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author Inka Parei
title THE COOLING STATION
original title DIE KÄLTEZENTRALE
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English sample translation

translated by Katy Derbyshire
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contact Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

www.schoeffling.de

We called the room the cooling station. It was large – six by four metres. The only windows were outside in the corridor, countless small squares across every storey. They were always grubby, as I remember. The haze from the adjacent heating and power station hung in the sky above us on two days out of three. No one could possibly have kept the windows clean.

The head of our department often stopped at the windowpanes when he came up the stairs in the morning. I couldn't see the hall behind the glass door from my desk, but when I got up on the early shift to take the shifts book out of the little cupboard above the wash basin and make out the previous shift's measurement entries, or when I hadn't eaten breakfast at home and headed for my locker at quarter to seven to fetch my can of coffee and then make straight for the fridge, I always noticed Buchwald.

I can see him now in my mind's eye, pausing for a moment, looking out through the dirt. Now and then he raised his hand and wiped a spot away with the tip of one finger. Disgusted, disconcerted.

What was he thinking, in moments like that, and what was he thinking that morning in May? Did he notice an unfamiliar truck lurching up the ramp, not even loaded?

I've got twelve hours left to understand everything I've been through over the past few days, to link up the pictures I've gathered with other images, from deeper layers of memory. To draw the right conclusions.

It's the moment I've been working towards, but I imagined it differently. I pictured myself sitting in the room I rented in Berlin a week ago, in the blue seat with the view of a crossroads in the Wedding district. I wanted to sort through all the information in peace there, re-ordering it and thinking, thinking over and over again, about a night twenty years ago.

At some point I'd have had an answer, and I'd have called Martha. She wouldn't have said anything or expected anything. In a neutral voice, I'd have informed her of what I'd found out. Her breath escaping at the other end of the line would have made me feel the tension she's been under over the past few days. Her voice would have

grown gentle, like it hasn't been for a long time now. She'd have asked me how I was feeling, and then, almost in the same breath, how the last few years had been. We'd have laughed because there was suddenly so much to tell, astounded at how many little things make up the world, and we'd have wondered how we could have stood to leave all the tiny things that make people happy out of our lives for so long.

But that's not how it is, and I'll just have to come to terms with that. I'm stranded.

A strange apartment, a large room, high ceilings. I see a wall on my left, painted blue. Trophies, photos, a framed newspaper clipping. Yellowed stucco. Six windows – it's almost a hall. It's dark. Lots of beds, with plants in front of them. I can't make out much but there are lots of people here. Coughing. Rustling. Someone retching. Wood creaking. A long, stiff figure walking out. Male scents.

I have to get out of this place, as fast as I can. And before that I have to find my belongings.

I hate waking up in strange places. You have to assure yourself piece by piece of your own body, over and over, and this time it's been particularly difficult. My eyelids feel sticky, there are stabs in my lung as I breathe. I felt nervously along my body – I'm still wearing my trousers and my watch but not my T-shirt, they took it off me and bandaged my shoulder up with something. I feel panic rising, a dull pain in my head.

I was lying in another room before I came into this one. It was small and narrow, with two beds one behind another. A woman, very tall and very fat, her hair dyed blonde, brought me soup and tried to take my shoes off. So you've been here in the city for a week – she said – We think you've hardly slept for about half that time. To be honest, when we first saw you we wondered how long a person can actually go without rest.

I remember a man in a waistcoat as well, with a tiny ponytail, who asked me questions in a big kitchen, that must have been right at the beginning. There was a cooker in the middle of the room, like in a restaurant; along the walls was cooking equipment on open shelves.

Do you know how old you are?

Forty-one.

Where were you born?

In Halle.

Do you have an ID card?

Yes.

Why haven't you got it on you? Have you lost it?

It's in my room.

Where is that, your room?

In Wedding.

Where exactly in Wedding? That's where we are now. Somewhere near here?

I don't know.

What's your mother's name?

Do I have to tell you that?

No. We just want to know if you've got your bearings. Have you any idea how you came to us? What month it is?

I couldn't answer. I knew it all really, but that knowledge wasn't within my reach, the right words were washed away by a fear I'd never felt before, that had spread out within me like a fluid.

Did I have a clear goal, a precise task for myself, when I came to this city? I thought so – perhaps that was why I failed to achieve it. I had seven days' time.

Seven long days.

I have to let the thought come now, give it space. That's better than fighting off the desperation, which only stays all the more stubborn and makes me tired. The next thing would be the burning in my eyes, the cool spot at my temples. A sense of apathy flows into my head from the temples, and that's dangerous.

A race against time. Like in a movie. There's a task, the hero has to rescue someone, breaking his way through the crowds to a train, to a bank or a telephone. He might just make it, if only there weren't so many adversities in his way. Little things that put everything at risk. The briefcase on the ground. The queue at the counter. The car blocking the road. It's actually too late but his desperation awakens special

reserves. In the background: an hourglass or a time bomb.

I have to find a man I haven't seen for twenty years, in a city with more than three million inhabitants. All I know is his name, and nothing else.

For a long time I thought I could make it without him. I hadn't even known he still existed.

I had a piece of paper with me, listing the names of my workmates from back then. I was convinced they'd help me. We knew each other, after all. No one can resist talking about the old days.

The night shift in Martha's hospital ends at six tomorrow morning. Breakfast is at seven, and the doctors start their rounds an hour later. I have to get results by then, or the probability of her surviving the next five years will fall from eighty to twenty percent. Eighty's a good number, an option worth fighting for.

I close my eyes and see my face, the swollen edge between my eyelid and eyeball, lit up like a glowing wire. When was that? When did I last look in the mirror?

Another place, not very far away, not long ago. It's dark but for a dim red light, wooden planks on the walls like in a shed. A water pipe that I'm looking at, while a fist grabs me by the collar from behind, pressing the buttons of a shirt against my throat, or something else cold, hard, metallic. A soiled toilet bowl that I approach, slipping on my knees, pushed from behind. The bowl is coated in traces of a neon green liquid, with pale yellow traces of piss, with obscene black and brown patches, I see it from the side, see the base fastened onto grey boards with blackish screws, coming closer and closer like the toenails of some evil creature, and I cry out, an ugly, shrill howl that won't help me.

Night. A large shopping mall with a car park outside. I watch it, from the distance, from a wide angle as if it had nothing to do with me. Extended, painted white, built against an embankment with railway tracks. A glass awning. My gaze, zooming in at terrifying speed, as if I had no body, as if I were a camera lens or a knowing, extremely agile point in space, recognizes for one moment trash, pigeon droppings and even the ridges in the glass.

Red granite. Wet street dirt. Footprints. A wastebasket, a lost glove. Someone's sitting leaned against the panes of the entrance door. Bearded, looking exhausted. A second person appears, leans over and looks at the man. He has a newspaper on his knees, and another piece of newspaper, half-soaked, is resting on his bag. Printed with Cyrillic letters. Can I help you? – asks the face – Do you understand me? I see it from very close up. It's breathing. It's smiling in a friendly way, has a dimple in the chin.

Yes – I say – I understand. And I'm very tired.

Would you like us to drive you to a place where you can sleep?

I nod.

I spent the past few months in a little village in the south of Germany.

On the morning before Martha first called I was in the forest with a neighbour. We loaded wood onto a borrowed van, split some of it into smaller pieces in his yard, and then I piled the logs under a jutting roof behind his house for them to dry over the summer. When I moved to the village I'd told myself I'd do it regularly from then on, once or twice a year. Maybe that would help me get closer to the people who live there.

The telephone rang, loud and shrill, piercing the afternoon indolence. She doesn't have to say her name, she knows that.

She said – They've put me in hospital.

So it's something serious.

Yes. Something serious.

I couldn't place the sarcasm in her voice.

Tell me where.

I don't want you to come.

Tell me anyway.

When she hung up I stood in my cramped, dark hallway, motionless as a reptile. I felt the past coming up slowly, from far below, like rising waters, taking hold of my feet, my belly, my chest and finally flooding into my head. I tried to recall the past few hours, a tiny retreat, a play for time. Our breath steaming on the still cold air. My fingers hot in my work gloves. The jerk with which the impulse for splitting the wood

went from my shoulder into the axe.

In the bedroom, in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe, were my old papers, reports and references, my diary. A welding certificate from 1985, a driving licence I got in the army for vehicles above seven and a half tonnes, an address book. I opened it up. Names, telephone numbers, addresses. Most of them were bound to be wrong by now.

I found a map of Berlin from 1991 as well. I unfolded it and searched through the index. She'd been put in Neukölln, almost on the edge of the city. I felt fear in my stomach like a rotating ball of grey, and the impulse to ask her immediately why she wasn't in the Charité hospital at the heart of Berlin.

The second call came an hour later.

Can you listen to me?

Of course! Yes.

Do you remember the truck?

The remark came so unexpectedly that I drew back for a moment, staring at the receiver. No How are you? or anything like that – she wrenched open the door to the past without warning. East Berlin, 1986. Blue sky and a couple of clouds. I'd been on the night shift. We met on one of the rooftops, by the iron stairs between the cooling towers. She was distraught. I saw brooms – she said – cloths and canisters of liquid. She was breathing heavily and had red patches on her neck, her eyes glittering wet, she looked very beautiful at that moment.

Do you know how long I was in the truck back then?

Two, or maybe three hours? Rakowski gave you a lift that afternoon. He offered to transport your mother's old chest.

No, it was longer.

Why... longer?

No reply.

The feeling that the world you live in is collapsing announces itself with a crackling felt suddenly all over your skin, I remembered at that moment. With a quiet, clicking sound, inaudible for others. Familiar places, ideas and thoughts disappear, and you're standing right back where you think you were at the very beginning, a beginning that escapes any specific memory. That's how I felt back then, and the time that's passed since then was suddenly nothing. I'd always been standing right there,

I'd never left this state of nothingness.

I ate something cold, lay down, took the phone with me to my bed. She might call a third time. That's her way of sorting out things that can't be sorted out. I lay there and thought, I can bear it. The way she's been bearing me, getting along with me, her whole life long. With the consequences that meeting me had for her.

I heard from her for the first time in ages in 1998. She told me she'd moved back to Berlin after we separated, we talked about this and that. Then the conversation petered out. We ought to have hung up at that point, but she simply carried on talking for a while. I was at a loss, feeling that she wanted something from me but not understanding what it was.

That's the way it was in the years that followed. She called at irregular intervals. I'd got used to it. Perhaps she was simply lonely.

The next time I picked up the phone it was one in the morning.

At this time of night? Aren't you bothering anyone?

Do you think we might find him after all?

She gasped.

Why?

Perhaps we'd get leads to people he knew.

It's over.

He was in the truck. There's no one else left. Rakowski's dead.

Dead? How do you know?

Through phone calls.

When?

In the last few hours.

I heard her breathing. I looked down at myself, my legs, thin and freezing. My pyjamas. The frail piece of humanity in them. I thought, silence is silence, by day or at night, but it feels different at night. If you let it up close enough it extends endlessly, and you're scared every second that you won't make it to the next.

What have you got? I mean, what illness?

I thought I'd just ask her. But I couldn't do it, I croaked as if I already knew the answer, and that's how it was in the end.

Forgetting works by strange rules. I mean the way we push things away that we don't want. Not what allegedly makes up our unconscious. You cling to the things directly around you: this is my work, I go there every day. My home, my bed. The air I breathe. Look, the sun, it's shining right now, just for me. You live without a before or an after. It's important to fill all the empty time with activity, you mustn't start brooding.

After Martha's calls I was teetering on the brink from one moment to the next, the brink I'd always denied existed.

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Schöffling & Co.
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstrasse 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

phone: +49 69 92 07 87 16
fax: +49 69 92 07 87 20

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