Sample translation from

Chris Kraus

Sun and Moon

translated by Ruth Martin, July 2025

The first day

1

There are people who are full of themselves. And there are people like Sunny.

A quarter of a century ago, on a perfectly pleasant September morning three days after her seventeenth birthday, her father hanged himself in his garage.

Herr Dipl-Psych Jonathan Meling was immediately taken care of by a reliable firm of undertakers called Leberschön, with the solicitous, seamless, hands-on approach of a family business that had flourished for three generations. The boss himself, Herr Leberschön Junior, embodied everyone's expectations of a decent funeral, his principal contribution being a very sad expression.

He had inherited it from his father.

Who had, in turn, inherited it from his father.

Without relaxing this genetic facial catalepsy even once, apart from the mundane moment when an elderly mosquito bit him on the neck, Herr Leberschön Jr laid the tragically deceased to rest in the

modest manner befitting a suicide, seconded by an overweight pastor who was looking forward to a tot of brandy afterwards.

Then thorough tribute was paid to the mortal realm.

The rather too cheerful waiting staff of the Ravenna inn served pasta and veal schnitzel for the funeral repast, along with fortifying drinks, and after his fourth Weissbier Herr Leberschön Jr was able to demonstrate how many other facial expressions were in his repertoire.

Sunny wanted to see her father one last time – she felt a real need to, since he was the one who had christened Sunny Sonja but then, day after day and year after year, even on the evening before his death, had called her by this far brighter, golden yellow name, which she would forever associate with his soft, yearning, and also slightly weak voice.

But to spare her a shock that would stay with her, her wish was not granted.

Better if you remember him the way he was, love.

She never forgot those words.

Thunder and Lightning would have been equally fitting names for Sunny. But she didn't talk about her bad weather. She didn't talk

about her father, her childhood, her birthplace. At most, she would talk about her enemies.

She didn't even need many words for that.

She could just silently curl her lip and instinctively round her shoulders when she encountered enemies. Enmity was the most personal thing she would reveal about herself. It was how she sharpened her edges.

Undertakers like the firm of Herr Leberschön Jr were enemies to Sunny, as were certain council cemetery departments, and regulations regarding death in general.

Often, her enemies had no idea they held this status, and these were mostly the ones who wouldn't have cared anyway. Windbags, show-offs and inveterate know-alls, for example. Or people who had a hunting licence and actually used it, climbing up to hunting hides to shoot a grazing deer two hundred metres away.

Sunny didn't shoot any animals dead. Nor did she eat them.

That was logical to her, since she didn't eat people, either.

Her greatest enemy was death. She thought him horrific, even though he was good to her. As a funeral director of not quite 42 years old, she could easily have regarded him as a friend. He gave her a livelihood, fed her, got things moving, and – hopefully – left her plenty more time.

But she didn't like what he did, and she always took care of the things he discarded like rubbish.

Death loves killing, not corpses. Death is a criminal.

On the one hand.

On the other, he also leads people across the finish line, sometimes with tenderness, often cruelly. And whether in life people were thick-skinned men, with snapping teeth and a castrated conscience, or women with integrity and warmth, who died by suicide after being abandoned by their lovers – in the end, like all corpses, they are a likeable version of themselves: so authentic, so weak-willed, so human, so harmless, so even-tempered – filled with defeats and artificial hips, and a bit boring.

Essentially, Sunny had a problem with authority – and not just any authority, but the ultimate authority in life: The Godfather. That's what she called him. Not often, of course, because she didn't talk much. But she liked old, obsolete words like "travails" or "tarry", perhaps as a show of resistance to the fact that The Godfather knows no mercy. He even comes for words and professions and, above all, for fashions.

Sunny had no time for fashions. To her mind, they were dead men walking.

She always wore the same black clothes. T-shirts. Hoodies. Simple and clear. Since her eighteenth birthday, her only jewellery had been a silver ring through her right nostril.

She had always stayed true to herself. Everyone who knew her said the same.

Though she also had a sense of style.

A sense of style was Sunny's nuclear bunker against the disorder of the world.

Anyone who knew the elegance of proper proportions held it to be just as important as a cure for cancer. In her opinion.

When someone entered a chapel of rest that she had furnished, they were stepping into an enlarged model of her skull. Not her heart – her skull. Everything bright, visible and flooded with light. The same went for the flower arrangements. Or for the choice of colours, and of co-workers, as she called them.

When Sunny walked past a homeless person, she knew instantly whether they would prefer the tofu sandwich she had just bought, or some change – because empathy, too, is a sense of style. Generally, she would give both. She was more kind than affectionate. And often she had to squeeze all the kindness out of herself like juice from a lemon. She could then be exhausted and unobtrusive at once.

There is so much beauty in kindness.

But nowhere, in her view, was there less of either than in the conventional funeral industry, an industry that Herr Leberschön Jr had once distilled perfectly into a single, unalterable facial expression.

This profession attracted people with stoic cheek musculature and a well-trained sympathetic ear, who combined foolish taste with tactful apathy and a pure and uninhibited delight in selling not only coffins, but all kinds of funeral goods. Coffin linings in unisex shiny silk or with strips of loden and printed mottos, football illustrations or genuinely immortal Swarovski crystals were just the tip of the iceberg. Coffin mattresses, padded pillows, foot cushions, chinrests, worry beads, and black balloons with or without crosses on them were to be brought to patient customers.

And many of the deceased were still dressed in pointless white linen burial gowns (simply because these things were stocked by Gundolf Köppele and Sons – specialists in burial clothes, funeral items and cemetery technology since 1849!), instead of being burned with dignity in their favourite beaten-up denim jacket or their wedding suit.

The most important thing for Sunny was that everyone who wanted to had the chance to say goodbye to their dead people – as God made them, as life shaped them, and sometimes as an Intercity

Express left them after the impact. Her job was to create a space for the dignity of this moment, and her expertise in the effects of light, shade and staging helped her in this.

She had studied product design, and had been a more than passable photographer for a few years. She'd even photographed supermodels. This was quite a chore for someone who has no time for fashion. It had also offended her cast-iron sense of style to snap undernourished idiots for agencies, all of them – whether they were called Gisèle, Nathalie, Marie-Caro or Thymiane – with the exact same sombre look, bordering on sullen, that had once been worn by corpulent Herr Leberschön Jr. Sunny had no desire to see this man's very limited expression again on any visage in the world, no matter how striking.

Youthful flesh had never interested her, either; to Sunny, youthful flesh was no different to old flesh: mere ballast that we lug around before casting it off when we reach our end.

Ever since she'd had to photograph Heidi Klum under a rainbow that ended in her open mouth, she'd hated kitsch like all other lies.

Sunny had not called her small Berlin studio for caring burials *Halleluia* or *Sonja Meling Funerals GmbH*; she had named it after an old Toten Hosen song. It was called *Summer Night's Dream* and was located in a former bakery in the district of Prenzlauer Berg. Some people claimed it still smelled of flour. Her only employee, Samuel, just called the business the Death Bakery.

The Death Bakery's paperwork was done in the former kitchen, now known as the "office". Box files were arranged by the colours of the rainbow in large bookcases, and now and again someone in a finely-ground state would be sitting under the table in an urn, awaiting their final appearance.

The showroom reflected Sunny's need for aesthetic clarity. There was an old wooden table, a cast-iron station clock, a model gravestone, and an open pine coffin for display purposes. It smelled of resin and wind and, like a Finnish canoe, seemed to be waiting for athletes in peak condition. The light, camomile-tea-coloured wall displayed some of Samuel's art.

Samuel liked to whittle things that looked like driftwood washed up by the sea. He was a little like flotsam himself, chapped, worn, marked by salt water and the elements. He'd had a previous career as a punk, the lead guitarist in the band Satanic Sex Toys, and as a film lighting technician, a student for a record-breaking length of time, a designer of computer graphics, and a funeral orator. Like Sunny, he had lost his father to suicide when he was young.

It wasn't a professional requirement for a good death-baker to have had a parent kill themselves at a young age. But Samuel found this link between him and Sunny quite remarkable, as if the two of them, as he once said, had "a giant liver spot in the shape of the Soviet Union in the same place on our left buttocks." He liked to make odd, macabre jokes about it; once, to cheer her up on her birthday, he put up signs in the front window with dada-style

advertising copy that said things like *The boss still does the killing himself here or Suicide, family-owned since the end of the 20th century.*

Unfortunately, Sunny was not cheered in the least by these antics; she was shocked, and took the signs down immediately. Sunny rarely found Samuel amusing. But he loved to witness her sense of humour failures, which he found so easy to trigger. It was the most intense emotion he could elicit from her.

They had known each other many years, and knew each other well. The hurt that Sunny had once caused him lay hidden under a kind of paving that they both walked over to get to work each day.

Otherwise, Samuel's girlish infatuation with Sunny was the best-kept secret of his stolid, somewhat overweight, ruggedly scruffy and thoroughly easy-going appearance. He hid it under the little black crab-fisherman's hat that he always wore, and behind a façade of occasionally harsh directness, the guttural lilt of his speaking voice, and a grumpiness that was sometimes just for show, and which always overtook him when he was secretly delighted by his boss choosing particularly unbearable enemies.

An unattractive full beard also helped keep his feelings hidden, as did his small, cunning seaman's eyes, which often studied Sunny when she wasn't looking. He was certain that he'd be sacked on the

spot if his weakness for her ever came to light, based on how his boss judged emotional dependency.

"Emotional dependency," Sunny often said, "just means there is no life before death."

Though in her view, there was no life after death, either. There were no praying hands by Dürer at her funerals, no rosaries, no priestly assistance or Ave Marias.

On her website, Sunny therefore summarised her company philosophy as follows: "At Summer Night's Dream, we are your helpers, companions and supporters through the process of dying, death and mourning. We know what needs to be done, and will take care of it. Including all the formalities. But first and foremost, we take care of the deceased, and of you and your needs. The most important thing is that you are able to make as many decisions as possible for yourselves, so that every step feels right for you. An individual, autonomous experience."

Sunny meant exactly what she wrote. She was a care-taker, and loved to turn her silence and candour into devotion, even into humility. And she was undaunted by the appearance of the deceased, whether they had been mutilated in an accident or decapitated in the course of a crime. To her, they were all just empty shells.

Though she did like hair, including her own, which was slightly frizzy and beech-bark brown. It was important that her clients had beautiful hair in their coffins. She had done some specialist training on repairing hairstyles; it was particularly important to her when parts of the skull were missing.

She also loved eyes. For someone like her, who didn't enjoy speaking, they were more than just windows; they were a greenhouse full of dark desires and questions and resentments. Her own eyes were nothing earth-shattering, she thought, and when other people looked into them and tried to flirt or make her melt, she looked back with a seriousness and unavailability that made you want to throw stones at her.

A pair of glasses with plain lenses gave her an added air of severity. The reason for wearing a seeing aid that didn't help her to see was something she rarely explained. But it did seem to be useful in some way. You could tell from the care with which she handled the plain-glass glasses – the case for which, lacquered in bright colours, she would fumble out of her jacket with a slightly nervous hand, contemplate, and put back – that they must be very important to her.

When she regarded her clients through these imitation glasses, the look in her eyes changed. An ex-boyfriend had once described that look as like a flock of flamingos taking off from a dark green, almost black lake. No wonder she left him. She didn't like overblown rhetoric.

She thought people usually died as they had lived, which was interesting. She also thought that, generally speaking, you could only be a good funeral director if you liked people. And Sunny liked people, albeit in a rather eccentric way.

For instance, human breath bothered her. It often just didn't smell nice, for which reason she liked to stay at least a metre away from other people's faces.

But she did love thoughts and feelings, which felt like solid bodies, almost like whole people, who could stroll through her heart and get stuck there, for years, like good friends, just without any body odour or bad breath, or any other miasmas.

And she still read books from the 19th century, looking for these thoughts and feelings that remained despite the author's passing, but also weird stuff by Bukowski. And now and then, covertly, a bad romance novel.

Most of all, however, she loved fairy tales. Though that was to do with her father.

The idea that she had once been a straight-A student, class representative, ready to take the great leap forward into the pack of hyper-ambitious careerists, was something not even Samuel could have imagined.

In dealing with the relatives of the deceased, Sunny was number one among Berlin's alternative undertakers.

Although she seemed so composed, rational and controlled, she often had to fight back tears when listening to stories about the deceased in her Death Bakery. And so people beat a path to her door to book her as a professional mourner.

Georgine from the lesbian funeral company Last Dance always said quite cattily that Sunny was like a cheap hooker who has an orgasm with every punter.

That was the usual tone. Even at its most caring end, the funeral business was still rough and hard-nosed.

Sunny liked Georgine, and often laughed about her. But she couldn't ever see a dead person as an enemy, because the deceased seemed cleansed of the stupidity that keeps our everyday lives running.

There are no stupid dead people.

The stupidity of the dead lies exclusively in the eye of the beholder, as do their greatness and beauty.

So Sunny thought, until the day everything changed.

2

"We there soon."

The man salted his indifference with a pinch of orientation.

He divided his passengers into categories, and this woman behind him was clearly in the "gizhi" class. That's what they called mad people in his country.

She was humming to herself, softly and with no hint of merriment. Despite the storm, she was wearing glasses with dark lenses, and curlers in glaringly bright colours that broke up the uniform blonde of her hair. And what could still be seen of her forehead was banging slowly and rhythmically against the side window, like someone with a behavioural disorder, while the rain drummed on the glass from outside.

It couldn't hurt to tell the gizhi their destination was a little closer than it really was.

"We there real soon!" the taxi driver promised, even more ingratiatingly than before. "Real soon!"

"Always slow," the woman said grimly , without breaking the metronome beat of her head against the window. "Otherwise we dead real soon."

He didn't quite understand why his broken German was coming back at him. Was she poking fun, or being racist, or simply mad? Still, he just laughed his placatory laugh, which had helped him once before when someone in the same category suddenly pulled a bowie knife and held it to his ear, to show him what a convex blade grind was.

"Belt?" he asked, as cautiously as possible, for the third time since the start of the journey. "Belt, please?"

The gizhi had apparently decided not to say anything more. Buckling up, like other forms of submission, was not one of her virtues. She stopped the humming, and stopped banging her forehead on the window, too.

The necklace was in her hand.

Everyone in her family had a necklace like this, with a cross on it. A silver one. She had been given hers at birth by her pious grandmother. She wore it because she had always worn it. But in times of inner turmoil, it was more than a habit.

Now, looking out of the window at the rain, she rubbed the neat row of tiny chain links between thumb and forefinger. She thought: It will be around my neck again soon. But not yet. It brings such calm. It feels so lovely in the hand. Fine and cool at once. And weightless. It always felt like this, even when I was as little as this taxi driver. He is inconceivably small. A kind of dwarf. How does his foot even reach the brake pedal, she thought. If the wheels lock

and aquaplane on the road, and he needs to brake, and his tiny body slides down, no, he jumps down to reach the brake pedal, and doesn't make it in time, and we crash into a lamppost – then his seatbelt will strangle him in a fraction of a second. And I will simply shoot through the front seats like a rocket, smack into the windscreen. Just like Mahm and Paps.

That made her smile. Thoughts like this always made her smile. They inspired her best gags. Once she had written a whole sketch about sudden death and improvised it in the canteen. The novelty laughing bags from the writers' room hooted themselves hoarse. Only the assistant director swallowed and looked at her. His daughter, she later found out, had leukaemia.

I really should put my seatbelt on, she thought. Just like the mini Georgian kept telling her every few minutes, in this accent that she really must try out.

Maybe it will make me feel more relaxed, too.

She'd never had Georgian in her repertoire.

He keeps staring into the rear-view mirror, like he's onto me. I'm sure he doesn't recognise me.

She looked odd too, of course, with this wavy hairstyle still in. She could at least have taken the curlers out. She doesn't think ahead enough, just does things.

They must have their own TV clowns over in Georgia. Are they even half as funny as me?

She was surprised at her own train of thought, but still contemplated making him laugh. She could do it with her hands tied; she'd just need to mimic the attitude of his eyebrows.

On the other hand, Said hadn't put his seatbelt on, either.

It would really be too strange if she ended up like him. Like him and the rest of the family.

Then again, as her pious grandmother had always said: an earthquake seldom comes alone.

And a storm had writhed above Said's final seconds, too.

She felt the cross on the tip of her thumb. She pressed down on it hard, to imprint the Christian metal into her flesh. She liked impressions on her skin, always had done, and loved to watch them slowly vanish. She made a fist.

Then she opened her hand, held up the silver chain with two fingers, shoogled out the twists and fastened it around her neck again. Was she doing the right thing? She felt sick, but that was the drugs. That was the upset. That was the everything.

I just need to close my eyes for a bit.

"We there," said the little taxi driver an eternity later, switching off the engine.

She looked up. They were double-parked on a cobbled street, opposite a grey block of flats that was over a hundred years old. Behind the ribbony film of rain, she saw the company sign. She had become so used to giving herself an expectant look that she looked expectant even now. But what did one expect from a funeral director? Service, of course. Quiet voices. To come to rest, somehow, when before you had just been hurtling through the cosmos. But otherwise? And why was it a "director", anyway, and not a "company", or at least a "boutique"? If you could have a laundry and a bakery and a perfumery, why not a funeralry?

"Director" sounded highfalutin. As if some Spielberg of funerals would be positioning and instructing you. As if you might learn something. As if you might come out a better actor than when you went in.

If there is death, what meaning is there in life? Why did Said even exist? she thought, and felt the headache and the nausea getting steadily worse.

"We there," said the man again, a touch more insistently than before, pointing at the taxi meter.

She nodded, although it made her head pound, and tore her eyes away from the rain. She reached for her purse and gave the driver her platinum credit card.

He was more than a little surprised, especially when she doubled the price of the ride as a tip.

She didn't usually do this kind of thing. But for a moment, she had the overwhelming feeling that an excessive tip might briefly give her own existence meaning. It was a powerful motivator, at least.

The Georgian leapt out and was immediately soaked to the bone by the cloudburst. He hurried round to the boot, opened it, took out an umbrella, opened that, and was eagerness incarnate as he helped this generous gizhi out of the car.

At the same moment, Samuel also saw the umbrella. He was standing at the front window, arms folded, chewing gum as he almost always did. He loved to stand there, chewing gum and looking out into the heavy September rain, watching the torrents run down the glass and the asphalt.

Decades ago, a kind of East German pretzel had been engraved into the glass frontage as a symbol of the bakers' guild, and through the hole of the left-hand knot, Samuel saw a vague confusion of red, green, yellow and violet on a head he'd seen somewhere before. The head belonged to a figure that was hunching out of a taxi, with a sodden gnome standing on tiptoes, arm at full stretch, holding a wavering umbrella over her. Feet dry, but swaying slightly and

pinching the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger, she marched through the storm towards the pretzel.

Everything about her appearance brought Samuel to the realisation that he had to spit out the chewing gum.

He feared that Sunny's perfect enemy was on her way to the Death Bakery.

The woman opened the door and strolled in, looking like a magnet that had just been thrown through a shopping centre, leaving the most expensive and least matching clothes stuck to her at random like iron filings.

All the same, she didn't strike Samuel as an oligarch's wife. An oligarch's wife would also have been chewing gum. She was wearing a coat of murdered mink, though all the mink were still alive, because it was a white faux-mink lookalike. But still. She had large earrings.

In the showroom the woman took off her sunglasses. She put them away, revealing glacial blue eyes that narrowed to slits and stared into space.

The taxi driver didn't lower the umbrella. He starred at the display coffin in consternation and dripped sympathetically, creating a giant puddle on the floorboards. He crossed himself, and the deathly pale woman groaned twice before making a brief gesture to

indicate her monster migraine, and then silently throwing up. Just in time, Samuel managed to produce an empty Caio-brand urn with a woodland-steam-train illustration on it, and a lid that sealed in odours.

When Sonja Meling heard the fuss and came out of the kitchen, the woman was still bent over the urn. But Sunny recognised her at once. Just by the knuckles of the hands holding the container. The left knuckles had L-O-V-E tattooed on them, and the right H-A-T-E, the letters just as skewed and crooked as she remembered them.

And when the woman looked up, half the television-viewing nation would have recognised her, too. Everyone, apart perhaps from a TV-hater like Samuel Petersen and a few Georgian taxi drivers, knew Jana von Moon's television face, which had clowned around in the Republic's comedies for years. RTL's Moon Shine Show had broken all viewing records. Though that was some time ago.

Now, Jana was white as a grain of rice.

For many years, nothing had been more of a lasting comfort to Sunny than the idea that Frau von Moon might one day be hacked up by ravens in a far-off galaxy, or lie eaten by insects in the middle of nowhere. With no one to lay her to rest.

And now she was sitting right in front of her. A coat like snow, pink sandals, pearlescent orange polish on her toenails, as if summer would never end. And those earrings.

And yet her misery came with a huge dose of unselfconsciousness, even as she handed Samuel the full urn.

How incredibly unselfconscious you look, Sunny noted with wonder. Almost all the people who walked through her door looked self-conscious in some way.

But Jana didn't display any hint of concern that she or her vomit might not be wanted, despite everything that had happened.

"Hi." The word was squeezed through slightly lopsided lips.

Instead of returning the greeting, Sunny handed her one of the tissues that were placed discreetly within reach.

Jana took the tissue, dabbed the corners of her mouth, looked up, and Sunny saw that she was still flexible. Flexible in the head. It was hard to explain. She allowed people to project whatever they wanted onto her, any kind of wishful thinking; it had to be the secret of her success.

Jana's enlarged pupils took in the reception room. Four 50-watt bulbs shone in defiance of the blue-black clouded sky, which was transforming the morning into late evening. The brightest spot in the room was the snow-white Kleenex box under the table.

"There are tissues everywhere in here," said Jana, wiping her chin. "How marvellous. Like in a brothel."

No one answered her. The only sound was the rain hammering against the windows, and a rumble of thunder somewhere nearby.

"Looks great. Honestly. Reminds me of this very cool bar I went to once in Madrid."

"Yes, you always did like throwing up in paellas."

The corner of Jana's mouth twitched.

"Peace, Sunny. Peace, okay?"

Jana was relying, as ever, on the immediate effect she produced.

With Samuel, at least, it seemed to work. Sunny noticed the precision with which he placed the misused urn on the model gravestone. Like it was a Ming vase.

Jana was not overly beautiful – you couldn't say she was beautiful at all, really. But still pretty. "Provisionally pretty," they had called her in the school yearbook. Because no one knew how she would blossom. These much-photographed lips, which you might call fresh. Partly due to the colour, but also because they sat a little lopsidedly, the left side of the upper lip fuller than the right, like a bent red chilli pepper when she curled her lips. Her chin was rounder than it used to be. And her forehead still so high you could catch cold on it.

Despite the brightly coloured pieces of plastic girdling her head, she exuded a maddening, brittle superiority.

Sunny sent Samuel into the back. She went to the shop door and pressed another handsome tip into the taxi driver's hand, much to his incredulous delight. Solemn-faced, she manoeuvred him out into the rain, turned the *Closed* sign to face the street, and thought of that line from Schopenhauer about blue-eyed blondes in the midst of overwhelmingly dark-haired, dark-eyed humanity being an abnormality, analogous to white mice. She sat down with her white-mouse visitor, though her whole being, in accord with the past that was rising up inside her, rebelled against it.

"What do you want, Jana?"

"Do you ask other people that when they come in here?"

"When other people come in here, I know why."

"I want the same."

Sunny looked at her more closely.

Jana still seemed to have ecstasy, LSD and glass capsules of amyl nitrate in her fridge. Or wherever. She was obviously on something, and was still coming up.

Those pupils.

She always did like to take drugs in the most unsuitable surroundings. The lunches Mama used to cook for the pair of them were often garnished with crumbs of her hallucinogenic pills. Sunny

had a sudden image of the little dining nook in the kitchen, with its blue wallpaper, where they had always sat side by side, cackling like hens while everything around them gave off such an irresistible scent of harmony.

"There are over a thousand funeral directors in Berlin. And you come to me?"

"Well, of course."

"I wouldn't come to you if I needed a ukelele player."

"But Sunny, I'm not a ukelele player."

"Uh-huh."

"That was just an act. A sketch, you know? I do sketches. And okay, the ukelele video got five million clicks or something. That's probably why you know it. But I can't play the ukelele, not even a bit. I tell jokes. That's all."

"I wouldn't come to you if I was in urgent need of jokes, either."

Jana transformed into one of her TV parodies, honky-tonk Jana, clicked the fingers on the H-A-T-E hand and hummed, "*Two trailer park girls go round the outside, round the outside, round the outside, two trailer park girls go round the outside, woo*!"

Sunny looked at her, her face unmoved.