

Anne Sauer: The Other Life
(OT: Im Leben nebenan)
Translation by Leanne Lockwood Cvetan

I get up from my desk and smile at my colleague.

“I’ll be right back,” I say. There’s no one else in the room as I close the door to the bathroom stall, my hand shakes as I engage the lock. There’s no one there as I unbutton my jeans, or close my eyes as soon as I see the reddish-brown streak.

Blood.

Why now?

My throat constricts. Please, please no. I was so careful. A cramp, and again, stronger this time. My right hand holds onto the wall, my other is pressed tight against my mouth. Tears, spittle, a groan, it all wants to come out. I’m racked with pain. There’s only the cold toilet bowl beneath my bare legs. And then, dark red clumps on the white porcelain.

No one hears me cry, no one watches me attempt to wipe my blood off my body. Again, and again, tearing off a handful of paper and wiping, tearing and wiping, there’s so much of it, so much remains. I wipe until there’s nothing left, no hope, no joyous anticipation. And then finally, it’s all gone.

How am I supposed to walk out of here, so empty. How am I supposed to sit down at my desk again, keep working, keep going. How. How do I say that everything’s okay when I never even had the chance to hold it. And never will. It’s lost. Rejected. Flushed away.

I’ll have to send a message. Schedule an appointment. Lay down on that table and be examined again, feel the cold gel on my stomach, endure the doctor’s silence until she confirms what I already know:

What had grown inside of me for eleven weeks isn’t there anymore.

This baby is not mine.

The small, downy head on Antonia's chest rises and falls as she breathes. Its tiny arm clings to its side, while the other is stuck underneath its body, which weighs almost nothing, but radiates an impressive amount of heat. This baby is not mine, the thought repeats in her head. She inhales, closes her eyes again, exhales. This must be a dream. She rubs her face, yawning, waiting for the mirage to fade. For reality to return at any second now. The dreambabything slips sideways off her chest, and Antonia doesn't stop it, because she's sure to wake up at any moment. But then the baby opens its dark eyes, takes a breath, and in the mere second between heaven and what-the-hell, it begins to scream, and Antonia is wide awake.

It's the sound of the couple upstairs having sex that wakes her up. The rhythmic squeaking of an Ikea bed frame and the barely restrained moans of the neighbor lady. Toni reaches for her phone; it's not even seven thirty in the morning. She initially thinks she can just ignore the noise for a while longer, but then gives up in the end just before climax. She removes her one ear plug; the other must have fallen out during the night. Her glass of water from yesterday evening tastes flat now, but she empties it anyway in one gulp before taking her phone off flight mode. No new messages. She turns toward Jakob, scoots all the way up against his back, breathes in the sleepy warmth of his neck. Kisses him gently along the thin silver chain that he never takes off, not even before bed. Toni touches his skin with the tip of her nose through the small hole in the collar of his pajama shirt. It's quiet again overhead until muffled footsteps shuffle towards the bathroom and the kitchen. She can clearly make out the guy from upstairs filling up the kettle at the sink directly above their bedroom, returning it to its base, and flicking the switch. Then the mugs that clink against one another until he eventually sets one down on the counter. Toni closes her eyes again, she knows what's coming next. The whirr of the electric coffee grinder hungrily crunching through the beans.

It's one of the few sounds that she actually likes to hear this early in the morning.

She loves their apartment, its beautiful floors, the low rent – a real stroke of luck they've been able to call home for a few years now. They'd taken their time moving in together. While her friends and acquaintances had all boldly leapt at the chance to take their relationships to the next level, the two of them continued on as before, spending years commuting between subway stations that were much too far apart. She preferred sleeping alone and he had to travel all too often. And, she needed her space. She dreaded the tediousness of everyday life as a couple, the morning breath, and the mundane arguments about how to load the dishwasher properly. They didn't want their love to become something merely utilitarian, the fundamental result of debate and compromise. They didn't want to move in together simply for the sake of saving time, or, at best, money. It was to happen only when they both agreed that being apart was too much to bear any longer. They saw it as a sign of fate when this apartment fell into their laps. Big enough for the two of them and perfect for their budget. It could

only have been meant to be. Especially in this city, and in this housing market. For the first time in her life, Toni could even afford to hire a moving company. She cheerfully helped Jakob put together the wardrobes and shelving units, neatly arranging their books, vinyl records, and clothes, left brand-new lampshades to sit in the corner for months on end, and these days, only rarely gets annoyed at wet towels left carelessly on the bed or finding his chin hairs on her makeup brush. They slowly filled up the three rooms with their entire being; sprawled out across the wooden floors in summer and huddled under three blankets in winter. They roamed the streets of their new neighborhood, one day turning left and the next right. Nowadays, Jakob knows already ten meters in advance the exact spot where Toni will cross the street. And the menu inside the glass case next to the entrance of the expensive Italian restaurant, they know it by heart though they've never eaten there.

"If only our apartment didn't come with the neighbors always going at it."

"Maybe moving back to the village wouldn't be so bad after all." A cute little house with a nice garden out front where she'd spend the weekends getting down on her knees and planting flowers. Where the neighbors couldn't be heard from the other side of the wall, but from the other side of the hedge. At least, it'd be quiet.

At the other end of their apartment, the door to the apartment across the hall is loudly yanked open, slammed shut, and immediately yanked open again. Toni startles, she must have dozed off since the family across the hall never leaves the house before eight-thirty in the morning. She pulls away from Jakob, who is also slowly rousing awake. The sleep departs his limbs in spurts, as traces of his last dream vanish into thin air. From out in the hallway, the cries of the neighbors' kids infiltrate their bedroom; it's the twins who, like every day, refuse to go to daycare. They also hear the mother's cries of shoes on, coats on, please stand up, and how-many-times-must-I-tell-the-two-of-you echoing in reply. One last time, the door slams shut; they never actually lock it. No time, as they're always late. They trample down the stairs, and even out on the street, no one is safe from their racket.

Toni sighs, switches on the lamp on the nightstand. It flickers, until it reaches full intensity. She stretches her neck to the left, then to the right, since when has sleeping become so exhausting. She was up three times during the night. Her last couple weeks of work were still revving in her head. Today is her first day off where she has no plans whatsoever. All she knows is that she needs coffee and she plans to go and make it right now.

The kitchen is still dark and cold. Toni reluctantly turns on the overhead light and, in its yellowish tinge, catches sight of the still-life they left there yesterday evening. She yawns as she loads the plates soaking in the sink into the dishwasher, along with the pan and its ring of dried tomato sauce. Their wine glasses still stand on the small table, hers is empty, his has a little sip left in it. "It's no good anymore, it tastes off," Jakob had said, wrinkling up his nose just a little bit as he swallowed, while Toni nipped on her berry juice. It was their first evening together in weeks, where he finally wasn't traveling for once. He had burst through the door in a clattering of suitcases and flung his backpack and jacket against the wall next to the drying rack. Between his "Hi" and their first kiss came his usual complaints about the enormous double stroller parked at the foot of the stairs.

"By the time it's your turn, we'll have moved out," the twins' mother had once laughed as she maneuvered it into the only free space in the hallway. The way she just assumed such a thing so matter-of-factly. A young couple: what else were they supposed to do with their lives.

Toni does shoulder circles while she waits for the coffee pot to boil on the stove. Her gaze falls on the oil stain on the wall just above the baseboard. She recalls the bottle of olive oil that had slipped through her fingers that one time, and how Jakob picked the shards up off the floor with his bare hands. She remembers him going over to ask the neighbor for some oil and how the twins' howls echoed through the hallway when she opened the door.

"You know what would be really cool? Like a 30-day trial subscription. A baby membership program, where you can try it out for a bit and just keep the fun stuff," she'd said as he poured the oil from the neighbor into the pan. "Like Parenthood Prime! And when you've had enough, it's *bye!*"

They'd both laughed. Toni had taken a sip of her white wine spritzer and then went very quiet. She'd watched Jakob as he stirred the carbonara, imagined him as a father: strolling through town wearing a baby carrier, this neat little accessory that would immediately boost people's opinion of him. Dark circles under his eyes and a five o'clock shadow, a young dad, very hands-on. One who shares the work with his partner, even though fifty percent of it belongs to him anyway. How he doesn't want to be one of those fathers who say things like: "It's nice when they finally find their voice." Or: "Just wait until you have kids..." She'd stood next to Jakob as he stirred the food in the pan, with her head on his shoulder and the fragrant steam from the sauce hitting her nose.

"We'd manage somehow. As a team," he had suddenly mumbled, speaking straight ahead of him as if to the pan of pasta. Her ears had immediately perked and she propped her chin on his shoulder, sensing that something inside her had just flipped.

"I'm just afraid of what it might do to us. That we won't recognize each other anymore." And I'm afraid for our love, she'd secretly added in her thoughts. I'm afraid that having a child will trigger a side of me you might hate.

"But that can always happen to us, even without kids."

When the espresso pot starts gurgling, Toni takes it off the burner and briefly warms up the milk. She doesn't want to think about that oil stain anymore, sets two mismatched cups down on the table, or their conversation from back then about having kids, or her next appointment with her gynecologist. She dumps that last mouthful of wine into the sink with the softened leftovers of food and, of course, exactly these thoughts race through her head. She turns on the faucet to let the clear water rinse away the vinegary smell, pours the milk into each cup first and then the coffee just as Jakob walks into the kitchen.

Toni holds on to this moment as tightly as she can. The way he stands there with his tired smile and his disheveled hair as he leans against the door frame and his first glimpse of the day belongs to her alone.

When she wakes up, she's not lying in her bed, but on a sofa. With a baby crying next to her that, until only a moment ago, was asleep. On her. Now crying and screaming, it's nothing more than a little bundle of searing reproach. Antonia looks up, waiting for someone to come into the room, to take the baby, to soothe it. For the mother to come. But nothing moves, not even her.

She continues to stare at the heaving little baby belly wrapped up in pink and beige, the tiny balled-up fists pounding against it, and the knobby little legs kicking wildly in the air. One foot is naked, and on the other, the teeniest sock in the whole world is hanging on by only two little toes. Antonia blinks, finally manages to pull herself out of her stupor, and gently puts her hands underneath the baby's slender back, reminding herself to support its head so that the tiny spine doesn't snap in two. As she picks up this hot, little baby parcel, the crying subsides. Accordingly, the baby's head lurches forward, desperately searching for Antonia's breast. She pulls it closer and holds the baby up to her shoulder, instinctively imitating what she's often seen other people do. Antonia places one hand under the small bottom, the other carefully anxiously please calm down what am I doing here pats the baby's back. Where in the world is she? As a large, lumbering being, they stand up very slowly and a blast of pain sears across Antonia's lower abdomen. She cries out and bends over in pain, exhaling sharply. But eventually, in slow motion, they leave the oversized sectional, with its coppice landscape of burb cloths, wet wipes, and tissues. A pacifier sticks out from between the cushions like a sprouting flower, slowly and mindful of each painful motion, she plucks it out, quickly blows on it, doesn't know whether that's allowed or not, and holds it in front of the baby's nose like a free sample at a buffet. She pokes the baby's glistening wet lips with it and the baby takes the bait, accepts the synthetic teat, and happily sucks away. Baby successfully stifled.

Antonia takes a deep breath and braves another step into the unfamiliar room. The cool wooden floor creaks under her hesitant footsteps. She stops next to a white marble-top table, inspects the stack of books on it: baby books, books on parenting, how to raise healthy children. The center of the room is dominated by one of those bouncy chair things with half a zoo of stuffed animals hanging from it. Antonia carefully places the baby onto the cushioned seat, a lion, a penguin, and a giraffe graze across the top of the little head as the chair tips backwards. The baby stares into the air, content for the moment. Then she discovers a pad of paper, page upon page covered with a sort of hourly chart, the small boxes meticulously filled with writing, one after the other. Sleep, feed, bathe. She flips through the pages, trying to make sense of the times squished into the little fields. The neat handwriting of the first page already loses its legibility by page two. Did Antonia keep track of all that? Or was it—

Jakob. Of course. He must be here somewhere, Antonia, look around. And Antonia turns around, only to see the monstrous sofa again and the mosaic of professionally framed artwork on the wall above it. Then quickly turning the other way - large houseplants in even larger ceramic pots and candles in every shade of beige atop of matt black candleholders. Her gaze continues around the room - to lastly, a set of shelves. Bookshelves with only a few books but picture frames by the dozen. Photographs definitely showing Antonia, and only rarely on her own; most are of her with a man standing next to her. Who is not Jakob. She blinks multiple times, but the face doesn't change. Antonia recognizes him as someone she knew as a teenager, who was her boyfriend for a few years, before she broke up with him at twenty-one. In one of the photos, she's all in white, radiant and glowing, with a bouquet of flowers in hand held up in the air like a trophy. At her other hand: Adam. Standing right next to it is a framed close-up

of both of their hands, elegantly intertwined, a meaningful connection, their rings glinting in the sunlit scene. Antonia examines her hands. And indeed, her right ring finger has a golden ring on it.

When Antonia reaches over to take one of the pictures from the shelf, the tightness in her lower abdomen turns into a wrenching and she simply collapses. She lets go of the frame, it crashes onto the floor, and of course, the glass breaks. There they now lay, the young couple. She's queasy and feverish, steadies herself on the shelf with her eyes closed. Water, she thinks, before her dizziness forces her onto all fours. She crawls out of the living room into the hallway, breathing heavily, her head swinging from side to side like a wounded animal. Where's the bathroom in this oversized place? Her knees scrape against the hard wood floor, pain and disorientation surround her. Antonia warily pushes open one of the doors, drags herself up by the door handle in slow-motion – the professionally laid gray tiles of happy home-ownership in the background. She sees the luxurious corner bathtub, the walk-in shower with its dark metal fixtures, the cream-colored towels draped over a large drying rack. She enters the room, turns around, and looks for herself in the mirror. There she is, her blonde curls pulled back into a messy bun, a single greasy strand hangs down over her shoulder, dirty and stringy. Her face looks pale and drained. Her lips are chapped, and there's a small scratch across her chin. Antonia turns on the faucet, guzzles down gulps of water and splashes some on her face. She leans forward, propping herself on the sink with both hands. Inhale, exhale. The pain is still there, throbbing against the cold porcelain sink rim. She looks down at herself, only just now noticing her rounded stomach sticking out. She grabs the hem on her t-shirt, pulls it up to her chin. Bends over forward, not recognizing much, then looks straight ahead into the mirror and sees a swollen strip of brown-yellow skin just above her pubic bone. Right in the middle of this hematoma aquarelle: the long, grinning scar that maliciously divides Antonia into two halves.

She hears a noise from the living room, and turns her head, then a whimpering, one that harmonizes with her own. Stumbles out of the room full of mirrors, there's no time to linger, no time to lose. Antonia loathingly hurries back as quickly as she can to the fussy baby, squirming and stretching uncomfortably. On the floor, the spit-out pacifier. An insult in the form of flesh-colored rubber. The squirming baby's face is bright red, its lips pressed tightly together, as the small body awkwardly writhes in all directions. Then Antonia hears a fart, long, drawn-out relief. Suddenly happy again, the baby waves its arms around as though she's applauding herself. Thus, directing Antonia's gaze off her and back to perusing the rest of the room. To the wall of floor to ceiling windows where she flings the heavy sand-colored drapes aside. Every move incites a burning pain around her scar. Sunlight pours in, blinding her for a few seconds until she realizes: outside is the village she grew up in. Antonia recognizes the street corner, the playground. At the end of the curve is the bakery that has the good pretzels and the cheese turnovers that always tasted so good with Sunday's stew. She knows exactly where she is. Only she doesn't know why. Antonia puts both hands on the baby in the rocker, picks it up, and stares at its face. Inspects its nose, chin, forehead, ears, the pursed lips, looks deep into the baby's dark eyes. She's read about women before who have gone crazy. Mothers who deny their children, reject them, or feel the need to remove themselves from this catastrophic situation. Postnatal depression. Who were then institutionalized and made to believe they were being heard and understood, prescribed pills, their backs gently patted and convinced they needed to return to their families in order to be happy. You're a mother now. You'll get used to it. But Antonia is not crazy. She is simply a childless woman who woke up today with a baby. In a house with perfectly ironed curtains and an immaculately tiled bathroom. Married to her first love.

No one's going to believe me, she already knows.

No one will believe her.

[...]

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Antonia sits upright, her back stiff, gingerly swings her legs over the side of the bed, lingers there for a moment, numbed by cold and exhaustion, before she drags herself into the nursery and picks up Hanna from her crib. Yawning, she stands in the kitchen, puts her cheek up to the baby's soft, sweet-smelling head while she waits for the coffee machine to warm up for the day. The wind rattles the half-open, shutters and, noting the first couple of raindrops on the matt black windowsill, she quickly closes the window. It had been a cold and unpleasant new year up to now, so far so normal. Antonia had grown accustomed to the dark. To this gray section of the perpetually half-finished heaven that never seemed able to clear up in time for evening. Adam comes trotting out of the bathroom and puts his arms around her and Hanna for a long time. Like a little flock of birds, they stand huddled together, all warm and cozy.

January was already halfway over as were those strange days that seemed to follow no reasoning. The new year lay still fresh ahead. She'd read everyone's resolutions, but Antonia was just looking to somehow make it through, in this life. In her new life, which she no longer expected to be able to change. Nor want to change. She was looking forward to spring. To spending Easter in Papa's – Grandpa's—back yard, to the weekend trip she'd be planning with Selma. To the novel that was already lying on the sofa waiting for her. To the first coffee of the day which she was about to make. Without realizing it, she had already begun a long time ago to forget. She thought about earlier the way she did a story from another time, she'd come to terms, even made friends, with the woman who nodded at her in the mirror.

"Maybe you'd like to come with me?" Adam kisses her on the corner of the mouth, his hand caressing her cheek, his aftershave filling in the air, before he moves to open the refrigerator door and tells her about his upcoming business trip. They could tack on the weekend, the three of them, and go explore the city together, see the zoo, "or something," he says. And while Antonia listens to him, she loads the dishwasher and reminds herself of their last couple of trips and how stressful they were, with the packing and the thinking ahead and the unpredictability of traveling with a baby, as nice as it is, she feels the need to interrupt him to say that she also wouldn't mind just staying here, at home. It's only when Adam says the name of the city, that she pauses. Stands there as though suddenly in the off-position, two sauce-covered plates suspended in each hand. He bites into his bread roll, topped with butter and a slice of cheese. It's Antonia's city. The city with Jakob in it. There, of all places, is where

he wants to take her. Just because, just for a few days. To the place where her apartment is. Was? Must be, where the snapshots from the photo booth still hang from the little garland in the hallway. Where, perhaps, someone is there waiting for her, who wants to be the first one to know what she dreamed about last night and how she's doing. Where she could lie down on the floor for hours without a baby screaming for her. To where – it dawns on her just this minute – she could actually go after all?

Antonia sets the plates aside and turns to the window, hiding both her face and her excitement from Adam, the sudden tingling in her fingertips, in her stomach and knees. Breathe, she thinks. Keep breathing, just keep breathing.