

Translated excerpt

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Between the acts

Translated by Zaia Alexander



Although I could not remember my dream, it left me with an oppressive feeling that made every thought or even a fleeting look out the window grow dark, and I was incapable of establishing a link between dream and wakefulness. Every attempt to move closer to the events of the dream or snatch a fragment of memory chased it further into a hopeless distance. All that remained was a vague anxiety of some unfathomable nocturnal happenings.

Maybe the dream had only been a foreshadowing of the day, and though I had framed it in black on my calendar, I refused to let the thought of it take concrete form. Only the flowers had I ordered on time, white roses with a little white bow: Love, Ruth.

The rain from the night steamed over the pavement and a yellowish-gray sky cast its light like a veil over houses and trees.

Wetter.de promised a dry day with temperatures of around twenty degrees. I looked for an appropriate outfit and decided on a lightweight, dark gray suit and flat shoes. I only attended funerals if there was no way to avoid them, or if I believed the dead person would be offended by my absence. Even though I did not believe in life after death, I imagined the dead person mysteriously was present, searching for his or her children, grandchildren and friends, wouldn't find me among them, and had to doubt my affections in retrospect. I thought about whether I should go to Olga's funeral for a long while, but ultimately it was this remnant of ridiculous insecurity that had influenced my decision.

Lately, we had spoken to each other only on the telephone, Olga and I. On the Tuesday after Easter, I had finally planned to visit her, but then Olga called and said she wasn't feeling well and that we should postpone our meeting. And now Olga was dead.

I checked Google Maps to find the route to the cemetery on the eastern outskirts of town, and read the text of the obituary one more time; thank god they didn't write: "suddenly and unexpectedly..." I thought. Nobody dies unexpectedly when they are almost ninety. Yet it also wasn't

expected, after all, we had made a date for the Tuesday after Easter, but Olga didn't feel well. And when you don't feel well at ninety, it could mean death. I should have taken that into account.

I was reading yesterday's newspaper at breakfast. I always read yesterday's newspaper, because I usually ate breakfast before I took a shower and dressed, and I didn't feel like taking the elevator in my bathrobe from the fourth floor to the mailboxes on the ground floor and back up again, since I got the latest news, not from the newspaper, but from the radio or TV, which is why it did not matter if I read yesterday's or today's newspaper. It used to take me an hour and a half from waking to leaving the house, now it takes two and a half. If wanted to get to my office at the museum by nine o'clock as usual, I had to get up at six o'clock. Olga's funeral was set for eleven o'clock. Nevertheless, I had woken up before the alarm went off at six o'clock, just as I had every morning, straight from my dream. The dream. For a brief moment it was suddenly within reach, just a feeling, no image, and then nothing again. Maybe I had dreamt about death, I thought, such a dark nothingness can only be death.

I skimmed over the headlines of the Miscellaneous page: *pre-resuscitation stopped*, I read and pondered what *pre-resuscitation* could mean, read it again: *pre-resuscitation stopped*, ok. And somebody had thrown his baby out the window; that was not a reading error. In the Op-Ed section I found a detailed report about a spectacular art forgery trial, but gave up reading after the first paragraph because the typeface blurred before my eyes as though the letters were casting shadows. I cleaned my glasses, sat closer to the window, it did not help, some hitherto unknown defect in my eyes made reading so exhausting that I started to feel dizzy. Maybe it was my circulation, I thought as I tore out the page and saved it for later. I was nervous. Other than Olga, I hadn't seen anybody from the family for nearly twenty years, not even Bernhard, especially not Bernard.

Five or six years ago, when Fanny first told me about her visit to Bernard, I asked without thinking: Whatever for? Fanny raised her eyebrows,

craned her slim neck ready for battle and said: He is my father. After that I never again asked my daughter about Bernhard.

I accepted that Fanny's father was more important to her than his betrayal. It wasn't any of my business. Of course, it was my business, because I was the one who had allowed Bernhard to become Fanny's father. But that had happened in another life, one I could barely recall. I had brought only Olga and Fanny from that earlier life. Bernhard's mother, and Bernhard's daughter, but as for Bernhard, I had forgotten all about him. I knew I had lived with him for three years, I remembered our apartment precisely, two large sunny rooms in a rundown house in the Wörther Straße, I knew how Bernhard looked back then, that he played guitar, and that was about it. He lay archived in my memory somewhere, buried under later, which in turn was buried under even later, a memory corpse, colorless, odorless, cold. I regarded the fact that he was the father of my only child dispassionately, of significance only in the event that my daughter might one day need a bone marrow or organ transplant. I had never demanded money from Bernhard or that he take responsibility for Fanny after I had left him. If I wanted to live with my child without her father, I had to take care of her myself. Anyway, that's how I explained refusing his help to myself and the others back then.

For a week now, since knowing I'd run into Bernhard at Olga's grave, there has been a murmuring in the dungeons of my banished memories. Images surfaced unbidden, Andy with a bandage around his little head from crashing his bike into a truck and cracking his skull on the hood. Frontal lobe syndrome, damage to the anterior frontal lobe. He lay in his bed with a blank look, a needle stuck in the soft back of his hand dripping liquid nutrients into the small body.

Andy was Bernhard's son, whom he had fathered with a waitress shortly after finishing his university entrance-level qualification degree; she was three years older than him and wrote poetry. The child lived with his mother, but on weekends she often took him to Bernhard, who was living at home with his parents. For Olga, Andy was like a third son she had no

longer expected. Madeleine, as the mother was called, left him more and more at Olga's, even during the week, until one day she didn't pick him up at all and could not be reached for days. She called a week later, she was in West Berlin, she could not say more than that, she was terribly sorry about everything, but Andy was in better hands with Olga and Bernhard. Andy stayed with Olga, even after Bernhard found his own apartment. Later, when Bernhard and I moved in together, Andy wanted to stay with his Grandparents. Hermann was still alive back then.

After Andy's accident, Olga moved into the hospital with him, fed him, washed him, read him stories. When he awoke from the coma, she taught him to walk and talk again, she massaged his clenched hands, had a physiotherapist show her what to do, did gymnastics with him. For four months she helped her grandson come back to life. When she brought him back home, she was gaunt and exhausted.

Fanny was not even half-a-year-old when Bernhard announced that Andy would be living with us from then on, that he would never be the same as before the accident, that his mother was not able to care for him anymore. At the housing office where we had applied for a larger apartment, they told us unmarried couples were not entitled to share an apartment. The registry office had scheduled us for four weeks. Two weeks before the wedding somebody took me to a hashish party. A guy from West Berlin had smuggled dope for ten people across the border and had given us a beginner's course in the art of smoking hashish. He showed us how to hold the cigarette correctly and brought the right music, I couldn't remember what. We were lying next to each other on pillows and blankets and eagerly surrendered ourselves to the high. Gradually the room, the people, dissolved into a space made of music, and in the distance I saw a huge avalanche, a white monster clouded by particles of snow soundlessly racing towards me, until it massively and ravenously draped over me and would devour me any moment. Even before they turned the light back on and declared the experiment was over, did I realize what I had just seen, it was what I had been feeling for

the last few weeks and hadn't dared to admit to myself: something was racing towards me that I was terrified would bury me beneath it and I had to run away from it as quickly as I could.

Bernhard was on a business trip to Saxony or Thuringia. The next morning I called the registry office and called off the wedding. Postponed or canceled, the woman asked.

Canceled I said.

When I moved out with Fanny, the scar on Andy's forehead was covered again with hair. But I remember him cowering silently in the hospital bed, the thick bandage wrapped around the fractured skull, only the eyes, nose and mouth were visible, a six-year-old boy, whom I had fled from.

I would probably run into Andy at Olga's grave, too, he was forty-one-years-old now, six years older than Fanny. The last time I had him seen was at Olga's sixty-fifth birthday. He sat next to Olga the entire time with his head hanging to the side, as if he was unable to find the center, he hardly spoke, except for when he asked for a piece of cake, then he shouted energetically; otherwise he seemed barely interested in what was going on around him. But whenever I thought about him, which was rare, he sat mutely with his head wrapped in white gauze, in my memory cellar.

Back then I felt as if I was being monstrous, heartless, mean, villainous. Abandoning the man with his sick child, simply running away with the child we had together, arrogantly denying fate, that was not allowed. I could not remember how I had explained to Bernhard that I had called off the wedding, how I communicated to him that I could not take responsibility for his son, who needed more care than Fanny, that I was Fanny's mother, Fanny's mother alone, and that I did not love him, Bernhard, enough to also be the mother of his son. I must have told him somehow. It was hard for me to imagine my SELF in this scene. I don't want this life that suddenly has been forced on me. I have other plans for me and my child. I'm leaving and I'm not looking back. That's how it must have been. I had done that, even though it seemed as if it wasn't me, but

a Ruth who no longer exists, and whose guilt had been redeemed by her disappearance, and to whom I will always be grateful, in retrospect, for her brave heartlessness.

Last year I turned sixty. None of my close friends had died yet, but in the wider circle of acquaintances the number of deaths was growing. Actually, I did not feel as if it was time for a summation of my life, but on days like this, pointless questions about the whys and wherefores manage to edge their way unbidden into my aimless thoughts. What is this Self actually, I thought, if the Self of one's youth is so foreign to the older Self, as if it had never been part of it. Where are all the various Selves of our past life to whom we owe so great a debt in the end? The problem is that you do not leave the world as the same person you came into it, I thought, then rejected the idea immediately, because of all the different Selves I've been, I wondered whether, perhaps, the child I used to be had remained the closest to me. I remembered the child well, better than all of the ensuing Selves, although temporally it was the farthest removed. Fear of the dark staircase when the light didn't work, the joy of going to the circus for the first time, the heartbreak of being betrayed by a friend, the scents from the windows facing the courtyard, a small dog's fur under hand, those were warm memories. The child is our primordial being, just as primordial man is the origin of humankind, our indestructible core in the brain stem, in the hypothalamus and the limbic system. We have forgotten the Stone Age and Bronze man, we have learned about the Ancients and Renaissance by reading about them, but we can never forget primordial man because he lives within us. Just like the child. The idea appealed to me. That we could forget one Self, once we have become a different one, that we preserve the cold facts and figures, but forget all the rest, otherwise we would go crazy. Maybe all the strange stories about multiple personalities that the American films were brimming with a few years ago were simply stories about people who could not part with their various Selves and all the voices started talking at once. Maybe it might

make sense to consider whether simple schizophrenia is nothing more than a failed case of compulsively attempting to preserve the Self.

The phone interrupted my anthropological speculations. Fanny wanted to know if we should drive together to the cemetery.

I had an important appointment afterwards and needed my car, I said.

We agreed to meet in front of the cemetery. I didn't have an appointment, but I didn't want to be dependent on Fanny, as she surely would want to eat or have coffee with the family after the funeral.

Even as a mother you have at least two Selves, I thought, probably even three or four, I hadn't met the fourth one yet. In the beginning was the miracle, even if it was the most common miracle in the world, which every mouse, cat, in fact any mammal could take part in, provided it was a female. Something biologically explicable, yet nonetheless incomprehensible, had grown inside me; one day it had belonged entirely to me in my enormous belly and the next day it was a separate individual. To discuss this phenomenon was pointless because it happened way too often every day, all over the world, and it has been going on like that for thousands of years. Nevertheless, it remained a miracle, at least for those who experienced it. The first mother-Self lives in a state of pure happiness that grows more perfect by the day, because it is intensified by the object of its love through a growing awareness of the divine, which is the source of all happiness. And whoever is the object of another person's irreplaceable happiness, forgets the questions about the meaning of his existence; he, in this case she, has found it, at least for ten, maybe eleven years, until the child begins to suspect that the mother only commands the tiniest fraction of happiness the world has to offer, in fact, in many ways, she stands in the way of happiness. Maybe the child occasionally thinks it would have fared better with another mother. Gradually, the child creates a mother-free space. Fortunately for the children, most of the dethroned mothers escape into a double life. They continue to live their first mother-Self in memory and draw strength from

it to endure the rejections, insults, and guilt verdicts in the decades that followed. Many of them buy a dog.

Maybe fathers were faced with a similar situation, but I knew nothing about fathers, I didn't have one, at least not for long. My father had died when I was four-years-old. He had returned from a Russian prison camp with a punctured lung, fathered a child with his last ounce of strength, then sat for five years in the green chair next to the window in the living room, and fought for every single breath for the rest of his life. I remembered the wheezing man in the chair as if he had been a stranger, untouchable, and nothing else, not a smile, not a game, nor a song. He was far too weak, my mother had said. After father's death, we lived alone for five years, Mother and I. In my memory, I saw myself as a carefree laughing child during that time: the excursions with my mother's girlfriends and their children, or the evenings when mother read to me, even though by then I was able to read by myself, or singing silly songs, while doing the dishes, "there's a hole in the bucket, dear Henry, dear Henry." That this perfect happiness wasn't enough for mother, that she had to bring some strange man into our lives to make herself happy, was equivalent to the expulsion from paradise for me at the time. I was ten-years-old when Comrade Keller moved in with his moving boxes and two clunky leather chairs, and I was eighteen-years-old and ten days when I moved out with two suitcases and my bedding.

The natural end to pure happiness had been preempted by my mother. That it was because of Comrade Keller, of all people, remained a wound in the mother-daughter relationship that would not heal, even if we didn't talk about it anymore in the end. Even when mother told people stories about her life, and she wasn't able to avoid mentioning Comrade Keller, she uttered his name so casually as if hoping her daughter would overhear it.

I was over forty when I finally stopped allowing myself to torture my mother with the same tormenting questions. I remembered a Sunday afternoon, probably it was winter. The last rays of twilight shone through

the window. The floor lamp next to the couch cast its light upon my mother's pensive face. Comrade Keller usually slept for two, sometimes three hours after dinner every Sunday. That was the time we had for ourselves, since I had moved out. Fanny also was finally asleep. We drank coffee along with two or three glasses of cognac, talked about everyday things, I told her about the Chagall exhibition I was organizing, and mother told me about her endless quarrels with Doro, her boss at the news agency. I asked how she could possibly work under that two hundred pound Stalinist, and mother countered that Doro's two hundred pounds had nothing to do with her political beliefs, which, by the way, were not so different from her own, and that Doro wasn't a Stalinist, she was a Communist who had been through hard times, which excuses her occasional unpredictability.

I was convinced that my mother—had she not loved Eduard Keller, of all people, for reasons beyond comprehension, this secretary in higher services—she would have never lasted longer than four weeks under Doro, in fact she probably would never have landed at this news agency, but rather at the journal "The Dog," or at a cookbook publishing company, where she would have been allowed to hang onto her well-functioning mind.

She talked just like her Comrade Keller, I told her, and he had shared the same beliefs as Doro, and he also had been through a lot, which probably also had excused his narrow-mindedness and obstinacy. I would never understand how a person could love a man like that. I didn't have to understand it, said Mother, to which I responded that I was forced to live with him, and on top of it all, had to watch my mother subordinate herself to some uncouth thug as if it had been a God-given law, and that she had internalized all of Comrade Keller's political insanity, and in turn had allowed my, her daughter's, mind to be turned into putty with his ideological garbage. And how could she possibly bear the fact that her only child had lost her home the moment Comrade Keller moved in.

Mother sat on the sofa with her arms slackly folded in front of her body and said wearily: Now stop exaggerating, to which I broke out in tears, as I always had during such conversations with my mother.

I remembered precisely these and similar such scenes from my life as a daughter. And if I were to tell anybody that even today, as a grown woman, it still made me cry that my mother had brought the wrong man home decades ago, I'd have to laugh. But this grief belonged to the child I used to be and that was why it could not be redeemed. Only since mother died six years ago, since I had lost the addressee of my childhood sorrow, did it gradually cool to a pain-free memory. That's what happened, that's how it was, nothing more.