

Michael Stavarič

Shadowcatcher

[Die Schattenfängerin]

Outline + Sample Translation



Novel

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How do you cope with losing your father as a kid? A gorgeous father-daughter tale, full of longing and emotion

Stella's father spends his life pursuing the next solar eclipse. He is often away, and always comes back with photos of the shimmering corona and tales of far-flung places. He can't take Stella with him – he says it's much too dangerous – but the special glasses and the shiny telescope are part of her life too. One day, her father doesn't wake up. Stella is all alone now, an oddball in a small town. When she comes of age, she decides to find out why her father was so fascinated by the total solar eclipse. She travels to Congo to witness the phenomenon for herself, only to discover that the moon's shadow hides her father's dark secrets...

A modern fairy tale full of charm and empathy: in the gathering dark, a young woman is on a journey to uncover her family's story.

Michael Stavarič, born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1972, is a freelance writer, translator and lecturer. He studied Czech studies and communication in Vienna, and spent 10 years teaching inline skating at the Austrian capital's Sports University. He has won numerous fellowships and awards, including Science Book of the Year, the Adelbert Chamisso Prize, and the Austrian State Prize for Children's and YA Literature. His most recent novel is "*Das Phantom*" ('The phantom', 2023).

Sample Translation

By Richard Arnott

1. Death

Early one morning, under overcast skies, father passed away.

I had come to his bed to encourage him into the kitchen; after all, our shared breakfast of toast with scrambled eggs and fresh garden herbs was out ready. I could never get my fill of chives and dill, and it was beyond me that some people weren't into that "chive-dill flavour". Any moment now, with father, I was about to savour toasted chive and dill rolls, and flick through the newspaper, whilst devoting more attention than actually necessary to the sports section. Like a girl possessed, I waved a page, fresh off the press, in front of his nose; the smell of newsprint would certainly waken him and entice him into the kitchen.

If anything could rouse a tired individual out of their bed, then it was undoubtedly printer's ink, the aroma of which had an almost magical appeal to me. I loved to take shrink-wrapped books or new magazines out of their packaging, sticking my nose into them, breathing in their unmistakable smell which I associated with anything and everything, space surely had the same smell too; I mean, how else is the blackness of deep space meant to smell of? Murky marshes might have a very similar odour, or the breath of crows, or the tears of mountain gorillas, I'd come up with a nice list¹. Chimney sweeps' shirts ought to be noted down there for example, which admittedly have a very slightly different smell but are clearly still similar. To me, smells were like playmates; they whetted one's interest in the world, enabling you to become airborne and float with them, whilst others also caused you to stumble.

¹ Things that smell like printer's ink: People at funerals? Undoubtedly the feathers of blackbirds from the garden. The air after a lightning strike. Pure liquorice sticks which always have to be black. Skid marks on the street if you hold one's nose close enough to them. Matchboxes. Smoked glass. Strands of hair that fall into the fire. Black mambas (theoretically). Unwashed feet, with these tending to smell more like printer's ink that has gone off (shelf life!). Everything that had been left out in the sun for too long. Everything before I was born.

For a moment, I stood beside the bed not knowing what to do, placed the newspaper down onto my father's face, as though the printer's ink ought now finally to work its irresistible spell for getting him to make one final foray to the kitchen. My efforts remained in vain. I took back the newspaper, shook it out like crazy, as if I could conjure its magic in this way, shake up the entire universe in it like bed feathers, levitating through space. My arms soon burned like fire, my muscles clenched and, eventually, I angrily crumpled up the piece of newspaper into an uneven ball. I tried to compress it all as small as I possibly could, into this one tiny point in space, from which a cosmos would be able to unfurl anew; this is what father had taught me, after all.

Before being able to be brought to life, everything needed to be bundled into an infinitely small point, from where it would be free to open out in the universe with a large bang, all forces and stars and beings. I repeated the process several times to be sure, unfolded the newspaper, smoothed it out as well as possible, only to crumple up the pages again into a smallest possible point, a ball of paper between fingers growing increasingly cramped and becoming gradually number.

I considered that God possibly must have faced a similar problem, accordingly he too had compressed the cosmos into an infinite minuteness (father called it singularity) in order to subsequently unfold and unfurl everything in a well-ordered manner, to bring about a new beginning so that matter mixes together and it was possible to breathe life into this matter in the process. Maybe even someone observed him here (which appears absurd) how he went about his work intently, with his folded and powerfully purposeful hands. A naive beholder would likely have imagined he was praying, which would explain a number of inconsistencies in the entire doctrine of faith. Religious faith is one single huge misunderstanding, father had once said to me, not wanting here in any way to cast doubt on the existence of a higher order.

Did I feel in that moment like a small goddess who wanted to bring everything around her back to life again? Yes, indeed! But it would not happen, which likely was down to my girl's fists. Exhausted, I let go of the tangled newspaper. The creased-up object lay at my feet, as though someone had hastily finished harvesting a wheat field, formed the most slapdash hay bales and left these behind for imaginary (even scruffier) herds of cattle. In truth, I'd perhaps no more than messed up the rows of letters, which indeed have the ability to

explain a world, but only rarely do so. Ink was sticking to my fingers and palms of my hands which was nice to look at but what resulted was lost on me.

When I was a child, books, newspapers and magazines helped me achieve an impressive eloquence as though my head would literally become “loaded or charged up” through what I had been reading. I constantly had staccato-like words whirring around in me that I could retrieve at any point, and rarely without knowing what I was saying. I did not understand why many people in our area hardly read any more and if they did, then only some trash in the tabloids or cringy self-help stuff along the lines of: How do I get him to love me in 5 days? Even as a child, I loathed short sentences and highly simplified content which usually omitted what I was interested in and also the purpose of which was to treat me (and others) as some kind of fool.

“You sound like a walking, talking dictionary, Stella! Stop speaking like an elderly lady from 1900.”

“Hm!”

“So, what have you been reading again today? Kant? The journal for cosmology and astroparticles?”

“Not at all!!”

“Talk about ...!”

But no matter when and what I read, the writings would illuminate every dark corner of my mind, they made me well and truly visible, as though literally light of the clearest quality would flow from my mouth, at least this is how I perceived it. Sometimes my lips would burn from all the chatter and I was drinking some fresh milk to cool them down as father was busy with his razor in the bathroom.

“It’s jammed again, Stella, the goddam thing.”

“Beard suits you though.”

“D’you think?”

“The beard is a phylogenetic remnant of all-over body hair and signifies sexual dimorphism.”

“Seriously, Stella? Carry on talking like that and I’ll be cancelling the trade journals’ subscription.”

He laughed.

“Father, a beard makes you unique and attractive, I’m surely still entitled to say that as your daughter. And you should go out again at last!”

He laughed even more loudly.

And soon his razor was buzzing again and all was good.

For his sake, I occasionally claimed to have spilled the milk again (and carefully wiped it up) because I drank too much of it, after all – in his opinion – I’m far too old for milk drinks but unfortunately still too young for proper coffee; it was anything but straightforward pleasing him. Sometimes I would think I’m living in some kind of in-between world meted out to me as a test and only the right age can set me free.

Father was still lying dead in bed, whilst I fluffed up the pillows in the adjoining room (my child’s bedroom) and folded the sheets, simple routine actions which definitely provided support in exceptional circumstances. Then I ate a chive and dill roll, got on with the washing-up, listened to the radio with the volume turned up loud, which was currently playing a song by Depeche Mode, which seemed fitting in the circumstances. *My little girl, drive anywhere, do what you want, I don’t care.* I hummed along to the melody, the girl in me had indeed finally grown up, could go anywhere and do what she likes, no one would stop her. On this day, fate had presented me the future on a supposedly silver platter ... and finally I wept bitterly.

Then it occurred to me to wake father by continuing to treat him as a living person and taking his silence generally as agreement. I left him lying in bed so he could have a proper rest, brought him coffee and food to the bedside table, told him that it was a nice day outside and I’d be going for a walk (I preferred to draw the curtains, since this was a plain lie; dark clouds everywhere). Later on, I cleaned the kitchen fastidiously, scrubbing at some stubborn stains on the tiles until my knees hurt. I charged father’s razor, shaved him with utmost care, which turned out to be a difficult chore as I didn’t know how hard or gently to press the hefty thing onto his skin; it whirred and vibrated, wispy bits of stubble floated through the air. Subsequently, I could not decide which aftershave I ought to dab on; stupidly father had two branded bottles and I was annoyed that I hadn’t noticed which one he preferred. I wished him good night which, for my part, was one full of turmoil but

I pinned my hopes on the following morning, the sun would shine again and everything could just vanish into thin air.

I was back standing at his bedside (this time by 5 a.m. already) and was really sad when I saw that father had not touched his food. I rushed into the kitchen in order to make the world's best and most perfect fried eggs, round and shiny like a sun, though it wasn't happening for me. I used up all the packs in the house but each egg was worse than the other, only these tattered, misshapen lumps all the time. It was as if I was jinxed; I ran furiously to the front of the house and yelled at the heavens, so loudly that all the birds in the garden flew away.

Soon I was knocking at the neighbours who lived a few minutes away, our gardens joined onto one another, and there was no proper fence, merely two boulders. A few shrubs, marking the boundary between our two properties, were starting to sprawl wildly there. I woke them from their deep slumber, tried to tell them that father had died, and I felt as though I was talking to myself in order to make sure of my own mental health. I spoke in a low voice but sternly. The neighbours were composed, there were no tears, they got dressed and followed me to father's bed. He appeared to be resting further, briefly I had still hoped he would finally have got up again in the meantime, he'd be sitting in the kitchen with the newspaper, astonished at the burnt fried eggs. "And why is the newspaper so screwed up, Stella? Stella??"

I was never sure with father what would happen next, what he would say, where he would go, or what things he would pursue. Why should that be any different in death? It wasn't until later that I noticed his telescope was covered, albeit fully extended (and in position) at the window. It had not been anything unusual for father, if he woke at night, to observe the stars. He professed to me he could fall asleep better afterwards. Admittedly, I could not know at what time he had died but I imagined that possibly he still had cast a glance to the night skies. Maybe he had already been in the process of scouting a way for the journey he was about to undertake.

Father had liked to refer to himself as "shadow catcher" to me, and this ultimately best describes his true passion. You see, whenever time (and financial) resources permitted, he'd regularly set off on his travels in order to chase the next solar eclipse; during these

“trips” I was left in the care of the neighbours. In the past, although I don’t really recall, for a short time Grete had been responsible for my personal well-being, although proved to be “extremely fickle”. Father told me, when I was old enough, that his wife Grete (he never said “your mother”) had had to be taken into a special clinic, there were no other options left. Why she had to leave us was something I was unsure of for a long time but it led to wild speculations².

I imagined how in that night, perhaps still gazing after the moon, father regretted not being able to face his sun ever again, which indeed was nicely illuminating the Earth’s moon but known only to show itself in the sky early in the morning. Maybe he had frantically tried to hang on until the first ray of sun, that is until precisely 6:32 am, as I later found out from a chart. I myself had still been fast asleep and not been aware of a single thing.

The neighbours stooped awkwardly over father’s body, as though two hefty chests of drawers were secretly looking for a place in someone else’s house, they were acting like people who didn’t know when someone could be declared dead. Unquestionably, they deliberated putting their spectacles to father’s mouth in order to ascertain whether they still steamed up, and only following the obligatory visit by the doctor were they inclined to come round to my opinion finally. The neighbours nodded to me. They had reached a similar conclusion as I had, father was definitely extremely ill, the neighbour mumbled. Her husband dialled a phone number; they then hung around in front of the house in order to wait for the ambulance.

It soon arrived without the obligatory raging siren, not even the blue flashing light had been used; the neighbour’s voice must have been convincing on the phone. Gradually, there was clarity about father’s death, he was carried out of the house on a metal stretcher, and I had insisted they did not cover him with a shroud. The sun ought to shine on his face, father would not have wanted it any other way.

²Theories why a woman like Grete must get away: Persecution based on ethnicity. Eviction due to environmental influences (such as moulds). Symptoms of emotional stress (excessive demands made on oneself or the housing situation). Genuine mental illness (schizophrenia, epilepsy). Addiction (drugs). Incorrect use of rooms (for instance moving the kitchen into the bathroom). A repeatedly occurring, inappropriate handling of equipment of all kinds, endangering the child’s welfare. Another woman (rival). An inheritance in America.

Before his final departure, I was handed the copy of the death certificate, this was important for the authorities and insurance companies, the neighbours pledged with the doctor to keep an eye on me as well, to inform relatives, to assist me at the funeral and so on. And before the ambulance left, I quickly ran into my room in order to fetch the special glasses which you put on during solar eclipses so as not to go blind. Father had a few pairs, sometimes he also had given out cheaper (but absolutely fully functional) versions to children. I knew this from photographs that showed him with other people during various solar eclipses, countless adults and the figures of a few children, who had doubtlessly come in order to witness the event too.

Very rarely did astronomical phenomena stick to father's wishes though, who would have preferred to locate such events somewhere nearby but not necessarily always on other continents. What was certain, however, was that he would go in pursuit of them even into the remotest regions, he usually took off once a year unless the solar eclipse was actually inaccessible (in the middle of the ocean!). Or he lacked the financial means which had earlier often been a reason when father was still young and did not always have a lot of money.

I insisted they put on his glasses, which the doctor found odd, but the neighbours explained to him who the man on the stretcher had been (an avid solar eclipse observer), that it totally stood to reason therefore and maybe would make it easier for me, his daughter, to say goodbye. They had briefly opened father's eyes and then closed them again, I heard the doctor mutter something that laypeople can hardly conceive how quickly some species of insects were able to lay their eggs in unprotected eye sockets and how rapidly a new creature, once it had feasted on the eye fluids as a grub, emerged out of them. Just imagine the prospect of that happening for instance during the wake, or safekeeping of the body, in the cemetery chapel; mourners should be spared such a sight. The protective goggles looked great on him and I imagined he would open his dead eyes and then follow the sun's path once more beneath them (and unnoticed by all). A solar eclipse coinciding with his death had certainly not been granted to him however, as much as I would have wished this for him. This would have been a simply unbelievable coincidence, winning the lottery and a lightning strike at the same time remained more likely, but father would have more than deserved this. He would then have died whilst

pursuing his passion, perhaps dragging his telescope along with him, banging and cutting his head on a rock or something similar, but would certainly have been more blessed than ever. The majestic sight of the darkened sun fully covered by the moon with its enticing corona, it would have lodged itself forever in his head at the moment of death, and would have been the final image he took away from the Earth. I was pretty sure he was still thinking of the sun as he was dying, of the dark solar disc during each eclipse (which is actually the moon), as though this distant ring is a secret portal which he must now cross. Did he spare a thought for me too?

"Do you even think of me when you're travelling somewhere?", I wanted to know from him once.

"Of course, how can you ask that?"

"And do you prefer to think of me or the sun?"

He chuckled.

"I think it's time for your bed."

"Me or the sun, otherwise I'm not going."

His look became more serious.

"The sun."

This struck home.

"Really, father?"

He grinned.

"You're my sun, Stella."

"So, you call your sun Stella?"

Now we both had to grin.

"Off to bed!"

"Going!", I said sweetly.

The first night without father was one without any stars, pitch black darkness wherever you looked, only at the neighbours' house the light stayed on the whole night. They had offered to put me up in one of their spare rooms, to get a bit of distance to the (empty) house, this would be the right thing now after all, according to their well-meaning advice. I insisted on staying at home, declined any further, certainly kindly offers that the neighbour's wife for instance can stay with me, prepare an evening meal, that her husband can perhaps take me tomorrow to the zoo in the capital further away (for distraction

purposes) but I turned them down firmly. In order to accommodate them, I suggested they leave the light on in their house so that when I looked out of the window I could see a bright spot in the darkness outside. I lay awake in my bed for a long time, had opened all the windows, despite the freshening breeze, in order to drive the musty smell out of the house, which I thought I could detect. In the morning, I would be bound to find a few moths and other insects in the kitchen or in the bathroom, but would leave them alone to snooze in peace in their own corners. After all, it was my house now (and plot of land on the hill), father had left me in no doubt about this, his ex-wife had long since had no further claims to assert, this had all been arranged a long time previously with lawyers and³ notaries.

I wondered during these hours too how father would spend his first night as officially confirmed deceased person, maybe still in the pathology department of the nearest hospital or in some basement vault or police station, until all papers and such would be signed off and properly issued. Perhaps his body had even already been “handed over” to the undertaker/gravedigger, who, depending on the current order situation, had to prepare him for burial immediately or in the next few days.

The neighbour had promised to take care of all organisational matters, after all I did not have a driving licence. Father's car remained in the garage for now but I had insisted on covering it. I found it appropriate for it to bear a mourning band from now on. What's more, for a while I removed from the house all items which were too shiny because I could not bear to look at them; even the tinfoil had to go from the kitchen.

Anyhow, someone or other would be driving me to the cemetery, put me in the front, then right on the front row and later on, as the first (and presumably most important) mourner, give me the task of scattering down some loose earth onto father's coffin. I would shake lots of clammy hands, have to put up with quizzical looks, take receipt of expressions of condolences, there might even also be singing and why not. Despite his thing for solar

³Dear Dr So-and-so, as discussed, I kindly request that all necessary steps be taken to register my daughter Stella as the sole heir to the property (including all pending assets). As you can gather from the documents attached, there will be no further complications with respect to my wife – we have been able to reach an amicable settlement. With the highest esteem and best wishes for a very successful duck hunt ...

eclipses, father had been extremely popular in the area, not everyone genuinely took him for some quirky oddball.

I had never been to a funeral but I'd seen some in popular TV movies⁴, where actors demonstrated how to behave and what would be required. I had also watched real funeral ceremonies on TV, sometimes they were transmitted if a famous person died, most recently that of Aretha Franklin (which was shown on repeat as "a historic event"), who had clearly insisted on lying in rest for three days in an open coffin, whilst half of Detroit had sincerely offered their condolences, and had had this decreed accordingly. One of her legs was sticking out of the edge of the coffin at a jaunty angle, her clothes had to be changed daily, every time her guests were treated to a new, stunning outfit with the result that lots of people came twice or even three times consecutively, waiting in a well-nigh endless queue in order to pay their last respects (again). I remember there was lots of singing (and very loud!) and outside the church a fleet of pink cadillacs circled round the building and later parked throughout the city. It was clear to me that funerals broadcast on television certainly passed off differently to those in normal life (and for lesser-known deceased persons), and still there was no reason why at father's funeral there should not be a book of condolences, and a few popular hits played which people like and would encourage them to hum along. Maybe the people at the cemetery could even (and fittingly!) bring sunflowers to toss down into father's grave, at any rate I was in good spirits to ensure a dignified departure for him.

Of course, I should have expected that things would turn out differently than expected. A lot in father's life did not go according to plan, why should it be any different in death? In light of this, I wouldn't even know what would have to be cited as evidence in order to substantiate this assertion. The following perhaps: I had definitely not been planned, father would have "blundered" into something with his wife, and the fact that he would go on to be granted sole custody, on the other hand, given his spouse's illness, came as no surprise. I still remember how intensely I thought about this 'blundering' and what it

⁴For example "My Girl" by Howard Zieff: in this, 11-year-old Vada is convinced she suffers from ever new and fatal illnesses (like those she is familiar with from the funeral home belonging to her father). When her best friend Thomas dies following bee stings, sobbingly she insists on putting his glasses on him in the coffin because he actually wanted to be an acrobat. I would never allow father to be buried without his protective goggles, that much was certain.

probably meant exactly, as a child you imagine a lot of things, after all you are constantly stumbling around somewhere and falling and catching yourself and falling again and twisting your ankle or pulling the ligaments in your knee, but even then it seemed quite unlikely to me that children were born in the process.

Father devised precise plans for virtually everything in life; ever since my “arrival” though (he avoided the word “birth”) this had fallen by the wayside. Solely his annual trip to the next solar eclipse kept him on course. I don’t wish in any way to create the impression that he showed a lack of affection, we were extremely close, but my birthdays, for example, were never celebrated. Indeed, father’s were not celebrated either, as far as I know, and certainly never those of his ex-wife. As a child I didn’t miss the birthdays at all either, after all there was always some sweet cake or other in the kitchen.

Arguably, I should never have been allowed to go to a proper birthday party, a proper and lavish celebration of a well-liked peer who grew up in a completely different family structure. Her parents had been married for ages and all over the house there were framed family photos on which everyone was smiling cheerfully to one another. Roses bloomed in well-kept gardens and they would take regular dips in the turquoise-coloured swimming pool, even the dog came running dutifully when called, I remember it was called something beginning with “F”, Fido or Frodo or Flutsch.

Following this event, I was aware how very differently my own life was going (and likely would continue to go), a child’s wishes stem from what they see and desire. Other people appeared to show an “imperious unity” to the outside world, an “implicit coexistence” (love?), which did not exist in our home in this form, and whatever it actually was, we likely had a poor copy of this. Many people basked ostensibly in their lives, got married, were happy, had kids and grandchildren, and we were left with something less civilised; at least there was a time when I perceived it like this. In this sense, it was no wonder that the sun remained the true passion of my father, which he did not want to stop (and was unable to do so), enthralling all around him at some time or other. He revered and desired the sun as a man typically stands by his wife, with the cards surely stacked against the daughter in this situation.