

Martin Lechner, *Petty Cash [Kleine Kassa]* (2014)

Residenz Verlag

Sample translation by Seiriol Dafydd, commissioned by New Books in German

pp. 5-20

Contact: Nina Stren, n.stren@residenzverlag.at

Even though it was wrong, wrong, absolutely wrong, he still ran down the embankment with the briefcase. He'd soon disappeared into the grass. All he had to do was drop to the ground and no one would be able to see him, not from the road or from the woods rising up green and black behind him. All was quiet now. All except for the sound of his steps in the whispering grass. Quiet and warm. He opened his jacket and checked his shirt. The patches under his armpits were so dark it looked as if he was bleeding. He fumbled around and opened the top three buttons and blew on his chest until he felt dizzy. Ideally he'd have liked to tear the sticky fabric from his skin. He looked at his watch. Only thirty minutes to go? He started running, thrusting his knees through the tufted grass and pulling the case behind him over the dry, rustling waves. Fifty paces later he came to a halt and stooped over wheezing.

Once his breath had settled he licked his hand and smoothed his ruffled parting. Where should he go? He looked back. The sign towered high behind the embankment. The bus stop and the billboard were still in view, the advert with the girl and the hotel, which had almost completely faded away in the glaring sun. But where was the road? He craned his neck but the embankment blocked all view. On the spur of the moment he placed the case on the ground, the trampled blades of grass reached out in all directions from beneath it. He placed one foot by the handle, lifted himself up carefully, set the other foot alongside the first, and could see the asphalt again, the road from Niedergellersen and back to Linderstedt. A dark raised form set against the fields, the road traversed the country in a string of curves. The light stung his eyes despite the milky clouds. He could feel the security locks pressing up against the soles of his shoes.

Suddenly, hardly a kilometre away, a vehicle came into view. It sped towards him in deathly silence. A light-blue minivan, whose elevated seats surely offered a particularly good and particularly extensive view. He grabbed the case and ran. Grasses, stalks, flowers, red and blue and yellow, swiped at his face. He shot off towards the forest, bent well forward so that only his back was still visible, allowing him, with any luck, to pass as an animal. His breath was pounding. He looked up for a second. Just another hundred metres, then the forest would swallow him up. But when the engine noises, which had at first only intruded on the rustle of his flight as a distant purr, rose to a thunderous din, he threw himself to the ground, lay flat, lay still, pressed his eyes shut. Until only the grass was to be heard, and the meadow with all its susurrating, chirping meadow sounds, and his heart beating against the case.

As he got up he forced himself not to look at his clothes, to coldly ignore any stains, grubby clumps of earth or squashed snails, and to walk onwards. He forced himself to simply continue, gaze fixed stubbornly on the forest, whose tree trunks, which from a distance had appeared to merge into a solid wall, now slowly separated and directed his gaze into an enormous space cut through by dusty, slanting strips of light.

He looked back once more, prayed that the wind would soon obliterate the track of trampled grass, then entered the forest. The cool air flowed over his sweat-bathed torso. To warm himself he pulled his jacket closed and marched onwards as quickly as he could. But since it was impossible to guess what might be lying in wait under the leaves – shards or branches or even hedgehogs – he tried to tread as carefully as possible. After all, once they'd suffered a single scratch, you could throw even the finest leather shoes away immediately, no matter what ridiculous sum you'd forked out for them. Miraculously, they'd survived the dash through the meadow unharmed. But despite all the care he took with his footing, every now and again he abruptly sank ankle-deep into the foliage. When he paused for the third time to peel the musty leaves from his shoe, he noticed that, apart from his own sounds, all was still. In the meadow he had hoped that his steps would be drowned out completely by the surf-like noise that rolled through the crowns of the trees, by the scurrying of deer, by the woodpecker's clatter and so on and so forth, but as soon as he stopped moving, everything became quiet.

He hurried onwards and climbed over moss-covered giants that had been felled by lightning; he accidentally grabbed at blue-spotted mushrooms, shook the mush from his hands, splattering it about; he kicked at the ivy tendrils that twined around his ankles as if they wanted to rip his legs from his body, before sinking again into the ground – an unsavoury, squelching morass; he cried in rage at his second shit-brown trouser leg, buffed his shoe wildly, and trudged on through the slowly dying light.

He jerked his watch from his sleeve with a punching motion and switched on the dial light. Only ninety seconds to go! The third, the second, even the first time, when he still had to prove himself, he'd handed over the case at exactly the right time. By the second time he'd even been allowed to collapse onto the big green sofa before pushing the case over the table to Herr Kraus, who, as the boss had repeatedly explained, was the only trustworthy person in matters of safekeeping in this otherwise depraved Heidekreis district. Herr Kraus, sitting in an armchair across the table, clicked open the lid of the case. A small desk lamp – the only light in this room rammed to the brim with groaning, decrepit furniture – was bent over the contents, humming, and Herr Kraus disappeared below the glowing edge of the lid. When he finally surfaced again, now illuminated from below, his face intersected by the dark shadows of chin and nose, he revealed his incisors and appeared to be very pleased with the goods that Georg had brought along. Or had he simply checked the case for size because he wanted to put something in it himself? After all, the case hadn't been that heavy, quite the contrary, and nothing had been moving about inside. But then the delicate goods had probably been securely lashed. Herr Kraus shut the lid, started humming a tune and went to the back room, the so-called counter room. A cold blue light shone out as he opened the door, a cupboard that came up to his head was visible, a safe maybe, a laboratory cabinet perhaps, it was hard to tell exactly. In any case it must have been that masterpiece of safekeeping engineering of which Herr Spick had so often spoken and that could be cracked by no one and no thing, neither by a lightning-fast, stampeding police squad nor a parcel of explosives accidentally detonated inside. Whatever it was that Georg had just couriered or would now courier, if they preferred not to reveal what it was then he also preferred not to know. But it was strange that Herr Kraus, despite the secrecy, had left the door to the counter room half open and now spoke so loudly on the phone with Herr Spick, extolling the latter's apprentice as reliability incarnate and an assistant deserving of appropriate remuneration, that Georg could not help but overhear.

But that was all in the past. The second hand jerked its way around the circle. In less than thirty-eight seconds, he, Georg, Oskar Spick's apprentice, would be at the mercy of the world,

nothing more than one of those beggars and criminals whose outstretched hands the boss was itching to nail to their heads. He ran through the undergrowth with his watch held right in front of his eyes. Thirty seconds to go. He dashed through a bush, got caught, fell, tore himself free and shot across a clearing of wave-like, undulating fern. Ten seconds to go, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four. Suddenly he lost his footing and slid on a carpet of oily leaves, shrieking into the void. He crashed into a tree trunk. In a daze, he got back on his feet and wanted to sprint onwards, never mind where, just off and away. But then he faltered. A few paces up ahead. Chalky white. Something was peeping out from the greenery. The air flowed cold down his throat. He stepped closer. Slowly, carefully, he moved the leaves aside, then let them go again in fright. Battered to the ground, on his back, with blood splattered over his shirt and a dark brown wound on his forehead, there lay a young lad, pupils rolled up towards the sky in a skewed stare. Georg looked around him in a frenzy to see whether perhaps ... but no, there was no one around. He moved the fern to one side again. He'd seen thousands of dead bodies, bodies sawn to pieces in the most nauseating ways, torsos perforated by machine gun salvos, clumps of carcass salvaged after years in a foaming pond to be immediately and expertly examined by some scruffy TV inspector. But he'd never seen a corpse, a real dead body, not to mention touched one. He extended an index finger and moved it unsteadily towards the stranger's forehead, tentatively at first because he didn't know whether he would, a moment later, suddenly convulse with nausea, with horror, with fear. He'd always thought that this first touch would disturb him so much that after the first convulsion, when he opened his eyes again, his vomited bowels would be dangling from his mouth. But he was calm, he was totally calm now. What are you looking at, my friend? He followed the gaze that stared out from under his hand up towards the light-pierced canopy of the trees and felt the crusted edges of the wound beneath the tip of his finger. You only feel a tap, that's what they say, when a bullet enters the skull. His glance was drawn towards the mouth. The tongue was resting in the darkness. A violet rag with white spots. It looked like it was stretching!

He jumped up screaming, sped off, branches scratching him in the face, puddles splattering from under his feet, he threw himself over piles of leaves and twisting roots, got himself in a tangle, crashed into the trees, and ran, ran, ran until he burst through the last bush, fleeing out onto a bone-dry field that lay there breathless and cool in the late sunlight. Suddenly he stumbled and rammed head first into a furrow.

It was already beginning to get dark by the time he was woken by the sound of an engine. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a man veering across the field towards him on a wheezing moped. He didn't dare to turn his head, and he certainly didn't dare to run off even though he'd certainly have been able to slip away again into the forest, because a cast-iron bell clapper swung around in his skull, beating thunderously against the sides, at the slightest hint of movement. All he could do was hope that this man, whose helmet shone alarm-red in the cloud of swirled-up dust, would just ride past. But the man was making a beeline for him. When he finally stopped, not ten metres from him, the sounds of Heidekreis FM could be heard droning from a radio tied to the handle bars. Georg closed his eyes. Perhaps the man thought he was sleeping and would just leave him there in peace. Before the radio fell silent the presenter's voice went into a crescendo like a boxing referee's and announced that it would be a fantastically crazy weekend, sorry, crazily fantastic, yes, a truly non-stop weekend was in store for their listeners in the Heidekreis. Then the only noise was the quiet rattle of the engine and the man's footsteps as he approached slowly.

Georg soon felt a tapping on his chest, a hand clasped his throat and pressed on his larynx, only for a second but enough to make him gag. He strove stubbornly to prevent a croak of suffocation from escaping from his throat, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, he counted so that he could concentrate better, but without success. Oh, he thought, as the pain throbbed away, he would so much rather lie there motionless looking up at the rapidly darkening blue than muddle his way through some stupid game of Twenty Questions. But when he opened his eyes he noticed that the man was still wearing his helmet and hadn't heard him. With his visor steamed up from his panting, the man was listening with his ear at Georg's flies. Before the man could yank down the zip, which he'd already grabbed, and start rummaging around for injuries he didn't have, Georg rapped on the red, plastic shell. The man shot up in a start. His fingers splayed wide apart, he stood there rigidly for a moment before suddenly grabbing Georg by the collar and dragging him over the field like a pig bound for slaughter.

'I was sleeping!' cried Georg, struggling to get to his feet. No chance. Just as he began to fear that he was going to be dragged around until his head burst open, the man dropped him and stared down at him dumbly. Georg crawled out from between the thick, pillar-like legs and picked himself up.

'I hope I didn't startle you', he said. Instead of answering, the man wrenched the helmet from his head and shook his soft, darkly perfused cheeks. Georg puffed up his chest. Very well then, even though there was still a relentless pulsing inside his skull, and even though being dragged over the ground had left countless frayed holes in his suit, and even though he would ideally have liked to evaporate and waft away invisibly, he would nevertheless be polite and thank the man. Anyone who says thank you politely, especially to a beast like this one with his trousers at half-mast, leaves the impression of being harmless, and anyone who leaves the impression of being harmless is quickly forgotten. But before Georg could get a word out, the man laid his warm, sweaty paw on the scruff of his neck.

'Now, now', he said and began to knead Georg's neck. He must have thought that Georg was going to cry. But it was just a speck of dust that had got into his eye. Anyway, he could think whatever he liked. The kneading was so wonderful that Georg would gladly have squirted some onion juice into his eyes just to make the fellow carry on.

'It's alright', he said finally, dabbing away the tears. He didn't know why this was, but he couldn't help but think of how he'd sometimes sat at the small desk above the stairs, where otherwise only the boss sat, and from which vantage point one could see the narrow shop, which stretched out towards the display window like a hose, almost in its entirety. This was where he had to study the lists, lists of screws, lists of tools, lists of knives, and where the boss had got him fully involved in the organisation and safeguarding of the business right from the very beginning of his apprenticeship. Now that really was quite different to just sitting at the till yawning or polishing the knives in the cellar. As soon as his head started buzzing so badly from the numbers that he was in danger of making a mistake, he would look up and watch Herr Spick. His boss usually marched along the rows of shelves, his hands placed on his back. Every now and again he would tighten the straps of his blue overalls. So it was all the more astonishing to see how elegantly he could move, almost like a dancer, each time a customer came in through the door. How he could inconspicuously divert a wilful customer towards the shelf of newly ground kitchen knives with the lightest of touches to the small of the back as they were heading for the door. Or how, when he demonstrated the characteristics and handling of an axe, he would casually remind the customer that this tool for

felling, debranching and debarking trees and for chopping, hewing and preparing wood should be held, unlike the common hatchet, with both hands on the handle, which was also known as the haft.

By now the moped man had ceased all movement and was looking out silently over the landscape, so rapt that Georg was reluctant to disturb him despite the fact that the man had unfortunately forgotten to remove his hand from Georg's nape. Georg was just about to stumble to the side deliberately as if he was blacking out – a plausible consequence of being dragged around and abruptly jerked upright by a maniac – when the man moved his hand of his own volition and drew an arc over the entire landscape, the horizon of which was already devoured by twilight.

'All of this, I make sure things are in order here', his face was a red silhouette against the front of the darkened forest. Georg nodded and allowed a moment to elapse.

'Now I have say goodbye', he then said and, clapping his hands quietly, got moving, 'thanks a lot for waking me up.'

He'd already walked a few paces when the man asked in a powerful voice that could presumably be heard far away over the surrounding fields: 'You have to go in such a hurry?'

'Sadly!', called Georg and, instead of turning around and indicating that he might after all be persuaded to stay for a chin wag in which his whole life story could potentially be wormed out of him, he looked, his arm angled visibly to the side so that the man comprehended the rush he was in, at his watch. It was six o'clock exactly. It seemed to him as if the ground gave way softly under each step he took. Herr Spick would have long called Herr Kraus by now. Maybe he was already in his car racing along the entire route. Maybe he was already at the other side of the forest, having long discovered the tracks Georg had left on the meadow, prowling through the undergrowth, armed with a powerful torch whose long, white finger bored deeply into the darkness of the woods. Suddenly, as if he'd poked a wall socket, Georg jerked to a halt. You've got to be kidding! But hardly had he flung himself around to look for the spot where he had come out of the forest, for some tracks that led to the wide-open mouth, the trembling tongue, the fern, and that bloody case, than the man came up to him.

'A nice watch he has there', he said, lowering his gaze.

'Leave me alone!', Georg moved to one side.

'Say again, you want me to grab hold of you?', the man smiled.

'No, I have to go', said Georg and marched directly away before the man started dragging him through the mud again. The best thing would be to lose this guy as quickly as possible and come back later.

'What kind of a person', the man bellowed over the landscape, 'sleeps in a field in daytime?'

'I was resting.'

'He was resting!', yelled the man and ran past him with surprisingly light feet. 'I've seen some things in my time but someone resting in a furrow on a field, and in the evening, too, as it's gradually getting cold and dark and damp, that is unusual, very unusual.'

'It won't happen again', promised Georg quickly and considered whether it might be an ingenious move – one that even Herr Spick would not see through so quickly – to leave the case there where he'd lost it, by the corpse in the forest. He took his watch off and handed it to the man.

'For the moped', he said and nodded towards the vehicle that was quietly chugging away. But the man was instantly so taken by the sight of this wonderful watch that he didn't move an inch. Georg had bought it with his first wage packet – a visual means of expressing his desire to always be punctual. And Herr Spick appreciated his apprentice's intention, even if he usually greeted him each morning with a glance at the shop clock which was always two minutes ahead.

'For the moped', he repeated.

'Company vehicle', explained the man and let the watch slide into his trouser pocket. Georg smiled at the little joke and waited to get the watch back. But the man just raised his empty hands and spread open his fingers.

'You give me my watch back right now', said Georg, taking a precautionary step back.

'Aha, and how am I supposed to go about my duties without my company vehicle?', asked the man loudly, 'you see, you have no idea!'

'Hey, didn't you hear me?'

'Yes, now you listen to me,' retorted the man, a pronounced crease suddenly appearing between his eyes. 'If someone is lying half-dead in a field and claims he's resting, you ask yourself: doesn't this person have a bed? Doesn't this person have a home? And what exactly is he resting from?'

Georg had no answer ready.

'That's nonsense', he eventually said.

'Vagrancy isn't nonsense', the man pointed to Georg's forehead, 'it's a crime.'

Rather than continue to beg for the watch, Georg stood with his fists against his hips, smiled, and put on the charm.

'Please, what do you see?', he asked.

'Well', the man coughed and spat, 'I see a shoulder seam torn to pieces, a scratched, bleeding forehead, a shirt with, wait, three, four, five rabbit droppings stuck to it, a chalk-white face, a ...'

'But that can all be sorted out!', cried Georg, pushing the half torn-out shoulder pad that was sticking up comically back into its hollow. Admittedly, the suit looked quite a mess at the moment and, admittedly, a sewing machine would be needed here and there. But essentially it still represented a smart investment with which you could make an impression on the customers, and on the ladies above all, even when you wore your work coat over it, with a few buttons open for all I care, but without the work coat you're not coming in to my shop.

'Lounging around on the ground all day, covered in dirt, clothes torn, unconscious, pumped to the gills with some poison that eats up your brains', the man rummaged through his pockets mumbling, 'but woe betide you if you dare to ask if everything is alright, you'll be bombarded with lies, lies, always only lies!'

'But no, I'm an apprentice, honest, a commercial apprentice, at a hardware store, in Linderstedt, with ...', he could have ripped his tongue out of his mouth and hacked it to pieces! But the man, instead of staring at him questioningly, continued to mumble and pluck out his pockets until lots of grubby pointy hats were dangling down from him, all of them empty. The only item he'd dug out was a small pocket torch but he quickly put it back. He rolled up his left sleeve grumpily.

'Flipping heck', he said as he unveiled his arm, which had an oily sheen to it, 'do you have any paper on you?'

'No, sorry', said Georg, relieved that the man seemed not to have noticed his loose tongue, 'what for?'

'I've forgotten my pad', he said and unbuttoned his jacket. His uncovered belly swelled out firmly as if an enormous alien was growing inside and could burst out any second. The man nodded once, then looked into his inside pocket. Evidently it had holes in it and he had to dig down to the seam with his hand. As he did so he leaned over so far to one side that it was a miracle that he didn't

topple over. In warning, Georg placed a fingertip against the moon-white sphere of the belly, ready to prop the man up if he went over. He could feel the resistance from the body, the smooth, creamy skin, the warmth below it, and the cold in his own body. Yes indeed, after the warm afternoon it had become cold and if the man hadn't been such a sweaty toad, Georg would have hugged him tightly to warm himself up a little. The man smacked away Georg's finger and, probably to test whether the biro he'd fought so hard to get out of his pocket still worked, drew a line across his belly.

'Oh for goodness' sake', he said when the bluish trail petered out after just a few inches.

'I'd like to go now', asserted Georg with a sigh of relief because the pain in his temples had gradually reduced to a clear hum.

'You can stay for just a minute, surely', said the man and marched towards his moped, which was shivering quietly in the twilight. Ideally, Georg would have liked to just run away. But whatever antics the man still had in mind, the less resistance Georg put up, the sooner he'd be free to go and the sooner he'd be forgotten. So he waited. Even if it was a disgrace how easily he'd let the watch be taken from him. Especially since it appeared to him as if time was passing more quickly as a result. He wanted to look at his mobile to check this feeling of his but the risk that the man would also snatch that from him was too great. He looked up at the sky. Just a little longer and the last patch of blue would be gone and he'd be looking directly into space.

With a groan the man hauled up a foot onto the luggage rack and slowly rolled up his trouser leg. He already had the biro ready to write on the yellow, quivering flesh of his calf when he turned around and asked loudly whether he would first have to sit bare-bum on Georg's face or whether the young man was going to volunteer to reveal his name, the reason why he'd been loafing around in the field, and where, with whom and since when he'd been doing his so-called apprenticeship in Linderstedt.

'If you want to know all the details', began Georg slowly as he stepped closer, head bowed and his hideously scratched shoes in view, 'then I should first explain to you what distinguishes our shop from the huge number of similar shops, but above all from the hardware departments of the big stores. The fact is, ...'

'Just tell me the name!', shouted the man and, before he lost his balance, scribbled something – apprenticeship in Linderstedt, presumably – on his calf. Well, let him! But I will never reveal my boss's name to you as long as I live: Oskar Spick! He could already see him bolting the door. He typed in the alarm code, shielding the touchpad from view with his hand. Then he jumped into his car and sped off. Herr Spick was a grimly resolute man. He would never call the police to beg for protection or assistance, especially not regarding the briefcase. He could take care of such matters with his own two hands. Even if he called someone else and got them involved, the moment he put down the phone he'd start to mistrust the person he'd called and gotten involved and he'd end up taking care of the matter himself. This approach of refusing to have his own ideas and actions questioned by anyone, much less allowing anyone to take his place, and certainly not those monkeys down at the police station, that was, as Georg had discovered early on, one of his boss's most prominent characteristics. Now his headlights were guzzling up the white lines. Now the freshly upholstered leather steering wheel was squeaking under his grip, and next to him, on the passenger seat, lay the double-barrel shotgun rifle, his favourite gun, which always hung furbished above the small desk. On Mondays he sometimes recounted his weekend hunting trips and the subsequent feasting on the game, a ritual he occasionally undertook with Zack the furrier. Because of the detailed and oft-repeated descriptions he'd heard of these hunting and feasting activities, Georg had a very clear image of his boss and Herr Zack stalking through the woods with panting dogs weaving

around their legs, of the shot and the bone saw, of how they gutted the animal and squeezed out the bladder to prevent the meat from going bad, of the removal of the gullet with these two hands here, and how they later sat in a dining room, Herr Zack and Herr Spick, before them on the plates, coated in dark sauces, the hare, violently dispatched mid-run.