuses on the text informing him, in the same self-controlled tone, that on 8 August Leonhard Seidel was dismissed from his position as fund manager at Norda Bank, *by mutual agreement and to preclude any further investigations*.

Looking up from these lines, Modin sees that the Seidels have left the dining room. Seidel is in his study, his wife is tidying up the kitchen, the boys are back in their room, sitting in front of a flickering computer screen, presumably playing games that they have been given. At increasing speed, Modin reads the following pages, in which Seidel describes himself driving off every morning for the next few weeks and months to the job that is no longer his, coming home in the evening as if nothing to worry anyone has happened. Modin turns page after page, his eyes skimming the lines.

Snow has begun falling again, and it is colder, but Modin feels neither the snow nor the cold as he runs. He is running to the house, down the flight of steps, towards the boys' room. He knocks on the unlocked door through which he walked so easily that very evening. One of the boys comes to the door, looking at him with wide, surprised eyes, and Modin thinks vaguely, in confusion, that this is another way of getting into a house: you simply knock politely at the door.

He runs past the two boys, upstairs and along the corridor, he finds the study empty, and only when he is in the kitchen, seeing a scene that doesn't seem to have much to do with reality, is he aware that, for the first time in a long while, he has come into a strange house without knowing how to get out again.

Seidel is standing frozen in mid-movement, and his wife has turned and is looking at them both – her husband with a gun in his hand, and him, Modin, a stranger who has appeared out of nowhere. They stand at right angles to each other, in silence. Modin senses the presence of the boys behind him, and the eternity that he feels passing lasts for only a few seconds.

He thinks of the last sentences that he read in the garden, standing under the tree, the final entry in Seidel's diary. *24 December. This is the day. A good day, the right day. I have thought it over at length. I've tried to imagine alternatives. But I didn't succeed, I won't be able to share what I have done. Not with anyone. We'll*

celebrate Christmas, go to church, eat Christmas dinner, open our presents and then leave. Together. I shall have to take my family with me...

Modin hears the shots as if from very far away.

One, two, three, four.

Two for the boys, one for his wife, one for Seidel himself.

Silence.

Modin looks at Seidel's face, his rapt expression. Seidel's thoughts seem to be moving in another world, in a parallel universe, or are they his own thoughts slipping away from him? The woman utters a scream that slowly rises, growing in intensity. The boys are there, behind him, but he doesn't see them.

Modin falls to the floor, wondering how likely he is to survive the four bullets that have gone into him. As long as he can think about it, there may be hope. The woman's scream dies away.

"Who... who's that?" she asks. Her voice is shaking, but she speaks very quietly now.

Modin looks at Seidel, who is holding the gun like something that doesn't belong to him. Modin sees him through the mist that has risen in front of his eyes.

"A... a burglar?" says the woman.

"No... no," says Seidel, without taking his eyes off Modin, and Modin gets the impression that Seidel is perfectly calm now. He shakes his head, and seems to be thinking. "An angel," he says at last.

"What?" asks the woman.

"Yes, a... a Christmas angel," says Seidel. "Call the emergency doctor."

"But...?"

"Say it's a case of gunshot wounds. Say it's serious. At once."

The woman disappears from Modin's field of vision, slipping past him like an incorporeal shadow, and Seidel comes towards him with the gun lowered. Because all the bullets that were to be fired have been fired now.

"Help is coming," he hears Seidel say. In the same calm voice, he tells the boys to go down to their room and not to worry, everything will be all right.

His wife comes back, saying that the emergency doctor is on his way.

"Good," replies Seidel. "Good." He smiles, uncertainly, but it is a clear smile, a smile of relief as if he has been liberated from a nightmare. That is the last thing that Modin thinks of before losing consciousness.

He thinks that he is seeing a smile on the face of a man whom he never saw smiling before.

[END OF SAMPLE]