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Meanwhile

(Tussentijds)

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Translated by Haico Kaashoek

[The first half of the book, ~18,400 Dutch words]

He shouldn’t be here.

But he was, and we called him Mats. We walked downtown and it was as if all the walls had been painted a slightly different shade, all the chairs and tables had been placed somewhere else. A complete city, shifted ten centimeters. At the entrance of a café a man stepped aside courteously, babies first, he said, and whether he could have a peek at the new life sleeping against my chest, a weight by now so familiar I’d have fallen over backward if suddenly alone again. That must be a very young one, the man said, before looking up at us, and for a few seconds we both stammered, because emotionally an hour and a half seemed just as plausible to us as three weeks.

He learned to walk, he learned to talk. He flicked through his daily expanding vocabulary like a box of index cards, biting at the right word until he’d got it. We waited patiently, another bite on the spoon. He watched the world and the washing machine turn. Wanted to listen to a song on repeat. Raised a finger and said: one. Kicked a ball and turned out to be left-footed.

After a shower Tess would sometimes watch him careen toward his bedroom in his poncho towel, a trail of footprints left behind him, and say, *we made him, Robin*, because every once in a while the realization really hit her, and she didn’t know what to do with that overwhelming fact.

I would sit with him during the hottest nights, when he just couldn’t get to sleep under our flat roof. He would hide under a tree and under his mom from sudden downpours.

A flood was coming and we’d pushed new life onto the water, a Moses in the wrong biblical story.

I have everything. And yet: at the exact moment the hardwood benches of Utrecht Central Station begin sliding from view, I'm sure I forgot something. For a split second I'm convinced I had the wrong platform or my bag is still outside, in an attempt to resist the irreversible.

Standing still, everything had still been possible.

I lift the crammed backpack onto my lap, first to assure my hands too that I haven't forgotten anything and then, as we approach top speed, to wriggle her book out along the quilted back. My hands caress the matte hardcover, as though to summon her, before carefully opening it.

Six hours and thirty-six minutes lie between us, nearly seven-hundred kilometers. This is her distress call, her threat, so urgently in need of answering that I'm on my way unannounced. Maybe I'm already too late.

They're twelve panoramic prints, in pencil, chalk, charcoal and paint, spread across twenty-four unnumbered pages of rough, recycled one-hundred-and-sixty-gram paper. I remember how excited she'd been when emailed the printing plans, as if the weight of the paper highlighted how good her work had become.

She drew mostly in the guest bedroom, for hours, in the evenings too. I would peek inside the next morning while she was still asleep and see the tilted tabletop where she'd been standing, the large sheet of paper fastened to it with a wide clamp, the pencil shavings saved up in a lead-crystal whiskey glass on the windowsill and her drawing tools on the stool in the corner, where not all that long before, in a different kind of daydreaming, she'd thought up the dresser.

It's hot out and getting hotter. The last of the passengers who boarded in Utrecht are searching for their seats. I locate the print in the middle of the book, and take the paper between my taut, involuntarily stretching and bending fingers. They are muscle spasms that work their way up into my shoulders and neck. The radiating pain will probably give me a headache before Arnhem. It's a tic I have, and there are only two ways of counteracting it: I can try with all my attention and willpower not to do it, this repetitive muscular stretching,

which kind of amounts to the opposite of mindfulness, or I can distract my thoughts enough for my body and mind to forget it for a minute.

Look—she's recognizable in every detail. The true-to-nature colors, the pencil strokes intentionally drawn just outside the lines. It's impossible for your eyes to snag on a corner; everything is rounded, filed down. Only now for the first time do I experience, as the sun climbs even higher and we cross the Utrecht Hill Ridge, what I've heard others say about her work: it doesn't matter where you might try to look, your gaze naturally drifts to the facial expressions. Even in a drawing like this. The print is a bird's eye view, extensive as a map, with some forest covering the entire left page and growing past the fold, mushroom trail signs in clearings, hikers with sensible shoes, a couple with a stroller, a group of animals in a circle as though one has just asked who will take notes, a partly overgrown wooden railroad, and deep in the top corner, next to my right thumb, a little impromptu festival is underway, a tiny man with a beard playing a grand piano and ten to fifteen people listening on wooden planks. It's April in the drawing, maybe May, spring is in the air.

She likes putting personal references in her work. We can be found on every page, I'm always to her left and she's always to my right, and always viewed from behind, as though in the next frame we'll look back one final time before walking off the page.

I recognize us on the planks near the forest. On one of the first prints I spot us standing under a streetlamp in the middle of the night. We've known each other for a couple of weeks and have just been swept outside by the staff at Café Olivier. In another one, we're sitting on a bench at the end of a tidy backyard that isn't ours. I flip forward and there I am again, in one of the last drawings, next to an okra-yellow hatchback, the open trunk allowing the first light of that Friday morning to fall on our freshly loaded weekend bags. She's getting in.

I don't daydream much, and in any case not like she does. I extrapolate reality at most. But a long time ago this had been an equally simple and attractive picture of the future I'd shared with her: to capture life in a few cubic meters, to preserve it *there* and to reduce everything else to nothing. No one else faced with this book will know that, but I do, and she too.

I keep looking, as though I can see *her*—learn to understand more about her.

I'll be able to think in the train, she said when I brought her to the station early that morning.

The shrill squeal of gates sounded in the pale-white hall, the occasional traveler with a quickened gait, the merry-go-round of announcements that kept turning even when there

weren’t any broken overhead wires or trees blown over, as though uncomfortable silences had to be filled there. The international train was already at the platform, its nose sharper and more worldly than that of the Sprinter waiting on the other side on a shuttle run toward Tiel. The sun was only just peeking under the roof now.

I noticed her green-brown eyes again. Those eyes she improvised her way through life with, forever curious and playing the future by ear.

How long had I not seen her? Really *seen* her? It felt like it had been at least a year since I’d looked up from my plate while having breakfast opposite each other. And when had I last looked at her in bed? Before, yes, I would look at her then, and she at me, as I came inside her. It was an intimacy that, looking back, felt *performed.* Young lovers playing the part.

She came closer and embraced me. With her nose in my neck and her hands on my shoulder blades she said: I’ll be able to think in the train.

About what, I didn’t ask.

I waited until the train was out of sight and drove home. With my shoulder I pushed open the front door, swollen shut from the heat, of our upstairs apartment in Tuinwijk. On the stairs was still a letter, popped through the mail slot by the delivery man yesterday: something was waiting for us at the supermarket pick-up point.

I returned home with a heavy cardboard box the size of a footrest. Her name was on it, and from the sender’s address I gathered it was from her German publisher.

At home I set the box on the dinner table. I cut the boxing tape along the top with a kitchen knife. Only then did I wonder whether I should have waited until she was back. Was this a celebratory moment? Her first illustrated book. I’d never seen her work harder or more intensely on anything else. It would be published in Germany and the Netherlands at the same time; the Germans had sent their twenty author’s copies just a little sooner.

Each book was packed in thin, tightly wrapped plastic. I grabbed one from the box, weighed it in my hands, peeled off the plastic skin and opened it to a couple of random pages. I slammed it shut and started, as I should’ve, at the front.

I checked and knew it was no coincidence. I leafed through, faster and faster, until the final drawing. My hands unsteady, I slammed it shut again, under the brief illusion I could still cover it up, could still feign I hadn’t seen it.

But I knew I had to go to her.

Arnhem comes into view. There, the train will shake off the last national passengers and I'll still be underway for more than six hours. I grab my cell phone and type a message: *I'm right behind you.*

No—the cursor swallows it back up. She'd want to know why, and I can't explain it over the phone. A look at the top left corner of the screen. Gone 11:30 already.

Mats is standing in white-green Velcro shoes on the seat opposite me as we leave Arnhem. He pushes his soft, round nose flat against the window, blows a light mist onto it, and while I'd rather he didn't, as there are undoubtedly all kinds of bacteria on that glass, suddenly I'm completely happy, because my *son* is here, a life started a little more than a two years ago and there's no other outcome possible.

It could easily not have happened. The first time Tess and I were in the same space, it escaped us both. Only later, when we were together, did we reach the conclusion that during the final hours of 2008 she must have been at my house. I was living with two other students from the same program on the Smaragdplein, in a post-war, single-family house without central heating. One of my housemates counted her among his friend group and had invited her, as he did about ten others, who in turn each brought people they knew. I kept my contribution to three of my best friends, guys I'd known since high school and with whom I organized monthly pub quizzes in student bars, but all together there were way too many of us for our small living room.

In the years after, that New Year's Eve would come up a lot. It became a story to tell others, or once in a while each other, and then she in particular would often start about the moments life tries to sell you alternative courses of events at the display counter, different ways things might have gone but that you also had to pay close attention to for just as easily staying blind to them, since I had been sitting on the wide windowsill beside the ticking radiator, next to one of my childhood friends who'd put on M83's *Saturdays = Youth*. It was through that album that we'd become interested in ambient music and it was that night that we'd started making plans for an ambitious pub quiz, I would come up with the questions and he would host, we'd forgotten the rest of room, where she was too, sitting on the beige

loveseat from Ikea, and at twelve o'clock everyone kissed everyone, so she me and I her, too, that must have happened, and then she biked off to another party and I didn't.

I pull out two passports from an inside pocket in the backpack. The next station will be in Germany. The chance is small that someone will ask for them, but I want to be prepared. I open the newer booklet, still barely damaged, and look at the picture.

He exists now. He is here.

Because we crossed paths *again*, Tess and I, several weeks after that New Year's Eve. It was 17 January 2009 and along with almost twenty-five hundred other people we'd formed a human chain through Amelisweerd, an estate on the east side of Utrecht, to demonstrate against new plans for a highway through the three-hundred-hectare nature reserve, with its trails, pollarded willows leaning over the winding river and the forty- or fifty-meter-high beech trees that were there when the ground still belonged to Napoleon. The protest chain ran along the envisaged course, across land that was still marshy and green, with a view of the farms and defense works of the New Dutch Waterline. Calm, almost resigned, we made our way through the light mist. A helicopter flew over, whisps of the sound of a brass band blew toward us—and there she was, her fingers folded along mine. She held my hand until there was no longer a difference in temperature.

On my left: my dad, who saw himself forced for the umpteenth time to stand up for what he called "Utrecht's backyard." Every couple of minutes he was clapped between his shoulders by an old acquaintance, they came by one by one, their beards now trimmed and eyelids droopier, and they filled in one another's memories of the autumn of 1982, when a motley crew of highly educated Utrechters, climate activists, squatters, emissaries of the anti-nuclear-weapons movement and second-wave feminists had occupied this forest for a week.

At the time, it was the government's intention to cut a strip fifty-five meters wide to make space for national highway 27. The oaks, maples, beeches, elms, poplars, chestnuts, birches, alders and ash trees on the kill list had been given a white dot, as if someone had aimed a soccer ball dipped in paint at them. My dad and hundreds of others hid themselves in self-made, slogan-sprayed huts, both on the fertile clay soil and in the trees themselves, and withstood multiple charges and eviction attempts by riot police.

My mom wasn't there. Several years before, as a young student, she'd walked into Café Marktzicht on the Breedstraat and met him, one of the least boisterous and at the same time most active members of the resistance group that had held a meeting around the corner

earlier that evening. Driven by nothing but love, she, a timid girl from a North-Holland Protestant family, had joined them. After the first violence between demonstrators and police officers, she decided from then on to wait in her room until he called to say nothing had happened to him.

The battle was lost in the end. A thousand-man riot-police army, drummed up from around the entire country, drove everyone out of the forest that Friday morning in September 1982. Three hours later, the trees disappeared under the steel tracks of a pair of yellow Caterpillar D8 bulldozers. Amelisweerd was pierced by ten lanes.

For years I'd heard a pronounced combativeness when my father would speak of that time. As the product of another generation and my mother's son I was less militant than he'd been in his heydays, but on the day of the protest chain, in my mid-twenties, I did start to recognize something of that all-overpowering eagerness, when you believed in something, to stand in front of a heavily armed police platoon. Not *despite that* but *because* you will be mercilessly beaten. Because change hurts.

But I also heard, and increasingly so, a certain bitterness and dejection in my dad's words whenever futile resistance came up in conversation. The fighting spirit had leaked out of his body and given way to a melancholy that seemed to hold him hostage more and more often. Later—yes, later he grew quiet. But perhaps it was then, on that Saturday in 2009, that I saw it for the first time. He didn't butt into our conversation. Even so, his diminished enthusiasm wasn't as distressing as the wavering participation of my own generation, whose small number of representatives marched along as though a weekend afternoon spent banging a pot with a ladle demanded the limit of what they were willing to give up.

Was I still holding her hand? No, but she was still there. Apologetically she said she didn't actually know the estate that well and looked around as she stuck a nearly full block pad in her backpack and slung it over her right shoulder again. She'd come along because the organizers had asked her to make a poster for the demonstration.

She wore a dark-blue parka that sat below her butt and under that a light cable knit sweater with a wide, round collar. The hair she'd put up appeared to be a darker gold than the bit hanging along her little ears. I saw her green-brown eyes for the first time. She looked for my hand again. "Better not break the chain," she said. The demonstrators were nowhere near consistent in their walking hand-in-hand, but the press photographers were standing on the other side of the Kromme Rijn and knew the power of image.

I nodded at her backpack and asked what she'd sketched.

"Oh," she said, somewhat absently. "Nothing. For a second I thought I had something. An idea."

She peered at the dark concrete bunker in the field to the right of us, detached herself from me for a moment and pointed at it with her index finger, as though hoping it would then reveal something. That it would tell her something. Then she shrugged it off.

"It'll work out," she said, to nobody in particular, like she'd already briefly been there, the future, and was returning to the present with this reassurance.

Then she turned to me and said her name.

Mats was four and a half months old when we requested the document for him. At the time he already existed in so many more ways than I could have imagined before his birth. The thought that no one knew him like the two of us did sometimes filled me with a feeling of unassailable intimacy. He grew up before our eyes and in our minds and rewired them in a way that could sometimes overpower me especially—oh, to have allowed the euphoria so undiluted, me who could only live in repetition, me who usually only recognized happiness when packaged as memory.

And still: he hadn't existed. Not for the first seventy-two hours, for example, when I hadn't yet registered the life balled up into a little blood-pink fist with an official behind a counter. And not, not for months, according to the terms, transcending borders and established in international law, under which a moving person is allowed to exist. Another appointment at the municipal office was needed for that. This red booklet was needed for that. His signature is missing, on that point the baby was respited from the rules, but he'd needed a picture taken, his face captured fully and centered within the frame, evenly lit, a minimum of nineteen and maximum of thirty millimeters from chin to crown, his eyes completely visible.

Those eyes, across from me, are now following the passing houses. Again and again they shoot along for a bit, let go and look for a new starting point. Then he notices, with glowing amazement, the end of a croissant in his left hand. A two-year-old boy can discover a bit of a bread in his fist like an adult a five-dollar bill in an old pair of jeans.

With a loud screech, the ICE curls to the right, over the remains of Fort Westervoort, before crossing the IJssel River and by way of the railroad dike crossing the town itself.

"Westervoort," I say, pointing outside. "This is where Mom grew up. This is where, in a way, your unlikely story begins."

“Yeah,” he says, casually, as if his dad weren’t telling him anything new.

Her story, if you ask her, begins in the early days of May 1940, when a twenty-three-year-old man by the name of Lothar Buske kissed his wife Ilse on the blond crown of her forehead, promised he’d be back within a couple of weeks and in one of the seven armored trains waiting at the border station invaded the Netherlands.

I now know this is the way Tess thinks: how everything causes the next thing. The lines she extends. She doesn’t deny the existence of chance, she just likes to mention that there could just as well be a logical connection, one that simply remains unobserved. I see it in her drawings, too: there’s always movement in them, the past and future in one print. Messages in bottles are sent and found on the same page. Someone who saves a life is given, just five centimeters farther along, a statue.

Lothar Buske died near Westervoort. He was sitting with dozens of other heavily armed soldiers in an armored steam locomotive that was supposed to reach the other side of the IJssel during the first night of the war, so as to immediately push on from there to the Grebbe Line. But capturing the bridge by surprise failed: the Dutch fort on the other side of the river had been warned and blew up the crossing. Several moments earlier, Buske and four others had been ordered off the train to clear the obstacles hurriedly raised by the Dutch. The explosives went off at two points, the arches crashing into the wide river’s waters with a deafening roar.

At the end of the seventies Ilse Buske, by then Ilse Bohninger, over fifty and director of a *Realschule* in Dortmund, reached out to a middle school in Arnhem and, through them, a potential host family in Westervoort. She proposed the idea of a modest exchange program between the schools, and specifically chose the town where her first husband gave his life at the starting shot of a devastating war.

That was how a year later a fifteen-year-old German girl, along with her twin sister, came to be housed by a Dutch family, to follow a curriculum put together specially for them and twenty others in Arnhem. And that was how a girl on Klapstraat in Westervoort fell in love with the Dutch boy living next door.

Her twin sister returned to Dortmund, disillusioned by harassment—another neighbor who’d pressed the accelerator just before the crosswalk, a teacher from Arnhem who’d refused to admit German students in his classroom. The experience had made her bitter, and this would never entirely fade from her character.

She herself completed the exchange program, went to Germany to finish her school and immediately returned to the Netherlands afterward. In 1988, she and the former boy next door had a daughter, and almost twenty-one years later I was holding onto the fingers of that daughter. We stretched along the length of the planned strip of asphalt, and I believed her when she said things would work out.

We fell in love—cautious and brittle at first. That winter I would bike two or three times a week to her room, right by the Lepelenburg Park, ring the doorbell and follow the narrow spiral staircase up to the third floor. Sometimes I would hesitate for a second at the door, as if going inside were equivalent to making some big, important decision.

One night she said: "I love you." But it was in those days I could be steadfast in all the wrong ways, so I didn't say it back, resolved to do so only when I felt it with my entire being, and without the self-awareness I have now: a man who too often only recognizes experiencing happiness after the fact. I *was* happy, almost eagerly so. But that night, I didn't say it back. We lay under the covers and she waited, but I didn't say it back.

She was patient. Months passed. I carefully bowed with her, until it became all I knew, until I could no longer be without her.

She graduated and started working for a small group of clients. For newspapers, magazines, sometimes a government organization or a company hoping people would confuse the charming friendliness radiated by her work with that of their campaign or new product.

For a long time, she tried to draw something weaving in her remarkable history, as though she were condemned to keep retelling it for as a long as she hadn't transformed it into something visible. She looked online for more information about the battle at Westervoort, watched clips on YouTube and went to the Netherlands Institute for Military History in The Hague to read preserved eyewitness accounts of the first night of the war. She drew the two banks from the story, the seventy-meter-wide river that lay between them, the bridge that was and wasn't there at once. There just had to be a multifaceted, symbolically charged image to be made there. That she didn't succeed for years all the same, she in the end attributed to the fact that nearly everything she could find about it recounted the events from a Dutch perspective.

I graduated and was hired by the government as a neighborhood advisor. A job in which, recalling a line by Lucebert my father used to over-recite, I soon considered it my most

important task to make the value of public space, which couldn't be expressed in money, resilient against the powers that would have rather extracted its economic potential—be it of a neighborhood square, a playground, a patch of green, even a bike rack if necessary—by ripping it out of the ground roots and all and putting something profitmaking in its place.

And I kept devoting myself to the Amelisweerd cause. On free days we went there to walk or kayak. I participated in associations and working groups, did lobbying work, organized crowd-funding campaigns and demonstrations. Each successive minister in each successive Rutte cabinet seemed more determined than the last to shoot a poisonous arrow of asphalt through the greenery. It had to happen, and even when the scientists demonstrated it wouldn't lessen the traffic congestion. I thought of what behavioral psychologists call "plan-continuation bias," and pilots "get-home-itis syndrome": you're so busy with reaching your pre-established end goal that you don't recognize that deviating has gradually become a more logical, reasonable and safer option.

"*Kann er auch?*" I didn't hear the employee of the Deutsche Bahn approaching. With a practiced smile and outstretched platter, he offers cookies. He asks whether Mats is allowed one.

The shining, Christmas-red bags read *Lieblingsgast*. Unintentionally, it comes across as a compensation for the detour and ensuing delay of which mention is simultaneously being made over the loudspeaker: during the *Flutkatastrophe* last week, roads, bridges and railways were swept away. The ICE won't be able to call in at Dusseldorf and will be redirected between Duisburg and Keulen.

But first: Oberhausen.

Yes, he does want one. I tear open the packaging for him, and then my own. They're heart-shaped, spritz-like cookies.

The doppler effect of a railroad crossing, the endless sound barrier graffiti. Dough, sugar and butter. A young horse drinks standing near a mare in a pasture. The train slows. We approach the border at max forty kilometers an hour, as though extra care is needed. The Netherlands waves goodbye with greenery, a last backyard with a trampoline. After that, the roads and forests immediately seem to undulate, and the signs are white and arrow-shaped. We pause alongside a small, soft-pink station building near Emmerich, where on the line next to us a semitrailer boasts its owner is saving the planet 3900 tons of CO_2 a year.

The intercom mentions nothing about the people who'd drowned in their flooded basements, about the bodies, the trees, mannequins and boxes of Christmas decorations that had been swept away. We look out the window together and see none of it. It happened and has been covered up already. For as long as we can, we'll pretend things aren't that bad yet.

I look at him. He has no idea. He still doesn't know.

In Oberhausen everyone is alone. A man in sandals walks back and forth along the length of the platform. A couple sits on one of the metal benches, each on their own side of the anti-sleeping armrest, he's hunched over his phone, her gaze is focused on where she expects the train.

An escalator lifts a very pregnant woman out of the station tunnel. She sees the ICE waiting and makes a panicky movement, her suitcase and large body awkward ballast in the sudden haste.

I send Tess a message, how late would things actually start? Again, I don't say I'm going to her. For a few seconds I stare at the little text balloon.

I'll see you tonight, I think afterward. *I'm not losing you.*

The sliding door of the compartment opens and the pregnant woman, now flushed, swings down the aisle. She puts her suitcase in a rack, leans and sighs and tries out three seats in an attempt to find the spot where the air-conditioner offers the most cooling. Her discomfort is so omnipresent I have to look away. The train rolls past the platforms' offshoots, which taper off and are finally no more than vacant concrete interspersed with weeds.

As a twenty-something-year-old I cultivated the appearance of a young man who didn't know how to act around babies. I readily admitted that you might as well have handed me a sack of potting soil.

Around me there were more and more of them. They became infants and toddlers and preschoolers and flooded the birthdays I already didn't like going to, but now there was no way at all of having a conversation without one climbing up my conversation partner's leg or carving with the back of a teaspoon in the wooden floor.

In those moments I discerned in others the tendency to see me as an outsider. Someone who hadn't experienced the delight of passing life on and was, by definition, not an adult yet. Someone who had to be very careful not to get lost in their third decade. And all of that was fine too, really, because it was precisely the disapproval of those scenes that gave me an identity. For a couple of years, I could make myself invisible on those Saturday afternoons spent underneath blue or pink bunting—more or less like I'm doing now, avoiding eye contact with this woman-and-a-half across the aisle. I would sit the time out with Tess as my buffer: she never felt comfortable at these parties either, neither of us were much good at small talk and we didn't speak up in large groups, but she handled kids more naturally and so made things easier for me.

Afterward, we would take the bus or bike home, so specifically free of everything we weren't and wouldn't become. We went home, where there weren't any baby wipes needed to clean up all the chaos and unpredictability, and where I found understanding and a supporter as long as she didn't feel an emotional bond with the life that had presented itself somewhere at the fringe of her or my family.

The woman sits down diagonally across from me, on the sunny side of the train. She is slender. She brushes some hair from her forehead, combs it back with her fingers and puts it up with a bobby pin taken from between her lips. A light-blue tank top contains her belly. Two benches away, a Dutch man with a large headset discusses a PowerPoint presentation while clicking through it on his laptop. He wants to set "targets," opting here for the English word, to win over "suppliers," and to "in-factor" emissions, a mix of the two.

"*Darf ich…*" the woman asks. She heaves herself up and points to my seat. She says moving backward is making her nauseous.

I nod. We dance around each other carefully and take each other's seats.

They kept coming closer. It wasn't distant family members anymore. A colleague behind whom I suspected the same kind of spontaneous thirties life as my own started talking about his kids over lunch—and not just that, he insisted on grabbing his phone and, on the spot, providing convincing evidence of the existence of Lieke, four, and Lola, almost two. For a while, I could still ascribe that to the Christian upbringing of that colleague, and others like him who didn't postpone marriage and having children for as long. Until one day I opened the door for one of Tess' best friends. There she was, the crown of her firstborn peaking out of an intricately knotted carrier sling. They came inside and twenty minutes later our whole house had reshaped itself to the dynamic a two-weeks-old girl enforces. Suddenly this mom

was a mom, not with the hesitant nature that had always been hers, but with everything in her.

Maybe that's what scared me: how easily people could change—that Tessa's friend had needed to leave behind everything her life had been until then, and not only didn't seem to mind; apparently it all had been downright meaningless in light of this new life.

Had that already happened to this woman? She moves again, all of a sudden looking at me.

"Thirty-eight weeks," she says, as though I asked.

I nod and make an approving sound, which immediately comes across as misplaced. As though she'd said: just ran a marathon.

"Is everything ready?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard you need to have a hospital bag ready," I say. "For when it starts."

"Yeah, everything's ready."

The train rocks her belly and she lets it happen. She places her palms on it, looks down and then says that it's her first one. That her mother doesn't want her to give birth at home. That the walls of the nursery have already been painted blue, though they'd have done the same if it had been a girl, it's just a nice color, they called it *Snowboard* at the hardware store, and that she sometimes walks through it, through that room, "and then I know, I just know…" She wipes her eye with a thumb and is silent for a long time, looks at her hands and then outside. She doesn't finish her sentence. Her breathing is heavy and low. For a moment the power seems to cut out: the air conditioner's blowing stops, monitors displaying travel information go out. Then everything starts up again.

"I would leave out that last slide," the man farther on says, "because you want them to invest in those 'efficiency measures' either way."

"It took a long time," the woman says softly. "Really long." She keeps her eyes shut.

We also put the minimum number of bedrooms at two the first time we sat with a real estate agent, and at every viewing stepped carefully into the smaller of the two and naturally started speaking a little softer. It was of course the logical next step if we kept unfolding our life along the heteronormative yardstick.

We bought an upstairs apartment in Tuinwijk. We called the second bedroom the guest room. We put everything there that had no other logical place in the house: a single-person

bed with a long-haired green bedspread, an old television, a low shelf with DVD cases, an old sled, a trunk with paints and paint sticks and roll mats, an ironing board, a drying wrack and, in the corner, rolls of extra wallpaper that Tess could use to sketch on.

Kids? For years we talked about it like a trip we planned to make some day.

Things went differently.

We were biking home one Sunday evening. We'd eaten at her parents, in another part of the city.

Tess said: "My mom thinks I'm infertile."

We'd just left the street and crossed the Majella Park. I turned my head: "How does she know that?" I asked. Rectification. "Why does she think that?"

It'd been at the end of the evening, we already had our jackets on, when her mother had asked her to come up with her for a second. "Me too?" I asked, suddenly uncomfortable with the charged situation. She narrowed her eyes good-naturedly, grabbed her daughter's elbow and said: "Just us for a second."

"She's being over-dramatic," Tess said on the bike, though she didn't look at me. She stared straight ahead. "It's just something she thinks."

I didn't understand. "What'd she say?"

"That she…" She considered her words for a long time.

I can't remember a moment of discomfort or tension in those first years we were together. No silences we thought needed filling, no emergency measures to keep a conversation going, no touch or look open to multiple interpretations and to which I had to quickly come up with a suitable reaction, the next move in a game of social chess. She'd grabbed my hand that Saturday in Amelisweerd, and immediately it was as though I'd known her for years. We both seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of stories, experiences, opinions and thoughts in the weeks and months after our meeting. No matter what I started on, it led to a new association for her, something she too hadn't told yet and where she took me to like a spot to watch the sunrise. When she listened to me, she would tilt her head slightly and could then sometimes say "yes" in a tone that seemed to confirm things—yes, that's how it went—even though she had no way of knowing, and then she could sometimes, just like that, pick up where I left off, not as if knowing better or trying to talk over me, but out of a deep curiosity with which she made it so her own that I sometimes started to doubt whether I'd been the one who told her or the other way around.

Something had changed, though. During difficult conversations Tess could be silent for minutes at a time, and that could irritate me. When I wanted to goad her, to remind her that half a sentence was still hanging in the air, she was always a second before me: “I’m still thinking.” She weighed up her words. Considered whether she needed to send them out conciliatory or armed. I knew I had no choice but to wait. We biked in silence. It was around nine, but the sun was still up. The bricks of the 1930s terrace homes turned a gold brown.

“When she was in her early twenties,” Tess started, as though already constructing the next couple of sentences in her head, “a complication came to light that could lower her chances of having kids. Basically, it looked like she was menstruating less and less. And if that went on…”

She biked ahead of me for a while down a narrow street, we left the roundabout near the Ulu Mosque behind us and passed under the railroad. Below the viaduct hung a poster with the warning, demanded by no one, THE END IS NEAR, next to an announcement for a student party in Tivoli, the music venue.

“Anyway,” she said—and I could hear her attempt to make it sound light. “They had me reasonably early. I’m here, see for yourself. So at the time she was clearly not infertile. But after that she never got pregnant again. It wasn’t like they were trying their hardest, but they weren’t trying to prevent it either, you know?”

At the stoplight on the Amsterdamsestraatweg, among the scooters and students, she was silent. I remembered a moment six months earlier, midway through October, when it had been unusually warm and all the terraces along the Neude had been black with sunglasses as a New Year’s donut truck parked itself at the top of the square. It was as if someone had stuck together pictures of two seasons. The rest of the afternoon I couldn’t shake the macabre thought that this celestial body had in a sense become infertile. No longer able to raise new life.

When we’d crossed the street and turned left, she continued. “Anyway, my mom never forgot what the doctor said: it can get harder with every year you wait. And that it *can* be passed on.”

I asked: “How likely is that?”

She shrugged. “It’s just a little door that slowly shuts, I think.” She involuntarily drew her legs together.

“I was thinking more like a percent chance.”

“I don’t have a percent chance for you, Robin.”

“You’re twenty-six.”

“I know that.”

“No, I just mean…”

“Yeah. I’m older than my mom when she had me.”

That night we lay awake under the empty comforter cover, and though neither of us said it, I knew we both felt the pressing hand of time.

The woman takes another deep and long breath, as though having to pass an obstruction in her airways. Tess hasn’t sent anything back yet. “That depends,” the man nearby says, “on what you want to convey. Emissions have to come down ‘either way.’”

I put my phone away again. “In the hospital,” I say to her before realizing it, “you’ll definitely have better air conditioning.”

She nods, and smiles a little. “I hope so.” She quickly rubs her belly for a moment, as though it were time for it to wake up. “But we won’t be staying there, will we? At some point we’ll have to come out again.”

I agree with her: of course, I say, apologizing with an open hand for the all too easy comment.

She waves it aside with a smile, and it occurs to me that the subject has naturally crept its way into every conversation since a couple of years ago. That now it’s permeated everything, like the smell of smoke.

We already had the facts, that spring when we were lying awake and thinking and sometimes both seemed to be listening for whether somewhere inside her a door had locked shut. We had the facts. The data, the reports, the percentages, the probabilities. We knew it. I was once inclined to think we had the elements on our side. That she wanted to be thought kind. Once in a while the wind knocks something off the table, the rain can spill, the sun can impose itself on you too enthusiastically. What could be violent about that? The oceans had absorbed the first excess heat and raised a white flag at the coral reefs. Two-hundred thousand saiga antelope dropped dead near Kazakhstan because the extreme heat and humidity had in each one allowed what was usually a pacifist bacteria escape their airways and granted it access, via the bloodstream, to their liver, kidneys and spleen. In Botswana one morning, a famous, thousand-year old baobab tree split in half and fell to the parched soil. Hurricanes named like people who owned mobile homes raced across Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico and Texas. Every year was the hottest ever.

Those who were still able to deny denied. A senator from the United States lobbed a snowball from his chair onto the blue carpet of Congress: his proof that we shouldn't be so arrogant as to think we could single-handedly lay waste to the planet so long as He mercifully looked on from above. The rest of us wriggled through the small gap that remained between silence and open panic: that of nonchalant acknowledgement, before quickly shifting to what the human and social psyche wrongly qualified as more relevant and weighty.

Amelisweerd, too, seemed beyond saving. That same spring the government's plans for expanding the freeway were published. There had to be, or better, would be fourteen lanes next to each other, for which it was necessary to victimize as many trees as in the early eighties, in pursuit of canonizing the travel times established in official documents and being able to arrive at our demise just a couple of minutes sooner. Since the day of the protest chain, no less than two-hundred thousand kilometers of asphalt had been laid in the Netherlands. Neither I, my dad nor anyone else had been able to block a single meter of it.

I thought about that too as we lay awake. But I didn't say it.

The pregnant woman says she needs to get off soon and wants to take her time getting up. "Could I ask you something weird?" she says. "Would you mind helping me with my suitcase?"

So I walk with her. I lift the dark-purple suitcase from the rack and lead us toward the vestibule. We pass between the empty chairs, heading toward Duisburg just a little faster than the rest of the passengers.

We wait at the doors without saying anything.

I'm still holding the suitcase handle. She rubs her belly. It looks like she does it unconsciously. Would the baby feel it? Would this gesture have any influence? I think of Tess' friend, who during her pregnancy said she could feel the fetus turn with its butt toward her hand if she just rubbed hard enough.

Through the narrow, oval window in the train door I look outside. Fields, country homes, trees, electrical towers, a church, a garden center, greenhouses, a nursery, an RV dealer, country roads, cows, an industrial park with large containers from Maersk. You can see the world by train, they say, but never everything. It's everything that by nature is along the railroad or through which the railroad has found its way. We don't know what we don't get to see, and whether we might rather be there than here.

My phone vibrates. It's not Tess' answer, but a voicemail. I play it and hear my father call out a name I don't recognize, and then a thud.

"I didn't dial anyone," he says when I call him back. The line seems to be breaking up. The pregnant woman gives me a worried look. Maybe she can overhear it. The noisy announcement for Duisburg keeps my dad waiting even longer.

The line is back, and now it's my mom.

"There's nothing, Robin," she says. "Everything's fine. We're about to—hold on a minute—we're about to go eat something." She apologizes and hangs up before I can say anything, as though wanting to get away after having been caught doing something obscene.

"Everything all right?" the woman asks.

Everything came together that spring.

Amelisweerd was taking more and more of my time. The exact government plans for the extra asphalt through the nature reserve had just been published. Along with a number of like-minded people, some from my dad's generation, I worked on an appeal. We came up with new protests and asked artists and performers from Utrecht to participate. I worked a day less for a time.

One afternoon I brought the expansion plans to my dad. We had only a few days left. The government and province of Utrecht, both just as opposed to the development, had been sidelined through a deviously applied emergency law. If resistance was possible, then it was only through citizen's initiatives like our own. We would, if need be, take this to the highest court.

"So," I said. "They want to expand again."

My father had grown quieter over the years. At times he look around vaguely, searching for parts of him that had crumbled away. But at other times he could be razor-sharp again. "You think I've gotten cynical, don't you?" he said, his voice unusually raised. He'd taken two empty coffee cups from the kitchen and put them on the square dining table.

"No," I said. "I don't think that." We were sitting in the living room, across from the bookcase with at eye level the volumes of *Reader's Digest* I'd once seen as mysterious books with faded spines and encrypted texts but that, as I grew older, had revealed more and more bits of knowledge I could place within the known and had fanned a love for facts and the course of history.

I could feel I was tired. Tess and I had talked in bed until late. I didn't want to contradict him. I laid my hands on the stack of paper I'd brought. "Or—yeah, sometimes I think so."

He laughed, warm and genuine, all of a sudden almost unrecognizable. "Listen, son," he said. "Sometimes I think I've gotten cynical too. But I'm not cynical. I just know what's possible and what isn't." He lay his left hand crosswise on mine, I looked at the dark hair on his knuckles, two fingers trembled lightly. Then he stood up.

"Coffee first?"

He'd hardly interested himself in the new, increasingly concrete asphalt plans. When the subject came up, he mostly spoke about it like a war lost long ago.

I was better informed and could explain to anyone who asked everything about the judiciary options we still had, about the mobility studies that had demonstrated the uselessness of extra asphalt, about investments in public transportation as a better alternative, about the value of greenery for human wellbeing. I felt like I could bring the most stubborn motorist round in ten minutes. If it came down to it, I would sit in a tree house for a week too.

And still: I might have taken his place, but that didn't mean I didn't need my dad anymore. At this table I was that eleven-year-old boy who'd tried to make himself invisible behind the garden chair cushions in the attic after reading in another one of his dad's magazines what a nuclear war would do. It might have been over a decade since there had last been a realistic possibility—the Wall had fallen, the Cold War ended—but before reading that cool, boxed explanation I'd never even heard of the whole premise, so from my perspective the chance of it had increased considerably in no time. What I'd known until that day without ever really thinking about it, was that humanity could never wipe itself out.

For the first time, the fear I'd felt back then was back. The attempts to prevent the felling of hundreds of trees were at least a means against this feeling of powerlessness.

"I trust things will go well," sounded from the kitchen. He came back and sat down again. Still no coffee.

At times I still recognized in him the dogged idealist I too had become. I recognized little features in his face. But I was disappearing from him, or he from me.

"You haven't even looked at it yet," I said and pointed at the packet of paper.

"Don't need to," he said. "I know. It'll work out."

"Just have a quick look."

That's how it went. I said: just have a quick look. I walked to the kitchen, where the empty cups were back on the stove, and decided to do it myself. I was standing with the canister in my hand when I saw the note hanging above the machine.

My mother's lavish, round handwriting. *Filter in the top. Coffee in the filter. Close it. Maybe add more water. Red button. Shout or call me if it doesn't work. Love.*

My father was sitting at the table and stared ahead.

In many of the possible scenarios I wouldn't have brought it up—would've acted as if I hadn't seen anything. I brought it up because I simply didn't get it. In that half a minute I couldn't put enough together to see the explanation.

I took it with me, the note, and showed it to him. I asked: "What's this for?"

The looking up, the getting up, a strange menace, the step, and then the impact. For a long time after that afternoon, I still didn't know exactly what had happened—other than this: my dad had hit me. He'd never hit me before. He'd risen from his chair, almost mechanically, driven by something I didn't recognize any more than his warm laugh from several minutes earlier, he'd taken a step and a turn and swung, really swung. Not to hit me, but—as I concluded later, after rewinding and playing it over and again, after endlessly probing with my tongue where my tooth had gone halfway through my lip, the residual feeling of a local anesthetic—to make me *disappear*, to turn me off.

And even now, every time I think back, it's not with fear or pain, not even with anger. It's the powerlessness in his eyes, *as he was hitting me*, that I can't shake from me. His body's lost bearing, as he stood there, from one moment to the next completely exhausted. He'd hit me and *he* was the scared one.

Tess was lying on the couch when I got home.

It was nine-thirty. The wine glasses from the evening before were still on the coffee table, misty red beside a pot of olives. She'd been at her friend's the whole day helping out now that the postpartum care had finished and her boyfriend was back to work. Everyone always called Tess. She had the gift of being the stabile factor in any space, a natural and reassuring presence, a housemate wherever she went.

I dropped the bag with the hefty government decision against a table leg but didn't feel any relief. She sighed, closed her eyes as though to not have to see me, and said: "I'm a little worried I'm getting a migraine."

I asked what she needed, and she said: "A cold washcloth."

I climbed the stairs. That friend had got her support while I got the wrung-out, helpless version that no longer had the energy to listen to me.

But what should I have said? What had happened? I still couldn't even tell myself. I'd maneuvered around his curved back to gather my things and he'd stammered something as I took leave with a curt goodbye. It was if already he'd partly forgotten what he had just done, had erased it with all of his remaining willpower from his memory. And even if this incident had managed to nestle itself in his degenerating long-term memory, I knew for certain he would never bring it up.

That meant in a certain sense it was up to me whether it had happened or not. And if it hadn't happened—the knowledge of being able to make that decision gave me, at that moment, a strange feeling of power, as though I could time-travel—then he'd be spared for a while yet. The signs of deterioration were everywhere, but in this one case I could deny it without remorse.

She needed me as well. A concrete action was expected of me. I walked into our stuffy bedroom. It was as if the open window had sucked out all the oxygen, and it was only spring. I grabbed an okra-yellow washcloth from the closet, held it for a moment under the cold faucet in the bathroom and went back down.

If everything else was going to change, then this could stay the same. The particular creaking of the threshold, this living room, the coarsely woven fibers of the sofa cover, her slender ankles.

She folded the washcloth in half and laid it on her forehead.

She said: "I'm so glad we don't have kids."

She'd never said it like that before.

"You don't want kids?"

She was silent for a long time. So long I started to doubt whether she'd heard me and whether she'd actually said what I thought she had.

"Not now," she said.

"I don't want them either," I said. It was a relief to put it so bluntly.

She propped herself up and looked from under the washcloth.

"It wouldn't be fair," she said.

I saw the last bit of energy flowing from her. She needed to lie in a dark room. She said: "Things aren't going in the right direction, are they?"

“No, things aren’t going in the right direction.” Anything more than repeating her words was beyond me. I’d seen a pack of cigarettes on the ground at the bike rack in the street. On it was a picture of someone, bald from chemotherapy, emaciated and dehumanized, with empty eyes and a tube through their nose. SMOKING KILLS—QUIT NOW. The pack was empty.

All of a sudden it was so apparent and pervasive. We had a five percent chance, *five percent*, of preventing auto-genocide. And still we didn’t stop what we were doing.

She got up to look for her migraine medication and came back with half a glass of water and a blue box of rizatriptan. It wouldn’t be long now before she was numb and dazed. Tess would slowly disappear from this body. I’d once had to struggle to keep her on her feet when, after an attack and an attempt to stop it with rizatriptan, she needed to be accompanied stumbling and dizzy through a transfer at Ho Chi Min City airport. It wasn’t until an hour after take-off that she lifted her eye-mask and I could see life in her eyes again.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

A little jerk in her shoulders.

“I’m thinking about how you’d make a good dad,” she said. “I’ve always thought that.”

Her voice shook. She looked at me and looked away again. She drew her lips together tensely and took a deep breath. “Yep. That’s what I think. For years I’ve been thinking: one day I’ll see who Robin is when he’s a dad.”

The room had become giant and we so small.

“And what do you see then?”

“You holding him, I think. You picking him up.” For one reason or another she spoke of a “him,” as though she were sure of it. She said: “He’s eighteen months old, and takes a few steps toward you. He leans against your legs and wants you to pick him up. So you do. And he’s holding onto you very tight and high. And then I’d look at your eyes and your nose and your mouth and see something really *gentle* there. Something I sometimes see now, but it would be truer then. As if you’d been waiting for this for a very long time.”

I said I used to occasionally think about it too.

She asked: “And that’s over now?”

I couldn’t give her an answer that wouldn’t hurt her. But: yes, that picture had slowly faded. Turned out to be impossible and therefore been disposed of, like a kind of self-defense mechanism.

We’d done it ourselves. We hadn’t even waited until the last moment to then, finally, intervene. A substantially more dangerous future for our kids: we knew what we were doing, and we’d let things reach this point.

I got up. Took a few steps, started bringing the wine glasses to the kitchen, but thought twice and sat back down. I touched her leg.

“I want him to be able to have the kind of life we have,” I said. “But everyone who knows anything about it says…”

“I know what they say,” she interrupted me, stiffly. “I don’t need to hear all that now.”

With an unsteady but determined gait, she walked out the room and up the stairs. I heard the bedroom door shut. I waited a little while. Then I went upstairs too. Carefully, I opened the door, lay next to her on the bed and tried to hear from her breathing whether she was asleep.

She wasn’t. She found my hand and squeezed it.

“I want to be with you,” she said, her eyes shut. “I want to stay with you.”

In that way we lay there. She breathed in and out deeply in that silent room. We’d stay together, the two of us. We’d take many a bus or our bikes home and know that nobody was waiting for us.

Tess sounds curt in the voice message she sent, and which I’m listening to while Duisburg comes to a standstill on the other side of the train doors. It lasts twelve seconds.

It starts at three o’clock, she says, and that she’s almost there. “See you tomorrow then,” she ends. “I’ll be back by early evening.”

The woman climbs out, leaning backward, a hand under her belly. While she catches her breath, I put the suitcase next to her on the platform. I get back in and ask if she can manage from here. It’s as if I’ve put her overboard. She nods meekly from the depths.

Two months’ worth of rain fell in two days. In Hilden, Solingen and Opladen, a triangle of German cities and villages we’re now forced to circumvent, people were overtaken in their sleep. The water went down and then came back up out of the rivers and the sewers, sucked the life out of the ground and left behind decaying bodies like fermenting fruit. Meanwhile,

large parts of China flooded after the heaviest rainfall in a thousand years, it was almost five degrees hotter in Canada than the more than eighty-year-old record temperature—something not a single scientist could explain, and precisely that was so scary—and in Oregon, on the west coast of the United States, a forest fire grew so large and hot that cause and effect switched places. The weather no longer determined what the fire did—the fire determined what the weather did.

Every summer comes with its own cocktail of disasters, and it's only his third July. He has so many more to go.

We're a few minutes from reaching Cologne. The sun is shining, the ICE races past little stations without looking back and Mats keeps asking about his mom, *but where's mommy, but where's mommy*, as though wanting to keep trying the words until they've lost their flavor. He looks around and says: "Daddy needs to look."

"I already know where she is, buddy. We're going to mommy."

He mmms, a soft moan, lowers his shoulders and suspends the search. It's 1:25. He's tired. I can see it in his eyes and rub his back.

The train brakes, the scratching sound of the wheels trying to find purchase on the rails, and then a woman-robot station voice that mutedly makes an almost unintelligible announcement about other trains on other platforms, with the sober and yet lightly singing staccato of an update, repeated again for good measure, on the standings of a bicycle race.

Cologne. We have twenty-eight minutes to switch trains.

I get up, heave the bag onto my back and extend my arms toward him.

"You coming?"

As the train glides into the station, we walk through the open automatic door to the vestibule. Together, we wait for Köln Hbf's platform roof to receive the train in its shade and to no longer have to squint against the sun.

As long as I'm carrying him, everything else stays at bay. In moments like these, fatherhood is so close it's like I can grab hold of it. Like I'm holding him now, as the train stops, the doors open with a hiss and a shallow, extra step automatically appears to bridge the gap with the platform, his blonde hair against my cheek, the deliberate, instinctive leaning. This limitless trust started on that first night at home, when the travel-heavy hospital days were behind us, forty-eight hours after the doctor had said "close one" and I tried to stay awake in the dead of night so the baby on my chest could sleep, sighing and sniffling

irregularly, uncomfortable with practically everything having to do with life outside the womb, though not with me and not with her.

How to remember this? How to save this in a comprehensive, well-ordered, user-friendly archive of how it feels to be a father?

It's quiet on the platform. The edge of the shadow is sharp, the air warm, heavy. A man in shorts, sunglasses and a baseball cap, clearly from The States, patiently waits for us to get out, winks at me and says: "Nice, dad."

While things happen I'm already working on how to remember them. How I won't have to lose it, how I'll tell Tess about it when I see her tonight. Life moves forward. It's no longer there where I reach for it.

We carefully step onto the escalator down to the wide, white-tiled station hall under the tracks. I put him on one of the steps and squat to be at the same height.

"Are you tired?"

He sounds beat. We glide down past suitcases and backs of knees. I lose him. How do I not lose him? I only live in repetition and he only in the now. Where can we find each other?

He says he's "hunnry."

"Ok, buddy." I promise him we'll buy food, and say that I need to find out where I can clean him and that the next train is leaving in about twenty-five minutes. A child is also an alibi for talking to yourself in public.

A woman runs through the station hall with a large, pale-red suitcase on wheels that can barely keep up with her. A group of boys makes itself as wide as possible to purposely hinder her. She runs into the farthest right, he pushes her out of reflex. She stumbles toward us and swears. One of her flat shoes has come off. She quickly steps back into it, swears again, her voice echoing icily around us. I'm holding onto a little, clammy, squeezing hand. He hesitantly follows, disappearing farther behind my legs with every step.

There: a sign with a male icon enclosed in blue—but it's the elevator. Where are the toilets? A little more than twenty minutes left. He starts crying and trying to pull me in another direction.

Maybe it was a bad idea to bring him, but we couldn't stay at home. *I told you*, I want to snap at another person, someone who forced me to do this, but I don't know who. Was it Tess? For a split second I decide to take the first train back. I don't want to improvise.

Dunkin’ Donuts, Starbucks. A toy store next to the Hunkemöller. Exit, emergency exit. An ever-growing agitation that seems to spread through my hand to him.

Walk back and forth again, a little too fast for his short legs, which have to follow me. There are seventeen minutes left. The crying has turned into restrained sobbing.

“We’re just gonna ask somebody.”

A girl from the Dunkin’ Donuts with a hairband and a fluorescent Adidas sweater sends us into another wing. Halfway down, turn left.

There’s a long line.

We descend a small flight of stairs another four minutes later. My eyes start watering from the lemon-scented disinfectant the room is apparently mopped every fifteen minutes with. I can lower a changing table fixed to the wall tiles like a drawbridge. Yes, as a baby he used to lie on his back on the dresser, and if we were outside, we’d lay him on a diaper bag that folded out into a quilt. *Das war einmal*. Now he’s as easy to get onto his back as a cat. I take him into one of the stalls, squat behind him as he put his hands against the white stall wall of particle board, as though being frisked.

“We’ll be done in a second,” I say, since under my hands I can feel the urge to move, to turn away. Keeping talking helps. Saying what you’re doing. “Now your right leg.” Shoes off, pants down, letting them hang around one ankle so they can come right back up while dressing in a bit. So far he hasn’t used his understanding of self-determination to become potty trained, but rather to turn a deaf ear. Diaper off, fold it into a messy package to be thrown away. A clean one from the bag, keep talking to him. In the meantime, he unrolls a meter and a half of toilet paper because he happens to be able to reach the dispenser.

“Almost done now,” I say. “We’re almost done.”

The train is leaving in nine minutes.

Back to the station hall. The same thing seems to be sold everywhere. Under red-yellow signs, employees stand behind bulging counters with sandwiches, pretzels, hotdogs and croissants, everything buried under *Käse* or *Schinken*, gleaming as though having been treated with hairspray. We’re startled by a scrub-machine, operated by a grumpy station employee, looming out of the crowd.

He starts crying again, and I know right away that it’s serious. In the busy station hall, I drop to one knee. My son squeezes his eyes shut and lets his head hang in defeat. One single tear: I wipe it away and know immediately I won’t forget the rest of the day.

He's upset, I can see it. Turned inward, and it's my fault, since if it wasn't for me he wouldn't have to be here.

"Hey," I try.

He looks up hopefully, but I don't know at all what I want to say. Should say. I'm disappointing him. He needs me, now, but I have no solution. I feel the eyes of the other travelers. If the person I was before becoming a dad would have seen me sitting like this, then he'd have counted himself lucky that it wasn't *his* life.

"I can pick you up again in a second," I say. "Do you want to eat something?"

The sobbing stifles. "Yes."

A little less than five minutes left. We buy a brie sandwich, a Höllander sandwich—Gouda cheese, lettuce and a watery slice of tomato—and pain au chocolates.

"Up," he says.

So I hurriedly look for the baby carrier he hasn't liked hanging in for a while now. The last couple of times we lifted him into it, he put up a fight, but I don't know what else to do now. I wrap the thing around my torso, the order for clicking together all kinds of buckles is still in my muscle memory. I lift him and wriggle his balking legs through the holes, it helps that part of his attention is on the food. I bite into the other side of his pan au chocolate, meanwhile we slide toward the platform. The protest continues, but I feel his little body holding onto me. The small balls of cacao in the dry bread poof away under my molars.

"We're off again," I say, searching for a moment for air. "We're off to mom."

I try to skip steps and bang my shin against the concrete of the final one. The train is waiting.

I limp inside. The doors shut behind me.

I pause in the vestibule.

At last I can feel him calming down. I can hear his breathing. His eyes still open but resigned, his look softer.

We're there. We're going. The movement doesn't have to come from us anymore.

This is how it was before, I think. For hours, around the street, the neighborhood, the forest. At home, in the afternoon, while I would pace through the living room reading a book. Sometimes in the mornings between five and six, driven out of bed by restless feet kicking at the ceiling. That's how it was, for months, a year maybe. Listening to music. A warm, regular breath in my neck. To have everything that mattered so close, my body his home, my arms his defense. That's how it was, back then.

And it happens now. He falls asleep.

Here, I think, while I look for a chair. We might reach past each other again soon enough, but it's here where I find him in time.

Three meters away, the agitated unease of two Frenchmen sticks out over the seats. The first, a hoodie, the second, a hat in military colors. They're blaming each other, but I don't know yet what exactly for. A look at the screen with travel information. A printed route description, a prodding look-finger like at a binding agreement.

They're on the wrong train.

And then the sudden, suffocating certainty: I'm on the wrong one, too.

I just got in. Didn't pay attention. *Deutschlands schnellster Klimaschützer* was on it, a green horizontal band running the length of perhaps a dozen cars. I'd refused to hurry, since a quickened stride, skipping steps or urging train staff would not have brought me to it sooner. But having not been physically utilized, the agitation has turned inward. The constriction tilts left, to my neck, shoulder, and from there radiates farther and farther to the muscle in my forearm and wrist.

The hoodie points outside: the coal-dust-gothic of two razor-sharp cathedral towers, the bridge over the Rhine. The cap is still staring at the screen hanging under the curved train ceiling, where our speed is increasing. He calls someone. A conductor in a Bordeaux-red vest and short-sleeved shirt appears, a giant keychain clinks against his upper thigh.

We're heading south. The blue dot on my phone screen says so. We're heading the right way. I'm heading the right way. Only they aren't, the Frenchmen. In a fusion of three languages, the conductor explains where they can transfer to limit the damage.

I'm going in the right direction—but now I no longer want to. For a moment I'd given it up and felt the accompanying relief. It'd all been over just then. I'd have already turned around to await her at home. The door would open. I'd read her eyes, take her weariness and her suitcase from her. I went to you, dear. I went after you, really, but then. She would laugh at my being unhandy and I would handily play that out. Come sit. Your books are here. I opened one and saw it, and I need to tell you something.

So as to clear my head and escape the now only heightened French-language nervosity, I search for a seat in another car. I sit near a man in a compartment with six seats, cut off by a glass door from the teeming in the rest of the train. There's a smell of new upholstery. A small hopper window is open.

I gauge him at twenty years older than myself, his beard hair graying in random spots, a certain distractedness or curiosity in his appearance—the two are sometimes hard to distinguish. Peering over the edge of his tan glasses, he pecks at the screen of his phone with a pointer finger.

I grab the book again.

She would sometimes show me something. Not often, she was careful with it, but now and then she would come down with a sheet of paper she almost couldn't get through the doorway. Careful, she would say, it's still wet. And then she pointed to what I could recognize. The bits of life she'd remembered and added to her imaginary world.

But she kept this to herself. The counting down that only has meaning now the prints are in this order. I want to examine the prints even closer. I want to touch us on every page, so that we'll look back, so that I can ask how it's going with them and don't have to wait until tonight.

"Studying?"

The man has been watching me. I close the book, hold it up and say: "My wife."

"That?" He points. "Your wife made that?"

I say that I'm going to her. That today she's visiting a bookstore in Ehingen, a town at the bottom of Germany. She's doing it more and more these days, I say, appearing in bookstores. She draws live then and people can follow along on a big screen. The beginning is always the same, she does that to not make things too hard for herself. She draws a square in a city. There's always a fountain, there's always a dog just escaping its leash. It's always early spring. She always draws women taking men's places in well-known scenes. Nine have their lunch sitting on a steel beam a hundred meters up. Four follow each other over a crosswalk. On a large poster on one of the buildings, a woman in snow-white boxing shorts stands over her opponent, her red-gloved right fist in front of her left shoulder. After that she subtly works in several details of those who have come to the store to see her. A coat someone is wearing, a kid walking around.

"And that goes over pretty well," I said. "Everyone enjoys that."

Do I mind if he has a look at “the work,” he asks in a calm voice. His Dutch reminds me of Tess’ mother’s: almost flawless, but with the tendency to make his consonants a bit rounder and to sometimes choose a more formal word than expected.

He opens his hands and I pass the book to him. With exaggerated reverence he lays it on his lap and opens it to the first page.

“It’s her first one,” I say. “But she’s always drawn. Even before I knew her.”

The southern half of Germany presents itself. The train hisses past deepening valleys. It’s a little before two-thirty. I try to imagine her, the future where she already is. In a while she’ll have held onto seeing all those people and daydream her square up. She won’t say much—*I’m no Bob Ross*, she’ll say at the start, an apology and a joke at the same time, followed by a polite chuckle by the audience—and after, after at most forty-five minutes, she’ll pack her bag while the owner sells copies to those present who have been charmed by my wife, and then she’ll receive a small bouquet, retrieved from the back, lightly embarrassed and uncomfortable as always, because she still won’t know how to react to compliments and she’s allergic to cut flowers.

“Incredible,” the man says as he hunches over even farther.

She does what she’s good at. She can pause life, rewind it, play it back. I can’t. I want to but can’t. We were at a wedding at a country home, years ago. She was supposed to go and quickly change. For a couple of minutes, I looked dreamily upward. There—there she appeared, in the open window of one of the rooms on the second floor, framed by the curtains. I watched her from the lawn. A glint of ebbing sunlight. Not too fast, Tess, I wanted to say. I don’t want to forget it, this exact moment, can I see it again, rewind again, then I’ll see better, then I’ll make it last longer.

The man shuts the book and asks whether we have kids.

In the tram to the fertility clinic in the hospital at Nieuwegein, late in the spring of 2017, we told each other in every possible way that it really still wasn’t time, but that it would nevertheless be good to know for certain whether we could expect the same complications as her mother.

The woman behind the front desk instructed us to make a visitor’s pass, as though we were signing up for a subscription. I wondered whether I’d be walking these hallways more often, increasingly purposeful though uneasy, decreasingly reliant on the signage stickered to the floors of the hospital hallways. I was asked to have a seat on the green couch, arranged

around a planter, in the middle of the wide hallway and wait for her, for the results of the umpteenth screening of a decreasing fertility.

I wondered what infertility would mean. Loss—in the first place, anyway. Maybe not directly of a future, but then of a choice.

However it also meant, if I went deeper: liberation.

Behind a cream-white curtain, she stoically underwent the internal examination as I awkwardly stood by.

Two weeks later we were sitting across from a friendly doctor, maybe a little too roguish for his profession, who turned his flat monitor to us as though working for a travel agency, indicated a number of interpretations of the data, entered by him, and said that Tess could become "magnificently pregnant."

Delighted, we took the train home, and for a couple of days we permitted it. Everything. Every possibility. We'd won magnificently, we were magnificently invincible, we had the time magnificently on our side. With an audio splitter and the "Forever Young" zest of Frank Turner's *Tape Deck Heart*, we took the train to Lille, where we spent a whole afternoon in the Jardin Vauban and saw everything widescreen before us. In the small hotel room in an alley right by the station, we made love without a condom, as though for a short moment we'd been convinced that the ruling out of one bleak prospect also meant turning out to be immune to all other situations.

The next day, we stumbled upon a small open-air festival. We sat on the grass under a pair of trees for a pianist's performance. She took her slippers off and rested her foot against my shin.

"I wrote this song for my daughter," the pianist said. "She always sleeps with her bedroom door open. One night I was watching her from the doorway and all of a sudden I started to worry about everything that could happen to her in life." He played a couple of notes, as though searching for the start of the song. He said: "That was the moment I knew what it meant to be a father."

She found my hand and squeezed it.

At home, reality awaited us blazing.

We didn't sleep. In the middle of the second thirty-degree sleepless night in a row she sat straight up in bed, her right leg drawn in. Using the flashlight function of her iPhone, she shined on the inside of her thigh.

“Caterpillar hairs,” she said. “That’s why we’re itching all over.”

I rubbed my elbow. I had them too.

“Don’t scratch,” she said. “It’ll only get worse.”

“I’m not scratching—just rubbing.”

“Just leave it alone.”

“It’ll get worse anyway.”

I was silent and dozed off. This is how it starts, I thought, senseless from sleep deprivation. Not with a deluge or an inferno, not with the overflowing of the Haarlemmer Lake or the collapse of the Amsterdam Exchange. It starts with itching.

The next day: bright sunlight through the kitchen window, a kitchen towel in my hands, a radio bulletin on the newest records. The thought: this is how the disaster movie would start.

The front line was being pushed in-land, in-life. It was here. *The call was coming from inside the house*.

The upbeat mood was over.

Under the flat bitumen roof of our top-floor, more heat was being trapped by the day. Initially, Tess courageously went up against it with her personal heat protocol. In the mornings, when the sun was coming up on the other side of the house and had yet to turn, she opened all the windows on the bedroom side. In the afternoons she closed everything. Windows, roller blinds, curtains. She put a liter bottle of frozen water in front of a thin, meter-and-a-half-tall fan that made little rotations in a corner of the room.

While she busied herself with the house, I moved on to the newspapers and news sites. All of the world records were being broken. In Oman, during a twenty-four-hour period, it didn’t get cooler than 42.6 degrees Celsius. The forests above the arctic circle were burning. The Sahara was on the verge of crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

The resistance broke after the third bad night. None of it had helped. The wood of the wardrobe felt clammy, as though taken by fever. She bent toward the digital thermometer on her nightstand, white and square like a picture frame with a mount. 33.2. Apparently, the temperature wasn’t even dropping at night anymore.

The next afternoon we were sure of it. We stuffed some essentials in a grocery bag and sought asylum at the downstairs neighbors’. A week earlier they’d headed into the Swiss mountains for a hiking vacation and had given us the key so we could take care of the plants and chickens.

We descended.

She made a pasta salad while I walked, a dark-green watering-can in hand, over the uneven clinkers of the garden path winding its way past two seating areas and a chicken coop, a route passing five ceramic plant pots, each one large enough to wash a baby elephant in. When the can was empty, I stood and watched as the water that couldn't immediately be absorbed streamed out of the bottom and between the stones and found its way to my bare feet. The sun blazed from the side, on my neck. I scraped an edge of the rough handle along my forearm.

It was as though she'd heard it from meters away. "Let me have a look," she said. She hopped into the backyard and lifted my arm, as if to divine the future from the riverrun of my veins.

"It's like five, six degrees cooler here," she said, peering at the peaked bumps, three in a row. Her mood seemed considerably improved since the move. Suddenly she was cheerful, almost jolly. "Mine are…"—she pulled up her dress and turned the inside of her right thigh toward me—"still here. Look. Well, ignore them." The young-woman thigh disappeared again. "We're almost ready to eat. I'm putting on a bikini."

The big, abstract dangers—she seemed less worried about those. As though we'd agreed I would curb them for both of us, and she would be attentive to the tangible and visible. Skin rashes, a birth mark on my back, an ingrown beard hair. She sometimes noticed a splinter in my finger before I did.

The water at my feet had already dried.

"You're quiet," she said when an hour later we were sitting at the table inside, just out of reach of the low sun. If I stuck my foot out, I'd feel it burning on my instep. Between the vegetation of the yard a heavy air hung trembling. I grabbed the porcelain dish that was between us and with a large wooden spoon pushed pasta with figs, lamb's lettuce, burrata and halved cherry tomatoes onto my plate.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked. She stroked my shoulder.

"It's just not cooling off," I said.

That was new too. It seemed like the hottest part of day kept getting later, as if the age-old idea that you mainly had to keep out of the sun between twelve and three had become obsolete. As if humanity had changed those settings. For weeks now it had been hotter at five in the afternoon than at two o'clock, after which the evening and night took much longer to master the fire.

She left half of her food on her plate.

“Little nauseous,” she said. “Quite often, lately.”

“Because of the heat?” I asked.

“Maybe. Or the food.”

Then she looked at me with big eyes. She pushed her chair back, clasped the cups of her yellow bikini, pulled her shoulders a little inward and said with performed astonishment: “Or I’m pregnant.”

It’s that day she describes in the book that my fellow traveler has in his hands. With eyes and hands he inspects the drawings. But he won’t see it there. Only I do.

By eight-thirty the sun had sunk somewhat. We were sitting at the end of the yard, next to the chicken coop, on a bench in the shade. She’d put her skirt and spaghetti top back on over her bikini. A gray-beige sketchbook was resting against her drawn-up knees. My hands still smelled like fig from the pasta salad.

When Tess draws, the contact between pen and paper is minimum, as though, carefully shading, she were luring something up to the surface that had been waiting below for some time. She writes that way as well. Her letters and words are born from a gentle pressure. I tend to push harder, to carve my words into the paper.

Two pencils lay next to her on the bench. She’d loosely clamped a third, hexagonal grip, the soft graphite of a 4B, between her fingers.

For a while I’d watched the shadow’s slow shift. The evening’s televised discussion on the Tour de France wafted into the yard from another house.

“Look,” she said. She showed me the page.

It was a bird, in miniature, patiently drawn, composed of careful, considered strokes. Plucked from the paper, it would have easily fitted in the palm of your hand. The wings were spread, the head looked up hopefully. The little creature didn’t have an underside—the drawing faded there. It was as though the bottom half could emerge from the surface of the paper at any moment.

“Lovely,” I said. I thought for a second. “More realistic, I think, than what you usually draw.” It touched me, but I didn’t know why.

She put the 4B pencil away and grabbed an even softer one.

I wanted to stop her.

Hold on, I wanted to say, it’s so beautiful already, isn’t it? All of a sudden I was scared she would ruin the bird. That one half was *alive*. That’s what it was. Until that moment I’d

never seen her make anything that alive. So filled with an unfulfilled promise, and yet finished. It didn't need the rest—as a viewer you filled it in, you automatically attributed that part the same beauty as the visible one.

She held the pencil tip above the paper. She hesitated for a moment and gazed out in front of her. The pencil hovered at an angle over her sketch for a moment more, as though she were ready to let herself be steered by a sudden inspiration, would see a tail before her and with another careful stroke try to capture it.

Then her thoughts seemed to take another direction, she put the book aside and stood up purposefully. She plucked a daisy along the garden path and sat back down.

One by one, very calmy, she plucked the petals from the head.

I asked: "What are you doing?"

"Seeing if I'm pregnant."

We watched together. The plucked white fluttered down. At times she paused. In the lives surrounding us, a beam was sawed, coals smoldered on a barbeque, a wind gong chimed. The summery pop of Berry's 'Les passagers' sang out the talk show.

She left the last petal attached. She looked at it for a little while. She stayed seated, very still, all that yes-no-yes-no-yes-no in her lap.

"I need to get a test," she said then. "The stores are about to close."

"Should I do it? If you're not feeling well…"

"No," she said. "I want to walk by myself for a bit."

We lay awake for a long time under the weight of our own house.

She'd come back with a little white box and had taken the leaflet to bed like a novel before going to sleep. It has to be in the morning, she'd said, that's when the test had the best chance of picking up the pregnancy hormone.

"Do you think it's exciting?" she whispered next to me. "Are you scared?"

"Of what?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Not exactly of tomorrow morning."

She turned to me. "Of what, then?"

I took a deep breath and thought of the abyss into which I sometimes felt myself staring. I wasn't stronger than the last thing I'd read or heard about it. A headline above an article could get into my stomach and legs like a fear of heights.

“Whether it’d be fair,” I said. I whispered, just like her, but didn’t know why. There was nobody we could wake up. We’d spoken about this before, that evening when her migraine attack had subsided, and then I’d said more or less the same thing, but in the months after it was as if she’d forgotten it. As though she’d plead insanity as soon as I returned to it—which I didn’t do, precisely because I foresaw and would understand that defense.

But in the gap between the two possibilities I had to say it. I said it as I’d phrased it in my mind many times before. “To put something in motion with a life expectancy stretching far beyond any of the predictions.”

She sighed.

“It won’t be a *something*,” she said. “It can live on its own. It can shape the world. Later, it’ll be able to take off its jacket on its own, bike to school on its own and decide how the world looks on its own.”

“Well I don’t know,” I said. “Whether that’ll still be possible.”

It wasn’t an act of protest for me, like it was for some. Not an ultimatum to those in power: solve this, and quick, or I’ll refuse to contribute to the future of the society you’re overseeing so negligently. Nor was it an indictment of others’ choices, of flying back and forth for a weekend in Barcelona, greedily yielding to Black Friday offers or choosing for progeny without any consideration. In a certain sense I saw in accusing each other of hypocrisy, and with it the possible discouragement of behavior that could actually help, a larger danger than that hypocrisy itself, which after all was ubiquitous—it had become practically inescapable for humanity to sin.

No—it was my best attempt at weighing up everything within the given certainties and uncertainties. At *rationalizing* it, despite knowing she would sneer it away. Rationalizing, she thought, was white-washing emotion, and emotion is the only thing really driving people.

I said: “Every additional life is bad news for all other life.”

She said: “That means it’s good news if a bus with thirty school kids crashes into a ravine somewhere.”

“Now that’s very cynical.”

“But that’s exactly my point, Robin. It’s a logical consequence of *your* cynical thinking.”

It was a wonder we were both still whispering.

I leaned over her and pressed my lips to her soft belly.

“What are you doing?” she asked sharply.

I didn’t know. I didn’t know why I’d done it.

She sat up straight. I got out of bed, I couldn’t continue this conversation while lying down, and asked: “And how do you know then what we should and shouldn’t do?”

She answered quickly, almost instinctively. “I don’t want us to die out.”

“Who?”

“Us. That we don’t die out.” She glanced sideways. “Not we, *humanity*, but *us*. You and me.”

She fell silent and looked away again.

I asked: “How do you feel?”

“Queasy.”

“I meant…”

“I know what you meant, Robin.”

For a long time I didn’t say anything. I stood there. Now and then she looked back, as though wanting to parry my gaze. I rubbed my eyes to escape it. She was stronger than me. Most of the time she was stronger than me.

In her silences I pondered. What do parents promise their child by giving it life? How many good years does that child have a right to? Is a life successful when they’ve lived forty, thirty, twenty, ten years in relative happiness? Once they were big enough to bear the weight of understanding, would they hold us responsible?

But at the same time I’d be shouldering a burden by denying it to her, and us together. Another future: we sleep in and take a walk into the city for breakfast. Across the street a mother with a stroller, and Tess starts to cry.

I didn’t bring all that up. I just thought it.

She dozed off. Her voice, vulnerable and soft, half from under the comforters: “This isn’t our story.”

“What isn’t our story?”

“What you’re saying. What you’re thinking. How you think things are going. It doesn’t have to go that way. That’s not our story.”

She’d said something similar on other occasions. A grim battle at the start of a devastating war had been, over time, bent into an unlikely love between two people who otherwise would have never met each other. She’d derived an unwavering feeling of optimism from her origin story. When I’d once objected that her mother’s twin sister had, despite exactly the same variables, experienced something very different, she’d said: “I think

it comes down to which story you want to be told." She, Tess, had long ago chosen which story she'd been told. Which story she *was*.

She sat up a little again and leaned on her elbow.

I said: "But I don't know if we still have a say over that."

"Sure we do," she said, just as sharply. "We *do* have a say over that."

"I don't get it. I don't get how you can think that."

"Then I suspect we're two different people after all."

I was silent. I went for a glass of water.

"Every generation thinks it's the last one," she said when I was back. She was lying down again. Her voice had something reconciliatory about it. "Just ask your dad."

I hadn't spoken with anyone about the slap. Not with her, nor with him or with my mom. Denial seemed like the only option for dealing with it, for my parents too. They'd postponed consulting a doctor and seeking a diagnosis for as long as possible, as though competing with each for who could shrug it off the longest. But there must have been other incidents, since they'd sought help in the end. The findings: what had once been a mild cognitive disorder had developed into the initial stage of dementia.

My mom became the spokesperson. Not because my dad had deteriorated so much already, but because his tendency to avoid the subject hindered him from using the word himself. She might have said something general about it every now and then, though appeared to see it as her primary task to shield us from it. We needed an acquaintance who had studied medicine to tell us that between the initial and late stage, when there's only an occasional flash of recognition, you've got about five years.

The strange thing was my dad meanwhile had become an open, warmer man—so long as things didn't have to be about *that* and nobody put him on the spot or forced him to face it. He asked how Tess was doing more often. He could suddenly turn up on our doorstep with something he'd cooked. He could call up and say: "I just wanted to hear your voice for a bit."

As for the question of whether I was genetically predisposed, I didn't want to know the answer for now. It could be the case, although the chance wasn't high: at most a couple of percent more than everyone else, and even that would go paired with the possibility of being cured of it. Medical science had high hopes of finding an effective treatment within twenty years. Too late for him, but on time for me. I also told myself I was keeping all my options

open this way, multiple scenarios that could all still be true, which gave me an irrational though comfortable feeling of control.

We couldn't sleep. They were our sheets, but shaped by an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar room. I listened to a dripping faucet.

She said: "Tomorrow morning everything will look very different."

We turned toward each other and turned away from each other. We faced the same direction and then didn't.

"Do you want to check upstairs?" she asked. "See what it's like now?"

The empty street at two in the morning, lit dark-yellow underneath the lampposts. The front door that only opened after a kick against the bottom. Climbing two flights of stairs toward the sun.

34.4 degrees, the picture frame said.

I sat for a while on the stripped bed and listened to the silence in the next room. Sometimes it was like I could hear something. Or *wanted* to hear something. A little cough, a turn in his sleep. Would I get up? Would I put a hand on her thigh and say I'd quickly check? Would I lift him out of his bed and help him get rid of his hiccups? Can a newborn baby sleep in 34 degrees? If I watched over him at night, would that feel like won or lost time?

All the imaginable danger had always come from the side, like a car shooting out of a side street onto the road. Swerving was always possible, and then the flight forward, toward a snow-white arch of unwritten time. Not anymore. The road came to an end. The future pumped the breaks and came reversing, bristling.

I locked the empty house and walked into our downstairs neighbors'. I knew her breathing so well that I could tell from behind the front door she's asleep.

"Afraid" is the word I use with the man in the train. Of what's about to happen. "Half of us, at least."

His flat hand rests on the book. He's taken his glasses off and looks at me from under thick, dark eyebrows.

"And your wife?"

"She isn't. Nothing scares her."

The man nods slowly.

“And you?” I ask.

“Sometimes,” he says. We race into a tunnel. He stands up and closes the window to keep himself intelligible. “Sometimes. And sometimes I’m blissfully happy.” He sits back down and crosses his legs. I notice his white sneakers now, their noses a little dirty. “Listen,” he says, “I’m on my way to the Stuttgarter Musikschule. I teach a master’s in *Klavier-Kammermusik*. This coming year as well. Piano for chamber music. I sit in the train and gaze out the window. I stand in an auditorium, drink coffee and talk for a bit about Schubert, Dvořák and the late Debussy with people who know what I’m talking about. Maybe I’ll play something myself, maybe I’ll listen to some other people play. Talented people. And that’s it. That’s what they give me money to do. I can then take that to a restaurant or a bar, or I can go for a walk in the afternoon sun to Berthold und Schwerdtner on the Königstrasse, and in exchange for that money they let me take a guitar.”

He’s talked us through the tunnel. In the sudden daylight, he opens the window again. When he sits back down, he looks at his hands. “All things considered, it’s never been this way before,” he says. “If the universe is a day old, then this is that one second in which everything is in balance. An exceptional balance. A glitch. So every now and then I think: no, this can’t go on.”

It’s as though the high-speed train lifts him a little out of his seat, tries to make him weightless. He rubs his nose and says: “Shouldn’t we have ourselves something to drink?”

I agree.

Within five minutes, he’s back with two glasses of Bitburger, high, cylindrical, on a short stem, with a light head of foam, as though you could blow on it and it would only flutter back down meters away.

“I meant to ask: do you have children?”

He is halfway through his glass. He narrows his eyes and says he “didn’t exactly have a good example,” making it clear with a hand gesture that it shouldn’t be pursued. He says he left home at sixteen and spent a “dog’s life” certain he didn’t want kids.

“And then?”

“And then I met a woman.”

He says in that period he wasn’t who he is now. Not someone with—he knocks on the khaki-green overcoat on the hook diagonally above him—this kind of coat. Not a lecturer in Stuttgart. “Those people aren’t still hanging around in café Wilhelmina in Eindhoven around one o’clock on a Wednesday night. But I was, at the time. On other days of the week too, but

this was a Wednesday. And she came in. She'd lost her keys. Outside the door perhaps, or inside, she couldn't remember. I grabbed the box with found items from behind the bar. I was there so often, can you imagine: I knew where that box was. They were on top. But by then she didn't need to get back home as urgently."

They fell in love. That was pretty easy, he says. She became pregnant. That wasn't hard either. Things only became hard afterward. He wanted to have it removed. She too at first. But her parents already knew. She was four, five weeks along. "I still don't know how," he says, "but they saw it. Abortion wasn't an option anymore. She'd be disowned, cast out, rejected. So we kept it. We kept it to keep the peace. I'm saying it to you honestly: that was the sole reason."

He says: "And twenty years later, you're standing on a kitchen staircase whiting the ceiling of a student house, and that evening you're holding each other in their abandoned room, and you say: it's so empty here."

He puts his glass to his mouth one last time.

He sets it down and sighs deeply. "So we can be wrong too, right? All of us. Listen, I sometimes also have the idea that we have roughly thirty years left. Half a century, if things go well. By then we'll have squeezed one another's throats shut. And at other times,"—his index finger traces circles along the edge of his glass—"at other times, I'm sure it won't happen. Because I see the students running across the yard to the main entrance on a spring afternoon, under the bright sunshades, and it's damn hard not to believe they're about to change the world. Take it from me, there's not one among them who thinks everything will work out. That we can let things run their course. They're all worried. But they head outside, armed to the teeth with ideas and ideals. They *run* outside."

Perhaps I know too few of those people, I want to say. But I can hear the undertone already. That I would be saying it out of politeness. To smother a discussion I didn't have the energy for before it got going.

A burp. I swallowed too much air with the beer. The train slows.

"What you're scared of never happens," he said. "It's always something else. It's always the next thing."

Then he looks out the window and says: "Frankfurt."

The next morning she woke me up early. "I'm taking that test," she said.

“OK,” I said. “Every result is a good one.” That was something we’d said to each other before. I didn’t know if I meant it this time.

She climbed out of bed, put something on and walked out of the room on bare feet. I sat on a chair and while waiting followed the broad nerves of the tabletop with my fingers.

It took about four, five minutes, maybe longer. Then the bathroom door opened, and then a second door, and then she was standing in front of me again. She looked tired. I looked at the clock and I looked into her eyes.

In a big group, during a party or a dinner, I could watch her for a long time, watch who she was within such a group, and it was precisely then that watching took on an intimacy, seeing her as she was, not in relation to me but precisely as though I wasn’t a number in the equation, as when she told a story to someone, as when with her finger on the menu she asked the waiter whether a dish could be made vegetarian. I could predict her movements, the little laugh she could fling a light social discomfort into oblivion with, the frustrated sigh when searching for one of the countless tubs of Vaseline, hidden in our house, for her cracked lips, the way in which she pronounced her s’s just a little different when she was making a point. That, half-delighted, she would say “oh boy” when we were watching a movie and during a wedding the inebriated witness demanded the microphone for a speech. Her unlikely eye for detail: the precise shape of a maple leaf, colored red by fall, how the curls of the three-year-old girls next door fell, where my favorite shirt was starting to wear. When she read an appeal or policy text of mine, she could notice an unintended double space between two words like a conversation partner’s missing front tooth.

“You always have to wait a bit,” she said softly. “A couple of minutes.” She plucked at the seam of the t-shirt that came to halfway down her thigh.

“Where is that thing?”

“On the toilet.”

We looked at each other for a while. This was a different Tess, I could see that: unusually vulnerable, touched, robbed of something that had always belonged to her. For a moment she looked about to fall to her knees. She sucked in her bottom lip.

I quickly walked over to her and held her.

I asked: “How long do we still have to wait?”

She pushed her head into my neck and said: “I already waited. I know it already.”