

New Books in German – Emerging Translators Programme. Tony Soprano stirbt nicht © Hofmann und Campe Verlag. Translation © Sinéad Crowe

Antonia Baum, *Tony Soprano Doesn't Die*

Translation: Sinéad Crowe

It was mid-February, and I was in a rush. The hours and days were lists I climbed up and down. When I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, I slept, so that the next day I'd be able to tackle the next list, and then the next one, and the one after that. A Céline handbag was on one of these lists, but I couldn't afford it. Things were running well nonetheless, and I was running too, but the days outran me. Suddenly there were only a few weeks to go until my second novel was due to come out. It's about three children who are raised by their father; it's about cars, survival and speed, and about this one night when the father disappears and the children are afraid that something has happened to him.

But this is about when those children came to point and laugh at me. About when the hours no longer had rungs, and all that was left was artificial fog.

1.

The accident happened on Monday, 16 February, at 7.50 a.m. At 10.31 a.m. my uncle called me. “Have you heard?”

This, or something like this, was what he asked. He took a deep breath when he realised I hadn’t heard (about what? What, for Christ’s sake?).

“Your father was in an accident this morning.”

Of course. Of course it was him. Who else would it be? How could that surprise me?

It did surprise me. It wasn’t my father I had thought about in the seconds between my uncle’s inhalation and the sentence that came after it. Usually I thought about my father whenever there had been an accident, so why hadn’t I thought about him then? I hadn’t thought about him.

A little more than twelve hours previously I had hugged him and told him to drive safely, and when he had finally stood up to leave the pub – his regular pub in Charlottenburg – I had wanted to hug him again, because that’s what I always do when he leaves. I hug him tightly a second, and maybe final, time, but that evening I didn’t manage it. Somehow we missed each other. My body moved towards his, but he was already somewhere else, possibly busy waving goodbye to Peter, the barman; whatever the reason, I remember noticing that I hadn’t managed to give my father my usual second (final) hug, and I remember thinking that he hadn’t noticed any of this, and that even if he had noticed, he wouldn’t have understood why it was significant. He wouldn’t have known that I always hugged him one last time to make sure I see him again. That this was why the hug was important. That it was a safety precaution and that I did it to prevent an accident from happening. After the missed hug I wondered for a second whether it was a bad omen, but I quickly dismissed the thought. Because nothing ever did happen to him.

I didn’t think about any of this when my uncle called. I don’t remember what I thought about. (And anyway, why do we want to know what people think about when they get news that changes everything? Because it might help us understand what it’s like to get news that

changes everything? Because people who get news like this want to understand what's happened? Because they're looking for a pattern, for logic?)

My uncle told me that my father had had a bad motorcycle accident and that he was in the intensive care unit. My uncle (a doctor) listed the injuries: traumatic brain injury, brain haemorrhage. He said that it was impossible to say right now what it would all mean. (What it would mean? But to establish the meaning of something, you need something like a context in which the meaning can unfold. So what exactly are we talking about here?) My uncle explained the context, but I didn't understand anything, so I just observed myself not understanding anything and saying "yes". Also: traumatic aortic injury (at this point my uncle explained the structure of the aorta, or main artery, as I ascertained), which can lead to complications (a complication, according to the dictionary, is a deterioration in a medical condition) in the kidneys and liver. Also: lumbar vertebral fracture, sternal fracture, midfacial fracture (midfacial?).

As a doctor's daughter – and as my father's daughter, at that (*Keep it together. Don't make a scene.*) – I'm an expert at staying calm and rational in serious situations, and this is exactly how I was while talking to my uncle: calm and rational, because that's how I am in serious situations. I keep it together, I don't make a scene. My uncle's telephone call lasted seven minutes and fifty-three seconds, and I don't know why I feel it's important to write that down.

Afterwards I smoked a cigarette and cried a little, but calmly and quietly, and I thought about how the thing I had spent my whole life expecting to happen had finally happened, and about how everything would probably be okay (had my uncle, who always chooses his words carefully and never exaggerates, really said "severely injured"?), because somehow my father always managed to get away with things. For as long as I can remember, that's been the story of his life, its premise, its theme. That the boring laws of physics and the limits of the human body don't apply to him. But maybe now it was payback time, I thought, hastily stubbing out my cigarette. I ran into my bedroom to do something, but when I got there, I couldn't remember what it was I had wanted to do.

The accident didn't happen in Berlin. It happened 600 kilometres away, on the morning after my father had left his regular Berlin pub. Having driven all night, he was on his way to his practice. It was the morning after we had met in the pub where we always meet when he's here. As usual, he had looked pretty scruffy. His grey beard and hair were standing out in all directions. Wrinkles, lots of wrinkles (*I've never bothered with any of these stupid creams. They're a load of nonsense!*). A creased shirt, baggy trousers. We – my brothers, my father and I – sat together and ordered our food. As usual, he noted exactly who ordered what so that by the end of the meal he would know exactly what was on the bill. I told the waitress that I wanted fried rather than boiled potatoes. The waitress replied that she'd have to charge an extra euro. "No problem," I said. I would feel guilty about this a little more than twelve hours later. Actually, I felt guilty shortly after waking up, before I found out about the accident. "Sure it's no problem, seeing as I'm paying," said my father. I tried to mollify him with a smile. Like I always did. And I stroked his arm.

"So what's going on with your novel? Is it out yet?" he asked me later. "No, it's not out yet. And when it is out, you're going to buy it!" I said, aggrieved. Later, when the bill arrived, he was the one who seemed aggrieved. As usual, we sat together, tossing loose banter and wisecracks back and forth. We and him, we just weren't tight. Well, actually, we were, and what tied us together tightly on that evening, as it always did, was the loose banter, the wisecracks, the old familiar stories. As usual, I remembered how we – my brothers, my sister and I – used to shout at him when he was driving at night to make sure he kept his eyes open. Because sometimes he would doze off.

Dad, open your eyes!

They're open!

Then he said goodbye. Then there was our missed hug. Then, around twelve hours later, the accident. Then the call.

I ran around my flat thinking about what to do. I tried to get through to my little sister, then my brothers. I cried at the thought of having to tell my little sister – who I knew was at carnival right then, dressed up as a pirate – what had happened. And at the thought of her running home in her costume through the carnival crowds with the terrible news going through her head, and of her being all alone until we – my brothers and I – had driven the 600 kilometres our father had driven the previous night. I couldn't tell whether the scene that made me cry right then sprang from my own imagination, or whether it was rooted in a strategy for constructing a plot (something like: *The crying sister in the carnival crowds is a good image. It brings the drama home to the viewer. It works; I'll use it*). I got dressed. I was scared and I was cold, but that's how it always was with him.

My sister told me later that it had been almost impossible to push her way through the throngs at carnival. She didn't say whether she'd cried. She said the first thing she did when she finally arrived back at her flat was wipe her red pirate lipstick off her face.

When I got into the car with my brothers to drive to my father, I couldn't help thinking that the story – our story – would be perfect if, as we were on our way to our father, who had been in an accident, the three of us also had an accident. It would make sense. If the traffic that had always threatened our family got us in the end. I shook my head firmly and told myself that that isn't how it works, that there isn't somebody somewhere who cares about whether lives make sense and who is able to exert an influence on them. The only people who try to establish meaning, I thought, are the people involved; they're me, us. And yet I didn't fasten my seat belt. Because nothing ever did happen to us.

“Do you really believe it wasn’t his fault?” I asked my brothers, who were sitting in the front. One of them had called the police, who had told him that a 29-year-old man driving a BMW hadn’t seen my father when he was changing from the left to the right lane. When we’d first heard about the accident, we’d immediately assumed it was my father’s fault. Up all night, too fast, too reckless, something along those lines. What the police told us didn’t fit with the story we knew so well even before the accident, a story we had gone through in our minds a thousand times.

“Maybe he was overtaking too fast on the right again?”

Maybe.

“Maybe he was driving too fast?”

Possibly. He drives too fast whenever he gets half a chance.

“I wonder what helmet he was wearing. The white one with no visor?”

“He might as well have been wearing a headscarf!”

“Maybe he had a brain haemorrhage because he was wearing such a crap helmet.”

Because he always scrimped on everything. Because scrimping is what kills him in the end. That would make sense, that could be a premise.

“I feel bad for assuming it was his fault.”

“That’s what we all assumed, though.”

“But now it seems even more tragic.”

Because the accident that got the better of him in the end was an unspectacular accident in a 50 km/h zone, an accident that wasn’t even his fault? Because that didn’t make sense? Not for our father, who had always driven so spectacularly?

I looked out the window into the darkness. The trucks coming towards us in the opposite carriageway looked beautiful through the fogged-up windscreen. Like moving houses. Motorway. Home.

I've basically spent my life on motorways with my father, who lived in his cars and will continue to do so, I thought with an exclamation mark. Seat pushed right back, backrest reclined, little finger on the steering wheel. "Want a few jellies?" he'd ask us when we were hungry, and now, as we drove down the motorway to see him, we remembered this together and laughed. He always used to have a bag of jellies in his breast pocket to keep us going on car journeys. Because he didn't want to go to McDonald's, because he thought McDonald's was stupid and overpriced. So we had jellies instead. You can buy them in Aldi, they don't leave crumbs behind, you can keep them in your breast pocket. And – crucially – this is how I described it, though ultimately my description was completely different, in my last book, the book he had asked me about around 24 hours previously and that he might now never read. And just like in the book, we – my brothers and I – were now on our way to him, and so, I thought, as we drove along the motorway, maybe in fact there is someone out there who's responsible for making sure that things make sense. But I only thought that for a second.

We joked. About my father's eccentricities, about everything. Is it okay to joke when someone you love is in a critical condition? And why do we feel obliged to ask this? To whom do we think we have an obligation when something bad has happened? In films, when people get bad news they usually stare into the distance, and their lower lip trembles, and they don't say anything. Tears flow, tissues are used.

We joked.

In a film, the fact that we were joking would be a sign of some kind of dysfunction within the family. Aha, this family is trying to joke away its grief, so obviously something's not quite right, and what exactly it is that's not quite right is revealed to the viewer as the plot unfolds. "What a pillock," said my brother when the driver in front of us switched lanes without indicating. We laughed. "Pillock" – that's something my father would have said. "But dad never

indicates when he switches lanes either.” We laughed again. We listened to loud rap music, all the stuff we used to listen to when we were teenagers. Method Man and Redmen, Public Enemy, Q-Tip, Westberlin Maskulin, Pete Rock. Rap music always helps, because rap music is all about getting up and fighting. Nobody lies down and cries. You stand up straight and you fight for survival.

He’s got to pull through this. He absolutely has to wake up, I thought. And for the hundredth time, I thought about how the exact thing I’d always feared had finally happened, and, like the headlight of a speeding car, the thought hurtled through my head that it was my fault, because I’d exposed the father in my book to constant dangers but had allowed him to emerge unscathed every time. I used to think that my father would always be absent to me, no matter whether he was dead or alive. But if he was only asleep now, then there was hope, then I could convince myself that things would be different, better, when he woke up. Romy, the girl in my book, understood long before me that the main reason she was so scared of her father dying was that this would allow her hope to become huge and unbearable. The hope that he would eventually have changed for the better if only he hadn’t died.

Everything was the same as usual in McDonald’s. With half the journey behind us, we waited in the queue. The same light, the same floor, everywhere. People chomped on their cheeseburgers and threw fries into their mouths. People picked up their serviettes, calmly and unhurriedly. People went to the toilets, on the door of which there was a piece of paper documenting when they had last been cleaned. And later, everyone here would go home, wherever that was, and if anyone here suffered a head injury that left everything uncertain, they had people who’d be phoned. Everything’s the way it’s always been, everything’s the same, I thought as I chewed, and yet nothing’s the same. People ought to go home. McDonald’s ought to close. The guy sitting across from me ought to stop telling his friend about his weekend. It’s not important. It should somehow be obvious that life has changed completely, I thought as I peered out from myself, and I’m sure I looked totally normal.

“Traffic” is an indifferent word, one that’s devoid of ambition. Whenever I hear the word, I see long-necked street signs that have no interest in anything. An unemotional, a steadfastly undramatic and impassive word. “Traffic” has got nothing to do with the violence that’s always threatened me. Violence that’s huge, unpredictable, ruled by my father. When we used to drive down the motorway, my father at the wheel, my mother beside him and us children in the back. When my mother used to cling to the passenger door handle, and the sound of her uttering my father’s name as she exhaled was like a valve hissing. When I used to look ahead anxiously and hope that my father would please slow down so as to avoid a row. When we burned our little legs on his motorbike’s exhaust pipe. The tools in the boot, always in tow, my father’s instruments. Jack, Allen key, screwdriver, disposable gloves that he never disposed of. This strange way of tackling the world. With tools. With a determination to fix it. To tinker with it. To master it. When our car would break down somewhere and he would push-start it by opening a car door, steering with his right hand, holding the door open with his left hand and pushing his weight against the car. My dad’s so strong that he can push a car all by himself, I used to think when I was a child. When one of us sat on one of his motorbikes and it fell over, because my father had built it himself and the stand didn’t work properly, and when my mother stormed outside because a child was lying under the motorbike. When it was pouring rain, the windscreen wipers weren’t working, we still had several hundred kilometres to go and my father kept dozing off. But nothing ever happened, nothing bad, and as a child I knew that my father was the only one with the power to rule the traffic.

Okay, so from time to time the traffic rebelled against him. When he had the cycling accident, steep and winding roads, a racing bike. A child’s leg got caught in the spokes, and my father landed on his face. A bit of his nose was missing, but that didn’t stop him. He didn’t even take a break. The motorbike accident around ten years ago. At 120 km per hour. “I had to get off for a while.” He told me about it on the phone weeks later. One leg was open along the side. “I was bloody lucky.” And just last summer he showed up at my office with his legs bleeding and gashes on his hands. He had ignored another car’s right of way.

“I was bloody lucky.”

“Is it really painful?”

“Could be worse.”

The traffic had never managed to defeat my father before. Why now? Who was trying to tell me something, and who was I talking to anyway? Who was being punished here, and for what? According to the police news ticker, the man who didn't see my father when he switched to the right lane was born 29 years ago. My father was 34 years old then. What was he doing at the moment the man was born? And why was I asking myself questions like this? “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” This sentence, a sentence that has been quoted a thousand times, is Joan Didion's, and I had come across it before my brothers and I made the journey to our critically injured father, but I had never really understood it. It was on the motorway that I first began to fathom its meaning.

We try to find meaning in the things that happen to us.

That night, when I saw his swollen face, his deformed head, his closed, blue-tinged eyes, the wounds on his forehead and nose, the breathing tube, the feeding tube, the devices surrounding him, when we arrived at the hospital and I saw all of this, I had prepared myself for worse, and I saw only the constituent parts of the situation, this man, my father. I saw him as the sum of his destroyed parts, which added up to the situation he was in. The situation he lay in. This wasn't my father. My father was running around somewhere right then making decisions, fixing things, calling people. This here was a room you could go into but also leave again. A drawer somewhere in the world that could be closed again, I thought as I stood by the hospital bed; a drawer that is completely and utterly disconnected from the transactions and processes that make up day-to-day life. That's what hospitals are. Big drawers. And all the people who, for whatever reasons, can no longer take part in what's happening outside, get tidied away into these drawers. In hospitals, people get fixed. Boxes full of hospital beds, boxes

full of things that keep the people in the hospital beds alive. Small independent towns where different laws apply.

Intensive care unit. He was in the intensive care unit. Tony Soprano, the gangster boss in my favourite TV series, had been in an intensive care unit too, and he had recovered. His stupid, senile uncle had shot him in the stomach. Of course, his whole family – Meadow, Anthony Junior, Carmela – came straight away. Just like we did. Like them, we now stood helplessly in front of the devices, not understanding what it meant when one of the coloured graphs suddenly changed. And like them, I couldn't reconcile the image of my strong father with the unconscious person lying there on a ventilator. I held his hand and told him I was there. Just like the Sopranos do when Tony's in hospital. They said that it was good to talk to Tony, and that he could definitely hear them, so I said something too. Everything was just like in the series, except that we didn't cry as loudly as we stood by his bed. I cried and felt strangely relieved, because crying is what you're supposed to do when you're by the hospital bed of someone you love, because at least that was going according to plan. It was the right thing to do. And yet in that situation by the bed of my injured father (again: impossible, it can't be happening), I couldn't tell if it was me that was crying. The situation was playing out somewhere, but not where I was. It was happening in some box that you can close again, like a laptop, perhaps. I decided to take a book with me the next day to read to my father, like in the series.

We walked down the hospital corridor, maybe to smoke a cigarette, maybe because we had to leave the ward to let the nurse attend to him. Either way, we walked down the hospital corridor for hours on end, for hours on end we sat by my father's bed, for hours on end we walked down the corridor. Hospital corridors are like driving outside of time and without speed. The buzzing noise, the glaring light reflecting off the shiny floor, the fact that there are no windows (not in my hospital corridors, anyway), that the cast of characters stays the same and that what seem to be the same scenes are repeated over and over again, though you can't really call them scenes – people walk across the shot. Blue and in a hurry.

Hospital corridors are places where you can easily start believing that some power somewhere is playing tricks, evil tricks, on you. Someone who says to you: Listen honey, I know that up to now you've believed that things will work out in such-and-such a way (and here you can insert whatever it is you believe, even if it is the belief that you don't believe in anything, and even if that's never true), but I'm afraid things are going to work out differently. Hospital corridors, I realised as I watched the blue ghosts dart by, are places where you develop a willingness to talk to powers. Maybe at first it was just a willingness, but then I felt compelled to talk to them. Always about the same questions. Did the helmet offer him any protection at all? Had he been driving too fast? Had the bicycle accident last summer been a warning? Did the accident have anything to do with his lack of sleep? To what extent was it his fault? Would he survive? What if he didn't survive? How could life be so cruel? How wrong is the word "cruel" in this context? And how right, seeing as, without admitting it to myself, I'd always hoped that we – he and I – would eventually come to understand each other? So, once again: was it his fault? I need to know, because then I'll know if what happened was what I've been waiting for my whole life. If my premise was right. My version of the story. Will he end up brain-damaged, and if so, will that be the payback, what they call the moral of the story? And if he doesn't end up brain-damaged, what will the moral be? Will I start believing that the world is good? Am I really prepared to do that, despite the many examples proving the opposite? Because I'm human and I think my life is special? How do people who are beset by one catastrophe after another manage to keep believing that their lives are special and important? Tsunamis, Ebola, Islamic State, massacres, Mediterranean. *How do they manage to find meaning in the things that happen to them?* What stories do they tell themselves?

By the morning after my first hospital visit, I had already opened my laptop and begun to write. With no goal in mind, though of course I asked myself guiltily whether I did have one, a goal. Whether I was writing in order to get published. Whether I was a vampire. Whether I was writing because I wanted to create something to counter the novel due to be published in a few weeks, the novel about three children living in constant fear of losing their father. Whether I

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was writing because I'm used to being able to control what happens in my writing. You're writing with blood, I thought, and I kept on writing.