`

Your Turn

a novel by

Arno Frank

Sample translation by Tanjil Rashid

© 2017 by J. G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger GmbH, gegr. 1659, Stuttgart

Klett-Cotta Verlag
Rotebühlstraße 77, 70178 Stuttgart, Germany
Contact: Roland Knappe
Tel: +49 711 6672 1257
r.knappe@klett-cotta.de

Your Turn
(So, und jetzt kommst du)
by Arno Frank
novel
published March 2017
352 pages, hardcover
Klett-Cotta , Stuttgart

This unique road-movie of a novel sees Arno Frank and his family travel across Europe in a fresh, humorous take on 1980s life.

Arno's parents dream of making it big. It's the 1980s and success seems just around the corner, even for someone living in an unremarkable German town. When his father starts to work for a car dealership, the family seem to have made it. They are rich, and suddenly everything is simple. Arno's parents relocate the family to the South of France and the children enrol in an expensive private school. But things soon begin to unravel. Arno's parents start acting strangely, and before long he discovers that his father is a conman. The family's sudden wealth stems from money he stole from his former employer; the move to France was an attempted escape; and Interpol are looking for them. Leaving all their possessions behind, they go on the run, first to Lisbon, and then back to Germany. What had at first seemed to Arno and his two siblings like an exciting adventure soon turns into an exhausting odyssey. Even their grandmother refuses to take them in. Arno's father is arrested; the family are now on social welfare, and Arno is back in his old school. From the classroom window he can see the prison where his father is serving his sentence.

Arno Frank's autobiographical novel begins with an epitaph by Peter O'Toole: 'I'm not working-class. I come from the criminal classes.' Frank, a gifted storyteller, takes the reader on a journey through the 1980s, through Europe, and through his own family history. His fine wit is on display on every page: he is a close observer of the details of time and place, and recreates a world that seems entirely authentic. The story of his family is a tragicomedy of aspiration and inevitable disappointment, but it is Frank's narrator, young Arno, who turns a familiar tale into a unique one. We see everything through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old boy who is only half-aware of the goings-on around him. We admire his father; we are delighted by the sudden access to wealth and the new lifestyle in France; and we're horrified by what follows.

Prologue

The first time my mother died, I was with her.

She was lying on her back in the hall, one leg slightly bent, the other stretched out. Right hand by her head, left hand on her hip. Eyes closed, like she was having a nap on the Persian rug. I made of this what any child of about four years makes of most things: nothing. Or at least nothing bad.

“Mama? Mama, look!”

She was meant to look at a picture I’d drawn. A ‘V’ and an ‘M’ with smooth arches, a whole flock of them spread out over the page. I’d managed birds for the first time. I was calling my mother from my room, but she hadn’t come. Then I saw her lying there, completely still, at the foot of the stairs as I came down from my bedroom. Carefully, with one hand on the bannister, because the steps were big and I was small. I crept over and, on my knees, went right up to her body. She still wasn’t moving. I stopped myself from snickering. This was going to be fun. I tickled the soles of her feet, only very lightly. She didn’t react. Fine then. I held her mouth and nose shut at the same time. No response. Maybe I wasn’t patient enough. Delicately, I placed the page on her face and watched the birds on it very closely.

They didn’t move.

Shouldn’t her breath have rustled the paper?

I took the page away again. Her mouth was slightly open, her eyelids too. I noticed now the whites of her eyes, two slender half-moons under her lashes. I gently tugged at her earlobes, because she liked to be touched on her earlobes and would normally then purr. Not this time, this time she lay there like a soft, warm doll. Unsure what to do, I reached for her wrist. If a person is lying motionless on the floor, someone always reaches for the wrist, then shakes their head and says to the bystanders, “Nothing we can do!” That much I knew from television, but I could feel no pulse. Was her chest rising and falling? When I put my ear to the hard bit under her collarbone I felt only my own heartbeat.

Holding her I sprung myself onto her belly and looked at her face. Freckles all over, as if they had been scattered over the bridge of her nose, then had tumbled down from there. Just above the spot where she would always pluck her eyebrows in the bathroom. Tiny

bristles grew there, too short for the tweezers. I ran my thumb along the curve of her eyebrows several times. Her long, black hair draped her forehead. I decided to take a tuft of it in my fist and tugged till her head rose up a little from the ground. It felt heavy and valuable.

No reaction.

Eventually, I no longer knew what I was meant to do. Her breasts were dangling left and right. Underneath the flimsy, green fabric with the printed roses I could dimly make out her nipples. With both my hands I tried to shove her breasts back to the centre. They were like jelly, so I let them be. Was that the scent of roses? No, only of her perfume. Strawberry, or maybe orange. If somebody dies perfumed, do they then smell of that scent for all eternity?

I bent down to her, my nose on hers.

“Mama!”

Nothing.

What now? It seemed she couldn’t hear me, but she must have been able to *see* me. So I lay my hands on her forehead and with my thumbs lifted up her eyelids. Her eyes were round and brown as always, but blank. Like they were fixed on something endlessly boring on the ceiling. Like I wasn’t even there.

“Mama, stop it!”

Shivering, I became aware of the emptiness of the flat. No-one at home, just me and her. The radio murmuring in the kitchen. The sliding door onto the back garden. A fly thrusting against the glass over and over with a muffled thud, even though the door right next to it stood open. At the sink I filled a glass with water, turned back and poured it over my mother’s face. She didn’t even flinch. Instead it was the birds on the paper next to her head that moved. The moisture had made the ink run.

“Mama?”

With a hard click from inside her mouth, her jaw flapped open. Again I jumped onto her body. Feeling behind her teeth with my trembling fingers, I tried to catch her tongue. It kept slipping away from me sideways, like a gherkin in a jar. As I fumbled about her lipstick left red blotches on the backs of my hands. Soon my hands were red, like a murderer’s. No, I didn’t like this game any more. Not one bit. I knocked on the bony bit between her breasts.

“Mama! Mama! Mama!”, with a knock each time on the first A.

Nothing. She was there without being there. Panic seized me, as if it had silently snuck inside from the garden and grabbed me from behind.

I howled.

I howled and at the same time I was startled by the sounds I was making, I had heard dogs howl like that. I howled and pounded my fists against her chest and could feel that I'd just peed my pants but I didn't care.

And with that I brought her back to life.

Suddenly her fingers, running through my hair, and in my ear her voice, soft and soothing: "It's okay, it's okay!"

In tears I let myself fall into her open arms, which closed around me in a reassuring squeeze.

"You little rotter, you've weed all over my belly!", she whispered. Beneath me I felt her snicker, she wasn't angry with me. And I felt my sobs, too, turn to laughter.

Mama *was* still there.

She *had* been the whole time, she'd never gone away.

It felt to me like I'd passed a test. When I'm dead, will you grieve for me? Will you grieve me back to life? And then there was something else too, something dark. As if Mama had taught me an important lesson. A lesson whose meaning I could not fathom back then. And nor, in all likelihood, could she.

Chapter 1

Depot

My father was born shortly after the war in the south of France. He used to love telling us about it. He said Grandpa earned his living back then laying down little airstrips in cornfields in the shadow of Romanesque cathedrals. A strip of concrete, a fence around it, a shed on it, the windsock hoist – bish, bosh, all done and onto the next order. That had been grandpa's job as an architect, said my father. That's why he spent much of his childhood and youth in a boarding school in Perpignan. Names like Sète, Montpellier or Nîmes have entered into the mythology of my father's family, forever associated with heroic professional achievements.

My father won't have had it easy as a German boy in the France of the fifties. But he would wax lyrical about that distant time in a distant land. As if it were a blurred movie that never stopped rolling before his inner eye. This one time, in rural Languedoc, he'd gone to see a wandering circus: "In the tent, there was this fortune-teller stooping there, just like you imagine, an old hunchbacked woman in a headscarf. Obviously a gypsy. She took my hand and read it like it was the stock market. Then she looked at me and said, 'Cher ami, you'll be rich! It won't look like it for a while, but by forty at the latest, you'll be rich!' I laughed at her, but privately, I understood what she meant. I understood what she meant about me." He would be rich. He wouldn't *become* rich with some idea or business. No, he would simply one day *be* rich.

When he told anecdotes like this, I'd always wish that one day I might also be able to remember my own childhood as a fleeting sequence of rich visions. Now, Jürgen didn't pass the Baccalauréat, nor later – back in Germany – his Abitur exams. He was too smart for that. If still waters run deep, he was a reservoir, nurtured by his father's self-esteem and his mother's astute eye. He was a creature of his own making, which is why he did not care for certificates issued by some authority or other. He was his own authority.

After finishing school, he was pressured by his parents into an unglamorous clerical trainee scheme for the civil service in Ludwigshafen. After all, things are always happening, and everything that happens must be processed**.** Except the shortcut to success rarely runs through offices and administrations. Especially not for my father, who saw success as a derivative of money, and his education as a first step to greater things. Greater things would, moreover, meet him half way. Of that he was convinced, and he became more and more sure of it.

On the passing of his driving test, he was gifted an Italian sports car by his parents. Later, when my parents once spotted an Alfa Romeo Giulia Super on the road, they spoke fondly of "Julia", as if it were a mutual friend. Julia was actually a burley beauty in the sixties, like Belmondo, and one day my father drove it up to the US army depot in Kaiserslautern. He was a burley young man too, tanned and toned and ready to begin his first role as a civil servant. Department: Needs Assessment and Acquisitions. Second-rate stuff the Americans had the civilians produce in Kaiserslautern.

He had rolled slowly past the guard hut and barrier towards the flat, grey, prefab barracks that stood behind barbed wire in the shade of pine trees, brazenly parked his car right next to the entrance, in the space reserved for officers, got out, lit himself a Gitane and, at precisely the moment the flame cupped in his hand had illuminated his rather intense face, he caught my mother's eye. She'd just stepped out of the door for a smoke herself.

What did she see?

Something altogether different from the hunched figures she dealt with in the office, and among whom she must privately have counted herself. An Alain Delon or Hardy Krüger maybe, scornful insouciance and bravado. The young man wore a stylish jacket, over a white shirt with the three top buttons undone, and under his arm a copy of *Spiegel* magazine with Sharon Tate and Charles Manson on the cover. Confidently, he nodded at the young woman, blew out a puff of smoke, looked around and asked with a smile, "Are you allowed to smoke French cigarettes here among the Yanks, miss? Or do they have to be Lucky Strike?"

My mother was born shortly after the war in Saarland, still a French protectorate then. That is to say, the French somehow looked after the region, whatever that meant. Her parents, "Oma" Julia and "Opa" Alois, ran a little supermarket in St Ingbert. Named for its patron saint, this town – which we never even visited and to which we had no other connection – has always remained a place of defeat in the mythology of my mother's family. The supermarket never made any money, which is why years later Mama always gave branches of that chain a wide berth**:** "We used to have an Edeka too," she would say, as if she were mourning a place of eternal plenty. How you could lose an Edeka when there were so many Edeka stores all around you was always a mystery to me. After going bankrupt, the family moved to Kaiserslautern. But Opa Alois was a master confectioner, baker and cook, and the Americans sought a chef for their officers' mess. A man who could make soup for two hundred men, but also knew how to bid a General farewell by conjuring up an exquisite layer cake with a mushroom cloud of candy floss. Such a man was Opa Alois, and the Americans took him on, "with relish", as Oma Julia liked to stress.

Jutta was forced to go to a school of domestic science. She was continually being *forced*. She said that was the way it was then. It was impossible to rebel against this disempowerment as a girl in the Germany of the early sixties. So her thoughts often turned

inwards. The look on her face would then empty out, become completely blank. Maybe, at such moments, she was on the trail of some mysterious sweetness only she could taste. When she wasn't being forced to do this or that, that's where she liked to go.

After finishing an apprenticeship as a photographer's assistant, she was qualified to develop other people's holiday pictures in the dark. But she never actually practised her trade. Not because she wished for another life. Her ambitions were limited to superficial possibilities, and consisted solely of becoming a photographer. But not one who takes pictures of dusty leopards in Zaire or ragged-haired rebels in Cuba. Just one who does passport photos: "I like it when people come to the shop dressed in their finery, sit down and adjust their facial expressions. Then you can see on their faces who they want to be. And that's more interesting than who they really are."

In my memory, she's the humming woman. From dawn till dusk her perpetual humming encircled her like a halo of serenity. If a tune on the radio proved to be particularly dour, my mother would raise the collar of her dark felt coat, take the trolley bus to Schiller's record store in the town centre and buy a single by Daliah Lavi, Wencke Myhre or Drafi Deutscher. The point was to drive out the earworm through persistent repetition and repetition of the repetition to the point of tedium. Each song a link in the chainmail armoury of well-being.

And after all: that radiant first laugh at my father's joke during their cigarette break at the Depot; the secret beating of her heart at the sight of Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw on the poster outside the cinema in the pedestrian zone; the nocturnal crinkling of sheets and enmeshing of moans; the startled joy at the doctor's visit, still in the hallway; his murmured diagnosis as the rain tapped against the window; and finally the tinny chiming of bells – all the merry noise of life must have drowned out the momentary clacking of the points shifting decisively when Jutta met my father and became my mother.

Conifer Road

The houses on our little street were crammed next to each other like four friends in the back of a car, shoulder to shoulder. There were no other houses there, four cubbyholes of

happiness made from the same "New Objectivity" construction kit, modernism among the old conifers. Beneath them my parents' house, a time-honoured bolthole.

My paternal grandfather had built these houses in the sixties, after he had paved over the south of France with airstrips and settled down with his architecture firm in this little corner of Kaiserslautern. My parents had me christened with his name shortly before he died. What was for him perhaps a final pleasure was to me only a vague obligation. You can't recreate a void, at most you can fill it with your imagination. In mine, he really had built the houses all by himself. He dug the trenches, mixed the cement, soldered the pipes, laid the cables, stacked up the blocks of stone, tiled the roofs.

An old photo showed a flattened surface where, later, the houses would stand in all their whitewashed glory. The building site had jagged edges and gleamed the colour of caramel, as if a cheerier sunlight shone back then. Men have tanned torsos; one of them slight, hands in his pocket – my father. Next to him, half out of shot, an imposing woman with horn-rimmed glasses and a red headscarf, her sleeves rolled up – his mother.

The cheerful light, the people and the photo itself have vanished. But the houses, they're all still there. A wooden carport, fresh flowerbeds, a new winter garden out back, attic extension, satellite dishes – nothing has changed much in all these years. They are inhabited today by other families, happier or unhappy in their own way. They stand the test, these houses. They effectively keep the great outdoors at a distance from their new inhabitants, as if they deflected time itself from passing through. Perhaps they stand at a favourable angle to its flow.

Unlike my mother's parents, whom I would rather intimately call "Oma" and "Opa", my father's mother was always "Grandma". Or Bärbel, with a bun like a handball and a "life of her own", which she guarded against encroachments as vigorously as a small nation its borders. Although Bärbel lived in the house next door she rarely came to visit. She never had any hot chocolate at hers, only Ovaltine, which she nevertheless stubbornly called hot chocolate and tasted of disappointment. Whereas Oma Julia brought back packs and packs of sweets, Haribo, Mambo, Milka, Grandma Bärbel had only packaged wisdom to share. And the urge to lure my mother into reading strange books. Doris Lessing, Anaïs Nin, Germaine Greer. Once, a well-worn paperback of the German translation of *Les Belles Images* was lying there on our dining table, and my mother listened intently to her mother-in-law as she

tapped on the cover with her finger: "You simply must read Simone de Beauvoir, Jutta. It's about you. It's about our whole world falling apart. A world which only had an eye on money. Not left or right, only money." After that the book gathered dust on my mother's bedside table for eternity, buried beneath stacks of dime novels about heroines called "Sylvia" or "Sybil", who all had rather a keen eye for money.

Bärbel liked to keep her probing sights trained on me: "Like father, like son…"

Mother would then stroke my neck and say: "Isn't that true?", but Bärbel's look would reveal that she hadn't meant it as a compliment.

Whenever I was plagued by an infection of my middle ear, that piercing pain in the skull, Bärbel would apply a compress made of onions and sit me by an infrared lamp. And make me sausages and cauliflower. Her care was tough and astute and didn't allow for whingeing. In the war, she had been a nurse in a field hospital. First in the west, then in the east, always just behind all the frontlines. She must have acquired a detachment then that served her well in her civilian existence as a midwife at the hospital in Kaiserslautern: "In the war I helped people die, after that I helped them into this world."

For days we watched the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, later we argued about the young Soviet leader. Bärbel was of the firm view that his wife Raissa held the reins, which I couldn't conceive of and which only goaded grandma: "You're a macho little kid, aren't you? Can't imagine a world that doesn't just belong to the men, can you?"

Everything I loved on television, she hated. The slapstick show *Die Klamottenkiste*, and those old Westerns with Fuzzi who shoots a hole in the screen during the opening credits. She was quite capable of springing out of her arm chair in the middle of a show and switching off "this American balderdash". The same went for that Swedish series in which a boy finds a brown pair of cords in the attic with money always stuffed in its pockets. No matter how much he takes out, the money never runs out. The boy wishes to do something good with it, but soon the crooks zero in on the trousers. I never learned how the series ended, but damn I would've liked a pair of trousers like that.

If Bärbel ever tuned into the television of her own free will, it was for the daily news. And Open University programmes on Channel 3, where pasty-faced mathematicians in mud-coloured jumpers would snottily talk over impenetrable charts and vectors. Sooner or later some gentle snoring indicated to me that even my grandmother's attention wasn't unlimited.

Before going to sleep, she insisted on reading to me from books she herself had read. Dog-eared pages marked the places for me. “We have no need for made-up stories”, Bärbel decided, nourishing me with anecdotes Tacitus recounted about the Germans, Herodotus about the Phoenix in Egypt, Thucydides about the plague in Athens – all of which struck me as fairly made-up. At times she’d waver as she read aloud, when she looked for easier words or skipped over whole paragraphs completely if they were too difficult. As soon as she wavered a little longer, I’d seize the opportunity and fall asleep on her soft shoulder.

Conifer Road is an area I’d happily douse in caramel. I’d pour it over the playground with the slide and the iron monkey bars and the swing in the sandpit outside the houses. In spring the stag beetles used to buzz around me like tiny helicopters flying at head-height. Marvels lay in wait just around the corner. One day, out of sheer boredom, I lifted up one of the grey slabs of slate which paved the footpath in front of our house. Underneath, on a smooth – as if ironed – plane of clay-like earth, I discovered an outlandish maze of streets and canals, which a moment ago had been tunnels and in which an entire population of amber-coloured ants were crawling around. In a hidden world, which had without my knowledge always existed beneath my feet and whose gracious God I might have a claim to be. I placed the slab back with care, so as not to disturb any further the secret populace underneath it.

Once, in the sandpit, I ran into another child who was on the swing, hurtling into the wooden poles that held it up. At home mama dabbed my tears dry, took care of the grazes on my face and sat me before the television. When Papa came home I heard him swearing in the hallway. That was strange, as it hardly ever got noisy among my parents. At least I never caught anything like that. Maybe Mama and Papa set the alarm so that their arguments happened at night in hushed tones. Mama now whizzed into the living room and said in passing: “Careful, your father is cross! I told him what happened…”

Cross, that wasn’t good. When Papa was cross he’d ask questions I didn’t know how to answer. If I’d been up to something daft, he’d rap me on the head with his knuckles. Not beatings – he made a point of that. Just bumps. But what could have ‘happened’ this time that was so bad? There he stood – his lips narrow and completely tense – next to me in the living room.

“What’s going on?”

“The charming Jeannie,” I said.

He shot me an unwavering glare. Petrified, I glared back.

Over his shoulder he called to the kitchen: “Who did you say did this to my son?”

“That’s what kids are like, Jürgen!”, my mother called back. “No-one meant for this to happen! Another boy hit him with that new swing. So he unfortunately got knocked over.”

“The swing in the sandpit? Can somebody tell me what a swing is doing in the sandpit? What’s the point? I don’t understand it. And anyway, what was so bad about the old swing?”

“It was old?”, suggested my mother.

“It squeaked!” I added.

“Jürgen, it might have been any other kid who…”, Mama began softly.

“It’s a threat to public safety, that’s what!” my father intervened. “And you know what? I’m not going to put up with it any longer!”

He took the big breadknife out of the kitchen drawer and hurried out of the house.

Translated by Tanjil Rashid: tanjil.rashid@gmail.com