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English sample translation

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Fat Man in the Sea

Klaesner was wearing a black-and-white geometrically patterned bathing suit; the broad elastic waistband encircled his paunch at its greatest girth below which it virtually arched over his genitals.

He stood in the sea up to his knees. The water was pleasant and he could feel it reflecting the sun's warmth. He was perspiring, but the water cooled him from below. He groped around with his foot, then took a few steps away from shore; it was nice to have his feet sink into the soft sea floor. Soon the water came up to the lower edge of his bathing suit. Whenever a wave rolled in, it sloshed over his navel. Klaesner turned around and looked back. How far away the beach was! Surely an optical illusion. His wife was just rubbing suntan oil on her arms, talking with the people who had the room next to theirs in the hotel, a couple from Bielefeld. Or was it Braunschweig, Klaesner didn't remember which. Mornings they'd run into them in the hallway, then see each other again at lunch, if not before. But most of the time they'd already be lying near each other on the beach soon after breakfast. The Bielefelders were passionate Canasta players and always insisted on playing as a team.

Klaesner looked toward the horizon again. There the dark blue of the Mediterranean became a silvery shimmer, above it the whitish sky. Sometimes large ships would sail from left to right. It's a shipping lane, Klaesner thought. On navigational charts the shipping lanes are drawn as curving lines. There's a lot of traffic in these lanes, but a few thousand yards off to either side, and you could drift in the water for days. Nobody would see you.

Klaesner took a few more steps. Here he could still stand comfortably. He crossed his arms over his chest to keep his hands dry. This was important, because if his hands were wet with seawater he'd get a rash when he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Now he could really feel the waves. The larger ones lifted him up a little and then gently set him down again on the sea floor. When he turned around again, his

wife waved to him. The Bielefelders shouted something. As if he could still hear them! Klaesner waved back. Then he faced out to sea again. This is our last day here, he thought. It had been a nice vacation. Nothing wrong with the hotel. Friendly staff, good food, small rooms but quiet. And of course the beautiful beach. It hadn't been a mistake to come here.

This was their first vacation without the children. Last year their youngest, the baby of the family, had come along. The kid was actually more of a stay-at-home, but he was bright, everybody said so. Just for the boy's sake Klaesner had taken him to museums, even though he himself didn't like being on his feet so much and the air inside was bad. He had listened to his son's explanations of pictures and rocks. It was nice to have his boy tell him about the things he'd read. Right now though he was in England with a tour group. No need to worry about him.

A swimmer emerged from a wave. "The water's great today," the swimmer said. And even though he could have touched bottom, the man continued to make swimming motions with his arms. He was wearing a bathing cap and tiny water goggles.

"It sure is," Klaesner said. "It's gotten even warmer overnight. Maybe there are currents too."

No doubt about it," the swimmer said. "I bet it's the currents. When you swim farther out you can definitely feel them. You really have to swim hard against them."

"Take care," Klaesner said.

The swimmer raised his hand to his bathing cap in salute, dove and disappeared in the sea.

About two hundred yards ahead, anchored on the sea floor, was a wooden floating dock with a diving tower. Klaesner wondered whether he should swim over to it. He hadn't swum that far out since they started their vacation, even though he'd always been a pretty good swimmer. In the evening the young people from the hotels met on the dock. Once they even had a party there. They had put all their clothes, drinks, lanterns, and a radio into waterproof bags, and with these they had swum out to the dock. Then they'd put their clothes on again, had hung the lanterns on the diving tower, and turned on the radio. Klaesner had watched them, first from the

beach and then from the balcony of his hotel room. They had danced till late into the night, then they all swam back.

Klaesner now felt something touch his leg. He looked down. It was a fairly large fish that seemed to be sniffing him. Usually you didn't see any fish here. Klaesner tried to remain motionless. Should he catch the fish? No, impossible. He wondered if there were any poisonous fish. One always thinks of the worst. Then suddenly the fish was gone.

Yes, I'll swim over to the dock, Klaesner thought. I'll simply keep my head above water. He let his upper body glide forward, pushed himself off with his feet and swam with slow and even strokes. The dock came closer and closer. He had almost reached it when he saw a young man and a young woman emerge from the water; laughing, they swung themselves up onto the wooden platform. Klaesner swam past the dock; he felt the gentle current pulling him away from shore.

Soon he had swum out so far that he could see the next inlet on the other side of the spit of land. They had been there several times at a restaurant the Bielefelders had recommended. The beach in the neighboring inlet was always full of young people playing ball, shouting to each other, and laughing. It was more peaceful in their own inlet, much more peaceful. Yet not too quiet, just right.

The pain came without warning. Suddenly Klaesner felt an ache in his left arm. At first he thought it was the rheumatism in his shoulder flaring up again; then his whole chest was full of a dull, consuming fear. His jaws were clenched; it took all his strength to draw the next breath. Swimming was out of the question. Klaesner didn't even try, though he knew he would drown. It was no longer a question of deciding. He sank. And found himself standing head and shoulders above water. He was standing on a rock, a shoal.

Gradually he recovered. He placed his arms on the surface of the water and tilted his head back, that way it was easier to breathe. After five minutes he felt scarcely any pain. He had a firm footing. The swell cradled him gently, only a heavy wave could have pushed him off, and this was a calm day with a steady light breeze.

Cautiously Klaesner turned around, he could not see the beach, the wooden dock with the diving platform blocked his view. And the young people were gone. Maybe I won't have another attack if I swim back slowly now, he thought. He made a

rowing motion with his arms, then stopped. The fear was too great. It was about a hundred yards to the dock. But once there, he'd have to hoist himself up a foot or two; there was no ladder. I'm too heavy for that, Klaesner thought. He turned around, nothing but the open sea, what else had he expected.

Klaesner thought about death. It would be terrible for his wife. They probably wouldn't allow her to take his body home, or it might simply be too expensive. Then he'd be buried here. Assuming of course they'd find his body. Maybe he'd be swept out to sea. Then his wife would have to wait for weeks until they declared him dead. Where would she live during that time? Certainly not in one of the resort hotels, that was impossible.

It was his own fault. Kaesner carefully ran his hand over his stomach below the surface of the water. Of course he was too fat. And he didn't go in for any sports, he drank beer, he smoked. And let things slide.

Klaesner was startled. He hadn't intended to let his life pass in review. Wasn't that what they called it? He had no use for such thoughts. His motto was: Life will go on somehow. Just then, out at sea, another ship sailed by. Klaesner watched; it wasn't in the shipping lane. Should he yell? Maybe then a shipboard pool attendant would row over and pull him into his boat. How embarrassing. Anyway, as long as he didn't move he didn't feel the fear.

In a hotel room not too far from where Klaesner was standing on a rock in the sea, an argument had broken out. —“It's always the same with you,” he said; whereupon she slammed the door shut behind her. He sat down on the edge of the bed and thought things over. You can't fix broken relationships on a vacation. He should have known that. But how much can you really know beforehand? He shuddered at the thought that the day after tomorrow they'd again be sitting in the same office. And all the people at work would ask how things had gone. He swore never again to get involved with a co-worker.

Wolfgang got up and went down to the beach. Karin was nowhere to be seen. He watched the lifeguard, a sun-tanned Italian. Karin didn't go for that type. No. Karin really was a great girl. That wasn't the problem.

The lifeguard sauntered over to him. “Your last day?” he asked. Wolfgang nodded. Where’s the Signorina Karina? Wolfgang shrugged. “Do you have another board?” he asked.

“*Si, claro!*” the lifeguard said and ran off to get it. They had never had an argument about his windsurfing, even though he was often out on the water for hours leaving Karin sitting by herself on the beach. “Be careful,” was all she would say.

Wolfgang climbed on the surfboard, hauled up the sail and held it against the weak wind. After a few swinging motions the board got under way. It moved forward slowly, first along the shoreline. When he had picked up enough speed, Wolfgang turned across the wind, away from shore at a right angle, and out toward the open sea. Whenever he cut through a wave, cool water slipped over his feet. It was pleasant to glide over the water, different from swimming, and different from sailing in a boat. Wolfgang was a good windsurfer, still he didn’t want to take it up seriously.

After a short time he could see the neighboring cove on the other side of the land spit. At the start of the vacation he and Karin and some other guests from their hotel had gone to a party on the wooden dock that floated in the water not far from shore. They had swum out and back; it was like an adventure. Late that night he had said to Karin that they ought to make a fresh start. Karin had been a little drunk. Now Wolfgang decided to sail to the dock.

Klaesner’s shoulders felt cool, not cold, not unpleasantly cold, merely cool. It was almost refreshing. About halfway through their vacation they had gone to an aquarium where it had been unbearably hot. It was really ridiculous, going to an aquarium when they were so close to the sea. But the Bielefelders had wanted to go; they even had to take a taxi. In the semi-dark rooms of the aquarium Klaesner had stood in front of the green-and-blue shimmering glass of the tanks, sweating profusely. The man from Bielefeld had expounded on the fish; after all, he was a biology teacher. A metal rod hung inside one of the tanks. When the electric ray came into contact with it, a sign bearing the name of the fish lit up. There was also a gag tank. Ground glass lenses were mounted on the front of the tank. When a fish swam by, it was comically magnified.

The deep-sea section was almost completely dark; a few of the fish glowed with a phosphorescent light. The man from Bielefeld asked one of the guards whether they had any *Kofferfisch*, trunkfish, but the guard didn't understand German. So the man from Bielefeld made believe he was carrying a trunk; then he made swimming motions. Nothing helped. Afterward they went to a nearby fish restaurant. Klaesner had said jokingly: I wonder whether we're eating fish left over from the aquarium.

He looked around him again. Had the dock been swept farther out? No, impossible, he could see the heavy chains that anchored it to the sea floor. Klaesner wondered whether he should swim over to it after all. He moved his arms again and drew up his legs, but it didn't work; the fear returned at once. He stayed where he was.

Once Wolfgang had rounded the spit of land, he set his course for the dock. The wind seemed to have freshened slightly, but since it was coming straight from the direction of the dock, Wolfgang couldn't steer straight toward it. So he held to a course about two hundred yards out to sea. He would sail past the dock and steer for it after his next turn. He liked navigational calculations like these. In a sailboat that sort of thing was much more important, but then everybody in the boat would be discussing it. Wolfgang didn't like that; he called it talking shop.

After the turn, on his way to the dock, he remembered they still had to pack. Karin had taken on that chore. He couldn't pack, hated suitcases. It would be awful if Karin were to refuse to pack his suitcase, but he had to expect that. Suddenly Wolfgang saw a fat man who appeared to be standing up to his chest in the sea waving to him. He made a slight alteration in his course, and a few yards before he reached the man he allowed his sail to slap down into the water. Then he sat astride the board and paddled closer with his hands.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm in an awkward situation," Klaesner said. "I just had something that felt like a heart attack, and now I can't swim back to shore."

"Oh. What are you standing on?"

"I don't know. It's not important. Maybe a sandbank, or a rock. In any case, it's what saved me, so to speak."

Wolfgang pondered this briefly. “Shouldn’t I get the coast guard or something? They could get you back to shore.”

A larger wave passed them. Klaesner rowed a bit with his arms. Then he regained his footing. “Not a bad idea, basically,” he said. “But I’m a bit afraid of the fuss it’ll cause. It would be nice if no one finds out about it. Know what I mean?”

“No,” said Wolfgang. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Look,” Klaesner said, “I thought I might simply hang on to your surfboard, and you would pull or paddle me back to shore. Quite inconspicuously. We could pretend we were having a conversation.”

“A conversation? About what?”

“About our vacations. There are enough things to talk about. Are you also staying in this inlet?”

“No,” Wolfgang said. “But I was here once, on the dock, at night, at a party.”

“You see,” Klaesner said, “we practically know each other. I watched you that night, from my hotel room.” He pointed past the dock. “Over there. You can’t see it now.”

“All right,” Wolfgang said. “I’ll take down the mast. Then it will be easier.” He knelt on top of the board and undid the rigging.

“Won’t the sail be carried away?” Klaesner asked.

“Not far, I’ll get it later.” Wolfgang paddled still closer until the back of the board was in front of Klaesner’s chest. “Now,” he said. “Hold on with both hands and try to pull yourself up.”

Klaesner was about to grab the board. “Wait a moment,” Wolfgang shouted. “I’ll sit up front for balance.”

Klaesner felt the smooth surface of the top of the board under his chest. Not an unpleasant feeling, but the fear returned immediately.

“Everything all right?” he heard Wolfgang ask up front. He tried to lift his head. “No,” he said, “please go to the dock.”

The dock was still far away. Wolfgang paddled harder. Maybe if I make swimming movements with my legs we’ll move faster, Klaesner thought, but he didn’t dare.

They approached the dock on the seaward side. Klaesner grabbed one of the wooden piles with his right hand and slipped into the water. He was breathing heavily. Wolfgang slid off the board and swam over to him. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

With his back to the dock, Klaesner placed his other arm around a second pile, put his head back, and stretched his legs out in front of him. He floated gently on the water. “This is better,” he said. “I had this feeling of pressure on my chest, you see.”

“I’d better go back to get a doctor,” Wolfgang said.

“No,” Klaesner said. “Please stay here a little longer. It will pass soon. Let’s talk about something else. How was your vacation?”

Wolfgang sat down on his board again. He could still see the sail. It glittered in the water whenever the sun hit it. “Not so great,” he said.

“Oh,” Klaesner said. “May I ask why?”

“We had a fight, my girlfriend and I.”

“That’ll pass,” Klaesner said.

“I think it’s all over,” Wolfgang said. “It isn’t working out between us. Maybe we simply don’t belong together. I can’t say what the problem is.”

“I’m sorry,” Klaesner said.

“Maybe it’s better this way.” Wolfgang had to paddle again because the board was drifting away from the dock. The wind was getting stronger. “You see,” he said, “we got to know each other at the office. Somehow we were already used to each other. It wasn’t really exciting.”

“The excitement always fades,” Klaesner said, “take it from an old married man.”

“But it has to be there at the beginning. You have to have something to look back on.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Klaesner chided him. “You’re still a young man. What should *I* say?”

“Maybe I didn’t express myself properly,” Wolfgang said. “Anyway, the real thing is missing. I can’t explain it any better.”

“Yes, well, if that’s the way it is.” Klaesner glanced toward the horizon. “Look,” he said, “there’s another ship. I wonder where they’re coming from, and where they’re going.”

“Do you feel any better?”

“Well, yes. You know, let’s try it a different way. I’ll try to lie on my back on the board because of the pressure on my chest.”

“Can you do that?”

“Sure, you’ll see. It’s bound to work.”

Klaesner slowly pushed himself away from the dock and grabbed the board. He turned around carefully until the back of the board was under his neck; then he reached backward with his arms as far as possible. “Now,” he called out trying to pull himself up. But he slipped off and sank below the surface. Wolfgang dove after him, grabbed one of his arms, and pulled him up.

“You’re out of your mind,” he said after he had maneuvered Klaesner back to the dock. “It simply won’t work that way. I’m going for help now.”

“Please stay here,” Klaesner said.

“But this way we’ll never get away from here. It’ll get dark. We’ll freeze to death. Or there’ll be a storm. In the end they’ll come searching for us. I’m going to shout for help.” With one powerful motion he swung himself up on the dock.

“No,” Klaesner called out from the water. “We can keep things under control. Please have a little more patience, and we’ll manage so that there won’t be too much fuss about it.”

Wolfgang bent down to face Klaesner. “What is it you actually want? What sort of a man are you, huh? You stand there in the water like a fat lighthouse and pretend to be a considerate guy. What’s this all about?”

“Please don’t get upset,” Klaesner said. Suddenly he was seized by a pleasant sensation; the tension had left his body. He tried a few swim strokes. No doubt about it, he was back to normal. The fear was gone.

“See,” he said, “I was right. It’s better. I’ll swim back now. See, it was good not to make a big fuss. Thanks very much for your help.” That said, he was already heading for shore.

Wolfgang shook his head and watched him. There he was, swimming off, this fat man who had stood in the sea. The characters you meet! Wolfgang continued to sit on the dock for a long time, thinking. He’d tell Karin what had happened to him.

Maybe it would be a way for them to start talking to each other again, at least for this evening.

Suddenly he remembered the sail. He dove headfirst into the water and swam toward the spot where he thought it might be. But it wasn't there. He swam back to the dock and kept a lookout for it. The sea sparkled all around him, the sun's rays breaking up in each wave. It would be stupid not to admit that the sail was lost. Wolfgang slipped back into the water, sat down on his board and paddled back to shore. There, he saw Klaesner sitting at a folding table with two women and another man. They were playing cards.

"You have to pay me for the sail," Wolfgang said.

"Oh. You don't say," Klaesner said. "Couldn't you find it?"

"What does this man want from you?" one of the women asked.

"Could it be you were really surfing all that time?" the other man said to Klaesner and laughed. "A secret hobby maybe?"

Klaesner denied it. "We met out there. We talked for a long time. The young man removed the sail from his board. I warned him but he didn't want to listen to me."

"You're a damned liar!" Wolfgang said and took a threatening step toward Klaesner. Klaesner tried to get up from his folding chair, lost his balance, and fell backwards. His arms flailed in front of him, and when Wolfgang grabbed them in order to keep Klaesner from falling, the fat man pulled him down with him. Klaesner's back hit the overturned chair hard. For a few seconds Wolfgang lay on Klaesner's chest but then quickly rolled to one side and got to his knees, helping Klaesner free himself from the chair and stretch out on the sand. Klaesner was breathing heavily, holding his left side.

"Hurry, get a doctor!" Wolfgang shouted.

"What for?" asked the woman. A group of vacationers had already formed a circle around the man lying on the sand.

"Hurry!" Wolfgang shouted again, and when nobody showed any sign of moving, he jumped up and ran as fast as he could toward the hotel.

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