

Sample Translation of Katharina Hartwell's Debut Novel

**Das Fremde Meer (The Strange Sea)**

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Excerpt from the Chapter:

The First Story

The Last Days of the Changing City

(pp. 41-64)

It is one of the last mornings, on one of the last days in the Changing City.

Far out in one of the most western districts, at the edge of the city, Moira is sitting on her bike, rocking gently back and forth. The front light of the bike is broken, so are the front brakes, but at least the rear brakes still work. Given the choice, Moira would prefer a motorbike, but in the Changing City it is difficult, almost impossible to find fuel. There are no cars on the roads, no buses, there aren't even that many bikes left.

Moira is wearing a tightly fitting, black suit. Only her hands, her neck and her head are left uncovered. The cut and material of the suit are adapted to the special living conditions of the changing city; the airtight, protective fabric is reminiscent of neoprene. Wherever Moira's skin *is* exposed to the air, it is covered by a rash, the corners of her mouth are torn, her eyes are reddened. Since she is tall and thin, and since her facial features are sharp and somewhat strict, she is often taken for a boy at first sight. The most startling thing about her are her eyes. They are of an unusual chilly blue, but it is not the colour alone which is distracting. Eyes are said to be windows to the soul, yet Moira's eyes seem more like closed doors.

Far to the east, at the other end of the city, lies a district called Basenzia. Something lingers in the air here, a smell, a sensation, a certain kind of mood maybe. The sky is tinted in a most peculiar way, rumours flutter through the streets like quick birds. People are whispering, gossiping, telling each other: Basenzia will vanish, and soon. The Changing City is long past its expiration date, but nowhere is it as obvious as here in Basenzia.

Among the decayed and decaying buildings, there is one that stands out in particular. Through a dark staircase you ascend to the loft, which used to be one of the most popular properties of the city. There is a man, slouching in a stained armchair. He is gazing through the floor-to-ceiling windows on to Movement Square. There is not much to be seen. Every now and then a lone figure scurries through the adjoining streets. Even the Housewatch has given up patrolling.

Not so long ago Movement Square was famous above all for one thing: the Golden Angel, the landmark of the Movement and of the Changing City, a statue of approximately two meters in height, rumoured to be made out of pure gold. The pedestal it used to stand on now is a forlorn sight. On a mild spring night, half a year ago, the angel vanished. No one knows where she is now.

Slumping in his armchair Jonas lets his gaze stray aimlessly over Movement Square. His eyes always stumble over the bare pedestal. He cannot recall what used to be different about it. He only knows for sure that something *was* different.

Jonas is tired, hungry and thirsty. His bones hurt, his joints and his muscles. He has come to think that the blood running through his veins hurts. For days his thoughts have been caught

in a loop. I need water, he thinks, water is out there, I can't go out there, I am much too tired. I am tired because I cannot sleep, I cannot sleep. I am much too thirsty. I need water.

He half-heartedly hits out at the radio on the wobbly table next to him. After several attempts he manages to reach the red button, turning the radio on, letting its static noise fill the room. Listlessly he adjusts the frequency until he finds the last station of the Changing City. The static finally gives way to a voice:

“We welcome you on one of the last mornings on one of the last days of the Changing City!”

He pulls a face and coughs extensively. Just like the Changing City, Jonas is long past his expiration date.

Although he gives the radio an unaffectionate push it continues blaring and since he is too tired to get up, he lets it ramble on, barely listening to the umpteenth special broadcasting about the recent developments in the Changing City. Only when a representative of the Housewatch is introduced does he start to listen. The radio host asks the representative to shed some light on the recent rumours.

“It is all unfounded scaremongering”, the representative claims, “In the past we have dealt with this kind of – admittedly unplanned – disappearance before. We will not dispute that. However, it is simply hysterical to speculate about the disappearance of an entire district. Nothing comparable has ever happened before.”

Jonas does not recognise the representative's voice. It doesn't seem to be someone he has ever worked with.

“It is true”, says an excited listener on the radio, “that no district has ever vanished. Two weeks ago, however, it happened to an entire street. And that was a first, too. Before that it had only been the occasional house.”

While other men and women are speaking excitedly on the radio, Jonas dozes off, until one of the last comments causes him to lift his head again.

“I used to work at the ICMR”, a woman says, “and it is not true that there is no evidence. In the past some of my colleagues and I could measure a certain kind of aura surrounding those objects which were coming into a Change. The probability that those objects would vanish in the next 48 hours was 98 per cent. In the last few weeks we have been able to collect data in Basenzia which suggest that – “

At this point the connection is cut off.

Jonas leans backwards and closes his eyes. I need water, he thinks.

Long before the Changing City became the Changing City it was the City of the North. There was not much to say about it, except that it was a city in the north of the country. The city was also known for its bad climate, a high crime rate and a stale, yet cheap kind of beer (Northbeer), which is not brewed anymore. Since the City of the North was the capital of the country, this was where Movement Research formed, culminating in the founding of ICMR<sup>1</sup>. Physicists of the entire country were working day and night, in order to refine the art of Movement which was founded on the most recent insights from quantum physics. A few years ago the first revolutionary breakthrough in the realm of quarks and quantum occurred. Whereas at the end of the last century it was barely possible to transfer the state of a particle within an entangled quantum system, one was now able to teleport quantum energy within the entangled system. In the laboratories of the ICMR, scientists developed techniques which

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<sup>1</sup> International Center for Movement Research

made it possible to transfer the research results from microphysics to macrophysics, and soon entire objects could be teleported from one location to another. At first they used only smaller macro-objects, but with the advancing success of the test series they ventured to teleport larger and larger objects.

Moira can still remember, how during one of the more popular television programs the first car vanished amid thundering applause. Like thousands of other citizens Moira sat in front of the TV and watched the car disappear from one pedestal and magically appear on another. In the flash of an eye the Movement conquered television, finding its climax in the game show “Now you see it – now you don’t” (NYSINYD), where contestants were asked to retrieve objects which had been moved via teleportation to hiding places behind curtains, in boxes or under little hats. If Moira had ever taken part in the show, she would have won every single game.

The average citizen knew nothing about the highly complex process, which left no outward traces on the object, yet massively changed its inner structure on a molecular level. The average citizen, however, wasn’t exactly interested in molecular structures and the smallest particles; all he or she cared about was the fun side of the Movement. Long before anyone had fully understood the physical principles on which the Movement was founded, theory was put into practice, bringing the Movement from the laboratories to the television studios and finally into people’s everyday life. There couldn’t be any real damage, one argued, as long as only lifeless matter and no human beings were being moved.

The advantages were obvious. Before the Movement, citizens had to travel from one corner of the city to the other in order to get to a certain restaurant or shop. Now they only had to take a

look at the “House-Plan”, in order to find out at what time of the day a certain house would appear in their district. The city council assigned “wandering houses”, commonly referred to as “moving estates” or short “moves”, which travelled through the districts according to fixed schedules.

A few months after the City of the North had become the Changing City a rather unsettling development took place. Not only the “moves” were wandering through the city but also ordinary houses which no one had prepared for the process commonly referred to as “the Change”.

The citizens soon lost track.

Schedules became obsolete, since entire districts started to re-organize themselves within a few weeks. When a citizen left his house in the morning, there was no guarantee that upon his return in the evening he would be able to locate his own house again. Most houses returned to their original location sooner or later, yet the reappearance of a house was by no means to be equated with the reappearance of its interior. For it wasn't only the houses which succumbed to the precarious magic of the Change – the Change also affected their complete contents. More than once a citizen would discover objects entirely unknown to him within his own four walls – a neighbour's saucepan, the hairdryer from the salon round the corner or even an entire fitted kitchen featuring a well-filled refrigerator.

A few weeks after that, the situation deteriorated further. Not every object, which vanished, reappeared again. It was a prerequisite of the Movement that all the particles of the changing object dissolved in order to reassemble themselves at another location. The occasional ICMR employee had already hesitantly pointed out that the said re-assembling did not necessarily take place each and every time. It was completely unknown what

kind of repercussions or long-term effects this interfering with the deepest structures of the objects might have. Additionally, no one seemed to know what happened to those men and women who were inside the buildings at the time of the Change. There were rumours about severed heads found in cellars, severed hands found in bathtubs.

“The bodies travel with the houses”, Moira’s friend Pip once said to her, “just not in one piece.”

A group of grey-clad men and women is marching through the more lively streets of the Northern District. You might think they were police, but since the police station vanished a few months ago this institution has fallen apart completely. The grey men and women are representatives of the Housewatch, the last and most important organisation in the Changing City. They regulate whatever there is left to regulate, taking care that the number of people without permanent residence (referred to as PWPs) stays as low as possible. The umbrella term “PWPs” covers all those who have given up looking for their apartments or houses and instead spend their time searching through the entire Changing City for objects, so they can sell them on the black market. By selling them they hope to earn enough money to be able to afford to leave the Changing City. Everyone who wants to leave is required to pay an exorbitant fee.

Moira too does not have a permanent residence. She hasn’t had one for such a long time that she doesn’t remember what it feels like to turn the latchkey in the lock, to listen to the answering machine or to check the mailbox. But Moira does not dream of finding a home again, she dreams of being able to leave the Changing City one day.

On this afternoon she is waiting for Pip so that she can consult with him. For days they have not been able to find anything. No telephone, no television, no jewellery and no CDs.

Just a tiny percentage of the lost objects reappear again. A few months ago it became obvious that it would be more and more difficult to get hold of objects. Back in the summer Moira and Pip had found something every day, selecting among the objects the most valuable ones, discarding the others. But the autumn wind seemed to sweep quite a considerable number of the objects away with it. There were more and more days on which Moira and Pip did not find a single object, not even a saucepan or a flat iron. For a while there were certain places they could always rely on – such as the old warehouse or the junkyard. But even those places they now left more and more often empty handed.

Moira is restless. They are still patrolling on a regular basis in the Western districts of the city, and Moira is offending the law simply by being here. She neither has permission to own a bike nor permission to loiter in the Western District.

While she is waiting for Pip, looking out for representatives of the Housewatch, she is thinking about the Golden Angel. She does not believe that the angel vanished accidentally. She believes the Housewatch simply took the statue, like they did other valuable objects, into custody.

All of a sudden she starts when she hears the sound of tires on the pavement, the swishing of spokes turning. Even before she sees Pip turn the corner, she recognises him by the rattling and scraping of his bike. His shoulders and his head hang down. No luck, she understands. Not in the warehouse, not in the junk yard.

“Well it was worth a try”, he says.

She nods, even though she had tried to talk him out of it.

On their bikes they ride in the direction of the Northern District, where they will meet the others in an abandoned coffeehouse. There has not been any coffee for a long time, the large windows have been barricaded up with boards and in order to be let in, Moira has to orchestrate a complex sequence of knocks.

For a while they came here so that they could swap retrieved objects. Now there is nothing left to swap.

Moira and the others are much too careful to sit in the actual coffeehouse, they always retreat to the back of the building. Someone is making soup, someone is saying that he hasn't found anything for the last three weeks, someone gives Moira and Pip a tip, which is not exactly red hot, more lukewarm. Basenzia, they whisper to each other and to them. That's where you have to go, you're bound to find something there.

Moira and Pip nod, spooning their soup silently.

"Well maybe we'll take a look", Moira claims, exchanging a glance with Pip, assuring herself that they will not under any circumstances go to Basenzia. The very idea makes her fidget on her chair. As long as they can avoid it, as long as they haven't found the last remaining object in the last remaining district, they will not go to Basenzia.

Early in the evening the group dissolves. In the night everyone takes care of themselves.

Moira and Pip leave the city centre behind, riding their bikes up a hill and into the former cheap side of the city, with crowded, high-rise apartment blocks. As if following some secret agreement, the most expensive villas of the city have gathered here. Nowadays Moira and Pip prefer to spend their

nights in old mansions or modern town houses. They are used to marble bathrooms, folding doors, terraces and large, open kitchens.

Slowly they ride their bikes through the abandoned streets, surveying the facades. Before they enter a house and prepare to spend the night, they make sure the building is secure. They work like a meticulous bomb squad. Moira is only convinced that a building is safe if the outlines are sharp and distinctive, if the air is clear and calm. Since her instincts never fail her, it is always she who makes the final decision.

On this evening she has difficulties deciding. They wander from house to house, yet sooner or later Moira shakes her head. Finally, when they reach the tenth house, she nods hesitantly, and they hide their bikes behind a shed in the front garden.

Recently Moira has noticed that the Change takes less and less time. There used to be days between the first sign and the final disappearance, now it takes only a few hours. More than once they have woken up to a sinister crackling.

On their first quick round through the spacious town house Moira confirms what she has already suspected. The house has been cleaned out. Whatever the owners did not take with them, other PWP's have long since taken.

The bedrooms on the first floor are too far away from the front door, so they spread their sleeping bags out on the cool stones of the entrance hall. Since it is still early and they are not tired, they sit down on the wide staircase which leads to the upper floor. Resting her forearms on her knees Moira lets her head hang down, contemplating the marble floor. Like delicate, little roots the colour black is spreading into the grayish whiteness of the stone.

“We have to leave”, Pip says.

Moira nods, staring down on the stairs.

“I have an idea”, she says, “but you won’t like it.”

“Well, I don’t like this either”, he says gesturing towards the entrance hall.

“Where do you think the angel is?”

Pip shrugs. “Where do I think any of the objects are? Probably dissolved into a million tiny particles, circulating in the air.”

“No”, Moira says. “Not the angel.”

“So?”

“What if – “ Moira interrupts herself. “How much do you think we could get? What would they pay for it? Outside, I mean.”

Pip gets up and leans against the banister.

“They would pay a lot, that’s for sure. But since we don’t know where to look, it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Well maybe I do know.”

Pip crosses his arms. “I’m not going down into the cellars”, he says after a moment’s silence.

“You said yourself that we need money.”

“Even if we got inside, Moira, we wouldn’t get out again. We would never get out.”

“Maybe not.”

“Definitely not.”

“If we don’t try ...”

“You only have a hunch, a feeling.”

Moira gets up. “Right now we’re relying on my hunches.”

Pip opens his mouth, then closes it again, shaking his head. “I’m tired, Moira. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

He walks down the stairs and towards the sleeping bag. As usual he is fast asleep after a few minutes. Moira envies him his

sleep; she always lies awake at night, and when she does finally fall asleep, she is frequently woken up by feverish nightmares. She dreams of the sea but it is no sea that she knows; she dreams of a forest and snow, of a circus, a ship, a factory and endless corridors. She dreams of places she can remember even though she has never been to them.

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Moira and Jonas are still at opposite ends of the city. While Moira is crawling out of her sleeping bag, Jonas opens his eyes. As usual he has not managed to walk to his bed and awakes sunk deep into the soft cushions of his armchair. He tries to stretch, but his joints seem to be stuck. He tries moving the little finger of his right hand, then the same finger of his left hand, loosening one finger after the other. Soon, he thinks, I will have grown into the armchair. I will try to get up and I won't be able to separate myself from it. At some point someone will find the armchair and they will wonder at the weird pattern until they realize: those are ears, those are eyes, that's a mouth, there's an entire face hidden in the chair.

Moira is folding her sleeping bag, when she hears it. "Did you say something?", she asks Pip.

He shakes his head. No, he didn't.

Moira keeps on folding, then stops. This time she is sure, she has heard a crunching, grinding sound.

When Pip sees the expression on her face, he gets up. "What's going on?", he asks.

"Hurry up", she says, looking around.

Silently they finish packing. Outside they get their bikes from their hiding place behind the shed. As soon as they start to move

away from the house, Moira feels as if a weight has been lifted off her, but Pip comes to a halt after a few paces.

“The flashlight”, he says, looking back undecidedly to the house, slapping the handlebar with his flat hand. “I need to go back inside.”

Since Moira is thinking about the angel and the cellars, she barely pays attention to Pip, as he turns around and walks back to the house. With her feet on the ground, she pushes back and forth, letting the bike roll backwards and forwards. Meanwhile she is observing the sky. The dark, heavy clouds hang low today. Suddenly she notices a flicker. She turns her head. A green mist is crawling through the cracks of the windows, covering the walls and the roof. The outlines of the house are shimmering, white flakes are breaking off from it, drifting through the air and high up into the sky. And then the Change grips the house like a tooth which has been sitting loosely in the fabric of reality. Pip!, Moira wants to call out, as a blast wave hits her from behind, hurling her off the bike and onto the road. She presses herself against the surface of the road, letting the Change roll over her.

When she finally lifts her head and opens her eyes, there is nothing left to see. No house and no Pip.

Moira does not move. For almost an hour she has been sitting on the kerb in front of the vanished house. Her bike is lying on the street, next to her. What is there left to do? Is there anything left to do? She scrutinizes one of the houses in front of her. Its door is wide open, inside is a green shimmer. She could go inside, she could walk over the broken glass and the dirty carpet, towards an equally dirty sofa. She could collapse into the soft cushions. She could wait for the next Change.

She gets up, making her first move towards the house, when suddenly images of severed heads in cellars, severed hands in bath tubs flash up in her mind. She stops in her tracks and doesn't seem to be moving an inch, while inside she adjusts and re-organises herself completely, finding a new purpose, a temporary balance, just as she has done endless times before – when her apartment vanished, when she found a new one, when she lost her job, when she found Pip.

She is standing at the edge of the hill, looking down onto the rest of the Changing City. From here she can see almost all the districts, even Basenzia. How long would it take to get down there and at least look through a couple of houses? And how fast could she be back up here again, at a safe distance?

If I am fast, she thinks. If. If. If.

She gets on her bike and starts pedalling.

Meanwhile Jonas is sitting tiredly in his armchair. Apart from the armchair and Jonas there is not much to be seen in the loft. In the kitchen there is a refrigerator and two hotplates no one has cooked on for a very long time. There is a bed no one has slept in for a very long time, and a table no one has eaten at for a very long time. Jonas is the only resident left in the multi-storey building, and since he is not planning to ever leave the building again, he is not going to meet another human being ever again. But that only means that he will never have to argue with anyone, will never have to explain himself to anyone. He can wait patiently for the end. That is what he is thinking about – the end – when he hears a noise. In the past few weeks animals have occasionally strayed into the house. A few days ago he saw a fox on Movement Square. Thus there is no need to worry, and he does not worry. He doesn't even worry about the noises

which follow the first one. Only the opening of the door makes him start. Something in his neck seems to tear, Jonas moans, and turns around much more slowly. There is a boy standing in the door, tall, thin, dressed in black. No, not a boy – a woman, he now realizes.

“No one should be here anymore”, Moira says. She gazes through the loft, taking note of the bed, the table, the refrigerator.

“There’s nothing here for you”, he says and starts coughing. After hesitating briefly, Moira gets a bottle of water out of her backpack and holds it out towards Jonas. “It’s only water” she says, as he doesn’t react.

He takes the bottle and starts fiddling with the lid, until he is finally able to open it.

“I thought no one lived here in Basenzia anymore.”

“I live here”, he says.

She observes him quietly. She almost seems to assess him, as if by looking at him she were calculating, measuring probabilities. Probabilities of what, he asks himself?

“I wouldn’t stay here if I were you”, she says. She speaks in a decisive manner, looking around in a way that tells him she sees more and differently than he does.

“Are you able ... are you able to see how long it will take?” he asks.

She shrugs. “Not long. Probably today.”

“Today?” Jonas’ fingers dig into the arms of his chair. This happens involuntarily and even when he notices that Moira is looking at him, he is unable to disengage his fingers. Having stared at his fingers for a moment, Moira walks towards the kitchen, where she takes a good look at the hotplates, then opens the refrigerator. While she is going through his empty

cupboards, Jonas is looking at her back, long and slender, at her hair, dark and stringy. And something inside him moves. Inside Jonas it has been quiet for a very long time. While the world has succumbed to the Changes, nothing has stirred in Jonas for an eternity. Yet now he hears it, he feels it, it is a fluttering, a rustling. It feels just like – like what? Jonas does not remember. Maybe like – having been waiting for someone a very long time. And finally seeing them again. Maybe like – having asked a question. And getting the right answer.

“Do we know each other?” he asks Moira.

Moira steps away from the empty cupboards. “I can’t imagine where from”, she says. “I’ve never been here before. And you – well you don’t look as if you get around much.”

“No, I meant from ... before.”

Moira takes a good look at him. No, she is pretty sure she has never seen him before. Then suddenly she notices something – there is something here she knows, something she has seen before. And here again is that familiar difficulty of putting it into words. Is it maybe that he is sick? That he is suffering from malnutrition or daylight deficiency? Moira eyes him more thoroughly and her doubts crumble. Even though she is still looking at him, she is already forgetting his facial features. She couldn’t say anything about the colour of his hair, or his eyes. And there is one thing above all that makes her feel certain: his outlines are blurry. He is flickering like a house immediately before or after a Change. Part of him seems to be – already or still – somewhere else. Does he know what is happening to him?

He is still looking expectantly at her.

“No”, she says, “we do not know each other.”

He is no concern of hers, she reminds herself. She is here to find objects. He probably already knows that he is sick, and

even if he doesn't, there is little she could tell him and even less she could do for him. His illness has no name, at least no official one, there is no diagnosis, no classification system of symptoms. Moira has only ever seen one other case, and she wasn't able to help *him* either.

"I need to get going", she says. "Unless you have the angel hidden away somewhere in your apartment!"

She speaks very slowly and hesitantly like someone who is lying or not listening to herself. Usually she is an expert at not letting anything show. The Changing City may change, may decay and crumble, but in the midst of all the swirling particles she stands undisturbed, unmoved. Undecidedly she shifts her weight from one leg to the other. She is thinking about Pip. She is thinking about Marvin. She does not turn around, she does not leave the house.

Instead she sits down on one of the arms of the chair.

Jonas flinches, moving slightly away from her. It has been quite a while since someone was that close to him. So much time has passed that he cannot even recall a face or a name. I hope she won't touch me, he thinks, but he only thinks it for a few seconds, and then he imagines her stretching out her hand, stroking his hair and his face. Her fingers would linger on his skin, and something, he thinks, could be found, something could be won back.

"It's in the cellars. The angel", someone says in his own voice.

Moira jolts up, and Jonas looks around him, startled. Aghast, he wants to take the words back and claim not to know anything about the angel and the cellars. Then he remembers: Basenzia will disappear. He too will disappear. And that is why he doesn't have to keep anything in. Not even a secret.

“How do you know?”, Moira asks.

“I used to work for the Housewatch”, he says.

She takes a step back. Jonas lifts his hands.

“It was a very long time ago.”

Still, Moira keeps her distance. “And you were there? In the cellars?”, she asks.

He nods. “Yes, for a while I was there quite often.”

She waits for him to say more. Instead he gestures outside, to Movement Square.

“Is it true?”, he asks, “can you see the Change coming?”

She nods.

“What does it look like?”

She turns her head in the direction of the windows. She could tell him about the flicker and a faded glimmer, she could tell him that it is not only necessary to sense what is happening inside of space, but also what is happening inside of time. You not only have to know about the Movements that occur elsewhere but also about the Movements that are still waiting to happen. You have to know about the first molecular quiver, about the trembling before the trembling. The edges of the world will start to blur when it prepares herself for the next great Change.

“I’ve only seen the ocean once”, she says, “as a child, when we were still allowed to leave the city. My mother, she travelled with me to the Sea of the North. We lived in a boarding house in Trouwen. Have you ever been there?”

He shakes his head.

“My mother and I, we went diving. And everything here is exactly as I remember the sea. How everything is vague, blurry. And the colours – “

“The colours?”

“Aquamarine and azure blue and grass green. Or maybe they were different colours. Colours we don’t have any names for.” She points to a gray building on the other side of Movement Square. “Do you see the old town hall? It has already begun to lose its outlines. The edges are corroded.”

“Corroded?”

“Yes. And it is almost as if – “

“How?”

“As if something else was shining through. A different world, a different space. And the actual world, the world you see right now, is nothing more than a transparent foil you could simply strip away.”

He waits, he wants to hear more, he still cannot quite imagine what it looks like. But Moira does not know what else to say. She wants to describe it as accurately as possible, but suspects that this is precisely what characterises the Change: You cannot put it into words.

“I don’t see anything”, Jonas says. They are looking through the windows into the world behind the glass. “I’ve never been able to tell”, he says. “Didn’t matter how often it happened right in front of my eyes, I could never tell before.”

“Have you lost much?”, Moira asks.

“Furniture. A car. My apartment eventually. Yet nothing important – I mean, nothing that would explain how – “

Nothing that would explain to her or himself or anyone else for that matter what came over him that day, when it felt like a great inner plunge, almost as if something, his very core, the centre of his being had suddenly fallen, and fallen inside of him. He lifts his head, and she understands that he knows. He knows about the illness, he probably knows more than she does.

“I used to know someone who –“, she begins, then stops. She thinks about last summer, about the cloudy sky, the thunderstorms in June, July and August. She thinks about Marvin, Pip’s brother, who fell ill in spring. Since they knew nothing about the disease, they told themselves and they told him that he was going to recover soon. The truth was that his condition deteriorated from week to week. She remembers that he seemed both thinner and smaller to her, even though she saw that he was not actually shrinking, that he was in fact still as tall as she was. She remembers how he could stare at his hands and arms for hours, as if unable to recognise them, and how once at night she had entered the living room of the house they were living in then and he was sitting on the couch, rubbing his arms and legs frantically, as if he needed to scratch something off, maybe some kind of caustic layer. She remembers how he lifted his head and looked at her without recognising her, telling her: “I can’t find it. I just don’t know where it is.”

A few days later he jumped from the observation platform of an abandoned office building onto Movement Square.

She closes her eyes and keeps them shut for a moment.

“Did you see many Changes?”, she then asks.

Jonas weighs his head. On the day his apartment vanished he was standing in the staircase, the key already in his hand. And then he heard it – a grinding sound, which came from the other side of the door. And he wanted to turn around, to run away but behind the door was his home, and since he didn’t know where else to go, what else to do, he opened the door, gave it a little push and gazed into the emptiness behind it. A few feet away he could see the wall of the neighbouring house.

Yet, even more than the apartment, it is the supermarket that haunts him. “I had just gone outside”, he tells Moira, “and was

standing outside on the parking lot. And as I turned around I saw that the supermarket had vanished. And all the people inside. They had all vanished.”

Severed heads in cellars, severed feet in bath tubs, Moira thinks.

Jonas looks at her questioningly. “Still, others have lost much more. And they are not – “He falters. Within the Housewatch, the disease is a well-known phenomenon, yet just like the common civilians, the watchmen have not given it a name, nor do they ever speak about its symptoms. They keep quiet about its implications and also about the course it will eventually take. There is a vague stigma attached to the disease, some sort of distastefulness. Like others who were affected by the disease before him, Jonas tried for a long time to believe that the way he felt was nothing serious, a merely temporary state he found himself in. Part of him still hopes that he will wake up one day and be the person he used to be again. Even though with every day that passes he finds it more and more difficult to recall that person.

“And how is he, the sick person you know?”, he asks.

“Maybe it has something to do with the radiation”, Moira says, instead of answering. “Maybe you have a low tolerance.”

“Radiation?”

“Houses which have just vanished or appeared glow. Some say they have an aura. My friend Pip and I, we called it radiation. Whatever it is, I can see it.”

Jonas spreads the fingers of his right hand. Even though it has been feeling numb for days, it seems unchanged. Maybe this is what he can bear least of all – that he looks like himself, yet feels like a stranger.

“How is it for you?”, he asks. “What do I look like for you?”

“You are blurry. Your outlines are –“

“Corroded”, he repeats the word she used before.

“Yes. And your skin reminds me of – coloured glass maybe.”

“You can see through me?”

Jonas looks at his skin.

“Where is he, your friend Pip?”, he asks after a while. “Why is he not here now?”

“He’s gone”, Moira says and turns her back to him.

“What are you going to do?”, he asks.

When he realizes that she is not going to answer, he continues. “The cellars are secured. You will not get in there and even if you do and even if you find the angel – the angel is pretty large, you won’t be able to get it out of the cellars on your own.”

Moira turns around. “Well I’d better stay here then”, she says. “Maybe I can sit next to you in your armchair and we can wait for the end together.”

Jonas lowers his eyes. Suddenly he feels embarrassed for himself, embarrassed for his plan to wait for the end, for his beige armchair, his bathrobe, his hair, which he hasn’t washed in a while.

“What do you want with the angel anyway?” he asks. “It’s not as if it can *do* anything. It’s just a statue.”

“I know. I just want to sell it.”

“Who to?”

“People from the outside.”

“And what will they pay for it?”

“Not money. But they’ll give me an exit permit. And transport to the outside.”

“Won’t do you any good. Outside no one will help you. You have no money and no friends. No insurance and no apartment.”

“Still better than staying here”, says Moira and lifts her backpack. “I’ll go now. I feel sick from the stuff that hangs in the air. You’re breathing it in the whole time, you know.” She sways back and forth. She would like to say: come with me. And so she keeps on talking, even though she knows that it will take more than a simple request to follow her if she wants to get him out of the armchair.

“The deal was that they were going to get me and a friend out of the city. I know you don’t want to leave, but if you changed your mind, if you were to help me ... I would take you with me.”

Jonas shakes his head. “I’ll stay. Thank you very much.”

“No you won’t stay, because Basenzia will disappear. And even if you stay here, you won’t stay here. Best case scenario: you’ll die. Worst case scenario – who knows?”

He blinks, his eyes seem to water. Moira turns to one side, she has never been patient or optimistic enough to pat other people on the head and assure them everything is going to be all right. Most of the time, she thinks, it is not going to be all right. When Jonas sees the expression on her face, he presses his hands against his eyes. “I just want it to stop”, he says. “Nothing can be as bad as this.” He lets his hands slowly fall down. He looks tired, as if he hasn’t slept for weeks, yet she is sure that he hasn’t done much else lately. She stares into the green sky. It is high time to leave Basenzia. Yet, not for the first time on this day, her legs will not move. And instead of leaving the room, the house, the entire district, she asks: “What does it feel like?”

He thinks for a moment. “As if something was missing. I have – I have cried often. Without knowing why. But I couldn’t stop. I had nightmares. I *know* that I had nightmares, but I can’t remember a single one of them. After waking up I remembered

something, but just like I was unable to recall the dreams, I was unable to recall what it was. The first time this happened it felt like falling, as if every cell in my body were falling down. It was as if – “

“You were going to die?”

“No”, he says. “As if someone else had died.”

Exactly like that: as if he had heard about the death of someone he had thought he couldn't live without.

“During the day it got better but not very much. I felt dizzy all of the time, and I stumbled often, just kept falling over. Suddenly I had the feeling my leg was not there, my foot or my arm. But when I looked everything was still – there.” He holds his hand out to her. She nods.

“I've heard they can help. Outside.”

He shakes his head.

“No one can help me”, he claims.

“Outside they have centers. They can do so much more than us. They can ... “

“No.” He lifts his hands. “None of it makes any difference at all. We would never make it. We would never get the angel out of the cellars. We would never manage to sell it.”

He closes his eyes. Moira looks at his closed eyelids, the torn corners of his mouth. Could she just grab him and drag him out of the loft? But then she would also have to drag him down through the entire staircase and onto the street. She can't very well throw him over the bicycle rack. The bike is not a horse, and she is no cowboy. She swallows, her throat aches, her skin itches, there are red spots on her hands. She has been in Basenzia for far too long.

“Well, enjoy the view”, she tells him, turns around and leaves the loft. ( ... )