

Monika Held, DER SCHRECKEN VERLIERT SICH VOR ORT (This Place Holds No Fear)
sample translation by Anne Posten
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The house stood at the end of the street, its garden turning into woods without a fence. They couldn't make up their minds, as if deciding their fate. On their first visit the sun was shining and Heiner said: The living room is friendly. Lena liked the plum trees in the garden and imagined herself making jam. The realtor gave them the house key. Take your time, she said, see if you suit each other. How can you tell whether a house suits two people or two people suit a house? They didn't know. They walked around the house, approached it from every side. It's bored, Lena said, it's been alone too long. Heiner asked the house about the future. What awaits us here—disaster or happiness? The house didn't answer. If they painted the window frames white it would look friendlier. On their second visit the sky was grey and Heiner thought six rooms would be too many for two people, but Lena had a plan for every room: living room, workspace, and laundry room on the ground floor, a bedroom and two guest rooms on the second floor.

Heiner inspected the neighborhood. There were no shops, no pubs, no newsstands—only new houses, easily mistaken for one another. Even the gardens were nearly identical: a mown lawn with a rhododendron bush or a mown lawn with French broom. Fine. He walked up and down the streets. Dirty little shoes outside the doors, yards with swing sets. There was a playground with a slide and a sandbox full of children. A girl with blonde braids whizzed past the houses on rollerblades, while her mother called to her from the kitchen window: Jenny, watch out! The sight of the nimble child brought back a name that made Heiner feel sick: Kaija. These children would grow up and when their parents were old, they would still be younger than he was today. He would sleep poorly in a neighborhood filled with people his own age. The neighborhood is fine, he said, but shouldn't a new house be love at first sight? They returned the key and looked at houses in other new developments. A month later, when the house was still on the market, they paid it a third visit. It was early evening, the day hazy and oppressive—weather that would make any house look dreary. They sat on the porch swing that had been left out on the patio. Lena set a thermos and two coffee cups on the table; they waited without knowing why. Patches of fog settled on the pine branches and floated down to the forest floor. The birds were silent, as if the fog rested heavily on their beaks. Lena put her arm around Heiner. What do you think? she asked. Will your soul be at home here?

It smells nice, he said, that's a good sign.

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It smelled like Lena's hair when it had first fallen over his brow, blanketing his closed eyes, tickling his nose—long ago when he didn't know whether the hair of the woman bending over him was blonde, brown, or black. It lay on his face, warm and smelling of mushrooms.

They rocked on the swing, uncertain whether they suited the house or it them. Six rooms are too many, Heiner said, and this place is so lonely. He poured himself more coffee. There are only young couples and children in the neighborhood. More cats than dogs. They watched the silent paths of the fog. The silence is nice, Heiner said. He had barely spoken the words when Lena grabbed his hand: Listen. A crackling sound came from the woods, as if someone were creeping over rotten branches through the undergrowth, approaching the patio. Then a stag with huge antlers stepped out of the woods.

This can't be, whispered Heiner, it's impossible. Tell me it isn't true.

The animal looked at them calmly and without fear, almost as if it couldn't quite believe in the two motionless people either. It lowered its head and slowly turned around. The stag was sunk up to its belly in fog and seemed to float back into the woods on a white cloud. They heard the crackling of branches under its hooves.

Lena stood up. She packed up the thermos and led Heiner away from the patio. His hands were ice-cold and he was trembling. It's a sign, he said. Fate can't speak more clearly than that. I see, she said, you hear fate—what does it say?

Buy it, Heiner said. And when we live here, if it comes back, I'll tell you about the most terrifying night of my life.

They kept the key and bought the house. They painted the window frames white.

The porch swing became Heiner's summer sofa. He'd often sit there long after midnight, listening to the muffled thuds of pinecones falling to the ground, feeling more certain every day that he would be happy here for a good while to come. Impatiently he waited for the stag to return.

His winter sofa, in the living room, had two bare patches: one from sitting, and the other near the right armrest, where his head lay when he got tired during the day, when even Lena's coffee didn't help.

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The cuckoo clock hung over the sofa: a twelve-inch-tall, walnut-brown little house framed by five hand-carved leaves, with a pointed roof and faint writing under the face which read “Made in Germany.” When the cuckoo called four times it was time for coffee and cake; when it called eight times it was time for the evening news. The cuckoo clock was the ugliest thing in the room, in the house, probably in the whole neighborhood. Every hour the little door sprang open and a pale, shabby bird made of light wood shot out, shrilly calling out the hour. Day and night, around the clock, 156 sharp cries. All that was left of the painted beak that opened when it cuckooed was a red dot that looked like a speck of jam. The left eye was paler than the right, making the bird appear to squint. Heiner loved the ugly clock. It had once hung in his parents’ sitting room. It had cuckooed when Heiner was born, and it had cuckooed when the Germans invaded. Eight cries were the last thing Heiner heard as the police handcuffed him and hauled him away. His mother stayed behind in the kitchen so that Heiner's last image of her would not be her tear-streaked face.

Martha, his girlfriend, gripped the doorframe and whispered “Red Front.” And because a whisper was too quiet for what they were doing to him and for all that they were going to do, at the cuckoo’s last cry he turned. Louder, darling, say it louder. Before he stepped into the street, he heard her despairing cry from the stairwell: Red Front!

Come back soon, his mother had said—but when is soon? Is four hours soon, or three days? If he had known the future, a month would have been soon, or even a year. But when Heiner was taken for interrogation, he hadn’t been thinking about a long separation. He’d thought he was going to die.

After the war, when he picked up the keys from the caretaker and stepped into his parents’ apartment, he was prepared for anything except for the orderliness that greeted him. In his room the bed was made. The pillows and bedspread were as smooth as if they’d been ironed. How often he had dreamed of this red-and-white-checked linen! Seneca’s *On a Happy Life* lay on the nightstand. A bookmark was stuck between pages 260 and 261. The chapter was titled “Man is Man’s Wolf,” and it was only thirty lines long. He had underlined the most important ones: *Even the storm, before it gathers, gives warning; houses crack before they crash; and smoke is the forerunner of fire. But damage from man is instantaneous, and the*

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nearer it comes the more carefully it is concealed. You are wrong to trust the countenances of those you meet. They have the aspect of men, but the souls of wild animals...

He snapped the book shut. These sentences were of no use to him anymore.

Heiner's childhood in Vienna had been quiet. There were barely any cars on the street, just horse-drawn carriages. In his district there was a fountain where horses were filled up by a man they called the waterer, just as cars would later be filled up at a gas station. In winter he sledged down the steep streets. In school he sat on brown wooden benches with forty other boys, their backs as straight as if they had swallowed sticks. Hands were supposed to lay on the table, never under it, so nearly every good schoolboy kept his ten little fingers scrubbed clean—but not Heiner. He smeared dirt under his pointer finger and let the teacher hit his hand with a ruler. He showed his father the welts, and the teacher never hit him again, no matter how black his nails were.

The picture that had so revolted Heiner as a child still hung in the kitchen. In it a dead pheasant with glazed eyes lay on a bed of carrots, celery, and leeks. Its claws were spread, and a slug crept from its open beak. Heiner could no longer understand his childhood fear. The picture was an idyll. Pure peace.

There was still a can of skin cream on the rim of the bathtub. His mother's toothbrushes still stood in a green ceramic mug. His grandmother had once brushed her long hair in front of the mirror over the sink. She would bend over and brush her hair a hundred strokes from back to front. Then she'd straighten up and throw her head back, brushing the hair off her forehead and down her back with another hundred strokes. No more and no less. Why do you do that, Grandma? So my hair stays shiny and doesn't turn grey. Look, child: No grey hairs. Can I help brush, Grandma? Yes, she said, but careful, child, don't pull your old Grandma's hair out, she still needs it. Sometimes in the evenings Heiner was allowed to brush her hair, so he learned to count to a hundred before he even started school. When he gripped the brush right near the bristles, her hair would glide through his fingers. It felt like silk. Sometimes sparks flew from her hair. When that happened his grandmother would say that a storm was in the air. She was an old lady who wore long black dresses, so long that they dragged on the floor. She had fought on the barricades for women's suffrage. When it was finally granted on November 12, 1918,

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Heiner's grandmother declared November 12 her birthday. Because of the barricade incident and her long hair, the family called her "wild Wilda."

Heiner went into the living room. The white lace tablecloth used for family celebrations lay on the table. The silver saltshaker that was never cleared away stood on top. Salt on the table brought good luck. His father sat at the head of the table with grandmother across from him and mother to his right; next to her sat Greta, still young enough to need help with her food. Heiner sat to his father's left, beside his sister Alma. For a moment he saw them all there, the whole family. They didn't pray. They joined hands and his grandmother said: Even in times hard and sad, we wish for salt and bread.

Carefully, as if it were a relic, Heiner took the silver saltshaker in his hand. It was tarnished; he shined it on his jacket. Nine tiny clogged holes. The saltshaker exuded quiet, as if it had been holding its breath for years. He licked the top—even in times hard and sad, we wish for salt and bread. The meal began only after his father told the family to begin. To Heiner, his father was a man in a suit. A civil servant in "Red Vienna," he had returned from the war a radical social democrat. After dinner there wasn't always dessert, but there was always a little lecture from his father on politics. His grandmother would nod in agreement while his mother let it wash over her; the girls were bored, but Heiner was rapt. The Vienna of his childhood only seemed quiet. By age five Heiner knew that there had been a great war, and that Austria had been left without a Kaiser. He was six when his father brought him to the social-democratic youth organization. By then he already knew that Vienna belonged to the "Reds," and all the rest of Austria to the "Blacks." Heiner could hear the hooves of the horses, the rumbling of carts, the screeching of children, all the sounds of the cozy Viennese world outside, when one day his father did not pick up his silverware and begin the meal as usual. Instead he stared at his bare plate and finally broke the silence by saying: The courthouse is burning. Heiner was seven and would have let any soup in the world get cold if his father would just explain why the courthouse was burning, who had set it on fire, and whether this was a good thing. And for whom it was good—the Reds or the Blacks.

Heiner sat in the chair that he had used as a child. He heard his father's voice, curt, lecturing like his schoolteacher. In Schattendorf, a town in Burgenland, two people had been shot in a clash between the right-leaning "Front Fighters," who were loyal to the Kaiser, and the

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left-leaning social democrats. A man and a child. Yesterday, on the 14th of July 1927—remember that date, child—the killers were acquitted in a trial by jury. People were so outraged by the “Schattendorf Verdict” that they took to the streets. Crowds marched on the courthouse and broke through the barriers, pushing closer and closer; stones flew, glass broke. Brave men stormed the building, destroying the furniture with hatchets and setting fire to everything that could be burned. The fire devoured the roof and smoke rose to the clouds. The people stood up for themselves—never forget that, child. Let’s go, begged Heiner, let’s go look! It’s no place for children, his father said. He left the apartment after lunch; later at dinner he summed up the events of the day. The police had opened fire on the crowd. Eighty-nine people were dead and thousands wounded. Watch out, child, the right is gaining power. He picked up his silverware. The murderers are free, he said softly. These are radical times. Take my word for it—this is the first step towards civil war. He picked up his silverware: let us enjoy this food. To Heiner, his father seemed like a prophet.

When he was eleven Heiner joined the Red Falcons, where he was introduced to Marx and to Martha. She was a slim girl with thick braids, the first in the group to ask his name. Other boys spent their free time thinking about adventure heroes like Hadschi Halef Omar Ben Hadschi Abul Abbas Ibn Hadschi Dawuhd al Gossarah, but Heiny, as Martha called him, dreamed of the dictatorship of the proletariat and fell in love with the slim girl who shared his dream. Like Heiner’s grandma, she was ready to take to the barricades in the name of justice.

When he was thirteen, Heiner’s father died. A year later the civil war began. Heiner and Martha handed out pamphlets. There were only two sides: right or left. Left stood for justice, right for exploitation. They knew where they belonged. The right wanted to do away with everything the Reds had done for the poor in Vienna. Apartments that anyone could afford, rent control, luxury taxes on people who had servants and housemaids, riding horses and private cars. Many districts in Vienna were no longer quite so cozy. The high and mighty battled in parliament while the common folk brawled in the streets. Heiner fought for his mother, when, as his father’s second wife, she was denied her husband’s pension. Stubbornly she begged for a reprieve, for an orphan’s pension for her children, and went to work cleaning rich peoples’ apartments ten hours a day. Now Heiner sat at the head of the dinner table and played at being head of the household. He gave political lectures, quoted Marx, and said “Red Front” before

starting to eat. When he called his mother a “dishrag of the bourgeoisie” she threw her empty purse on his plate. Buy some bread and meat, she said, and then you can come back. Furious, he ran through the city, rang Martha’s doorbell, and found out that her mother also cleaned houses. He grew quiet. Without their mothers’ hard work, they’d both have starved. Cleaning for class enemies—they swore they would be revenged for this humiliation.

In the mornings he left the house without coffee, without even a bite of bread. He saw swirls of red and black, and would hole up in doorways to wait for the dizziness to pass. His view of the street sharpened. He saw people in rags. Old coats, pants, and jackets weren’t thrown away, they were patched. He looked down at people’s feet and saw their shoes falling apart. Beggars now stood in the alleys where his father had once marched resolutely to work. He wasn’t the only boy who sat in doorways fighting red and black whorls of hunger. He realized that Marx alone could not alleviate poverty— more was needed. Stalin became his god, and revolution his new dream. He couldn’t imagine anything better than writing pamphlets with Martha and distributing them during the night. Love and danger—he was intoxicated. After the revolution, they planned to take their exams and go to university—in Vienna and Moscow. In the meantime, Heiner tried to find an apprenticeship as a draftsman, and when none was to be had, his mother apprenticed him to a bookbinder. A bookbinder! It was slave labor. At the crack of dawn he was harnessed to a wagon full of books. He hadn’t known that mere paper could be heavy, but he quickly found out. It took him four hours to pull the cart from the fifth district to the seventeenth. He unloaded the books, loaded the cart up with fresh paper, and travelled back from the seventeenth district to the fifth. He collapsed in the street like a malnourished nag. People stopped and stared: look—the poor boy! They helped him up and pushed him onward as if he were a stubborn mule. Once a woman gave him a bit of sausage.

Heiner encountered new things in this changing world. Suddenly every family he knew had a new kind of subletter—men who had work, but not enough money for a room, so they rented beds for just a few hours. People had started to call these men “bedgoers.” Even Martha’s family had one, and one day Heiner’s grandmother brought a stranger home. According to the rules, he could only arrive after nine in the evening and had to leave the house at seven. These men had no family and on Sundays, when they had no work, they slept on park benches. In comrade Paul’s house Heiner noticed chalk marks on the floor. There was a line in

front of the sitting room, one in front of the room where Paul slept with his son, and one in front of the kitchen. What game are you playing? he asked his friend. It was no game. Paul had marked off areas where the “bedgoer” wasn’t allowed. Heiner never met the man who stayed in his own house. Once Alma saw him in the hallway at night. He’s a dwarf, she said. He’s punier than Greta, that’s how two of them can fit in one bed.

How long ago that was. Another lifetime. Heiner stood up. He pushed his chair under the table. His whole family was scattered, yet he could feel their presence in this room. He put the saltshaker back on the table, right in the middle, where there was a hole in the lace tablecloth.

A thick layer of dust covered the chairs and the floor. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling with motionless spiders, either sleeping or dead. Should he rescue the apartment from this dusty stillness, or leave it to the spiders? Should his new life begin in a new apartment? The carpeting was full of holes. While he’d been gone the moths had had more to eat than he.

As he was about to leave the apartment he noticed tracks in the dust, the imprints of shoes larger than the ones he wore. Whoever made them had just walked through the hallway into the living room, over to the sofa above which the cuckoo clock hung, and back to the door. There was just this one path. They were long steps, longer than his. They hadn’t gone into the nursery, the bathroom, or the kitchen. Then on his way out Heiner heard a muffled knocking. He went back to the living room and saw that the door of the cuckoo clock had gotten stuck. When he opened it, the little bird shot out and belted its familiar “cuckoo.”

A hundred thousand bombs were dropped on Vienna, forty thousand apartments destroyed, half the world shattered, millions of people killed—and in the middle of the inferno some crazy person must have come and wound the cuckoo clock every eight days. And on returning home, he, a survivor of the madness, had freed this wooden cuckoo from imprisonment. Heiner stood looking at the clock and laughed his strange laugh. It sounded like an asthma attack.

Softly, so as not to wake Heiner, Lena closes the door behind her, pushes the motor scooter out of the garage, and drives straightaway three miles down the street to the town. She

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wouldn't have wanted the house by the woods if this little town hadn't been close by. Her eyes want more colors than the dark brown of the tree trunks, the velvet brown of squirrels and the green of pine needles, and her ears need more sounds than just screeching birds and cracking twigs. She needs the voices of the merchants at the Saturday market, the sounds of traffic, the feeling of being part of things. She'd liked this place from the very beginning. The tall half-timbered houses along the square were five hundred years old, red and white, with shiny slate roofs. Pigeons bathed in the sandstone fountain and in the summer tourists sat on its edge.

It's just after eight when Lena gets to the bakery and picks up her standard order of "two poppy-seed and two caraway for Rosseck." Then she drives to the newsstand, takes a copy of the local paper from the stack and adds a "Vienna Courier" for Heiner. She sits down to read in the dusty old "Café Plush" on the square and drinks two strong black coffees. The travel section is her favorite. Lena dreams of going to the South Pacific. Four weeks of sitting under palms and swimming with colorful fish, burying her hands in hot sand—but marrying a man like Heiner meant either giving up the South Seas or traveling alone. One time, right after the wedding, she'd succeeded in carrying him off to the Adriatic. They stayed in a little hotel by the shore. The water was as blue as the sky, and they could see the sea floor from the window of their hotel. Heiner stayed in the room while Lena swam and lay in the sun. He wasn't bored. He read and slept and made notes for his essay on life as a survivor. He enjoyed making love to Lena. She smelled like the sea and tasted like sand—he never wanted to let her go. If that meant travelling to a Croatian island called Dogi Otok, then so be it. Heiner didn't find beautiful places relaxing, Lena learned after that vacation. Beauty dazzled and tormented him and made the images he carried inside even gloomier by comparison. And besides, he had his own sand to stick his fingers into every now and then. He kept it at home in a mustard jar on the sideboard, three steps from the sofa.

How is your husband? twangs the waiter in "Café Plush." He asks every morning between Lena's first and second coffee and Lena always says: My husband is well, thank you, even when he isn't. At nine she drives back home. On Wednesdays and Fridays it's not until ten, because on those days the pastor's wife practices the organ. There is a ritual connected with this organ-playing, though no one knows when it first began. The pastor's wife enters the church and closes the heavy door behind her. As soon as she hits the first note, someone opens the

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door again so that the music can flow out over the square. Twice a week Lena watches, fascinated by the way just fifteen minutes of Bach or Bruckner are enough to break the routine. A woman pauses in her shopping and sits down on the church steps. The baker opens the bakery window, the bookseller stands outside her shop and Lena puts down her newspaper. The butcher says there's a difference between slaughtering a lamb on a Monday and slaughtering it on a Friday. When it's accompanied by organ music, he says, even butchering becomes holy.

When Heiner and Lena moved into the house by the woods in the fall of 1966, they counted as an old couple amid all the young families. He was in his mid-forties, she was ten years younger. Fifteen years later, only newcomers to the neighborhood wonder what they're doing together. She's a jolly woman who loves to laugh and laugh loudly, who makes the best plum jam in the neighborhood, speaks Polish and French, and wears crazy hats and dangerously high heels when she drives the old Daimler into the city. A sign hangs on their front door: Lena Rosseck, Certified Translator. She lets her long hair fly free in the wind when she drives the scooter and it almost seems like she could be the daughter of the old man with the deeply wrinkled face. It's quite charming the way he greets people on the street, but then his smile fades a bit more quickly than other people's smiles. That's the interesting thing about them: They seem like an unremarkable couple, but one can spend a long time talking about them. They often keep the living room light on all night, and a thin yellow strip spills through the curtains and onto the street. They say the man didn't work, even when he was younger. He reads at night—maybe he's a scholar. Now and then the Rossecks have houseguests who stay for a long time, sometimes as much as two weeks. People from Poland who roll their "r's" strongly, and there are often cars with Austrian plates parked in front of their door. You can talk to Poles—they speak good German. No one knows why such a lively woman would love such an odd man. Still, she must have her reasons. Perhaps he's rich and she has a lover in the city. The Rossecks are the only people in the neighborhood who never put up a Christmas tree. They celebrate the holidays with guests from Poland and Vienna—you can tell from the license plates. Everyone knows that Lena has a friend in town—Gesa, the woman who owns the cinema. When no one wants to see the movies that Gesa has ordered, the two women sit alone in the theatre, watching the movie and drinking wine. Besides Gesa, the doctor, and the postman, no one has ever seen the inside of the Rossecks' house. You can see their patio from the woods, and

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everyone knows you can set your watch by “the Viennese,” as they call him. It’s three o’clock when he ends his afternoon nap on the porch swing. Then he takes a brisk walk in the woods for an hour, as if there’s no other way he can wake himself up. It’s four when “the Viennese” drinks his coffee on the patio. The news is over when he takes his evening walk through the neighborhood as if performing an inspection, always with a glowing cigarette in his left hand. The man isn’t unpleasant, just somewhat peculiar. He gets a lot of mail and puts thick envelopes in the mailbox several times a week.

Lena rolls the scooter back into the garage, sets the breakfast table, makes coffee, and quietly opens the bedroom door.

Are you awake?

If he doesn’t answer, she lets him sleep. If he moves his head slightly he’s awake, but not yet ready for the day. If that happens Lena goes into the study, starts working on a translation and listens carefully to the sounds from the bedroom. When she hears the shower she makes scrambled eggs and bacon for Heiner and two soft-boiled eggs for herself. His hair is damp. He smells of lavender. He wears the velvet bathrobe that she gave him for his birthday. A poppy-seed roll for Lena and one with caraway for Heiner. Sometimes he says: Even in times hard and sad, we wish for salt and bread.

We’re having a guest on Sunday, Lena says.

Who?

A colleague. She’s new to the area. She’s nice—I like her.

Good, says Heiner, then I like her too. What’s her name?

Ninja. Don’t scare her off with your sand. Or do. See how you feel.

His eyes were closed when Lena’s hair fell on his face. He couldn’t see what the woman bending over him looked like, but he liked how she smelled.

Nor would Lena forget her first sight of Heiner. A tall, gaunt man leaning against a wall in the hallway of the courthouse, slowly slumping, sinking down inch by inch. She had spent the last few hours sitting in her office translating the testimony of a Polish witness who had refused to come to Germany. Her windowless office was stuffy, but the feeling of suffocation had to do

with the text. She put the transcript in the binder to send to the judge's office. It was a Friday, the 5th of June, 1964, a warm summer day; Lena had planned nice things to do to get the witness's testimony out of her head. She'd go swimming, take a little nap by the pool, then go to the movies with Tom and drink some wine with him somewhere in the warm summer night.

The face of the sinking man was very pale. Lena ran to him and held his shoulders until he was safely squatting. Watch this binder, she said, and ran into the cafeteria. She found a chair, bought water and a chocolate bar with nuts and got a pillow for his head. His brown curls were stuck behind his ears, and his forehead was sweaty. She knew who he was. He was the witness from Vienna, summoned for 8:30 am on June 5th, 1964, the 52nd day of hearings. She wiped his brow dry with her handkerchief and he opened his eyes. They were blue and very bright, the color she had painted the sky in watercolors when she was in school.

You okay? she asked.

He drank a sip of water, took a bite of chocolate, and let Lena help him into the chair. Later he confessed that he'd been less concerned with his weakness than with Lena's strong hands and the smell of her hair. Lena's first thought was: What a gentle face. The first word he whispered was a greeting: "Hello." On this day of all days the last thing he wanted to do was answer more questions, but Lena asked more than the judge and wanted to know everything all at once. Are you alone here in Frankfurt? Are you staying with someone? How long have you been here? How long are you staying? Are you staying at a hotel? What do you do at night?

The man, who was slowly regaining his color, said faintly:

I'm trying to get around the city.

Why "trying"?

Because it's not working. Whenever I leave the hotel I'm back in ten minutes.

Why?

He smiled. There are too many Germans in this city.

Hmmm, Lena said, too many Germans. You can't do much about that—they live here.

Young people aren't the problem, he said. I just can't handle the ones who are my age or older. I stare at them until they stop and ask if we know each other. Then I say: Good God, no—that would be terrible!, and I turn around. Hmmm, Lena said. It could have meant anything. I understand, or: this man is nuts.

She laid her hand on his shoulder and considered. Swimming. Movies. Tom. Wine in the warm summer night. It was a nice plan—but could she leave this poor man all alone in Germany, struggling to take just a few steps? Why didn't he let someone sponsor him here in Frankfurt? Usually all the witnesses were taken care of. Should she take him with her, include him in her plans? Not a good idea. Ten minutes ago the man had tears in his eyes. She looked at him. He looked good. He smiled and let her help him without being ashamed of his weakness. The longer her hand lay on his shoulder, the more curious she became. She didn't know anyone like this man. If he went back to Vienna, she'd miss the chance of getting to know him. May I...Lena said, and at the same time Heiner said Shall we...and then their sentences overlapped: "Buy you a beer this evening?"... "Eat some cream-cake?"

He had first come to Frankfurt a year ago. At the time his feet had been leaden, and the road to the detention center where prisoners were kept during investigation had felt like a second deportation. The judge who escorted him had been kind, but no matter what friendly terms they used for what awaited him—a lineup, a meeting—it didn't make the trip any easier. He was to identify two men who could have killed him whenever they felt like it back then: Josef Klehr and Oswald Kaduk. He was to say what he had seen to their very faces. Kaduk had spent the last five years in prison awaiting trial after a former prisoner had recognized him and denounced him to the authorities. As if nothing had happened, Kaduk had been working as an orderly, just as he had before the war. The patients called him "Papa Kaduk," because he was so friendly. He was a powerful man who still terrified Heiner. What if he suddenly lashed out? Would the judge be able to protect him? His fear of Klehr was more diffuse. The man no longer held a lethal syringe, but the cold fear that had overcome Heiner when the SS-Oberscharführer inspected him still lay in his bones.

The judge reassured him: It will be fine, Mr. Rosseck. Don't worry. When they entered the small interrogation room, the two men were already there, and Heiner saw them for the first time without uniforms, without weapons, away from the surroundings that had given them their power. He exchanged a quick look with Klehr, whom he'd seen every day in the camp. Why the charade? Klehr said coolly. I've never seen that man before in my life. Heiner believed him—how could Klehr recognize him? He was no longer mere skin and bones, his head shaved like all the others. He had let his hair grow and wore a suit, a white shirt and a tie: he was a gentleman.

Of course Klehr didn't know who he was. Klehr stuck out his hand and Heiner took it, although he had planned not to shake hands with any of the men—it was just a reflex. You shake the hand that's held out to you. Klehr was not angry, but enervated by the accusations: Yes, yes, I gave injections, he said. How many times do you want to hear it?...I kept records...everything is in those diaries...yes, 12,400...it was a release for those people, why won't anyone believe me?...in the gas chamber they would have had to suffer for more than eight minutes...but inject them, right in the heart, and they fall over, dead...And this man here—he looked at Heiner again—I've never seen him in my life. Heiner could hardly recognize Klehr, either. He looked like anybody now, though at the time Heiner would have been able to pick him out of a crowd of hundreds, and from any distance.

Kaduk didn't stand up. He threw his head back and looked at Heiner as if to say: What do you want, you little shit? Please, Mr. Rosseck, said the judge, describe your first encounter with Kaduk.

Now he was allowed to speak, and he said what he had planned to say. Everyone there had a specialty, Your Honor, but it's something you can understand only once you've seen it. I remember it so clearly because it was my first day of work, and I had just arrived the day before. Kaduk killed with a truncheon.

The detainee jumped up, fists clenched. Heiner recoiled as Kaduk screamed: Just put it all on me, ha! And suddenly it was him again, the old Kaduk. The bellowing and the "ha" at the beginning or end of a sentence. Ha, they put everything on the little guys, and nothing happens to the higher-ups. They run free and we get life. He stared at the judge. Do you want to know how it was? The judge nodded—that's why we're here. It was how it was, Kaduk screamed. The great commanders shouldn't deny it now. The transports rolled into the camps like rolls hot from the oven—everyone did shifts on the ramp, and of course children went to the gas chambers first, that's logical, and then the mothers who were clinging to the children. But I didn't send anyone, not me—I just watched like a hawk to make sure that none of the condemned snuck off. Yes, sure, I was an attack dog. Working at the camp took a toll on my nerves, believe me, it was hard work. But I wasn't the kind to fall apart—it's only here in the cell that I had a breakdown—and do you know why? Because I'm being tried in a court of double standards.

Heiner pressed himself against the wall. Kaduk was a tough customer. Heiner couldn't let Kaduk see him trembling, no matter what. The judge tried to calm the accused: Sit down, please, Mr. Kaduk, just sit down. When he finally fell back into the chair, Heiner took a deep breath in order to make some sense of the whirl of images in his head, a whirl on which everything depended. His voice was soft and firm. *Kaduk did it with a truncheon*, he said *and Klehr with a needle*.

As the two men who had often come so dangerously close to Heiner in the camp were led out of the interrogation room, the judge pushed Klehr's chair over for Heiner to sit in. Please, Heiner said, let's leave. I can't sit in that chair.

That was a year ago, and now he had to repeat in court what he'd seen. As precisely as possible. When, where, how. The transcript would later state that the questioning of the Viennese witness Heiner Rosseck on the 52nd day of hearings was paused because the witness broke down in tears and was unable to speak. But it wasn't the memories that overpowered him. He could talk about what he had experienced—that was why he had come to Germany. What did him in on that morning was the search for truth in the context of the penal code. He knew that a trial dealt with facts and data, not with feelings, but he had overestimated himself. The judge's tone was reproofing, as if he were questioning some inept witness of a traffic accident. An entire world would have fit between the images Heiner carried inside him and the facts the judge wanted to hear. His skin wasn't thick enough for such a performance. The murderers sat behind him. He didn't need to turn around to know that their faces were sneering and taunting him. Klehr smirked. Kaduk threw his head back insolently. Their lawyers' questions were sharp or smug: Where is this supposed to have happened? On which day, in which month, at noon or at night? How far away were you when you saw this? Ten yards, twenty yards? You were able to recognize a face from a distance of fifty yards? And the weather? Was there snow? Rain? Was it foggy that day? The door through which you say you saw Mr. Klehr giving injections, was it on the right or the left, at the back or the front of the barracks? Was there even a door, or just a curtain in front of the room? Was it brown or blue? It was easy to fluster him. The lawyers for the accused were like the dogs in the camp. Lurking, vicious, ready to spring.

His head turned, and he began to stutter. He broke into tears and asked for a break.

Monika Held, DER SCHRECKEN VERLIERT SICH VOR ORT (This Place Holds No Fear)
sample translation by Anne Posten
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On the evening of the 52nd day of hearings Heiner and Lena were the only two customers in Café Stern. The café was in the Gallus area of town, the same neighborhood as the court. Lena drank wine and Heiner smoked two cigarettes with every coffee. They found the right tone quickly—earnest, cheerful, and already rather familiar since their meeting in the hallway. Heiner let Lena describe the way he had slowly sunk down the wall, and she wanted to know what he had first noticed about her. Your hair on my face, he said. It was like a cool silk cloth. And your scent. Have you ever picked cèpes on a sunny day in September? That’s how your hair smells. Your hands seemed bigger and stronger than they do now, lying on the table like that. A surgeon’s hands. Are you a doctor? He felt good. He hadn’t felt as light as he felt on this evening, with this woman, in a long time. He wanted to please her, to entertain her, he wanted to make her laugh. He liked her laugh—it was easygoing and loud. For Lena he turned his crying fit in court into comedy. He spoke with a Viennese accent. Heiner gestured to the man eating bratwurst next to them. Imagine this: After twenty years this man is summoned and interrogated. Heiner sat up straight and played the defense attorney: How long was the bratwurst that you ate—3 inches, 5 inches, 10 inches? Was the skin notched or smooth? Was it brown or pale, crispy or limp? Hot or cold, or perhaps simply lukewarm? Mr. Witness, what color was the mustard? Was it light yellow, golden, orange, or brown? Mild, spicy, or medium-spicy? Whole-grain or smooth? Or did you eat the sausage without mustard? Was there ketchup or mayonnaise involved? White or dark bread? Was your waiter German or foreign? Heiner was a good actor. He waited for Lena to laugh, but she didn’t laugh. She looked at him as if he’d told a terribly sad story, and he liked that even better. He felt her looking at him as if his nose looked like he had lost quite a few boxing matches, as if his chin, if you looked really closely, was a little crooked. He felt like falling in love, but it would have been a miracle if that were possible in this place, where he had already struggled with so many feelings. Falling in love—what chaos. It was something to fear more than to celebrate. And if she didn’t return his feelings and was just sitting with him out of pity—here, in this city? It would do him in. Better not to see her again. Tender feelings are like young plants. You can just pull them out before they take root.

They sat in Café Stern on the evenings of the 53rd, 54th, and 55th days of the hearings. He told Lena, as if it hardly mattered, that he had been divorced for five years, and that he had a daughter in Vienna—Kaija. He had no contact with her. So he wasn't completely free, but he wasn't strictly attached, either. And you? Lena answered tersely: I live in an apartment alone. I don't have children. I'm attached to Tom. On the 56th day of hearings Heiner walked through the city for a whole hour, led by Lena's hand, and he still wasn't sure whether the hand was only meant to protect him or whether her heart was pounding just like his. He gained confidence, ventured a few shy glances at people and stopped thinking that he had seen every face before. When he appeared in court for the second time, Lena sat in the gallery, listened to the judge's questions, and heard Heiner's clear voice in response. Just knowing she was there gave him strength, but he still felt as if he were walking on a wire suspended over a deep canyon. He couldn't allow himself to fall, not again. He had to simply remember, without seeing any of the images that went along with his memories. Evidence in the eyes of the law: that was all that mattered. Murder, even the murder of thousands, had to have a place, a time, and a date. Where had he seen Klehr? In Block 20? Why there? He worked in Block 21. How did he get from Block 21 to Block 20? Which door had he used? The one on the long side or the one on the short side? Or on the gable side? In what room did Klehr kill people? Was it to the right of the hallway or to the left? Was Klehr alone or were there prisoners in the room? Did Klehr wear an apron during the killings, or a lab coat? Was it purple, red, white, or yellow? Did he have a needle in his hand when the witness saw him? Was it in his right hand or his left? Did the witness see the people who were killed? How many were there? Was it closer to twenty or to a hundred? And where did they put the bodies afterwards? Was there a door between the hall and the room, or just a hanging blanket? How often did killings take place there? Once a week, or every day?

He wanted to be a reliable witness—that was why he had stayed alive. He couldn't let them confuse him. He couldn't think about the men who sat behind him, haunting his every word. He couldn't imagine their eyes, their smiling faces. It cost him an inhuman effort. Kaduk put on a show: he paraded into the courtroom with his hands stiff at his sides and his head thrown proudly back. He ridiculed the court, the witnesses, and even the men next to him in the dock who couldn't remember anything. Klehr laughed and spoke just as he had back then. Selection was called "making the rounds," and killing with the disinfectant Phenol was called

“inoculation.” He said what he thought: the method was cost-effective, odorless, easy to use, and completely dependable. He found the judges obtuse. Why fuss? A quick death is humane! The syringe was hardly empty before the man was dead, he explained. Murder? Your Honor, you couldn’t call these men sick. In plain German: They weren’t ill, they were half dead.

Heiner made it through his second testimony, barely stuttered, and did not let them confuse him. He did not break down. He was proud of himself, but only made peace with his performance later, after he had written down what he actually wanted to say. Whenever he was asked, even years later, he could recite the text like a ballad.

Your Honor!

I worked as a typist in Block 21, the prisoner’s infirmary. That’s where I learned to use a typewriter, practically overnight, otherwise I wouldn’t be standing here.

The typing room is on the ground floor of Block 21, just on the left as you come in. Sixteen men type constantly, day and night. It’s piece-work. We type death records. The first shift lasts from six in the morning until six at night and the second begins at six at night and ends at six in the morning. Death records, you have to understand, are written only for people who have numbers—those are the ones actually admitted to the camps. There are the fewest of them on every transport. No records have to be written for people who are going to be killed immediately. Several times a day an SS man brings us a list with names and numbers of the dead. We don’t know how these people died. We can choose from thirty different illnesses. In my typewriter people die of heart failure, phlegmons and pneumonia, spotted fever and typhus, embolisms, influenza, circulatory collapse, stroke, cirrhosis of the liver, scarlet fever, diphtheria, whooping cough, and kidney failure. Under no circumstances is anyone tortured, beaten to death, or shot at Auschwitz. No one starves, dies of thirst; no one is hanged, no one gassed. We write death notices twenty-four hours a day, eight hundred to a thousand every shift, and we write doctor’s reports for the relatives—but it’s all an empty clattering of keys.

Here Heiner paced his speech as if chanting a hasty Our Father. You could see him typing: Prisoner 128.439, Otto Schnur, born 9. 24. 1905, previous residence Hannover, admitted to KL Auschwitz on 10.19.1942. Period. On 11.28.1942 Prisoner 128.439, Otto Schnur, was admitted to the camp infirmary. Period. A clinical and radiological examination found typhus, which resulted in cardiac failure, and he collapsed and died on 12.2.1942 at 19:35. Period. If the

deceased was a citizen of the German Reich, a copy of the report was sent to the relatives. I don't know what Prisoner Otto Schnur actually died of.

Your Honor!

Do you know what phlegmons are? Phlegmons are inflammations of cellular tissue, primarily in the legs, as a result of hunger and filth. The legs swell—they get thick like Doric columns and the feet start to look like cannonballs. The skin cracks and pus is secreted through the cavities. And—here he holds his nose—it smells rotten and sweet...you can't imagine the stink! Sometimes I smell it in my dreams, and I get sick and have to vomit. Otherwise, I have to say, the work was perfectly pleasant. Except that sometimes it broke your heart. You come across the number of someone you saw in the morning and now it's afternoon and he's dead. What happened to him? Was he shot? Did he get his head bashed in? When it's for someone you know, when you have to invent a cause of death for a friend—that's a terrible thing.

Your Honor!

The death-books from the infirmary in the main camp survived. 130,000 numbers from the summer of '42 to the summer of '44. It's hard to believe what human beings can get used to. We ate our bread next to half-decayed people. We amused ourselves. Sometimes we made jokes and laughed.

Now, for Klehr. It's as if I saw him every day. When Klehr made his selection, the prisoners had to leave the infirmary naked and stand in the corridor, each holding his medical card. The cards were laid on the table before Klehr. He smoked a pipe and singled out sick prisoners with its stem: Step forward! You and you and you and you. Klehr picked up the first card. He had time. He looked at the card. The entries revealed how long the person who stood naked before him had been in the infirmary. He puffed on the pipe. Fourteen days! He put the card aside, picked up the next one, shook his head. Just two days in the infirmary and already a *Muselmann*!¹ He set the card aside. No one had ever survived more than fourteen days in the

¹ *Muselmann* (pl. *Muselmänner*, from the German, meaning Muslim; in Polish *Muzułman*) was a derogatory term used among captives of World War II Nazi concentration camps to refer to those suffering from a combination of starvation (known also as "hunger disease") and exhaustion and who were resigned to their impending death. The Muselmann prisoners exhibited severe emaciation and physical weakness, an apathetic listlessness regarding their own fate, and unresponsiveness to their surroundings. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muselmann>)

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infirmary. During every selection one of us typists sat out in the corridor. Klehr announced the numbers and we wrote them down. These were the numbers of people he had chosen to die. The people were still alive while we were pecking out their death records. Dead of heart attack, dead of phlegmons, pneumonia, kidney failure, spotted fever, typhus, embolism, influenza, circulatory collapse...Everyone whose cards we had sorted out was picked up and brought to Klehr in Block 20.

Your Honor, in Block 20, Klehr injected Phenol into the hearts of the people he'd selected. He killed them in the "dressing room"—that was what they called the room behind the curtain. There was a small table with the needle and the Phenol. Next to it was a chair where the victim was forced to sit. Most of them were so weak and their minds so run down that they just let themselves be killed. But one time I was there when a man cried out and begged for his life and tried to protect his heart with both hands. Then Klehr ordered his assistants, who were other prisoners, to twist his arms so that the right arm lay against his back and the left could be pressed to his mouth. Then it was quiet. The area around his heart was free.

Once I had to deliver a message to Block 20. The curtain to the "dressing room" wasn't closed. I saw Klehr with the needle in his hand. He looked into my eyes, annoyed, as if I had interrupted his breakfast. He lifted the needle and snarled at me. Beat it—or do you want one too?

We had this crazy fear of Klehr because he had no anger towards us. He killed with a light touch, and without hatred.

Your Honor!

The perpetrators of these crimes weren't sick in the head—they weren't any crazier than you or me. If this murderous playground in Poland, if I may call it that, hadn't existed, Klehr would have stayed a carpenter and Kaduk an orderly. Or a firefighter. Dirlewanger would have remained a lawyer, fat Jupp a dumb gangster, and Palitzsch, if he hadn't died in the war, would have been Chief of Police or Secretary of State, and Boger would have been manager of a local insurance company. Or a teacher with a secret lust for punishing children. He wouldn't have built the Boger swing. The perpetrators, Your Honor, were young and ambitious. They wanted to

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succeed at what they did. What it was didn't matter. They acted like employees, hungry for praise and advancement. Sadists aren't the most dangerous. The most dangerous are the normal people.

Your Honor, if you and I were to meet again in such a place, I would stand among the prisoners. You don't know where you'll stand, I'm one step ahead of you there.

At this point Heiner paused to free himself from the sentences that could have driven him mad. End of the ballad.

Your Honor. You hear our stories. You record them. They touch your mind. They touch your intelligence. Perhaps even your imagination. But you're not one inch closer to us than you were before the trial. Nothing in the world can bridge the gap between your imaginings and our experiences.