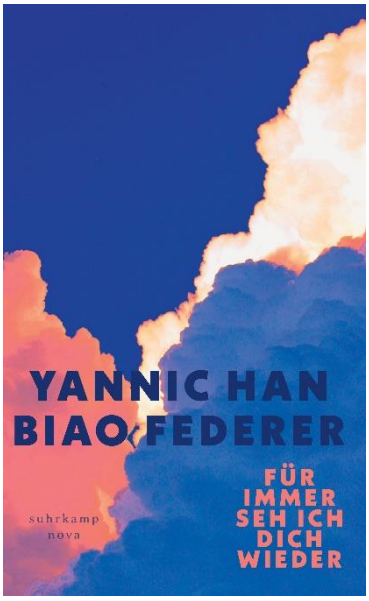

Yannic Han Biao Federer

I See You Everywhere, Forever

(Original German title: Für immer seh ich dich wieder)

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I

It's already late but we run to the supermarket, we're having some friends over on Saturday. Charlotte goes though the invite list, I lug the crates onto the shopping cart, Kölsch and Helles, soft drinks and non-alcoholic beer, chips, pretzels, crackers, Pocky sticks. Then, exhausted, we silently eat some salad, she goes to bed, I go to my desk, turn on the computer and the desk lamp, open my book. I work until four, at four thirty, I lie down and am out in a second.

I wake up with a start. She's standing in front of me, something's not right, it's eight o'clock. Her stomach hurts, she says, here, not too bad, probably nothing, maybe gas from the salad, or false contractions, strained ligaments. She's going to go the doctor, just to be sure, you stay in bed, she says, are you sure, I ask, yeah, of course, don't worry, and she walks out the door.

Her voice from behind the door, something's not right, I fling off the covers, she's standing in the hallway. She wouldn't take me, she says, who, I ask, the doctor, she says, said I should go to the hospital. Why? I ask, no idea. She looks at her phone, maybe the practice is

full, or she wants to get away on time, start her weekend. I'll take you there, I say, grab a shirt from the chair, a pair of trousers, yeah, good, she says, doubles over a little. What is it, I ask. I dunno, she says, grabs her stomach, it hurts, and I feel kind of queasy.

We call again, we're heading over, we say, the doctor's assistant says okay, but it's at our own risk. Man, what's their problem, I say. Yeah, says Charlotte, what's their problem. Then we look for the closest hospital, they don't want us either, no neonatal unit.

A dinged-up VW Golf in front of us, it's absolutely dawdling, I can't overtake it, it shuffles into the turning lane in slow motion, creeps along the onramp and then merges with the traffic. Charlotte starts to cry as we cross the bridge. He's dead, she says, I can't feel him anymore, he's dead. Stop it, I say. I say, we'll do the whole catastrophe thing when it gets here. I really say that. Let's just get to the hospital, I say.

We finally arrive at the parking lot of the gynaecology unit, a beige Audi is sitting in front of the boom gate, I pull in behind it, the tail lights flash, the driver glances in the mirror, I swear, flap frantically, put the car in reverse, the engine squeals, the car jumps up onto the sidewalk with a jolt, the woman in front of us could reverse out now, but she changes her mind, takes a ticket and rolls inside. I swear some more, shuttle around, crane out the window to press the button, follow her, there are no spots, it's all full, I can't think, I curse and curse, I turn behind the woman in front and go back out onto the street and around the block.

Just let me out, says Charlotte as we get close to the entrance again, there's a truck in front of us blocking half the street, a delivery guy pushing palettes off the tailboard, the cars going the other way are squeezing past him, yeah, I say, okay, she gets out, throws her backpack over her shoulder, her red scarf fluttering above her coat, somewhere, a car honks.

I snake aimlessly through the streets, see a sign, follow it, but the parking spots are fenced off, construction work, I keep driving, finally, a spot in front of a shop, I rummage around

for change in front of the machine, I don't have any change, a convenience store across the road, I hand the guy a note, can you break this. He shakes his head, everyone pays with notes, always notes notes notes, no one has change. Fine, I say, place a muesli bar on the counter along with the note, he keeps on muttering as he grabs the coins from the till, notes notes notes, my phone rings, her photo on the screen, I pick up, the man gesticulates with the coins in his hand, do I need ones or twos, is this okay, yeah that's fine, a stranger on the other end, sir? where are you, where are you, please come to the delivery room, please come right away.

I still can't think or my thoughts are all gibberish, I mutter under my breath, I curse, terrified and helpless, take the coins from the counter while the man goes on about notes notes notes, I run to the machine, grab the slip of paper from the slot, place it behind the windscreen, lock the car, make a note of the street number I've parked in front of, rush over to the hospital.

Later, I tell this story so many times. That I actually paid for the parking ticket and placed it inside the car, even took note of the street number, forty-two Zülpicherstrasse. The fact I even looked for a spot instead of just leaving the car outside the entrance, hazard lights flashing, doors open, whatever.

Straight ahead, they say at reception, I follow the man's arm, walk down a corridor, it winds through the building, a closed door at the end of it with an intercom, I press the button, say something, it buzzes, another long corridor, someone pulls me into a room.

She's lying there half naked, her pants scrunched up between her legs, stained with blood, she's been bleeding, a doctor next to her looking at a screen in silence, moving a probe over her stomach. All around us people in green and blue. Charlotte looks at me. She cries. She says: he's dead. His heart's stopped beating. I cry too, can't see anything, try go over to her but I can't, someone pulls my backpack from my shoulders, my heavy jacket, pulls me to the side, tells me to stand there.

The head doctor speaks slowly and calmly. A haematoma has formed between the placenta and the uterine wall, he says, the placenta detached prematurely, stopped providing our son with nutrients, there is no detectable a heartbeat. The haematoma was completely enclosed, it was underneath the placenta, nothing was coming out that could have been noticed, it only just ruptured now, hence the blood. He's so sorry, he says. This is a very, very rare complication, he says. No, he says. No, you did nothing wrong, he says. No, stop that, you did nothing wrong. No, he says, there was nothing you could have done. No.

Then he says something about a natural birth, it does come with certain risks, but it's still possible, behind him, the midwife starts to get agitated, as he leaves the room, she comes over to us, bends over towards Charlotte, grabs her by the shoulders. You don't want a natural birth, she says. You want a C-section. Charlotte nods. Wipes her cheeks. Yes, she says, yes, please.

They take Charlotte out into the hall, I grab our bags and jackets, stagger along behind them, there's an awful racket in the birthing room, construction work being done on the façade outside, as if the drill was gouging right into my temple. They heave her from the stretcher onto a bed, access points are poked in her arm and her hand, electrodes are taped to her body, a clip stuck on her finger, brightly coloured cables dangling from a monitor showing her blood pressure, ECG, oxygen saturation. The operating theatre is still being used, someone says, you can operate in half an hour. The midwife bends down to her, come here love, she says, and wraps her arms around her. The anaesthetist gives her a clipboard, asks her questions, what medications have you taken, any known allergies, then he explains what's about to happen. I'm scared, she says, we'll take care of you, he says, will I wake up, she says, we're going to look after you, he says, we'll take care of you, but he doesn't just say: yes. She is pale, she looks up at me, says, call everyone, tell them what's going on, I nod, as if I knew what was going on, as

if I could explain it, I step out into the hall, a man with a Maxicosi in his hand, the look on his face, it makes me realise how I must look.

I call Charlotte's sister. Our son is dead, I say. What, she says. What. What. How. That can't be. She cries. I say, they're taking her into surgery. What. What happened, she says. What happened. Sorry, I have to go, I say. I call her mother. Our son is dead, I say. They're taking Charlotte into the OR now. What, she says, what happened. What. I'm sorry, I say, I've got to go, I have to. I call her other sister, she doesn't pick up. I call my mother. While I'm talking to my mother, her sister calls back. Then I call my father.

I'm back in the room, Charlotte looks sallow, her lips drained, I don't feel good, she says, I really don't feel good. Things get hectic, more and more coloured scrubs coming in and rushing out, yelling in the corridor. She looks at her monitor, oh god, she says. We'll take care of you, someone says, turns the screen around, obviously an anaesthetist, her colleague from before is gone, must be at the other operation, I think, we'll look after you, here we go, she says, they open the door across the hall, the room doesn't look like an OR. They roll her over anyway, I want to go with them but the midwife says: you can't, general anaesthetic, she'll be intubated, can I give her a kiss, I say, yeah, of course, she says, but her body language says, no, or: make it quick, everything needs to be quick now, I can barely get through to her, I kiss her, say something, she says something back, then I'm standing in the corridor.

Did I know at that moment how important it was to have given her that kiss, because it could have been the last one, a goodbye surrounded by cables, tubes, panic, terror? Is that why the midwife let me, because she had sensed it too, even though we were running out of time to prevent this death, to at least prevent the second one?

They're still hammering open the façade on the other side of the wall, a midwifery student is with me, I'll take you over, she says, it's quieter over there, okay, I pick our jackets and bags up off the floor, Charlotte's bloody jeans, underpants, her singlet, leave that stuff, she

says, I'll grab that in a minute, I'll bring everything over, come on, and she places a hand on my back, where do they learn that, how to comfort people like that, no, I say, and search for the second sock, can't find the other sock, I want to find the other sock, it's lying between the exercise ball and the birthing bed.

Then I find myself alone in birth room number four, dimmed lights, paper cups and bottled water. I stare at the birthing bed, at the changing table, at the scales for the first weighing; I stand up, look out the window into the courtyard, it's dark and empty. I call Alex, don't get through, I write, can you pick up. Please. Hey, he says, clears his throat, hey, what's up? Our son is dead, I say. We're at the hospital. Oh my god, he says. What happened. The placenta detached, I say, it stopped providing him with nutrients, my little boy died, just like that. Oh god, Yannic, he says, I'm so sorry. I'm scared, I say. I'm scared that I'm going to leave here alone. What's going on with Charlotte, he says, how is Charlotte. I don't know, I say. They're operating on her. I'm scared, Alex. If I have to leave here alone. If I leave here alone. Her mother calls, I say, Alex, her mum is calling, he says, yeah, yeah, of course, I say, hello Doris. Then I call my father. We're at the hospital, I say, our son is dead. Oh, he says. He says, oh, oh no. I say, it's so awful, it's so horrible, how can this be happening. It's not fair. It's wrong. I say, Charlotte is in the OR now. I'm scared, I say. I cry into the receiver. Oh, goes my father. I'm so sorry.

Alex writes: Yannic, if you want to talk more, just call me, okay? Anytime. I'm here.

Her mother writes: Don't forget to tell them she's been taking blood thinners. We don't want her to bleed out.

My mother writes: Your message is so sad. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Tell Charlotte that I'm really sorry and that I'm sending her love and strength to get through this. You too. I wish I could hug you and comfort you. I'm still in total shock. I can hardly believe it. All my

love to both of you. Then she calls, I don't answer, I just look into the courtyard. A salty film on my glasses, I rub them with the cloth, it does nothing.

The head doctor. Your wife is still in surgery, he says, but she's out of the woods. I say, okay. Okay, I say. He asks if I want to see our son straight away or if I want to wait until she wakes up. When she wakes up, I say. He asks if we would like pastoral care. Yes, I say. Catholic or Protestant, he says. Protestant, I say. The hospital has its own cemetery, he says. I know that's a little unusual, but it's a product of certain historical circumstances, in any case, there is the option of having him buried in a communal grave, we wouldn't have to organise anything, there'd be no costs, they would take care of everything, and the parents get invited to the funeral service, we don't have to decide straight away, we should think it over. Of course, we can also get a private funeral provider to pick up our son, can bury him ourselves. Yes, I say. We'll bury him ourselves. Very well, he says, good, I just wanted to let you know. But if you'd prefer to— Yes, I say. We'll do it ourselves. Good, he says. All right. Okay, I'll let the pastor know. I nod, say, thank you, yes. And your wife will be here as soon as she's awake. Okay, I say. My sincere condolences, he says, I truly am sorry.

She's already half awake when they wheel her in, immediately starts babbling. My boy, she slurs, my little boy is dead. How can that be. I hold her hand, kiss her lips, they're dry and chapped. Coloured cables hanging from the monitor with her vitals, a tube dangling from the blood-pressure cuff, then the drip, catheter, surgical drain.

The midwife comes with the trainee, it's the end of their shift, they hug us, they say, we'll be back, yeah? Write to us, please, and then we'll come and talk again. Yes, we say. Yes, thank you. Okay, take care, they say.

There's a knock at the door, the midwife from the night shift, she hands me a slip of paper. Can you please write down your name? Of course, I say. Of course. Thanks, she says, then leaves us alone, I sit down on the bed, between the urine bag and the drainage bottle.

Gustav, I say, he's a Gustav, right? Yes, says Charlotte, of course, Gustav. Our little Gusti. Then I look up the Chinese name that my aunt wanted to take to the temple, I say, we'll have to decide that on our own. Okay, she says. Tian Ming? I ask. Yeah, she says, heaven and light, right? Yeah, and it means dawn. That's nice, she says, yes, Tian Ming. I nod, write it down.

The monitor beeps, giving us a start, what's that, she says, I don't know, I say, press the buzzer, a nurse opens the door, takes a look at the machine, just a malfunction, that machine's a bit finicky, nothing to worry about, she pokes around on the touchscreen, the notice disappears. As soon as she leaves the room it beeps again, I buzz again, it takes a while, then she's back, mutes the monitor, don't worry, she says, we can see it over at the desk anyway. Later, the anaesthetist comes, asks Charlotte how she's feeling, clicks here and there on the screen, and then pulls the cables out of the electrodes and peels the electrodes from her skin. Do I not need them anymore? she asks the doctor. The anaesthetist shakes her head, no, you don't need them anymore. My stats are okay? Yes, the doctor nods, they're all perfect. Good, she says. Because I don't want to die. No, says the doctor, that's not going to happen. Good, says Charlotte, thank you.

They bring us Gustav in a little basket, his face is peering out from beneath a blanket with cats, elephants, and bears on it, all sitting happily on a sort of swing, or holding onto it with their little paws, each swing is dangling from ropes that are attached to turquoise-coloured stars, the animals are carrying the children through the night, and they are happy about it, one of the kittens is even giggling. Beneath it, Gustav is wrapped in a towel, and he's also wearing a beanie made of grey-green wool, the band beige. The midwife pulls back the blanket and the towel, lifts him up carefully, gently, knitted socks on his feet, also grey-green and beige, grey butterflies on his onesie.

I'll lie him down on your chest? Charlotte looks at the midwife, okay, she says, but I can see that this is all moving too fast for her, that she's frightened, that she might have wanted

to look at him in his little basket first, hold one of his tiny hands, the midwife leaves her no time for that, she says, do you want to pull up your operating gown a little? Like this, asks Charlotte. Yeah, perfect, says the midwife, that's the way.

Could you take some photos? Yes, I say, yeah, of course, I stand up, look for my phone, take some photos: Charlotte, crying, Gustav lying across her chest under her blanket, her right hand resting protectively on his shoulder. Charlotte and Gustav in the same position, Charlotte looking down at him. Photographed from the side: Gustav's face nuzzled against her body, her fingers enveloping his tiny arm, the corner of her mouth above it bent, tense. Then Charlotte's thumb and index finger holding his hand. Then Gustav's hand on my outstretched left hand. Then his hand enclosed in mine. Then a portrait of Gustav, his elbows bent, a kind of questioning gesture, but peaceful, as if nestled in a deep slumber.

I pick him up, am afraid I'm going to do something wrong, you can't do anything wrong, says Charlotte, but I'm not sure that's true. His feet in the hollow of my elbow, his shoulder pressed up against my stomach, his head in the palm of my hand, his face looking toward me. I weep. I stroke his nose, his cheek, and his mouth and eyes move slightly, at one point, little wrinkles form on his brow, as if I'm disturbing him as he drifts in and out of sleep. And he almost seems to be breathing, his little body shifting up and down, but it's just my body that is moving beneath him, the lobes of his lungs never got the chance to expand, were never filled with air, he never screamed, never whimpered, nothing, and as I caress him and talk to him, I realise that I will never see his eyes, will never find out what colour his irises are, what it's like to be seized by those eyes, to recognised by him, first as a hazy outline, then as a person, and at some point, as a father. What it's like to be called Dad.

Oh, little Gustav, I say. This isn't how it was supposed to be. It's really not how it was supposed to be. And I say: hello. Hello little Gustav. Hi. Hey. Hey little guy. I say: my son is

dead. My poor little son is dead. How can that be. How can that be. It's so unfair. It's so wrong. It can't be real. It can't be.

I take a photo of Gustav lying in my arm. I take selfies of the three of us. Charlotte says, give me that, I pass her the phone, then she takes some pictures of father and son.

The pastor arrives. She says how sorry she is. She gives us a little metal figurine of an angel, I think it's brass or copper, it sits cold and heavy in my hand. I say, how am I supposed to believe in a god who took my son away. She looks at me. Mm-hmm, she goes, nodding her head. I don't mean it rhetorically, but she just stares at me, at some point she says, I could give your son a blessing if you like. Okay, I say. She says a prayer, I hardly hear a word, I just see her wiping rose water on his hand, on his forehead, and I cry onto his onesie, my nose is running, it's dribbling into my beard, I hear Charlotte on the bed, she's sobbing. Amen, says the pastor, amen, whispers Charlotte, I say nothing, or maybe I say thank you.

I think she was Catholic, Charlotte says later. God, insult to injury, I say. We laugh.

At some point, the midwife comes back, she says, it worked, we've got a family room for you. Oh, that's great, says Charlotte. Yes, I say, great. I help the midwife to tow the bed into the middle of the room, we place Gustav back in his basket and the basket at the foot of the bed, where I can keep an eye on him while the midwife pushes from the other end, she asks if we should cover his face, because of the people outside, no, I say, he's beautiful, let everyone see him. Yeah, says Charlotte, and the midwife says, yes, of course, and if anyone says anything, they'll have to go through me, okay? Yes, I say, thank you. Not at all, she says. There's something about her voice, I think, the way she speaks. It helps, it holds us. She pulls out a metal rack from under the bed, I throw our bags and jackets onto it, I shove Charlotte's clothes into a tote bag, then we walk out into the hall. Presumably there are people standing around, presumably they're looking at us, I hardly even notice them, I'm too busy battling with the

inertia of the vehicle, at one point I press a button to open a door and look at my son, at Charlotte, at her tubes and bags, making sure they don't get caught on anything.

In the lift I think: presumably there are people standing around, presumably they're looking at us, I hardly even notice them, I'm too busy battling with the inertia of the vehicle. Then I shake myself, hate myself for the fact that my head is already doing this voice, that it's testing and weighing up how I would word things, how I would tell the story, how I would arrange sentences one after the other, where I would leave something out and where I would add an embellishing detail. Later on, I say, hey, it's really bad, I can't stop myself, what can't you stop, she says. I have this incessant literary voice in my ear describing what's going on, it's like a radio behind my temples, jabbering and blathering, as if this were all research, as if this were for a text, but it isn't a text, it's real, this is real life, this is our little son, and he's dead, and— Charlotte shakes her head, of course you're going to write about Gustav, are you crazy, of course you'll write about him. You think? I ask. Absolutely, she says. I *want* you to write about him. I'd be offended if you didn't, this is our son we're talking about.

I need to go to the bathroom, I'm thirsty, she says, me too, I say, give me a second, I'm just going to wash my hands. There is soap and disinfectant in the bathroom, I use both, then I place a glass in front of her on the table, twist at the carton of water, don't understand the mechanism, I hurt myself, there's a knock at the door, it's the nurse, says she can bring us something to eat if we tell her what we want, but we can also get something from the buffet ourselves, okay, I say, I'll grab something myself, fair enough, she says, and leaves the room. I fill the glass and pass it to Charlotte, she can't sit up straight because of the incision and the stitches, has Gustav in her arm as well, the water dribbles out of the corners of her mouth, left and right, oh, I go, pull some paper towel from a dispenser on the wall, pat down her throat and her chest. Did any get on Gusti? she asks, no, I say, nothing got on Gusti, and I refill her glass, she tries again, this time I hold some paper towel under her chin, which works, that's enough,

she says, thanks. I drink some too, am about to go to the bathroom when the nurse reappears in the doorway and says I should come, the buffet's about to close, yep, okay, I say, I'm coming. Good, she says, and leaves the door open. I look for my mask, can't find it, I ask Charlotte what she wants to eat while I rummage around in my jacket pocket, look in my backpack, among the clothes, she says, I don't know, what is there, no idea, I say, I'll take a look, I finally find the mask in my trousers. I scuff down the hallway, past the break room and the nursing station, the storeroom and kitchen, behind it the cafeteria counter, where a man is standing. I take a photo and say, sorry, I just can't remember anything at the moment, no worries, he says. I'll be back in a second, he looks at his watch, okay. Back in the room, I look at the screen and run through everything, there are apples and pears and kiwi fruit, there are biscuits and fruit yoghurt, salad, bread, cold cuts, I don't know, says Charlotte, just grab me something, I go back, order kiwi fruit, biscuits, yoghurt, two slices of wholemeal bread, two of multigrain, cheese, and a sausage I call bologna, but which the man says is not called bologna, no, that one is bologna, but you wanted this one here, right? And something to drink? Peppermint tea, I say, make it two, the man looks up. Is your wife breastfeeding? No, I say, our son died. She has to suppress her supply. Oh, he says, oh, I see. He turns around, pumps hot water from a big thermos. As he places the cups on the counter he looks at me again, my condolences, he says, thank you, I say, would you like some of the other meat? he asks. No thanks, I say, that's plenty. Or some more cream cheese? Thanks, I say, that should be enough. Butter? Already got some, thanks. My condolences, he says again. Thank you, I say, thank you, taking the tray from the counter. Back in the room, I place it on the table and say, now I'm going to the toilet. Yeah, go for it, she says, but then the nurse knocks, she has swabs with her, shoves them down our throats and then into a little tube that she labels, then she throws back the blanket and pulls up Charlotte's surgical gown and rubs a kind of long cotton bud on her groin, left and right. What's that for? I ask. Hospital pathogens, she says. The second she walks out the door, the phone rings, Charlotte's family is at reception.

[…]

The bell rings, I spit into the basin, look for my pants, open the door, hello, says Juliane, hello, I say, and motion toward the living room where Charlotte is lying, I bring over glasses and some water, she asks how it's going, it's a lot, I say, it's still a lot. Have to go to the cemetery today and sign papers, get bouquets for the guests, have to decide what we want to bury with Gustav, have to issue the undertaker a power of attorney, pick up the official documents, we also wanted to grab some drinks and a photo frame that goes with the coffin. Charlotte says, yeah, he's just spinning his wheels, well it's all got to be done, I say, the grief will catch up with you at some point, says Juliane. Later I ask myself what that's supposed to mean, what the grief she was talking about looks like, and how she knows when it's there and when it's not, when it wants to come and go, how it expresses itself, shows itself. Or if Juliane will end up turning out to be right, if I'll wake up someday when it's all over, the funeral, all the paperwork, and I'll never resurface again, have no energy left, not be able to tolerate the light, just lie there, grumbling, wishing I were in the grave. Juliane writes down the name of a tea for the bleeding, then she disappears. Christiane gets in touch, asking if we need anything, I make a list.

Down on the street, half the road is cordoned off, there's a note stuck to the door, they'll be shutting off the water on Thursday, between nine and twelve, urgent repair work, they ask for our understanding. I lug the groceries up the stairs, muttering and cursing, but powerless, anxious, I show Charlotte the paper, what's next, she whispers, what's next. I dial the number on the notice, clench my jaw through the tootling while I put the cheese and eggs in the fridge, yes, hello, I eventually say, and explain who I am, where we live, that we have to bury our son, that we will have funeral guests at our house on that day, that they need to change the dates for their construction work, please, whenever they want, for as long as they want, just not on

Thursday, please, not on Thursday. Oh god, says the man, oh god, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Then he hesitates, thinks. Listen, he says, I need to make some calls, I'll ring you back, takes my number, thank you, I say, hang up, put the bread in the breadbasket, the frozen pizza in the freezer, am still unpacking the shopping when my phone starts to vibrate. Yes, hello, Breidenbach again from Rheinenergie, Mr Federer, would it help if we wait until twelve to shut off the water? Would that do? No, no, I say, that's even worse, please, you can shut it off tomorrow, on Wednesday, on Friday, next week, for the whole month of March for all I care, but please, not on Thursday. Oh, he goes, mm-hmm, I hear papers rustling, a keyboard, mm-hmm, he goes again, yes, just a second, I'll call you back, and hangs up. Outside, parakeets are screaming in the trees, a plane descends from the clouds, stretching its belly toward the earth, I collect dirty laundry from around the house, empty the basket, he calls straight back. Hello Mr Federer, Breidenbach from Rheinenergie, listen, I'll take any flak there might be for this one, we'll move the date, don't worry about it. Oh, thank you, I say, thank you so much, bah, he says, not at all, my sincerest condolences, best of luck with everything, goodbye.

I wake up the next morning, hear a door slamming, hear voices, they're yelling things to each other, something beeps, something bangs, I get up, walk over to the window, there are people in hi-viz vests down on the street taking down the notices and posting new ones, someone drags a traffic marker onto the bed of the truck. Check this out, I yell, it's Rheinenergie, I can't, she calls out, ah, yeah, of course, I say, wait a sec, and I take a video, show it to her, how good are they, she says, yeah, I say, for Gusti.

It's already late and almost dark by the time I race up Gotenring, in the distance I see the man by the shutters, he wants to close, but he's just standing there, one hand on the metal handle, the other perched on his side, he's listening to a guy with a backpack, for immigration office, he says, residency permit, please, so a normal passport photo? asks the photographer, the man nods, yes, normal passport photo. All right, he says, waving him in, looks at me, I say,

could I maybe come in too, he shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head, but says, yeah all right, come on. The other guy puts down his backpack and jacket, sits down in front of the canvas backdrop, shoulders facing this way, says the photographer, he positions the lens, I walk through the shop, look at photo frames, grab one with a black metallic frame, and then a second one made of wood, but I'm unsure. Behind me the shutter, several times, okay, says the photographer, there should be one in there, the man's jacket swishes, then they look at the monitor together at the counter, that one, says the man, and that one, the photographer clicks around on the computer, humming as he goes, at some point, the machine begins to rattle, to beep, photos fall lethargically from its jaws, thank you, says the man, thank you very much, and pays. Okay, says the photographer again, this time it's directed at me, his arms are propped on the counter by the till, could you maybe give me a hand, I say, I need some photo frames for a funeral, for next to the coffin, what do you think, are these okay. He tilts his head to the side. A little small, don't you think? It's a small coffin, I say. He looks at me. Hesitates. Nods. Steps out from behind the counter, walks over to the shelves, pauses there a moment, grabs a black, lacquered frame made of wood, this one, he says, with a passepartout that'll look good. Or this one, a little lighter. Okay, I say, yeah, great, thanks, I'll take both. If you need anything cut to size, he says, just drop by, I'll take care of it for you, no charge. Thanks, I say, that's so kind of you. Of course, he says, not at all. I hold my phone up to the terminal, three diodes light up, it beeps. As he shows me out, he pauses for a second, turns to face me. We had the same thing with our Simon, that's eleven years ago now. I look at him. He presses his lips together, so do I. It's a real shit, huh? I say. I really say that. I can't think of anything better. Neither can he. He just says: sure is. I walk out onto the street, say goodbye, he says, my condolences, take care now. I say: thank you. Thank you. Bye. He pulls the grill down in front of the façade with a rattle.

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VI

At some point, I suddenly realise that I can't see properly, I pull off my glasses, look into the lenses, see a milky film that I can't wash off. How do you clean them? asks the optometrist in the shop, with the microfibre thingy, I say, sounding a little defensive. Never with your T-shirt or whatever? I shake my head, no. Okay, she ponders, but you like to cook, right? When you open the oven or take the lid off a pot, hot air comes out, and then you have to be careful, because you've got multiple layers of plastic here, and as soon as they expand, do you see here, she points to the film. Oh, mm-hmm, I go, but I can't see a thing, my eyes completely helpless without any correction of the angle at which the light hits them. When I'm cooking, I start leaning back as far as I can when I throw vegetables in the wok or noodles in the colander, trying to avoid the steam and the heat, it looks absurd, a little bit slapstick, Charlotte laughs, sometimes I take my new glasses off, put my old ones on before I grab a frozen pizza from the oven rack or put a pasta bake in there. It took quite a while for it to slowly dawn on me, those days in the hospital, my lenses constantly wet with tears, the dried salt, and how I would wipe the cloth over it in vain, not thinking to hold them under the tap, or just had no time, all those corridors and tubes, our son, everything behind a veil of fog, at my computer, I scroll through my photo archive, look at the selfies from that time, Gustav in my arm, Charlotte's hand in mine, and my eyes constantly behind a salty film.

What you doing? I ask. Reading, says Charlotte. What are you reading? The paper, she says. And what's it about? Microchimerism. Ah, right, I say, and leave it there. At some point, she puts her phone down and looks at me. Little Gusti is still inside me, all over the place, and he's alive. Apparently there is an exchange of cells between mother and child through the placenta, they can identify cells of the mother in the child, and some are also transmitted from

the child to the mother, to her organism, they become lodged there. Really? I ask. Yeah, that's what it says here, she points at the screen. Part of him is still here, has survived, inside of me, maybe in my lung, between the valves of my heart, in my spleen, no idea, but like, everywhere. Crazy, I say. Insane.

(And I think, part of Charlotte is lying with him in the grave. And part of me too, not cells, of course, or maybe there are some cells, a few flakes of skin perhaps, or an eyelash or a hair from the middle of my head or from near my temple, one that fell out while I was holding him in my arms and then ended up in his coffin, under the ground.)

I do some googling, at night, I dream of sphynxes and griffins, later, another scene at the dining table, Charlotte with a beak, me as a three-headed dog.

The test is positive and I'm overwhelmed, it's still really early, says Charlotte over and over, it's really still so early, but once she falls asleep, I steal out of bed, walk over to the desk, count the weeks and months, move brightly coloured blocks around on the calendar, estimate my income, calculate the parental allowance, and only as dawn starts to break do I realise how abstract this seems, how unimaginable, after Gustav and everything.

Exactly, it's still really early, says the gynaecologist, taking the probe from the little trolley, she applies some gel, then we look at the monitor. The doctor seems to be more or less satisfied, she draws coloured lines on the sonogram, brings up the oxygen saturation stats and clicks them away again. Look at the little pea, says Charlotte, yes, I say, our little pea.

I'm also overwhelmed by my birthday, we go out for dinner, just the two of us, and head to bed early. Not long afterwards, we're standing at Gustav's grave, we bring him presents and flowers and the only dragon from the toy store that isn't scowling and baring its claws menacingly, with fangs, dirty-grey scales and spines, miming the monsters from European legends – no, this figurine is purple, spreading its wings, fine glitter sprinkled across them, a

golden star above the nostrils, and there is a friendly, tenacious courage to its facial expression. A lucky charm, we think, and a placeholder for the little pea at their brother's grave, who is supposed to arrive in the year of the dragon.

Charlotte is working late, the phone rings, her voice.

It doesn't feel like déjà vu, more like catastrophe as farce, like endless sequels of some terrible film.

Later on, I Sometimes tell people that I jumped up, threw on my shoes and ran out the door, because that's how it felt, but it's not true. I hung up, went to the fridge, shove some food in my mouth, chewed methodically as I pulled something else out of the packaging and Tupperware containers, reloaded my mouth, poured water into a glass, drank it, refilled the glass, because I knew I hadn't consumed a thing since midday, that I couldn't rush to the hospital and then collapse – dizziness, cold sweats, trembling, my forehead split open – that I needed to function, all night long, the following day, the next week, who knows. It still gives me the creeps to this day, not because the thought was wrong, but because I was able to think it, in that moment. The routine of catastrophe.

I walk into the waiting room and they look up at me, a man and a woman and a cooing bundle, another woman and a whining child. I know this scene. The only thing that's new is the hospital. Charlotte writes, I walk down the corridor, knock, enter.

The doctor isn't taking us seriously, it's just some spotting, nothing to worry about, it happens, she tries to be funny, professionally casual, but gets tense when we don't laugh, puts more gel on a probe, positions it here and then there, clicks around on the computer, which reacts with a lag, oh, now the computer's refusing to cooperate, ha ha. At some point her voice goes quiet, she gets her boss, who is frantic and totally exhausted, dark rings under her eyes, she rattles through a host of possible diagnoses and causes, one worse than the other, every now

and then the phone on her belt rings, sometimes she picks up and barks, yep, no, yep, I'm coming, pulls her gloves off, disinfects her fingers and in-between them and then her palms, well, I'm terribly sorry, she says, but she says it with one foot out the door, and then she's gone, has to go to the operating room.

It's not until the next day that I collapse, by then we know that most of what she told us was nonsense or baseless speculation. Charlotte's gynaecologist calms us down, the miscarriage is sad and difficult, especially for us, but the implantation went perfectly, there is absolutely no evidence of any lasting damage from the emergency operation last year, no, it was just still really early, and unfortunately, at this stage, it's statistically quite common. Charlotte nods, okay, she says, I hand her some tissues. I see this every day, you're not alone, believe me, and if everything goes well, your body will manage everything on its own and we won't have to do anything at all. Why don't you come back in on Tuesday, okay? It creeps across my skull, black from left and right, my field of vision becoming a tunnel, I say, excuse me, I need, I think, I need— The doctor smiles as she bends over me, I'm so embarrassed. How much water have you drunk today? She asks. I'm fine, I say, I'm fine now, and try to stand up, no no no, she says, no, first you need to eat something, and she stuffs me with chocolates.

I can explain very well what's going on with me, and quite convincingly too. Then the therapist says, okay, so that was the cognitive side, what about your feelings?

Charlotte is on sick leave, not even two weeks, she sends her boss an email, writes messages to friends, doesn't want to see any distraught faces when she goes into the office, she can be around people, but there's no need to act like it's nothing. It should be out in the world, because it helps when people know what we know without us having to speak or keep silent about it.

And somehow, we absorb all of this. I just don't know where it goes.

(It's not until a few days later that she tells me that she had dreamt about it before it happened, about blood, about the pea that had to or wanted to go, that couldn't come with us, that she had sensed or known it, even though she told herself it was just a stupid dream, a barely distorted reflection of her fear, our fear, about this new pregnancy, for this tiny life that had emerged, was trying to emerge. And of course you can think, pure chance, fear of a statistically possible scenario that then happened to occur, but you can also think, no more dreams, no more sleep, don't even close your eyes, never again.)

Sometimes, it starts to come back up, from deep down, through my chest and up into my throat, into my eyes. That's where it gets stuck. Doesn't get past the threshold. It happens most of all when I've been on the road for weeks, not enough sleep and endless commitments, and then I come back, don't get out of bed till midday, at some point I empty my suitcase, shove my sweaty clothes in the machine, and then hang them on the line in the laundry room in the attic, where I can hear the pigeons cooing, hear their claws on the tiles, when I go to the supermarket, or later on, having put away the fruit and vegetables, as I eat muesli and look out the window, at blinking aeroplanes in the sky, or maybe just a lawn mower or a garbage collector with a dustpan and broom. There, out of nowhere, all of a sudden, it comes up, gets stuck, halfway up.

It did us good, Charlotte and me, it helped to find some kind of composure, not some dark abyss in which everything is always there all at once, overwhelming and formless and dull, but a story, in which things line up one after the other, in which one thing always has to happen before the next one can, in which everything has a time and a place that you can visit and then leave again, and it can even be shaped and moulded and reworked.

And yet, at times – actually, quite often – I miss that state, maybe I even romanticise it a little, but I long for it, being smashed to pieces, confused and lost, I miss the way it shook me – falling apart, that is, casting aside all composure, just for a moment. Because it was an

intimacy and a warmth, an upending love that could have burned me up, could have taken me out, had I given myself over to it for any longer. Time heals all wounds etc. What a joke, it leaves behind a numbness, and a scar, almost a lack of feeling, and it's terrible, in a way.

Charlotte writes: Oh, there you go again, always so doom and gloom.