

Saša Stanišić

When the Widow Wants Someone To Talk to Her, She Puts the Watering Can on the Grave with the Spout Facing Forward

[Möchte die Witwe angesprochen werden, platziert sie auf dem Grab die Gießkanne mit dem Ausguss nach vorne]

Outline + Sample Translation



Stories

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What if I'd decided differently? What if I'd done that, instead of this?

What if I had defied expectations?

Wouldn't it be nice if you could give life a trial run first, before living it for real?

We sometimes worry that we've been a coward, hesitated too long – and missed out on something that would have made us a better, happier person, with better-looking and more fun pets and partners. This is what Stanišić's new stories are about: the constant, gnawing feeling that maybe you should have taken the road less travelled, made the less obvious choice, told a lie for once. Like the cleaner, for instance, who, holding a goat's-hair brush in their hands, finally decides to take the matter of life into their own hands too. Or like the author who travels to Heligoland for the first time, only to discover that he's actually been there before. Or like the father who's prepared to cheat, if that's what it takes to finally beat his eight-year-old son at Memory...

Saša Stanišić, born in Višegrad in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1978, has lived in Germany since 1992. His novels and stories have been translated into more than 30 languages, and have won numerous awards, including the 2019 German Book Prize (for "Where You Come From") and the 2014 Leipzig Book Fair Prize (for "Before the Feast"), as well as the Eichendorff Book Prize, Schiller Prize and Hans Fallada Prize. He lives in Hamburg.

Sample Translation

By Damion Searls

DREAM STORY

For a long time Dilek hadn't realized that time had stopped, and in retrospect that was pretty annoying, because if time stops you want to take advantage of it, or at least do something besides what you would have done anyway in normally passing time. Dusting the radiator, in Dilek's particular case.

Dilek, Dilek, Dilek... Again, something happened! Something not exactly insignificant! And you? You were dreaming again, Dilek, just dreaming along.

That said, one reason Dilek didn't immediately realize that time had stopped was because, let's be honest, you humans as a species don't have much experience with time standing still, because how often does that happen? What are the signals you need to pay attention to, exactly, what signs do you need to understand? Just because the birds suddenly start acting up doesn't make you think, aha, so time has stopped now. No, you think, or at least Dilek thought, they're just wanting to reproduce, there's no law against that.

Except for the birds the world was suddenly quieter. What a loud species human beings are, really. Only when the whole din and racket of one of your Viennas on one of your Mondays falls silent—when all the drilling and driving and rumbling stops from one moment to the next—do you realize just *how* loud a species.

Or maybe *you* might realize it, but Dilek didn't. All she cared about was the radiator she was going at with her goat-hair radiator brush.

Well, not exactly.

Dilek did realize something, she just didn't react to it. Because what she realized had to do with Mrs. Sehner, and Dilek didn't like reacting to Mrs. Sehner. As a general rule. And especially not today, because she, Dilek, was busy with more important things—namely the dream in her heart and the dust in Mrs. Sehner's

radiator. Dilek pushed the brush between the radiator fins and pulled it out. And pushed it in again.

What Dilek noticed were Mrs. Sehner's slim fingers bashing into the keyboard of her slim computer. Or rather the lack of clacking and clattering in the next room, the work room, although you'd have to say that Mrs. Sehner didn't really work. Didn't need to either. Still, she called it her "home office."

Right before time stood still a feisty clacking and clattering was coming from the home office, which meant: Mrs. Sehner was not happy with Austria. The less happy with Austria she was, the harder she thrashed the keyboard. Mrs. Sehner was a seamstress of opinions, sewing her ideas and troubles into a newsletter for her female friends and, every now and then, stocking her uncle's newspaper. Domestic politics, Ibiza, vaccines (pro and anti), that container ship stuck in the Suez Canal, those dead refugees in eastern Austria near the Hungarian border, this climate (pro and anti), viniculture (dear to her heart due to owning a vineyard): Mrs. Sehner had many reasons to reflect upon our country and much capacity to do so.

All right, enough about Mrs. Sehner, back to Dilek and her dream. Dilek was dreaming about a plane tree in a field. More precisely: of the view of the sea from under this tree. More precisely still: Dilek was dreaming of the humming song of the flies and the sweetish smell of the goats on a hot summer day when she would decide to leave the goats to their own devices for a couple of hours and jump into the sea, cannonball!

No, not really. Dilek had lived through this day in real life! It was a memory, not a dream! The hot unreasonable day with the jump into the sea. The dream aspect was how strange her life back then felt to her now, how different, like she wasn't quite sure she had lived it. Yes, for that reason too: a dream. And it came at her with sharp edges. Stabbed her painfully in the chest. Dilek dropped the brush.

Yes, now, this brush. A goat-hair brush, a present from Mrs. Sehner. Back when Mrs. Sehner had given Dilek the brush, she'd wanted it not to be just a present but wrapped up with a joke: "A relative of your goats!" she cried, laughing her Sehner laugh, Sehner head thrown back. All the Sehners laughed this laugh, even the ones

who technically weren't Sehners: Mr. Feigl, Mrs. Sehner's third husband, laughs that way too. Sophie-Clementine and Gaston, them too, and—no kidding—even Otto, the pug (Mrs. Sehner is interested in literature) laughs like that, despite barely being able to do what you'd call throwing your head back! After all her years in the Sehner villa, Dilek laughs like that too, but only when she finds something particularly unfunny.

She had definitely made merry about the goat-hair brush. Not about the production with the goatly relative, but about how absurd it was that Mrs. Sehner, on a trip to Germany, in a city by the name of Marburg, had gone specially to a *renowned brushmaker's* and bought a goat-hair radiator brush, just so that she could ceremonially hand it to Dilek, with a ribbon tied in a beautiful bow and everything (Dilek had taught her how to tie a bow).

When she was done laughing, Mrs. Sehner put a hand on Dilek's shoulder and sighed, "Oh, my dear Dilek, you don't need to do the home office today, please don't, I want to do a little reading."

And how did Mrs. Sehner even think of the goat-hair thing? What was the point?

The point started a few months before her Marburg trip when Mrs. Sehner started to concern herself with her cleaning lady after two decades of employment. What does that mean, *concern herself*? Let's say: have conversations more substantive than "Good morning, Dilek" and "Otto ate something on the street again and shit in the master bedroom, can you start in there, thank you Dilek."

Loneliness, boredom, a pandemic, and some alcohol: a mix that, as everyone knows, makes a person aggressive and/or communicative. Mrs. Sehner, luckily, only communicative. She talked at Dilek more and more often, sometimes even screaming over the sound of the vacuum cleaner, screaming Mrs. Sehner didn't pay attention to such things.

Now don't take that as a criticism! Please! Not of Mrs. Sehner and not of the exploitation of minorities or the dismal educational opportunities for poor immigrants in Austria or whatever. That's not the point. The point is that Dilek, one

day, answered. And not because Mrs. Sehner had asked her something—Mrs Sehner is a woman of many answers and rather fewer questions—no, because Dilek herself on her own account had something she wanted to say.

The first time was in March of this year, spring and citrus-scented cleaning fluids in the air, Dilek going at the stove with a rag, Mrs. Sehner at the kitchen window with a glass of rosé and various comments about the prospects and risks of organic farming, that is: her comments had to do with some requirements she felt to be inappropriate being imposed on her vineyard.

Then Mrs. Sehner was done. She sighed. She always sighs after she's felt injustice. A silence settled in, between the scrubbing of the tiles and the sighing gaze out the window. And then, into that silence, Dilek launched a story.

A surprise for everybody! For Mrs. Sehner: that Dilek was saying something, something which, if printed, would consist of multiple paragraphs. For Dilek herself: that she wasn't keeping silent despite having something to say, like she usually did. It was probably a surprise for the burners of the induction stove too: they didn't know this Dilek who would suddenly start telling a story about her childhood.

The Sehnerian remarks about farming had awakened something in Dilek, specifically: a memory of tending goats. Dilek herded the goats up to the Aktarım meadow. Not from the kitchen, obviously—she told Mrs. Sehner and the induction stove about the goats she'd herded as a child, on the lordly meadow above her village.

"Kaleköy." Dilek spoke the village's name three times, like a magic spell, at which point Mrs. Sehner repeated the name so carefully that it was like a mispronunciation would make it explode. (She didn't like it, Mrs. Sehner didn't, when things exploded.)

What else did Dilek talk about? How in the morning before she went to the goat pen she'd combed her mother's hair. Such thick hair—here Dilek smiled—that in winter she used to plunge her hands into it to warm them up. How she milked the goats, and fed them or herded them straight to the meadow. She described the sea in Turkish, there was no other way to do it. How it looked to her, seen from the

meadow, and she didn't care that Mrs. Sehner couldn't understand her, but Mrs. Sehner nodded, because maybe she did understand some of it after all, from Dilek's eyes, how they shone.

"Derin bir deniz."

And how the goats smelled. So nice. Like honey. And like goat shit, let's not kid ourselves!

How hard some of the days were: knuckles bloody. Calluses all over. Scratches, dirt, silence, short nights of sleep and long days of work, how hard it was to drag herself on the endless road to school and the endless road back home from school.

Delights: reading books, Aunt Özlem.

Reading in secret because Father didn't like to see it.

Aunt Özlem, the delight, had supplied her with books. When Özlem came to visit from Trabzon, a new book would come with, for Dilek, and stay.

How good some of the days were: opening a new book. Reading up in the meadow with the goats. And Özlem comes by, lies down in the grass next to the girl, doesn't say anything, and Dilek just keeps reading, but now out loud. Some of the days so wonderful that she wished time would stand still (aha!).

She had spent one of those days with the poems of Nâzım Hikmet. Özlem had written the poems out for Dilek on loose pieces of paper. Özlem's beautiful handwriting! This is the day that she described to Mrs. Sehner. How Özlem joined her and the goats and the plane tree and gave her the poems, ceremonially almost.

She said Dilek should read this one first, read it out loud to her: "Invitation" it was called.

Özlem lay with her head on Dilek's lap, and now, along with the buzzing flies, the poet's language was circling around the moment.

"Dilek?" Mrs. Sehner cleared her throat.

"Nâzım Hikmet." Dilek cleared her throat too.

"Nassim who?" Mrs. Sehner asked.

"Just Nâzım's fine," Dilek answered. And she recited a little from "Invitation":

*Yok edin insanın insana kulluğunu!
Bu davet bizim.*

*Yaşamak! Bir ağaç gibi tek ve hür
ve bir orman gibi kardeşçesine,
bu hasret bizim!*

And that's the point. Mrs. Sehner must have been thinking about the goats in Dilek's story when she was in Germany, in Marburg, and went specially to the renowned brushmaker's shop to get Dilek a goat-hair brush.

Why not a book?

No way to know. And it would have been even better if she'd brought back latex gloves from Marburg.

Dilek hadn't had the time or strength to read for years. You try raising four kids in Vienna as a Turkish woman!

She doesn't remember the other books from Aunt Özlem. She knows there were some fairy tales, which Özlem had rewritten because they'd been too prim and proper for her or not feminist enough. There were serious stories, too, like ones about the possibility of a differeny Türkiye, impossible today.

She remembers how the books and the loose sheets of paper smelled: like a different everyday life, life in the big city, like movie theaters and long conversations afterward about what you'd seen, like young people her age, like being able to be lazy, like music on a big city square in the summer and not many mosquitoes to shoo away and, ahh, no animals to look after.

Özlem came from Trabzon not just to give Dilek books. She came to argue with her brother, Dilek's father. The time she spent with Dilek was just the timeouts from the arguments.

He had never forgiven Özlem for leaving Kaleköy. Dilek didn't understand what exactly was unforgivable about it. Why not be happy that at least one of them had escaped the endless mud? The endless silence every morning because every plan had been decided generations ago and everything was still the same and would eternally be the same?

Özlem was the only happy member of the whole family. That's what Dilek thought. On one of her last visits she'd brought her a little book, more like a notebook, and in that notebook she'd written a story of her own. Up on the meadow she suggested that Dilek fill up the rest of the empty pages with her stories.

The little catch in her throat when she puts the upholstery attachment on the vacuum cleaner nozzle and vacuums up the Haas, Haslinger, Haushofer, Hochgatterer, Hofmannsthal. You big beautiful glorious Sehner library! In Kaleköy she hid her books in the stall, behind loose boards. The stall doesn't exist anymore. The books probably don't either.

Now the other thing Dilek dreamed about: Ercan, who wants to go back to Türkiye, back to Kaleköy. He's had a house built there, and obviously Dilek should come with. He's been whispering it in her ear since forever: back, back to Türkiye! Fatih should come too, and that's the next thing that gives Dilek a little stab in the heart: one of Ercan's two ideas:

"Fatih can play soccer in Türkiye too."

Or: "In Kaleköy we can die happy!"

When time stood still, Dilek realized that neither of these was really an idea. Not for her or for Fatih anyway. They weren't suggestions or offers either. "Fatih can play soccer in Türkiye too" wasn't anything Ercan wanted to do for his son. Ercan only wanted to do something for himself. He was the one who could imagine dying happily in Türkiye.

The eagerness was new. The impatience. The house in Kaleköy isn't even ready to move into yet! But Ercan doesn't want to (he says: "can't") wait any longer, nothing about a house matters less than the plaster on the outside, and our parents survived without a fan above the stove for the smoke, and the doors aren't installed inside the house but someone who doesn't necessarily care about growing old somewhere, just about dying happily there, doesn't need any doors inside their house.

But what stabbed Dilek in the heart even more was that Ercan didn't want to wait to see if Fatih found something—a steady job, an apartment of his own. Any

dream at all that he made come true on his own would be good for his confidence. He was still living at home!

Fatih has only been done with school since the fall. Yes, he's applying for things, doing internships and training courses, but he wants to *seriously* give soccer another try. Dilek wished he'd never started playing. But Fatih's first word as a baby was the fan song for the Vienna team: *Bis in den Tod hinein, werd ich nur für Rapid schrein!* What can you do?

In the beginning, Ercan had supported him for a long time, full of hope. Soccer classes and practices here, new soccer shoes there, money for soccer trips. Dilek noticed that his enthusiasm was waning when all of a sudden she was supposed to take Fatih to the away games. All those Sunday mornings standing next to all those soccer fields—in Zwölfaxing, in Kaltenleutgeben, in Hinterbrühl. And it wasn't because Ercan was on an installation job all weekend sometimes, it was because Ercan had lost hope.

So when time stood still, Dilek also thought about Ercan and his longing to go back, and about Fatih and his longing to play soccer, and by the way, Fatih's not an only child—in case you're wondering why Dilek singles him out so much—he's the youngest of four. Studies prove, however, that parents do not love all their children equally, however strongly they claim to and believe they do. Not that Dilek herself ever claimed that Fatih wasn't her favorite.

The other three are out of the house and doing fine for themselves in the world. They're grateful to Dilek, and, yes, even Ercan. For the sacrifices.

Dilek would have preferred if it was for the love.

Taner and Ünal have jobs doing... what do they do, actually? Something with search engines on the internet, Dilek knows that. Not Google. For cars. She doesn't need to know any more than that. She also doesn't want to know any more than that.

Tilbe is at the university and being exploited. Not because she's Turkish but because she's a grad student. She has, in other words, the same worries and problems and stress and shitty prospects and much too much to do as every other

grad student in Austria. Unless your family is loaded and you aren't feuding with them—then it's fine.

Ercan wanted to give up the apartment in Vienna, so he gave Fatih an ultimatum: come with or move out. Dilek was able to slow the process down. There are rules, you know, first the water and electricity. Ercan no longer listens to other arguments, about the house in Kaleköy as such.

He retired early. A tear in his meniscus and only one thing in his head: saying goodbye to this country that gave him a tear in his meniscus but no joy—that Dilek understands; she understands that.

Ercan, oh, my Ercan.

When time stood still, Dilek had to hold onto the radiator. First the stab and the dream, then a tingling in her arm down to the finger holding the brush, and a breath, difficult, a difficult breath. But instead of collapsing, which would have been eminently plausible and in fact perhaps even necessary, Dilek straightened up and all at once knew: I want my own happiness.

And knew: not die happy, live happy.

Ercan had never even asked her if she *wanted* to go back to Türkiye! He took it for granted—she should come with because she was the taken-for-granted wife, and Fatih the taken-for-granted son. But the life Fatih took for granted was this life here, life in Vienna. He had friends here; Dilek was sure that for about the past two months he had a girlfriend too, because for about the past two months Fatih would look at himself in the mirror ten to fifteen seconds longer than usual. A soccer dreamer, that's Fatih. Crooked Aktarım meadows aren't for people like him!

But for Dilek it's a totally crazy idea to be back in Kaleköy and looking at the sea and needing to telephone with Fatih, who's stayed behind without her, and not being able to just get in the tram and go see him because he needs something or just to cook together and look into his big Fatih eyes after a few minutes, deeper than any gaze at the sea can be, *take it all from the top, from the beginning, slowly, güneşim benim, everything'll be fine.*

The sharp-edged dreams in her chest.

The breathless decisions.

Images of happiness that isn't her own.

The loud presence of the birds. Like they're all about to take off at once!

Mrs. Sehner's silent home office.

Incidentally, Dilek kind of likes it that Mrs. Sehner is constantly expressing her opinions about this and that. She herself has some things she wouldn't mind saying, but when you clean for fourteen families and two companies you don't have the strength to express yourself at the end of the workday. Has any cleaning lady in the history of Austria ever had a column in the newspaper? Oh, these dreams of hers, please, who would want to hear them?

You would, Dilek, you yourself would.

Recently Mrs. Sehner has let Dilek take part in crafting her positions before publishing them. To do so, she invites Dilek into the library—a little ritual, with a plate of little cookies from Mrs. Sehner's house baker (he isn't really her house baker, she just calls him that, and besides he's been dead for three years and his daughter has taken over). Mrs. Sehner pours herself a glass of Zierfandler from one of her vineyards; Dilek gets herself a glass of water from the kitchen. Mrs. Sehner reads out loud and Dilek and the books arranged by topic listen, more or less attentively depending on the topic. And when she's done, Mrs. Sehner asks: "So, Dilek, what do you think?" And Dilek says what she thinks.

Obviously not. Mrs. Sehner never asks Dilek anything, or not unless she's misplaced something, Dilek have you seen my glasses, my iPad. No, Mrs. Sehner usually just smiles when she's done reading, smiles thoughtfully at her wineglass. Then Dilek says something sometimes: it's not like that. Or doesn't say anything, when everything's clear. But the end of the ritual is always the same: Mrs. Sehner mutters something in a thick Viennese accent, "well I'll take another look through it, it's not quite right," pours herself another glass, and takes the bottle with her when she leaves the room.

The morning before time stood still they'd had another little meeting. Mrs. Sehner had written a letter to the district council regarding the plans for the renovations in the neighborhood—a plea for additional parking spots.

Unlike Mrs. Sehner, Dilek thought wider sidewalks were a good idea, actually. And the twelve Japanese pagoda trees they wanted to plant: Trees are so nice! And they give shade! “Anyway, more parking spots, you care about that because you have four garages?”

Mrs. Sehner hesitated four whole seconds before replying. Yes, Japanese pagoda trees might be brilliant, she can't exactly picture them at the moment, but Dilek may not be in an ideal position to appreciate the importance of losing parking spots since she takes the tram everywhere.

What Dilek didn't say: She had no idea what exactly this pagoda tree was either. But the name sounded nice. The most beautiful tree in the world (name and tree) is the plane tree. *Çinar*. And this set Dilek dreaming again, in other thoughts, while Mrs. Sehner lectured on a bit about the parking spot as the symbol of freedom of movement.

That's often how it goes. When you're not a hundred percent interested in a conversation, you associate to another one in your head. Dilek associated from the Japanese pagoda tree in the 18th District to her plane trees in Kaleköy on the Black Sea, and in fact to her thirteenth birthday in the shade of the oldest plane tree, in the humming of summer, and to her goats and the tassels on their bells, maybe you can hear them too? Imagine it all—Dilek too. You definitely picture her hair as black. It is black though. And you need to google what plane trees look like. And where Kaleköy is exactly.

Do you feel sorry for the girl who has to tend goats even on her birthday? Or did you not even think of that? Bet you didn't. But you don't need to feel sorry for her; Dilek was genuinely happy with the goats and the plane trees and the view of the sea, and extra happy because she knew Aunt Özlem was coming later that day.

The pleasant sense of anticipation was soon joined, however, by an unpleasant sense of agitation. Today was the day Dilek wanted to ask her aunt if she could go

with her, to Trabzon, and live with her in Trabzon, read in Trabzon, go to school in Trabzon. And the sense of agitation was not about the question, it was because Dilek knew her father wouldn't allow her to leave.

Now the unpleasant sense of agitation was also joined by the heat. Dilek was sweating, the flies and the dingdingding of the bells were getting on her nerves. Now Dilek felt sorry for herself. Up here, all alone, and it was her birthday! She didn't want this. She wanted: to trade her view of the sea for her body in the sea.

Such confusion, next to Mrs. Sehner's radiator. At any moment, the radiator brush will clatter onto the parquet; at any moment, Dilek will jump into the sea. Her mother had woken her up early, given her a kiss, wished her happy birthday, and said that Özlem would be coming that afternoon—that had made Dilek very happy and also scared, because of *the question*.

The heat was unbearable despite the shade of the plane trees. Or rather: it was bearable, but she didn't want to have to bear anything on her birthday, and the goats would be fine without her. Dilek prayed and Dilek ran down to the sea.

Boats in the port of Çarşıbaşı.

Crests of foam farther out. Back then the same as in the moment when time stood still: a postcard picture in Dilek's chest, sharp edges to the hard paper, immutable and unforgettable forever.

Çarşıbaşı is a town of fishers and weavers; even today there are hardly any tourists. On that day, Ercan was there. He was wearing a ridiculous straw hat just like he still wore in the sun today. He said hello, and, no, he didn't fall in love with Dilek then and there, or her with him, this isn't that kind of story, the man seven years older than her, etc. No, she asked him to keep a lookout by the seawall and whistle if anyone came.

Can you do that for me, Ercan, I need to cool off, I need to take a swim in the sea.

Of course Ercan did—he faithfully stood guard by the wall below the country road, didn't even sneak a secret look at Dilek, and no one came by but a dog, haggard and wary.

The swimming was no different than usual. The sea kissed her, salt in the corner of her mouth. Dilek lay on the surface of the water for a long time, and dreamed. You and your dreams, Dilek.

Before long the sky grew suddenly dark; a storm was coming.

What do you have planned for today, Ercan asked her shyly.

Big things, Dilek said.

Here, Ercan said, giving her a beautiful comb, and the rain started falling and Dilek ran off. Now she had to get back fast.

Dilek wasn't scared of the weather. She never had been. Still, she stopped and took shelter, the wind was so strong and nasty. She waited a long time, but then had to go check on the goats after all, and she was late to her own birthday meal.

As if it was easy to step out of one life and jump into another!

There were no harsh words spoken at home. There were, as so often, no words spoken at home at all. Father was chopping wood in front of the house, sweating, furious. Mother was at the set table, pale beneath the colorful garlands. Towers of slices of revani tatlısı cake, of meat, bread, goat cheese. Flies rubbed their little wings clean on the garlands. Mother, eyes red, waved Dilek into the kitchen.

Then, in the kitchen, she asked Dilek to brush her hair for her. Her mother's hair smelled sweet, like pound cake. But Dilek didn't get the brush, she asked:

"Where's Özlem?"

"You can still catch up to her."

"Why did she leave?"

"Dilek..."

"Mother, why?"

"She wanted to give you a present that your father couldn't accept."

"What kind of present?"

"Trabzon."

"I don't understand."

"She wanted to take you with her, Dilek. Have you live with her. Your father—"

"Why didn't she ask me?"

"Your father can't let you go."

"She didn't ask me!"

Mother and Father and Özlem and the goats are all dead now, the house is in ruins, and Ercan has had a house built a hundred meters from the ruin as the crow flies. When time stood still, Dilek thought about whether Father and Aunt Özlem would have come to blows and never spoken to each other again if she'd put up with the heat instead of lying on the sea, dreaming. She would have been on time to her party and maybe have had a different life.

No, nothing would have been different.

Not father.

And Özlem hadn't asked her. Why not, actually? After talking with her mother in the kitchen she ran after her, ran as fast as she could on the muddy road, fell, scraped and cut the palms of her hands. "Özlem! Why didn't you ask me?"

Both of them stood up to their ankles in mud.

"Would you have come with me?"

"Yes."

"So come with me."

"No."

It was her life that was supposed to go to Trabzon, not her father's life!

"You're bleeding," Özlem said, and she tried to take Dilek's hands, and Dilek took a step back, she didn't want to be consoled and didn't want to be hugged and didn't want any more presents—a book, wrapped in newspaper, Dilek threw it into the bushes. Özlem needed to ask *her*, her first.

Dilek went swimming in the public pool in Vienna only a few times, when the kids were still young. She never eats revani anymore, since that birthday. How beautiful and demanding her mother's hair was.

The girl, here's a detail for you to picture: with calluses on her palms, went out in the twilight of her bitter birthday to look for the book in the bushes. Her rage had flung it aside; what bush was it, what book?

The girl, this too: pleading, sewing, knitting, getting up early to walk long distances, with the goats, to school—the most important thing was having good boots, and good eyes in the eternal half-darkness. Surrounded by milk, honey, manure, vegetables, and lots and lots of mud. The few things she misses about that life she can no longer have: Peace and quiet with the goat and with her book. And the feeling, then and there, that time passes only in books, and otherwise: it stands still.

Özlem, you and your rebellion. Look at Türkiye now...

When time stood still, Dilek from Kaleköy on the Black Sea pushed a special Marburg goat-hair brush into a radiator in the 18th District and dreamed about the sunny, stormy birthday when she did what she wanted, she jumped, and these were the presents she got:

A comb.

A book.

A whittling knife.

Wool gloves.

A wool cap.

A brooch (a plane tree. In other words: a tree she can't define any more specifically, but Dilek always says it was a plane tree).

When time stood still, Dilek pulled the brush out and heard the silence of Mrs. Sehner's fingers on the keyboard and knew that she would never go back to Kaleköy, never set foot in the house Ercan had had built, never drink water Ercan had brought up from the well.

You'll like it, Dilek.

No, I won't, Ercan.

And why didn't she tell him that a long time ago? That she cannot see herself in a future Kaleköy because in Kaleköy she'd be always looking back at the past too. But she wants the past over and done with. She didn't live the life she wanted to live, in fact she could only dream it up from stupid books!

Oh, Ercan, who are you without your Dilek? I've taken so much away from you.

And what if it wasn't time that was standing still, but my heart.

Incidentally: Time was standing still for everyone except Dilek. *Presumably* for everyone, that is. Dilek couldn't check on the whole world of course. But definitely for Mrs. Sehner. Dilek found her in her home office bent over the keyboard with a rather bitterly clenched jaw. Dilek: shock of course, fear, shaking her, calling her name, and so on, but nothing worked.

Dilek ran. There was no one in the divan room or the fireplace room, but Gaston was in the apartment, sitting in his room, in front of his computer too, and similarly... paralyzed. And then Dilek started to realize and she looked at the alarm clock and those dots on the clock weren't blinking and it said 10:45 and at around 10:46 it still said 10:45, and Dilek grasped that Gaston would probably have a bent back forever now, and his index finger would be pressing the left mouse button for all eternity, well, Dilek thought, at least he would end his life doing what he most loved to do: sitting in front of a screen that showed a monster in the process of being blasted to pieces, and Dilek wanted to call Fatih at once, but the line was dead. Unless the body rotted, in which case Gaston would obviously not have a bent back forever.

Dilek opened the window in Gaston's room. She was relieved for a moment, she saw people on the street, and she shouted down, but no one moved. Oh, shit.

Dilek left the villa. Ran down empty streets. She felt cold; in her excitement she'd forgotten to throw on a coat. Now, the streets weren't actually *empty*, there were people here and there, but their performances were totally *frozen*. To Dilek that made the streets feel... *empty*.

The birds! There were still those! A pigeon landed on a young woman's head. Dilek shooed it away, that was too much. The stoppage had caught the young woman as she was getting out of a car—one leg was already sticking out. She was wearing a short skirt, so Dilek tugged the skirt down a little.

Dilek kept going, but she was calmer now. Because when you're the only person far and wide who isn't as frozen as the Schnitzler monument where Dilek rested and thought about what she should do, it's definitely an unusual situation but not

actually horrible. Other than worrying about the children and Ercan, and being cold, Dilek actually had no worries at all for a change.

And she solved the problem of being cold by borrowing a coat from a lady in the Türkenschanzpark, but then she gave it right back, because what if people, despite being paralyzed, still felt the temperature?

She looked down Hasenauer Street from the Schnitzler monument. In front of the auction house's yellow façade a monument was looking at his pocket watch. That is, a man frozen like a monument, magnificently dressed, complete with vest and bowtie and ankle boots and a leather satchel and a hat! Too bad this kind of exaggerated extravagance was dying out, in Dilek's opinion. Despite his paralysis the gentleman had lost none of his exaggerated extravagance, and it awakened the show-off in Dilek and she took the man's hat and put it on. *You don't need that anymore, it's never raining again.* (She didn't put the hat back because even if time got unstuck at some later point a guy like that would certainly have thirty-three more hats.)

She also took his suitcase and pocket watch. Although snatching a pocket watch is just about the dumbest thing of all time, if time has stopped, please, Dilek! But what does that even mean, "snatching"? If time is standing still then everything belongs to the people who aren't standing still with it, that's how it is.

Back in the Sehner villa, Dilek opened the suitcase and took out two folders and they were full of stamps. And a description was written under each stamp, with the year, country, place, and estimated value. How touching our hobbies are, don't you think?!

Dilek looked for a particular stamp. There it is, the only one from Türkiye. On the other hand it was from her birth year, 1963. *Parliament Building, Ankara.* And then she didn't take it after all, because the letter with a stamp like that on it would never reach its destination. So she took a modern stamp, from today, with Schnitzler's head on it. And then, in the end, she didn't take any, because she realized that after all time was standing still and so the post office was hopefully standing still too.

Even so, Dilek wrote her letter to Ercan. On the thick stationery, from the Sehner Vineyards. And she explained everything in the letter, fully and honestly: *Not my happiness. You would have known that if you'd have asked me.*

She ran water into the big Sehner bathtub. Wanted to give herself some time back. Not an indulgence. Time out. For herself. She took the Schnitzler down from the bookshelf and brought it into the tub with her, and Schnitzler had written this: *"When Albert woke up at six in the morning the bed was empty beside him and his wife was gone. There was a note on her bedside table. Albert reached for it and read the following words: 'My dear friend, I woke up before you. Goodbye. I'm going away. I don't know if I'll come back. Farewell. Catherine.'"*

There, you see? Dilek thought, and she shut the book.

She lay in the tub and looked at the ceiling.

She lay in the sea and looked at the sky.

Whispered

*Destroy man's servitude to man!
That is our invitation.*

*Live! Each alone and free like a tree
and all brotherly like a forest,
that is our desire!*

Drained the water, dried herself off.

Went into Mrs. Sehner's office and took a black magic marker and drew a thin but jaunty mustache on Mrs. Sehner's face.

BEATING THE KID AT CONCENTRATION

Georg Horvath stands in front of the garbage bins in the courtyard, hesitating: Is Pirate Concentration paper or Yellow Bin or Non-Recyclable?

For a long time Georg Horvath didn't take separating the garbage and recycling as seriously as Regina did. Regina fishes the double cookie cylinder out of the wastepaper basket in his(!) office and doesn't say the planet is being destroyed and yet here you are throwing that in the wastepaper basket, yet he knows that that's exactly what she's thinking, it's the telepathy of the long-married, someone should do a scientific study on it someday. Anyway, the fact is that Georg Horvath has to snack on something the second he opens an Excel spreadsheet.

Since he saw that documentary recently about likeable-looking fish getting strangled by plastic, Georg Horvath has decided to do the garbage and recycling properly, for example now, with the Pirate Concentration game. But he has found that there are too many complex connections. Too many unclear classifications. Kind of like in everyday life, in a relationship, a family—it's ultimately totally impossible to take everybody's needs, his own desires, Regina's moods and Paul's moods and his moods and all three of their TV preferences into account to everybody's satisfaction, which is why they all always end up with Paul's, watching *Peppa Pig*.

The pizza box is Non-Recyclable, unless the remains of the cheese has been entirely scratched off, in which case it's paper. That's logical, in Georg's opinion, and he likes scratching the cheese off anyway—the paper recycling bin is the one he finds most satisfying in general, he likes folding cardboard boxes into manageable flat surfaces, he's good at that.

But medicines. For example if they're expired. They're Non-Recyclable, but the packaging, Regina claims, is Yellow Bin. Georg doesn't want to hear that, and seriously, it was just too stupid that one time when he pushed every individual pill out of its plastic blister into the bin while Mrs. Schülle from the third floor watched the whole procedure suspiciously from her balcony. What exactly did she suspect him of doing? Destroying evidence? His medicine chest was not to contain any

expired medicine, if there was one bodily indisposition Georg Horvath liked least of all it was diarrhea.

Since the internet wasn't unanimous about the proper disposal of medicinal garbage any more than it was about anything else, Georg Horvath had called the city sanitation department. Since the internet also wasn't unanimous about the proper use of phone numbers, he ended up reaching a friendly gentleman in the municipal administration by the name of Arne. Georg initiated Arne into his medicament problem, and Arne wished he could help but he wasn't sure about it himself, so he transferred Georg, not to the sanitation department, but to the office of the Climate and Environment Senator, Kathrin Moosdorf, Green Party.

There too someone named Arne picked up the phone, and Arne 2 couldn't say how to handle expired medicine, but also couldn't refrain from adding a little footnote when he said goodbye to Georg: a problem like this wasn't one for municipal politics, it was a regulatory problem, maybe even a philosophical problem, by which he meant, first and foremost: not *his* problem.

Georg was already done with their conversation but the remark made him a little mad, a little eager to reclaim his honor, and so he asked Arne to put him through to the Environment Senator. "You're clearly just the front desk," he unnecessarily provoked Arne, and immediately felt bad about it.

Arne 2 was unruffled, he just said that the Senator was at the annual convention of the Lower Saxony Ornithological Association at the moment, which made Georg, deeply against the grain of his usual calm demeanor, cry: "Lower Saxony Ornithological Association?! You're making that up!" Then adding, a bit more cool and collected: "But if she really is there, I'm sure she'd be glad to get a call that gives her an excuse to leave."

Arne hung up.

Georg Horvath found a second number for the city sanitation department on the internet, but again Arne 1 picked up the phone; it sounded like he was happy to talk to Georg again, and that does feel good, when someone is genuinely happy to hear that you've called.

Arne liked musicals and had an extra ticket to *The Lion King* for that evening, he said Georg could have it for 178.99 euros.

Unfortunately, Georg said, he didn't have time, although he did have time, he just thought musicals were stupid and he didn't want to admit it so as not to offend Arne. Georg Horvath believed fans of musicals were easily offended.

Arne apologized for forwarding Georg's call to the wrong extension, the system was going a bit nuts today. He read out a number, and it was the right number, and so Georg on his third try finally reached the city sanitation department, and no one named Arne picked up the phone, it was Björn, who had the following to say: "The main thing with medicine is not to flush it down the toilet."

Pirate Concentration consists of thirty-six cards. One pair of cards shows the captain. He's the captain because he's wearing a coat over his horizontal-striped shirt. Another shows a sailor. He's a sailor because he's not wearing a coat over his horizontal-striped shirt. The rest of the pairs of cards show pirate stuff and things on a ship. Georg Horvath opened the box and looked through the cards. Here's the saber, here's the treasure chest, and here's the parrot with the eyepatch, which he hates to the depths of his soul.

The inscrutability of so many things. The fact that you can't decide what's most important. Not when it comes to material and packaging, to other people's feelings and goals, often even your to own. Why Markus always calls only on Sunday to force some extra work on you. Little cards face down.

Georg Horvath stands in front of the garbage bins in the yard and holds the one-eyed parrot up in the sunlight like a gold miner holds up a nugget and in just that moment Mrs. Schülle shouts something down from her balcony. Greetings? A threat? It is simply impossible to comprehend the lifetime quantity of Gauloises she's smoked. Georg waves and nods and Mrs. Schülle shakes her head and coughs a deep throaty cough like a coal mine.

Georg looks back at the card; the card reflects the light like it's coated in plastic. Theoretically, then, he should peel off the thin layer of plastic or scrape it off some other way so he can put it in the separate bin. And the box, too, with that same

parrot on it, is definitely reinforced with plastic. Mrs. Schülle squawks from overhead: "Whass that game?"

What should he answer? That "iss" his son's Concentration, which he wants to make disappear? No way. He can't have any witnesses to his shameful capitulation to his son's game.

Paul likes Mrs. Schülle. First of all, presumably, because she's the only grown-up in the building who totally ignores him, never getting on his nerves with questions like "How's school?" or "Is that ice cream tasty?" Secondly, because she occasionally throws gummi bears down to him from her balcony, or more exactly, throws gummi bears *at* him, and sometimes even hits him, which Paul of course thinks is super fun, and he laughs, and she laughs too. Or maybe dies. You can't tell for sure from the noise she makes.

Paul will quickly realize that Pirate Concentration is gone. He'll look for it, and of course won't find it, and then he'll ask his father if he knows where Concentration is, and Georg Horvath has long since prepared himself psychologically for this question and for his answer: "You need to look after your toys better, Paul."

At some point, then, Paul would, not forget that Concentration ever existed, he likes it too much for that, but come to terms with the fact that it's gone, and that's what child-rearing is all about: having the stamina to let situations ripen into faits accomplis without buying another Pirate Concentration.

Paul is good at Pirate Concentration. Very good. So unbelievably good that Georg Horvath has never, not one single time, beat his son at Pirate Concentration.

And that drives him nuts.

Today isn't the first time Georg has tried to get rid of Concentration. A few months ago he put it out on the street with other junk to give away—books no one would ever read again, Regina's Birkenstocks whose left strap had acquired a stain, to Regina inexplicable, by Regina unremovable no matter how hard she scrubs.

That afternoon, when Regina came home from school with Paul, the boy held the box up like a trophy. "Dad, look what I found outside! It's just like the one I have!" And from the boxtop grinned that parrot.

Regina had given her husband a pitying look, with a hint of Grow-up-will-you. She stuffed the Birkenstocks back in the closet. The fact that no one had taken them from the free box didn't surprise Georg in the least, even without the stain.

Since then a second, as it were invisible Pirate Concentration game has existed in the house, making it even harder to get rid of it. One gets lost? Okay, fine, that can happen. But both at once? Even the most naïve six-year-old doesn't believe in coincidences like that. Georg Horvath stands in front of the garbage bins in the yard, determined to see what happens and find out what a six-year-old will and won't believe.

Paul had gotten Pirate Concentration from a classmate of his with another one of these north German names—Joris or Jannis or Jonte. For a while this Joris or Jannis or Jonte would shove Paul during every recess, and Georg had mentioned it at a parents' night, and the teacher had said yes, but Joris or Jannis or Jonte shoved kids besides Paul too—as though that would make it better. Strangely, though, this did soothe Georg somewhat: his son wasn't being so to speak personally bullied, Joris or Jannis or Jonte was just out of control.

Maybe, after this parents' night, Joris, Jannis, or Jonte's parents wanted to atone for their child being so aggressive—whatever the reason, they gave the victims little presents, or maybe they were supposed to be payoffs since the parents couldn't rule out or prevent further attacks? There weren't many other occasions to give presents, since no one ever invited Joris, Jannis, or Jonte to their birthday party.

Since then Paul wanted to play Pirate Concentration every day right after school. Georg thinks: to recover from school stress. Regina thinks: because he always wins.

Regina has never played Paul in Pirate Concentration. Before Paul's birth she made it crystal clear that she would be happy to arrange and regulate everything else in her son's life but under no circumstances whatsoever would she dig an imaginary ditch on the carpet with a plastic construction vehicle while speaking in a fake voice, or, God help her, dig a real one in a sandbox. Regina doesn't honk the horn of a toy car. Regina doesn't look for matching pirate cards. Regina doesn't play.

One time, when the van den Bergs suggested, during the third or fourth tense silence after a dinner—this was shortly before their divorce—playing a game (in Georg’s opinion: a good idea), “How about a round of Settlers of Catan?” Regina pleaded a migraine and went to lie down, and later, once the van den Bergs were gone, offered this statement: “You can’t play Settlers with all the terrible things happening in the Middle East.”

Pirates and car horns were Georg’s territory, and that was fine with him, forgetting about housework and job and himself for the time it took to play a game. But since Pirate Concentration moved in with them, he could no longer forget about Pirate Concentration.

Georg Horvath stands in front of the garbage bins in the yard and wonders, Why did this game of Concentration look used since the first time he saw it? The edges were dented; a skull had tomato sauce in the corner of its mouth. By this point, he doesn’t think it outside the realm of possibility that an ancient pirate curse lies upon the Concentration game, according to which no grown-up can ever win against any child, and that Joris or Jannis or Jonte’s parents didn’t know what else to do but pass along the game and thus the curse to someone else.

One point speaking against the curse theory is that Paul has lost to Elke. Elke is Regina’s mother, and Georg Horvath finds it quite interesting, although, to be honest, pretty harsh, that the person who beat Paul at Concentration should be precisely the one who recently caused a ten-mile backup on the highway, and when the police showed up, ready to crack some heads, they found out that Elke was not a climate protestor who’d glued herself to the road but a barefoot runaway from the old-age home.

After his approximately thirtieth defeat, he decided to tackle the problem scientifically. Hypothesis: He wasn’t a terrible player, the kid was unusually suited to Concentration. And look, about this the internet *was* unanimous: It sparks more in a child’s brain than it does in an adult’s—something about synapses—a child notices details better and thus better remembers where the same pictures are hidden. Paul the child has thus not only noticed that the parrot is red, yellow, and green, and has a

skull on its eyepatch, but also that it's on the second card in the top row, whereas Georg the adult notices only: "That shitty parrot's in the top row somewhere."

Furthermore, a researcher has shown that most children are more desperate to win games than most adults, and their motivation has a positive effect on their attention during a game. Disillusioned adults, marked by the defeats life has dealt them, have gotten out of the habit of wanting to win, as a defense mechanism. Plus they're much too tired to play Concentration. This last bit was Georg's conclusion, not the researcher's.

Georg Horvath was proud of his son. Not because Paul was good at something, but because he did what he was good at voluntarily, on his own, without exhausting arguments about it. Georg Horvath doesn't throw out Pirate Concentration—not because of the smoking witness on the balcony, not because of the uncertainties regarding the separation of trash and recycling, yes because he's proud of his son, but most of all because it's totally asinine, seriously Georg, come on, pull yourself together. He puts the parrot back in the box, nods in the direction of the balcony, and gets a wave in return, or maybe a middle finger, he can't tell without his contact lenses on.

Back in the apartment, he puts on water for coffee. He could do something else while it's coming to a boil, but he could also wait and brood, and so, like every normal person, he picks the option of waiting and brooding.

What life choices have brought him to this point, where as he's boiling water in an old Bremer-style house in Schwachhausen there's nothing he'd rather do than stare at the water boiler? Look at the bubbles through a gap in the container, listen to the rumbling? How lovely, Georg Horvath thinks: how lovely physics is.

The first thing that comes to mind is the extreme fact of a child's existence entering his life and his bedroom at around two in the morning. The life choice to try to have a child, in other words, which, once he and Regina set about it in practical terms, was anything but self-evident given Regina's professional ambitions (becoming head of the clinic) and Georg's professional scepticism (better to give it all up and try poetry or ornithology), not to mention that they were over forty already!

Georg Horvath did not have an easy time picturing himself as a father. No one who has friends who bring their kids along to brunch, or, like the van den Bergs when things were good, to the exhibit on Socialist Realism in the GDR, North Korea, and Bulgaria (third-party insurance is the best insurance), could be that naïve. Raising a child must be at least one level harder than, say, growing a geranium.

Georg Horvath lays out the Concentration cards on the kitchen counter. He wants to play a round against the water boiler, he needs to feel what it's like to win for a change. Skeletons with swords and three-cornered hats dance on the backs of the cards. He pours some coffee and takes a sip as he reflects some more about his fate, and you should never do that, you should never reflect on your fate right before you burn your tongue. Georg flinches and coffee from the jolted cup splatters all over the cards.

He immediately wipes off the drops. He wipes them away but a couple of little, barely visible spots remain. Here, on the top left card—Georg turns it over—it's that piece-of-shit parrot. And here, on this one, now that's interesting, it's that piece-of-shit parrot again.

Barely visible. Definitely noticeable.

And Georg Horvath? Georg Horvath has an idea.