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Trössner, what are you doing? Do you think you're the one whose name we're always so keen to avoid, even in those unguarded moments when we speak it without actually referring to him? The one whose name we suppress because we're so deeply convinced of his non-existence? Even – well, especially – at moments like these, when people love to say that someone in your shoes will learn to pray?

He does rather look the part, Hartmut Trössner, currently pointing one long finger at the display on the ticket machine. There's a strong resemblance to the image of the white-bearded Lord, pointing down so energetically at Adam from his cloud; though when you look a little closer, everything about Adam is a little droopy, even the finger he's holding out to God. As though he's shrinking from his creator's touch. You remember, Trössner? In Rome you had to crane your neck to see it, and your father was reading about it to your mother from the guidebook. If there had been mobile phones back then, he would have remembered that one must always switch them off while inside. Simply out of respect for the man upstairs. But I digress.

Now he's pressing the screen. Pretty forcefully, in fact.

Why so forceful, Trössner? Are you trying to give life? Or maybe you think your fingertips might be too cold to create the necessary stimulus? Seems unlikely, given the season and the gorgeous weather, but the notion is in keeping with his temperament. It has a certain poetry.

Where are you going? asks the screen.

Berlin.

And when?

Now.

And why?

That's me asking. Emphatically. Particularly because, as far as I know, yesterday it wasn't even on the cards. A journey, a departure.

I don't get a response.

The transaction is being processed. Trössner is asked to insert his card into the slot and type in his PIN.

Crunch time! Will they have frozen his private current account? It's the ancient account – nostalgic is a better word – which, if I'm not mistaken, his father set up for him when he first started getting pocket money. Currently there should be a sum of money in it that Trössner considered a fortune at age fifteen and, post-thirty, started describing once again as pocket money.

He punches in the code. 6369. Born on the moon. An exceptionally lovely mnemonic.

A message promptly announces that everything has gone through. *Please remove your card.* Do I sense a weight being lifted? A ticket is printed out.

Tell me, Trössner, while we're on the subject, when was the first time you took the train? Is it forty years ago? Thereabouts, I'd say. Anybody peering inside your head would see the open carriages of the first Intercity generation. Yellow-orange walls, luggage racks and seats, reddish-brown noses, and the reserved signs behind scratched Plexiglas.

One might call it ghastly. Late Pop-Art on state-owned wheels. But I bet you liked it, Trössner. Admit it! You were young, the colours were young, it all went together marvellously – a fantastic start to a school trip. To Berlin, perhaps? Once upon a time they were subsidised by the government. Which, as it happens, brings me back to my question: why Berlin?

And again, no response.

Instead, the ticket is printed. Trössner takes it from the dispenser, where a light is flickering urgently. Back in his school-trip days, communicating like this with a machine was an as-yet unknown future, but today it already seems outdated. *One two three, at hasty pace, time is running.* But no, no nostalgia now. There's a journey to be made. Heaven knows why. And why Berlin, of all places!

You are going to tell me, aren't you, Trössner? Not keeping it a secret from me, eh?

And not so fast! I can barely keep up.

He's not alone up here on the platform. I hope that won't put a damper on his mood. After all those years being so ludicrously sociable, he's since become a dab hand at being alone, and he seems to treasure it. Of course, it was just a question of reviving an old skill. As an only child and the son of a businessman in a plush suburb without a kindergarten, he learned to be alone straight off the bat.

He even took a certain pleasure in the people around him growing more lively. That's what he told one of the therapists, in my presence. Around twelve or thirteen he went to this old-fashioned cinema at the train station, which in those days was still quietly expiring. A matinee. Four, maybe five other people in the theatre, unrecognisable in the darkness. He didn't care about the film; all that mattered to him was feeling like he was pretty much the only person there, or even the last person. When they came round asking if anybody wanted ice cream, it felt like a personal enquiry.

Ages ago, Trössner!

He merely nods, wedging his thumbs behind the carrying straps of his new rucksack and gazing down the track. I step aside. I don't want to ruin these precious moments for him.

Aha, he's muttering something. Sometimes people wish they could lip-read. I wish I couldn't. I can, though; I don't even need to look. Two syllables, each with a vowel, his lips first wide then round. Maybe A and O, then. Yeah. So what's that supposed to mean?

He really shouldn't take offence at me quoting from his childhood memories. All things considered, it wasn't that bad. His own words. Despite his father constantly brandishing the sword of Damocles over his only son's head, always on about inheriting the firm. In the end, nothing so terrible happened. Then.

Anyway, Trössner never wanted to be one of those people who has a tough time growing up, then uses it as an excuse for anything and everything. Yet it lingered, didn't it?

Oh, and the A, O? Arsehole. That's what he said. Definitely.

Trössner, why? What's so bad about musing on the old days a bit, on what's happened in the past? Why do we always have to fight about that? I mean, I steered clear of the minefield – it's not like I mentioned anything touchy. Who am I, anyway? All I did, very gingerly, was try and salvage a little of what's not completely lost. The way you wander around after a house fire, looking for things you can still use.

Oh no! Sorry, my mistake. Wrong simile. Okay, now I do deserve a good thump.

Trössner takes a step towards the edge of the platform as they make the announcement. The train will be arriving in five minutes, and is therefore on time. In half an hour he'll change trains, wait ten minutes, then be off like a shot towards the capital on the fast line from Paris to Moscow, arriving at ten something in the morning.

Assuming all goes well.

Trössner, please, step back from the platform edge. I can't see you in imminent danger. That's my Achilles heel. Thank you.

So, five minutes. Still time to turn back, you know. Not necessarily to that admittedly dreadful hotel. Come on, let's go somewhere else. The weather's fine, even rather lovely – this incredible summer is simply unending, and the day is still so young. Why don't we go on a little excursion, maybe even a short holiday? We've got the funds. The card worked, your old pocket-money account isn't frozen. Just think of the possibilities!

Let's set off nowhere in particular. Ride off into the sunset, as they say. And then – sorry to keep harping on this – then we'll come up with a plan. A positive plan, mind you. Let's think it over: no agenda, but in an optimistic frame of mind. I do have a suggestion or two. And yes, don't worry, quite different suggestions from the ones I've been hounding you with the last few weeks.

Again, those impeccably legible movements of the lips. A and O.

Trössner, for Christ's sake, I'm coming to the end of my rope here! Please: what do you want in Berlin? A school trip – nope! That was decades ago. Business – nope! Those days are gone.

What, then? What are you hiding from me? Or, more accurately: what is it you think you can hide from me?

But he doesn't say. He turns on his heel, walks along the platform edge and aims a kick at a pigeon, which doesn't give a shit. A middle-aged lady takes umbrage, although nobody was hurt. It doesn't look great, a grown man kicking out at birds like some snot-nosed little brat.

Luckily, the lady keeps her opinions to herself. Otherwise we might have had to explain that the pigeon-kicker is none other than Hartmut Trössner, in many ways a very special person, perhaps even one of the chosen few. A person who knows what it's like to be pointed at, much like the aforementioned Adam – albeit with different results, unfortunately. And if this Hartmut Trössner doesn't know how special he

is or what he's been chosen for, or who or what was pointing at him, then, well, come on, that doesn't change the fact that if pigeons get in his way, he –

Sorry, Trössner, did you say something? Don't think I quite caught that. Maybe you were explaining why we're going to Berlin, of all places.

Not for the sights, that's for sure. And hopefully not to wallow in nostalgia, to remember a time when Berlin was your own personal capital, when you had a suite at the offices of the Industry Association, meetings with senior management and working lunches with ministers. Or is it because everybody goes to Berlin when they don't know where else to go? You want to be yet another lemming bound for the big city, is that it?

Sorry. I didn't mean to talk like that.

Another announcement, after a hideous crackle: the train is arriving, please move back from the platform edge, blah blah blah. Trössner reacts obediently and takes a step back. As he does so, he says – quietly, so that only I can hear – Charlotte.

Okay. By now I know more than enough about his tendency to avoid certain topics. Or even to withhold things from me. Like right this very moment, for example. It's a simple move, but effective, I must admit.

It always works the same way. I ask him something – at breakfast, say. Quite harmless, pointedly friendly. So, what are we up to today, then? Meaning, how are we going to spend the day – ideally to some benefit, given that it's famously the first day of the rest of our life?

In response he flings down a word at my feet, one of a handful of codewords he has for that fateful day, the ninth of April, the day when – and this is a direct quote – he *lost everything*, everything he ever had or ever was. He does it all the time. Instead of replying to my constructive

suggestions, he comes out with a codeword for *losing everything*, and this time it's Charlotte.

I don't like telling people this, but at first it shut me up completely. I had to leave him in peace, much against my will. By now I've found ways of keeping the conversation going. I might show him one of his more recent days, for instance – still being friendly, of course. Maybe even just a few hours, words or gestures. Snapshots, if you will, from Trössner's life after the ninth of April, collected by yours truly. So that he can see I'm not his enemy, I'm his friend. More than that: I'm his bodyguard, armed with nothing but unshakeable optimism, the best weapon you can carry if faith and religious conviction aren't to hand.

So now, when he plays his ninth of April again, I counter with the twenty-fifth of August, the day before yesterday, Saturday. And I hand him the corresponding snapshot.

In it, Trössner is going on a nature walk. Back when he was a boy, there was apparently nothing there but fields. By now the company buildings behind him have receded beyond his field of vision. It's already warm, even though it's early. Everything around him has been affected by the drought: the corn barely reaches his chest, and it's as yellow as a field of stubble. There's a narrow, bumpy path with a central line of turf, equally parched, and tyre tracks left by some tractor either side. The worst of the potholes have been filled with stone chippings on Trössner's instructions. So he's walking, his newly acquired rucksack on his shoulders, heading to the place where it all burned down, the house, his house, the neighbouring buildings, and even the trees in the forest behind.

And what was he doing there, the day before yesterday? I could say, wallowing in his thoughts. But I don't want to judge. That's not my thing, or it shouldn't be. I'm only supposed to accompany and show. To advise, when the opportunity arises.

Bright and early that morning he'd ordered a taxi and agreed a flat fee with the driver for the cross-country route. There followed an unspectacular journey. They'd just passed the company when he told the driver to stop the car exactly where the path branched off from the country road, not far beyond the industrial estate. After a few hundred metres into the field, the company sank behind a gentle wave in the ground, making the three windmills on the small yellow knoll ahead seem to tower even more mightily than before. Reaching the patch of burned land, which was black and criss-crossed with tyre tracks, Trössner paused. He took the strange book out of his rucksack, opened it, removed the small Glock from its bed of velvet, held it aloft in the morning and checked to see whether it was loaded. It was, just as it had been from the beginning. If I'd had the requisite limb, I'd have knocked the thing out of his hand!

Suicide, then. Pulling the plug exactly where it had begun and ended on that ninth of April. Well, that's not unreasonable, even if the delay between stimulus and response, as it were, might seem strange. Straight away or not at all, that's standard procedure. To wait four and a half months, and then – ? Some might call that half-hearted. As though at first he hadn't the grit to make a grand exit, and later hadn't the grit to keep on living.

No, it's not my place to pass judgment! In any case, although someone who self-harms is considered nuts as far as psychologists are concerned, he's always justified. He can silence his critics, at least, assuming he's successful.

Still, there between the fields and the scene of the fire I had a job to do, which was this: to make sure the book of Trössner's life wasn't prematurely closed when the hero put a bullet in his head after chapter three of five. I couldn't bring in an expert on communicating with

suicides like you see in films, so I had to handle it myself. Perhaps, I thought, I shouldn't go barging in like a bull in a china shop; perhaps I should broach the subject with a few practical questions. And maybe a bit of irony will suck the drama out of the scene.

So I asked: Trössner, what's the plan? Head or chest?

He didn't like me going into detail, of course. But grand gestures are still gestures, and the body is responsible for them. So I ran through the options. First, in the head. That's manly, heroic, but not as foolproof as many people think. Unless you've got a mouthful of water when you put the barrel in – but then you make a terrible mess. Second, in the chest. That's more discreet, but there's an element about it of wanting to make your omelette without breaking any eggs. And it's more likely to draw out your suffering. Even if you barely miss the heart you'll choke on your own blood as it trickles into your lungs, and who wants that! The upshot? As usual, there are pros and cons for everything. In the end, it's a question of taste.

Trössner didn't dignify that with an answer. Instead he raised the Glock to his temple.

I thought: shit! I fucked it up. He'll pull that trigger and we're done for good.

Then he said he wanted to say one more thing. And he did, speaking very softly to himself, the gun held at his temple like a finger that helped him think. In primary school, he said, in that musty old building, all the girls had sat in the two rows on the right and all the boys in the two rows on the left. His seat was right beside the window, and what he remembered best were the tall trees outside the schoolyard, the way they rustled in the wind and dropped chestnuts in the autumn, which struck the ground and burst.

I wondered where all this was going.

At my first communion, he said, it was the same story. The boys, all in black suits with white shirts and bow-ties, were lined up in two rows in the schoolyard, while the girls, also in two rows, were in front of them, all clad in white dresses and with white garlands in their hair. How silly! It would have looked so much nicer if they'd walked in pairs, like little brides and grooms, arranged according to height – or, even better, who went best with whom. He'd have liked to be next to Marlene. That would have looked great: they both had dark blonde hair, grey eyes and fair skin.

Was that it?

No. As they traipsed out of the schoolyard, he broke out of the row of boys and stood next to the aforementioned Marlene. Without a word, the girl made space for him by her side. But at once the teacher came over and asked what he thought he was doing. And he, Hartmut Trössner, nine years old, could give no answer. She repeated her question, and when he remained mute she led him back to the row of boys. Then they all set off, Hartmut red-faced, not with shame but anger. Back then he thought she'd have let him be if only he'd answered. Or, better still, if he'd known the magic word.

So? Were those his last words? A bit enigmatic. *Rosebud*, Trössner-style? It just slipped out; instantly I was sorry, and I expected the shot that would hit me too.

Yet Trössner lowered the gun, with a look that might have been directed at the windmills or the site of the fire or me. Not that it mattered – the Glock was on the ground. I exhaled; rightly, as it turned out.

But I don't want to be a credit-hog. If my hero refrained from shooting himself that August morning, then my corny *Rosebud* joke was hardly the reason why. I suspect it was the Glock.

And I mean that quite seriously. If I enjoyed the cadence of our therapists, I'd say: the possession of a handgun functions both to stimulate and to neutralise the suicidal impulse. Put more simply, if you've got a Glock in your bag, you're less likely to take drastic action: you won't leap from the roof of some miserable hotel or plunder the medicine cupboards at the porter's lodge.

And who knows! If Trössner had gone out there without his pistol, there between the company and the burned-out ruins, maybe he'd have drowned himself in his basement, which was still full of water from when they put out the fire. Or he'd have swallowed as much black ash as it takes to die. But once you've got a gun in your hand, doesn't the world suddenly start brimming with possibilities again, even if it seemed empty before? Perhaps the small Glock is the real ticket for our trip to Berlin.

But I'm speculating. Back to the snapshot.

Trössner took a few steps, his shoulders slumped, and sat down on the edge of the blackened patch with his back to the ruins. It's a good thing nobody came by. Nobody could be allowed to see him like that, sitting on the ground beside a small black pistol in the dry grass.

It was a small win. Just because it had worked out this time, didn't mean it always would. So I said, Trössner! Throw that thing away. Or, better still, wipe off your fingerprints and bury it in the field. It won't hurt next year's crop of organic wheat.

What he actually did was to stand up, take a few steps away from the black patch and walk into the yellow field of stubble. The ground there was hard as stone. The small pistol would have to dig its own grave, I thought.

But Trössner had something else in mind. There was something lying there, well camouflaged in its light-brown cover. It must have been there since the ninth of April, since he jumped out of the window and

landed in the evidently soft wheat. The case was dusty and scratched, maybe by a harvester, but safe and sound inside were two objects: Trössner's smartphone on the right, and on the left the card for his private bank account.

I was so relieved I tried to say something about happy accidents, but I had been struck dumb.

Trössner, on the other hand, reacted with supreme nonchalance, as ever. He put the Glock in the book, the book in the rucksack, the smartphone in his trouser pocket and set off back towards the country road. It took us twenty minutes to reach the industrial estate and another fifteen to the electronics store, where he bought a charger – not with the card, to be on the safe side, but with his rapidly dwindling supply of cash. In the fast-food restaurant next door there was a table with a power socket. Trössner ordered a late breakfast, but didn't eat it; he was only waiting for the phone to react to him pressing the button with its usual melody.

And look, all of it was back!

I sat breathlessly beside him. There was the calendar, still jam-packed well into next year. The list of contacts, a comprehensive who's who of economics, politics and the media. Chat groups for the company, the Industry Association, his family, one just for him and Charlotte. All abandoned since the ninth of April, ditched.

And, of course, the Photos icon. I tried to warn him, but I was too late: Trössner had already touched it, and thousands of tiny photographs appeared, copied year after year from one device to the next, each one a small tile in a mosaic that formed no image. Touching the screen again he opened the last one, taken on 8 April: Charlotte on the balcony, reading a script, the windmills barely visible in the background. I still couldn't say a word.

Trössner opened a menu, tapped *Select all* and paused, his finger hovering over *Delete all*. I didn't know if I should encourage him or put him off. But then he tapped *Home*, the pictures disappeared, and he opened his contacts and made a short call, stepping into the carpark outside the fast-food place. Not ten minutes passed before an ancient but meticulously cared-for Benz appeared, softly coughing diesel. The driver stopped and rolled down the window.

Herr Trössner, he said, is that really you?

Morning, Herr Wiechmann, said Trössner. Will you take me on credit?

The driver nodded, his eyes as wide as though he'd seen the walking dead.

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