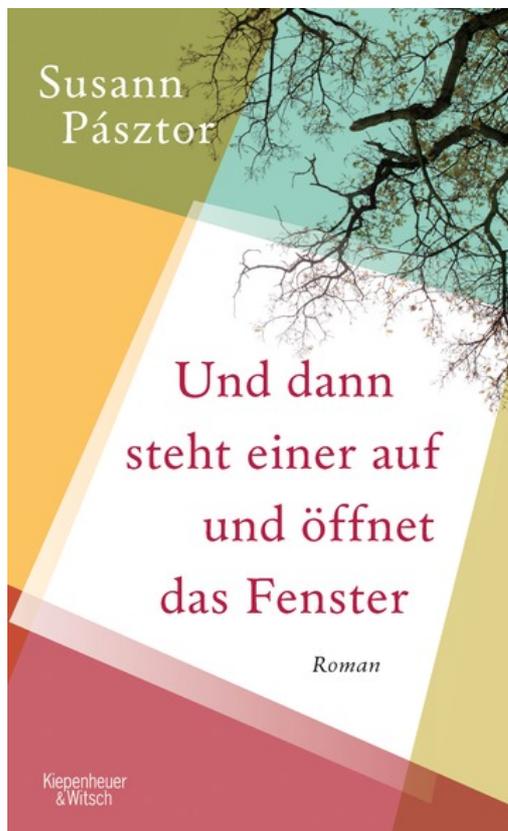


Sample Translation (pp. 7-23 and pp. 38-50)

And Then Someone Stands up and Opens The Window by **Susann Pásztor**

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Fred

A mere ten minutes in front of the main door to Karla's building and Fred's assured state transmuted to anxiousness then barely controlled panic.

She was not keeping him waiting. His was the habit of arriving places with plenty of time to get his bearings. It gave him a sense of security. If he had made an arrangement to meet someone, a rather rare occurrence, he liked to walk up and down a little, then remove himself to where he had a view of the assigned venue, to start his approach when he caught sight of the person in question. Fred was not one for sitting alone in a restaurant exposed by the act of waiting, which might even be in vain. He preferred staying outside, keeping his distance with an eye on the entrance, thus easing the conscience of the person running late by arriving out of breath himself after them, and if he was stood up he could convince himself he hadn't been there at all. When visiting somebody, he liked to use the time gained by his early arrival to take in the building façades, front gardens, shop windows, passers-by or advertising bollards, until it was time to ring the doorbell.

Karla's street had little that invited the eye to linger. Generally he was not drawn to areas like this, too much graffiti on the walls, too much dog's mess on the pavement, too many local bars he wouldn't dream of entering. The house of flats he was standing in front of would have been built at the beginning of the last century, maybe even the end of the previous one, and

it had a down-at-heel, unwelcoming air. Someone had looped a string of Christmas lights over the flower-boxes in the balcony of the raised ground-floor flat, and they illuminated the withered shrubs in blue LED light, blinking on and off at half-second intervals. Karla's flat was on the fourth floor, she had said on the phone. He tried to imagine what Karla might look like, and noticed his stomach was clenched tight with nerves. To help him relax he allowed himself to imagine a face wreathed with gratitude and relief when she opened the door and looked at him. That helped, but only for a moment. He knew he should be channelling feelings of relaxedness, of serenity, but what he felt was fear, pure and simple.

It was time. Before he could stretch out his hand to the buzzer – he had noted its position on the panel the moment he arrived – the door opened and a weedy man in a burgundy tracksuit burst forth, dragged by a mastiff. Fred was thankful it was wearing a muzzle. He mumbled a greeting and slipped past them into the building. Immediately noticing the sign that read “In case of fire, refrain from using lift”, he opted for the stairs. He took them steadily, but when he reached the second floor he was sweating and breathing heavily. The higher he climbed the more he cursed his decision and also the black briefcase he had wedged under his arm, stuffed with unnecessary paperwork that was supposed to lend him a certain gravitas. At least struggling to breathe distracted him from his nervousness. When he eventually reached the fourth floor, he had to resist the urge to

flop down on the top step. That would have struck him as disrespectful of the task at hand; he was simply overweight, but otherwise in good health. He stood still listening out for any sound beyond the door to her flat, but his own heart was pounding too loud to decipher anything else. He would take a couple of moments to regain his composure.

Smile. In one of his handbooks, Fred had read that even a fake smile, if worn long enough, turned a sense of unease into a sunny mood. The brain received signals from this mimicry, presumed it was a happy occasion and began to release the appropriate positive chemical messengers. Positive chemical messengers were the very things he needed. He put on a smile, self-consciously initially, then directed full beam at the door until it suddenly struck him that Karla may long since have been alerted to his presence in the stairwell and be observing him through the spy-hole. His mouth snapped shut and he looked at his watch. Already gone half-past five. She'd be expecting him. He didn't pause to observe whether his mood had lifted or not, but rang the doorbell. When he heard footsteps approaching from the other side, he called out his name and that he was already upstairs, just by her door.

“Fred Wiener,” he said once more when Karla opened the door.

“Hello, Mrs Jenner-García. We spoke on the phone.”

That name. Should the last part be given a Spanish inflection?

Perhaps the first part, too? When they had spoken two days ago for the first

time he had successfully avoided addressing her directly, although before lifting the receiver he had spent a long time instead practising how he would introduce himself. “Yes, hello, Fred Wiener here, your dying companion.” That didn’t sound good. “Fred Wiener, your assigned volunteer palliative carer from the hospice.” Too formal, surely, and with it being such an important job he found the tagged-on “volunteer” a touch demeaning to be honest, for he had after all completed a course of rigorous training. “Your visitor and companion”? He eventually plumped for: “Fred Wiener from the hospice.” That contained the essentials and might prove less daunting to Karla. It had not had the least effect on the quality of their exchange. Karla had been abrupt, merely confirming the appointment and her address, and if he had indeed been brave enough to tackle her full name once or twice, that would have doubled the length of their call. *Would Friday at five thirty be convenient? – Yes. Fourth floor, there’s a lift.*

Now Karla Jenner-García was leaning against the doorframe with an expression that suggested Friday at five thirty was anything but convenient. Fred noticed to his surprise that she didn’t in the least look like a person who was dying. Not the way he had imagined such a person in his mind’s eye, not what he had been prepared for. Pale and slight, yes, but perhaps she had always been pale and slight. Her gaze was intense, her hair long and brunette shot through with single strands of white. She was wearing clothes he found hard to define: was that a dress or a long tunic skimming her

trousers? What he did know for certain was she was sixty years old. And he also knew that she had pancreatic cancer with metastases in the liver and spine, and that it was inoperable. That she had chosen to discontinue chemotherapy and that she had half a year to live at the very most, probably significantly less, that she had private health insurance, was not a member of any church, and by the question about family members there was a mobile number with a question mark next to it. All this was on the patient's information form, which he had received from the hospice management. He had it tucked into his briefcase purely for his own peace of mind, for he knew he wouldn't require it for this conversation.

Karla stood perfectly still and Fred did not dare ask if could come in. If the mumbled "García" had been horribly garbled she would have corrected him for sure. With a name like that a person had to reckon with it being a challenge for others. Karla's gaze moved from his shoes to his briefcase and he understood that he was undergoing a test, but he did not know how to pass it. Wiping the sweat from his brow would be a bad idea although he dearly wanted to. Instead he took off his glasses, for the damp skin on the bridge of his nose was unbearably itchy and he polished the lenses with a ragged paper tissue from his jacket pocket. When he put his glasses back on, the scene was unaltered. On the floor above them a door slammed shut. After a moment's silence there was the clack of high heels and a young woman appeared on the stairs, stumbled, caught her balance,

and continued her dash down. Fred stepped to the side to let her pass. The woman said “Hi”. But it was unclear whether she knew Karla or was simply being polite. Her short hair was dark and tousled, she was wearing leather boots that reached high up her thighs and above that something scanty, transparent, that Fred was as little able to define as Karla’s rigout, and a long blond wig was poking out of her half-open handbag, swaying with every step. The odour of perfume and turpentine she left in her wake was enough to connect Karla and Fred in mutual antipathy and to break the spell.

“Come in, Herr Wiener,” Karla said, stepping back.

She led the way, he followed and he thought that her slightly hunched posture indicated pain or an attempt to avoid pain. He kept his jacket on as she passed the coat-stand without asking him to leave it there. The hallway was long and bare, with black and white photographs he barely glanced at in passing: snapshots from parties? Theatre performances? It was only when Karla led the way into a large bright room – her living-room, he presumed – that he was able to distinguish that most of the photographs were of live concerts: guitarists with hair flying, sweaty singers clinging to microphones and drummers behind gigantic rigouts of drums, ecstatic fans whose hair and clothes spoke of the era of the seventies or eighties. An alien world he had no connection to for he didn’t care for the music of those days nor indeed for more contemporary rock and pop music. If he really put his mind to it he would be able to come up with five classical composers and

the song titles of a dozen or so German hits, but that would be his whole repertoire. Music was a kind of background noise in his life, sometimes pleasant, but more often irritatingly entering his subconscious. Hippies, Woodstock, and free love were a mystery to him. He decided he would look at Karla's photos when there was a quiet moment.

There was little else in the room inviting contemplation. No bookshelves, plants, or personal bits and pieces. There was a music stereo and loudspeakers on the wooden floorboards, and next to them a stack of well-used removal boxes patched with sticking tape from some German removal company with a four-digit postcode. He tried to recall when the five-digit postcodes were introduced. Against the wall opposite stood a lone sofa, on it a rumpled grey blanket that looked like an abandoned cocoon. The temperature in the room was near tropical. Karla pointed to a round dining table in the corner and Fred took off his jacket at last, hanging it over the arm of a chair and sat down, while she filled two glasses with water from a carafe and pushed one his direction. Then she leaned back and observed him in silence. The test wasn't over yet. What did she see when she looked at him? A harbinger of death? A support for difficult times in the future? A sweaty overweight man in his mid-forties?

Although Fred wasn't thirsty he emptied his glass in one draught and placed it firmly on the table. He saw her flinch at the noise and made a

decision. She had requested a companion; he was her companion. It wasn't important where he started, it was simply important that he made a start.

“Your name. Are you from Spain?”

She folded her arms. “I lived there for a long time.”

“Where exactly?” As if Fred knew his way around Spain.

“Ibiza first, then Formentera.”

Unpleasant memories surfaced in his inner eye of a disastrous family holiday. “Ah, Ibiza. I was there once. A while back now.”

Karla nodded politely and disinterestedly. He took a stab at another subject.

“The photos... Did you take them? Great pictures.”

“Do me a favour and cut out the small-talk.”

She didn't say it in an unfriendly way, but determined.

Fred turned bright red and froze. A mistake, he had already made a mistake. What did she want? To talk about death? Her illness?

“I'm sorry,” he said. He did not dare look her in the eye. Instead he stared at the floor and noticed that Karla was barefoot. He had no idea why he was so moved by the sight of her bare feet.

“Herr Wiener?” Karla asked, and patiently waited for his eyes to meet hers. “Can I ask you why you do this? What compels you to attend to strangers who are close to death?”

No question could have delighted him more until now. Not that he was constantly asked it, but at least word had quickly spread among his colleagues that Fred, boring Fred, had started attending mysterious training courses. Palliative care, really? How had he come up with that? Hesitantly at first and then with increasing enthusiasm he had explained that he wanted to make some sort of meaningful contribution to a society that regarded the subject of death as taboo, how it should be brought back to the centre-stage of life where it surely belonged. Human compassion, caring companionship, maintaining a quality of life, a dignified life right up to one's dying breath: those were the things he wanted to show respect for. They had listened to him. And they were impressed, he saw it on their faces.

Check that out, our own Fred, the Wiener sausage, that's courageous. *Boy, I could never do that.* Instead of the usual teasing about his way of life, he now garnered their respect. The hospice brochures and list of events he brought in for them every month were left unread.

It was clear to him that he couldn't voice this to Karla. While he might have gained kudos from the others for his social engagement, it wasn't appropriate to hold forth passionately on the urgency of social need in the company of the sick or dying. Here a simple, modest answer was called for. The truth ideally. Second best, something pragmatic.

"I watched a television programme once about the work hospices do," he said. "I immediately knew that I wanted to be part of it."

“They take everyone then?”

He decided not to regard the question as a personal dig. “Not everyone. We are given rigorous training.”

“But you must get something out of it. You are not paid, are you?”

“No, I work on a voluntary basis.” Fred cast about for a personal remark so that she would stop trying to fathom would-be hidden motives. “What do I get from it? Perhaps I want to learn how to accept that people do die.”

“You want to learn that now? Haven’t you done so already?”

“It’s a long journey,” he said vaguely.

Karla frowned, then apparently inspiration struck. “You haven’t been doing this long, have you?”

Oh no, not already. He would so have liked more time to establish a relationship between the two of them and to win Karla’s trust, and to trust in himself that he could handle this job, although he was a complete novice. He briefly considered saying “More than a year” tacking on his training period which would not have been an untruth, but then he said: “It’s my first time.” He tried to keep his voice steady and confident-sounding.

She looked at him in amazement. Then she attempted a smile, which didn’t quite work, and said: “What a coincidence. It’s my first time, too.”

They were both silent. A myriad of formulations raced through Fred’s brain to pick up from her last sentence – “Then let’s make the best of it” or

“I know what a difficult situation this must be for you” or at the very least “Would you like to know more about me?” – but none of them seemed right. For the sake of doing something he asked: “May I?” and was about to reach for the carafe, but Karla was quicker and knocked over his glass, which seemed to really bother her. She stood up and left the room. She was gone a long time. Fred watched a small trickle of water snake towards the edge of the table. Before it could drip down he caught it with his forearm.

Karla returned with a roll of kitchen towel, tore off a couple of sheets and began to dab the table dry. “I don’t have much time,” she said.

“No problem,” Fred reassured her, reaching for his briefcase. “We can easily make a new – ”

“Perhaps just a matter of months. At the moment, I’m feeling remarkably well, apart from the back pain. I don’t require the nursing service yet, but that could quickly change. I can adjust the pain relief myself. I don’t want to go to a hospice. I want to stay here in my flat. My doctor told me the hospice has staff to look after you at home. He told me these are trained individuals who are able to cope with disease.”

“That’s right,” said Fred, carefully placing his briefcase back down.

“I don’t want to waste any time on conversations that bore me. Conversations about my photos bore me. I’m sorry if I gave you a shock earlier.” She pushed the damp mound of paper-towel to one side and sat down again.

“What would you like to do with the time that is left to you?” At last he could ask her a sensible question that would get them somewhere and coax their discussion into a more peaceful and positive direction.

“Is this your entertainment programme for the dying, Herr Wiener?” Karla asked. “I put together a wish-list and we work through it together? One last outing to the sea? Make a film for posterity’s sake? I’ve never been to a sex shop – that kind of thing?”

“Why not,” he responded cautiously.

“Then you are very romantic, Herr Wiener. When I write lists they are these kinds of lists: ways of dying I would find worse than my own. I write lists of my broken promises and lists of the things I have never believed in. In fact lists are the only things I do write. I can’t find the words for anything else.”

Every *Herr Wiener* pressed Fred a little further back against the wooden back of his chair. He tried to liberate himself by remembering helpful tips from his training: *Situations like this are common. People who are dying are not always agreeable. People who are dying can be indignant, curt, even aggressive while still desiring your proximity.* Be that as it may, Karla had immediately seen through his secret fantasies. Of course he dreamed of happy clients whose last wishes he, Fred Wiener, would discover and make reality with creativity and great skill, the more unusual the better. And, he believed, there was nothing, absolutely nothing wrong with that.

“Do you have family or friends looking in on you?” he asked, steeling himself for the next *Herr Wiener*.

“I only returned to Germany nine months ago, Herr Wiener,” Karla said. “After more than twenty years away. I couldn’t stand the constant sunshine anymore. Other people go to Ibiza to spend their twilight years. I wanted to do it in reverse. It’s gone pear-shaped. But I’ll handle my sunset here on my own, thank you.”

Fred nodded. So, no friends, none to hand at any rate. “And your family?”

She looked at him as if he had asked about the exact number and position of her metastases. Then she stood up, reached for the little pile of soggy kitchen-towel with her fingertips and, turning on her heel, she said: “I have a sister. She is to be informed when I’m dead. As long as I can say that, the moment hasn’t come.”

Call sister, Fred noted in his thoughts. Make contact. Reconciliation. He stretched his legs out in front of him, stretched his aching back and was aware of pressure on his bladder: the water, the nervousness. For a moment he hesitated because it felt awkward but then he called through to where he presumed the kitchen was and asked whether he could use her bathroom. He expected to be directed to a separate guest-loo, but she evidently didn’t have one for there he was in her private bathroom feeling like a clumsy intruder. The heating was on full-blast here, as well. He managed to avoid

treading on her cotton mat with his outdoors shoes, and sat down to pee. Although he had vowed to himself he would adhere to absolute discretion, he couldn't help staring at the barrage of medication on the tray by the sink. There was MST, Retard, Sevredol, Novaminsulfon, and Movicol, the latter in packaging the size of a washing powder carton. Fred hadn't heard any of these names before. He washed his hands and rubbed them dry on his trouser-legs, not daring to use her towel.

On his way back to the living room, he passed the kitchen door, which was open. The kitchen was empty and as warm as the bathroom. On the table was a further array of medication, and between the packages an open notebook. A pen had rolled onto the floor next to the leg of a chair. A poster was pinned to the wall above the kitchen table, the first picture with colour he had seen in Karla's flat. It was a drawing of a skull, half-buried in the yellow desert sand under a bright blue sky, next to it a couple of bones and a gleaming red rose. "Grateful Dead" was written in large letters beneath the drawing, then came dates, cities, and venues. The poster was torn in several places and the bottom right-hand corner was missing. Fred thought the poster in bad taste. He took a step closer and saw the year 1981 sketched in under the drawing, not that it made it any better. When he heard Karla's footsteps in the hallway, he stayed where he was.

“I hung it up again last week,” she said when she saw him in front of the poster. “Because of the irony. And because it meant a great deal to me once.”

“It’s very – unusual,” said Fred, not knowing what else he could say.

“It’s quite horrible,” said Karla, “Unless you happen to find skulls attractive, Herr Wiener?” She began to prod around the packets of medicine, without finding what she was looking for. Fred had the definite impression he was imposing.

“I think I should be on my way,” he said, taking a surreptitious look at his watch: only half-past six. The time he had allotted for the visit had also been generously calculated, he had reckoned on around two hours at least.

“Yes,” she said. Nothing more.

He led the way to the living room to collect his jacket and briefcase. She stayed by the door. He gathered his things and asked, “When would you like me to come next? Or should I call you over the next few days and we can arrange another appointment then?”

“I’m not sure, Herr Wiener,” she said.

“That’s alright. I’ll just give a call.”

“Herr Wiener, I’m not sure whether this – ” her hand drew a spiral with him at its centre, “whether I need this.”

He wasn't prepared for that. Early bumps and wrinkles, yes, there were bound to be those in the getting-to-know-one-another stage, not easy in the circumstances, but whoever requested a palliative companion, knew what they wanted. It must be his fault. Not sensitive enough, or too chatty. The wrong subjects. Perhaps he shouldn't have admitted that he was new. He was too inexperienced for her. If that was the reason there was nothing he could do, everyone had to start somewhere. If he had been assigned a patient in a semi-coma or with Alzheimer's he wouldn't have had this problem, those patients didn't question a person's experience.

"It has nothing to do with you, Herr Wiener," Karla said, studying his face, and it sounded as if she meant it. "Perhaps this kind of support simply isn't for me."

Struck by the thought that the reason she continued to address him by name was because she expected the same in return, he said: "Do take a little more time, Frau Jenner-García." He had spontaneously opted for "Garzia" and found it sounded better than his first attempt. Only then did it dawn on him what a nonsensical sentence that was. She did not have time, she had said so herself. She could neither take her time nor wait a-while.

"I'll call you next week," he said decisively. She waved him aside when he suggested he find his own way out. Walking behind her he couldn't tear his gaze from her bare feet. Her toenails were painted a vivid red. There was a fairy-tale with a princess who could only walk with the greatest of

pain. He couldn't remember any more, but he knew he had read it aloud to Philipp when he was small.

“As I say, I'll call you. Right at the start of next week.” At the risk of making another mistake, he reached out his hand, for it suddenly seemed incredibly important to him that he touched her as they said their goodbyes. If she took his hand it would be a sign that things would continue. He didn't know why he wanted this so much, but he did know how cold her hand would be.

She hesitated, then took his hand and gave it a brief squeeze. “All the best, Herr Wiener.” And then, when the door was already half-closed: “It's fine to call me Frau Jenner, that's enough.”

“Thank you, Frau Jenner,” said Fred, although the door was now closed. The fact she had told him how to address her he took as another sign that they would meet again. He couldn't find the light-switch for the staircase, and was afraid of pressing her doorbell by mistake, or someone else's, so he descended in the dark, the handrail of the bannisters to his left and the muted light from the rear courtyard orientation enough. The further down he went, the louder and the more disagreeable the voices and the cooking smells emanating from the other flats seemed to him. The last door he passed on the ground floor was flung open when he was level with it. For several seconds they stared at each other, the man in the burgundy tracksuit and Fred, both equally surprised by the sight of the other. Then the man

pressed a switch by his door and Fred, blinded by light, fled past the dented letterboxes towards the exit.

[...]

Karla

in one's sleep

whilst playing auto-erotic games

by being beaten to death or having household items fall on you

drowning in inappropriate substances

accidents resulting from one's own spontaneous changing of plans: taking a later train, changing a flight, accepting a lift

alzheimer

in a hostage situation or a terrorist attack

humiliated by pointless chemotherapy

hoping right up to the end

Fred

He called her straightaway on Monday during the lunch break while his colleagues from the office were in the canteen and the light of the December sun was slanting directly onto the frame of the photograph of Philipp on his desk, his first day at school. It was a good moment.

As he listened to the ringtone, his left index finger pushed the crumbs from his lunch into a little pyramid. Next to the file that lay open, and to which he'd be returning after the break, were three foolscap sheets of printed notes about The Grateful Dead that Phil had put together for him. Although he had assiduously read them through twice, and even highlighted a couple of places, he was still puzzled by the information provided. An American rock band, formed in 1965, and disbanded thirty years later, coming into existence therefore five years before he did, and disappearing again without his knowledge. Perhaps Karla's photographs were taken at performances by the band. He wasn't intending to score points through his freshly gleaned knowledge, but it could do no harm to be prepared. The phone rang three times, four times, five times, and by the time Karla answered on the ninth ring and said "Hello?" the little heap of crumbs had become less of a pyramid and more of a crescent moon, and he also had a short message ready for her answering machine. Her voice sounded tired and washed-out. He must have woken her.

“It’s Fred Wiener. Fred Wiener from the hospice. I hope I’m not disturbing you, Frau Jenner. How are you?”

He heard her drawing in air and a moment later breathing it out. She didn’t reply. He resolved never again to ask her how she was, not on the phone at least.

“I was wondering if you might like to go for a walk. Sometime this week. The weather is supposed to stay fine, the so-called pre-Christmas spring. How about it?”

“Thanks for the offer, Herr Wiener. Absolutely not.”

“Ok. Well, then.” Because his desire to do the right thing was always just that bit bigger than his fear of making a fool of himself, he added. “I thought you might enjoy being outside.”

“Sorry,” said Karla. “I would not enjoy it at all.”

“I understand.”

“Like hell you do,” said Karla, and she started to cry. Then she hung up.

Fred dialled her number three times, without success of course, and then let it be. He swept the crumbs from his desk into the hollow of his hand and threw them into the bin. His colleagues returned from lunch, there were two pension applications to process, the day dragged on.

On his way to the car after work he tried her again. No answer. He pondered whether he should get backup from the hospice management

before taking any next steps, but decided against it. Situations like these could be resolved through inner dialogue, too. He simply had to consider what advice he himself would offer in such a situation. And the answer was, as he knew it would be: stay with it. Karla was in a bad way and evidently there weren't many people around to provide support. No one, in fact. She was testing how committed he really was. How could he do anything other than drive over to her? Today? Immediately.

He called home to let Phil know he'd be late back, and Phil gave his customary answer: "No problem!" Although he hadn't expected any different, he was filled with sudden consternation by the realisation of how similar they were in their undemanding natures. The passive resistance that Phil was enacting as regards his mother was the means of self-defence both of them used when things got tricky. He decided he would call Sabine that week and settle the matter of Christmas. He was dreading it already.

He found a parking place directly in front of Karla's building. There was a light on up on the fourth floor, but he couldn't recall for certain whether her windows looked onto the street or the back courtyard. He rang her bell three times, holding his finger down emphatically after the first attempt. Then he tried her again on his mobile. Nothing.

What prompted him eventually to ring Leo Klaffki's bell, there on the ground floor, he couldn't have said afterwards. He simply did it. Perhaps because the name Leo Klaffki was written by hand on the buzzer, perhaps

because he guessed that the name matched the guy in the burgundy tracksuit, and perhaps simply because he was afraid, afraid of dogs, and of dying, and of tasks that seemed too big for him alone. He needed an ally, and that ally's name was Leo Klaffki.

“What is it?” Exactly the sort of voice he'd anticipated came through the intercom.

“My name's Fred Wiener. Forgive the interruption. I was hoping to go up to your neighbour on the fourth floor, Frau Jenner –” (he assumed that Klaffki would know whom he meant without the whole shebang) “ – but Frau Jenner isn't picking up her phone nor answering the door.”

“Then she wants to be left in peace.” As far as Leo Klaffki was concerned, their dialogue was at an end. Fred rang his bell again.

“Frau Jenner is seriously ill,” he said. “I'm worried.” For a while nothing happened, then he heard Klaffki say something to his dog, or perhaps his wife. The door buzzed and Fred pushed it open. Klaffki's dog came towards him in the hallway and greeted him with a wagging tail. He was wearing the muzzle and hung back enough to make Fred feel halfway safe. Leo Klaffki was leaning against the frame of his door and was wearing a Werder-Bremen football shirt.

“She's sick?” he said. “First I've heard of it.”

Was he allowed to mention what was confidential information to someone such as Leo Klaffki? Fred decided this was an emergency and therefore yes.

“I’m from the hospice,” he said, and because the truth felt right, he added: “I’m a volunteer.” He wasn’t sure if Klaffki would know what a hospice entailed.

“Hospice,” said Klaffki. “Oh, shit.”

He ushered the dog back into the flat. He called it Kottke. Fred knew that people often gave pets strange names but he hadn’t heard the like of Kottke before. Klaffki looked at Fred thoughtfully and then turned in the direction of the lift. And thus Fred came to appreciate Klaffki’s capacity for empathy. And learned immediately afterwards to fear the lift. The cabin was narrow and according to the sign by the door could carry 225 kilos or three people, which should be ample, but when the inner folding door had shut and the lift had begun its groaning ascent, Fred started to worry.

“Built in 1908, but modernised in the sixties,” Klaffki said. “We only have a problem if it sticks with me in it. I’m sort of the janitor here.” He pointed to a note beside the buttons for the respective floors. It read: “In case of emergency please contact –” and there was his name and number. Fred recognised the handwriting from the buzzer.

“Does it often get stuck?”

“Sometimes,” said Klaffki, staring at the note.

With a shudder the cabin stopped at the fourth floor, the concertina door opened and Klaffki pushed open the door to the landing. On the mat in front of Karla's flat there was a plastic bag from Aldi packed to the brim. They rang the bell and waited a while. Klaffki pressed his ear to the door and then reported he could hear nothing.

"As the janitor, don't you have a key to all the flats?" Fred asked. Klaffki shot him a tortured look and squatted down to look at the lock.

"The key is probably in the door on the other side," he said. "So I wouldn't be able to do anything anyway. We'd have to call the cops."

"Does that mean that you would have a key for Frau Jenner's flat?"

"To my mind it's not enough of an emergency," said Klaffki, in two minds, and up he got.

Fred basically thought the same. In all likelihood Karla wasn't at home, or maybe she was asleep, or simply didn't feel like answering her telephone or door. Or she was dead, which couldn't be entirely discounted for a woman with cancer. This was the thought that was driving him crazy because he was meant to accompany her through that. For the second time that day he felt helpless and was willing to make a fool of himself so as to do the right thing, and to break down Karla's door with his fists, when suddenly his mobile phone started to ring in his pocket. Leo Klaffki, looking as though any excuse to exit would be welcome, looked at him expectantly

as he reached for his phone and peered at the display. It was Karla's number.

"You've tried to reach me a few times today, Herr Wiener. Apologies for my little breakdown earlier. Everything's fine. I'm alive and well."

"Ah. It's great that you've called." He waved his free hand over at Klaffki to sign the all-clear. Klaffki seemed to get it.

"And if you are still intending to look by this week, I'd be pleased."

"Tell her there's a bag in front of her door," Klaffki's voice boomed round the staircase, penetrated the cracks in doors, and escaped past Fred's hand, which he had hurriedly placed over the mouthpiece.

"Great stuff, Frau Jenner. I definitely will."

"That's not you by any chance, is it? Out on the landing?"

"Yes," said Fred, looking over at Klaffki. Klaffki shrugged his shoulders and stayed where he was, directly in front of her door. They listened as the key turned in the lock and then Karla appeared in the right-hand corner of the doorframe, looking absolutely dreadful, sick and wretched, but there she stood, barefoot, upright, and determined, it seemed, to cast her idiotic companion-unto-death into the wilderness forever, that much was immediately obvious to Fred.

She said, "What the hell is going on?" But then she looked at their faces, gathered what was happening, and started to laugh, a hoarse and rather alarming laugh, but it sounded genuine.

“You brought along the emergency doctor, Herr Wiener?”

“Leo Klaffki,” said Klaffki. “Ground floor, right-hand-side flat. Your janitor, if you ever need anything. Your friend was worried, so I came with him. I see everything’s ok.” He bent down to pick up the shopping bag and held it out to Karla, then lowered his arm and said: “This is a deadweight.”

“Well, then,” said Karla. “A cup of tea it is.”

Leo Klaffki did everything, absolutely everything, just right that evening, Glimpsing the first of the black and white photos, he dropped the bag in delight and shouted, “Hey, isn’t that Jerry?” and then ran from picture to picture, commenting “That’s wild” at almost every one, or asked about the venue and date. Karla answered quick-fire and was evidently amused, no trace of boredom, Fred thought, and realised that a knowledge of music made even a pensioner in a Werder shirt an interesting conversation partner. He couldn’t compete with his three pages of Wikipedia and he didn’t dare utter a single word on the subject. He carried the shopping bag past the living room where Karla’s woollen cocoon lay discarded in the middle of the room next to a pair of headphones, then turned through into the kitchen. Fred heard Klaffki behind him asking, “Listen, were you a Dead Head?” and Karla answering proudly, “Yes, from the seventies onwards” and Klaffki’s protracted “Wo-w-w” in response, as he set about preparing water for tea.

The tropical temperature raged in the kitchen and the rest of the flat as it had during his first visit. Fred started to sweat. This felt right. It was his first care-case and he felt he was giving it his all. He didn't dare explore Karla's cupboards for teabags or a teapot yet, but he was sure that in the not too distant future he would do such things with an air of self-evidence. He filled the kettle with water and switched it on while Klaffki, through in the sitting room, was lauding Karla's sensational headphones, which provided Fred with an explanation for her temporary deafness and Klaffki with further proof of her "awesome taste." Then Karla appeared in the kitchen with Klaffki behind her who, upon catching sight of the Grateful Dead poster, stopped in reverential stance by the kitchen table, which Fred found a little exaggerated.

"And your name's really García? I mean García like García?" Klaffki's voice shook with respect.

"Saves a lot of time if you leave it off," Karla said.

They stayed in the kitchen and drank their tea, and Klaffki seemed to suddenly recall that this was no normal Advent visit to a healthy neighbour, for he refrained from further nostalgic hippy references and seemed thoughtful. The tea was a herbal concoction and not to anyone's taste. Karla pulled out unending supplies of chocolate, gingerbread biscuits and marzipan from the Aldi bag without changing her expression and returned it all. And then she turned to Fred. "And what about you, Herr Wiener?"

“I’m very happy to have reached you today,” said Fred.

“Yes,” said Karla. “It’s actually very nice what you did. It’s just, I don’t think I would always be thrilled by such endeavours.” She took a gulp of tea, coughed, and put her cup down. “Today, for example, I am only pleased because the hellish pain of the last forty-eight hours has stopped and the morphine regulation is better. I am doped up to the eyeballs like I haven’t been for ages. It’s like the good old days, Herr Wiener. And it helps.”

Klaffki nodded enthusiastically. Fred felt excluded.

“That’s the main thing, Frau Jenner,” he said and hoped that no one noticed his deficiency. He knew what it was like to be drunk, doped up he could just about imagine, but forty-eight hours of hellish pain he could not. “That it helps, I mean. Whatever it is.”

Karla didn’t respond. Klaffki, who in spite of his light clothing had beads of sweat on his brow, again knew the right thing to do and said: “I’ll be off. Kottke will go crazy otherwise. Thanks for the tea, dear neighbour.”

“His dog,” said Fred.

“Leo Klaffki and the dog’s name is Kottke?” said Karla. “Brilliant”

She nodded at him in approval and Klaffki grinned broadly as if this was an insider’s joke, and Fred’s sense of exclusion grew. When Klaffki stood up, he remained seated to show that the duration of his audience with Karla wasn’t dependent on a yowling mutt on the ground floor. To his great

relief Karla didn't ask him to leave, but simply asked Klaffki to place the bag back in front of the door to her flat where he had found it.

“No need for me to understand, right?” Klaffki asked.

“No,” said Karla benignly.

She remained seated in the kitchen with Fred when Klaffki had left.

The floorboards in the flat above creaked.

“If you're going to be my companion, then you'll have to understand that sometimes I'll withdraw and won't be reachable, Herr Wiener,” said Karla after a while.

“And how will I know whether you just need your peace or when it's an emergency?”

“Herr Wiener.” Karla looked at him as if he hadn't grasped something fundamental. “I'm going to die, right? I do not want to be rescued.”

“You might suffer unnecessary pain.”

“I don't know what is necessary and what is unnecessary. But I do not want you and your friend hanging around my apartment door simply because I haven't answered the phone a couple of times.”

He felt a little hurt, but simply said: “Understood.”

“I'm not so sure that you have really understood me, Herr Wiener. I think you are a kind man, and deserve to be treated kindly, but when I feel

like being a recluse, I don't want to waste a moment wondering how you'll react to my behaviour."

"That's alright, Frau Jenner."

This time she seemed to believe him, or perhaps it was all the same to her whether it was all right with him or not. It was important to him that she did believe him. He wanted to say something that would deepen her trust in him, but nothing came to mind, so instead he sat quietly, staring at his hands. He was sweating. And he had to get home.

"And nor do I want to be responsible for the unhappy expression on your face just now, Herr Wiener."

Fred pulled himself together. "My son's waiting for me at home. I'll have to go, I'm afraid." He gathered up the teacups and carried them to the sink, rinsed them and left them to dry. She let him. He picked up his jacket.

"Are we still planning for me to look by again this week?"

"I'll call you," Karla said. "Perhaps I will feel like going out. As long as I'm able."

She escorted him to the door. When they were about to say their goodbyes, they both started talking at once.

"You go first," said Fred.

"How old is your son, Herr Wiener?"

"He'll be fourteen next year. I'm divorced. He stays with me."

Karla nodded. "And now your turn."

“Why did you decide to stop chemotherapy? Am I allowed to ask you that?”

“Because it made me feel so lousy that the hope of a few extra weeks at that price struck me as absurd.”

Her answer stayed with him, long after he was back behind the wheel and driving home. It churned inside him. He wrestled with it, he argued against it. He stopped at a red light and called Karla a coward. He called her arrogant and presumptuous. He wanted to lecture her, convert her, heal her, even against her will.

He stopped at a snack bar and ordered two burgers and fries to take away. The smell in the car comforted him. It was only when he opened his own front door that he remembered that when he had left, the bag in front of Karla’s door had vanished.

[END OF SAMPLE]