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English sample translation

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The bar Ines brought me to was called, of all things, Orion Bar, but the name of the constellation didn't fit: the owners were stingy with the light. It was only eight in the evening, but it might as well have been midnight, time did not exist here. The few guests who'd arrived already were clustered around the bar, large dark shadows. There's a little dance floor in back, Ines said, sitting down, then ordered whiskey, which the bartender set before our noses with polite detachment. Bottoms up, she said. This strange enthusiasm of hers surprised me, but I had no objection; I'd come straight from the editorial office and was tired—I could use a drink. Ines drank down her whiskey in two contented gulps and said, hey listen, they're playing Björk, I've got to go dance. I watched her take up position at the exact center of the empty dance floor, instinctively she placed herself at the point where the imaginary lines defining the room crossed, as if the scene surrounding her had been painted according to the laws of perspective. I found it astonishing that it didn't bother her to be dancing all alone on a completely deserted dance floor where anyone could stare at her, but that's just how she was, my big sister, always happy to be the center of attention. Slowly she moved to the music. Björk isn't easy to dance to, but she was good at it, she moved beneath an invisible bell jar. Two other women, inspired by Ines, got up as well, but no one dared enter the circle around her, the others stuck to the periphery. Ines's face was flat and expressionless. Between songs she remained standing there stiff as a poker, without moving her body in any way, as if she were a machine whose electricity had just been switched off or a mannequin in a shop window; I said to myself, she isn't dancing for the people watching her, she isn't dancing for someone she's thinking about, in fact she isn't thinking anything at all, she's completely empty inside and moving only for herself, in a sort of abstract space created by her own dance steps and breathing. That's what made it so great to watch her. Only once had I danced with such abandon, I thought, just one single time, and this also happened to be the one time I'd taken drugs. It had been late at night in a packed disco in Trastevere back when I was a student, I'd gone out with a group of other students

from all different departments, including a handful of med students, and one of them, Enrico or Pedro or Fabio, had given me some sort of tablets. Reassured by the fact that he was studying medicine, I swallowed them, and soon my perceptions began to change. First off, the noise of the music and the skewed, crooked, unrhythmical dancing of the people around me stopped bothering me, on the contrary, I found myself suddenly enjoying it. I even started nodding my head in time to the music. I remembered that I'd picked up my glass from the bar and started walking around with it. Then I felt a wind blowing from somewhere, a draft, I looked around and for a reason unknown even to me began smiling in all directions, although I found it painful to smile, it was as if the nerves in charge of smiling had been severed precisely where they intersected the capsule of my brain, which was now filled with a deadly silence. A bit later, my surroundings began to change—at first just subtly, around the edges, then all at once. A few lights were swooping down across the dance floor, becoming larger and larger and increasing in intensity until they were blinding, painful to look at. Their colors shifted, turning greenish, but soon there were no more edges, everything became brighter ... brighter ... brighter..., I was being swept along by the light, found myself compelled to rise to my feet and join the dancers, to move in the same rhythm as the crowd, dissolving into motion. The moment I hit the dance floor everything began to look luminous and eternal, and I was suffused by a feeling that was a little like believing in God. Gold—this I knew at once—gold stood for the flesh of the gods, and the mortals were writhing on the earth before them, groveling worms attempting to curry favor by these motions, I couldn't keep my feet still, the floor was covered with these little beetles whose name I couldn't remember, the name, the name, a voice kept murmuring in my ear, then someone answered: Scarab. The beetles were rolling balls of dung into perfectly round shapes from which their eggs then emerged as if from nowhere. My mother was incredibly quick at braiding my hair, said a woman with a lonely expression, pushing past me. May I take your hand, a man ventured, but I could see all he wanted was to poke me in the eyes, so I slipped away from him and went on dancing. The wind was knocking from outside, trying to slip indoors with lightning in tow, it filled the room with the all-embracing scent of fresh wheat fields. Everyone was singing:

Hark! the herald angels sing! On all sides a faint peeping could be heard, coming from the mouths of the beetles; it sounded as if little children were wailing, I noticed that saliva was running down everyone's chins, mine as well, my breast was heaving, and I was no longer sure whether it was the sound of my own laughter that woke me from this trance or that a stranger was shaking me, shouting over and over: hey there, hey, can you hear me?

Strolling down memory lane, eh? the redhead suddenly said to me. She'd taken a seat beside me approximately three minutes before and was just sitting there like a hillock, silent, with her long hair flowing down her back. I know you, she said, wiping a strand of hair from her face, I remember you from the shoot, and I looked at her silently for a moment, I wasn't sure what she was getting at and why she was breaking the rules of this place, then I asked: what shoot, and she said: the shoot for the Historical Witnesses campaign, I'm the one who brought you to the studio. So? I asked skeptically, seeing no cause to renew our acquaintance, but my rejection didn't bother her in the slightest, it's just funny, she said good-humoredly, swirling her glass around, which made the ice cubes clink. She was getting on my nerves, and I thought about getting up and going back to the dance floor, but then quickly abandoned this idea. I just wouldn't react to her. I bent down low over my glass, gazing at the surface of the liquid as if I were thinking about jumping in. My name is Carol, by the way, in case you've forgotten. Oh look, Ines is dancing, isn't she adorable? She sidled up to me even closer, so close I could smell her perfume again, a hideous flowery scent that in a better mood I might have found amusing. Carol, I don't know what you're talking about, Ines has a boyfriend, and I'm not lesbian either, please cut it out. Cut what out? She gazed at me with her dark eyes, and besides, even if Ines does have a boyfriend, she was with me once, not for long, it's true, but still long enough to break my heart, that sister of yours... And as if to bear witness to her smoldering feelings, a bit of ash now fell from her cigarette and burned a spot on the Formica of the bar. It's been almost a year now, but I still haven't gotten over it. What hurts the most is that she claims not to remember anything. I replied, maybe she doesn't, because it never happened, and besides, even if it did, what do you want

from her? Carol sighed and said, nothing, nothing at all, I just like to watch her dance, she's here after all and she's such a good dancer, and then I often bring her home. I found this last remark of hers peculiar, so peculiar that I condescended to ask a question of my own. You do what? I asked. Carol gave an arrogant smile, I can see you don't know much of what goes on here, there really are things Ines just doesn't remember. I couldn't help laughing all at once, this conversation was downright absurd, but then I looked at the dance floor and saw that Ines was gone, there were just the two girls left dancing near the edge, but the center of the floor was empty, strikingly so, for no one else dared enter the circle of lights, as if the light still belonged to Ines alone. I looked around searchingly, clueless as to where she might have gone. Suddenly I was furious at Carol, it was her fault, and in an irritated tone of voice I asked whether she'd seen Ines leave. Carol looked around self-importantly, then she said, no, she hasn't left. She's back there drinking with some guy, I have a good nose for Ines, I can always find her. This thought made her look just as satisfied as some researcher who's just had proof that he really is the best in his specialized field of knowledge, better than all the others. What do you mean, with some guy? I asked, craning my neck. Did Kai show up? Ines was standing beside a dissipated-looking fellow who could just as easily have been twenty as forty. When she saw me, she waved and came over, holding a glass of whiskey filled to the brim. I had him buy me a drink, she explained murkily, then she seemed to recognize Carol and said, what a surprise, Carol. I looked at her. The way she'd uttered the name sounded resentful. No doubt noticing this herself, she pulled herself together. Carol, this is my sister, she's had a hard day at the office and now we're out partying a little and, yes, I'm a little bit drunk... She lost her train of thought, but the next sip helped, just a little bit, she said, glancing in the direction of the dance floor, and assumed a worried expression, the people dancing now are all so dreadfully young... She puffed a high-octane cloud in my face, involuntarily I turned away, and even though there was no point, I corrected her, saying that I hadn't had a particularly hard day at the office, the day had been quite normal. I see, Carol said and looked at me, amused. Maybe we should go home, I suggested. Ines said: that's right, home, and clambered up laboriously on the barstool, where, having seated herself with a slight wobble, she

withdrew a pretty little flask from her purse, by her own admission she was now ready to let her hair down. I saw her cell phone flashing in her purse and asked, hey, didn't you say Kai was going to be coming, he could pick us up, couldn't he? Call him, will you? Great, Ines said and pressed two buttons, she shouted hello, and then in more subdued tones said yes, that's right, I guess so, no, the Orion Bar, and then silence for a while. Then she turned to me, he wants to talk to you, she murmured, holding out the phone to me; me? I asked, dumbfounded, and took the phone with trembling fingers. It wasn't lost on me with what fascination Carol was observing these proceedings. Is that you? he asked, sounding serious and restrained, but his voice was so familiar I felt horrified, and my extreme insecurity was clearly audible as I said, yes, hello, I'm here with Ines. I simply disregarded Carol, she was finding herself important enough anyhow; there she stood, her eyes flashing, and kept running her fingers through her red mane—how incredibly exciting all of this no doubt appeared to her, at least as thrilling as in the movies. I took a step to one side with the telephone, burying the tiny device in my hair, and shielded my head by dropping it to my chest, all this in order to create for myself the impression that I was making a phone call in private, I lowered my voice, just as I would have done had I been alone, and asked, Kai, can you hear me? Unfortunately the evening is over already; I was trying to sound casual and amused; I realized how tired I was all at once, tired enough to collapse. Is she very drunk? Kai wanted to know, I mean, can she walk? What I mean is, I am completely uninterested in playing chauffeur yet again, I've got a colleague of mine over, he's sitting in the next room, and later I still have to develop a few rolls of film for tomorrow, I'm really busy... can't you just drive? I explained that I didn't know where Ines had parked the car and probably wouldn't find my way back home, but that we could take a taxi, and it appeared that the conversation had come to an end, which was fine with me anyhow, suddenly I couldn't help yawning, in fact I had an entire attack of yawning, but now Kai had begun to speak, he just wouldn't stop. He was sorry, he said, he felt guilty that my evening had been ruined; also Ines shouldn't call him until the morning—my God, he exclaimed, I'm sick to death of these babbling phone calls, they make me want to throw up—and so parallel to my yawn solo he improvised an aggressive monologue. I understand, I said

reservedly, still half yawning, and he went on: OK, listen, I'll just finish things up here and then I'll come to her apartment, would you please stay with her until I get there, I'll send my colleague home, and, oh yeah, give her lots of water to drink, my Lord, I'm starting to sound like a professional social worker, and just in case you were about to ask, no, it isn't the first time all this is happening. When the conversation was finally ended, I said, exhausted, we're taking a taxi, and Ines asked tearfully, why won't he come? I fumbled a fifty Euro note and a twenty out of my wallet and was surprised to see both of them vanish, Ines had drunk a great deal, and it wasn't exactly cheap here, nine Euros a drink. All right, so now I don't have any money left, I said, embarrassed, we've got to stop at a bank on the way, and of course that was Carol's cue, she heaved her Tintoretto figure from the stool and announced, I can drive you, and she looked at Ines as if she were trying to devour her with her eyes, how strange, I thought, that it wasn't just half of Ines still standing there before us, and then I realized I was jealous, incredible, human beings were such idiots, and I was no exception.

Ines had insisted on finishing her drink first, and only then was she willing to leave, which in her case meant zigzagging right down the middle of the room, including the dance floor; couldn't you be just a bit more subtle, I murmured. I saw Ines's companion from before grinning over at us, this made me sad and also furious, since he seemed to know Ines well, or else he knew the problem. Carol, who'd gotten her second wind and seemed perfectly chipper, said, just come on, who cares. Just so she doesn't vomit all over my car, sit in back with her please and let me know if she does anything suspicious; I hissed my consent. Really, from the way she sounded, it seemed as if she were enjoying all of this, or maybe I was doing her an injustice and she was simply enthusiastic at finally being this close to Ines again. The cold air outside struck my face, I felt my cold nose and my lips and the cold that was creeping up my body. Carol drove an oxblood-colored sports car with reddish brown leather seats, it looked brand new. A sour-smelling effluvium, the alcohol, was coming from Ines, whom I'd jockeyed into position on the narrow back seat with effort, whereupon she at once laid her head on my shoulder, and along with the odor of the leather seats

and the fact that Carol now put on the heat as well, this began to make me feel as if I were in the innards of some gigantic beast, a monster that was digesting first my sister and then me. Carol saw my look of disgust in the rear-view mirror and remarked, you're not so used to bringing her home, are you? With effort I said, no, we didn't see each other for a few years, I didn't know she'd, well, taken a turn in this direction. Carol laughed, very well put, and she kept looking at me in the mirror. Well, she said then as we stopped at a red light at a brightly illuminated intersection, I never dreamed I'd get involved with an alcoholic, no, one really shouldn't, they're like moths slamming into the same pane of glass over and over, they never wise up, but that's love for you. The interior of the car was bathed in amber light from the intersection, there were no other cars anywhere in sight. Ines's head had meanwhile wound up on my lap, her skin was luminescent pink and her hair red, she looked perfectly otherworldly, Carol would surely have enjoyed the sight, and indeed, our driver kept desperately hunting around in the mirror for a glimpse of my sister's face, but in the end she gave up when she saw me imitating her lovelorn look. I said, I have the impression you've misunderstood the word love. Love is something that exists on both sides, and what you're talking about is at best fantasy, at worst obsession. I observed her strong back in the thick jeans jacket, saw her shrug her shoulders, lean almost imperceptibly to one side and make a hard turn to the left, like a race-car driver.

Shortly thereafter we arrived. Carol wanted to accompany us to the door, but I said no thanks before thanking her politely for bring us home and, with great difficulty, climbing out of the car shoving Ines in front of me. Carol wasn't mad, she'd lost this battle, but surely not the war, what remained to her was infinitely great, it was this task, her *idée fixe*. Alexander the Great wept when there were no new worlds left to conquer, but Carol found this unnecessary, she smiled, see you later, she said, nodding her head and beaming. The moment her car was out of sight, I cursed, I really could have used some help. Ines's ankles collapsed and she sat down on the curb. I opened my arms and tugged at the boozy-smelling package to keep it from landing flat on the ground. I'm sorry, Ines said, sounding tearful, and I replied in a

soothing voice, you don't have to be, come on, let's wave at Carol. I was speaking to her as if to a small child, and Ines did in fact send a wave down the empty street, tears shooting into her eyes, sweet Carol, she mumbled, Carol's such a sweetie, I really love her. I couldn't get another word out of her, particularly with regard to the location of her house key, and since I couldn't get an answer, I started digging around in her purse myself, then I looked in the pockets of her leather jacket, hoping no one would happen down the street at just this moment and witness the way I was groping her. I steered Ines into the apartment, which was smaller than mine and lovelessly furnished. I was surprised, the pieces of furniture were standing around like embarrassed acquaintances, smack in the middle of the room was a lone chair, the sofa was pushed a meter away from the wall as if someone had been looking for something behind it and then not returned it to its place. Ines plopped down on it at once. She murmured something to the effect that she was feeling sick to her stomach. Water, I thought, remembering what Kai had said, and went to the kitchen. There I found an entire battery of empty bottles, rum, whiskey, all different sorts, I opened the refrigerator, where a single fresh lemon gleamed. That can't be all, I thought, and had a look in the freezer compartment where, indeed, a bottle of vodka nearly rolled into my arms.

When I returned with my water glass, Ines had gotten up and was tottering toward me, I rushed to meet her like a nurse. Ines, I said, Ines, I wanted to ask her how often things like this happened, but there was no point, not just now, so all I said was, here, drink this, and she obediently took a sip, more, go on, it'll help with the nausea. I forced a second glass on her, and she sank back again on the sofa. Is that better, Ines? But she'd fallen asleep already and was snoring softly like a little mouse in a cartoon. A strange sense of relief, almost contentment filled me when I sat down, wiped out, on the armchair beside her, for a moment it was if I'd decided to make a day's work of putting Ines to bed, as if this mission had been on my calendar for ages. I got up to fetch myself a quick glass of water as well. This time I didn't turn on the kitchen light. Gradually I was realizing that there really was a construction site here, but not in front of the building, the construction site was in the middle of the

apartment. Ines's life was more torn up and in disarray than any street. I went back to her and listened to her breath. Her face was disfigured by red spots as though she were allergic to some ingredient in her drinks, or perhaps she was allergic to her very existence. She looked more fragile and endangered than ever, and I sat beside her, trying to put my feelings in order. Just a moment before I'd felt significant, like an important rescuer, but now this impression had vanished again and I felt only emptiness, and although I was awake and sober and didn't have red spots on my face, it was as if I were looking into a mirror. So that was your secret, I whispered, that's what you wanted to say to me but also didn't want to say. Damn it!

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