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sample translation

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20 Counting Fish

The first thing I thought was that she looked exactly the same.

I got there early and waited a few minutes, instinctively looking in the right direction so I saw her coming from afar. She approached the bridge from the other side of the canal, not from the city-centre. I recognized her wreath of glowing yellow hair, tips bobbing in time to her step, the oversized trousers and the colourful top, and it seemed like I'd just seen her in the school courtyard or dining-hall. I looked down at myself, to make sure that, unlike her, I *didn't* look like I had then. Most of the person she had known simply didn't exist any longer, melted down years ago through a combination of speed, a few push-ups and forced marches; shorn off by the barber's scissors; peeled away by the dermatologist's medicines. Ultra-fine, practically transparent layers of skin had been peeled off my whole body, deep down to where every last pimple had been. Looking at myself in the mirror since then had a calming effect on me.

But that didn't help. Jessie was standing on the other side of the bridge beneath the red traffic light and I stared at her as though she were a being from another world come to take me away. I hadn't expected anything in particular from our meeting. I'd looked forward to it, and thought it wouldn't make any difference seeing her in person after speaking to her almost every day on the phone for weeks. I suddenly realised I'd made a fatal mistake. It didn't just make a difference, it was a shock. I felt my back rounding, my shoulders sinking and my arms suddenly hanging uselessly by my sides. I felt patches of sweat in my underarms and an unpleasant, cold dampness in my shoes, signs of a paralysis, the mechanism of which I had forgotten long ago. My whole body suddenly remembered the time I had lain in bed every day, reading a trashy science fiction novel, waiting for the heroine, breasts bound by ammunition belts, to turn up again, and how I had almost damaged my kidneys so many times because I had been too lazy to get up to go to the toilet.

The traffic light turns green. The closer Jessie came, the more I felt like an imposter, someone who had sneaked in where he wasn't really allowed. I thought about the flights in first-class with Rufus, which were getting more and more frequent, stretching my legs out as he drank a coffee with Cointreau next to me, a mixture, he thought, that could only be drunk on a plane. He would speak in his brief manner of the point of the 'home-call' we were making, never altering course according to the reaction of the person he was speaking to. I'd never been able to give a correct answer in class in school even when I knew it, and now it seemed strange how I enjoyed sitting silently listening to Rufus. Beside him, I looked at the world

from above, not because we were on a plane, but because of his unique ability to see the planet as an interesting but completely manageable place. For him, the countries of the world in all their complexity were nothing more than individual persons with separate personalities and easily graspable characters. They were born and died, they had biographies, they were marked with certain qualities and had lived through traumatic times, they had memories, hopes and dreams, they were poor or rich, strong or weak, had friends and enemies. Rufus was their doctor, their judge and priest; only countries and a handful of other people worked on the level he was on. I was his assistant, looking over his shoulder, often dizzy from the view. Now I thought I knew why. The idea of that being my real place in the world suddenly seemed completely wrong to me.

On the other side of the road, Jessie was getting nearer. I had a long way to fall. I felt myself pulled towards her as towards an abyss without a safety railing; I wanted to turn before she discovered me, run back to the U-Bahn station and back into my office, where I would get all calls from her number blocked. I wanted to be back working with what I knew.

It was too late. It was busy on the Franzen Bridge, but Jessie had seen me over the cars. Our gazes met and the shock turned into pure fear when I realised that she'd recognised me immediately. She didn't stop short, but threw an arm up in the air immediately.

Cooper!! she called.

I hadn't heard the name for twelve years. I waved back and Jessie ran onto the road.

Look out! I shouted.

Brakes screeched, there was a stink of burnt rubber. One of the drivers couldn't stop himself from signalling are-you-crazy, then she was standing before me, safe.

My God, I say.

Cooper, she said. I'm totally confused.

I worked out that she had to be twenty-six years old. There were a couple of fine lines running across her forehead and the expression in her eyes was too tired to be a child's. But everything else made twenty-six seem impossible: her tiny frame, her clothes, the way her hands constantly moved to touch her face or her hair, the way her arms dangled, how she hopped from one foot to the other. She could have been twenty, sixteen, even twelve really, her age changed according to the way the light fell on her, perhaps according to what she thought or said in any single moment. She had the sun behind her now, and her eyes seemed to have got darker with the years, almost black; perhaps the pupils were unnaturally dilated or perhaps she had two holes in her face into which I could shout and then listen for an echo.

She was looking me up and down too, as though I was something she wanted to buy. She looked at my black suit, felt the lapels of my unbuttoned jacket and the light-coloured shirt beneath. I'd taken the tie off and stuffed it in a pocket, Jessie's fingers found it immediately. My hair fell into my eyes as I looked down at her. I had a casually styled haircut that wasn't suited to looking at a small woman close up. I'd get it cut as soon as I could.

It's wonderful to see you, Jessie said. You look really professional.

And you're exactly the same, I said on impulse.

She hugged me slowly; slung her arms around my middle, leaned her head against my chest and pressed me, probably as hard as she could. I smelt her hair, which had something of the sun-warmed street and the vertically slanting light in it, a hint of rain and the whole of late summer really. I smelt her skin, sweet and clean, untouched. Jessie was tiny in my arms, I hadn't held anyone so small in ages, and I suddenly realised that I'd missed her, that the life of titans at Rufus's side hadn't been perfect, and that I needed something small. Big things like Rufus or whole nations could be marvelled at, listened to or fought against, but they couldn't be loved. I remembered that Jessie had been the first girl who'd held my hand of her own accord, it was a sad memory and I was a sad figure in it. But I recognised myself in it. Now it seemed to me that I'd always felt different from the others in the office, though never admitted it. They were completely absorbed in the big picture, whilst I had needed something small. The smaller, the better, ideally as small as Jessie.

I pushed her a little away from me and pulled myself together.

I actually meant to be in Greenland by now, she said.

In Greenland, I said, that's far away.

You haven't been there either have you? she asked.

I shook my head. She started walking down Radetzkystrasse and I walked next to her.

Jessie, I said, I don't have much time. My lunch hour ends at one.

It's because of the silence, she said, also because of the cold. And most of all, because there are no colours there.

Don't you want to tell me what you're been up to in the last twelve years first, I asked.

Whatever, she said. I've got a book at home, with pictures of the arctic, I'll show you sometime. The sea is dark grey, it gleams and looks viscous. There are icebergs swimming in it, proper castles and palaces, mit towers and gables and balconies and battlements. The eskimo boats in front of them are tiny and colourful, like leaves in a moat. And the silence, do you know what the silence is like?

Total, I said.

Exactly, she said. Total silence.

She turned into the Vordere Zollamtsstrasse, running her hand over the metal railing on the three meter-high wall at the foot of which the Wien flowed on the other side. I knew what it looked like in full flood; it reached from wall to wall, flowed swiftly and looked like something the could have been called a canal. Now it was a shallow stream of water flowing over the knee-high steps of a cobbled gutter.

Jessie, I said carefully, I have to be back in half an hour.

So white and still, she said. Can't you imagine it, Cooper?

The name was like a landing strip for memories. Every time she used it, I felt the next squadron approaching. I thought a while.

Yes, I said, I can.

Good, she said. I just want to show you something. We're walking towards the U-Bahn station anyway.

We walked the next fifty paces in silence. Then she suddenly stopped, tugged a corner of my jacket and pulled me towards her.

Look, she said. Do you understand that?

She pointed down at the river. There was a swarm of black fish in it at the level of the third step underwater. Their heads were against the current, and they were so closely packed together that the water sloshed off their backs over of the sides of the gutter, flowing left and right along the concrete path. The wriggling of countless bodies, just short of leaping out of the water, looked like the trembling of a single large animal. They made up a huge mass of energy, ten metres long and three metres wide, probably weighing a few hundredweight.

Isn't that beautiful, Jessie said.

It's repulsive, I said.

What are they doing, Jessie asked.

I don't know, I said. Exploring, spawning. No idea.

We stood there, elbows propped on the railing. The swarm of fish didn't move, it simply stayed put.

They've been here for days, Jessie said.

You live nearby, then?

She didn't reply immediately. As she paused, I looked at her sideways. There were shadows on her cheeks, her cheekbones were prominent. She'd grown thin, not just lost puppy

fat. A thin whitish crust covered her lips, some kind of secretion, traces of saliva. There was a dark red scab bulging from the middle of her lower lip, a dried-up ridge.

Oh well, she said. Maybe you really can drop in some time.

She gave me the address, 61 Prater Strasse, close to Praterstern, and we carried on standing there for a moment. A ladybird landed on my elbow, one spot on each wing. I'd been told as a child that the number of spots on a ladybird told its age, but no-one had been able to explain why there were no one-year old ladybirds. I touched it lightly with my index finger so it would bring me luck; it slipped off my elbow and dropped into a clump of grass below the railing where it also lost its grip, tumbling onto the asphalt. It lay on its back paddling its legs, not managing to turn itself over. I turned away in disgust.

What do you want to do in Greenland anyway, I asked.

It'd be good for my eyes, she said, and my head.

She touched her eyelids, then her forehead.

It'd be very expensive too, I said. Do you need money?

I regretted the question immediately, but she didn't seem to notice.

I thought I had more than enough really, she said.

I realised that she was probably loaded. She'd certainly been working for Herbert all these years; I couldn't imagine what else she would have done.

Would you take me to Greenland with you? I asked.

Oh Cooper, she said. You don't really want to go at all. Don't treat me like a child.

She turned on her heel without casting another glance at the fish, and walked up the street in the direction we had come in. I let her go. I started counting the fish for fun, poking my index finger in the air, but I couldn't; the eye simply slid off the shining bodies. When I gave up and lifted my gaze, I saw Jessie standing a few metres away. She was watching me.

Come round tonight, she called to me.

Then she walked off, mingling with the people on the bridge.

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I'd changed a few things in the flat, and I was proud of them. I'd hammered a nail into the wall near the front door so I could hang my coat up when I came in. There was an electric kettle in the kitchen, and two cups on top of the refrigerator. I'd bought box of old books from a street stall at the Naschmarkt; they smelled musty, and were on completely unrelated subjects, but that didn't matter. I'd found it that reading aloud to Jessie sometimes calmed her down. It didn't matter what I read, as long as the words that came out of my mouth were exactly those on the page. She was a stickler for that, craning her neck constantly to follow

the lines in the book as I read. The exact correspondence between the written and spoken word seemed to give her something to hold onto while everything else around her, myself, the ceiling, the floor, her own body, the book itself and what I said was slipping and sliding around, changing from liquid to gas and back, leaving her tormented and alone.

I'd bought a pair of second-hand army boots for her, for the winter. She went to visit them in the hallway from time to time. There was also a roll-up camping mat from a sports shop. She'd never have let me into the flat with a proper mattress.

I found the most revolutionary of all the new things in a skip on the Stubenring. I pulled it out, heaved it onto my back and up the whole of the Praterstraße right up to her building. I pressed the doorbell until Jessie leaned out of the window of Room One above. .

Come down, I shouted. Help me carry it up.

Not on your life, she screamed. That's not coming up here.

Her voice reverberated down the lane, people stopped and craned their necks upwards like I was doing.

Please, I called, trying to keep my voice down. I swear this the last thing I'm bringing.

No, she screeched even louder. Take it away and don't ever come back yourself either. I don't EVER want to see you again!

It was getting dangerous. When Jessie took against something, she could cross her arms, lift her chin, fall backwards onto the tarmac and hit her head, too stubborn to catch

herself. She was still screaming, I saw her going wild with rage in the window. Above the roof, seagulls were circling in the blue sky as if the sea were nearby; they were just diving for rubbish in the street. I needed an idea, something quick, something amazing. As long as Jessie was still at the window, I had time. Then the Lord gave me inspiration.

It's old, it's dying!

I shouted so loud that she could hear me over the sound of her own screaming. She stopped for a moment.

I'll come down, she said.

The window slammed shut. The main door seemed to open the very next second. Jessie must have slid down the banisters. I smiled, but she looked serious. The table was old and heavy, soaked with water, nothing more than the essence of a table: four legs and a top.

Table, this is Jessie, I said. Jessie, this is table.

Hello, she breathed.

It would have been much easier to carry it up the stairs myself. Jessie was so little, and she insisted on walking behind, so I had to bend down low and knock my shins blue and black. But she helped me enthusiastically, panting as she told me to look out at every curve, not to crash into the banister. I let her have her way. We put the table next to the window in the kitchen. Jessie stroked it.

It's beautiful, she said tenderly. Where did you find it?

In the rubbish, I said. It looked so sad.

She looked at me, downcast.

Good that it's here now, she said.

I nodded.

Look what I bought for it, I said.

A small bag dangled from my left elbow. It contained two packets of boil-in-the-bag rice. She understood immediately. The table would be happy to have a meal eaten off it. That was its job. From then on, it got easier to feed Jessie, and when we had to flee the flat a few weeks later, the table was the only thing she said goodbye to.

She ran up to me when I came in the evening. I brought some coffee and had a couple of sugar sachets in my pocket that I'd smuggled out of the office kitchen. I also brought rice, always rice. She was used to eating rice. It was more of a ritual to her than a matter of nutrition. We cooked it twice as long as the instructions recommended, she cut the bag open, concentrated like a surgeon opening a stomach, and I tipped the lump out into the tin pot with a single shake. We sprinkled salt over it, and if I had a tomato with me, I'd squeeze it in my fist and dribble the juice over the rice. I was allowed to push the rest of the tomato into her mouth if I told her the story of the snake first. The snake that grew more and more colourful because of the things it ate, until it shimmered like a bird of paradise and the jungle all around it had turned black and white. Then I passed her the pocket mirror I used to snort coke off, so she could see her red cheeks. She sat down at the table, holding a spoon in each fist.

What's for dinner today, she asked.

It's not ready yet, I said. You don't need to sit down yet.

What are we having, she insisted.

Rice with Kant, I say.

Oh no, not Kant, she cried. Can't we have Nietzsche with it instead. We had Kant yesterday.

Exactly, I say. And there's still some Kant left. We have to use it up.

She groaned and let the spoons clatter onto the table as I went to fetch the book.

We ate out of the pot. I sat on the chair and Jessie stood next to me. The book lay open in front of me, a couple of rice grains dropped off the fork and landed between the lines now and then.

The major works of Kant, I read, are not only some of the richest, but also the most difficult texts in world literature.

Ah, she cried. That's not real Kant, it's just Kant flavouring!

Of course, I said. You can't have real Kant with rice, it's too difficult.

Than we could have had Nietzsche as well, she said through a full mouth.

It's also just the flavouring of Nietzsche that we have, I said.

I held the book up: A Condensed History of World Philosophy. She laughed so hard that half of what she was chewing fell out of her mouth. She laughed like this often while we ate, but what she swallowed was enough. It was her only meal of the day, but it was better than nothing. I was happy, and her colour really was starting to improve.

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