

Sample Translation

Tirza

(Tirza)

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Chapter One

Jörgen Hofmeester is in the kitchen, cutting tuna for the party. He holds the raw fish with his left hand. He handles the knife the way he was taught in the course “Making Your Own Sushi and Sashimi” he took with his wife five years ago. Not putting too much pressure on it, that’s the trick.

The kitchen door is ajar. It’s a sultry day, as Tirza had hoped. She has been following the forecasts intensively for days, as if the success of her party depends on the weather.

Later, the guests will take over the garden. Plants will be trampled. Young people will sit on the wooden steps leading to the living room, while others will hang around in the four garden chairs Hofmeester acquired when they first moved here. And still others will penetrate the small shed where Hofmeester has found empty beer bottles after parties in the past, glasses half full of wine beside the mower, bottles with exotic names surrounding the electric saw which he uses to trim the apple tree on Sundays in the spring and the autumn. A forgotten, unopened bag of crisps which he ate absentmindedly one morning.

Tirza has thrown parties before, but tonight is different. Like lives, parties can fail or succeed. Although Tirza hasn’t said so, Hofmeester senses that much depends on this evening. Tirza, his youngest daughter, the one who turned out the best. Turned out excellently, both inside and out.

Hofmeester’s sleeves are rolled up. In order to protect his shirt against stains, he’s wearing an apron he once bought as a Mother’s Day present. He looks more manly than usual. He hasn’t shaved in six days – he didn’t have time. As soon as he got up he was occupied with thoughts that he had never had before, not to this degree: plans, memories of the children when they were only just crawling, ideas that seemed brilliant in the early morning. He’ll have a quick shave later on. He wants to appear presentable and charming. That’s how the guests will see him: a man who has not lived in vain.

He will make the rounds with sushi and sashimi, neatly displayed on a platter that was bought for the occasion in the Japanese store. He will chat with people and say casually: “Try the squid sashimi.” A self-effacing parent, that’s what he’ll be. The secret to parenting: self-effacement. Parental love is silent sacrifice. All love is sacrifice. No one will notice anything about him. There is nothing to be noticed. Some will congratulate him on Tirza’s impressive grades, one or two invited teachers will ask what Tirza will do now, and he will answer, with the platter in his hand: “First she’s going to travel for a while – Namibia, South Africa, Botswana. Then she’ll be back to go to college.” He will be an excellent host, one with six pairs of eyes. Not only will he ply the guests with food and drink, he will also keep a close eye on the lonely and neglected. Those who have only their own glass or a piece of sushi to talk to will be entertained by Hofmeester. He will offer the shy guests his company. And dancing – there will be dancing.

Hofmeester reaches into a bucket of lukewarm rice. He kneads the rice, inspecting the trim around the kitchen door as he does so, as if he has never worked at this counter before. He sees the peeling paint, a dull spot on the wallpaper beside the trim where a shoe once bounced that Tirza had aimed at his head. Before that she had shouted “Bastard.” Or was it afterwards? – he doesn’t remember. A good thing the window didn’t shatter.

He looks at the rice in his hand. The Japanese restaurant always does it better. Hofmeester’s sushi is shapeless. His dedication to the kneading surprises him the way he is surprised by the follies of his past – the kind of folly that doesn’t do too much damage.

He glances again at the peeling paint that reminds him of his own skin. He has a cream, but hasn’t had a chance to use it these last couple of days. Holding the rice, he begins to think about selling this house – his house. At first he doesn’t take the thought seriously. He thinks about it like he thinks about matters that won’t happen anyway. Like having yourself frozen after death and waking up a

hundred years later. But slowly the conviction grows. The time is ripe. How long should he wait, and for what?

In the past he had dismissed such plans immediately. His house was his pride. The apple tree he had planted himself was his third child. He had had the idea of getting rid of the house and the apple tree before – if the worst came to the worst – but he couldn't do it. It was impossible, unnatural. Where would he have gone with his family? The apple tree could no longer be dug up. He was tied to this house – he was tied to everything. And when friends and acquaintances couldn't think of anything nice to say about Hofmeister, which happened from time to time, one of them would always remark: "But Jörgen lives in a very desirable neighbourhood."

A desirable neighbourhood. That was essential for Hofmeister. Ambition had to have something to show for itself, usually an address. A certain fierceness came over him when he mentioned his street, as if his identity – all that he was and stood for – was balled together into house number, street name, and post code. More than the name Hofmeister itself, more than his profession or the M.A. title that he sometimes added to his name without violating the truth, his post code indicated who he was and whom he wanted to be.

He no longer needs to live in a desirable neighbourhood. Draping a piece of tuna over rice, that realization – that it's no longer necessary – feels like deliverance.

He has been told he's too old to be fired. And when you're too old to be fired, you're also too old to live in a desirable neighbourhood. When the nursing home is less than a decade away, that no longer matters. He knows people his age who are already going senile, though they have been drinking a lot.

Away from this house, away from this neighbourhood, away from this city – that's all he can think about when he searches for the meaning of the word 'solution'. Some people wake up in the morning with the thought: There must be a solution for all of this – this can't go on. Hofmeister is one of them.

The children have left home or are about to leave. His work has evaporated into an empty occupation that no longer has anything to do with productivity, only with waiting. He could go east. In the days that he studied German, putting forward opinions about expressionist poets as if he had known them personally, he planned to live in Berlin and write the ultimate book about expressionist poetry. He could do that now. It's never too late for such a book.

He would miss his post code – the impression it made on some people, the suggestion of success that clings to it, the smell of success. Now that his youngest daughter is leaving for Africa he should also let go of his post code. He no longer has to attend parent-teacher meetings, he doesn't have to shake any more teachers' hands. Who's left for him to impress?

He has to admit that only sentiment and fear of change still tie him to this place. Since Hofmeister has arrived at that point in life where he mainly needs cash and an escape route, a way out, he decides to pay no more attention to sentiment and fear.

He cuts the tuna energetically. That's how the sushi master does it – chop chop chop. The fish has to welcome the knife as a friend. He takes a bite of tuna. The shrimp are waiting for their rice on a saucer.

This morning he drove to Diemen to get supplies at the wholesale catering store. To Hofmeister the raw tuna on his tongue is a pleasant sensation. That's what's important about sashimi.

His wife enters the kitchen in her dressing gown, flip-flops on her feet. She asks: "Has Ibi called?"

Hofmeister isn't yet used to her presence. She left, three years ago. More than three years ago. The course "Making Your Own Sushi and Sashimi" hadn't helped.

But counter to expectation she came back, six days ago, around seven in the evening.

Hofmeister had been in the kitchen. He was there a lot since his wife left him, but actually he had been there a lot before that. The stove was his true workplace. The wife never felt the need to make an effort in the kitchen. Her talents reached further than lasagna, they were more urgent than parenting. Something else in her life always outweighed feeding her family.

The doorbell rang, six days ago, and Hofmeister called: “Tirza, can you get that?”

“I’m on the phone, Papa,” she returned.

Tirza is on the phone a lot. Other parents have told him that this is normal. Being on the phone can develop into quite a hobby. He seldom calls anyone himself. When the phone rings, it’s for Tirza. And as a well-trained employee and excellent papa the father then says: “You can reach her on her mobile phone. This is the number.”

That night Hofmeister was preparing a casserole. The recipe came from a cookbook. Since the wife left him, Hofmeister has gradually built up an impressive collection of cookbooks. He didn’t see improvisation as a sign of creativity, rather as pure indolence. The recipe was sacred – a teaspoon is a teaspoon. He had to stay in the kitchen. The oven was preheated. He had just placed the dish inside.

“Tirza, get the door,” he called again. “I can’t right now. It’s probably the tenant. Tell him I’ll drop by later this evening. Get the door, Tirza!”

The tenant is a young man who isn’t actually that young anymore but officially still a bachelor. He occupies the top floor of the house Hofmeister bought for a song at the end of the seventies. The young man, who’s studying to be a notary, complains regularly to Hofmeister about all sorts of things, and one thing in particular: a foul smell in the bathroom. At least once a week he’s at the door with complaints and moaning.

Hofmeister promises improvements each time, even though two reliable plumbers have explained to him that unless he’s willing to replace all the pipes,

which would cost a fortune, not a lot can be done. He doesn't own a fortune, and even if he did, he wouldn't dream of spending it on new pipes.

In addition to all the rest, Hofmeester is a landlord.

He heard Tirza swear – he heard her walk to the front door. Then it was quiet and he concentrated on the casserole, convinced that it was the tenant, with unsolicited advice and barely concealed threats.

Rent protection, renowned lawyers, housing associations – what has he not been threatened with? As landlord, Hofmeester has had them all at his door, but they haven't defeated him. The predator Hofmeester fought back, against the institutions, against the tenants, against the law that often seemed to have it in for him. The predator Hofmeester is tough.

A minute later – it can't have been more – Tirza walked into the kitchen. He thought she looked pale, desperate. But he probably made that up himself, later. She probably always looked like that. Without his noticing, the desperation had at some point appeared on her face and never left.

“It's Mama,” she said.

Intuitively he took the casserole from the oven and turned off the gas. He stared at the cod and potatoes – simple but tasty. This would take a while. This was not a smell in the tenant's bathroom. This was not the sewer, for a change, but the mother of his children.

Wives don't pay rent, it's true, but, like the tenant, with whom the landlord is by definition at war, they complain. Complaining – that's what the wife and the tenant have in common, reproaching. Threats, nagging – and behind it all, dependence hiding like a disease.

Housing associations, rent protection inspectors, lawyers – he blew them off, sent them off none the wiser. But the woman hiding behind the forgotten word “mama”, the mother of his children, never let herself be blown off. She was more dangerous than rent protection officials, slyer than the housing-authority inspector.

He walked to the front door, the cloth he had used to take the casserole from the oven still in his hand. It surprised him that she would come this evening of all times, just when he was cooking dinner.

The first months after her disappearance, or rather the first years, he half expected her to return any day. Sometimes he called home from work to see if she would answer. She still had the keys and he hadn't changed the locks. He couldn't believe that she would never return. He couldn't imagine that she was willing to exchange this address for an address that was so much less, so banal, so insignificant: a houseboat, he was told.

But after a while he had to admit that he had miscalculated – she didn't come back. She didn't even bother to contact him or come for the rest of her things. She was gone and she stayed gone. He learned to live with her silence as he had lived before with her presence.

At first the wife would be in touch now and then with his oldest daughter Ibi. They would meet in the city, in a café where people meet who don't want to be seen. But then that stopped, too. Hofmeester didn't get to hear much about those meetings and he didn't insist with Ibi, who was really named Isabelle, but whom everyone had called Ibi from birth. No, what Ibi discussed with her mother remained a secret.

Tirza no longer wanted anything to do with her mother, and the wife hadn't exchanged a word with him – the father of her children – since her departure, not even through letters or e-mail. Hofmeester knew she was still alive and that she'd gone abroad after the houseboat, but that was about all he knew. The black hole started abroad, and he regretted it.

The longer the silence lasted, the more his regret increased. Time does not heal all wounds, he discovered – time tears open wounds, poisons and infects them. Maybe death ends all pain, but not time.

Hofmeester could have called her, of course, or he could have sent a postcard, but he did neither. He had his pride. He waited in silence for her to realize her mistake. A childhood sweetheart on a houseboat, that had to be a mistake. It had

to be. After all, the houseboat itself was a mistake. He continued to live calmly, awaiting the insight that his wife would come to.

Meanwhile he continued living with two children, but after six months his oldest did as she had seen her mother do – she left home.

When the doorbell rang in the evenings those first months, he would catch himself thinking: That's her, my wife, she's back. But gradually the expectation had turned into a ritual, an empty habit, and together with the expectation the hope disappeared. The mother of his children was gone. That was a fact, and facts are called such because they are generally unchangeable.

But now she stood there, in all her glory, fact or no. In the hallway, with the same suitcase as when she left, a red suitcase on wheels. She had calmly walked out the door. Her departure had not turned into a drama, not her departure.

The sight of his wife affected him more than he could have suspected when he put the casserole on the kitchen counter. Why? thought Hofmeester. Why tonight? What had happened? He didn't understand this visit, and he liked to understand things. He detested the irrational like others detested vermin.

His craving for rational considerations leading to well thought-out behaviour remained unsatisfied. Unwanted thoughts welled up. He had to admit that he felt nervous the moment his daughter pronounced the word that no longer existed in this household: Mama.

What God was to atheists, mama was to the Hofmeester family. No one talked about the runaway mother. No one mentioned the infamous word. No one said: "When Mama still lived with us..." Even at parent-teacher meetings, which he attended with a certain fanaticism, no one referred to the mother of his children. People accepted him as a single father, and they did so so thoroughly that everyone pretended that Hofmeester had never been anything else – that he was designed from early childhood to be a single father. And it must be said that he had risen to the occasion.

There was no mama, and therefore the word no longer had the right to exist. He was here now, father and mother in one. The only remaining parent and therefore also the true one, and with him everything would be better.

Standing face to face with her, Jörgen noticed that he was aroused. Not in the sexual sense of the word, but aroused like before an exam, even when you know you've studied enough. Anything could go wrong. That was what the adrenaline told him, what the concentration with which he looked at her whispered to him – a lot could go wrong.

He inspected her, first her head and then her suitcase. For an instant he felt the incomprehensible urge to hold her to him, to hold her for minutes on end. But all he did was lean against the wall with his right hand, semi-nonchalantly, the dishcloth dangling from his left hand. Hofmeester had spent a lifetime looking for the right pose and now that that life was almost over he still hadn't found it. He had a dishcloth but not a pose.

His only thought was: It always happens when you least expect it. As if that's the only reason it happens, because you don't expect it.

How long had he looked forward to this, to her standing in the doorway? She had left before but she had always come back. A few days, a few weeks – her urges had never lasted longer than two months. One day she would be back again. Shameless, unapologetic, arrogant, a tad aggressive, but she would be there, in his doorway. But this last time that didn't happen. The last time was different from all the others – the last time was permanent.

And now, now that he no longer expected it, now that he no longer needed to expect it because the children were old enough to manage without her and he was old enough to pass as a young widower, she rang the doorbell as if it was the most normal thing in the world. And maybe it was. She was still the mother of his children. She had lived here for years, first just with him, then with him and the girls. Maybe she wanted to come and check on her pots and pans and admire his apple tree that had indeed grown quite a bit.

He looked at the woman who claimed he had ruined her life – not just ruined it, taken it from her. He hadn't allowed her to live. Like a magician he had spirited away her life, three breaths and – poof – gone. She wanted it back, her life. That's why she left. She had walked out the door like the rent-protection ladies and gentlemen, calm, but not without resentment. He had called after her: "Shall I ring for a taxi?" But she had said: "I'll take the tram." And so he had closed the door and sat down in the living room, with the evening paper on his lap.

"I thought I'd come and see how you're doing," she said and she brushed a few hairs from her face. Her gestures, the way she stood there, self-assured, confident that this was the perfect time to check on her family, that of all evenings she could not have chosen a better one, a faint smile round her mouth, sunglasses on her head – it all claimed the opposite, but he could tell by her voice that she, too, was nervous, as nervous as he was. Maybe she had walked past the house three times before finding the courage to ring the bell. She had probably returned to Amsterdam weeks ago and spied on him going to work, carrying groceries, walking Tirza to her bike in the evenings if she wanted to go to see her boyfriend. And how he would linger there, first to watch Tirza cycle away and then to look at his street and the park – the wife had seen that.

A man in front of his house, that's what he was on such evenings. No, an elderly man in front of his house. In the bathroom, in front of the mirror, he had become familiar with the sensation of looking at something that has been. And it was a relief. What consoled him about his existence was that it lay behind him. If he searched long enough, he would recover life in the past.

The wife could have known that too. She could have known everything, Hofmeester thought. And that's why it surprised him all the more that she did this evening what she should have done sooner or not at all: ring the doorbell and stand there with her red suitcase on wheels.

He didn't understand what she wanted from him. It probably wasn't sex. She never was an archetypal mother. She couldn't know that he had learned to cook

so well, that had come after her departure. What could she want from him at this point in his life? Whatever she had come back for, it wasn't for him. Not for who he was now. For who he had been? But what he had been – what they had been – could not be reproduced. However you looked at it, she was too late.

He took his hand from the wall. He looked at the hand. Working in the garden had left its traces. He was still looking for the right pose. He wanted to come across as a man chatting to the postman – interested but at the same time somewhat distant, the way it goes when you chat to postmen.

People leave for a reason, that much is certain. And they come back for a reason. You don't just happen to stand on the doorstep after three years. If this was an impulse, then what was the rest of life?

He should simply ask her what she wanted from him. He considered saying: "Is it urgent? I need to put something in the oven."

She hadn't closed the front door. Hofmeester looked past her, towards the street.

"How did you get here?" he asked. He took a step forward, he passed her, he smelled her – a few more steps and he was outside. He looked to the left, he looked to the right. The street was empty. As if he had expected a lover politely waiting outside while she checked on things. A handsome man with blue eyes, youthful. The type who considers desire to be an inconvenience with which others bother him daily. He knew the type – it visited him in his dreams, it larded his life history – the other man who remained invisible but was nevertheless always there, every second of the day.

On the distant corner a child was playing with a tennis ball. No lover. No childhood sweetheart. An evening in early summer, like so many evenings. It promised to be hot. Hot, humid and close – good for sun worshippers. Hofmeester was not a sun worshipper.

"I came by taxi," she said.

He went back inside and closed the door. He picked up an advertising leaflet. What did she need? What was she going to demand? The children were too old.

They didn't belong to anyone anymore. They had boyfriends whom they talked about seriously and thought about even more seriously, boyfriends with whom they could imagine spending the rest of their lives. He had overheard talk of engagements, not even meant to be sarcastic, with rings and all. Marriage was on the offensive. It was an indestructible institution – no war could defeat it. Well, maybe the atom bomb could.

But the wife's eyes contradicted his reservations. She looked at him amicably, almost tenderly. She didn't look angry or aloof – maybe she hadn't come to demand anything. He couldn't pretend he didn't notice: she was emotional.

She saw her past, he suspected. And she thought: Jesus, did I live here all those years? Is this the man with whom I spent more than two decades – with interruptions, but still, was this my life? She saw something that was undeniably hers and that she could nevertheless not quite grasp.

This reunion made Hofmeester want to giggle, to laugh long and loud in order to release a tension he couldn't deal with. Uneasiness first leads to snickering, later to silence, even later to sex, and then the silence returns. The laugh that would overcome all, including the past, failed to come. Not even a smile appeared on his face.

Now that the mother of his daughters stood in front of him again after years of absence, he remembered Tirza's birth. Waiting in the hospital. There was no private room available. About ten other women had all decided to give birth that night. He had gone home early in the morning. He couldn't do it – he had fled from the blood and at home he had prepared the cradle, waiting for a call from the hospital.

“Did you come a long way?” he asked.

“From the station.”

For months the neighbourhood had been shocked by her departure. People couldn't get enough of it. They were liberal, they hated imperialism, but they wouldn't pass up an opportunity to be shocked. Pride made him stand up for her as much as possible when the gossip at the butcher, the grocer, or in the street

reached him. “It just wasn’t working,” he would say. “This is much better for the children.” Hofmeister pretended that everything had gone according to plan. He shrouded his wife’s disappearance in mild irony. When people asked him if it wasn’t hard on the girls, he smiled and replied: “Most of her clothes are still in the closet, so I imagine she’ll reappear in her children’s lives one of these days.”

But that reappearing hadn’t happened, despite the clothes – until that evening six days ago.

She still looked pretty good, he thought. Less make-up. More tanned, though, as if she regularly used a tanning bed.

“Is this a bad time?” She asked the question without any discernible sarcasm.

He looked at her suitcase again. Even that still looked pretty good after all those years.

“I’m cooking, but I wouldn’t say it’s a bad time. I mean, what’s a bad time?”

She took a step towards him, as if she wanted to embrace him. It turned into a handshake, a strong one.

“I was wondering how you were doing,” she said. “And how Tirza’s doing.” The mention of the name brought a small, sad smile to her face. And when he heard the name of his youngest daughter he cringed briefly, as if someone had whipped his back hard.

Tirza, how was Tirza doing?

That was the emotion he had seen. She had left, but apparently she missed something after all. A part of her life was missing. One day she stopped seeing her daughters grow up. All she knew of her youngest daughter’s adolescence was what she heard, and that wasn’t much.

And now that she had stood face to face with that daughter, she realized the consequences of her action.

His hand was released.

Hofmeister wiped the hand on his pants as discreetly as possible. Another’s sweat made him uncomfortable. It was too intimate. The less vulnerable the other

seemed, the easier it was for him to be a predator. If he had learned anything as a landlord, it was that the tenant must not become human, because humans weaken you. You give in and say you'll have this fixed, that fixed. A new bed? No problem. A new book case? Why not? Hofmeester rented out his top floor fully furnished, which enabled him to remove the tenant without too much legal fuss if need be. For that reason alone the tenant must not become human, because then sentiment would rise up like hiccups, and it would be hard to evict him unscrupulously. Weakness – he despised weakness. He hated weakness.

The wife's sweat was vulnerable sweat. That's why it had to be wiped off. He looked behind him, as if he expected to see Tirza standing there, but she wasn't. She was upstairs in her room, on the phone. Or she was in the kitchen, keeping quiet and eavesdropping, like an accomplished spy. Again he remembered the days, the hours before her birth. Strange that he remembered that birth so much more vividly than that of his older daughter. He even remembered the gynaecologist's face. Later he had brought the man a good bottle of wine worth at least thirty guilders, with Tirza on his arm. "Here she is," he said, and showing the man the rumped baby with its brown tufts of hair, like so many other babies. Tirza entered the world wrinkled and it took a long time for the wrinkles to disappear. The gynaecologist accepted the wine and wished the father good luck. Then he said, looking as if he was giving away a trade secret, "Difficult births often produce something beautiful, something very special."

"Things are going well," said Hofmeester. The dishcloth hung on his arm – in his left hand he held the leaflet. He folded it a few times and put it casually in his pocket.

"Things are going well," he repeated. "Tirza graduated. Two nines. Eights. One or two sevens. Nothing lower than seven. She's having a party next week."

He said it proudly, but when he was done he realized how absurd it was to have to tell Tirza's mother this. This was why the neighbourhood had been shocked by her, and probably by him. You're not supposed to become a stranger to your children. They can become strangers to you, but not the other way round.

Now that he was no longer holding a leaflet, he could pull at his lower lip as much as he wanted to. He did that a lot when there was something he didn't understand, something he couldn't figure out.

"That's great," she said. "Those nines. But I expected nothing less. What for?"

"What do you mean what for?"

"What were the nines for?"

"Latin, and history. Didn't you know? Didn't you hear anything – not a thing?"

Her ignorance surprised him, even annoyed him slightly. Someone who has decided to return, however temporarily, could have discreetly enquired about the latest developments concerning her daughters and husband. It must have been an impulse, this return, like so much in her life.

"Who would have told me? Ibi? I haven't talked to her in ages. She never calls."

He noticed that she was looking at the hand touching his lower lip. He knew this old nervous tic annoyed her, and he stopped.

She never calls. The wife felt that her children should call her, and not the other way around. It was all about her.

"Shall we go in?" she said, "If I'm not interrupting."

It was true – standing there in the small hallway was increasingly uncomfortable.

"Come in," he said. "I just put something in the oven. I mean... It's not in the oven anymore, but it was."

She looked at him. She had already grabbed the handle of the suitcase to roll it into the room, but now she let go and said, "I see what you mean. I see exactly what you mean. You are like, well, like always. You haven't changed."

Christians and those of other religions hadn't thought of that – that reunion with the dead in paradise could very well end up being a rather uncomfortable adventure. Polite conversation in heaven, a handshake that should be an embrace.

Without a word he helped her take off her coat – a light blue raincoat he didn't recognize. It wasn't cheap, so much was clear. She didn't like cheap things. He hung it with care. He was gradually calming down. Hofmeester had everything under control again. This was life. People disappeared. And sometimes they came back, one evening in early summer when you have just put a casserole in the oven – but they couldn't know that. If you looked back, the careful planning disappeared, impulses became apparent, coincidences came to the surface – everywhere you looked coincidence reigned.

Now that he was the epitome of peace and calm, she seemed to hesitate.

“Or is there someone?” she asked. “Do you have anyone?”

Hofmeester heard his youngest daughter coming from the kitchen. She had been eavesdropping, as he suspected. Curiosity is a sign of intelligence, but an intelligent child also means the parents must always be on their guard. With an intelligent child you never know who's pulling whose leg. Tirza gave her father a withering look and went upstairs. Past her mother, past her mother's light blue raincoat hanging so conspicuously on the coat rack.

“Do I have anyone?” asked Hofmeester after his daughter slammed her bedroom door. He had to laugh. “Do I have anyone? Not really, no. I live here with Tirza. Of course she's someone, but not in the way you mean.” Hofmeester was still laughing. He couldn't stop – he was embarrassed. “Come in,” he said when he was finally done laughing. He led the way to the living room. He paused at the couch, but she didn't sit down. She turned around, as if she wanted to have a good look at everything. As if there was someone else after all, a stranger, in this room that she had inhabited for so long, where she had sat in the evenings, with him – alone and with guests, where she had thrown parties, where she had placed cots and playpens, where her daughters had crawled on the floor, where she had painted still lifes every now and then.

“It hasn't changed much,” she said. “Neither have you, like I said. Unchanged really. Did you have the place painted?”

“The book case is new, as you can tell. So is that chair there. Tirza chose it. Some things have changed.” He ignored her question on purpose. If you pretend not to hear a question, you can’t slip up. As a landlord he didn’t hear most questions. Absentmindedness was an excuse that could serve him for years to come.

She didn’t look at the chair Tirza had chosen, or at the book case. She stood right in front of him – she examined Hofmeester. Like a painting in a museum that you only know from postcards and from catalogues, and now that you stand in front of the original, you try to understand why it’s a tad disappointing. Not much, just a tad.

“You haven’t had the place painted,” she said after a few seconds. “I can tell – everything’s slowly yellowing. You’re not maintaining it properly, indoors. You have to maintain a house on the inside, too. But you have taken good care of yourself.”

She sounded satisfied but surprised at the same time. What did she expect? An alcoholic? A patient? Trembling hands, ill-fitting dentures? A wreck with moments of lucidity who, in those lucid moments had nothing better to do than to have everything painted, have the wood floors varnished and have the drains replaced?

His being able to manage without her seemed to have surprised her, but it was also a disappointment, just as the lack of fresh paint on the walls disappointed her.

The similarity between the tenant and the wife was more than coincidental. Both could always find a ceiling that had to be painted. They were always stumbling upon something in the house that needed replacing. They had no concept of money. They hadn’t a clue what handymen asked nowadays for an hour of odd-jobbing. There was always some complaint or other. In the wife’s case the complaint was also camouflaged as love.

She took a step back. “Are you happy to see me?” she asked.

The question took him by surprise. The question overpowered him.

“Happy,” said Hofmeester. He looked at his watch. “Yes, I’m happy, but I’m also cooking. If I’d known you were coming I would have made more. You could’ve called – the number is still the same. But...” He had to pause for a moment, not out of emotion, but because he had to think what he wanted to say exactly. “It’s good to see you. You are curious, aren’t you? I am.”

It surprised Hofmeester that the words he had expected to say upon seeing this woman again didn’t pass his lips – they didn’t even occur to him. Now that he could finally say them, he had forgotten them. He wanted to come across as charming, strong. The reed was not only not broken, it wasn’t even bent.

“Curious about what?”

“About you,” he said. “How you’re doing. What you’re doing. How you’re living. What happened to you.”

“How I’m living? Then why did you never call, in three years? I would have told you, you know, in detail. I wouldn’t have kept it a secret, if you had taken the trouble to call.”

That was typical – she disappeared and she expected people to chase her to find out about her welfare and to ask if there was anything she needed.

“It didn’t seem like a good idea,” said Hofmeester, “to call you. I didn’t want to impose. If you’re hungry I can fry you an egg. Anyway, I didn’t have your new number.”

“I haven’t come here to eat,” she said, sitting down on the couch where she had sat for years. Hofmeester had had it reupholstered. Tirza had picked out the leather. He picked out a lot with Tirza.

“Something other than an egg maybe?”

“Jörgen, I’m not hungry.” She didn’t just say it, she emphasized it.

“You don’t have to be hungry to eat. I’m making my casserole. It’s famous. Tirza’s friends love it. We don’t eat because we’re hungry – we eat because it’s dinner time.” He said it like a teacher trying to recommend a book he knows the students will hate.

That tone of voice should be familiar to her, the tone of the corrector, the tone of someone who has arranged his life to catch others making mistakes.

“Not me,” she said. “I no longer eat because it’s time to eat. I no longer obey those stupid little rules. I eat because I feel like it. I didn’t come here for your casserole.”

She lit a cigarette. Her handbag was new. A tad too trendy and young for her age, with all sorts of embellishments. Hofmeister thought of Tirza’s girlfriends’ handbags. Early in the morning, after parties, they would stand around the kitchen with their bags covered in beads, pieces of glass – anything could pass for embellishments nowadays. Hofmeister would excuse himself if he entered the kitchen in his pajamas to find Tirza there with her girlfriends, in a state of exuberance, smelling of smoke and sometimes of spoiled food. He would quickly pour himself a glass of milk or grab an apple from the fruit bowl and flee back to his bedroom, or – if the weather was fine in the summer – he would go to the shed, where he would sit beside the rake and the electric saw until the girls went to bed or back home. Tirza was popular. Occasionally he has met strange boys in the bathroom, boys he didn’t know, who had not been introduced to him, but who had stayed the night. Boys whom Hofmeister asked: “Would you like a towel?” because Tirza would be fast asleep, and once she was asleep she was out like a light. The boys always woke up before his daughter. They didn’t smell too good, those types he met from time to time in the bathroom. That’s what those boys had in common with Tirza, their bad smell. But now she had a regular boyfriend and Hofmeister hadn’t been able to determine yet whether he smelled or not. He feared the worst.

“You’re smoking again,” he said, still looking at her bag.

He sounded worried and that irritated him. What he said was too personal. As if her cigarettes were any of his business! Her lungs were her affair. Her whole body was her affair. Her body was no longer his responsibility.

“Does it bother you?”

“No, not really,” he said. “I’ll ask Tirza to bring you an ashtray. I put the ashtrays away.”

He turned to the hallway and called: “Tirza, would you bring Mama an ashtray?”

Hofmeester waited, but Tirza didn’t respond. She was probably on the phone in her room. A true passion never lets you go. She discussed everything with her girlfriends, in detail. She had told him so once, during dinner. “Me as well?” he had asked. “Do you talk about me?” “Of course,” she had answered. “You’re my father. Why wouldn’t I talk about you?”

The wife smoked on, stubbornly.

“Tirza,” Hofmeester called a little louder, “an ashtray for your mother. Please.”

He looked at the lengthening cylinder of ash that would soon fall. He couldn’t keep his eyes off it – he seemed hypnotized. He said: “She’s always very helpful. Not like before. Even while she was studying for her finals she insisted on helping me.”

Hofmeester was talking as in a dream, chatting away, as if talking more to himself than to her, as if no one else was in the room. As if he were practising what he would say once the others finally arrived.

Tirza didn’t show up so he went to the kitchen himself to look for an ashtray. Where were they? No one smoked anymore in this household. Hofmeester rarely had visitors. The cleaning lady didn’t smoke either. She would drink a little something now and then, but she didn’t smoke. And if Tirza’s girlfriends and boys smoked – which they hardly ever did – they went to the garden. Or they hung out of the window. Tirza liked boys, not smoke.

He couldn’t find an ashtray. Hofmeester had packed them away, not expecting to ever need one again. So he grabbed a saucer. It wasn’t good form, but it would have to do for now. Good form – that was what morality came down to for Hofmeester. If there was one thing he could say for himself, it was that he had good form.

When he came back to the room he saw the ash in the wife's left hand. He gave her the saucer and asked if she needed a damp cloth.

"My hands are fireproof," she said, and laughed. Just like she used to. People hardly change. They find a new environment for their obsessions. They get more wrinkles, they lose teeth, bones get broken, organs are replaced by machines, but they don't change.

When she stopped laughing she said, "If you like, if you want me to, and I know you want me to, I'll join you for a little bite, but don't go out of your way. Just give me what's left. Don't make a fuss."

Hofmeister shifted a vase of roses on the dining table. Tirza had received the flowers a few days earlier. Thus he made room for the wife who would join them for a bite. He wondered if the suddenly reappearing wife had had a drink in some nearby café to muster up courage before coming to her old house, with her suitcase.

"Cooking is not making a fuss," he said softly. "It's part of it. I have a family. I cook. It's my job."

The table was already set for two. He always set the table long before dinner was ready. Sometimes he did it the minute he came home from work, because he couldn't wait for Tirza and him to be sitting at the table, because that moment would restore the balance that always threatened to be lost. Tirza and he at the table, eating. The semblance of a family, and more than that, an alliance – a sacred alliance.

He took a plate from a sideboard. He remembered his task. The casserole, the oven – there was cooking to be done. He stood there uneasily, plate in hand, as if he wasn't sure he could leave the visitor alone. Should she be invited to join him in the kitchen? To talk about trifles from a distant past? How did you say something like that? "Do you want to come through with me to the kitchen for a minute?" Then he put the plate on the table. It was now set for a third person. The wife. Tirza's mother.

It had all started, once, with her joining him for a bite to eat. The Hofmeister family had commenced with a lamb chop. Jörgen had cooked for the woman who would later turn out to be the wife. She had liked the man better than the lamb chop. He thought of the suitcase in the hallway. The first time she came to dinner she had brought a home-made cake.

“She’s changed,” said the wife, looking at a painting on the wall. She had hung it there herself. She had painted it herself as well, and Hofmeister couldn’t be bothered to remove it, although Tirza had asked a few times: “Do we have to look at that fruit bowl for the rest of our lives? Is that absolutely necessary?”

“Who? Tirza?”

The dishcloth was still hanging from his arm.

“Yes, Tirza. She’s beautiful.”

“She’s a woman now,” said Hofmeister. But the moment he said it, he wished he hadn’t. A woman? What was a woman? Okay, she had grown breasts and something like hips. But when were you a woman? What made him a man? The sex organ dangling between his legs?

He didn’t know what to say about Tirza, or what he wanted to say about her. So he said: “She was always beautiful. She was wrinkled as a baby, but all babies are. Ibi was less wrinkled – she had other flaws. Do you want something to drink?”

She shook her head. “I’ll get it myself. Right now I’m completely satisfied.”

He stared at her. The satisfied woman who had never been satisfied in the past, despite all the still lifes she had painted. But now she was satisfied. The happy ending was hidden somewhere in the story, he just hadn’t been there.

Hofmeister went to the kitchen – she would probably entertain herself in the living room. He placed the dish back in the oven. Then he opened a bottle of white wine and set the egg timer for thirty minutes. Hofmeister couldn’t cook without an egg timer. Then he put the cookbook back on the stack of other cookbooks.

He stood near the oven. His hands went over the counter as if he were a blind man reading braille. Once dinner was served something was sure to come to him to say to the visitor. “Have you been travelling much?” Or, “Is your mother still alive?” Her mother had been seriously ill when she left him.

He thought about his work, about Tirza and the trip she was going to take. Malaria was common in Botswana, he’d read.

The egg timer went off and with undeniable love he took the casserole through to the living room. The wife was reclined on the couch. She had taken off her shoes. Her eyes were closed. It smelled of cigarette smoke.

“I’ll get you some cutlery,” he said, putting the food on the table.

She didn’t move. She lay stretched out and satisfied, as if she had never left. As if she had only gone out for some currant buns and was delayed along the way. A traffic jam, no more. Her three-year absence had been no more than a traffic jam of human flesh.

In the hallway he called: “Tirza, dinner!” He got the cutlery and a glass for the guest and the bottle of wine from the kitchen.

“Where do you want me?” asked the wife as he poured the wine. All the glasses were equally full. Every detail counted. He relished his role – the waiter, the butler.

She got up slowly from the couch. She walked barefoot to the table.

“Here, at the head,” said Hofmeister. “That’s where visitors always sit. Nice shoes. Italian?”

“French.”

She sat down. Hofmeister served the food. Again he called, louder this time: “Tirza, dinner!”

Dinner was served but no one ate. They were waiting for the child.

“A present,” said the wife, her fork already in her hand. The ring finger of her left hand held a piece of jewellery he didn’t recognize.

“What?”

“The shoes. A present.”

“How nice. You still have about ten pairs of shoes here. Did you know that? I wanted to send them to you, but I didn’t know where.”

He took a piece of bread from the bread basket that had been on the table for several hours already.

“I assumed you would have given them away.”

The bread was dry.

“Give them to whom? Your shoes, you mean?”

“Yes, my shoes. I assumed you’d get rid of them. That you’d get rid of all my things. That’s what I assumed. That’s not so strange, is it? I bought everything new.”

“Who has your size? I don’t know anyone your size. You have a difficult size. Tirza, dinner! Everything is exactly like you left it in the closet. You could’ve moved right back in.”

She looked at him searchingly, as if she wanted to know if he was joking.

“My feet are jewels, I’m told,” said the wife after a brief silence. She laughed amicably. She was trying, that much was clear. But so was he. That was what had become of them: two people trying. Who knows, maybe that’s what they had always been.

“Have you seen them? I’ve kept my jewels well.”

She shifted a little and stretched her feet out alongside the table. The nails were painted pink. The tips of the toes reached Hofmeister’s upper leg.

He stiffened.

With the piece of dry bread in his hand he looked at his wife’s bare feet and bare shins, the toes touching his trousers. Then he put the piece of bread in his mouth and started chewing.

“Don’t you have anything to say, after all these years?”

“Anything to say?”

“Something nice. Are you happy to see me?”

“About your feet, you mean? Something nice?” The bread was very dry, but he didn’t want to get up to toast it.

“You know how important certain things are to me. You could say something cordial, after all this time. You have feelings, don’t you?” She wriggled her toes a few times and Hofmeester glanced at her feet again.

Cordiality. So that’s what’s expected when your wife shows up on your doorstep after three years.

“Your feet haven’t changed,” he said.

“Is that all?”

“I think so.”

“They’re jewels, Jörgen, my feet. I’ve been told often. Many have looked at them.”

Then she put her legs back under the table.

Hofmeester stared at the flowers. It was an expensive bouquet, maybe thirty euros worth. Who had given them to Tirza? She hadn’t mentioned a name. She seldom mentioned boys’ names. At the table they talked about everyday matters – the news, the food, the weather, her girlfriends, school exams. Every now and then her trip around the world would come up. But they avoided political discussions. They had different opinions about Africa.

“I think...” Hofmeester began. Since he didn’t really know what he thought, he broke off. At that moment he heard Tirza come down the stairs and decided it wasn’t necessary to finish the sentence. He would leave it to Tirza to say something nice and cordial, if something cordial absolutely had to be said, which was questionable, but if it was necessary, then she could do it.

“Yuck, it stinks in here,” Tirza cried. She was wearing a white blouse – she had changed. She never changed for dinner, unless there were guests. And if there had been guests these past years, they had been Tirza’s guests. Only the cleaning lady from Ghana came for Hofmeester, but she couldn’t really be called a guest.

The daughter sat down. Hofmeester reached for his glass and said: “Let’s drink, Tirza, to your mother’s unexpected visit. Let’s drink to us all, almost all, being here together as a ... well, as a family. And that we are in good health.”

The daughter had already lifted her glass, but she put it back down and said: “I’m not drinking to that. And it stinks here, Papa, don’t you smell it? She’s been puffing away in here. We don’t allow smoking.” Tirza, too, could talk like a teacher when she wanted to. The student counsellor once said: “She’s a born leader, she takes initiative. She’s always up ahead and drags the others along with her.”

There was a silence. Nervously Hofmeester took another bite of dry bread.

“Let’s drink...” he began.

“No,” said Tirza. “I’m not doing this. This is bullshit.”

She mashed her fork roughly in her father’s casserole.

“Very well,” said Hofmeester. “To life then. To your good grades, okay Tirza? To your final exam. To your future. To you.” Before anyone could object, Hofmeester quickly took the first gulp. The wine wasn’t chilled enough, but it would have to do. A lot would have to do on an evening like this.

Hofmeester’s casseroles had been better, but as long as they were eating, everything was all right. It was under control – the evening, the company, the family.

After a few bites the wife took her sunglasses from her head and asked: “Well Tirza, how are you doing? I was telling your father how good-looking you’ve become.”

Tirza picked a string of cheese from her knife. The dish contained cheese – it was a recipe from a French cookbook. Tirza mumbled: “As if you care.”

“I care,” said the wife. “I care a lot. I’ve thought of you a lot. You’ve really become quite good-looking.”

“Become?”

“Even more good-looking than you already were. You were always good-looking, but now you’ve – how shall I say – blossomed.”

And Tirza answered: “Oh, funny.” She ate unwillingly, like a child, playing with her food. Ostentatiously reluctant.

“Funny?” asked the wife. “What’s so funny about that?”

“Funny that you remember that I was good-looking before. Funny that you care how I’m doing. Because I haven’t noticed too much of that these past years. Nothing, really.”

After this they ate in silence. But nervousness had taken hold of Hofmeister again, even more so than earlier, standing in the hallway, looking at his wife’s suitcase. So he crammed a few more pieces of dry bread in his mouth. He stuffed the entire contents of the bread basket in his mouth. He had to finish it – throwing it away would be wasteful.

When her plate was almost empty, the wife asked: “What kind of wine is this?”

“South African,” said Hofmeister. “Tirza and I have discovered the South African wines.”

“Discovered?” She grinned. “How do you mean, discovered? What exactly have you discovered about them?”

“The wine shop around the corner organizes wine tastings on Saturday afternoons. Tirza and I sometimes attend them, don’t we, Tirza?”

Tirza’s mother studied the label and said: “Wow, you’re like two little turtle doves – going to the wine tasting together on Saturday afternoon. How romantic. Who’d have thought that you’d be getting along so well?”

“Papa,” said Tirza.

But the father pretended he didn’t hear. He said: “Tirza is very interested in South Africa – in the whole region. Actually, Tirza is interested in all of Africa. Isn’t that right? In all of Africa? Tirza would love to go by bus and train from the southern-most tip of South Africa to Morocco, but I won’t allow it. Besides, there’s virtually no public transport there, any way. Public transport in Cameroon, what could that possibly be? Death. I read somewhere that they don’t even have

hearses there – they have to take the dead to the cemetery by bus. Under their arm.”

He laughed. The idea that you had to take your dead relatives under your arm in the bus to the cemetery made death a lot less threatening. If you pretended that nothing much was wrong, then nothing much was wrong. He got kicked against his shin. That was a sign for him to collect the crumbs from the bread basket and put them in his mouth. Food was mercy.

“So you want to travel across Africa by public transport?”

Tirza’s mother was trying, but she wasn’t succeeding. She had the best intentions, always did, but she was completely self-absorbed.

Tirza didn’t answer. She kicked her father’s shin again. Maybe that was her answer.

“I told her,” said Hofmeester, “that public transport in Africa...” Another kick.

“Tirza,” said Hofmeester after his mouth was empty, “I can’t help this. I really can’t help this for once.”

Tirza just shook her head. She continued to shake her head, like a toddler who’s up past her bedtime and who’s become tired and cranky.

“It’s not about whether you can help this, Papa,” she said, “it’s about the fact that I can’t stand it. I can’t stand this. Would you stop? Please stop this.”

She emphasized each syllable.

Hofmeester looked at her. Half her food lay untouched on her plate. She had merely played with the other half. He understood little about people – sometimes even his own children seemed a mystery to him. Familiar, but strange. Like the boys Hofmeester met from time to time in the bathroom – they were also strange and yet familiar. As if they had been waiting for him in the bathroom the entire night, waiting for him and a towel. His daughter’s friends, for whom he was nothing more than a glorified extra, even though – he had to stop lying to himself – he would like to be something more than that.

“Stop what?”

“Stop being like this. Stop this conversation. This ridiculous conversation. You have to stop being different to me than usual. Stop this acting, Papa. Just because that woman’s here at the table.”

Her voice got sharper when she said ‘that woman’ – she was almost shouting.

“Am I behaving differently?” asked Hofmeester. He tried to watch his wife and his daughter at the same time, as if they would attack each other if he lost sight of them.

“Am I talking differently? Am I eating differently? Or have I suddenly stopped slurping?” He laughed at his joke, but he was the only one.

“You don’t slurp, but yes, you’re talking differently than usual, Papa. Usually I do most of the talking and you simply nod or you ask: ‘What does her father do?’ And then we do the dishes. And then you also hardly say anything. You listen to what I say. And that’s fine. Sometimes I ask: ‘What have you done today?’ And then you say: ‘Not much.’ That’s fine with me. That’s who you are. That’s all you can do. And that’s still a whole lot more than she does. But this conversation, this completely ridiculous conversation – I can’t stand it.”

Hofmeester felt the oven dish. It was still warm.

“Sometimes I talk to you, Tirza. You know I do, you know perfectly well. And I read to you from the newspaper. The funny parts. You know that.”

“It doesn’t matter, Papa. You’re sweet in your own way. In your own way you’re very sweet. And that you read me the funny parts from the newspaper while we eat – I like that too. They aren’t always that funny to me, but okay. You think they’re funny and that’s the most important thing. But can I ask you something – now that we’re talking anyway, now that we’re not reading the funny parts from the newspaper – can I ask you something?”

“Yes, of course,” said Hofmeester. “Anything, Tirza. Anything, whatever you want.”

“Why haven’t you kicked that woman out of the house yet?”

For an instant he felt the urge to pull at his lower lip, but he suppressed it. Hofmeester poured more wine, first for Tirza, then for the wife, and then for

himself. He tried to exchange a knowing glance with the wife, but she smiled faintly, not paying much attention to him. So he said: “You don’t kick women out of the house, Tirza, and especially not women with whom you have fathered two children. That woman is your mother. That’s why I let her in instead of kicking her out. That’s a good reason, it seems to me. She’s your mother. She was. She always will be.”

Tirza’s mother pulled a face as if a different mother was being discussed here. A different mother with a different child.

“With difficulty,” she said, playing with her sunglasses, “with difficulty, Jörgen, did you father two children. Oh, you could talk – talk, talk, talk. Sometimes it was like an erotic radio play in our bed. But in order to make children you have to do something, Jörgen. Not just do something, do *it*. You have to stick your tool in the right hole.”

Hofmeister’s thoughts caught for a moment on that erotic radio play. He had considered himself to be a quiet, discreet man, but apparently others had seen him differently.

“She left us in the lurch,” said Tirza, pointing her fork at the woman who’d shown Hofmeister her feet not long before. Some food still stuck to the fork and it fell on to the table cloth. “Maybe she had a reason to leave you in the lurch, Papa – she probably had all sorts of good reasons – but she had no reason, really no reason to leave me in the lurch.” Her voice broke. Hofmeister felt panic rising, a dreadful panic.

“Don’t point with your fork, Tirza,” said the father. “Don’t. It can cause accidents.”

He ran his hand over his hair briefly as if that would help, as if that could push the conversation in another, innocent direction. The summers that used to be better. School. Africa if need be. Public transport anywhere in the world.

Tirza’s voice was getting louder. Hofmeister knew what that meant. There would be crying. Tears – he couldn’t stand them. His own weakness nauseated him. His children’s weakness infuriated him.

He glanced at the wife, who was calmly drinking her wine, still sitting there as if none of this had anything to do with her. He had to fix this, and soon – no one else would. No one else could.

“I wouldn’t put it like that,” said Hofmeester. “She didn’t leave us in the lurch. She practised self-fulfillment.”

The wife sighed. She put down her knife and fork. “It’s safe to say I couldn’t stand being with you, Jörgen. Tirza knows that as well as I do – the whole neighbourhood knows it. You don’t have to call that self-fulfillment. You and your stupid euphemisms. It wasn’t self-fulfillment. I couldn’t stand it here. No one could have. No one normal.”

“Very well,” said Hofmeester, “Self-fulfillment. Let’s leave it at that for now. Isn’t that a civil compromise? Sometimes self-fulfillment is the same as not standing something. There really isn’t that much difference between the two.”

“Papa,” cried Tirza, “don’t be ridiculous. Don’t let her treat you this way.”

“I want to eat in peace, Tirza,” cried Hofmeester. “That’s all I want – to eat in peace. I have made this casserole in peace. I want to eat it in peace. And I will, like I have for three years.”

The daughter slammed her left hand on the table. A fork fell to the ground. “I won’t sit at the table with that woman,” she cried. “I don’t ever want to see that woman again, ever.”

Tirza got up. “I hate you,” she shouted. “You shouldn’t have come here. You should never have come back here. I wish you were dead.”

With that she ran upstairs.

Hofmeester wiped his mouth a few times, moved the bottle of wine a few inches and asked: “Would you like dessert?”

The wife stared in her glass and removed a piece of cork that had ended up there. “She’s always been like that,” she said calmly.

“There’s some left from yesterday,” he said. “I made tiramisu. I always make it on Wednesday. I can offer you that. Or fruit?”

“She can’t forgive.”

“I can make a fruit salad.”

“She can’t forgive herself. Can you forgive yourself, Jörgen, can you?” She put the sunglasses back on, like a head band.

“Fruit salad? Shall I make that for you? It would be done in a jiffy.”

The wife sighed.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s talk about something else. If that’s what you want.

How is the window-cleaner?”

“Which window-cleaner?”

“The man who did the windows here once a month, that old man. How is he?”

“Oh, him,” said Hofmeister. “He’s dead.”

He remained in his seat and pulled at his lower lip.

“You’ve learned to cook,” said the wife. “That has to be said.”

“Thank you,” said Hofmeister.

He got up and headed upstairs to his youngest daughter’s room. But he changed his mind halfway, stood there for a moment and came back to the living room. He sat at the table again.

The wife was still there as well. Not like a guest, but like someone who was at home here. Which she was, strictly speaking. She had never officially changed her address. The wife’s election cards still came here and Hofmeister always placed them on the small cabinet in the hallway, until the elections were over and he concluded with some melancholy that again his wife hadn’t used her right to vote.

“Does she have a boyfriend?”

“Tirza?”

“Tirza, yes. Of course, who else?”

“Sometimes I meet boys in the bathroom.”

“In the bathroom?”

“In the bathroom, that’s where they often hang out.”

“What do they do there?”

“What people do in the bathroom. They shower, I suppose. They got to the lavatory. I don’t ask: ‘What are you doing here?’ I’m not that inhospitable. This is her house, it’s also Tirza’s house.”

The wife sighed deeply and emptied her glass. “And what do you say to them?”

“I ask them,” said Hofmeester, “although this might surprise you: ‘Would you like a clean towel?’ That’s what I ask them. But maybe you have another suggestion? Maybe you have a better idea. Maybe I should ask them: ‘Do you feel like a glass of champagne, young friend? Did you have a good fuck? With a condom, one hopes, but if not, it’s no big deal.’ You would have handled it differently, I know. You were always jealous of your daughters’ boyfriends. But I simply ask: ‘Would you like a clean towel?’ And nothing more.”

“Stop it,” she cried.

It was silent for a moment and then Hofmeester said: “We’re shouting at each other.”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s stupid. We’re doing it again, and we no longer have any reason to shout at each other. We really don’t have a single reason anymore.”

She walked to the couch, got cigarettes from her handbag, lit one and came back to the table.

“Are those sunglasses French as well?” Hofmeester indicated the sunglasses with the ridiculously large lenses she was still wearing like a kind of head band.

“Italian. The shoes are from France and the glasses are from Italy.”

Now the smoke was bothering him too, but he said nothing.

“Did you set her up against me?” she asked. “Or did that just happen?”

“It just happened,” said Hofmeester. “I didn’t have to do a thing.”