

Larissa Boehning, *Nichts davon stimmt, aber alles ist wahr*

(Suggested English title: *Nothing Like the Truth*)

Translated by Elizabeth Janik

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Tricks

He stood at my apartment door. In his immaculately pressed, dark blue suit, brightened by the evening light coming through a hallway window, he might have materialized as if by magic. He certainly couldn't have climbed the steps to the fourth floor. He must have glided here on an invisible cable.

He looked at me and smiled. A smile that said: I know you. But how did I know him? I wasn't sure. The way he stood there with a smile that faded at the corners of his lips, that brief glance at the dingy linoleum on the stairs. He seemed oddly familiar – like a forgotten childhood friend, a former coworker, someone you used to say hello to at the university.

He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out his phone, held it out to me as if he were going to record my voice and said emphatically, "Here. That's her. I'm looking for her. Is she with you?"

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I took the phone from his hand and saw the photo of a cat. The very same cat, unfortunately, that was sitting directly behind my kitchen door, claws retracted, softly pawing at the wood.

“Haven’t seen her,” I said.

For the past several days she had been lying on the mat in front of my apartment door. When I came home from the agency yesterday evening, I stepped over her, and she then she got up and followed me into the kitchen.

Even before I set down my bag, I mixed some water and milk, pulled up a kitchen chair and observed how the cat sniffed the edge of the bowl. I lifted the strap over my shoulder and let the bag sink carefully to the floor, as if I were trying not to disturb an insomniac. There was no disturbing the cat. She licked the bowl clean, pushing the porcelain around in front of her. Then she lifted her head, looked around, and wiped her whiskers with a paw. A shiver ran across my arms and legs, a shiver of relaxation, and together we seemed to sink into a state of bliss – the opposite of my usual pace at the agency. It wouldn’t have taken much more, and just like the cat, I would have wet my hands with my tongue, wiping them across my face as a sort of mysterious cleansing ritual. She jumped onto the foot of my bed and lay down, curling up as though she planned to stay there for the rest of her life.

The man didn’t look much older than I was. I handed back his phone and held on firmly to the door. He took a step towards me. He looked nothing like a rumpled office

worker on his way home, he was clean-shaven. If he had worked a day in this fine suit, he must have been standing the whole time, or maybe his job required only cool, effortless motion. His hairline was receding above his temples. Brown eyebrows, the same shade as his hair. A soft curl touched his forehead. He hadn't toned his body at the gym, instead he exuded a more basic, fierce athleticism. His eyes were bright, as if they were illuminated from behind. He looked like an optimist who had been stunned by an unexpected blow. Grief for his missing cat.

"I hope she didn't run into the street."

"Oh no, in that traffic," I said, and I was convinced this could have happened.

"The guy on the second floor just said: collateral damage."

"That's awful. Do you live in the building?"

"In back, on the top floor." He moistened his lower lip with his tongue.

My stomach collapsed, as if I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. A damp gloss on his lips, soft and inviting. I reached for my throat in an attempt to hide the red spots that appeared, that had always appeared, when I told a lie – usually a white one – that set gears into motion.

"I thought I heard her through your kitchen window."

"Those sounds? In our head," I said. "Sensory illusions." My lies seemed to be entertaining him. "Did you try everyone else in the building?"

"Actually, I was sure that if anyone had her, they'd bring her back. Wouldn't you?"

“I should think so,” I said. He looked at my doorbell, bent over and plucked a fine tuft of cat hair from my doormat. Now I was having trouble breathing. My little white lie had become a heavy motor vehicle. I had set it in motion, now it was turning around and heading back at me, at full force and without brakes.

“I’m not home much,” I said. “Who knows what goes on in front of my door.”

He stepped onto the mat.

“Somehow I have a feeling that she’s with you.” He smiled, again so charming, but also disappointed.

“I’m sorry,” I said hesitantly, “I’d be happy to have a cat in my apartment.”

“If I understand you correctly, she’s doing well.”

“Yes,” I said, “if she were here, she would be doing well.”

“That’s a lot of hypotheticals,” he laughed. The laugh caught me off guard. It wasn’t sarcastic, and it held a wide expanse of sadness.

“I do have a great sense of possibility.”

“Could it be that my cat is here, but somehow you’ve convinced yourself she isn’t – and it’s impossible for me to prove otherwise?”

“You could take a look in my apartment.”

He nodded.

“But maybe you’re really the cable guy, and you’re checking to see if I’m getting service I haven’t paid for. How do I know it’s your cat?”

His amusement disappeared, giving way to a concentrated, serious look. His earnestness moved me. From now on I only wanted to tell him the truth.

“Funny,” he said with a restraint that reminded me of my father when he would say ‘too bad,’ years ago, when I hadn’t met his silent expectations. Too bad – you’ve missed your chance, there’s no second try.

“Yeah, it’s funny. I can’t shake the feeling that I’m right.”

He pressed his lips together. “I’m going home. If you want, you can bring her to me later. I’d like that. The other side of the courtyard, fifth floor, Matthias Thies.”

A few days later I saw him through the window of Brazilian Coffee, a small café across the street from our building. He sat with one shoulder leaning against the glass, bright-colored pillows behind him. I saw his profile, in a moment of deep concentration, as he read the newspaper spread out before him on the table. He turned the page, a rolling wave that came to rest against the window. On the table, a tall glass with milk froth and a fountain of tulips that tumbled over the sides of a vase. I saw myself approach the window pane, iridescent, like the rest of the world around me. It was as though I had entered the freeze frame of a movie. He didn’t wait for my reaction, but when I moved, the film started rolling again, and there was at least the chance that I could confess to having lied to him, all because his cat had slipped into the emptiness

with such tender devotion, trust, and loyal affection. Through her, I found something that I had lost long ago.

As if he had already seen me out of the corner of his eye, he stood up as I entered the café. I remembered the magnetic pull and the rejection that followed, how he stood before my door, my growing desperation to invite him in, just so I could stay within the thrilling atmosphere of our game. I was so caught up that his easy manner irritated me: He took a step towards me and extended his hand.

My first thought was: He knows that I lied to him, but he's generous enough not to mention it. We spoke haltingly. Not once did he mention the cat. I had difficulty talking around her. I was trying so hard not to think about the cat, I couldn't think of anything else.

Matthias Thies said, suddenly: "I have to go."

As a reflex, I said: "Yes, me too."

Then he asked, almost as an aside, as he reached for his bag: "And what are you doing this evening?"

Buzzing with euphoria, I flew through the day. I flew through gray, deserted city streets that sprawled across the video screen walls in the basement of the agency. I flew with a young couple across canyons of concrete, spun around my own axis in a stadium-

sized parking lot, and I perched on the middle of the backseat so that I could see both of their profiles as well as the great perspective on all sides. No one was in the city except us. Then I saw the couple kissing close up and in reverse, as if I were now sitting on the front hood and staring right at them. In the background, a sunset glowed in the chasms of sky carved between the buildings. The music swelled – Rihanna, I thought, but a remix with extra bass. Jochen, the best of all our SFX guys, asked me whether the client didn't want a less dramatic sky above the city. It didn't seem dramatic to me. It looked just right. But I remembered what the client had said: Real Emotion. That's what he was looking for. "It's about the couple," I said to Jochen. "The sky reflects their happiness."

"So it's not too much."

"They're both really happy, don't you think?"

"Jule," said Jochen, sounding like a teacher who had been drilling multiplication tables, and I still didn't get it. I thought the actors were convincing. They were unbelievably good at demonstrating their love. For themselves and for their car. The client had said: we're down to earth. Our products are solid and genuine. The exterior shouldn't be ideal. Think about the city's scars, and the ruts along the road. Plenty of potholes too. Our vehicle is built for harsh reality. And for a couple who harbors no illusions. "Keep it real!" was the closing tagline.

"Okay. Let's replace the sunset with a stormier sky. But not too green, so it doesn't look like a nuclear accident," I said.

Jochen took the mouse, clicked, selected an image from one of his collections of endless lists, and then showed me the new version. I liked sitting with him in the basement, not only as a respite from the summer heat, but also because he never made us – the writers and ideas people from the top floors – feel like we had to come up with small talk. We could sit beside each other the whole day and discuss only what was essential. He worked and I observed, as silent as a longtime couple who needed only a few words each day, small gestures of attention, to feel like their relationship was secure.

He had given the sky a slightly more noxious color and made the exterior more forbidding, somehow colder and rougher, with a few added imperfections – crumbling plaster, a touch of smog – and the couple became the embodiment of happiness in their new car. They kissed one another with utter devotion, real emotion, real intimacy, the precious gift of love. The final image, accompanied by the reminder to “Keep it real!”, filled me with a fragile hope. I believed in our invention of confidence.

“Incredible,” said Matthias in the morning, still soft and groggy, just after waking up and turning towards me. “That’s never happened to me before.”

A fly circled over my bed, its buzzing far too ordinary for what had just happened to us. Since the cat and her food had come to my apartment, there were a lot of flies around.

“Me neither,” I whispered.

“Crazy.” He kissed me.

“What should we do now?” The fly stopped buzzing.

“Don’t think too much,” he said. “Just go with it.”

He touched my face, tracing the arch of my eyebrows with one finger, across my cheekbones, down to my lips, outlining my mouth. He let his fingers travel across my throat, over my shoulders, highlighting my body in a way that amazed me, probably because I had hardly noticed it for the last two years, except as an appendage to my head, a necessary mode of transportation for carrying my spirit to the agency.

“I’ve got something to confess,” I said.

“Your boyfriend’s on the way.”

“I have your cat.”

“What cat?” he asked, smiling his sad, beautiful smile.

“Yours.”

“I don’t have a cat.”

I had to laugh, and it came in a burst that was too intense for the quiet contentment that had settled between us. But he demolished my lie so elegantly. So charming, how he freed me from the dilemma.

“I really don’t have a cat,” he said with a grin, a kind of double-decker grin, restrained below, playful on top.

“She’s moved in. But maybe she’ll change her mind, and move out again. She’s welcome to stay as long as she wants. As you want.”

“I can’t decide that.”

“You can visit her whenever you visit me.”

“So you’re throwing me out.”

“Unfortunately,” I said and kissed him, “otherwise we won’t be able to see each other again.”

“You’re running a fever,” he said and kissed my forehead, “and you didn’t sleep all night.”

I closed my eyes, smelled myself in his kisses, and tried to numb my sense of responsibility. It wasn’t working.

He took my telephone from the night table and held it out to me. There was something so persuasive about his movement that I hesitated again.

“No,” I said, “I really have to go.”

I could sense he disapproved, and I didn't want to disappoint him. I put off the decision again, we showered together, couldn't get enough of each other. I stole a glance at the clock in the bathroom mirror.

I went into the kitchen, while he showered again, and made coffee. The cat wandered through the apartment, heading right towards him when he left the bathroom. He bent down and rubbed the scruff of her neck.

"Don't move," he said, sitting across from me at the kitchen table.

I couldn't sit still, I was too nervous, daylight made everything so awkward. I wanted to shut off the usual flow of my morning routine, but I stood under the clock's watchful eye. I paced around the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and beheld a rainbow of marmalade jars, wishing that Matthias would come and decide for me, reaching past me to take one out. He came over to me, his freshly showered body beneath a white t-shirt. He pushed the refrigerator door shut with his shoulder and embraced me. It didn't seem strange, just attractive, that he was doing almost exactly what I had wished for.

"Come on, stay with me," he said softly, "say it's an emergency."

"An emergency," I mused.

"You do have a great sense of possibility."

"But I'm such a bad liar. I always feel like everyone knows it's not the truth."

He began to kiss me, moving down my throat kiss by kiss, along the wide neckline of my sweater. He demolished my hesitation. I felt myself in every one of his caresses,

like an eerie, beautiful pain, a slowly awakening memory of something that had sunk deep down, and now, after a brilliant return, was lulling me into a pleasant kind of stupor.

“So,” he said between kisses.

I returned his kisses with the sudden confidence that this was right, completely right, it felt and fit exactly right. There was no room for too many words or complicated sentences in my head, the only thing that fit was the word emergency, traveling through the black surface of my telephone into the secretary’s ear – an emergency, no problem Juliane, don’t worry, everything’s fine, we’ll see you later, of course, see you later. It was that simple. He made it that simple, everything would take care of itself.

I’m not someone who talks a lot. When something occurs to me that I could say, I think: is it worth it? No, it’s not. And Matthias had the ability to say whatever it was that, just seconds before, I’d thought: wouldn’t it be nice if someone would say that. Hearing whatever I’d just been thinking didn’t seem odd. Rather, I took it as a sign of how completely he understood me. We went out to eat almost every evening, and sometimes I observed us like an outsider sitting at the next table. There were no uncomfortable silences, and we didn’t make pointless small talk. If we had been aircraft designers, we’d be talking about flight, not engineering. As attorneys, we wouldn’t get

mired in the minutiae of our cases. We'd debate whether creative interpretation of the law was as important as dogmatic consistency.

I learned that he worked as a product manager for an online business. Its product had to do with the manipulation of chance – the chance that two intelligent people, who fit perfectly together, would meet. He talked briefly about matching algorithms, point scores, questionnaires, formulas, and then he asked what I thought: In the future, would chance be the only element left in our lives that couldn't be manipulated? Or could *kairos* – the one-time chance, the opportune moment, the magical blink of an eye that changes everything – be brought under our control with intensive practice and training, that is, through the right kind of exercise, or even artificial intelligence?

"Hmm," I said.

"We're about to implement a program that will compare faces and identify the points of congruence that are necessary for two people to *see* each other and recognize themselves."

"But no one is looking for their mirror image."

"They are. We all look for partners who resemble ourselves."

"But not exactly."

"How do you resemble me?" he asked, leaning forward and pushing the base of his wine glass towards me. With the same movement, I pushed my glass towards him.

The bowls of the glasses clinked softly together, meeting halfway, the vibration moving out from the center of the table.

“We drink at the same pace,” I asserted.

“We eat at the same pace.”

His enthusiasm for the competition was apparent.

“I eat like a snail,” I countered.

“You think as quickly as you drink.”

“Is that part of your algorithm for the manipulation of chance?” I asked. “The rhythm of a person’s movement through life?” He reached for my hands, which were resting to the side of my plate, as if they didn’t quite belong to me. He brought my hands together beneath his, a cave. “We have the same rhythm. That’s where chance comes in. That’s where chance needs a bit of help. So everything works out.” He looked at me. That strange power of his: In a way I felt pulled out of time, as if we were part of another reality – so tightly sealed off from the rest of the world, nothing else could break through.

He asked what I enjoyed most about my work. I said that I enjoyed producing nothing but illusions all day long. Different realities, parallel worlds that allowed us to believe we were someone other than ourselves. Where other laws prevailed – not just attraction, repulsion, chronology, the familiar rules of physics.

Sometimes it felt like I was moving through a universe of loneliness, I told him, through flattened time, a tunnel that had room for one person only. Even the couples that I observed seemed to be living light years apart. Isolated planets, all of us, always in need of someone else's radiance. Fewer sources of light meant that the things we bought for ourselves had to shine that much brighter – cars, telephones, watches, and tablet computers, and even our shoes had to glisten as if their main function was lighting our way.

"I think there's too much darkness in the world," he said – really? Yes, but more because he happened to like starting this kind of conversation, cool and analytical, a conversation that didn't get too personal. A healthy sense of detachment made the conversation so much clearer.

"You didn't slip away from me in the dark," he said softly.

"You stood in front of my door. I couldn't slip away."

He smiled and then glanced to the side, as if something had darted swiftly across the room, but not swift enough for him.

"We still have to figure out the situation with your cat," I said.

His forehead twitched, an irritated flicker, as if he had just remembered something that had happened a long time ago, something that I had said to him but he had forgotten. Something inconsequential, hardly worth mentioning.

"It's all good," he said, squeezing my hands. "All good."

But his voice seemed controlled, there was a cold flatness concealing something that wasn't allowed to rise to the surface. Anger or fear, I wasn't sure which, so I resolved to bring back his cat as soon as possible.

In the last few years, I had been alone or together only briefly with men who weren't interested in commitment. These men and I always seemed to meet on uneven ground. It didn't take long for one of us to stumble over the edge of a trapdoor that lay open and waiting. And so we'd set each other free. With a few more bumps and bruises, but not completely desolate. Perhaps taking greater precautions to ignore our reflections in the mirror – and the disappearance of our youth into an inexplicable time warp. Childless, I moved in a vacuum that, like all vacuums, was devoid of life. From my carefully balanced vantage point, remote from life, I dreamt that I might be able to make time stop. If only I didn't look too closely, if only I made sure that nothing intruded from outside, or else the ground might open up, right where I stood.

"I wanted you," he said as we went out, and he put his arm around me and slid his hand through my arm, softly touching the side of my breast with his fingers. "Yes, exactly. Since I first saw you around the building. Since then, I had to get to know you."

"Why?"

He took my face in his hands, looked at me, and his gaze penetrated my bones. A gaze like a military commander who had brought chance under his control: I came, I saw, and I conquered.

“You’re used to getting what you want,” I said.

“Not always,” he said, tenderly kissing my ear, “but with you, I have to.”