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sample translation

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original title	DIE STILLE IST EIN GERÄUSCH
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Girl Scout

Most of the Republika Srpska border is made of garbage, it seems the whole town of Stolac brings its waste here. I meet three oncoming cars in fifty kilometers. The village of Malineja is marked on the German Automobile Club map, but the reality is that it's completely wiped out. Nature is a little too unspoiled for me, and so I turn up the music in the car full blast to remind me that there's a Somewhere Else. Lisbon, for instance, where women like Maria Teresa Salqueiro sing with an angel's tongue about shadows, birds, and islands, while the love-struck stroll around, saying that the heat is "Nice weather." A near miss with a cow trotting downhill in my lane tells me a town is nearby.

Cl-lick: I roll up my window and use my elbow to lock all the doors automatically. More cows on the side of the road; a couple of young people, strays; construction material in sloppy stacks; a flat city without shade or any color to it. Tobacco leaves are drying out on ropes strung under some awnings. I stop in front of the next road-sign and leave the motor running to go and decipher the Cyrillic letters with the help of my dictionary. Contrary to all expectations "Ravno" is at hand.

Half an hour later Popovo Polje opens up, an elongated valley with a flat and yellow floor. Its length is spanned by a river, the paved road to Trebinje, and the interior Bosnian border. I stop doing my research into melons; even apples don't grow here. From this distance I can make out the single road that angles down to the valley and over the river; it's a narrow gravel road, slightly elevated like a dike.

I slowly roll along toward a blown-up bridge. A crane flies up from the rubble, with a shape like some kitchen utensil, and circles a few times as it screams at me. The looks of the temporary bridge do not inspire confidence, *donated by the Spanish Stabilization Force (SFOR)*, but I've no choice. I park after crossing to the other side and sit myself down on a concrete pillar. The silence is roaring in my ears, the river below me stinks. Now I know to keep a sharp eye out for yellow plastic cuttings and red coloring markers. I turn up some pieces of scrap on the roadside gravel from marking the mines. My dog doesn't believe it's in his own interest that he's not

allowed to swim. A hoopoe flies gently down into the bushes on the shoulder. All I know about hoopoes is that it brings its mate a pot of flowers: Whoop-dee-do! It has the air of a stray about it, just like me and the dog.

One hour has skipped by, ten kilometers of river have flown past, a couple of clouds moved on in the direction of the Adriatic. Otherwise nothing's moved, absolutely nothing. I'd rather not see if I've still got reception on my cell phone. Once again I have a pee right on the road, as a protest against my solitude. Now and then the wind in the bridge's metal rods simulates the noise of an oncoming car.

Ravno is quite well populated and offers the world's narrowest and steepest streets that you can still manage to drive on. With the wall of a house up against each side mirror I creep uphill, then downhill in reverse. I'm trying to get to Zavala, where you can find dairy products, but hardly any grain or vegetables, which is why people here live to be 110, 120 or 130 years old. Maybe it's also the result of the bad Dutch translation in my travel guide. Zavala has one of the biggest caves in the world as well, Vjetrenica, a wind grotto. It's been explored for twenty kilometers inside and is full of stalagmite sculptures. It breathes out warm air in the winter, cool air in the summer. I find nothing wrong with that. Besides the cave there's a cloister that rents rooms to travelers. The one bartender in the one café in Ravno laughed himself silly when I asked about a hotel.

The three books I would take into the wilderness with me: An atlas with detailed maps of the wilderness, then "Geotaxis for Beginners: Orientation through Gravity Made Easy," and "How to Stay in a Good Mood through all of Life's Situations." We creep along the mountain ridge between rocks and stunted trees, going in the direction that I'm guessing takes us to Zavala. The snout of the Opel dips into the potholes and pops up again on the other side. We'd go faster on foot, but you can't abandon a friend.

A black, massively Communist monument squats by the side of the road, big as a house. It's impossible to find out who it's supposed to represent because the face has been shot away. There's tape wrapped all around the base as a mine warning; it's been bleached white by the sun and rain. I can tell at a glance that the village has been thoroughly cleaned out; there's plastic tape between the houses going up the mountain

and red paint on all the walls. There is no cloister. I decide that Zavala is somewhere else.

The mine markers along the side of the road form an escort two hands' breadths away from the right lane. The rock face drops off the same distance away on the left.

Suddenly the roadway comes to an end, blown up, broken off, fallen into the valley. I turn off the motor, lower the back of my seat, and shut my eyes. I'll be able to turn the car around if I put the front wheels in the mined area and let the rear wheels hang out over the abyss. I lie there, dozing a little until my thoughts start to wander from one trivial thing to another and back. Has my prof read my master's thesis yet? Did I lock the door to the apartment? Will Poland join the EU in 2004? I start the car and put it into reverse.

I couldn't find the turn-off on the way down. The bushes make ugly squeaks as they try to sink their claws into the paint, as though they all want to come along for the ride. I manage four hairpin curves, then a pothole I thought I never would get out of. I put the parking brake on and shake the car to be sure it won't roll away, and I start walking on ahead.

The first ruins poke their heads out from under the luxurious vegetation. If they were part of Zavala, then they were from the Fourteenth Century. It was not the tooth of time that had chewed them up. I still haven't gotten my eating schedule figured out. My knees are shaking, and not just from the heat and strain. I walk through lots of patios while searching out grapes, figs, or kiwis, cut through houses, in through the door, out through the window, climb up crumbling steps, struggle ahead through the underbrush by backing up and protecting my face from being tickled by the tips of grasses that are almost as tall as I am.

The cave can't breathe at all: a curtain of climbing plants blocks the entrance. The guidebook contains photographs of illuminated stalagmites, boardwalks, and punts on black lakes. It all must all still be in there, in impenetrable blackness. Whatever you might find there after five years of war is something I don't want to know about. I settle down a respectful distance away, and I'm hardly sitting down when I'm unable to get up anymore. So this is Zavala, minus the cloister in the meantime. And minus

the people. Lizards, butterflies, birds, snakes, and grasshoppers are whispering, chirping, and rustling all around me; I'm covered all over with little twigs and grass seeds. Here shall I put down roots. At last, my metamorphosis into a bush.

When I wake up I feel squashed, as if I weren't lying on the ground but the ground were lying on me. The dog was watching me closely.

“Why,” I ask, “didn't you wake me up?”

Reassured by the tone of my voice he turns away and starts gnawing on a blade of grass. It's gotten late. There aren't any hotels before the Croatian border.

So I'll stay here. I climb down through the village into the valley. One house is inhabited; the family's repairing the roof. Without really understanding why, I sneak past them, slipping through the underbrush. I stumble across a cement driveway, the Opel can make it for at least these few meters. I go uphill, from patio to patio, still not satisfied: too much garbage here, too few grapes over there, a wasp's nest, or no view. I finally find the ideal spot. I'm persuaded by the fact that the patio roof is intact and by the square-shaped well going deep down into the mountain. The chain's rusty but doesn't break. I find a watering can that shakes as I lower it in; the water is clear and fresh. I water the dog and rig up a shower on the edge of the roof with the watering can, some iron hooks, and cord. I push the garbage off to the side, sweep the patio with a piece of timber, repair the legs on the wooden bench, and pad it with all the clothing in my rucksack. I arrange a few symbolic pieces of furniture: a broken footstool that now has a washbasin on it; a chair, and a pot with holes, tall grass, and cactus. Man is an odd creature, what with his nesting urge; even on the moon he'd try to make an imitation TV chair out of dust. I unpack my books and writing pads, try out my new shower, and wash my hair. Going through the house I turn up a soup kettle for eight people, fill it with wood from the burned-out attic, and light a fire. It burns like hell. The dog gets his supper. I'm happy as a kid who's just fixed up a tree house.

As I'm leaning on the railing having a cigarette and watching the sun as it sinks toward the mountain peaks, I'm thinking I might stay here a few days, relax, save money, live off the fruit I could find. The hammering of the renovating family

penetrates all the way to me up here. A shepherd down in the valley a kilometer away keeps me company; the muted tinkling of the bells on his animals, and his shouts, make echoes rise and fall on the slopes. I'd gone and found the garage he lived in on the main street. I was going after blankets and pillows, but the bed looked slept in and the sheets had a man's strong smell to them. I sneaked away with a racing heart.

To get the car and bring it here, I have to climb up the mountain again, drive around the valley back to Ravno, and look for the lower entrance to the village.

By the time I've parked the Opel in the driveway it's gotten cold and turned pitch black. Masses of stars are powdering the sky; the moon has a ragged right edge like a half-eaten fruit. I throw more wood on the fire, stretch out on the bench and ask myself whether I can now go to sleep. No sooner had I answered with a "Yes" than I hear the shepherd's voice again, loud and close by. It's not his sheep it's meant for. As I lean over the railing I can make out three men standing in the driveway exit. They've found the car in the bushes. The shepherd, the father of the family, and his eldest son. I huddle down in the corner. Their flashlights sweep along the slope, but the beams don't hit me. Then they shout again.

"Who are you? C'mon down here!"

I've no intention of going. I live here. When the shouting gets louder, I decide to answer.

"Ne!" I roar out. "Zasto?"

For a minute it's quiet. Maybe they hadn't figured on hearing a woman's voice. Or, as is often the case, the question "Why?" is not an easy one to answer. I don't have anything to counter the subsequent tidal wave of Croatian with.

"I understand nothing!" I shout in Polish.

The son remembers he can speak English.

"This is our village," he shouts. "We live here."

"I won't make anything kaputt," I shout back.

In spite of the incredible devastation we're all standing in the middle of, they don't seem to think my promise is funny. They threaten to get the police; the beams of their flashlights are frantically scouring the rubble.

"Who are you?" the shepherd bellows. "What are you doing here? How many are you?"

“Only a tourist,” I say. “Alone.”

I’m pleased how innocuous and forlorn that sounds.

“Don’t have many tourists coming here,” says a voice from down below, sounding unsure of itself.

I should think not, and a tickle in my throat makes me want to laugh. That my answer might have been idiotic, a real crappy one, occurs to me only when they’re traipsing down the driveway, muttering among themselves. My friendly “Laku noc!” gets no response.

I am uneasy, go and lie down; every sound in the valley has something to do with me. It bugs me for a while that I can’t sleep. But there’s actually no reason to go to sleep. The stars are multiplying as fast as a bacterial culture. The song of the cicadas fill the valley and seems to come from the stars, to be starlight itself; a song I’m hearing for the first time, in this absolute stillness. For a while I give myself over to the night.

The calm is brief. The shepherd begins shouting again, rhythmic calls that are answered a moment later from the far side of the valley. The second voice is soft, ten kilometers away for sure. It takes twenty minutes for a car to roll along the main road and stop in front of the shepherd’s garage. Images I can’t control flash through my head, images of men in a huddle, saying only a few words of agreement, images of raped women, of men destroyed by war who have now crossed over the line and decided to solve problems their own way. As they go on talking softly down below me I start stuffing my things into my rucksack, making an effort to keep my movements under control, not to panic, not to bump into anything, not to make a sound. The acoustics are just too good. When the shepherd’s voice starts talking into a phone, I realize he’s asking a friend on the other side of the plain to bring him a cell phone. Now, I’m thinking, they’ll call all their friends around here. I slip into my boots, sit down on my rucksack and strain to listen out into the night until I can’t hear anything at all.

The headlights of another car crawl down the mountain along the road where the Opel couldn’t make it. I lose my nerve. I jump off the patio with a bound, climb over the rubble, push through broken-down fences, run over patios, through what once were living rooms, gardens, sheds. Flights of stairs keep appearing, my rucksack

keeps getting in the way. Thorns tear at my arms. And that's the moment the question pops into my head: How do I know this village isn't mined, just because the one next door isn't? And why didn't those guys make a bee-line up to where I was? They'd have discovered me sooner or later.

Just when I get to the car I hear the second car's motor right near me, on the main road. I load dog and rucksack inside, get behind the wheel, lock the doors, click. Now I can zoom off, run right over anybody in my way. Then the second car comes to a stop behind me, blocking the driveway.

It's the cops. Whether that's cause for relief, I don't know, but if it weren't the cops it would have been game over. Absolutely over, right away. Yielding to an absurd impulse I push my seat back and pretend I'm asleep.

They hit the windshield with the palms of their hands. There are two of them, a little fat guy and a tall skinny one, and they both have rotten teeth. I'm to get out. Put down the window. I stubbornly shake my head and stare at their side arms. The dog sticks his nose into my hair from behind.

“Policaj! Policaj!”

They shine a light in my face, alternately hitting the insignia on their uniforms and the driver's window.

Finally I holler, “Znam! I know!” They scratch their foreheads and the corners of their mouths. We stare at one another through the glass; the little fat guy looks as if he's got to laugh. I open the window a centimeter and push out my papers. They walk around the car, check the license plates, then give the papers back and offer me a cigarette through the window. The thin guy says he's born in the same year as me. I don't believe him, he looks like he's in his late thirties. The three of us smoke, they're outside, I'm inside.

What I am doing here? Tourist, I say. No camping, they say. This is no camping, I say, this is a car. Hotel, they say. There is no hotel, I reply. They've got to admit I'm right. Engerpol, my mishmash of English, German, and Polish, works beautifully, and we negotiate what's to be done. They move a few steps away and take their time talking about me, with an occasional outburst of laughter.

Their suggestion: go to Ravno with them and spend the night in the car in front of the police station. I don't know if I can trust them, but I don't have another option so long as the car behind me is blocking the driveway. I ask that we take the road down the valley and over the river, not the one up the steep slope. They're pleased that I know my way around.

Their jeep doesn't take me over the paved road but along two tire tracks across the field. Bushes clutch the undersurface of the car; sparrow-sized locusts swarm up from the field and hit the windshield. I soon lose sight of the jeep and its cloud of dust but decide against taking off and being chased over the field of stubble. For five minutes I feel fabulous, as if I could never be in danger anywhere in the world. Fatso and Skinny are waiting for me at the next bend.

They point to a spot in front of the station and pilot me into the bushes. They are painfully embarrassed by this half-baked police action, but the Opel can't be hidden completely. Lying back in my seat is tolerable, if only the dog weren't so restless. Fatso or Skinny come once an hour and check with their flashlight to see if I'm still there.

"Sun, no sleep." Fatso wakes me up at five. I send him away; he promises coffee. I insist on being left in peace until six and roll over.

We have coffee on the patio of the police guard's bungalow while talking about the cost of a twelve-year-old VW Golf and the lack of security in the region. Fatso and Skinny grin at me as if they'd saved my life. I brush my teeth in the policemen's pissoir, no windows. I stand right close to the mirror so I don't have to look at the washable tile floor. I've read about all the torturing that went on in Ravno. My face in the fluorescent light looks like it could use a shave. As we're saying goodbye, Skinny shows me his police ID. We were not only born in the same year but born on the same day. I'm surprised and raise my head; we look each other in the face for a few seconds in a different way, as if we'd already met. I feel an urge to give him something, but I can't think of a thing.

Nice to be up so early; the air blowing in my face is cool, the landscape sparkling. It's just that my eyes keep closing while I'm at the wheel. I promise myself breakfast on the Adriatic to cheer me up.

How I'd love to tell that British newspaper lady from Sarajevo about my arrest. Every journalist who goes abroad has himself arrested, gets let out with the help of the Foreign Office, and afterward they all know that particular country like their own back yard.

Juices, honey, wine, pyramids of melons get a cold shower over their backs. Women picking things in the gardens stick their flower-printed rear ends up in the air like big colored balloons. Trains are rusting onto their tracks; dogs share the small shady spots. What does that tell us about a place, when the waifs and strays are in such a good mood?

The Adriatic is in the act of exchanging its black morning robe for a silver shirt of chain mail. The pines on the slopes have turned their faces away. The islands lie there like big animals asleep in the water. So here I am in the "Country of Feelings." I'd have thought up another advertising slogan: "Forget Italy!"

During breakfast I stretch out my legs under the woven table and watch the fishermen coming back from their work. Right off the bat you turn into a cat with no employment other than keeping your paws clean. I limit my glances seaward to the essentials so that I don't all at once transform my fatigue into a vacation and just keep sitting here for a week. Just one more coffee.

Just let your feet dangle into the salt water a little. My toes make sluggish movements in the water. Lovely to have legs, even if the fish aren't biting.

The sea is peaceful, lifts its back up at the horizon and allows some boats to make scratches on its anthracite-black skin. I think Dubrovnik is out of the question. Dubrovnik isn't in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

And I go and run for half a day through that white city, in a circumscribed pattern, like a figure on a chessboard, caged in by city walls blocking out the sea that's lolling around behind them and blowing its salty breath in through the embrasures. Marble,

everything's marble. I forget the sea, see cats in the corners, all black-white-red, bearing the colors of their own unfathomable state. Flinching whenever a football smacks against the wall.

Five hundred years ago the bricks on Dubrovnik's roofs were shaped by being placed across a man's thigh. Wherever a street replaces steps, you need a pile of boards to push wheelbarrows up them, all over the city. Enough boards to build a raft afterward so that the manual laborers, children, and cats can leave the city when the renovating's over. The incessant mixing, plastering, installing, pouring out, and filling up sound like insects; nobody's hammering, nobody's talking. The laundry snaps against the walls of the houses. I swing my arms as I walk along, not alternating them in the rhythm of my footsteps but moving them together, back and forth at the same time, like beating my wings.

Only the arrival of evening can lure people out onto the street; everybody saunters along, only the nuns are in a hurry. The wind smokes my cigarettes. I'm sitting in a corner of the city and also in a corner of Croatia as well; here the land is stretched thin, like chewing gum that's been pulled apart until it's about to snap. I'm sitting in a corner of the continent; that's how fast you can get to the end of the world. I see myself as a small plastic figure in the lower right-hand corner of a map of Europe, giving a little wave.

A whole bunch of questions keep me from my pizza. Is there a conscience around here somewhere, and if there is, then where has it been all this time? How can people be so friendly and make such an effort to understand a Pole speaking German when they think she's Russian? What about all those photographers? What's there to see except a city that wants to be left alone, to hide within itself inside a white clam shell? And where does a man exist when he's looking at something that's not himself?

This continent will know no peace once people start moving around in it. Homesickness would be nice if it proved there is a place you could call home. But homesickness doesn't ever show up. The only thing that does turn up is the feeling of wanting to get away, of pushing on. To somewhere else. That's not the same thing.

You can't stay here anyway, up in the clouds. What is there for manual laborers to do, the people who slowly, and never stopping, plug up the shell-holes in the house walls, in the pavement, in the roofs, until the last one's filled in, and then what? Do they move on to where there are more holes? As for myself, I can't stay anywhere, least of all with a person. Being alone is the best way to explain speechlessness. Last night was an attempt at passing the entrance exam for the Girl Scouts.

I make up my mind to go stand on the city walls and kiss the Adriatic goodbye: Do it yourself; the fact that you're nearby won't solve anybody's problems, even though it might occasionally look like it does.

That's enough. The dog thanks me for the pizza and sends his compliments to the chef. Flute music in empty streets is no reason to go crazy. For once I want to be able to look myself in the eye as I lift my head and leave these kinds of thoughts behind, with my eyes still veiled, then getting clearer, and finally able to make out the silhouettes of people with the light behind them.

The cats in the family I'm now lodging with are black, white, and red, and they're named Clinton, Hillary, and Monica. As I'm thinking about them I fall asleep on the living-room couch, and the dog, in all probability, is thinking about nothing else.

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