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English sample translation

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The building stood at Frankfurt's western edge, near a river, the Nidda. The old man had never expected to inherit it, he'd been shocked when the news came to him. At first he'd found himself unable to remember its former owner. The building had a façade typical of the post-war years, soiled and inexpressive. Probably it hadn't seen a coat of paint since the late 50s. The exterior was plastered in a pattern of rough, worm-shaped indentations in which decades' worth of dirt had collected, forming black grooves. It was a corner lot, with a restaurant and a butcher's shop on the ground floor, and the street on which it stood, *Alt-Rödelheim*, was narrow and winding. During the day, a very loud streetcar bearing the inscription "23 – *Röderbergweg*" passed by every ten minutes. He liked the sound of it, he'd soon come to recognize and anticipate it, and on weekends and in the evenings the silence struck him as artificial.

He hadn't fully gotten used to his new circumstances, as often happens when people his age move, part of him was still living in Berlin. When he was tired, or had drunk a glass or two more than was right, it sometimes happened that he had difficulty finding his bed, or else he caught himself looking for doors at the wrong ends of rooms.

He hadn't wanted to take much with him when he moved. He'd left behind the wall unit and passed his books along to a neighbor who sold second-hand goods from a stand in a vacant lot behind the *Möckernbrücke* station in Kreuzberg. The man had shown him the long wooden crates in which all the things the dead left behind them was offered up for sale, their letters and family photographs and personal documents, and this had caused him gather up all the photos still in his possession and burn them.

All his new living room contained was a pair of armchairs, a table, and a cabinet with glass doors. The table was generally bare except for a colorless cloth and a box made of exotic wood that was meant for visitors and held ancient cigarettes. By the time he woke up on the evening of September 6th, it was already dark. He'd dozed off at the window and struck his ear against the pane. He started and rubbed the side of his face that had been chilled by the glass. Outside it was nighttime, but he hadn't witnessed the arrival of the darkness, nor of the rain.

The rain was utterly soundless.

For a moment he wasn't sure where he was. He'd had a bad dream. The windowpane in front of him was fogged over, and everything behind it appeared blurry and lacking in depth. He wiped off the glass with his shirtsleeve. Beneath him lay a thick curve of asphalt that was silently turning darker, it wound its way between

the buildings like an animal's back and then came to an end a few meters later where there was a driveway. He saw parked cars and, somewhat further away, the light of a streetlamp that gave the damp bits of pavement a faint, grainy sheen. The façade of the building across the way was just a few steps distant, it leaned out over the street, a wall of wet slate tiles, overlapping like huge reptilian scales.

He could no longer remember what his dream had been about, only that it had been cold. It had smelled of snow, and he'd seen the trunks of birches, he often saw birches these days; the trunks close together, with indentations where bullets had grazed them. For a few minutes he lay there listening to his own breath. It was a moonless night, already chilly. The restaurant owner's children were crying. There was still light coming from their windows. He could hear loud noises below, the courtyard he gazed down into more and more often these days and nights was like a mineshaft from which nothing escaped, not even a whisper.

He removed his binoculars from their place behind the radiator and pointed them in the direction of the building opposite.

He'd never had any major possessions, not even a car of his own. Of course his income now was considerably more than when he was younger, but the money didn't mean much to him. He'd sat for nights on end over the papers they'd given him, it was above all the insurance policies on the building that had worried him, he'd read through all the pertinent regulations, but in the end had to admit he didn't really understand it all. He didn't know what sorts of catastrophes the building was protected against, and so he was always watchful.

Above the parking lot was the apartment occupied by a couple named Dörr, the building's oldest tenants. They kept it overheated even in summer, the kitchen windows were dripping with condensation. The woman was seated at the table with her knitting, he could see part of her legs and knees and a plastic bowl filled with balls of wool. The Dörrs' son stood beside her at the stove, a pimply youth with a moustache. He was stirring a pot and tossed an empty can into the trash without looking.

The children's room, one floor up, was generally in disarray, it looked neglected, he thought. The doors of the wardrobe stood open, and a swinging lamp filled the room with dim light crosshatched with raffia fibers.

The children were girls, he couldn't understand why they didn't wear nightdresses. They were sitting on the upper bunk, a tangle of scrawny arms and legs clad in pajamas of washed-out terrycloth. At first glance, he couldn't tell whether the two were wrestling or trying to hide behind each other, then he saw that they were fighting. Their hair was disheveled, the older girl was pressing her shoulders into the

belly of the younger one, whose hands clawed at her sister's neck from behind. When the children saw someone was coming, they sprang apart and starting shrieking. A man's hand appeared in the picture, a fist clasped around a pair of toothbrushes. The bristle heads were sticking out on top. The restaurant owner was a strong, dark-haired man in his mid-fifties, with strikingly well-developed bags under his eyes. He pointed at various objects strewn about the room, shouting something, then he approached the children's bed and opened his belt buckle. The old man let his binoculars sink, his hands were trembling. He had coarse hands covered with age spots and white patches that were free of pigment, the veins protruded beneath his skin. His hands were gnarled, like those of a laborer, though he'd never performed any sort of physical labor, he'd had a desk job at the post office.

He could hear the hiss of leather sliding through belt loops. The younger of the two girls ventured a glance out the window, a glance that all at once became a gaze, a wary one, as if she'd spotted him. Then she turned and ran out the door, and someone shut off the light.

Later—how much later?—a distressingly loud noise made him jump. He'd been startled awake, he must have dozed off again. He didn't like the sound, and he was cold.

It's the insomnia, he thought, it's making me groggy. Absently he took his head from the windowpane and scratched his chin. His other hand, which had been lying in his lap, moved nervously across his legs, where it encountered a crumpled-up handkerchief and from there continued on its journey to his left knee. He ran his hand across the knee, then reached into the space between radiator and wall, just a few centimeters wide, and from there he let his fingers grope their way upward to the windowsill.

There was nothing there.

He wondered what time it could be. Those first dazed moments of awakening had cost him his sense of time, this confused him, he'd always been good at knowing exactly what time it was. Cautiously he turned around. The remains of his dinner still stood on the table, the slice of bread with liverwurst that had a bite missing, a pickle. There it was again, that strange sound, someone must have been banging downstairs on the front door of the hotel. He leaned forward a little to look down. The courtyard was cold and quiet. Across the way, everything was dark, the windows in the building's other wing were protected by brown shutters at night, they looked small and blind, like embrasures. To one side of the building, the butcher kept a vegetable garden, someone had covered it the day before with a tarpaulin from the delivery van, it had a pig printed on it. There was a fork sticking out of the animal's

back, and its body was divided into numbered sections, the parts that would be used after the animal was slaughtered, and between leg and belly there were large gaps as if joints were missing. On the surface of the tarp a film of water had collected, it flowed into the cracks of a crooked path made of stepping stones with chipped edges that led from the garden to a laundry drying rack and from there to the front door of the building. A length of rubber the children played with was dangling from a pole, beneath it stood a metal bowl with a concave sieve sticking out of it, little balls with bite marks, spade handles.

The hotel belonged to the restaurant, it was a single corridor with five or six rooms, most of which faced the property next door. The corridor was connected to the main staircase by a fire door that was never used. He almost never heard any of the hotel guests, though two of the rooms shared walls with his apartment, the bedroom wall and the one in the kitchen.

The rain had increased in intensity, it was falling in fat, diagonal strokes. It hadn't rained for quite some time. The summer had been warm and humid, the sky almost invariably a hazy, blurred light blue. A highly rarefied layer of clouds had hovered for weeks without precipitation, but now the water was dripping from the downspouts of the gutters outside and collecting in the drains. Concrete drainage chutes cut the courtyard into three segments and met in a depression at its center, an ancient point of access to the sewers. A foul-smelling grate clogged with lime and threads of insulation material was suspended above it; over time, its bars had broken off and then been fused back together with rust, brown and cracking. It stank of filth for days on end whenever a heavy rain submerged the courtyard.

The old man tugged his vest down over his hips. The rattling downstairs continued, it was a disconcerting, urgent sound, and now it was compounded by knocking. He looked at his legs. They were thick where they shouldn't be, not where the muscles belonged, and this made them look unnaturally straight and also limply flexible, like the limbs of stuffed animals.

Somewhere outside a clock struck the hour. He pulled himself upright. Standing up after sitting some length of time always made him a bit woozy, and for a moment he felt as if he were nothing more than this pair of legs. He waited for the dizziness to subside, then took up his crutches, gray poles tipped with a trio of rubber feet. He tapped his way forward, as he always did when he was getting started, or when it was slippery, or when he felt unsure. Supporting himself on the right, he pushed his foot forward, followed by the left-hand crutch, until legs and crutches stood in mutual opposition like four separate limbs, like this he traversed the floorboards all the way to the kitchen.

The corridor looked dark and as narrow as a ditch. It had been painted a color that would appear to have adorned the walls here since time immemorial, a drab yellow or green smeared on shreds of wallpaper that were still clinging to the walls only because of the paint. There was a damp, metallic smell. The rattling of the door could now be heard only faintly. At the entrance to the kitchen he stopped short. His kitchen was small, a room whose walls were innocent of tiles, and with a top-hung window in a niche between two sloping walls. When he had gone all the way in, he filled the space almost entirely and could turn in different directions only by means of cautious quarter-turns, to the stove, the cupboard, the table. He switched on the light, moved forward a few centimeters and tugged on the drawer pull beneath the tabletop. A drawer smelling a bit severely of grease and lined with paper came into view, a jumble of pencil stubs, creased trading stamps, old ball-point pens, corks and red and green rubber bands. Amidst this chaos lay his tenants' key rings, means of access to the Dörrs' apartment, garage and basement, labeled and held together with a loop of tape, a ring attached to a fob of brown leather that the restaurant owner had recently deposited with him, along with one more set of keys, to the front and rear entrances to the butcher shop. The butcher had bought the rear of the building from him right when he moved in and then torn it down, he'd built himself a new house to live in, a low, ugly building with a sauna in the basement. All the building keys the old man owned were tied together with a cord into one big clanking unified bundle except for a single one that he had never used, a brassy one. He fished it out now and put it in the back pocket of his trousers.

Someone ought to wake up, he thought. The restaurant people ought to wake up. Probably they were too tired, they were always woken early in the morning by the loud machines and the shouts of the construction workers outside. Their bedroom was in the front wing of the building, now the center of a construction site where, for days on end, chunks of old sidewalks had been knocked out and piled onto trucks from six-thirty in the morning until three in the afternoon, stacked in carefully marked rows like bones at an archeological dig. Insufficient sleep was like a blanket that was either too short or too thin, you could only tug at it endlessly in a state of restlessness and watching. Every disturbing sound that did not signal acute danger would be drawn into your dream in an uneasy shifting, it was a cold sort of sleep, you never really warmed up under the covers and invariably awoke shivering. He imagined the two of them, the restaurant owner and his wife, pale, hung over and thirsty, pulling the covers up over their faces to make the sound of the knocking go away.

It's no different with me, he thought, it was the first time this connection had occurred to him. I'm always shivering, and when I sleep it's the same sort of dilute,

miserable sleep I used to have as a soldier, except that now I'm never tired, at least not when I try to shut my eyes. Not ever.

He turned to face the niche behind the kitchen door, where his crutches stood propped against the lid of the garbage can. One of them slid to the side and landed on a pile of old newspapers. He leaned forward to pick it up again and found himself gazing into the face of Elvis Presley, it was a picture taken just before his death, a close-up. The photo showed the droplets of sweat on his neck, the shadows beneath his eyes and each strand of his hair, which was illuminated from behind by the stage lights, turning it a strange, bleached-out gray.

The stairs were dark. The hall smelled of cleaning fluids. The rubber feet of his crutches always stuck to the black stone of the floor; with every step, there was a smacking sound as he lifted them up. The old man put a hand on the light switch. Behind him, he felt the draft from his living room window, which was still open, then heard it slam shut along with the door, and at almost exactly the same moment a basement lock snapped shut somewhere beneath him, in the building's guts. He leaned against the wall, pressing his head against its cold surface. Then something occurred to him. He felt in the front pocket of his trousers for his key ring, but even as he was doing so, he already knew it was there, it had been hanging, as always, on its hook above the stove next to the pot holders, he'd grabbed it with the same familiar gesture as always before he left the kitchen. Recently he'd developed a petty habit of monitoring the location of his keys and identity papers as well as checking that the curtains were drawn and the tablecloths lying smooth on their tables, and standing now against the wall, breathless and somewhat discombobulated, he had the impression that by rushing headlong out of his apartment like that, he had stepped out of this habit as if out of a picture frame. When he was younger, he'd always been absentminded and forgetful, he remembered this well. It wasn't often he thought of it.

The metal fire door was right next to the head of the stairs. He walked the few steps over to the railing, rested his crutches against it and took out his keys. The light from the stairwell reflected in the door's enamel surface blinded him. The door was painted white, even the handle and the lock that was recessed behind a plastic cover. He rattled the handle and tried to push the cover aside, but, oddly, it was fixed in place, as though the paint had fused it to the door's surface. He used the edge of his key to cut a slit around the cover and lifted it away, tearing the paint.

The key fit. He pushed open the door and at once drew back at the rush of stuffy, foul-smelling air. The coughing fit that overcame him then, racking his upper body, almost made him trip over the metal threshold that divided one hallway from the other. Cursing under his breath, he gripped the doorframe to steady himself and

then crossed over into the hotel corridor. The hall was narrow and low, it smelled of nicotine. Along one side of the hall were the doors to the guest rooms, on the other the sill of the radiator cover which held decorative ceramic jugs and tankards and a few empty brochure racks provided by the local tourism office. He couldn't remember when he'd last been here, it must have been quite some time ago. At the end of the corridor a brief flight of stairs led downward. When he'd reached it, he paused. His crutches couldn't be used on the stairs, so he had to fasten them together with the strap attached to one of the grips to hang them over his shoulder. Then, he thought, he'd hold on to the railings with both hands to ease his legs carefully down the stairs one step at a time. But now he realized that the rattling had stopped and that there were no more sounds of knocking anywhere in the building, and for a moment he just stood there as if stunned by this awareness and uncertain which way to go. He yawned, feeling the strength drain from his limbs. He was starting to feel cold again. Someone in the building flushed a toilet, and a car's tires off in the distance squealed.

I should have gone to bed, the old man thought, rather than stumbling around in the middle of the night, I'm an old, bull-headed idiot, I'm so exhausted. Maybe for once I'd have been able to get a good night's sleep.

It was a moment before he saw the stranger. Standing on the second step, lost in thought and feeling a bit annoyed with himself, he peered distractedly down to where the end of the staircase faded into the darkness of a little entry hall. A few patches of light from the courtyard came in through the door. A metal bucket stood against the wall, a scrub brush beside it. A washrag had been laid over the top of the bucket and had dried there as it hung over the edge, then someone had taken it off, and now it lay upside-down on the doormat, senselessly mimicking the shape of the bucket's lip. He saw the tips of two shoes and a knee covered with gray flannel, and only then did he perceive the rest, the entire man, sitting in the dark against the wall with his legs drawn up, apparently unconscious or asleep.

The headlights of a car backing out of a parking space in the courtyard swept the door and lit up the entry hall, this confused him. He tried to understand what was happening, but could not quite manage this, not as quickly as needed. He knew that the situation as a whole would now progress without his involvement, he was just standing there in the middle of it all, helpless, on someone else's staircase. He felt a brief moment of rising panic until he realized there was no connection between the figure in the hotel entryway and the flash of light. Presumably it was the butcher, who made the drive to the wholesale meat market several nights a week. Against the rear wall of the new building, he remembered, there was a pergola that bordered the courtyard on its southern edge, and a climbing plant had grown up it. So it was

definitely the butcher's headlights shining into the entrance hall, one of them was clear and bright, the other, partially screened by the vine's leaves, dim and blurred. He saw the outlines of a fire extinguisher as the beam of light moved slowly through the room, and two glittering dots, eyes. I locked myself in, the stranger called to him.

He had a loud, booming voice. He dropped his knees apart, and the old man saw something shiny catch the light, something dangling from a ring and chain that the other man was twirling around one of his fingers in a circular motion. He felt his heart beat louder as the chain caught the light, recalling the fascination that circular motion had exerted over him as a child, the moment when an object, increasing in speed, appeared gradually to vanish, although in truth it was just that his eyes could no longer keep up with its motion. Then the delivery van turned the corner, a stack of empty meat trays clattered across its cargo bay, and the insistent droning of the motor, revved and then thrust into a higher gear, echoed on one of the wet, empty streets beyond the row of buildings. It was a sound that—for reasons he could not explain—he always feared for.

The entrance hall was once more shrouded in darkness except for a bright cone of light near the doormat, and the railing curving down beneath his hand like a steep roadway faded to black a few meters below. He wondered why the stranger hadn't called for help right from the beginning, such a loud voice would have easily been heard once it was raised, he wouldn't have had to break open the lock. There was something typical about this, he thought, among the young people he often saw. He asked himself what it was, perhaps a certain obsession with particular ways of dealing with objects in situations involving other persons.

Can you hear me, the stranger called to him, I can't get out. There was an edge of panic in his voice, just the slightest trembling, an ambiguity of pitch, but the old man was seized with indecision, he was no longer certain whether he hadn't, after all, been so lost in thought for one brief moment that he hadn't heard what the man had said. The stranger held up his key ring, the key had snapped off at the shank. He leapt to his feet and switched on the light. A windowless hotel lobby with a reception desk came into view, on a dusty glass plate behind the counter stood a handbell and an empty key box with a home-made look to it. You should do something about the lock, the man went on, as you can see it's stuck. He came up the stairs, taking two steps at once. Directly beneath the old man he stopped, and the two of them looked at one another. The old man was frightened, but didn't know why. The stranger had long, powerful arms that made his suit jacket appear somewhat too short. The jacket was hanging open, revealing a shirt of a thin white material, and between skin and cloth one could see the hairs on his chest like small protruding bits

of shadow. Oh, I'm sorry, he said, it seemed only now to occur to him that the man he was speaking to was not a hotel employee. I must have woken you, but I've got to get back into the courtyard, I'm not finished unloading.

There's a second entrance, the old man said quietly.

His head bowed in concentration, he moved slowly back to the landing, brushing against the other man's body as he did so. It seemed to him that a sort of dampness emanated from the other's person, he couldn't tell whether it was perspiration or rain, but he could sense a cooling of the air close to him, and caught the unctuous scent of wet wool. The hem of his pants had slid up above his right ankle, revealing a strange elongated welt. Wait a moment, the stranger said, I'll hold the door open for you.

He squeezed carefully past and hurried on a few steps ahead. Then he realized that it would take a few minutes before the old man had reached the end of the corridor, and he remained standing there a moment in indecision, until he remembered the room he'd rented. It really did look as though it only then occurred to him. He scanned the row of doors, went over to one halfway down the corridor, placed one hand on the handle and disappeared inside. It hadn't been locked. The old man stopped. All was still now in the building, the sort of stillness found in cities only in the early morning hours, when the streets are completely empty and most people are still asleep. It was the sort of stillness in which you could feel the absence of sound in all the lifeless things that make up a city, the stillness of mortar, of brick walls and streetcar tracks and metal casings, the stillness of wood and cut stone. It was quite different from in the countryside, where nights are not perceptibly more quiet than days, and this he loved. In the early morning hours, a person, waking, stood between motionless things, in the great labyrinth of a city without its population, and there was no question but that the wind and light and dampness were descending upon it with no significance at all.

For a while he listened only to the soles of his shoes scuffing along and the gravelly sound the crutches made under his armpits when he lessened the pressure on them to lift them up and place them in another spot a little further off. Then he heard the low sound of something being dragged. It sounded as if heavy boxes or crates were being pulled out from beneath a bed and heaved onto a raised surface. He reached the middle of the hall. The stranger appeared in the doorway, gave a weak smile and pulled the door shut behind him. There had been a brief glimpse of the room, a narrow rectangle, light brown wallpaper with stalks glued onto it, filaments of straw or at least something imitating their look, and a thin-walled wardrobe that looked flimsy, more like a cardboard carton, but no crates, he must have imagined

hearing crates. They did not speak. The stranger slipped through the exit and held the steel door open for him. He looked away as he clambered over the threshold. They walked the few remaining steps to his apartment door in silence, and it occurred to him that the man was breathing quickly although he hadn't seen him running or jumping. When they arrived, he pointed out the second flight of stairs behind which was the second exit, which was usually unlocked. They parted without a word.

The old man knew that in a few hours he would be able to see the dawn arriving through the window above the stairs. Sometimes he would stand here at night when he couldn't sleep. It wasn't yet light that shone in through the window at such times, but a more intense brightness radiated from the outlines of things outside just as the incipient dawn was floating its questioning, insistent dark blue in the air, while inside the building it would remain night for quite some time. He found himself yearning for the brightness of dawn, he would return here in time to see it, he resolved, and would gaze out this small window through which one could look out as if into another time. Whether future or past was of no importance.

He closed the apartment door, gripping the key in his fist, and leaned against the wall. His sciatic nerve twitched. Just keep standing here, he thought, press your legs into the carpet. He had the feeling he was offering his body immobility like the sort of swap in which one keeps a sharp and steady eye on the other person and resolves to do nothing wrong so as not to endanger the transaction. But it wasn't possible not to move at all, there was always a muscle stirring somewhere or other. He fought back a yawn, and all at once the pain struck him. It felt as if a very large surface were all at once exploding into flame. Not so long before, he'd seen a fire on an oil platform in the Atlantic, the flames had covered half a square kilometer of the water's surface in a split second, topping the waves with a gleaming, wind-swept fur. He touched his face, it was drenched with sweat. He smeared the moisture across his cheeks and felt the salt slip into the little crevices in his lips. One of his crutches fell onto his back, he pushed it aside and crawled a bit farther across the carpet.

He had a good memory. Not for names, for faces, he could memorize a person's features like written characters. He knew that he had seen the face of the man in the hall somewhere before, it hadn't been long ago, it must have been yesterday. Or the day before? No, it was yesterday. He felt warm and agitated, he tried to remember the previous day, staring through the stillness and the dust he'd stirred up just above floor level at a point in space beyond the wall, beyond his bedroom door, but it didn't help. He had seen the man, that was all he could remember, and it couldn't have been from close up because of the eyes, he would definitely have remembered them. Standing close to him on the stairs, he'd been able

to notice that the man had brown flecks in his eyes. Blue eyes, and the spots in them had looked like drops of liquid that had gotten there accidentally and then been fixed in place, as if they might hinder his vision, but he knew that was an illusion. In reality it was only the observer who was distracted by such eyes, they confused the viewer and caused him to overlook other things.

He was now lying on his chest flat on the rug as if on a raft, there was still a meter and a half separating him from his bedroom. He decided to try experimentally moving himself forward like a rower by gripping the edges of the rug and pulling them towards him. If I can shimmy myself forward to the bedroom door, he thought, then from there I might be able to reach the edge of the bed with my arms. He tried to keep his torso stiff and move only his hands and upper arms.

Ten minutes later he lay at the threshold to the bedroom with his head on the wooden floor planks, smelling the dust and the old gray paint and something astringent. He remembered that a few days ago he hadn't made it to the toilet in time. He wrapped his hands around the bedpost and pulled, but the front of his waistband was caught on the threshold and the back of it pressed painfully into his lumbar vertebrae. He let go of the bedpost, opened the button of his trousers, grabbed the front of them and pushed it over the ledge. In front of the door of his apartment, footsteps could be heard, starting and stopping, accompanied by a gravelly sound as if the stranger were dragging something behind him that was too heavy to lift. He waited until the sounds diminished and then tried once more to hoist his body across the threshold, and this time he succeeded. He reached the bedframe and pulled himself up.

He had resolved to be looking up at the sky when he died.

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