

## Sample translation

### **The Comfort of Revenge (Der Trost der Rache) by Wilfried Steiner**

Translated by Jackie Smith

#### **ONE**

My favourite quote on the subject of infinity comes from a conversation between Hamlet and his father.

Not the Prince of Denmark and the ghost, but the cartoon character Hågar the Horrible and his son.

The two of them are standing in a field gazing up at the firmament.

‘Looking at the stars sure makes you think, doesn’t it, Dad?’ says Hamlet.

‘Yeah, it does,’ Hagar replies. ‘They’re so little and puny and we’re so big.’

Karin presented me with the comic strip as a gift once, mounted behind glass in a pretty frame. I suppose it was meant as a hint that she was starting to find my nights out on the balcony a bit uncivilised. But perhaps she also secretly had some sympathy for the way I marvelled at the heavens, and saw in me something of the boy Hamlet, in his tiny Viking helmet, trying to get his father to understand that there’s something more out there. Something majestic and awe-inspiring stretching way beyond his hopelessly limited horizons.

My telescope isn’t a very big one, and apart from the Orion Nebula, the craters of the moon and the outlines of the Andromeda Galaxy, I can’t make out a great deal. But if I point it at any random section of the sky, I get to see the twinkling of hundreds of tiny hot spots on a black cloth, or occasionally the

glowing trail of a shooting star, and feel inexplicably consoled and removed from the trials and tribulations of everyday life. Karin has always thought of me as an escapist, pure and simple. Well I'm sorry but who doesn't like to escape from the reality around them once in a while? It's my doggedness that gets on her nerves, the way I carefully note the position of Jupiter's four largest moons in an A3 notebook on every clear night without fail, even during the February frosts: the small, round blob that is Jupiter, the four dots of its four moons, Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto. I can't sleep until I've mapped their distance from the planet and angle to it, recorded the date and time on my drawing, and checked the sketch several times, starting again from scratch if I spot a mistake, until I've got everything just right. When Jupiter is in a position where it can't be observed – a situation that can go on for months at a time – I become agitated. Karin, as a therapist, has no shortage of nasty expressions for this, an *anal personality* being one of the milder ones. They're always delivered with an indulgent smile, though.

Yet now, sitting here in this inhospitable place, I'm wondering whether the past tense wouldn't be more fitting. Who knows when I'll see them again, Karin and my telescope.

I was ten when I was given my first book on astronomy. Entitled simply *Stars*, it was this tiny paperback with blurry photos and skewed star charts that first sparked my fascination with the cosmos. I learned that there were fixed stars, planets, galaxies and nebulas, that a matchbox filled with matter from a white dwarf would weigh seven tonnes on Earth, and that the circumference of the red supergiant, Betelgeuse, was greater than the length of Mars's orbit around the sun. My father's friend – Uncle Martin, I used to call him – handed me the parcel with a secretive look, as if it contained treasure maps that only he and I would ever get to set eyes on. From that day on, every time he visited us, I would make him spend half an hour on the balcony with me. I would stretch out my hand and pinpoint dots of light, proudly reciting names, distances, colours and spectral classes. He would nod without saying a word and clap me on the shoulder. At some point he stopped visiting us, and I was convinced it was my fault. It was only

later that I found out that my father's falling-out with Uncle Martin had more to do with my mother than with me. But the story proper begins with the death of my father five months ago. It all happened very quickly. One evening he phoned and asked if he could come over – and right away.

He had a tired look about him. At first I thought he was still feeling a bit worn out from the massive feast he'd laid on three days earlier in celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday. He'd invited one guest for every year of his life. He'd donned his old leather biker jacket over an open-necked white shirt and kept his guests entertained with his black humour until two in the morning. Later, though, after Karin and I, by a joint effort, had carried him up the steps to his apartment, he was seized by a fit of melancholy and called for my mother, who had been dead for ten years. He then succumbed to several bouts of vomiting before we laid him in bed and made him comfortable.

'Adrian,' he said, sitting at our kitchen table a quarter of an hour after his call, 'there's something I have to tell you.' Karin knew straight away that something ominous had happened. My father was hugely fond of her, and if he ever made a point of addressing me individually – an attempt to seek solace among his blood relatives, of whom he had always been wary when in sound health – it was a sure sign of how helpless he felt.

'I went to see Stefan yesterday and today,' he said. 'He checked me over from top to toe. You know the routine: gastroscopy, endoscopy, the usual torture methods.' He drew a deep breath and took a sip of the cognac Karin had set down in front of him. He had wild, arching wisps of white hair sticking out sideways above his ears. For a moment he reminded me of the photo of a tamarin monkey I had seen once in an illustrated book about the Amazon.

'My nausea isn't caused by poor diet. Or by alcohol. It's caused by a shitty little lump that's parked itself in my pancreas.'

Karin, who had just been arranging a garnish of melon on a plate of ham, dropped into the chair next to me. I could tell she was battling to hold back the tears, but still a sob escaped her.

'Hey, hey, it's not that bad,' said my father, patting the back of her hand.

‘The old oncologist who ends up struck down by cancer, what a joke!’

‘How long have you got?’ I asked helplessly, earning myself a withering look from Karin.

‘Three months,’ my father said. ‘Assuming the old quack isn’t mistaken and I don’t confound the experts by pulling off a miraculous recovery.’ He burst out laughing, like some cocky youth proud of his attempts to impress a group of adults by spouting obscene language.

Karin managed to regain control of her facial muscles and smiled. But she couldn’t stem the tears.

‘We’ll help you with everything. Whatever you need,’ she said bravely.

‘I know, sweetie,’ said my father. ‘When I’m completely at Stefan’s mercy and can’t speak any more, can you please remind him of his promise.’

‘What promise?’

Another sip of cognac.

‘It’s just one word.’ He glanced around the kitchen and flared his nostrils. ‘It smells unpleasantly fresh in here. You haven’t stopped smoking, have you, you old scaredy-cat?’

‘No, no.’ I fished the pack out of my pocket and held it out to him. ‘It’s just we’ve started airing the place more.’

He pulled out a cigarette, snapped the filter off and lit up.

‘What’s the latest on the stars? Jupiter got any new additions to its brood? Or is it still the same four brats?’

I don’t know why I said what I said. Karin would no doubt have an apt name for it. A *possessive instinct*, a *fixation*, whatever.

‘Jupiter’s a planet, not a star. And there are more brats appearing all the time. It’s up to 67 moons now.’

‘But you only ever get to see four!’ He laughed and coughed at the same time.

I couldn’t answer because Karin had reached over and clamped her slender fingers over my mouth.

‘What’s the word?’ she asked.

‘Morphine,’ my father replied.

The next morning I spoke to Stefan Höller, an oncologist like my father, and my father's best friend. He had taken over as head of the department at the General Hospital after my father retired.

I came across Stefan walking down the dark corridor of the clinic towards me with an absent expression on his face. The moment he spotted me, his face turned sombre.

'I'm so sorry,' he said by way of greeting.

'How bad is it?' I asked.

He took me by the arm, led me into the nurses' room and sat me down on a chair.

'It's a particularly aggressive tumour,' he said. 'We can't operate, and your father has categorically refused chemotherapy.'

'He's going to die,' I said in a hollow voice.

Stefan nodded and laid a hand on my forearm.

'He can stay at home another one or two weeks, but after that the pain will force him to come to us.'

We took my father on excursions to his favourite places. It was a sun-drenched late autumn. Karin drove, he sat next to her, and I was in the back. Semmering, the Wachau valley, the forests.

Once, late in the evening, we got stopped by the police. Karin wound down the window, and the officer leant inside. My father grabbed him by the collar.

'Piss off,' he said. 'I'll have you know this is a taxi for the dead.'

We ended up standing by the side of the road for an age while Karin explained everything.

For a long time, my father resisted going into hospital. When the pain came, he waged war on it with the pharmacy's entire arsenal. On one occasion, as he sat on the edge of the bed with his face in a grimace, I put my arm around him to try and gently convince him it was time, but he brusquely pushed me away.

'I'm not going to let myself be deported by my own children,' he barked.

Then, after a moment's reflection, he took my hand and whispered in my ear:

'You know, don't you, that once I'm there I'm never coming out again.'

What most put him off going into the clinic was the fact it was so familiar to him. Up until his departure ten years previously, he had been one of Vienna's foremost cancer specialists, and even afterwards, he was regularly contacted by younger colleagues seeking his opinion. He tended to keep his true thoughts to himself.

'I've watched so many people fight it, but nearly all of them were fighting a losing battle,' he said towards the end of his birthday party, when there were only a handful of guests still sitting at the table and his eyes already had a glazed look.

'The worst thing is that you so often have to make them suffer in vain. They cling to it, they accept it, because they'd rather vomit and writhe and cry out than die quickly. The humiliation of clutching at straws, no matter how flimsy: that's what chemo's about when it comes down to it. I pray to God, even though I don't believe in him any more, that I drop dead of a stroke one day.'

That's how he was talking three days before his diagnosis. It was just two months later, in December, that he gave up the fight.

At the moment of his death, I was sitting by his bed. He had been lying peacefully on his back staring at the ceiling, when suddenly a jolt passed through his body and a rattling sound started in his throat. His upper body jerked up off the bed, but only for a moment, before he slumped back down and started gasping for air. The rattle grew louder and slower. I pressed the button for the nurse. My father lifted his head and looked at me. I wasn't sure whether he recognised me. His head sank back on the pillow. His mouth fell open and a gurgling sound emerged. From one moment to the next his face changed colour, as if someone had laid a thin film of wax over it. He's turning yellow, I thought. His pupils rolled back, his eyes were now just two white holes. His gaze had turned itself through 180 degrees, away from the world and towards an abyss invisible to the living.

The nurse flew in, gave a shout, and ran back into the corridor. Stefan found me next to my dead father, racked by sobs which only subsided when he wrapped his muscular arms around me and hugged me so tight I couldn't breathe.

I've often talked to Karin about that moment. It wasn't just the grief over my father that had shaken me so deeply. His patronising manner had always prevented us getting really close, and my love for him was tainted by anger and disappointment. Perhaps it was the encounter with Death itself that had sent me reeling. That sense of horror. You see it sometimes at funerals, when a mourner standing by the open grave is suddenly overcome by a shaking that speaks of something more than their pain at the loss of the loved one whose remains lie six feet down in their wooden box. When people who, a moment earlier, had been discussing the food on offer at the funeral reception suddenly feel their blood run cold at the sight of clods of earth landing on the coffin.

It was as if the Bird of Death had forced its feathered head out through my father's eye sockets, perched on his forehead while it unfurled to full size, taken flight, swooped over my head and clipped me with its yellow wings as it passed.

When someone dies, we always die with them, Karin said. She regularly had clients who couldn't get over the death of a parent, whether or not they'd been close. Our parents, she said, are the final barrier between us and death, and their passing causes our denial mechanism to break down and brings home the inevitability of our own death. That sounded convincing. But no, on second thoughts, it sounded professional. I constantly had to take care not to slip into the role of one of her patients.

'What do you really think?' I asked her. We were sitting side by side on the sofa, staring at the blank television screen.

'I think it was to do with your rage.'

'How do you mean? Of course I was angry with him, but...'

'Not with him,' interrupted Karin, 'with yourself. Because, to the very last, you never got around to saying to him what you'd always wanted to say. And then it was too late.'

Psychology, psychology.

For a moment I thought I heard my father's booming laugh somewhere behind me.

'Coward!' he shouted. 'Coward, coward!'

'Did you know,' I said to Karin, 'that Hamlet's father was called Hamlet too?'

But there *was* something I could offer in reply to my father's ghost. The idea came to me gradually one night as I was lying in bed like a plank of wood, vainly longing for sleep. Hazy at first, then more sharply defined. It was a strange kind of certainty, as banal as it was surprising.

I would die too. *Inescapably, inevitably*, and all those other words you use to express a dawning realisation. Resistance is futile.

Yet the revelation did not, in that moment, produce in me a sense of resignation. On the contrary, something in the unsparing nature of it spurred me on, made me take a proper look at my own life.

There were a number of things I wanted to get under my belt before I died. Realise some of my long-held dreams, for instance. A wish come true is a small victory over transience. Or something like that.

This realisation would please Karin, of that I was sure. I shook her gently. Then a bit harder. She opened her eyes.

'I know now what I have to do,' I said.

'What time is it?' Karin asked groggily.

'Not too late. Karin, there's a dream I've been harbouring for ages and I'm going to make it come true.'

'Can't it wait till morning?' She rolled over onto her side and went back to sleep.

I stayed sitting upright in bed until the alarm sounded.

I was going to go on a little trip. Ever since its inauguration, I had dreamed of seeing *Gran Telescopio Canarias*. It was located at the Roque de los Muchachos observatory on La Palma, and its mirror, at 10.4 metres in diameter, was the largest in the world.

I would head there as soon as I possibly could.

There was no place on earth you could get closer to heaven.

## TWO

The photographs that impressed me the most in my first ever book about stars were from the largest reflecting telescope in the world at that time, the one on Mount Palomar in California. Its mirror, at five metres' diameter, was only half the size of the *Gran Telescopio Canarias* mirror. Mount Palomar opened in 1949, El Roque in 2007. Nearly sixty years of advances in astronomy had resulted in barely more than a doubling in capability. That doesn't sound like much, compared to the rate of scientific progress in other areas. It's only when you compare the photos from the two that the scale of the improvement becomes apparent.

I'll never forget the shiver of excitement that went right through me the first time I saw an image of the Orion Nebula. Up until then, the only fog I'd had any concept of was the impenetrable grey mass that would sometimes float up from the ground and creep up the windscreen on car journeys, making my father nervous, while my mother urged him over and over to 'Slow down!' Never before had I beheld colours and shapes like this. I struggled to find words for them then and I still do. A crimson haze enveloping a teeming throng of tiny creatures formed of light. The folds of a pink nightie like the one my mother used to wear when she wanted to be alone with my father – but with a ghastly pelican's head protruding from the head hole. The splayed limbs of a toad or lizard, with a viper's head sliding towards them; a screaming human face with seven eye openings, each one gouged vertically into the black flesh. And the entire spectacle bathed in a kind of all-engulfing hot air in which everything was suspended.

I now know the scientific names for many of the phenomena you see in M42, but when I leaf through my old book from 1972, carefully, for fear of it falling apart, I still hear echoes of those first croaky voices from space, feel a trace of that shock of pleasure that gripped me back then. I could be here and somewhere else at the

same time, disappear into a world where gigantic beings formed of gas and dust spread their wings to carry me away, far away from the things that frightened me.

When I look through the lens of my balcony telescope, the Orion Nebula appears as no more than a purple smear, but that in no way detracts from the pleasure I derive from seeing it afresh every night.

The alarm bleeped at last.

Once Karin had got up and had an espresso, she was ready to give me her full attention. You had to take care not to wake her too early; she hated mornings, and never opened her practice before eleven o'clock.

'I'm not human,' she used to say 'until I've had my first coffee. I'm nothing but a blob of biomass floating around in the primordial soup.'

I told her my plan.

She listened with interest; from time to time I noticed the flicker of a smile on her lips. When I'd said my piece, I looked at her with bated breath, but all she came out with was: 'Good idea.' I'd been braced for some kind of ironic comment, so I breathed a heartfelt 'thank you!' and kissed her on the forehead. She tilted her head up until our mouths were only millimetres apart. 'May I come too?' she asked. I hugged her and nodded for longer than was necessary, my chin rhythmically bumping her back.

She extricated herself. 'We'll talk more later. My arachnophobe is waiting.'

Karin's psychotherapy practice had gone from strength to strength in the last few years. At not even forty, she was known in Vienna as an eminent authority on mediation and supervision. She would have been perpetually booked up had it not been for the fact that she made a point of keeping a certain number of sessions free for her 'special protégés'. That was the name she gave to clients who had been referred to her by her friends at the social services department, whom she generally treated for a nominal fee. Word of this got around, earning her a certain kudos among her colleagues, and so her reputation spiralled steadily up. There was much discussion of her methods: although she had undergone the traditional

'training analysis,' in her work she practised a highly unusual mix of therapies, from individual psychology to character analysis, from family therapy to biodynamics. This wild eclecticism had earned her the nickname 'the Frank Zappa of psychology' among her colleagues. But the man she most revered was Wilhelm Reich. She admired his early work, especially *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, as well as his tireless political efforts to promote sexual liberation. The later phase of his work, when he began building his notorious orgone accumulators – which in fact were nothing more than simple wooden boxes lined with metal – and firing orgone canons at clouds to generate rain, produced in her a sense of sad sympathy rather than derision. She liked to tell the story of the time the psychoanalyst Edith Gyömrői went for a walk with Wilhelm Reich and Otto Fenichel. 'He went on and on about his new theory, the magic energy of orgone,' Gyömrői is said to have reported. 'Fenichel and I didn't dare to look at each another, and had cold shivers. Then Reich suddenly stopped and said: 'Children, if I were not so certain of what I am working on, it would appear to me as a schizophrenic fantasy.' Karin never related these kinds of anecdotes to her mediation clients from the world of business, whom she secretly couldn't abide. Instead she charged them extortionate fees, which they paid without batting an eyelid.

My own contribution to the family budget was more modest. My attempts, in my youth, to earn a living by selling my paintings and drawings didn't work out. Probably because, in my artistic endeavours as well, I couldn't get away from my obsession with all things astral. My visions of colliding galaxies or dying hypernovas elicited at best a little cough, a mystified pat on the shoulder, or a thin-lipped smile from seasoned observers. For a while I wanted to be an art teacher, before my pedagogical impulse abruptly evaporated. By chance I landed an administrative job in Municipal Department MA7, where I was involved in discussions surrounding the awarding of grants to artists. If someone had told me at the age of eighteen that I would end up, at fifty, in a lousy civil servant's job, they'd have had a lyric by The Who hurled back at them: *I hope I die before I get old.*

But that was the way it was, and our lives trickled along unspectacularly, but harmoniously. No one could possibly have foreseen what consequences our little stargazing expedition was to have. The events that unfolded took us completely unawares. They swept us along, or rather they engulfed us.

When, like now, I find myself staring at the door for hours at a time, I sometimes expect my father suddenly to enter the room, sprightly as anything, flanked by two men in white coats who proceed to inform me that the psychological experiment is now over and I am free to go.

And now the door really does open. Someone has brought me some food. It's a green slop with soggy chunks of white bread floating in it. Pea soup, at a guess.

Once in a while I ask myself whether I would've come here if I'd known what was going to happen to us.

I don't know. I hope I would.

### THREE

On the evening following the night when I had arrived at my decision, Karin arrived home later than usual. One of her clients had suffered a crisis and Karin had offered him a double session.

‘Alone at last with my very own neurotic,’ she called from the door, flung her bag into a corner, rushed up to me and hugged me.

Later, when we were sitting at the kitchen table eating the spaghetti I’d cooked for her as a surprise, which had gone a bit wrong, she seemed exhausted and despondent.

‘Sometimes I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing,’ she said, pushing the pasta around the plate.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, gesturing at her plate. At first she didn’t understand what I was getting at, then she stood up without a word, fetched herself a yoghurt from the fridge and sat back down.

‘You don’t get what I’m talking about, do you?’

‘Why don’t you just explain?’

She spooned the yoghurt into her mouth, before looking up.

The hand holding the yoghurt pot hovered motionless above the table.

‘Lately, more and more, I keep getting the feeling that I’m on the wrong side.’

‘But why? You help so many people, a lot of them virtually for free. What could possibly be wrong with that?’

Karin lobbed the pot in a high arc across the kitchen and into the bin.

‘All I do is patch them up. They come to me completely and utterly overwhelmed by the merciless laws of the jungle out there. Burnt out, bullied, outsourced lives full of anger and despair. After a few hours with me they’ve calmed down again and don’t draw attention to themselves any more. I’m helping the system, not the person.’

‘You’re too hard on yourself.’ I picked up the plate, tipped the spaghetti into the bin, went and stood behind Karin and massaged her shoulders.

‘How do you think *I* feel? All I do is arrange a few handouts.’

‘Well at least you’re supporting artists,’ she said.

‘I just give them the money they’re due anyway. I’m just one more worker in the belly of Leviathan.’

She sighed. ‘Hmm, maybe we’re both wasting our lives. But at least you’ve got your Big Bang.’

I sat down beside her and laid my hand on her cheek.

‘You were really fond of him, weren’t you?’

She nodded and looked away.

We were silent for a few minutes. I went and sat opposite her again. She dragged her fingers through the thicket of her blond hair several times as if removing cobwebs. Then she made a V-shape out of her palms, propped her head in it and looked at me. The pale grey of her irises shimmered imperceptibly. I knew that look. It sliced through my outer shell like a hot knife through butter. Karin Rauch, the woman with the X-ray eyes.

‘So you’re taking up travelling then?’

There it was, the gentle mockery I’d been expecting earlier. I could see where it was coming from. I basically regarded travel as a plague introduced by the bored middle classes. Not a very original thought, but it fitted conveniently with my reluctance to engage in the routines that a change of location entails. Hearing the word ‘packing’ was itself enough to make me feel nauseous and headachy on the spot. The perverse process of stowing your most essential possessions, which at home you had readily to hand, in suitcases so that you could transport them several hundred miles to the south, take them out and put them down somewhere where you were bound not to find them again! And for what? Merely so as to force the residents of this place, which happens to be by the sea or in the mountains, to conceal their understandably hostile attitude towards tourists behind a mask of subservience. And to make matters worse, the invading hordes would refer to their victims as *Einheimische* or ‘locals’, a vile word that in German conjures up images of jam jars and pickled vegetables, institutions for children with special needs, or specimens preserved in formaldehyde and put on

show in the display cases of dilapidated museums to be gawped at by the inquisitive.

The so-called holiday, I had once announced to Karin, was nothing but a veiled form of conquest. Neocolonialism masquerading as enlightened interest.

Karin thought that was a bit far-fetched; she was keen to point out how stimulating it was to meet new people on your travels. I had to disagree with her. What was so stimulating about engaging in hours of deadly small talk with complete strangers, if there's even a single Cortázar or Julian Barnes novel you haven't yet read?

But you can read on the beach, Karin argued. Why would I want to do that, though, if I find myself having to shovel out handfuls of trapped sand each time I turn the page? Not only that, my body has a bad reaction to the combination of sun, sand and salt, with symptoms ranging from conjunctivitis to the early stages of shingles.

Karin claims that behind my liberal façade I'm hiding a sprawling web of fears and prejudices, like an old piece of furniture which, beneath its polished veneer, is all eaten away with woodworm. And so I was back in a psychological trap again.

'Yes,' I said. 'I'm taking up travelling. And I'm thrilled you're coming with me.'

She smiled. 'I wouldn't want to miss the chance to witness my husband casting off his old hang-ups. If not on my account, then at least on account of the stars.'

'You've got the wrong end of the stick,' I began, but Karin immediately interrupted me.

'I wasn't really being serious,' she said, stroking my shin with her toes. 'When are you thinking of going?'

'I have to get everything organised first. Look for flights and a hotel. And most importantly contact the observatory. After all, I don't actually know whether they even admit amateur astronomers.'

‘Right, you’d better find out then. But don’t take too long about it. I can’t wait to close the practice for a few weeks.’

‘I’ll make a start in the morning.’

‘Great,’ said Karin. ‘And you’d better start packing while you’re at it, just to be sure.’

Translated by Jackie Smith