



**Deniz Ohde**

**Pretending to Sleep**

Novel

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Sample translation by Imogen Taylor

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Can a strip of earth tell you what’s happened? Was it possible to see anything in this plot of land, its surrounding fence swaying in the hot summer’s wind? Yasemin looked closely at the ruins to see if they spoke to her. Looked at the bricks sticking out of the sand. At the thistles and ground elder that were already springing up in between. It was as if a patch of dead land neglected by constructors had only recently become accessible: the grey stone slabs of the backyard showed where the missing house had once begun; the marks on the building to the left told of a former staircase. The interior wall was now an outside wall. A sheet of white plastic provided a makeshift cover for the crumbling plaster and blew up in the wind like a skirt. The tree of heaven had pushed up the paving stones with its roots, transforming the yard into a hilly landscape. ‘Rubble tree’ had been the old name for it, because it thrived on ashes and didn’t mind rough ground and barren soil. Now its suckers grew unchecked because Ante no longer pulled the young shoots out of the clayey earth before they put down roots.

It was very still—still as only summer can be. Only the plane trees rustled and it seemed to Yase that it was *her* skirt blowing up in the air. Her ash-blond hair hung at her neck in a plait; it had taken the last of her strength to braid it that morning. There had been a time when she’d

worn it like that every day, but now the hank of hair felt wrong on her skin, as if she were in disguise, only pretending to be herself—a zombie that ought actually to be buried somewhere under these heaps of sand.

The evening before the house vanished, Yasemin and Lydia had sat here on the pavement outside KlickKlack. Ante had put out the wobbly aluminium chairs and brought lemonade; the glasses had immediately started to sweat. The sky was strangely leaden, as though bleached by the blazing sunshine. Yasemin hadn't had enough sleep lately. Her usually fresh, glowing skin was sallow and for the first time she'd noticed lines around her eyes when she looked in the mirror. This was nothing unusual for a thirty-five-year-old woman, but in the last weeks it had become so pronounced that it was obvious she had something on her mind. She sat slumped on her chair, too tired to keep upright. Behind Lydia, she could see the looming buildings on Vogesenstrasse, a complex of connected tower blocks arranged in a wavy line along the square of grass that was the park. The grass, which had turned yellow this year, was surrounded by gravel paths; the canal ran along one side in a bed of old cobblestones, widening at one point to form a dangerous eddy. Forty-five to fifty Vogesenstrasse were the only tall buildings in the area. Some were six storeys high, others ten; the metal clad balconies were stacked one above the other, and from her bedroom window over the illuminated white KlickKlack sign, Yase could see the red geraniums on Lydia's ground-floor balcony in number forty-five and, six storeys up, the balcony door of her childhood. Now other people lived there. The concrete façade had once been painted a pale apricot colour to make it less forbidding, but it had developed a grey patina over time.

'All one big illusion, darling, what did I tell you?' Lydia turned the glass in her hands, her grey hair framing her face in a straight bob, her lips lilac coloured. You could almost hear her flick the ash off her cigarette at the end of each sentence—but Lydia hadn't smoked for a long time, thirty years at least. 'It's not good for the skin,' she'd tell her clients when she smelt

the cold smoke in their hair as they lay back on the beautician's chair. It was true, Lydia had spoken of illusion right from the start—and tried a number of other tacks too—but nothing had got through to Yasemin. Smokers never wanted to listen either. Always came up with some excuse for why it was nice. Whenever Lydia mentioned nails in coffins, the answer was always, 'Yes, but coffee breaks aren't the same without a cigarette.' She might as well have gone to one of the drunks in Ante's pub and told him he was only imagining his alcoholism. The drunk would have stared right through her and knocked back his schnapps—because he had to. It was an addiction; he didn't drink for fun. He suffered as a result, but there was nothing he could do about it. What could you say to a man like that? How could you tell him that none of it was real—that he simply had to put down his glass and walk out?

That's how Yasemin must have seemed to Lydia back then—scurrying about as if touched by a ghost, doubting and questioning everything. Now, looking back on it, the episode was a mystery to her. She saw a distorted version of herself breathlessly lecturing Lydia, trying almost manically to explain the signs she thought she'd seen in that hot summer that echoed that of twenty years before—signs in the stars and on car number plates, but above all, of course, in the moon.

[...]

‘We’ve made a bit of progress, but I’d like to see some more.’ The doctor pencilled lines onto Yasemin’s X-ray picture with a set square and measured the curvature of her spine. He spoke in the ‘we’ form, as though he and Yasemin’s spine were in some secret alliance and she was only the service provider. He pulled out another, smaller image and put it on the light box. The bones of Yasemin’s left hand shimmered white. The doctor studied the gaps between them which showed that she was still a child. ‘Hmm,’ he said, dissatisfied. ‘You have maybe another year. After that, there’ll be no more growing. And that means no more chance to correct your spine.’ Yasemin sat on the bed in her vest, waiting to see what conclusion the doctor would come to. ‘I’m afraid it’ll have to be a corset.’

She’d seen corsets on other people. The elderly woman with the wrinkly back had worn one from week two. Hard white plastic, made to measure—an abstract replica of her torso with a flexible opening so that she could squeeze out sideways before the exercise sessions. Blue plastic buckles were attached to the front, with Velcro to pull it tight. On the inside, strategically positioned rolls of foam pressed the body into shape.

Among the younger people there was a fashion for decorating the corsets with patterned adhesive vinyl. Yasemin had come across military tartan, shocking-pink batik flowers and a pixelated denim.

She had hoped desperately to be spared. ‘I’m not getting one of them,’ she had said, as if it were up to her—just as she’d thought to herself, *I’m not going to fall* seconds before she came off the horse.

Once out of the consulting room she pulled the already slightly greasy paper out of her pocket: *time, gather round, give me wings to speed my way...*

The following day, a driver took Yasemin to the orthopaedic technician. As it was an unscheduled appointment, she was the only person in the six-seater that usually drove the corset crew up the hill every first Tuesday in the month. Yase slid onto the leather seat. The

moustachioed driver said nothing and drove off while she was still strapping herself in. They made their way up the winding roads of the health resort, leaving the forest behind them and heading through a residential area to what the locals called the 'industrial estate'. This consisted of the orthopaedic practice, housed in a fifties' bungalow, and a stonemason's yard. Yasemin pulled the sliding door shut behind her. The driver would pick her up in two hours.

Inside, everything was designed for throngs of patients, but here too Yasemin was alone. The reception desk was in semi-darkness and she followed signs into the waiting room, where one wall was lined with windows and the other three were hung with drawings, photos of smiling girls in corsets and pictures of orthotics. About twenty chairs stood around the room, as if for circle time; Yase had the impression she'd strayed into a nursery school at a weekend. She picked a chair by the windows so that she could keep an eye on the door, and sat down with her papers ready in her hands. Was there anyone here at all? What did this place look like on a regular day? How many girls had sat here before her, waiting for adjustments, their corsets between their legs, plaster casts of their torsos on their laps like some Futurist homage to the marble busts of antiquity?

The room she was called to by one of the orthopaedic technicians was also too big for its purpose; it looked like an art room in an adult education centre. Another man was waiting for her there; they were both dressed in white overalls like decorators or builders and wore white orthopaedic sandals on their feet, flecked with plaster of Paris. The first was about fifty, with a grey goatee; the other was much younger, maybe mid-twenties, with a full head of shoulder-length black hair tucked behind his ears. Yasemin was asked to stand on a podium in the middle of the room. The walls were lined with rows of grey metal filing cabinets from which the older man fetched gauze bandages. The younger man prepared the plaster. Yase was used to getting undressed in front of men; it had to be done and she'd never been treated with anything but clinical coolness. Usually she'd been able to keep her crop top on. Only the X-rays had required her to be completely naked, but they'd always passed without incident; Yase

had been positioned matter-of-factly in the crosshairs of the beam and the men had reverently left the room. These two were different. They were staggered by the unquestioning way in which Yase stripped off her top. ‘Unfortunately’ they were going to have to ask her to undress completely. Yasemin was not ashamed. It was what it was. This was a medical situation. The man with black hair started to rub Vaseline on her skin; the other continued to stir the plaster. Then the first layer of plaster-soaked gauze was applied to her ribs. Not a sound except the barely audible swish of the damp bandages. It was cold. The man with black hair grinned. The older guy stood behind Yasemin and said nothing. The black-haired guy started to mumble something. ‘What do we have here... Take a look at this.’ His voice was strangely hoarse; he grinned again and chuckled. Yasemin shrugged. The older man said nothing. The man with black hair left Yasemin’s breasts till last, making more hoarse comments as he smoothed the gauze over her chest. ‘Plenty of women who’d like a pair like that.’ Yasemin wondered if she should mention that she was fourteen, but in the end she said nothing, only smiled in what she hoped was a helpful way. Arch and knowing. *Friendly but discreet*. Standing on the podium, arms stretched out at her sides. The guy with black hair dutifully took the loose ends from his colleague and smoothed them over her back.

There was no one in the waiting room, no one at reception. Outside, the space where the car had been parked was empty. The road bright in the glare of the sun, the only sound the stonemason’s saw as it cut through a piece of quartz.

[...]

One evening I was walking along a main road in a knee-length coat, headphones in my ears, a bit of snow coming down. Behind me to one side I saw a shadow approaching at a run and thought it was someone who had a train to catch. Then I felt a hand between my legs. Didn't the man vanish into the next side street afterwards? Did he hold something to my throat? *Don't wear your headphones on the street*, I once read. *You'll make yourself easy prey*. The eleventh commandment. Didn't I scare the man with my loud scream? (The man who, now that I come to think of it, looked rather like the driver with the red number plate.) I scared myself—no, I *impressed* myself yelling at him, the words flying out of my mouth, my cracking voice muffled by the headphones. 'Are you fucking crazy? Piss off! Piss the hell off!' How did I know what to do? Children are taught to yell *stranger danger* in such situations. The last I saw of him as he retreated into the darkness was an obscene gesture, his fist hitting his palm. There was a couple walking a few hundred metres ahead of me who turned around. Presumably, if I'd carried on screaming, people would have leaned out of windows in the buildings that lined the street like grey rockfaces. Did I just keep walking? Only one bud in my ear, but with a firm step. Soon I didn't even look round anymore. I felt that hand between my thighs for a long time.

Was the night Immacolata and I left the party my undoing? Did I read that in a headline—*her undoing*? We parted ways at the grass. It was quickest to cut straight across. I watched Immacolata walk back towards the youth centre; I'd promised to text her when I was home. For a moment I hesitated on the edge, as if the dark expanse in front of me were a frozen lake and I couldn't be sure how thick the ice was. When Immacolata had passed through the last cone of light from the streetlamps and vanished into the dark, I too stepped into the darkness. I wasn't sober. I tramped through the damp grass although I'd seen a man in the distance doing the same. There was hardly any lighting in this part of the park, and the man was a shadow who sometimes merged with the grass altogether—only the red glow of his cigarette gave him away. I thought he was taking a shortcut too. It was only when he came closer that I began to wonder if maybe

he had other ideas. I acted as if we were on a busy street and I had to share the space with strangers, like in a big city during the day when you accept that there are other people in your personal space. Here, though, there was nothing but the grass and the canal. Either of us could have taken the gravel path around the edge, but I was tired, I didn't want to go the long way round. And the man didn't swerve an inch from his course; he was making straight for me. Had he seen me or not? I had no glowing cigarette to give me away. Did he think I was a boy he could start a fight with? The purposeful way he was heading towards me suggested he did. His firm stride. The flourish with which he raised his cigarette to his mouth. I decided it was too late to change course now; he would have smelt my fear. Wasn't it the same with men as with dogs? I held my head high. We walked towards each other. Even when he was very close I couldn't make out his face. Our shoulders almost touched as we slipped past one another. I felt a current of air to my right, displaced air caused by our combined speed. Once more I glimpsed the red glow of his cigarette; thin smoke vanished in his slipstream. Then he was gone and I made for the yellow streetlamps at the edge of the park.

I took my chances. *Come on, lay me*, I thought, once I'd pushed my fear aside. I stepped onto the grass as if it were an abyss. There are videos of penguins that leave their group to waddle off over the never-ending ice, apparently without reason. Even if scientists go out after them and bring them back to the flock, they turn straight round again and head off the same way, waddling to a certain death. They're not lost; they move as though pulled by an invisible string.

Did I walk along the canal and get myself killed? Was my murderer a man who came out of the dark? It was night, not morning, and I was walking home tipsy, not coming from a workout, so people weren't as horrified as they might have been. Increases the likelihood, journalists would have said. *Don't walk around at night alone*. The eleventh commandment.

Immacolata and I should have stuck together.



When I was ten or eleven I was on the bus going home from school. I had a window seat in a group of four. A man sat down next to me. He had a big empty hiking rucksack with him. One of those ones with a metal frame. He put this rucksack on his lap, but it was so wide that it ended up on my lap too. It was like a bolt pushed across me, locking me in with him behind a metal bar. After a while I thought I felt his hand on my thigh. It was winter; I was wearing jeans with a pair of tights underneath. He didn't grab me suddenly; it was more of a gradual thing. Like he'd pushed his hand very slowly towards me under the rucksack, then let it sink onto my thigh a millimetre at a time so that I couldn't be sure if the weight on my leg was him or the rucksack. A moment later, though, I *was* sure, because his hand started to knead my thigh. That too was gentle, with a tremor that betrayed his excitement. I thought I heard him groan softly beside me, but I didn't dare look at him. I stared out of the window. I looked into the faces of the people standing next to him in the aisle. No one in the packed bus gave a second thought to a man who had laid a hiking rucksack across his lap and that of the child next to him and thrust his arms out of sight underneath.

I turned to the door whenever the bus stopped and new passengers crowded on. I tried to look at them in the casual way you glance at strangers on a bus—and at the same time I searched their faces for signs that someone shared my consternation. *Stranger danger?* I asked with my eyes, but no one answered. I didn't trust my own judgment.

'Are you getting off?' The man jumped when I made to get up. He spoke in a rush, with studied politeness, and he made a big thing of lifting his rucksack, as if he wanted to be very nice to me—as if the last thing he wanted was to get in my way. He spoke to me as if I were no longer a pale-faced little girl.

As if by touching me he'd made a woman of me.

He couldn't know that I had no innocence left to lose.

He couldn't know that I'd lost my innocence on the night of my conception. That I would lose it again on a moonlit night when Lydia, beside me, bit back her 'no'.

That I'd been conceived by a breach of will that led my parents to marry eleven years after my defiled conception, *because they had to*.

I thought all that was normal.