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Flight Novella

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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1 The Head

No body, just a head. Like after an execution. As if it had just been lifted out of the basket and planted on the ground. It was resting on a massive plinth, though in reality, it was resting on the cushion of its voluminous beard. A high brow, sharp nose, a grim, clenched mouth and strangely stiff hair, blown back by the breeze. You had to really look to see the eyes between the brow and the beard, and yet you still felt trapped by its gaze as soon as you stepped onto the stairs of the monument. The head was angular, as if it were hewn out of heavy metal with crude tools, the expression serious and cold.

It was in the centre of the city, on a square that was actually no square at all, more of an indentation in what was already a wide street. All around, the grey, faceless buildings with countless windows and panels, the kind you saw everywhere here. From its plinth, the head looked onto a small park and a big hall behind it. If it had been able to look around, it would only have been confronted with the same dreary, prefab buildings. Behind it a tall, dark wall with inscriptions that I couldn't even read on my first visits there.

Even though I had been familiar with it since my youngest years, to me, everything in the centre of this city looked the same to me. While visiting my grandmother, I often wandered the streets as a child with my family, my mother, father, and sister. We had to do something. We couldn't sit around all day long in her little apartment on the outskirts of the city.

But we don't really know what to do with ourselves. The city didn't have a great deal to offer. We would usually just walk around aimlessly, and I would run about to burn off my excess energy, or we'd go to the markets or sit in a café. When it was cold and the furnaces were burning, the air was tinged a brownish colour. You could do drawings with your finger in the dust that settled on the cars.

The head was my only point of orientation. It was so huge that it must have even intimidated adults, and it certainly did a young boy like me. I would look up at it whenever we passed it, and as we drifted around the city, it would constantly crop up unexpectedly behind the next street corner.

I also knew who it belonged to, my parents had told me.

One day, as we were walking towards it, I suddenly sprinting over. Nobody called me back. There was nothing unusual about me running ahead like this, but this time I had a goal.

From off in the distance, I had seen that there were flowers lying on the ground near the head, a bouquet full of red blossoms. I'd never seen that before and thought someone must have left them lying there by mistake.

So I ran over to get them and headed back to give them to my mother.

She didn't even get the chance to say thank you. My grandmother instantly hit the roof, looked at me with horror and glanced around in a panic to see if anybody had observed the scene.

When she didn't see anything of note, she instantly grabbed the flowers from my mother and rushed over, taking them back to where she thought they rightfully belonged.

Later, she maintained that from that day on, the head had been under surveillance. But it was all in her head.

2 **Face Swap**

“Hm, that’s a strange picture.”

The village police officer looked up and examined the woman across from him inquisitively.

“It’s just a bit old, that’s all.”

The officer held the passport photo in his hand indecisively, twisting and turning it, as if that would afford him new perspectives on it, and then looked back at the young woman on the other side of the table.

She didn’t seem nervous, more like she was embarrassed that she hadn’t gone to the trouble of rustling up a more recent photo.

The officer didn’t want to act all suspicious, but he still hesitated.

It took a certain degree of imagination to make the face in the picture fit with the face of the woman sitting across from him.

He tried to think back. They were roughly the same age and had known each other since they were kids. They had performed in plays together and had both been in the gymnastics club, they had always liked each other. In recent years, their contact had grown irregular, they’d see each other now and then on the street or at events in the village.

Did she really used to look like that?

The young woman on the other side of the table was the former girlfriend of my father. She lived in a small village in the east of Switzerland and was of modest means. Everyone knew each other there. Being a schoolteacher, she was liked by everyone in the village.

Her father was a doctor from Leipzig who had come to Arosa straight after the war to work in the spa resorts and later moved to the Rhein Valley, not far from Sargans. From visits to her relatives and from the stories they would tell, she was much better informed about the political situation in East and West Germany than most in eastern Switzerland in the mid-sixties.

That made it easier for my father to convince her to take part in his plan – a plan that was cooked up a few years before my birth, and without which I probably wouldn't exist, at least not the way I am now.

He wanted to convince his former friend to procure a Swiss passport for him: in her own name, but with a picture of his new girlfriend from East Germany.

He'd been trying to convince her for a long time, explaining precisely what it was that he had in mind. He had tried to argue that while the deed that he wanted her to commit might not have been legal, it was justified according to an overriding, moral interest.

His former girlfriend was very religious and had concerns about committing an act of fraud, which she was unable to square with her conscience. But my father could be very persistent when he really wanted something. He just kept on and on, pleading with her with increasing urgency, and she finally acquiesced and agreed to carry out an act that seemed defensible to her because nobody would be harmed by it.

By the time she was sitting across from the local police officer, her connection with my father had been over for some months – in the sense that neither of them could lay any real claims on one another. She had since started a new relationship with a blacksmith from the region. Perhaps that's why she found it easier to do what my father asked. Maybe she just said to herself: I'll do him this one last favour, and then I can write off the whole thing.

My father had brought the picture from his last visit to see my mother in Dresden. Before he went with her to a photographer to get the passport photos taken, he had done everything possible to make her look like his former girlfriend.

They both had thick, dark-blond hair that fell in a similar way and was cut in a bob, as was the fashion in the sixties. The black and white of the photos obscured the tonal nuances. There were also similarities between the faces: their eyes resembled each other, their button noses as well to a certain extent, and their narrow cheeks, less so the lips and the shape of the chin. But my father got my mother to practice holding the corner of her mouth in a certain way that he knew from his former girlfriend. He had even thought about her clothes, had brought a blouse with him so that her fashion didn't stick out.

They needed countless attempts before he was even close to content with the picture. It was impossible to produce more congruity. And yet it would still take a somewhat swayable observer like the young village constable to look past the differences.

He sat there holding the passport photo in his hand uncertainly, contemplating.

Because the young woman on the other side of the table was observing him, he couldn't manage to evoke her earlier face in his mind's eye. But he couldn't imagine that she was trying to deceive him. Nor why she would even want to.

So he let the matter drop and accepted the photo for the passport she was applying for.

"Okay, then we'll use this one."

He would send it on to the Canton passport office to have the new document issued.

While my father waited for the authorities to issue the new passport, he practiced my mother's signature. To be more precise, he didn't practice her actual signature, he practiced the way that she wrote the name of his former girlfriend.

That's how he would sign the document for her.

Any person who by fraudulent means causes a public official or a person acting in an official capacity to certify an untrue fact of substantial legal significance, and in particular to certify a false signature or an incorrect copy as genuine, or

any person who makes use of a document obtained by fraud in this way in order to deceive another as to the fact certified therein, shall be liable to a custodial sentence not exceeding five years.

Any person who, for their own benefit or for that of another person, forges or falsifies identity papers, attestations, or certificates, or uses for fraudulent purposes a written document of this kind that has been produced by a third party, or fraudulently uses written documents of this kind that are genuine but not intended for them, shall be liable to a custodial sentence or to a monetary penalty.

The offence consists of forgery (that is, complete falsification) or falsification (that is, unauthorised alteration of existing documents) or the use of a false identity document or the misuse of a genuine identity document.

Swiss Criminal Code (1937/1942),

Art. 253, 252:1 and commentary

3 At the House of the Red Army

HER: At first, we thought they were Czech. We got into Erfurt pretty late that night, we were on an excursion from the Dresden Academy of the Arts, and someone told us there was a group of young Czechs at the 'House of the Red Army'. So we headed over, my girlfriend and I, especially since we were planning to go to Czechoslovakia on a holiday the following year. We thought we might meet a few people who would let us stay with them for cheap.

HIM: I was bored that night because there was nothing on at the cinema. And I didn't feel like sitting around with my classmates from Zurich. We were on a study trip to see the historic sites of Weimar, of Goethe and Schiller. Then someone said there was a group of art students from Dresden staying in the city, and that they'd like to talk to students from Switzerland. So I went over, together with a friend I had met at university.

HER: When we arrived, the place was packed to the rafters. There was a band playing and people were dancing. Two guys from my course had a spot at a table, and when they saw that everything was full, they offered us their spots. We sat down with them, but we didn't know anyone at the table.

HIM: We had made friends with a Russian soldier over a beer, and were engaged in a lively conversation with him ...

HER: ... they just kept slapping each other on the shoulder because they could communicate with each other ...

HIM: ... it was very loud. In any case, we suddenly saw two young women sitting across from us, but they weren't paying us any attention ...

HER: ... we thought they wouldn't understand us anyway. But then out of nowhere his friend asked me to dance ...

HIM: ... no, no, there was a picture of Walter Ulbricht hanging above our heads, and her friend prodded her and pointed to the picture and make some remark or a joke that I didn't understand ...

HER: ... it would have been about his goatee

HIM: ... so I turned around to look at the picture, which I hadn't even noticed, and when I looked back across to the other side of the table, the two of them were laughing nervously, because they were afraid I had understood the joke ...

HER: ... well we didn't know ...

HIM: ... it was the through the joke that we got to talking ...

HER: ... the four of us, they couldn't speak any Russian, and we didn't feel like being able to...

HIM: ... it was only then that my friend asked her to dance, that's how it went. Afterwards, we danced with each other for the first time in our lives ...

HER: ... not that night, the following one ...

HIM: ... gradually, the rest of her group and my group came and sat at the table ...

HER: ... there were lots of people there by then, word had gotten around ...

HIM: ... The Russian left pretty quickly, because he realised his services were no longer required ...

HER: ... so we were sitting in a big group of students from Dresden and Zurich ...

HIM: ... until long into the night ...

HER: ... and then the next morning, we saw each other at the train station ...

HIM: ... by chance ...

HER: ... we ended up being on the same train, and the whole way he was reading “Neues Deutschland” with rapt attention.

HIM: ... It was the official newspaper ...

HER: ... he was mostly reading the international news, I’ll never forget, we were so embarrassed, because in the GDR, hardly anyone read them, so there was just nothing in them...

HIM: ... both groups had their own programmes in Weimar, but when we got back to Erfurt in the evening, one of you invited us ...

HER: ... you picked us up with a bus ...

HIM: ... the whole group said it had been nice talking to those people, they were about twenty years old, just like us, so we decided to meet up again, and we drifted around Erfurt for a pretty long time looking for a bar ...

HER: ... I don’t know, I was somewhere out in the sticks ...

HIM: ... what was the pub called again ...

HER: ... no, you swung by with the bus and picked us up ...

HIM: ... we didn’t have a bus ...

HER: ... and then we drove somewhere way outside of Erfurt ...

HIM: ... on a hill ...

HER: ... and we danced there ...

HIM: ... *that* was the first time ...

HER: ... coiling our way up the hill ...

HIM: ... Somewhere out of town, above Erfurt, it was quite a nice, respectable, attractive bar...

HER: ... or was it the Czechs ...

HIM: ... the Czechs, yes! The Czechs who had also been at the House of the Red Army, they started the whole thing, yes, the Czechs, but apart from that, they had nothing to do with it...

HER: ... they invited both of our groups, and we got picked up by the Czech bus, and so did you guys, they had a band up there, and everyone danced with everyone, I mean, the Czechs couldn't speak German anyway ...

HIM: ... everyone with everyone, it was chaos ...

HER: ... and on the third evening, we met up again ...

HIM: ... but only a few of us ...

HER: ... someone came and said to us that we should meet up at some student pad somewhere, in a doglegged alley in the old town of Erfurt ...

HIM: ... so there we were, and really, that was also where we had our first real conversation with each other ...

HER: ... and the next day was his birthday, we knew that, so we bought a present and left it at the hotel for him ...

HIM: ... a record ...

HER: ... I hadn't managed to find any flowers ...

HIM: ... in any case, that night we exchanged addresses ...

HER: ... no, not true ...

HIM: ... the next day then ...

HER: ... we never exchanged addresses ...

HIM: ... all of us, not the two of us, all of us ...

HER: ... in the group? ...

HIM: ... no ...

HER: ... we swapped them randomly among the group ...

HIM: ... now I remember. I was unhappy because I got the address of her friend ...

HER: ... and I got his mate's ...

HIM: ... whom I then convinced to give me her address, offering the one I had gotten in exchange ...

HER: ... and at the end of the night, they walked us to the tram, and he said: "I wish I could put all of you in my backpack and take you home with me" ...

HIM: ... all of you? ...

HER: ... yep ...

4 **Berlin One Way Street**

Switzerland did not recognise the GDR diplomatically until 1972. It held to the Hallstein Doctrine, according to which the establishment of diplomatic relations with East Germany by foreign countries was viewed as an “unfriendly act” by West Germany. The Federal Republic of Germany laid claim to the sole right of representation – in East Germany referred to as the sole *presumption* of representation – for the entire German people and viewed the German Democratic Republic as occupied territory.

So Switzerland kept out of it and maintained their embassy in Cologne/Bonn as a solid ally of the Western Bloc in the Cold War. They had no representation in the East, and there was also no GDR embassy in Bern. That only changed as part of the Willy Brandt’s new *Ostpolitik*: in early 1973, an East German embassy was opened in Brunnadernstrasse in Bern, while in East Berlin, a Swiss embassy was opened on the Esplanade.

In the mid-sixties, there was only a “Swiss delegation” in Berlin. It was located in a city palace on Fürst-Bismarck-Strasse, what is today Otto-von-Bismarck-Allee, on the inside of a curve in the Spree at the northern tip of Tiergarten. The neoclassicist building with three storeys and nine axes was erected in 1870/71 for a doctor and professor at the Charité hospital, and was located in one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Berlin, the Alsenviertel, formerly the favoured address of the nobility and diplomats, military officers and industrialists. Even Dostoyevsky once visited the building to see the doctor. By some kind of miracle, it escaped major damage, both from Hitler’s deranged plans for a “World Capital Germania”, to which countless villas fell prey, and from the aerial bombardments of the Second World War.

In 1919, the title was handed over to the Swiss Confederation, which first used it as an office for the Swiss mission and as a residence for the envoy. After the Second World War, it housed the *Heimschaffungsdelegation*, which was tasked with looking after Swiss people in the eastern territories who wished to return home and with maintaining contact with the Soviet occupation zone. In 1949, after the founding of the two German states, the repatriation delegation was transformed into a Swiss delegation. It largely fulfilled the functions of a consulate general, but politically, served as a bridgehead for Switzerland on East German soil.

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HIM: ... after my experiences in Erfurt, I altered my plans to do a semester abroad at the last minute, switching from Göttingen to West Berlin, because from there, it would be easier to travel to the GDR. That was actually a direct consequence of this encounter, but not just because of her but because of the whole group, I wanted to keep in touch with these people ...

HER: ... he communicated that to me by letter, much to my surprise ...

HIM: ... to her surprise, to both of their surprise ...

HER: ... said he would be going to Berlin and would be pleased to have the opportunity to see one another again ...

HIM: ... very businesslike ...

HER: ... on one of the first days of the winter semester we went on an excursion to West Berlin ...

HIM: ... art history, museums ...

HER: ... we organised to meet up at lunchtime at the Teachers' House at Alexanderplatz, in the restaurant upstairs ...

HIM: ... the four of us, my friend had made the trip to Berlin as well ...

HER: ... and when they walked in, we were already waiting for them, and his friend greeted us by name, which was a big disappointment for my friend, because she had always assumed that the addresses had been mixed up ...

HIM: ... by accident ...

HER: ... it's also worth mentioning that at the time, I was well and truly attached ...

HIM: ... various boyfriends ...

HER: ... not various boyfriends, it was just the one ...

HIM: ... an architecture student ...

HER: ... that's why, from the perspective of my friend, the whole thing can be seen from a different standpoint, because she actually quite liked the other one ...

HIM: ... the following night, we went to the theatre, all four of us, Peter Hacks ...

HER: ... no, first we went to see the Thomas Wolfe play ...

HIM: ... ah yes, and then the Hacks, *The Beautiful Helen* ...

HER: ... we only went to the theatre once ...

HIM: ... and the next time we organised to meet up just the two of us ...

HER: ... in the meantime, my friend had met up with his friend ...

HIM: ... I had explained to him that I wanted to spend an evening alone with her ...

HER: ... not long after that, I had to go back to Dresden ...

HIM: ... on that evening, we wandered around and got lost ...

HER: ... and really fell in love with each other ...

HIM: ... yes ...

HER: ... it all went so quickly, but we were sure about it ...

HIM: ... even though we hardly knew each other ...

HER: ... I had no passport and no money ...

HIM: ... it was a nightmare to have no passport in Berlin ...

HER: ... we were staying just outside of Berlin, I wouldn't have even been able to travel back to the area we were staying in ...

HIM: ... perhaps I should mention that I was extraordinarily interested in the GDR, not out of ideological sympathies, not at all, more for literary and philosophical reasons; I sat an entrance exam for Humboldt University, that was an incredible administrative task, a story all of its own, as a Swiss student who is enrolled at the Free University to then try to get enrolled at Humboldt University and ultimately gain access to particular lectures and to receive certain exemptions in comparison to the other visitors from the West, such as the compulsory currency exchange upon entry, for example, because I had a lecture pass for the university.

Also, I could eat there for cheap ...

HER: ... once I got back to Dresden, we sent each other letters, back and forth ...

HIM: ... and then she invited me to visit ...

HER: ... he wrote that he was staying in Berlin for Christmas, all on his own, and I kind of felt bad for him, so I invited him to come and spend Christmas at my house ...

HIM: ... to Karl-Marx-Stadt, where her mother lived ...

HER: ... and my friend invited his friend, but more reluctantly, right?

HIM: ... more reluctantly, in the interest of symmetry ...

HER: ... he arrived on the first day of Christmas holidays ...

HIM: ...got up at four and crossed the border at five, Friedrichstrasse station, on Christmas Day, with my Swiss passport, all the customs officers were so nice and friendly, they were all confused and found it funny, stood around me, we wished each other merry Christmas, otherwise, there wasn't a soul in sight ...

HER: ... and then he stayed ...

HIM: ... three weeks ...

HER: ... the plan was for him to stay till about New Year's Day ...

HIM: ... which was only possible because of my exemption ...

HER: ... to the chagrin of my girlfriend, who wasn't happy about the whole thing ...

HIM: ... and of her boyfriend, he gradually withdrew into the background ...

HER: ... and of my mother, who was also reaching the end of her tether with him ...

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You entered the palace housing the Swiss Delegation on Fürst-Bismarck-Strasse through a large wooden entranceway. You walked through a marble-panelled antechamber and through glass doors into the entrance hall. There, you could register with reception if you had made an appointment. The offices of the delegation members and the consultation rooms were on the upper floors. A sweeping stairwell led up to the entrance hall.

My father had requested a meeting with the head of the delegation, without giving any further details. It was an important matter, he had written, pertaining to him as a Swiss citizen living in Berlin.

He arrived at reception early and had to wait. That gave him the opportunity to go back over in his head how he wanted to present his issue, so that in the best case, he would receive assistance, or in the event of a negative response, would at least not attract the suspicion of the Swiss authorities. Shortly thereafter, his name was called up, and he was shown upstairs by a staff member.

Initially, the diplomat listened calmly and attentively his visitor's issue, but quickly grew impatient. Eventually, he interrupted his guest before he had finished his story.

The government representative had precisely three sentences to say on the matter:

Sentence 1: "Do not interfere with the business of other states."

Sentence 2: "If something happens, we cannot provide you with any assistance."

Sentence 3: "First and foremost, we cannot extract the woman, because she is not even a Swiss national."

He had nothing more to say and showed the visitor to the door.

The appointment did not even last a full five minutes.