



Translated extract from

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Tamara Bach
Now is Here

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Bowie sits in the kitchen, staring at the calendar. January's empty. The calendar doesn't serve any purpose, it's just for show. It's only hanging there because there's supposed to be a calendar hanging up in the kitchen. Because there's always been a calendar hanging up in the kitchen. Dad's appointments are all on his PDA, his smartphone, his Filofax, his calendar at work. Or else his secretary knows. Tomorrow is January 5th. There's nothing written in the square. Even though it would've been her birthday. The first one they're not going to celebrate. Bowie wants to figure out how old Mom would've been, but the numbers won't add. Like it matters. The date of her death always messes him up. It's all hypothetical anyway. Would've been. Mom's going to stay young. "Much too young," Grandma said. And that a daughter isn't supposed to die before her mother. The phone breaks the silence. Bowie checks the display. He sees that coincidences don't exist. It's Grandma. Bowie stays next to the phone, letting the rings fall across the apartment floor like salt behind a snowplow.

The phone rings. Ziska stands swaying in the doorway. Mono gives her a nod. She's picked up her plate and is free to go. He answers it. "I totally forgot. You're supposed to call Mrs. Heiland. About the piano lesson."

"Today?"

"Yes, today. Has everybody eaten?" Mom changes the conversation.

"Yeah."

"Good. So call her then. We'll be back later. And Ziska has to be in bed by 8:30 at the latest." She says bye and hangs up.

Mono sees the address book next to the phone and flips it open. Mom has everything so organized. She even wrote down the number. Mono dials. This sucks.

"Hello?" a male voice answers.

Mono says who he is. "I'm supposed to call your wife about the piano lesson."

The man doesn't say anything else to Mono. He yells out "Katrin!", and Mono can hear her coming. Then some mumbling. This sucks.

His dad shows up, but goes straight into his study. Bowie follows him and stops in the doorway, looking at the back of a dark sport coat.

“What’s wrong?” his dad asks without turning around, but Bowie can’t think of anything. He just stands there. His dad listens for ten seconds to nothing. So he finally turns around, but only halfway, an envelope in one hand and a letter opener in the other. He has a questioning look on his face. But the more he looks, and the more he waits, the fewer words Bowie can think of. Not even enough to put a single meaningful sentence together. Bowie clears his throat and props his hand up against the doorframe. He can feel the wood and the varnish flaking off. A piece sticks to his hand.

“Are you staying here today?” Bowie asks.

“Mhmm.”

“You sure?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tomorrow’s her birthday.” The words just kind of tumble out of his mouth.

His dad looks at the letter and slips the blade in between paper and paper.

“That’s correct.”

He guides the knife along the top of the envelope. Paper detaches from paper. Fibers separate cleanly. He withdraws the sheet of paper and unfolds it. He reads. And Bowie just stands there. He’s got to come up with something say. Bowie doesn’t have to say her name, say “Mom”. In this household it’s enough to just speak of “her”. And Bowie thinks, even though it hardly ever happens, whenever she is called by name, the walls momentarily hold their breath. Every time. There’s got to be more than this. Something besides the endless calls with Grandma and this silence, this suspension of time, this hush. There’s got to be something they can just call “normal”.

Bowie’s dad seems to have forgotten him. He turns on the computer. A remittance slip is lying next to him on the table. He pulls out a folder. For Bowie he’s nothing but neck, shoulders and back. There’s got to be more than this

Fienchen lounges on the couch next to Mom. Mom hands Fienchen the remote.

Mono's first kiss

“Hey, that’s...” says Mono, and thinks of about a million things to call it: sick, stupid, bull, not what he meant.

“Don’t be such a wuss,” says Fienchen.

Mono lets out an anguished sigh and looks around.

“Nobody’s watching.”

The wrinkle appears that Mono gets between his eyes when he’s mad, and Fienchen can hardly keep from grinning.

“I can’t.”

“Just close your eyes and think of something nice.”

He doesn’t.

“Hey, like, it’s fine with me if you don’t want to do it. Just go over to Ines and kiss her.”

“Screw you,” Mono snaps.

“Ines?”

Mono looks around again. Fienchen waits.

He takes a deep breath. “Okay.” And closes his eyes.

Dad is sitting on the couch next to Mom. In front of him on the table is the plate of goulash she warmed up for him. Dad bends forward. Next to the plate is a bottle of beer. There’s a glass half full.

Mom suddenly sees her son. “Johannes, come over and sit with us a bit.”

Zanker would normally make some stupid remark so he could leave. He sits down.

Dad shoves noodles in his mouth, chews, drinks beer, puts his glass back down on the coaster without looking.

Mom glances at Zanker.

Dad changes the station because it’s time for the news.

“Jörg?” she says.

Dad watches the news.

Zanker sees a war out of the corner of his eye.

“Dad?”

“What?”

When he was a kid, the rule was: Don’t bother your dad at dinner. Just stay in your room and play. He works really hard and needs his dinner. So he can recharge his batteries. Afterwards was fine.

“Johannes wants to go over to Christian’s tonight. You know how he’s always so alone now,” Mom says and gestures slightly to Zanker.

“What are you guys going to do?” asks Dad, staring the newscaster right in the eye. The newscaster then glances down to read his text.

“Watch movies.” Zanker waits. Stock report. Some company takes over some other one. Antitrust laws.

“When will you be back?”

“I wanted to sleep over at Bowie’s. If that’s okay with you.”

“Who’s Bowie?”

“Christian, Jörg. You know that.” Zanker’s mom looks at her husband, who doesn’t answer back. You decide. “Yeah, okay. But be back tomorrow by breakfast.”

Zanker gives a careful nod and takes another quick glance at Dad. Sports. Quietly, Zanker stands up, counting the seconds he needs to get to the door. Counting slowly. He waits, then closes the door behind him without his dad saying another word.

“Are you going to Lene’s tomorrow?” asks Ziska.

Mono nods and lowers the blinds. Ziska puts in a story. Mono sees her.

“You don’t get to listen too long,” he says.

It seems okay with her.

“Are you going to give Lene piano?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to teach me piano, too?”

“Since when do you want to learn the piano?”

Ziska shrugs her shoulders. She gets in under the covers. Mono sits down on the edge of the bed because that's what you're supposed to do. But he's not sure what comes after that.

So he asks, "You need anything else?"

Ziska shakes her head.

"Something to drink?"

She gives her head another shake.

"Did you go to the bathroom?"

Uhuh.

"Okay. Good night then. Sleep tight."

Mono gets up, goes over to the switch and turns off the light.

"Mono?"

"Yeah?"

"You're staying home until Mom gets back, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Can you keep the door open a little?"

Mono only closes it half-way. From out in the hall he hears the melody from Ziska's cassette. It sounds familiar. He stands still and listens. It's one he had when he was a kid.

Because of the lady, Bowie wants to say, pacing back and forth in his room. What's up with her? Who is she anyway? And why does even need anybody? When he knows it would've been Mom's birthday tomorrow. He knows, he knows... Shit. There's supposed to be logic to your arguments, but logic doesn't exist anymore. Bowie's been tailspinning through a chain of unfortunate events since New Year's Eve. Fuck it. Who cares. Bowie tries to settle down. He's got to say something. Now. No matter what. Bowie walks out of his room and makes a 90 degree turn towards the study. Then the doorbell rings. He turns back around 180 degrees. Bowie falters.

"Christian!" his father calls out from the other side of the door. "Who is it?"

Bowie turns around. Okay, he's cool. And opens the door.

“Hey,” says Zanker, pushing Bowie a bit to the side. The winter wind manages to sneak in the door behind him. It eludes capture, refuses to be locked out, and lowers the temp inside by three degrees. Zanker takes off his jacket. Then there’s Dad, standing in the hall.

“Good evening,” Zanker says.

Bowie’s dad gives a nod. “You guys doing something tonight?” he asks his son.

“Yeah.”

“Alright,” his dad says, about to go back into his study. Then he pauses and turns to his son. “And about tomorrow. I probably won’t have time. Maybe you can go and pick up some flowers for the cemetery. I’ll leave some money out on the table.” Pleased with the plan, he turns around and closes the door.

Fienchen heads over to Mono’s. If she doesn’t pick him up, you know he won’t come. Fienchen didn’t make a big deal about it today. She’s not sure if Zanker’s coming or not. Fienchen can’t wait to go dancing again. She hasn’t been yet this year. Fienchen’s freezing. Shit. That means she’s really going to freeze later on. She hops on a streetcar to get out of the cold. There’s a man there. A lady with her baby. Two guys blaring. She tucks her head between her shoulders as best she can and waits for the stops to go by. She’s mad at herself for not bringing her bag. Sitting here without her music, her book, her hand cream.

Mono sits in front of the TV. He feels like a babysitter waiting for the parents to come back so he can get his money and leave. Except that he lives here. He looks up at the clock. He already changed. Not a big difference. Just a different shirt. His pants are alright. And his hair looks like it always does. Mono stares at the screen and listens for Ziska and the front door. He can’t hear the story anymore from her room. Mono tiptoes over and carefully pushes the door open. He can tell she’s sleeping by the way she’s breathing. She breathes faster than Mono when she sleeps, just like her heart beats faster than his does. He notices her room’s typical girl smell and leaves the door a bit open again.

The doorbell makes him jump.

Fienchen nudges him aside and lets herself in.

“What are you doing here?” Mono asks.

“Nice to see you, too,” Fienchen says. “Ready to go? The concert was supposed to start fifteen minutes ago, but I bet it didn’t.”

“I can’t.”

“Don’t even tell me you changed your mind!” I knew it, Fienchen thinks.

“No. I have to wait until my parents get back.”

“Oh.” In that case she might as well take off her coat. A key turns in its lock right behind her. Fienchen takes a quick jump forward so the door doesn’t whack her in the back. She turns around. It’s Mom and Dad Nothvogel. “That means we can go,” Fienchen says.

Mono’s mom raises her eyebrows. “Is Ziska in bed?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything else?”

“Not really. Can I go?”

“Yeah, we’re here. Just not too late, okay?”

Mono agrees as he yanks his jacket off the hook and squeezes out the door behind Fienchen, who’s made an even faster getaway than he has.

Zanker takes a look around. For a Wednesday it’s already pretty full even though the band’s not playing yet. Not even the opening act. Zanker hates being so early. Early as in: before things really get going. But Bowie was so hung up on leaving. So there they are now, hanging around up at the bar. Bowie’s up on a barstool, and Zanker’s facing the other way. He likes being able to see the whole place, whereas Bowie only seems interested in the bottles lined up behind the bar. Zanker scopes things out. There’s lots of people his age. Of course, it’s vacation. A few college kids. Mainly guys. Probably because of the music. There’s only a couple young girls. And a few older ones. Zanker’s relieved. He hardly knows any of them. A few he’s maybe seen before. Nothing special.

Fienchen pushes open the heavy door. The bouncer takes her ticket and stamps the inside of her wrist. Mono stumbles in behind her. Fienchen's radar is working. Zanker's right over there. His arms resting up on the bar. She sees him from the side, the red light falling across his face, and gets weak in the knees. It takes Mono a little longer before he spots the two others, but then he leads the way. Zanker sees the band's finally getting ready up on stage. He turns around and takes a drink. At least things are starting to roll. A few people clap. They apparently know the band members. The singer has this grin on his face.

Mono gets stuck at the wrong spot at the bar. Next to Bowie, who gives him this lame wave after he taps him on the shoulder. Zanker just flicks his head. Fienchen squeezes in between Zanker and Bowie. Zanker leans over across Fienchen to Bowie. She catches a trace of his scent.

"There aren't any chicks here," Zanker says.

Fienchen deflates.

Bowie stirs, gesturing with his chin in her direction. "Duh." Zanker raises an eyebrow, follows Bowie's gaze and grins. He elbows Fienchen in the ribs, lightly, he thinks. But it hurts. "Ow." She rubs her side and thinks how her skin must be holding up some big "Welcome!" sign for bruises or something. Zanker doesn't notice. Doesn't feel Fienchen's eyes on him. Bowie looks, but now it's Fienchen who doesn't notice. Bowie sees how long Fienchen's eyelashes are. And now, the way she's looking down at her shoes, he makes out the dark shadows on her cheeks right beneath her eyes. He suddenly feels how his arm belongs around her shoulder, but he doesn't let it. Mind over matter.

"I'm going down front," Zanker says. Then he's gone.

Fienchen orders something. Mono looks in his wallet. Fienchen sets a beer down right in front of him.

The band counts off, one-two-three-four. Bowie finally turns around so he's facing Fienchen.

Then the door opens. And in walks Natalie.

Great, Fienchen thinks. But then she catches Mono's gaze and quickly thinks of something nice.

She's actually here. Mono can't believe it. He thought Fienchen'd just made that up so he'd come. But apparently she hadn't. Natalie stands there looking around. Behind her is the obligatory girlfriend, but no guys! Natalie looks around, bobbing her head to the music. Her friend says something to her in her ear. Natalie nods and her girlfriend walks off. Maybe Mono's staring so hard at her that she can't help but look back at him. His ears turn bright red, but the light takes pity on him. It looks like Natalie says "hey" and then starts! walking! right! towards! him!

Fienchen's eyes search for Zanker down in the mosh pit. He's down there somewhere, somewhere, where suddenly pandemonium breaks loose.

"Don't you wanna dance?" Bowie suddenly asks.

"Nah," Fienchen says.

Bowie shrugs. He watches her staring straight ahead. He can tell she couldn't care less about the music, her body totally unresponsive. She's just sitting there completely numb. The only thing that moves is her head, like about a millimeter. He can tell how her eyes are focused on the crowd. On Zanker.

"Hey!" says Natalie.

"Hey!" Mono about yells.

"You here by yourself?"

He'd die to say yes, but he shakes his head and gestures that the other two are with him. Or that he's with them.

"Oh," she says, taking a quick glance over at Fienchen and Bowie. Mono keeps smiling so hard that his cheeks hurt. That it hurts all the way back behind his ears. But he can't help it. Natalie leans over the bar and orders something. Mono breaks out in a nervous sweat. He'd love to get her something but he can't afford it. There's just no way. If anything, a soda. But that'd be totally fucking retarded. The bartender starts slicing limes, and Mono knows he can't afford whatever drink he's making. It takes him less than a second to shrink about two inches. Luckily he's sitting down so no one notices. And besides, he's one of the tallest people here anyway. But try shrinking two inches. It's not so easy. Natalie gets up on the barstool next to him. Real cool. How she just sits there, looking around.

"And you?"

Natalie raises her eyebrows.

“Who are you here with?”

She sucks on her straw and points with her glass over at the girl from before. She’s standing in front of some guy and yelling at him, though nobody can hear her. Punk rock. The dude’s like twice as big as she is. Her words only seem to come up to his chin.

“Oh,” says Mono.

“Yeah,” Natalie says, putting her glass down.

Say something. Say something.

The band announces its last song, and the crowd revolts. The singer tries to explain.

“That’s all the songs we have. Sorry.” But you can tell it makes him happy.

“Is that it?” Fienchen asks. And since nobody else is around, she asks Bowie.

“I don’t know. Maybe that was just the opener.”

“Oh…” The night’s already over for her anyway. Zanker’s down there jumping all around for the final song. Fienchen keeps catching a glimpse of his hair in the crowd. Once the band leaves the stage, Zanker disappears, too.

Mono takes a big swig of courage. “My little sister was the only one who made it over the vault today.”

Natalie doesn’t quite get it. Mono doesn’t, either, all of a sudden.

“Your sister?” Natalie asks carefully.

“Yeah, my little sister. Ziska.” Mono takes another drink. “In gym class today. She was as proud as a peacock.”

And Natalie smiles.

Fienchen doesn’t notice the second band either. At some point she spots Zanker again, who never did come back up to the bar. Absently, she taps her foot to the music. Bobs her head.

“Still don’t want to dance?” Bowie asks.

Which is exactly what she should do. To be close to Zanker. To dance next to him. But something holds her back. “It’s not my kind of music,” she says.

Bowie smiles.

Then Fienchen. “Yeah, let’s go,” she says, finally seeing him. Bowie only guesses what she means.

Natalie looks anxiously over at her girlfriend. The guy apparently said something she didn’t want to hear.

“Shit,” Natalie says.

“What’s up?” Mono freaks when he sees Natalie suddenly slide off her stool and grab her bag. Her girlfriend heads for the exit with tears in her eyes, stumbling right past her without even seeing her.

“I think I better go.”

Mono shows that he understands, but then does some really fast thinking. “You doing anything tomorrow?”

Natalie just stares at him. Then, after about forever, she says, “Tomorrow? Yeah, I’m doing something.”

Mono loses another inch.

“But in the afternoon I’m free. Like around four?”

Four suddenly sounds like the best time ever invented.

“Four, great,” Mono says.

“Where should we meet?”

“I’ll give you a call,” Mono says since he can’t think of anything so quickly.

“You have my number?” Natalie asks.

He does.

“Alright,” she says. Then she suddenly remembers her girlfriend is outside in tears. “Okay, see you tomorrow.” Then she turns around and leaves.

I’ve got a date, Mono thinks. With Natalie. Four o’clock. His inner voice sings. Four. Four?! Shit!

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Fienchen tells Bowie. Like it’s any of his business.

And then she’s here, surrounded by walls of tiles sending voices back-and-forth. Voices from the stalls. But she stays, standing there looking in the mirror which suddenly appears before her eyes. She bends over, her hands braced on the sink. Wet porcelain. Then bends some more and asks herself: What are you even doing her, Fienchen? You know it’s always the same. The same glimmer of hope whenever his face appears. She didn’t even dress up. And now she doesn’t have a thing with her to do anything about it. She looks just like she always does. Some mascara is all she put on. The same old clothes, the same old face, and lugging around the same old feelings for Zanker. How lame. If she were a TV show, she easily would’ve zapped herself by now. She might as well forget it. Fienchen hears a toilet flush in one of the stalls, then the echo and a girl’s voice that doesn’t stop talking over another girl who opens the door and keeps talking to somebody else sitting behind some other girl. “Shit, yeah. The bitch is totally fucked up! Coming here and screaming all over the place. What a bitch.” A voice from the stall offers up a “totally”.

Fienchen licks her index finger and wipes away a few crumbs from under her right eye before straightening back up and turning away from her reflection.

His beer’s empty, but Mono acts like it’s no big deal. Bowie looks over towards the door and waits for Fienchen. He sees Mono looking around. He orders another beer and points towards Mono.

Fienchen returns. The band’s long gone. There’s finally a DJ playing while the instruments are being taken down on stage. Fienchen gives herself a shake, then goes onto the dance floor and closes her eyes.

Fienchen stands in the middle of the dance floor with her eyes closed.

Bowie sees her, her fists, her steps, the way she stomps, kicks, bends her body, and how the other girls get out of her way. Zanker slides up to the bar. He goes over to Mono and then up to Bowie. He follows Bowie’s gaze without interest and notices

Fienchen out on the dance floor. He takes a drink, puts his beer back and walks over to her.

Not again, Mono thinks.

Zanker slowly dances his way over to Fienchen. And because she's Fienchen and he's Zanker, she notices even with her closed eyes, even before he even touches her. You know how much I like dancing with you?

Bowie turns back towards the bar.

At some point there's someone else. Who stares at Zanker so long until he finally notices her. She smiles. Zanker sees her and keeps dancing.

"You're a good dancer," she says in his ear a little while later.

"Yeah, I know," says Zanker. He didn't have to take so much as an inch in her direction. Just sit back and wait. As usual.

Conceited, the girl thinks.

Fienchen notices something. She turns around and stops moving. Fienchen gets bumped into and pushes back without looking. Another girl. Suddenly, Fienchen doesn't care about the music anymore. Suddenly, she's back at the bar. She sees her jacket's still there. So's Mono. And Bowie. Somewhere off behind her Zanker's dancing with the next chick. And she even likes the song that's playing. Until now, anyway.

"It's so boring here," Fienchen says, hoping someone can prove her wrong.

"You know what? I think heaven or the afterlife or whatever it's called is a green mountain in the middle of the ocean. With a waterfall and all this fog along the coast," says Bowie, sitting next to Fienchen and staring at the back of the bar. He says it quietly, to spite the noise, the bass, the next group of people ordering drinks right beside him, Zanker's dancing. But Fienchen still hears him, loud and clear, as if he'd said it right in her ear. But Bowie's lips are sealed again by the time she asks herself what she should say. Ask. And when she finally does open her mouth, he takes a quick glance at his beer and at Fienchen. Then gets up, stretches, and goes, "I'm taking off." Like it's no big deal. Like he's going somewhere else or something. Fienchen gives a slight nod. He shoots Zanker a wave, gestures towards Mono, about faces and leaves.