



**Mischa Mangel**

**A Crack of Air**

Novel

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Sample translation by Caroline Waight

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Monsieur T.'s life cannot really be told in full. His statement is missing.

– Olivia Rosenthal: *We're Not Here to Disappear*

The key is the whole house. Full stop.

– Michael Lentz: *Dictation*



 YOU ARE IN A CABIN, IN THE DEVIL'S CABIN

██████████ The relationship between Frau ██████████ and Herr ██████████ produced a child by the name of ██████████, born on ██████████. After the birth, the child was placed in the joint care of both parents. In August ██████████ the parents separated. The child's father was able to stay in touch with his son only sporadically, and there were periods when contact was cut off altogether. The mother began to exhibit symptoms of psychosis after the birth, with episodes occurring in phases from March ██████████ as well as early ██████████. Frau ██████████ terminated several courses of psychiatric treatment, removed ██████████ from nursery and withdrew from the outside world.

There once was a mother who had a little boy of seven, who was so pretty and good that no one who saw him could help but be fond of him; and she loved him above all else in the world. One day it happened that he suddenly fell ill, and God took him to himself; and the mother could find no solace, and wept tears day and night. Soon afterwards, however, once he had been buried, the child appeared by night in the places where he had once sat and played in life; when the mother wept, he wept also, and at daybreak he had vanished. But when his mother would not stop crying, he came one night in the little white shroud in which he had been laid in his coffin, with his garland about his head, and he sat at the foot of her bed, and spoke. "Ah, mother, cease your crying, or I shall never sleep in my coffin, for my shroud will not dry because of all your tears that fall upon it." At this the mother was afraid, and wept no more. And the second night the child came again, holding a little light in his hand, and said, "Look, now my shroud is almost dry, and I can rest in my grave." Then the mother entrusted her sorrow unto God, and bore it quietly and patiently, and the child came no more, but slept in his little bed beneath the earth.

██████ The photo shows the baby on its side, in a cot, its eyes closed, its hand to its face. The gentle pressure of the thumb against the cheek, the slight swell. A few dark hairs on its head. The baby is covered: a white blanket, voluminous, as though inflated. The onesie is a sunflower-yellow material, fastened at the top with a bow. Sky-blue fabric lines the crib, printed with clouds and a few white animals. The animals, in profile, seem half like clouds and half like birds. Beyond the cot all is black.

He's dreaming.

He's standing on the main street.

The lights aren't in use. No cars, no bikes. No one on the pavement. The view into the houses on both sides obscured by blinds or curtains, the doors shut. A few leafless trees at the roadside. The sky grey. Hardly any wind.

About thirty yards ahead he sees a woman plodding across the street. Out of her shoulderblades, growing through her clothing, are two bones thick as arms, which finish after a few centimetres in smooth stumps. The bones are clean, a spotless white.

The woman trudges down the street. He follows.

After a while he hears a snapping. The snapping keeps getting louder.

Then, at a distance, the houses slowly topple like tree trunks, left and right, roofs and upper storeys colliding, breaking apart in great chunks – and collapse. Rubble heaps up on the street and pavement.

The woman trudges on. He follows.

Then, directly in front of the pile of rubble, very close, the road and pavement burst as well. First, crackling like a thin sheet of ice on a lake trodden for the first time, a few hairline fissures appear, spreading wider and wider; then the asphalt splinters, the paving slabs splinter, and the fragments gradually sink as though through water, down.

In front of the rubble there's now a trench roughly four yards wide. He looks down. No sight of the bottom.

The woman stops and looks down. He comes closer.

He's hanging back, a foot or two behind her. The stumps on her back move slowly up and down.

She can fly.

He nods.

She can fly.

He nods. He stretches out first one arm then the other, clasps the bones with both hands and unscrews them from her shoulderblades. With every turn he hears the skeleton's resistance, the muscles in her back.

The woman is motionless.

Two bones in his hands, flat at the back, tapering at the front, the surfaces immaculate. Two dazzling white pegs. Two holes thick as arms in the woman's back.

Soon afterwards he sees the bleeding stop and the wounds close.

He tosses the bones past the woman into the trench.

The woman watches them fall. Then they're out of sight.

She looks down.

He comes to stand beside her. He sees: she is reflected in the air.

She puts her head in her hands and cries.

Turning, he walks off down the street.

█ I'm fifteen or sixteen years old, standing in the hallway of our house. The house is in a small town. I live in the house with my mother. Stepmother, strictly speaking, but I say mother when she comes up in conversation – it's easier, and doesn't make her sound like some wicked character from a fairy tale. When we talk I use her first name. I live in this house with my two brothers as well. Half-brothers, technically, but how can they be only half my brothers? Then there's a cat, a Turkish Angora, and my dad. A man, a woman, three kids. Ten years between me and the first brother, eleven between me and the second. A man, a woman, three kids, a cat, a house, a massive garden, a couple of apple trees, a couple of plum trees, a couple of cherry trees, a meadow here, a meadow there, a long hedge, a football goal, a treehouse, a basketball hoop, a table-tennis table, a giant trampoline, a camper van, a garden shed, a conservatory, a patio, a practice room, amps, guitars, drums, a keyboard, a few books, a few toys, a few bikes, two cars – a little one and a minivan – plus rooms, loads of rooms: kids' rooms, studies, bedrooms, living room, dining room, storerooms, basement, attic. Three floors in all, half of it inherited and half paid off by my dad. My dad teaches the piano, at state music schools and privately. My dad, who in my childhood listened to so much John Coltrane, Ahmad Jamal, Jan Hammer and other jazz music that now, years later, I recognise incredibly complex pieces without knowing where I heard them first. My dad, who I went to after they took me away from my mother, just before I turned three. I'm fifteen or sixteen years old now, standing in the hallway of my parents' huge house, a narrow runner beneath my feet and a chest of drawers in front of me, where they keep the towels. On the chest of drawers is the portable phone, which has been ringing for a few seconds. I put it to my ear and give my dad's surname, which I started using a couple of years ago so my name didn't stand out from everyone else's. I hear a male voice. The man says he's a doctor, a psychiatrist, and that he wants to speak to my dad. I tell him my dad isn't home but I can give him a message, and the doctor says thank you and goodbye. I set the phone back on the chest of drawers, say nothing to my dad about the call, and put it out of my mind.

There's a knock at the door. He opens his eyes.  
He looks upward, at the ceiling. Light falls into the room through the window. His eyes adjust to the brightness, recalibrating. Outlines sharpen.  
The weight of his body on the mattress, its resistance.  
He pushes himself upright and sits.

There's a knock at the door, echoing through the flat.  
He gets up, walks out of the room, down the hall, and opens the door.  
He peers into the stairwell. No one there.  
He looks down. Two letters are on the mat. Bending down, he takes the letters and opens them. In one letter is a key. Looks new. In the other a sheet of paper, a list:  
Flat  
Courtyard  
Street  
Building  
Playground  
Park  
Lake  
Meadow  
Flat  
Stairwell  
etc.

He picks up the phone. He shuts his eyes.  
He opens his eyes.  
Then he calls his aunt.  
Of course he can come. How lovely to get his call. It's been ages, but if he comes now, that would be great. Best not hang about. When she leaves the house and goes for a wander around town, some days everything is so faded she can barely tell the curb from the street. Yet on other days, everything seems normal. Can't count on it, though.  
Then he calls his cousin.  
She'd love him to come. She'll be happy to show him everything – well, everything that's left.  
Then he calls his uncle.  
No, he didn't send the key. How's he supposed to send something he doesn't have? But if he doesn't mind a piece of advice, he'd suggest keeping well out of it, for everyone's sake but especially his own. Anyway, all the best. He's hanging up now.

Then he calls the office.  
He's off sick.  
How long.  
He doesn't know.  
He hangs up.

He walks through the flat.  
He walks into the bedroom, past the mattress, to the window. He gazes down at the inner courtyard, the playground:  
a slide  
a swing  
a climbing frame  
a sandpit  
etc.

He leaves the flat and goes into the inner courtyard, into the playground. Reaching the sandpit, he looks up at the flat and the window. He kneels down. With two hands, he begins to dig.

When he's up to his neck in the hole, he climbs out, throws in the key and the sand he scraped out. He stamps everything down hard, until you can't even see the hole. Then he looks back up at the window, standing still.

Minutes later, he sets off.

He's dreaming.

He's at a playground, on the swings, and as he rocks back and forth he's gazing up at the top window of a block of flats. In the window is a white curtain, obscuring the person staring down at him behind it.

He waves.

The person turns away, stepping back from the window.

He keeps rocking, gazing up at the window, waving.

Slowly the block begins to fade, till in the end it disappears.

On the other side of the empty plot is a street, where now and again a few cars pass by. The sound of engines, wind.

█ Here. It's meant, here. More precisely: it's meant to show, here. More precisely: it's meant to show an absence, here. More precisely: it's meant to show the absence of a person, here. More precisely: it's meant to show the search for the absence of a person, here. More precisely: it's meant to show the search for the absence of a person, without resolving their absence, here. More precisely: it's meant to show the search for the absence of a person, without resolving their absence, but making the traces of them visually and audibly apparent, here. More precisely: it's meant to show the search for the absence of a person, without resolving their absence, but making the traces of them visually and audibly apparent, making them recognisable without revealing them, here. More precisely: it's meant to show the search for the absence of a person, without resolving their absence, but making the traces of them visually and audibly apparent, making them recognisable without revealing them, like a human outline in chalk on the tarmac, here. More precisely: it's meant to show the search for the absence of a person, without resolving their absence, but making the traces of them visually and audibly apparent, making them recognisable without revealing them, like a human outline in chalk on the tarmac, which shows the shape of the person who lay there but reveals nothing of what filled it in, here. Here. It's meant, here. Here. Here. More precisely: it's meant to show, here. More precisely: it's meant to show how he was shaped, is shaped, will be shaped by the absence of this person, here. It's meant. It's meant, here. More precisely: it's meant to show by all conceivable means, here. More precisely: it's meant to show by all conceivable means how the absence of this person is present in his life, here. It's meant to show, here. It's meant. Here. It's meant.

██████ YEAH WELL I'M STILL HERE  
WE'LL SEE WHO'S STRONGEST

██████████ His aunt drove him to the car park. The rest he walks alone, down the paved path, along the grounds of the centre to the entrance, which is a metal gate.

He stops and looks inside.

He sees:

the grounds of the centre

concrete slabs

two stone table-tennis tables, one behind the other, parallel

a small rectangular lawn, left

a small rectangular lawn, right

trees on the grounds, at the edge

their foliage

the centre building, a flat pavilion, glass-walled

etc.

He turns. In front of him is a wide strip of paving stones, slowly descending into the courtyard. Halfway along, on the right, the concrete façade of a large hall. Further down on the left, at the foot of the slope, is a black box, concrete, with long rectangular windows along the sides.

The sky is cloudy.

He heads down into the courtyard. It's roughly fifty yards.

He feels himself growing smaller with every step.

SUBJECT: Re: Hello

I write to my mother for the last time. I haven't seen her for sixteen years or written to her for five. I write that I would like to be back in touch. Shortly afterwards I get a brief email. *Good afternoon, I do not want any further contact. With best wishes.*

He's barely advancing. He stops and glances down: his body hasn't changed. He keeps walking.

Each stride is less than half its usual length.

I was a student at this, sort of this college, and so's she. And then I, um, we walked past each other headin to a seminar or suming, and you're heading up, and I mean you're going, wow, that girl's a stunner. An then next time, nex week, we saw each other again. Cause y'know, you're doin the same route each week, right. Think she must've noticed me too. And then there's, there was a cafeteria where you, youyou'd just sit or have a coffee or whatever, and I saw her in there too, from a da-, from a distance. Gave her a smile or suming, just, just with my eyes, y'know.

Frau ██████████ lives with her child, ██████████, nearly two years old, in a small flat in ██████████. Frau ██████████'s flat was not available for inspection, but from the outside it appears to be well cared-for (window, curtains, view from the front door). Frau ██████████ is not in employment. She provides for herself and the child through social welfare payments and child support.

He stands in front of the black box on the left side of the courtyard. Two big glass doors. Black metal frames, handles.

He peers inside. A large entrance area, black tiles, a staircase by the wall at the back. Someone is standing on the bottom steps.

The person is blurred. He looks at her.

He looks at her.

The person walks up the stairs.

He hears:  
Steps,  
Echo.

So one night, okay, I was at this disco – used to go to the disco in the evenings – and it's disco, so loud, all these flashin lights, and there she is right at the back. I come in, and then she comes up, and bang, she's in my arms. Didn't know her name, and we're kissing just like that. Instant euphoria, right. So that was the night we got together, but then I went home after, right. I was with someone else back then, this other woman. But then at some point then I went to hers, just for a visit. Then it was just normal conversation stuff, chatting, getting to know each other, sittin round the table, and then at some point that night I headed home.

He stands in front of the black box on the left side of the courtyard.

He turns, looks around.

A grey paved surface.

The path he took, leading to the centre past the hall.

A low, curving embankment that borders the other sides of the courtyard. Covered in grass. Beyond are the high wire fences of a sports ground.

A weak wind.

He hears a scraping or clinking noise, far away.

He walks in the direction of the noise.

█ Maybe she could drive him?

Of course. She'd driven him back then, too. Sometimes.

His aunt sits opposite him on the sofa.

The sofa is almost as translucent as she is.

Maybe she could drive him right now?

Sure.

██████████ A scraping or clinking noise,  
far away,  
echoing across the courtyard. Faint. Soft wind.  
It echoes faintly across the courtyard.  
He walks in the direction of the noise.

Anyway the second time I didn't come home anymore. And then I split up with, with, it's over, I said, I'm with someone else now.

#### YEAH WELL I'M STILL HERE

Growing up, Frau ██████████ was the eldest of seven.

A scraping or clinking noise, far away,

She went to secondary school, passed her exams and initially began training as a teacher.

echoing across the courtyard. Faint. Soft wind.

#### YOU'RE GOING TO DIE OF CANCER

Then we were just in bed, we spent the whole day lying in bed, and we were just listening to these records, some record I'd never heard. Dunno now what it was called. Just loads of records, going round and round, y'know in those days that was, I mean, there wasn't much else. Yeah, that was pretty euphoric.

#### YOU'RE GOING TO DIE OF CANCER, YOU PIECE OF SHIT

The class of drugs known as typical or classical neuroleptics (also: first-generation antipsychotics) were developed in the early 1950s. They reshaped the treatment of psychotic disorders so profoundly that in psychiatric history their arrival is referred to as a *psychopharmacological revolution*.

echoing across the courtyard. Faint. Soft wind.

It echoes faintly across the courtyard.  
He walks in the direction of the noise.

Examples of classical neuroleptics include chlorpromazine, synthesised by Paul Charpentier in 1950, and reserpine, in clinical use since 1953, which is derived from Indian snakeroot (*Rauwolfia serpentina*). The introduction of the psychotropic drugs provided a – relatively – humane alternative to established forms of “treatment” for psychotic disorders. Common interventions at the time included the detention of the so-called mentally ill in psychiatric institutions and lobotomy,

#### YOU PIECE OF SHIT

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a neurosurgical procedure in which the nerve fibres between the thalamus and frontal lobe are destroyed. The practice has produced inconsistent results: while a few lobotomised

individuals seem to have improved, some died as a result of the operation, others subsequently committed suicide, and others still became apathetic or developed significant cognitive impairments, even intellectual disabilities. It was, incidentally, quite common to use a tool that resembled an ice-pick. This was no coincidence: the first lobotomy of this kind (headword: transorbital method) was performed by Walter Freeman with a cocktail ice-chipper retrieved from his kitchen drawer. The tool was driven through the skull into the brain, first above one eyeball then above the other, then swirled back and forth for a while (externally, most patients were left with nothing more than haematomas around the eyes). The procedure was considered particularly advantageous because it could be carried out by people without surgical training and did not take much time: Freeman – who once posed for a photo in the middle of a transorbital lobotomy, during which the surgical instrument, dubbed an Orbitoclast, deviated from its path and the patient immediately died – sometimes took less than ten minutes.

YOU PIECE OF SHIT

YOU PIECE OF SHIT

YOU PIECE OF SHIT

According to Herr ██████, Frau ██████ – apparently her father’s “favourite daughter” – was cared for very attentively by her family for a long time. Herr ██████’s account and the coldness of her present behaviour towards her parents suggests that being removed from a safe, caring family environment proved a major stumbling block for the young woman.

He walks in the direction of the noise. He’s barely advancing. Each stride is less than half its usual length. Faint. Soft wind. It echoes faintly across the courtyard.

He walks in the direction of the noise. He walks towards it.

He keeps walking.

He walks.

[...]