

THE HOUR BETWEEN WOMAN AND GUITAR

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Excerpt

Graduation

– Follow that hot air balloon!

The taxi driver turned his head and looked in the direction Natalie's arm was pointing. There actually was a balloon in the spot indicated by her finger: a thimble-sized upside-down drop of water in the cloudless blue of the sky over the outskirts of the city, with a vaguely perceptible company logo on its skin.

Natalie lowered her arm. There was no way to predict how the taxi driver would respond. Her heart pounded, everything could still go wrong. His face revealed nothing.

It was the last day of her program, and she had massively overslept. Strictly speaking she was done with everything, had written all her final papers, passed all her exams, the certification was hers, was from now on part of her name, so no one would be angry if she didn't make it to the graduation celebration. But she had been looking forward to it for weeks: Red Bull was hosting a festive balloon day for the instructors and

graduates of all special education programs in the country, and of course all the former charges were invited too, two special balloons would be equipped with wheelchair-accessible gondolas. And Natalie was three hours late. Three and a half.

But that didn't stop the taxi driver from taking his time to process the information. Natalie began to hate him, his shoulders, his snow-white hair – but then he suddenly started driving without asking another question. Natalie flopped back into the seat, fastened her seatbelt, soundlessly clapped her hands and laughed. Success! Everything was going smoothly again. Last week she had sent off eleven applications and was in contact with the world. Perhaps she would see the balloons from up close, those magnificent spherical forms, the sight of which made you inwardly rounder and more complete. It was going to be a great day after all!

Then the driver began to speak. He didn't know how to do this, he said. He was happy to bring her anywhere, but the balloon...He pronounced the word with emphasis on the first syllable. For that alone Natalie could have slapped him. The music in her head went silent. She leaned forward.

– Let me out, she said.

– Do you have address?

No, she had forgotten that. The point of being three hours late wasn't to be well prepared and provided with all the information, was it? Damn idiot.

– Doesn't matter, she said. I'll get out here please.

The driver sighed and stopped. They hadn't gotten far.

– I was hoping to make it at least to the city limits, said Natalie. Just that, without questions.

There was no point anymore. He had ruined everything.

– Yeah, should I bring you? To the city limits? Is no problem. But balón...

The driver gestured with an irritatingly dignified hand movement at the flying object floating at a great distance.

– Ballón, Natalie corrected him, trying not to let the deeply honest taxi driver mustache, which shone snow-white at her from his face, faze her. Here. Keep the change.

She gave him a five-euro bill, more than enough for such a short ride. He thanked her with a shake of his head, held the bill in his hand and looked as if he had now really lost any belief in – but no, Natalie realized, his belief in humanity was still intact. There, you could tell by the back of his neck. No doubt he could speak a lot of languages. Depressed, she got out of the taxi.

It would have been too late anyway. Three and a half hours. She had taken the muscle relaxant yesterday evening, it made her sleep too well. She crossed the street and walked into a hot blast of summer wind. Unease overcame her, her hands and fingertips felt strange, *aury* – that was her word, since childhood, for the state that usually preceded a grand mal seizure. Aura, aury. It was as if you were in unpleasantly hot, close and intimate contact with your surroundings. (Are things aury again? asked her mother, and Natalie nodded dazedly.) But her last big seizure had been eleven years ago.

My God, just to the city limits, without asking questions – the taxi driver could have done her at least that favor! Wretched citizen of the world. No wonder hair and mustache were snow-white. He was out of touch with the way things are. Since there was nothing else to suggest any direction to her, she kept walking toward the miles-away hot

air balloon. She imagined what the taxi driver's life must have been like in his native country. Native countries, they all had those.

She shook out her finger. No seizure. Not here in the street. Not after eleven years without one. Not because of a few balloons with gondolas...gondolae? What was the plural?

Okay, just don't think about it. The word has some plural. And it's one of those two.

I'm seventeen again, she said to herself. Sometimes that thought could calm her down. T minus one. At zero next year life will suddenly become pitch-black and insipid and miserable. Then, to avoid getting muddled, she quickly corrected her age to the right number – twenty-one – and thought of how she would soon appear for job interviews, in a long ball gown and with a tiara on her head. The balloon was really very far away, you couldn't make out any details. No doubt the taxi driver sent money home every month, to his thirteen daughters.

As the pre-storm state of her nerves subsided, she stopped outside a small café and took a rest. I got too worked up, she said to herself. Maybe also the fault of the magic medicine last night. She had been lucky, the aury feeling was gone. And it was a pleasant, warm afternoon. Through the window of the café the back and forth of the waiters and the pantomimes of people feeding themselves could be seen. A faint smell of food was in the air. A man with a surgical mask on his face walked past her, he was carrying a black briefcase. Then something happened to the sun, as if an overhead transparency had been slid in front of it, and the light became odd, a leaden yellow. A car drove out of a parking space.

The blue and red celebratory balloons were now so far away that they looked like eye floaters. As a child Natalie had once discovered a magic trick with which you could bring into focus all the faraway things that were interesting and mysterious – a man with a rabbit-ears hat in a ski lift gondola, a peacocky wind wheel on a neighboring balcony, a colorful decoration in a hospital window, an advertising poster being towed by a sailplane. Whatever object was blurred in the distance, all you had to do was hold two fingers very close to your eye and view the thing over the edge of your fingers. As in the misty mirror at a waterfall's edge, the thing then appeared considerably sharper, but at the same time somewhat unsteady, flickering. If you moved your fingers, the thing wavered as if it were elastic. If you kept your hand still, it could again be seen very clearly, strangely preserved, in a picture frame the size of a mustard seed. It worked even with stars. The best method was to form a compressed bird beak with thumb and forefinger of each hand and make these two beaks kiss each other. The resulting space between them was a tiny diamond through which you could look. At the time she couldn't have said whether this magic art came from her fingers or from her eyes. Her eyes could also do entirely different things. In the car to the clinic, for example, every Tuesday morning, she chose a little black mark on the window next to her seat and then, by shifting her focus to the distance, turned it into two. These two identical, slightly indistinct marks thus became the wheels of a skateboard, which rolled along on guardrails, on fields and (during the return journey, when she lay stretched out on the back seat) on overhead power lines that flowed into each other and swayed up and down. With a tiny turn of your head you could change the axis of the skateboard wheels, and the whole thing became a game of skill. Sometimes she imagined a little man on the skateboard. Or she thought of a sharp blade,

which jutted out of the car like a wing and sawed off all the telephone poles and fences and even the trees on the long lane leading up to the clinic. Or cut through them as smoothly as butter, so that they didn't fall apart into two pieces. As a ninja sword did with a candle. One stroke, and the candle stands there seemingly unscathed, as if the sword had missed it, but you are well aware that it feels the unhealable break in it, the invisible dividing surface that extends across the universe. Then a gentle push with your finger, and the upper half falls off.

Since it was warm, she stayed outside until evening. She had a late lunch in the lobby restaurant of a hotel, next to a group of Swiss who almost all had pleasantly round, shiny heads, at least a small consolation for the missed balloons. She stopped in various bookshops and leafed through atlases. Certain countries had a strangely indeterminable color, a mixture of brown and violet, and if you looked at them for a long time, they began to flicker. She held a thick, heavy biography of the Icelandic author Halldór Laxness in her hand and read the last two pages, which were about the writer's death. He suffered from dementia, could no longer speak, but still played Bach on the piano; shortly thereafter, he fell down the stairs. Then Natalie stood in front of the horror shelf and, thinking of meerkats, stood on tiptoe. There was no new Stephen King, Peter Straub too was unchanged. A few unknown titles with interesting cover illustrations, but the names of the authors didn't give her a sense of security.

She considered for a long time what she should buy herself as a reward. She had, after all, completed an entire program, forty-one times she had injured herself in the one year, almost always out of clumsiness. A child suffering from spastic paralysis had once

gotten stuck in an elevator door on her watch, and in panic she had tugged at him, and afterward, with bruises all over his body, the child had even forgiven her; two Down syndrome boys, both already in their late twenties, had asked for her hand and convinced her that there were people of almost extraterrestrial goodness and kindness; she had learned to take advantage of her body's center of gravity and the natural load-bearing capacity of her bone structure and lift and hold immobile people; she had acquired physical calming techniques and patience mantras, had become addicted to board games and ASMR videos and had, not counting today, overslept only a single time. She had dealt with parents whose children would never learn anything, because they had a barely functioning brain; she had dealt with parents who held her responsible for the fact that their children wouldn't become astronauts someday; she had dealt with parents who often wept and read books on grieving, even though their children were still alive. She had witnessed the death of a severely disabled boy whose mother had given him too much of his sedative that morning before she brought him to school. Silently to himself he had choked to death on his own saliva, and no one noticed until around noon. Like a teddy bear he had lain facedown in his playpen in the classroom, in brown coveralls made of a special material that couldn't be torn even by teeth. Natalie had retched and puked all night. But the next day she had gone back. She had survived unharmed that dark phase, beginning in the first three months, in which you feel as if you're the only point in the universe that still functions according to the principles of logic and reason. You argued with a constantly spinning blind man about whether a hot dish towel was dangerous or not; you frightened a forty-year-old man so much by carrying over a handful of snow that he fell unconscious; you put a diaper on a thirteen-year-old with stunted extremities who

with lightning speed grabbed at his own shit and threw it across the room; you were puked on, you were taken for the devil, you were screamed at by people who had never learned to speak; you felt how, with an awkward turning movement, you broke the clavicle of a child with brittle bone disease, just like that, and the child just softly said *Uh* and turned red and began to breathe heavily. Or you philosophized with an Alzheimer's patient about where the swimming pool was actually hidden. My God, that unforgettable afternoon with the invisible swimming pool! Weinrauch, that had been the old man's name. And he was searching for the swimming pool. Which one, he couldn't explain. But it was somewhere, perhaps in the walls, perhaps under the floor. Natalie didn't contradict him. For a whole afternoon. Herr Weinrauch himself would have forgotten the subject after half an hour at the latest, but Natalie had kept bringing it up again, so that the wonderful flow wouldn't stop. Afterward her head had been ringing, and in the evening she had burst into tears in front of the ticket counter at the movie theater, because everything there was so wonderfully reasonable. Everyone stuck to the subject, a short, meaningful dialogue unfolded about the desired row of seats and the admission fee. Then, a week later, Herr Weinrauch had died in his bed, and she had hated herself for the minute of crying in the movie theater line, in retrospect she even found the movie to have been a failure, even though she had actually liked it.

When it got dark, she went home. No one was waiting for her there. The air was still warm as at noon, as if the twilight in the city were only a mistake of the eyes. Streetlamps: light-pubs for insects. Mannequins: cartoon characters in the clothes of their

artists. And stars: worlds that were so small that hundreds of them fit between a couple of evening tree branches.

Work

That spring the newspapers warned of a virus that afflicted certain rodent species in Asia. You often saw the picture of a clay-brown Japanese dormouse that would have appeared completely healthy if the puzzling caption hadn't been there. Aside from that there was a lot of talk about a new digital currency and a revolutionary re-greening system for deserts, some people were building themselves bunkers, and at the end of May the Christmas letter of a person who had died eighty-five years ago arrived somewhere extremely late. There was an attack on the American embassy in Lebanon, and that same day a girl in a bright red moose costume crossed the Tegethoff Bridge. The city was full of construction sites as it was every spring, and on Sundays the excavators stood there in graceful motionlessness, the shovel arm raised in a gently threatening gesture toward the sky. The tall, old trees at the edge of the city park were being trimmed, passersby formed groups and watched the work, in the end only the smaller branches remained, crooked and useless as Tyrannosaurus Rex arms. That same week Natalie moved into her new apartment in one of the city's outer districts. The apartment was on the second floor. In the courtyard of the building were three deck chairs, which all the tenants were permitted to use. There was also a parking lot for four cars, a few modern, receiving-antenna-like laundry racks, and a low walnut tree that looked as if its glasses had fallen in the grass.

Just a few weeks after her move and the completion of her program Natalie found work in the small, private assisted living facility of Villa Koselbruch, near the St. Leonhard sanatorium. She was offered a job with sixty-six percent work time. That meant that three employees would share two full-time positions. Something cozy emanated from this image: standing together, pressing against each other under one rain shelter, protection from the elements. Natalie liked the calculation, for she remembered from school that the number she would carry around with her from this point forward went on infinitely. And of course the fact that more than a few people were faring no differently on the job market made it even more beautiful: 66.6666...% Strictly speaking, you shouldn't even write the percent sign, since there was no end. The three dots were cheating, the number in actuality as long as a ray of light.

In late June there was an orientation day, followed by a two-week trial period, during which the employment relationship could be dissolved at any time without giving reasons. But that didn't happen, for Natalie fit in, as her colleagues, led by the kind director Astrid Koller-Verdyl, quickly agreed, very well with the existing team. In the past, they told her, these trial phases had often lasted whole months, a gray, ponderously uncompact time, which they could hardly imagine anymore. Of course, after those first two weeks Natalie did not yet have any *carees*, but that would certainly come with time. *Carees*, that's what they called the clients for whom they would in the future be the first point of contact, they would be their *personal carers*. And *clients* – that's what they called the residents of the facility. Almost everything here had its own name, like Disneyworld money, which was worthless in the outside world. Internally they actually spoke only rarely of an *assisted living facility*, although this phrase was on several signs

and even on the home page, but rather of *training units*. For the goal was that the clients might one day have their own apartment, paid for with money from their own work, and would no longer need personal carers. So far this had succeeded with two of them. Their photos hung, decorated with imaginative ornaments, in the team meeting room, which was at the same time the carer kitchen. Their names were still mentioned, and at a moment of unmonitored thinking it even seemed to Natalie that the carers sometimes kneeled before these pictures and prayed.

The facility permanently employed two civilian service workers. These two young men in fact never met, since their working hours were divided in precisely complementary fashion. They were used for simple tasks and for what the contract called *fetch and carry services*. The cleaning of the refrigerator, for example, was done by the civilian service workers. Helping get food, helping serve food, assembling things, shopping. Various social activities were also expected of them, such as playing cards or putting together puzzles, but most of them had an incredibly hard time with that, since they, with few exceptions, had always just arrived fresh out of school, a green seventeen or eighteen years old and about as self-confident as deer who had strayed onto a cruise ship. When they acted all too awkward in dealing with the clients, you did them the favor – in accordance with an unwritten rule in the facility – of having them repair a broken power outlet instead, after you had first described to them where to get the required screwdriver and by when to bring it back.

For the first two weeks Natalie worked alongside them, with instructions to observe everything, ask as many questions as possible and learn. During that time her name was written, mysteriously in quotation marks, on the whiteboard in the social space.

Natalie was happy about their presence, for because of her slight nervousness in this initial phase she was often dropping things, keys, shoehorns, utensils. When a civilian service worker was nearby, a glance sufficed, and he picked up the object for her. From her earliest childhood onward Natalie had had an intense aversion toward bending down. Whenever her head came close to the ground, she grazed death. This was connected to her grand mal past. The seizures occurred, or at least she had thought so as a little girl, above all when she bent down, for then a marble in her head rolled into a wrong corner. If she simply held herself bolt upright for her whole life, she wouldn't have any more seizures. Even as a teenager she had carried around a level with her for a time. She was the great picture frame adjuster in her family. These days she was only rarely grazed by death, an ice-cold, deep moment, which generally passed immediately.

If the uneasy feeling remained longer, she often turned off the light in the bathroom and stood in the dark in front of the mirror. Then she brought her face very close to the glass and, with the reach-extending help of a hanger, switched the light back on. If she was lucky, she could then see her pupil – you could always focus only on one – shrinking. Like the o-mouth of a surprised insect it contracted. In the manner of a space portal in a sci-fi movie, shortly after the spaceship has slipped through. Natalie liked to check her reflexes, her alertness, the small islands of mysterious independent life maintained by her body. With the pupil reaction there was a pleasant delay, as with a webcam, that slight time lag, which for a fraction of a second seemed to plunge you into that element from which you were otherwise excluded: the unobservable world. Your own face with closed eyelids; the back of your own neck; portrait heads in paintings that were capable of moving and thumbing their noses at you when you weren't looking.

Natalie couldn't operate a light switch without balancing it for at least a couple of seconds exactly on the transitional edge between electric current and no electric current. It was, of course, impossible, for most light switches had a spring built in that always compelled them to decide on a direction. But one day the light switch in the bathroom actually got stuck in the middle, the light flickered briefly, then stayed off, but the switch remained in a precarious balance: absolutely parallel to the wall, in the no man's land between on and off. After years of patiently playing this balancing game a small, bizarre success. Natalie left the bathroom. She would have given a lot to be able to sneeze now, just to dispel the peculiar feeling that the flip-switch-in-balance gave her. Then she became frightened that somewhere a wire might burn out if she left it like that, and, with a heavy heart, she ended the unique state of suspension.

Over her bathtub hung a huge poster of emperor penguins. The eggplant-round birds had spread out like chess pieces under the low polar sun, still and expectant, and cast long, defiant shadows over the ice. Natalie saluted – sometimes in actuality, sometimes only inwardly – the penguins every morning. At the same time she held her breath for a moment and swelled out her belly. It gave her a small, light-blue surge of happiness.

Natalie loved everything that was worldwide, like live broadcasts, phases of the moon, or the novels of Stephen King. All the things that at any given moment were perceived and liked by as many people as possible. She loved to record noises and voices and listen to them with headphones when she went for a walk and watched the passing souls of the people on the street. She loved magazines and mail-order catalogues that were older than

she was. She loved her own passport photo. Sometimes she took her passport, which had an expiration date like milk, out of the cabinet and looked at the strange, serious face in it. She imagined keeping the tiny girl to whom the passport face belonged in a shoebox in her apartment. When she lost her patience, she threw the annoying little girl against the wall. And she loved her new friend who had recently been going in and out of the rooms of her apartment: a cat, whom she named Chat.

Immediately after she got up, the television in Natalie's apartment was turned on. That hadn't always been the case, but by now she no longer had a choice. She was really glad that she had been able to acquire a taste for a medium that had once gotten on her nerves so much. Since then even department store music and huge animated advertising surfaces no longer bothered her. I can tolerate anything, I'm growing up. The later it got, the stronger her need for a live broadcast became. In the morning she could definitely leave on movies and other recorded broadcasts, but then came the evening. At that point something weird happened to the atmosphere, and then came the hour when the sky confessed the first small stars, as if it had now undeniably remembered them, the trees recited their finger alphabets more frantically, while the giant dome over the city lifted and was blown away into outer space. As if you were living in an observatory that opened every evening. At that time the urge for a live broadcast became uncontrollably strong. For when something was live, you saw and heard exactly what was happening right now at the same moment somewhere else. So you were in two places at the same time. With a recorded broadcast, however, you were at once in the past and in the present,

and that was never much help; on the contrary, that only made you inwardly astronauty and reclusive.

Now, in the summer, she slept at night in a rumpled T-shirt until it smelled so strongly of her that the incest barrier seemed transgressed if she put it on again. Some days she stayed naked, and only in the morning, immediately after showering, did she go into the kitchen to pick out something to wear. For reasons of space the laundry rack was there. The floor around this structure with its insect-like symmetry was always somewhat cooler. And this special, pantry-like coolness Natalie associated with the *sh* in the word *whitewashed*. It was one and the same sensation.

After a sweaty night her cleavage was tallowy and shiny. She loved rubbing her index finger over this area, creating gray fluffs of skin. She was afraid that by indulging in this new habit she might revive an old, long-overcome addiction – the squeezing of blackheads on her own and others' skin – and the fear seemed not entirely unrealistic, but it was still something different: Here you conjured the doughy greasy substance out of nothing, so to speak. Simply by rubbing. And what formed was made by skillful, tight rolling movements of the fingers into little pellets. These tasted bitter. You could also set them on fire, if you felt like it, but the result was not very impressive. Natalie collected some of the pellets inside a particular clothespin, which had a small nick in it, so that you immediately recognized it and wouldn't accidentally open it. At some point she would have stored so much of her rubbed-off skin in the narrow mouth of the clothespin that this, in the manner of a dental impression, produced a formed piece. You could build whole cities out of your own substance.

The cat had a strange way of expressing himself. His voice was actually quite pleasant, but often, when he was sitting somewhere lost in thought and you touched him from behind, he made exactly the same sound that Super Mario makes when he runs into an animal and shrinks: Dnrr-dnrr-dnrr. Then he stood up, cleaned the spot you had touched, and let out a meow that usually turned into a yawn. Half his head seemed to break apart when the cat yawned. It looked like those Venus flytraps. Karl should be here, thought Natalie. My brother should see all this here and say something about it. Why had he moved so far away? It would make him happy to see me like this.

Sometimes, shortly after waking up, Natalie had the feeling that her movements, indeed all changes, however insignificant, of her physical position, had invisible consequences that extended over the neighborhood and the horizon to other cities and continents. Like in that sci-fi story about the butterfly that causes a hurricane on the other end of the world, and the people there don't even know that it was this butterfly to which they owe the ruins of their house in Kansas. Perhaps a similar principle applied to the air swirled by Natalie's big toes in the morning, when they, first sentinel buoys of the still slumbering body, freed themselves from the blanket and moved back and forth. And undoubtedly it was the case that down the line these tiny changes of her position, the arrangement of her fingers, the set of her jaw inflicted horrible torments on a person living far away from her. She was entangled with him by a dense causal net, nothing belonged only to her, everything always went on, one atom struck another, and at the end of the chain sat the poor guy, what might his name be, perhaps Juan or Mordechai or

Salim, in any case from *down there*. He had nothing but bad luck and suffering and misery in his life – and that due only to a slight change of Natalie’s chin-neck angle while bathing.

In her gentle minutes she thought about apologizing to the poor stranger by gently touching a window handle or whispering something soothing into the thermostat of the radiator. And during gloomy periods, such as the days after the child’s death, back then, during her program, Juan was her constant companion. Her perpetual destructive effect on this life that was invisible to her and could not otherwise be influenced by her in any conceivable way then became as evident as the air surrounding her, it was the music of the spheres, the brass band beyond the horizon. Often she thought about simply, for Juan’s sake, not moving anymore. But that gave her neck pains, and she cursed her distant, unknown victim and imagined how he abused his daughter and actually deserved to be tortured by her by molecular planetary means.

What might the causal chain look like? If I lie like this, she thought, with only this slight leg movement, then perhaps I will have a tingly feeling in my arm in the morning, and as a result I will lose one or two seconds in the morning, and as a result I will look differently at someone on the street, and he will remember this look and pass it on to someone on the telephone, and so these two seconds will travel as a slight distortion through the world. And things that she had done years ago: smoothing out a newspaper that had an ugly crease; touching an already-limp balloon and giving it those cellulite spots; grabbing the sticky lid of a honeypot first with her nails and then, when there’s not enough leverage that way, with all her fingers, being disgusted and overstretching her fingers, etc. – all that reached Juan only today, at this second. Strangely, when she

thought about Juan, she always imagined him at a railroad crossing. A cap sat on his head. He had one hand on the back of his head, blinked into the evening light of the planet and asked himself why so much misfortune and misery had to befall him, he was, after all, always kind to everyone. She wondered whether it would be theoretically possible to help Juan. But she couldn't know at any moment of her life which decision, which change of position, however minimal, would reach him, and when, and with what intensity.

Every person in the world had a Juan. Even Juan had a Juan. She too was someone's Juan. The white-haired taxi driver, who had been unable to handle the balloons, was the Juan of half the world. Her eyes wandered to the cat, who had fallen asleep on the couch with the eternally cheerful facial expression of his species, curled up into a shape that was reminiscent of an uppercase D or a human ear: the outstretched legs pressed against his face. He slumbered soundly. Only his tail was still awake and performed inviting coiling movements. It was clear: He had already made the Nirvana leap, he had no Juan.