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THE STAGGER

Translated by Caroline Waight
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You've got this little hole, here. Between your vaulted belly and your chest. There, where the crease is, where the belly drops away and the ribcage begins. You've nothing on, only a dotted piece of fabric tied at the neck and open at the back. It's bunched up on the right side of your body, the tie cutting into your neck, vanishing into a fold.

"A mole." The nurse points at the hole. Her on one side of your bed, me on the other. You must have picked it off. She tells me so, speaking over you. "Must have picked off a mole."

And now you have a hole there, the size of the nail on my little finger. And beneath it, layers. Fat, muscle, tendon. As you breathe, as your belly moves, drawing the hole taut into an oval. I don't like to look this closely. The nurse sprays it with antiseptic and sticks on a plaster. Gingerly, I cover you up with the gown. Your head moves in my direction, and I see that the tie has chafed your neck raw.

You're puffy, you have been for a while, from the hormone therapy and the cortisone. Your throat is a bulge pressed by your chin against your chest, although you're sleeping with your head tilted oddly upwards. Your mouth is ajar.

A tube runs over your ears and cheeks to your nose, two small offshoots leading into the nostrils. Another tube is inserted into your body below the collarbone; I see the bump under your skin. There's a cannula in the back of your left hand, attached to a light blue tap. A bright red clip is clamped to your finger. Everything leads to or from machines. They penetrate you. A monitor traces your heartbeat, your breathing, in wavy multicoloured lines. Beeping, pumping.

Gently I touch your hand, putting my fingers to your dry skin, your liver spots, beside the bruise that runs blue from where the cannula has punctured the skin and dissipates into a fringe of red. Your head twitches again in my direction, but your eyes stay shut. Long, narrow fingers – your hands are beautiful. Like mine. I get my hands from you. So people say. She gets those hands from her dad. Her depression, too. And the addiction. Or rather, the structure of addiction. When I smoke, I do it right after I go out onto the balcony. I put the baby monitor on the wooden slats, with the little green light to show that the connection is stable, and light the first of many cigarettes that day. It's not good for me. I'm ashamed. Of my breath, of the smell, which clings to my skin and clothes, but especially when the child is there to see me. Shame is addiction's little sister. I'm an only child, but despite that, or because of it, I picture them like siblings, hand in tiny hand. When I drink, I reel into bed, and my dullness and unsteady tread connect me to you. When I take drugs, I dip my finger deep into the powder, and in the morning I sit on the rim of the bath, my toenails danced bloody. Confetti collects around the drain.

A document is clipped to the end of the bed, a fold-out chart of abbreviations and numbers and ticks and dashes. I examine the cryptic yet meticulously kept reports. The record of your blood pressure is a mountain range: two dots each hour, joined up. Between seven and ten o'clock, both lines rise sharply; someone has drawn a red arrow, then they dip again. "PWTT: SpO₂ probe," I read. "IV: PVC, CVC (Hickman)." And: "CVP 1 mmHg, 1.36 cmH₂O." "38.5," that's your temperature, "38.7, "39.0". Your medications: "Fentanyl 12.5 µg/h, aspirin, pantoprazole, mirtazapine, prednisolone, macrogol." You have passed 240 ml of urine. Vomiting – a dash. Drainage – another dash.

Outside the windows, which have no handles, is a glistening, unmoving summer sky. It's hot, I know; I came to you in a summer dress. I'm still sweating, although it's cool in here and oddly hushed. When I go to the window, I see a young girl in a bikini on the lawn, lying on a white blanket she has spread out on the dry yellowed grass.

“Is he dying?” I ask the doctor. I speak in English, because I assume you can hear me. That you also heard what the doctor said, and what you already know. That you have metastases in your lungs, the left one is riddled with them, and in your liver, bones, hips, pelvis, shoulder. A build-up of fluid in the body. The pneumonia is new – that’s why you’re here, and there’s a probable infection in your urinary tract. Sepsis.

“We’ve still got to wait for the lab results,” says the doctor.

“My father has a living will,” I say. And, “I have general and lasting power of attorney.” I hand him the copies. You and Mum had the documents drawn up more than fifteen years ago. I also have power of attorney over all your bank accounts, so I could have cleared them out or at least helped myself if I’d wanted to. But there was no need. You took good care of me, making it possible for me to go to university. You have always trusted me. Now you have to, because the declarations in your will are in force.

“We don’t want any interventions to prolong his life,” I say.

“This is intensive care,” says the doctor.

He’s good-looking, this doctor. I can tell even though half his face is under a mask. Dark skin, shaved head, big brown eyes, brows a little wild. Young.

I put my hand on your forehead. I will do this often, touching your head, at the place where your white hair begins to grow. You fall out of sleep and open your eyes, slowly and stiffly, your gaze imprecise at first, unable to fix on anything, wandering, still disconnected from the situation, and maybe from your personality, too. Then your eyes find me, and your expression relaxes.

“Dad,” I say.

You open your mouth, your dry mouth, teeth black on the inside, and you say, heavy-tongued and soft, “And Mum?”

You ask for Mum. The name I use: Mum. Not Ingrid. Or Besele, as you affectionately call her. “Besele,” said an American you met in the navy, who asked you what your favourite food was and then tried to repeat it: *spätzle*. With lentils and Vienna sausage.

“Mum’s doing fine,” I say, clearly and loudly, although I don’t know. “I’m going to see her in a minute,” I say.

Your eyes close again and you drop back asleep with a barely perceptible jolt. I’ve seen it before, in my child. On the verge of sleep, the body sinks a fraction, into letting go, and the dream world begins. Your body is telling me the same tale: your fingers move, your eyes roll back. I see them roaming under the lids. Your mouth hangs slightly open. On the monitor the fluctuations slacken, rising and falling, and the beeping gradually slows.

Mum. Your first question when I visit you in intensive care is about her. Your story, then, is Mum’s story too. Your dying is her dying. Or, to put it another way, her dying is where it began.

Photographing People

One of my first memories is a gecko, a small, dark-dotted gecko hanging from the whitewashed ceiling. Above me, in the house in Dénia, in our house. He darts his head just once, flicking it from one side to the other, and I’m scared. You’re the one, Dad, who tells me it’s a gecko. My tongue is a father tongue, because it’s you that gives me words. Gecko. Olive grove. *Buenos días*. I’m fascinated and terrified by the animal’s wide-splayed toes. It’s also you, Dad, who tells me not to swallow the water when I brush my teeth. We’re standing by the sink in our house in Dénia, me on a stool, and you show me how to spit it

out: water runs into the drain. I copy you: just a small, gluey blob. It's your hand I hold as I walk across the sand, the puckered waves tickling my feet. It's your hand when I take my first steps of all, teetering and proud. Mum stands at the tall, dark counter in the kitchen and cheers me on, as I steady my wobbling with your hand. Later on I'll steady yours, and often. One day we're coming home from a May Day barbecue at Bärensee, I'm eight or nine, and there's a chain of people holding hands as we walk up the broad asphalted track through the forest to the carpark. You're on the end, holding my hand – the other's clasped in someone else's, now I don't know whose – and you stumble, but I don't want your unsteady tread to be noticed. I brace myself against you or pull you up, to avoid passing on your stagger, to hide it.

So that I'm not sitting in the blazing sun all the way to Spain, Mum pins a blue white-spotted scarf to the seal around the car door. I'm cast now in discrete, narrow beams of light, alive with dust. Mum and I pick oranges, big oranges, and carry them in our arms. I drop one and it bursts, juice and pulp spilling over the fine gravel. Mum tosses the split orange back into the trees. In the evenings, she puts out a bowl of milk for the cats that prowl around our house. I stroke them. Always from head to tail, Mum showed me. I'm afraid of Killy, the neighbour's dog, although he's always behind the fence, where I stand and watch. Unlike the cats, which appear only in multitudes, soft or scruffy, with vacant patches in their fur, my memory of him is pin sharp: a German shepherd with a pale, lolling tongue and sloping hindquarters that make him look as though he's readying to pounce.

In the overall image of my first memories, it's hot in Dénia, and I'm naked, sometimes in a pinafore dress. There's a small garden, steps outside the house. Mum is painting a wall white, wearing only a bikini, and the sunlight reflects off the white wall. Is that a photograph? One I remember, and that merely suggests to me that I remember her in a bikini, painting the exterior of the house white?

The invention of photography calls into question former certainties. Walter Benjamin describes how photography comes unstuck from the here and now, from what he calls the context of tradition.¹ For me, something similar happens with the context of my memory: there was a here and now, when Mum was painting the wall of the house white, round lunchtime on a hot day, in cloudless heat; when you, Dad, must have played your part by pressing the shutter on the camera. Yet my position remains unclear, even though it's my memory and my emotions. It oscillates between the child recognising the photo of her mother in a bikini, and my possible presence, my here and now, which I only think I remember, confusingly identical with the photo, even though I haven't seen it for decades. The actual reference escapes me.

"Look, it's me with my mother," says Rachael to Deckard in the film *Blade Runner*. The photograph is of a girl being hugged by a woman in the sunlight, both sitting on the steps of a veranda. Rachael shows it to him as proof that she isn't a replicant.

Although I can't get beyond the picture to a sensorial, moving moment – Mum in her bikini beside the white wall – that I can be sure of, I feel sadness when I see my beautiful mother in front of that wall, slim and tanned, her bikini bottoms tied simply at the waist with two knots, and in my imagination I see her bending back down to the paint bucket with the roller.

I remember the first photo I ever took in my life. In a hotel room in the Canary Islands. After you sell the house in Dénia, for a while our holidays are on all-inclusive resorts on the various islands. And on one of these islands, Fuerteventura or Gran Canaria, in a hotel room, I'm allowed to borrow your camera. You sit down on the sofa beside the protuberant

¹ "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version", in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Vol. 4 1938-1940*, p. 256.

bouquet of flowers, as sumptuous and unwieldy as the one Mum will be given when, later, she arrives at the nursing home, the one that neither she nor I will take, that dangles unnoticed from the manager's hand. You put your arm around Mum and I take the photo, peering through a small rectangular window and pressing a button. Mum's in a red-and-white striped dress, her arms bare and bronzed, dark curls down to her ears. You, Dad, are wearing light-coloured clothes, a white shirt. You're tall. Mum returns your touch by hugging you back. Between you is a narrow gap. I remember taking the photo, which is blurred, though you can still see you laughing. It will be in one of the cardboard boxes stacked on top of my wardrobe, in one of the five boxes containing the last records that remain of you.

The Greeks, writes Roland Barthes, entered into Death backward. They kept their past before them. In the same way, Barthes traces the life of his mother, whom he cared for during the last six months of her life, by leafing backward through his photographs of her. Unlike for Benjamin, photography for Barthes is anchored more than any other visual art in the here and now. It proves that something was the way it was: "that the thing was there"; and this is where grief comes into play, grief over his dead mother, even as it proves that the something is gone.² The loss of the woman in the image resounds in the very moment of its capture, revealing her death. Barthes goes one step further, observing that the viewer of a photograph – that person's feelings, knowledge, testimony – will likewise pass away. Coming across an image of his parents, he becomes aware of this final loss. "In front of the only photograph in which I find my father and mother together," he writes, "this couple who I know loved each other, I realise: it is love-as-treasure which is going to disappear forever; for once I am gone, no one will any longer be able to testify to this: nothing will remain but an indifferent nature."³

My photograph of you, my parents, who also loved one other, sometimes fatally so, is already testament to your passing, which I now experience with a clarity that was really always there. "All photographs are *memento mori*," as Susan Sontag writes.⁴ When I look at it that way, all acts of holding fast, including my writing about the photo, my writing about you, are shaped by the death that will ultimately find me. Your ending is present in every single picture, my text an archaeology of loss. Sontag describes the act of photographing people as brutal, and I think of writing in the same vein. I transform you into objects, show you in ways you would never see yourselves, learn things about you that you will not learn. I describe scenes you did not authorise. Though I did ask you if I could write about you, and in your touching generosity and composure, you answered, "Yes, of course." And when I pointed out that I would write about the ugly moments too, about your alcoholism, you repeated only, "It's fine."

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² Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 87.

³ Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 94.

⁴ Susan Sontag: *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, p. 15

I go down through the stairwell to the first floor of the hospital. The glass doors are difficult to open. I pass a lift. The door to the visitors' toilets is ajar, and cold black light shines out. I walk past the operating rooms. There are hospital beds outside; the colourful, numbered signs on the mattresses irritate me every time. Rubbish is piling up in the bins at the end of the wing. A transparent fluid drips from a black plastic bag onto the floor, pooling. I walk through the first double door into intensive care and push the bell before I've even disinfected my hands, because I want to see you urgently.

I wait until the nurse has left your room. You're lying quietly. I walk up to the bed and touch your arm. "Dad, it's Maren. Can you hear me?"

You make a vague noise, your lips barely opening.

"Mariele," it might have been, with your weakened tongue. My heart is thudding; I can feel my agitation. Your eyeballs shift beneath your lids. You're trying to lift them. You can't.

"Dad, listen carefully." I know I have to ask you this. It's why I came, I prayed for it, to God and to Auguste, your mother, for a lucid moment with you.

You nod weakly.

I bend down close. "What do you need from me? What do you want?"

Your crusted mouth opens, the lips cracked, dry scraps of skin shaped into dark, sticky crumbs. Your tongue is a garish red. "To die," you say, softly but clearly. And something in me releases, something almost like joy: I've felt those words already, and they come as a relief.

"Here or somewhere else?" I ask.

"Yes," you say.

"Here?" I ask.

Already you're drifting back into sleep.

"I want everything switched off," I tell the doctor.

"If we switch off the adrenaline now," says the doctor, pointing to a large syringe attached to the wall, "then we can't keep his circulation going."

The digital display on the syringe says zero point five. A machine injects the adrenaline steadily into your veins. The doctor touches your upper arm, letting his hand rest there, one finger grazing your skin. It's the good-looking doctor, the young one. As soon as I arrive, he comes over to your bed. I like him, he likes me too. Once, when I'm crying, he pulls his mask aside to answer me. Just as I thought, his lips are full and lovely. He's always suggesting what else he could do to help you. Like escalating the antibiotics, as he calls it; which he then actually does, maximum dosage, as far as I can tell. Or draining the fluid in your side to ease your breathing. This requires a minor intervention, to which I agree. He informs me of the possible complications, which seem ridiculous to me in light of the overall situation. And it shows me that the doctor doesn't see what I think I see, what you've just told me. He doesn't see that you want to die, and the machines are holding you back. That an old man with terminal cancer shouldn't be in an intensive care unit at all, where even the young people shout and scream, especially when night falls and the light dims. "Hello," or "help".

You waited until I was back from holiday. I'm just unpacking, a mountain of laundry next to the washing machine, when I get your call from the nursing home. You're crying down the line. For the second time in my life, I hear you cry. The first time I was still a child, and you sat in an armchair and cried because you thought there was something wrong with your heart. I was horrified, the way you grabbed your chest and wept. It really shook you. You

went into hospital, got treated. And now you have chest pains again, and you're back in hospital. I get another call in the night, from the good-looking doctor, perhaps, to say, "Your husband is currently stable." – "You mean my father?"

You waited until I was back from holiday, and then wanted to die. That's what I think. So I can take care of Mum, so that you can let her go. And now I'm staring at the syringe on the wall. If I watch for long enough, I can see the plunger bearing forward and the fluid disappearing. I don't know if I should put an end to what would have finished long ago without intensive care, or even if I can. In the last two years I've kept picturing myself at your bedside, holding your hand as you die. Years before that, I waited for the call – from a paramedic, telling me you'd fallen, you'd collapsed or had a heart attack, that you had died without me. It never crossed my mind that I would have to bring about your death. A death that, paradoxically, is interrupted only by the machines and medications and injections.

"If the antibiotics work, it'll buy him some more time," says the doctor. "Weeks, maybe even a month or two, with you, with his wife."

"At what cost?" I ask.

The doctor nods.

"Will he be lucid again?" I ask, because for me the worst thing is your bleared mind.

The doctor moves his head, up to down and left to right.