

Translated extract from

**Thomas von Steinaecker**

***Das Jahr, in dem ich aufhörte, mir Sorgen zu machen,  
und anfang zu träumen.***

S. Fischer Verlag

Frankfurt 2012

ISBN 978-3-10-070408-5

pp. 7-15, 109-113, 176-177, 386-389

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***The year in which I stopped worrying and began to  
dream.***

Translated by Ruth Martin

pp.7-15

On the morning of my first day at work in Munich, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2008, I paused in irritation at the bottom of the stairs up to the surface in the Nordfriedhof U-Bahn station. Where the ceiling ended, and with it the warmth that was held in the underground rooms like a memory of summer, the steps were covered with a fine film of snow. Such a sudden cold snap had only happened once or twice since records for the region began. Added to which, the RTL weather fairy (I had always wondered whether her blonde hair had that soft, subtle sheen in real life, or if it was a digital effect) had predicted light cloud cover – not even rain, let alone snow. When I had left my flat in Maxvorstadt, it had been stormy – the wind somewhere between force four and five, I guessed – but dry. Climbing damp stairs in 3-inch heels is an onerous task.

*Gala* says: "Killer heels are ruining Victoria Beckham's health." Angela Braly, née Fick, Managing Director of WellPoint Inc. Insurers and, according to *Forbes*, currently the fifth most powerful woman in the world, says: "After all, I am still a woman, what do you think?" Ellen von Unwerth, celebrity photographer, says: "The higher the heel, the better I feel." My best friend Lisa Miller says: "Step out and shut up."

Outside, the street lamps and the lights in the surrounding buildings created an unhealthy orange twilight, and snowflakes swirled through

the air. On the other side of the inner ring-road I noticed a group of mourners. Around thirty men and women in long dark coats, walking close together, their heads bowed, following the wall of the graveyard, from behind which loomed crosses and the black wings of angels. It was as if I could feel their pain, and I couldn't stop them triggering the memory of how I, too, had stood in a little mortuary chapel some months earlier, in July, just a few kilometres from here. But the mourners didn't turn off towards the chapel; they were heading for the Business Towers complex, a few streets further on. They were on their way to work, like me.

In Germany, an accident happens every four seconds. Over 39% of all fractures in Western Europe occur in fresh snow. Given the size of the group, there was a pretty good chance of a sudden slip, a heavy landing, a costly broken bone. And if it didn't happen to somebody here, it would be someone close by, right now, for sure. It would happen. It happened.

Dark and defiant, the HighLight Towers, with their 33 and 28 floors, rose above the tree-tops and the roofs of the prefabs. This was my future workplace, where already there were more windows lit up than I'd expected. Fortunately, I had been instructed on exactly how to get to the complex from the U-Bahn station, along raised walkways, through tower-blocks and subways under the motorway, otherwise I would have got lost on this morning and wandered along the ring-

road, always with my goal, the towers, in sight, but without hope of ever reaching them.

The offices of CAVERE Munich North were on the 14th floor of the east tower, with the firm's head office on the 19 floors above them. As I pressed the entry buzzer, and the two doors swung open automatically with a hum, I read the names of the other businesses there: almost all asset and tax consultancies, solicitors' offices and advertising firms. This was the company in which CAVERE felt it belonged. The same here as it was in Frankfurt. You think big? So do we.

The external lift contained the usual emergency call button. The warranty plate duly identified the not-too-distant year of construction. The lift rose gently and noiselessly, suggesting well-maintained cables. I fixed my hair, which had suffered on the journey, in my compact mirror. As always, I was wearing foundation, powder, mascara, eye-shadow, eyeliner and very subtle red lipstick. Without foundation, powder, mascara, eye-shadow, eyeliner and lipstick I was not human. I pinched myself hard. My smarting cheeks quickly showed the desired effect: a healthy pink.

Nothing further happened, until the doors opened onto the semi-circular reception area of CAVERE Munich North. Bright stripes of the firm's colours, orange and blue, ran the length of the two curved walls, reminded me of the flag of a country whose name had slipped my mind. Studies have shown that the combination of

orange and blue puts most people in a positive frame of mind. The blue-grey shallow-pile carpet harmonised with the stone-grey six-seater leather suite in front of the flat-screen TV, across which *n-tv*'s red news ticker was scrolling, and with the yellowy-green of the weeping fig (often mistaken for a common fig) growing in a tub. Next to it was the chestnut reception desk, the wood heavy yet seeming effortlessly curved, not so much furniture as a landscape in the room.

The fluttering feeling in my chest which, unusually, had grown rather than dissipated after the Trevilor I'd taken just over an hour ago, instantly disappeared, and my professionalism returned. Sure-footed and smiling, I headed towards the fat, thirty-ish woman in the brown trouser suit.

"Good morning, Frau Aktan," I read from the name plate on the desk, wondering what relationship her immigrant origins had to the ethnicity of the average CAVERE client in Munich North.

"Good morning... um..." She tucked a long black curl behind her ear and tried to hide her irritation, which pleased me. "We're not actually open for business until eight."

"Renate Meißner." I paused to see what effect my status had on her. Nothing. "I'm Renate Meißner. The new Area Deputy Director."

"Area... Deputy Director?"

"Renate Meißner," I repeated.

"That's very odd. I...err...don't know anything about that." She leafed through a desk diary. "Maybe you need the next floor up? Head office, on the next floor up?" She picked up the phone. "One moment, I'll just ask..." Whilst she waited for somebody to answer, she stared me in the eye.

"Is this not the reception for Munich North... Oh, that's upstairs, is it?" I laughed too loudly. Frau Aktan didn't answer me. She was whispering into the receiver.

The orange and blue stripes. The newsreader on the television, talking to the leather chairs and the weeping fig.

I tried to recall what the fourteen on the sign in the lift had looked like, but couldn't. Where was the CAVERE font? Suddenly the room looked much more like an advertising firm than an insurer. So did the Aktan.

"Frau Meißner?" A sonorous baritone from the brightly-lit corridor. Not much more than 60, two heads taller than me, balding, black moustache, glasses, walking hurriedly, a pinstriped suit from Benvenuto, and inside it a wiry, healthy-looking man, Willy Scholz, the director, whose deputy I was. With a 100% confident smile I moved away from the surface of the reception desk, now damp with sweat, which had been supporting me.

"I've just had Strunk on the phone." He revealed the straight, white teeth in his upper jaw – bridges or implants, a painful operation, but

sensible in light of his daily contact with clients – and shook my hand whilst clapping me on the right shoulder. His eyes, studying me for one or two seconds longer than you'd expect. “Our improved package for the fitness centre at the stadium seems to be bearing fruit. They’re talking about four centres now.”

The receptionist, who had ceased to exist, said from one side: “Oh, how embarrassing. I’ve been out of the office for a few days, and my replacement forgot to note it down. Pleased to meet you, and welcome to the company.”

I flashed her a smile that said I forgave her, though in my position, I could have done differently. I have a heart.

Scholz extended his arm towards the corridor in a welcoming gesture, and lowered his head, allowing me to go first. He was wearing a Breitling watch. “Shall we?”

I considered whether I should react to his opening gambit about Strunk who, as I knew from my own enquiries, was the owner of the chain of gyms, but then decided it was advisable to wait until I had the measure of him. Scholz smelt of *Fuel*, the new scent from Diesel, if I remember correctly.

“I’ll give you a quick tour. As I said, in terms of orientation, it’s quite a simple set-up here, really. On the right are the brokers, and the assessors are opposite them in the open-plan office...”

He could just as well have said: "You may have been transferred here as punishment, shall we say, but you'll see, it will have its good side. Deputy Area Director's not bad, and it's a promotion. And, well, we'll get on alright, don't you think?" Or something like that. He would have been engaging with me as a person, and it would have got it over with. But ultimately, the fact he didn't directly address the circumstances of my being here was a positive thing. That allowed us to concentrate on the fundamentals.

He was thinking: "So this is her. This is what she looks like. Well, well, quite fanciable. So she shagged Walter Albrecht. Only he chose his wife over her, and now he's offloaded his ex-mistress on me. But does she have what it takes?" If something of the sort was actually going through his head, would he use the word "shag", "fuck", "have it off", or was he so thoroughly correct that even in his head, in his Franconian dialect, he'd use the expression "have a thing with somebody"?

"12 of them, aren't there?" I offered.

"Absolutely." He looked pleased, as if I had just given him some good news. "I see you've done your homework." In front of the open door to a darkened room: "Your colleagues in brokering. This is Martin Luckner." Outside the closed door next to it: "Serdar Koban..." Luckily I was the only woman amongst the CAVERE North brokers. Three years ago a younger woman came to "strengthen the team" as they say, in



Frankfurt. Tamara Kretschmann. The focus of my male colleagues shifted away from me the moment she arrived. If the two of us passed them in the corridor, their eyes would no longer be on me, but would involuntarily wander to the face, or breasts, or bottom of my colleague next to me. Soon the Frankfurt Area Director started entrusting Tamara Kretschmann with potential male clients in cases where not getting the contract would have hurt the business. In the beginning I underestimated this development – I'm opposed to bitchiness. But I then realised that the counter-measures to which I finally resorted to score points (working more, creative ideas, changing my appearance) were not really having the desired effect.

“...and here's our longest serving member of staff.”

I read the name “Rolf Katzer” on the sign next to an office numbered 1407. It was entirely empty, save for a white desk in the middle with a man kneeling behind it. When he heard us, he got up, a giant of a man with a screwdriver in his hand, his new tie resting on the dome of his pear-shaped belly. Yellowy-brown skin on his face, wrinkles, a chain smoker. I gave him four years, six at most.

Although I recognised Gernot Lindinger, the fourth of the Munich North brokers, from the CAVERE homepage, I pretended surprise: “Herr Katzer?” Scholz blew air through his nose in

amusement, as did the longest-serving staff member, creating a strange valve-sound echo.

"No, thank God. I'm Lindinger. A broker with this splendid firm for the last 20 years." In a strange way, he managed to emphasise "splendid" without indicating whether he meant it ironically. His shortness of breath meant he had to pause between words. Otherwise, a voice that would have been impressive in the past, whether chiming in with general laughter or telling off a subordinate, but now, hoarse and broken, was testament to Lindinger's miserable physical condition. It was possible that Lindinger and the as yet unknown Katzer were swapping offices today for some reason. In the course of the day the new hire would be explained to me, probably a short-term reinforcement for our team.

The longest-serving staff member began: "So you're the new lady? The one who's going to fix everything, eh? Well, I can tell you what the deal is around here..." but Scholz interrupted him: "Alright, Gernot. Let Frau Meißner get her coat off before you pounce on her," and tapped me gently on the shoulder, signalling me to move on. He winked nervously.

"Have a great day! And maybe see you later!" Lindinger's voice at our backs, placing an ambiguous emphasis on "great" and "later". Back in the corridor, we turned round without reaching the end. On the walls there were large photos of groups of well-dressed people at a reception or a

private view, chatting at posier tables. They might even have been art.

“We’ll pay a quick visit to the big boss, if he’s in. Lause. Then I’ll show you your office. The head office of CAVERE Bavaria is just above us, as you know.”

Scholz had suddenly begun brushing imaginary lint off his jacket, which led me to think that head office and Lause were not topics he was entirely comfortable with.

The panoramic windows in the CEO’s office on the 32nd floor made it look even larger than it actually was. A desk made of light grey stone, not marble, with a flat-screen monitor and a phone, and two chairs in front of it, a bookcase of concise dictionaries and two sculptures, probably made of steel, organic, like snail shells or the inside of an ear, otherwise space, emptiness. The huge gaps between the room’s few objects were a sign of power, I thought, as a secretary in a pencil skirt held the door open and we went in.

Lause was lean, around the same age as me, and as tall as I was in heels. He was wearing an Omega watch. Willy Scholz introduced me, bobbing up and down between me and Lause with every sentence. Lause spent two or three seconds longer than was usual studying me with his clear blue gaze, and I could feel a dome of anxiety building around Scholz, as he twitched his folded arms, 20 years older than the CEO, clearly physically superior to him, but at every conference, every request for a final sign-off,

confronted with the fact: I haven't made it as far as you. As he bobbed, I tried to maintain my own professional manner by doing an appraisal, as I did every so often – just for fun, and to stay in practice. How much were the lives of the two men standing in front of me worth? The points to be considered were the average life-expectancy of a German man in autumn 2008, their hierarchical positions and the associated health risks, plus the premiums paid up to this date, for which it must be assumed that a position further up the hierarchy made a more comprehensive insurance policy and thus a higher premium necessary. Allowing for the fact that Lause hadn't been in his position more than five years, and had thus only taken out a more comprehensive policy during this period, the worth of Willy Scholz's would be in six figures, while that of the CEO would be a good deal lower. I hurriedly assured them both how pleased I was that, and so on.

In the lift back down, Scholz had lost his relaxed demeanour. He looked exhausted. To the chrome wall opposite, he whispered: "So. Now you've met the CEO. He's a good man. We all hope he'll get the business back on track. Sure you're familiar with the quarterly figures. And that's not even *our* fault. *We're* the ones bringing in the profits. Munich turns a profit. And Frankfurt gambles it away... As I said, the actuaries there..." He shook his head and paused. "Please wipe what I just said from your mind." It might have been a coincidence that he looked at me as he said the

word “wipe”, but I thought I saw through his glasses and his disappointed brown eyes into his soul, whatever you want to imagine by that.

[...]

pp. 109-113

On my way home that Thursday or Friday evening, there was a warm downdraft blowing at great speed from the Alps and over the foothills to Munich. In the city lights, the clouds above my head shimmered magenta.

“Did you see the look on their ugly mugs when they had to ask for help?” The voice belonged to one of the Thomases or Stefans from IT. That was what about half of all the employees there were called, as an estimate. “Their days are numbered now, I’d say...” Thomas/Stefan looked over at the bank we were passing.

“People will change the way they think, I’m fairly sure about that,” I said. “Ethics will start coming into play again. Honesty will come into play again. It’s a kind of new beginning... Like it was in ‘89, in a way...” I was no longer paying attention to Thomas/Stefan; it was as if I was talking to myself. It’s even possible that this conversation on my way home was really just an inner dialogue.

In the tram, on that Friday evening of the 44<sup>th</sup> week of the year, or on one of the other evenings that week, I wondered for a minute whether it would make sense to invest the small

inheritance my mother had left me in gold. I had parked it in my savings account, and thinking about the worst case scenario, the possibility of which didn't seem all that unlikely, made me feel nauseous: everything she had spent decades working for might suddenly not even be enough for a small used car, or a two-week package holiday to Lanzarote. The shop windows were decorated for Christmas, and as the tram passed them, the models on their posters gazed at me from a time that had become distant in the space of a few days – another epoch.

At home, with a Caesar salad on my lap, having lined up the seven white Lyrica tablets beside me on the parquet floor at precisely equal intervals, I switched on the Sony that Walter had given me last January. I realised once again that I always watched TV at those times when the programme makers had a fundamentally different average viewer in mind, one who was expecting comedy or action. Watching the report on the earthquake in northern Pakistan on the late news, I froze for a moment with my fork in front of my open mouth; but as it became clear that this was at most a Medium Catastrophe, which would have no impact on the insurance business here – none of my clients had real estate in Pakistan – I finished the salad. There was also the fact that the pictures were poor quality, and the scenes of Pakistanis scrabbling through the rubble were interchangeable. Any of them could have been repeat showings of images filmed years ago in the

Iraq war. I tried to empathise with a woman my own age, clad in a burka, who was beating her chest in anguish and making shrill noises. I was conscious of her hopeless situation. Nonetheless, I found it impossible to create an emotional connection to her. I switched over. Politicians were struggling to retain their composure, and the inhabitants of Klagenfurt were bursting into tears in the queue for the book of condolence, mourning Jörg Haider's accidental death in the Austrian accents I loved, and this had slightly more effect on me. In the end, it might have been midnight, I couldn't get the phone call and the deal with Utz out of my head, and searched in my DVD folder for the disc that I had kept asking Walter to burn for me. The sight of extraordinary XXL Catastrophes from the last, say, 25 years usually made me feel calmer. Number 1: 9/11; number 2: the 2004 tsunami; number 3: Hurricane Katrina; number 4: the second Iraq war, and so on.

Now and again the images of the worst events reminded me of the moments when I saw them for the first time, incredulous, gripped by an unaccustomed excitement, in front of the television with Lisa, with my mother, calling my brothers, or with people who I hardly ever see socially, like work colleagues. On the afternoon of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, when for some reason I was at home – the World Trade Centre was smoking, but hadn't yet collapsed – the doorbell rang in my flat in Frankfurt. It was a man in a

suit, asking if he could come in and watch television with me, he'd just got out of work and lived in Hanau, but there was only one thing he wanted to do right now: watch TV. We spent the hours that followed together on my sofa, exchanging theories on who could be behind the attacks, what would happen next, etc., laughing, lapsing into silence. At one point the man wiped a tear from his cheek, entirely without shame, right next to me. In the evening he said goodbye, thanked me again, and we hugged. On days like these everything that, until then, had seemed an indispensable component of my life, loses its meaning from one second to the next. It's as if gravity were suspended, and with it the law of probability. What the future will bring, what will happen tomorrow or the day after, is unknown.

On this Friday or Saturday evening I chose the 9/11 chapter on Walter's DVD. At the start of the new century, to be honest, I'd been a little disappointed that the first year of the millennium hadn't seemed radically different from the one before. All year we had been living for the date change: 2000. But when the big parties were over and the months passed without any events worth mentioning, it suddenly seemed to me as if from then on we were living in an endless present, as if the future had vanished. It wasn't just me, I think, for whom that bright September day came like the belated fulfilment of a promise of something big, earth-shattering.



And so it was that on this evening I was sitting on my mattress, the empty salad bowl beside me, the television giving it a blue sheen, as if it was lit up from inside, and for a moment I felt the desire for a new, spectacular disaster that would bring everything to a standstill.

[...]

pp.176-177

The average German woman, born in the 1960s and in full-time employment, spends a total of 14,560 hours of her life shopping, and 864 hours at the hairdresser's. She spends 67 hours being afraid of enclosed spaces, 107 hours afraid of getting glass or splinters in her feet while walking barefoot, 162 hours being afraid of spiders and other animals, 278 hours afraid of getting grease stains on her dress. She spends 304 hours being afraid of somebody noticing she's farted, 340 hours afraid of losing her hair, 365 hours afraid that her hairstyle isn't sitting right. She spends 420 hours being afraid she's pregnant, 422 hours afraid she's left the iron or the oven on. She spends 432 hours being afraid of having bought the wrong present, 588 hours afraid of getting cancer, 645 hours afraid of being late, 827 hours afraid of having a car accident. The average German woman, born in the 1960s and in full-time employment, spends 945 hours being afraid of not finding a job, or of losing a job, 976 hours

being afraid of not being able to have children, 1002 hours afraid of being alone or remaining alone, 2190 hours being afraid of falling. She spends 2666 hours being afraid of getting a cold, 4899 hours afraid of something happening to her child, 5361 hours afraid of getting or being too fat. She spends around 14,559 hours being afraid of death.

[...]

pp.386-389

The same day, I moved from the Hotel Mars to a little bed-and-breakfast called *Nadezda* on the outskirts of the city, recommended by the concierge. Since then I've heard no more from Medov. I had a conference call with my brothers, explaining that I'd lost my job and was going to take some time out in Samara. I asked them if they knew that Grandma hadn't died in that car accident at all, but had been in contact with our mother until the 80s. After a short pause, Erich said: "Ah, right. That. You didn't know?" Mum had told him and Erwin shortly before she died. They'd decided not to speak to me about "the issue" at first, on the assumption that I'd have heard it from Mum anyway, and after the "upset of the last few months" it would have stirred up too many emotions for me. They hadn't investigated what had become of Grandma. What was done couldn't be undone, in any case. Maybe she was

still alive somewhere, who knew. And who cared. I said nothing about the suspicion I'd had that had turned out to be wrong. In parting, Erich said: "Let me know when you're back, when you're here again." Erwin said: "Yes." It was clear that what they meant was also what they said.

The CAVERE number, with an extension I didn't recognise, appeared on my Blackberry screen another three or four times. At the start of January, Willy called to bring me the news of Martin's suicide. He seemed composed, and spoke about the option of early retirement, which in the long run could be a positive thing for him. Lisa sent me a text. ":-/?". I didn't answer her. I think I'll meet up with her as soon as I get back to Munich. Then we'll see if and how we can carry on being friends.

Here, in my little room in the B&B, I've started to shed some light on this past year by writing about it – about what happened, what happened to me. It's a diversion. It makes me happy. I'm considering whether, after a thorough re-draft of course, to send these notes to Frau Wasserkind, who wanted to know who I was – though her reason for that no longer exists.

I'm wearing a thick men's jumper with a zig-zag pattern and jeans with no label that I bought in the city centre. The only radiator in my room, which is very simply furnished in light wood, is no match for the cold outside.

Today is 16<sup>th</sup> January 2009, a Friday, 10:44am. I sit at my desk and look up from the

pages of the pad that I've spent the last few weeks scribbling in. At first it felt strange writing by hand again. I don't want to buy a laptop here, because I don't know what the future holds. I'm trying to budget. The tip of my ballpoint pen has pressed through onto the paper I'm leaning on. The sentences are repeated there a second and third time, each one more unclear, until they're just lines and dots that mean nothing.

I'm having more and more frequent visions of myself in the near future, and they are something I am permitting myself. I'm sitting in a park. It's summer. I look at the green tones of the grass. I can hear the insects, the people around me lying on towels, half naked, talking to each other. I'm sitting in this park for no particular reason. Or I'm eating. A steak, potatoes, beans. I'm not thinking about the calories, I'm thinking about the way my teeth are tearing through the fibres of the meat, how my tongue turns the beans around in my mouth, the taste of the potatoes, floury, buttery. Or I'm walking through a large city. I cross busy streets, look into shop windows, watch passers-by. I have no goal. The walking itself is enough for me. Or I'm meeting a man. He sees right through me, I see through him. I love the person I see. Everything about him. In spite of everything. He loves the person he sees. Everything about her. In spite of everything. From then on, there is a life before, and a life after. The one before had meaning only sometimes. The one after often has meaning.

In all probability I will not see the year 2067, the year of my hundredth birthday. The world population will hit seven billion in 2011; in 2050 it will be nine billion. The next football World Cup will be played in 2010. Germany will be in recession until the end of that year. In 2013 the next general election will take place. By 2025 there will be 1.5 million unemployed in Germany. By 2040 the North Pole will have melted. Venice will have disappeared. The life expectancy of a girl born in Germany in 2008 is 76.9 years. Every second, 1.75 people die, and 3 people are born. My mother died at 64. If I take her genes and her age at death as a guide, I have at least another 22 years left.

I have decided on a plan for the next few weeks. Next to my manuscript lies a sheet of paper on which I will list the people who I should speak to at home, important firms, deadlines. It's still blank. Below me, outside my window, stretches a snowy field. I think the first thing I will do is put my pen down for today, wrap up warm, as my mother always put it, and go down the stairs and along the street, into the woods. In just a few minutes I will have made a set of tracks across the field, one step at a time. Sometimes in the last few days I have gone and crouched in the thicket. The trunks of the trees sway under the weight of the snow and creak in the wind, but there's no trace of the storm amongst the brushwood, behind the bushes. Yes, you can sit

there with your eyes closed – and imagine spring  
is on its way. *Vesna*.