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Getting Up
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Sample Translation
By Alice Thornton

My Happy Place

My happy place is actually a memory:
Of waking up after a nap in the hammock in my grandmother's garden that she shared with her boyfriend (or her old friend, as she called him) on the Greifswald fruit farm on the first day of the summer holidays.
Always on the first day of the long, delightful summer holidays.
Next to me, on a wooden table that had been hauled over especially, her old friend (who had owned a big bakery before and during the Second World War, and whose wife had hanged herself just before the Red Army invaded) had placed on a porcelain plate a piece of Streuselkuchen that he had baked for me.
This is how every first day of my summer holidays looked.
My grandmother, who, even in the summer, would strap her plump body away in a corset, came out of the kitchen with a pot of Muckefuck for him and me. For herself, she had brewed a full bean coffee: it's my medicine, I need it for my heart.
I was allowed to eat my piece of cake and drink the cup of Muckefuck while lying down in the hammock. The hammock was knotted between two apple trees, and apples lay both below me, knocked down by the wind, and above me, perfectly ripe. Bushes with red, white, and black currants surrounded me. Just a few steps away were some prickly gooseberry bushes.
I lay in the shade and everything was still. I could smell the freshly baked cake. I opened my eyes. This place was magic.
I had come alone from Berlin by train on the day of my graduation. Right after I got my report on the last day of school, I had had to call my mother at work, read her my grades, apologise for the occasional B, why don't you have an A, all you have to do is go to school while I have to spend all my days working away, you're so bright, all you've really got to do is be a little more hard-working, and what did Gaby get in that, see, an A.
All I had to do was say goodbye to my mother from the telephone box before being allowed to stay with my grandmother until the last day of the summer holidays.
When I stepped off the train at Greifswald station on this last day of school, as I had done so often since my seventh birthday in 1947, with my little suitcase that I had packed the night before, they were already there waiting for me: my grandmother and her old friend. She pressed me to her chest: my little girl. And he strapped my suitcase onto his luggage carrier. Then we went together to the drugstore at the market so that I could be weighed. I didn't weigh much more than I had on the last day of last year's holiday. I was thin, tall, and bony – she wanted to feed me during the holiday weeks so that she could then tell my mother, her daughter-in-law, with whom she had very little contact, just how many kilos I had gained, like some sort of a victory.
To the acquaintances we met in the old town, she said: this is my Gerd's daughter. She's come here to stay with me for the whole holiday. Then her old friend would push the bicycle next to us to the house in Apfelweg, which was at least an hour away.
When we had drunk our welcome coffee, my grandmother put the dishes back in the kitchen. I got out of my hammock, in which she had put a woollen blanket, and helped her carry them away. Then I carefully plucked the ripe apples off the tree and placed them one by one in some shallow crates, and packed the black, white,

and red currants and the blue and green gooseberries into baskets. The old friend began to fill the handcart with the fruit boxes for the next day. Early in the morning of the second day of my holiday, he pulled the handcart with me on the hour-walk to the market, arranged the crates on the long tables that were already set up, and the scales with the little weights, too, with the paper bags next to them. A queue quickly formed, and I sold everything.
He would light a cigar and chat a little with the other sellers.
When I had sold everything, we pulled the handcart back to my grandmother, who never went to the market: she was the widow of the deceased school headmaster, after all, so she let herself be addressed as Frau Doktor. She had in fact written the whole of his thesis for him, and to a very high standard at that.
When we got back, she had already cooked lunch for us and was getting on with watering the potato plants as we opened the gate. After lunch, she washed everything right away. I didn’t have to do any of the drying, and was allowed to lie in the hammock and read until I fell asleep and woke up again:
At the set coffee table.
And this was how things happened until the end of the summer. These fond memories have kept me warm when it has been cold. Every day. Even now.

Immediate Kin Abroad in the West

My child, who had grown up on the thirteenth floor of a building in the middle of East Berlin, told me that he wanted to become a forester. For the 600 students graduating in 1977, there were only two forestry apprenticeship places in all of Berlin, with this apprenticeship being a prerequisite for studying.
So, we went further afield. Do you have any immediate kin in the West? Excuse me for asking you this while you're still standing, said the director of the Waldsieversdorf Institute for Forest Plant Breeding (it was in the summer of 1975).
But if you have any immediate kin in the FRG (I distinctly remember that he called it the FRG), then there’s no need for my secretary to make you coffee, you know, then there's no point in us talking further as we won't be able to give your son (my fourteen-year-old son was standing next to me, and we had been booked an appointment with this institute director by telephone) an apprenticeship in two years.
No, I said:
I have no brother, no sister, and my father died when I was one. I have a mother who also lives in the GDR, I only have one child, and he’s standing right here, his father also lives in the GDR, we are divorced, and my new husband also lives in the GDR.
All right then, please sit down, the director said, relieved, and sent for coffee:
Our production here is very export-intensive, you see, our state earns a lot of foreign currency from what we produce: larch plants. They go all over the world. If our production method became known to the West, they would just copy our formula and no longer buy from us. Since our apprentices will be directly involved in production, we can't afford a security breach.
And here, miles outside Berlin, they wanted to bring in two new apprentices for the first time in two years, so that the young scientists wouldn't have to do the tedious job of sowing the larch seeds under the hot foil tents and pricking out the tiny seedlings.
You have to get an A in biology, chemistry, and maths after year eleven, and you also need to found a biology club together with your teacher, then you’ll have a chance with us, the institute director said to my son.
How very lucky it was that I, as a thirty-seven-year-old only child and a thirty-seven-year-old half-orphan, was sitting before him so immaculately Eastern. At least as far as the relevant blood relationship was

concerned: Only one mother and only one son. Both in the East. The larch production and the state budget of the GDR were thus unthreatened.
My son was put on the waiting list for one of the two apprenticeships that would start in two years. He was tenth on the list.
Where did the importance of blood relatives come from? Blood is thicker than water, yes, kinship matters, would you please stand further back in the wedding photo otherwise it won't be clear with whom you belong? You didn't get that from me, you got it from your grandmother.
Why would I tell any blood relatives in the West, of all people, if I had any, about how the cone pickers carefully broke off the larch cones at great heights to get at the precious larch seeds?

From Rising

Get up, get up said the fox to the hare, don't you hear the horns blaring?
That's how my mother used to wake me when I was still at school. She would stand at the foot of my bed and pull the covers off.
Sometimes she also sang: between the mountain and the deep, deep valley there once sat two hares, eating the green, green grass, eating the green grass, until the hunter, the hunter came and shot them down. I would picture it and would forget every time that the story ends well: when they had picked themselves up, up, and realised that they were still alive, alive, away they ran. I would leave my nightgown in the unheated room, glad that the hares were still alive, and quickly get up.
We wouldn't have breakfast together, because she would already be dressed for work, having read late into the night. All she would want from me was some spare change for her S-Bahn ride to work and back. I always had enough in my stash to hand her the pennies she needed. Twenty pennies there and twenty pennies back. Eastern pennies. I would be sent to the bottle recycling kiosk after school, and in return for the glass bottles, I would collect the fare for the next morning.
She used to spend most of her salary on books; she had lost almost everything in the war. Her handbag with a handkerchief in and I, her five-year-old child, were all she had on her when she escaped.

When I entered my mother's flat, which contained over ten thousand books, for the first time after her death, to cancel all her bills, to dismantle it, to have it renovated, I found the storeroom and the cellar filled up to the ceiling with boxes full of papers. On her desk there were still the two bronze Ernst Barlach casts: the reading woman and the flute player, somewhat smaller than the originals. She had been paying them off in instalments for years. When no one made any offers, I took them in, both of them absorbed by what they were doing, in their own world, the world of books and the world of music. Maybe that's how my mother wanted me to remember her. Everything else would slowly fade away.

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It is morning. My alarm clock is about to ring. In the dim daylight I count the bare trees.
If I were a bird, I would have to find another shelter now that it's winter.
The soft duvet pulled up to my nose. Stretched out, taut.
I am safe here.
Next to me on the wall hangs a picture: a lonely cottage with green and blue wooden doors, a hollow tree, ravens in its crown. The man who painted it and gave it to me lies quietly in the next room. Relying on me to

come and help him in a moment.

For fifty years he has made breakfast for both of us.
I used to always close my eyes after waking up. Inhaling deeply: the scent of clove soap in the hollow between my index and middle finger, the little bag of lavender next to my pillow, the scent of detergent in the flannel bed linen and my nightgown. But the coffee aroma would still be missing. This meant I could lie still and, carefully, lest it slip backwards into oblivion, undistracted by the brightness of the morning, hold a dream hostage with my eyes still closed.
Then, a few minutes later, when it would start to smell of coffee and toasted bread and he called me down, all that remained of my dream was a single word. I would exhale and stand up. I would hear his footsteps coming closer, go to meet him, spread my arms, hug him and press my lips onto the nape of his neck, just above his collarbone in the warmth of his birthday cologne, sandalwood, and then brush my teeth, peppermint, later vanilla and coconut milk in the bath, and finally go to the set breakfast table. On the toasted hot brown bread are piled soft butter, blue cheese and fig jam, packed in tightly, I’d take a bite.
Once I told him I was going to finish my story about scent. Seeing was definitely more important to him in his life than smelling, he’d said. Sometimes smells could be quite unpleasant, for example when they were prisoners of war, when he was seventeen years old, with 120 men in the barracks, at night they spread the wet foot rags out to dry, they couldn't wash them properly, and then they slaved a thousand metres underground in the coal mine. But you could always retreat into the safety of your own mind in times like that, he said.
Quite unpleasant, yes, but if he absolutely had to remember the most disturbing smell, it would actually be the swathes of rose oil around the wives of the Russian officers. Even on holidays in Bulgaria, there were always those rose oils.
Nowadays, he could withdraw from everything unpleasant smelling. Like from the women around the East, who at that time dressed all in black with henna-red hair and thought they were something special, a little existential, we thought, as we’d recently got hold of Sartre in the bookshop. Anyway, they all smelled of Madame Rochas. It was the only French perfume available for East German money in the expensive shops.
In the evenings, I used to brew Earl Grey for the two of us. Because of the smell of bergamot. It felt good after the exhaust fumes of the western cars.
I was responsible for cooking the evening meal.

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I still have a few minutes. All around me are piles of letters addressed to my mother, copies of the letters she sent, notes with addresses, folders with reminders and bills that have finally been paid, envelopes full of photos of people long dead and unknown to me, her pocket diaries with only a few entries, and postcards, both written on and blank.
I let visitors into all the other rooms of our flat. Not here.
Just throw everything away, a folder every day, you'll soon be done, you're eighty now, how long do you want to keep all that, nobody cares how many reminders your mother got to pay that bill. You don't have that much time left at eighty, he's been warning me since she died.
She died when I was seventy-six.

She wanted me to write a story about her. Have you finally started that story, she asked me, when she was

already over a hundred.
But how could I write about her when she was still alive? My great-granddaughter loves me, my mother had said to the nurse who came into the room to write down my contact details, my great-granddaughter will know what I want even when one day I can no longer speak, my mother said to the nurse.
But she’s far away right now, and studying, and she's also much younger than me, the nurse said to me with a startled look. Do you mind if I inform your daughter if something happens to you? My mother smiled and remained silent.

When the nurse left, I took the train home and looked for a cheap room on the internet in the northernmost town in Germany.
Why is observing the fourth commandment so difficult? What do you think is different about you and your parents? The pastor asked me there, a boyish young woman, who was sitting at the long table opposite me, the ceiling lamp was lit, there was nobody but her and me in the large church hall of the North Sea island. She did not smile.
This is just about my mother, not my father. You shall love your father and your mother. That is the fourth commandment.
Wrong, said the pastor. The commandment does not speak of love. God does not ask us to love our parents. We only need to honour them. You’ve got yourself worked up over nothing, she said. You cannot be forced to love your mother. But your mother cannot be forced to love you, either. Your mother created you. Why don't you, in turn, create a mother for yourself? If you’re so in need of one.
She smiled at me encouragingly, as if I were her student. Over the next few days, I walked alone by the water in the force seven wind, for many hours a day. The planes couldn't land in the storm and the ferry was also cancelled.
The 7th January 1940 was a Sunday. You're Sunday’s child, my mother said to me. That apparently meant I was lucky. She always seemed to be a little in awe when I did well. That right there was luck. That wasn’t your own doing, was what she meant by that.
I came into this world at noon. My mother had just turned twenty-five. She heard the bells of the nearby Christuskirche in Kreuzberg ringing as she gave birth. The midwife suggested she call me Juliane because that was the name of the Dutch queen.
My mother was disappointed that I was a girl. Until I was four, she still bought me boys' trouser suits made of blue knitted wool with her clothing vouchers. Naming your child after a Dutch queen was risible.
She gave me the name Helga. After the war, this name went out of fashion. When a woman is called Helga, you know straight away that she was born during the Second World War or just before. All my predecessors and peers and the female writers of my generation have this as their first name: Helga Königsdorf, Helga Novak, Helga Schütz. My mother might have also wanted to please my father with the name: he had been a German soldier in the war for exactly four months when I was born.

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I'll just stay in my bed for a bit longer. In a moment I'll hug him. He'll say: be careful of my left hand. I'll move the oxygen tube aside a little. And with my eyes closed, I will lean over him and then bury my face in the warm hollow of his neck.
My mother didn't have any of this. No man lived with us after my father died two years after I was born. Not even the young Dutchman. His father had forbidden him from doing that: he didn’t even care she was a

German war widow and ten years older than his son; he would have understood all that. It was the fact that she would have been willing to give away her little child, that’s what had freaked him out.
I think that was around the time that she hit me with the hanger, as if crazed, because I hadn't hung my coat on the hook in the hallway but had put it over a chair in the living room instead. Afterwards, I went to our small shared bedroom, knelt at the foot of my bed and asked the Lord for forgiveness.

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When I was six, my mother started singing a song to me every day before bed, always the same, soothing song. She would sing three verses.
The war was over now, she had been a widow for five years, was thirty-two years old, and was working in a nursery during denazification. She had once joined the NSDAP at her husband's request. She was tired. I thought she was very beautiful, the most beautiful of all the mothers in my class.
She sang about my tiredness, that I should rest and that my father was watching over me as I slept. Then I thought a little of my father, who was dead, torn apart by a hand grenade, who had been a middle-distance runner. Middle distances are particularly difficult, my grandmother used to say so proudly, not like short distance or long distance. On other occasions, my mother would sing: I know you inherited his nose, just make sure you also inherited his heart. I understood perfectly well what she wanted to express with that song, that I was a stranger to her, that I was nothing like her, nothing like her family, that I took after my father completely. It's a pity he's dead, he would have understood you, she said.
His was cheerful, kind and full of tenderness, he wouldn't have hurt a fly, your father, said my grandmother, my mother's hated mother-in-law, whom I also so resembled. So father would watch over me while I slept, that was the first verse. Then, in the second verse, mother sang that I should reflect on my wrongdoing: your grace and Jesus' blood will cleanse you of all sins. She sang over that part very quickly.
Creepy, I thought. Was there really a way I could be cleansed of every sin I had committed during the day? Like the fact that I had forgotten the acorns to feed the starving animals at the zoo, which I had been collectig in a wooden box.
In the third verse mother instructed me to think of my relatives. God would also hold them in his hand, it must be quite a big hand, for all those uncles and aunts from Pomerania who hadn't woken my mother and me when they were packing their escape vehicle to save space for beds, laundry, and crockery. The relatives who had driven straight through to the West, while my mother fled with me alone with nothing but a nervous little horse and a rickety handcart, later forced to stay in the East, first in Greifswald, then in Berlin, in the eastern part. So these selfish and faithless relatives will also be held by God. We were to be stuck in the same hand as them.
Sometimes I would feel an unusual warmth coming from my mother as she sang this song to me. Usually all I could feel was her coolness, her pride, and her stubbornness, all I could hear were her curses: if only you had died while we were escaping.

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I have two minutes left in this cosy warmth and in this lavender scent.
Everything is still quiet in the next room, because he is counting on me to get up on time. He knows that I get very frightened when he knocks on the wall three times with his fist and asks me for help, that it makes me jump up immediately from my deep sleep in the dark, run out of my room to him with my bare feet, ready for anything: whether he has lost his balance or can no longer get up on his own, whether he is in pain and the

painkillers are not enough, whether the water bottle has accidentally made the bed all wet, whether a ghostly figure is standing in the kitchen with her child, he sees them through the crack in the door and hears their incomprehensible conversation: how do they always manage to get through the locked front door at two o'clock in the morning? There are so many strangers sitting on the sofa. The male choirs were singing again all night: Daughter of Zion.
Lie down a little longer.
I want to feel small, I want to be blown away across the great sea. There are people who say that there is only water as far as the horizon. In this great water one is simply lost, they say, one must protect oneself and close oneself off from the dangers and from the evil in all people.
But he loves the river of his childhood, the Bober: a safe, clear landscape. Only after a long quiet while does the Bober flow into the Oder. A meadow on the bank, a narrow bridge, the opposite bank nearby.
At the age of seventeen he had to go to war, he tells us again and again, full of sadness, away from the girl and away from his river, forever. It would soon lie in another country, with another name: Bobr. Without an e.

But the longing for the nearby opposite bank, the calm water, remained in his heart. Later, he found his river once more in the Havelsee near Berlin, which he would explore on his sailing boat, and later again in our boat trips through the canals, the locks.
Now I sometimes push him in his wheelchair out of our village to the end of the meadow, down to the small lake with the swampy middle, with black terns and swans and dabblers and wild ducks, a kite above us. There is a great silence here, a sense of security and you forget all about the world around you. This longing for the nearby opposite bank remained, always. All his life.

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You can find use in everything, I apparently said to my mother as a small child.
For her birthday in November 1946, I gave her a necklace made of white beans, having asked her mother, my grandmother from Alsace, with whom we had found refuge after fleeing to Berlin, for a few beans, secretly soaking them and then piercing them bean by bean; otherwise the beans would have been too hard.
Everyone in my class gave their mothers a necklace like this one in 1946. And all of the mothers were happy, taking their children in their arms and giving them a kiss. That's what my friends told me. So I squatted expectantly on the edge of the bed. My mother stood in front of the mirror.
I took the necklace out of its hiding place, gave it to her and said, Look what I made for you. My mother continued to look in the mirror, combing her hair, and I said: Why don’t you put on the white bean necklace.
She turned to me: No, I’m not going to wear that.
She didn’t give me any pocket money to buy her anything else.
My mother laughed, perhaps disgusted by how pathetic I was.

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Eight months from now, on a September morning, it will greet me at sunrise with cobwebs between the branches; I've been looking forward to it since New Year's Day: Indian summer.
The ripening season, its slow withdrawal into its roots, into its snail shell. The harvesting, the mowing, the threshing, the digging up of the earth, the fertilising, the new sowing: it's all done then. It is just like when you write: conversation with other people stops for a time. The asking, the listening, even the reading of what other people have written, the comparing, the pondering, the thinking through, the doubting, the

remembering: of childhood, of one's own life, the reading of fairy tales. All that stops for a while. Then comes the ever-widening distance from the world, and only delicate webs of meaning, easily torn apart, connect the writer to the people holding them tethered by a barely visible thread.
Is it not arrogant to take oneself so seriously? Why would this writing in particular make even a single reader interested? How can you ask for the attention of these people, to claim their time and interest?
Don't they already know all this, aren't they already too grown up, more well-read, aren't they more refined in taste, won't they be bored, won't they sneer, secretly or quite openly, won't they simply loathe me?
I tell of things something that only I know. And if you read it, you will know these things, too. For the few minutes in which you read the story, in this infinite, icy world.
In a moment I will sit up, sit on the edge of my bed, slip into my slippers, roll up my duvet and put it behind the back of my folding bed, cover it with the red-patterned woollen blanket, and count to a hundred.
Pulling up the blinds, pushing aside the curtains, turning off the oxygen machine and rolling it away so it doesn't get in the way of the wheelchair, putting on the kettle, unlocking the front door and turning off the outside lights, taking the newspaper out of the mailbox, bread in the toaster, taking the tray with the breakfast dishes into the conservatory, washing and dressing myself, stacking his fresh clothes onto the wheelchair for the nurse, putting the medication, the eight tablets he must take before breakfast, next to his breakfast plate along with a glass of ginger ale. And then going to him.

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In these piles around me, my mother's life has clotted. She can no longer control it. But I spread over it the colourful oriental embroidered silk wedding shawls I bought at the flea market at Berlin's Preußenpark. And if I lift up the corner of a shawl, perhaps I will accidentally read one of the love letters that my mother wrote to a Chinese woman, didn’t send, then wrote once more.
Her one hundred years of life will lie under these wedding shawls as if under a sumptuous wave of colours. It’s my treasure trove. I cannot drown in this sea. But it’s up to me now to keep everything afloat.

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I still want to live a little longer, my mother said to me as she lay in intensive care at the age of a hundred and one, the flexible oxygen tube in her nostrils, the electrolyte infusion in her arm, receiving a morphine injection for her shortness of breath. The window was open, it was cold outside this February, but a sparrow was chirping in the sun and we could see him projected onto the hospital wall.
I was sitting at her bedside, propped up on my left elbow. She squeezed my hand tightly for two and a half hours. She spoke continuously, much of which I did not understand, so quietly and monotonously: I have accomplished three heroic deeds related to you, she said. Firstly, I didn't abort you, even though your father wanted me to. I didn’t particularly want you either. We got married in my second trimester. Secondly, I pushed you along till I almost collapsed in that three-wheeled handcart as we escaped from Eastern Pomerania to Greifswald, and thirdly, I didn't poison or shoot you when the Russians marched into Greifswald. Your grandfather demanded that I either poison or shoot myself. He put the poison and the gun on the table in front of me. Greifswald was to be the first town to be handed over to the Russians without a fight. You were sitting next to me and you were five years old, just getting back on your feet after the escape, after typhus and an infection in your ear. I would have to kill my child first, I said to him, and I can't do that. So I let you live. You were Sunday’s child your whole life, my mother said to me, six days before her death.

Outside the room of the intensive care unit, a blackbird sat in a bare tree. I said to my mother: I owe my life to you, all is well.
Today, four years later, I would like to add something else: I thank you for telling me so much about your life, about 1933 and about how everything turned out, about your history teacher who suddenly took off his jacket in class and underneath was a brown shirt, about your terror when your best friend was a Jew after all. I thank you for being so ashamed because you didn't visit your teacher after she was dismissed and no longer lived by Grunewald station. I thank you for listening to RIAS, the radio in the American sector, with me in the evenings when I was a child in the Russian-occupied sector of Berlin, and explaining everything to me: in the West they say it like that, and here in the East in the newspaper and in your school they say it like this, and it's a lie. I thank you for allowing me to visit my other grandmother, in all my school holidays, despite your hatred of her, for buying me a scooter with wooden wheels once after the war had ended, when I was seven, just out of the blue, there was no special occasion.
This little scooter was in a toy shop window, and I had just stopped to look at it longingly. We had already moved on, I hadn't asked for anything, when suddenly you took some cash out of your wallet and said: here, buy it.
On her hundredth and also on her hundred and first birthday, in November, she had invited her fellow residents and the nurses to a café. Each time, the priest who was to bury her one day also came. At my mother's request, we had to sing the Paul Gerhardt hymn: Geh aus mein Herz und suche Freud in dieser schönen Sommerzeit. Get out, my heart, and find joy in the beautiful summertime. She wanted us to sing that at her funeral too.
But what if you die in winter, the priest had asked her, when it might not be summer at all?
Then you'll have to change the words.
She died in February. Geh aus mein Herz und suche Freud in dieser schönen Jahreszeit, get out, my heart, and find joy in this beautiful season, was written on our hymn sheets in church instead. The priest had respected her wish. But only the first few lines were rewritten. The parts about Tulipan and Solomon's Silk were simply too beautiful for him to rewrite.

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The alarm clock rings. I'd fallen asleep again. But now I get up, walk past his bed in the dark room, pull up the blinds, exposing the parchment star that hangs on an almost invisible silvery thread from the flower on the windowsill, given to us by the palliative care nurse on her first visit. I have left the white, artfully cut out star hanging there. The nurse has to endure so much that is terminal, and now, hanging on the orchid between the dark purple blossoms, is a little glimmer of hope.
I turn away from the window, he spreads his arms to me.
All is well.

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