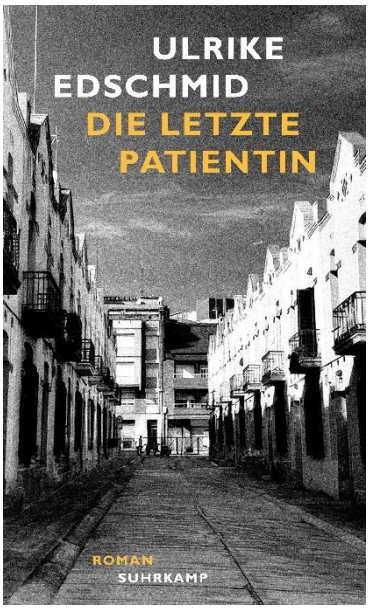

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The Last Patient

Novel

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

Chapters 1–6, 18–20, 24–27, 37–38, 45, 50–52

1

She calls a taxi instead of an ambulance. Up above Park Güell, the driver turns into a quiet alley, which gets blocked off at both ends at midnight. Now, though, the gates are still open, and the car stops in front of a slender terrace house. She hasn't packed a bag. She leaves the house as if she were coming back. A young woman climbs onto the back seat beside her. The driver takes the highway and stops in front of a hospital in Eixample, where her life in Barcelona had begun more than thirty years ago. Up into the summer, the infusions had still given her enough strength to do the long walk home on foot. Now it's winter, and the tumour beneath her collarbone reaches all the way to her heart.

It's already getting late when I hear her voice on the answering machine and leave my own messages, messages that will no longer reach her. The next morning, when I dial an unfamiliar Spanish number that I had jotted down in the margin of one of the pages of my notebook, the hospital answers, and I am put through to her room, where she is slowing slipping away.

A murmuring fills the room, muffled voices. Hers ever so faint. Barely a whisper. Of the five languages she mastered, it's not the language of her childhood she returned to at the end. In her dying moments, she speaks French, which, as she often said, she had always found the hardest.

She had hoped to be able to come along one last time to that barren island in the Atlantic, as in years gone by. Sitting on a sun bed in a patch of shade on the terrace, absorbed in books about neuroscience, she had been seized by a silent will to live. She read the way she would otherwise read novels. Captivated, without looking up, while everything around her seemed to melt away. When I think of those hours, days, and weeks now, it almost seems to me as if even then, her thoughts revolved only around the young woman who stayed with her until the end, and who was her last patient.

2

At the beginning of the winter of 1973, which I remember as being unusually cold, she had turned up at the shared flat in Frankfurt where I was then living with my child. She'd been left by a man and was looking for a room. She had turned her back on Luxembourg because she couldn't stand the country of her birth or the lifestyle and views of her parents. When they came to visit, they would bring a cake that was meant only for their daughter, something that always embarrassed her. They didn't understand how we lived, that we shared everything.

The only things that served as a reminder of her home country and the house she'd grown up in were the lilting melody of her speech and a Luxembourgian cookbook. When she sat at the kitchen table with a cigarette, a coffee, and a copy of *Le Monde*, she exuded a seductive air of world-weariness reminiscent of the films of the Nouvelle Vague. But behind this was a restlessness, combined with an unwavering mettle.

When our apartment was raided one night, she stood in front of the police in her floral children's flannel nightie, without her contact lenses the armed officers nothing but dark shadows to her. Like the mother she would never be, she placed herself in front of the bedroom where my son was sleeping, arms outstretched, refusing them access with such vehemence that they ultimately gave up and filed back out.

3

The three years of our shifting and yet dependable time living together might have been one of the few periods in which she had felt a sense of acceptance and security. Seemingly without effort, she completes a degree with majors in history and French and falls in love with a Spanish anarchist who had fled his homeland due to the rule of General Franco and whom she knew only by his alias.

After the death of the dictator, he returns to his homeland in late 1975. She follows him on New Year's Eve in her little Renault. With her eyes barely peering out from behind the steering wheel, she does the thousand-odd kilometres almost all the way to the Spanish border in one go. When the engine of her R4 begins to sputter near Narbonne and then conks out completely at a rest stop, she gets picked up by a VW Kombi with no papers, which had been stolen somewhere along the way.

The driver waits until midnight. Then he starts the van with a jumper cable, winds the window down, and as he wishes the customs guards *Feliz Navidad*, he crosses the border without provoking a second glance. He takes her to Barcelona. There, he drops her off in the middle of the city, at an apartment in Eixample, that neighbourhood that feels like it was drawn up with a ruler, with its central courtyards and gardens in square blocks of buildings, whose bevelled edges form a small plaza at every intersection.

4

Her relationship with the Spanish anarchist, whom she still calls by his alias, breaks down, like all the loves that will follow him. He had gone home and she had gone to a foreign land. While he takes part in Spain's evolution into a democratic country, she ekes out a living giving language classes, remains without a homeland.

It's a feeling that never leaves her and that she tries to share with a former Tupamaro, a guerrilla fighter from Uruguay, who had fled his country due to the military rule. For a whole winter, she travels to be with him every weekend in a little white house by the sea, warming her hands by a woodfire stove. But in the summer, she writes, it became evident that apart from their lack of a homeland, there was nothing keeping them together.

With Miguel from the Basque Country, for the first time, she dreams the dream of father, mother, and child. The relationship crumbles because he already has two children and doesn't want a third. After the abortion, she descends into a weeklong bout of lethargy that feels like the end of her life. When he turns to a twenty-year-old, she rails against what she calls her fate. But she doesn't leave, because that's never helped anything. She raged like a caged animal that knows that, whether inside the cage or out in the wild, the only thing that awaits it is agony. I wonder, she writes, how often I will have to repeat this primal scene of my life, which I know like the back of my hand, before I will finally be able to break out and free myself.

5

She falls in love with Xavier at a tapas bar. He is serving the drinks and seems to be able to offer her everything she longs for. But the more he blankets her with love and care, she writes,

the bigger her fear grows of life as a couple. She knows how to be alone. Being together is unknown territory for her. She had fallen into a genuine panic, as if, finding herself surrounded by warmth and security, she suddenly needed cold air. As if she would waste away without the void that she could fill with yearning desires. Her interactions with men remain a desperate struggle that she subjects to merciless examinations.

Whatever kind of conception she had formed of love, she had been hopelessly searching for it on her endless journeys through foreign lands and continents. Thanks to her letters, over nearly forty years of friendship, I had been able to follow her life even when she'd been travelling toward another new failed love, whether by plane, by bus, or hitching a ride with a stranger on a highway. She had left Germany because of the Spanish anarchist. When Barcelona got too cramped for her, with all her failed affairs – for which she used the word relationship – she doubled the amount of language classes she'd been living off so she could scrape together some money to get out. She would get up at six and travel through the early morning fog to the region of Montseny, where she taught French to the executives at an automotive factory. In the afternoons, she gave classes at a chemical plant or at the Goethe Institut. In the evenings, she would sit alone in the cinema, watching the late show. As soon as she has enough money, she packs her things and heads off. If she doesn't have love, she says, then at least she'll have movement. She is thirty years old.

6

Her first letter comes from Bisbee, Arizona. "If you were here", she writes on 10 June 1980, "you'd tell me to get out of here as quick as I could." I don't know how, of all places, she ended up in this deserted copper-mining town on the Mexican border. But in all the letters she writes over the years, it seems as if, in her heart, she never really left Bisbee.

A little wooden house, a hundred and twenty steps up on a rocky plateau. Looking back from the last step, the gaze tumbled into a canyon, with the main street running through it. A coffee shop, a gas station, a bar, a Mother Earth supermarket, and the public library. From the kitchen window, the endlessness of the Sonora Desert. A man from the South who bore a promise within him. Safety and security for life.

But it is the kind of safety and security, she writes, that he also gives to the needy children from the borderlands that he looks after. For the first time in her life, she writes, she is tempted to imagine her existence by the side of a man. What she was willing to give was also that which she craved for herself. Too much, she writes, in the world of a man who is used to being on his own. The dimensions of her passion are too big for him, they place him in question, overwhelm him, alienate and perturb him. He pulls away from her and falls silent.

The wound of this rejection does not heal. She feels as if she's being punished for her desire. What she had thought of as a new start became a journey into her deepest contradictions, which were ever present to her. She is someone who only starts to burn, she writes, once there is nothing left to be salvaged. She was always caught up in the rush of being in love. The comedown and the fall that followed hurled her into a more profound feeling of abandonment than anything the violence she experienced or the mortal danger she had faced on her travels ever could have provoked.

[…]

18

In August of 1982, her letters started coming from Barcelona again. Put up by friends in cramped, windowless rooms. Too little light, too little space, too little sleep. She feels like a

patch of earth that's been churned up and is supposed to be built on. The material is there, but it's unclear how to put it together in a way that will allow something to emerge from it. In a bar, she runs into an old lover she hasn't been able to get out of her head. A young, beautiful woman on his arm. She's left with an overwhelming feeling of having failed at life, an enduring, inexorable sense of loss and isolation, with no way out. The idea of giving language classes for the rest of her life begins to feel like a nightmare. She makes plans to do a doctorate on women in South America.

Ever since her time in the home of the underground fighter in Uruguay, she writes, the thought of those two women hasn't left her alone. A mother, in mourning, who falls silent and comes to grief. A daughter fighting for her own survival and against everything – against the tradition of being a mother and wife, and against the role of being the sister of a hero of the urban guerrilla war who has gone into hiding. For the first time, women move to the centre of her sphere of perception, after men had occupied the public spaces and served as the sites of desire and longing during all her travels.

For an entire winter, she writes, she is drawn to the old, beautiful university library. She reads calmly, with concentration, takes in the smell of the books and is captivated by the worlds that open up before her. But when spring arrives, she realises that it is not a genuine option but just a form of escape, a form of diligent activity, but without any life-changing force.

19

She goes back to giving language classes. She tries to camouflage her failure, she writes, with minor flights – making occasional sorties to France, to Italy. But this subterfuge doesn't hold. She travels through Greece with a Dutchman she thinks she loves. During an altercation on

the road to Kalamata, for a few seconds, this feeling transformed into such an intense hatred that she was about to throw a heavy rock at him, before coming to her senses at the last moment.

She hitchhikes back to Athens alone, where she gets on the Magic Bus, which takes her to London in three days and three nights, where she meets a German who had ended up in prison in Frankfurt due to a case of mistaken identity and had headed to England after his release. He seems to be the only man in her life who never left a scar behind. But also no memories and no images, she writes, that might have made him visible to her. For she had never mustered the time nor the energy, nor even a desire to really get to know a man, she says.

As if through the force of will, on her last big trip through the Mongolian desert, she tried to distance herself from the feeling of lack, from her denunciation of her lot, her dissatisfaction with life. She was increasingly seized by the fear that her wrath would make her sick. She no longer wanted to be tormented by what she didn't have. It is a trip that is not accompanied by a craving for love and during which she makes just a single, fleeting mention of a man. It happened on the day of her flight home, she writes, in the early morning. She stepped out onto the balcony of her hotel room in Ulan Bator in her nightgown, looking out onto the courtyard, and somebody waved at her from across the way. Half blind, she waved back, and it was only when she put on her glasses that she was able to recognise the Dalai Lama in his red robes. As he walked across the courtyard, he kept waving his hand, smiling at her.

20

Back in the windowless broom closet in Barcelona, she feels a knot in her breast. Hard and cold. The operation confirms her fears. Her epiphany came in a moment hovering between

megalomania and depression, she writes, as she lay on a mattress, with no natural light or fresh air, perhaps influenced by the recently released and widely read book by an American analyst about narcissistic disorders and the origins of the loss of the self.

She felt that she had discovered herself in the drama that she enacted with her mother, and that had kept her imprisoned her entire life. Her attempts to run away had gotten her nowhere. She had survived dangerous situations and shown endurance. But she had not been able to escape the demands and expectations of an embittered and unhappy woman who was waiting for her in a sterile building overlooking a country road lined with scrawny, barren apple trees tens of thousands of kilometres away. She was not the daughter her mother had hoped for, and she never would be. She wasn't able to tie a man down and would never have children, never have a family, and she had no career. She was nothing, nothing but a disappointment.

Her doctor, she writes, is a believer in the commonly held theory that earlier events play a role in the origins of cancer, which cause the body to secrete excess adrenaline. But no research was being carried out on the matter because there was no money in it. *La bolsa no sona*, he had said. She would have put it differently, with no logic of cause and effect. But she sensed that it was a psychic cancer that was wreaking havoc within her.

She is someone who needs science in order to confront her own demons, she writes, and hurls herself, as a last resort, into the study of psychology, which her father is willing to fund. For the first time, she moves into an apartment of her own. Not in Eixample, but in an alley in Poble Sec, from where a cable car hovers above the docks and above her apartment, heading up to Montjuïc.

[…]

24

I'm not sure if you remember, she says, but for some time now I've been working with an international aid organisation, a kind of shelter in the north of Spain. They take in young girls from Germany who have gotten mixed up with drugs or been hit by some family catastrophe. Both were true of the patient who came to my practice ten years ago. She was on drugs and had run away from home at fourteen and sought help from social services. Her parents were separated. No contact with her mother. Her father a businessman with companies based abroad. She was sixteen. Deeply traumatised. She'd told the director of the shelter her insides were filled with terrifying images. Like a curse, her parents had given her a name from a classical drama. The name of a figure that nobody believes. But my patient didn't even believe herself. I will call her N., she says, N. for Nobody.

N. came once a week, every Monday, always at the same time. She came by train, travelling more than a hundred kilometres each way. In her consultation room, she would then sit on a chair and say nothing. She waited, she said, she spoke, and then she waited again. She spent the first while feeling her way around the silence by patiently posing indirect questions. It was a task that demanded great sensitivity, for which she had to carefully manage the amount of energy she expended. She sat there, not wanting anything, but with the utmost attentiveness. The little, inconspicuous things, a closing of the eyes or a glance toward the window she perceived as elements of body language, but without ascribing them too much meaning or jumping to conclusions.

25

In the first two years, her sole focusing was getting her patient off the drugs and strengthening her sense of self-worth. But her silence was ominous. Not a stillness, but hard and

unrelenting. An impenetrable wall had erected itself between her and her patient. After every session, she was utterly drained. In the motionlessness, her body began to ache, first in one spot, then in another. She'd had to use all her strength to relax her body and keep calm. Sometimes, the silence had pushed her to the verge of madness.

She used all the means she could, everything she knew. But with each step she took or didn't take, she was moving on fragile terrain, wracked by doubt. She felt as if she were just blathering away while the feeling that there was something horrifying hidden behind N.'s silence slowly ate away at her.

Under the dark thrall of the mute power with which her patient sat across from her, she was also ultimately fighting for her own survival. The tumour had been removed, but metastases had formed. Her regular infusions gave her a brief flicker of vitality that carried her through her working days, but then died out on the weekends. She just about breathed a sigh of relief is even a single session was cancelled. But N. kept coming, without ever saying a word.

26

Back then she hadn't known – she'd only found out years later – that her patient had incessantly dreamt of being able to speak with her, even if just once, just a few words. But were she to begin to speak, she had whispered to her, she would be killed. What came out of her were short, chopped-up scraps of sentences, in a strange, breathy, high-pitched and monotone voice, leaving her uncertain of whether she had really understood her.

What N. cannot say with words, she thought, her body says. But her patient descended into a panicked state as soon as she even had to lie down. Every touch, no matter how gentle, instilled in her a mortal fear. She could neither speak with her nor work with her body. And N.

could not speak to her, nor could she touch her own body. Her questions elicited no answers. Nothing moved in the spoken realm, not a thing.

It was the most awful therapy of all time, she said, she had been continually pushed to her limits. She was constantly plotting ways of getting rid of her patient. If I hadn't been the way I am, she said, and if I hadn't had a mother who never opened her mouth, I would have given up. But she held on, with hatred and rage. Faced with this deeply traumatised young woman, who had fled her home as a girl and had now kept silent through a third year, she kept going.

27

An event on its own is no trauma. Trauma is defined by the way it is experienced. Memory alone does not cause illness. Most people can overcome or repress cruel blows of fate. But for those who are unable, any kind of trigger is enough to send an event from the past crashing down on them with the most brutal force. Here and now, as if the only thing that existed was the eternal presence of this horror. When it comes to trauma, she said, you cannot control the trigger, you cannot evade it. It's like a landmine, it explodes at the lightest of touches.

Traumatic events are experienced in the body, she explained. Unable to be relieved through a realisation of their historicity, they cling to the body as eternally festering wounds. An injury that always remains part of the present but cannot be named. The process of healing only begins when a before and a now emerge and words are found for the suffering. When language is able to slot what has been experienced into the structure of memory, and in doing so, to commit it to the past. Sometimes, she says, this work is never performed, and people spend years teetering on the edge of the abyss. They toil away with learned survival strategies. But they can never be freed of this fear.

The place in the brain where fear originates has the shape of an almond. In a person who has been made mute by some kind of trauma, she says, a blow of fate, this spot is enlarged. The person no longer belongs to themself. They are seized by demons. Everything happens in the now and has no end. Trauma is always connected to a form of helplessness that originates in early childhood. Whatever is, is, and it will stay that way forever. For a person with trauma, she says, there is no solace.

[…]

37

During all the years in which N. sat across from her in silence, her patient had needed her for her survival. The words were the last thing. Now the focus was finding a way into the outside world. N. had moved into a small apartment in the old town in Poble Sec and wanted to study. Not having a high school diploma, she had to complete an entrance exam and went to university to prepare for it. She had just turned twenty-five.

Her father turned up on every one of her birthdays. Acting as a loving father, he brought her gifts and supported her financially. As a messenger from the underworld, though, he subjected her to violence. When she came to therapy afterwards, she could suddenly no longer see and she didn't know why. She was paralysed and didn't know why. She was unable to study for the exam and didn't know why, and she could no longer walk and didn't know why.

As if she had suddenly fallen lame, N. had tripped over her own feet, and with her arms aching from the infusions and punctures, her therapist barely managed to carry her to the room on the first floor where she could lie down before there was a ring at the door from the next patient. In the middle of the night, though, N. suddenly fell into a panic. She was afraid

her father might find her. In the voice of a child, she whispered: “but I’m a good girl, but I’m a good girl …” which was more awful than anything else that had come before it.

38

What her father had done to her, she says, had settled in a realm of terror. Bit by bit, it was stirred up, rising to the surface. In the summer of their ninth year, her patient began to avoid her father and to free herself from his grasp. She began to understand what had taken place in the past and how it was still occurring in the present. She did what she had been unable to do before: she disappeared whenever he came. Some nights, she would hide among the bushes in the park on Montjuïc.

One time, she said, after the sun had gone down, she had gone there to look for her patient. The atmosphere was menacing. Barça had won and the park heaved with the beer-soaked bellowing of football fans. N. was a mess, had stopped eating, was hardly drinking, and her clothes reeked of mould. “I want to see my mother, I want to see my mother,” she had whispered as they crawled out of the bushes. I was afraid that N. was going to die, she says, that she would slip away, because people often call for their mother as they near death.

But her father would also show up unannounced when she was at university. The only place he had not managed to find was the little terrace house in the north of the city, in the alley with the two gates at either end, locked at night from both sides. But he had threatened her. It was her job to obey him. If she would not succumb to him, he would do something to her friend and her younger sister, two people she loved.

When traumatised people love, she said, there is no choice. Anything that is done to a person they love is also done to them. When people they love die, it is also their own death. For her father, who had spent his childhood in an orphanage, N. was supposed to be everything: mother, daughter, and wife.

[…]

45

Numbed by the unceasing drumming of the rain on the roof of the veranda, she says, she almost overheard the doorbell. It'll be her neighbour, she thinks, who had wanted to invite her over for dinner. She gets up and walks into the little hallway. Through the corrugated glass door, she sees the vibrating outlines of a figure. When she opens it, she sees her patient standing there, buffeted by the storm and the wind, her hair plastered in clumps against her face. Muffled by the murmur of the rain, she whispers something she had never said before and would never bring herself to say again: "hold me, please!" and then: "thank you," as she pulls her, sopping wet, towards her.

She runs up the stairs, grabs a pile of towels, spreads them out around her patient, dries her hair, pulls her sodden shoes from her feet, props up her legs. When she goes to take off her wet clothes, N. shrinks away with a start. She makes her a bed on the sofa and lays out one of her flannel nighties beside her – much too short for this tall, slim, young woman – of the kind she still wears out of an unfulfilled desire for a sense of childlike security.

She makes her a hot tea and something to eat. She places a lamp beside the sofa, and when she looks in on her later, N. had eaten and had something to drink, and had fallen asleep in her nightie. It was the happiest moment of her life, she said.

[…]

This is where the tape recordings with my friend stop. Near the end of the summer, she returned to Barcelona from Berlin. It was the beginning of a long period of leave-taking. No more letters, just these daily telephone calls that are unable to stave off death and are difficult to end. She fights the way she has always fought. No longer for love. She fights for the life she has left. But the tumour scorches the earth.

Memories of her mother had drifted up out of the depths, wrathful, half-directed, half-spontaneous images. The mother as ghoul crouching atop the tumour that is killing her, killing her daughter. She knew that she needed to speak to her, to enter into an inner dialogue, in order to free herself of this demon, and this fear. But you're my mother, she said to her in her imagination, what are you doing there? Then she imagined the answer, and they spent a whole week arguing endlessly, virtually. All of this played out only in her head, mute, without a single sound. And when her mother gave in, which she had never done in reality, she too was also able to give in. And in this way, in the realm of the imagination, they began to move toward one another. Though the demon of her mother continued to crouch atop her tumour, they had agreed that they would make peace. She hadn't helped her to live, she said, but she was helping her to die.

51

She spent the final year of her life enveloped by a sense of security she had never known. No longer the kind of love she had always struggled for and which at the same time had suffocated her. She experienced an intimacy and a kind of care that she doesn't demand and that do not besiege her. N. does the groceries, cooks, tidies up, and repairs things around the house. She oils the hinges of the doors so that she doesn't wake her when she looks in on her therapist, who is now her patient. She gets the heating working when the temperature begins to drop, cleans the windows in the entire house, and plays the flute. Her own, simple melodies

and sometimes also a classical piece that her therapist recognises when it makes its way from the rooftop terrace down to the windowed-in veranda, where she lies dying.

N. moves through the storeys of the small terrace house with a profound air of familiarity and belonging, as if she had always lived there. It is the place where she came back to herself, and to which she had fled in utter distress. She feels safe here, she had wanted to come here. And she should stay here, forever.

Her therapist had hoped to make it into the new year, to the day on which she wanted to amend her will. After her death, ownership of the house was to be handed over to N. instead of to an aid organisation, as she had originally stipulated. But two days before Christmas, when she calls the notary's office, nobody picks up the phone. And then it's too late.

52

She dies at four in the afternoon. On the island in the Atlantic, the sun is already wandering westward above a stretched-out *punta*. Red, yellow, and blue hang-gliders drift down from the steep edge of the rocks and hover silently above the water. I do the walk that I would have done with her at this time of day. Toward the east, a dusty path hugging the rocky coastline that drops down vertically to the side, past herds of goats ripping thorny vegetation out of the desiccated earth. Down into a gorge covered in gravel, into which the sea laps in little waves. Then back up to the plateau and on to a cone looming above everything, with steep, zig-zagged lines leading to the summit. In espadrilles with wedge heels, she had sometimes slipped dangerously on the gravel, but she never fell. She'd been guided by an almost imperceptible caution – and always wearing heels, making her appear a little bigger than she actually was.