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sample translation

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In Stühlinger

I knew immediately that something was wrong when the man, who later passed himself off as a tanner by the name of Bartok, stepped into the compartment, he was unfeasibly fat, was sweating, didn't pay me the slightest attention, sat himself down in the middle of the three seats facing me, diagonally opposite, but only after pushing up the armrests as he was too wide for a single seat. The journey was taking me up from the south, I had just looked out the window shortly before Bartok's arrival, the Rhine was flowing close to the railway tracks, we must have just been approaching Coblenz, the water level was high, and clouds hanging so low that all the light was tinged with gray. I'd been sitting alone in the compartment for two hours. A while ago I'd got into the habit of boarding the rear of the train, entering the carriage with the old six-seater compartments, because that's the only place you can still open the window and stick your head out, breathe in some air and, when you're wearied, pull down the seats, joining in the middle to make one large bed you can lie down and sleep on.

This possibility had been snatched from me now. I was surprised that Bartok had come into my compartment, as I hadn't noticed the train being particularly full, surely there were other empty compartments in the carriage. When he came in I looked up, gave a curt nod, but as Bartok had eyes only for the row of three seats that he sank down on, he didn't notice my nod, and I croaked out a hello, but like any

word you speak after a long period of silence, this hello was inaudible and I repeated it. He didn't say anything.

I guessed he was in his late forties, and after his bulk had spread out in the narrow room and I'd resigned myself to sharing the air and restricted space with him, it was his hands that first attracted my attention. They are the only part of him, I thought, that's thin, they don't fit to him, how does such a giant come by hands like those? They were long and almost delicate, lacking the flesh that draped the rest of his body in abundance. His hands resting on his legs, Bartok's held his head tilted slightly forward, and he breathed in and out. That was the only thing he did: breathed. Slowly and regularly, not that you'd hear as the train swallowed up all softer sounds. Bartok was wearing a baseball cap, the peak of which obscured his upper face, so that his eyes were in shadow and I couldn't make out whether he was looking at me from under the peak, or down at the linoleum floor, or whether his eyes were simply closed.

While we were sitting quietly opposite one another I started to feel uncomfortable, threatened by his massive body, that exuded something, a kind of odour, not sweat though, something that sidled up to me closer and closer, and robbed me of the little remaining air. I could have got up, shouldered my rucksack and left the compartment. As the train was just pulling into Coblenz, I could have pretended I was getting out, yet I remained seated. Perhaps it was fear at the thought of having to push past that body, dominating half the space, that prevented me leaving the compartment, at being close to him, having to, God knows, look him in the eye, when he, interrupted in his regular intake of breath would glance up at me. Perhaps it was also quite the opposite, a kind of curiosity about this person who was different to the people I knew. In any event, I remained seated, quietly, at my place, and the train moved off again. What could possibly happen, I thought to myself. I only have to shout and someone would rush to help me in a flash. And besides — I looked around

the compartment — there were all sorts of weapons here. I could tear the faded curtain from the window and flick it in the face of my attacker. I could reach for the railway magazine hanging on a plastic rod by my head, roll it up and use it as a truncheon. I could prise the small ashtray from its fixture in the armrest and clasp the hard, sharp object in the hollow of my hand in a fight. But I looked out the window, and sank my thoughts into the Rhein; with the mass of water it was channelling, it seemed to flow twice as fast as usual, and the long, narrow-chested transport barges scarcely seemed to move from the spot.

— Are you travelling to Cologne?

I flinched, turned around, looked at him. He was sitting there, had taken his cap off, was turning it in his hands, and yet this wasn't a sign of embarrassment: his gaze was clear. Without lowering his lids he looked at me. I said no, I was travelling further. Where to, he asked, and I said, to Braunschweig. What was I going to do in Braunschweig, he asked, and he put it in a brusque way, almost impudent, direct, not polite, not as though he wanted to start a relaxed conversation with a stranger, no, rather as though he were prying for information, interrogating, as though I could tell him something of significance for him. I'm going to see my parents, I responded, annoyed at myself for saying so. He had bulldozed me. Already he was asking the next question, and I was answering. He asked where I came from, I said from Freiburg, he asked what I did there, I said, I'm a student, he asked, what subject, I said philology. All this within the briefest space of time, and I was sweating. His manner of questioning didn't allow me a moment's hesitation before responding, my only thought was tell him what he wants to know, tell him quickly, and then be still and look out the window. But he didn't stop. He said he used to live in Freiburg, too, lived, studied, where exactly did I stay. I said, in Stühlinger. Ah, he said, that's a coincidence, he had lived there too, and he wanted to know which street I lived in, and

that was the moment I noticed it was time to put up my defences, to stop the conversation, to politely but firmly silence the man, to make it clear in simple, short words that I wasn't interested in further conversation, and would prefer to spend my time quietly alone or with the book on my lap, but just at the moment that I wanted to start protecting myself and to stem the flow of his questions his eyes met mine, no, not his eyes, rather a kind of invisible shift of his whole body, a motionless shift, something that seemed to come from within, a moan, an warning moan, but silent, not visible, not audible, but I felt distinctly how it rose from him, drifted over to me, how the will to defend myself disintegrated, and I said softly, muted, subdued: Ferdinand-Weiss-Straße. No, he said, that's beyond coincidence, difficult to believe, here he was talking to a young man just past Coblenz who claimed to live in the same town, in the same neighbourhood, yes, in the very same street he used to live in years ago, and now, of course, I was going to tell that I lived in house number 24. I answered in the negative. Which number then? he asked. 5, I said and regretted having said it, 5, to him, a complete stranger, who had pressed his body into my compartment and begun interrogating me, but it was too late, I'd told him, and what bothered me most of all was that I'd told him the truth, it would have been easy to say 4 or 6 or 39, he couldn't have checked, but no, I said 5, I gave him the exact number of the house I lived in, and it unnerved me, almost before the word had left my mouth. How long had I been living in Freiburg, he asked, for four years, I said. How long was I spending in Braunschweig – two weeks. Wouldn't it be too boring at my parents' – no, I still had old school friends there. He continued questioning me, wanted to know what my relationship to my parents was like, whether we lived in town or in the country, whether we kept horses, what I proposed to do in the evenings, and which pubs were stayed open after two AM. I answered all his questions tersely, succinctly, meticulously. From the moment of his indescribable shift he had robbed me of my air

of defence. I was hardly breathing now. All I wanted to do was to leave the compartment, no, the train. He continued putting his questions to me for some minutes more and as I answered, almost like a good school-boy, I hoped, yes prayed fervently, that the train would presently draw into Bonn, for then I could say that I had to change trains in Bonn, to an Intercity Express, for example, that there was a direct connection to Braunschweig, I could take my rucksack from the luggage rack, and push past him in the hope that he wasn't well-versed with the rail timetable. But what, I thought, if he reaches above his head, if he reaches for the folded timetable on the lowest gilt latticed luggage shelf, holds it in front of his nose, subsequently looks at me, looks at me darkly, to say through clenched teeth: Why are you lying?

And then the questions stopped. And I couldn't have said how or why or when, and what the last question had been. He simply didn't ask anymore, and it felt like I had survived a tidal wave, wet certainly, exhausted, but still alive, still breathing, I shut my eyes briefly, and leaned my head against the headrest that stank of smoke. I wanted to leave, to be alone, yet I had the feeling that something could happen if I were to stand up now and walk past him. I wasn't thinking of violence, not that that he'd seize hold of me and throw me out the window, or wrap his delicate, thin fingers around my neck, no not that, I had a different picture in front of my eyes, I thought he might grab my arm, pull me down to him, and whisper something in my ear, something I wouldn't forget my whole life long. And so I stayed seated, and didn't move.

Simultaneously I started to sense that he wanted something from me. I knew immediately what it was that he wanted, and resisted, tried to free myself from his power, fixed my gaze outside where it was beginning to grow dark and it had started to rain, drops spattering the window pane. Some water flew through the leaking cracks of the window, onto my face. I was grateful for the coolness, hoped for fresh

ideas for the duel with Bartok. Who was silent. Who wanted me to start talking, who wanted to force me into it . We wrestled mutely. I, by looking out the window, he, by observing me from the corner of his eye. The tension increased, my breathing grew more laboured and louder, and started to drown the sounds of the train, and finally I gave up. I turned to him. Looked him in the face. Now that he knew he'd won, his face seemed almost soft, I even noticed laugh-lines as he nodded at me, giving me a final push to do what he wanted of me, and I did it. I asked him his name and whether he was travelling to Cologne and what he'd studied in Freiburg and whether his parents were still alive, and what his profession was. Something seemed to dissolve in him as I asked. He leant back, his presence retreated, he let some air out of his swollen body, he put his cap back on with the peak backwards so that his eyes were free, uncovered, and he first he laughed, and as he laughed I laughed with him, and then he said, he was glad that I took such an interest in him and his life and he was very willing to tell me everything I wanted to know, he rubbed his hands so saying, a sign of the warmth he was suddenly exuding, I even shifted somewhat closer to him, the raindrops squeezing through to the compartment starting to be unpleasant, brushed his knee by mistake, and looked into his eyes. These eyes, I told myself, are gentle, small, round, twinkling eyes, how could they belong to anyone wishing me ill? And I listened to him as he spoke of his life. Sure, he'd studied, he said, but dropped out early on and started an apprenticeship as a tanner. A profession that had almost died out nowadays. And he started to hold forth on the conserving of skin, of drying and freezing, of softening and washing, he described all the tools necessary for his craft. He talked of the two-handed scalpal. And the stretching of skin over the tanning horse and about how difficult it is to remove the skin without tearing holes in it. He spoke of calcium ashes and chrome tanning, but always abruptly, in short staccato sentences. He waxed most lyrical on brain tanning where one cooks the brain of the slaughtered

animal and spreads the ensuing mush – similar in appearance to lumpy egg-white – on the hide so that the hide gleans a fleeciness and sheds its fat, for the brain is at once a rich material, and a solvent.

He cut short his explanations of tanning almost brusquely, and turned to skins, he spoke of the suspending of the dead bodies upside down, fixed at the legs, of the round incision by the ankles, of the length-wise slice, and of the care that had to be taken when stripping the girth area because, as he said, if you weren't careful, the contents of the intestines could easily empty over the dead body and your own hands. And then he said that after these incisions you could pull the skin up almost with practically no difficulty or resistance, over the *upperbody*. And it was only when he pronounced this word that I realised all his talk was nothing but a horrible game. I saw behind the mask that he'd let slip a few minutes ago, how an evil gleaming pleasure settled in the laughlines at confusing me about his actual meaning, saw his immeasurable delight in the ambiguity of his words, saw how his fleshy body – with every apparently harmless word – started to take up more and more of the compartment again, I noticed how the mass of him pushed me back deeper into the corner by the window, and his teeth, yes, I did see this, hung down like single jagged points between his stretched lips, I noticed them for the first time, stumps but sharp. As he continued now to describe how easily the skin came away, I suddenly saw myself hanging upside down from a rail and could feel his hand, I felt it start to separate the skin from the flesh, from my flesh, how his hand, his delicate, flat hand slowly stroked beneath the skin, carefully started to pull away the skin, over the few sticking places, and how the blade of his knife severed the remains of thicker skin. And beyond this, I saw myself suddenly at my window in Stühlinger, looking down from the window at the street, and I saw Bartok down there, observing, the door to number 5 in his sights, and he was waiting for me to leave my room, waiting without

concealing the fact he was waiting, in tranquil, heavy certainty that I'd have to leave the front door some time. And that was the moment when there wasn't enough air in the compartment for me, the moment at which Bartok, the tanner, had breathed it in, sucked it away, and so as not to suffocate, I stood up. This happened as the train reached the station at Bonn, Bartok hesitated in his flow of narrative, I bent over him, and went into the offensive, reached above his baseball cap, propelled my escape, I didn't know where the sudden strength came from, but I reached over his head to the folded train schedule that was on the gilt-latticed of the lowest luggage shelf, glanced at it, told him I had to change, Bonn, my Intercity Express, direct to Braunschweig. He did nothing, however, as I fetched down my rucksack, did nothing, when in passing I stood for a brief moment between him and the seat, did nothing as I turned my back to him, and tore open the door, did nothing as I stepped into the aisle, and from there shot a brief look backwards, and saw him settling in by the window. I hurried along the aisle, and managed to leap out just in time, before the doors sprang shut, and the train started moving again. But as I stood there, on the platform, a little relieved, and as the train chugged past me, I looked, I confess out of curiosity, once more into the compartment where I'd sat, and with me Bartok. And as I looked in, he looked out, and our gaze met, his expression didn't change, but suddenly he raised his hand, his right hand, with the long tapered fingers, raised his hand to the window, and pressed it against the glass, pressed it next to his blurry face beneath the baseball cap, and I thought he was waving, he wants to give me a sign, a conciliatory sign, and I waved back, and yet his hand remained motionless, as though stuck to the window, he didn't shake it back and forth, he held it completely still, so that I, had I been standing closer, would have seen the flattened skin of the surface of his hand, no, that was no wave, no farewell gesture, it was a sign, a figure, a number.

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