

*A disturbing picture of modern man*

## Arnon Grunberg The Asylum Seeker

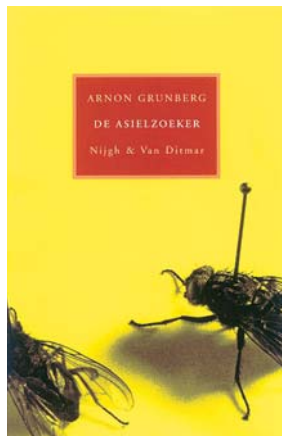


photo Klaas Koppe

exerts the same kind of 'guilty' effect on the reader for his disgust and compassion.

Grunberg's new novel is the story of the writer Christian Beck who in his work broached something that 'should have remained untouched, an anger, you could even call it blind hate, probably unfounded and explosive in nature.' This anger and hate frightened Beck so much that he decided to put down his pen and become a translator of operating instructions.

Beck lost faith not only in the power of writing but also in his own luck. He is a man without illusion and without feeling. He begins to feel that it is up to him to unmask self-deception; only the innocence of the woman he lives with whom he calls 'Bird' can touch him. They are well suited because Bird is inclined to bear the grief of the world on her frail shoulders. However much Beck wants to attach importance to innocence, Bird's compassion can amaze him. This amazement becomes total when Bird finds out that she has a fatal disease and tells Beck that she wants to get officially married – not to him but to an asylum seeker.

There is a concrete reason for the fact that Beck is willing to put up with the humiliating charity of his wife and share the last part of her life with a complete stranger. One day Beck, who visited brothels daily, had stuck a screwdriver – accidentally – into a whore's eye. When Beck told Bird, she flew into a rage, but didn't leave him, hence earning his everlasting respect. Therefore he indulges all her wishes, her wish to marry an asylum seeker, and her wish to 'learn to make goat's cheese herself' – until she dies.

With *The Asylum Seeker* Arnon Grunberg has again written a deadly book that plays satanically with prevailing social ideas. He has given a disturbing picture of modern man who passionately wants to come home somewhere but seems to thrive nowhere.

Arnon Grunberg (b. 1971) made his breakthrough at the age of twenty-three with the novel *Blue Mondays* (*Blauwe maandagen*, 1994), which describes the world of prostitution with wry humour. Grunberg's subsequent novels, *Silent Extras* (*Figuranten*, 1997) and *Phantom pain* (*Fantoompijn*, 2000), strengthened both the readers and the critics' conviction that Grunberg is a great writer. Under the pseudonym Marek van der Jagt he published the successful novels *The History of my Baldness* (*De geschiedenis van mijn kaalheid*, 2000) and *Gstaad 95-98* (2002).

Thank God. Arnon Grunberg is only 32.  
*DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER*

We are lucky that this writer has been enriching the landscape of our literature for the past six years.

PZC

No less than a masterpiece.  
*HET PAROOL*



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### OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

*Blue Mondays* (*Blauwe maandagen*). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. Also in German (Diogenes, 1997), in French (Plon, 1999), in Spanish (Mondadori, 1998), and in many other languages.  
*Phantom pain* (*Fantoompijn*). London: Secker & Warburg 2003. Also in French (Plon, 2003), in German (Diogenes, in prep.), in Swedish (Brombergs Bokförlag, 2002) and in Hungarian (Gondolat, 2002).

*Silent extras* (*Figuranten*). London: Secker & Warburg, 2000. Also in German (Diogenes, 1999), in Italian (Mondadori, 2000), and in Spanish (Grijalbo Mondadori, 2000).

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## An interview with Arnon Grunberg

### Happiness is sadistic by nature

by Bart Vanegeren

(14 June 2003, De Groene Amsterdammer)

*translated by Roz Vatter-Buck*

From a New York sweating under a terror alert, come the glad literary tidings of the spring: with *De asielzoeker* (The Asylum Seeker), Arnon Grunberg (32) has delivered his best book so far. To celebrate, the maestro talks about melancholy, happiness, marriage, the masquerade, fear, fame and goat's cheese.

NEW YORK – we've descended on a Korean tea house, that's buzzing with conversation interrupted by ritual gong-beating, and we're drinking Plum Tea. According to the menu it's supposed to be good for constipation and food poisoning. "A promising overture to the rest of the evening," grins Arnon Grunberg.

*De asielzoeker is your most moving book. Is that because it's got guts?*

Arnon Grunberg: "I hope it is my most moving book, because that was what I intended. It moved me, at any rate – you're always your own first reader after all – and then you hope other people will have the same reaction. I've become less scared of the reader. When I wrote my other books, I was more conscious of the reader. Now I generally think: *I'm* the reader. I no longer worry, "Oh dear, will they stop reading now?". This was what I wanted to create – if they don't like it, tough".

*Have you abandoned the literary view you repeatedly expounded in 'De troost van de slapstick' (The Solace of Slapstick)?*

"Oh, I'd just had enough of that kind of book – I began to get bored writing them, let alone reading them. I no longer believe so strongly in slapstick and certain kinds of jokes having a comforting effect, either. Speeches that are meant to be funny and cabaret-type jokes are the worst – all that I find terribly dull. But I'm afraid irony does still rear its head here and there in *De asielzoeker*, and the absurdity of some situations does lean towards slapstick. I can't do anything about that; I didn't do it deliberately, it's just how it came out".

*As a result, 'De asielzoeker' is also your darkest book.*

"Yes. But I've changed, too. And this certainly hasn't made me any more cheerful. The other day I was thinking: I still recognise the guy who wrote *Blauwe maandagen*, but I'm alienated from him. At the time, I didn't think actions had lasting consequences; I thought I could always put things right again, it didn't matter what I wrote, because I could always start all over again, I could

change myself, too, and my faults would go away by themselves. In short – one day I'd be able to look myself straight in the eye. That gave me an easy approach to life. Sometimes I was sad and gloomy, but even so it was another sort of melancholy.”

*Now the laughter is more or less over, what other strategies have you for combating melancholy?*

“I'm left with fewer and fewer (*laughs*). The best one is simply to work: sit down at the computer at nine and write – not to get rid of melancholy through the writing, but to keep yourself busy. Cleaning shoes helps, too. Or taking the washing to the launderette. I can sometimes get great satisfaction from that. If you're satisfied with something you've just done, the melancholy is much easier to bear. ”

*But you do intensify your melancholy in your writing.*

“At some point, the melancholy becomes so familiar it's hard to let go of, even when you're writing. I know the pain of melancholy from inside and out, I can deal with it. If I started doing anything else, it might bring a worse kind of pain. I'm so familiar with my sadness I couldn't do without it any longer.”

*And you saddle your reader with your melancholy.*

“If you read something you find really beautiful, no matter how gloomy it is, you don't feel saddled with anything, nor does it make your own misery worse. It can even be hopeful. Two days ago I saw a really dark, gloomy film, *Lilya 4-ever*. I came out feeling really gloomy, myself, but I did think it was a good film. It doesn't mean you start thinking: Now I'm going to top myself.”

*Your main character, Beck, wallows in dark thoughts like: “Anyone who tries to make himself happy will end up in a rusty siding; striving for your own happiness is like gatecrashing hell.”*

“Being intensely preoccupied with your own happiness inevitably leads to the opposite. I speak from experience here. Happiness is sadistic by nature: it wrenches people out of their misery, but then when they have to return to their old state they feel even worse, because they've seen that life really can be different. Beck solves it by stopping striving for his own happiness, but maintaining the same goal in a roundabout way: wanting to make someone else happy. That's one way of doing it; it's very tempting to focus on someone else's happiness and do everything to make him or her happy. It has some pleasant aspects to it.”

*The masochistic counterpart of sadistic happiness.*

“Well, more or less. As soon as you fail to make the other happy, the sadistic side takes over again. Then you start getting angry with the other person: ‘Why aren't you happy? I did everything I could to make you happy!’”

*In some of the sensitive passages Beck pushes his ailing wife round in a wheelchair. It reminded me of your father.*

“Yes, I often had to push my father round in a wheelchair; maybe I’ve drawn subconsciously on that experience. There’s a bit about it in *Blauwe maandagen*, which is rather less sensitive, less sweet and affectionate. I didn’t have the technique then to write about it lovingly without getting sentimental. I was a lot angrier, I didn’t yet realise then how much love was involved in pushing that wheelchair round.”

*When I was reading De asielzoeker, I kept thinking about Michel Houellebecq. Does that surprise you?*

“Well, yes and no. I wasn’t thinking about Houellebecq at all when I was writing it; I’d almost finished *De asielzoeker* when I read *Platform*. But someone else said I’d written Houellebecq’s biography, too. I think *Platform* is much more hopeful than *De asielzoeker*: real love is possible in his book, and sex and love can go hand in hand, too.”

*Is Beck’s life the bogeyman under the bed for you?*

“It might seem a sad life to the outsider, but he’s content with it. That helps. It’s not a bogeyman; I think it could be a lot worse for instance – if you had to end up permanently wearing a mask, like a TV presenter or something.”

*A quotation: “Beck entertains no thoughts about his life, in any case no heavy, all-embracing thoughts. He watches. That’s what life is to him: watching. Sometimes he still takes part, but less and less.”*

“The position of the voyeur, observing without intervening, is enjoyable. And looking at your own life, like a peepshow, also feels good initially. You feel you’re kind of floating above it and that distance makes you more aware: You’re doing something while giving a mental running commentary on what you’re doing. The only disadvantage is – and this is where melancholy makes its entrance – that you’re never completely in the action; wherever you are, you’re always slightly on the outside. And that means you’re never really with someone.”

*But isn’t that awful?*

“Yes (*laughs*). You just have to learn to live with it. I wouldn’t know any other way now; the longer it goes on, the more difficult it is to adopt any other way of life. What makes it even more difficult is that it’s an extremely neat strategy for writing. That’s my rational defence for this way of half-life: Sometimes I miss out on the fun other people are having, and dancing or letting myself go is out of the question, but then I’m the one sitting here at the computer, writing a story.”

*Your characters used to opt for as charmed an escape as possible into the masquerade. Is escape no longer an option?*

“I wouldn’t be able to write *Silent Extras* (Figuranten, 1997) now; wearing a mask in order to escape, with the attitude ‘Okay, it’s a game, so let’s play with the highest stakes possible,’ only makes sense or makes things more bearable if you really believe in it. By the time I wrote *Phantom Pain* (Fantoompijn, 2000) I realised it was less ideal than I’d imagined: the role you play soon becomes a prison.”

*Marek van der Jagt was both the climax and the end of your flight to the masquerade.*

“That joke’s over, too. It did provide a moment of happiness, being so intensively busy that it became absurd, but still it didn’t go quite as I’d hoped. I’d thought it would all last much longer, but maybe I was naive to think my signature wasn’t recognisable in *Het geschiedenis van mijn kaalheid* <The Story of my Baldness>. I made a couple of clumsy mistakes, too: I’d created a Yahoo address in New York, without realising it could be checked; I’d claimed that Van der Jagt wrote for the *Wiener Kammerspiele*, but that turned out to be a real outfit, so people could ask them. I’d also thought people would give up at some point, that they’d no longer be waiting for the final ‘Yes, it’s me.’ But people can’t do without the illusion of truth.”

We pay the bill, Grunberg treats me to Chianti in a hotel bar, Asian again, you’d think he was determined to catch SARS. Luckily, we’ve drunk enough Plum Tea to avoid poisoning and constipation for the next twelve months. A transatlantic wedding is taking place in the lobby of the Kitano Hotel; eternal vows are being exchanged in German and English.

*Thanks to his wife, Beck still retains some humanity.*

“His wife is his contact with the world, she’s virtually his whole life. They no longer have any sexual relationship so theirs isn’t what people usually think of as a relationship, but it is a real bond. It’s a really serious attempt at love.”

*According to Beck, love is “your purest discipline, like mass murder and factory labour, it’s not giving in to your emotions; it’s fighting them.”*

“The generally accepted idea is that love is your purest emotion, but I’d like to correct that. There are plenty of ideas that are generally accepted but simply aren’t true. You can’t focus on what the other person needs until you’ve got all your lesser emotions, like jealousy and revenge, under control. At the same time, Beck puts his wife, very romantically, on a pedestal. It keeps the love alive. If you can no longer worship, you stop being in love. There’s nothing masochistic about it as far as I’m concerned; that’s actually the nice part.”

*Do you think it’s possible to have a better marriage than Beck and his wife?*

“Well, to be honest, I hope so, but sometimes I don’t think it is. Perhaps there is something hopeful after all in two people coming to the conclusion after ten or twenty years together that enough is enough and disappearing from each other’s

lives as if they had never been there. Actually, I don't believe in marriage. That's almost certainly down to my parents, everything's down to your parents – but that's not a good enough explanation. I've never done any in-depth research, but I don't know a single couple that has been happily married for any length of time. Sometimes they put on a show, but if you look carefully, you can see through it.”

*That visit to Leo and Tineke Vroman you immortalised once in a column suddenly springs to mind.*

“That may be a relationship like the one in my novel: their marriage also entails an enormous amount of self-sacrifice. Leo and Tineke are in Texas, now. I haven't seen them for ages. I visited them when they were still living in Brooklyn; we went to the beach together. We took the binoculars to go bird-watching, but when Tineke was out of earshot for a moment Leo said the binoculars could also be used for watching women on the beach.” *(laughs)*

Steam billows up from a sewer; New York is unashamedly New York. We walk to an Italian restaurant, where Grunberg is received with a swift bow and a respectfully whispered “maestro”. “They could have made me rich,” the author says through gritted teeth. “When they started a sandwich shop they asked if I wanted to invest in it to the tune of \$ 20,000. I hummed and hawed – I still had some money then, but I turned them down in the end. I bitterly regret it now; they've since evolved from a sandwich shop into a respected restaurant and they've got two branches”. The *vongole* do, indeed, bode well.

*How is your international career progressing, maestro?*

“Steadily; every two months I get to hear which books have been sold to which countries. I'm getting used to it now: when *Blauwe maandagen* was sold to Sweden, I went round on a high for two days. Now it's just: ‘The book's going to Norway? Oh, good!’, not because of arrogance, it's just that none of it contributes to my happiness.

Of course it's pleasant to win a prize, you have a good evening afterwards. But the next day it's all over again *(laughs)*. It disillusiones me to see how many people still believe in prestige and go out of their way to achieve it. Of course I'm pleased when I win a prize and it would bother me if no one outside the Netherlands read my books any longer, but I don't believe any of it helps, at all, and prestige means nothing in the end. But perhaps you have to have experienced it first to realise it's nothing and that's why so many people still seek it.”

*All things considered, fate has been on your side in life.*

“Absolutely, but knowing it could have been a lot worse doesn't help. Far from it. A little while ago, I was in Manila and they drove me from the hotel to the airport in an armoured taxi. We were standing at the traffic lights, when a glue-sniffer pressed his face right up against the window and asked for money. ‘Don't give him anything’, the driver said, ‘he's got a gun.’ I sat there wondering quite seriously who was better off, that boy or me. The back seat of the Mercedes felt

terribly dead. It was comfortable, but all the life seemed to have been sucked out.”

*I suppose money doesn't buy happiness, either?*

“Well, not being able to pay off my credit cards is a kind of happiness for me. If I get really desperate, then a sort of survival instinct kicks in; that ‘they won’t get me’ feeling surging up gives me a moment of euphoria. Maybe I spend a lot deliberately, just to get that adrenaline shot. I’ve got plenty of debts, but I’ve got very good at juggling. The trick is to remain on good terms with one of the cards, by paying faithfully so you can go on using it. And I’ve noticed those people are quite willing to negotiate: if you call and say you know it’s a bit late, but you’re expecting money from Holland and then you actually make the deposit you promised a little while later, then they get more accommodating and, after a while, you can still go on using your card, even if you’re ten weeks or so overdue. The ultimate goal is to live in style and die with loads of debts (*laughs*)”.

*Has New York changed since 11 September?*

“Not really. Though some would say otherwise. The biggest change was that, in the first few months after the attack, the hotel rooms were suddenly forty percent cheaper. That made quite a difference when I wanted to invite people over. But it wasn’t as if anything changed in my life. I saw the enormous plume of smoke, but not for a moment did I feel my life was in danger. I couldn’t understand people calling from Holland, asking if I was frightened. The Korean tea house we were at just now was still an Italian café at the time; people were sitting outside eating pie while refugees from the south of the city came walking past. It did smell a bit like a barbecue, but people talked about it with humour and distance. It was a strange night: everything was closed, but everyone had to eat, all those stranded travellers, too. People got together in hotel lobbies and ate take-away pizzas. The atmosphere was cheerful. I don’t have a TV; that helped, too. The first time, I feared for my life was when I was in Brazil, recently. On TV they kept going on about a ‘terror alert’, so eventually I started believing São Paulo was the next target. But what really did it was when I realised my hotel was a very tall building. That’s what CNN does for you.”

*There’s a pervasive atmosphere of threat in ‘De asielzoeker’, from the first page onwards: “Beck is apprehensive, although he doesn’t know pf what of from which direction to expect danger; so he’s a light sleeper”.*

“Like anyone else who watches the news or reads the papers occasionally, I was thinking long before 11 September that things couldn’t go on much longer the way they were. In a culture dominated by fame and celebrity, for a lot of people violence is the only way left to emerge from anonymity: let’s face it, we all know who Mohammed Atta is now. There was a boy at school with me who wrote stories and said, ‘I don’t mind if I don’t get published until after I’m dead, at least

I'll still be famous posthumously.' So, you see, there's a group of people out there who have reconciled themselves with getting famous posthumously."

*Do you make any allowances for the High Terror Alert in force now?*

"It's mostly an inconvenience; you just sigh while when you're frisked for a third time before boarding a plane. My theory is that nothing happens on the days with an increased alert level, and certainly not in New York. I think things will always go wrong in a way you don't expect, so there's not much point in leaving New York, for example.

Fear-mongering is the mainstay of every society. It's an incredible bonding tool: keep people scared and they're easier to manipulate. Nothing helped President Bush like 11 September.

I did take note of the Terror Alert in Manilla, and in Tel Aviv recently, too. I've been there loads of times, so it really struck me that it had become a ghost town. Once I was eating next to the window in a restaurant, and it did cross my mind that I'd be the first victim if anything happened. But then with a kind of reckless perversity I think: That's hardly likely, I wouldn't be so lucky as to get blown up. Anyway, the moment you're in the middle of it, danger becomes banal and everyday. Let's face it, you can get run over by a bus in Brussels."

*Finally: your earlier books you promoted wearing a green overcoat, having bookshops open in the middle of the night and displaying eccentric fiancées.*

*What will it be this time?*

"I'm going out and about with a goat; I picked them out myself at a goat's cheese farm".



**Sample translation from**

*The Asylum Seeker* by Arnon Grunberg  
(Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 2003)

**Translated by Sam Garrett**

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One evening, after weeks of something like forty jars of vitamins and dozens of litres of strawberry juice, the bird asks: “Would you mind if I got married?”

In that marrying, Beck sees his enemy’s final victory. They were man and wife already, without having to get married.

“Why?” he asks. “Why get married? It’s been fine, it will keep being fine for years.”

“Not to you,” she says, “to someone else.”

Someone else, two words that pretty much sum up their relationship. It had cost him so much effort to learn to live with his wife that, after he had, he couldn’t live with anyone else. Not that he didn’t think about it, often in fact, but it seemed to be out of the question. He’d used up the facility to live with anyone for longer than a three-week vacation. Looking at him objectively, you’d have to conclude that he couldn’t live with himself either.

“With whom?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, I suppose it does, yes. When you’re talking about getting married, it matters.”

“I thought you wanted to share me with everyone.”

“Sharing isn’t getting married. Sharing is, to be precise, something very different from getting married. You don’t get married every day, and you’ve never been married before. You actually had all kinds of objections to it, if I remember rightly. Except for the occasional urge, but okay, we all have our urges. So I’m extremely curious to hear who you’re going to marry, very curious indeed.”

His old sarcasm has started coming back again, but that sarcasm no longer has to protect him against the threat of third parties. Normally, what’s threatening about someone else is that there’s one person too many. When you hear: “There’s someone else,” that usually means: “You have to go.” What binds him to his wife goes beyond the sexual, the emotional, the jealous, the fear of being one too many. It’s more as if the bird and he belong to a secret organization, so secret that neither of them knows the organization’s objectives, or even whether that organization really exists. They provide each other with the illusion that, through each other, they are linked to the rest of mankind, that they are not finished with each other yet, and never will be finished with each other, the way believers think God isn’t yet finished with mankind.

On one occasion they had planned to get married. Abroad. At her request, he’d rushed off to buy her a bridal gown and was just about to bring it to her when she called off the wedding. He would have loved to marry. Back then, someone else was no threat to him either. And now, when it turns out that that someone else can actually only be death, the only thing that surprises him is that there are still other candidates in the running.

“He’s Algerian.”

“An Algerian. Why?”

“Why not?”

“Why not a Turk, or a Russian, or a German? You can marry Germans too.”

“He’s seeking asylum, he’s run out of possible appeals, Algeria is supposed to be a safe country. But it isn’t for him. If he marries me, he’s still got a chance.

Most of it's already been arranged. I was just wondering whether you would be my witness."

"That's all you were wondering?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it enough for you that you're dying?"

"Enough, what do you mean? How could that be enough?"

"Nothing is ever enough for you," Beck shouts. "You can't even die like other people. Asylum seekers have to get into the picture, too. What did I do to deserve this?"

"I didn't think you'd find it such a catastrophe."

"Catastrophe isn't the word. I don't think it's a catastrophe. Not if you wanted to marry ten of them, all at the same time. I think it's madness. That's what I think it is."

"I can be useful to him. I thought you'd think that was nice. That I can still be of use to someone."

"I don't think it's nice at all, I think it's anything but nice. What do you mean, of use to someone? Since when do you suddenly have to be useful? If you want to know the truth, I think it's completely insane. Where did you meet this Algerian, anyway? What's his name?"

"Raf," she says, "Raffie, that's what he calls himself."

The sarcasm he'd sworn off takes hold of him. "Raffie. From Algeria. Wonderful. What am I supposed to say? What do you want me to say?"

"Well, 'congratulations', for example?"

"Congratulations? Fuck is what I say, fuck, fuck, fuck."

"You used to be more eloquent."

Beck wants to say something back, but he's too tired, the rage has flowed out of him and with the rage the need to appear flippant. He sits on the floor in front of his wife and holds her legs. "Don't go away," he says, "don't leave me here alone."

“I’m not going to leave you here alone, not if you take me to the town hall tomorrow at eleven.”

“Tomorrow? Why did you wait so long to tell me?”

“I know you, don’t I? I knew how you’d react.”

The next morning at ten they start the journey to the town hall. Beck is wearing a suit; he is a witness after all. He’s helped his wife put on her prettiest dress. The dress he bought for another wedding, but which was never used.

All night he sat on the edge of the bed, and later he crawled under the bed, amid the dusty boxes with fax machines, typewriters, answering machines. He lay there, beside a few bags of clothing and books no one wants to read anymore. He didn’t turn to God, God has never meant much to Beck, but to those other dead of his. Using his most irresistible voice, he begged them for strength, for himself and for his wife.

That morning that clouds are low.

“Mist,” the bird says, “it will burn off later.” Beck has draped a blanket over his wife’s lap. She’s wearing lipstick. Apparently this wedding falls under the heading “special occasions”. He’s put a woollen cap on her head. It’s been a few days since he showed up at the translation agency. He’s ill. No one comes to check up on him, no one asks: are you feeling better? No one seems to miss him.

“This is madness,” he says as he pushes her along. “This is sick, this is so incredibly sick. There are no words to describe it. How could someone come up with an idea like this? That’s what I want to know.”

“I’ve already told you, it can be useful to him, a marriage like this. I can be of use to him.”

“I’m telling you right now that I want nothing to do with this Algerian. If he tries to get chummy with me, I’ll tell him: ‘Fine and dandy, but it’s my wife you’re married to, not me. So just leave me out of it.’”

He wants to turn around, he wants to undo everything, that’s what the police report said: “Suspect says he wanted to undo everything.” But he keeps

pushing her along. When they stop at a traffic light, he comes and stands beside her, holds her hand and squeezes it lightly. In the bag dangling from the wheelchair are two bottles of homemade strawberry juice – fortified, of course, with all kinds of vitamin preparations – and plastic cups and drinking straws. He's still fighting, but he's afraid he's going to lose. He has her drink a little strawberry juice.

“Drink up, little bird,” he says. “Please, drink something.”

She drinks.

“Enough,” he says. “We have to cross now.” He wipes her lips with the cloth which he carries, just like the juice, everywhere these days. The strawberry juice sloshes in its bottles.

Beck feels like throwing himself on the ground and shouting: ‘No. No. No,’ until the world listens to him. But he holds himself in check.

He has no choice, he pushes the bird faster and faster in the direction of an Algerian unknown to him.

The civil servant is wearing trousers a few sizes too small. His socks are highly visible. Beck shakes his hand. There's some brief confusion about who is marrying whom, but the civil servant seems to be a man who has decided to no longer be amazed by anything, and who punctuates that decision now with adamant gestures.

“Coffee?” the civil servant asks.

Beck says he would like coffee, but the bird has to think about it for a long time, too long for Beck's liking. He sees the civil servant thinking: it can't be such a tough decision, can it? Then she says: “Just make it strawberry juice.”

Beck isn't sure whether she really wants it, or whether she's just saying it to make him – source of innumerable litres of strawberry and other fruit juices – happy. But that's not important. Beck likes pleasing people, especially his wife. He thinks of himself as a man who knows what other people need, and once such a need is satisfied – there are, of course, needs too great for him to satisfy – then

there remains the polite silence or dinner table patter. From the bag dangling on the wheelchair, Beck produces the juice, a cup and a straw.

The civil servant watches courteously as the bird drinks, and tells lighthearted, almost humorous anecdotes about his life as a civil servant, ending with the words: “Maybe I should write it all down, but I don’t have the time. Oh well, maybe once I’ve retired.”

“Yes,” Beck says, “that would be a good idea,” and he wipes the bird’s lips, but she pulls the napkin out of his hand and does it herself. She looks like a baby, with eyes that seem to take in everything for the first time. There’s a picture of her, she’s a few months old, sitting beside a stuffed animal, her eyes open wide. She looks earnest in that one. It’s Beck’s favourite photo, he likes to look at it while he’s pacing the house. That pacing is a vestige from the days when he used to write. When you’re translating instruction manuals, there’s no need to pace.

“The groom will arrive any minute,” the civil servant says, looking confidently at his watch. He knows that grooms always arrive; sometimes they arrive too late, he has some nice anecdotes about that, but not showing up at all is something fairly rare.

Beck wipes off the straw and puts everything back in the bag, except for the napkin, which remains lying on the bird’s lap. The civil servant accompanies Beck’s activities with humorous comment. Humour, that’s a thing Beck has sworn off as well. To him, it seemed like some gas that sucked all the life out of people. Organized laughter especially, comedies, witty speeches, comic writers who read aloud from their own work. Beck used to be funny too, Beck used to be a clown.

“Do you share a home?” the civil servant asks the bride and her witness.

“Yes,” the bird says, “we live together.”

Beck looks at his shoes, neatly polished for the occasion. He doesn’t want to burden others with the way he lives, which – due to circumstances – has turned out a bit less conventional than intended. But the civil servant is not burdened, the

civil servant says: “That’s handy. I live close to my in-laws as well. If anything happens to my mother-in-law, we can be there within two minutes.”

How long did it take me to get to the bird? Beck wonders. Like every person, he has memories, lots in fact, but he doesn’t bother to summon them up. Beck’s memories are nightmares, enemies of the little happiness that is now growing littler all the time, that’s crumbling before his eyes. He lives like a man who has obliterated himself.

“Someone’s knocking,” says Beck’s wife, who has good ears.

“Ah,” the civil servant says, “that must be him.” He gets up and goes to the door. There was no emotion in the way he said it, he was stating a fact. Strangely enough, the civil servant walks as though the next step may be his last. He drags himself along. Beck props his wife up in her chair. He doesn’t know whether it’s weakness that keeps her from sitting upright, or whether she just doesn’t feel like making the effort. But now that she’s about to be united with her lawful spouse, she mustn’t slouch in her chair, Beck feels. She should sit proudly, not bowed or beaten, but ready for battle. Whatever battle that might be.

When he’s finished with the bird, Beck finds himself face-to-face with his wife’s bridegroom. He doesn’t look like what Beck had imagined by an asylum seeker.

Standing in front of him is a young man in his twenties with slightly long, brown, curly hair, and that young man lays a jovial hand on Beck’s shoulder and says, in reasonably coherent German: “Nice that we meet at last.”

“At last, well....” For Beck, there’s nothing “at last” about this meeting, as far as Beck’s concerned he could happily have lived to be eighty without ever running into this man. The civil servant tries to save the day by clapping his hands like a kindergarten teacher and shouting: “The party is almost complete.” The asylum seeker is springy, his movements, his hair, even his voice. She’s getting married to a monkey, Beck thinks. He sees the asylum seeker bend down over his wife, and turns away discreetly. He doesn’t know what may have taken

place between these two in the past, he doesn't know what may still be taking place. What he knows is enough, a few facts.

“I quit smoking,” the civil servant says, “ten years ago, but there are moments when I truly long for a cigarette.”

Beck looks at the civil servant's socks, then says: “You should write it all down, after you retire. Writing is precisely the thing to do once you're retired.”

Beck decides that the time for protocol has arrived. He holds out his hand to the man who is about to become the bird's official husband and says: “Beck, Christian Beck, pleased to meet you.” For an asylum seeker, the man is well-dressed; at least his pants aren't a few sizes too small, Beck notes contentedly. His jacket is a little worn at the elbows, but otherwise well-tended.

The asylum seeker bares his teeth, grins. A couple of his teeth are missing, a couple of teeth are badly awry, but Beck cannot deny that, by conventional standards, this is a handsome man. A man women love, maybe men too, not white, but attractive. Just the thing for Beck's wife. To seek out an asylum seeker, and then to take the youngest, most handsome one in the bargain. In these aesthetic times, of course, those are the ones with the best chances of survival.

“I think it's very kind of you to have come,” the man says.

“Yes,” Beck replies, “it was.”

The bird whispers something and Beck puts his ear to her lips to hear what it is.

“He's strong,” she says.

“That's good,” Beck says. “He can pick you up.” He himself can't pick her up. He doesn't have to: if any picking up needs to be done, the nurses are there to do it.

Beck nods amiably at the strong asylum seeker, then sets his wife up a little straighter in her chair.

The civil servant clears his throat, as though an important announcement is on its way, but all he comes up with is: “Now just one more witness, then we can start.” In the distance, church bells are ringing. Beck wants it to be over as soon



as possible, the sooner the better, but he's still standing beside the man who is going to marry his wife, and he doesn't know what to do with his hands. Moments like these are not very pleasant, but pleasantness is not a trait he expects from life. Memories arise, they seem to come from his stomach, like acid, but he pushes them back.

To while away the time, Beck asks: "So, how long have you been seeking asylum?"

The young man lays his hand on the shoulder of his bride-to-be.

Beck is a man without opinions. Opinions about others are a waste of time, he believes, nothing but stalling. Opinions about your own life too, in fact. Elevator music to go with circumstances you can seldom, maybe even never, control.

"Seven or eight years," the man says. "I don't know exactly. It could be a bit more, too."

Beck sees asylum-seeking as a profession. His grandparents did it, his own parents did too; by chance, long ago now, he chose a different profession, but that choice proved a fatal one. Perhaps one should choose the profession for which one is best suited by nature.

The civil servant has overheard the conversation and comes a little closer to them now. "Ah," he says, "so you're an asylum seeker. I've read a lot and heard a lot about that. But this is the first time I've actually met one. In a small town like ours, you almost never run into them. Is it difficult?"

"You have to put a lot of effort into it," says Beck's wife's husband-to-be, after a brief silence. "And keep your eyes open."

He smells of paint, Beck thinks, as though he'd still been whitewashing a ceiling somewhere just an hour ago. Maybe the asylum seeker is a house-painter in his spare time.

"That goes for normal people too, these days," says the civil servant. "We all have to keep our eyes wide open." The civil servant gives them all a penetrating stare. It looks like he's trying to prove that nothing escapes his gaze.

Beck had girlfriends, back when he was still pursuing his own happiness. Even when he was already living with the bird; maybe even especially when he was already living with the bird. Dozens of girlfriends, they came and went. Sometimes it would last a week, sometimes a month, sometimes a year. On the surface, those romances were always very passionate and intense. Beck enjoyed being infatuated, it went well with the happiness he systematically sought. Wherever it was, there Beck was also.

Some of those girlfriends had wanted to marry him, others had only wanted to live together, yet others to live together and have children, preferably more than three. Beck wanted nothing, really, only to be happy, but such details he kept to himself.

“You are hoping to establish residence in Göttingen?” the civil servant asks.

“Göttingen is good,” the asylum seeker says. “Beautiful city, old houses.” Then he falls silent. Apparently he’s a man of few words.

“Yes, I feel at home here myself,” the civil servant is forced to continue, “although I wasn’t born here. But we are used to foreigners, thanks to the university.”

Beck observes his wife, sees how tired and weakened she is; then he looks at his wife’s husband-to-be, who still has a hand on her shoulder. It’s a gesture that betrays more intimacy than that of a pro-forma marriage. More intimacy than the trick which the bird had hoped, before she died, to play on this world she has learned to despise: marrying an asylum seeker.

Beck is slightly amused by the intimacy between his wife and this young man, it reminds him of everything he has lost. But there is little that doesn’t remind him of that.

For some time now he has been aware that his wife needs others for her own happiness. He suppressed that awareness, until he no longer could. For a long time he thought: I’m enough for her, even if she’s not enough for me.

Who in the world he could possibly make happy, if not his own wife, he has no idea.

“Did you have a good trip?” the civil servant asks.

The asylum seeker looks at him blankly. The civil servant, who seems even more wary of silences than before, simply rattles on.

“I’ve been to Mexico twice myself. No further than that, unfortunately. New Zealand has been on my list for years, but the flight alone... And my two daughters aren’t interested in faraway places. But I take it that someone like you has seen a lot of the world, you’ve probably been places where your run-of-the-mill tourist never comes. Yes, that tickles my curiosity.”

Whores had been part of Beck’s infatuations as well. Whenever he fell in love, he’d go to the whores right away, to water down the happiness.

Beck’s wife sits up. “He used to be in a gang,” she says.

She sounds hoarse, as though she’s been singing too much.

“Used to,” the asylum seeker says. “Not anymore. Not for a long time.” He smiles, rolls up his sleeve and shows them a tattoo.

Beck peers at it, but can’t tell what the tattoo is supposed to represent. “Splendid,” he says. “Impressive.”

Even without the infatuations, there had always been something in need of watering down. Beck had done that with love, the pursuit of his own happiness, imperfect as it may have been. For him, nothing was too good for that happiness. When it came to happiness, expense was no object.

“A gang,” the civil servant said. “I suppose I come from a different world. But I’ve read a great deal about it. Apparently it’s just like a village, some sociologist said that. With village elders and all. I thought that was fascinating. How some things are always the same, even in a gang.”

“He’s a very good fighter,” the bird says.

The proximity of death has bolstered her conviction that proclaiming her own truth can heal her fellow humans.

Beck would rather see her leave this civil servant unhealed. But if it pleases her, why not?

“We also laughed a lot together,” the asylum seeker says. He nods pensively, his thoughts seem to wander. In his mind’s eye he probably sees fights, the way Beck sees women, whores and electric screwdrivers. That’s how Beck sees life when he looks back on it: as happiness missed. He’s not angered or aggrieved by that missed happiness, he’s of too practical a bent for that. Besides, that’s the only definition of ‘maturity’ that appeals to him at this particular season: learning to live with your losses. Beck has learned to be a good loser; he is, he figures, made for defeat, from head to toe.

“That comes as a pleasant surprise,” the civil servant says. “That gang members laugh too. The book I read gave you the impression that there wasn’t much of that going on, that the young people who belonged to those gangs were actually extremely serious.”

“I fought for money,” the asylum seeker says slowly and dreamily, his hand still resting on the bird’s shoulder.

Some people fuck for money, others fight for money. But living, that’s one thing they never do for money. Beck had never met anyone who said: “Give me five hundred bucks and I’ll live another day.” They did that for free, they were even willing to pay for it themselves.

Although Beck likes pleasing his wife – it’s what he lives for – he still feels that it would be better to spare the civil servant the undoubtedly colorful life of this asylum seeker. That is why he leans over to his wife’s husband-to-be and asks: “Don’t take this wrong, but could it be that you smell of paint?”

The asylum seeker sniffs the back of his hand. “It could be,” he says, “I fix up houses.”

Beck squats down beside his wife and hugs her, he squeezes her legs and says: “You’re getting married, bird. Come on, stay with it, you’re getting married in a minute.” He has the feeling that she’s sinking away into a state of partial sleep, a daydream from which it will not be easy to shake her awake.

Far away, as though from some adjoining room, the civil servant mumbles: “Fixing up houses, that’s all we needed.”

“I think you two would get along well,” the bird says. “You could learn a lot from each other. In fact, you’re a lot alike, you both have this thing with aggression.”

Beck looks up at the asylum seeker, who nods at him charitably. Along the lines of: take it easy, we’ll have you whipped into shape before you know it. This is madness, Beck thinks, my wife is mad, I’m mad, the asylum seeker is mad, my life has gone one hundred percent mad. But then he rejects that thought. Once you’ve put aside your own happiness, the categories change, you stop asking yourself what’s the use, what’s in it for you; instead, you let it roll over you, you live for a goal greater than your own happiness, and in that way almost every question receives an answer, every situation takes on meaning: for you, for you, once and for always for you. He calls it resignation, but his wife has something against that term, she thinks it’s too negative. “Letting go,” Beck has often said, “that’s resignation, you submit to the power of coincidence. There is no reason, there is no connection.”

The asylum seeker’s witness comes in without knocking. It’s a woman, an indeterminate someone, in fact. Beck can’t even make out her name. She’s brought cake with her, almond cake in silver paper, and she passes it around. Very thoughtful of her, but Beck would rather have lived through all of this without the almond cake.

“Are you also a,” the civil servant begins to ask, but then stops himself, coughs quickly and says: “You’re not from around here either, I take it?”

The bird nibbles on her piece of cake, but stops after a few bites. The last few weeks she’s been nauseous, as though she’s pregnant. Beck brushes the crumbs from her lap and puts them on the table. He tries to wipe her mouth, but she yanks the napkin out of his hands.

“Let’s get started,” the civil servant says. “We all have other things to do today.”

Beck is now brushing the almost-invisible crumbs from his wife's lap. Superfluous, perfectly superfluous. In the dedication with which he carries out his superfluous actions each day, therein lies his dignity.

The ceremony is short, but reasonably pleasant. The civil servant smiles a few times. To Beck's amazement, there are even rings. As it turns out, they came from a vending machine.

In less than fifteen minutes they're back outside. The female witness passes around some more almond cake, which Beck, mostly out of politeness, eats standing on the sidewalk. Then she has to leave. She's in a hurry. Even in the midst of goodbyes, he still can't make out her name. He watches her go, a wad of silver paper in his hand.

"Perhaps you'd like to come with us for a cup of tea?" Beck says to the asylum seeker. "Then you can see where we live."

"I'd like that," the asylum seeker says, "but I can't stay long."

Beck pushes the wheelchair, the asylum seeker walks beside it. Every once in a while, when he stops for a light, Beck leans down and puts his nose close to his wife's neck, to smell her. More than his wife, what he smells is hospital.

When they get to their house, Beck helps his wife out of the wheelchair. They have to climb two sets of stairs. She can barely make it.

"I'll carry her," the asylum seeker says. He takes Beck's wife on his back, she holds on tight, and Beck folds up the wheelchair.

"Will you be all right?" Beck asks, just to be sure.

"Yes," his wife says, "I will, I'll be just fine." She has her arms clamped around the asylum seeker's neck with all her might.

Beck thinks it's a comic, perhaps even moving sight, although for a moment there he's afraid they're going to fall. It reminds him of something, the way his wife hangs there, but he can't figure out what. Before they start the climb, he pinches her gently and amiably on the buttock. They climb the two sets of stairs, the asylum seeker with Beck's wife, Beck himself with her wheelchair.

A few minutes later they're sitting in the living room; only Beck remains standing.

"With all the hubbub, I forgot completely," he says. "I forgot to congratulate the two of you." He shakes the asylum seeker's hand and kisses his wife. He remains standing next to her and says: "Would you two like something to drink? There isn't much, but we can open whatever we've got. This is a special day, don't you think? This must be a special day."

The asylum seeker wants only water, his wife wants strawberry juice. Now Beck is sure she's only saying that to please him. His wife's wedding has cheered him up unexpectedly. The melancholy that follows him everywhere is not inexplicable, but, for practical purposes, Beck prefers to label it so. He pours himself a glass of white wine and says: "To life, to your lives."

He lights candles. Candles go with weddings. Then something occurs to him. "Do your parents know about this?"

"No," the bird says, "not yet."

That doesn't surprise Beck. She's an extremely independent woman.

"I won't tell anyone," he says, and sits down in the only chair left. "I don't have many friends in this town, not outside this town either, in fact. I don't know what my wife might have told you about me, but I translate instruction manuals."

The asylum seeker looks at him affably, but Beck doesn't think his words have really sunk in.

Years ago, when Beck still bore happiness on a silver platter and worshiped it devoutly, his wife had said one morning: "I haven't had a man in four years. It's been four years since you've touched me."

"Is that right?" Beck had asked, rattling his newspaper. "Are you sure about that?"

"Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why haven't you touched me in the last four years?"

“We’ve been busy,” Beck said after a brief silence. “We’ve been incredibly busy.”

He saw tears in her eyes and wanted to flee, and where could someone like him flee to but to new happiness?

“Four years? Are you sure about that?” he asked. “Time flies. I’d like to touch you more often, but at night I’m just dead tired.”

“You mean, it’s never occurred to you?”

“Not really,” Beck said. “We’re doing well, things are fine, I barely notice not touching you. It’s overrated anyway, all that touching.”

Now that he’s celebrating his wife’s wedding, he can remember that conversation, the way he can remember everything if he wants to, but he doesn’t want to. He bends down and takes off his wife’s shoes.

“Nice,” the asylum seeker says. “Nice.”

“What?” Beck asks.

“It’s nice here.”

“Yes,” Beck says, “not exactly roomy, but comfortable. It’s only temporary, we’re actually waiting for an, uh, for her research, for it to be finished, that’s what we’re waiting for.” He takes his wife’s cold feet, rubs them together.

“Your blood needs to get flowing.”

Once he’s rubbed her feet warm, he asks: “Maybe you’d like a little wine now?”

“Once I start drinking, I can’t stop,” the asylum seeker says.

“But you’re a married man now,” Beck says. “You just got married. That doesn’t happen every day.” They haven’t had guests for a long time, not for months. They didn’t know anyone they wanted to invite over. At least Beck didn’t. Maybe his wife did, but Beck was often at home, so she preferred to receive her friends elsewhere.

Beck pours a glass of wine for the guest. “Even if it’s just a sip,” he says, and then he asks his wife: “Would you like a footbath?”

She nods.



In the bathroom he fills a basin with warm water. He sets the basin down in front of her and hands the man a glass of wine.

“You look good,” Beck says to his wife, “you look very good.” She does her best to smile.

It isn’t true, but you can believe a lot if you want to.

Contrary to all expectations, the house actually takes on something cosy. The asylum seeker is as good as his word and drinks one-and-a-half bottles of wine in less than an hour.

“How well do you two know each other, anyway?” Beck asks, lifting his wife’s feet out of the footbath. He’d lost all track of time; not that they had so much to say to each other, the asylum seeker had talked about his fights, Beck had spoken briefly about instruction manuals, occasionally he had touched his wife and run the flat of his hand across her back. The candles had gone out, there were silences, long ones in fact, but Beck didn’t find them unpleasant.

“We know each other reasonably well,” his wife says, “not too slightly and not too well.”

Beck nods, he looks at them, his wife and her husband. They’re a funny couple, he thinks, you wouldn’t think they belonged together, but maybe they don’t, not really. They’re only married. For the sake of a passport.

“I’m sorry,” Beck says, “but there’s no more wine.”

“We know each other a little,” says the asylum seeker.

Beck nods. Everyone in this room seems happy. Beck doesn’t ask any more questions, he accepts the reality others set before him, precisely because he feels that you must not burden others with the deadly truth, that you should spare them that. When everything has been unmasked, one sees unmasking as an overrated phenomenon.

“I feel like dancing,” the bird says.

Her feet have soaked too long. The skin is withered. Beck rubs her feet with one of the many cosmetic products from the bathroom.

“Raf is a romantic,” his wife says.

Beck stops massaging his wife's little feet, he looks at the man slouched down now in an easy chair.

There's no sound, then a long, stretched-out sigh comes from the easy chair.

"Yes, I am a romantic," the asylum seeker says. "I believe in love."

Beck massages and massages. This is touching, he thinks, if this isn't touching, then what is? I'm touching my wife. Then he says: "Enough is enough." He gives his wife's feet a few final caresses, then stands up and puts on a little music.

"Good," Beck says. "It's good that you believe in that. Because our house is a house of love."

His wife gets up and dances a few steps with her new spouse. Beck moves the bottles and glasses out of the way. "Dancing comes from the hips," his wife has said to him on occasion.

Beck entertains no thoughts about his life, in any case no heavy, all-embracing thoughts. He watches. That's what life is to him: watching. Sometimes he still takes part, but less and less.

Taking part gets in the way of his life.

The dancing ends the same way it began: abruptly.

Beck's wife falls asleep leaning against him, the asylum seeker is sitting across from him. Twilight has come. Beck feels a little uncomfortable with a stranger in his house, but he realizes that the stranger is his wife's husband and that you can't just show someone like that the door.

"Could you close the curtains?" Beck whispers. "If I get up, I'm afraid I'll wake her up."

The asylum seeker gets up and closes the curtains. Then he sits down again.

Two men are sitting across from each other. They have no more wine and no more text. They wait.

At nine-thirty that evening the bird awakens. She's thirsty. The asylum seeker is still sitting there, he has his eyes closed. Beck doesn't know whether he's meditating or sleeping.

"Our guest hasn't left yet," Beck says quietly, and fetches her a glass of water.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind? No, I don't mind. He's married to you. He can stay here for a while." He's sitting beside the bird now, together they watch the man sleep.

"Good-looking, isn't he?"

"Certainly is," Beck says. "Good-looking. A good-looking asylum seeker."

Once, at the age of fifteen, he had striven after beauty, a logical answer to a world that places beauty above all else. But when that effort was not rewarded, not richly and not less-richly, he decided to strive after other things. To be smarter than the others, better than the rest, funnier, more independent.

"But you're good-looking too," his wife says. Her hand moves to his leg.

Beck nods absently. He has no visions of the future. He did have them once, many in fact. Reality has demolished his visions. Once that sank in, he could finally stop being smarter than the rest, and funnier. He's placed himself outside his own life. He lives through his wife, the way his parents lived through him. He now does what they did, he lets others do the living.

"Is he reliable?" Beck asks.

"Oh yes," the bird says. "Very reliable." She shivers. He fetches a blanket and wraps it around her. Reliable and good-looking, Beck thinks, what more could you ask? He still hasn't resigned himself to the doctors' prognoses, he can't resign himself to them, it's physically impossible for him. If he did that, he would finally have to start talking, and that is exactly what he can't do: talk. In fact, he's never been able to do that.

Years ago, he and his wife lived in Eilat. She was doing research there. She would go into the desert north of Eilat and observe animals. He can't even

remember what kind of animals they were. She came and went in a jeep, driven by a slender young man with a fairly shrill voice who was also studying animals.

His parents owned a delicatessen, but the slender young man wanted something different. While she was studying animals in the desert – nightlong perseverance has always been her strongest point, or at least one of her strongest points – Beck went in search of happiness. Looking back on it, he sees that he sought happiness like a man with leprosy who knows he doesn't have long to live, like someone, in fact, on the verge of realizing that happiness doesn't exist at all.

Beck remembers the seaside resort, the beach at Eilat, the heat, their ugly apartment, the neighbours, two old Russian ladies, sisters, stranded in Eilat on their way to America. They screamed constantly. It began in the morning, and only late in the evening, when they had no more energy left, did the screaming finally taper off. Around that time, the man in the jeep would usually come to pick up his wife and take her to the desert to study animals of interest to no one in their right senses.

And he remembers himself, as he was there in Eilat, vain and wounded. Reality had already demolished his visions of the future, but he refused to give in to that reality, just as he now refuses to give in to the doctors' prognoses, just as he is forced to cast aspersions on their expertise, dragging all of medical science through the mud *en passant*, in order not to have to see what any layman can see.

There, in Eilat, there was only one viable vision of the future: an orgy, a long, drawn-out orgy. The definitive triumph of body over mind, the *Endsieg* of the flesh.

His thinking had betrayed him, his consciousness had lured him into a trap, in revenge he had decided to be nothing more than body.

“Does he sleep in chairs a lot?” Beck asks.

“He does that sometimes,” his wife says.

“Oh.”

People are supposed to sleep in beds, even when they're asylum seekers. Anyway, a guest should never fall asleep in a chair.

Beck massages the bird's shoulders, he pinches her flesh.

"Ow," she says.

He's back in Eilat, he hears the Russian women quarrelling. He can't leave the places he's been. Beck is a prisoner.

Around eleven Beck begins preparing a tray of crackers, his wife doesn't want anything.

He forces her to eat some yogurt, he cajoles her. When he looks in the mirror he sees his mother. The same features, the same eyes, the same hands. He has started to look like precisely the person he didn't want to look like, because she represented the intolerable and he would rather not be intolerable. There are pictures of him, at the age of twenty-five, in which it's hard to tell whether he's a boy or a girl. Innocent photos.

The crunching of crackers has awakened the asylum seeker. He rubs his eyes and stretches.

"You slept a long time," Beck says, offering him a plate of crackers.

"Just call him 'Rab'," his wife says. "When are you finally going to call him 'Rab'? Don't be so standoffish."

"If you don't mind, I'm not ready for first names yet. We've barely met."

Beck's wife knows when not to contradict him. She stirs her yogurt listlessly. "Yesterday I felt weaker," she says. "Why do you think that is?" She expects to get worse every day, she's surprised, almost worried, about any improvement, no matter how slight.

"It's got brie on it," Beck says. "We don't have anything else." The asylum seeker looks at the plate of crackers, then eats one hungrily. Beck enjoys it when people eat well. That's why he says: "Help yourself."

The man doesn't let the chance go by. When the plate of crackers is finished, the asylum seeker says: "I hear you write books."

Even on subjects he prefers to avoid, Beck is willing, for courtesy's sake, to exchange a few words. "I used to," he says. "Now I translate instruction manuals, like I said. For hand blenders, for example, that was one of my most recent projects. It sounds crazy, but I enjoy it." The asylum seeker doesn't think it sounds crazy, he says: "Great." The words come from his mouth like a pistol shot.

Beck takes his wife's yogurt bowl to the kitchen. She hasn't eaten much.

"Maybe you'd like a shower?" he hears her ask. And her new husband says: "Yes, that would be good after a day like this."

Beck comes back into the room and says: "I'll show you the bathroom." He glances at his wife, disapprovingly, slightly irritated, but in principle she's right. When you finally have a guest, you can hardly begrudge him a shower.

"Here's a towel," Beck says once they're in the bathroom. "Do you use soap?"

"Of course I use soap."

Beck hears indignation in the man's voice.

"I almost never use soap myself," Beck says. "I wash in hot water. I have sensitive skin." He feels the need to explain himself, he doesn't want to insult his wife's husband unnecessarily.

"Oh, does that help?"

Beck doesn't know whether the question stems from interest or rudeness or both. He only knows that he finds the question extremely impertinent. But the more impertinent people are, the politer he becomes. Beck's politeness is a way of life. "It helps wonderfully well," he says. "I'm a hygienic person, on the job but also off the job. My wife uses only liquid soap, I can offer you some of that, I'm sure she won't mind. This one smells of grapefruit, but she has other fragrances as well." Formally, of course, his wife is no longer his wife, she's the wife of the asylum seeker, but he's so used to referring to her as his wife, even though they never married, that he can't simply stop all of a sudden.

The man bares his teeth for the second time that day. His grin, Beck notices now, is a threat. No wonder he belonged to a gang.

“I’ll take grapefruit,” says the man, who, at the strangest moments, reminds Beck of a monkey.

Beck leaves him alone.

The asylum seeker doesn’t lock the bathroom door behind him. Beck would have done that. He does that all the time, often even when he’s home alone.

His wife looks at him mischievously, more mischievous than she’s been for weeks.

“He’s smart, don’t you think?”

“Smart. Yes. He seems intelligent enough,” says Beck. “Tight-lipped, but intelligent. Only his teeth, you don’t want to look at them too long: to be honest, the less you look at them the better. To call it a ravage would be an understatement.”

“You’re jealous.” In her voice he hears the old tone he knows so well. Teasing, but affectionate.

“Not at all. I’m just stating a fact. Once he saves some money he should have his teeth fixed, maybe he could become a photo model. Or maybe even more than that. A politician.”

She takes his hand and squeezes it.

“I’d be pleased if you two liked each other.”

“But we do like each other,” Beck says. “We like each other very much. Considering the circumstances, one couldn’t like each other much more.”

His wife squeezes harder.

“Very, very much,” Beck repeats, slowly and deliberately. He who once wanted to kill everyone with his typewriter is now prepared to like everyone. Very much, if necessary. There are few things about people that can bother him anymore.

“What I would really love,” his wife says, “is to learn to make goat’s cheese.”

The asylum seeker comes out of the bathroom wearing only a towel. His hair is wet. The man sits down in the same chair where he had been sleeping earlier.

“Perhaps you could loan him a pair of slippers?” The bird’s voice sounds almost cheerful.

Beck looks in the closet. He finds a pair at last. He hasn’t worn slippers for ages. The days when he wore slippers coincided with the days when he searched intensively for happiness.

“Why not try these on for size?” Beck says.

They fit perfectly.

“What size do you wear?” Beck’s wife asks.

After thinking about it for a while, the man says “forty”. Almost reluctantly, as though it were information that might be used against him.

“Then you can give him some of your old shoes, that’s a good idea. You’ve got lots of shoes you don’t wear anymore.”

“Yes,” Beck says. “I could do that. I have many shoes I no longer wear.”

One afternoon, a year or so ago, he saw his wife going out the door with a pile of towels.

“Where are you going?” he’d asked.

“Oh,” she’d said, “these people I know, they don’t have any towels, and we have so many.” Beck had asked no further. He was not particularly attached to towels. You had to save your strength for things worth resisting, the rest you were better off letting roll over you. Beck had, however, been slightly irritated the day he noticed that half his wardrobe was missing. He wasn’t particularly attached to material things, it’s true, but there were a few shirts and trousers he had worn with relative pleasure. But was half a wardrobe anything to risk a relationship for, or even a day-long quarrel? What nonsense. So he had fought back his irritation. And his wife had merely kept repeating: “I saw that they wore your size, and they needed it, it was a perfect opportunity, I couldn’t pass it up.”



After fifteen minutes, he'd had to admit that it *was* a perfect opportunity. When people really need them, the bird likes giving things away, including herself.

Her new husband is walking around the room in Beck's slippers and the towel. She watches contentedly, and Beck feels that the man does, indeed, have what it takes to be a photo model.

"You move well," Beck says. "But how long are you planning to stay?"

"Christian!" his wife shouts.

"I know you two are married, but I thought the marrying part was just a formality. What time are they picking you up?"

The monkey looks at him in surprise. Apparently, there will be no picking up.

"It is," Beck's wife says, "it is a formality, but I also happen to love him."

"Oh," he says, "oh. You didn't tell me that part, but it doesn't matter. It's no catastrophe." Beck nods a few times and looks at the young man wearing his slippers and a towel, standing at the window, being young and handsome. That's what love should look like, young, fresh and comely, wearing only a towel. Then it's not too hard to overlook a set of teeth crooked as an old rake.

Beck goes back to the bathroom. Declarations of love make him uneasy, even when they're not aimed at him. The asylum seeker's clothes are in the sink, soaking in soapy water. Only his jacket is hanging on the rack.

Beck turns off the light in the bathroom and goes back into the room. "And what about you?" he asks. "Do you love her too?"

The towel looks good on the asylum seeker. Some people don't need clothes.

"Oh yes. Very much, in fact."

"And how long have you loved her? If I may ask?"

The man thinks. "A year, something like that."

"But at first it was platonic," says Beck's wife.

Beck sits down, he crosses his legs. “I believe,” he says, “that one should revel in the happiness of the people one loves, even when one has no share one’s self in that happiness. That is why I am happy for you two.”

He had put that well, very well, given the circumstances, but his words seem to have made little impression, and that hurts him.

“Why are you looking so angry?” his wife asks.

“I’m not looking angry,” Beck says, “I’m looking thoughtful.”

He examines his slippers on the feet of the new man, they’re quite nice for flip-flops. He can’t remember where he bought them or who he got them from, or whether he stole them from some hotel.

“Fucker,” his wife says. “You’re the one who started with not touching me, you drove me into other people’s arms, so don’t go sitting there now all grotesque and broken. For years, you never laid a finger on me.” She’d always been strong, even when she wasn’t dying.

Beck concentrates intensely on his slippers. He’s almost sure he got them from someone, but he can’t come up with a name.

“It just never happened,” Beck says, more to the asylum seeker than to his wife. “Something always came up. And at a certain point it had become a tradition not to touch each other anymore.”

“Doesn’t matter,” says the asylum seeker.

“Maybe not,” says Beck, still staring at the slippers, “maybe not. But maybe it would have been better if we had touched each other, as man and wife, but like I said, I had my mind on other things.”

His mind is on other things too at the moment, he pulls loose, walks over to his wife, puts his arms around her and says: “It’s fine, believe me, it’s fine. I’m not broken. Really not. It just looks that way.”

She laughs. High and loud. The way she used to, in a theatre or at the movies, making herself heard above all the rest. “This is absurd,” she says, “*you* telling *me* that it’s fine.”

“But it *is* fine,” Beck says, “it’s great, isn’t it?” He looks at the man, who slowly nods his head yes, cautiously, as though he can’t fully believe the situation he’s in. As though he’s not sure whether this is heaven or hell, or somewhere in between.

This is where Beck lives, this is the venue for his life, or what’s left of it, he wouldn’t want to move away, not without the bird. He can live with little changes, an asylum seeker here, an asylum seeker there, it takes some getting used to, but you can get used to things quickly. He can’t live without her. She is his future, now that he’s renounced his own. He lives to watch her live, to be close to what he himself can’t do: live. For him, life is: the watching of it.

“And if the two of you make a baby,” Beck says, “I can take care of it. That’s no problem.”

The silence that follows is one which even Beck finds uncomfortable.

“I’m sick,” the bird says, “I’m sick, I can’t make babies.”

“I know that,” Beck says, “maybe you can’t make babies right now, but you’re getting better. You feel better than you did yesterday, you just said so yourself. You’re getting better. Don’t you think? She’s getting better.”

The asylum seeker nods again, amiably, but even more astonished than before. “Do you think I could borrow a pair of underpants?” he asks.

Beck clears his throat. “Of course,” he says, “no problem. But first I’m going to make tea for the two of you. And then we have to get some sleep. This has been a long day, for all of us.”

In the kitchen he puts water on to boil.

“He’s very sweet,” he hears his wife say, “but a bit broken.”

While the water is heating up, he goes into the bathroom and looks at himself carefully. For a broken man, he looks pretty good. He still has all his hair. It could have been a lot worse. He slaps his cheek lightly a few times. Then he goes to the closet and looks for a pair of suitable underpants. He chooses blue ones, with white dots. A neutral design, a few years old, but cleanly laundered, no one could object to these, not even an Algerian.

He makes peppermint tea, then goes into the living room with the peppermint tea and the underpants.

“Here comes the broken man,” he says, “with tea and undergarments.” He had hoped for a little laugh, a smile, no more than that, for courtesy’s sake. But they merely stare at him, embarrassed. He hands the underpants to the asylum seeker, who gives them a quick sniff.

Beck is willing, if need be, to play the broken man. Better that than to play the complete man, the success, the winner; that role no longer fits him, it never actually did.

When they’ve had their tea, he sits down beside his wife. Beck puts his arms around her again, hugs her to his chest. The asylum seeker is sitting across from him, still wearing the towel, the blue underpants with white dots on his lap, the teacup on the floor beside him.

“Most people,” Beck says, “fuck each other, but don’t belong to each other. We don’t fuck each other, but we belong to each other. Do you understand that? We belong to each other.”

Beck feels his lower lip quiver. He thinks: be careful, this is no time to go crazy. Don’t go crazy now.

The asylum seeker takes a sip of tea. “So you two belong to each other, but you don’t fuck each other.”

“Exactly,” Beck says, “we belong to each other.”

“But you belong with us, too,” Beck’s wife says to the asylum seeker; he takes another sip of tea. She caresses Beck’s arm. For a broken man, Beck is doing well, not many broken men are doing as well as Beck.

“Good,” the asylum seeker says, “real good,” and he puts the teacup back down on the floor.

Nowhere had Beck sought happiness as intensively as he had in Eilat, perhaps because he had nothing else to do there. He sought after it day and night, without being all too choosy, every last crumb was welcome. He didn’t realize then how unbearable happiness was, how intolerable, how it only led him faster,

faster all the time, towards death, and meanwhile his wife was observing animals from behind a rock, categorizing their behaviour, trying to discover systems. She wanted to fathom the beasts of the desert, perhaps even understand them. And he who wanted to take revenge took off his clothes as often as he could, he sought contact with his body, he tried to discover what that was, pleasure.

She is still caressing his arm and he notices how much he enjoys that. “You’ve killed a lot in me,” she says to Beck, “but I can’t blame you for that, I let it happen too.”

At the word “kill” the asylum seeker sits up briefly, as though ready for the fight to begin at last, but when she finishes her sentence he leans back in his chair again. A contented person, or so it seems.

“So what did I kill?” Beck asks.

“I can’t tell you right now, we’re not alone.”

“I want to know right now,” Beck says. “You don’t mind the two of us talking together, do you? We don’t have any secrets, now that you belong to us.”

The asylum seeker shakes his head.

The bird thinks about it, she caresses his arm, automatically.

“You killed my commitment,” she says at last, “you made me the way you are yourself. Reservations, always those reservations, never a hundred percent.”

“But you can still feel commitment, can’t you?”

She says nothing.

“Hey, I asked whether you can feel commitment? You feel committed to him, I take it? Otherwise he wouldn’t be here.” He points at the asylum seeker.

“With difficulty,” his wife says, “with great difficulty.”

“You mustn’t take this personally,” Beck says to the asylum seeker, “this doesn’t directly apply to you.”

The contentment on the bridegroom’s face has disappeared. He seems to be doubting his own happiness, and that, Beck must admit, makes him feel good.

“I’m sorry that I killed all kinds of things in you,” Beck says, “but now it’s time for you to get some sleep. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

“Is there any tea left?” the man asks.

“No,” Beck says, “there’s no tea left either. And put on those underpants.”

He carries the empty glasses to the kitchen. When he comes back into the living room, the asylum seeker is busy putting on Beck’s underpants. He doesn’t even try to hide his penis. Beck looks away, he doesn’t want to catch people at their secret parts.

“Do you two want to sleep in the same bed?” Beck asks.

“Is this a trap?” his wife asks. “Is this a trap you’ve set for me?”

Beck had set a trap for himself, long ago that trap snapped shut, and now he can no longer escape from it. His only hope is to take the trap he once set for himself and set it for other people, so that he’s no longer alone in his trap. But as far as he can tell, this is no trap, this is love.

“I thought,” Beck says, “that you two might want to sleep in the same bed. I thought that might be doing the two of you a favour. I don’t mind sleeping here in the living room.”

“But it’s your bed, too.”

“That doesn’t matter, I’m telling you,” Beck says. “It would be a pleasure to do that for you, a heartfelt pleasure.”

She looks at him, she hesitates. “For one night then,” his wife says. “After that you sleep in your own bed again.”

“For one night,” Beck says. He doesn’t know whether he really loves his wife, or if he’s only addicted to her presence, to the remains of his past that she still bears with her, more than he does. What he does know is that love cannot be a free choice, not for him; it’s a duty, a task, an offering.

He shakes the asylum seeker’s hand. “You still smell a bit like paint. Good night.” And when he notices that the man finds it unpleasant to enter his wedding night smelling of paint, Beck quickly adds: “But my underpants look wonderful on you. Very handsome indeed. And exactly your size.”

Then he embraces the bird. He doesn’t know who he’s embracing: his wife, his sister, his mother, his child; probably, more than anything else, his life.

Slowly he begins making his bed under the coat rack. It's not the first time he's lain there, it's a fine place to sleep. But it is the very first time that there is an asylum seeker lying in his bedroom.