

Lutz Seiler
Frank

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Sample translation: © by Bradley Schmidt

Their last evening. The girl at the lectern in front of the entrance wore the restaurant's yellow and blue uniform, a short pleated skirt and some kind of blouse with epaulettes and gold buttons. If you wanted to wait, it was customary to give your first name, which was then called as soon as a table was open. In the past weeks Faerber had learned that his first name was too complicated for the restaurants' maitre d' and had adopted a simple name. He was embarrassed that he had to repeat it; the girl had understood *Hank* instead of *Frank*. I could have left it at Hank, he thought, but he had gotten used to Frank, thought Frank.

Part of the asphalt that had been softened by the heat had seeped between the rocks of the shore. Or maybe it had been used to better protect the stones against the swells – he was fixated by these types of meaningless questions.

He and Teresa stood a while on an illuminated beach beneath the restaurant. The sand was blinding in the halogen light and the foam glowed white and phosphorescent. A couple of overweight sea gulls tumbled towards them and then struggled to turned away again. Faerber would have liked to say something but he had to be careful, he had to concentrate, so it wouldn't be, as Teresa put it, something negative again, something that he only tries to use, as she believed, to repel his perpetual dissatisfaction.

He wanted to go down to the water but Teresa sat down on one of the rocks. Her arms and legs were tanned, her black hair lay in a loosely woven braid between her shoulder blades. When Teresa noticed that Faerber was looking at her, she pushed her feet into the sand. She wore a new silver ring on her second-smallest toe.

The parking lot filled up and more and more guests came up the driveway. Faerber didn't understand their motions, the sweeping gestures, pointing with outstretched arms, sometimes towards the canyon, sometimes towards the ocean, beside that, their distinctly straight, almost reclined way of walking, while an expression of unrelenting happiness on their faces. The worst sign is that I don't feel anything special when I see the Pacific, thought Faerber.

He wanted to draw Teresa's attention to a sea gull that must have gotten snagged on one of the adopt-a-beach trash barrels (all the trash barrels on the beach carried this label) – a wing jutted out and beat the bin's rim, a sort of Indian drumming that was easy to hear even as the wind became stronger from the water and the music from the restaurant swashed over their heads. For a moment, Faerber saw a couple of the homeless stomping around the trash barrel, rhythmically thrusting their fists in the air.

He had *not touched* Teresa the whole time. He had gotten very close to her in the log cabin at Tioagra Pass, but she had actually been asleep. At first she was shocked and furious but she had to be quiet because Lucy was sleeping on a cot on the opposite wall with her cuddle pillow under her arm. "Don't touch me!"

He was nauseous later. Sunstroke – although he had only been outside of the car for a couple minutes. Why don't you ever put anything on your head – he sometimes heard his mother say and Faerber mumbled some answer, he was dizzy, and suddenly he had tears in his eyes: *Don't touch me! Let me be... touch, touch!* At some point Teresa must have fallen asleep, the blanket pulled tight around her shoulders and her feet dug into the covers – just like he knew her.

They did day trips together, normal things that all tourists did, the desert, the Sierra Nevada, San Francisco and back down the coast heading south on Highway 1. He knew that the people at where they were staying laughed about the Germans because they always wanted to go to Death Valley, all the Swiss and Germans want to go to the desert, where it's the hottest. Why in the world, Randy asked and laughed. Randy was their landlord. He had been promoted to *Uncle Randy* for Lucy and she was staying with him this evening. Unlike its gluttonous fellow gulls, which circled over the shore with bills wide open and let out cat or baby cries, the bird in the bin stayed completely silent. It hammered its wings on the rim like a job that had to get done.

The West Coast had always been a dream of Teresa's. At first it was unrealizable and then difficult because of Lucy. Two of Teresa's friends ran a restaurant in Los Angeles with specialties from Thuringia. It was there, at *Holy Elizabeth*, that they had their best evening. Faerber had drunk *Köstritzer* beer and eaten stuffed cabbage. The friends told them about their famous guests, about *Clint* and *David* and *Betty*, whose party they had been at, where the whole garden was covered with carpets, probably expensive, and a collection of four hundred busts of Lenin, filling half the house – they laughed and even Faerber had laughed, relieved,

and put an arm around Teresa's shoulder. He and Teresa were still an enviable couple in the eyes of others, or at least he believed.

Teresa had taken pictures from the car the whole time. When she wasn't taking photos, she put one leg on the dashboard. She braced the ringed foot against the windshield and sometimes that ring clicked a little against the glass. Faerber hadn't asked her about the ring. Jewelry usually came from Teresa's father, who gave his daughter gifts for every possible occasion. These were valuable, often delicate silver necklaces – jewelry that was made for special occasions, for dresses with plunging necklines. She was usually uncomfortable about it in front of Faerber but at the same time pleased and said, "Isn't it gorgeous?," or "Just what suits me," and "Doesn't he have great taste?"

She had pushed her seat as far back as it went. Her profile had slipped out of his range of view. The tanned feet, the lightly spread toes, the bright, almost square toe nails, with the landscape in the background ... The big toe wasn't really the biggest, when compared to the next and even the middle toe was a bit longer. Faerber was almost thankful for the foot. At the same time, the foot almost taunted him: a strange ringed animal that he didn't know anything about for sure.

But he had always enjoyed going places with Teresa. Without her enthusiasm, her energy and cheerfulness, most everything remained pale, as if nebulous; it hardly existed. When alone, what was missing was a connection, a kind of mediation that he needed to see and hear. Once, when Teresa withheld something like that, he grew silent. There was no good answer. He had depended on Teresa and Lucy; to a certain extent they experienced things for him, but he would never have said that. Their presence was like a garment, something that allowed him to be in the world. Some kind of camouflage that shrouded and protected him.

The wind picked up and the beating against the trash barrel became stronger. Maybe it is a different, larger animal, thought Faerber, a cormorant or albatross. He had seen how the waves pulled back into themselves, rolled in and spit out a second, smaller wave just before it hit, which moistened the shore like a tongue and left a fine, colorfully shimmering frothy rim.

Faerber laughed and wanted to say something, which should have been the segue to a comment, and he felt like he was at the end of a long fight. While letting his quiet fake chuckle fade away, he didn't know which way his comment might go and started to laugh again, cautiously and unconvincingly. It was just then that they were called. The girl used a megaphone: *Mister Frank please! Misses Teresa please! Two places please!* They had been

married for ten years. They had left out all the elements of ritual for the ceremony: no music, no procession, no speech. "And what about the kiss," Frank had asked after it was almost over. "Well, you didn't want anything," said the justice.

The girl drew out the *a* in Frank as much as possible. She celebrated the guests' names, as if she was announcing their appearance on a show or in a boxing match. It took some time before those who were called came up from the beach. Her words became questioning, then pleading, moaning (she knew that her guests would be amused), and in the end very firm, almost demanding, a kind of judgment, Frank thought he could discern this from the empty, metallic tone of the megaphone.

Fra-a-ank, please, Fra-a-a-ank! Frank!

Although it seemed ridiculous to Faerber, he had to think about how their car wouldn't start on the morning of their wedding. They had often told of it, it was just too good as a story. How Faerber had tried to push-start their Russian two-door down the street, how he, completely soaked in sweat, walked off to ask their hated neighbor for help... Fra-a-a-ank! The maitre moaned out the *a* out for a while. She chewed it like a big sticky piece of gum. And then she slowly blew a bubble with it: Fra-a-a-a-ank, please...

Faerber thought about the eighty euro girl who still lay on the bed, stretched and sat up and turned away from him, while he was already tying his shoes, his temples throbbing, took his suitcase, which was still the most important thing, the most beautiful. He gave her a hundred.

"Thanks, my darling. How about Tuesday?"

"Yeah, maybe; I'll give you a call." He came back to her for a second. He absently touched her between the legs. He wore jeans, and shoes with leather that came up to the joint, the ones Teresa called ankle boots.

"Yeah, but Monday at the latest, honey, so I have time to slip into something a little more comfortable." She guided his hand. He liked her childishness, her breasts, the small hips, only her voice was a handicap.

Fra-a-a-a-ank!

By now they had reached courtyard in front of the restaurant. In the halogen light the guests waited closely in front of the lectern with the maitre d' in her blue and yellow uniform. One last time there was the dull, metallic tone of megaphone and for a moment Faerber grasped why all of these people showed up here and lined up with their sweeping gestures, faces bright with anticipation, on this freshly tarred lot whose harsh, numbing odors they all willingly inhaled. The

thought that they only wanted to influence the megaphone's choice shot through Faerber's head, but it wouldn't help them, and suddenly he sensed his hate.

Behind the maitre d' with the loudspeaker in front of her face there stood a boy who casually draped his arm around her hips. He also wore the restaurant's uniform. Faerber could see that the girl was touching the boy, she had started to swing the *a* in Frank's name up and down, she was putting everything she had into the name. She knew, Frank thought in a moment of confusion, and then again, she doesn't know anything, not even my name. Her hand was touching the boy's thigh as if she wanted to cover something there. They were directly in front of her when she started to wind up again and call Frank's name. Faerber could see her eyes. But it was just her voice, not her face and not the position of her soft, shining lips that had drawn in Frank in this moment, Fra-a-a-nk!

When the girl discovered him she broke off suddenly. She smiled mechanically, her mouth half-closed, *please* ... Frank was still there, between her teeth, Faerber could feel it, suddenly and he tensed. A year ago he had started to give her the fee in cash, for tax reasons, he had told Teresa.

The girl passed the list of names to the boy next to her and led them to their table. She kept the megaphone in her hand and waved the gadget while she walked, as if it was still of importance.

Faerber was exhausted. He would have liked to follow the swaying pleated skirt for a while. He thought briefly of the flared leather skirt that the girls used to wear when he were young. He was envious of the boy, even of his blue and yellow restaurant uniform. He felt cavernous and worn out as if life had already slowly started to reject him again.

"Don't touch me." It could have been their evening. Teresa and he, they could have drunk, talked and felt like they had reached the finished line. They could have ordered Lobster and remembered their first Lobster. The restaurant on the street that didn't look like a restaurant, the tables that were positioned much too close together, the faintly shiny pliers that they didn't know how to use, their awkwardness, sheepish of their happiness.

Faerber thought about the fat man, Teresa's first affair. He had never seen him. One time Teresa had mentioned that the man was *not exactly skinny*, that he brought something to the scales, as she put it; since then, Faerber had called him the fat man. And that she sometimes jumped onto him, she had said at some point, and that the man would stand completely firm, like a rock, that he could support her, *hold* ... Maybe he was remembering it wrong. But it was

something that he should know something about, that things *depended* on, and for a while he had always held Teresa tight while falling asleep. The fat man drove behind Teresa on her way home with her own car, out of the city to their house. They parted ways on the corner a block away from their house and then the man ate breakfast at a highway rest stop. Faerber found all that out, piece by piece.

Earlier they would have thought the place was fabulous. The windows had been removed; they sat directly above the beach, the wind in their faces. Under them, on the beach, there was a table set with candles, the table cloths attached with silver clasps; a couple of chairs were already half in the water. There were some people at the bar that were dancing. When the music stopped, Faerber heard the beat of the gull's wing, or at least he thought he did. They talked about Lucy – school, piano lesson, her room, nothing should change for her. They agreed, like always. Even now it felt good to talk to Teresa.

At the end of the evening Faerber was drunk. He heard the beat. It was coming from inside himself. Or from Teresa. He had almost put his hand on her breast. Everything was ok.