

ALL THE STARS UNCOUNTED

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Sample translation by Simon Pare

The coin under the tongue

This is the way it all ends. And with that fleeting thought it began. My death had been foretold, and as if struck by lightning, I thought: This is the second time someone has told me I'm going to die.

The doctor was still a youngish man, half as old as me, which made him my daughter's age (she is in her mid-thirties). He could have been my son, this Dr Goossens, successor to my GP who had retired the previous winter. I didn't recognise a single object in his surgery. The young doctor was sitting at his desk, staring at his screen, and he invited me to take a seat as well.

What I did recognise: the row of horse chestnuts outside the window, a line of tall, ancient trees along the moat; the gables of the houses opposite; Dammtorstrasse within shouting distance of the opera house (where I had last been before Vivien and Dr Goossen were born).

Neither of us said anything for a long time.

(The traffic rushing across Stephansplatz.)

For a while we chatted politely about bridges, my job and my (former) administrative responsibilities. So I knew every bridge in the city? he asked. Weren't there (he had read this somewhere) several thousand of them?

'I know quite a few, of course,' I replied. 'That comes with being bridge commissioner.'

'But no one knows them all,' he said.

And I said, 'I don't know of anyone.'

Him again: 'That's where our professions are alike, because I don't know every illness either.'

Hardly surprising at his age.

(Where is this conversation leading?)

Finally he suggested that what he had to tell me was undoubtedly the most difficult message, the saddest one. (He needn't have said any more.) There was no bridge leading up to this announcement, really, but still . . . He regarded it as his compassionate duty not to make any pretence but to come right out with it.

'The truth.'

I listened as he presented the truth to me (for thirty seconds, a minute).

Then I said thank you in the middle of his exposé, which was advancing into details. 'Your body,' I heard him say several times, as if he thought he was more familiar with my body than I was (or as if I wasn't familiar with it, only he was).

I stood up and held out a hand (mine) but, as normal since the pandemic, he didn't shake it.

(He gave me a nod, and I left.)

The strange feeling of being alive, going down those stairs and stepping out into the dazzling light and the heat pressing down on the city. I perceived everything the way insects supposedly do. I sensed every fraction of a second as something I had never experienced before, with astonishing intensity.

Something unheard-of had happened to me.

I crossed over to the park and ambled along the Gorch-Fock-Wall under the trees by the water. Only very faintly could I hear Schiller-Benz's successor saying that it was his conviction that I should get used to the idea of this being my last summer. (It was possible I wouldn't see the autumn, certainly not the winter.) He was no soothsayer and nor were the specialists he had consulted. It depended on how advanced the defect was. He pronounced the name of the defect, which consisted of an English and a Japanese-sounding surname, neither of which I had ever heard before and which could just as well have been the names of decipherers of hieroglyphics or chess grandmasters. He had printed out a prescription (and already signed it) for a fast-acting and reliable drug, he said without looking at me, to relieve the ailments that would inevitably kick in soon. (There was no time to waste.) Very little was known about this defect yet. Covid had practically brought medical progress in other areas to a standstill, but the detected figures (unfortunately, unfortunately) were not a good augur.

'We're talking about weeks, not months,' said Goossens, who was wearing a strange thing in his ear, obviously a device (no larger than a hornet) that seemed either to whisper something to him or give me some indiscernible access to the young man's inner life. I heard him saying that there were now computer programs that could precisely calculate life expectancy (he said 'remaining lifetime' as if everyone used the term). To the day, or even to the hour. It took time, though, maybe a few weeks.

(Time I didn't necessarily have.)

He looked at me.

I looked at him. I was incapable of saying anything, as if I had a coin under my tongue.

We'll be in touch, Dr Goossen said, and I thought that this future tense might be my last.

Being alive becomes a memory.

So it was all downhill from here, into the final valley. (I had never seen myself as an old man.) I wondered if I was repressing this verdict on my imminent demise as I strolled through the sunny afternoon, listening to the finches and the blackbirds and, as I always did while walking along the moat after an appointment with Dr Schiller-Benz, kept an eye out for the pond turtles that reportedly lived there.

(Never seen one.)

This unheard-of occurrence had nothing to do with the prediction. Actually, I was recalling for the first time in over sixty-five years a completely forgotten conversation with my father. The young, unsuspecting doctor's announcement must have exposed this buried memory. It led, like a door you discover to your amazement behind a familiar patch of wallpaper, into a lost room.

I saw everything with utter clarity again: my father next to me on the red seat on the number 1 tram (terminus Niendorf), which climbed the Grindelberg and the Hoheluft; my hands on my bare knees; the bright blue daylight over Harvestehude – I am four years old perhaps; the Grindel high-rise buildings (completed in '56). What I couldn't remember, however, was how we got on to the subject. Were there still rubble heaps around Grindel, or had we seen a car accident or a corpse being recovered? He and I – my father with his briefcase, me with my slab (as he called my satchel) – talked very seriously and at length about the transience of everything, the inevitable end, death.

I asked my father, Delf, if he was going to die too, and he smiled and nodded as we went under the railway viaduct by the Hoheluft bridge (where I now live) and, after a while, I got up enough courage to ask him what would happen to me. If everything had to die, would I have to die too?

Redshift, death shift

No one comes to an arrangement with his own end. Defying every fibre in me, my account starts where I stop. I am filing a report about the end of a commissioner's life.

Preparations can be made for the end, but that is all. (All preparation is placation.) You order a folding bed online. You buy a down sleeping bag from an outdoor shop (the twenty-five-foot-high storefront window display has canoes and kayaks revolving around each other). You try out the equipment in the living room and then wait for not too cold a night when the sky is nonetheless clear (spectacular).

As soon as they forecast one, that evening you drink three (four) glasses of a Lagrein you've been saving up precisely for the occasion, instead of the usual pale imitation of a Riesling that no longer tastes of anything anyway.

Upstairs the jazz trumpet player, who (unfortunately) also owns a saxophone, is practising as he does every day between 6 and 8 pm, but the familiar notes suddenly sound like a dirge.

Then comes the decisive moment. You give yourself a jolt and put your decision into practice, which means lying down in the middle of Hamburg and sleeping outdoors (on the balcony) surrounded by some two million strangers. Because that is something you've never done, although for almost seven decades you have wanted to experience it at least once.

(The here and now. Nippy, almost cold.)

A good two weeks had passed since my fatal consultation with Dr Goossens (whose surgery has since been trying to contact me). Me: perfectly prepared (still without painkillers). Agreeably tipsy, I watched the stars come up.

But that is not how it turned out. (Obviously.) That night I befriended not the certainty of my imminent demise, but its precise opposite.

Ho . . . Hope.

Li . . . Living.

Hollie . . .

The opposite of the end is not the beginning, even if that is how it looks. (After all, what would have begun?) Everything merely recommences and happens for the umpteenth time.

(Everything is a continuation.)

Think of the transit of Venus, my favourite astronomical example. The passing of Venus between the Sun and the Earth occurs only four times in the space of about two hundred and forty-three years: once after eight years, the second time after one hundred and twenty-one and a half, again after eight years, and the final time after one hundred and five and a half, before this apparently immutable cycle begins all over again.

(That's what we think.)

The last time Venus passed in front of the Sun was in 2012 (I was sixty and divorced) and before that in 2004 (I was fifty-two and living apart). Rebekka and I had two flats and in 2004 our daughter went to work for Airbus in Toulouse for a year, but Vivien did not move back in with Rebekka again after breaking off her training course. (She was nineteen.) The next transit of Venus is scheduled for 11 December 2117.

And yet no half sensible person would ever suggest that the Earth-sized planet, which we see as a black dot sliding across the white-hot surface of the Sun, might be doing this for the first time.

Venus was not visible from my balcony. It had embarked on its next century-long voyage, and I would never see it again in front of the Sun's gigantic disc because it was pretty inconceivable that I should live to be one hundred and seventy.

Although, in logical terms, we cannot know that.

(The philosopher Wittgenstein claims that we cannot even be sure that the sun will come up tomorrow.)

There are records of the transit of Venus reaching back into the depths of time, into the mists of a nameless age. Kepler made his (still slightly imprecise) calculation of the transit in 1631. However, passages of Venus had already been chronicled in ancient times and perhaps even during the Central European Bronze Age. Gold dots on the approximately 4,000-year-old Nebra sky disc discovered in the German province of Saxony-Anhalt (probably) represent the movements of Venus. The ancient Egyptians recorded dozens of observations of the transit of Venus, stretching back thousands of years, in the notches of an unknown hand – the silent signals of lost dynasties and civilisations. Pharaohs are marginal figures here (mere references for calculating). The reports come instead from anonymous individuals, of which I am one.

That is what I was thinking about during that night on the balcony.

(What is an ending, what is a beginning?)

A beginning would perhaps come if Venus were not to show up in 2117. Our high-performance telescopes, the eyes of our knowledge of the macrocosm, would focus on the Sun and on the precisely calculated route our neighbouring planet, with its carbon-dioxide sky, would have to take (because it always had).

But it (Venus) would not come.

No transit of Venus.

No Venus.

Where was it?

What now?

No beginning. (Nothing but make-believe.) Every beginning is a new beginning.

The new beginning would be the boundless amazement that something regarded as immutable could simply cease.

Over and out.

Like my life before I met Hollie.
Ma . . . Masquerade.
Gen . . . Generosity.
Ta . . . Tactlessness.
Hollie Magenta!

I welcome clear-skied nights with great interest. I detest anything unclear, and I believe that I can claim to have always been a proponent of clear relations. There are arguments for and against, but they should at least provide for greater clarity (one way or the other).

Yet stars have no effect on my mood. In the night sky I see celestial bodies, lights that are an unimaginable (and yet measurable) distance away from me, distant suns in the most distant galaxies, some of them long dead. Yes, when I am in a particular (mild) state of mind, I imagine that the twinkling stars are sending messages to humankind. It is just that they are not a reflection or an embodiment of whatever my state of mind might be. How should Mars or Uranus exert any influence on me? (Please!) Astrology is entertaining and at best inspiring poppycock.

No, stars communicate to my eye, when it sees them twinkling, nothing more than their light and their distance. My son-in-law (who calls himself an astrophysicist) would perhaps argue that it is precisely this light and distance that Venus has to communicate to us. Light that (happens to) reach the Earth, he might say, tells the story of the giant star Betelgeuse in the constellation of Orion, for example, or of a quasar.

‘Yes, my good Benno,’ he would say (my son-in-law Timothy), ‘it combines the underrated and even hated science of astrology with philosophy and fiction.’

The word ‘fiction’ somehow conjures up thoughts of friction in the engine block of my forty-seven-year-old Rover.

I am (was) an engineer. As a technical specialist, I assess, examine, gauge and reduce risk through expert calculation.

In my line of work, anything else is reckless (and has been as far back as ancient Egyptian times).

In that notable night on the balcony, I contemplated the stars especially hard and especially deeply and perhaps even especially to distract me from thoughts (emotions, perhaps) that affected me too much, and I won’t deny that. I wondered why Orion wasn’t visible, nor the shoulder star (Betelgeuse), not even the three stars in the belt.

Of course, a quasar is neither a star nor a sun. Quasars are rotating, fiery nuclei in faraway galaxies. The most luminous of them (as if quasars, in the plural, were even conceivable!) has the radiance of a quadrillion suns.

Yes. So what does that mean?

Maybe that there are people who are like quasars.

Unimaginably faraway (because they have died or not yet been born, or because they have turned their backs and forgotten you).

‘There are unimaginably luminous people.’

That is what my astrophysicist son-in-law Tim would say. (He believes that the age of Aquarius is almost upon us.)

And I would explain to him: 'A quasar rotates at the speed of light.'

To which he would answer: 'Like all of us, dearest Benno.'

(Balderdash.)

In the street, under the bridge, it was silent. From my balcony I saw the star winking above the roofs, the fine gossamer mist and the light blue of the sky darkening and growing lush by the minute.

There are a few old plane trees and sycamores in my street, their canopies dark patches by night. And almost as dark as this dense tangle of foliage and shadows of the sycamores and plane trees in Isidorastrasse was the darkness under the bridge, which is at the same height as my street-side balcony, carrying underground trains north-east towards the suburbs and south towards the port.

There was the light of the stars, and there was the distance between the stars and me. (Accordingly, I was there too.)

Amid all these explicable facts, it was odd that no human had ever set foot on any of these stars.

Unlike Fischer, my assistant who retired at almost the same time as I did, I do not read horoscopes. (I know who I am, and I know that it is impossible to see into the future.) And, unlike Fischer, I don't read poems either. (I know I'm looking at poetry when I can't understand a word.)

Every seventeen minutes on average, a couple drove past on one or two electric scooters. I heard the purr of the electric engine, quieter or louder depending on its battery level, and although I was dog tired, I had to look down. I saw the rear lights of the scooters (there were indeed two of them) disappearing between the parked cars under the bridge.

The red light expands into the darkness, then fades into it.

I once read in a treatise on the Hubble telescope that the farther away a galaxy is, the starker its redshift. It said you could test this on the blue lights of an ambulance speeding past you, which look more and more red the farther they recede.

'Redshift, death shift,' Hollie will say when I tell her about it one day, and then she will laugh and so will I.