

Translated excerpt

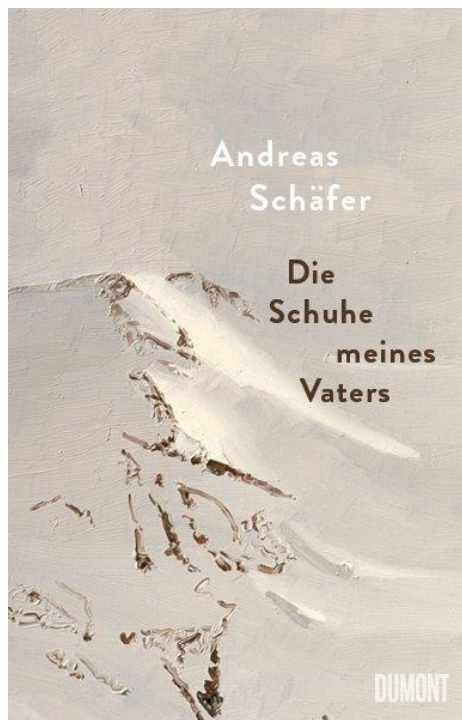
**Andreas Schäfer**  
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**Andreas Schäfer**  
***My Father's Shoes***

Translated by David Burnett



Making the hospital room more homey, a place that belongs to us. The first time, you fear the worst; coming back, it was like I had driven countless times down the narrow residential street with its single-family homes before turning right at the hospital. The tranquil green, the long hallway on the ground floor, the doorbell. I had a plan, had the abstract desire to shape things, even if this meant little more than lending form to my own sense of helplessness, countering the beeping, blinking machines with the beating of our family heart. We'll beat the drums, start chanting, cast a circle. We would sit there at my father's bed, the first family gathering in a long time, even my brother would be there, though he might be roaming the streets of Athens right now, the alleyways of Plaka, being greeted by restaurant waiters: Έλα φίλε, είσαι καλά. Come on, man, everything alright? Even my brother would be there with us, it wouldn't be a problem for him, he can walk through walls and move between worlds as he pleases. And I would share the latest news with our father. I would tell him about the lovely public bookcase outside the building and the pleasant smell of freshly dried laundry in the elevator, about our encounter with the violinist and that we had to take some documents.

“Do you remember, father,” I would say, “the last time the four of us did something together? You and Mom had been separated a long time, almost twenty years, when one spring day we went to the Peloponnese together. We, the sons, sat up front, and you, the parents, like kids on the backseat of the midnight-blue Mercedes I drove from Athens to Corinth on the old road along the Saronic Gulf. On the bridge over the isthmus we stopped for a rest, took pictures and looked over the railing at the ice-gray water below. Later we walked through the Lion Gate of Mycenae; on the broad promenade of Nafplion we ate pastitsio and stifado under an awning that flapped in the wind, and in the late afternoon we sat on stone benches in

the top row of the otherwise deserted theater of Epidauros: the orchestra, a pine wood behind it, and barren, lunar hills in the distance. ‘Unbelievable,’ you said. ‘Simply unbelievable.’ A beautiful day. We stopped wherever and whenever we wanted, and when you two incorrigibles sitting in the backseat got in each other’s hair about where we had to turn off the road, I pulled over and waited for things to cool down. A beautiful day, our last outing together,” I would say at my father’s bedside, and in the silence that followed all we would hear was the agonizing pumping and sucking of the respirator. I would keep quiet until I could no longer stand it.

“It’s like this, Dad. You’re here at the neurosurgery ICU and the situation is critical. The situation is hopeless. And we, that is to say your never-divorced ex-wife and your two sons, want – no, need – to ask you for one last favor: Please give us your blessing to turn off the artificial respirator.”

Outside, behind the closed door of the patient’s room, doctors and nurses would go about their work, but inside the circle we’d cast my father would open his blue eyes in wonder and ask: “Just so I understand: You want my blessing to end my own life?”

“You could put it that way.”

“Fine, I’ll think about it,” he would answer after a while.

It would be the last thing he would say, but we would know what to do, not immediately, not right after our family powwow, but later we would know.

Instead, we entered the hospital room and my father had disappeared. He was there like yesterday, by the window of the first room on the right, I just wasn’t able to see him. I saw tubes and machines and blinking green displays, the reflections of the sun on the bedframe

hurt my eyes. I stared at the tiny cross under his ear made with a ballpoint pen, concentrated on this vestige of an unsuccessful operation and tried to speak. My words echoed dully back at me, like in a sound-absorbent room. His face seemed to melt before my eyes.

I got up abruptly and left the room. In the hallway I shook my hands, shook them as if by doing so I could fling the panic away from me. In the visitor's cubbyhole sat a woman and a man, silent, fear in their eyes. I looked for a restroom, washed my face and hands, then crept like a criminal through the hallways until the nurses got annoyed and sent me back.

When I entered the room, my mother was standing at the foot of the bed, speaking softly to my father. She signaled me to come in, but no sooner had I approached than she said goodbye and left the room, a mysterious smile on her lips. I sat down. The door was closed. No doctor to bother us, no one to tell us we should go or to ask us if we had come to a decision. Just him and me. Why did I feel nothing? My carefully prepared monologues, my appeal for his blessing, the lovely picture I had painted in my imagination – all of it gone. There was a metallic taste on my tongue, as if stuck inside my chest were a windpipe made of iron. There would be no helping hand, I realized. No one would make the decision for me, or decide for us when the right time was; no one would make the most brutal of facts less brutal. Which is why now the time had come to arrange the inevitable. Wasn't that the reason my mother left the hospital room, so that I could make *the decision*? I should talk with the senior physician, I thought. I should tell him that we were ready now and he could – no, *had* – to turn off the ventilator. Now. Immediately. But I couldn't move. I became a five-year-old abandoned child who'd forgotten how to call for help. Before starting to rock back and forth, I managed to move a chair to the window and stare at the manicured lawn and the road leading up to the hospital. There was a turnaround with a bus stop, the back of the shelter displaying an ad for an expensive watch manufacturer. I took my laptop out of my bag and connected to the Internet. I read the news and reports about the World Cup just getting underway, answered, in

my role as class parent, an email from an irate mother about the level of education at my daughter's school. I barely heard the pumping and sucking of the respirator, knew he was at my side again even if I didn't see him. Life was slowly returning.

At a height of eight hundred and eighty meters, the Grosser Feldberg is the highest peak in the High Taunus mountains; Google Route Planner indicates a distance of 38.6 kilometers between "Frankfurt Sachsenhausen" and "Grosser Feldberg, Taunus." On a clear day the Feldberg with the telecommunications tower on top is visible from my father's balcony, and the Feldberg was always the first destination when my father, who loved to hike more than anything, felt like *climbing the mountain* for a while. If Sundays he didn't pick up the phone, he would call me back in the evening and say he'd been out and about, which basically always meant he'd been hiking on the Grosser Feldberg. He would take the bus down Darmstädter Landstraße from Südfriedhof to Südbahnhof; from there he got on the U3 subway and rode it to the last stop, Oberursel. At that point there were two options: either he took the 57 bus through Oberreifenberg, eight stops to the expansive summit plateau – or he began his hike right there at the subway station and walked the seven kilometers.

Once we'd left the hospital, I had to admit to myself that the decision, as I'd come to call it, could not be brought about by magical incantation or rational deliberation. I knew what my father would have said: *Don't hook me up to any machines! Just let me croak and be done with it.* And yet still I couldn't comply.

I brought my mother to her friends' place before parking my host's car in front of her house. Then I took a walk through the enchanted Südfriedhof, the Southern Cemetery. Here, under these trees, is where he would be laid to rest. I crossed Darmstädter Landstraße and approached the parking bays of the mighty apartment blocks, unlocked my father's silver

Volkswagen Bora and got behind the wheel. There was nothing at all on the seats or the floor, even in the glove compartment there was only a tattered owner's manual in a grubby plastic folder. He had emptied the car when he knew he would no longer drive it, he was done with driving and so he removed all traces of his former self. The decisiveness of his actions and the absence of his things affected me more than the mess in his apartment. I couldn't even detect his scent. For a while I sat there motionless, then I turned on the windshield wipers and let the wiper fluid flow until I could see through the bird droppings enough to get to the carwash at the next gas station.

A sunny day. Window rolled down, I drove down Babenhäuser Landstraße and out of town, then around the east of Frankfurt on the A661 until the freeway turned into a highway and entered the Taunus nature preserve.

What can I say about my shame? It was shame that lay between me and *the decision*. I tried to hide my father, afraid of what others would think about him (and me?), not just as an adolescent and in early adulthood, but into middle age and, by going out of my way to avoid certain situations and encounters, probably even now. Part of me has never stopped being ashamed of him. The more I left Frankfurt behind me and climbed the Taunus massif, on winding roads through pin-straight firs, the more I became convinced: It's the shame I feel for my father that haunts me to this day.

What is shame? It blossoms in countless colors and shapes. A person falls from safety and only partly finds his way back to it.

The knowledge that his father is easily offended was soon joined by the experience that, in his father's presence, situations could flip from one moment to the next. His father corrected others if their German was not grammatically correct and accompanied these corrections with

a smug smile that said: Is it my fault you don't speak good German? His father corrected his mother in the presence of others or interrupted her to contradict. Or he became dangerously silent while she spoke and the anger gradually built up inside him, because to his mind she'd said something wrong and utterly provocative, until he could no longer contain himself and, with a barely concealed hatred accompanied by unusual rasping noises, grumbled, "Here we go again!" – his recurrent expression of profound disgust. He began to heap her with incriminations, saw himself wronged for reasons only he could fathom, and only calmed down once he had set the record straight. Excess pressure had to be released. Then he smiled contentedly. The others smiled too, but his father didn't seem to notice how forced their smiles were, the way they inwardly flinched, even recoiled in horror. He seemed not to notice their embarrassment, the suddenly toxic atmosphere, as if he were fully suffused with the subsiding of his anger and the pleasure of his ensuing relief.

His son felt the world fall apart. He saw the glass bubble his beloved father was trapped in, and physically felt the icy judgment enveloping this unwitting man. A crack ran through him too. He wanted to flee, to escape this squirming embarrassment, and wanted at the same time to throw himself in front of his father in order to silence him, or at least to shield him from the others' contempt.

Even after his parents' separation his father was prone to angry outbursts, and his longwinded remarks were often still accompanied by an indignant, strangely aggressive rumbling. And, although the son expected of himself the leniency and detachment of a grown man when dealing with his father, something of the old childhood fear had survived in the hidden recesses of his emotional landscape and flushed to the surface even decades later whenever he met with close or distant acquaintances in the presence of his father. Even at the age of forty, when he regularly went to the theater for his work, he dreaded these encounters in the company of his father, especially during intermissions. If his father launched into a

monologue about his likes or dislikes, the son would scan with Argus-eyes the faces of the others for hints of astonishment, would gauge their level of bewilderment, their degree of dismay, listen for their inward coughing, their awkwardly shuffling feet, torn between a downright servile need to feel he belonged with them and a well-positioned, precautionary resentment for the contempt he suspected them of having; he felt, in other words, like protecting his father, come what may. When the son finally succeeded in prying his father loose from the group, the second wave would hit him: the shame at having betrayed and repudiated his father in front of insignificant friends or colleagues. “Come on,” he said, touching the checkered sleeve of his father’s jacket with a tenderness intent on making amends. “Beer, champagne, wine, water? You want a pretzel too?” If another encounter followed, the son was wholly indifferent. He would follow the conversation with no emotional investment, exhausted and disappointed that once again he hadn’t been able to anticipate and avert the implosion.

I left the car in the parking lot beneath the telecommunications tower and walked the spacious, nearly deserted grounds. It was good to be out in the fresh air, was good not to know what was coming next. I sat down on a bench, looked out north across the countryside – all the way to Usingen – before getting up and wandering around some more. There was a playground with swings and a jungle gym made of gnarled tree trunks, next to which a snack bar reeking of rancid oil served up fries, sausage and coffee. I turned to the falconry further back, a falconry with genuine falcons, buzzards, owls and eagles, according to the sign on the fence. There was no one to be seen, neither human nor animal. Closed for the summer? The hiking-trail signs pointing in all directions, the well-beaten paths cutting through the meadow like rivulets. And where did they used to ski? Long ago in the 1980s you could still go skiing on the Feldberg! Well, what do you know, there’s an old ski-lift pylon in the meadow. I see



and commemorate you, ski-lift pylon, you relic of a bygone era. And here's the slope we used to hurtle down – cold wind in our ears – on long and narrow Blizzard-brand skis. And another nice memory: how, when I was a child and rode the ski lift together with my father, he explained to me why the water hole underneath us, which the wooden T-bar was carrying us across, wasn't frozen over, even though the landscape was covered with a blanket of snow. I'll hold on to that one, put it in my pocket and keep it warm in my hand.

And now we're approaching the Feldberghof restaurant. This is no shabby snack bar, no, a real tourist café and a good place to tell the father *on high* that he's going to be a grandfather, and introduce him to my girlfriend in the process. We came straight here to the Feldberg when he picked us up from the main train station in the summer of 2006, me and the woman who is now my wife.

“How about we head straight from the station to the Feldberg,” I'd suggested on the phone.

The Feldberg was a refuge for me. The idea of the three of us going to a restaurant in Frankfurt made me nauseous. We would have to drive through the city center, might end up in a traffic jam in the short distance from the station to the Hauptwache or Rossmarkt plazas, and my father would start muttering angrily under his breath. We would have to find a parking spot or use of one of Frankfurt's parking garages, low-ceilinged and poorly lit, the stairwells always cold; there would be countless things to consider, obstacles to work around, who knows what dramas would transpire by the time we sat down in a restaurant at all. Too problematic, too many little details, far too prone to complications. It was in fact only the second time I'd ever introduced him to a girlfriend or partner of mine; the first time, in my early twenties, the three of us had gone to a restaurant in downtown Frankfurt and the evening had been a disaster. No sooner had we seated ourselves than right off the bat I committed a major blunder. He greeted my then girlfriend with the formal *Sie* and I said,

possibly even amused, that he could go ahead and address her with the informal *du*. I immediately regretted my boorishness. My father froze; only his Adam's apple bobbed briefly up and down. With a choked voice he managed to force out his "Here we go again." A deathly silence ensued, then the earth opened up and offered a frightening view of the seething mass of glowing yellow fire – one wrong word on my part, I knew, and the lava would erupt, hissing and burying all three of us underneath. Blind to everything around me, I stared into this hot spot, trying to make out the outlines of figures. Which ancient characters there in the depths were waging a primeval battle? Did he once again see in me the son-demon that, even as a five-year-old, was capable of throwing him off balance? And what was my role in this? Had it really just been a mishap on my part, or had I not, well aware of how touchy he was, deliberately pressed the red-hot iron into his naked flesh out of some pent-up desire for revenge, perhaps even secretly delighted by the prospect, making clear through my supposedly harmless remark who dictated the terms here, that is to say me?

Before anyone grasped the situation, the abyss closed and we struggled through the rest of the evening. We acted as if nothing had happened, though the heat at the table made us break into a sweat. He asked my girlfriend questions, listened, made a genuine effort, but then, as if driven by some uncanny power, began talking at length about himself, endeavoring to explain himself and show himself in a favorable light. He set his sights on her, talked straight *into* her, confidentially, never suggestively, but in a way that demanded her approval, as if they had known each other for ages. Incessantly his hands pushed the salt and pepper shakers across the tablecloth, touched his silverware, his glass, crumpled his napkin. I saw the effort she was making to listen, saw her pained smile. Her eyes narrowed, she leaned forward, index and middle fingers on her temple trying to stay focused, to follow his flow of words. At some point we entered open terrain again, didn't we? He talked, smiling, about I don't know

what anymore, she laughed too, and when it was time to go he gallantly helped her into her coat and gave her a warm goodbye, me too.

Silently my girlfriend and I went to the car. She seemed to stagger, as if the battle against the elements had robbed her of all her strength. I sensed her bewilderment, her anger at being monopolized by him that way, an anger that was probably directed at me now for putting her in that situation and not sufficiently protecting her. “Oh, man,” she finally said. “It’s really a miracle you turned out the way you did – with a father like that.”

It was a load off my mind that I wasn’t guilty by association and that, now that she knew the truth, she didn’t back away from me; that my father didn’t automatically make me a suspicious person too. Only later did I grasp the painful ambiguity of her verdict. The corollary seeped into my consciousness like poison: So I hadn’t been wrong. He was just as unreasonable, just as frustratingly irritating as I’d intuited in my childhood. She proved me not guilty by confirming my worst fear: that my father was some kind of stigma. I was ashamed of my father, ashamed of my relief, and – although I understood her anger – ashamed of her ruthlessness.

Of course, this event had happened twelve years before I eventually introduced him to my current wife and shared the good news. By that time I had finished my degree, had gotten a job with a newspaper, my first novel had been published. I had my own life. But what does that matter? Deep-seated fears are indifferent to time.

While the train was approaching Frankfurt, it was only my pride that prevented me from warning my pregnant girlfriend. We got off; I immediately spotted him at the end of the platform. He was wearing a light-colored trench coat – on official occasions he donned a suit jacket and overcoat. His gaze was earnest while trying to find us, then a bright glow of recognition. He raised his arm in greeting, approached us with a brisk step, small, agile,

extended his hand to her: firm handshake, friendly gaze: “Pleased to make your acquaintance. Hi there, son. How was the ride?” Diagonally through the hall of the main station, seemingly against the flow of other people. Walking a little faster than necessary, my father half a step ahead of us. Glaring sun in the station parking lot. The first moment of calm at the parking-ticket machine. It was only when he fiddled with his wallet, its worn-out coin pouch, that I seemed to recognize the familiar, mortally wounded, self-defensive father ready to hiss at any moment, while the other, almost forgotten, jubilant father was already going into raptures with my girlfriend about the *Feldberg mountain in Freiburg* and the *unbelievable Bernau valley*, the next destination after our brief visit in Frankfurt. What was going on here? Things were running smoothly. He spoke – but so did my girlfriend. Even I joined the conversation, instead of watchfully lying-in-wait or hesitating suspiciously. Now off in the bright-red Mercedes, the toll bar lifts, keep to the left and then through Friedrich Ebert Park and past the Festhalle to the freeway junction – and off into the mountains.

From the Black Forest it’s not far to Switzerland. Magic words buzzed through the air: *Säntis im Alpstein. Chur, Graubünden. Val Lumnezia.*

“You know the Val Lumnezia?” he asked, astonished.

My future wife, her head extending between the seats towards the front, one hand on the backrest of his seat: “Since I was a kid. Ilanz, Vella, Vrin.”

“Did you hike or go skiing?”

“Everyone else went skiing. I didn’t feel like it. I would listen for the thump of ski boots on the steps and, when the place was empty, I’d go downstairs and paint in the living room.”

“Thump,” he repeated with a laugh. “Yes, that’s exactly the sound that ski boots make.”

By then we had reached the Feldberg plateau, we sat down at a window table in the Feldberghof, and at some point, while eating spätzle with cheese, potato omelettes or barley soup, I told him that in a few months he was going to be a grandfather, whereupon he fell silent in surprise and looked out the window with glistening eyes. He was crying, couldn't hold back the tears of joy, pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. Life is beautiful, was never anything else. Every breath, every glance, every word a dance, a gift, a celebration of the day. And yet still I feared her devastating verdict on the train to Freiburg hours later. We hurtled past Niederrad, Sportfeld, the Zeppelinheim forest of my childhood, and I waited for her verdict. Shame detectors in position, cells of mistrust activated, wrong-note sensors on the alert, I anticipated the swish of the guillotine. But no beheading took place. At some point during the ride she said: "That he's so happy to be a grandfather. What a big heart he has!"

"Yes." That was all I could say. It was as if a healing hand had been placed on an old wound.

And now I entered the Feldberghof again, even that had something soothing, though nothing looked familiar at first. Had the dining area with its light-brown laminated tables made such an unwelcoming impression back then? Where did we sit? My father had often told me that he came here again and again and sat down at the very table where he'd learned about the existence of the granddaughter he would later love more than anything. But I couldn't remember which table, so I sat down by a window and looked around. Two older couples were swallowed up by the expansive room. When the lone waiter finally approached me, I searched his face for something familiar, as if he could have been the one who served us twelve years ago. I glanced through the menu, wondering what my father, my wife and I had ordered back then. Did I want to sit at the same table, eat the same meal in order to feel closer to him here? Because I'd failed to connect with him at the hospital? Did I want to recover the happy father or, rather, reconstruct a situation in order to intervene in the past and create a different present, like time travelers try to do in the movies?

The introduction of the daughter-in-law in 1967: when my father and my mother went to his parents in Berlin a few months after they'd decided to get married and bought wedding rings in wintry Thessaloniki. During the war, until it was bombed, my grandparents had run a butcher's shop in the Berlin neighborhood of Moabit, and after the war they were modestly prosperous as the proud owners of a dairy and grocery store in the more bourgeois district of Friedenau. My father told them on the phone that he intended to marry a young Greek woman, and they reacted with irritation. Why a foreigner? Were there not enough Hanseatic girls in Hamburg? My grandfather, the master butcher, summoned a friend of my father in Berlin and asked him: What was the nature of this affair between his son and the Greek student? How would he gauge their relationship? The friend assured my grandfather that it wasn't just a fling, that my father knew what he wanted because, after all, he'd had other, non-Greek, that is to say German, maybe even Hanseatic girlfriends before her. Warily my grandparents received my father and his fiancée, who would later become my mother. My grandfather asked the young Greek woman where she came from, how long she had lived in Germany, why she was in Hamburg at all. His suspicions subsided in the course of the conversation, and at the end of the examination my grandfather even said to her in a gesture of conciliation: "Well, then, I'll need to buy a new suit for the wedding!"

What went through the minds of my grandparents when the young couple left the apartment and set off back to Hamburg? What caused them to change their minds and burden the future of their son and his fiancée with the weight of their rejection? Did they think my mother was a *gold digger*, or were they just using the opportunity to act on their long-simmering disappointment with this wayward son of theirs?

No sooner had my parents entered the little apartment in Othmarschen, the one they shared since my mother's return from Greece, than the telephone rang. My grandmother informed my father that they would not be attending the wedding as planned. They disapproved of his

marriage to this Greek person, this random woman with a big nose and peach fuzz on her upper lip. If he married her against their will, they'd have nothing more to do with him and would disinherit him on the spot.

My father is an outcast, a disinherited son, because he married my mother, a foreigner, despite his parents' threat. What happened at that moment? Hadn't his parents' refusal catapulted the young couple into a void? Their marriage was built on a fragile foundation: nothing but their own determination. His anger at his parents remained, and until this day my mother is racked by a sense of guilt, their marriage having led to my father's break with his parents. What else happened? Didn't the condemnation of his fiancée – even though he stood by her – drive a wedge of mistrust between them, whose effects were only felt later? Did the nagging question not flash through his mind – as if against his own will – after quarrels or in other dark hours of marriage whether his parents had seen something in her that had gone unnoticed by him? Even I long saw myself as being under the spell of *the disinheritance*; my striving for freedom and sometimes brusque attempts to distance myself from him were always accompanied by the stale feeling of having disowned him myself.

The food made me lethargic. I had seen it all: the photos of celebrity patrons on the walls, the cake counter, the polished beer taps at the bar; I had touched everything with my eyes until I succeeded in sitting still, devout and devoid of thought. I really had to go now before I sank into a state of apathy again.

It was stormy outside, the temperature had dropped below freezing. Myriads of jagged hailstones dotted the meadow. Footpaths had transformed into dazzling veins of ice. The onset of winter in mid-June? I wanted to go to the Brunhildis boulder, the bizarre quartzite formation where, according to legend, Siegfried awakened the sleeping Brunhild from her magic slumber with a kiss. From there I wanted to work my way cross-country down the

northern slope, through rugged wilderness, gashing open my skin on undergrowth, bumping my knee on rocks, and banging my forehead on the low-hanging branches of primeval Hessian trees. But I could barely make headway against the icy wind. A plaintive wail howled through the murky grayness all around, the wailing of the damned, which long since included me. I tasted the earth in the fog, the slate, the damp roots, the bitter bark of a tree. Now I could finally sit down and, arms wrapped around my knees, wait motionless. I was shivering from the cold, my teeth incessantly chattering. I waited for the redeeming father to come, to grab me by the scruff of my neck, hoist me onto his shoulders and scramble down the slope, panting over hill and dale until we reached the illuminated hut before it grew completely dark.

He's a man I've never met, and likely never will.