

Sample translation from

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The Time of the Cicadas

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translated by Alexandra Roesch, March 2024

Alex is going to reclaim her true self. She will no longer be confined to the role she has held for thirty-six years as Mrs. Mattmann. "Mrs. Maaattmann!!!" The bright voices of the fifth-graders elongate the first syllable of her name so much that what was once a polite address becomes an insistent demand. They're like fledglings, clamouring for attention. The ongoing crisis has made their need for attention even worse, as indeed it has with many other things. One might think that introducing children to information technology early on would foster their independence, but behind that façade lies an even deeper neediness.

At one time she could never have imagined being a primary school teacher. She's not a surrogate mother. She doesn't coddle them, and sometimes she's even a little sarcastic. Perhaps it was precisely this quality that made the little ones like her so much throughout her entire career in education. But fundamentally, she was always more suited to teaching the older students. By the time she could truly engage with them, they left, year after year. She never dwelled on their departure. Hardly ever. She knew that's just the nature of teaching: being left behind, starting over, and gradually ageing in every way. But now, it's her turn to move on.

Outside, she'll revert to being Alex again, embracing her youthfulness without denying her years, without slapping on make-up or resorting to artificial enhancements like Botox. Natural and agile: part seasoned fox, part resilient character, part youthful rebel. It's the perfect blend for a woman in her sixties. She'll feel desirable as she steps out in the morning into one of those beautiful Instagrammable spots that seem to be popping up everywhere, responding to the growing demand, onto the glistening grass,

deeply inhaling the deliciously crisp air, and stretching her arms in various directions with her back arched. She looks forward to joining these transient communities, to intriguing nomadic neighbours. To shared life experiences, vitality, and the sparkle in people's eyes by the firelight. To the profound simplicity within this small, ingenious box where everything serves multiple purposes, where each step offers additional storage space. Today, she signed the purchase contract; come summer, she'll handle much of the interior work herself - and not only to save money. She's determined that her tiny house, no wider than a lane, won't constrain her. Instead, it will expand her space almost infinitely. She won't be needing a foothold anytime soon. She will be able to stand on her own two feet.

She smiles. In her old school, where she once played a vital role in the faculty, she'd managed to procure a basement theatre space. She had hung a sign reading "Theatre Studio" over the stairwell, written in twinkling fairy lights that she would switch on before performances. Those who enter here, be prepared for some intense experiences. Back then, it had felt like she was releasing a piece of her heart as she pulled her beloved, moth-eaten red stage curtain from the cold fluorescent lights and carried it to her car, which she'd never driven into the schoolyard for any reason other than theatre-related ones. It was raining, which seemed fitting. She was alone and had to make two trips. But she had brought this curtain back from Italy, and she would take it with her. Once, on a trip to Tuscany, she had persuaded a little man with a neatly trimmed moustache and weathered face to part with it. By chance, and through the crack of a heavy door, she had peeked into a half-ruined theatre in a mountain village when he suddenly appeared behind her in his cream-coloured suit and hat, with a delicious manly smell of aftershave: "*Non recitiamo piu, signora. Mi dispiace.*" Broken Italian, gesturing,

laughter. They had flirted as though they were in an old black-and-white film, and the next day she left the village with a roll of velvet on the back seat, which seemed to glow from its very depths. It is still somewhere in the cellar. Now it's time for serious decluttering, and the bulky waste collection has been scheduled. She takes boxes of books to a second-hand bookstore - she doesn't get any money for them and doesn't have to pay anything, that's the deal.

Will she miss her old attic apartment with its affectionately close sloping walls? She's lived here for over thirty-one years. She moved in with the firm intention of never being a property owner again. Never again being in a residents' association. One terraced house disposed of at a loss was enough. In the early days, she forced herself to arrange everything here exactly as she wanted it, including the fiddly kitchen fittings made of solid wood with hinges that she could never get quite right. When she was done, she probably thought, she would be done with her ex as well. A mistake. That is, she ended things with him quickly, basically on the evening he told her about the other woman and how long it had been going on, that her misgivings had been justified in every single situation. "You don't trust me!" He had been right. She had been right. There wasn't too little justice in the world, but too much. He left behind in her the loss of trust. That was *her* unborn child, and ever since, if she began to have feelings for someone, she was sure she felt it wedged inside her like a tree trunk in a flood.

Not that she hadn't had any more men. Once even a woman. She had met Elisabeth in a workshop for theatre club leaders, in that lively atmosphere where everyone simultaneously wants to be an extraordinary teacher and

not a teacher at all, rather an artist from whom the joy of play still bubbles up even in the most banal exercises. Lots of laughter in the room and then one person who just looks at you intensely, and if you agree to have a drink afterwards, you know the conversation won't revolve around the students. Alex had enjoyed being picked up. Letting something happen to her that she would have said no to beforehand. It felt youthful. And it had been lovely, too. Tender, more loving than with men. Perhaps truly loving for the first time. But it was also a bit like cross-country skiing when you're used to downhill.

Alex walks through the rooms. The signed purchase contract, lying on the kitchen table, seems to slightly rearrange the furniture, although everything is still in its place. Actually, it's a strange exchange, she thinks: you make room for pieces of furniture in the hope that they'll create a place for you in the world. She'll miss the Gründerzeit bureau, inherited from her mother, which occupies one of the few straight walls.

She enters the bathroom. "Who designs something like this?" she had asked Gerd, laughing, the first time she saw it. Gerd was her landlord and has been dead for almost three years now, after the ventilator stopped working. Back then, during the viewing, he was full of life, a T-shirt type who always showed a slice of his back or belly and sometimes the top of his butt crack while working. Someone who exuded a sense of home in all his full-bodied agility, whose sweat was not unpleasant. The curious layout was probably one reason she got the flat; only a single person could live here anyway. Or a very symbiotic couple. You have to go through all the rooms if you want to go anywhere. And through the bathroom to the roof. Through this giant

bathroom with the huge space in the middle. Yet she was never one to spend ages in the bathroom. "Who designs something like this?" she asked him again when the toilet with the overly long waste pipe got blocked, and he spontaneously came upstairs with her. She never understood why her landlords lived on the ground floor; on the first or second floor, you would have a better view and more privacy. But Gerd and his wife were not ones for staying at home. Helga still manages the rental on her own now and does what needs to be done; they're sort of friends. Alex helps her with IT stuff. Back then, you just had to touch Gerd as he washed his hands afterwards, not touch, touch, with both hands, and everything else followed. She liked the slapping sound.

She had adored Sebastian. He was the headteacher at her old grammar school, a place she felt deeply connected to. Yes, even the building itself – and by that she didn't just mean her quaint little theatre that you accessed from the courtyard; she also, and especially, meant the grand facade adorned with rustic stones, columns and graffiti. This proud institution had been erected during the late nineteenth century on land once claimed from the Rhine. Alex had a special bond with the neoclassical building, when it was empty and just walking caused the lights to flicker to life. The venerable structure had exhaled youth, pausing before inhaling them once more. In her role as a theatre director, she was often the last to leave, forming informal connections with the migrant cleaners. Technically, she was the second to last. Sebastian practically lived in his cramped office. In his corridor you had to use the light switch, which she never did, because she knew the way and relished the streak of light beneath his door.

On a fateful Thursday in April 2011, she didn't go up to see him, despite the fact that he was supposed to have been at the final performance and it was not like him not to turn up and take his seat. He took his responsibilities seriously. Alex had thought he hadn't come because they had argued. She had thought him childish for staying away from her theatre and punishing the students. She had been the childish one for thinking that. Perhaps she might have saved him. It was said that he had died instantaneously and yet she would never quite be able to forgive herself.

In her new school - even after twelve years and right up to the end, it would be her new one - she is happy with her niche, allowing things to ebb and flow. She never did theatre here again. Come summer, all that would be left of her in the staffroom would be her faded name-tag on a pigeonhole - a name that the younger staff, come autumn, won't even recognise and will throw into the waste bin. Alex smiles.

She's truly loved two men in her life so far. She doesn't know whether that's a modest or typical count and she is just being honest. The two were polar opposites. She married the university friend, the same age as her. Love was a venture. This might sound prosaic, but it wasn't. When she was barely half her current age, their future resembled a construction site where they converged, coming from the different schools they'd been dispatched to after training. The ground was bare, and they layered their dreams upon it, conjuring the house in 3-D. They envisioned their children, two of them, frolicking in the grass, amidst a luxuriant green reminiscent of paradise. Light-heartedly, they debated names. "Godwin" she proposed, finding no name more provocative. "I've always fancied a little Goddy as son and heir,"

he quipped. "Or Winnie, you can choose." They kissed, and then she got on her bike, beating him in a race to their flat. On her side, it was love, until the very end, when it collapsed like that bridge in Genoa. She'll never know if the fissure of deceit had run through him from the beginning.

Dr Sebastian Egyptian was almost six foot six and in conversation always folded himself into the same armchair of soft, cognac-coloured leather, worn yellow in places. Alex can't imagine anyone else ever having sat in it. Where had the chair gone? It had probably gone the way of all flesh. Or maybe it's wound up in some run-down student cellar where you are greeted by the unmistakable scent of weed. In her new school, there is no unused space for the boys and girls to take over, to clear of old clutter and before you know it replace it with a mishmash of new and old treasures. There is no basement to speak of and definitely none on the digital learning platform. Nowadays, there aren't any uncharted continents left to explore. After graduation, they jet off to the farthest corners of Africa, but not before delving into the extensive blogs and vlogs of those who went before them, meticulously analysing reviews and rankings. They form an impression of everything before experiencing it first-hand. Sebastian's worn armchair, its lost form... If she were to stumble upon it tomorrow, abandoned by the roadside, awaiting collection as bulky waste, rain-soaked and forlorn, she would take it home to her tiny house. There, it would undoubtedly clutter the space and seem almost out of place. Yet, in the evenings she would sit in it, one knee drawn up or a foot tucked beneath her, just like him, her daddy longlegs. She'd gaze out through the panoramic window, the reason she chose this particular style of house, until the forest succumbed to the cloak of darkness, leaving her alone with her reflection and memories, enveloped

in a profound sense of solitude. *All God's children need travelling shoes ... Look my eyes are just holograms ...*

From my hands you know you'll never be / More than twist

in my sobriety.

They shared just one holiday together: five days at Lake Ammersee, five days of brilliant blue skies. While he was careful not to be seen with her in any ambiguous situations at home, here, four hundred, not four thousand kilometres away, he kissed her amidst the bustling promenade. Did Sebastian seek a nudge from fate back then? For those five days, they functioned like a well-oiled team. In the bright sunshine, they almost forgot the peculiarity of their being so normal together. But as evening descended, it took on a feverish quality. They swam, dined lavishly, hiked, savoured ice cream in a medieval town, and indulged in the most intense sex of their lives with the balcony doors wide open at night. They had gone for the suite, the most expensive option available (he was paying), which overlooked the lake, of course, a view they didn't appreciate enough. Yet at night, their sweaty bodies conjured a spectre or djinn, performing loops over the moonlit water surface, while inside, she had to bite him to stifle her moans - so hard that it was he who ended up screaming. To this day, she can't say why Sebastian resisted making their relationship official. Admittedly, the dynamics of boss and employee create a certain tension. On the other hand, it's a classic scenario. They wouldn't have been the first. They weren't the first. True, there was also his history with his ex-wife, but she had been history for several years by then. Sebastian had done everything in his power for her. But eventually, you reach your limit. Eventually, you must liberate yourself. It was the reason they had grown close in the first place; she offered him an

open, feminine, non-hysterical ear. During a late afternoon performance review, he had risen from his chair to fetch and fill in the silly form, but then it turned into an extended conversation, roles reversed, and no form in sight. In that moment she realised how lonely kings are. Because that's what he was: a wise, prophetic, undoubtedly outdated king from today's perspective. She offered him an ear without ulterior motives. That's the unvarnished truth. It took years, of course. It grew in silence, and when they finally touched each other beyond mere greetings and goodbyes, it felt exhilaratingly new yet somehow familiar, like their hands docking in each other's harbour.

The image remained true later on, though what had once been beautiful could then be irksome. She navigated conversations gently, like a harbour pilot, occasionally steering them towards a shared future. He either became terse or verbose, delving into general and philosophical subjects. He sought refuge in melancholy, enveloping himself in his responsibility like an octopus. She hated it. She hated it when he became cryptic and retreated into the notion that he had never made false promises to her, as if theirs was a contract to be fulfilled and they were commodities with assured attributes. It trivialised everything! In those moments, she wanted to strike him, just to make contact. A strike is definitive, it makes a point. Sometimes, in this civilised, tepid drift, she yearned for it. Guiltily, she noticed the overly concrete nature of that thought: he did succumb to a stroke, or at least something very similar, a ruptured aneurysm.

Marriage hadn't crossed her mind; for her, if anything, it was a few stages ahead. Alex is fairly certain there was no one else. After death, such things

come to light, don't they? But there was no unpleasant surprise at the grave, when you have to line up according to closeness; there was no evil fairy. Just that moment when you stand alone at the edge of the world, where it would be easy to tip forward, to land on the hollow-sounding casket and lie there, with him, in full view.

That was nearly, wait a moment, twelve years ago. The funeral took place at the end of April. They delayed it as long as possible, so everyone could return from Easter holidays. He had always joked that he was married to his school - a joke too trite to be mere humour - and now, over a thousand mourners had assembled. The sun beamed down on the world, rendering the greenery unusually fresh and rejuvenated that year, which seemed incongruous. But because you tread carefully on a day like that, as if wrapped in cotton wool, it seemed fitting. Nature's indifference, life's continuity, was a greeting from the other side of the river, an appropriate meagre solace. She had wondered why so many colleagues, especially the women, looked her in the eye and hugged her tightly, signalling they knew everything - or at least, what there was to know. She herself felt as though she had been party to a secret. Spontaneously, she decided to turn around at the graveside and recite the poem, aloud for all to hear. Their poem. She skipped the post-funeral gathering. They always say, and it's true, that there is a lot of laughter afterwards when people share tales about the person who has died and it does everyone good. But her tales, her tale with him, she needed to take to the river and run with them, and afterwards, she sat atop her roof for half the night, until she and the chimney were best friends.

Throughout her life, Alex has often pondered whether she has a father complex. That was definitely the case with her linguistics professor, although nothing ever really happened between them. He had only one arm and used a screw-on knob on the steering wheel of his car, and when he drove her to the Italian restaurant after the seminar, his driving had a daring quality. Like an eagle, he darted into the tightest parking spaces, and only once did the side mirror fly off with a bang - whether it was his own or someone else's, she can't recall. Her later husband, a fellow student and friend at the time, was very jealous of the professor. She simply laughed it off. "Jealous of a cripple...!" That's what people said back then. With Sebastian, her girlfriends raised the question again. Reflecting on it now, this annoys her. In asymmetrical relationships, one is confronted with what everyone seeks in so-called normal relationships: the satisfaction of one's most innate needs. And precisely because these needs are the most innate, they're inexplicable, not fully understood, and certainly not easily changed. Yet in a relationship like this, it's not a matter of finding someone who provides what apparently no one else can. Instead, it's complex, often dismissed, immediately marking one as dependent. Sometimes she thinks it reveals a deeper envy. How can love, true love, exist without feeling dependent? That's the most intense part of it. The painful and the beautiful part. Isn't that also a complex, perhaps a much more hardened one, of never truly committing to anything?

Absentmindedly, she opens an envelope that she had casually tossed onto the leather-covered surface of her desk when she came in. She even has a letter opener, also an heirloom, though it's never to hand; her finger always does the job, tearing open the envelope. She's careless with trivial matters, but with artworks, she becomes a perfectionist. Many aspects of the terraced

house and the minute garden back then were her artworks. Having to let it all go, leaving it behind as something that grew foreign at that very moment, was more painful than the financial loss, even though she struggled with that for years afterwards. The improvised kitchen tucked under the eaves in this flat then became her artwork again. And the interior design of the tiny house will be the next, along with the tiny house as a whole. That's why she chose it. Without artwork, any small piece of art, Alex would be dead.

Art for her isn't about abundance - it's about making the best of it. While many may simply shrug and say, "Just make the best of it," for her, the best, if it truly is the best, especially under limited conditions, always shines. Polish it, go over it again, be tender, and it will shine.

What she retrieves from the envelope is a wedding invitation. The folding card is made of something exquisite, precisely between paper and cardboard, which would have warranted the invention of the word 'haptic' if it didn't already exist. Inside, text is printed in dignified grey, while the space around it is filled with blue ink. It's been quite a while since Alex received a handwritten letter, and this one fits the bill. Garlands of typically feminine handwriting adorn it. Alex herself never wrote like that, but hundreds of her female students did. While their essays aimed for visual perfection, as if striving for an A, the writer here fills the margins in all directions. You have to turn the card while reading it. The signature, upside down, lands at the very top of the last remaining strip. She manages to decipher: *Wibke Wieczorek, née Müller*.

Do you remember me? I remember you well, dear Mrs. Mattmann! You helped me a lot in my youth. Without you and the theatre, I wouldn't be who I am. Some things ended up a bit askew - that was one of your favorite expressions. And then you were gone. Otherwise, we might have made a toast to sisterhood at the prom. It would be lovely if you could come to our wedding. With your partner, of course. Dominik would really be happy to meet you. I've told him a lot about you. We've already been to the registry office, now for the big bash!

There's a black and white photo printed on the front of the card, showing a young woman with a pretty, chubby-cheeked face and ample curves - the figure-hugging dress leaves nothing to the imagination - leaning against a boyish man in a suit. Dominik. Beautiful and fitting. His hair is darker than hers. The small bulges under his smiling eyes and the turned-up corners of his mouth make him seem rather shy and very kind. Not a daredevil, thinks Alex, more of a carer type, and she imagines this man asking his wife what she wants to drink after a long day, mixing it for her, carrying it to the sofa, and then massaging her outstretched feet. Alex would like to be touched by hands that aren't her own right now, and she doesn't mean that primarily in an erotic sense - but perhaps secondarily.

The picture, the real one, is anything but a snapshot. It wants to convey something meaningful. A good picture. Though very conventional. Even "bash" is a surprisingly old-fashioned term. Not youth slang, not even from ten or twenty years ago. Alex would only use the word ironically at most. But with the young woman, she's sure the same irony isn't at play. Rather, a new playful seriousness.

The elegant card, and then she has just written inside instead of enclosing a letter. The gendered "sisterhood," but then she very traditionally takes the man's name and drops her own. And adding "née" makes it even more traditional. The latter can't really be because she's afraid Alex won't remember her: there weren't that many Wibkes in the theatre group, they both know that, and the photo is clear. For the first time, Alex notices how twisted the word "maiden name" is: only when you no longer are one can you acquire one.

Did the bride go for rarity and sound in the new name? Wiczorek is alliterative, Müller is commonplace. In Alex's eyes, that wouldn't be reason enough. But it's not her name, it's Wibke's. In any case, these interlocking arrows, pointing in different directions, like in a game of Mikado, pique her curiosity. And what touches her heart is the small, emphatic underline of "lovely".

Wibke has changed. She's as plump as she was back then when she joined her theatre studio. But her aura has changed completely. Her eyes sparkle, and that's why her body is different too. In between, in upper school, she has lost weight. Alex, who is always slender (that's her genes plus her insatiable need for movement) thinks: why do we see this weight gain and weight loss, this yo-yoing, as a defeat? If you see your body as a kind of dress, so to speak, you don't have to wear the same dress all your life.

When she joined the theatre group at the beginning of tenth grade, Wibke was clearly the reluctant one. Ariane had tossed her red-blond mane; she

was her own stage. She didn't really need one, but wanted it all the more. Wibke was the one who, as is often the case with pairs of teenage friends, was the one who tagged along. She suffered from her corpulence. She was the one in tow, forcing herself to join in.

That's always been difficult for Alex in all her years as a professional - pretending she has a less sharp eye than she actually does. Women in the teaching profession are expected to be much less ruthless than men, even now.

But then there was that one time. The first performance where the plump girl surprised everyone - with her truth. A performance that was almost unbearable as it unfolded, but at the end of which the teenager, relieved and smiling in disbelief suddenly became touchingly beautiful. And this isn't just teacher-talk. It was not just Alex who felt this but also the girl's peers, which of course was much more important for Wibke. Alex wanted to hug her afterwards, but that would have been exactly the wrong thing to do, she knew. "*You helped me a lot*" How rarely you hear that as a teacher! In Alex's memory, she had done very little or almost nothing; everything came from the girl herself. Before, you wouldn't have expected such an impactful performance from her, and afterwards, the oversized wound that had been exposed had closed again. Thank goodness, one might say.

Alex had thought for thirty-six years that teaching was an impossible profession. In it, you can't achieve success; you can't mould people. You provide space, and that's basically all. In the theatre studio, back then, that

took shape. The grief over his loss still stings her now. And suddenly she thinks of the experience she unfortunately never had: giving birth. But she still knows the experience. Perhaps more than some women who had a child once in their life and then insisted on a Caesarean section in order to plan everything. She looks out from her roof over the familiar backyards and slightly shabby courtyards to the river, which she can see a small part of, where the ships sail through. Whoever moves in next won't be able to do that any more. They're closing the last gap in the construction. The heirs are cashing in on the property, after their stubborn relative, who lived with half a dozen cats in the last war ruin in the city, passed away at almost a hundred.

She doesn't know if she ever made art in her basement theatre. If she's honest, her performances were always a bit strained and contrived. Certain moments of the rehearsals were irreplaceable. The real essence always happened inside, within the group. But Wibke's performance was art. Concentrated art. At fifteen, the girl decided to be a tree root, no, admitted that she wasn't a delicate flower, but a knobby tree root. At fifteen, she could blow up the street.

At the end of her working life, the teacher sees again in her private cinema – theatre installs private cinemas into the minds of those who love it - a scene from the beginning of a school year. As always, she posted announcements and approached some promising students directly. Everyone is flattered, but most don't show up. But eight came last week. Once again, seven girls and only one boy. At the first meeting, they just talked. But what does "just" mean? Alex has found that when she asks the teenagers directly what they want to act, they mention movies, series, TV

formats. "Something like..." But she doesn't want to reenact anything. That's why she's started to engage them in aimless conversation at first, almost like a psychoanalyst with her free-floating attention. Let things come out first. In the theatre club, unlike in class, Mrs. Mattmann should become invisible. Alex should get a chance. For now, she's a sympathetic listener who can come up with a surprisingly casual remark. She likes being that, the unconventional godmother they find cooler than their own mother. One who delves into the labyrinths of adolescents, tolerates their minotaurs. Someone who doesn't always have immediate answers and solutions ready. A fundamental problem of school, exacerbated by all the IT, is that the answers are already set before the questions. School is increasingly less a place and more an artificial intelligence that tunes the students ever more finely.